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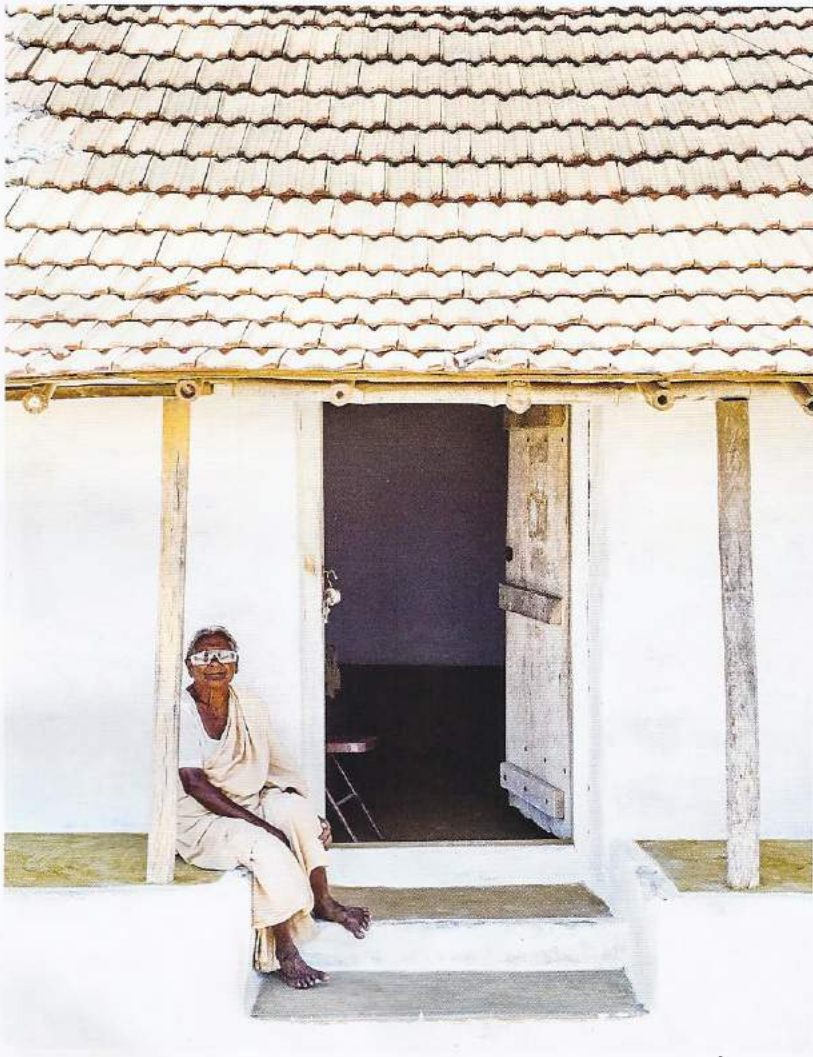




OLD-SCHOOL CREW

You all work somewhere on your year away, but what's it like to go back? Newspaper editor and Lucian Freud biographer Geordie Greig does just that in India's Tamil Nadu

Photographs by James Bedford





THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, aged 18, I arrived alone in a village in south India so small that it wasn't even a dot on the map. I brought with me two New & Lingwood shirts, a little black radio and a toothbrush. As tiny as it was (98 villagers among India's then 700 million population), it also had the longest place name I had ever encountered: Lakshminaikenpalayam. It was about 20 miles from Coimbatore, a city known as the Manchester of India, in the heart of Tamil Nadu, and was my home for 10 months, where I was a very amateurish teacher of art and English at the village school, Sri Ramaswamy Naidu Vidyalayam.

It was on a dusty plain surrounded by tobacco and onion fields with the odd wandering cow or buffalo. There were no telephones, little electricity, no fridges, one car (an Ambassador, proudly polished daily – but never used – by the most prosperous villager) and all food (vegetarian) was cooked by wood fire. I was the only westerner for 500 miles and was referred to by the children as the *velai carnun* (white man) with *tangam* (gold) on his head. They were generous folk for, while my hair was longish, mouse-brown would have been more accurate. We had curry three times a day. A white dhoti was provided to wrap around my waist. I took to the beedi to smoke and betel nut to chew. I went native. And loved it.

