

LORD OF THE FESTIVALS

On a trip to Kannur, in North Kerala, **HEMA NARAYANAN** comes face to face with Theyyam, an extraordinary dance ritual that narrates legends of gods, evil spirits, and local heroes.

I HAD SEEN STRIKING photographs of Theyyam—faces splashed with vermillion, orange, and red, and bodies dressed in vibrant costumes. Theyyam is a ritual dance festival popular in north Kerala where men don the guise of different gods and bring to life the many legends of the state such as those of blood-sucking *yakshis* (evil spirits), serpent gods, warlords, and heroes of yore. The name literally translates to ‘demi-god’, and the performers are from Dalit communities.

One fine morning in January 2020, I landed in Kannur and made my way to an over 400-year-old ancestral home named Koodali Thazhathu Veedu, on invitation—to witness the magic of Theyyam. For the residents of Koodali, Theyyam is an annual occasion, held at the end of January—on the 14th and 15th nights of the Malayalam month of Makaram.



◀ An artiste dressed as Karuvai Bhagavathi, the protector of the womb.
Above: An ancestral home, Koodali Thazhathu Veedu, gears up for the Theyyam festival.



▲ Clockwise from above: Agni Kantaakarnan with 16 fire torches tied around his waist; the accessories are mostly in orange and red colours; a performer dressed up as Vettakkorumakan, believed to be the son of Lord Shiva; mukhamezhuthu, or the art of face painting in Theyyam, employs natural dyes.

As my first evening at Koodali drew near, family elders began distributing rice, pulses, and lentils, as a mark of respect to the artistes. Soon, the place was abuzz—palm leaves were being hung as embellishments, artistes were engrossed in face painting or *mukhamezhutu*, percussion and folk instruments were lined up, and the temples illuminated. Theyyam is performed in front of the Kalari, or the martial arts centre of the house, which enhances its spiritual atmosphere. Each Theyyam artiste has a distinct costume that features skirts, bracelets, chains, breastplates, garlands, and headgears made out of spliced bamboo and wooden planks covered with flowers and coconut leaves. The headgears are around six-to-seven metres high, and can go up to 18 metres for certain types of Theyyam. There are more than 400 types of Theyyam, and as the evening went on, I was introduced to a few.

First up was a prelude called Thottam and Vellaattam. It is a subdued act without any elaborate costume during which the performer, also known as *theyyam*, narrates the origin of different Theyyams. In the final act of day one, Uchchitta Bhagavathi, the *theyyam* sat fearlessly on a pyre of jackfruit tree logs as sparks flew all around. The second day's final act was by Agni Kantaakarnan, or fire *theyyam*, who walked in at 4am with 16 fire torches fastened around his waist. The swirling fire dance ended with him blessing the spectators and dropping the torches in a sequence.

It is believed that the frenzied dancing, wild drumming, mime, and music of Theyyam can elevate humans to the stature of gods. As I watched this extraordinary festival unfold, I found myself nodding in agreement. +



▲ Clockwise from above: Rice and pulses are offered to the performers as a mark of respect; palm leaves are hung to decorate the area; other embellishments made from spliced bamboo and palm leaves.



▲ Clockwise from above: Headgear woven using screw pine flowers and palm leaves; Theyyam begins with chenda melam, or drum beats; coconuts laid out as offering; Uchchitta Bhagavathi fearlessly sits on red hot coal to appease the gods.

GETTING THERE

Kannur has an airport but it is not well connected to other major cities of the country. Fly to the airport in Kozhikode, which is at a distance of 102 km from Kannur.

STAY

State Beach Boutique Resort & Spa overlooks the Arabian Sea and flaunts the Victorian style of architecture. Doubles from ₹3,500; statebeachresort.com

