

THE GHOSTS OF CHETTINAD

Among streets lined with empty, palatial homes, stands one that's been restored by two French architects

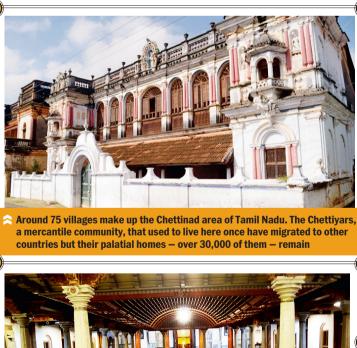
Lakshmi Sharath mirrorfeedback@timesgroup.com MumbaiMirro

s light filters in through the stained glass windows, it takes you a moment to register that the room sits in a century-old palace lost in an obscure Tamil Nadu village called Kothamangalam. A giant terracotta horse, carved by village potters, stands next to the bed, as if guarding the guests. A heaving push on the ornate door, carved in teak. leads to the expansive hall. Within the 35,000 sq feet of space the mansion occupies, seems to be nestled the entire world - pillars from Burmese teak, mirrors and chandeliers from Belgian glass, tiles from Japan and Holland and marbled floors from Italy.

Kothamangalam is one of the 75 villages of Chettinad, a region in Tamil Nadu which was once home to the affluent Chettiyar community, primarily the Nagarathar, who are elite bankers and merchants. Some time in the 19th century, most members of the community, which had maritime trade relations with South East Asia, migrated to Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Sri Lanka.

Today there are hardly any Chettiyars in Chettinad but, their homes — 30,000 of them — spread over 74 villages stand as cultural reminders. While most of them are locked up, with only a caretaker to enjoy their splendour, a few like Saratha Vilas, have been restored and opened to travellers.

A small lane off the main road leads you to the mansion, built in the





The courtyard at Saratha Vilas has been built in accordance to vaastu shastra and sports laterite pillars, as is seen in temples



< French architects Bernard Dragon and Michel Adment who decided to stay back in India after a 2003 trip. They have restored the mansion and now run it as a homestay



colonial and Dravidian aesthetics

typical Chettinad style: a fusion of colonial and Dravidian aesthetics in 1910. The porch, guarded by columns of dark marble, opens into a succession of halls and courtyards built in accordance with vaastu shastra. The verandah leads into an expansive hall, where crystal chandeliers dangle from an ornate roof. The central courtyard is lined with granite pillars.

The ancestral property of Subramanian Chettiar (who migrated to Malaysia years ago), Saratha Vilas has been restored and converted into a boutique hotel by French architects Bernard Dragon and Michel Adment who, on their second trip to India in 2003, travelled around Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, and were lured by the mansions of Chettinad.

We were like the fools who had discovered an incredible treasure. We went from village to village, discovering streets of decaying mansions with ornate facades and interiors, leaving us to imagine the fascinating stories of their owners," they say. They kept visiting the region till finally in 2010, when they met the owner of Saratha Vilas. They impressed upon him the need to restore the property. The process took 11 months and at the end of their labour, Dragon and Adment decided to live on in Chettinad, dedicating their lives to the preservation of this unique style of architecture.

While the architects have retained the original structure of the house, the guest rooms have been carved out of the main banquet hall and some open into the courtyard. The friezes have been painted in vegetable col-

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ours on Chettinad EGG PLASTER

with a mix of egg white and lime-

stone or chalk and other ingredi-

ents) and the original tiles have

duced in the neighbouring

men

been redone with cement tiles pro-

Athangudi village. The furniture has

been designed by the architects and

carved in teak wood by local crafts-

"Today, Chettinad is in the

process of being classified a UNESCO World Heritage Site as

the government of Tamil Nadu has

requested us to present Chettinad

Heritage Tentative List for India."

Dragon says. Chettinad was also

Endangered Sites of the World

included in the Watch List of Most

Monuments Fund, by a New York

organisation and a campaign to

launched in 2012, in partnership

with UNESCO and supported by

the Tamil Nadu government.

A walk around the village

reveals Chettinad as a colourful

Revive Chettinad Heritage was

for inclusion into the World

(the flooring is usually plastered

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VAHISHTA MISTRY INDIA



The Raja's Palace is a mansion built by Dr Annamalai Chettiyar, founder of the Annamalai University

GETTING THERE Karaikudi is the main town in Chettinad and connected by rail and road It's about 100 km from Madurai, 90 from Tiruchirapally, and 400 km from Chennai. All three cities are connected by trains from Mumbai. You can also fly into Chennai and take a train or bus to Karaikudi.

