



1. Saratha Vilas is a restored heritage Chettiar mansion

2. The *blanc mange* at Saratha Vilas is the perfect antidote to Chettinad's fiery cuisine

3. Tuck into an authentic Chettinad *thali* the minute you set foot in Karaikudi

Facing page:

1. The 1,000-year-old Brihadisvara Temple is one of India's architectural marvels

2. Thanjavur's iconic head-wagging dancing doll

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for Mrs Meyappan for a few decades, now dishing out exquisite banana-leaf lunches. Our spread for the day includes a local okra *mandi*, prepared using the water drained after washing rice, a Chettinad-style pepper chicken, and a sinful *badam halwa* for dessert. We're convinced that Karupiah is probably the finest exponent of Chettinad cuisine, but Mrs Meyappan doesn't agree. "Sethu, our cook at home, is the best, but he refuses to work at the hotel."

The concept of tea-time snacks, or 'tiffin', as it is referred to here, is probably one that's popular only in the southern reaches of the country. And to sample some in Chettinad, we head to **Karaikudi Annalakshmi**. This unassuming vegetarian restaurant serves delicacies like *vellai panniyaram*, a fluffy, white bread made with rice and black gram, and *kummayam*, a subtly-sweet dish made with lentils and jaggery.

Chettinad's other claim-to-fame is its hand-woven cotton *sari*. The number of weavers has shrunk by 90 per cent and power looms have almost pushed this traditional art to the brink. Still, you *can* find weaving units that have tweaked the traditional Chettinad colour palette (olive green, red and yellow) and use mercerised cotton to make the *saris* lighter



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and more wearable. The story in Athangudi is completely different; a surge in demand for Chettinad's glazed Athangudi tiles has led to a spurt in the number of tile manufacturers. You can visit one of these units, watch craftsmen at work and also order some of these handcrafted tiles that can be customised.

For a break from Chettinad cuisine, head to **Saratha Vilas**, an early 20th-century home that has been transformed into a charming boutique hotel by French architects Bernard and Michel, who are actively involved in conservation in Chettinad. Instead of aping the local fare, the duo has created its own culinary experience. Whether it's freshly-baked scones for breakfast or an exotic *blanc mange* for dessert, it's a welcome respite. The kitchen also recreates the recipes of Lourdes Tirouvanziam-Louis, an author and culinary expert on Puducherry cuisine.

#### WHERE TO EAT

**The Bangala:** 00-91-4565-220221; thebangala.com; Devakottai Road, Senjai; non-veg Chettinad meal: ₹1,000, prior bookings mandatory.

**Karaikudi Annalakshmi:** TT Nagar, Karaikudi; 7am – 10pm; snacks from ₹35

**Also visit** Friends Family Restaurant: 00-91-4565-236 622; TT Nagar, Karaikudi; 12pm – 11pm; from ₹600 for two