

Guide

The Ultimate Guide to Paradesi Synagogue

The 450-year-old Paradesi Synagogue is the only one of the area's seven synagogues still holding prayers. See its hand-painted Chinese porcelain tiles, its clock tower with four scripts, and the copper plates from a Hindu king's gift to a Jewish leader.

Before you go

Monday
10am – 6pm

Tuesday
10am – 6pm

Wednesday
10am – 6pm

Thursday
10am – 6pm

Friday
10am – 2pm

Saturday
Closed

Sunday
10am – 6pm

WhereParadesi Synagogue

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

In this page

You take off your shoes at the door. This is the rule. It is a Kerala rule rather than a synagogue rule. Hindu temples, mosques, churches, and this 450-year-old Jewish prayer hall all ask the same thing: leave your footwear outside.

That small detail tells you more about the Paradesi Synagogue than any plaque on the wall. This building belongs to My Beloved Fort Kochi.



The Paradesi Synagogue, built in 1568 — hand-painted Chinese tiles, no two alike, in Mattancherry's Jew Town.

A Synagogue Built on Borrowed Land and Shared Walls

In 1568, Samuel Castiel and David Belila built the Paradesi Synagogue with Joseph Levi. They built it on land given to the Jewish community by Raja Rama Varma of Kochi. The land was right next to the Mattancherry Palace to symbolise the King's care and love for the Jewish community. Did you notice that the palace's Hindu temple and the synagogue share a wall to this day?

The word "Paradesi" means "foreigner" in Malayalam. It stuck because the synagogue was built by Sephardic Jews, families whom Spain and Portugal had pushed out during the Inquisition. Some came through Aleppo and Safed. Others arrived via the Netherlands. They spoke Ladino and learned Judeo-Malayalam. They also traded spices with the world.

But they were not the first Jews in Kerala. Not by a long stretch.

Jews in Kerala: A Timeline That Starts Before Most Countries Existed

The Jewish connection to Kerala goes back to at least the 4th century, when the first synagogue in India was built in Kodungallur (then called Cranganore). These were the Malabari Jews, also called Yehudan Mappila. They were traders on the Malabar coast, and they controlled a large share of the global spice trade.

Around 1000 CE, the Hindu ruler of the Malabar Coast gave Joseph Rabban, a Jewish leader, copper plates granting him special privileges and political autonomy. Those copper plates still exist. They are inside the Paradesi Synagogue today, inscribed in Old Malayalam.

When a flood destroyed Cranganore's port in 1341, many Jews moved south to Cochin. They built a synagogue there in 1344. Centuries later, Portuguese raids destroyed it. The Raja of Kochi stepped in, offered protection and land, and the present synagogue was built.

The area once had seven synagogues. The Paradesi is the only one still holding prayers.

What You See Inside

The synagogue is small, with one main hall. Each wall and floor shows history from a different continent.

The floor is covered with hundreds of 18th-century Chinese porcelain tiles, hand-painted in blue and white. No two tiles have the exact same pattern. Ezekiel Rahabi, a Jewish businessman, brought them from Canton around 1762.



The Paradesi Synagogue, built in 1568 — hand-painted Chinese tiles, no two alike, in Mattancherry's Jew Town.

Belgian glass chandeliers hang from the ceiling, dating to the 19th and early 20th centuries. A brass-railed pulpit stands in the centre. A carved teak ark houses four Torah scrolls, enclosed in silver and gold. Inside, the synagogue keeps gold crowns that the kings of Kochi and Travancore gave it, two in number.

And then there's the clock tower. Built in 1761, it stands 45 feet tall. Each of its four faces shows the time in a different script, and the scripts are Arabic, Hebrew, Roman and Malayalam.

On the outer wall, you'll find a stone tablet from the Kochangadi Synagogue, which was built in 1344 and later destroyed. The inscription, in Hebrew calendar dating, calls the structure "an abode for the spirit of God."



The Paradesi Synagogue, built in 1568 — hand-painted Chinese tiles, no two alike, in Mattancherry's Jew Town.

The Three Classes

Worshippers here fell into three groups, and they were not treated equally.

The "White Jews" were the Paradesi Jews themselves. Descendants of Sephardic families from Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands. They were full members.

The "Black Jews," or Malabari Jews, were the original Jewish settlers of Cochin, families who had been here for centuries before the Paradesi arrived. They could worship in the synagogue but were not admitted to full membership.

The Meshuchrarim were freed slaves and their descendants, brought to India by the Sephardic families. They had no communal rights. They sat on the floor, or on the steps outside.

In the early 20th century, a man named Abraham Barak Salem, himself a meshuchrar, fought this discrimination. He campaigned publicly, and eventually the rules changed. If you're walking through Mattancherry and its sights today, Salem's story might be the most important one you hear. A.B Salem Road near Jew Street honours his story and memory.

A Community That Left

At its peak around 1948, the Cochin Jewish community numbered about 2,400. They had never faced antisemitism in India, except during the Portuguese conquest centuries earlier. They lived alongside Hindus, Christians, and Muslims for generations.

When Israel was established in 1948, the pull was strong. By 1954, most Cochin Jews had emigrated. The Malabari Jews went mostly to Israel. The Paradesi Jews scattered to Australia and other Commonwealth countries.

Today, about 15,000 descendants of Cochin Jews live in Israel. In Kerala, only about 14 Malabari Jews and one Paradesi Jew remain. (As of 2025)

The synagogue still functions. Prayers are held when a minyan, the quorum of ten men needed for a Jewish service, can be gathered. However, those ten often include visiting tourists. The community that actually built this place is, for practical purposes, gone.

Visiting the Paradesi Synagogue

The synagogue is at the end of Synagogue Lane in Jew Town, Mattancherry. You'll walk through a narrow street lined with antique shops, art galleries and cafes to get there.

Entry

A small fee per person gets you in. Carry cash.

Dress Code

Cover your shoulders and knees. Men should wear full shirts and trousers. Women should wear skirts or clothes that cover below the knee. And remember: shoes off at the door.

Getting There

From Fort Kochi, take an auto-rickshaw to Jew Town (about 15 minutes, Rs 50-80). You can also take the Water Metro to Mattancherry Water Metro Station and walk. If you're already visiting the Mattancherry Palace, the synagogue is a short walk from there.

The Paradesi Synagogue is not a museum. It is still a place of worship. However, the community that built it, prayed in it, fought over it, and reformed it has almost entirely moved on. The building still holds objects from China, Belgium, Ethiopia, Spain, Portugal, and Kerala all in one room. A clock tower that tells time in four scripts. Copper plates that recorded a Hindu king's friendship with a Jewish merchant a thousand years ago.

And one shared wall with a Hindu temple, in a town where everyone takes their shoes off at the door.

That is My Beloved Fort Kochi. Meow.

The place

Paradesi Synagogue