



# Condé Nast Traveller

8<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
SPECIAL

THE LAST WORD IN TRAVEL  
OCT-NOV 2018 | ₹200

INDIAN EDITION

## GO BEFORE IT'S GONE

Spectacular experiences around the world that are disappearing fast

GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS **KIRIBATI** PERU **THE SUNDARBANS**  
THE GREAT BARRIER REEF **ANTARCTICA** RWANDA



DISCOVER CHETTINAD'S  
ROYAL LEGACY

THE HEROES SAVING INDIA'S LIVING  
(& DYING) TREASURES

SIKKIM'S COOL CULINARY  
TRADITIONS



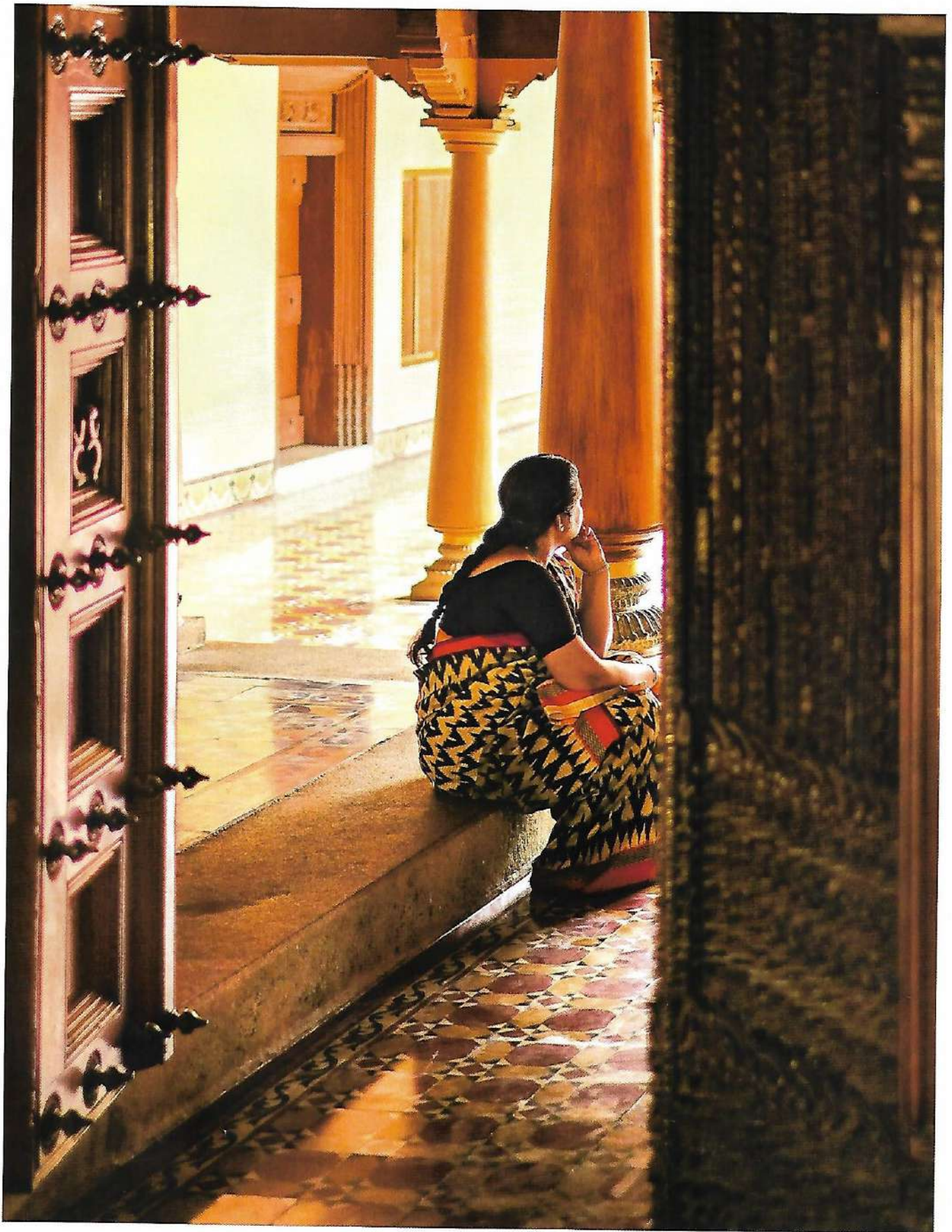
# FEATURES

**WILDLIFE IN RWANDA** EAT AROUND SIKKIM **DIVE INTO THE GREAT BARRIER REEF**

The interiors of the CVCT House in Chettinad. Photographed by Himanshu Lakhwani for *Masters of Mansions* (p196)









A close-up photograph of a standing female figure, likely a Hindu goddess, adorned with elaborate golden jewelry and holding a long, ornate staff or scepter. The figure is depicted in a dynamic pose, with one leg raised and bent. The background is dark and textured.

