

# Historic Kochi

Kochi is an unique amalgam of historic influences. British, Portuguese, Dutch, Arab, and even the Chinese left their mark here, much of which can still be seen in the city's many heritage buildings and traditions

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**W**hile Kerala is famous world over as "God's Own Country", the beautiful Fort Kochi is often referred to as "Gateway to Kerala". This quaint city sits strategically on the southwest coast of the Indian peninsula, and has emerged as Kerala's commercial-industrial capital over the years.

Blue lagoons, backwaters and myriad other facets would take anyone's breath away but what tugged at my

heartstrings was its elegant European heritage which goes hand-in-hand with its swank cosmopolitan temperament. I was particularly drawn to the confluence of architectural styles that personify the city and have left indelible marks by a multitude of nationalities other than the British. To me, this was the most striking rarity of Kochi.

Since time immemorial, Kochi has seen several foreign attacks and successive waves of migration where the Portuguese, Dutch and the Arabs, apart

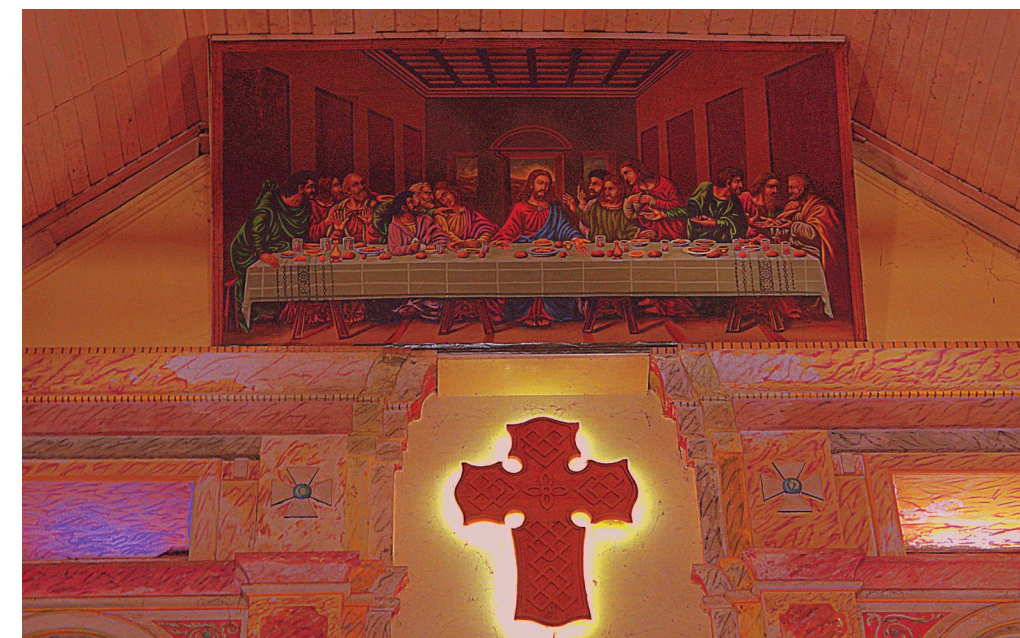
from the English, came in for purposes of trade and stayed on. These groups went on to create their own settlements and colonies. While colonialism and foreign invasions had their downside, the upside was their rich contribution to Kochi's history and development. I marveled at these architectural gems, built eons ago by people belonging to different races and beliefs.

Here we take a look at these creations from those who were anything but British. The chapels, churches, forts,

palaces and even the little towns and fishing nets stand testimony to their enduring craftsmanship. In one of the earliest accounts of Kochi's history, documented by Chinese traveller Ma Huan, the Portuguese (1498-1662) were the first to establish base here, followed by the Dutch (1663-1795) and then, the English. Jewish minorities (referred to as 'Paradesi' which is literally, foreigner) lived even in the time of the Portuguese, who controlled a major portion of the worldwide spice trade.

