

# KERALA

KOCHI  
ALLEPPEY  
TRIVANDRUM





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A COASTAL VOYAGE THROUGH KOCHI • ALLEPPEY • TRIVANDRUM

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# A coastal voyage from Kochi to Trivandrum for the die-hard romantics

What we write on sand will vanish in minutes, but what we write on our hearts will stay forever. Kerala etches deep into your heart, leaving a forever mark - like a lover's tale, a legendary Arabian romance. And why not? The blue and frothy Arabian sea washes its 580 km long western shores - the swish of sea waves mesmerizes visitors into total submission. The first thought as you regain control of your senses is, 'this is the place I wanted to be all this while. I have arrived, now there is no going back to any place else'. That's what Kerala, now Keralam, does to you. It makes you its own. But the reality dawns when life pushes you to get back to the rut of everyday living.

We two, Rajni and I, who had prayed to the Lords of oceans, skies, monsoons, hills, beaches, swinging palms and the houseboats floating in quaint backwaters - were finally heard in December 2013 and allocated a measly week to spend in the God's Own Country. To sum it - it was nothing short of inner peace and joy - true *Ananda*.

It was a short break for us to be in Varuna's domain but the moment we landed from a *vimana* my first thought, or question, was: why by air? With such a long and striking coastline why shouldn't the visitor arrive at the port of call in a ship, a boat, a steamer, a dhow, a canoe or even a coracle basket-boat? Arriving in Kerala by air doesn't do justice to its beauty; somehow it doesn't seem appropriate - it lacks the zing of special arrival. Next time, I promised myself, it will be by water. The city, often called the "Queen of the Arabian Sea", i.e. Kochi/Cochin was where we landed. The overpowering aroma of spices captured my nostrils immediately as I entered the drab airport. Kochi has been an important spice trading centre on the Indian west coast since antiquity. The port of Muziris traded with the Romans, Persians, Arabs, and Chinese.

Since we were in the city at the asking of our prince, we had to locate the city's fort and thus we moved to Fort Kochi. The fort in Fort Kochi is Fort Emmanuel, built by the Portuguese in 1503, long before the Mughals set foot in India. The entire Fort Kochi region takes its name from this historic fortress. However, it is largely in ruins today, with most of it destroyed by the Dutch and British or submerged by the sea over the centuries. Overlooking Fort Kochi is the Vypin Island which seems to be perpetually rocking and rolling over the waters. Across from Fort Kochi is the other island town, Ernakulam, which can be reached by a ferry or a steamer that runs between the two islands. Ernakulam is quiet, city like,

more business type - Kochi is a cultural hub, resonating with art, music, history and heritage. The whole city seems to be a large open-air art gallery.

Our first halt at Kochi was the century old heritage resort Brunton Boatyard, a pioneer shipyard in British times. From its architecture to the art pieces on display, the place bewitches you - the hotel's northern face bathing in Arabian sea also serves as an art gallery. Mornings are a veritable delight - sitting out in the hotel veranda one can watch hundreds of large and small ships pass by and dozens of fishing boats spreading their nets for the day's catch as egrets, crows, mynahs and other birds fly around to get their share of the fish.

This boutique resort inspired the setting for Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The book, which spans events from the early 1900s onward, follows generations of a Portuguese merchant family in South India, drawing creative influence from the unique atmosphere and historical layers of the Brunton Boatyard and its surroundings.

Brunton Boatyard's interiors reflect an eclectic but tasteful blend of English, Portuguese and Dutch influences, evident in its high ceilings, hanging fans and a plethora of artifacts and curios from a great mercantile age known for its pomp and glamour. The scent of colonial history is all around you as you take a tour of the historic Fort Cochin area where the hotel stands. The legacy of its proud history is visible everywhere.

Fort Kochi is best explored by combining slow, leisurely walks through its historic, art-filled alleys with short auto-rickshaw rides or bicycle rentals for longer distances between the heritage zones and nearby Mattancherry. The whole area represents a mix of 18th and 19th-century residential buildings and hotels, such as the Old Harbour House, some of which have been renovated more recently.

The city was the final resting place of the Portuguese trader-explorer Vasco Da Gama who died of malaria on Christmas Eve. Da Gama had first landed at Kozhikode (Calicut) at the Kappad Beach in 1498 and kept coming back to India. The St. Francis Church in Fort Kochi, around the Vasco da Gama Square, is where he was buried initially. This square is famous for precolonial Chinese Fishing Nets believed to have been introduced by Chinese traders in the early 14th century.

The colonial-era streets, especially around Princess Street, are shaded, and lined with vibrant art, colonial-era bungalows, and cafes. The most famous art event in the country is held here. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale is India's largest contemporary art exhibition, held every two years across heritage sites, warehouses, and galleries in Fort Kochi, Mattancherry, and Willingdon Island.

Right next to Brunton Boatyard are the famous Aspin Wall and the Mattancherry Palace – a palace popularly known in Kochi as the Dutch Palace, which features murals, portraits and exhibits of the Rajas of Kochi. The palace was once included in the tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Despite the name Dutch Palace, the palace was built by the Portuguese Empire as a gift to the Kingdom of Cochin. Religious, decorative and stylised, the murals have been painted in rich warm colours in tempera technique in keeping with the traditions of Hindu temple art. Portraits of the Rajas of Cochin, from 1864 onwards, are displayed in what was once the Coronation Hall. These were painted by local artists in the western style. The ceiling of the hall is decorated with floral designs in woodcraft. Amongst the other exhibits in the palace are an ivory palanquin, a howdah, royal umbrellas, ceremonial dress used by the royalty, coins, stamps and drawings.

