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Kochi, Kerala's Friendly Gateway, Is No Backwater



Scott Eells for The New York Times
Indian fishermen and tourists mingle on the beach in Kochi, a busy port on the Arabian Sea.

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Correction Appended

THE best seller “1,000 Places to See Before You Die” includes as one of its don't-miss destinations the “staggeringly beautiful” backwaters of [India's Kerala](#) state. The book also says a stopover in Kochi, the gateway to these interconnected lakes, lagoons and canals, is a must. But a quick visit is hardly enough.

Cochin Travel Guide

Where to Stay

Where to Eat

What to Do



The New York Times

Known as the Queen of the Arabian Sea, Kochi has a multilayered colonial history, relaxing ayurvedic spas, colorful Kathakali dance troupes, stately rajah palaces and a laid-back way of life that is a welcome change from India's typical frenzy. As I learned when my husband, Don, and I visited in late October, the people are friendly (“American? Can I take your photo?”), and the children go to school instead of begging on the street (Kerala has a literacy rate of 90 percent; the Indian average is 65 percent).

Kochi was a backpackers' retreat even when it was called [Cochin](#), the colonial name that was officially dropped 10 years ago (locals and visitors still use both names). But amid a blooming of new boutique hotels — two opened on the waterfront in the last year — Kochi is growing up fast.

“The number of international tourists is increasing every year,” said Dhanika Us, the manager of the Malabar House, where we stayed. “Their high-spending habits mean other businesses are growing fast, too, like fashion boutiques and antiques shops.”

Chinese, Arabs, Portuguese, Dutch and British have serially dominated this port on the Malabar Coast, exporting tea and spices, and importing their own architecture, religion and cuisine. These influences are still represented, particularly in Fort Cochin, the historic district — from Chinese fishing nets (watch as hapless tourists try to work the giant wooden pulleys) to Dutch houses, Portuguese churches and English trading company buildings. And in nearby Mattancheri, there is a Jewish presence that locals date back

to A.D. 72, just after the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem.

The best way to get a sense of Kochi's sprawling peninsula-and-islands geography is to take a boat tour. The Kerala Tourism Development Corporation has morning and afternoon sightseeing cruises, but Don and I opted for a private sunset tour (920 rupees for two, about \$20 at 45 rupees to the dollar), arranged by our hotel with less than an hour's notice.

The two of us and our two-man crew chugged around the busy container port, dry dock and Indian Navy base, saw the manmade Willingdon Island with its shipping company offices, warehouses and [Taj Malabar](#) hotel, and gazed toward the high-rises of Kerala's commercial center, Ernakulam.

There was plenty to see on the water, too: ferries taking commuters home from work, party boats with lights flashing on and off to Bollywood music, and narrow fishing canoes with no lights at all.

When we returned to Fort Cochin, it was dark and quiet, except for American gospel songs coming from a Y.W.C.A. According to one guide, 45 percent of Kochi's population is Christian, and the number of nuns on the streets makes that statistic believable. In 1503, Portuguese settlers built the oldest European church in India there, St. Francis, which briefly held the explorer Vasco da Gama's remains. To appreciate St. Francis and Fort Cochin's other architectural highlights, ask at the Malabar House for a walking tour map. This handsomely eclectic 17-room hotel, on the colonial Parade Ground, is itself a historic 18th-century residence. Its sister establishment, the very hip three-room Trinity, is a former Dutch East India Company building.

In fact, most of Fort Cochin's new hotels have stories. The all-suite [Koder House](#), on the waterfront, is the former residence of one of the city's most prominent Jewish families. The Koders, merchants who bought the property in 1905, were famous for their Friday night "open house" dinners.

About to open next door was the Old Harbour Hotel, which still bears traces of its Portuguese, Dutch and English past. Farther along the

seafront is Brunton Boatyard, an elegant hotel built, as the name implies, on the site of a 19th-century shipyard.

To explore the other historic district, Mattancheri, take a 10-minute autorickshaw to Jew Town. At the synagogue, built in 1568, leave your shoes at the door, not for religious reasons, but to protect the 200-year-old, handpainted Chinese floor tiles. The youngest of the 13-member congregation, a 34-year-old woman, took the 2-rupee admission and answered questions (“No, we don't have a rabbi”).

Nearby is the Dutch Palace, which the Portuguese presented to the Cochin rajahs in the mid-16th century. Its highlight: some of the most important Hindu murals in India, including a series that brilliantly relates the entire Ramayana story.