

Of pink lotuses and PENANCE



Time lapse (From left) The writer at a Chettinad mansion, scenes from the Amman festival, and a figurine at the rock-cut temple ■ TISHANI DOSHI



■ WILLIAM DALRYMPLE



Going beyond Karaikudi's mansions in search of Vishnu, 1,400-year-old Jain frescoes and raw emotion at an Amman temple

■ TISHANI DOSHI

There is a quality of red that characterises the earth of Tamil Nadu, which is as ancient and life-giving as the red earth and pouring rain of the Kurontokai – and we are in it. One hundred kilometres from Tiruchirappalli, driving south towards Karaikudi, we are winding through incongruous landscape. Flat and parched all around, interrupted by groves of leggy palmyra and swathes of eucalyptus. In the distance there are rocky outposts – forts and temples, sun-blasted, desolate. At regular intervals we pass rectangles of paddy fields so green, the eye stings.

Hidden histories

Then there are the famous mansions of Chettinad everyone comes to see, springing up unexpectedly amongst humble “fancy stores”, art deco cinema halls and heaps of roadside watermelons. Houses with bravura fortress exteriors – all cornice and swirl, arch and stucco. The Chettiar traders who moved here after their capital, Poompuhar, was devastated by a tsunami, rebuilt their lives in these red-earthed villages thanks to the generosity of a Chola king. They may have moved inland, but their houses still carried trademarks of their coastal life, and spoils of sea-faring tradesmen: Burmese teak pillars, Belgian chandeliers, Carrara marble floors. Spoils of sea-faring tradesmen. The men left their women behind in these large houses to rear their large families, and it is mostly the ghosts of these matriarchs I encounter when I walk through here.

The mansions are repositories of memories. You pass rooms for daughters filled with dowry from the day of their birth. You sense the chaos of joint family living – how important it was, therefore, to find a breezy corner by the window grills in a courtyard. You understand why food is at the apex of the Chettiar experience by the vastness of their kitchens. But when you tire of the Victoriana of the bungalows, which you will, you should look outwards to the tapestry of time these houses sit in, and realise that the landscape exerts a much stronger pull.

Out in the open

Our friends Bernard Dragon and Michel Adment, the French architects who restored, and now run, the beautiful Saratha Vilas in Kanadukattan, offer us an alternative itinerary. One morning we find ourselves scrambling up a steep rocky cliff in search of Vishnu. It is 34 C. We have no guide. “They said it was here,” the youngest in our group insists, scaling the cliff, and so the rest of us follow. After 10 minutes of intrepid rock manoeuvring, we arrive at the Narthamalai cluster of ninth century Shiva temples, which sit on a plateau in glorious solitude. Nothing like an abandoned ASI site. No pesky guards bossing you around. No ticket counters or queues. The Vishnus we are looking for stand ahead in a Jain cave – a row of 12, cut from the walls, elegant and jewelled, gazing at us from behind the caged gate that separates us.

In Fort Thirumayam, we find Vishnu and Shiva side by side again – two seventh century rock cut

temples divided by a narrow street, competing in size and gorgeousness with their *gopurams*. But it is the Jain frescoes at Sittanavasal that stun us. On the walls, there are faded representations of *Samavasarana* – the Jain idea of a heavenly pavilion. These 1,400-year-old frescoes are a profusion of pink lotuses. A monk in a loincloth carries two giant stalks lightly on his shoulders. Catfish, geese and elephants cavort amongst them. In one corner, we see the 10 stages in the life of a lotus. We gape upwards, straining our necks, thinking how happy a place this is, dreamed up for the dead.

Much as I adore lotuses, my idea

of heaven would be where every meal was lunch at The Bangala. The food is exquisite and bountiful, and deserves a cook book of its own (which it has). But it is the way it is served – on a banana leaf, by a smiling man dressed in a simple white *lungi* and shirt, who winces slightly if you do not take that extra *vadai* – that seals it for me. After our feast we wander the maze of Karaikudi, and see people dressed in yellow, carrying pots of fire, so we follow, and are led to the local Amman temple.

Prayers and daggers

Women drenched in milk, clutching neem branches in two hands, prostrate themselves and wave the branches around. There are drums, whistles, loudspeakers. A policeman befriends and invites us to watch the proceedings from a line of plastic chairs, but it is impossible to sit still with all this activity. Men and women strapped with medieval-looking wrought iron devices filled with fire lamps walk with bells tied around their ankles, the look on their faces something between devotion and despair. The calmest of all are the devotees who walk with tridents, daggers or spears skewered through their cheeks. They walk as if hypnotised.

