



HERITAGE

The homecoming

Tucked away in Kerala's verdant Palakkad district, **Amrita Bose** slips into a time warp at the Tharavad homestay
Photographs Shamik Sen Gupta



(INSET) PRABHAKRAPHY/GETTY

If a particular state in the country were to be credited with developing the concept of a homestay, it would be Kerala. The simple idea of living with a family with all the comforts one associates with hotels at a fraction of the price – and the added attraction of eating a traditional home-cooked meal – has now been turned into a successful business model across the coastal state. When we received an invitation to visit Tharavad (meaning ancestral home in Malayalam), a recently restored property dating back to the 1880s in the Palakkad district of Kerala, it was with suppressed

excitement that we boarded the overnight Kannur Express from Bangalore to Shoranur Junction. A 20-minute early morning drive from the station took us through long, meandering roads, amidst much greenery, to our destination where a grand main door, made from jackfruit wood with shiny brass fittings and giant knockers, welcomed us.

The term tharavad is also used to refer to the joint family system followed in Kerala by communities such as the Nairs, Thiyyas and Tharakans. Originally belonging to a Nair family, the property was bought and restored by Praxis-Institute for Participatory



Practices – a non-profit organisation that works in the fields of social equality and administration – to facilitate space for corporate training and tourism. Until recently, the house had a reputation as a prime shooting location for over 60 feature films, among them some award-winning ones like *Manjadikuru*, a Malayalam movie directed by Anjali Menon about a family's return to its ancestral home for a funeral. However, after suffering damages during past shoots, the property now wishes to focus on those looking to relax and rejuvenate.

Home improvement

As we took in our grand surroundings, we were told that the restoration was a painstaking, three-year-long process. As is typical of the architecture of a traditional tharavad, the two-storey house came with a nadmuttam – an open courtyard at the centre of the house used to capture rainwater, thereby creating an indoor pool during the monsoon. Low, sloping

tilled roofs bordered the courtyard, providing shade during summers; while a parallel corridor opened up into several rooms including a long dining area and kitchen. Our quarters downstairs, though cosy, were a tad gloomy with a heavy door that creaked every time we tried to open or close it. An insider's tip: the rooms on the first floor are generally blessed with ample sunlight.

A beautifully polished wooden staircase leading to the first floor was suitably atmospheric, courtesy an empty chair positioned expectantly by the window and a resident owl who didn't mind hanging out during the day. This floor comprised a long space which, the staff explained, once served as a dormitory of sorts for several members of the family; as well as a few small rooms. You could almost imagine a bunch of children running amok on the cool, red floors

during stifling summers.

However, it was the Nair family patriarch's room here that was perhaps the best suite in the house. Filled with sunlight, it was furnished with a long wooden four-poster bed. The reason for the size, we discovered, was that the Nair patriarch, or thampuran as

he's referred to in Malayalam, would have two of his waitstaff constantly seated at the foot of the bed to massage his feet. An adjacent open window offered the best vantage point to keep track of the comings and goings of the estate. We also

found ourselves privy to two secret entrances to a parallel dorm on the second floor, accessible only by ladders hidden under harmless looking beds.

TREAD LIGHTLY

Catch a Kanyarkali performance, which combines martial arts and dance, at one of the Bhagawathy temples in the vicinity during March-April

Step outside

There was plenty to explore outdoors as well. The lush estate was outlined



FYI

When to go

Kerala is hot and humid for most part of the year. It's best to visit during the cooler period (Nov–Mar).

Getting there

The nearest railhead is Shoranur, a transport hub connected to most major Indian cities. Tharavad is a 20-minute drive from Shoranur Junction. The nearest airports are Kochi and Coimbatore that's a 2.5-hour drive away.

Getting around

You can hire a car or bike from Tharavad for short trips around town. A good way to check out the verdant landscape of the surrounding village is on foot. Public transport (buses and auto-rickshaws) is available on the main road at the village of Vallapuzha.

