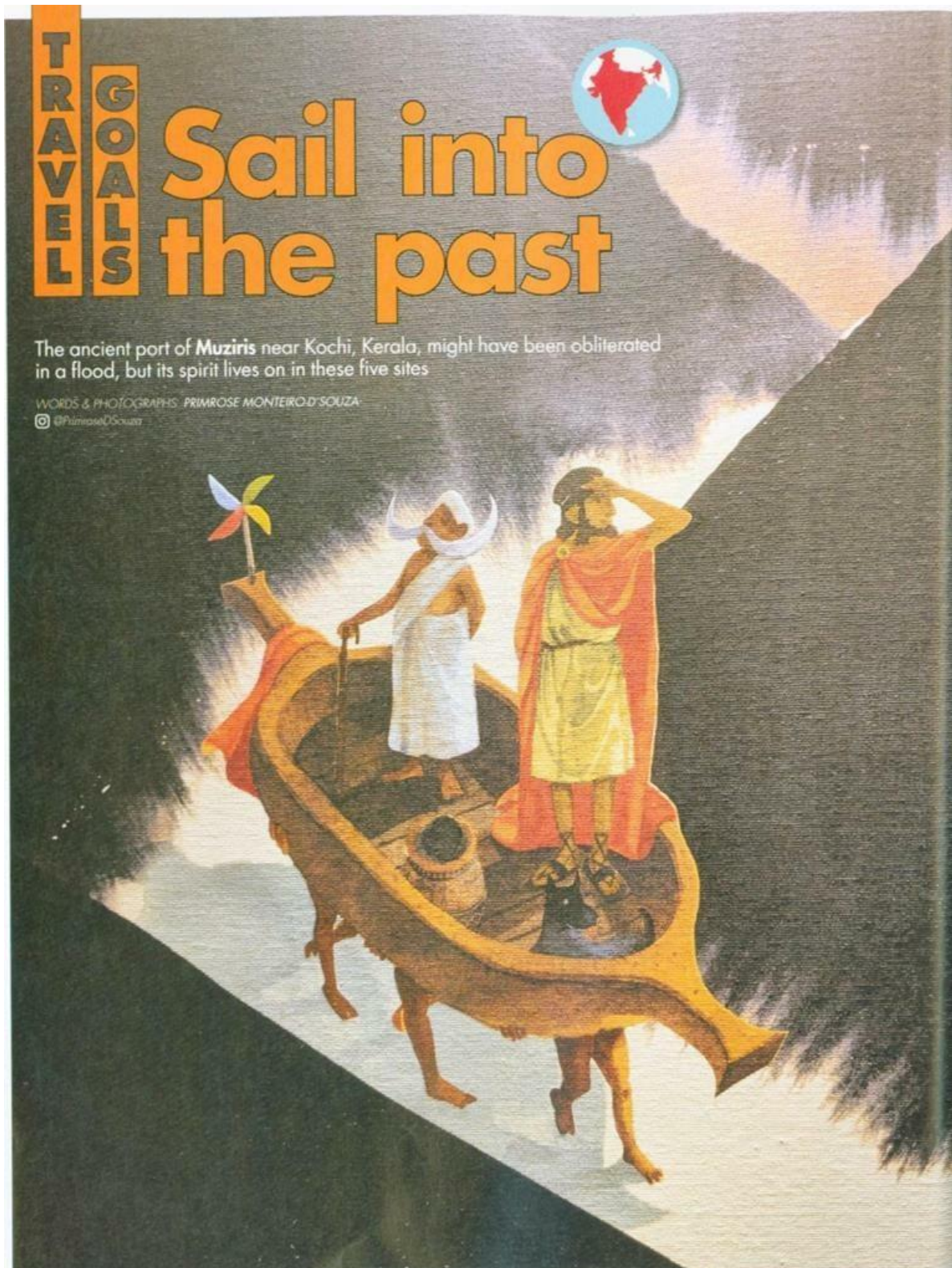


LONELY PLANET

Sail into the past

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FINDING ANCIENT MUZIRIS, KERALA

IN Kerala, stepping into a boat can transport you to another world. When you step gingerly into a wobbly *vallam*, the ubiquitous wooden canoe, you will be privy to the lives of the locals who live off the backwaters. If you are welcomed onto a *kettuvallam* (houseboat), you will be handed into hospitality - welcoming but never obsequious - that the state is famous for. And then, there is the hop-off, hop-on boat that works as a time machine into centuries gone by. Gliding down backwaters, flirting with the Arabian Sea, the boat takes you back to a time when an area close to Kochi was a bustling port city that brought traders from all over the world to this corner of the sub-continent.

