



kochi

Centuries before call-centre skills lured foreign business to India, merchants came in search of spices and that zestful trade created Kerala's port capital. Sarah Murray savours its cosmopolitan history.

It's mid-morning on Bazar Road, Kochi (formerly Cochin), and the activity is heating up as quickly as the tropical temperature over the city's teeming harbour. Spice merchants haggle over their wares from behind wooden desks in warehouses filled with the pungent aromas of cardamom, ginger and pepper. It's a scene that has changed little for centuries.

With their eyes on the valuable spice trade, Arabs, Chinese, Dutch, Portuguese and British merchants all contributed to the cocktail of cultures that makes this ancient trading centre on India's south west coast like no other corner of the country. But the glorious thing about Kochi today is that immersing yourself for a long luxurious weekend in this exhilarating chaos no longer requires the courage of Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese explorer who landed here in 1498. Escape here from commercial hubs such as Delhi and Mumbai and the dust and noise of the subcontinent soon fade away in the cool rooms of hotels where colonial elegance meets minimalist chic.

The Malabar House, one of Kochi's growing collection of elegant boutique hotels, is a fine example of Kochi's sophisticated welcome. Created by German designer Joerg Drechsel and his Basque wife Txuku Iriarte, this exquisite hotel looking on to a village

green where boys play cricket would be a treat in any setting. In what was once the private residence of wealthy spice traders, rich carvings, antique furniture and silk textiles are set against frosted glass, subtle lighting and cool open spaces.

Open space is what dominates another delightful hotel, the Brunton Boatyard. With vast lobby spaces set round a large verdant courtyard, the building could have easily accommodated 100 rooms. But, with a mission to promote sustainability, the Kuruvinkunnu

Above: Cantilevered Chinese fishing nets add grace to a waterside view.
Below: Paradisi Synagogue.



brothers who run the hotel and its sister resorts decided upon just 22 rooms. With its tiled roof, majestic arches and guest-rooms with splendid vistas on to the harbour, the hotel is permeated by Kochi's ancient trading history – except that it was built five years ago. Antique furniture, brass and teak cleverly conjure up the impression of an old colonial mansion – but with wireless internet connections, a swimming pool and state-of-the-art air conditioning.

The Brunton Boatyard is also one of the best places to sample Kochi's excellent seafood. At the History Restaurant or the Terrace Grill the catch of the day is grilled or baked in a tandoori oven on the terrace and brought to the table as exquisite dishes. Seafood is also a speciality at the Malabar Junction, the Malabar House's garden restaurant. In keeping with Kochi's multicultural flavour, dishes here mix Keralan and Mediterranean influences. At night, candles illuminate its courtyard and with European columns on one side, live Indian classical music on the other and an elegant swimming pool at the centre, it's easy to forget just which corner of the planet you are dining in.

But cultural confusion is exactly what makes Kochi so alluring. Crumbling

European mansions, churches, temples and mosques provide evidence of a long history of multicultural melding. The ancient history of the city is Fort Cochin (retaining the city's previous name) on the tranquil tip of the peninsula that protects the harbour from the Arabian Sea. Here, British colonial bungalows sit among low-slung Dutch and Portuguese buildings including the church of St Francis where da Gama was interred until his body was removed to Portugal. On the waterfront, giant Chinese fishing nets – majestic structures resembling monstrous long-legged insects that, so the story goes, were introduced by traders from the court of Kublai Khan – add yet another layer to Kochi's cultural mix.

And if all that wasn't sufficiently exotic, Kochi is also home to what must be one of the world's most far-flung Jewish communities. While the date of their arrival here is debated, they came to trade spices and stayed. Today, only a handful remain, since most left India in the 1950s after being given free passage to Israel. But the Pardesi Synagogue, with its elaborate glass chandeliers and 17th-century blue ceramic floor tiles, is a charming testament to their once powerful presence in the city.

Even the topography of this place is richly complex, with Fort Cochin – now a World

Heritage site – looking out onto a magnificent natural harbour. To the north are the tropical islands of Vypeen, Vallarpadam and Bolghatty, and east Willingdon Island, created by the British in the 1920 as they sought to expand the port. Ferries cross the harbour carrying commuters to Ernakulam, Kochi's modern centre, and while bridges now connect most of the islands, the best way to get your bearings is by hopping on to one of these energetic little vessels.

