

cats of kochiStory

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When Fort Kochi was a merry-go-round of colonial powers, Bastion Bungalow's history

The Portuguese built Fort Immanuel in 1503 and the Dutch had built a bungalow on the Stromberg Bastion by 1667. Read about the museum, the Dutch kitchen and the tales of secret tunnels.

In this page

I rushed into the office, paws skidding on the polished floor, tail high like a flag of feline importance.

Bandit - jet-black fur, sharp yellow eyes, Editor-in-Mischief of Cats of Kochi - did not even flinch. Bandit hunched over his desk, surrounded by museum pamphlets and empty tea cups arranged like modern art.

“Finally,” he said, not looking up. “Your report on Bastion Bungalow.”

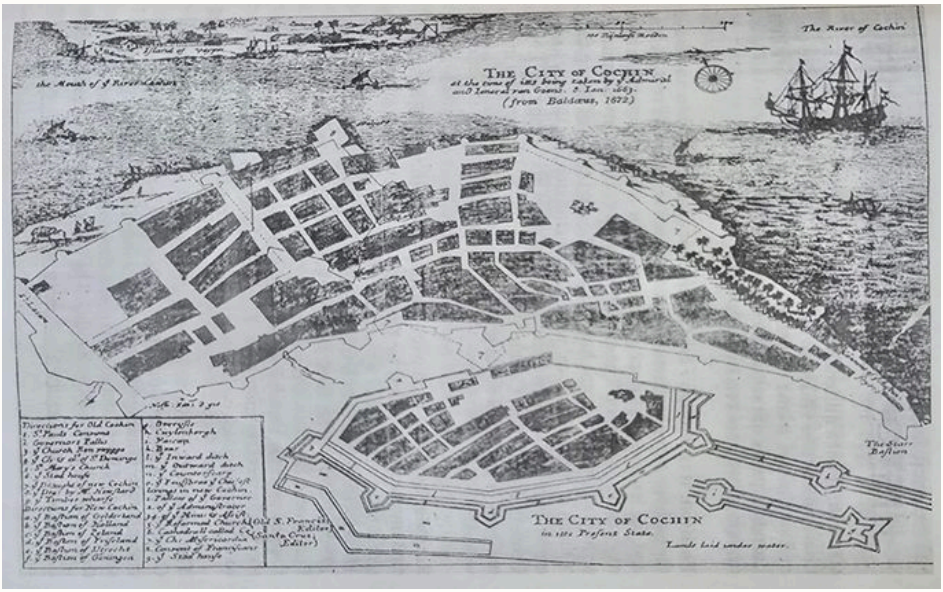
“The readers want details. Scandals. Secret tunnels. Tell me everything.”

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

“There was this cat-”

“The Bungalow first, Ginger. You know the rules. Historical facts, then romantic distractions.”

He had a point. So I took a breath and launched into it.



A reproduction of Baldaeus’s 1672 engraved map ‘The City of Cochin’, displayed at Bastion Bungalow’s heritage museum.

Where three empires collided

“Right. Bastion Bungalow,” I said, settling onto the windowsill. Rain splattered behind me like a backdrop from a period film.

“It sits right on the remains of the old Stromberg Bastion. Back when Fort Kochi was a merry-go-round of colonial powers playing territorial tug-of-war.”

The story starts in 1503. The Portuguese built Fort Immanuel right here - the first European fort in all of Asia.

Seven bastions. Watch towers. Ramparts. The whole military package.

Then came the Dutch in 1663. They captured Kochi and, in true conqueror fashion, knocked most of the fort down. Reduced it to a third of its size.

They kept the Stromberg Bastion. By 1667, they had built a bungalow right on top of it - wrapping the new structure around the old circular fort walls. That is the building you see today.

The building itself

“The place is pure Indo-European architecture,” I told Bandit, flexing my claws for emphasis. “Big open verandahs. Geometric-tiled roof. High ceilings. Wooden first-floor balconies along the front.”

“They used brick, laterite, and wood - it’s all very rustic, very ‘look how important I am’ colonial charm.”

Then the British arrived. They took over toward the end of the 18th century. Colonel Macaulay lived here in the early 1800s. In 1806, the British destroyed the remaining fort walls - but left the bungalow standing.

A typical British move was to flatten the fort and keep the pretty house.



The museum inside

In 2016, the Kerala government turned it into the District Heritage Museum. It is one of the most quietly impressive museums in Fort Kochi.

The exhibits walk you through Kochi's entire trade history - from ancient sea routes and the Muziris Papyrus to Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial periods. Old maps, rare documents, paintings and artifacts from the different communities that made Kochi what it is fill the rooms.

Old cannons from the colonial era stand guard in the grounds.

The Dutch kitchen

The museum has set up an old Dutch kitchen with original-style utensils. A big Dutch oven - heavy, probably cast iron, built for slow-cooking roasts and stews. Metal pots in copper and brass. Long-handled ladles and serving dishes that look half-Dutch, half-Kerala.

It is one of those small details that tells a lot about the past. European cooking methods met Kerala spices and tropical weather. Imagine trying to bake bread in this humidity. Those kitchens were little culture-mixing zones - probably the origin of every argument humans have about fusion food today.

The secret tunnels

Bandit's ears perked. "Secret tunnels?"

"Legends say so," I admitted. "The Portuguese were known for building underground tunnel networks beneath their forts - escape routes in case of enemy attacks. Some sources mention a tunnel in the basement. But a full network? Not found yet."

"Maybe under the garden," Bandit said. "Or behind a bookshelf."

"Humans do love their secrets."

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.

And then there was Zara

Bandit jotted down the last notes, satisfied.

"Right," I said, grinning. "Now can I tell you about her?"

"Here we go." Bandit sighed, settling in like he knew resistance was futile.

"She was at the entrance. Amber eyes like molten gold. Sleek grey fur with a silvery shimmer. And the way she spoke - like every word held a hundred years of secrets."

Her name was Zara. She said she had been watching over the bungalow for years. Knew every brick, every whisper of history. She walked me through the place, weaving stories like silk. She showed me the garden with its stone sculptures - none compared to her.

And right at the end, she gave me this look and said, “If you’re really into Indo-Portuguese history, the real treasures are at the Indo-Portuguese Museum nearby.”

“You went there?” Bandit asked.

I blinked. “No. Obviously not. I rushed here to tell you about Zara.”

Bandit stared. Tail flicking with quiet disbelief. “You’ve got the attention span of a kitten at a laser pointer convention.”

“Rude, but accurate.”

He hopped down from the desk. “Come on, Romeo. We’re going to the Indo-Portuguese Museum - together. Someone needs to keep you from wandering off.”

“Deal. Maybe Zara will be there too…”

“Focus, Ginger. History first. Scandalous romances later. You don’t want to give Lady Whiskersdown more content that she already has on you”

With that, we walked into the Fort Kochi streets, tails high, paws ready - for history, mystery, and maybe a little more sparkle-eyed magic.

For more on Fort Kochi’s colonial heritage, read the Paradesi Synagogue through Alleppey’s eyes and our 32 things to do in Fort Kochi.

Bastion Bungalow is also one of the main venues for performances and workshops during the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. Check the link for the latest events.

Visit Napier Street, Karuvelippady, Fort Kochi, Kerala 682001

Timings 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Mondays.

Nearby attractions Francis Church and Chinese Fishing Nets.

Places in this story 7

Fort KochiBastion Bungalow
Historic building
Paradesi Synagogue
Synagogue
Napier Street

Street
Indo-Portuguese Museum
Museum
Chinese fishing nets / Vasco da Gama Square
Historic building
St. Francis CSI Church
Church