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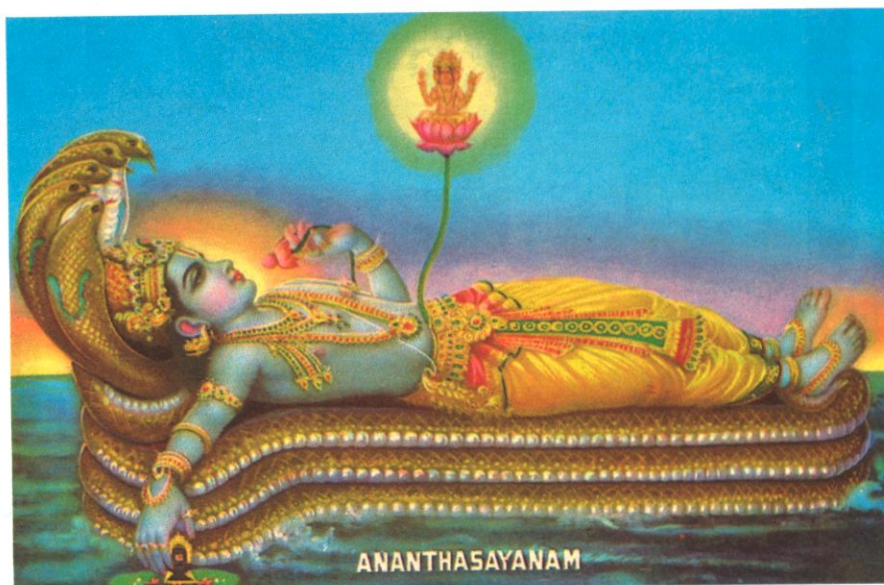
T RIVANDRUM

*Apart from being
the capital of
Kerala,
Trivandrum is a
city where the
traditional and
the modern live
side by side in
quiet harmony*



For rupees two, less than 10 cents, I bought a colourful print of Lord Vishnu—one of the gods in the Holy Trinity. Floating in primeval waters he was depicted reclining on the coils of an enormous serpent called Ananta or the Endless One. Out of Vishnu's navel emerged a lotus stalk atop which sat Brahma, the creator of the cosmos. The image explained it all.

I was in Thiruvananthapuram the City of the Endless Serpent which was dominated by the temple of Padmanabhaswamy or quite literally, the 'Lord with the Lotus Navel.' It was befitting therefore, that I begin my tour of Trivandrum by first paying my respects to the presiding deity of the city.





I arrived early outside the imposing seven -storeyed tower of the temple—the city's most impressive landmark. Joining in the flow of devotees, I made my way towards the main shrine but was abruptly stopped by the temple staff to make way for the Maharaja. Moments later he arrived and after perambulating the main sanctum went inside for a private morning *puja*.

I was informed that the Maharaja came every morning for worship, like his forefathers had before him. I had known that the Vermans, once the ruling dynasty of the former State of Travencore, were worshippers of Vishnu. What I did not know, however, was the fact that Martanda Verman, the most



famous of the Verman kings, had dedicated the entire State of Padmanabhaswamy to the Lord in 1750. From then on, all rights of the ruler and all his possessions belonged to the deity and were held by the king and his successors in His name only.

After a lot of jostling I managed to get inside the inner sanctum which was full of ritual fire and incense smoke. I had a brief glimpse of the stone statue of Vishnu reclining on Ananta on my way out.

Sights And Sounds

Driving down Mahatma Gandhi Road, I cut through the heart of modern Trivandrum city and found the unmistakable stamp of the British. On either side of the road were impressive buildings of the colonial times—the Public Library, College of Fine Arts, the Victoria Jubilee Town Hall and of course, the Secretariat. My destination however, was the Napier Museum—an exceptional building combining indigenous

architectural styles with European methods. The museum is housed within a large complex which also includes the Sri Chitra Art Gallery, the zoo and the Botanical Gardens. Besides a horde of historical artefacts on display, the Napier Museum also has an excellent collection of bronzes and ivory carvings.

