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Santa Cruz Basilica in Fort Kochi and its painter Antonio Moscheni

Antonio Moscheni painted the interior of Santa Cruz Basilica in Fort Kochi. He died on Nov. 15, 1905, four days before the church was consecrated.

In this page

On Nov. 15, 1905, an Italian painter named Antonio Moscheni put down his brush inside a half-finished cathedral in Fort Kochi. His friends saw him working through fever to finish the ceiling. He died that afternoon. Four days later, the church he had spent his final months painting was consecrated without him.

That church is Santa Cruz Basilica. You have probably walked past it. The twin white spires are impossible to miss on the Fort Kochi skyline. Most visitors take a photo, look inside, and move on to St. Francis Church nearby. They miss the story that makes it worth a visit.

The beautiful Santa Cruz Basilica (Daily, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 3 to 5 p.m.) Map

Easter Mass on April 4, 2026, at 10:30 p.m. See you there?

A Church That Had No Business Existing

In 1505, Fort Kochi did not have any stone building. Local custom reserved stone and mortar for two things only: royal palaces and temples. Everything else was built with wood and palm leaves.

Then the Portuguese arrived.

They had arrived in 1500 with 13 vessels and 18 priests, led by Captain Pedro Álvares Cabral. King Unni Goda Varma of Cochin welcomed them.

This made the Zamorin of Calicut furious enough to declare war on Cochin. Portuguese forces helped defend the Cochin king in 1503 and again in 1505. The grateful ruler then gave them something no foreigner had received before: permission to build with stone.

Dom Francisco de Almeida, the first Portuguese viceroy of India, used that permission to build two churches. Santa Cruz came first, in 1505. St. Francis Church followed a year later. The foundation stone was laid on May 3, the Feast of the Invention of the Holy Cross. The feast gave the church its name.

> **Santa Cruz means Holy Cross.**

The original church stood where the Children's Park is today, near the Fort Kochi Water Metro Station. Next time you walk through that park, think about what used to be there.

Three Empires, Three Fates

In 1558, Pope Paul IV elevated Santa Cruz to a cathedral. The newly formed Diocese of Cochin was one of the first in India. It was answerable to the Archdiocese of Goa. The Archdiocese of Goa's jurisdiction at the time stretched from the Cape of Good Hope in Africa to China and Japan.

Then the Dutch arrived.

When they conquered Cochin in 1663, they tore down almost every Catholic building in the area. These included churches, chapels and monasteries. The Dutch spared St. Francis Church, which stayed a church, and Santa Cruz Cathedral, which they turned into a weapons storehouse. Cannonballs and gunpowder sat where the altar used to be.

Did you know? Only 27% of Dutch sailors who came to Cochin ever made it back home — Between 1740 and 1795, nearly 400,000 people left Europe for Asia, but only about 112,800 returned. The 8-month voyage was treacherous.

The British took over in 1795 and used the cathedral as a warehouse. In 1806, they demolished it entirely. This was not careless. It was policy. The

British were systematically dismantling Catholic infrastructure across the region.

One piece remained. It was a decorative granite pillar from the original 1505 cathedral. You can still find it at the southeastern corner of the current basilica grounds. It has stood there for over 500 years, longer than any of the empires that tried to remove it.

The Rebuild: A Century of Patience

For about a hundred years after the demolition, nothing happened. The old cathedral remained only in memory and as one granite pillar.

Then in 1887, Bishop João Gomes Ferreira arrived in Cochin with a plan to rebuild. He started the construction. He did not finish it. His successor, Bishop Mateus de Oliveira Xavier, carried the project forward from 1897.

The bishop planned for the new cathedral to look like the great churches of Europe. He needed an artist who could make that happen. He found Antonio Moscheni.

The Painter from Bergamo

Moscheni was born in 1854 in Stezzano, a small town near Bergamo in northern Italy. He trained at the Accademia Carrara, one of Italy's great art schools. He went to Rome to study Michelangelo's work at the Vatican. His career was growing. Churches across Lombardy were commissioning him.

Then at 35, he gave up this career. He joined the Society of Jesus as a lay brother.

His Jesuit superiors were not about to waste his talent. They sent him to paint churches in Croatia, Albania, and back in Italy. In 1898, they sent him to India to paint the chapel at St. Aloysius College in Mangalore. That chapel, with every wall and ceiling covered in Moscheni's work, still draws thousands of visitors a year.

> **One of his paintings there shows the Hindu goddess Saraswati, something you wouldn't expect from a Jesuit painter. He was paying attention to where he was.**

After Mangalore, he painted churches across Karnataka and the Holy Name Cathedral in Mumbai. In 1905, Bishop Xavier personally invited him to Fort Kochi to paint Santa Cruz.

What He Left Behind

Walk into Santa Cruz Basilica today and look up.

The white exterior does not show what is inside. The interior has pastel colours, Gothic arches, and painted surfaces throughout.

Moscheni and his student Fr. De Gama of Mangalore painted frescoes on the columns. They painted scenes from the Via Crucis on the ceiling. They also painted seven large canvas paintings showing the passion and death of Christ.

The most striking painting is a version of the "Last Supper", based on Leonardo da Vinci's original. It hangs behind the altar. The stained glass windows add coloured light across all of it.

Moscheni finished the work despite worsening dysentery. He died on Nov. 15, 1905. Bishop Sebastião José Pereira, the Bishop of Damao, consecrated the cathedral on Nov. 19. The painter missed it by four days.

If you have been to our guide to the 32 things to do in Fort Kochi, you know this town rewards the curious. Santa Cruz Basilica is one of the places where that is especially true. You can see it in five minutes. Knowing what happened here changes how you see it.

Visiting Santa Cruz Basilica

The basilica is on KB Jacob Road in Fort Kochi. It is a short walk from Tibetan Chef's Restaurant and about 200 metres from St. Francis Church. Entry is free. Walk to the beautiful Santa Cruz Basilica (Daily, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 3 to 5 p.m.) Map

In 1984, Pope John Paul II elevated Santa Cruz to the status of a basilica through a decree titled “Constat Sane Templum Sanctae Cruci.” It is one of nine basilicas in Kerala and 34 in India.

A relic of the Holy Cross sits on the right side of the church. Outside, there is a shrine to Our Lady of Fátima. The annual Santa Cruz Basilica Feast begins on Dec. 26 and runs until Dec. 31.

Look for the old granite pillar at the southeastern corner of the grounds. It is the last piece left of the 1505 original. Five centuries, three colonial powers, one pillar still standing.

You may also like A Day at the Paradesi Synagogue.

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Santa Cruz Cathedral Basilica, Fort Cochin
Church
Fort KochiTibetan Chef’s Restaurant
Restaurant
St. Francis CSI Church
Church
Paradesi Synagogue
Synagogue
KB Jacob Road
Road
Fort Kochi Water Metro Station
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