

Malabar trading town enjoys its old age

By PATRICK JOHNSTON

It's been a part of four empires, home to all of the major religions, and once a central trading port on the Malabar coast: Cochin, "queen of the Arabian Sea," stands today as one of India's most eclectic and probably least appreciated cities.

International cultural influences in Cochin go back millennia. Resource rich, the area around Cochin, now called Kerala, in southwest India, was a magnet for traders from Europe, Arabia, and China, not to mention peoples from northern India, all of whom left their mark in some way on the face of the city.

While it had been an important port city since the trade with foreigners began, it rose to capital status in the 14th century, controlling a small area between various feuding groups along the Malabar coast. Independence was relatively short-lived. Portuguese traders appeared a century and a half later, followed by the Dutch, the British and finally the unifiers from the north.

Now Cochin has taken a back seat to Ernakulum, the port city across the bay. This is probably all for the better, since it has allowed the city to retain its mellow ways while Ernakulum bustles under the weight of its heavy port traffic. Ernakulum is now the second-busiest Indian sea port after Bombay on the Arabian Sea.

Cochin's international trading legacy is everywhere. Chinese fishing nets reach out into the sea much as they did when the Chinese introduced them here 1,000 years ago. St. Francis' church, the oldest European-built church in India, has changed little since its construction in the 16th century and contains the tombstone of Vasco da Gama (he died in Cochin). Most of the town buildings date back at least a hundred years, adding a friendly colonial feel to the port area.

Walking through Cochin's wide-open streets with a cool breeze blowing off the ocean can make you forget that you're actually in India.

St. Francis, a solid, somewhat imposing structure, sits at the northwest side of town.

Depending on its colonial master it has housed a number of different denominations from Catholic to Dutch Protestant to Anglican. It is now Protestant under the leadership of the Church of South India.

Along the north shore, facing the freighters, and close to St. Francis, sit the Chinese nets. These elaborate devices

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do most of their work at high tide, operating on a kind of pulley system that lowers the net into the sea then lifts it after making the catch. While the Chinese probably had trading contacts with Cochin since before the Christian era, the nets were likely introduced in the 9th or 10th century A.D. when extensive trade

existed between Malabar and China.

The park area around the nets, shaded from the sun, is a good place to just relax and take in the sights of the port. You can also take advantage of the nearby nets, as vendors will cook up fish freshly caught just offshore.

Inland a bit, Mattancherry palace, an elaborate structure built in 1557 by the Dutch as a present for the Cochin raja, introduces a little piece of India to the cultural mish-mash. It features a mural, said to be one of the finest in India, depicting legends of the Indian gods. The painting is a bit confused, coming with a whole assortment of wives, incarnations, monkey gods and demons, but the chaos does make for an interesting image. Photography is strictly prohibited — that is, unless you grease one of the museum attendants. They seem to encourage it.

Near the palace is a collection of winding narrow streets and shops known as "Jewtown" — home of what remains perhaps the most extraordinary community in Cochin.

Tradition has it that the

first Jews came to Kerala in 68 A.D. to escape persecution at home. No real evidence supports this, although King Solomon did know of India as far back as 1000 B.C. What is for certain is that a Jewish community lived in Kerala 1,000 years ago and established themselves in Cochin in 1565.

The Jewish community, while small, generally prospered under the British and Dutch regimes. But when the state of Israel formed after World War II most left the country.

Now only around 25 Jews remain in Cochin, serviced by a small synagogue tucked away in Jewtown. If you have an interest in this you had better act fast as the proprietor of the temple told me he expected the community, a somewhat aged group, to last only another 10 years.

Fortunately laid-back Cochin, removed from the dynamic of a busy port area, will likely last a good deal longer. In fact, town planners, having left most of the buildings and town layout intact, appear to have no intention of erasing Cochin's cosmopolitan past.



ADVENTURER Nil Bohigas of Spain packs for his attempt to become the third person to reach the North Pole alone on foot. WASHINGTON POST PHOTO BY WILLIAM CLAIBORNE

North Pole?

By WILLIAM CLAIBORNE
The Washington Post

RESOLUTE, Northwest Territories — Before setting out from this snowswept Arctic hamlet in an attempt to become only the third man ever to trek alone to the North Pole, Nil Bohigas tried to describe the satisfaction he gets from making such treacherous expeditions.

"You see, there are people who go to work every day and punch a time card, and they are very happy, I suppose. But I dream of other things," the 33-year-old Spanish adventurer said, as he methodically packed 54 kg of survival gear onto a fiberglass sled that he was to pull behind him across some of the world's more inhospitable terrain.

Bohigas, who said he climbed Mount Everest and