



# A Journey to the Temples of Kerala

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PVSM, AVSM, VSM

*To my Wife, for patiently listening,  
To my daughter, for compiling,  
To my granddaughter, for constantly Inspiring*

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## **Forward**

To the average Malayali, the day used to begin with a dip in the Temple tank. With wet mundu and bare chested, he used to offer his prayers to the Almighty. After that, breakfast and then off for the daily work.

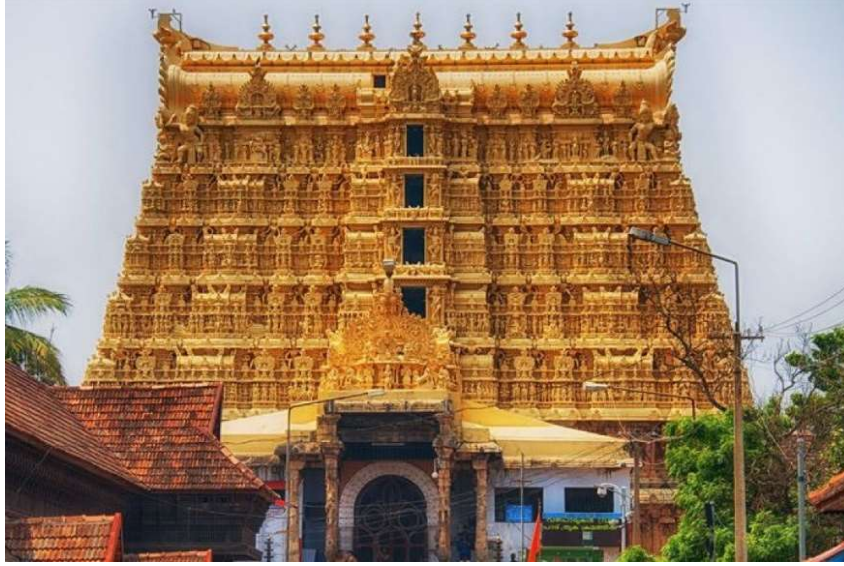
The names of Gods were taken often, and particularly so, when in trouble of any sort, which was quite often.

The Gods were witness to major events in one's life, like marriages, annaprasanam etc. Despite the advent of communism and atheism, this attachment to the Temple prevailed. Some of them took their Gods to other places and, in many cases, even abroad.

Gradually the Temple, from a place of worship, became a social and cultural gathering place. In my own way, I will try and write some lines about temples in Kerala. Much of it is what I have read and heard, some which I have experienced.

-KR Nair

## Sree Padmanabha Kshetram, Thiruvananthapuram



In the early and mid-twentieth century, poor Brahmins, orphans and widows used to go to Trivandrum for free meals. They were given two meals free in uttupuras. The most famous uttupura was the one in the Padmanabha Kshetram.

The meals used to be pretty heavy. On the lighter side, a famous Malayalam poet, Kunchan Nambiar once satirized

"He pulverizes two whole baskets of pappadams,  
And mixes it well with two whole baskets of bananas,  
And kneads it to paste like country cement,  
Eats all he can,  
Leaves all he can't,  
The way he gorges,  
Will make one's gorge rise"

The history of the Padmanabha Kshetram is intrinsically linked to the famous Marthanda Varma, who surrendered all his wealth to Lord Padmanabha, and thereafter ruled only on His name. Uttupuras have become a thing of the past. Many of the cauldrons, which required elephants to lift, have been sold off. Some can still be seen in the Temple.

The Temple is a landmark in the city of Trivandrum. The very name of the city was derived from Ananta, the serpent on which God rested.





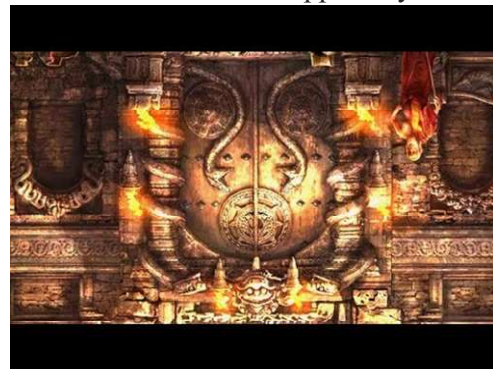
The Darshan of the Deity is from three doors. The Face on the south side, the sacred Feet on the north side and the Navel in the middle from where Brahma appears. The idol is made of 12008 Saligram stones, then covered entirely with gold, and then with an Ayurvedic adhesive. So, no abhishekams are done on the main idol, but on another smaller

idol kept there. In fact, near the foot of the Lord you can see the gold visible because the paste has worn out.

The architecture of the Temple is unbelievable. Did you know that the temple flag staff, built of special teak, later encased in gold, came from a site 50 km away, without touching the ground, on elephants? The famous corridor surrounding the main shrine, took 4000 masons, 6000 labourers, 100 elephants, 7 months to be completed. The mandapam in front of the idol was built from a single stone, granite 2.5 feet thick and 20 feet square. The Temple has preserved the best in Kerala stone architecture. The Temple grounds cover an area of about 7 acres.

There are two festival seasons in the Temple. One in March/April and the other in September/October. Both are ten-day festivals beginning with flag hoisting and ending with Pallivetta (hunt) on the ninth day and Arattu on the tenth day. On the last day the Lord is given a ritual bath in the sea near Shankumugham beach

The Temple is considered to be very rich with six secret vaults. They are called A, B, C, D, E, F vaults. Only the B vault has never been opened. The door of the vault is supposedly sealed and guarded by poisonous snakes. The door has images of snakes and Yakshi on it. Many years back, when an attempt was being made to open this door, loud sounds of waves were heard, and the attempt was given up.



How did so much treasure come there? I must, at this stage, tell you a little anecdote. As a young boy, I was visiting the Temple one day, when the authorities asked us to vacate. The Maharaja had come for his daily prayer. We stood outside. After the prayers, the Maharaja came and washed his feet before leaving the Temple for his abode. Since this was a bit peculiar, we asked why? We were told that the Royal family took care that not even a speck of temple sand is taken away from the Temple. This spirit of the Royal family ensured that all wealth collected remained in the possession of the Lord. Recently the Supreme Court has decreed that the ownership of Padmanabha Kshetram rests with the Royal family.

When you get a chance, do visit this great temple and pay obeisance to the Lord.

## Mannarsala-Temple of Snakes



Snake worship goes back to antiquity, and in Kerala, it continues as live tradition. In olden days, in every house, the SouthWest corner was set apart as Sarpakavu, the snake shrine. Their worship was considered essential to the well-being and prosperity of the family.

When Parasurama got the first Aryan colonists, they found the land inhospitable. Then the Nagas came and occupied the land. The Aryans came again and then waged war against the Nagas. At that time, it was decided to set apart a corner of their abode for the serpent gods.

At one time there were 15000 serpent groves in the Travancore and Cochin states. One famous one is the one at Mannarsala, very close to Haripad, near Allapuzha. The Temple is located in a huge grove covering an area of 16 acres. There are thousands of snakes of granite, many live ones; and the main temple has two idols, one of Nagaraja, the serpent king and the other of Sarpayakshi, the serpent queen. On the north side is an Illam, house where stays the oldest female member of a family. She is called Nambiathy or Walliemma. Legend goes that this family was spared when the forest was set afire by Arjuna.

The head priestess of the Temple is Walliemma, who is sworn to chastity, and must leave her husband. She has to stay in this house, and even if she goes out, she has to come back before dark. Only she has access to the cellar, where the serpent king lives. On most days she does the pujas, but on some days the male priests also do the pujas.

There is an interesting folklore here. It is said that when a child is born into this family, the child is placed on a banana leaf, and the Wallieamma calls out 'Unni'. The serpents come out and go near the child, and then leave, as blessing the new born.

Surprisingly, a number of Muslims and Christians also visit this shrine. In fact, the mandapam opposite the main temple was donated by a Christian gentleman, as a Thanksgiving for fulfilled wishes.

The Temple festival falls on the Ayilyam star of Thula month, that is October-November. Offerings of gold, silver, salt etc are made by the devotees. During this festival the serpent gods are taken in procession from the Temple to the Illam, where offerings of milk, flour, turmeric and boiled rice are made. One of the peculiar offering made by childless couples, in this temple, is the uruli, a small bell- metal vessel.

Today, when we see snakes, we feel a sense of revulsion. Yet, they are sacred and many offer prayers to the serpent gods. Snakes are, of course, linked to Lord Shiva. Surprisingly, they are also linked to fertility, and many temples have provision for pujas to serpents by childless couples.

They say that when Parushuram created the land of Kerala, the soil was not fertile and extremely brackish. He prayed to Nagaraj, and the soil was injected with snake poison to make it fertile, which is today responsible for all the greenery.





## Sabarimala Swamy Ayappan



As the rains subside, the green fields, valleys and mountains of Kerala echo to the loud chanting of 'Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa'. The very sight of men and children, fresh from an early morning bath, clothed in black, making their way to the temple invokes a deep, spiritual, peaceful feeling in our minds.

As the ocean was being churned, Lord Vishnu, in the garb of beautiful Mohini, appeared, to entice away the Asuras; and then Lord Shiva succumbed to the charms of Mohini. From that Union was born Ayyappa, hence, the name Harihara Putran.

He descended to the world in the name of Manikanta. Found on the banks of river Pamba, He was brought up with love and care by the king of Pandalam. The story goes that the Queen, who was earlier childless, did not want the Lord to be anointed as the king; but, wanted her own offspring to ascend to the throne. She asked Him to get leopard milk from the jungle. He dutifully went, with his bare essentials on His head; and came back astride a tiger, carrying the leopard milk. The King realised that this was the very Lord Himself.

The pilgrimage to Sabarimala is unique in many ways. First and foremost, is the vritham of 41 days, observing strict abstinence from mundane pleasures, frequently taking the name of the Lord. Total surrender to the Lord and seeking refuge in the Almighty. Remember the famous sloka in the Bhagavad Gita, 'Sarva dharman parityajya, mamekam saranam vraja' (forsaking everything, take refuge in Me). You also have to be barefoot throughout. The long arduous journey itself through mountains and forest is demanding. Nowadays three routes are available. The most difficult one is the trek via Erumeli. But, via the popular route, you could go by vehicle to the Pampa river and then cross the Neelimala mountain. You also have to carry the Irumudi on your head, the two compartment cloth bag, the front compartment for the ghee

filled coconut and the rear for the essentials during the journey. This is symbolic of the necessities carried by the Lord when He went for the leopard milk.

Also unique are the eighteen steps leading to the Sanctum Sanctorum. Only those who have undergone the 41-day austerities and carry the irumudi can climb these steps. The first five steps represent 'Panchendriyas', which are the five human senses. The next eight steps represent 'Ashtaragas' which includes Kama (desire), Krodha (anger), Lobha (inordinate desire), Moha (attachment), Madha (pride), Matsarya (unhealthy competition), Asuya (jealousy) and Dhumb (braggy). The next three steps represent 'Thrigunas' or the three qualities of Sathva, Rajas and Thamas. The final two steps indicate Vidya (knowledge) and Avidya (ignorance of knowledge). The pilgrim conquers these steps and then is granted a darshan of the Lord. The Lord Himself, is seated in Padmasana, facing East, with His left arm resting on His left Knee. As a Temple, it is not as vast, nor, does it have the architectural splendour of many other temples, but the religious fervour in the pilgrims is rarely seen anywhere else.



During the period of austerities, and during the pilgrimage, all are equal, all are Ayyappans, all look alike also. You have to surrender your ego to the Lord. There is no difference due to status, wealth, caste or even religion. One of the most ardent followers of Swamy Ayyappan is the famous singer Yesudas, himself a Christian. Before you pray at the main temple, you can pray at the shrine of Vavar, a Muslim saint. Pilgrims who pray at the Temple almost always go back for repeat pilgrimages. It is estimated that, before the women entry controversy and the pandemic, about 40 million people visited the Temple every year. In fact, if you go to almost any part of Kerala, during the season, you will see numerous pilgrims, going to or coming from Sabarimala

The Temple opens for five days every first of the Malayalam month, then during the Mandalam season in December, and again for Makaravillaku on January. The occasion of Makara Sankaranthi in January is considered very auspicious with many ceremonies, and ends with you sighting of the Makaravillaku, the celestial light.

The customs and traditions of the Temple at Sabarimala has, on few occasions, given rise to some controversies. The source of the Makaravillaku was once debated at length. Recently, the non-entry of ladies in their reproductive age was yet another controversy fuelled, partly, by a Supreme Court decision. But then religion is essentially a Faith, and who can explain or question a Faith.

## Chottinakara Amma



South East of Ernakulam about 10 km from the railway station is the abode of Chottinakara Bhagawathy. The Goddess here, is worshipped as Saraswati in the morning, Lakshmi in the noon and Durga in the evening. These amazing transformations are accompanied by different attires of the Goddess, white in the morning, crimson for Lakshmi and blue in the evening. The Goddess here is also called the 'Melekavu Bhagawathy'. This is the main shrine.

There is also another form, here, that of Goddess 'Keezhkaavu Bhagawathy' believed to be Bhadrakali, in her fierce form or Ugra form. Bhadrakali, is a form of mother Kali, supposed to be born from the third eye of Lord Shiva, to kill the demon king Darika.

There are many stories on how the Temple came to be there. One of the interesting ones is linked to Sankaracharya. He meditated in the hills of Karnataka and was blessed by the appearance of Goddess Lakshmi. He requested Her to go with him, so that a temple could be built for Her in Kerala. The Goddess agreed, on the condition that Sankaracharya was never to look back. After a while, not hearing the sounds of Her footsteps, he looked back and the Goddess stopped right there. This later became the Mookambika temple. Sankaracharya did not give up. After much pleading the Goddess agreed and came up to Chottinakara, where this temple was consecrated. This is perhaps the origin of the belief that, from early hours of morning, the Goddess would come and appear at the Chottanikkara temple. Then in the afternoon, she would return to the Mookambika temple.

The Keezhkaavu Bhagawathy shrine appears to have come up later. As the story goes, Kali came to the rescue of a Brahmin, who was being entrapped by a Yakshi, in the form of a beautiful girl, and destroyed the Yakshi.

