



TRAVEL Going off track



➤ The courtyard of a mansion in Athangudi, Chettinad. A private palace, this too is occupied only by a caretaker and livens up during movie shoots and private functions

THE GHOSTS OF CHETTINAD

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

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As 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 Chettiars 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



➤ Around 75 villages make up the Chettinad area of Tamil Nadu. The Chettiars, a mercantile community, that used to live here once have migrated to other countries but their palatial homes — over 30,000 of them — remain



➤ 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



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



➤ The Chettinad style is a fusion of 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 vastu 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-



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

ours on Chettinad EGG PLASTER (the flooring is usually plastered with a mix of egg white and limestone or chalk and other ingredients) and the original tiles have been redone with cement tiles produced in the neighbouring Athangudi village. The furniture has been designed by the architects and carved in teak wood by local craftsmen.

"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 for inclusion into the World Heritage Tentative List for India," Dragon says. Chettinad was also included in the Watch List of Most Endangered Sites of the World Monuments Fund, by a New York organisation and a campaign to Revive Chettinad Heritage was launched in 2012, in partnership with UNESCO and supported by the Tamil Nadu government.

A walk around the village reveals Chettinad as a colourful

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.

STAY AT

Most private mansions like Saratha Vilas have been converted into hotels or offer bed and breakfast facilities. 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 shrubbery. 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.

BREAKAWAY



VAHISHTA MISTRY INDIA

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

Going 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 easy to manage.

STEP 1 READY YOUR CAR!



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:

- Check air pressure and tyre health — driving on worn or improperly inflated

tyres is the number one cause of highway accidents.

- Check and top up fluids: Wiper fluid, coolant, power steering fluid, brake oil... the works.
- Check the air filter and replace engine oil (don't top it up, replace it entirely!)
- 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!)
- Finally, on the day of your travel, wash your car and make sure you have good visibility!

STEP 2 PACK YOUR CAR

Knowing what to carry is vital: just because you're in a car you may be tempted to load it to the roof, but remember that your fuel efficiency is dependant on your total weight — and your undercarriage will scrape every speedbreaker on the way, if you have foolishly piled on the pounds. The bare minimum you need are:

- Clothes and personal effects — preferably packed in a single backpack per person, so that you can maximise on the number of things you can squeeze into the boot.
- A good tent and sleeping bags (or hotel reservations, but tents are just cooler)
- If you're camping (and you really should be) carry food, water and barbeque



equipment — including firewood or charcoal.

- Plenty of garbage bags — because littering is not cool and if you pack it in, you should really pack it out as well!

STEP 3 GO!



On the day of the trip, make sure you have the absolute essentials before you set off:

- A good road map or a GPS receiver that doesn't need internet connectivity to function.
- Music or some other entertainment.
- Plenty of cash (in paper form, for tolls and fuel stops — most of which don't accept plastic!)
- 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 and overplan — sometimes, you just need to get behind the wheel and drive!

INDIA ON INSTAGRAM



PHOTOGRAPH by **ADITI TAILANG**
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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



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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.