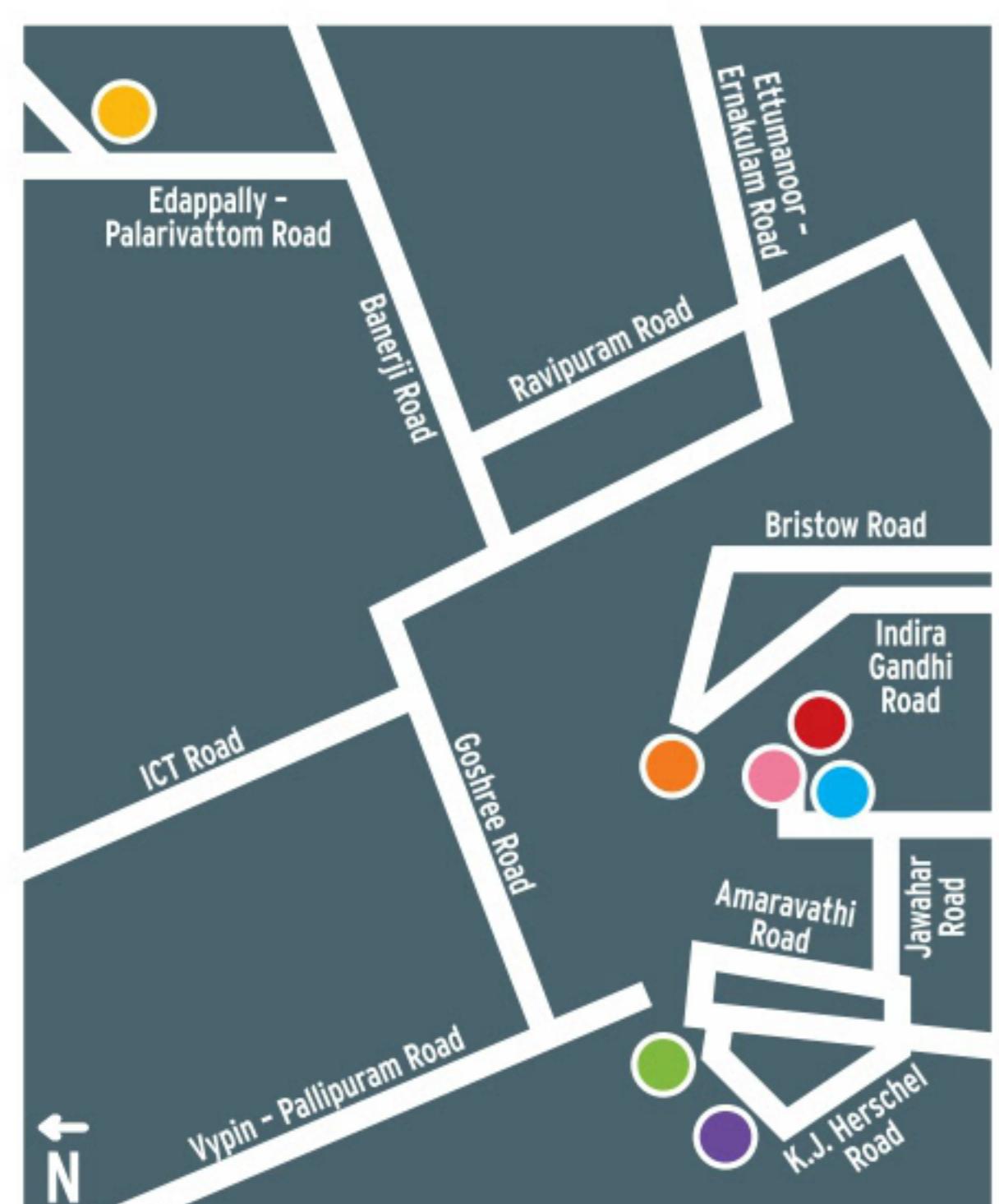




Visitors are drawn to the eclectic culture of this enchanting port town, reputedly the most popular destination in the South Indian state of Kerala.

