

DISCOVER INDIA

The Land of Legends

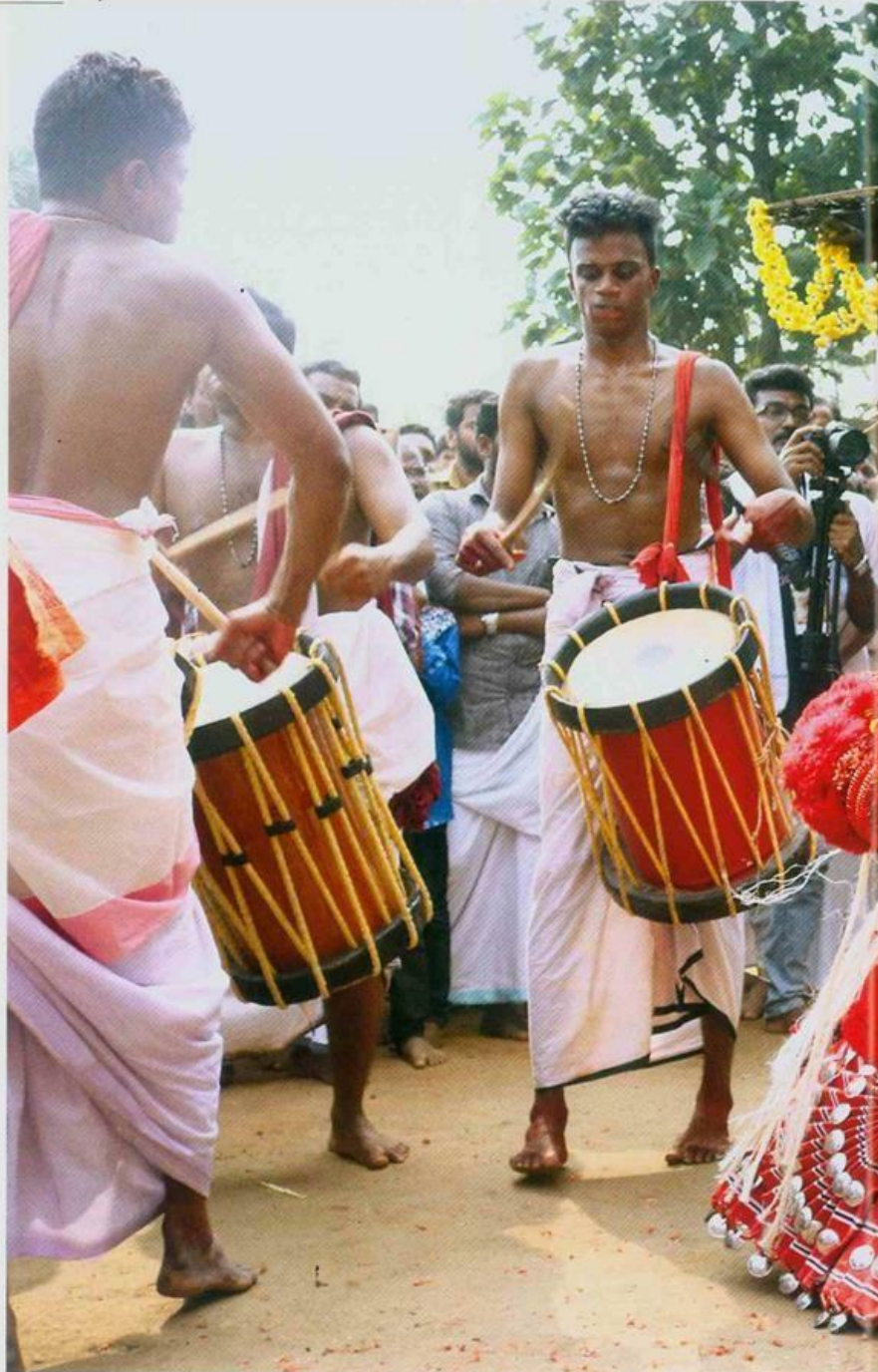
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DI EXPERIENCE CULTURE

The Land of Legends

The little-known coastal town of **Kannur** is home to intriguing history, mystical dance forms, and delectable food. By SUGATO TRIPATHY