I TOOK TO THE BEEDI TO SMOKE AND BETEL NUT TO CHEW. I WENT NATIVE AND LOVED IT. THE REST MY LIFE UNFOLDED MORE CONVENTIONALLY

Afterwards, the rest of my life unfolded more conventionally: university, job, mortgage, marriage, children, school fees, climbing the greasy pole.

But so much stemmed from that first independent adventure, that time in Lakshminaikenpalayam, arranged by the gap-year organisation Project Trust. (Also on Project was Tilda Swinton, who went to South Africa to work in a children's home.) I experienced a profound culture clash, but I must have seemed as alien to the villagers as they initially were to me. They had never owned a television or a record player (Tamil films, travelling circuses or trance-like drums and dancing at night formed their only entertainment). I had never been in a place where a single track meant apartheid, dividing the so-called Untouchables or Harijans from the higher castes on the other side. Vegetarianism was the rule rather than the exception, and alcohol was illegal. As a foreigner I was allowed a liquor licence, so I bought and sold 12 bottles of whisky a month to boost my £10 salary. I developed a deep love for India, which I have since visited more than 20 times, but never until now have I been back to my school.

Today, as I returned to tour Tamil Nadu and show my wife where I had lived, much had changed as well as much being the same. We landed at Coimbatore airport and were met by SP Subramanian, the school's basketball coach and PE teacher, who had been my stalwart friend all those years ago, introducing me

Clockwise from left: Visalam hotel, Kanadukathan; the Oberoi Trident, Chennai; Chettinadu Mansion, Karaikudi; a house outside Lakshminaikenpalayam; the dining room at Rajakkad Estate; Raman the laundryman. Previous pages: a truck in Lakshminaikenpalayam; pupils at Sri Ramaswamy Naidu Vidyalayam school



to goat curry, forcing me to try to learn the language and helping me to adapt from the English shires. It was like re-meeting India's Mr Chips. His moustache and hair were now snow white, but apart from that he was exactly the same. 'Wanakam! Sapadajah? (How are you? Have you eaten?),' he asked and immediately I was back into my broken Tamil. And so to the school, winding our way across the plains to the village, which was almost freakily unchanged. Sivakami, the tea lady, asked me where I had been. Her prices had risen from 30 paise a cup to eight rupees. The *dhobi* (laundryman) Raman and his wife, Sarawaysi, were still working away. The sweeper, Vellingiri, who had kept my cell-like room clean, was still there. The children at the school had, of course, all grown up and gone. And some had gone far. S Balasubramaniam, then 12, whose grandfather was the holy man at the one tiny Hindu temple, had always been super bright. He was now working in the USA. K Selveraj was now a policeman in Coimbatore. The school had expanded, and the grandchildren of the founder, Ramaswamy Naidu, a Coimbatore industrialist, were maintaining his philanthropic zeal, investing in computers and new buildings.

Faded blue airmail letters I had kept in a box in my bedroom for almost four decades added a poignant purpose to my return. They had been sent by pupils after I had left India. 'Thank you very much for the letter and stamps. I do not forget you promisly (sic) end of my life. With God's help I definitely come to your country. Please send my all respects to your family. Your friend S Balasundaram.' At the top of the letter is written 'God is Love. Trust in God.' They were little time capsules of friendship, which released memories that made me want to go

