

[A Visit to Los Angeles' Tenth Century Vishnu Temple](#)

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Skilled Priests, Ample Facilities Serve 25,000 Southern California Hindus

Dongre, Archana The tall, ornate, ivory-colored towers of the Shri Venkateshwara Temple stand as an elegant oddity in the rural surroundings of a scenic canyon in Malibu. Winding down the Las Virgenes Canyon road, cars come to a screeching halt at the sudden sight of the spectacular temple architecture and sculpture. For Hindus, however, it's a familiar scene, plucked straight from their cultural and religious roots in India. It is also a place of ultimate reverence and worship and a significant symbol of Eastern culture gaining acceptance on Western soil.

I climb a few steps to the 52-foot entrance tower or rajagopuram, noticing how the early morning sun casts a golden light upon its sculpted figurines, flowers and other intricate adornments. Underneath, two Dwarapalakas or guardian angels, stand at either end of the tall entrance, remind me that the temple is protected by divine spirit. An inscription on the ground proclaims: "Om-This temple belongs to the Hindu community of America. It symbolizes their devotion to God and dedication to the spiritual uplift of humanity."

A few more steps and I enter the meditation hall, supported by four ornate pillars. The cool, clean marble floor feels wonderful to the bare feet. The aroma of freshly lit incense makes the atmosphere fragrant. Through surrounding glass walls, I see the tall, luscious green trees and forested mountain peaks beyond. Gentle breezes flow in and bring the feeling of nature which is refreshing and soothing to the psyche. Inside the temple's innermost chamber the priest chants Sanskrit prayers in praise of Lord Vishnu, his clean, robust voice, deep and resonant, reverberating in this enclosed stone chamber. The mood is serene. I feel touched by the Divine.

There are only three people in the temple at this early hour. A sari-clad young girl sitting on the floor to my right, her eyes closed in devotion. Her facial expression looks so tranquil. After a momentary silence following the priest's Vedic prayer, she

sings a devotional song to Lord Krishna. Her high, sharp, feminine voice and the song's lilting tune are moving. I am transported to a childhood memory of a similar temple in India.

In India temples are not just places of worship, they are a locus for anything that is lofty and elegant. They symbolize the elevation of the human spirit and are the abodes of performing arts like classical music and dance, which are rendered in utter devotion. On Vijayadashami day in October of every year the teachers and disciples of many Indian classical dance schools in the Los Angeles area of California come to the temple and perform before Lord Vishnu, seeking His blessings in the perfection of their art.

Inside the sanctum sanctorum the granite Deity of Lord Venkateshwara, or Vishnu, stands an impressive seven feet tall, adorned with both fresh and silk flowers. The God's eyes and part of His forehead are covered with white camphor paste. "The Lord's sight is extremely powerful. You cannot bear to see it with ordinary eyes. That is why the God's eyes have to be covered with camphor paste," the priest Narasimha Bhattar explains to me.

The golden ornate jewelry shines bright and dazzling against the granite Deity as the twin flames of a brass lamp lend a gentle radiance to the atmosphere. Rows of brass lamps frame the doorway to the sanctum.

Bhattar performs an archana invoking blessings for me. As I bow, Bhattar chants and touches my head with the Deity's brass, bell-shaped crown symbolizing that all His devotees are kings.

The Priests

Bhattar, a priest for 21 years, was functioning as the chief priest at the ancient Shri Ranganathaswamy Temple at Shrirangam before coming to the USA in December, 1985. He was born into a family of well-known priests in the tradition of Shukla Yajur Veda and has studied the Agamas (the Science of religious worship) for many years.

Although he seldom leaves the premises, he likes living in the USA. "I can feel the freedom here. People are broadminded. They [Americans] come to the temple and ask many questions."

Bhattar and two other equally learned priests, Samudrala Krishnamacharyulu and S. Nagarajan, are occupied from six in the morning to late at night with the ritual worship of the nine Deities housed in the temple complex. All three priests were brought here on permanent visas as "ministers of religion" after their knowledge was rigorously tested by the American consulate in India. The temple is approved by the Los Angeles County as a religious organization authorized to conduct marriages and issue marriage certificates.