197





We are here in a dry part of Tamil Nadu, in the midst of a pleasing, but largely unremarkable, landscape, because of the heritage left behind by the Chettiars, the forebears of people like Meenakshi Meyyappan, the owner of a charming hotel called The Bangala. Her ancestors travelled to Southeast Asia as moneylenders and traders in the colonial era—leaving the women behind to look after their grand homes and raise their children—and amassed great wealth thanks to their business acumen. Our guide, Annapoorni, a Chettiar herself, defines the term business acumen for us: “They knew who to trust and who not to trust.” We are here to see the treasures accumulated by men with great business acumen, and nurtured and polished by women who managed homes without male support for years on end while the men went about their business in distant lands. We are here to experience Chettiar heritage.

The grand mansions of Chettinad are divided into rectangular spaces, each marked as the domain of men or women. The capacious wedding banquet spaces and the stone loggias where business was conducted are the male spaces and they have high ceilings that are highly decorated. The extended central courtyards are marked out by low arcades whose roofs are held up by beams, each of which has a large iron hook installed. These hooks, Annapoorni explains, were where babies’ hammocks were hung. In the quiet of a weekday morning, it is hard to imagine what this courtyard must have looked like, or sounded like, when it was in full use, when a large contingent of women slept here—the family slept in the courtyard, the rooms were used to store valuables—with several babies swinging in their hammocks. Now, only some of those babies still live in these grand homes where they were lulled to sleep on a hammock hung from a beam of the finest Burma teak, over a beautifully tiled floor that was cleaned by hand day after day for years until its dyes gleamed and its surface exuded a warmth that soothes the bare feet, in an arcade whose walls were finished with eggshells in such a way that their glow evokes moonlight.

This dense accumulation of beauty in palatial spaces had already begun by the middle of the 19th century. The Chettiars were well-established merchant bankers in Southeast Asia and Ceylon. The expansion of British presence in this region brought even greater prosperity to this enterprising community and led to a spurt in building that was to continue until the late 1920s. But then the Great Depression severely affected their fortunes. Later, the Japanese occupation of Burma and finally, the end of colonialism brought an end to the phenomenal run of success that the Chettiars had enjoyed for several generations. Many of them took to other professions. Their descendants work, like many of their contemporaries from Tamil Nadu, in IT and related industries.

But this is not a story of tragic decline, as we will learn when we visit the antique stores of Muneeswaran Koil street in Karaikudi. Burmese lacquer bowls, rotary phones, compasses and telescopes of all sizes, spoons and ladles, finely carved chess sets, coffee grinders, door handles and →