Tourist information

www.keralatourism.org

(Opening page) At Tharavad, you are greeted by an imposing front door made from jackfruit wood; (Inset) Homestays allow you the opportunity to sample authentic local fare

(Clockwise from top left) The heritage property has served as a set for over 60 feature films

A priest prepares for evening prayers at one of the several temples in the vicinity

Temple elephants, a common fixture in the Keralan landscape, are often decked out for festivals

Three to try

About ten-minutes from Tharavad, roughly a kilometre off the Shornur-Kavalappara Road, are the stately ruins of the **Kavalappara Kottaram** (kottaram meaning palace) belonging to the Moopli Nair family, a local clan of Kerala. The architectural design of the palace also served as inspiration for the grand Tharavad family home. There is a temple with an attached pond at the back, which is still in use. While the walls are scribbled with graffiti and odes to lovers, the creaking floors upstairs lend a spooky air.

Located in the neighbouring Thrissur district, on the banks of the Bharathapuzha river, is **Kerala Kalamandalam** (*Cheruthuruthy 679531, via Thrissur. +91-4884-262-418. www.kalamandalam.org.*), a cultural centre and university for Indian performing arts, especially those developed in south India. It specialises in kathakali, mohiniyattam and kudiattam dance forms. Spend a day learning from the resident masters, attend a koothambalam (traditional temple theatre) or visit the on-campus art gallery that traces the history of dance with murals; a gallery dedicated to traditional costumes and headgear and fibre installations of kathakali dancers.

The port city of Kochi, a four-hour drive from Vaniyamkulam, makes for a great day trip. Head straight Jew Town at the old quarters of Mattancherry. There is plenty to see here – the most famous landmarks are the Jewish Paredesi synagogue and the Dutch Palace. One can buy ceramic cookware, chunky costume and silver jewellery, touristy clothes, art prints, antiques and plenty of spices.

by low-lying hillocks and has a banana plantation along with coconut, jackfruit, mango and neem trees. A little away from the main residence was a pool with a smaller house adjoining. We were told that the secluded home was used by the ladies of the estate to change and bathe or just to relax. Steps led from there straight down to the pool; the bathroom in the house was equipped with a pulley system that allowed the women to draw buckets of water from the pond nearby and bathe in privacy.

Migratory birds are known to flock here each year during March and April. Though bathing in the pool is allowed, be warned, the waters are really deep. A steep flight of stairs inside the little bathing house brought us to a lovely balcony where we could sit and read a book in peace for hours. There are two more pools on the property: one behind the main house that's now used as a fishery and a larger deeper moss-covered one where, it is believed, the estate's elephants were once bathed.



The simple idea of living with a family with all the comforts one associates with a hotel, at a fraction of the price has been turned into a successful business model across the coastal state

Kitchen confidential

No homestay experience is complete without an authentic home-cooked meal. At Tharavad, the kitchen turned out incredible ones, all prepared in coconut oil and served in earthenware to enhance flavours. The wait between meals became increasingly difficult thanks to the aromas constantly

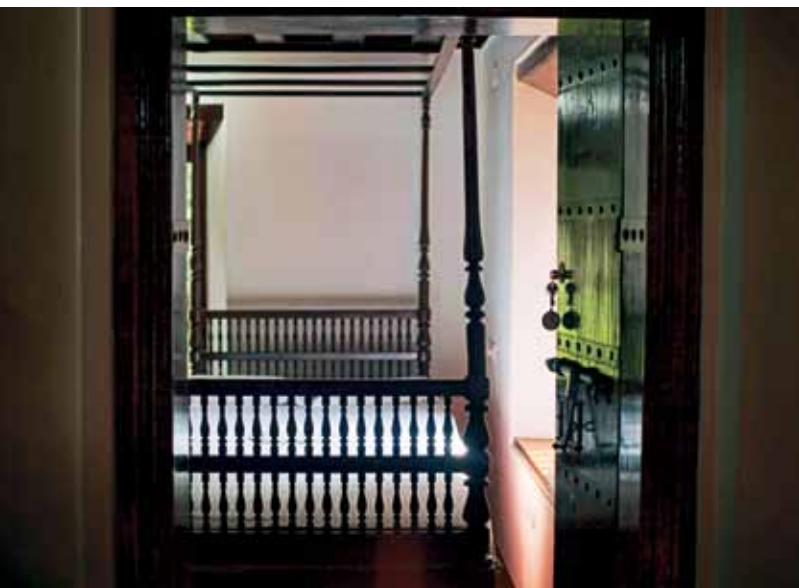
(Right) The Tharavad estate is flanked by lush, gentle hillocks

