

Storied Mansions 2+ DAYS

The empty palatial homes of Chettinad are packed with history and grandeur

By CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

Large verandas, pillared passages and rooms that can fit a thousand people are commonly found in the traditional mansions of Chettinad.

Over a century ago, daily life in the villages of Chettinad in eastern Tamil Nadu would have been very different. The sounds of women's anklets, the laughter of children, the aroma of freshly-ground spices would have filled the imposing mansions of Chettinad built around the 19th and early 20th century. The region comprises some 78 villages, dominated by the prosperous Nattukottai Chettiar community

of businessmen and bankers. Karaikudi is the region's principal town.

It is estimated that 11,000 such mansions still remain—about half the number that existed 100 years ago. They were built by men who once traded in everything from salt to gems, with countries like Burma, Malaysia and Singapore. Much of their profits went into building these grand residences, which used to be called *nattukottai* or regional fort. But in the mid-20th century, most Chettiar families moved to cities such as Chennai. Their palatial homes were left in the custody of caretakers, who maintained them for those rare occasions, such as weddings or Pongal, the Tamil harvest festival, when the family came to visit.

These days, the better-maintained homes see a smattering of curious tourists, brought by local guides and cab drivers who can rattle off names of movies which were shot in Chettinad, and actors who have graced the region with their presence. A few mansions have been converted into elegant hotels. Though these mansions are still Chettinad's biggest draw, there are other things to see and do once you are mansioned-out. The region is also just a two-hour drive from two of Tamil Nadu's great temples at Madurai and Thanjavur.

EXPLORE

MANSION HOPPING Chettinad is full of palatial homes so big their entrances are on one street and exits on a parallel street. In a typical Chettinad mansion, a sweeping path leads to the front porch, called *thinnai*. Then comes a large veranda leading into an open space that was used for weddings and other celebrations. A narrow passage from there leads to the next veranda and then another. Along the verandas are the mansion's residential and store rooms (over 100 in many homes). Some of the mansions have long rooms that run parallel to the courtyard; these can seat a thousand people.

Owners or caretakers proudly show off the fine carvings on the doors, teak pillars from Burma, marble tiles from Italy and ceiling tiles from Spain. The smooth walls are coated

of businessmen and bankers. Karaikudi is the region's principal town.



The Chettinadu Mansion (above) is one of several old palatial homes converted into a heritage hotel. Walking through the original rooms, iron-pillared courtyards, and large balconies, guests can get a glimpse of the way in which the Nattukottai Chettiars once lived: An old radio (top right) still plays the news and music every morning at Visalam; Some of the Chettinad homes (right) are so big that their entrance and exits are on parallel streets.

with a mixture of egg white and lime giving them a sheen that has lasted for decades. The design of the mansions keeps them cool even in summer and incorporates water harvesting methods created a century ago.

All Chettinad towns have a few well-maintained mansions that locals helpfully point out. Some of the more popular ones are the **Chettinadu Mansion** in Kanadukathan village (now a boutique hotel) and **Chellappa Chettiar's House** (also referred to as "the museum" by locals) in Kottaiyur. The **Periya Veedu** (big house) in Athangudi is exceptionally beautiful and well-maintained. Every surface in this mansion gleams, from the Spanish tiles on the roof, to the teak pillars from Burma, and stained-glass windows from Italy, and murals painted above the pillars. This house also feels more warm and welcoming than the mansion hotels. All these are usually open to visitors between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.. Caretakers often expect ₹50-100 for entry. Pallathur, Devakottai and Kothamangalam villages, all within a 50 km-radius of the main town of Karaikudi, are also well known for their grand mansions. Guests of The Bangala hotel, can visit the palatial **MSMM House** in Karaikudi, owned by the Meyyappan family. Karaikudi is also home to **Ayiram Jannal Veedu** (the house with a thousand windows) but as it is lived in, tourists are not allowed to