BY ISABEL PUTINJA

Once one of India's most important ports, Kochi was the centre of the spice trade, with Arab and Jewish traders settling here in the first century. The Portuguese arrived in 1500 and dominated the trade before it came under Dutch control in 1663, and the British more than a century later. As one of the first European settlements in India, the city has a unique atmosphere of quaint tradition mixed with a contemporary vibe.



1 Fit for a king

The magnificent **Mattancherry Palace** was a gift from the Portuguese to the Raja of Kochi in 1555 and restored 100 years later by the Dutch. Built in the traditional Kerala style of architecture with long verandas covered with a sloped red-tile roof, the walls are decorated with beautiful murals in rich colours depicting scenes from the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. Today, the palace is an archaeological museum showcasing the portraits and personal possessions of the Kochi royal family, that include robes, turbans and palanquins.

2 The world's a stage

Traditionally performed by men, Kathakali is a classical performing art of Kerala combining dance with theatre. The **Cochin Cultural Centre** offers an introduction to this art form, where visitors can watch the elaborate makeup process and

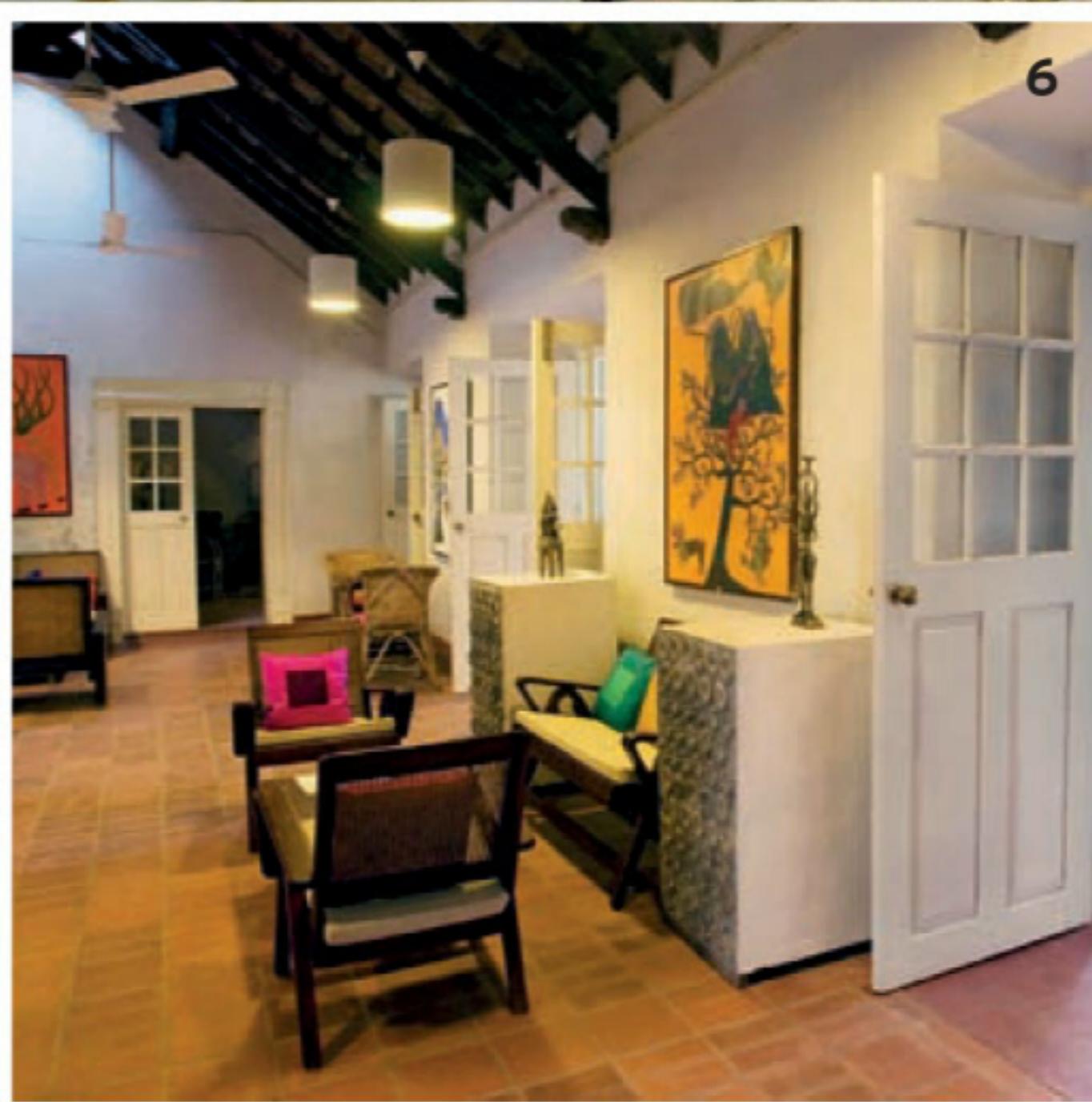
listen to explanations of the intricate eye and hand gestures and other unique features. This is followed by a performance accompanied by drummers where the dancers enact scenes and different characters from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