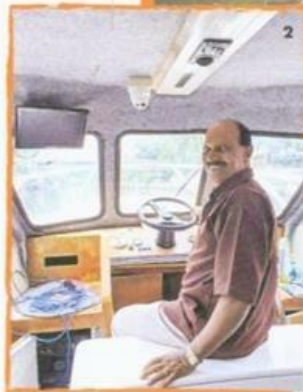
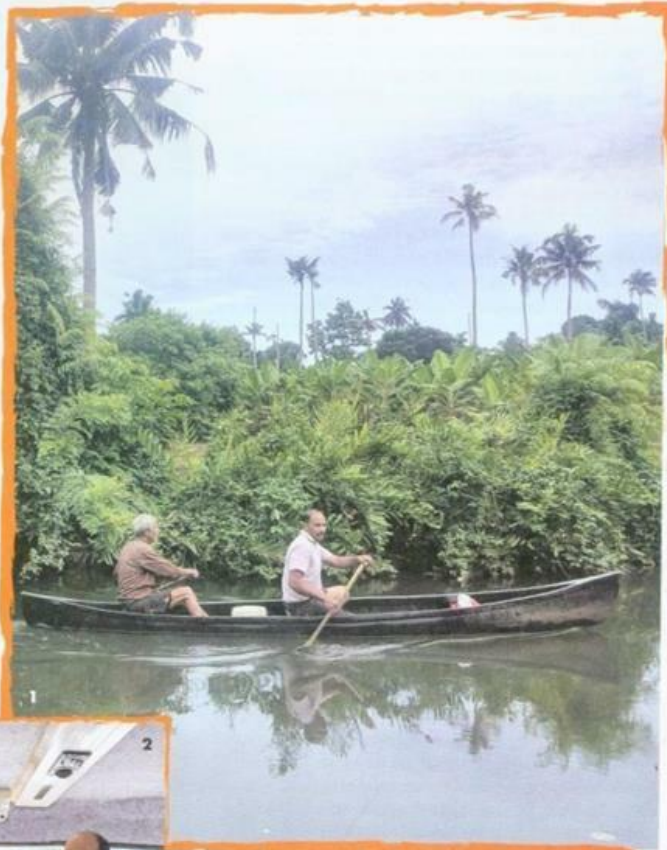
ASONG OF WATER AND JEWELS

My interest is first piqued by a painting at **Port Muziris - a Tribute Portfolio Hotel** near Cochin International Airport. A Roman and a Keralite gentleman stand in a boat carried by men across a swathe of land. The painting by Vishnu Nair is part of a series commissioned to bring the many moods of Kochi and Kerala to the property. There is modern Kerala, the hustle and bustle of its metro and malls, but there are also these throwbacks on canvas to a time gone by.

Like the Kochi-Muziris Biennale that has grown to become one of India's most significant contemporary art exhibitions, the property takes its name from Muziris, an ancient seaport and city dating back from at least 1 BCE. No one is really sure what the modern-day equivalent would be, but, based on Tamil poetry and classical sources (including the *Ramayana*), and evidenced by a number of excavations in the area, **Pattanam** on the Malabar Coast, 37km from Kochi, is probably where that once-flourishing gateway was sited.

It was a place to which Arabs, Chinese, Persians, North Africans, Greeks and Romans came to buy spices, precious and semi-precious stones, Chinese silk and tortoise shells, and to sell gold coins, peridots, linens, raw glass and wine to the chiefs of the Chera kingdom.

Arguably, it was a place abustle with trade industry. The Tamil poetic work, *Purananuru* (the name translates to the Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom), has a wonderful description of 'Muciri': "With its streets, its houses, its covered fishing boats, where they sell fish, where they pile up rice... With the shifting and mingling crowd of a boisterous river-bank where the sacks of pepper are heaped up... With its gold deliveries, carried by the ocean-going ships and brought to the river bank by local boats, the city of the gold-collared Kuttuvan (Chera chief), the city that bestows wealth to its visitors



1. The modern-day backwaters are always alive with activity
2. The journey to Ancient Muziris is made in a comfortable, air-conditioned boat
Facing page: Pepper, a painting by Vishnu Nair at Port Muziris - a Tribute Portfolio Hotel

indiscriminately, and the merchants of the mountains, and the merchants of the sea, the city where liquor abounds, yes, this Muciri, where the rumbling ocean roars, is given to me like a marvel, a treasure."

