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# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER

## INDIA

# WHEN WINTER COMES

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MERCURY DIPS

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THE

# OLD CITY AND THE SEA



Walk onto the black-and-white chessboard floor at Ayana Fort Kochi, and you immediately sense what a good move it is in the oft-chequered game of travel. Located in the heart of Fort Kochi at Kalvathy Road, Ayana is a refreshing mixture of old and new—it flaunts minimalist, contemporary decor but there are also those gorgeous old Athangudi tiles paved across the hotel, still cleaned with coconut oil and warm water.

Ayana opened its doors by hosting the third Kochi-Muziris Biennale breakfast seminar in December 2016. However, its building has had several avatars in the past: it was a courthouse in the early 1900s and a tea warehouse in the mid-1900s. My uncle and aunt, lifelong Kochi residents, meet me for lunch at The Old Court, the hotel’s all-day dining area overlooking a garden patch. My uncle recalls coming to this building when it was a bank, and we consume old stories along with Kerala specialties

such as spicy prawn curry, stir-fried cabbage and steamed rice.

Later, I decide to unfurl my tourist raincoat and step out into Fort Kochi’s streets. Ayana is a great place to stay for those who plan to visit the next Kochi Biennale, in December 2018. Exit the hotel, turn right, and you’re close to two biennale venues: Pepper House and Aspinwall House. I feel a hint of nostalgia as my auto sputters past the latter, having shown an installation of drawings and sound there called the “Fluidity of Horizons,” at the second biennale, in 2014. My chatty auto driver tells me that “biennale” has become a Malayalam word.

I meet Ajitha, my enthusiastic and well-informed guide, who first takes me to the famed “*cheena vala*,” Fort Kochi’s Chinese fishing nets, to watch fishermen raise their gigantic webs and examine their haul from the sea. We linger at the fish stalls and a low-key fish auction, where crows are shoed away but a tame

cat is fed choice bits of fish offal.

Fort Kochi is peppered with cafés, boutique hotels and leafy rain trees whose saplings are believed to have been brought from Brazil by the Portuguese. Ajitha points out heritage structures that have centuries-old stories to tell. St. Francis Church, for instance, is said to be the first European church built in India, and was the original resting place of Vasco da Gama for 14 years after his death in 1524, before his remains were taken to Portugal. A 15-minute rickshaw ride takes us to Jew Town’s 16th-century Mattancherry Palace, whose walls are covered with Ramayana- and Mahabharata-themed tempera paintings. The nearby Paradesi Synagogue seems as opulent as it must have been when it was built in the 1560s, thanks to its Belgian chandeliers and blue willow-patterned Chinese floor tiles.

In the evening, I head to the Greenix Village cultural centre. I am fascinated by the mixed performance of kathakali,

PHOTO COURTESY: AYANA FORT KOCHI (LOUNGE), PARVATHI NAVAR (BOAT)

MODERN AMENITIES AND OLD-WORLD CHARM  
MEET AT AYANA FORT KOCHI **BY PARVATHI NAYAR**

Some rooms and the tea lounge at Ayana (middle and facing page, left) overlook the sea and Fort Kochi's streets; The hotel is centrally located, and guests can conveniently catch a kathakali make-up session (left) and performance, sail the backwaters on a boat cruise (facing page, right) or score some nutmeg tree fruit from a local riverside farmer (right).



mohiniattam and kuchipudi, which includes an hour-long opportunity to watch a kathakali dancer apply make-up.

After a long day, it is a relief to return to Ayana's cosy, well-appointed room. Its deep—and trendy—duck-egg blue walls complement the chequered floors and the ivory-and-gold colour scheme reflected in the artwork, frames, and bed linen. I see the same hues reflected in the swimming pool open to the skies and The Tea Lounge upstairs that was once the courthouse. It flaunts a high wooden ceiling, and its decor is uncluttered, with a single *deepa stambha* or pillar of lamps placed at the centre of the room.

The next day, I go further afield, to the suburb of Vaikom that lies about 43 kilo-metres southeast of Fort Kochi. Shajas, my guide during the backwater boat cruise from Vaikom, is full of tales about Kerala's history and life in these backwaters. He points to a toddy tapper sailing in his boat, armed with knife and a piece of buffalo bone, his instruments

of trade. Shajas explains how he climbs the coconut tree to drain the sap of the coconut flower bud—the basic ingredient of toddy.

The boat cruise takes in the wide Muvattupuzha River as well as narrow, private canals, almost all the way up to Vembanad Lake. Shajas points out the fauna and flora—wild jackfruit, pandanus, neem, tapioca, nutmeg; Indian pheasants, stilts, blue kingfishers. I am delighted to have skipped the mechanised boat; there's a lovely rhythm created by the two boatmen who pole us along.

I break the 1.5-hour-long drive back to Fort Kochi by stopping at the small town of Thalayolaparambu, where the potter Ramakrishnan shows how the little pots for capturing the sap are thrown on his wheel. I also visit the peaceful Vaikom Siva temple on the way, and later treat myself to supper in my room: flaky Malabar parotta, fish curry and dry roasted chicken. I relish how well-located

this place is, irrespective of what a guest would choose to do. It is the monsoon, and I have gambled much with the weather. But I have also stumbled upon fewer travellers. God's own country feels like my own personal getaway. ❁

ESSENTIALS

Ayana Fort Kochi is at Kalvathy Road in Fort Kochi. It lies 40 km/1.5 hr southwest of Cochin airport and 12 km/40 min west of Ernakulam South railway station. Ayana has 12 rooms and four suites ([www.ayanahospitality.com](http://www.ayanahospitality.com); doubles from ₹8,000). The hotel organises 3-hr culinary tours for guests to sample Kerala specialities cooked in locals' homes (₹1,500 per person), and 4-hr heritage walks across the city (from ₹1,500 per person).