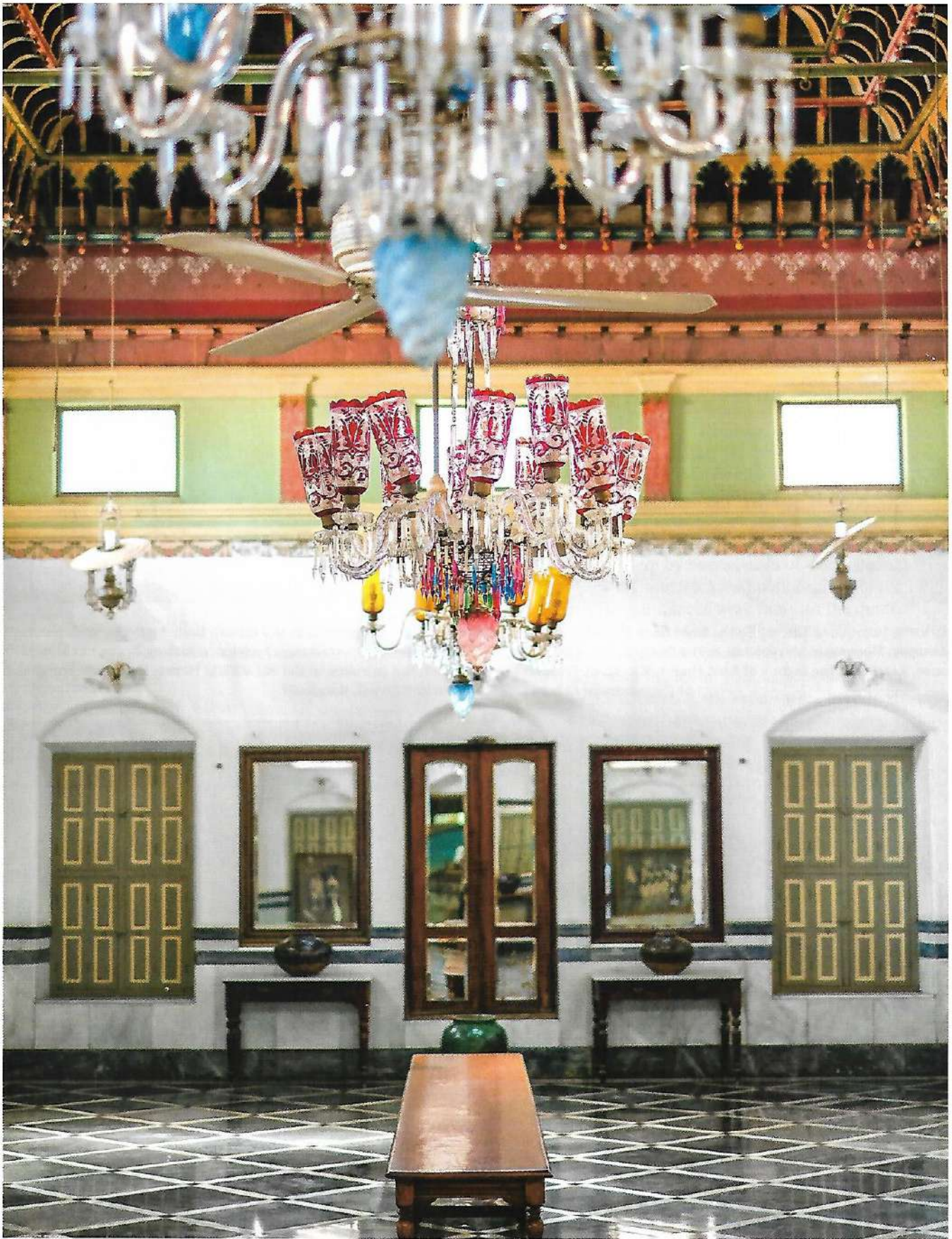




Clockwise from above: the key to the front door of AMA House, Karaikudi; sculpture in progress at the Canara Bank Institute for Artisans, Managiri; Meenakshi Meyyappan at The Bangala, Karaikudi; the pool at The Bangala. Opposite page from top: a carving at the old MSMM House, Karaikudi; the façade of AMA House, Karaikudi. Previous pages from left: the entrance to the old MSMM House, Karaikudi; antiques at Raghavendra Arts in Muneeswaran Koil Street, Karaikudi

