

# Haunted by Covid-19, debt-ridden hosts leave Fort Kochi homestays

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## TOURISM HUB LOSES SHEEN

Pic: Jipson Sikhera

**Kochi:** More than 250 homestays in Fort Kochi, the tourism hub of the city, are on the verge of closure as there has been hardly any business for the past five months since the outbreak of Covid-19.

Though more than 80% of homestays remained shut, those which kept their doors open with little ray of hope are also struggling to meet expenses, including paying the rent. Homestay owners have been seeking government's help like waiver of taxes, low-interest loans, revival packages etc., but no announcement has come from government so far. Though many have thought of renting out homestays as Covid-19 quarantine centres, residents nearby have opposed the proposal fear infection spread.

It is no secret that tourism and hospitality sectors rely on each other for their growth. Kochi's tourism industry, the most thriving in Kerala, is now facing its worst-ever deadlock with the closure of tourist spots, prohibition of tourism activities and restrictions on international air travel. Homestay owners said the hospitality sector would not be able to overcome the impact of the pandemic anytime soon as more than 70% of their customers who depend on homestays in

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Fort Kochi are foreign tourists and their inflow has stopped since the lockdown started.

"Fort Kochi has largest number of homestays in state. I closed my homestay in March even before lockdown was announced. It is my 11th year in the hospitality industry and it is the worst season ever. This year's tourist season passed with zero business. Usually business during this period helps homestay owners to survive the off-season. Even though the homestays are closed, the rents need to be paid. Many landlords gave concessions in the initial months but not anymore. Many of the homestay owners have decided to vacate the building as they could not pay the rent," said Sree Kumar, who runs Travellers' Inn in Fort Kochi.

Antony Kureethra, president, tourism promoters' association, said the government should interfere in the issue as if not for hospitality sector, Kerala cannot be revived even after the Covid-19 and its related fear subsidizes. Government should come up with a special package and interest-free loans to aid homestay owners. "The business has been hit mainly as no foreign tourists visit the state now. It will remain grim until international travel restrictions are lifted. But even then, the economic dip caused by the pandemic across the world will reduce the number of tourist inflow. Waiver of taxes was promised by the government but it has not been implemented yet," he said.

Joseph Dominic, general secretary, homestay owners' welfare association Kerala said

though some homestays in Fort Kochi started functioning after lockdown restrictions were lifted, they also are now closing down as the number of Covid-19 cases is increasing. The government should consider their financial constraints and support homestay owners by giving low-interest loans and tax reductions," he said.

Hundreds of people who were employed at these homestays are now struggling to make ends meet as they lost jobs after their employers discontinued their services to cut expenditure. "Now we don't have any guests at our property. So, there is no point employing cleaning and reception staff. We asked them to go on leave without pay as paying their salaries is not affordable anymore," said a homestay owner.