TAY AT

Most private mansions like Saratha Vilas have been converted into hotels or offer bed and breakfast facili ties. In Saratha Vilas, a room per night would vary between Rs 6,500-Rs 9,000. Other options include The Bangala, Chettinadu Mansion, Chidambara Vilas, Visalam and Chettinadu Court.

mosaic of arts, crafts, jewellery, culture, architecture and food. A drive through the villages which will take you two hours connects you to temples, markets, handicraft centres, local tile manufacturing units, lush fields and

brimming reservoirs.

Each house stretches for miles, sometimes filling up an entire street. Walking around, I see colourful facades with deities on their walls while an occasional statue of Queen Victoria stands in the shrubberv. Most of these homes have been given their celluloid due -Bollywood films like Virasat and Kollywood films like the Aishwarya Rai-starrer Kandukondein Kandukondein were shot here.

Dragon and Adment have also tours planned for their guests. There are day trips, but a minimum of two days is recommended. The region, as they say, merits a visitor's attention.

Besides clan temples, each village has a local Ayyanar temples guardians that watch over these empty homes. The shrine is surrounded by symbolic offerings of terracotta horses and elephants, carved by the local potters. They point to a once bustling civilization that's now wilting away from lack of attention.



BREAK

Vahishta Mistry, a 29-year-old marketing professional did something most of us have only dreamed of doing. He sold his possessions and set out to explore the world. Have a question for him? Ping him @vahishta and he'll answer them here

Ready, Pack, Go!

Going on a road trip is easy, so long as you are prepared

oing on a road trip is a romantic concept that most people want to

do but few end up embarking on, because the logistics are a bit

daunting - but from my experience I believe it's actually quite

Since this step will invariably involve a visit to the service center, get it out of the way first. Needless to say, a car being considered for a road trip should have no mechanical problems. All of the following steps should be performed on a car that is already performing decently:

a) Check air pressure and tyre health driving on worn or improperly inflated

SIE

tyres is the number one cause of highway accidents

- b) Check and top up fluids: Wiper fluid, coolant, power steering fluid, brake oil. the works.
- c) Check the air filter and replace engine oil (don't top it up, replace it entirely!)
- d) Make sure you have an emergency kit for the car - puncture repair tools; a good spare tyre and the necessary paraphernalia to change it; a triangle for signalling and a set of screwdrivers and a knife. (A combination knife / pliers set is best, it saved my life when my fuelcap cable snapped and I had to use the pliers to pry open the fuel cap - else I would have been stranded at a pump with no way of filling fuel!)
- e) Finally, on the day of your travel, wash your car and make sure you have good visibility!



Here's a square slot just for you

We're looking for strange and fantastic photos of our country. **Photographer Paroma Mukherjee will** handpick those that best convey that mood, and tell us why she loves them

Send your pictures to instagramformirror@gmail.com with your name, profession and a note on where and when you took the picture.

PHOTOGRAPH by ADITI TAILANG Television actor Follow on Instagram @adititailang

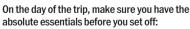


From a trip to Kashmir in February 2014

This classic, landscape composition is interrupted beautifully by the shikara, forcefully bringing to attention the barren trees that wait to be felled and sailed on the lake.

- ishly piled on the pounds. The bare minimum you need are:
- a) Clothes and personal effects preferea bly packed in a single backpack per per son, so that you can maximise on the number of things you can squeeze into the boot.
- b) A good tent and sleeping bags (or hotel reservations, but tents are just cooler)
- c) If you're camping (and you really should be) carry food, water and barbeque

G()_



- a) A good road map or a GPS receiver that doesn't need internet connectivity to function.
- b) Music or some other entertainment. c) Plenty of cash (in paper form, for tolls
- and fuel stops most of which don't ac cept plastic!) d) Food and water for the actual driving
- portion of the trip. A good camera to record the trip.

Of course, this list is a general one for all cars and trips — you might have some specifics that call for certain equipment or preparation, such as a drive through snow, or mud. You should thoroughly research your destination and make sure that you understand what you're getting into - but that said, don't overthink - sometimes, you just need to get behind the wheel and drive! and overplan -



equipment - including firewood or char coal

 d) Plenty of garbage bags – because litter ing is not cool and if you pack it in, you should really pack it out as well!

