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Cool it in a sun-soaked town

Visit temples, explore Chettinad, or just watch life go by at **Heritage Madurai**, a sprawling hospitality property in the temple town.

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The April sun is glowing down on the denizens of the southern temple town of Madurai, and the most pressing impulse is to seek out a pool of water, within the cool confines of which you can ruminate unhindered and watch life go by through half-closed eyes.

At Heritage Madurai, a sprawling hospitality property that perfectly blends both old and new elements, it is possible to fulfil this impulse. Magnificent trees — huge, feathery tamarinds laden with fruit, majestic banyans, languid mangoes, golden laburnums amongst others — etch an arabesque against the cloudless sky. The air is redolent with the fragrance of frangipani and the birds twitter ceaselessly. What's more, there's a private plunge pool in your very backyard, quite literally speaking in addition to a huge, temple-tank style swimming pool accessible to all residents of the resort.

Located on 17 acres with an abundance of green, it is the architecture of the buildings that makes Heritage Madurai distinctive. Designed by Geoffrey Bawa, the late Sri Lankan architect, the squat, whitewashed, single-storied buildings with roofs of terracotta tiles exude a charm that is alluring.

Built in the 1970s as a club for officers of Madura Coats, the place passed into the hands of the Chennai-based ETL Hospitality



Services Ltd a few years ago. S. Thiagrajan, the promoter, restored the existing structures, and added what is, today the main lobby and the reception area. To keep in step with the aesthetics, Bawa's associate Vinod Jayasinghe was called upon. The brief: to build upon the same theme and use materials sourced from the vicinity as in the original building.

UNDERSTATED ELEGANCE

At the end of the process, Heritage Madurai emerged a masterpiece in understated elegance. The main portico is supported by four tapered wooden pillars — the top-end intricately carved — sourced from a Chettinad home. The roof of the wide lobby (that is open on one side) rests on magnificent wooden beams, while honey-coloured columns of unpolished granite run along its length. An intricately-carved door of a Mayurbhanj palace (sourced from Thiagrajan's collection of antiques) provides the backdrop at one end. Two latticed windows and a

clutch of unique floor-mounted fans with blades fashioned from cane, complete the charming setting.

The restoration also addressed seven existing colonial style villas, with wide verandahs running along the entire length. Each villa was reconfigured to house five luxurious 1,600-sq-ft suites, complete with plunge pools. Happiness could well be a private dip followed by a snooze on a recliner that waits invitingly under the shade of the blossom-laden frangipani.

Modern-day lifestyle merges seamlessly with that of the past here. The rooms have wooden flooring, and modified brass *dijas* for bedside lamps, in addition to the best of amenities. Water in the spacious bathroom — you could live in it — is solar-heated. The tariff differs with the time of the year, ranging from Rs 3,500-Rs 6,200 (Rs 10,000 during September-February). Construction of a spa is under way, but in the meanwhile, you can opt for an 'in-room' massage (Rs 1,400 for an hour) to shed your stress.

Should you elect for this, expect an attendant to arrive with what looks like a large suitcase. This opens out into a massage bed. Within minutes, the room has all the trappings necessary to make a massage really relaxing: the two-in-one is playing soothing music, essential oils from the aroma lamp are diffusing into surroundings, and a bowl of scented flowers rests on the floor at the head of the bed. You can choose from lavender, orange or *vlang-vlang* for the rub-in. At the end of the appointed hour, sip on the herbal tea and savour the goodness of it all.

LEISURE OPTIONS

Another highlight at the resort is the virtual golf course. The affable Robin John, a professional on the Indian golfing circuit, is in charge here. Golfers who sign up for a session can work on improving their handicaps or putting skills and pick up nuances that matter under his keen eye; novices could get a lesson or two on the basics. A fleet of golf carts, used to ferry guests around the proper-

ty, can be used to add a touch of real for those really serious about the game.

Banyan Tree, the dining room, is large, and offers plenty of variety including some interesting Chettinad fare. Adjoining this is a 24-hour coffee shop overlooking a large family of banyan trees.

Heritage India, the management of which recently passed from the Sri-Lanka based Aitkin Spence Group to Grand Lukes Hospitality (an arm of ETL), has prepared a three-day, two-night package (Rs 19,999 per couple covering domestic travel, airport transfers, stay in a luxury suite and sight-seeing) that includes a visit to the temples, beginning with the famed Meenakshi Amman Temple and a day-trip to Chettinad heartland. Indoors, you could take lessons on stringing *mallipo* (jasmine buds), draping a saree or playing one of several stringed-instruments at the cultural centre.

You could choose some of these options, or simply elect to stay put and enjoy the hospitality. Either way you win.

Clockwise from left:

The reception lobby; Swimming pool built to resemble a temple tank; Portico with pillars sourced from a Chettinad home.