

The hidden gems of Karaikudi in Tamil Nadu

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Image courtesy: ©Ami Bhat

About 60 km from Madurai, is a cluster of villages that is popularly referred to as the Chettinad region. The area has been an ancestral hub for the mercantile community of Tamil Nadu – Nattukottai Chettiers. The community relocated to this region post a massive flood in their original habitat. They settled into 96 different villages and travelled far and wide to bring riches to their homes. Eventually, most of them moved overseas, almost never to return.

Karaikudi is the focal point of 76 of these original villages of Chettinad. The town still retains vestiges of its original owners and offers an offbeat trail of grandeur, heritage and traditions to travellers in Tamil Nadu. Here are some interesting things that you can do in Karaikudi.

1- Discover the abandoned Chettinad Mansions

Be prepared to be dazzled at the very sight of Kanadukathan – an area near Karaikudi. Each lane is lined by palatial mansions that literally take your breath away. From their tall arched gateways to carved windows and elaborate terraces, there is plenty to admire in these mansions.

While most of the mansions are locked and can be seen from the outside, there are a few that allow the visitors to see the interiors. A walk through these reveal a typical courtyard styled home with the public areas like kitchen, dining rooms and verandahs on the ground floor. Made from the local limestone, Karai Veedu, the walls still sparkle – even without a whitewash!

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2- Explore the Athangudi Palace

