

Design Resource

## Traditional Vanji Making - Alleppey, Kerala

Boat Making

by

Prof. Bibhudutta Baral and Ranjitha M. C.

NID, Bengaluru

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala>



1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

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## Introduction

Alleppey or Alappuzha is an attractive tourist place in Kerala and is also known as 'Venice of East'. There is a very interesting story behind this name (Venice of East). During the British period, Lord Curzon visited this place and seeing the beauty of Alleppey, he addressed Alleppey as 'Venice of East'. Raja Kesavadas, who was an architect of modern-day Alleppey born at Kunnathur on March 17, 1745 as the son of a farmer woman and police constable. Poku Moosa, a rich and influential merchant, was impressed by the young boy's intelligence and hard work and he employed him as a tally clerk in his firm. As time passes maharaja of Travancore, Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma promoted him as Valiya Divan in the year 1789. Raja Kesavadas was also a well-trained soldier and later he became army chief of Travancore and was credited for victory over Tippu Sultan in the battle of Kaladi. Raja Kesavadas found Alleppey is very suitable for transportation and navigation because of geographical and oceanic reasons. He was also aware of the importance of having a port town to trade with the western countries and became successful in materializing his dream and the first ship boarded at Alleppey in 1786. Alleppey is one of the most densely populated districts in Kerala, whereas the municipal headquarters is also known by the name Alleppey itself. The dock that extends into the sea here is around 137 years old. Alleppey is one of the busiest ports and developed with a system of canals to facilitate the transportation of goods from different parts of the town and to promote business.

Alleppey is famous for its boat races, old lighthouse, backwater holidays, beaches, marine products and coir industry. The density of the fisher population in relation to the rest of India is very high in Kerala. Another wonderful experience while in Alleppey is a boathouse cruise, however, this boathouse cruise is a reworked version of a small traditional boat of olden times. The waterways around Alleppey not only provide cruising on houseboats, but they are also home to an incredible diversity of birds and wildlife. The Alleppey district had a prominent role in the freedom fight of the country. T.K. Madhavan, a fearless journalist, organized the campaign for the eradication of untouchability much earlier in this district.

The boat race is one of the main attractions of Alleppey. Generally, Snake boats (Chundan Vallam) are used for boat racing. The snake boats of Kerala has over 400 years of history and the story can be traced back to the kings of Alleppey and the neighbouring areas, who used to fight with each other in boats along the canals. There are four main snake boat races are held every year, in and around Alleppey such as,

- Nehru Trophy Boat race on Alleppey's Punnamda Lake.
- Champakkulam Moolam at Champakkulam which is around 25kilometers from Alleppey.
- Payippad Jalotsavam at Payippad Lake, 35 kilometers from Alleppey.

### 1. Introduction

### 2. Tools and Raw Materials

### 3. Making Process

### 4. Products

### 5. Video

### 6. Contact Details

Design Resource

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- Aranmula Boat Race is held at Pampa River at Aranmula, around 50kilometers south of Alleppey.

Boat racing is also a part of the tradition in Kerala. A number of teams from various districts participate in boat races, which are organized by a number of social and religious organizations. Whereas boat race is the highlight of the Onam festival, mainly the Aranmula Boat Race that takes place mid-way through the 10days celebrations.



A view of the traditional boat made at Alleppey.

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

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1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Artist chopping off the extras of the wooden planks.



A view of traditional boat.



Experienced artist working on Vanji making.



Traditional boats sailing at Kerala.

Design Resource

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<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/introduction>

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



A view of making traditional boat.

Design Resource

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## Tools and Raw Materials

Tools and raw materials that are used for Vanji making:

- **Wooden Planks:** Made of the jackfruit tree is the basic material for boat making.
- **Coir Strips and Needle:** These are used to join the wooden planks.
- **Hand Saw:** It is used to cut the wood into the required size and shape.
- **Neem Oil:** It is used to apply on the plank before heating.
- **Fish Oil:** It is used to apply on the finished boat for durability.
- **Hammer:** It is used for nailing and tightening the coir stitch.
- **Hand Driller:** It is used to drill a hole in the wooden plank.