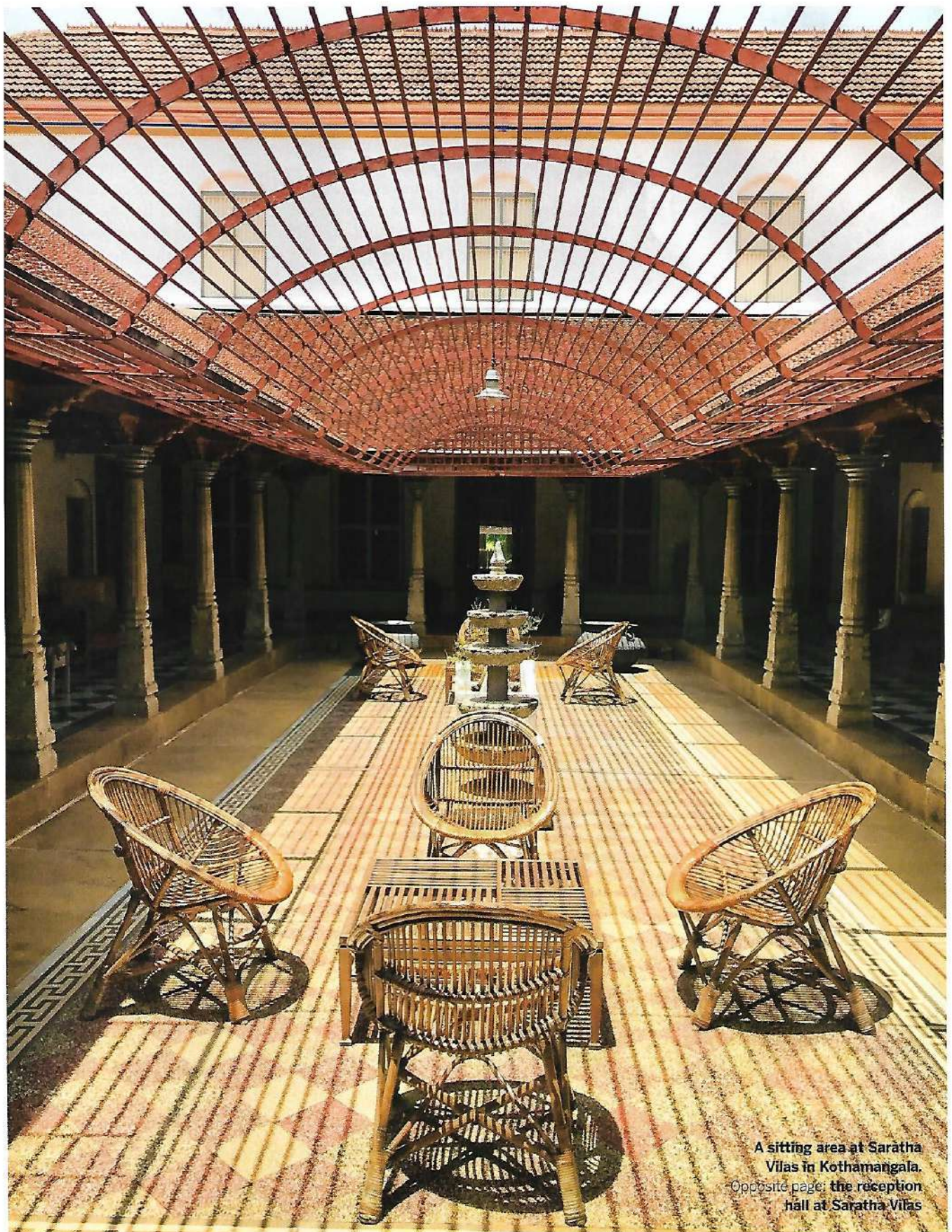






"THE FLOOR WAS CLEANED BY HAND UNTIL ITS DYES GLEAMED AND





A sitting area at Sarathi Vilas in Kothamangala.  
Opposite page: the reception hall at Sarathi Vilas

ITS SURFACE EXUDED A WARMTH THAT SOOTHES THE BARE FEET"





doorknobs, mortars and their pestles, decorative tiles, side panels decorated with a figure of a yali (part horse, part elephant, part lion, part tiger, as Annapoorni explained to me when we first saw one in Nemam temple), tiffin boxes, side tables, swings, Tanjore paintings—all give us the first inkling of the massive evisceration of the grand homes of Chettinad. Annapoorni tells us, with some pride, that by dismantling their homes and selling all the decorative objects that their ancestors had accumulated, many Chettiar families retrieved some capital that helped them make prosperous post-colonial lives. Coming from Delhi, with its well-established narrative of faded glory and rumours of the descendants of emperors begging on the streets, the matter-of-factness of the situation is difficult for me to compute. It feels somewhat liberating.

But the real thing is yet to come. The proprietor of Arasu Arts, one of the antique stores, takes us to his warehouse outside the centre of Karaikudi and we realise the full extent of the investment the Chettiars made in decorating their houses. The whole space is organised around pillars: single-tree ones made of Burma teak, and stone ones, all highly decorated like those in the millennia-old temples of this region.

I ask the proprietor the price of an intricately carved teak door frame. He says ₹10,000. Later, Annapoorni explains that there are no fixed prices. He looks at the customer and quotes a price. And I thought I was the one doing the looking.

