



CHECK OUT

The Mangalam Heritage Home

Rural Tamil Nadu gets mapped.

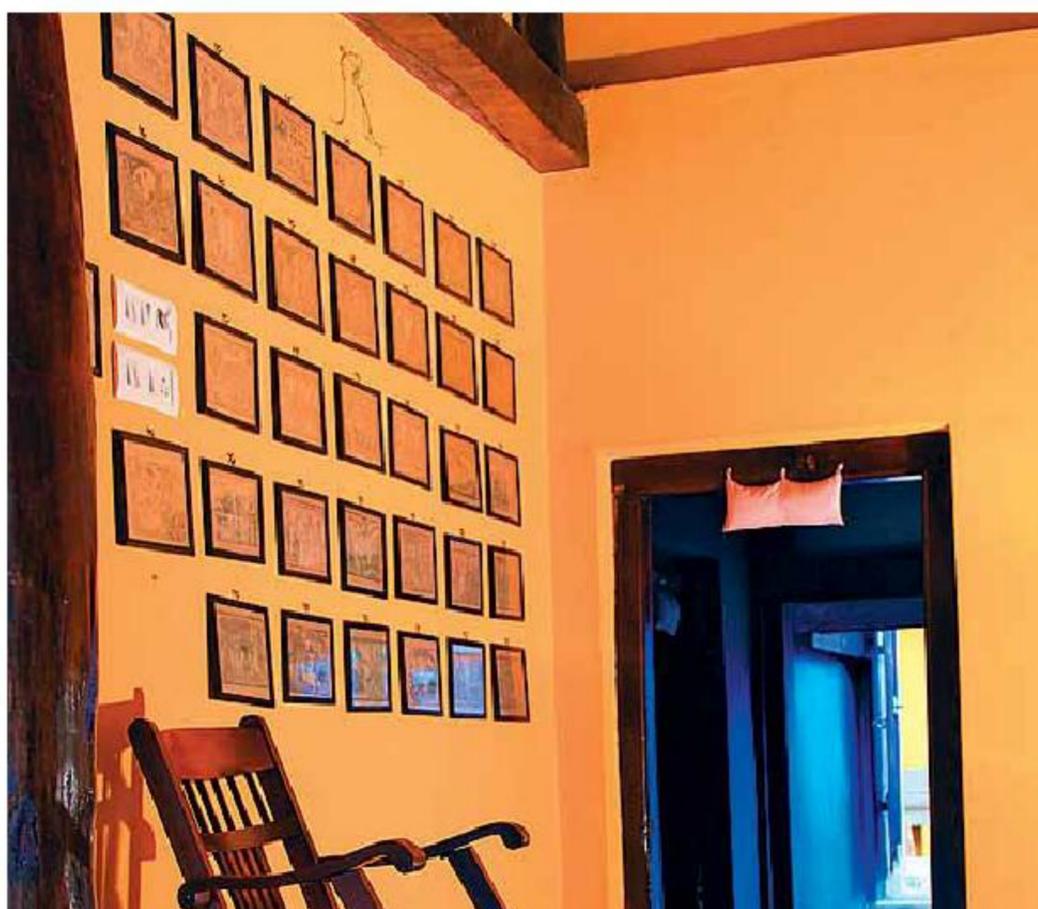
LATHA ANANTHARAMAN

A simple traditional home in the small town of Tirupugalur has been turned into a spanking new homestay. It is well off the tourist routes, and yet just 18km from the temple town of Tiruvarur in the district of Nagapattinam. The district is rich in agricultural beauty, green waves of grain, tamarind-lined roads and cool, dark temple tanks.

The Mangalam Heritage Home stands on a bend in a minor road between Tiruvarur and the town of Nagapattinam, on which grain-laden ox carts make a slow, rhythmic bustle down the roads and bring all traffic to a more rational pace.

From the symmetrical pillared veranda in the front to the enclosed porch at the back, the spaces at Mangalam alternate between cool interiors and sun-drenched courtyards. Ranvir Shah, who runs the Prakriti Foundation in Chennai, stumbled on this place, he says, when looking for a house that could accommodate scholars and others exploring the magnificent Thyagaraja-swamy temple at Tiruvarur. A driver discovered it and Ranvir committed himself to the purchase by laying down Rs 101 in the puja room of the seller. It's that kind of place.

Once he bought it, he was clear about what it would become. Travellers who come to these parts, Ranvir says, basically want a clean bathroom, hot and cold water, no bugs in their room and good food. In this place, they can experience what it would be like to live in a small Tamil village.





