



NATURE WALK

SAFE ARBOUR

In a city known for its history, much of Fort Kochi has been accessed, analysed and admired, save for its omnipresent citizens: the trees. A closer look reveals a past beyond the bricks, one that branches through the present, towards the future

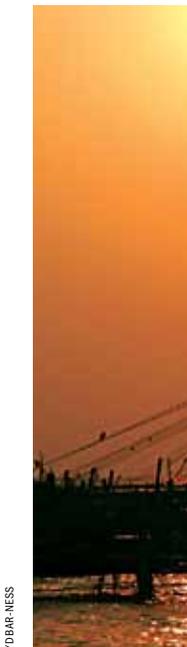
By YD Bar-Ness

While the intricate layout of Kochi may challenge and surprise the explorer, to the geographer, it is a complex mix of the natural and the cultural. Coastal waterways and peninsulas vie with elegant architecture and historical neighbourhoods; the stories of the many seafaring nations that made it to these shores are recorded on its multi-layered landscape.

There is a bridge between the wild and the human, however, in the towering trees that shade pedestrians strolling by the old fort of Kochi. There is an arboreal geography here – as well as, for those who pay attention, a living history of this forested city.

These giant trees are as exotic as the Dutch, Chinese, Arab, and British influences on the city. In the tropical sun and upon the soil of Kerala's swampy lowlands, they have been brought from afar: Central America, the Pacific Islands, and the northern part of the Subcontinent.

I was introduced to these green citizens, and the history of Fort Kochi, by a long-bearded, white-robed environmental activist named Ananda. Decades before, Ananda had been a child of the district, but was now visiting from his new home in Tamil Nadu. To him, walking the streets of Fort Kochi was to reminisce. We were introduced over coffee and toast in the peaceful courtyard of Kashi Art Cafe, and our conversation soon turned to the trees that made Fort Kochi so pleasant. Ananda, it turned out, was a keen amateur botanist and a busy environmental activist; he had a story for every tree in the central core of the Fort. Each was a landmark and a memorial. It seemed to me an eminently sensible way to explore the city, and it took little effort to persuade him to adopt the role of tour guide. Notebook and camera in hand, I trailed Ananda, and a rotating cast of friends, through the streets of Kochi, learning to navigate history under the green canopy.





YO BARNES



SANJAY RAMCHANDRAN



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(Opening page) A ferry docks at the jetty with Note Brunton Boatyard Hotel in the background

(Clockwise from top left) St Francis Church is an example of 16th-century Portuguese architecture;

Every tree that dots the landscape of Fort Kochi has an historical tale to tell;

Set within a tropical background, Kashi Art Cafe has a healthy menu;

The city's iconic Chinese fishing nets;

The ideal way to discover the district is on foot or a bicycle



Central American rain trees offer much-needed respite from the afternoon sun

Enveloped by nature

I will confess that I had been hopelessly lost in the Fort before we met, and had wandered through the cobble streets and elegant Portuguese laneways confused and disoriented. But Ananda walked directly to the waterfront. Much of the Fort was barred to motor vehicles, and to travel on foot was both relaxing and novel.

With its promenade and view of the sea, the Children's Park plaza attracts strolling pedestrians through the day. At sunrise and sunset, the light is filtered dramatically through the branches of the giant Central American rain trees; at midday, these same branches offer blessed shade to those having a restorative nap.

A curiosity grew by the promenade, a giant peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) tree with a metal platform engulfed by the living wood. Ananda told me that this structure, with flags and weathervanes, once functioned as a signal tower used by the British to communicate with inbound boats. But it had fallen into disuse, and the fig tree had taken root and swallowed the ladders and spars. The base of the tree

was squared off abruptly, having been constrained in earlier years, but the top burst into green abandon.

Rooted in history

We walked along the promenade, past the iconic fishing nets. Muscular fisherman perched on the wooden frames,



At the corner of the field, there stood the largest tree of Fort Kochi, a bodhi tree... the site of a Kochi Tree Festival

and reached down into the dipping nets to pull out fish from the fertile estuarine waters. They were working in dramatically altered region. Kochi, a land raised from the waters in recent geological times, had been settled relatively peaceably in 1500 by sailors from Portugal, and then, in the mid-

1600s, conquered by the Dutch. But when the British invaded in 1814, they also brought schemes of industrialisation and empire. Sir Robert Bristow spearheaded the transformation of the harbour, clearing the mangrove forests, dredging the waterways, and establishing a naval base. The Kochi harbour was still biologically productive, but, like the entire coastline of Kerala, it had experienced drastic environmental degradation.

The harbour was now part of an independent India. As we walked along the promenade, Ananda told me stories of the freedom fighters: KJ Herschel, raising aloft the flag of independent India, and Kunjali, who actively resisted Portuguese colonial rule. We passed by relics of a more imperial time: giant steel boilers on the shore, rusting away next to a picturesque saptaparni tree (*Alstonia scholaris* or blackboard tree). Below the citadel, we discovered a massive twisting tree, growing horizontally out towards the water. Ananda explained that this was an overgrown hedge, more than a century old, which had grown into a fantastic playground. We

watched children running along its branches, and paused for a moment to rest on this wooden bench.

Our exploration continued. I followed Ananda on a complicated path through the town, learning points on the map by the stories and the trees. Some of these were evidence of the diversity of thought and culture in Kochi: the new Caledonian pine at the St Francis Church, sometimes used as a Christmas tree, and the mango tree haunted by Kappiri Muthappan, a ghost invoked to scare misbehaving children. Others connected us with the natural world: there was a coral-wood tree, one of the last remnants of the native forest, and a jujube tree where people would gather to watch the sun set over the Arabian Sea.

