The Land of Legends

The little-known coastal town of Kollam is home to intriguing history, mystical dance forms, and delectable food. As we trek its narrow by-lanes, we come across unique customs and traditions. This month, we take you through the fascinating world of the Land of Legends.

The Land of Legends

WAITING TO BUY a ticket at Murphypillaliland 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 latte-stone 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 colonizers, 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 15 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 smelt 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
DISCOVER INDIA

The Land of Legends


The Travancore Chicken Biryani is a rich and hearty dish that combines the flavors of rice, chicken, and spices to create a truly delightful meal.

Data: 1.12.2019

Edition: National

Page: 94

Clip size (cm): W: 42 H: 54
boasts the best version of Malabar paratha (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 Piramshah 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 forms, including the traditional martial art called kalariyattam.

Kannur’s vibrant weaving industry finds a mention in the travelogues of Ibn Battuta, 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, bed sheets, 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 durbar 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
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, coinware, and more.

The beaches of Kamar are a little from the usual seaside sights. In place of clamoring 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 nearly Erhana Beach. Known as Chera Rocks, these provide a beautiful vantage point to admire the entire stretch of Kizhunna Beach on one side and the Erhana 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 rhythm 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. 