FADED AIRMAIL LETTERS WERE TIME CAPSULES OF FRIENDSHIP, 'WITH GOD'S HELP I COME TO YOUR COUNTRY', THEY READ

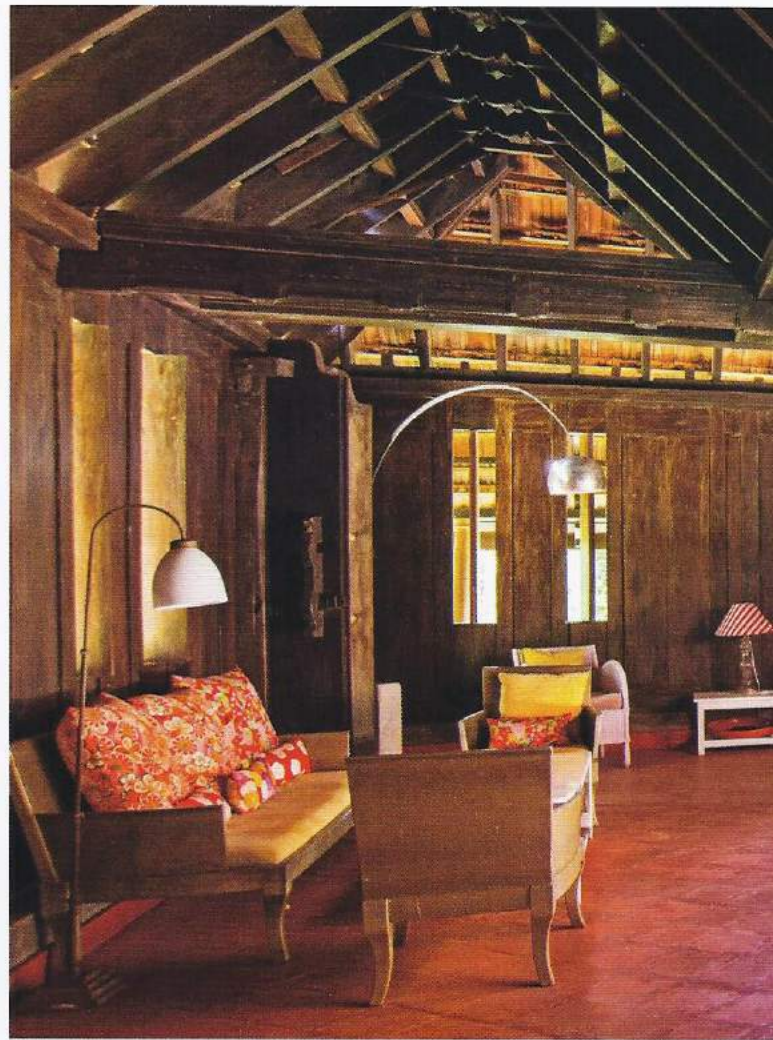
back. The visit was moving. Such affection from those who knew me. Some of their lives seemed caught in a time warp as I kept thinking back to my late teenage years. I was asked to address the children from the schoolyard, and the faces seemed to echo those I had known more than a generation back.

After our time in Lakshminaikenpalayam, SP Subramanian saw us off from Coimbatore railway station for our next stop, Trichy, four hours away. He had given us a splendid picnic breakfast for the train, but we couldn't help but be enticed by masala dosa (rice pancakes) with coconut chutney and tamarind sauce from wallahs going up and down the carriages. The curries in South India, served on a banana leaf, are different from those anywhere else in the country: hot, light, and, in my view, the best Indian food to be found. And so, stomachs filled, we set off on our looping exploration of the rest of Tamil Nadu, a more innocent, less predictable route than the well-worn golden triangle of Rajasthan.

In the jungle we stayed at Rajakkad Estate, an 18th-century house built in Kerala but moved bit by bit to a coffee plantation in the foothills of the Western Ghats by the British inventor and adventurer Jeremy Fry. This delightful place, reassembled around a traditional courtyard, was sensitively turned into a hotel in 2011.

The tranquillity of Rajakkad Estate in rural Dindigul contrasts with the streets of Tamil Nadu's bustling cities and towns such as Palani, where hawkers clamour for the attention of passers-by