UNIQUE LOCAL EXPERIENCE

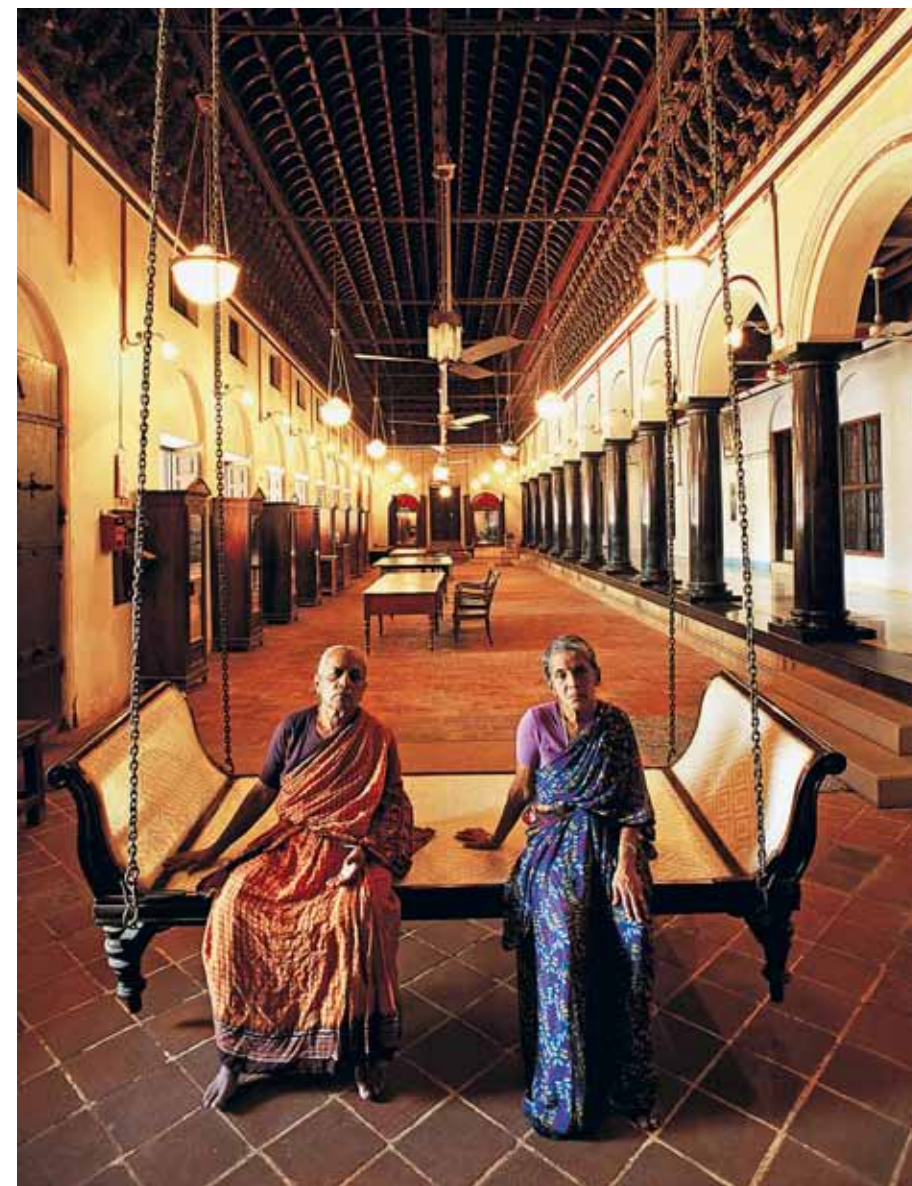
When in Chettinad, learn to cook the Chettinad way. Most upmarket hotels offer **kitchen tours, cooking demonstrations, and classes**. Chettinad cuisine derives its flavours from the judicious mix of several spices: star anise, cinnamon, black pepper, red chilli, fennel seed, and tamarind.

Visalam has an **open kitchen** where guests are invited to observe and participate in the preparation of all the meals of the day. Apart from that, there is a free cooking demonstration every evening at 3 p.m. where a signature Chettinad dish like chicken *thirakkal* (chicken in rich gravy), pepper chicken,



or mutton *uppu varuval* (fried mutton) is prepared.

The Bangala also offers **cooking classes** where 4-5 of their specialty dishes like tomato rice, prawn masala, pepper chicken and *urulai karuvaadu poriyal* (potato fry), are taught. Students cook (₹1,000 per person) and then eat their preparations (₹800 extra).



SHORT BREAK

► From Chennai



The Kovilur temple (top left) near Karaikudi has a mandap, or hall where public rituals are performed, in the centre of a pond; A woman in Kanadukathan dries whole red chillies (top right), an important ingredient in Chettinad cuisine; Caretakers often show off the huge keys (bottom left) which unlock the massive teak doors of these mansions.

enter. The **Chettinad Palace** (Raja's Palace) in Kanadukathan is another grand mansion where visitors are not allowed in; it is definitely worth stopping by for a look from the road (or take a virtual tour at www.view360.in/virtualtour/karaikudi).