That marvellous city vanished from the maps of the world in the 14th century. The flood of Periyar in 1341 was cataclysmic - to the extent that it changed forever the geography of the region, opening up the current harbour at Kochi and a network of backwaters, and forming Vypeen Island near Kochi. In time, the mouth of the Periyar River was so silted up that Muziris could no longer function as a port.

Since then, it has lingered only in the minds of antiquarians, archaeologists and festival curators. Seven seasons of excavation by the Kerala Council for Historical Research have uncovered artefacts at Pattanam. Roman coins, as well as other ceramics, gold ornaments, semi-precious stone beads, items related to lapidary, architectural ruins and botanical remains reveal contact with countries around the Mediterranean and Red Sea. The Chinese presence is seen in porcelain shards with typical blue-on-white patterns. In 2007, a brick wharf complex with bollards to harbour nine →

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boats, and a canoe mummified in mud were found. The heritage site stretches across the municipality of North Paravur in Ernakulam District to the municipality of Kodungallur in Thrissur district. Time, then, to step into a boat and sail into the past.

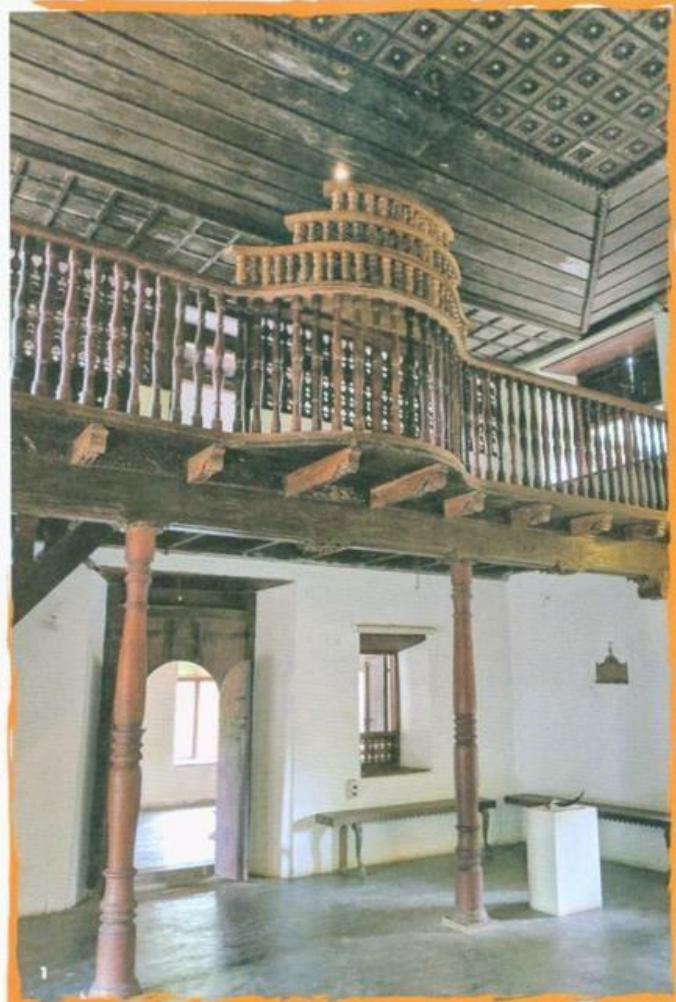
ABOATASAPORTAL TO THE PAST

Initiated by the government of Kerala, the **Muziris Heritage Project** is an initiative to conserve and showcase an ancient culture that the tourism department avers is as significant as that of the Indus Valley. For visitors like me, it translates to a day spent out on the water, riding the backwaters to explore old temples, churches and forts set amid modern coastal life. As we set off in the very comfortable – and, importantly, air conditioned – boat down the backwaters of the Periyar, Neethu, our guide for the day, points out the Chinese fishing nets that are so much a Kerala signature. The banks are close to us as we motor along, past coconut trees and banana plantations, people walking or cycling on the paths alongside, ducks holding an impromptu conference about whether it's a good day for swimming. The blue netted fish farms set into the water breed *kalanji* (Asian sea bass), and *vallams* carry locals down the river. Overhanging greenery atmospherically obscures the banks at some places, revealing a boat tied up under it here, a set of steps coming down to the water there. We float past a massive river island, and pass a Shri Krishna temple which, Neethu tells us, cocoons a five-foot statue of Shri Krishna in his Narasimha avatar.