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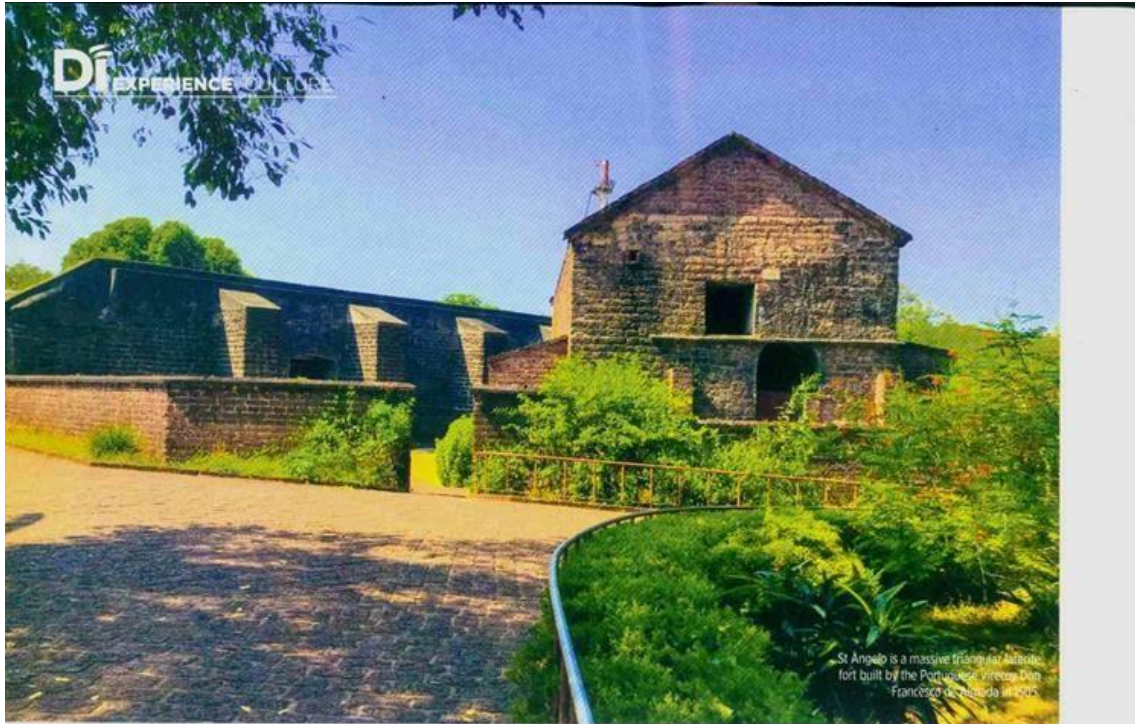
Theyyam, a ritual art popular in North Kerala, celebrates warriors and ancestral spirits.

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St Angelo is a massive triangular laterite fort built by the Portuguese viceroy Don Francisco de Almada in 1505.

WAITING TO BUY a ticket at Muzhappilangad Beach—the longest drive-in beach in Asia, located in Kannur, a little-known coastal city in Kerala—I felt like a child impatient for his turn on the carousel. The ocean roared in front of me and car tyres ripped the sand, leaving furrows for the sea to fill. This impressive 5.5-kilometre stretch of sand, with the majestic Arabian Sea on one side, offers a picturesque ride. I gleefully manoeuvred the car to the rhythm of the incoming waves, occasionally glancing in the side mirror to catch the receding waves.

Formerly called Cannanore, Kannur was once a bustling port for British, Portuguese, and Dutch traders. One of the earliest Portuguese settlements on the Malabar Coast, St Angelo is a massive triangular laterite fort built by the Portuguese viceroy Don Francisco de Almada in 1505 with the permission of the Kolathiri, the then king of Kannur. The structure is flanked by majestic bastions, and has a wall protecting it from the rough seas and inland waters. In 1663, Dutch colonisers, who also had a fair share of trade interests in peninsular India, captured the fort from the Portuguese. They sold it in 1772 to the Ali kings of Kannur before it was finally seized by the British 18 years later and turned into a military establishment. Some of the canons still face the Arabian Sea like sentinels.