The main deity is worshipped as Rajarajeswari. The vigraha, made of laterite, is said to be self-born (Swayambhu). The nirmalyam image can be seen in the morning, all other times the golden-hued idol is bedecked with flowers, garlands and jewels, always shining resplendently.

Alongside, there is a granite image of Vishnu. Hence the popular chant "Amme Narayana" or "Lakshmi Narayana". A peculiar feature of this temple is that the area around the pedestal is full of loose sand, hence water poured on the deity does not flow out, but percolates underground.

There is a Dharma Sastha shrine on the North East side of the main deity. Unlike Sabarimala, where the Lord is a "Nithya Brahmachari", here the Lord is a "Grihasta", has two wives, Purna and Pushkala.

The annual festival of the Temple falls in Kumbha, February- March, with flag hoisting on Rohini star and ending on Uttaram star, nine days. During the festival time comes the important day of Maghom star. Darshan between 2 pm and 8 pm, on this day, is considered as very auspicious for mangalyam (long married life) as well as for getting good marriage proposals for unmarried girls.

This temple has tremendous energy around it. Normally, you would see many mentally challenged people sitting around the temple. They would become agitated at noon, possessed by evil spirits. Many also get cured here.

A paala tree located at the Keezhkaavu is fully embedded with thick and long nails. It is believed that the mentally sick people get cured here, usually after praying at the temple for 41 days, by putting a nail here. These nails are hammered by the patients themselves with their foreheads. Guruthi (a mixture of water of temple well, jaggery, turmeric powder, chunnambu) pooja is a ritual done at late evening to invoke goddess Mahakali.



As a young officer in the Navy, I was, once, at the Temple with my parents. It was close to noon time and there were some people who were getting agitated. One of them was a strapping young youth, well-built and smart. He, however, had a vacant look on his face. As it became closer to noon time, he got up and started dancing and singing. I did not pay much attention to his song, till he mentioned some familiar names of Naval Establishments. To my surprise, I realized that he was a sailor, who had run away from the Navy and had some mental sickness. Rightfully I should have reported him, but, that day compassion overruled, and I left him there to get cured.

When in trouble and there does not seem to be any clear way ahead in life, pray to Chottinakara Amma, who will always heed the plea of Her devotees.



## Ambalapuzha Sree Krishna



Find a spiritually inclined Malayali and talk to him about 'Palpayasam'; and invariably the discussion will veer to Ambalapuzha Sree Krishna temple.

Located just 20 kms south of Alleppey, this Sree Krishna temple is believed to be one of the seven great shrines in the erstwhile Travancore State. These were Kanyakumari, Suchindram, Trivandrum, Haripad, Ambalapuzha, Ettumanoor and Vaikom.

Legend has it that, long back in time, Pooratam Thirunal Thampuran, the ruler of the area around Ambalapuzha (then called Champakasseri) was travelling in a boat, accompanied by a sage, Vilwamangalam Swamiyar, when they heard the strains of the flute. The music emanated from under a peepul tree. The sage realised that it was the music of the Lord; and he and the Thampuran, prostrated themselves before the tree. The Thampuran wanted to build a Temple there, which he, subsequently, did. An idol of Sree Krishna, in black granite was carved out for installation. Unfortunately, just prior to the installation, the idol was found to be damaged on the left side, and hence unfit for installation. The ruler was very disappointed. However, on the advice of the sage again, the idol of Parthasarathy from a neighbouring place, Kurichi, was taken by force and handed over to the Thampuran on Moolam day of Mithunam (June-July). On Thiruvonam day, in the 1613 AD this idol was installed in the Temple.





The idol at Ambalapuzha certainly looks like Parthasarathy, with a whip in the right hand and a shankha on the left. But the deity is worshipped as Unnikrishnan.

Interestingly, during the invasion of Tipu in 1790 AD, the deity from the Sree Krishna temple at Guruvayoor, was taken to Ambalapuzha, for safe keeping. The spot where the deity was temporarily installed is known as Guruvayurambalam. Even today it is believed that Lord Krishna goes daily, at nivedyam time, to Ambalapuzha for 'Palpayasam'.

The temple is also associated with the origin of the famous performing art form of Kerala – Ottamthullal. It is believed that legendary Malayalam poet Kalakkaththu Kunchan Nambiar created this unique art form in the Ambalappuzha Temple premises.

There is another myth associated with the introduction of *paal payasam* as a daily offering at the temple. The Thampuran (ruler) once borrowed some rice from a Brahmin. Thampuran could not repay the rice for a long span of time. The Brahmin demanded back the rice. Thampuran asked his minister to repay the debt, who managed to collect the required amount from households and asked the Brahmin to remove the paddy in one go from the place before the afternoon worship at the temple. The Brahmin was not able to remove the paddy. In the meantime, the shrine closed for its afternoon worship. Hence the brahmin donated all the paddy for making paal payasam. So, from this time this sweet porridge is distributed among the devotees. The porridge is golden in colour. The *paal payasam* is widely acclaimed for the taste. There was a time when the total quantity of milk at Ambalapuzha was procured for making payasam and the entire payasam was distributed free. Nowadays only a limited quantity is prepared and available for sale.

The ten-day festival commences on Atham day in Meenam (March-April) and ends on Thiruvonam day. The ninth day is famed for the Natakasala sadya, a feast for the traditional artists who play the percussion instruments.



The Ambalapuzha temple is linked with the Chundan boat race. This is so, because, it is widely believed that these boats were used to bring the present idol to the Temple.

Take the scenic coastal road from Allapuzha and drive to the Ambalapuzha temple. A really serene beautiful temple. Don't forget to partake of the Palpayasam. Taste heavenly, as they say.

## Attukal Bhagawathy



The Attukal Bhagawathy temple, one of the very old temples of South India, is popularly known as the Sabarimala of the Women. One of the arguments in favour of not allowing women of reproductive age to enter Sabarimala, was that, in the case of Attukal, only women were involved during the festival.

The story goes that Kannaki, the famous heroine of Cilappatikaram (the earliest Jain Tamil epic) after destruction of Madurai, traveled via Kanyakumari, stopped at Attukal, on her way to Kodungalloor. I am, myself, not aware of this epic, but some of my readers may be aware of it. Attukal Bhagawathy is supposed to be the divinised form of Kannaki, the incarnation of Parvathy, the consort of Lord Shiva. The Goddess revealed herself to a fervent devotee of the Mulluveetil family. The Temple was built in that consecrated spot to house the Goddess.

It is quite clear therefore, why this temple is such a harmonious combination of both Kerala and Tamil types of architecture. The image attached with this write up will highlight this combination of architectures. There are several beautifully carved figures of Goddess Kali, Parvathy, Lord Siva, and many depictions of Goddesses in and around the Temple. Presented around the corridors surrounding the temple, are the depiction of various other Gods and the epic stories of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, the "Dasavathara". On either side of the elegant front gopurams - are the icons based on the story of Goddess Kannaki. On the southern Gopuram, the puranic story of "Dakshayaga" is depicted in sculptures.

Located in the Sanctum Sanctorum is the main idol of Attukal Devi, adorned with gems and gold ornaments. Actually, there are two idols of the Goddess in the Sanctum Sanctorum. The original idol is preserved in all its pristine beauty covered in ornamental gold embedded with

installed stones. The second idol of the Goddess is installed besides the original one. Attukal Bhagavathy reigns eternally supreme and looks after Her devotees as a mother does her children. Thousands of devotees from far and near flock to the Temple with awe and reverence to prostrate, and seek Her protection.

The Pongala Mahotsavam is the most important festival of Attukal Bhagavathy temple. It is a ten-day programme commencing on the Karthika star of the Malayalam month of Makaram-Kumbham (February-March) and closing with the sacrificial offering known as Kuruthitharpanam at night. On the ninth day of the festival the world famous Attukal Pongala Mahotsavam takes place.

Only women are allowed to participate in the Pongala ritual. Right from the night before the Pongala day, thousands of women, regardless of religious faith, assemble at the temple premises and on either side of the roads leading to the shrine, to make the Pongala offering. Devotees from across the country and even from abroad participate in the ritual. This is a festival that has figured in the Guinness Book of World Records in 2009, for being the single largest gathering of women for a religious activity (25 lakhs). In 2019 it is estimated that, conservatively, nearly 50 lakh women participated. The rush is so much that women come the evening before, and book their spaces on the road to do their offerings. Spaces outside hotels are pre-booked by the hotels themselves, and given as a composite package to those who stay for this purpose. The city of Trivandrum comes to a complete halt on that day. At the conclusion of the festival, the Attukal Temple chief priest sprays holy water into the Pongala prepared by devotees.



More than 250 priests are deputed to spray holy water to the offerings across the City. It is indeed an astounding spectacle, and you will find many well-to-do, affluent ladies sitting on the side of the roads, preparing their offerings for the Goddess. People, I know in Trivandrum, tell me that it is virtually impossible to step out of the house on that day.

The Attukal Temple is situated near the heart of the city, 2 kilometres away from Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple, East Fort in Trivandrum. So next time you visit Trivandrum, make it a point to visit this unique temple.

## Ettumanoor Mahadeva



The asura, Khara, after arduous prayers, got three Shivalingams from Lord Shiva. He brought them down to Kerala, holding one each in left and right hand and one by his teeth. The Lingam held by his teeth was consecrated in Kaduthuruthi (held by the mouth and put), the one held in his right hand was consecrated in Vaikom and the one in the left hand at Ettumanoor.

Just 10 km from Kottayam, towards Ernakulam, lies the temple town of Ettumanoor. This is the abode of the fierce form of the Lord, the Aghora Moorthy. There is a large compound separating the actual temple from the Main road, providing parking spaces. Then you descend some steps and enter this famous temple. Right in front, inside the temple is the golden flag staff, topped with an idol of a bull surrounded by small bells and metal banyan tree leaves.

On your left is a makeshift counter selling puja material including oil. A big “Kedavilakku” (the lamp lit without break) in front of the temple is noteworthy. The devotees offer oil to this lamp which is regarded as the representation of Lord Shiva.





There is a story behind this lamp. One day a devotee brought this lamp to temple and requested the temple authorities to use it. But the authorities rejected his offering and laughed at him. The devotee was deeply hurt; he prayed to Lord Shiva. A violent thunder storm erupted suddenly. The authorities sensed the displeasure of the Lord over their behaviour. So, they accepted the lamp and placed it just in front of the temple.

The black oily soot obtained as a result of the burning of the wick in this lamp, which accumulates on a circular plate above the lamp, is considered very good for the eyes. Also, when children have bad dreams in sleep, application of this 'Mashi' calms them down and thwarts such bad dreams. I try and keep some of this mashi in powder form at my home always.

The temple is very artistically constructed and has a copper roof. Several wooden sculptures can be found around the temple. There are also statues of two bulls in this temple. There are also temples for Dakshinamurthy (very rare in Kerala), Ganapathi and Sastha in this temple. The idol of Dakshinamurthy, also of Shiva, is considered as a more benign image.

The image of the Lord, facing West, is a two feet high Lingam installed on high pedestal. To enable devotees to meditate, a beautiful vigraha is placed in front of the Lingam after the morning abhisheka. On the East side, Goddess Parvathy is imagined and prayed to. One can only see a closed door there.

Ettumanoor Mahadeva Temple is famous for its unique festival of *Ezhara Ponnana*. Celebrated in the Malayalam month of *Kumbham* (February – March), one of the elegant sights associated with this temple festival is the 'Ezhara Ponnana' procession (carrying golden elephant statues). 'Ezhara' means seven-and-half and 'Ponnana' means golden elephant. Each of the seven elephants is two feet high and the eighth one is of one foot only. Hence, they are together called seven-and-half elephants. It is on the night of the eighth-day of the festival that the devotees can witness the procession of these golden elephants.





According to popular belief, the Vaikom and Ettumanoor deities are not on good terms with each other, though both shrines are dedicated to Lord Shiva. Back in 1798, Maharaja of Travancore, had a dream that the Vaikom deity- Lord Mahadeva had asked for an offering of eight elephants. The Maharaja immediately ordered for eight wooden elephants plated in gold to be made and sent these with his trusted men to the Vaikom temple. As the entourage carrying the elephants reached Ettumanoor temple, the hungry and tired men handed over the elephants to temple guards for the safekeeping and went to bathe and eat. When they returned, they were taken aback to find that every single elephant had a serpent coiled on it with its hood spread in an attacking posture. The Maharaja's men tried every trick in the book, but the snakes wouldn't budge. Helpless and crestfallen as they could not reclaim the elephants the men went back to the king and reported the strange incident. The Maharaja immediately consulted his astrologers and found out that the Ettumanoor deity was unwilling to let go off the elephants and was staking claim on the gift meant for the Vaikom deity.

As there was no other way out, the Maharaja decided to get another set of eight elephants made and sent to Vaikom Deity. That night the Vaikom Deity approached the Maharaja in his dream saying he is no longer interested in the offering of elephants and instead a special ritual should be conducted for him using the same expense. This was done immediately. However, this did not bring peace between two deities. It is believed that the two deities are still not on 'talking terms' with each other. This is confirmed by the practice of Ettumanoor residents boycotting the Vaikom celebrations on Ashtami every year.

For many years I have visited this temple regularly, at least twice a year. There is a practice of symbolic giving-up-of-your-child to the deity here. The infant is left in front of the main temple and parents appear to walk away. The priest then claps his hands and calls them back. Then the parents pay some money and take the child. The meaning being, that, from then on, the child belongs to the Lord and you are only a caretaker. Custom is that if a girl undergoes this custom, then her offsprings will also need to go through it. It is called 'Adima Kadathal' in Malayalam. Whilst this is practised in many temples, the peculiarity here is that a child who undergoes this ceremony here, cannot go and pray at the Shiva Temple at Vaikom. Consequently, I have never visited the Vaikom temple.

Whilst, the Lord here is quick to get offended and angry, and demands total loyalty, He is protective to His devotees and guards them from all evil.

When you get a chance, do visit this temple and pay homage to the mighty Lord.