When touring these homes, look out for **old family photographs** on the walls, the fading sepia memories of the mansions and the people who once lived there. Crane your neck up before entering to see statues on top of the main door leading to the house—from goddess Lakshmi and Lord Murugan to soldiers on horseback, these brightly painted statues were the pride of the house. Once inside, look up at the ceiling for the most ornate chandeliers.

BEYOND MANSIONS The hilltop **Thirumayam Fort** was built in 1687 by a local ruler, Sethupathi Vijaya Raghunatha Thevar. Apart from the cannon right at the top and a

fantastic view of the landscape for miles, the fort also has three small rock-cut temples, dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu. Try to visit in the morning so you can make the short but tiring climb before it gets hot.

There's also the fifth-century **Pillayarpatti Temple**, 12 km from Karaikudi. Venerated as Karpaga Vinayakar (Shiva-Ganesh), it is considered the most significant of the nine important shrines to Ganesha and Shiva to be found in the area. The side entrance has exquisite frescoes on the ceiling. The other temples are at Illaiyathangudi, Mathoor, Vairavankoil, Nemamkoil, Illupaikudi, Surakuddi, Velangudi, and Iraniyur. Each of these is a clan temple for one of the nine main Chettiar village clusters.

Shops selling **antiques** can be found on Muniswaran Koil Street in Karaikudi. Much of what is available was once part of the dowry of Chettiar women. Apart from this, there are

traditional vessels, furniture and woodwork from the area, and the odd quirky item like an old biscuit tin or gramophone records. Beyond the disarray in the displays, you may discover a gem or two, especially old, sturdy cooking utensils in brass and copper.

At the local **sandai** (market) one can catch a glimpse of everyday life in Chettinad. These markets are held on Mondays and Thursdays in Karaikudi, and on other days at different villages (check with local hotels for information).

At one of the many **tile workshops** in Athangudi, visitors can see how a basic stencil, and the clever use of colours and techniques create stunning floor tiles in floral, geometric, and paisley patterns. Tile-making skills are passed on from father to son and the superiority of these products is credited to the high quality of local soil and water. Again, a tip of ₹50-100 is appreciated.



DINODIA PHOTO (KOVILUR TEMPLE AND RED CHILLIES); MICHAEL MELFORD/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY IMAGES (KEY)

► Chettinad

It's possible to see local weavers at work and purchase stunning **Chettinad cotton saris and fabrics** at very reasonable prices from a weaving centre. The money goes directly to the weavers rather than through middlemen. The best options are Sri Mahalakshmi handloom weaving centre in Kanadukathan (94885 67554/9442047995; K.M. Street) and the weavers' colony just outside Karaikudi.

STAY

LUXURY Several old mansions have been restored and turned into hotels.

The Bangala (Karaikudi) is not a typical mansion. It was once a gentlemen's club (4565-22021 / 250221 / 250231; www.thebangala.com; doubles from ₹6,400).

Visalam (Kanadukathan, 15 km from Karaikudi) is a beautifully restored hotel, with eco-friendly practices. Visalam was a father's gift to his daughter, Visalakshi, and retains the spirit of hospitality that must have once been its mark (04562-273301 / 273354; www.cghearth.com/visalam; doubles ₹13,500; off-season discounts).

Chettinadu Mansion (Kanadukathan) is a popular stay option but food and service are often not as good as the others (*SARM House, Behind Raja's Palace*; 04565-273080; www.chettinadumansion.com; doubles ₹5,500).

Chidambara Vilas (Kadiapatti) is a magnificent mansion, but they don't allow walk-in visitors (*TSK House, Ramachandrapuram, Off Thirumayam Fort*; 04333-267070/71; www.chidambaravilas.com/; doubles ₹7,500).

Saratha Vilas (Kothamangalam) is over 100 years old (832 Main Road; 98842 03175; www.sarathavilas.com/index.html; doubles ₹7,060).

MID-RANGE

Chettinadu Inn (Kanadukathan) is a good, clean hotel (*Raja Street*; 94426 36124; www.chettinaaduinn.com; doubles from ₹4,000).

