

Nandhi Collective: A New Model for Tourism in the North

Posted on

For travelers seeking more meaningful experiences, Nandhi Collective in Jaffna provides a new model for slow tourism in the North, connecting visitors directly with local culture through curated tours, a thirdspace and heritage festival, while ensuring economic return for the communities involved.

Photography: Nandhi Collective.

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At Nandhi Collective's café, gallery, and boutique, a curated selection of locally made goods connects traditional craft with contemporary audiences.

Sri Lanka is no stranger to tourism, but it often follows familiar patterns. Sun, sea, and surf on Southern coastal routes and established hill country circuits. It's a type of tourism that prides itself on simplicity, which often translates into experiences that are easily packaged and scaled.



Yashodha Sivakumaran and Ashanya Indralingam, co-founders of Nandhi Collective, moved to Jaffna to bridge the gap between travelers and local communities through a diaspora lens.

The Northern region doesn't quite fit into that model. Its value lies in the intangible heritage that it has managed to keep intact, distinct from the rest of the island. Brightly colored sarees, Hindu kovils, Dutch forts, bicycles, spicy seafood curries, palmyra trees, all backdropped by a constellation of islands connected by bridge and boat. A commonly heard refrain: the North feels like stepping back in time.

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Join a hands-on cooking session in a restored 100-year-old ancestral home, where guests learn to prepare Jaffna crab curry with Vaddukodai home cooks.



In the Gurunagar fishing experience, guests step into the lagoon with local fishermen to learn traditional net techniques and sea cucumber harvesting.



At a pottery studio, guests watch artisans shape clay using techniques still embedded in everyday life across the North.



Going beyond mere dates and names, Nandhi Collective offers history and architecture tours with a difference: deeply researched, chronologically told, and often led by architects and expert locals.

But the same qualities that make it unique are what has made it harder to access. Enter Nandhi Collective. Formed by returning diaspora, this Jaffna-based social enterprise works within a new model, one that is designed to connect travelers directly with the region's living culture, while still ensuring economic return for the communities involved.

By curating direct-to-community experiences that move beyond conventional tourism, visitors are connecting directly to knowledge holders. Nandhi Collective offer both custom multi-day itineraries as well as one-off experiences that are intentionally varied: a cook-along with local women from Vaddukodai demonstrating how the infamous crab curry is made from scratch, followed by a long table communal lunch in Catumaran, a 100-year-old ancestral home redesigned by Channa Daswatte. A morning spent with Gurunagar fishermen learning traditional net fishing techniques in lagoon plots divided up by the church, capped with a visit to a working sea cucumber farm. Afternoons spent with master artisans in craft workshops, discovering the art of hand-painting Tamil signs, clay pottery, and palmyra weaving, crafts that are part of everyday life, but increasingly under threat. Proceeds from these direct-to-community experiences support people, practices and communities involved.



During the fishing experience, guests have a unique opportunity to sample the local catch in the middle of the Jaffna lagoon.

“For a meaningful enterprise to succeed here, it must be rooted in the local cultural context and an understanding of its specific history and communities. You can’t really impose a framework in Jaffna that has been created elsewhere. Ironically, the more we focused on this region’s specificity, the clearer it became that there are some universal truths about human connection and collective memory. Through all

the relationships we've built with our community partners, we look at heritage preservation not just as a practice that honors the past, but as a conduit for cultural identity and supporting livelihoods. Because for heritage to endure, it must sustain those who carry it," Yashodha Sivakumaran says, a Tamil- Australian.