The fort is a unique amalgamation of Portuguese, Dutch, and British architecture. The Portuguese built the

Central Prison, chapels, offices, and many other amenities; the Dutch constructed the stables and ammunition house; and the British renovated it and made it their chief military station until India's independence in 1947. The fort walls look out across the Arabian Sea. It's a good spot to regard the erstwhile colonial powers and their legacy of appropriation scattered around the world.

FEAST LIKE KINGS

Vestiges of the past intrude into the languid present. The cuisine of Kannur bears testimony to this. North Kerala's centuries-old association with the Arab, Portuguese, and Dutch has permeated into the state's culinary culture. I heard the word Moplah for the first time from my cab driver, Paramesh. "The taste and flavour [of Moplah cuisine] are unlike any other cuisines. It smells of the history of our region," he told me during one of my rides through the coastal town. I invited Paramesh to have lunch with me at a local restaurant, where he and the waiter giggled as I tried to pronounce the names of the

SHUTTERSTOCK

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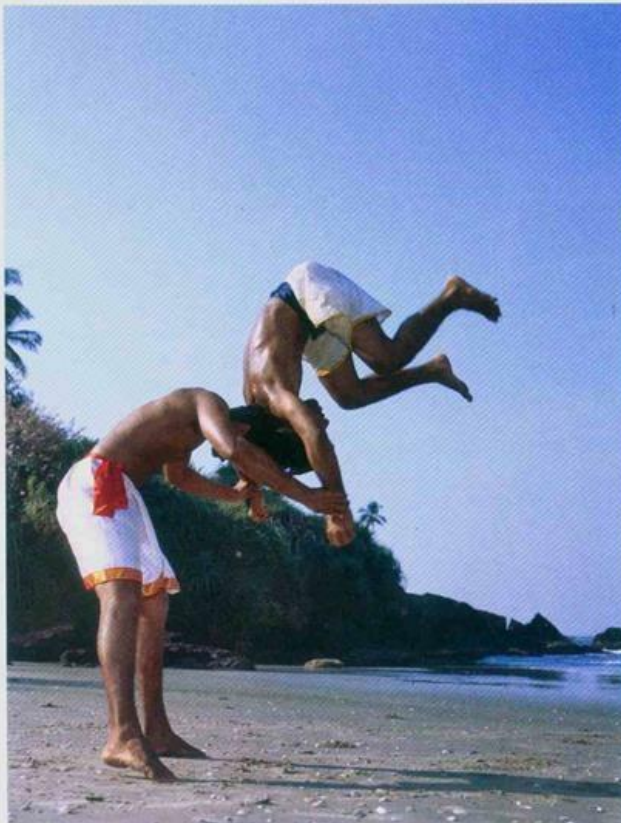
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DISCOVER

- **Thalassery Chicken Biryani:** Considered to be the best biryani dish in Kerala, it is quite unlike the traditional one. Instead of the usual long-grain basmati rice, this one has a smaller variant known as the jeerakasala rice. The dish is a mishmash of rice, chicken, and spices cooked together in a pot.
- **Bekal Fort:** The largest and the best preserved fort of Kerala is a three-hour drive from Kannur. Shaped like a massive keyhole, it has several underground passages and offers spectacular views of the Arabian Sea from its many watchtowers.
- **Kannur Lighthouse and Museum:** The 75-ft lighthouse on Payyambalam Beach was built in 1903, and provides breathtaking views of Kannur town and the Arabian Sea. The museum houses exhibits related to the history of lighthouses, ancient lights, lenses, ships, and much more.



The Thalassery chicken biryani is a mishmash of rice, chicken, and spices; (below) Kannur is also home to many training centres of *kalaripayattu*—the traditional martial art form of Kerala.



HERVE BRUNAT/GETTY IMAGES (TOP), SHUTTERSTOCK

dishes. Going by their recommendations, I tried *ari pathiri* (pancakes made of boiled rice flour, served with meat or fish curry) and *kunjurotti* (steamed rice dumplings coated with spicy chicken or beef). Next came some heavenly *erachi puttu* (steamed cylinders of ground rice layered with coconut) with mutton stew. Paramesh and I shared a *chatti pathiri* (layers of pastry with sweet custard filling, topped with sesame seeds)—a quintessential Malabari dessert.

Each dish stood out for its style of cooking and the ingredients used. The curries were quite spicy, pepper being a star ingredient in most of them. "We never use anything artificial to enhance flavours in our dishes. We allow the natural ingredients to sing," said the waiter. I marvelled at his choice of words.