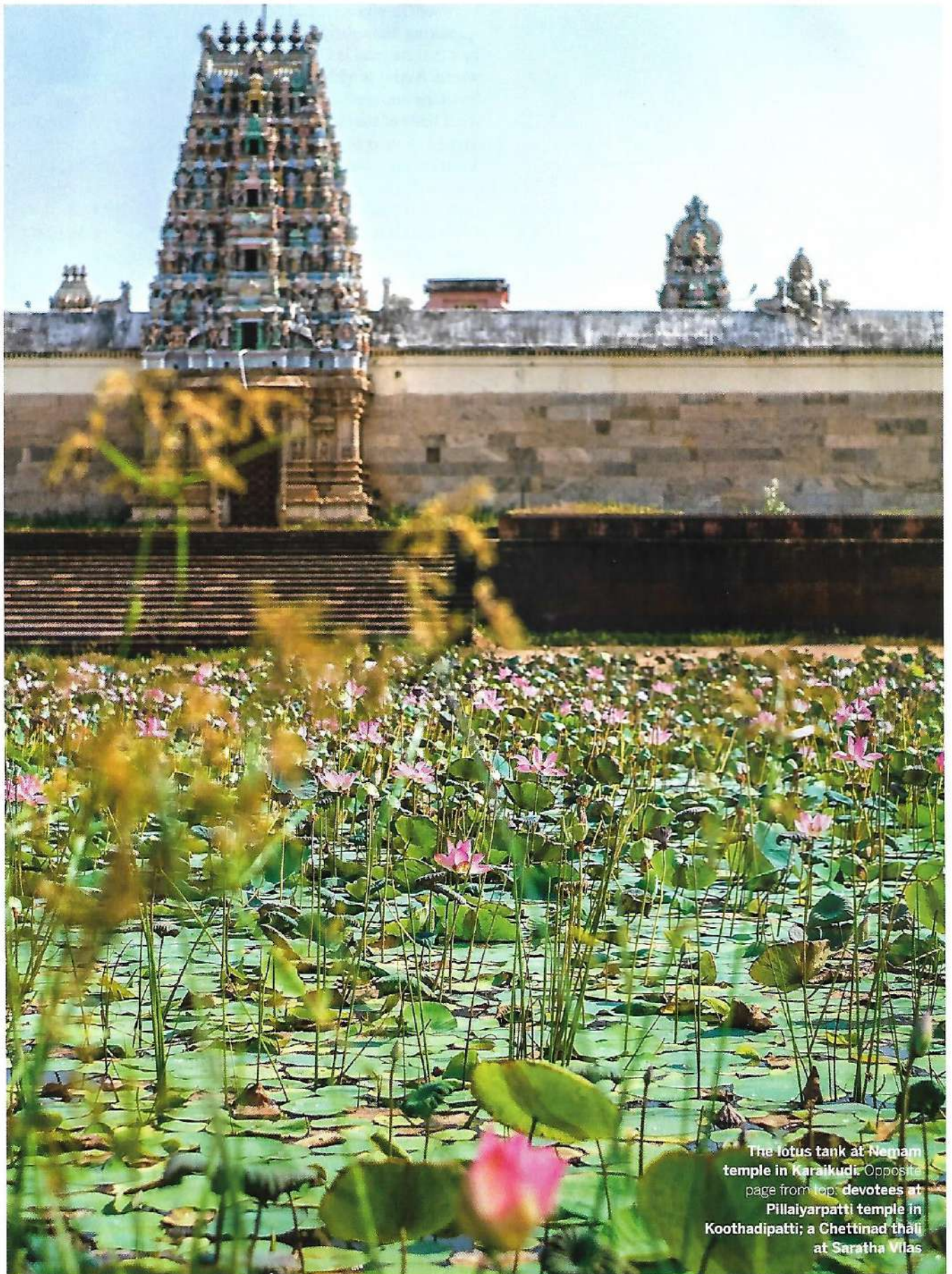
**“CHETTIAR HERITAGE IS CLEARLY NOT DEAD. IT IS BEING RECYCLED AND DIFFUSED INTO THE WORLD”**



Out in the yard, pillars and pieces of old furniture are being repaired and refurbished for sale. I can tell from the proprietor's body language that business is good. Later that evening, I will notice that even The Bangala has bought and installed some of these old stone pillars for some of the new constructions that were undertaken to make a hotel out of this space: the veranda overlooking the pool and the dining area. Chettiar heritage is clearly not dead. It is being recycled and diffused into the world. Many of the mansions remain, and a few of these have been opened for us to see and marvel at, such as at the magnificent Chidambara Vilas and Chettinadu Mansion. But many of them have given up their treasures, shared them with the world.