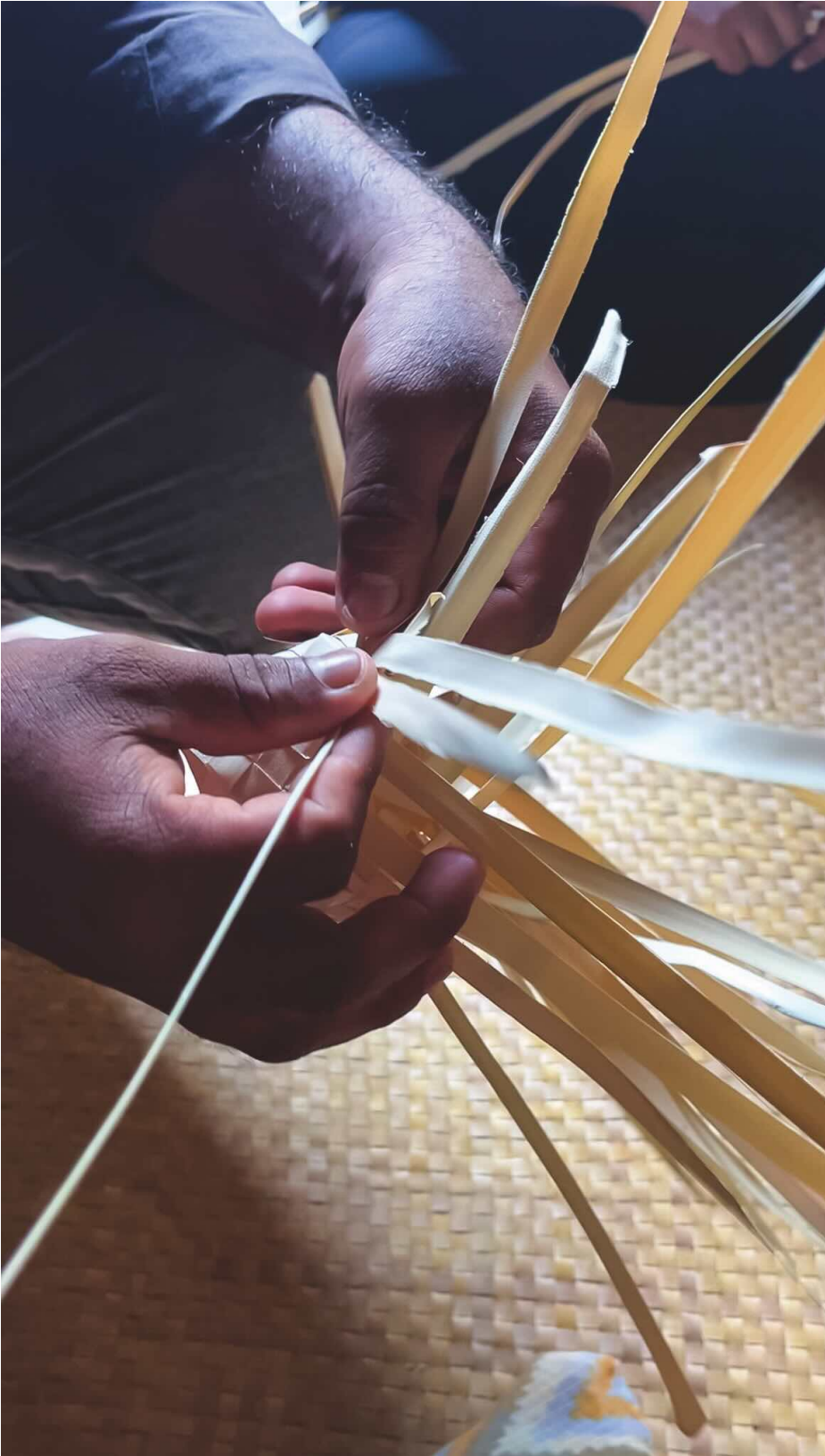


Nandhi Collective functions as both a virtual and physical community, a way for both locals and travelers to connect over shared heritage and practices.

The group have also restored a heritage home in the center of Jaffna, functioning as

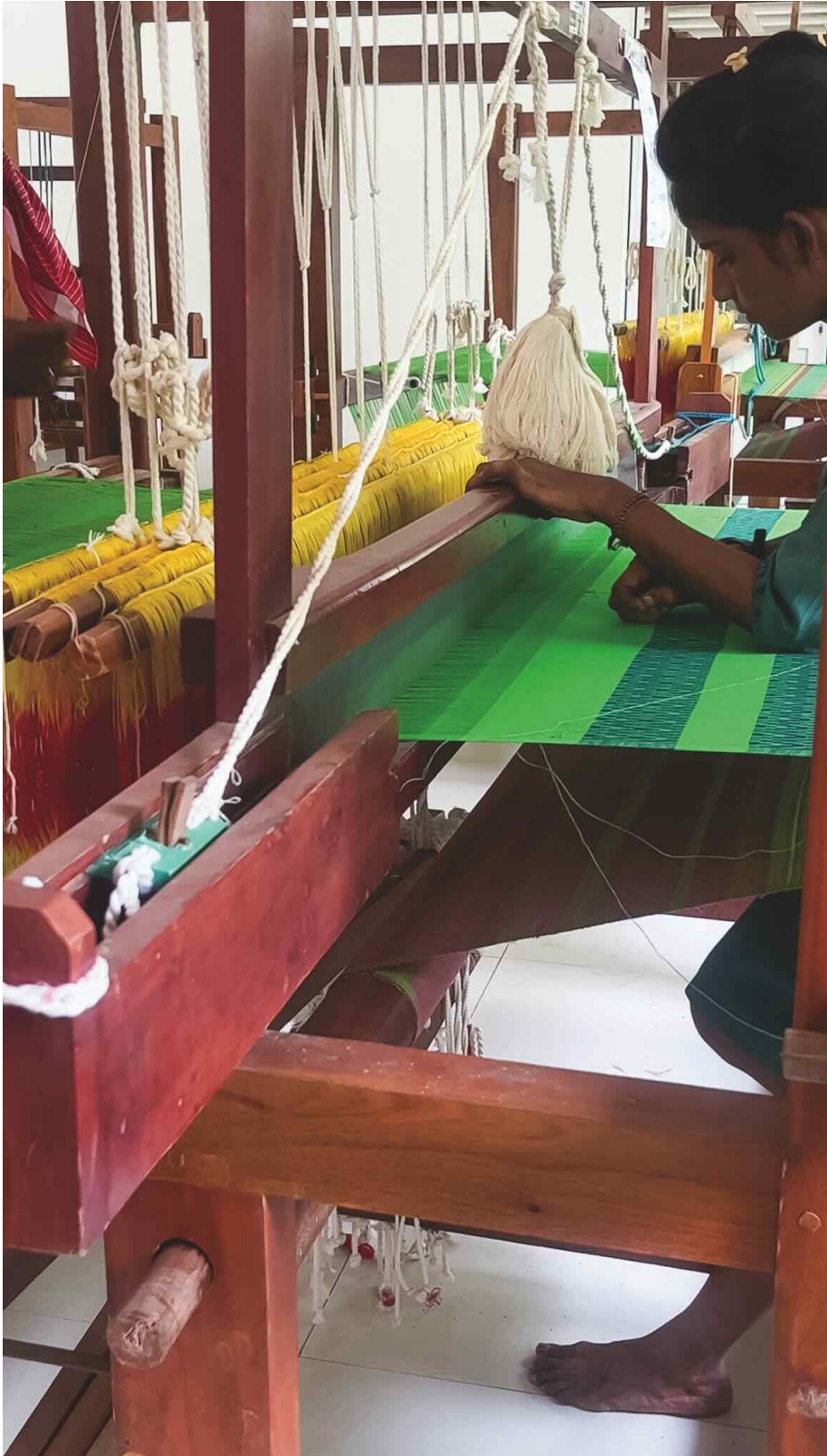
a café, gallery, and boutique. Formerly an unused space, Nandhi is not designed to be simply a cafe. Visitors might come for coffee, but leave having encountered a local artist, purchased a handcrafted Palmyra soap or hand drawn postcard, and signed up to join a history and architecture tour that provides context for the layered city that Jaffna is. This May, Nandhi Collective expands this model through Northbound,