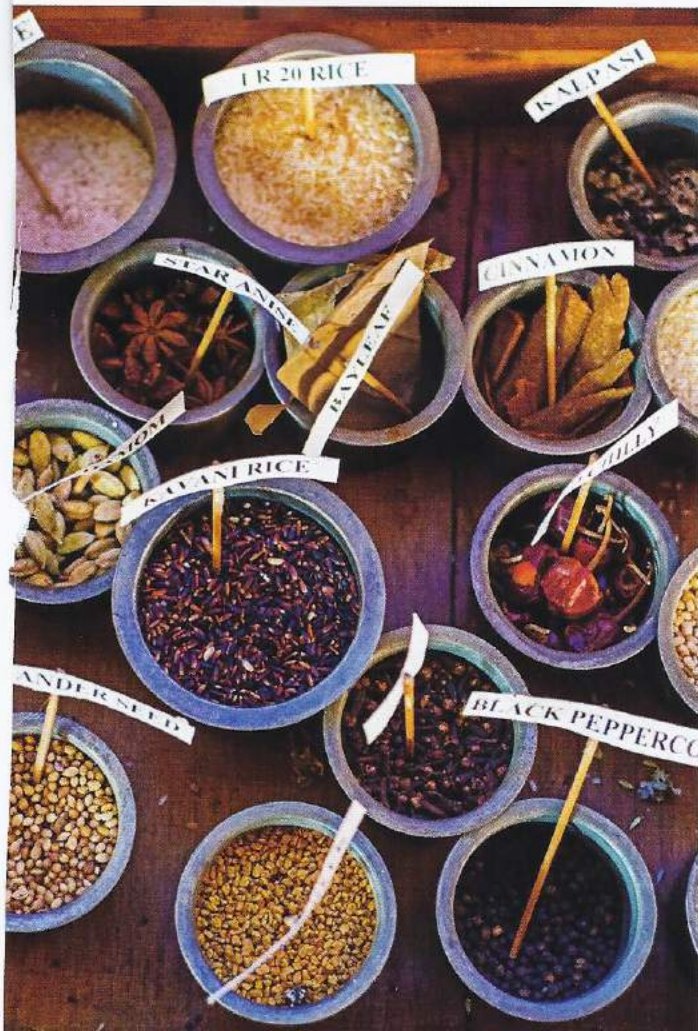


PILGRIMS ARRIVE,
SHOPPERS GATHER,
SELLERS SHAKE THEIR
BRACELETS AND
PARROTS OFFER TO
TELL YOUR FORTUNE





Clockwise from left, a portrait of the owner at the Chettinadu Mansion, Karaikudi; an array of spices at Visalam hotel in Kanadukathan; the Kapaleeshwarar Temple in Chennai



A sign in the room warns that clothes are cleaned by being pummelled on a rock in the river. The food is as organic as you can get. Yoga and head massages are provided, as is a hammock outside your room. The gardens are lush with jackfruit, papaya and avocado trees. This is the country at its most tranquil; a chance to rest easy from the rub and rhythm of chaotic India, the only sound being the beak-on-bark rattle of a woodpecker. People come here to soak up the peace; there is little else to do except for hillside walks through the forests, past thundering waterfalls. It feels like somewhere Mowgli might have re-entered the human race after bonding with Baloo.

We then moved eastwards. When I was first in Tamil Nadu all those years ago, I travelled everywhere by rickety bus. Once I embarked on a 14-hour journey with Tamil music blaring, we slept in the bus, me and two other teachers and 35 schoolchildren, and survived on food from roadside cafés. This time, in soft middle age, I had hired a car and driver. Jose, a Catholic from Kerala, was entrepreneurial India personified. He bought a learn-German CD at the tea stall on our way to see the lost mansions of the south. We were heading to Chettinad, once a bubble of 19th-century banking wealth, with some 22,000 grand wedding-cake villas in one small area. Ramu, guest manager at the Visalam hotel in Kanadukathan, invited me on an early-morning bicycle ride to see wild peacocks. Afterwards, he asked if I would like to have tea at his home. I politely said yes, expecting a modest bungalow, but instead we went to an 18th-century architectural jewel with three courtyards, carved columns and a princely façade – all this on a dusty, semi-paved road, past a half-full water tank. And everywhere a gentle air of slow leisure. Our hotel itself was another such house. Art Deco in style, with high ceilings and long corridors. With its swimming pool and shady colonnades, it was a throwback to grand living, and yet had that thrilling sense of not having been touched by developers.

From Chettinad we wound our way through paddy fields, past scenes of ploughmen and buffaloes at work, to Madurai, a lively place where everything revolves around the big daddy of Hindu temples, the Great Temple of Meenakshi-Sundareswarar, tall and multi-coloured as a packet of liquorice allsorts. The second largest city in Tamil Nadu, Madurai was built on trade in pearls, silks and spices dating back to 300BC. Our hotel, the Gateway, is set above the sprawl on a high slope with a sweeping panorama of the rooftops. Bollywood music drifts in over the houses, parrots offer to tell your fortune and sari-clad street sellers shake their silver ankle bracelets. Pilgrims arrive, shoppers gather, millions of Indians amass in the streets. It is strange being back in a country where the senses, smells and feel of the place are so familiar. The hustle and bustle, heat and dust, exoticism and intoxicating optimism, all entangle in my memory. It's hard to believe that 35 years have passed. Coming back has been like entering my own Tamil Tardis.

Ampersand Travel (+44 20 7819 9770; www.ampersandtravel.com) offers a 10-night trip from £2,482 per person, with three nights at The Leela Palace in Chennai, two at Palais de Mahe in Pondicherry, two at Rajakkad Estate in Dindigul, one at Taj Gateway in Madurai and two at Visalam in Chettinad, including flights, private car, private guides and breakfast