Over in Kanadukathan, the 'capital' of the Chettinad region because the Raja of Chettinad's palace is there, we visit Visalam, a hotel operating out of a Chettiar mansion that is built in the Art Deco style. Here, as in Saratha Vilas in Kothamangala, the oblong dining rooms that run along the sides of most Chettiar homes have been converted into guest rooms. These are large, airy rooms that manage to convey some of the sense of the space they have been carved out of, despite the amenities of a modern hotel. We are not staying in either of these hotels, but we have a meal in each, comparing their kitchens to each other and to that of the Bangala. Like the decorative elements of the mansions, the famed Chettinad cuisine is a multifaceted product of the cultural encounter →





The lotus tank at Nannam temple in Karaikudi. Opposite page from top: devotees at Pillaiyarpatti temple in Koothadipatti; a Chettinad thali at Saratha Vilas





between Tamil Nadu and Southeast Asia. Each hotel provides a cooking demonstration, as an acknowledgement of the fact that its food is Chettinad's ambassador to the outside world. And it is with this ambassador that each of the three kitchens impresses the visitor. My wife loves paniyarams—fried balls of the dough used to make idlis and dosai—and The Bangala produces succulent specimens for breakfast. Visalam decorates the banana leaf with many wonders: as I write this, my tongue remembers a pumpkin preparation that is a coruscation of flavours. Saratha Vilas serves us the pride of the region, chicken Chettinad. Back at The Bangala, Meyyappan's Ceylonese childhood finds utterance in idiyappam and egg appam. Quail, prawn, crab, dried mutton curry, fish—all are presented in an eclectic bouquet. And the brand-new The Vaadhyar's House, by Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels as part of its new project in the region, uses traditional spices and wood-fired stoves to produce local delicacies and the best of international cuisines.

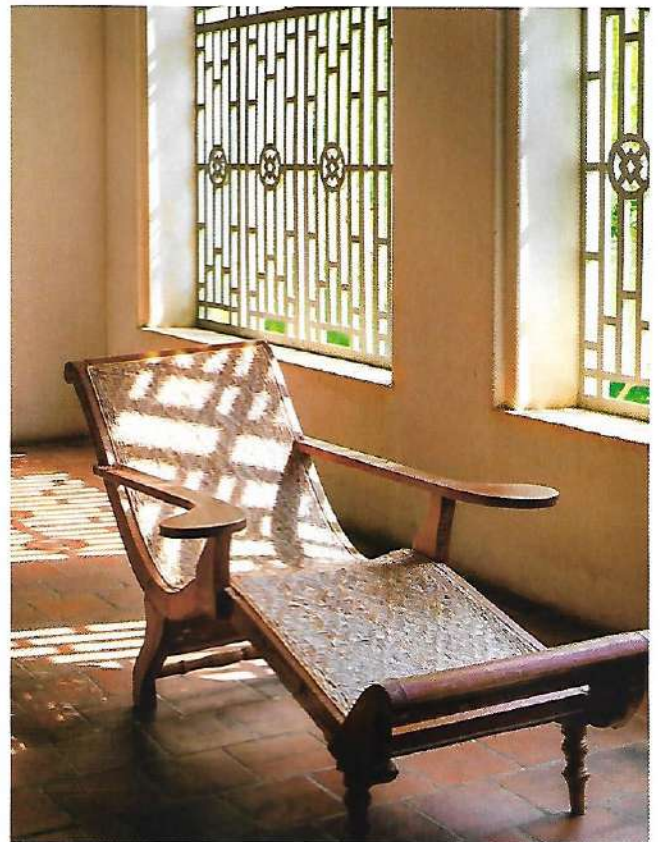
But while the different hoteliers agree on the importance of the food, there are some differences of opinion when it comes to the future of the built heritage of the region. I am impressed by the way Saratha Vilas and Visalam have remodelled their spaces into hotel rooms, but Meyyappan is not: "What if the owners want to terminate the lease and move back into their houses?" she asks, and this question crystallises Chettinad's appeal for me. This is not a museum of past glories. Chettinad and its heritage are living and evolving, the past is a partner to the present, and together, they negotiate the future.

