

# Where the past is present

**CHETTINAD**, AN AREA CLOSE TO MADURAI IN TAMIL NADU, IS HOME TO MAGNIFICENT MANSIONS HAILING BACK TO AN ERA WHEN THE WORLD WAS A DIFFERENT PLACE ALTOGETHER. **CHARUKESI RAMADURAI** GETS TO RELIVE THE PAST IN MODERN TIMES

► **OLD MEETS NEW:** Locals cycle past ancient Chettinad mansions in Tamil Nadu

**T**here is no doubt that time seems to stand still in Chettinad. It is perhaps due to the fact that many of the palatial homes in this region largely remain closed, collecting dust and memories in several shades of sepia. These mansions come alive to the sounds of the silver anklets of the women of the house and the booming voices of the men only once or twice a year. And when they do, it is like nothing has changed since the time they were built, over 100 years ago.

Barely 80 kilometres from the temple town of Madurai in south India, Chettinad is the collective name for 74-odd villages and towns, which were earlier inhabited by the Chettiar community. The biggest of these towns today is Karaikkudi, which is also the commercial hub of Chettinad. Apart from Karaikkudi, the overgrown villages of Kanadukathan, Devakottai, Kothamangalam, Kottaiyur and Athangudi have some of the most opulent mansions in the area.

Chettiars belong to a trading clan, with maritime ties once extending as far as Vietnam, Burma, Singapore and Malaysia. Apart from trading in rice, spices and silks from the deep south, they were known as bankers and moneylenders to the local kings and later to British Raj, flourishing under their rule. Chettiars invested their wealth in their hometowns, building large mansions. It always meant: the larger the mansion, the higher the status.

And they brought in the best from everywhere in the world: glass from Italy, teak from Burma, chandeliers from Belgium and terrifying gargoyles from France! They also threw in some Victorian furniture and Art Deco influences to the mix to create arresting architectural masterpieces.



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PHOTOS: CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

**PEEK INTO THE PAST:**  
 1 Traditional statues on the ceilings of Chettinad mansions  
 2 & 3 The exteriors of classical houses  
 4 A popular antiques shop in Karaikkudi  
 5 Colourful Athangudi tiles at the workshop  
 6 Tamil Chettinad breakfast at Visalam heritage hotel

The other highlights of these homes are the intricate woodwork on doors, and, then, the smooth, still gleaming plaster on the walls made of a ground mixture of egg white, lime, powdered shells and a local fruit.

Many of the art and artefacts from Chettinad homes have found their way to the bustling antiques market of Karaikkudi. This was my first stop on my day out in Chettinad, otherwise filled with plans of mansion hopping. At the line of shops on the narrow Muneeswaran Koil Street, I found decades of history carelessly piled up in multiple layers, waiting for new owners and new uses.

The shopkeepers were friendly and happy to chat about the stories behind their wares, which in a way told the story of Chettinad's prosperous, if chequered, past. I had set my sights on some cast iron cookware from the early 20th century, works of art to my eyes. Ramanathan, the canny salesperson at the shop, clinched the deal by assuring me that these utensils still carried the metaphorical scent of the spices used by Chettiar *aachis* (as matriarchs of the clan are called respectfully).

Following a morning of hectic bargaining at these shops, I headed to Kanadukathan for a quick tour of the sprawling mansion known as Raja's Palace. The streets were filled with scenes from everyday life in south India; children returning from school, women carrying plastic pots of water on the hips and men standing in small groups to

catch up on the day's news. Inside, it was a different world from a different time. This erstwhile residence of Chettinad's entrepreneur and philanthropist Annamali Chettiar was easily one of the largest and grandest, shining proudly even among a sea of such mansions.

My final destination for the day was the village of Athangudi, to see one of the most famous mansions of the dis-

trict. At the 'Periya Veedu' (literally meaning 'Big House') at Athangudi, the caretaker, under whose watchful eyes the house remained locked, opened it for me in exchange for a small tip.

After the dry and dusty landscape of the region, the cool and spacious interiors of Periya Veedu came as a pleasant shock. As I stepped into the first level of the house, known as the *mugappu*, I

could see through the long, narrow corridor all the way to the back door. "That opens out on the parallel street, that is how large houses in Chettinad are," said my guide with a proud smile.

The *mugappu* itself was stunning, with its low and wide seat called the *thinmai* running along the wall on both sides of the main door. This used to serve as one of the social hubs of the house: to welcome visitors, catch quick afternoon naps and hold intense gossip sessions.

On my way to the house, I had walked into one of the home factories in Athangudi, which produced hand-made tiles from local sand. Known popularly as Athangudi tiles, I had seen them in homes as far away as Mumbai and Delhi. Not surprising, since these tiles, which come in typical floral and geometric motifs, stay new and glossy for decades. It was a delight to watch the workmen fill the moulds with the bright paints mixed with a little cement to create colourful and intricate patterns.

Like most of the big Chettinad mansions, the Periya Veedu – which also sported these tiles – was built in the early 20th century. Several mansions across the region fell into disrepair over

the years along with the migration of their owners to larger towns like Chennai and Coimbatore. While some have recently got a fresh lease of life through conversion into luxury heritage hotels, others like the Periya Veedu have stayed afloat by hiring it out for film shootings.

Tamil filmmakers have set traditional wedding scenes in these mansions, usually framed within the large courtyard (a typical feature of these mansions) just following the *mugappu*. Open to the skies, these courtyards were used for drying poppadum and pickles, and were always the main site for family get-togethers and weddings. And branching off to a side were large halls (now again locked) – some of which can hold up to 500 people at a time – used just for feeding guests during weddings.

As I stepped out of the Periya Veedu at Athangudi, I craned my neck to look at the statues above the main gate. I saw vibrantly painted stuccowork of gods and goddesses, animals and birds, even British soldiers with horses and guns. They stood peering passively at the passers-by on the streets, as they have done for over a century now. Hopefully, for centuries more to come. **W**

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