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Kerala's Timber Temples

The temptation was irresistible. Though they knew that stone was, and still is, the orthodox temple building material, the matriarchal Keralites were so in love with their beautiful and abundant hardwoods, especially teak, they created their own temple architecture just to show it off. Heavy monsoons and 44 rivers flowing down from the Western Ghats nourish this slender, leaf-like state into India's most lushly verdant land. Forests cover 27% of the state, some so dense they have never been accessed. In 1970, a tribe of cave-dwellers was discovered in the Nilamber Valley.

One thousand timber temples span Kerala, serving its 70% Hindu population. "The typical design is a cluster of modest buildings standing freely within a compound. The most usual type is square, but rectangular, circular and even elliptical examples are also common," notes Indologist George Michell. "The most important auxiliary structure is the kuttumbalam, the hall for ritual dance and theatre."

Interestingly, this sloping-roof design with gables, circumambulatory porch/walkways, intricate carving and fine joinery is used also for wealthy residences, even mosques. But today, wood is so costly that concrete has replaced wood as the state's primary building material for temples and other edifices.

Photos and data for this article were drawn from several issues of Marg magazine. Subscribe today to see what you're missing.