



Sunset over the Chinese Fishing Nets



David Hall Gallery and Café



Colourful fishing boats



Cruising through the backwaters of Kerala on wooden boats

48 hrs in FORT KOCHI

This pocket of Kerala is laid back, if a tad gritty, with Portuguese-Dutch colonial architecture, friendly locals, great seafood, boutique hotels and a dash of hip cafés. Like India, Fort Kochi is a crazy mix. Waving palms and historic fishing nets are often interrupted by the passing swollen bodies of container ships.
 Words by Margaret Barca

Eat

SUPER BUDGET

If you're after authenticity, and like to eat like a local – or a local tourist (and Indians love to visit Fort Kochi) – head towards the fishing nets. Choose your fish from a fishmonger, take it to a nearby stall and have it cooked (for around \$2). Follow with a fresh coconut juice – a stall owner will lop the top and drop in a straw for about 25 cents – or perhaps a sweet chai from a street stall for around 10 cents. There are plenty of rustic seafood restaurants, just follow the pungent, spicy fried-fish fragrance.

BUDGET

David Hall Gallery & Café

1/264 Princes Street

Behind a Dutch colonial façade, lies a serious art gallery (India's first Biennale was held here at

the end of 2012) and in the tranquil garden lies a simple but casual café with French-style pastries, good coffee, and a wood-fired oven for pizza on par with anything outside (or even in) Italy... really.

Kashi Art Café

Burgher Street

This is a small contemporary art gallery with a cool-vibe courtyard café (where you'll hear Sinatra crooning in the background). Top-notch chocolate cake, soup and healthy fruit and veg salads are on the menu. A great spot to chill-out.

Ginger House Restaurant

Jew Town Road, Mattancherry

After your foray into the antique and faux-antique warehouses of the area, stop in for a feed at this open-air restaurant looking across to Willingdon Island; it catches a breeze and serves tasty simple curries, sandwiches and zingy fresh lime and ginger soda.

HIGH END

Malabar Junction, Malabar House

1/268 Parade Road

Junction is right: ocean-fresh seafood meets Southern Indian meets sophisticated fusion cuisine. Seriously delicious with stylish surroundings and thoughtful service. Mains around \$12 but wine is expensive, of course. There's a bar too – Divine (that's what it's called).

1788 Restaurant, Old Harbour Hotel

1/328 Tower Road

This restaurant offers a nightly seafood barbecue, subtle south Indian vegetarian curries, majestic trees and twinkling lights glinting off the pool. Service was a smidgen offhand, though. Mains around \$10, lavish seafood platters are more.

Brunton Boatyard

1/498 Calvetty Road

It can be a little noisy here with ferries chugging in and out – but hey, this is a working port after all. The building is colonial-style and the bar has water views, with a lovely breeze off the river. Shades of the British Raj are evident if you choose the First Class Railway Mutton Curry, but there is more sophisticated fare, vegetarian curries (naturally) and a swag of seafood dishes. The wood-paneled History & Terrace Grill is the main restaurant. Mains around \$10.

Things To Do

CHINESE FISHING NETS

The famed Chinese fishing nets are weatherworn teak and bamboo-framed nets that hang like spidery predators over the water's edge. Tough, wiry fishermen, usually clad in traditional check



