# Mattanchery, the land of mixed cultures

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Kochi is vibrant with a host of activities. Trade and commerce have enjoyed the commercial spotlight in Kochi for several centuries now. Trade has also significantly impacted the lifestyle and social scenario in the city. And so, Kochi became a single roof under which people from multiple cultures and creeds started living together.

An epitome of this unique amalgamation of cultures and histories is the little town of Mattanchery, eight kilometers from the heart of Kochi city. Once renowned as the stronghold of a vibrant Jewish community, Mattanchery, for years, was known as the spice trade center and the house of Jews. In 1951, records state there were 5000 Jews. Unfortunately, today, the Jewish community has diminished to a dismal population of less than ten. While they still follow Jewish customs, they are extremely comfortable with Kerala food, language and customs. Talk to them, and they prefer speaking in Malayalam. Sadly, in a few years from now, the Jews who have enjoyed a wonderful bond with Kerala will be relegated to the realms of history.

The singularly most popular attraction in Mattancherry is a narrow lane called Jew Street. Lined with handicraft, jewellery, clothes and artifact shops on either side, Jew Street has become a favourite shopping destination for the local and tourist populace alike. During peak tourist season, you’ll see Jew Street teeming with tourists. Situated t the end of Jew Street is the 451-year old Jewish or Pardesi Synagogue, built by the descendants of Spanish, Dutch and other European Jews.

The Synagogue has large windows, without bars. These windows allow sunlight and breeze to reach every corner of the hall, illuminating the hall with natural light. One of the unique features of the Synagogue are the 1100 hand-painted Chinese floor tiles used in the Synagogue. They are of four different patterns, but every single tile is different and dates back to 1774. The chandeliers were imported from Belgium and Italy 105 years back. The priests stands at the Bimah or Teybah (commonly known as ‘Pulpit’) to lead the services. Torah, the religious book of the Jews is read every Friday and Saturday when the Jews gather for prayer.

The Streets of Mattanchery are fragrant with the aromas of spices and a forgotten history. If there is a place in Kochi, that hasn’t been defiled by development, it has to be Mattancherry. Even the buildings here were built hundreds of years ago and stand as silent sentinels, safeguarding the memory of their glorious past.

Here’s a street where you can find almost everything you want – and if you have a particular interest for antiques and art works, spices, readymade dresses and books, go right ahead. The streets are spread between the Dutch Palace and the Pardesi Synagogue. The world’s largest Varpu (huge traditional bronze utensil) is displayed at the Crafters Antique shop. For lovers and collectors of antique, here’s a lane that’s right up your street!

When you are in Mattanchery, you can’t miss the architectural marvel, Dutch Palace, replicating Kerala’s traditional architectural style – Naalukettu with a combination of Dutch styled doors and windows and Gothic arches. The Palace exhibits a series of paintings on Ramayana, Lord Krishna the earliest map of Kochi, an 18th century palanquin, an ivory palanquin, sheathed swords, draggers and axes, spears, Maharaja’s swing, Parasol, garlands and royal costumes. The Dutch Palace has been recognized as a National Monument and has been placed under the protection of the Archaeological Survey Department, Govt. of India since 1954.

Another place of prime importance in Mattanchery is the Jain Temple, built in 1904, and dedicated to Lord Dharamnath. The Jain community in Mattanchery comprise around 375 families, most of them engaged in business activities and the others in varied careers. This is yet another local attraction where people from all walks of life visit to pay their respects to an ancient culture and also to marvel at the historical wonder. Adjacent to the Jain temple, is yet another temple. Unlike the norm, there are no lamps in this temple and hence this temple is called “Velakilla Temple”.

To reach Mattanchery, you can either take a taxi from Kochi city, or go by the local ferry from the main shores of Kochi. For your accommodation, there are hotel and homestay options in Kochi and Fort Kochi aplenty. All in all, a trip to Mattancherry is like a pilgrimage into the past. Sacred and so special.