However, Kannur is specifically known for its eclectic breakfasts. Introduced by the king of Travancore, *kappa* (tapioca) has been a part of the daily diet for centuries. Served with mutton *chaap* (spicy curry), the dish is a crowd-pleaser. *Puttu* (steamed rice and coconut cake) is to be savoured with spicy *meen* (fish) curry, *kadala* (black chickpeas) curry, or simply with sugar and banana during breakfasts. Kannur also

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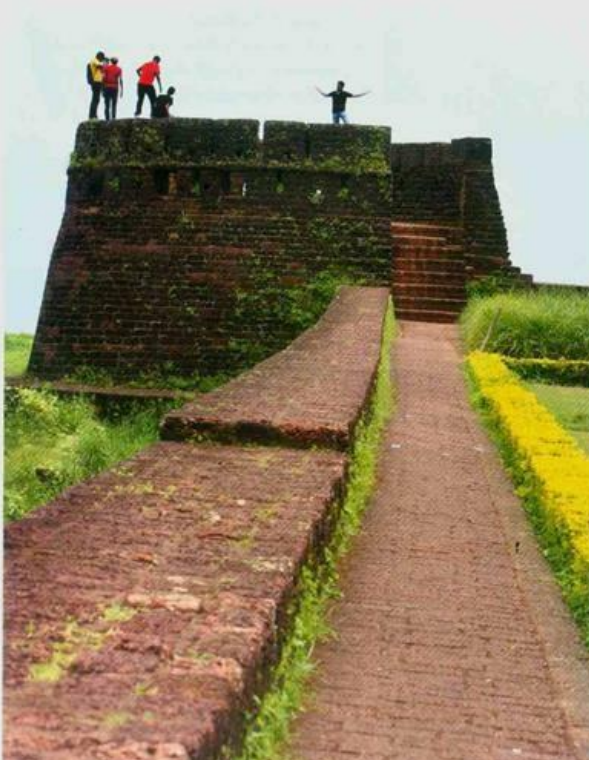
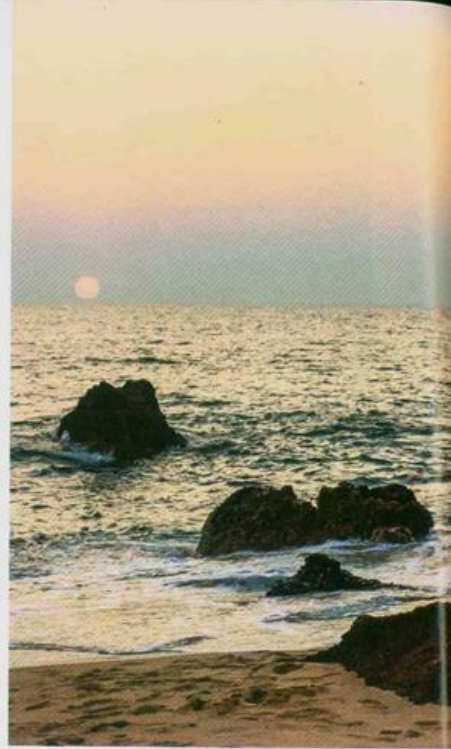
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boasts the best version of Malabar *parotta* (multi-layered flat bread). I remembered reading somewhere that one's bond with a place grows stronger once you taste its food. In Kannur, I could relate to it like never before.

DANCE OF GODS

When Paramesh announced that he would take me to a *theyyam* performance the next day, I had no clue that he was referring to one of the most ancient art forms of Kerala. *Theyyam*, I learned later, is specific to Kannur and the nearby town of Bekal in Kasargod. Performed before shrines, it is a quirky dance form where the artiste portrays a powerful hero. The socio-religious ritual is meant to glorify warriors and ancestral spirits. The performers wear heavy makeup and elaborate costumes. Their expansive head gear and flashy ornaments stun spectators who assemble in large numbers to witness the show. Kannur and Bekal hold many performances from December through April. Asking a local is the best way to gather information about times and venues. Seek the wisdom of The Kerala Folklore Academy set up by the state government to promote the traditional art forms of North Kerala, for a deeper insight into not just *theyyam* but also other art

Clockwise, from right: Thottada Beach is a secluded haven, with a small river at one end that drains into the sea, fishermen return to the coast with the catch of the day, Bekal Fort is the largest fort of Kerala, and is a three-hour drive from Kannur.



forms, including the traditional martial art called *kalaripayattu*.