Echoes of the past seem to mirror the present; Neethu's own home in this very area was inundated in the 2018 flood; she spent eight days in a camp, she tells me, matter-of-factly. Her guests include locals and visitors from across the world who want to cast themselves back into a time gone by.

TO EXPERIENCE A BYGONE SERENITY

Jewish visitors come seeking the heritage encapsulated in our first stop on the heritage trail. Sited on Jewish Street, the **Paravur Synagogue** is among the largest surviving synagogues in Kerala. It dates back to 1615, though many believe that the site sits on the ruins of an older synagogue from 1165. Built by permission of the local king, the synagogue is a testament to the cultural influences that impacted the Jewish settlers and traders in the area. Many of the other synagogues in Kerala suffered damage during the Dutch and Portuguese occupations and the invasions of the Mysore Kingdom; this one is gratifyingly undamaged. All but one of the local families in the area have moved to Israel, Neethu tells me, which means the quorum of 10 adult males to hold services is not met. The stunning structure is now a museum, showcasing Keralite influences in its whitewashed laterite walls, special seating for women worshippers on the upper floor, and the hanging lamps in the prayer room.



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As is traditional with dwellings in Kerala, we bend our heads in respect as we enter. Well-researched information boards tell of the history of the Jews in this part of the world. Within, we find excellent replicas of the carved Ark of the Torah and the *bema* (pulpit), now in a museum in Israel; the woodwork is a tribute to the skill of local carpenters. The ceiling and benches are original. We climb upstairs via a separate staircase from the outside to the inner balcony for women, and gaze through carved openings at the upper pulpit used on special days and at the main worship room in which the men prayed.

TO FOLLOW IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF PRIME MINISTERS (AND KINGS)

Picture a stormy night long, long ago. The invading Portuguese threatened the royal house of Kochi, and the king sought refuge in the home of the *Pallathachan* (prime minister) in Chendamangalam. It was a successful evasion of disaster, obviously, because, after the event, the traditional home was elevated to the status of

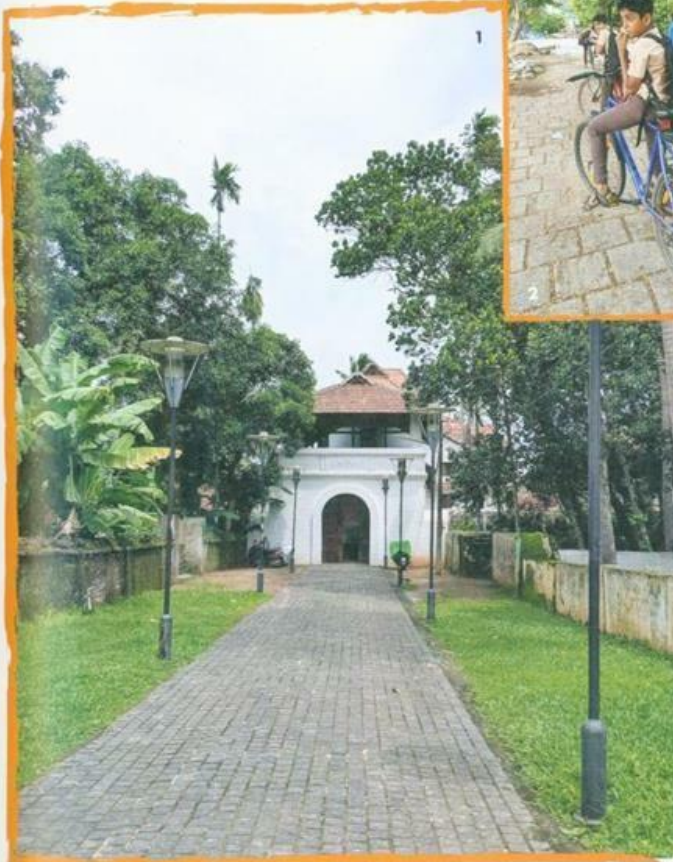
1. The entrance to the Paliyam Palace Museum; photography is not allowed inside

2. Schoolchildren cycle back home along the backwaters

Facing page:

1 and 3. The woodwork in the Paravur Synagogue is a tribute to the skill of the local carpenters.