Break your peregrinations on Willingdon Island with a gin and tonic on the balcony of the Taj Malabar Cochin. While the waterborne world keeps busy, this is the place to relax and watch tiny fishing boats dwarfed by majestic cargo ships out on the Arabian Sea. With impeccable service and elegant rooms, the Taj people really know how to do things well.

From Willingdon Island, it's a short ferry ride back to the peninsula, either to Fort



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Cochin or its neighbouring district of Mattancherry, which is the heart of India's spice trade. Sadly, many of the old spice houses are now tourist emporia but if the spice merchants are gradually moving out, there are signs of new life for this area. A handful of galleries have opened, the most impressive of which is the Kashi Art Gallery which showcases Indian contemporary artists in a spectacular former warehouse on Bazar Road (it has a sister gallery on Burgher Street with a café attached).

The spice trade has not deserted Bazar Road yet, however. Walk around to discover courtyards filled with workers laying ginger out to dry and darkened rooms where black pepper is being graded and packed into thick hessian sacks for export.

The magic worked by these valuable natural seasonings is best experienced at Rice Boat, the Taj Malabar Cochin's superb restaurant. The subtle fragrances of Kerala dishes such as Meen Vevichathu (fresh fish in a fiery red curry flavoured with fish tamarind) or Chemmeen Koondal Kuru-mulagu (prawns and calamari tossed with freshly crushed black



pepper, shallots and curry leaves) leave you in no doubt as to why spices became such valuable commodities.

The Portuguese were quick to latch on to their value. They soon wrested control of the trade from Kerala Muslims and, from the 15th century onwards, played a large part in shaping Kochi. Near the synagogue, the 16th-century Mattancherry Palace is evidence of how much they threw their weight around. The palace was their gift to Kochi's raja, Vira Keralavarma, and, with its richly carved wood ceilings and heavy tiled roofs, it

must have been an impressive offering. The highlight here, however, is not European but Indian in origin, a series of spectacular murals depicting the epic stories of the *Ramayana*.

For while Europeans did their best to transplant their culture, the irrepressible force of Indian life is ever present.

Back in Fort Cochin, the brilliant pinks and violent greens of Roman Catholic

Above: Kochi's canals are an enjoyable way to experience the city. Right: the sale of spices drew traders from around the world. Below: a Kathakali dancer enacts ancient Hindu legend.



religious objects and paintings inside Santa Cruz Basilica, a Gothic structure erected in 1887, seem to be more influenced by Hindu than Christian traditions. Don't miss wandering

around the charming school next door, where simple classrooms furnished with wooden benches line a lovely courtyard and a 17th-century European cloister behind.

Nearby, it's the British presence that is most strongly felt on Fort Cochin's Church Road where, passing the street's impressive bungalows – now occupied by Keralans – you can imagine the sound of porcelain rattling on a tray as the maid brings tea on to a lawn. Around the corner, the sound of rattling teacups is more than a memory. In Old Harbour House – once used as a boat club –

the enterprising Sanjay Damodaran has set up the Teapot, a tearoom complete with porcelain services and a selection of fine teas. Next year, the place will be converted into a luxury boutique hotel but Sanjay insists that the teahouse will live on in another location nearby.

Hopefully, it will end up close to Idiom Books, where after a cup of tea you'll be able to browse the shop's vast array of literature and books on Kerala history and culture. This treasure trove is a great place to pick up recently published reading material about the region. Bibliophiles will love its marvellous selection of local imprints of 18th- and 19th-century accounts.

For really elegant shopping, try Cinnamon, where Radhika Poddar, the woman behind this creative boutique, has put together an eclectic collection of handbags, jewellery, ceramics and other objects. The shop is ablaze with highly original textiles that have been

transformed by designers such as Sunita Shankar and Anshu Arora into gloriously rich, vibrant colours.

