



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



Spice Queen of the Arabian Sea

FORT KOCHI IN INDIA IS AS COY AND ENIGMATIC AS IT IS WELCOMING, PLAYING HOST TO VARIOUS PEOPLES OVER CENTURIES — DISCOVER THIS ALLURING, MULTI-LAYERED HISTORICAL SPOT ALONG THE WATERS OFF THE KERALA COAST

TEXT AND PHOTOS:
CHARUKESI RAMADURAI



1



2

COASTAL CULTURE:

- 1 Chinese fishing nets are a major tourist attraction in Fort Kochi
- 2 Local fishermen rigging the nets in place
- 3 Installations at the Kashi Art Gallery
- 4 A quiet evening at Tea Pot Cafe



3



4

There was a time when the very mention of Fort Kochi brought to mind the neighbourhood's Chinese fishing nets framed gracefully against a golden dusk. And why not? It is the image that graces every other picture postcard of the city.

But nowadays, Fort Kochi offers a lot much more than silhouetted talking points.

The most remarkable of these is the Kochi Muziris Biennale, which saw its second edition earlier this year.

The first arts biennale shone the spotlight on Muziris – speculated to have been located a little north of Kochi – a prosperous port that saw widespread trade with other countries from the 1st century CE, before being mysteriously swallowed up by the sea in the 14th century. But it is not just Muziris; Kochi itself has been a prime trading centre for centuries, attracting explorers and traders from all over the world with its heady aroma of spices and the soft rustle of silks.

Fort Kochi's affair began with the Portuguese in the beginning of the 16th century, with the Dutch taking over a century later, and then the British. The region continued to flourish under all these masters, with each of them leaving their signatures behind, all of which define the essence of Fort Kochi today, along with its unique homegrown flavours.

I find it all extremely charming, centuries of history and culture squeezed tight within a few square kilometres of narrow lanes all leading to the sea.

A 'RESTING PLACE' & CHINESE NETS

Walking into St. Francis church one morning, I see a tour guide escort a group of British visitors to a flight of low steps so they can sit and comfortably remove their shoes. This is one of the oldest European churches in India, along with the Santa Cruz cathedral basilica around the corner, dating back to the early Portuguese days here.

At the entrance, I stand for a few minutes eavesdropping on the guide's spiel about the church. "This is where the famous Vasco da Gama was buried," he says with a flourish. It is true that the Portuguese explorer died on his third visit to India and was initially buried in the same church which he had helped build. However, his remains were soon shipped off to Lisbon and today, St. Francis Church contains only his empty burial vault.

On entering the church, I can hear the soft murmur of voices from a kid's choir practice session, which soon convulses into a giggling fit when someone suddenly sings out of tune. On another side, there is the steady din of renovation work, but despite that, there is a quiet dignity in the high wooden ceilings and brilliant stained glass windows.

At the waterfront promenade of Vasco da Gama Square (he remains a popular figure here even today), I get my first glimpse of the Chinese fishing nets operated by crafty local fishermen. These picturesque nets work on a simple cantilever system introduced by the first visitors from the court of Kublai Khan in the early

FACTS ON FORT KOCHI

- > **THANKS TO THE** ancient spice trade, Greeks, Arabs, Syrians, Dutch, Portuguese, Chinese and others have traded, invaded and settled here, some of them mingling with the local population, until Cochin's final colonisation by the British.
- > **ABOUT 90 PER** cent of India's pepper production is traded here through the International Pepper Exchange at Fort Kochi.
- > **THE ENGLISH CALLED** Kochi (then 'Cochin') "Mini England", to the Dutch it was "Homely Holland", and the Portuguese made it "Little Lisbon".
- > **ITALIAN TRAVELER NICOLAS** Conti wrote in his travelogue: "If China is where you make your money, then Cochin is surely the place to spend it."
- > **FORT KOCHI IS** the only place outside China where the famous Chinese finishing nets are found.



15th century. Today, they are used in Fort Kochi as much to trap fish as to attract tourists.

IN A TEA AND SPICE SPOT

Later in the evening, I go the square again, to find that all the locals and tourists seem to have gathered to shoot the breeze. The stalls right by the nets are doing brisk business with the fresh catch of the day – “you buy, we cook.”

I am not in the market for fish, but could do with some tea. And so I do what everyone does in Fort Kochi when in need of this brew that refreshes: head to the Tea Pot. This café is an effusive ode to tea, with a wide range on the menu, and even the clocks tell tea-time (all numerals replaced with the letter T).

The quirky Tea Pot is one of my favourite spots in Fort Kochi, with its dozens of teakettles on display, and tables made of tea crates that proudly proclaim Produce of India. Sitting here with a pot of chamomile tea, I feel miles away from the multiple layers of history that cloak Fort Kochi.

Another morning, I make my way to Kashi Art Gallery with the intention of catching a quick breakfast at the café there. The small gallery exhibits contemporary art from around the region, including a rather striking installation smack in the middle of the café’s tiny open courtyard.

It’s only an hour into my eggs and toast that I realise there is no such thing as a quick meal here; it is the kind of place to sit all day, coffee, cake and book in hand and indulge in a spot of people watching or daydreaming. However, I do not have the luxury of time, and head out towards Mattancherry on the other side of Fort Kochi, away from the churches and backwaters.

A particular spot in Mattancherry once used to be a thriving spice market. The narrow connecting road is bustling with activity from warehouses and wholesale shops. The air is still redolent of the fragrance of pepper and cinnamon and the other spices this coast has always lured people from far and wide with.

PALACE OF CURIOSITIES

My destination is Mattancherry Palace (also known as Dutch Palace) but I linger at the antiques shops lining the road that leads to it. Clearly, the penchant for trade and commerce is still in the veins of these canny shop owners, who have sourced their wares from here, there and everywhere.

Most of the shops are chockablock with collectibles, with delicate Chinese porcelain vases sitting cheek by jowl with hardy cast iron cookware from the deep south of India. There are displays of silver jewellery, exotic Indian perfumes, brass and bronze utensils, massive stone statues, towering teak wood pillars and exquisite chandeliers.

Only a sharp eye can spot the real gems amidst all these colours and chaos. Admittedly, I have neither that eye, nor an interest in collecting expensive antiques, and so I am content to just browse. The only trinkets I find tempting are the wooden spice boxes, with their niches already filled with aromatic spices to make them more alluring.

I try bargaining over one of them – more for aesthetic value than any practical use – but it is clear that the shopkeeper is not encouraging haggling.

Window-shopping done, I reach Mattancherry Palace, which also owes its existence to this area’s earliest visitors, the Portuguese. It is now also the local archaeological museum, with rare photographs and notes about the long and convoluted history of this tiny island.

For a small entry fee, I get to see its vast collection of arms and coins and palanquins, and more delightfully, the vibrant wall murals on the first floor and the basement. The rich natural dyes of vermilion and ochre and green still shine off the walls, in the right light.

As I walk out into the fresh air an hour later, I take a moment to reflect on the fact that these stunning murals have endured the test of time.

Just like everything else in Fort Kochi. **W**

SPICY SIGHTS:
1 and **2** colour-
ful graffiti on the
streets of Fort
Kochi **3** to **6**
Antiques and
spices on sale in
the markets of
Fort Kochi