Malabar House in the evening



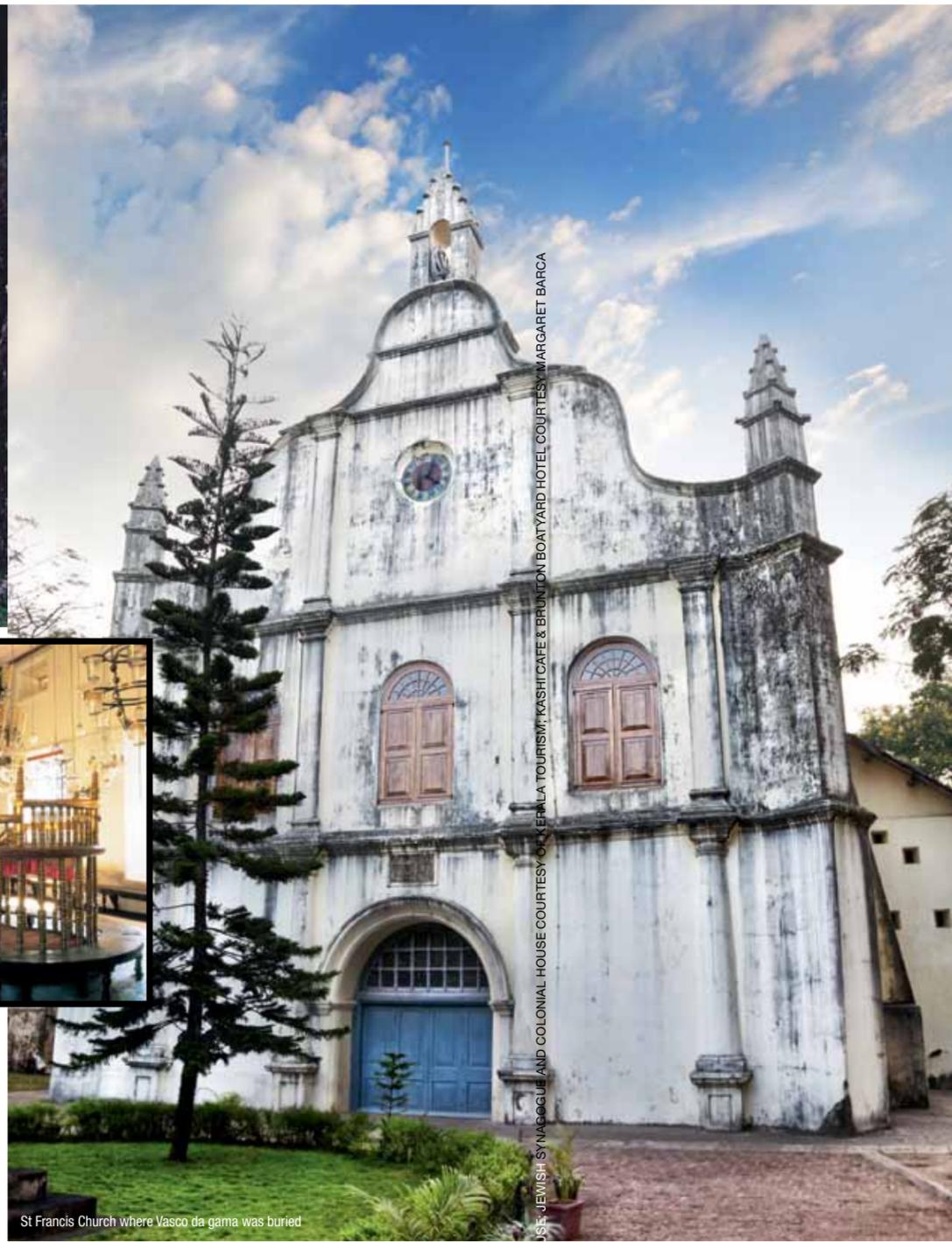
Malabar House swimming pool



Tuk Tuk is the most popular mode of transportation



Kochi Jewish Synagogue



St Francis Church where Vasco da gama was buried



Typical colonial building

waistcloths or *mundi*, hoist the rope pulleys, weighted with (literally) a tonne of stones to lower the net into the water. Fishermen walk precariously along the poles adjusting the net. After a while, they hoist the net and scoop out the fish. A definite photo opportunity – but make sure you tip... in fact, their tips are probably more lucrative than the catch.

FISH MARKET

Early each morning, you'll see seer fish, barracuda, prawns, crabs, small sharks and the occasional stingray piled high on ice in baskets and on wonky tables in the open air. Stray cats choosing the occasional tasty morsel don't seem to worry the locals.

