

Guide

The Ultimate Guide to St. Francis CSI Church

A stone slab in St. Francis Church in Fort Kochi marks where Vasco da Gama's body lay for 14 years. The oldest European church in India, it passed under Portuguese, Dutch and British rule and still holds its original fittings.

Before you go

Monday
9am – 5pm

Tuesday
9am – 5pm

Wednesday
9am – 5pm

Thursday
9am – 5pm

Friday
9am – 3pm

Saturday
9am – 1pm

Sunday
Closed

WhereSaint Francis Church Road, Fort Kochi

Pulled from the place record. Nothing in this panel is written on the guide.

In this page

A stone slab lies on the floor of St. Francis Church. Visitors walk past it, stop, and walk back to it. The slab is plain, with no gold and no engraving you would notice from a distance. It marks where Vasco da Gama's body lay for 14 years before his bones went back to Lisbon in Portugal. The place is quiet and plain.

The oldest European church in India

Portuguese Franciscan friars built St. Francis Church in 1503 from wood and mud inside Fort Emmanuel, near Fort Kochi Beach. They arrived with Pedro Alvares Cabral, five years after Vasco da Gama reached Kappad near Kozhikode (Calicut).

The Raja of Cochin gave them permission. In 1506, he also allowed the Portuguese viceroy Francisco de Almeida to rebuild the wooden structures in stone. By 1516, the church had a stone structure and the name St. Antony, the patron saint of Portugal.

The church is over 500 years old. The neighbourhood around it is still called Fort Kochi because of the original Portuguese fort.

Why did the Dutch spare this church?

When the Dutch captured Kochi in 1663, they were fiercely anti-Catholic. They destroyed almost all Catholic buildings, convents, and churches in the area. But they spared both St. Francis and Santa Cruz, for different reasons:

- The Dutch spared St. Francis Church so they could use it for their own Protestant (Dutch Reformed) services.
- They spared Santa Cruz Cathedral, but not for worship. Instead, they turned the grand building into an arms storehouse and armory.

Vasco da Gama's burial (and removal)

Vasco da Gama died in Fort Kochi on Christmas Eve, 1524, during his third visit to India. He lay in a grave inside St. Francis Church. For 14 years, the explorer who opened the sea route from Europe to India rested in this small church by the Arabian Sea.

Then his son had his remains dug up and taken back to Portugal. Today, Vasco da Gama's body is at the Jerónimos Monastery in Lisbon. The tombstone in Fort Kochi remains. You can still see the marked spot on the church floor. It is one of the most photographed corners of the building.

Portuguese, Dutch and British rule

What makes St. Francis unusual is that it passed through three colonial powers, and each one left something behind.

The Portuguese built the church and gave it its first form. They controlled it for about 160 years.

In 1663, the Dutch captured Kochi. They were Protestant. They tore down every other Catholic church in the area. But they spared St. Francis. They converted it into a Protestant church and used it for government purposes.

The Dutch also left a document called the “Doop Book,” a baptism and marriage register dating from 1751 to 1804. Dutch citizens still visit the church today to look through its pages and trace their family roots.

Around 1795, the British took control. They renamed the church St. Francis and rebuilt it in 1886 under the Anglican Church. One remaining item from British days still works inside the church: manually operated punkah fans, the large cloth-on-frame fans that swing above the seating area. Someone still pulls them during services.

In 1923, St. Francis became a protected monument under the Protected Monuments Act of 1904.

What to notice inside

The church has white walls, a tiled roof on a timber frame, stone flooring, and semi-circular arched windows. It has no heavy decoration and no gold ceilings. That plainness makes the space calm.



St. Francis Church, Fort Kochi — the oldest European church in India, where Vasco da Gama was first buried.

Look at the walls. The Portuguese tombstones stand on the northern wall. The Dutch tombstones line the southern wall. The 1886 renovation moved them from the floor to the walls. Reading those gravestones shows the names of European families who spent their lives in this small corner of Kerala across three centuries.

The wooden pulpit, carved with care, is still intact. The old baptism platform is too. Near the entrance, the original title deed of the land, the one the Raja of Cochin gave the Portuguese, is still inside. It is on palm leaf.

Outside, a cenotaph stands in the churchyard. It dates from 1920 and remembers soldiers from Kochi who died in World War I.

A heritage walk anchor

St. Francis Church stands opposite the Head Post Office on St. Francis Church Road. It is a natural starting or stopping point for any Fort Kochi

heritage walk. From here you can walk to the Chinese Fishing Nets in about ten minutes. The Paradesi Synagogue in Jew Town is a short auto ride or a longer walk through the spice smelling (and selling) streets of Mattancherry. The Santa Cruz Basilica, another colonial-era church with a completely different personality (painted ceilings, Italian frescoes), is just around the corner.

If you are doing the full Fort Kochi circuit, St. Francis fits naturally between the waterfront and the older Mattancherry area.

How to get here

You can reach Fort Kochi from Ernakulam. The Kochi Water Metro is the most scenic option and takes about 25 minutes from High Court Water Metro Station. Auto or cab takes about 45 minutes by road depending on traffic. City buses are very fast. The Fort Kochi Water Metro terminal is a short walk from the church.

Plan about 30 to 45 minutes here. Read the tombstones. Look at the punkah fans. Find the Vasco da Gama slab. Then step outside into Fort Kochi's lanes, where every other building has a history of its own.

The place

St. Francis CSI Church