

LEISURE



TO MT MERU AND BACK PG38

Sportscaster Charu Sharma shares his experience of a 1986 climb to the 6,450 metre-high peak and the lessons he learnt from it

MumbaiMirror 24

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2012

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NEW YEAR PLANNER



MUNCHING IN COCHIN

A FEAST, BESIDES AN ART FEST AND CARNIVAL, AWAIT YOU BY THE CHARMING SEASIDE CITY

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I'm standing at the Chinese fishing nets in Kochi - a legacy left behind by Chinese explorer Zheng He or perhaps by early Portuguese settlers from Macao. The sharp smell of fresh fish assails the senses as these nets haul mounds of fish on to the land with their long, suspended arms swaying in the breeze.

On a food trail in this bustling city that has been a trading port for over 1,000 years, I find many meals worth going back for.

Just past the nets lies Little Maxim's, a tiny food stall run by former five-star hotel chef Jude Allen Stevens. Select your fish at the nets, and watch it being grilled or pan seared in a matter of minutes. Stevens cooks his fish in many ways. Choose from con-

tinental styles or the Kerala-styled Porichatu, with sliced shallots, curry leaf, chillies and tamarind pulp. My favourite was the Peera Pattichathu, made with crushed coconut and smoked tamarind.

Eating out in Kochi is a gastronomic delight, I came to realise. At the Malabar House, the European owners have painstakingly created a menu using farm-to-table produce. Even the scrambled eggs prepared from organic farm eggs of happy Kodaknath, Australorp and New Hampshire hens with prawns, spring onions and red sweet pepper is delightful, here. The tiger prawns with thakkali curry (a ginger and garlic-based tomato sauce), served with string hoppers, Kerala's own rice flour noodles, is a must-have. End the feast with chocolate samosas on

mango coolis.

A week in Kochi translates to seafood dishes, seasoned with coconut, tamarind and cam-bodge (kokum). But vegetarians needn't despair. The most exciting dish we sampled here was the Thoran, where vegetables such as drumstick and jackfruit are chopped and cooked with grated coconut.

At the Koder House, a three-storey boutique hotel opposite

the beach at Fort Kochi, you can eat traditional Jewish food. Until recently, the hotel belonged to the most illustrious Jewish family in Kochi, the Koders. The heritage boutique hotel has six luxury suites, where one can partake in traditional Jewish fare like Pulip Salad (roughly-cut mini potatoes, onion, green chillies and fresh coriander with coconut vine grate dressing), Koubba (an Indo-Jewish stuffed chicken cooked in Jewish gravy), Fish Sadambar (fish cooked in coconut and mustard gravy) and Plave (rice cooked in coconut milk).

Some of the typical dishes of Kochi include the local pearl fish. At the Grand Hotel in

TRAVEL

Going off track

Those who go off the beaten track, write for us.

Ernakulam, the Meen Pollichathu, which locals swear by, is made with fish wrapped in banana leaves in a mollee masala. Another noteworthy local dish is the Thakkali chetha meen curry, which is a pungent red fish curry that is best mopped up with hot appams. The eatery is also known for its Kozhi curry (chicken curry) and the Varutha fish mollee, a delicate curry flavoured with turmeric, green chillies and tomatoes.

Spices, fish, rice and plenty of flavour - visit Kochi to treat your taste buds to the finest food of the country.



Sech fishing nets are not traditionally seen in any other location in India

This month, in Kochi

VISIT the country's first biennale, to be held across various venues of the charming harbour city, including Durbar Hall, Pepper House, Aspinwall House and Parade Grounds. Touted to be the largest art event to be held in contemporary times in India, the three month-long Kochi-Muziris Biennale will feature site-specific art installations by over 90 artists from 24 countries. Expect daily talks, presentations, performances, conversations and panel discussions with artists, academics, curators and critics. It starts on December 12. Visit <http://kochimuzirisbiennale.org> for details.

THE last week of December is also the most colourful in Kochi, when the Kochi carnival is celebrated. Held at and around the historic Kochi Fort, the festival dates back to the time of the Portuguese, who celebrated the coming of the New Year with much fanfare. Expect exotic-coloured attires in events as varied as swimming, beach volleyball, football and bike races on the beaches. On New Year's eve, even the elephants take to the streets to celebrate.