Kannur's vibrant weaving industry finds a mention in the travelogues of Ibn Batuta, the 14th-century Moroccan traveller. The handloom products of this coastal town are also exported and much sought after around the world. The mid-20th century witnessed social reform movements in the weaving industry, which lent it a much-needed organised structure and brought handloom weavers into the fold of cooperative societies. Shop for printed cotton saris, cloth pieces, bedsheets, towels, and dhotis (traditional lower wear) while here.

A PAGE IN HISTORY

The Arakkal Museum is another important piece of history that Kannur owns. Housed in the *darbar hall* of the residence of the sole royal Muslim dynasty of Kerala, the museum oozes grandeur and transports you to the 1600s, when the Arakkal Ali kings once ruled not just the Malabar region but also the islands of

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: SHUTTERSTOCK/2; DANIEL J. RAO/ALAMY

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GETTING THERE

There are daily flights from Chennai, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru to Kannur airport. You can also drive to the city from Bengaluru (six hours).

WHEN

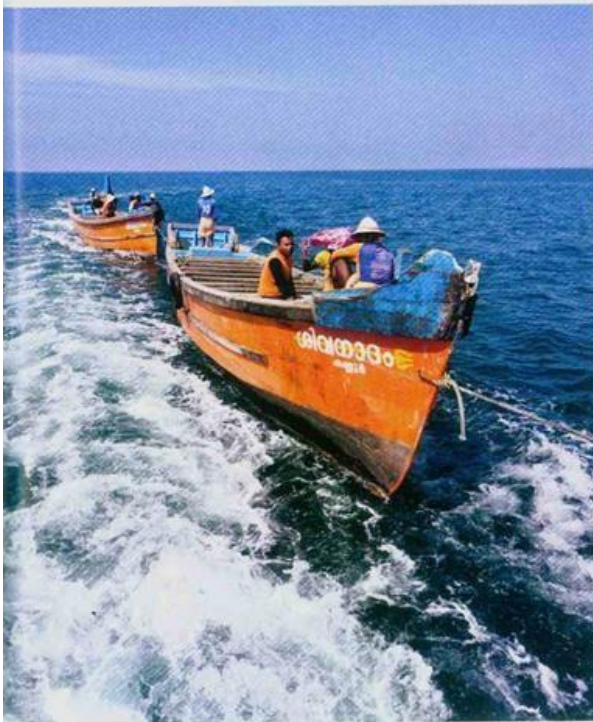
November to March.

STAY

Malabar Beach Resort is a beautiful homely resort on Thottada Beach (starts from ₹3,500/US\$49; themalabarbeach.com). Chera Rock Beach Resort is nestled behind dense coconut trees, on Kizhunna Beach (starts from ₹3,500/US\$49; cherarocks.com).

IDEAL FOR

Families, beach lovers, foodies, and shutterbugs.



Lakshadweep and Maldives. In 1792, the family ceded power to the British. The museum is a reminder of their past, and houses royal furniture, weapons, seals, copies of the *Quran*, old telephones, telescope, cookware, and more.

The beaches of Kannur stray a little from the usual seaside sights. In place of clamouring vendors and buzzing bars, pristine waters and singing waves welcome you. The sands are free of plastic bottles and polythene bags. They are yet to be ravaged by the monster of commercialisation. Thottada Beach, in particular, is a secluded haven, with a small river at one end that drains into the sea. Walk further south to get to Kizhunna Beach, flanked by gorgeous green bushes and coconut trees. At one end of the beach is a small rocky outcrop that protrudes into the sea, separating this beach from the nearby Ezhara Beach. Known as Chera Rocks, these provide a beautiful vantage point to admire the entire stretch of Kizhunna Beach on one side and the Ezhara Beach on the other. These two, unlike the more popular Payyambalam Beach, are less crowded, and have many homestay, and bed and breakfast options.

Walking along the pristine sands, with nothing but the euphony of the waves for company, makes you want to hit pause on your life for a little bit. And that was exactly what this coastal holiday was all about. 