## The Army Ganapathy-Pazhavangadi



Whilst we are generally traveling northwards in Kerala, in our very brief exposure to the old temples, let us take one more, small trip down south to Thiruvananthapuram, to visit the Army Ganapathy.

This temple is located very close to the Padmanabha Kshetram, and devotees often make it a point to visit both temples in one visit. It is also called Pazhavangadi temple. The word comes from Pazham (fruit) and Angadi (market).

The main Deity of the temple, obviously, is Lord Mahaganapathy. The idol is installed in a seated posture, with the right leg in a folded stance. Other Deities worshiped at the temple include Dharmasasta, Goddess Durga and Nagaraja. The temple sculptures include 32 different forms of Lord Ganesha. Did you know that temple exterior is black in colour? Quite surprising.

The devotees who visit this temple are overcome with the calm and peace of the pious atmosphere. They say that Lord Ganesha fulfils the deepest wishes and fixes the stubbornest problems of his devotees who visit Him at the Pazhavangadi Ganapathy Temple.

The temple traces its origins back to Padmanabhapuram, which was the capital of the erstwhile Kingdom of Travancore. Legend has it that the soldiers were disturbed by a Yakshi at night, while they were keeping guard. One night a soldier, while taking a bath in the river chanced upon an idol of Ganapathi, with the right leg in the folded posture, and took it with him to the

fort. He remained unaffected by the Yakshi while keeping vigil that night; and since that day all the soldiers began worshipping that idol. Soon a temple was built at that place.

So, when in 1795 the then King Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma decided to shift the capital of the Kingdom from Padmanabhapuram to Thiruvananthapuram for administrative purposes, the soldiers of the Travancore Army took their idol along and placed it just outside the boundaries of the main fort. The present temple was built in 1860 under the rule of King Ayilyam Thirunal Rama Varma and the responsibility of managing the affairs of the temple was given to the Travancore Army. When the Nair Brigade went to fight in the First World War, they didn't leave without making the customary offerings of coconuts to the presiding Deity.

In 1935, when the Travancore Army came to be considered a part of State Forces, the administration of the temple was taken over by the latter. During Second World War, when soldiers from Travancore were sent as part of the State Forces, they continued with the tradition of taking blessings of Lord Ganapathi, before embarking on the arduous journey. After independence, when the forces were merged with the Indian Army in 1949, the responsibility of maintenance of the temple was transferred to the Indian Army. Even to this day, when most of the temples are managed by Travancore Devaswom Board, the Pazhavangadi Temple has defied the norms and is being managed by the Army.

Over the years, devotees from far and wide have been flocking to the temple to offer their prayers. It is believed that more than 3000 coconuts are offered a day to the deity. That is about



5 coconuts every minute. The right to take the coconuts offered to the temple is auctioned periodically. The income from this goes to the Madras Regiment of the Indian Army which has formed a Trust to help the needy.

Does the fact that the Army maintain a temple seems strange to you? Not really, when you realize that in most land areas belonging to the Services, there are Temples, Gurudwaras, Churches and Mosques. On board ships, however, display of religious symbols is strictly prohibited. Those who have been to the Navy Nagar in Colaba may have seen this temple complex there.

Isn't it true that our prayers become even more meaningful when you know that the fruits of your offerings benefit those, who need it most?

## Chengannur Mahadeva



As you travel south from Allapuzha, along the serene West Coast, you are reminded of scenes from the famous malayalam movie 'Chemmeen'. Then you hit Haripad, and turn inland. Green undulating paddy fields and scenic beauty. Soon you are at a place called Chengannur. Just south of Thiruvalla on the MC road. The town is built around a Mahadeva temple. This Mahadeva Temple by the western bank of the holy river Pamba, is famous all over the world.

The presiding deity is Mahadeva, in the form of a Lingam facing East, while the image of His consort, Parvathy is located exactly behind, facing West. The temple is approached through a temple tower, built in Kerala style, and a golden flagstaff. There are shrines of other deities around the temple for Sastha and Ganapathy. The image of Bhagavathy is made of panchaloha.

The temple has a two storeyed gopuram with the upper storey having wooden trails covering the *Kottupura* (a hall of drum beating during festivals). The roof of the temple and some of the pillars have lavish wood and carvings depicting various stories of ancient epics, Ramayana and Mahabharatha.

What makes this temple unusual, and unlike other temples, is that it attributes a human trait to the Divine – Parvathi menstruates here; and the duty of the head priest is to watch out for blood stains on her clothing every morning, when he removes the previous day adornments, and prepares for the fresh day pujas.

As always, there is a story behind this also. When all the Devas gathered together in the Himalayas for Lord Shiva and Parvathi's wedding, Lord Brahma feared that the world would lose its balance. He sent Saint Agasthya to the South to balance the weight.

After the wedding, the newlyweds came to the southern bank of the Pamba river, where Agasthya was living, to pay their respects to him. Goddess Parvathi got her first period during this visit.



The temple was constructed, supposedly, on the spot in which the Saint resided. Shiva and Parvathi's visit were special and so they became the deities in the Temple. But since a girl attaining puberty is a moment to celebrate, that became the most important ritual of the temple.

Once a 'blood stain' is seen, the eldest woman of a Brahmin family, Thazman Matt, where the priests of the temple belong, is called upon to confirm if the Devi is indeed menstruating. If yes, then Parvathi's idol is shifted into a small room off the sanctum sanctorum and the temple remains closed for four days.

Two women are deployed throughout the day as thozhi (helpers) and they will stay in front of the room of Devi during the four-day festival. On the fourth day, Parvathi's idol is taken to the Pamba river for an 'arrattu' or bath. With pomp and splendor, the Devi is brought back to the temple where Lord Shiva's idol awaits her at the entrance. The festival is called 'Thriputharattu'. Parvathi 'menstruates' once in two or three months, but devotees say that until a few years ago, it used to be a monthly affair. I have not heard of this phenomenon for many years now, though, in my student days, this was quite normal occurrences.

Can an idol menstruate? The legend goes that a European officer, Colonel Munro poked fun at the ritual and stopped it. Soon his wife had intense pain and heavy bleeding. He was forced to restart the ritual.

In a place, like Kerala, where menstruating women are banished from temples for seven days; such a ritual, certainly, has an added significance.

As you travel along the Main Central Road from Angamaly to Thiruvananthapuram, do take a break at Chengannur and visit this famous temple.



## Aranmula Parthasarathy



In Kerala, take the name of Aranmula and three things will come uppermost to the mind. The 'Val kannadi', the Boat race, and, of course, the Parthasarathy temple.



First, the 'val kannadi' or the mirror with the tail. Aranmula kannadi, is a handmade metal-alloy mirror which unlike the normal "silvered" glass mirrors, is a first surface mirror or front surface reflection mirror, which eliminates secondary reflections and aberrations typical of back surface mirrors. The exact metals used in the alloy are maintained as a Vishwakarma family secret. It is polished for several days to achieve the mirror's reflective surface. They are considered to be one of the eight auspicious items or "ashtamangalyam" that play a role in the entry of the bride at a wedding venue.

These unique metal mirrors are the result of Kerala's rich cultural and metallurgical traditions. They are produced by one extended family in Aranmula. The origins of the Aranmula

kannadi are linked to the Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple. The legend says that some centuries ago, eight families of experts in temple arts and craft were brought to Aranmula from Thirunelveli in Tamil Nadu. They were given the task of undertaking works in the Parthasarathy Temple. While working with bronze to make a crown for the presiding deity of the temple - Lord Parthasarathy, they accidentally stumbled upon a unique reflective property of one alloy comprising copper and tin. The craftsmen later tried different compositions, which eventually led to the standards of making the metal mirror

This Temple is one of the five important temples in the Chengannur area of Kerala, connected with the legend of Mahabharata, where the five Pandavas are believed to have built one temple each. This one was built by Arjuna. Thrichittatt Temple by Yudhishthira, Puliyoore by Bhima, Thiruvannanthoor by Nakula and Thrikodithanam by Sahadeva, all Mahavishnu temples are the other four.

You may know that the sacred jewels, called Thiruvabharanam are taken in procession to Sabarimala each year from Pandalam, and Aranmula Temple is one of the stops on the way. Also, the 'Thanka Anki', golden attire of Ayyappa, donated by the king of Travancore, is stored here and taken to Sabarimala during the Mandala season in December.

The temple has four towers over its entrances on its outer wall. The Eastern tower is accessed through a flight of 18 steps and the Northern tower entrance flight through 57 steps leads to the Pampa River. The temples have paintings on its walls dating back to early 18 century

Legend has it that the deity of Sri Krishna here, is in the form of Parthasarathy, about to throw a wheel at Bhishma, on the ninth day of the battle, when he inflicted so much havoc on the Pandavas, that the Lord is forced to use weapons on him, despite his vow of not fighting in the battle.

According to the locals, the idol of the main deity of the temple was brought here in a raft made with aru (six) pieces of mula (bamboo), and that's how the temple was known as Aranmula. Aranmula is also famous for the annual Snake Boat Race held in the Pampa River nearby. The snake boat, or the 'chundan vallom', is about 105 feet of length with the bow and stern being about 5 and 18 feet above the water respectively. There would be about 4 helmsmen, 100 rowers and 25 singers in each boat. They sing the vanchipattu, the boat song.

The Temple hosts the annual festival called the 'vallom kali', literally, the boat festival. After the festival, there is a vallasadya, a feast for the participants, offered by the devotees. Really a Temple steeped in rich traditions and culture of the local people. Definitely a must place to visit. This should motivate you to pay homage at this wonderful House of God



## **Tripunithara Poornathrayeesa Temple**



The Poornathrayeesa (family deity of the erstwhile Cochin Royal Family) Temple is one of the eminent temples in Kerala, located at Tripunithura, a distance of around 10 km from Ernakulam.

This temple is dedicated to Lord MahaVishnu, worshipped in the form of Santhanagopala Murthy (savior of Infants). Lord Vishnu is seen here in a sitting posture under the shade of the five hoods of the serpent Ananthan. This is quite a unique pose, unlike the other Vishnu temples where the Lord is usually found in a reclining posture on the divine serpent. The folded body of the serpent itself serves as the seat for the God. The two upper hands of Lord Vishnu hold Sanku (conch) and Sudarshana Chakram and the lower right hand holds the Padmam (Lotus flower).

The name Poornathrayeesa emerges from - "thra" meaning three; 'poorna' meaning complete and 'isa' meaning Iswara. The Lord manifests Himself as the essence of the Vedas, who can be attained through inner saadhana.

Legend say that Lord Vishnu offered the idol of Sree Poornathrayeesa to Arjuna, when Arjuna sought the help of the Lord to give rebirth to the ten dead children of a Brahmin. The ten children and the sacred idol were then taken by Arjuna in his chariot. He handed over the idol and the children to the delighted Brahmin. He asked Ganesha to find the correct place to install the idol. Ganesha found this holy place and occupied it. Ganesha was then requested to move to the South side and the idol was consecrated there. In memory of this event, a temple was built with a sanctum-sanctorum in the form of a chariot. Devotees can also pray at the idol of Lord Ganapathi on the extreme South side of the sanctum-sanctorum.



It is interesting to note that, besides the idol of Lord Ganesha, no other Upadevatas are worshipped at Sree Poornathrayeesa Temple. The sidewalls of the sanctum sanctorum are heavily decked with large brass sheets and statuettes of Gods and Goddesses, while the roof is plated with copper sheets.

In the year 1920, much of Sree Poornathrayeesa Temple was ruined due to a fire accident, but the idols were taken out safely. Then in the year 1921, it was again reconstructed by the great architect, Sri Eachara Warriar. The temple has a two storeyed building, in which the first floor of the Gopuram includes a Mandapam, and eight beautifully designed wooden pillars which hold the Mandapam.





The Gopuram on the western side of the temple is very old, which was built in 11th and 13th centuries AD. Kedavilakku (permanently lit lamp) is another attraction of the temple here; and as per the legend, Arjuna, first lit this lamp by using Gingelly oil. So, now visitors or pilgrims use Gingelly oil to light this lamp in the temple.

One of the major festivals here is the Vrischikolsavam which, as its name implies, is celebrated in the month of Vrischigam (November-December). It's an eight-day annual festival that ends with 'Kodiyirakkam' (flag lowering) and 'Aarattu' (bathing) rituals. The fourth day of the festival is called "thrikketta purappadu" and it is believed that the Deity Himself is in the procession. Offering 'kaanikya' (money offered) to Lord Poornathrayeesa, in the pure gold pot, on thrikketta purappadu day, is the greatest achievement that a devotee can get in this temple. The 'pancharimelam' played during the festival here is considered one of the best in Kerala.

Then on the eight day of this festival, the holy flag is brought down by the priest of temple and after the holy bath (Aarattu), a procession is taken to the temple with the accompaniment of 'pandimelam'. The procession in this festival is accompanied by five caparisoned elephants.



Apart from these, a huge number of programmes like folk arts of Kerala and classical arts of South India are also conducted during this festival, much like most other temples. Lord Poornathrayeesa is considered to be a big fan of elephants and He is known for His love of elephants. Hence, there have been instances where more than 40 elephants participate in this grant Vrishchikotsavam.

There is also another festival, 'Utharam Vilakku', celebrated in the month of Kumbham (February-March) every year. On this day, the Goddess Lakshmi of the nearby temple 'Pishari Kovil' visits Purnathrayeesa temple and then a joint procession is held.

This unique Temple is certainly a place to go for moments of peace and happiness. When you visit Thripunithara, remember that it was the seat of the Cochin Kingdom, and take time off to visit the Hill Palace, with its own museum.

## Aluva Manappuram Mahadeva Temple



As you travel from Ernakulam to Thrissur on the Highway, just after you leave the city limits of Ernakulam, and before you turn for the Airport, you will see two characteristic bridges marking the town of Aluva. The river Periyar flows near this town.

When you cross the first Marthanda Varma bridge, if you look to the right you can see a fork in the river. The Periyar river splits into two near Aluva railway bridge, and after splitting, one part is called Mangalapuzha. The Mahadeva Temple is situated at a distance of about a kilometre from the Marthanda Varma bridge, on the sand bank in between the Mangalapuzha and Periyar river. The Aluva Mahadeva Temple is managed by the Travancore Devaswom Board. During the monsoons, the water reaches till the roof top of the Temple and it is very unique to see such a phenomenon.