Such creations could easily compete with the brilliant hues of Kerala's famed Kathakali dance. In its traditional form, dancers enact Hindu legends dating back thousands of years in performances that can last all night. Fortunately, for those with less stamina, a handful of local institutions (the Kerala Kathakali Centre is one of the best) offer a shorter version of this extraordinary art form.

After watching something so energetic, you'll need to relax. Happily, Kochi is home to the Ayurvedic treatments for which Kerala is famed. The most sophisticated Ayurvedic spa is at the Taj Malabar Cochin, which also has a steamroom, pool and yoga classes. Encompassing everything from dietary alterations to having medicated oil dripped into the nose, Ayurvedic medicine's most popular incarnation is the massage, using warmed oils. Like everything else here, the oils are spiced. But the heady aromas will only serve to enhance the dreamy sensation of these ancient treatments, sending you drifting into a trance-like state that matches the otherworldly magic of this most unusual corner of India. ♦

THE HIT LIST

HOTELS

Prices are for a double room with breakfast, excluding taxes.

Brunton Boatyard, Fort Cochin (0091484-266 8221,

www.cghearth.com); from £108. **The Malabar House**, Parade Road, Fort Cochin (0091484-221 6666,

www.malabarhouse.com); from £105. **Taj Malabar Cochin**, Willingdon Island (0091484-266 6811, www.tajhotels.com); from £98.

RESTAURANTS AND CAFÉS

Prices are for a three-course meal for one with half a bottle of wine.

History Restaurant and Terrace Grill, Brunton Boatyard, Fort Cochin (0091484-221 5461,

www.cghearth.com); £16. **The Malabar Junction**, Parade Road, Fort Cochin (0091484-221 6666,

www.malabarhouse.com); £14. **Rice Boat**, Taj Malabar, Willingdon Island (0091484-266 6811, www.tajhotels.com), £22. **Teapot**, Old Harbour House, Tower Road, Fort Cochin (0091484-221 8035).

SHOPS AND MARKETS

Cinnamon, Ridsdale Road, Parade Ground, Fort Cochin (0091484-221 8124), **Idiom Books**, Princess Street, Fort Cochin (0091484-220 432).

SIGHTS

Chinese fishing nets, River Road, Fort Cochin; **Church of St Francis**, Church Road, Fort Cochin, closed on Sunday. **Kerala Kathakali Centre**, Cochin Aquatic Club, River Road (0091484-221

5827). **Mattancherry Palace**, Calvathy Road, Fort Cochin, open Sat-Thurs, 8.30am-7.30pm. **Kashi Art Gallery**, Bazar Road, Fort Cochin (0091484-221 5769, www.kashiartcafe.com); open daily, 10am-5.30pm. **Pardesi Synagogue**, Calvathy Road, Fort Cochin, open Sun-Fri, 10am-noon and 3pm-5pm. **Santa Cruz Cathedral**, Bastion Street, Fort Cochin.

LESS THAN AN HOUR AWAY

Kerala's backwater tours are among the region's highlights and Peter Panathara of Salmon Tours (00984-721 7874, peterpanh@yahoo.com) offers an intimate and informative trip. In a small wooden boat, Peter leads you through peaceful waters where shellfish flourish to small islands inhabited by fishing families. But the main joy of this trip is



winding though a peaceful maze of tiny water canals shaded by coconut palms. About 45 minutes' drive from Fort Kochi and just outside the pretty town of **Thripunithra**, there's the delightful Hill Palace Museum above classical Italian gardens, which once housed Kochi's

royal family. While the jumble of exhibits is eccentric the chief joy here is exploring grand empty spaces, taking in the vistas and revelling in a tranquility once only enjoyed by royalty. Open 9am-12.30pm and 2pm-4.30pm, Tuesday to Sunday.

WHEN TO GO

To miss the monsoons, visit between late September and early March, with December to February the ideal time.

HOW TO GET THERE

Sarah Murray stayed at the Brunton Boatyard, Malabar House and Taj Malabar. **British Airways** (0870-850 9850; www.ba.com) flies daily to Mumbai and Delhi from London Heathrow, from £637. **Jet Airways** (www.jetairways.com) has three flights a day from Mumbai to Kochi, from £200.