2. Neethu, our enthusiastic guide on the Muziris trail



FINDING ANCIENT MUZIRIS, KERALA

a '*kovilakam*' (palace) in gratitude. More enhancement to the house came when the Dutch renovated it in appreciation of the prime minister's services (more on that later), which means the **Paliyam Palace Museum** we step into is a carefully-preserved hybrid of local and Dutch styles of architecture.

It is also a gateway into a world of domestic and foreign threats to the kingdom of Kochi. As prime ministers and chiefs of the army, the *Pallathachans* from the noble Paliyam family were an intrinsic part of local governance in the 17th and 18th centuries – an importance reflected in the elegance of the house in which the *valiyachan* (eldest father) lived and in which many important decisions regarding the state were made. The two-storeyed building is stunning, and the no-photography rule means that non-visitors will almost never be privy to its interiors. Within laterite- and lime walls three feet thick to protect against cannon-ball strikes, the first staircase is made of teak in the Kerala style; Neethu points out the high steps that are difficult to climb –

this could only be used by the prime minister. Even today, we move on into the erstwhile armoury and weapons storage room, which hosts lamps from 41 temples across Paliyam.

We climb to the first floor by a Dutch-style staircase (easier to climb, happily) to the PM's rest room, which takes up most of the space on this level. A cupboard-like space on the periphery could have served variously as a punishment closet to wring out confessions from suspects, as an escape route for the prime minister (and so, no doubt, also the king), or opened out to facilitate much-needed air circulation. From the outer windows, in many different styles across the two storeys, the minister could keep an eye on the temple, his office buildings, the

Paliyam temple and the *tharavadu* where the women and minor boys of the family lived (this was a no-female zone). Also on this level was the *darbar* hall, in which he held court and listened to the complaints of the people, presiding over the proceedings from a small platform.

On the second floor, the bedstead in the resting chamber is made from 68 medicinal woods, to ensure that the prime minister was never distracted from his responsibilities by plebeian aches and pains. Bodyguards were stationed on the adjoining balcony, overlooking the *darbar*.

Today, no threat hanging over us, we wander leisurely through the reading room, now a repository of artefacts from temples – conch shells, ornaments of those who get possessed in temples, *puja* items in copper and bronze, coconut measures for paddy, a temple safe with seven internal locks, a manuscript chest, and ornaments for elephants during festival time, among them.

In 1956, in what is called the Paliyam Partition, the joint family broke up into smaller units, and this building came under the custodianship of the Paliyam Trust. The atmosphere is hushed by request, and it seems fitting in this place seemingly frozen in time. →

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TO ENTER AN ERSTWHILE WORLD OF STRONG WOMEN

If the Paliyam *kovilakam* was a male domain, the **Paliyam Nalukettu** (*nalu* = four in Malayalam) is absolutely about woman power. Four blocks around a central courtyard, this was the ancestral home of the Paliyam noble family since 1986, in which several generations of the matrilineal joint family lived together. Minor boys lived in this *nalukettu* till they left for bachelors' living quarters near by; when they married, they were allotted houses by the administration.

We peep first into this museum's massive kitchen, in which food for 300 people was cooked, all under the strict supervision of the *valiyamma* (matriarch), who kept her eye on the *kochemmas* (lesser women in the household). All authority lay with the matriarch; from her beautiful wood-panelled room on the first floor, she kept an eye on the kitchen below (she gave instructions from a window offering direct view into the comings and goings in the house), and she kept the keys to the massive strong room ("*ara*") in which all the valuables in the house - including all the jewellery - were stashed. Other portkeys into another time include the tiny wooden windows set at an angle to aid circulation, wooden troughs for curry so big it took two people to carry them,

a child's wooden bathtub, a photo wall of family members, a burnished mirror in the *valiyamma's* suite, and the corridor of *sambandh* rooms in which the women of the house could meet privately with their husbands.