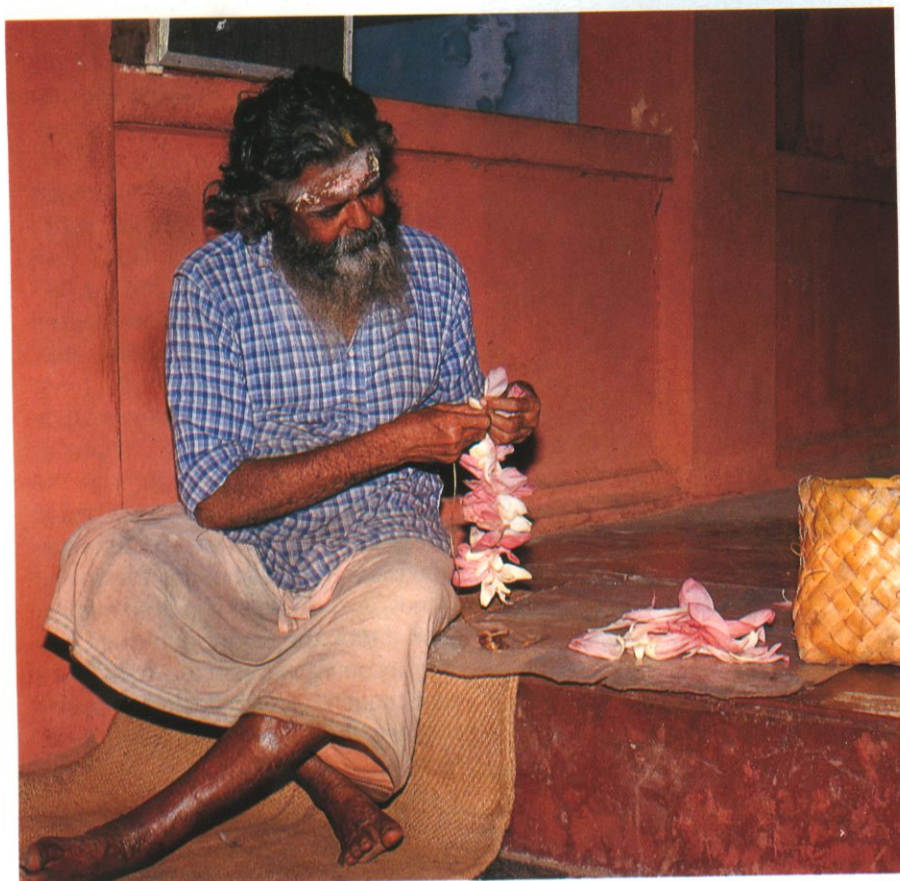
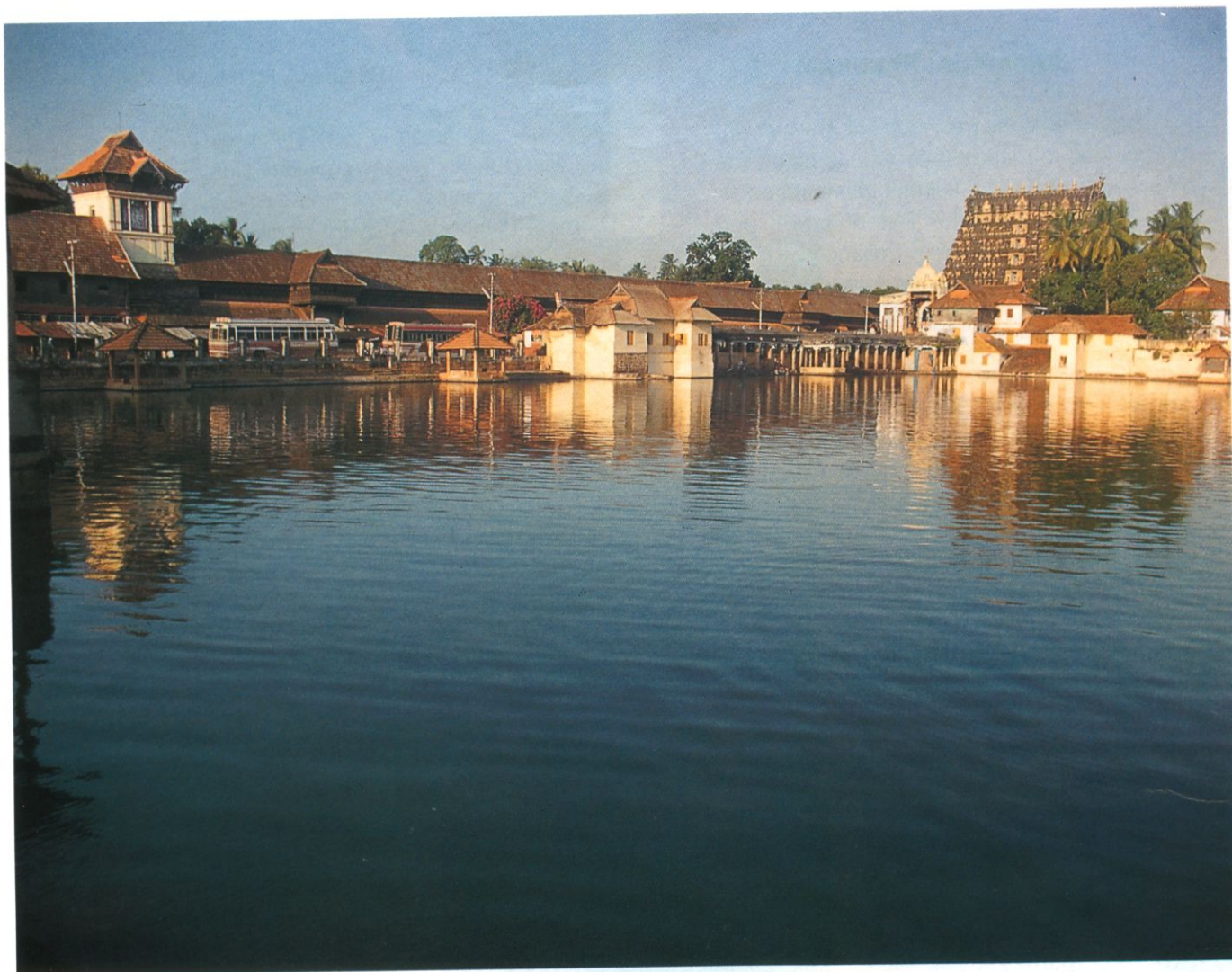
What is worth taking a look at are the paintings of Raja Ravi Verma (1848-1906). Ravi Verma was best known for his dramatic scenes from Hindu epics and the Sri Chitra Art Gallery has the largest collection of his work.