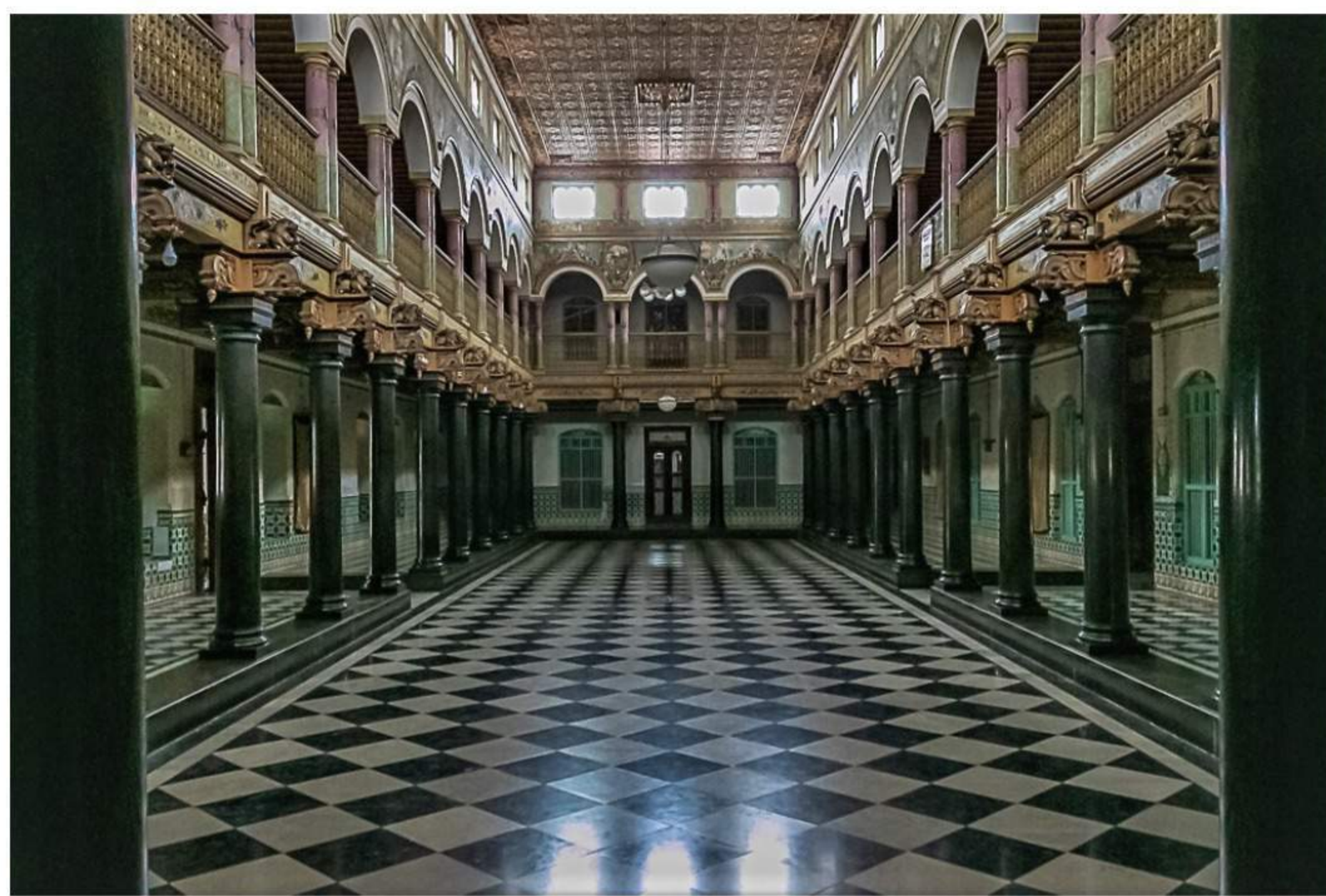


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The Athangudi Palace is your gateway to seeing the interiors of one of the grandest mansions of Chettinad. Be ready to be dazzled by the sparkling ceiling of the main hall and the majestic pillars that line the hallway. The stained glass windows emit a kaleidoscope of colours onto the floors – ones that are paved with the local Athangudi tiles. It will be no surprise when the caretakers reveal that the place has been a location for many Indian movies.

3- Visit the Athangudi Tile Factory

The colourful Athangudi tiles would be a familiar sight when one visits the grand mansions of Karaikudi. These are actually, hand-made and have a classic appeal, especially for markets overseas. The tiles become even more priceless when one visits the traditional tile-factory near Karaikudi. The pain-staking process of this heritage industry is definitely worth a watch when here.

4- Go on a temple trail



Image courtesy: ©Ami Bhat

Head out to the hills of Pillaiyarpatti to discover the ancient rock-cut temple of Ganesha. In the soft glow of the diyas, one can observe the unusual direction of Ganesha's trunk. It points to the right as against the commonly depicted left. The next in the temple trail involves a visit to the nearby Kundrakundi Murugan temple. Yet another rock-cut temple, this one is bound to awe you with the intricately painted ceilings. An absolutely unmissable one is the village deity temple – Solai Andavar Temple. Legend has it that the village guardian protected Karaikudi by riding on a white horse.

5- Tickle your taste buds with authentic Chettinad food

One might not know of Karaikudi but the same can't be said about Chettinad food. The lip-smacking flavours of this region have achieved fame world-wide. The spicy-tangy affair of the Chettinad food can be experienced across their meals – whether vegetarian or non-vegetarian. The palm-leaf meals with assorted curries, sambhar, rice and chutneys are best option for your lunch while for dinner and breakfast, consider the special dosas and iddiyappams.

6- Find the hidden antique markets



Image courtesy: ©Ami Bhat

Hidden in the main square of Karaikudi, near the Kallukatti Amman Temple, is a lane full of treasures. The entire street is lined with shops that sell antiquities that have been bought from the Karaikudi mansions. The variety ranges from antique locks to gramophones, valises, benches, bronze statues and Tanjore paintings – all at very affordable rates.

Travel Tips:

The Madurai and Trichy airports are the closest to Karaikudi. The town is well connected by rail to several cities in Tamil Nadu.



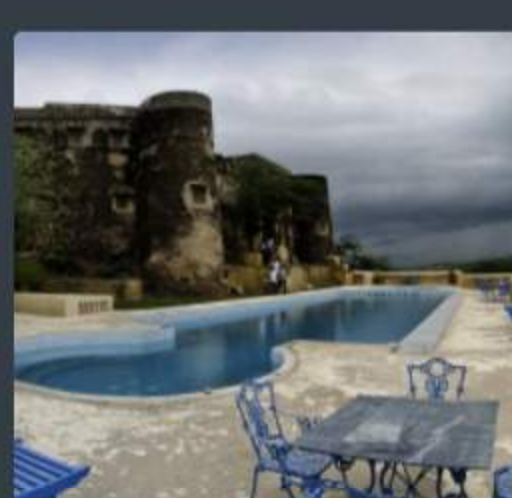
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