The Snake Boats of Kerala
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Pageantry prevails in a yearly festival along the tropical River Pampa

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This is no ordinary boat race.There are other such tournaments taking place elsewhere in India, and even in some parts of Kerala, but there is only one real snake boat race, and it happens in only one place: right here, near the beautiful and peaceful village of Aranmula in Kerala's Pathanamthitta district. This event not only features uncommonly elegant and symbolic boats in competition, it showcases an unusual combination of expert craftsmanship, exquisite dance, music, devotion and time-honored ritual. Such happenings as these sport a vigor verging on religious fervor.

From start to finish the whole event is imbibed with religious meaning. In fact, it is based on an alluring old legend which goes something like this: Once upon a time in the village of Aranmula, a brahmin made a vow to feed one pilgrim every day. Happy with this devotion, Lord Krishna appeared before him in a vision. The brahmin was so overjoyed that he arranged for a huge feast to take place at the Aranmula Parthasarathy temple. This feast became a tradition and occurred year after year. On one occasion, a ship bringing food for the feast at the temple was ambushed by scoundrels, and villagers' snake boats came to the rescue. Thereafter, all

offerings for the feast were brought by snake boats, and devotion was proven by the speed at which the boats could arrive with the goods. Thus was born Aranmula's boat races.

The race itself, which occurs once a year in the Malayalam month of Simha (usually August), is only the end of a long process which begins with the construction of the boats themselves. Specifications for every detail of the construction of these unusual vessels are revealed in the Sthap Athya Veda, an ancient scripture defining the building of yaman or odam (wooden boats). It takes 650 man-days to build a single snake boat. The long wooden planks used in the construction of the hull must be precisely 83 feet in length and six inches thick. The boats themselves are 158 feet long and hold 100 men. They are constructed so that the head and tail project out five and three feet, respectively, above the water. Each boat must have 64 seating compartments for 64 oarsmen, representing 64 art forms. At the head of the boat on a raised platform are seats for four more master oarsmen who control the direction of the boat with large oars. These four oarsmen symbolize the four Vedas. In the middle of the boat is a platform for eight people to stand. They represent the Ashtadikpalakas (devas), who guard the eight directions.

There are 32 snake boats representing 32 villages on the banks of the holy River Pampa, which winds through the district of Pathanamthitta. On the main day of the festival, everyone worships the murti of Lord Parthasarathy, a form of Lord Krishna, the presiding deity of the ancient Aranmula temple. On this day, all of the boats are adorned elaborately with decorations and maneuvered into view of the Parthasarathy temple, standing majestically above and near the shore.

The oarsmen, wearing white dhotis with white scarfs around their heads, row the snake boats to the rhythmic tunes of sacred hymns composed by the late, great poet, Ramapurathu Warrier. All of the local people participate in the festival. And all the pilgrims who come to Aranmula become the guests of the resident families. Food, especially, is made available to everyone."This is our harvest festival," says local resident Radhakrishnan. "Those who come to Aranmula, the land of Lord Parthsarathy, should be extended the greatest hospitality. All are our guests, and they should be treated well. We do this every year."

According to master boat craftsmen Venu Achary and Thankappan Achary, the total cost of building a snake boat is about Rs 1.5 million or about $33,000. But snake boats are special. They are called Pallyodam, which means "that which belongs to the Lord." And local Hindus donate liberally for the construction of such worshipful objects.

For years the "Aranmula Festival" had been exclusively a religious affair. However, beginning in 1978, politicians entered into its management and made it more of a sports event. This August, 2000, festival (reported here) commemorated the way the event was celebrated before 1978 and officially re-established those previous more religious customs and practices. Copying this colorful festival, there have been other boat races in the backwaters and rivers of Kerala for the purpose of attracting foreign tourists. But only at the impressive Aranmula festival do the true snake boats compete.

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