On our final night, we return to the temple, and everything has erupted tenfold. Women are rolling around the entire circumference of the temple. The weaponry pierced through cheeks has grown in length and girth. We know now that these are pre-Vedic rituals for the Goddess Mariamman. That these are simple requests made in a frenzied manner: for rain to come, for diseases like the pox to be kept away. It is the oldest, most alive thing we have seen in Chettinad. Beyond the great Jain and Buddhist monuments, the many glorious Shiva, Vishnu and Ayyanar shrines, the mansions built by rich men – all invitations to admire a particular frozen moment of grandeur – it pleased me that the timelessness was held by a woman – rain-giver, goddess – who demands only a wild ferocity in return for protection.



What they know

■ SINDHURI NANDHAKUMAR

French designer-architects Bernard Dragon and Michel Adment's history with India goes back to 1994, when they collaborated with Kerala artisans to create the furniture line, Gondwana. A decade later, a book on the past glories of the Chettiars, which they found in a dusty antique store, led them to Karaikudi with its palatial mansions. Today, the duo runs Saratha Vilas, a restored early 20th century mansion. Here they give us their alternative tourist guide for the inveterate traveller:

* The region is synonymous with mansions and, as architects, we have strong opinions about the best ones to visit. We recommend two lesser-known ones. The VVRM house in Kanadukattan is built in the early palatial style of the 1870s, with double columns, façades and multilevel construction, showcasing the beginnings of Chettiar wealth. On the same street is the CV Rm CT House, built at the height of Chettiar prosperity in the 1910s, with wooden ceilings, Italian marble, and tiles from Japan.

* To see the evolution of the region's architecture, take a walk in the village of Pallathur. As you climb up the sloped terrain, you will see the houses becoming more modern, revealing a mix of Tamil culture and Western influence, like Belgian murals and chandeliers.

* The Karaikudi antique market (Muneeswaram Kovil Street) is a tourist staple, but we enjoy strolling through the Kallukatti Main Bazaar (Koppudai Amman temple area). Featuring a host of artisans, you can find jewellery, metal work and traditional woodwork here. It is a reliable source of authentic craft.

* Workshops of Chettinad's famous Athangudi tiles – inspired by the early 20th century mosaic tiles made in Maastricht, Netherlands – are everywhere. Try your hand at making them at Sri Ganapathy Tiles (Athangudi road), the first workshop to start producing the colourful glazed cement tiles in the 1950s. All the rooms at Saratha Vilas are laid with tiles from them.

* Stop by the chariot makers (Pallathur road, next to Sathiyam Theatre) to admire their meticulous work, and also make time to observe the artisans at the Bronze Workshop (Palanivel East Street, Ariyakudi) firing their pieces.



French alternative (Top) Dragon and Adment, (above) Saratha Vilas

Odisha's lost cities

Explore Buddhist sites hidden away in the hills

■ SHARAN APPARAO

The intricately carved head of a Buddha protrudes from the ground – it probably fell from its post during an earthquake, our guide speculates. The rest of the statue is waiting to be discovered. We are at the archaeological site of Ratnagiri in Odisha, stepping off the track of our detailed and planned itinerary to take a look at what most tourists don't take the time to see.

When we planned a temple tour of the state last year, the idea was to host a series of destination lectures at the sites themselves. On reaching there, howev-

er, I was told there were three Buddhist sites we should definitely add to our itinerary.

We had with us an expert who knew all about the temples, but it was local historian and author Manoj Bhoi who was familiar with our new destinations. While there is a Jain site quite close to Bhubaneswar, we were headed much further away, to Udayagiri, Lalitgiri and Ratnagiri. It takes about 1.5 hours to get to the first two sites and a little over two hours to get to the third.

Known as the Diamond Triangle, the



three sites are active archaeological digs, and discoveries are still being made. This is not surprising, considering work on them started in earnest only about three decades ago.

At Lalitgiri and Ratnagiri, we see the remnants of what would have once been beautiful buildings. Most were built with a stone base, brick walls and wooden roofs. (If you notice the Indo-Saracenic architecture in Chennai, you might see similar structures.) The bases and some bricks have survived the test of time; the rest is left to the imagina-

Abodes of peace The digs at Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri and Udayagiri ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

tion. The *stupas* that can be found all over, and the skeletons of the *sangha* halls give an idea of what might have been. Udayagiri is the largest Buddhist complex to be unearthed in the state, and is believed to have been active between the 7th and the 12th centuries.

All three sites are vast, and speak of a thriving community of monks who chose to live in seclusion, while also being able to preach and share their way of life with those who sought Buddhism. Our guide says that there is more to come. “It will take at least 20 to 30 years to uncover everything. And when it is done, this will be a more important discovery than Nalanda,” he says.

I believe that we need to claim and own our Indian heritage. And rather than simply buying a sculpture, it is better to visit sites like these and appreciate them. Find out how we can help, in spreading awareness. Most of all, let us see how we can spread respect for our monuments – perhaps then there will be historic sites that will not be defaced.

As told to Susanna Myrtle Lazarus



The writer is the founder and director of Apparao Galleries