3 A step back in time

Drop by Jew Town, the centre of Kochi's Jewish community and the hub of the spice trade, and explore **Paradesi**, the oldest synagogue in India. Dating back to 1568, it boasts an ornate brass pulpit, coloured-glass lamps, intricate hand-painted floor tiles from China and magnificent Belgian glass chandeliers.

4 A piece of the past

The narrow, atmospheric lanes leading to the Paradesi synagogue are lined with many spice and antique curio shops. **Crafters** antique shop is one of the biggest, and a treasure trove of beautiful antique wooden furniture,



intricately carved dowry chests and coloured crystal lamps. This is also the place to pick up traditional local handicrafts like wood carvings, brass statues, terracotta pottery, and handloom textiles.

5 Catch of the day

Used by local fishermen since the 14th century, the **cheena vala**, Chinese fishing nets, are a popular local attraction and unique to Kochi. These giant, suspended fishing nets made of bamboo and mesh take at least five fishermen to lift from the shore. The best time to see a fresh catch being hauled out is at daybreak or nightfall along Fort Kochi beach near Vasco Da Gama square.

6 Artistic impressions

Kochi put itself on the art map when it hosted the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, an international showcase of contemporary art in 2012.



Since then, many of the biennale venues have become permanent galleries. Set in an old atmospheric Dutch bungalow, the **David Hall Gallery and Café** is a contemporary art space and cultural centre with a popular café. Art lovers flock here for exhibitions showcasing works of upcoming artists, film screenings and other arts events, or just to enjoy a cup of coffee or light lunch in the leafy garden.

7 Coastal eats

For a taste of coastal cuisine in an atmospheric Kerala houseboat overlooking Kochi's harbour, you can't beat the highly rated **The Rice Boat**. Try its tiger prawns in coconut and white snapper in banana leaf.

BEAUTIFUL BACKWATERS

Kochi is the gateway to the scenic Kerala backwaters. A boat trip through this picturesque network of rivers, lagoons and lakes running inland from the coast all the way to Quilon is an absolute must-do. Rent one of the traditional thatched-roof boats, converted into floating mini-hotels with a private cook. Enjoy the leisurely cruise while drinking in scenes of fishermen gathering their nets, women washing clothes by the shore, and smiling schoolchildren waving hello. Lakes and Lagoons offers deluxe air-conditioned houseboats with up to four bedrooms and a team of three staff. lakesandlagoons.com



SilkAir flies nine times weekly between Singapore and Kochi