a three-day culture and heritage festival happening at various locations around Jaffna and the surrounding areas. Guests stay at a luxury boutique resort, and move through both public and private access spaces: restored courtyard homes, fishing lagoons, paddy fields, and more, all led by local collaborators. With food as a big part of Jaffna heritage, Northbound curates both traditional Tamil dishes like Jaffna crab curry and kool, as well as supperclub-style dining, where traditional dishes get turned on their head through sensory multi-course experiences that include folk music and dance theater.



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As part of a workshop, guests learn to weave with palmyra, a material deeply tied to northern culture and daily life.



Through Nandhi Collective, visitors engage directly with weavers and makers, gaining insight into material, process, and the realities behind craft.

“We’re conscious that, as diaspora with a certain level of privilege and access, our role here is simply as connectors. We want to use our skills to create a framework where Northern culture, when accessed thoughtfully, can help sustain livelihoods, but also help revive practices that might otherwise die out,” says Ashanya Indralingam, a Malaysian-born Tamil.

Rather than aiming to reclaim the North, the group came with a mission to understand what was really needed. Looking ahead, Nandhi Collective is focused on deepening the model that underpins the current work, such as working directly with local craftspeople to create products hyper-localized to the North, with a contemporary spin. Through Northbound, the group saw an influx of local demand for Northern experiences and hopes to curate more events catering to growing interest. The group also offers training and mentorship for local guides, hosts, and small business operators to raise the standards of storytelling, service, and experience design. “What we hope emerges is that the North becomes seen as a destination for the considered traveler, not just a niche stopoff.



At Kolam, a design and art collective, weaving revivalists use natural dyes and traditional practices to create beautiful handloom sarees.

Ideally, Nandhi Collective becomes a model that others can transfer across the North, and maybe even the Central and lesser known regions of Sri Lanka,” says Ashanya. “It’s a way to activate underused spaces and places as a counterbalance to mass tourism and ensure that locals are still the cultural and economic beneficiaries.”

Northbound Jaffna Cultural Festival, May 8 – 11, 2026

Day 1: Art and Architecture	Time
Registration and Welcome Drinks	1pm
Courtyards and Climate: The Nachar Home	3pm
Dance at Dusk	5pm
Supperclub 1. Feast at the Threshold	6pm
Day 2: History and Craftmanship	
A Classic Tamil Breakfast	8am
A morning through Kingdom and Memory	9am
Lunch and Local Art	12.30pm
Palmyra, Pottery or Gingelly Oil Workshop	2pm
Supperclub II. Preservation on a Plate	6pm
Day 3: Knowledge and Flavors	
Sea Cucumber Fishing Adventure	7am
The Anatomy of Jaffna Crab Curry	12.30pm
Palmyra: Sap and Society	2pm
Firelight, BBQ and Closing	6pm

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