

INDIA UNFOLDED · CITY EDITION

KOCHI

The Spice Port

No. KL-01 — RAJASTHAN COLLECTION · 32 PAGES

IN 60 SECONDS

A flood in 1341 silted one harbour and opened another — and for seven centuries everyone who wanted India's pepper came through here: Arabs, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, British, Jews fleeing Iberia. Kochi is the port where the world met Kerala.

The historic peninsula — Fort Kochi and Mattancherry, two kilometres apart — holds the oldest surviving European church in India, a synagogue of 1568 sharing a wall with a raja's palace temple, spice godowns still loading pepper, and the cantilevered fishing nets every photograph shows. Across the water is Ernakulam, the working city — a metro area of two million — with the Metro and the Water Metro. Come December to February, give it two days, and take the ferry rather than the bridge.

Founded

1341 · 1503

the flood that made the harbour ·
Fort Manuel

Best months

Dec – Feb

Biennale winters; monsoon June–Sept

Give it

2 days

Fort Kochi, Mattancherry, one ferry

Fly into

COK

≈ 40 km, 60–90 min to Fort Kochi

01 The Story, in Five Acts

I THE PORT THAT DROWNED · 1341

The Roman-era spice port of Muziris lay up the coast at Kodungallur, where excavations at Pattanam have turned up amphorae and Chera coins. In 1341 a great flood on the Periyar — inferred from a new calendar era, a new island and a silted harbour, since no chronicle records it — closed Muziris and opened an estuary at Kochi. The ruling house moved; by 1440 an Italian merchant found a town five miles round at Mattancherry, and the pepper went out by Arab dhow.

II THE PORTUGUESE · 1500-1663

Cabral arrived in 1500, two years after da Gama reached Calicut; the Raja, a vassal of the Zamorin, took Portuguese protection, and in 1503 they built Fort Manuel — the first European fort on Indian soil — and a wooden church that became St Francis, the oldest surviving European church in India. Vasco da Gama died here on Christmas Eve 1524 and lay under its floor for fourteen years. The Portuguese built the Raja a palace to apologise for plundering a temple; the Jews of Cranganore, attacked over the pepper trade, fled here in 1524 and in 1568 built their synagogue against the palace wall.

III THE DUTCH · 1663-1795

The Dutch East India Company took the fort in January 1663 for the pepper monopoly and the Ceylon route. They demolished the Catholic churches, kept St Francis as their own and the cathedral as an armoury, extended the palace that has been 'Dutch' ever since, and — by one account — brought Tamil washermen to launder their uniforms; by another the British did; their descendants still run the Dhobi Khana. A Jewish merchant added the synagogue's clock tower in 1760.

Stand here. Look for this.

Five things almost everyone walks straight past — where to stand, and what you're actually seeing.

1 The 1344 stone

Set into the synagogue's outer wall — the foundation stone of the Kochangadi synagogue, the oldest dated trace of Jews in Kochi, three years after the flood.

2 The tiles

Look down: hundreds of willow-pattern tiles, no two alike, said to have been shipped from Canton in 1762 — ordered, the story goes, by the Raja for a temple.

3 The shared wall

The synagogue's back wall is the palace temple's — one wall, two faiths, since 1568.

4 The clock tower's faces

Hebrew toward the synagogue, Malayalam toward the palace, Roman toward the lane — and the harbour side blank; the three worlds the community lived in.

5 Sarah's shop

Sarah Cohen embroidered kippahs in her front room on the lane until 2019, aged ninety-six; the shop carries on under her name.

One more thing

Sunday to Thursday only — Friday afternoons, Saturdays and Jewish holidays it is closed, and the palace next door closes on Fridays. Go at ten when it opens, shoes off, shoulders covered, then walk Bazaar Road to the spice godowns before the sun is high.

01 ARRIVAL

The nets at dawn

Vasco da Gama Square · Sunrise · 1x · landscape · 1x

Nets in silhouette; family at the rail

02 THE CHURCH

Da Gama's empty grave

St Francis Church · Morning, at opening · 1x · portrait · 1x

Slab, child, punkahs above

03 THE LAUNDRY

The Dhobi Khana

Dhobi Khana · Mid-morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Sheets both sides; family walking away

04 THE SPICE GODOWNS

Bazaar Road

Bazaar Road · Mid-morning · 1x · landscape · 1x

Sacks and porters; family at the door

05 THE LANE

Jew Town to the clock tower

Synagogue Lane · Mid-morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Lane → family → clock tower

06 THE PALACE

The Dutch Palace courtyard

Mattancherry Palace · Late morning · 1x · landscape · 1x

Roofs, temple, family