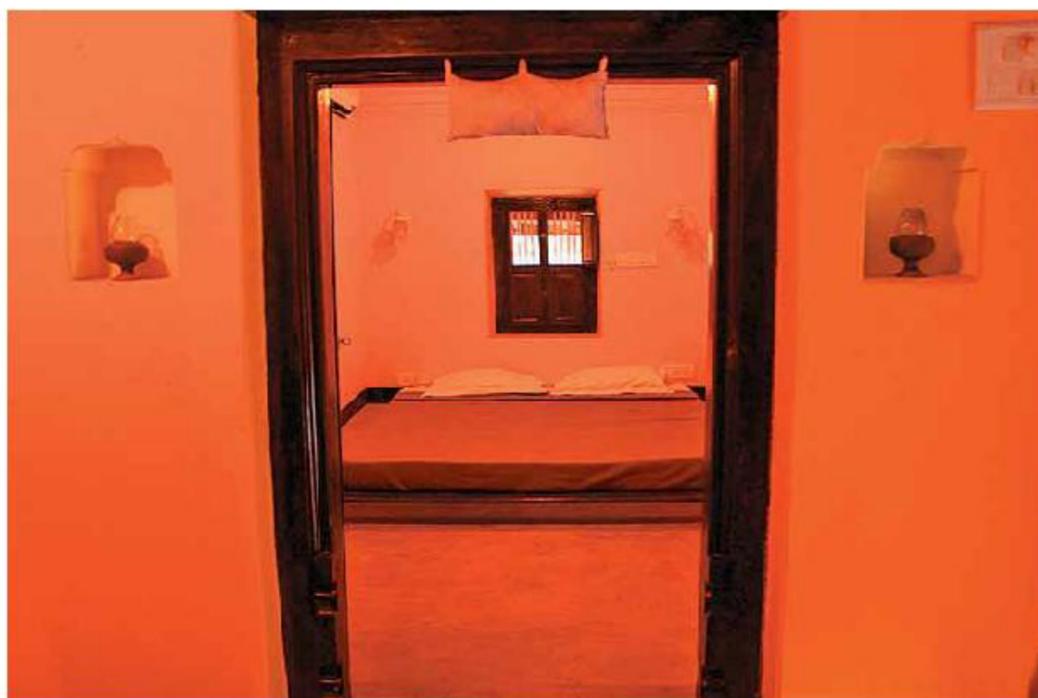
Simple, traditional Tamilian style at Mangalam

It is a consciously pure idea. But, as with anything Ranivir touches, it has been so elegantly executed that it has an immediate sensual appeal. Mangalam has the benefit of impeccable design inputs from cultural heavyweight Shanta Guhan and the architect Benny Kuriakose, whose work is most familiar to us from Dakshinachitra. The ceilings of the house are timbered in a way typical of the region, using unfinished sawn planks. The bedrooms are small, painted in the fearless and yet serene colours of this countryside. The baths have hand-beaten brass washbasins crafted in Pune, and brass pipes and taps sourced locally. Floors are of red oxide, stone and terracotta tiles.

The courtyards are painted in the colours of sun and sky, with glossy, tapered wooden pillars, perfect for leaning on while sunning your feet on the stone floor. Ornamentation is minimal, with some dressed stone from Mahabalipuram, an old icon or two and a verse from a Tamil epic. The eye is more often drawn simply by the play of sun and shadow. To one side of the large courtyard is the dining area, and a group of us who visited one afternoon were treated to a vegetarian feast on banana leaves. The meals here are

always home-style and vegetarian, and every detail of that meal was perfect, not least the tamarind symphony that goes by the name of kaara-kuzhambu. The smaller courtyards have just a suggestion of a garden, with small trees, a well and a stone trough that has been turned into a sink.

Arun Kumar and his wife manage the place and provide the meals, using provisions and vegetables sourced locally or in Kumbakonam. They live just three doors down and are always on call. There are four double rooms with AC and attached bath and an extra double room without its own bath. The spaces are all of an intimate family size and uncluttered.



One of the vibrantly coloured bedrooms

The property has just got started. So far the guest house has hosted a few friends but it is now ready for travellers who want an intimate look at the unseen beauties of Tamil Nadu. It's an ideal stop on a driving holiday or you can base yourself here en famille for a longer stay, visit the region's massive temples from the Chola era, and just immerse yourself in village life. Guests can look in on pottery-making and bamboo-weaving, and drive out to the culturally rich cities of Kumbakonam (35km away) and Thanjavur (80km away).

The ancient temple to Shiva as Agnees-wara, where 13 idols were unearthed some weeks ago, lies very near Mangalam. From the deep, stepped porch at the back of the house, there are views of the temple's vast tank and nothing in between but a narrow sandy path frequented mostly by goats. We spent an afternoon here, lounging about after a rich meal and listening to a scholar tell us about the music of the universe and the divine event that transformed it into the music that permeates this land. Our bodies were limp with satisfaction, but our faces shone with discovery. As I said, it's that kind of place.