



TRAVELOGUE

A visit to South Asia's little Israel

Kerala, a state on the south-western Malabar Coast of India, is often referred to as "God's Own Country," displaying a unique and dynamic cacophony of noises emitting from mosques, churches, and temples synchronising together in picture perfect unison.

In Kerala sits the idyllic port city of Kochi, the bustling and ever thriving capital and tourism hub of a region famed for beaches, forests, and backwater lagoons. The landscape of Kochi remains scattered with lagoons, far entrenched greenery and places of worship, adding to the unique mix of its microcosm of diversity with other parts of South India.

Dotting the landscape, ancient and modern churches, temples, and mosques greet every visitor in Kochi, but the one place every visitor goes to is a place known as Jew Town in Mattancherry, near the old city of Fort Kochi.

My visit to Jew Town was mainly intrigued by my curiosity about the Jewish community. Little did I know that India, even South Asia at large, had a thriving Jewish community which lived side by side peacefully with people of other religions, modelling Kochi as a hub of interfaith tolerance.

This little region of 30 million has long been a bastion of unity in diversity in all diverse stripes, reflective of the centuries of Chinese, Persian, Dravidian, Arab, Syrian, Turkish, Jain, Jewish, East African, and eventually European cultures like Portuguese, Dutch, and British, all of which



Kerala has absorbed and transformed into its own.

Jew Town is a tourist hotspot, and like much of India, has evolved with the torrent of foreign influences. Jew Town houses the Paradesi synagogue, the 450-year-old oldest functioning synagogue in the Commonwealth of Nations. Due to heavy rainfall and closed timings, I was unfortunately not able to go inside.

What made the trip here worth it was meeting the pillar of India's micro minority Jewish community, a feisty and elegant 96-year-old woman named Sarah Cohen. A personification of Kerala's multicultural history, she has been a witness to India's birth and numerous challenges the country and her community has faced from being under colonial rule to being a major player in world affairs.

As you pass the brightly coloured antique stores and colourful lanes adorned with graffiti, you come across a tiny embroidery and souvenir shop named "Sarah's Hand Embroidery." Sarah Cohen, the oldest living Jew in the subcontinent has a cult-like following, with visitors from heads of state like Prince Charles to everyday tourists like myself.

Sarah Cohen's shop consists of brightly coloured hand knitted kippahs — the Jewish hat of prayer — knitted all by herself, surrounded by menorahs of all sizes and a vast array of pictures, letters, and books hanging on faded yellow walls attributed as a tribute to this paragon of resistance and virtue.

Sitting in her night gown with her late husband's pink kippah placed on her head,



she was elated to take a picture with my friend and I in her modest bedroom-cum-sitting room after our pleasant greetings in Hebrew saying the traditional "Shabbat Shalom."

Sarah was a local celebrity amongst Keralites and her story duly says so. Her caretaker, Ibrahim, and his family, have been taking care of her for a very long time. In a world where coexistence of these two communities is rarely thought of, this bonding was quite reassuring of the common humanity we all share. No wonder Kerala is called God's Own Country.



According to the shopkeepers, Sarah is descended from the Baghdadi Jews from Iraq. The war hero of 1971, JFR Jacob also stemmed from this community and was duly recognised as a friend of the Liberation War by the people of Bangladesh. Jewish communities were originally established in what was the Kingdom of Cochin in southern India and never faced any anti-Semitism here unlike in other parts of the world.



The museums and antique stores are a manifestation of the deep-rooted syncretism of Kochi where you find miniature and larger than life statues and portraits of Jesus, Buddha, and Krishna, side by side.

Jew Town, devoid of its Jews today, comprises mainly of Muslims and Hindus who co-exist side by side, rub shoulders constantly in everyday work, and never forget to take care of the remaining Jews and their symbolic, conspicuous culture. Cohen's home exemplifies the religious synergy that has come to characterise her neighbourhood.

By Israr Hasan
Photo courtesy: Israr Hasan