Annapoorni takes us to two of the nine clan temples of the Chettiars—Nemam and Vairavanpatti—which feel like a trip to the source of a river, since all the grand houses we have seen turn to the temples for their basic decorative elements. Here, the same elements appear in grander versions. There is much to see here, but I suspect there are similar grand temples all over Tamil Nadu. What is unique to the region is the fact that the Chettiars were not content to let art and beauty lie within the temple; they invested their resources in recreating it within their homes.

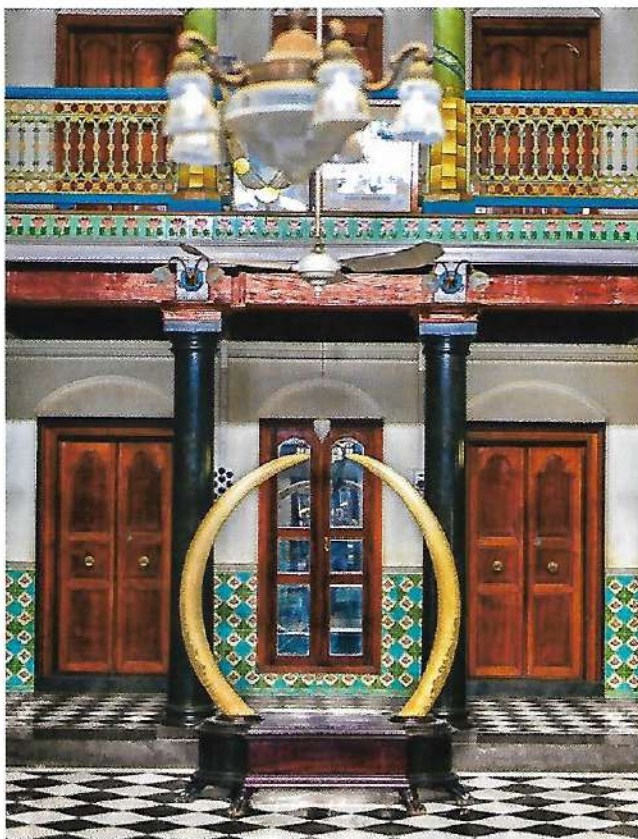
On our last day in Chettinad, I visit the Canara Bank Institute for Artisans in Managiri, not far from Karaikudi. Housed in an unremarkable building, the school has two active classrooms for its two sections: woodwork and stonework on one side, metal and cement work on the other. The woodwork instructor shows me pencil sketches of animals and gods drawn with the geometric precision characteristic of sculpture in the south of India. The clarity of the lines of one drawing of a horse almost brings tears to my eyes. He shows me how the drawing is transferred to wood and the sculpture begins to take shape. "How many students do you have?" I ask, and Mr Soosai, the head of the school, tells me there are 25. "Do you have a selection process?" I ask, thinking that there must be a rush to get into a place where such an intricate art form is being taught at such a high level. No, he replies, whoever is really interested can come. I wonder aloud why Canara Bank Trust thought of starting such a school. To give employment, he says, and tells me there are other schools as well; one, for example, teaches students →







Clockwise from above: Saranya, a staff member at Visalam in Kanadukathan; the common area at Visalam; a detail of the ceiling at AMA House, Karaikudi; African elephant tusks on display in a hall at AMA House. Opposite page from top: Athangudi tiles; paint supplies at the tile workshop in Athangudi







"THE CHETTIARS DIDN'T JUST LET ART AND BEAUTY LIE WITHIN THE





The opulent dome of Chidambara Vilas, Pudukottai. Opposite page: Priyadarshini, a staff member of Chidambara Vilas, at its entrance

TEMPLE; THEY INVESTED IN RECREATING IT WITHIN THEIR HOMES”





how to repair ACs. I am taken aback. But I realise that if Mr Soosai feels that AC repairs and classical sculpture are comparable career options, this means he feels that classical sculpture has as much agency in today's world as air conditioning technology. This can only be a good thing for the future of sculpture and the decorative arts.

Before going to the airport, I visit a *sthapati*, a sculptor, who is actively involved in making sculptures that are exported to temples all over the world. Ramkumar Sthapati doesn't speak English, but with Annapoorni translating, I learn from him that his family is not from here, they are from Kumbakonam. They came here because there was work here. What work, I wonder. The Chettiar mansions, of course, he says. The gravitational force of the Chettiar heritage drew them here. "How do you come up with the designs for your sculptures?" I ask. And he replies, "Some we copy from the temples, some things we add ourselves." The heritage lives on in the present and turns, with the present, into the future. **📍**

## NEED TO KNOW: CHETTINAD

### GETTING THERE

Fly to Madurai from major Indian cities. Karaikudi is a two-hour drive from there.

