

# CHETTINAD'S TREASURE CHEST

DOWN SOUTH, IN AND AROUND THE UNIVERSITY TOWN OF KARAIKUDI, TAMILNADU, RATHINA SANKARI DISCOVERS MAGNIFICENT EXAMPLES OF CHETTINAD PALACE ARCHITECTURE FROM OVER TWO CENTURIES AGO. CHARMING ANTIQUE MARKETS, HANDMADE TILES, ANCIENT TEMPLES AND A DISTINCT CUISINE ARE SOME OF THE OTHER TREATS AWAITING A TRAVELLER HERE.

## THE NAGRATHAR OR NATTUKOTTAI CHETTIARS

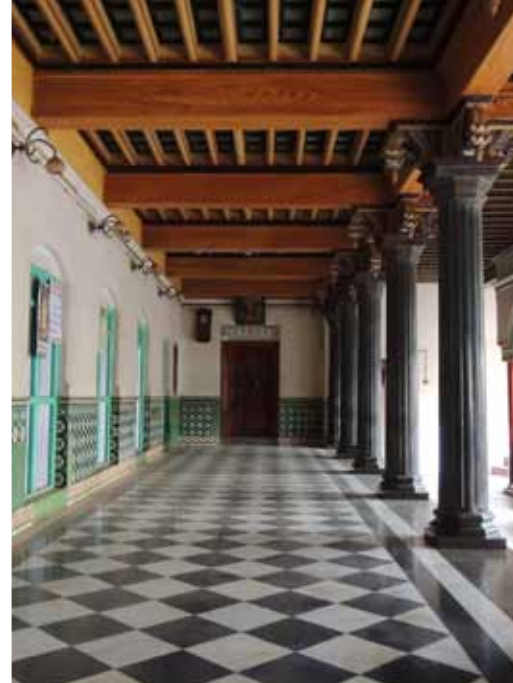
were once some of the wealthiest traders between Southeast Asia and India – operating in Burmese teak, spices, gold and many other precious commodities. Legend says that around the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a flood in the plains of Cauvery forced the Chettiars to move to Karaikudi, an event that marks the origins of Chettinad (land of Chettiars). The Chettiars grew to be wealthy bankers and traders, as well as extensive travellers. Their travels stretched from Europe to the far east, and they brought back not only ideas and inspirations but goods too. With excellent taste and an astute sense for quality whether it was Burmese wood, Belgian glassware, Italian marble, Spanish granite, Japanese ceramics, Czech enamelware or fine English crockery, they built their mansions in an incredible fusion of European styles and Tamil traditions.

Originally, a settlement of 96 villages, today only 75 remain in Chettinad. These villages are dotted by numerous temples, but there are nine significant Shiva temples, each more than 1000 years old now, each with a different Nattukottai Chettiar family as a principle patron, and each an example of incredible art and workmanship. Among these, Pillayarpatti, Viaravampatti and Nemam are simply unmissable. The temples of Ayyanar or the guardian deities are found in the outskirts of the villages with bright terracotta horses. The locals believe Ayyanar's are guards who ride steeds to protect the villagers. Their houses which are as old as 150 years, speak of a grand lifestyle, huge joint families and an era of rich customs that were religiously followed.

It was my curiosity about the art and architecture of this period that brought me to Karaikudi, and its few remaining but restored mansions. The first Chettiar mansion I visited had a beautiful Kolam (rangoli) at the entrance and a stucco work of Goddess Gajalakshmi on the façade symbolising prosperity. I entered the mugappu or the entrance area that has arches with their original stained glasswork from Belgium and granite pillars from Spain. In the old days, the verandah or thinnai was where



Spiral staircase in a Chettinad Palace. **Opposite:** the entrance and poolside at The Bangala.



guests were welcomed by the family. The ceilings bear designs in intricately-carved teak, satinwood and copper. A huge ornately-carved Burmese wooden door showing animal motifs leads further into the house. On entering the house, I noticed it was divided into four different portions or Kattus with valaivus (courtyards). Each valaivu was surrounded by rooms used for storage, prayer and living. Originally, the first valaivu was used for living, the second for dining, the third served as a kitchen and the last was for rearing cattle. The pillars of the house were made of teak and when I embraced one, my hands wouldn't connect, such was its size. The walls gleamed white with a plaster of lime, egg shells and gallnut that keeps the house cool despite the extreme high temperatures this part of the country endures. The mansions typically have high ceilings, more than 60 rooms, and vast windows to provide ventilation. This in addition to the average 300 tonnes of teak wood used in the homes, lends them a richness and stateliness both visually as well as in value.

Today, most of these houses are in a state of disrepair as many Chettiars have moved out. As I walked down the dusty streets of one such village, I found a house reduced to rubble. Several changes in ownership and soaring expenses have led to the houses being neglected or demolished and the artefacts being sold in the antique market in Karaikudi. Some are even given on rent to filmmakers. Today, the architectural legacy of the Chettiars breathes in only a handful of restored and well-preserved mansions.