For a town long accustomed to exchange, Kochi remains notably unhurried: coconut trees sway, humidity softens the air, and spectacle never quite takes hold. Clean, walkable streets, warm weather and a rare openness to outsiders set Kochi apart.

Having spent two days exploring Kochi we hired a car to move south on NH 66 towards Trivandrum. On the well-paved elevated highway where many exits, underpasses and over bridges were still being constructed, it took us nearly four hours to reach Alappuzha or Alleppey, a major city in Kerala famous for its picturesque backwaters and houseboat cruises.

Alleppey town is located on the east coast of Laccadive Sea dotted with fishing boat harbour on one side and lighthouses and watchtowers on the other which keep an eye on boats that go out fishing or come back to the port.

Together with the flowers, a birthday cake is philosophically viewed as a symbolic anchor representing the passage of time, the sweetness of life, and the intentional celebration of existence. It serves as a shared ritual that fosters community, marks a lived milestone, and offers a moment to pause and reflect on mortality, growth, and gratitude.



केरलम अथि सुंदरम

It was the 16th of December, the next day was Rajni's 65th birthday. On a rainy morning, our next stop was yet another heritage place away from the Alleppy city. Our cab driver, Mr Reji, was the old school kind who could neither read Google Map directions nor cared to ask about the route – resulting in him forever losing the way. Reji also loved his local hooch in the evening and would wander off without informing. Mr Reji had this uncanny ability or the talent to simply ignore listening to us as he couldn't understand what we were saying.

Away from the national highway and hidden behind tall coconut trees, close to the Marari Beach is the Xandari Pearl Beach Resort, Mararikulam. From a distance it looked more like a small village settlement with its thatched roof cottages. Here we were closer to the sea than the backwaters or the famous floating houseboats. The consistent light showers, the cool sea breeze and the smell from the swaying coconut trees clinched the day to just about laze and explore the vast beach which had been left all to us. Since the beach resort was only about half-an-hour drive from the town, we had a great time exploring Marari beach, flying kites, taking cool dips in the ocean and watching a bluish sunset with low hanging grey clouds over the Arabian sea.

4 With dreams in her eyes and fresh flowers in her hair, Gayathri Thampatty was leaving the resort as we crossed each other in the corridor. Gorgeous looking Mohiniyattam dancer had not found an audience that evening. We struck up a conversation and mentioned how much we would love to watch her in those sylvan surroundings. Her eyes lit-up and she came right back with us, set up her sound system, and started performing in the corridor - JUST FOR US . Yes, the two of us were her only audience. The *Apsara*, or the celestial nymph, disappeared into the late evening sky like a divine spirit. Mohiniyattam is a classical solo dance form from Kerala, known as the “dance of the enchantress”.

An exclusive dance performance, a decent dinner and a few cocktails later, we were back to our circular room. For the first time in my life I was staying in a room without corners or two walls meeting at a junction. The rush and the noise of the rising tide didn't let me sleep till late that night. Half-dreaming half-awake my last thoughts that night were scary. We were only 150 meters from the sea; what if a tsunami envelops us before we are even able to say our goodbyes.

Xandari Pearl Beach Resort at Mararikulam turned out to be a treat with its great food, a lot many activities and the proximity to the sea. In between we drove to the city looking for a famous church in the middle of a lake – which, courtesy Mr Reji, we could not find but that aimless

long drive enabled us to explore small villages and the life of the locals in that area. It drizzled through the drive. On our way back we spotted a red and white painted lighthouse in the distance. We had never seen a lighthouse so close, or been inside one. We somehow reached it navigating the narrow muddy lanes and were keen to go all the way up the seven-storied claustrophobic structure. Just like the temples, shoes are not allowed inside lighthouses too. These temples of science are also considered pious and precious structures which bar dirty shoes. Climbing a slippery, wooden, circular staircase in the dark takes double the courage. Making it to the top gave us a great view of not just the rain-washed town but also to the vast spread of seas south and west.

On the way back to our retreat, we came across Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cathedral at the Convent Square, in Alleppy. Still raining, the holy cathedral gave us the much-needed rest and a hot cup of coffee. The interiors of the white cathedral are stunning. Though it was not service time, someone was playing the organ. Back at our Beach Resort, we celebrated Rajni's birthday by cutting a cake and raising a toast. We had planned to leave for Kovalam early the next morning if Mr Reji arrived in time. But to our dismay, not only was he late, he was reeking of bad liquor and drove like a snail on the muddy highway.

At the Uday Samudra Leisure Beach Hotel & Spa in Kovalam (Trivandrum) we paid off and bid goodbye to Mr Reji. He was visibly upset as he thought he was going to stay with us till the end of our tour.

Uday Samudra Leisure Beach Hotel & Spa in Kovalam is located right on Kovalam beach where our room had a wonderful sea facing view. Popular with groups and budget tourists who throng this very large hotel was rather noisy and a total let down considering the peace and quiet that we had enjoyed in the past few days. But we made the best of it by visiting the beach, getting therapeutic massages and trying different kinds of food.

Located in Kovalam, a popular tourist destination, the hotel's private beach is known for its coastal scenery and backwaters. From the balcony of our suite we could trace the silhouettes of fishing boats lazily floating over the waters, the hills and plantations on Poovar Island across us were just a boat-ride away. Poovar Island is a stunning, tranquil coastal destination nestled between the Neyyar River and the Arabian Sea, located roughly 10 kilometres south of Kovalam.

Outside the Uday Samudra Hotel in Kovalam, there were lots of coconut sellers and a few Ayurvedic massage parlours attracting the tourists with their smiles and suspicious wares.