There are many legends associated with this temple. After installing the Lingam, Parasurama had built a temple here, but was destroyed by a flood. Lord Shiva told him that no temple structure will exist at that place because He does not want a temple structure for protecting the Lingam.



Another legend goes like this. The Bhuthaganas of Lord Shiva worshipped the Lingam every night. They decided to construct a temple there. But Lord Shiva told them that they must complete the temple in a single night. Bhuthaganas agreed and started the construction. When the foundation was completed, Lord Vishnu came there, disguised as a cock and crowed to mislead the Bhuthaganas. The Bhuthaganas, fearing that dawn had approached, left the work unfinished. Apparently, Sri Rama, during his search for Sita, performed tharpana for Jadayu here.

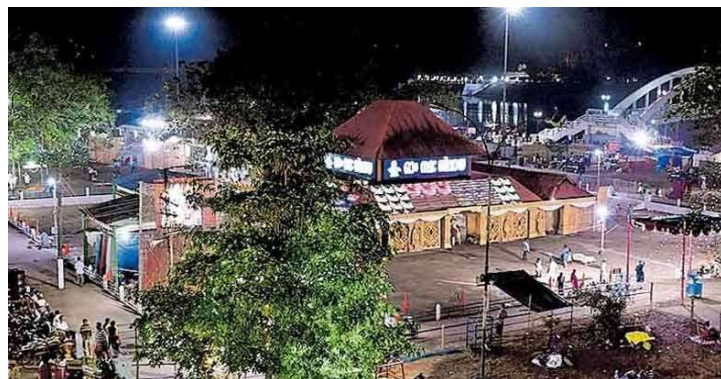
As I mentioned earlier during the monsoon season the whole region gets flooded and the Shivalinga gets submerged in water. So the Namboodiris decided to construct a small temple on the banks of the river in order to perform poojas during monsoon season. This temple is called Bala Kshetram. It is a fact, that, though unfinished in nature, this temple has withstood many a flood and still is an enigma to architects. The Travancore Devaswom Board authorities did construct a temple structure here some years ago but the 'Deva Prasnam', conducted later, revealed that construction of a temple structure is against Lord Shiva's wish.

The unique feature of Aluva Mahadeva Temple is that the Shivalinga is not enshrined in a Sreekovil. The Swayambhoo Shivalinga, supposedly installed by Lord Parasurama, and worshipped by Lord Sree Rama rises out of the sand banks of the Periyar river. For several years this Siva Lingam, did not have even a roof and it used to get submerged during the rainy season. Now it has a roof, but not the usual Sreekovil.

The Lingam faces east. There is a Nandi prathishta in front of the temple. There is only one pooja daily. From Makaram 1 (mid Jan) to Medam 1 (mid-May) only athazha pooja is performed and on other days only nivedyam is offered. Sivarathri in Kumbham (Feb-Mar), Utsavam in Meenam (Mar- Apr), Vavu Bali in Tulam (Oct- Nov) and Karkkidakam (Jul-Aug) are the festivals. Dhara and Rudrabhishekham are the main offerings.

The most important festival of Aluva temple is the Maha Sivarathri in Kumbham (February-March). There is no other place in Kerala where Sivarathri is celebrated on such a grand scale as in Aluva. The Sivarathri festival is a colourful celebration and devotees stay away the whole night in prayer and pay homage to their ancestors. The sand bank is extensive and the pilgrims run into several thousands.

On the night of Sivarathri, pilgrims keep awake and recite the puranas. There are shows, dances etc. meant for keeping the pilgrims awake throughout the night. In addition to the observance of Sivarthri rites, most of the pilgrims offer Bali (sacrifice) to their ancestors in the morning succeeding the holy





night. A dip in this river at the Brahmanuhurtham, after observing the rituals of Sivarathri is considered very sacred. Daily Ezhunnallippu of the deity atop a caparisoned elephant is conducted. The festival concludes with the Aarattu on the next day of Sivarathri.

On the day of vavu (no moon day) in Karkidakam (the last month of the Malayalam calendar which falls in July- August), Hindus gather on the riverbanks and beaches to offer Bali to the souls of departed ancestors. The bank of river Periyar in Aluva in Ernakulam district, popularly known as Aluva Manappuram, is significant in the observance of this Karkidaka Vavu Bali.

Next time you land at Kochi airport and travel to Ernakulam, look out for this temple close to Aluva. If you have time to spare, then you must visit also, just, be sure the is not flooded. By the way, do you know how the name of Ernakulam originated? Well. The commercial capital of the state has two popular theories that claim stake to its name – one says that the city's name is coined from the Tamil word *Erayanarkulam*, which means the abode of Lord Shiva. Another version supposes that the name was drawn from Malayalam words *Ere-naal-Kulam*, which literally translates to 'Pond for a long time'.



## Kodungallur Bhagavathy Temple



By now you would know that the temples of Kerala have great history and interesting legends behind their creations. The Kodungallur Bhagavathy temple in Kerala finds an essential place in the itinerary of every devotee who visits Kerala.

One of the most ancient temples in Kerala, this temple is dedicated to a dominant form of Shakti – Goddess Bhadrakali. This sacred temple is one of the most powerful and is also known as the abode of Kannaki – the incarnation of Goddess Kali. The phenomenal powers of the temple are believed to be residing in the five Sri Chakras installed by none other than Adi Shankaracharya himself.

The temple is also significant as one of the first temples in Kerala which permitted entry to devotees belonging to the lower strata of the caste hierarchy, into the temple premises; even when other temples barred their entry.

As expected, there are many legends associated with Kodungallur Bhagavathy temple. One of the legends is that Parasurama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, built the first structure of the temple to make his people more prosperous.

A demon called Darika harassed Lord Parasurama, and he prayed to Lord Siva, who advised him to construct this temple. Parasurama installed the idol of Bhagavathy as the Shakti Devi alongside the deity of Shiva. Bhagavathy as the fierce Bhadrakali killed the Demon Darika and saved Parasurama and his people.

Goddess Kali is the presiding deity of Kodungallur Bhagavathy Temple. Locally, she is known as 'Sreekurumba' and is a revered deity in the district of Thrissur. Therefore, the shrine is also called as Kurumba Bhagavathy at Kodungallur.

The idol is carved out of a Jackfruit tree and is six feet high. The idol stands facing north; and has eight arms carrying weapons and symbols like the sword, spear, discus, pestle, bow, etc in

each hand and the severed head of DarikAsura by the hair. The Goddess head is adorned with a crown that resembles the headpiece of a Kathakali actor. The body is totally covered with golden attire made of chains woven out of gold discs, necklaces, etc. The goddess is shown in her fierce form as the Destroyer of evils. A cloth hung on the western wall of the sanctum serves as a symbol of the Deity, and is worshipped by the devotees. Some years ago, animal sacrifices were made in the temple premises which is now completely banned by the law.

The temple is situated in the middle of a plot of land about ten acres, surrounded by banyan and peepal trees. The srikovil is facing north. The western chamber of the inner temple is the seat of Saphthamatrakas (Seven Mothers) who also face north. The idols of Ganapathi and Veerabhadra are found in the chamber, one facing east and the other facing west, respectively.

Built in typical Kerala style architecture, there are supposed to be a lot of secret paths and chambers within the temple. A secret underground room with no doors and windows to the East of the main idol is the 'Sakthi Kendra' (centre of power) of the temple. This granite chamber can be entered only through the door from inside the sanctum which has never been opened to date.

To the left of the temple sits a small stone structure called the 'Samadhi of Vasoori', perhaps a medieval shrine for a deity of smallpox, chicken pox, mumps and other contagious diseases. Devotees make offerings of turmeric powder, sprinkled and rubbed on its walls. Kannaki, the heroine of Silappathikaram has a separate shrine inside the temple.

About fifty metres further is a sacred pond called Pushkarini, where devotees bathe before entering the main shrine. It is believed that this pond was created by the Goddess by striking the ground with her sword.

The Bharani festival at the Kodungallur Bhagawati temple is one of the major festivals of Kerala. It normally falls between the months of March and April. The festival, earlier, used to start with a ritual called 'Kozhikkallu moodal' which involves the sacrifice of cocks and shedding of their blood.

The first day of Meenam, known as Ashwathi, is said to be the first day of the Goddess



menstrual cycle which is known as 'Kavu Theendal'. All the preparations of this particular event are overseen by the King of Kodungallur upon whose signal, the celebrations begin. The offerings by devotees of the Goddess include kumkum, turmeric powder, pepper and the cocks. The premises of the Kondungallur temple would be

full of decorated oracles who are covered with vermillion, sparkling clothes, heavy jewellery and who dance in complete ecstasy. The devotees who witness the event are also inspired to sing along in an abusive form of language that is aimed at the Goddess. And weirdly enough, according to the devotees, this abusive language is actually an appreciation of the Goddess. They yell out lewd, bawdy, abusive cries at the Goddess. Not only this, one astonishing fact about 'Kavu Theendal' is that the most abusive song wins a prize from the Kodungallur King. Many oracles go into a frenzy and break open their heads with their swords. The uncontrollable bleeding is stopped by the application of turmeric into the wound. This not only stops the bleeding but closes the wound so well that no trace of it is left. I remember that if you were on the road during that period, you would come across bus full of devotees, singing really bawdy songs with graphic details. Many families in Kerala forbade their womenfolk to go out during those times

The Temple is closed for seven days and, then this is followed by a purification ceremony the next day.

There is a Thalappoli festival in the month of Makaram (Jan–Feb). The four-day Thalappoli commences from the evening of Makara Sankranthi with religious rituals. Big procession headed by richly caparisoned elephants are taken out to the accompaniment of Pancha Vadyam, Pancharimelam Paandimelam etc. The finale is a procession by women dressed in traditional Kerala costume, each carrying a plate containing rice on which is placed a half coconut, which is made into a lamp with oil and a lighted wick.



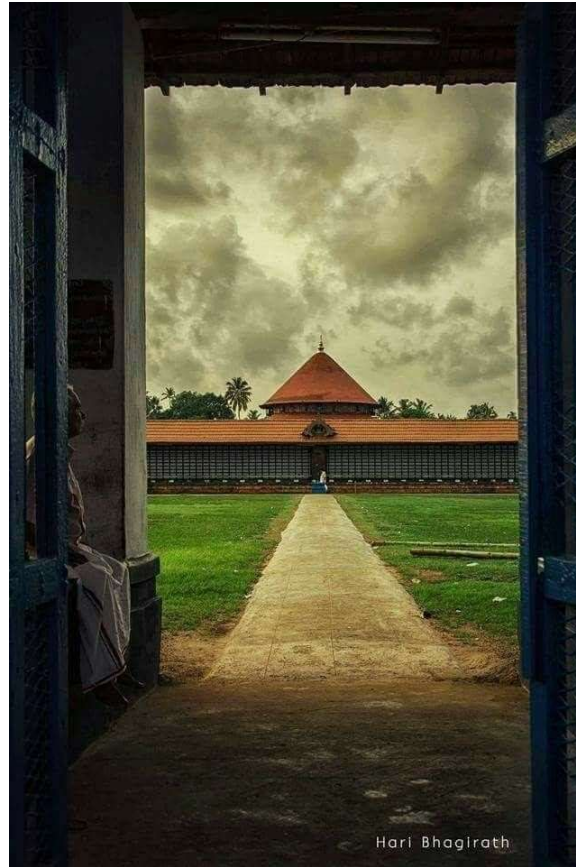
This is called Thalappoli. A caparisoned elephant walks in the middle of this procession. The procession starts at a spot away from the temple and slowly winds its way to the temple where a grand reception is arranged.

The Kodungaloor Bhagavathy Temple is certainly a 'must see' place for anybody visiting Kerala. Of course, the Bharani season is the most colorful and happening time, but be prepared for large crowds, incredulous sights and bawdy songs.

Amme Narayana.



## Koodalmanikyam Temple Irinjalakuda



As you travel North on the scenic coastal highway from Kochi, about 60 kms away, you come to a place, Moonupeedika (literally three shops). Here you turn right and soon you are at a small town, Irinjalakuda. Actually, a quiet nice town, where I go frequently now for work.

Lush green trees on one side and beautiful temple ponds on the other, the Koodalmanikyam Temple at Irinjalakuda, is one of the most famous temples of Kerala. Dedicated to Lord Bharatha, brother of Sree Rama, this temple is an architectural wonder; belonging to the ancient world, with murals on the walls, and four massive ponds in the courtyard.

The origins of this Temple can be traced to a story of the local chieftain, Vakkay Kaimal, who dreamt of four idols washed up nearby. He took these idols and consecrated them in four different places.

Closely connected with this legend is the 'Nalambalam Yatra' (4 temple journey) which begins from the Rama temple in Triprayar and ends up at Shatrughna Temple in Payyammal. It is customary to visit the four temples in the order Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrughna respectively. Starting from Thripprayar and ending in Payammel, through

Irinjalakuda and Moozhikulam. A pilgrimage to these temples on a single day, during the holy month of Karkkidakam, is believed to shower blessings and ensure prosperity

Legend, also has it that this Idol used to emit a very bright light from the forehead. Unable to find a reason for this bright light, someone brought a Quartz from the King of Kayamkulam, for purposes of comparison. The precious Quartz slipped from the hands of the person, and merged with the bright light emanating from the idol. Merging of the two Manikyams led to the name Koodalmanikyam.

The unique feature of this Temple is that there is only one Deity here known as Dhanwanthara Moorthy or Lord Bharatha, well-known for His ability to cure even the most dangerous diseases. Rarely there is a Temple without a shrine for Lord Ganesha. Here there is no shrine for Ganapathi. Even Hanuman, here, is in the Thedappilly (cooking place).

The Lord at Koodalmanikyam is a Chathurbahu Vishnu with Conch, Chakra, Gada and Japamala. The general belief, however, is that the Lord is Bharatha, the brother of Sree Rama. He, anxiously and devotedly awaited the return of Rama from exile for fourteen years, and then learning from Hanuman that Rama has reached the outskirts of Ayodhya, was much relieved and happy. Baratha, in that happy mood, is said to be worshipped here.