Wooden hammer used for arranging the wooden logs tightly.

### 1. Introduction

### 2. Tools and Raw Materials

### 3. Making Process

### 4. Products

### 5. Video

### 6. Contact Details

Design Resource

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Copper nails are used for joining the wooden planks.



Wooden planks are the main raw material used for making tradition boat.



Chisels are used for chopping the wooden logs.



T angle tool.

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

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Motorized saw used for cutting the wooden planks.



Metal and wooden hammer used for hammering the nails.



Measuring tape used for measuring the wooden planks.



Coconut coir used for filling up the gaps in-between the planks arranged for boat making.

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Design Resource

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/tools-and-raw-materials>

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Axel blade used for cutting purpose.



Color used for painting of the boat.

Design Resource

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1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

## Making Process

Alleppey still follows a tradition of making traditional Vanji (boat) making. Traditional boat making is classified into two categories: one is stitched and the other is built with nailed planks. The traditional boat construction starts with the laying of a keel, which is the foundation beam for the wooden boat. Enormous wooden pieces are supported on a branching stern above the ground at both ends. This is paced to take the stern-post and stem-post, all made of massive pieces of wood. Initially, wooden logs are arranged vertically on the ground according to the required size and the shape of the boat to give external support to build a boat. Then the keel is laid on the wooden logs and then the planks are attached by hammering the copper nails. Usually, a single piece of wood is preferred for the keel and stern.

The planks are clasped horizontally on either side of the keel to make a perfect frame to build a boat. Then the bending process is mainly based on the traditional method of applying neem oil on planks and mildly heating to obtain the curvature of the boat. Then the wooden planks are added for renovation and nailed temporarily and stitched together using synthetic rope by drilling holes at the edges of the planks. The coconut fibre strands are bundled (twelve strips) and inserted into the coir. Then the bundles are stitched along with the coir in a vertical and cross-stitch method with the help of a needle. The coir is pulled by winding the coir strip to the hammer to tighten the stitch and the small gaps are filled with the coir. Once done with the stitching, fish oil is applied to the boat and then coloured according to the design.



Initially wooden logs are arranged vertically on the ground.

Design Resource

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<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/making-process>

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Wooden logs are measured as per the requirement.



The extras are cut off.

Design Resource

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/making-process>

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Then it gets initiated to position the wooden logs for the further procedure.



Wooden logs are arranged as per the design of the boat.

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/making-process>

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



And the sharp edges of the nails are chopped off.



Then logs are further nailed using copper nails to make a frame.



A stage is set on the ground for the wooden logs bending process to take place.

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<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/making-process>

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Traditionally wooden planks are mildly heated and obtained curvature of the boat.

Design Resource

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/making-process>

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Then the required coconut coir is allocated.



This coconut coir is placed in-between the gaps of the wooden planks, on which the rope is enclosed.



These buddles are further stitched, followed by cross-stitch method.

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/making-process>



The in-between gaps are further crosschecked by tightening the stitch using sharp tool.



An outer view of the boat after filling up the gaps.



Boat is then colored.

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Design Resource

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NID, Bengaluru

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/making-process>

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



And the painted boat is allowed for drying.

Design Resource

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<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/products>

## Products

Traditional boat making is a unique art and also the craft of Kerala. Mr. V T Thomas from Alleppey is a well-known artisan who has an experience of 30 years in boat making. He got this unique talent from his ancestors and he also trained many localities.



Traditional boat made at Alleppey.

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/products>



The close-up view of the traditional boat.



The unique design of traditional Vanji.



A small boat made at Alleppey.

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

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Boat Making

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-vanji-making-alleppey-kerala/video>

1. Introduction
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

## Video



Traditional Vanji Making - Alleppey

Design Resource

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## Contact Details

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You can write to the following address regarding suggestions and clarifications:

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**1. Introduction**

**2. Tools and Raw Materials**

**3. Making Process**

**4. Products**

**5. Video**

**6. Contact Details**