Building the Temple

The temple complex occupies 13,000 square feet and cost more than US \$3,000,000 to build. Of the nine shrines, five are on the upper level and four on the lower level. Each has a sculpted dome called a vimana, elaborately decorated artwork appropriate for the Deity enshrined within. One marvels at the work done in brick and mortar by 23 silpis (temple sculptors) imported from India, who have been coming to work on the temple since December, 1982. They too, were artisans who learned their trade from their fathers according to ancient tradition and fulfilled apprenticeships under capable masters. The entire complex is an example of the South Indian Chola style of architecture that flourished during the reign of Chola dynasty in 900-1100CE. The architects and silpis belong to the Vishvakarama school of Silpa Shastra (science of sculpture), that originated in India thousands of years ago.

The Deities themselves were made in India and then brought here. Those made of granite were crafted in Tirupathi, while those of white marble came from Jaipur.

How could the Hindu Temple Society of Southern California create such an authentic and exquisite cultural monument thousands of miles from its original home? The story began with the idea to create "a magnificent monument for posterity," conceived by Mrs. Leela Krishnamurthi. She presented her concept to a group of local Indians in April, 1977. They collected \$200 and formed the above-mentioned society. Mrs. Krishnamurthi then relocated to Houston but the

idea had already developed firm roots. Many Indians dedicated their spare time to the arduous task. Marathon fund raising efforts were made. Nearly five acres of land were purchased and permits were secured despite objections from sources such as the local homeowner's association. The groundbreaking ceremony finally took place in January, 1981.

The original designer of the temple was Mr. S.M. Ganapathi, chief stapathi of Andhra Pradesh government who won several awards and honors for his extraordinary services in the field of temple architecture. Assisting him was Mr. S. M. Muthiah, his younger brother, also a well-known stapathi in his own right, having designed numerous temples in and outside of India.

The 23 Silpis or artisans were hand picked by Muthiah for their superb skills. The temple art is a harmonious confluence of religion, history, mythology and art woven into a unified whole.

"In order to create that in a foreign land we had to use many innovative ideas," said Mr. Vasan R. Srinivasan, the secretary of the Society and a civil engineer himself. "The entire structure is reinforced for seismic zone earthquakes."

Local architect Ravi Varma worked in collaboration with the Indian builder/architects to bring their concepts within the building codes of Southern California, and was instrumental in developing features such as the multi-purpose hall in the basement and the commercial kitchen.

The mortar and brick walls are covered with carvings of dragons, lions, elephants, and lotus blossoms. While a multi-petaled pink lotus, surrounded by eight parrots all framed in a green square, adorns the ceiling and imparts a touch of color to the off-white mandapam, the two white elephants with gilded ornaments, standing at either end of its entrance give a regal touch. The whole creation is like a song in stone.

Future Plans

Funds are currently being raised to create the Shiva complex which will enclose the three individual shrines for Ganesha, Shiva and Kartikkeya-on the lower level. A dance performance given by seven-year-old Shvetha Bharadwaja on September 9 kicked off the fund raising campaign which eventually aims to raise \$120,000 for the enclosure.

The priests as well as the manager have recently moved to newly constructed quarters adjacent to the temple.

A Gurukula has been proposed for the youngsters. If this idea is well accepted, the gurukula will be held like a summer camp starting in the summer of 1990. Up to 30 children of different age groups will be admitted to this month-long live-in camp. The primarily religious and cultural curriculum will be tailor-made for children living in America.

A library is also proposed which would house books on Indian religion and culture for the benefit of young and old alike. A children's park and picnic area is also being planned near the temple.

Thirty-five families have recently bought and donated 2.8 acres of land adjacent to the complex. The temple society proposes to build retreat cottages there, which will serve as accommodations for devotees coming from long distances to pujas and other rituals or ceremonies like marriages.

There are plans to level and landscape the grounds surrounding the temple. The increased work load calls for more staff, and the society plans to add an assistant manager and two more priests.

The temple's current expenses including bank payments and maintenance are about \$30,000 per month. The temple society is seriously considering several fund-raising approaches to meet the costs of existing and future projects.

For further information please write or call Shree Venkateswara Swami Temple,
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