

A HOMECOMING TO REMEMBER

With three generations of travel companions in tow, **RATHINA SANKARI** sets out on a family reunion trip to discover the undiscovered village of Thandikudi in Tamil Nadu.

“

WHEN WILL YOU REACH Madurai, akka?” asked my cousin, Kavipriya, from Chennai. “I shall plan to arrive the same day,” she added over the phone. This trip was special because I was visiting my hometown after four long years.

I was born in the temple town of Madurai but brought up in Maharashtra’s cultural capital, Pune. Despite the distance between the two cities, I spent my summers and mid-semester breaks in the southern city during my growing years. Memories of playing on its streets with cousins and friends, and ancient board games of *pallanguzhi* and *paramapadham* (snakes and ladders), are still etched in my mind.

When I arrived with my teenage son, pre-teen daughter, and sexagenarian mother at my maternal aunt’s home in Madurai, summer was in full swing. And plans were being made to visit Thandikudi, a village in the Kodaikanal taluk.

So, one fine morning, a motley crew of 22 individuals spanning three generations boarded a bus to Thandikudi. Situated at an altitude of 1,500 metres in Dindigul district, Thandikudi

▲ From top: Thandikudi offers ample opportunities for trekking and birdwatching; the writer and her cousins hitched a ride in a pickup truck.



RATHINA SANKARI (2)

is just 40 kilometres away from the touristy Kodaikanal. The eldest in the group was 67 years old, while the youngest had just turned one. Three hours flew by as we reminisced about the good old days, munched homemade snacks, and played *antakshari*. Soon, we were on a winding hill road, replete with coffee plantations and lush green valleys. Thandikudi sits daintily in the lower Palani Hills, and is home to pre-Iron Age burial sites, ancient temples, and plenty of myths.



We checked into the wooden houses at Kodai Vel Farms (kodaivel farms.com), a resort set amid verdant surroundings. Kishore, my anaesthetist cousin, managed to arrange two resort vehicles for a drive in the hills. While my youngest uncle and aunt decided to stay back in the resort, the rest of the troop squeezed into the vehicles. I found myself seated beside 49-year-old lungi-clad Sukumar, the man behind the wheel. It was a rickety 1997 model of Mahindra Jeep, and I wondered if it would conk out midway. I eyed the other vehicle, which looked better in comparison to the jalopy that I was in. But Sukumar was confident; he stepped on the gas and rumbled ahead.

The jeep swerved through the narrow lanes of the village. If I extended my arm out, I could touch the walls of the houses. At places, it looked like we were driving through the homes of villagers as the lanes cut through their courtyards. We soon left civilisation behind and were surrounded by wilderness. There was no road ahead. Sukumar began to navigate the dirt path dotted with slender eucalyptus trees. Many times the vehicle came to a standstill on the stony ground. Whenever this happened, Aswin, my software engineer cousin, would start chanting “*thallu thallu* (push)”, from an old Tamil movie. Thandikudi, Sukumar explained,

▲ From left: Sukumar with the 1997 model of Mahindra Jeep; a wooden cottage at Kodai Vel Farms.

has about 1,000 houses. There are no hospitals in the neighbouring villages, and the villagers walk to Thandikudi for any treatment.

After a 40-minute bumpy drive, Sukumar switched off the engine. From here on, it was a trek uphill. The other vehicle was nowhere in sight. None of the mobile networks seemed to work, so calling them was not an option. All we could do was to start walking uphill. Sukumar had mentioned that the view would be incredible, so I pushed myself, and true to his words, a jaw-dropping view of the valley greeted me. We were at the border of Kodaikanal and Oddanchatram taluks. A rain gauge installed during the British era lay unattended on the ground. After walking around for a bit, we decided to take the road back to the resort.

Halfway through, we spotted the rest of the group stranded in the middle of nowhere. The hooptie’s engine had given away while moving uphill. The vehicle was now moving backwards on the incline with most of my relatives still seated in it. The driver and my uncle were frantically trying to stop its crawl by placing large stones under the rear wheels. After a few minutes, the vehicle was stalled. It was decided that everyone would shift to our jeep and be driven to the resort, and Sukumar would return to pick us up.

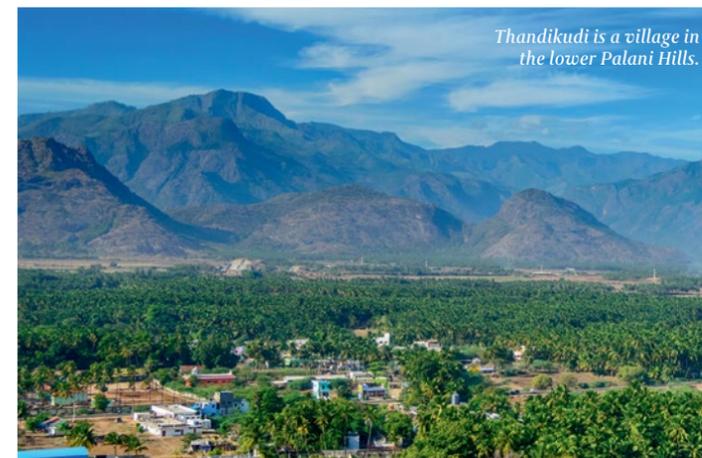
The troop left, leaving us in the company of nature. Time crawled as we waited for our ride. Aswin’s three-year old daughter, Srushti, exclaimed, “Why can’t we book an Ola?” We burst out laughing, breaching the silence of the hills. Eventually the sun set and the hills got enveloped in a shroud of dusk. After what seemed like an eternity, a pickup truck arrived. We clambered up to its dusty rear and stood for the entire ride.

After dinner, as we gathered around a bonfire playing games like the old times, I reflected on the events of the day. Our misadventures had made it the perfect family reunion. +

GETTING THERE

Madurai Airport is the closest one to Thandikudi. From there, it is a three-hour drive to the village.

Thandikudi is a village in the lower Palani Hills.



CLOCKWISE: RATHINA SANKARI; COURTESY OF KODAI VEL FARMS; SABARI NATH/SOOPXI/BETTYPAGES