Close to the gallery, I found a wonderful variety of almost every tropical tree and plant in the Botanical Gardens. Having admired the bio-diversity of Kerala in a showcase, I walked across to the zoo where species endemic to the region like the Malabar Horned Bill, the Lion Tailed Macaque and the Slender Loris were housed in sylvan surroundings. Skipping other enclosures, I rushed off to witness Kalarippayattu, an ancient martial form, characteristic to Kerala.

The term *Kalari*, I was told denoted a gymnasium while *Payattu* meant traditional style of combat. Inside the C.V.N. Kalari four students exercised on the mud floor, dressed in loin cloths, their bodies glistening with coconut oil. Initially, I was quite unprepared to see two combatants go at one another with swords in what were well practiced swift motions, but I soon lost my apprehension and sat back to watch what was an enthralling performance!

The fresh twilight air of East Fort hit me as I came out of the humid Kalari and slowly drifted into the Chala Bazaar area. Always crowded in the evenings, this was Trivandrum's old market and it still retained its traditional charm. Jewellery and cloth stores, fresh fruit and flower stalls, fish and vegetable markets co-existed cheek-by-jowl.

After an hour of wandering about the market place, I had worked up an appetite and was ready for dinner with Prabhakaran, a friend who was taking me out to experience a taste of the south. Over a varied vegetarian fare,



replete with fiery *rasam* and rice, he gave me an insight into the city.

Encapsulating the character of Trivandrum, Prabhakaran said that though it was the capital of Kerala, Trivandrum was essentially a middle class city which was home to a number of working professionals: doctors, engineers and scientists. Trivandrum, he informed me, is home to some leading scientific and technological institutions like the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, the Centre for Earth Science Studies and a museum dedicated exclusively to science and technology. In fact, India's pioneering efforts in space exploration began at Thumba, not far from the city.