The custom in most of the temples in Kerala is to have five pujas and three Seevelis a day. But in Koodalmanikyam Temple, daily, there are only three pujas and no Seeveli, except on festival days. There is no Usha puja and Pantheeradi puja at this shrine. In fact, surprisingly, there is no Deeparadhana. This is, perhaps, the only temple without Deeparadhana.



Sticks and camphor are not used for the pujas. The floral offerings to the Deity consist of lotus, tulasi and thechi. But they are not grown in the temple compound. Interestingly enough, there is no Thulasi growing in this temple – unlike other temples. You may know that Thulasi grows easily from the seeds which fall on the ground. No other flower is taken for puja or for making garlands. The Lotus garland is an important offering to the deity.

The Eastern ‘Gopuram’ (gateway) of the temple is a grand imposing structure, graced with numerous paintings and carvings on the walls. There are two more imposing Gopurams on the

Western and Southern sides. The architecture is typical Kerala style with white-washed walls and tiled roofing.

The Sanctum Sanctorum is round shaped and is covered with copper plates. A six-foot Thaazhikakudam, at the pinnacle, adds to the beauty and majesty of the total temple complex.

On the Southern courtyard is the well-known Koothambalam, the Natyagruha for Koothu and Koodiyattom. This Temple had also been an important centre of temple arts like Kathakali, Koothu, Koodiyattom and Thullal.

Koodalmanikyam Temple is a marvel in architectural beauty. The impressive gateways, round shaped Sanctum Sactorum, the majestic Koothambalam and the carvings in wood and stone on the walls, all attract students of Art and Architecture. The murals on the walls on either side of the Eastern entry to Chuttambalam also deserve special mention.

The temple holds its annual festival for ten days, each year in the month of Medam (April/May). The first day of the festival is signified by hoisting a ceremonial flag (the start day falls one day after the famous Thrissur Pooram festival). Each day of the festival, Seeveli is held twice, once in the morning and once at night, to the accompaniment of Pancharimelam. Seventeen elephants take part. Two features of the Seeveli are unique to the Koodalmanikyam Temple: first, that two baby elephants are included in the procession, one standing on either side of the elephant carrying the Deity. Second, while the 'netti pattam' of seven elephants are made of pure gold, the rest are made of pure silver.

One of my uncles used to stay very close to this magnificent Temple, and, in my school days, when I stayed with him during vacations, I used to visit there very often. I still recollect the serenity and spirituality in that place.

So, next time you are in Kochi, and, of course, inevitably coming to Guruvayur, make it a point to visit the Koodalmanickam Kshetram in Irinjalakuda and see the architectural beauty of this Temple, as well as take the blessings of the Lord.





## Thriprayar Sree Rama Temple



After our small detour, we are now back on the coastal highway and going towards Guruvayur. Just about 30 km short, we enter the small town of Thriprayar. At the very centre of the town you can turn right to the famous Sree Rama Temple there.

There are not many Rama Temples in Kerala, and this is one of the prominent ones. The Deity in the Triprayar Temple is popularly known as Triprayarappan or Triprayar Thevar.

According to the legends, it is believed that this idol of Lord Rama was worshipped by Lord Krishna. The idol was immersed in the sea after the swargarohana of Lord Krishna. The idol was later found from the sea near the Chettuva region of Kerala. The local ruler constructed a temple at Triprayar and installed the idol there. Along with Lord Rama, there are shrines for Lord Shiva as Dakshinamoorthy, Lord Ganesha, Lord Sastha and Lord Krishna.

Here, the idol of Lord Rama is seen with four arms bearing a conch, a disc, a bow and a garland.



It is believed that the deity worshipped here, possesses some of the aspects of Shiva too. It was after killing the asura Khara, that Sri Rama got both the Shaiva and Vaishnava aspects. So, the Triprayar Thevar is also called Khara Samhara Moorthy. It is also believed that the portrayal of Rama with a garland held in the image's hand is suggestive of aspects of Bhrahma; and hence the Deity is said to be a manifestation of the Trimurthis. The image is adorned with necklaces and other fine jewellery. Images of Sreedevi and Bhudevi are on either side. The original idol of Rama was subjected to severe wear and tear, with the passage of time. Astrological investigations, however, revealed that the Lord did not desire to



have a change of the vigraha. Therefore, a covering was made in Panchaloha and now covers the original stone image.

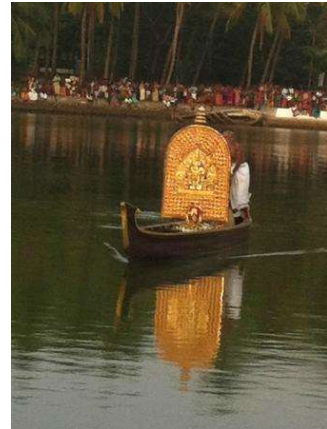
Though there is no separate idol for Rama's devotee Hanuman, it is believed that His presence is always there at the Namaskara Mandapam, in front of the Sreekovil of the temple. Devotees generally bow before the mandapam, imagining the presence of Hanuman there, before worshipping Sree Rama.

The Triprayar temple is rich in wood carvings. The Sreekovil is circular in shape, with a copper covered conical roof and is surmounted by a golden Thazhikkadam. The circular sanctum has several sculptural representations of scenes from the Ramayana. Its walls are decorated with beautiful mural paintings. The namaskara mandapa, which is copper-plated, is profusely sculptured -having 24 panels of woodcarvings, representing the navagrahas.

Ekadashi falling in the month of Vrischikam (November - December), known as Thriprayar Ekadasi, is of special importance here. The idol of Sastha is taken in procession on the preceding day (on Dasami day) of Ekadashi; and on the Triprayar Ekadashi festival day, the procession of Sree Rama is carried out, accompanied by 21 elephants and royal possessions.

An unusual offering made by devotees, who visit the Thriprayar temple, is the feeding of fish, ('meen uttu') in the river, recalling MahaVishnu's matsyavata, incarnation as a fish. When the fish crowd together to eat the grains of rice thrown into the river, the water splashes on the devotee, who considers it to be a blessing by the Lord.

As you leave the Temple towards Thrissur, you cross the river on a bridge. You must stop at this bridge and view the Temple from there. It is a breath-taking sight. A serene river, with a magnificent adjoining Temple. The heart is filled with joy and contentment.



When you cross the bridge, you reach a place called Chazhur. There was, once, a palace in Chazhur. The root family of the Cochin Maharaja stayed in this palace. Today it is just a palace which is totally in ruins. My grandfather from mother's side was from this family. I recently visited this dilapidated palace, now looked after by a poor, sick descendant. It was quite sad to see the state of the original palace.

Anyway, it is time to be on our way to the cultural capital of Kerala.

"But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep".

## Vadukkunathan Temple Thrissur



As we enter Thrissur, we can see that the town actually is built around what is popularly called the 'Swaraj Round'. The 'Round' is actually a hillock on which stands the famous Vadukkunathan Temple. You may be aware that the name of Thrissur is derived from 'Thiru-Siva-Perur', the sacred place of Shiva. Earlier this area was covered with teak trees, hence the name 'Thekkinkadu Maidan' for this ground

The prime attraction of this location is the Lord Shiva Vadakkunnathan Temple. Situated right in the midst of the city, this divine structure emanates positive energy and has got a breathtakingly marvellous architecture. Lord Parasurama is said to be the reason for Lord Shiva to manifest in this region. Constructed in the famed Kerala style of architecture, this temple houses the Shivalingam which is said to have appeared under a banyan tree there, due to the will of Lord Shiva. The lingam was then transferred into the temple from that 'Moolasthanam'. The idol was said to be at the base of the Moolasthanam for many years. Later the rulers of the Kingdom of Cochin decided to build a temple and place the idol inside it.



The shrine of Shri Vadakkumnathan is circular in shape with one roof and pillars. The Lingam of Vadakkumnathan is not visible as it is covered with mounds of ghee due to regular abhishekam conducted over so many years. It is said that the ghee never melts neither in the summer season nor due to the warmth of the Diyas lighted inside the sanctum sanctorum. There is no foul smell even inside the temple due to the presence of so much old ghee. According to traditional belief, this represents the snow-clad Mount Kailash, the abode of Shiva

The Lingam is embellished with thirteen crescents of gold. It has three serpent hoods on top. The Deity of Parvati is in the same shrine at the back of the temple. Both the deities do not face each other. There is a two-storeyed Sree Rama shrine located inside the courtyard that faces West. There is also a circular shrine, dedicated to Shri Shankar Narayan which faces the same direction as the other two shrines. The Vighraha of Shankar Narayan is a combination of both Shiva and Vishnu having four arms that carry a trident, a hatchet on the right side, and a conch shell, a Gada on the left side. Between Vadakkumnathan and Shankar Narayan is the shrine dedicated to Maha Ganapati facing the East direction.

On the northeast corner is a platform dedicated to Parasurama. It is said that He disappeared from this place after completing His duties. A Diya is lighted there.

On the South-East corner, a small shrine has been constructed for Sastha or Shri Ayyappa. Behind the temple, there is a place full of grass. It is believed that some parts of the soil from the Sanjeevani mountain fell down here, while Hanuman was carrying it to Lanka.

The Koothambalam is a huge wooden structure where the ancient dance and art forms of Kerala like Koothu, Koodiyattam, and Nangyar Koothu are performed annually. The temple also houses a museum that showcases ancient paintings, woodcarving and other works of art of ancient times.

Shivratri is the main festival of the temple that is celebrated in the month of Feb-March. Many cultural and musical programs are organized in the temple premises. The entire temple complex is lit with lights on this day. The temple is open throughout the night. Continuous Abhisekham is done with coconut water and ghee. The deity, however, is not taken out for any procession.

One of the biggest festivals held in the temple, is when elephants are fed on the first day of the Malayalam month Karkkidakam i.e in the month of July. A Mahaganapati Homam is organized on that day. Many people visit the temple to worship and feed a large number of elephants, gathered for this festival.



Of course, many have heard of Thrissur Pooram. It is the mass gathering of different deities of the nearby temple every year in the temple ground. It is held in the Malayalam month of Medam that falls in April. This festival is the grandest of all Pooram's that are held in the State. The Pooram is said to be about 200 years old. Said to be the brainchild of Raja Rama Verma, popularly known as Shakthan Thampuran, who was the king of Cochin. He unified all the ten temples situated around the Vadakkumnathan Temple. The entire procedure of the Pooram celebration was planned by him. It is followed till today without any change.





He classified the temples into two groups – the Eastern and Western group of temples. All these temples send their processions to Shri Vadakkumnathan to pay their respects. It is a seven-day festival that starts with the flag hoisting at respective temples and display of fireworks to announce the commencement of the festival. Both the groups of temples display their ornaments and caparisons of their respective elephants on the fourth and fifth day prior to the Pooram.

The 36-hour long Pooram follows a strict schedule and route through which the deities come to pay their obeisance to Shri Vadakkumnathan in their caparisoned elephants. The day starts with the ceremonial entrance of each of the deities as per their schedule. The Festival ends with the final display of fireworks. That is such a spectacular sight. People come from far off places and are awake the whole night to witness the grand finale of the event.

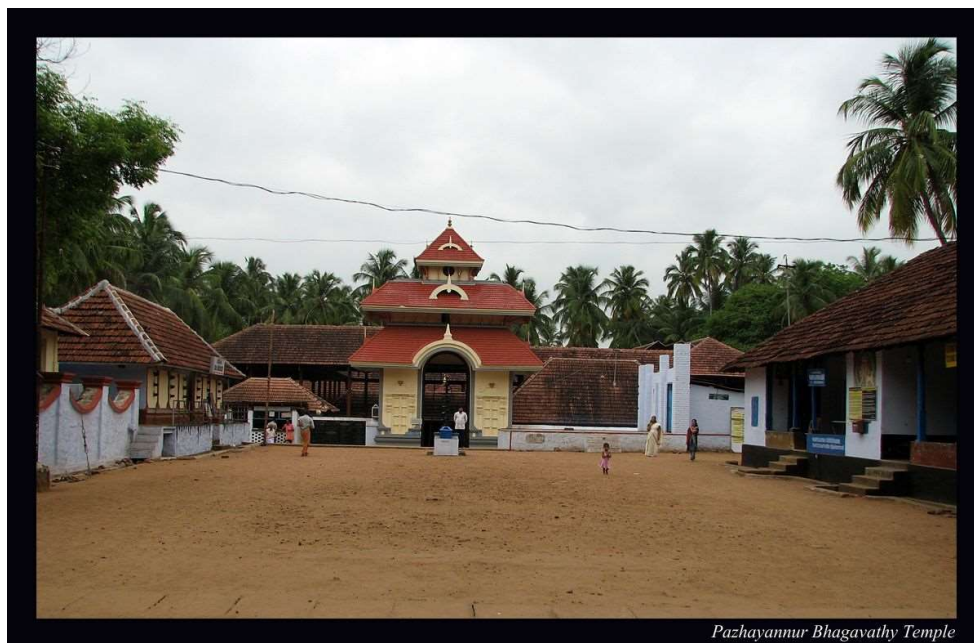
The Vadakkumnathan Temple in Kerala has received the award of excellence from the UNESCO. It is one of the oldest temples in Kerala, which has Mural paintings about 400 years old, and the Vadakkumnathan Temple is itself 1000 years old.

If you want to enjoy the architecture of Vadakkumnathan Temple, and pay homage to the Lord, then you must visit Thrissur. The temple has architectural beauty, history, heritage, spirituality and also culture. The people of Thrissur have maintained the culture and tradition of Vadakkumnathan temple.

From here we could go West to Guruvayur, but we will go East and visit some more unique Temples near my native place before coming back to Guruvayoor



## The Kozhiambalam Pazhayannur ( Rooster Temple)



*Pazhayannur Bhagavathy Temple*

We left the cultural city of Thrissur and continued our spiritual journey towards Shoranur, and the river Bharathapuzha. But, before reaching the river, we take another diversion and go right, first Chelakkara, and then to a small town, Pazhayannur. The drive is excellent with good winding roads, scenic green splendour and hills in the background. At places the overarching trees do not even permit the sun's rays to fall on the ground. We reach the small town of Pazhayannur.