BUDGET

Hotel Subhalakshmi Palace (4565-235200 / 235201; doubles ₹2,100) and **Hotel Udhayam** (www.udhayamhotel.com; 4565-234068 / 233142 / 237440, from ₹1,350) both in Karaikudi are among the most popular options.

EAT

Besides the famous Chettinad chicken, the region is known for its flavourful and fiery cuisine, but most hotels will tone down the spice for visitors. Breakfast dishes include **paniyaram** (round shallow fried dumplings) eaten with a variety of chutneys, and **idiyappam** (string hoppers) with **kosumalli** (a local stew). For lunch and dinner, try **kola urundai kozhambu** (a sambhar-like stew with steamed dumplings made of pulses) and the special of the day (chicken, fish or mutton).

The Bangala is open to non-residents for meals (₹400 for breakfast and ₹1,000 for lunch; ₹850 for vegetarians; rates are lower for hotel guests). Book the previous day, and eat lightly at breakfast to do complete justice to



Chettinad pepper chicken is a popular dish that's found fame even outside the region.

the meal. The owner, Meenakshi Meyyapan, is well-informed about the region and the changes it has undergone over the years. While in Kanadukathan, try the food at **Visalam**; book a day in advance.

To eat with Karaikudi locals, ask for **Hotel President** (present at three locations in the town), where piping hot vegetarian dishes are served throughout the day. It is always crowded—try their **kothu rotti** and different types of dosa. A **panneer** (rose water soda) from the cigarette/drinks shop outside is a good way to end the meal. ■

THE GUIDE

Orientation

Chettinad is a collection of 78 villages and towns in the Sivaganga district of eastern Tamil Nadu. It is about 400 km south of Chennai and close to the temple towns of Madurai (100 km/2 hours) and Thanjavur (130 km/2 1/2 hours). The main town of Chettinad is Karaikudi, located on the Trichy-Rameswaram Highway.

Getting there

Air There are daily flights from Chennai to Madurai (or from Bengaluru via Chennai), the nearest airport, 100 km/2 hours from Karaikudi (taxis ₹1,200).

Rail A cheaper and more convenient way to travel is the overnight train to Madurai from

Chennai or Bengaluru, both roughly eight hours away. **Road** The Chettinad region is in the heart of Tamil Nadu and equidistant from Chennai and Bengaluru (a little over 450 km) on excellent roads.

Getting around

It is convenient to have a vehicle at your disposal as there is no reliable public transport (a cab for two days, including all local travel and airport pickup and drop charges about ₹7,000). It is possible to take bicycles from the hotels (at no charge) for short trips.

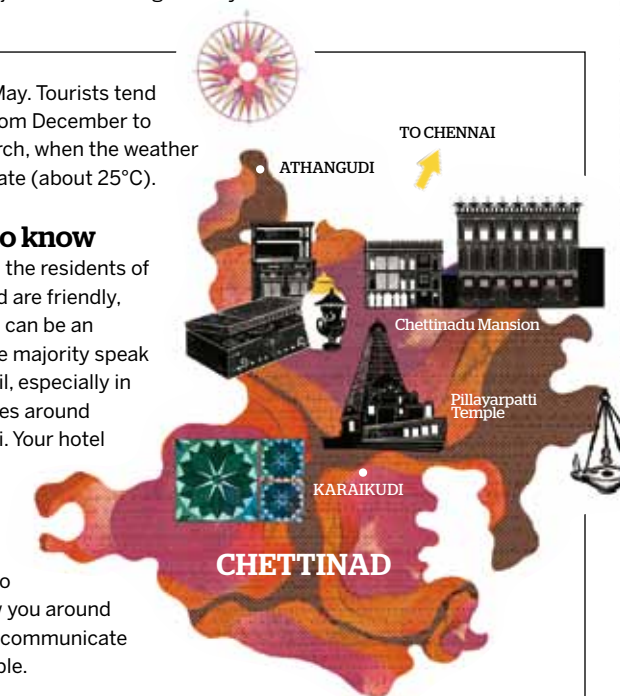
Seasons

Tamil Nadu is hot during most of the year, with highs of about 40-

45°C in May. Tourists tend to visit from December to early March, when the weather is moderate (about 25°C).

Need to know

Although the residents of Chettinad are friendly, language can be an issue. The majority speak only Tamil, especially in the villages around Karaikudi. Your hotel or resort should be able to find a guide who can show you around and help communicate with people.



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