Shops And Surf

On my way back from the Space Centre, I stopped by to see the range of water sports facilities offered at the Veli Tourist Centre. Designed more for the domestic tourist, it is an ideal picnic spot where the lake merges with the sea in a setting of wading pools, gardens and a

PADMANABHAPURAM

Fifty-five kilometres south of Trivandrum, on the road to Kanyakumari, you jump off the highway to reach the Padmanabhapuram Palace. This was once the seat of power and residence of the Vermans of Travancore. Now it is a museum managed by the government. The sprawling palace complex looks very southeast Asian in its use of pagoda-shaped tops with sloping roof architecture. But obviously, these are features born of Kerala's climatic conditions. Inside, one is impressed by the exquisitely carved woodwork and polished floor surfaces of cool and dark rooms and halls that lead from one to another, opening now and then, into sunny bright courtyards. What leaves one breathless are the stunning murals on the top floors which were executed in the 17th and 18th centuries. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in reverence to Lord Vishnu, the region abounds in lotus.

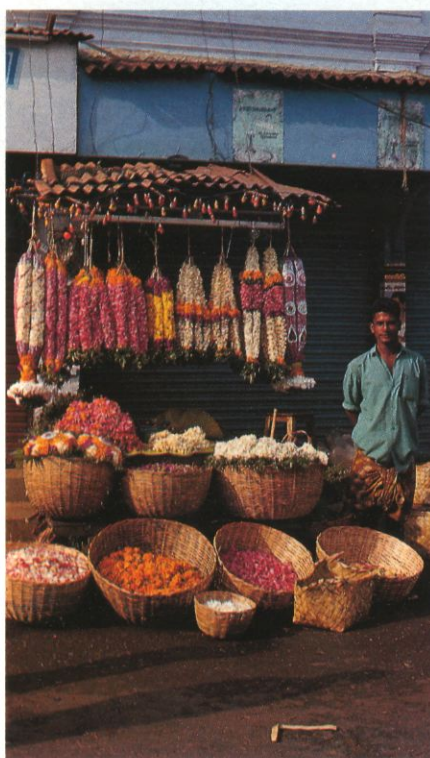


floating restaurant. What struck me was the enormous statue of a conch shell which I later learnt, was designed by one of Kerala's eminent artists: K.K. Raman. Another creation of his was taking shape in equally large proportions at the Shanghumugham beach where a goddess was depicted arising from a sea shell—reminiscent of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*.

THE SPACE MUSEUM

In 1962 the Government of India set up a committee under Professor Vikram A. Sarabhai to organise a national space programme. After extensive surveys, Vikram Sarabhai chose Thumba, a sleepy fishing village near Trivandrum. The Christian fisherfolk were persuaded to move out of the area. Before any new building could come up, their church building of St. Mary Magdalene was used as a workshop while the Bishop's house served as the office. From those humble beginnings, India, in November 1963, successfully launched a two stage sounding rocket thus marking its entry into the space age. Today, India's space programme has come a long way and the old church building of St. Mary Magdalene, which nursed the Indian space programme in its infancy, has been converted into a Space Museum to tell the story of the last 30 years of India's entry into space.

Situated within the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, the Space Museum is not easily accessible. One needs special permission to see it. For further enquiries contact: Head, CDD, VSSC or call 563503.



For me, there was shopping still left to do and my first stop was Karalkada which in old Tamil translated as 'Fixed Price'. More than a hundred years old, Karalkada was highly recommended by everyone I spoke to for Kerala textiles, especially saris and *dhoties* called *mundus*—which were representative of the State's ancient handloom weaving traditions. But to see the range of

handicrafts from this coastal State, I went to Kairali, the government emporium. From huge and heavy brass oil lamps to delicate items made of sea shells, I was impressed most by the wood carvings. To see the mastercraftsmen at work, I went to the government owned Shilpi Kendra. Under one corrugated iron sheet sat more than 50 craftsmen chiseling away at statues of gods and goddesses and sundry other rosewood carvings.

Now there was only Kovalam left on my mind. To set the mood right I changed into my "Kerala: God's own Country" T-shirt, slipped into my Bermudas and Hawaii slippers and packed a towel and a change of clothes. How does one prepare for one of the finest beaches in India? With a breezy attitude I walked barefoot through the sand as music came wafting to me through the coconut palms. The clear blue sea lapped the shore in gentle waves. European tourists were spread out on the golden sands, eyes closed as if in deep meditation. I took the plunge and dived into the oncoming waves of the Arabian Sea and though I was not floating in cosmic waters, the feeling was truly heavenly.....

Text and photographs: Nihal Mathur