The Pazhayannur Bhagavathy Temple is believed to be more than 500 years old. In olden times this temple – known as Pallipurath Mahavishnu – was dedicated to Lord Vishnu.

The worship of the Divine Mother in the form of Bhagvathy started after She chose this place as Her abode. The erstwhile King of Kochi was a great devotee of the Divine Mother. Once he went to Kashi to offer his prayers to Mother and asked Her to come to Kochi along with him. The Divine Mother agreed and reached Pazhayannur. The unique topography, natural beauty and vegetation of this place touched the Mother's heart and She sat near the actual Vishnu temple called Pallipurath Mahavishnu.

She then moved toward a Banyan tree near the main entrance that still exists. This spot is called the 'SreemoolaSthanam', and then she appeared at the Thedapally (a part of the temple where food offered to the God is prepared). The king of Kochi helped a great deal to develop this Temple. It was named the Pazhayannur Bhagavathy Temple, as it is called now. Both the Divine Mother and Lord Vishnu are equally worshiped here in this Temple. The premise has a

Shiva temple too, just outside. The Pazhayannur Bhagavathy is also considered as the Guardian of the Kingdom of Cochin.

There is a strange custom in this Temple. That is the offering of live roosters and feeding them as an Act of Worship. People believe that these are the Divine Mother's favourite; hence, by this act their wishes will be fulfilled. The story goes that, when in old times, the Temple and the area around it was under an attack, the Divine Mother, appeared in forms of thousands of roosters, assaulting the enemy soldiers with their piercing beaks, knife-like claws and high-pitched sharp sounds and won a victory over them. So, the belief is, that, the act of offering live roosters to Bhagavathy and feeding them would destroy enemies. There are so many roosters there and they go around without any fear. In olden days many innocent animals and birds were sacrificed in the name of religion, so a visit to such a place really fills us with great happiness.



The Siva Temple is just outside the main temple. A small simple temple.

The Sreekovil of Pazhayanoor Bhagavathi temple was razed in a major fire on 12th May 2009 and the fire was caused from the side of 'thedappalli'. The fire force from Thrissur and Palakkad extinguished the fire by mid night. A major portion of sreekovil was destroyed. Later the priest along with natives brought the idol and thidampu out of the temple. The Temple has since been restored.



Niramala Mahotsavam, celebrated every year on the last Friday of the Malayalam month of *Thulam* (Mid Nov) is one of the major festivals of Pazhayannur Bhagavathy Temple. Decorations with more than hundreds of flower garlands, Illuminations, elephant procession and traditional orchestra performance are the highlights of Niramala Mahotsavam.

The annual *arattu* festival is celebrated in the Malayalam month of Meenam (March- April).

This is not a big temple, but it is a unique one in respect of the customs.

If you are going on this route, do stop and see this unique temple, and pay homage to Bhagavathy.

## Thiruvilwamala Vilwadrinathan Temple



Close to Pazhayannur, on the way to Ottapalam, and, before you cross the Bharathapuzha, you will come across a small cluster of shops; the place is called Thiruvilwamala, actually a village. We are on the border of Thrissur and Palakkad districts. On top of a hill here is the famous Vilwadrinathan temple.

The Vilwadrinathan Temple in Thiruvilwamala is dedicated to Lord Rama facing West and Lord Lakshmana facing East; both again in the 'Chathurbahu' prathima. The Temple is on the top of a hill, 100 ft above the sea level, along the side of the river Bharathappuzha. It is believed that the bottom of the Temple is a cave, and a golden 'Vilwa' tree exists there; and thus, the place came to be known as 'Thiruvilwamala'. On the North side you overlook a green carpet dense growth of trees, and you can see the Bharathapuzha about 3 km away. On the West and East sides, there are remains of two huge gopurams, which got destroyed under mysterious circumstances. Some say it was due to lightning. A Deva Prasnam indicated that the Lord wished that they were not to be reconstructed.

It is believed that Lord Parasurama consecrated the idol of Lord Vishnu, at Vilwadrinathan temple. Sage Amalaka also did penance here and Lord Vishnu appeared before him. He requested the Lord's presence here in this place to give protection to the people. Vishnu agreed to Sage Amalaka's request and turned himself into an idol (Swayambhu) with his consorts and Anantha.

The main temple gate is from the West. The place where Amalaka did his penance is known as Saraswathikund is on the side of the Temple steps.



The temple consists of two double-storeyed square-shaped *sreekovils* (sanctum sanctorum) which are the two shrines of the temple. There is no kodimaram (flag staff) in this temple. The idol of Lord Rama is in the West facing Shrine and is about 5ft tall, and made of “Patanjali Sila” which is a rare kind of stone. The idol of Lord Lakshmana is in the East facing Shrine and is about 3ft tall. It is also made of the same type of stone. On first glance it appears that the two idols are back-to-back, but actually they are side to side, facing opposite directions. There is no ‘namaskara mandapam’ (prostration hall) in front of both Sreekovils.



An amazing event at the temple at Thiruvilawamala is that sunlight falls directly on the idols during the Malayalam months of Kanni (Sep-Oct) and Meenam (Mar- Apr). The sight of the rays of the rising sun falling on the idol on the Eastern side is astounding. During sunset, the idol on the Western side glitters like gold.

Inside the Temple, you will be surprised to see that you are actually walking on a rock surface, with inherent cracks, crevices and slippery slopes.

You are supposed to pray at the East facing shrine first, and then you walk around to the West facing shrine. As you do this, on the way you offer a homage to MahaGanapathi.

Outside the nalambalam, on the South-Eastern side, is the shrine of Lord Hanuman. It is believed that Hanuman, sent by the Lord, after killing the asuras who were attacking the temple, resided there permanently for preventing further attacks. The idol is around 5 ft tall, and is in a sitting posture. One of the principal offerings to Lord Hanuman, here, is 'vadamala', the garland of vadas.



On the southern side, there is a shrine of Lord Ayyappa, called ‘Kundil Ayyappan’, as the shrine is situated on a pit (called ‘kundu’ in Malayalam), 50 ft below the main temple. Here, Lord Ayyappa resides with Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, all facing East. It is from this temple that Lord Vilwadrinathan gets rice for ‘Thripputhari’ in the month of Karkkadakam (Jul–Aug). There are shrines dedicated to serpent Gods and Brahmarakshas near Lord Ayyappa shrine.

Saraswathikund, the place where sage Amalaka is believed to have done his penance, is to the side of the fleet of steps of the West nada. The place got this name because, supposedly, there is a pit here with presence of Goddess Saraswati. There is a huge peepal tree here, and devotees write ‘Om Harisree Ganapathaye Namah’, the famous mantra chanted during Vidyarambham



ceremony, and after that make models arranging various stones, bricks, sand and clay. You may wonder how a peepul tree grew in this rock.

There is one peculiar custom here. People believe that one 'janma' (a lifespan) is reduced from 'cycle of births and deaths' if the devotees go through a Punarjani cave once. This is situated 2 km away from the main Temple towards the South-East, and is actually a 150m long natural tunnel. This is believed to have been built by Vishwakarma, the divine architect, on a request of Brihaspati. The height the tunnel gets reduced from six feet in the beginning, to a height where one can only crawl through, inside the tunnel, with no lights. It is so dark, that one makes out the way only by following the person in front. It is believed that one gets free from all sins (Papam) after crawling through this tunnel. At the end of the tunnel there are some steps to come out of it. Only men are permitted to go inside the cave and it is allowed only on one day – the Guruvayur Ekadashi day- the 11th day in the bright fortnight in the month of Vrischikam (Nov–Dec). All other days the tunnel is meant to be inhabited by ghosts.



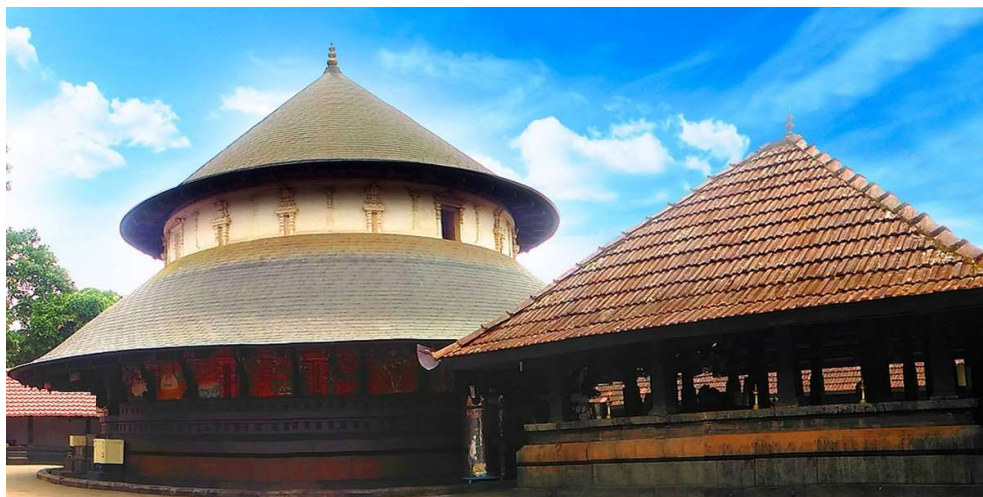
Thiruvilwamala Ekadasi and Sri Rama Navami are important festivals. Guruvayur Ekadasi day is also important for the passing through Punarjani event.

In January 2018, a major fire broke out, caused by a burning lamp at about 8 pm, in the North side of the Chuttambalam. The fire could be put out only by midnight. Though no lives were lost, there was extensive damage. The renovation work was ongoing when I visited last year.

This is one of the four major temples in Kerala dedicated to Lord Rama, others being Thriprayar, Kadavallur and Thiruvangad temples, and also one of the rarest temples in India itself which houses Lord Lakshmana.

Then, of course, it's home for me. So, when you come to Guruvayur, keep a day in hand, to together visit this charming place.

## Chowalloor Mahadeva Temple



Home beckons. And so, from this somewhat remote Thiruvilwamala village, we make our way to Guruvayoor. A journey, which takes close to an hour and half. On the way, just short of our destination we stop to visit the famous Chowalloor Mahadeva Temple.

As you turn in from the Main road, a narrow road takes you to this Temple. Once you enter the Temple, you are virtually cut off from the hustle and bustle of the traffic on the Main road. All you can see is undulating green paddy fields in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. Rarely have I found the Temple crowded. You can actually experience religious tranquillity set in a picture-perfect backdrop.

Reckoned to be one of the most beautiful temples in Kerala, Chowalloor Shiva Temple is situated 3 kms away from the Guruvayoor Sree Krishna temple. It is said that this Shiva temple is 1000 years old and is considered one of 108 Shivalayas or abodes of Shiva. The legend has it, that the Deity of Thrissur, Sree Vadakunnathan manifested Himself on an umbrella carried



by one of His devotees from Chowalloor Mazhavannoor Mana, who used to walk all the way to Thrissur to daily pay homage to the Lord. When he became too old to walk and worship Shiva regularly, the Lord is believed to have accompanied him to Chowalloor. The Swayambhoo idol of Lord Siva is seen facing West in the temple, whereas his consort Goddess Parvati is facing East. This is one of the few Temples where both Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvathy have equal significance. The

devotees have the good fortune to worship the entire Lord Shiva family - a rare phenomenon (Lord Shiva, Goddess Parvathy, Lord Ganesha, Lord Subramanian, Lord Ayyappan and Lord Anjaneya), which is rarely seen elsewhere in Kerala. A Navagraha Temple is situated in the North East corner of the Temple complex. The Sapthamathrukkal, precious black stone idols, symbolising the seven divine Mothers, are also worshipped in the Temple; yet another rare feature.

The Chowalloor temple complex covers about 4 acres of land. It has built a large edifice around it. There is no flag mast here, because there is no Temple festival as such. From outside, the



Shivalingam cannot be seen. On the North-West side of the temple there is a shrine of Subramanya Swamy facing East. The Subramanya Temple came up as a part of the renovation of the temple in 2001. The main Sanctum Sanctorum is in a round shape, and is made of two floors. The second roof of the Sanctum

Sanctorum is made of copper. The interiors of this ancient temple are adorned by murals which depict episodes right out of the Epics. The murals are in a really good preserved condition and very pleasing to the eye.

The festival of Shivratri is celebrated with a lot of enthusiasm here.

The Chowalloor Temple Thiruvathira Mahotsavam, in the Malayalam month of Dhanu (Dec-Jan) is a 12-day long festival. This is also a good time to visit this temple. There is an offering in this Temple to Goddess Parvathy called Pattum Thaliyum Charthal. This offering is performed to grant marital bliss for the numerous anxious to-be brides and to enjoy long lasting married life for wedded couples. On all the 12 days, the devotees are given Annaprasanam.

I have often visited this Temple, and on all occasions, I have been struck by the beauty of the Temple and the serenity of the surroundings. The Temple staff are very courteous and happy to answer your enquiries, as well as gladly willing to help in any way they can.

A small, architecturally beautiful Temple exuding spirituality and serenity. A place you must visit next time you are in Guruvayur.





## Sree Krishna Temple Guruvayur



The city of Dwarka was going to be immersed in the sea; Lord Krishna decided to give up His mortal body. He entrusted the idol He was worshipping to His devotee Udhava. Udhava, in turn, sought the help of Guru (Preceptor of the Gods) and Vayu (God of Wind). Guru and Vayu went in search of a suitable place to install the idol. After a long search, they reached a beautiful lake of Lotus flowers in Kerala, called Rudra-Theertham, then occupied by Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvathi. Lord Shiva suggested that the idol be installed there. So, it was done, giving rise to the very name Guruvayur itself. Lord Shiva occupied the other end of the lake at Mammiyur.