TO VISIT A SITE UNDER EXCAVATION... AND A SKELETON

Another ride on the boat and we come to **Cranganoor Fort**, also known as Kottappuram or Kodungallur Fort, much in demand over five centuries because its location at the mouth of the River Periyar before it joins the Arabian Sea was perfect for control over the sailing craft that passed into the interior of Malabar. Built by the Portuguese in 1523, it was captured and destroyed by the Dutch in 1663. Time now to recall the Dutch renovation of the *paliathachan's* palace. It came to be because the Dutch had tried to take the fort in vain in 1662, and only managed the capture in 1663 with the prime minister's help. Net result: The Dutch get the fort, the *paliathachan* gets Dutch-style, easier-to-climb staircases and the like. The Dutch used the site to keep an eye on their trading ships. When the Kingdom of Mysore decided that the Malabar deserved its interest, Haider Ali began negotiations with the Dutch to buy the fort. When Tipu Sultan started taking over the Malabar

Below: Cranganoor Fort is still being excavated
Facing page:

1. Under the trees picnic spots on the way back to the jolly from Cranganoor Fort
- 2 & 3. A local meal of Portuguese food
Destination on the heritage trail

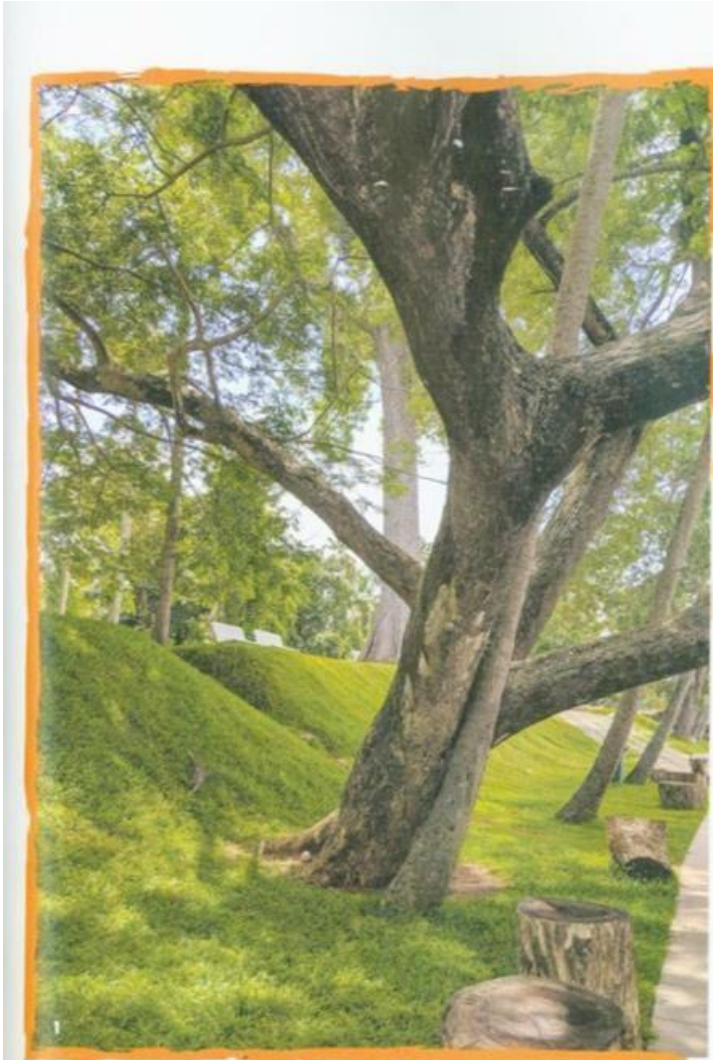


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FINDING ANCIENT MUZIRIS, KERALA

Coast, the Travancore rulers, recognising that they needed to stave off invasion by Mysore, purchased Kottapuram Fort and Pallippuram Fort from the Dutch in 1789. Later, in 1909, the Department of Archaeology of Travancore decided to preserve it as a public property, erecting a memorial pillar within.

We wander through the site, parts of it under cover for excavation. Here were found beads, cannon, pottery and the skeleton of a 21-year-old Portuguese man. Everything seems disappointingly abandoned; broken-down structures litter the area, the once-tall flagpole has been whittled down by age, and, no doubt, tourism. Even the centuries-old skeleton can be accessed by simply sweeping off a tarpaulin cover. The most life to be found here is when we come upon families having a picnic on the soft grass by the water on the way back to the jetty.