(Facing page clockwise from top left) The Nair patriarch's room offers the best views in the house

Antique furniture dots the home, adding to its vintage charm

No trip to Kerala is complete without sampling the signature chicken pepper fry





PAUL COWAN/DREAMSTIME.COM

wafting by. The staff was gracious enough to let us pop in for some impromptu cooking lessons. Between several cups of robust filter coffee, we wolfed down a traditional Kerala breakfast of spicy kadala (black chana curry cooked with roasted coconut) served with fluffy iddiappams (string hoppers). Lunch began with red parboiled rice served with a buttermilk-based vegetable curry and thoran (a stir-fry) made out of koorka or Chinese potato. A member of the tuber family, commonly grown around potato patches in Kerala, the koorka had a starchy, meaty and slightly waxy texture and was lightly

tempered with mustard seeds, red chillies, curry leaves and garlic. Mains included delicate country chicken tossed in the state's signature spicy pepper fry. Our evenings were spent munching on Kerala egg puffs – a perfect marriage between puff pastry, boiled eggs and spices – and beef fry spiked with black pepper and coconut slivers. Last, but definitely not least, our day was rounded off with fish curry infused with tangy Malabar tamarind.

Tharavad gives you the perfect opportunity to take a breather and step back to a time when life moved at a much slower, gentler pace. **E**

FACT FILE

🕒 AT A GLANCE

Considered an important trading hub, the town of Vaniyankulam is known for its livestock trading. Now part of the Palakkad district of Kerala, the area was once under the rule of the Chera dynasty. The town is also famous for its Thursday market – a tradition that dates back hundreds of years – where, one is told, elephants were once traded.

🍴 EAT

The markets along the Shoranur highway are dotted with roadside eateries where you can try the famous spicy beef fry and the flaky Kerala porotta. Sample a traditional Kerala breakfast of puttu (steamed rice in a cylindrical mould) and kadala (black chana) curry available along this

stretch in the morning till about 11am.

🛒 SHOP

The Shoranur highway has several shops from where you can pack kilos of tapioca and banana chips along with the regular potato versions. Don't forget to stock up on kodampuli, known in English as fish tamarind or Malabar tamarind, which is used to add tartness to

the signature Kerala fish curry. Ready-to-use beef and chicken fry and fish curry masalas are other good buys.

🏠 STAY

The two-storey Tharavad was built in the 1800s and recently restored to its former glory. Despite its simple living concept, the homestay offers guests modern amenities such as

Wi-Fi connectivity, a fully-equipped kitchen, satellite television and a media library. (Vaniyankulam, Palakkad District, Kerala. +91-466-222-6267. www.tharavad.in. ₹₹₹). Though the Vaniyankulam area is strictly a commercial hub, the picture-postcard town of Thrissur located about an hour and 43 minutes away, offers several homestay options. Kuruppath

Heritage Homestay (Kuruppath Rd, Mannadiar Lane, Thrissur 686001. +91-949-526-0000. www.kuruppathheritage.com. ₹₹) caters to the mid-budget traveller. It comprises five air-conditioned bedrooms fully furnished with antique furniture but modern amenities. It is also conveniently located close to Thrissur railway station.