

WHERE TIME LOOPS

IN FORT KOCHI'S OLDEST STREET, A SNUG, FRIENDLY HOMESTAY | BY KAREENA GIANANI



At higgledy-piggledy Princess Street, the wall to my right has cheeky graffiti by an anonymous, upcoming artist called Guess-Who. To my left lies the 18th-century Dutch facade of Walton's Homestay painted white with blue trimming on the doors and windows.

Christopher Walton inherited this large, historical home from his father, and fashioned it into a homestay in 2002. The reception area doubles up as a library where guests can swap books. After checking in, my host gives me hand-drawn maps of the port city. On one, I see that he has marked out the best places to have coffee, cake, and seafood. Another map has blink-and-you-miss-it attractions, meticulous footnotes by Walton and trivia about the town. I let my bulky, suddenly-irrelevant guidebook slide deeper into my tote.

In the lobby, guests snooze in planter's chairs, books teetered on their noses. I pass Walton's wife Ambika, working away in her home garden built in the small courtyard overlooking the lobby. Her newfound ambition, she says, is to grow orchids.

Most rooms at the homestay open into another large, slightly wild garden with a swing in it. The first thing I notice when I walk into my room is the wood panelling on the walls. The wooden furniture Walton picked up over a decade ago was locally made, and has a distinctly colonial feel. A four-poster bed, I imagine, would have been in

good company with the beautifully carved wooden nightstand and the cabinet in the corner.

At different times of day, the homestay assumes different moods. Breakfast is a hearty, communal affair in Ambika's large kitchen; she rustles up eggs, toast, and coffee as swiftly as guests switch conversations and languages. It is also the perfect place to ditch old itineraries and make new ones, because you meet all kinds of travellers here. I encountered a Swiss man here for an art project and an American artist-teacher-potter and his travel writer wife who have been visiting India frequently for the last seven years. Post lunch, however, the homestay slows down and takes a breath. Fragrant incense sticks jut out of corners, the ambient light is a dim yellow and strains of instrumental music can be heard from Walton's library-cum-reception.

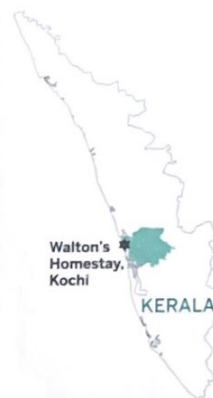
At Walton's Homestay you are never too far from Fort Kochi's attractions—the Chinese finishing nets are a few metres away, as is the Jewish Paredesi Synagogue and Kashi Art Café, curator of all things cool in Kochi. But if you can, stay back and join Walton in the library after he returns from his evening cycling jaunt. Like me, you could stumble upon a rare, stunningly illustrated copy of T.C. Boyle's *Drop City*. Or you could just enjoy listening to the innkeeper's stories about this port city he knows as intimately as the maps he draws up for his guests. ●



HERITAGE



FAMILY-FRIENDLY



THE VITALS

Accommodation

Walton's Homestay has nine large, impeccably furnished rooms and spacious bathrooms. Breakfast is complimentary, a simple affair of eggs, fruits, tea, coffee, and toast (0484-2215309, 92497 21935; waltonshomestay.com; doubles from ₹2,000).