TO WHERE IT SNOWED IN KERALA

Then we ride past the shipbuilding yard and St Thomas Church, swerving past the temptation of the open sea entrance to the backwaters. The placidity of the backwaters is soothing, with different districts on the two banks – Thrissur to the left, and Ernakulam to the right. Past the famous Munambam fishing harbour, where fish auctions are held in the early morning. Past the people in the local ferry service going about their regular lives, waving cheerfully at us.

And then we come to the **Basilica of Our Lady of Snows** at Pallipuram near Cheral. Also called the Manjumatha Church, it comes with an intriguing story dating back to the 18th century when Tipu Sultan was marching deeper into the South. The parishioners sought sanctuary in the church, and the Virgin Mary shrouded the church in fog, befuddling the army that soon left. An ancient chapel attributed to the Portuguese and Vasco da Gama also stands nearby.

SAILING BACK INTO THE PRESENT

Time runs out on us before we can visit the sixth site on our itinerary – the **birthplace of Sahodaran Ayyappan**, renowned poet, journalist, thinker, politician and social reformer, now a museum in memory of a man who did much to fight caste discrimination.

We head back to the jetty in Paravur and our life in modern-day India, even as the backwaters lure us to stupor, pull us back to a time long ago – not a gentler time, certainly, but a time of war and wisdom. The old Chinese curse goes 'May you live in interesting times'. With courtly intrigues, stately buildings, and sudden fogs, the people in Muziris certainly did. ©



PRIMROSE MONTEIRO-D'SOUZA thoroughly enjoyed her journey into the past. She travelled to Ancient Muziris courtesy Port Muziris – a Tribute Portfolio Hotel.

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MAKE IT HAPPEN: MUZIRIS, KERALA

Essentials

BEST TIME TO VISIT

While Kochi is at its most comfortable, weather-wise, from October to March, any time is good to visit. The monsoon months – June to September – are known to be good for Ayurvedic treatments, though do watch the warnings for heavy rains before you leave.

GETTING THERE

All the Indian airlines fly into Cochin International Airport from major Indian metros (return fares from ₹ 4,900).

GETTING AROUND

Auto rickshaws and app-based cabs are easily available in Kochi.



STAY



Port Muziris – A Tribute Portfolio Hotel is an ideal base for your exploration of ancient Muziris. Although it is 20km away from Pattanam, the artworks on the property are a great visual introduction on your quest. The property will organise this itinerary for you on request (00-91-484-719-3333; www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/coltx-port-muziris-a-tribute-portfolio-hotel-kochi/; VIP Rd, opposite Cochin International Airport, Nedumbassery, Vappalassery; from ₹ 5,000).

PLACES TO EAT

On the Muziris itinerary, lunch is usually at **Portuguese Food Destination** at Kodungallur; a set meal is part of your day trip, but do break out and order some of the excellent prawns and beef with Kerala parotta (00-91-89437-79900; Muziris Lake Shore Park; Portuguese special dishes start at ₹ 130). In the Port Muziris property (see Stay), grab a meal at **Lila's Kitchen**, which prides itself on being a perfect introduction to food across Kerala (see Stay; mains from ₹ 400). In the city centre, the **Grand Pavilion** restaurant at the Grand Hotel is a classic, both in terms of the menu and the elegant decor. Try the Alleppey fish curry for sure (00-91-484-238-2061; MG Rd, Ernakulam South; from ₹ 315). In Fort Kochi, enjoy a light meal at the iconic **Kashi Art Cafe** – the Watermelon and Feta Salad is particularly good (Burgher St, Fort Kochi; 8.30am – 10pm; from ₹ 150).

GOOD TO KNOW

- The Muziris Heritage Project is arguably India's largest conservation project. Book in advance by calling 00-91-90208-64649, or via the website (www.muzirisheritage.org). Although guides are assigned randomly, check if Neethu is available (tour from ₹ 5,850/ family; ₹ 580/ person [minimum 10 people]). You can also take a chance and book on the spot.
- There are usually four to five stops on the circuits, which entails about 3.5 hours in the boat, and some amount of walking to the sites. Done diligently, this immersion into the past could take up to eight hours.
- Ensure you carry plenty of water and an umbrella or big sun hat. These will have to be left outside the sites with the custodians, but you will need them.