Living with trees

As we walked up the staircase at Mango Tree, I was amazed to discover that the restaurant was literally built around a tree. The rooftop seating was shaded by the thick green leaves of a healthy mango tree.

We eventually found ourselves on the Parade Grounds, where once

British soldiers had marched to demonstrate the threat inherent in the colonial empire. Now, boys played cricket in the bright sun. At the corner of the field, there stood the largest tree of Fort Kochi, a bodhi tree with a corded stem and spectacular canopy. Almost magnetically, Ananda and I were drawn to it. We sat in its shade and admired the heart-shaped leaves. Like the Buddha so many years before, we found there was a peace to be had here, with the sun descending in the late afternoon towards the sea.

Here, Ananda told me a story from recent years. With the help of other enthusiasts and activists, this very tree had been the site of a Kochi Tree Festival. In keeping with Hinduism's reverence for nature, the tradition of Jewish Arbor Day (Tu B'Shevat, which marks the new year for trees) and a modern recognition of the value of the forest, they had arranged a day of celebration.

Perhaps, we mused, if everyone in Kochi looked up at the leaves that sheltered them, there would be an ongoing festival. We endeavoured to organise our notes, and create a tree trail through the old Fort. If you're in town, you can check out the project at Kashi

Art Cafe, or simply ask any of the residents about their own stories and memories of the trees around.

Kochi, of course, has a richly layered history and a diverse geography, and there are countless stories

to be told. We could imagine, however, that the town could be understood with only three layers: the blue waters, the dry land and the green canopy.

Instinctively, humans will gather beneath the shade of the trees, and meet here to share tales and revel in the company of each other. In colder climates, society has always focused around the warmth of a fire, but here, in the warm tropics, it is beneath the canopy of living trees that stories are told, and remembered. **■**

SACRED SPACE
One of India's oldest churches, St Francis Church is where Vasco da Gama was laid to rest

FYI

WHEN TO GO

Mid-September to March is the best time to visit Kochi, as the weather is at its coolest. However, the monsoon (Jun to mid-Sep, and again in mid-Oct) has a special charm.

GETTING THERE

Kochi is well connected by air, rail and road to the rest of the country, with regular flights from all major Indian cities.

AROUND TOWN

Short distances can be covered by auto-rickshaw or on foot. Private taxis can be hired for longer distances, and a motorboat to explore the harbour.

TOURIST INFORMATION

District Tourism Promotion Council. +91-484 236-7334, Open Mon-Sat 10am-5pm.

FACT FILE

AT A GLANCE

Originally a fishing village in pre-colonial Kerala, this stretch of land was given to the Portuguese by the king of Kochi to build a fort. Few remnants of the battlements the Portuguese built here remain. Later European colonists, including the Dutch and the British, also settled here, leaving behind a curious grid of streets lined with old bungalows and churches built in different European styles.

EXPLORE

Chinese fishing nets

Perched on the waterfront near Vasco da Gama Square are the much photographed Chinese fishing nets that greet all visitors

to Fort Kochi. Visit early in the morning, before the busloads of day trippers arrive, and when the fish market is stirring to life. *River Road. Open daily sunrise-sunset.*

Indo-Portuguese Museum

The erstwhile residence of the Portuguese governor in India, the museum is home to the bishop of the diocese of Kochi. The museum has a collection of sculptures, precious metal objects and vestments from the Santa Cruz Basilica and other churches of the diocese.

Bishop's House. +91-484-221-5400. Open Tue-Sun 9am-6pm. Admission: ₹10 Indians, ₹25 foreign nationals.

St Francis Church

The oldest European church in India, St Francis was initially built in 1503 by the Portuguese, and rebuilt around 1562. Much of the original structure has survived four centuries and three warring European empires and is a rich storehouse of history. *Church Road. Open daily 6am-7pm.*

EAT

Most interesting restaurants are concentrated in the Fort Kochi area. Kochi has liberally drawn inspiration from the many cultures that have visited Kerala in the last three centuries. Its culinary scene, like its

architecture, is a vibrant mishmash of Arab, Dutch, English, Jewish, Keralan, Portuguese and Syrian-Christian influences, all generously enhanced by Kerala's triad of spices – cardamom, ginger and pepper.

STAY

Fort House Hotel

Fort House Hotel offers a refreshing change from the sterility of many Fort Kochi hotels. Its 16 modest and clean rooms are built in a traditional Keralan style. There's a lovely waterfront restaurant serving traditional Keralan cuisine and a competent Ayurvedic centre. *Calvathy Road. +91-484 221-7103. www.hotelfort-*

house.com. ₹₹. No Amex.

Le Colonial

Vasco da Gama and his ilk are said to have stayed at this exquisitely restored 500-year-old house. It is a stunning residence that's more like a museum than a hotel, located right beside the Chinese fishing nets. The rooms are tastefully decorated and the bathrooms are lovely, with top-notch fittings. The experience here is luxurious, rather than luxury-hotel. Nearby is the 17th-century Tower House (*1/320 Tower Road. +91-484-221-6960*), a reasonable, colonial, heritage property, also managed by the Neemrana group. *1/315 Church Road,*

Vasco da Gama Square. +91-484 221-7181, www.neemranahotels.com. ₹₹₹-₹₹₹₹

Koder House

The distinct, red facade of Koder House has been a Fort Kochi landmark since it was built by Samuel Koder in the early 19th century. Each suite has a curious selection of antiques and traditional Keralan furniture, spread over a huge bedroom, living room and bathroom with a Jacuzzi. Four suites also have a small balcony overlooking the waterfront. *Tower Road. +91-484-221-8485. www.koderhouse.com. ₹₹₹₹. No Amex.*