One of these is The Bangala, a heritage hotel in the heart of Karaikudi. A 100-year-old mansion with a rich Chettinad history, it is the place to be when you want to experience authentic Chettinad food and hospitality. Vintage kitchenware given in a marriage by the bride's parents and rare black and white pictures of old Chettiar days decorate the spaces. Planter's chairs made in Burma wood pepper the cool poolside. A banquet hall serves an elaborate multi-course *yela sappadu* on plantain leaves and includes famous Bangala dishes like *Vella Paniyaram*, *Aapam*, *Banana Flower Vadai*, *Parupu Urundai Kozhambu*, *Pepper Chicken*, *Quail*, *Prawns Fry* and *Meen Kozhambu* (Fish Curry). You can also enjoy a Chettinad Cookery workshop conducted by chef Karupiah. Meenakshi Meyyappan, co-author of *The Chettinad Heritage* and *The Bangala Table* cookbook, and owner of the hotel, brings

**Opposite (clockwise) and this page:** A Nagarathar mansion; Granite pillars and long corridors with teak wood ceilings are the hallmark of Chettinad mansions; ancient temple with an ornate *gopuram* in Dravidian style; brightly-coloured palm leaf baskets; on display at The Bangala are oversized kitchenware traditionally gifted by the bride's parents; handmade Athangudi tiles; Elai Sapadu (Banana Leaf meal) in The Bangala cuisine; (Centre) a man in *veshti* (white un-stitched cloth wrapped around the waist).

authenticity to any visitor's experience of the Chettinad food and culture. Karaikudi itself is wonderful to walk around. In the summers, it's too hot to visit here but late winters mean a gentler sun and cooler air. As you stroll the streets around Kanadukathan, you'll hear the faint rhythmic sound of weaving looms. Karaikudi is famous for its cotton weaves called *Kadangi* and *Sungudi*. I walked into a house here to find craftsman Tamilchelvi working on a loom weaving the vibrant cotton *Kandangi* saris with bold checks and temple borders, a weave that dates back more than two centuries. Worn by the Chettiyar women without a blouse or petticoat, the *Kandagi* saris are twirled around the body such that the pleats are at the back. The cloth is thick, lasts long, and is yet extremely breathable.

My quest for other Chettinad handicrafts took me to the quaint Ariyakudi village. I found beautiful decorative brass and white metal (*villaku*) lamps that are used in religious ceremonies at home and in temples. Another village here is Athangudi, famous for its tiles. These are basically cement tiles like mosaic, but unlike the machine pressed and produced mosaics, these are handmade over glass surfaces. In the old days, they were mostly patronised by the rich Chettiars, as they were a costlier option. The Chettiars introduced to tile masons the carpet patterns, the easy to handle 10"x10" sizes of European tiles and glazed surface finishes of Chinese ware. To appreciate Athangudi tiles, it is important to understand how they are made. The mix of cement and coloured oxide in a liquid slurry state is individually poured into patterned moulds on a glass piece. A thin layer of local sand is laid; the tile is then filled with cement, sand and small stone aggregates or jelly. Each tile is then cured in water over three weeks before its deemed ready to be laid. Each one is made individually, building an amazing handicraft industry. In Athangudi, you can even attend a short course on tile making.

A short drive from Karaikudi took me to the picturesque village of Keelayapatti in Sivagangai district. Here, at the doorstep of a house that has been converted into a workshop, I could see a highly talented group of women basket weavers. Two decades ago, Visalakshi Ramaswamy, a social entrepreneur and author of the book titled *The Kottan – The Palmyra Basket of Chettinad*, realised that this Chettinad craft and community was dwindling. Today, with her efforts, the craft has earned a UNESCO heritage stamp, with five centres spread across the villages providing employment and training to them and marketing of the craft.

Not many Chettiar families remain in this land, but the heritage they leave behind is a treasure trove for a culture-loving traveller. +



**T+L Guide**

**STAY**

The Bangala in Karaikudi is an excellent option. The heritage hotel also has a boutique shop that sells Chettinad handicrafts like Kottan and the *Kandangi*. [thebangala.com](http://thebangala.com) +91-44-24934851/91-4565-220221

**SEE & DO**

Go on a Chettinad mansion trail: Raja's Palace and The Chettinad Palace in Kanadukathan among many others.

**Visit**

the antique market in Karaikudi to shop for vintage crockery, cookware, tiles, and other pieces from colonial times. Sandai, the weekly market in Karaikudi and surrounding villages would give you an insight into the local produce.

**EAT & DRINK**

Pepper Chicken, *Vella Paniyaram* are not to be missed when in Chettinad.