The Guruvayur temple is dedicated to Lord Guruvayoorappan, a form of Vishnu. The Guruvayoorappan form of Lord Vishnu, has four arms with one carrying the conch Panchajanya, another carrying the Sudarshana Chakra, the third carrying the mace Kaumodaki, and the last holding a Lotus with a Holy basil garland. This happens to be the Form, as seen by Krishna's parents Vasudeva and Devaki, around the time of His birth. It, therefore, makes sense that Guruvayoor has earned the sobriquet, "Dwarka of South India". Guruvayur is also often referred to as Bhuloka Vaikunta (Holy Abode of Vishnu on Earth).

Guruvayur Temple has a very strict dress code for entering the temple. Men can only wear mundu (tied around the waist), or shorts in case of boys. They are prohibited from wearing anything on the upper body, other than a small piece of cloth called veshti. Women were only allowed to wear saris until recently, when the rules were slightly relaxed and salwar kameez was also made acceptable. Only Hindus are allowed inside the Temple. This is very strictly followed with no exception for anybody, including very senior dignitaries.



The main entrance to the Temple is from the Eastern side. At the entrance to the Temple there is a 7 m high Deepa Sthambam, having thirteen circular receptacles to hold oil and wicks. As you enter the Temple, you can see the 34 m high Flag post (Kodimaram), made of teak and fully gold plated. Just in front of this is the narrow entrance to the inner enclosure of the Sreekovil. There are ten exquisitely carved pillars on two raised platforms, one on either side of the passage.

The Sanctum Sanctorum is a square two-storeyed structure, which houses the beautiful idol of Sree Krishna made of a special stone called 'Patala anjanam'. Pearl necklaces and Thulasi garlands adorn the Deity.

The inner enclosure has a small shrine for Ganapathi on the SouthWest corner. Before you come out of the inner enclosure on the North side, you must also pray at a carving of Lord Vishnu in the AnanthaShayanam image.

Once you are in the Chuttambalam, you can continue walking around the Temple. At the North East corner there is a separate shrine for Bhagavathy. It is said that this shrine even predates the main Temple. If you stand at the North East corner of this shrine, you can look Northwest and pray to Lord Shiva at Mammiyoor.

Once again you cross the Flag Staff and then, on the South side, in the Chuttambalam, there is a shrine for Lord Ayyappan.

The Deity at Guruvayur is well known for healing powers: and devotees make several offerings to fulfil their desires. A common offering is 'Thulabharam', in which the devotee is weighed, in a huge balancing scale, against his choice of items as per his vow, like plantains, jaggery, sugar, coconuts, grains etc. Also, famous here is 'Chorunnu', the first feeding of a child. You will also find a huge Uruli of 'Kunnikuru' (rosary pea seeds) in which children can put their hands and play. This is supposed to make them mischievous.

A lot of marriages get conducted in Guruvayur temple. In the peak season, nearly 300 marriages get conducted in one day, with about 200 between 8 and 11 am. I remember hearing many years back, that, in the rush for weddings, there was a case of mix up between couples.



The routine worship at the Temple was laid down by Adi Sankara, and is followed very strictly. Commencing at 3 am with the 'Nirmalyam', throughout the day, till the 'Athaazha' Seeveli at about 9 pm, the pujas are religiously followed. If the Temple becomes impure due to any reason, then the Temple is purified and the pujas are redone. If the sanctity is broken due to an individual's fault, then he/she has to bear the expenses for the purification and repeat pujas. There have been several cases of important dignitaries who had to bear such expenses.

There are many festivals celebrated at the Sree Krishna Temple. Ekadasi, the eleventh day of every lunar fortnight, is very auspicious to the Hindus. Of the 24 Ekadasis in a year, the Vrishchika Ekadasi has got special significance in Guruvayur. The Ekadasi Vilakku starts a month before the Ekadasi day as offerings by different persons, families and organisations. The Ashtami day Villakku is conducted by my wife's family, and we all contribute to the expenses. It is a wonderful sight to see the Temple lit up with lamps, hear the Temple drums and pray to the Lord during the Athazha Seeveli procession.

After the temple is open for Nirmalya darshan (3.00AM) on Dasami, it is closed only at 9.00 am on Dwadasi Day (12th day), thus allowing continuous darshan for devotees throughout Dasami and Ekadasi Days.

A highlight of the Ekadasi is the memorial honour for Gajarajan Kesavan. The Karanavar or head of the elephant family places a wreath at the statue of Kesavan in front of Sreevalsam guest house and all the other elephants stand around and pay obeisance. On Ekadasi day, the Udayasthamana Pooja (continuous pooja) is conducted by the Devaswom itself. After the morning Seeveli, on Ekadasi, there is a grand elephant procession to the Parthasarathi temple nearby, since it is regarded as Geethopadesam Day also. On Ekadasi after night pooja, the famous Ekadasi Vilakku with elephant procession, takes place and provides a fitting finale to the festival.



The annual Guruvayur Utsavam lasts for ten days in the month of Kumbham (Feb-Mar), and ends after the Arattu on the 10th day. Culturally, it consists of various processions, illumination and modest fire-works. All ten days, the place wears a festive look, streets dressed up with arches, festoons etc., houses freshly thatched and painted. Every shrine and building are tastefully decorated with lights, plantain trunks, bunches of coconut and areca nuts. The two Gopurams and the outer-courtyard are elaborately decorated with illuminations and eye-catching electric displays. The lamps, deepasthambams and vilakku are all lit.

A special event during this period is the elephant race, where these tuskers participate in the jaw dropping Guruvayur Aanayottam (elephant race). Legend has it that this practice dates back to the times when the Temple did not have elephants. As the festival started, elephants from a nearby temple ran to take part in the festivities. This has now been transformed into a tradition. These nearly 6000 kg beauties, race head-to-head, to mark the beginning of the annual Guruvayur Festival. The winner gets to carry the Thidambu (the replica of the idol of Guruvayoorappan) on all special occasions for one year.



As a part of the Ekadasi fete, an 11-day Chembai music festival is also organized, in which many renowned South Indian Carnatic musicians give their very best. The devotees consider it very auspicious to conduct the Arangetram - the debut - on this day in front of the Lord.

The festival concludes on the tenth day with the ceremonial bathing of the Deity, Arattu, in the RudraTheertham. At the same time many devotees also take bath.

On Uthradam day of the month of Chingam (Aug- Sep), one day before Onam, thousands of devotees bring "Kazhcha kulas" (bunches of Banana) as offering to the Lord. These bananas are given to all the elephants of Guruvayur Devaswom. On Thiruvonam day, free Onam feast with 'PazhaPrathamam' is given to thousands of devotees.

Ashtami Rohini in Chingam (Aug-Sep) is celebrated as the birthday of Lord Krishna. Appam and Palpayasam are considered to be important offerings on this day. A special feast is arranged for the devotees. You will also find lots of children dressed as Krishna and Radha taking part in processions during the festivities. Incidentally, Prasada Oottu, free food, is given on all days to those who desire it.

The first day of Medam (mid Apr) is the New Year day for Malayalees. People believe that the fortunes for the next year depend on the nature of the objects one sees in the morning of Vishu. For this purpose, KaNi (an omen) with articles like yellow flowers, rice, betel nuts, golden coins etc. is displayed in front of the Deity. Thousands prefer to see KaNi at Guruvayur on Vishu morning. Crowds stay overnight inside the courtyard of temple, which is specially permitted on this day. They close their eyes and set their eyes on the Kani and Deity, as the doors are opened at 2.30 am for darshan.

The Guruvayur Temple is also linked with famous devotees. Some of whom are: -

- Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri a Sanskrit scholar and a devotee of Lord Guruvayurappan, known for his magnum opus Narayaneeyam. The outdoor auditorium near in front of the Temple is named after him
- Poonthanam Namboothiri, a contemporary of Melpathur, and of Jnanappana fame.

- Vilwamangalam Swamiyar, a Brahmin saint, also a contemporary of Melpathur and Poonthanam
- Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, a famous musician
- and Manjula. The story of Manjula is very interesting. She was a girl who used to give the idol a garland every day. One day she was late and the Temple had closed for the session. She was very sad. Seeing her in tears, a Brahmin advised her to put the garland on a peepul tree. She did that and went away satisfied. When the Temple was opened, the garland was found on the idol. The place where peepul tree stood is now called 'Manjula' (Manjula aal (peepul)).



Similarly, there is a story of a Brahmin boy who had to officiate for Nivedyam in the absence of his priest father. Seeing that the Deity had not taken the offering, and scared of the consequences, he ate up the offering. When the Temple doors were opened, the priests got angry and about to beat him, when a loud proclamation was heard from God, that He had partaken of offering and not the boy.

The Temple also has many attractive murals all around. In fact, there is a small College of Mural Arts very close to the Temple and you can do a four-year course on the subject

Before I finish, I have to mention the 'office Ganapathi'. This is a shrine located just outside the Temple very close to the Melpathur auditorium. It is an open temple with no roof and is said to be a very powerful Deity, who grants all wishes for those who break coconuts there. The shrine was close to the original Devaswom office, hence the name.

Of course, the visit to this famous Temple is really complete when you do some shopping for fancy items in the many shops which line the road leading to the Temple on both the East and West entrances.

Whilst the Temple is always crowded and there is a lot of pushing and pulling to enter into the Temple, and sometimes you have to wait for long periods to gain entry, everything is forgotten when one sees the radiance of the Deity. The atmosphere inside the Temple is charged with divinity and faith amongst all the devotees, young and old. Every visit to this Temple is a unique experience and you always come away wondering at the infinite kindness and love of the Lord towards His devotees.





## Mammiyoor Shiva Temple



It is said that a visit to Guruvayur Temple is complete, only when you complement with a visit to the Mammiyoor Temple. Hence this visit, to this famous Temple, the last one in this leg of our journey.

We have seen that the place where Guru and Vayu consecrated the idol of Lord Krishna came to be known as Guruvayur. The site that Lords Shiva chose for Himself and his consort Parvathy became 'Mahimayoor'. Mahima, evolving out of the status bestowed on Lord Shiva for voluntary relinquishment of his original abode to accommodate Lord Krishna. This, in course of time, got colloquialised to Mammiyoor. Thus, the legend of the Mammiyoor Mahadeva Temple actually extends to the consecration of the famous Sree Guruvayoor Temple.



This ancient Mammiyur Temple is located at a distance of only 200m North West to the Guruvayur Sree Krishna Temple. The main Diety is Lord Shiva in the form of Uma Maheswara. Lord Vishnu is also given equal importance in a Sanctum Sanctorum next to that of Lord Shiva. In fact, inside, it looks like two separate temples side by side. Legend says that they installed the Vishnu statue here to reduce the anger of Lord Shiva. This is the only temple that conducts a special Pooja known as Rig Veda Dhara. This pooja is done by chanting mantras from the Rig veda

After praying in front of Lord Shiva, you circumambulate in the inside, pray at the Ganapathy shrine, then homage to the Goddess at the rear of Lord Shiva. You now need to take care that

you do not cross the Ganga, like in all Shiva temples. Continuing, you can pray at the shrines of Lord Subramaniam and Lord Ayyappan. Then to the main shrine of Lord Vishnu. It is indeed a remarkable sight to see the main shrines, so close to each other. After you come out of the Temple you can now go around the Temple on the external path. The Brahma Rakshas, then the separate shrine of Goddess Bhagavathy and the Sarpa Kavu. At the Snake shrine you will see many small wooden models of cradles placed there. These are the offerings of ladies who are desirous of childbearing. Back to the front again, to complete the circumambulation.

Beautiful mural arts that depict episodes from the Hindu mythology, and divine characters in the most elegant form, can be seen all over the Temple. As you walk around you can also read the legend of how the Temple came into existence.



Main offerings that are made to Lord Shiva are Pinvilakku, Dhara, Koovalamala, Abhishekam, Vedi Vazhipadu. Whereas Palpayasam and Kalabhabhishekam are the main offerings prepared for Lord Vishnu. The consecration day of Lord Vishnu is also celebrated by doing Sudhikalasam, Laksharchana, Chuttuvilakku, Niramala and other special Pujas. Other festivals like Navarathri, Mandala Pooja, Vinayaka Chathurthy, Shashti, Ashtami Rohini and Vishu are also celebrated here.

Quite clearly Shivrathri is celebrated with great pomp and show here. The Temple is well illuminated and decorated and the crowds linger on even at night. Periodically, in this temple,



a MahaRudra Yagnam is held which draws large crowds. The Vedic hymn Sri Rudram is the oldest listing of various names of Lord Shiva. Through the chanting of Sri Rudram, Lord Shiva's various attributes and aspects are invoked and worshipped. When the chanting is accompanied with the Vedic fire ritual, it is called Rudra Homam. Eleven recitations of the Sri Rudram followed by one recitation of the Chamakam is called Ekadasa

Rudram. Eleven Ekadasa Rudram recitations make one Laghu Rudram. And Eleven Laghu Rudra chantings make one Maharudram. The power available during the performance of this yagna is of such a magnitude that the sick become well, the unmarried find ideal mates, debts are removed, wealth and power is showered and death is evaded for the devotees. The Yagnam is followed by Abhishekam of Yagna Kalasams (pots) on the idol of Lord Siva.

During the festivities of Onam and Vishu and on all Mondays, Thursdays and Sundays, sumptuous free feast is served at the Temple Uttupura. Feast is also served during special occasions such as Sivarathri, AshtamiRohini, MaharudraYajana days.

## Kadampuzha Devi



**The Kadampuzha Devi Temple** is a pilgrimage center at Kadampuzha, in Malappuram district. The main Deity of this temple is Goddess Parvati/Durga in the form of a Huntress. Surprisingly, there is no idol of Goddess in this temple, and She is worshipped in a pit.

The Legend about the origin of the temple is associated with Mahabharatha, where Arjuna does penance to Lord Shiva to obtain the divine weapon “**Paasupathastra**”. Lord Shiva approached Arjuna as a Hunter (Kiratha) with His divine consort Parvathy escorting Him as a Huntress, Kirathi. Arjuna was challenged by the Lord, in disguise, to test the skills of the boon seeker.