### STAY

**The Bangala** The Karaikudi hotel used to be an old gentlemen's club, and the food is delicious. (*thebangala.com*; doubles from ₹6,740)

**Chidambara Vilas** In Pudukkottai, it offers an opulent experience of Chettiar heritage. Dining and communal areas are in the century-old house. (*chidambaravilas.com*; doubles from ₹7,249)

**Chettinadu Mansion** The Kanadukathan mansion has opened 12 of its rooms to guests, said to be maintained in the same style as in the 1900s. (*chettinadmansion.com*; doubles from ₹6,250)

**Visalam** It is a beautifully restored Chettiar house in Kanadukathan. (*cghearth.com*; doubles from ₹16,400)

**Saratha Vilas** in Kothamangala is a painstakingly restored mansion that combines Chettiar aesthetics with the sensibilities of its French architect owners. (*sarathavilas.com*; doubles from ₹8,380)

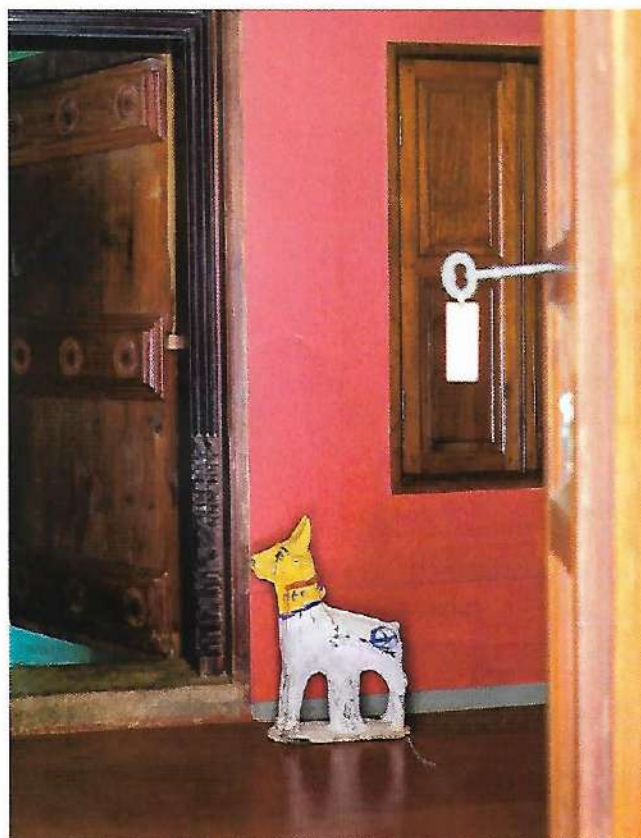
### SEE & DO

**Mansions** Notable among Chettinad's many grand mansions are AMA House and MSMM House in Karaikudi, and VVR House, CVCT House, MRM House and Chettinadu Mansion in Kanadukathan. Ask your hotel to arrange a tour or request one from the mansion's caretaker.

**Temples** Don't miss Nemam Kovil, Pillaiyarpatti Kovil and Vairavanpatti Kovil in Karaikudi.

**Shopping** Muneeswaran Koil street in Karaikudi is packed with Chettiar antique shops: Raghavendra Arts, Old Chettinad Crafters and Arasu Arts. Pick up traditional saris at the Sri Mahalakshmi Handloom Weaving Centre and gorgeous hand-painted tiles at the workshop in Athangudi.

**Beyond Chettiar heritage** Thirumayam Fort, a 17th-century fort, offers expansive views; don't miss the rock-cut temples. Also worth visiting are the Ayyanar shrines to local deities, such as at Aranthangi, lined with terracotta horses in sacred groves. Observe temple sculptures in the process of being made at Sthapati, a workshop in Karaikudi.







Clockwise from above: **Malaiswamy**, a staff member of Visalam; antiques from Chettiar homes at Raghavendra Arts in Muneeswaran Koil street in Karaikudi; a Chettiar family has a traditional celebration at The Bangala; a veranda at The Bangala. Opposite page from top: a rickshaw outside Visalam; the entrance of a room at Saratha Vilas