## SANTA CRUZ BASILICA

Counted as one of the heritage edifices of Kerala, this magnificent structure is one of the eight basilicas in India. I was impressed with the architecture of this church, with the interiors oozing devotion through the artistic grandeur of the Gothic style, in pillars, paintings, ceilings and frescoes. The highlight to me was the painting of "The Last Supper." A very dated church, this basilica has an eventful past. It was built originally by the Portuguese in the early 1500s and elevated to the status of a cathedral in 1558 by Pope Paul IV. Interestingly, it was spared by Dutch conquerors only to be demolished by the British, consecrated in 1905 and finally, proclaimed as a basilica by Pope John Paul II, in 1984.





### CHINESE FISHING NETS



Huge cantilevered Chinese fishing nets that droop toward the waters, like big hammocks, have become a hallmark of Kochi on the traveller's map. They are said to have been introduced by Chinese explorer, Zheng He, between 1350 AD and 1450 AD. Called "Cheenavala" in Malayalam, these nets are made of teakwood and bamboo poles and work on the principle of balance. Handled by more than four fishermen, this equipment is pulled down into the sea by just the weight of one man walking on the main plank. Pulling the ropes delicately raises the net along with the fishes. It is a sight admired by throngs of tourists every day.

### DUTCH PALACE

While its appearance is not as striking as the other structures – squat with whitewashed walls and tiled roof – the interior has been done with wood-carved floral designs and brass cups to embellish the ceiling. Built as a gift to the Cochin King, Raja Vira Keralavarma, by the Portuguese in 1555, this two-storey palace is locally called Mattencherry Palace. It is built in the traditional Kerala *naalukettu* (quadrangular) model. Since it was the Dutch who carried out the most extensions and renovations in the palace in 1663, it started being called The Dutch Palace. Today, it has been converted into a portrait gallery of the Cochin Rajas with some of the best murals depicting Hindu mythology.





### ST FRANCIS CHURCH



Dating back to 1503, St Francis Church is believed to be one of the oldest churches built by the Europeans in India. Built of mud and wood, the church was constructed by the Portuguese after seeking permission from the erstwhile Raja of Cochin. It was dedicated to the patron saint of Portugal, Santo Antonio, in 1516. I was fascinated by the “Vasco da Gama connection” this church seemed to exude. The Portuguese sailor was the first from his country to reach Kerala. He died on his third visit to Kochi in 1524, and was buried in this church. After 14 years, his body was taken back to Portugal. Till date, his burial spot inside the church is clearly marked out.



### LADY OF HOPE CHURCH

A beautiful church, seldom visited by travelers, it is one of the ancient Roman Catholic churches in Kochi. Located on Vypeen Island, where the Vembanad Lake merges with the Arabian Sea, this church, also called the Nossa Senhora Da Esperanca, was built by the Portuguese in 1605 A.D. History has it that during the Age of Discovery, a number of missions were created to spread Christianity. Missionaries of various orders went out and started building churches along coastal districts wherever the Portuguese power made itself felt.





## JEW TOWN

Close to the Mattancherry jetty is the pristine and extremely pretty Jew Town, a must-see for any visitor. On Jew Street, I walked through a row of antique shops selling wood carvings, oil lamps, jewellery boxes, spices and bric-a-brac. I came across the unique Sarah Cohen Embroidery Shop where this lady embroiders Jewish motifs on caps. Like most travellers, I spent time looking at old sepia pictures of her family. This Jewish quarter of Mattancherry was once a centre for the Cochin Jews, who fared very well in trade, prayer and Hebrew culture. But today, there are just nine surviving Jews living here.



## JEWISH PARADESI SYNAGOGUE

It is astonishing how every religion's place of devotion varies in so many ways, starting with its architecture. The Paradesi Synagogue is the oldest active synagogue among the ones existing in the Commonwealth of Nations. I wondered about the word *paradesi* which literally means foreigner. It is believed this was applied to this 1567 AD Synagogue as Spanish-speaking Jews or the Sephardic built it.



ALAMY (SYNAGOGUE)