



The Vallam Kali boat race is a highly anticipated event during Onam in Kerala



KERALA'S OWN CARNIVAL

Onam, celebrated with much fervour in Kerala, is backed by history and legends. **By Bindu Gopal Rao**

KERALA IS KNOWN AS 'GOD'S OWN COUNTRY' FOR MANY GOOD reasons. Onam, the state's most famous festival is celebrated by locals irrespective of religion. The traditional 10-day harvest festival marks the homecoming of the mythical king Mahabali, and is usually celebrated in Chingam, the first month of the Malayalam calendar, which corresponds to the months of August or September. The festival spawns 10 days of feasting, boat races, song, dance and merriment.

During Onam, one can enjoy spectacular parades of elephants, fireworks, the famous Kathakali dance, as well as many cultural and sports events. However, one of its most iconic attractions is Vallam Kali, or boat races that see hundreds of oarsmen row traditional boats to the rhythm of drums and cymbals. The long and graceful boats are called Chundans since their long hulls and high sterns resemble the raised hood of a cobra.

The swing is yet another integral part of Onam, particularly in Kerala's rural areas. Men, women and children can be seen decked in their best attire, singing Onam-related songs while they rock on swings attached to high branches.

Celebrations in the state begin with a grand procession called Atha-



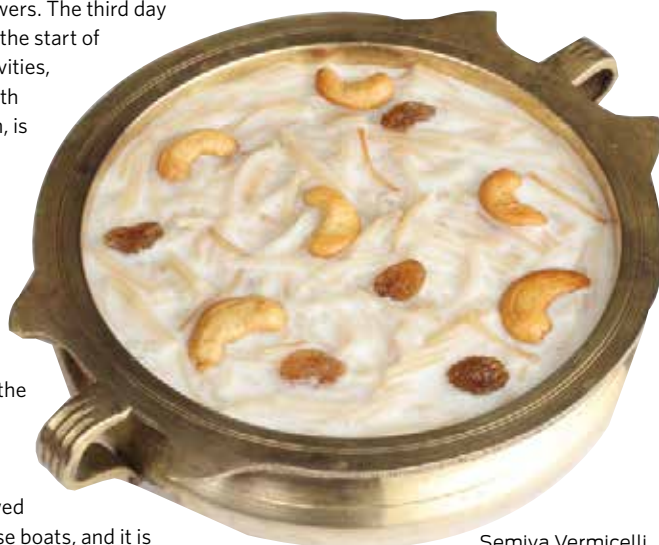
The Pookalam floral carpet increases in size as the days progress during Onam

chamayam at Thrippunithura near Kochi. This day also sees the ritual of laying Pookalam or floral carpets. Interestingly, the size of the carpet of yellow flowers starts small, and progressively increases in size by the last day of Onam. The states of Mahabali and Vamanan are also placed at the entrance of each house.

The second day or Chithira, sees a second layer of flowers added to the Pookalam design using two different colours of flowers. The third day Chodi, marks the start of shopping activities, while the fourth day Vishakam, is considered to be the most auspicious day of Onam. The fifth day Anizham, is very important as it kicks off the Vallam Kali (snake boat race). Only men are allowed to ride on these boats, and it is obligatory to be barefoot on the boat. Out of the 150 men who sit on the

boat, 25 of them sing traditional Kerala songs while the remaining 125 men row the boat with their oars.

Public frenzy reaches a high point on the sixth day (Thriketa), when the holidays begin for schools and offices. By this time, the Pookalam design is very large, with at least five or six new flowers added to the original design. The seventh day Moolam, sees smaller versions of the traditional Ona Sadya, which is a



Semiya Vermicelli Payasam, a seasonal sweet dish for Onam

special Onam lunch. Other festivities include Puli Kali or the masked leopard dance and traditional dance forms like Kaikotti Kali. One can see men dressed up as tigers as they dance to the beats of traditional instruments. So elaborately dressed are the men, that it takes approximately four hours to decorate a single person.

The Ona Sadya traditional Onam meal, is a lengthy affair, consisting of rice and over ten vegetarian dishes served on a clean green banana leaf. Biju V. Krishnan, Sous Chef, The LaLit Spa & Resorts Bekal explains, "The banana leaf is placed before a person so that its narrow part always points to the left side. Sadya is served from the top left corner of the leaf, on which is placed in order, a small yellow banana, Sarkara Upperi, Upperi and Pappad. Mango pickle, Injipuli (thick ginger and tamarind curry), lime pickle, Thoran, Olan, Avial, Pachadi, and Kichadi are placed in order on the rest of the upper half of the leaf. Once all these items are placed, the rice is served at the bottom centre of the leaf."

On the eighth day - Pooradam - the ritual of washing small statues of Mahabali and Vamana begins, before they are taken around the house in a procession. These statues are later placed at the centre of the Pookalam. Uthradom is the ninth and penultimate day of the festival that is the most auspicious day for the purchase of vegetables and fruits along with other provisions to be used on the tenth and final day.

So popular has the festival of Onam become that it has spread across the country and the world. "Everywhere, people seem to be embracing the concept of Onam celebrations and partaking in festivities. At our hotel, there are expats who ask about our Onam promotions," says Satish Murthy, F&B Manager, Courtyard by Marriott Chennai. A festival to be experienced when in Kerala, Onam truly celebrates the state's spirit and festive nature.