In the fierce battle between Lord Shiva and Arjuna, the arrows that Arjuna showered on Lord Shiva miraculously turned into Thechi flowers by the will of Goddess Parvathy, and Lord Shiva was fully covered with flowers. Arjuna then recognized the Lord and prostrates before him. Having found Arjuna worthy of the deadly weapon, the Lord obliges His devotee and He is goaded by Goddess Parvathy, who hastened the process with a motherly affection to Arjuna. Hastening is ‘**twaritha**’ in Malayalam and the Goddess at Kadampuzha is worshipped as ‘**twaritha**’ or One who is quick in granting blessings and favours.

Shree Shankaracharya, during his pilgrimage to various parts of the country, came across this place while he was going to Chottanikkara Temple after his darshan at Mookambika Temple. When he reached the place now known as Kadampuzha, he found that his way was blocked by a Divine Presence. Even with his superior sight that could “See” Divine Presences, he could not fathom this Divine Presence. Perplexed, he meditated to understand why he had failed to fathom this Divine Presence; and within himself he discovered that his ego had somehow crept in, to make him feel superior, and that this ego was making him unable to fathom it. The Divine Saint immediately set about cleaning his mind of any ego and made himself humble. He approached the Divine Presence again with utmost devotion and supplication, and immediately perceived what the Presence was and wherefrom it was emanating from. He marvelled at the



Divine Presence of the Devi, so strongly bonded with Lord Shiva; and decided that the place should be treated with absolute reverence.

He discerned that the Divine power is emanating from a hole about 6 cms in diameter in the ground, and took steps to consecrate the place as a Temple; and also constituted Lord Narasimha and Sudarshana Chakra in front of the Devi, and DharmaShasta and Nagakanyaka on either side of the temple. He also stipulated the poojas and rituals that must be conducted at the temple; these stipulations are followed even now.

The Devi, here, is worshiped in three forms. In the mornings she is worshiped as Vidya Durga, Saraswati, giving devotees knowledge and wisdom; in the afternoon she is worshiped as Vana Durga, blessing devotees with health, early marriage, and domestic harmony; and in the evening, as Aadi Durga, Lakshmi bestowing devotees with wealth and overall prosperity.

'Poomoodal', or covering with flowers, is the main offering of this temple and so devotees bring Techchi flowers for performing this ritual.

Another offering is Mutturakkal which is performed by breaking coconuts. “Muttu” means” obstacle” and “Arukkaal “means “to cut”. So Mutturakkal literally means to “cut away obstacles”. There are very many predefined obstacles for which this offering could be done by the devotee.

A coconut, after removing its husk is given to the priest, with the devotee’s name and birth star in Malayalam, and the priest, in turn, breaks this coconut in front of the Deity. If the coconut breaks evenly, it is believed that the Muttu or obstacle is removed. In case the coconut breaks unevenly, the devotee is asked to bring another and the process is repeated till the coconut breaks evenly, denoting that the obstacle is finally removed.

Angadipuram railway station is the major railhead about 23 km from Temple. Kuttipuram and Tirur railway stations are also nearby. Shornur is another important station located 46 km from Kadampuzha.



When you are in Kerala, you must make it a point to visit this Temple 'without an idol' and pay homage to the powerful Devi here. You can also remove all obstacles from your life.



## Sree Thirumandhamkunnu



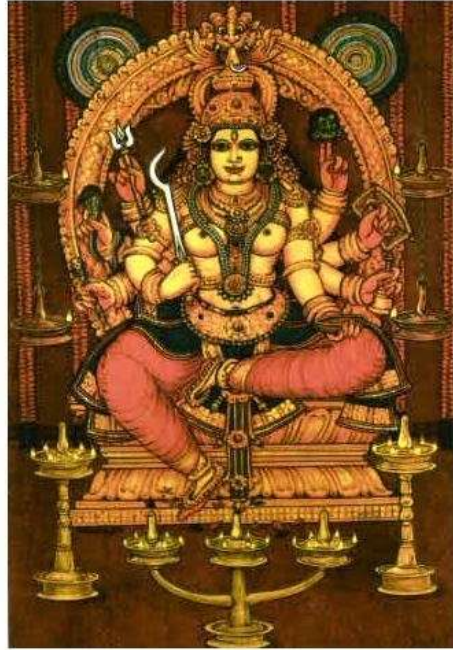
This unique Temple is located in Angadippuram in Malappuram district. As you approach the Temple, you need to climb a substantial number of steps to gain entry in to the hallowed premises, making it a bit difficult for those who find it painful to climb.

The legend behind the existence of this Temple is interesting. King Mandhata of Surya dynasty, an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva prayed; and when asked for a boon, the King requested for a ShivaLing from the Lord. On his request, Lord Shiva gave him a ShivaLing, which the King got down from Mount Kailash. On his return journey, the King kept the ShivaLing down at this place, to marvel at the beautiful surroundings. It is believed that the ShivaLing, at that stage, got stuck to the ground.

Meanwhile, Goddess Parvati came to know that the Shiva Ling, that She had worshipped, had been given to the King by Her Husband. As Lord Shiva had no objection to Parvati re-acquiring the Shiva Ling, the Goddess reached the Thirumandha hill (where the temple is today situated) along with Bhadrakali and bhoothas. Though they located it, they couldn't approach the Shiva Ling due to the bright light that was emanating from the stone. Their efforts for re-acquiring the Shiva Ling is believed to have lasted for 15 days, and the Shiva Ling, at one stage, split into two when Kali tried to acquire it forcefully.

Later, Parvati appeared and entered the Shiva Ling, as it was difficult for Her to stay away from it. The Goddess also instructed that Kali be worshipped here. Since Parvati had appeared at the spot with infant Ganapathy, Unni Ganapathy (baby Ganapathy) is also worshipped here.

The prime Deity of the temple is Thirumandhamkunnil Amma. The major Deities here include Lord Shiva, Ganapathy and Bhadrakali. The Siva Linga installed at Sreemoolasthanam has all divinities according to Vedamanthras. According to the legend it was first worshipped daily by Sree Parvathy. It is believed that Parvathy, Parameswaran and Durga- the three divinities - are ever present in that Idol.



The Idol of Thirumandhamkunnil Amma is about six feet high, in a sitting posture with the left leg bent up to the lap and the right one freely hanging down. The figure of the Devi with the brilliant crown, the glittering ornaments covering the breast, bangles and anklets, the head of Darika and weapons held in the eight hands, though fierce, as a whole, is captivating. The doorway to the Sreekovil is not directly in front of the idol, as is the case usually in most temples. Here it is slightly shifted to the right. The divinity of Goddess is transferred by avahanam to a metallic bimbam and abhishekam is done on the replica. The bimbam is used as thidambu for mounting on elephant during festivals.



The idols of Sapthamathrukkal and temple child are made from the same seasoned jack wood from which the idol of the main Deity was carved out. The legend about the temple child is that Parvathy and Parameswara laid a small lad in the scorching sun to calm down the angry and ferocious Devi returning with a thunderous roar after killing Darika. That lad later became the temple child and subsequently the temple ward (kshethrapalaka). This idol is said to be

growing slightly every year! There is also an idol of Child Ganapathy at the foot of the age-old peepal tree standing on the Northern side of the Temple.

The Temple here is famous for its Mangalya Pooja, an offering done to get rid of all obstacles related to marriage; and is an offering made to Unni Ganapathy with banana, appam, payasam and ada, which the Lord is fond of. It is believed that those who face problems for getting married, should be able to get rid of them and get married before their third visit to the temple after the offering. Even if you get married in between, you have to complete the three mandatory visits.

The annual Pooram festival, held at the temple, in the month of Meenam, is a colourful event marked by processions, fireworks, dances and celebrations for 11 days. The poojas held here are said to date back to ancient times

Thirumandhamkunnu temple is a popular Temple in Malappuram. Thirumandhamkunnu Bhagavathy is said to be the Reliever of all sorrows and a place of hope for those whose marriage have not taken place.

You can go easily to the Hospital Town of Kerala, Perinthalmanna, and then visit this Temple to pay your homage.



## Thirunelli Temple



On the side of the Brahmagiri hills in Wayanad, right on the border of Kerala and Karnataka, lies an ancient temple, dedicated to Lord Maha Vishnu, the Thirunelli Temple. The Temple, surrounded by beautiful hills and forests, is located about 30 km away from Mananthavady, the nearest town. The temple is also known as Sahyamala Kshetram, and sometimes as the Kashi of South.

As always, the Temple has an interesting legend behind the origin. While travelling around the world, Lord Brahma came across this beautiful place now known to be Brahmagiri hills. Getting attracted to the beauty of the hills, he descended there and noticed an idol resting on an Amla (Gooseberry) tree. He recognized the idol as that of Lord Vishnu Himself; and with the help of the other Devas, He installed the idol there. On Brahma's request, Lord Vishnu promised that the water around this Temple will wash away all sins and thus the stream 'Papanashini', destroying all sins, originated there. . The Temple got its name from Nelli meaning Amla, and came to be known as Thirunelli.

While reaching the premises of this temple, you travel through calm and peaceful surroundings, covered with lush green forest. If you are fortunate you can also see wild elephants. I went by bus long back, and at one place, when the bus stopped, we looked back and saw a wild elephant on the road side. Of course, the driver immediately started the bus and drove away.



The Thirunelli Temple is constructed as per ancient temple architecture. The rituals in this Temple are performed on the banks of stream Papanashini, which originates from the Brahmagiri hills. The stream is considered to have medicinal powers. You can also see



a holy rock in this temple, where people used to pray for their forefathers. On the Western side of the Thirunelli temple, you can sight a cave temple Gunnika. This temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Thus, Thirunelli is blessed with the trinities – Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. Near to the Papanashini stream, you can also sight Panchatheertham, the sacred pond. It is believed that five streams met here in ancient period. You can see dense bushes surrounding the pond and also a foot imprint of Lord Vishnu in a stone slab at the centre of this pond. On summer season, the pond becomes dry.



This shrine is perhaps the only temple in the world, where devotees can perform all rituals, related to life, starting from birth to death to after death. People from all over the world come to perform their ancestral rites.

There is an interesting tradition here. In the legend, Brahma had entrusted to two pious Brahmins of nearby Amalaka village, the maintenance of the Temple. He also instructed them that every day He Himself will visit the place and do service to Vishnu. In this shrine, when the ordinary pujas are done from morning till night, the priest prepares for a puja before leaving the place at night. On opening the doors, next morning, he finds that all the materials for the puja have been utilised during the night. It is said that it is Lord Brahma who comes to perform the last puja, when the rest of the world is in deep slumber. The priest before entering the temple in the morning, swears thrice that he will not divulge what he sees there on opening the door; and no priest dares to give out this secret at the risk of being bitten by cobras emanating from the shrine.

The Temple houses a stone aqueduct that ensures uninterrupted water supply to the Temple from the forests. Its channels are supported by pillars with interesting murals carved on them. Even today, cold mountain water gushes out of some of these channels. Truly an architectural marvel.

There is lots of shopping around the temple footsteps. I picked up some tea,, honey ,soaps, wooden driftwood artifacts, for quite a good price.

As I said earlier, both me and my wife went many years back to do the ceremonies for my departed father. When we reached there, we could not get accommodation. A kind Brahmin family took us in and gave us a room, with a non-rice meal at a nominal cost. It was unique experience. Now, of course, the accommodation is much more easily available.

A nice holy serene place to visit and pray for the souls of your ancestors.

## Trichambaram Sree Krishna



The Trichambaram Temple is a Krishna temple located at Taliparamba, in the Kannur district of Kerala. This Temple is located 2 km from the famous Taliparamba Siva Temple. The Temple is believed to have got the name from Thiru Shambara or the holy Shambara, in reverence to Maharishi Shambara, who is supposed to have meditated here. The main Deity of the temple is Shree Krishna after “Kamsavadham”, sitting in a Raudra (ferocious) posture. There is a general belief that this Krishna Temple was built soon after the Siva Temple in order to moderate the fierceness of Lord Siva. The sanctum has beautiful carvings and murals from the 15th and 16th centuries. In the Temple complex, there is also a shrine dedicated to goddess Durga.

The main shrine faces East and in perfectly square in plan. The image of Sree Krishna is carved out of stone and covered with ornaments. The Sanctum Sanctorum has some mysterious carvings and some really ancient murals.

To the North of the main entrance, there is a little pond of about 30 square feet, at the centre of which there is a Durga shrine facing West. The pond is considered sacred and nobody can take a wash in there. The quantity of water is constant throughout the year, with no increase or decrease in the level.

This Temple is considered as the Guruvayur of the North, a place for prayer for those who could not travel in olden days.

There are two peculiar customs here in this Temple. Firstly, as soon as the Temple doors are opened, the Lord is offered Naivedyam. This is apparently in memory of the fact that Krishna felt very hungry after killing Kamsa, and asked His mother Devaki for food.

Secondly, elephants are prohibited near the Temple. You may recall that when Krishna and Balarama entered the palace of Kamsa, a royal elephant charged them. In deference to this legend, no elephants are permitted in the Temple.

The local story goes that one Muslim once got an elephant near the Temple. Apparently, the closed doors of the Sanctum Sanctorum opened by itself and elephant's front leg buckled and fell down.



The annual 15-day festival is held in the month of March, on the 22nd day of the Malayalam month of Kumbham. As I brought out earlier, there are no elephants, hence the images of Krishna and Balarama (from a nearby temple) are carried on the heads of priests who dance to the accompaniment of drums. This is called Nritham or dance. This dance takes place quite a distance from the Temple on the main road. Apparently, a Brahmin lady used to visit the temple daily and pray to the Lord. In course of

time she became aged and sick, and could not visit the temple. Then on the Lord willed that the dance should be done front of her house. Today, of course, there is no such house there, but the dance continues to be held there.

The Arattu takes place on the 5th day of Meenam. The day after that, the Divine brothers bid farewell to each other in a ground nearby and attracts large number of people to witness the event.

Really a nice serene temple with some captivating architecture and quaint customs. Definitely worth a visit to pay homage to the Lord.





*We have come to the end of our journey. A journey to see the traditional architectural excellence of some Temples, to learn about the legends associated with them, to understand the typical customs and traditions of each place and to experience the vibrant spirituality and positive vibes emanating from inanimate stone structures.*