TAKE A TUK-TUK

Some of India's shiniest tuk-tuks navigate the narrow streets and drivers often have a fine line in patter – "book my Ferrari, all air-con," they say. And that's true, but only because there are no windows! Bargain with them, or politely say

no. However, for around \$2 you can be dropped at most key tourist spots for a few hours and the driver will wait. (Be warned – if drivers insist you go to certain shops and you buy from there, you'll be paying a commission.)

MATTANCHERRY AND THE SYNAGOGUE

Kochi's bounty of spices and goods such as ginger, mace, nutmeg, betel nut and rice were stored in Mattancherry's warehouses before being shipped. Most warehouses are now shops but you can sometimes still glimpse



Kashi Art Café



Brunton Boatyard Hotel façade

FORT KOCHI

huge bundles of chilli or sacks of rice awaiting shipping. **Mattancherry Palace** (built in 1557) has some extraordinary Ramayana paintings (open daily except Friday). **Kochi Synagogue** was built in 1568 and has an eclectic mix of timber, crystal lamps and blue-and-white Cantonese tiles. It's also the oldest still in use in India. (Open Sunday to Thursday)

KATHAKALI SHOW

The best of the highly stylised Kathakali artists who perform this dance-drama are mesmerising. Kerala Kathakali Centre has nightly shows. kathakalicentre.com

ST FRANCIS CHURCH

Possibly India's oldest Christian church St Francis began c.1516. Vasco da Gama was buried here but his body later returned to Portugal. (Open daily)

AYURVEDIC HEAVEN

Kerala is home to Ayurveda – an ancient system using herbs, oils and massage for balance and harmony. A body massage or *sirodhara* (oil pouring on the third eye) is a must-do while here. Indulge at one of the boutique hotel spas.

Shopping

JEWTOWN

The streets of Jew Town near the synagogue are busy with tourist shops selling cotton kurtas, silver and gemstone jewellery, Kashmiri scarves, spices, Ayurvedic herbs and 'antique' shops such as Crafters. Conveniently, most shops can ship.

BOUTIQUE SHOPPING

Sleek gallery-like spaces and an understated international ambience at **Cinnamon** is the setting for up-market Indian designer fashion, jewellery and homewares, including some clever up-cycling. cinnamonthestore.com

Nearby, the tiny **Fabindia** (part of an Indian chain) has bolts of interesting fabric stacked high and a select range of clothing. **Idiom** bookshop, in Princess Street, has an amazing selection of books to browse. fabindia.com

Stay

BUDGET

There's a booming business in homestays, from very basic to quite smart. Don't necessarily expect a room with a view and, if you don't fancy the heat, check if they have fans and air-con. Remember, the lower the tariff, usually the dodgier the air-con. From \$35 twin room. fortcochinhomestays.com

BOUTIQUE

Malabar House

1/269 Parade Road

This is an elegant, arty, boutique hotel in a handsome heritage building opposite the Parade ground, with the Relais & Chateaux stamp of approval. The white walls feature pops of brilliant colour and folk art, but it's not too precious. Ask about the first-floor garden suites and try out the great restaurant and spa. From \$340 including tax for a deluxe double, high season. malabarhouse.com

The Old Harbour Hotel

1/328 Tower Road

Featuring Portuguese/Dutch colonial architecture, shuttered windows and sweeping red-tiled roofs, with crisp white interior walls, a cool foyer, dark timbers and carved-teak furniture – this is the perfect retreat from the town's steamy heat. Not to mention the swimming pool, lovely breakfasts and, on a balmy evening, the leafy garden makes a nice spot for an icy Kingfisher beer. From \$200 including tax for a garden view, high season. oldharbourhotel.com

You should know

Visas are needed for India and must be applied for before you arrive. indianvisaonline.gov.in/visa

Allow at least an hour to/from Cochin international airport if going by taxi (or up to two hours by bus). You can book a pre-paid taxi at the airport on arrival for around \$16. ●