

## coverstory

## TREASURE TRAIL

The ports from where Indian spices travelled the world and heralded change back home



Afonso de Albuquerque

In 1510, under the command of Afonso de Albuquerque, the Portuguese laid siege to Goa, which was under the rule of Yusuf Adil Shah of Bijapur. Their interest was in establishing a permanent trading post there. Under the Portuguese, Goa entered its golden age, thanks to the wealth it gained from the spice trade. With the arrival of the Dutch, however, Goa's prominence in the spice route waned.

Described as a global business hub by Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta, Kozhikode is one of the largest harbours in the world. In 1498, Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama landed at Kappad beach here. Before his arrival, the Arabs and the Chinese had already established strong trade ties with Kozhikode. This led to a fight between the old hands and the new entrant. Soon, the Dutch joined the battle and established their supremacy.

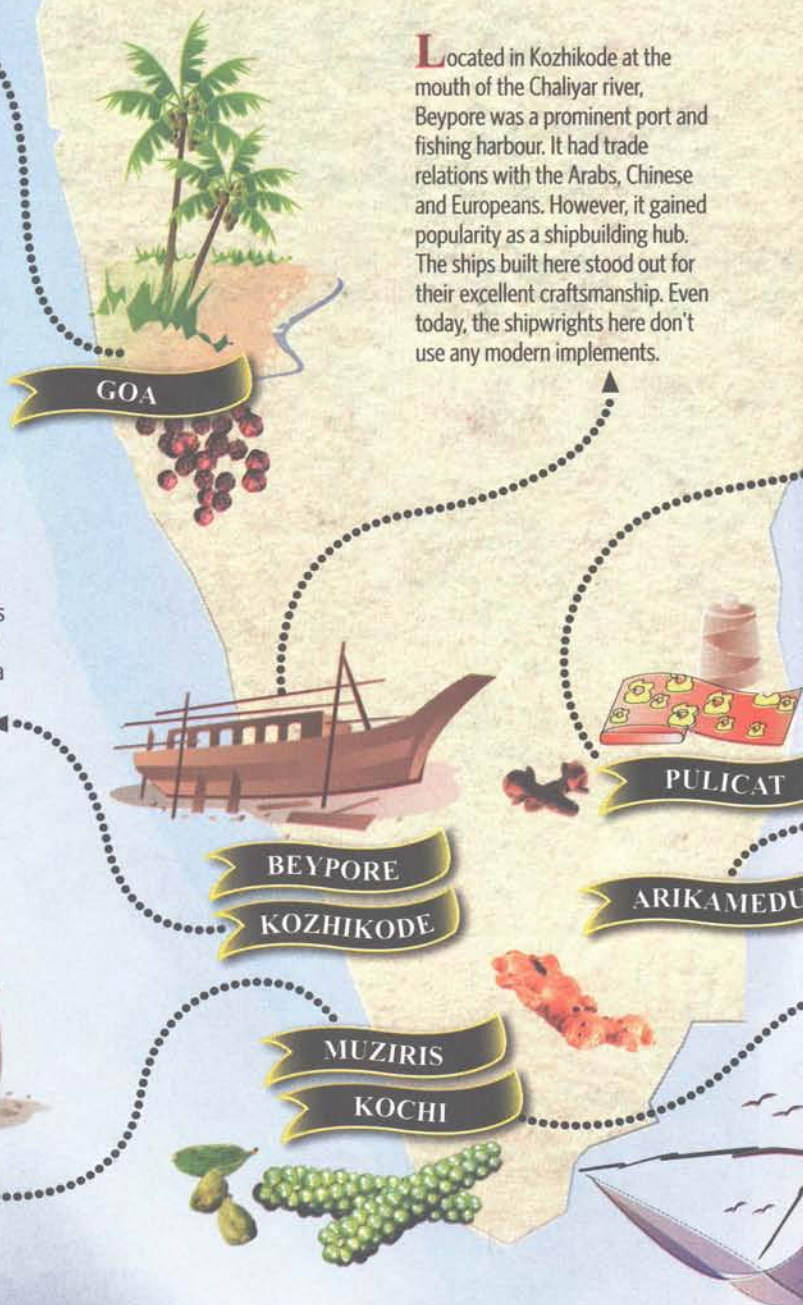
A prosperous port that vanished after a huge flood in the Periyar river in the 14th century, Muziris traded in everything from spices to precious stones. In fact, various artefacts unearthed from the excavations in a small village called Pattanam indicate trade dating back to 15 centuries before Vasco da Gama came to India.

Located in Kozhikode at the mouth of the Chaliyar river, Beypore was a prominent port and fishing harbour. It had trade relations with the Arabs, Chinese and Europeans. However, it gained popularity as a shipbuilding hub. The ships built here stood out for their excellent craftsmanship. Even today, the shipwrights here don't use any modern implements.

A strategic port, Pulicat in Tamil Nadu, was dominated by the Portuguese traders. In 1606, the Dutch arrived and forged a friendship with the Muslims there. They mostly traded in textile and spices.

One of India's biggest ports during the Roman period, Arikamedu was first discovered by French astronomer Guillaume Le Gentil in 1768. About 6km from Pondicherry, the port town was inhabited by Romans, Greeks, Cholas and the French. Evidence from excavations indicate that apart from spices, terracotta objects, beads of semiprecious stones, gems and shell bangles were exported from here.

A major port city, Kochi rose to prominence after Muziris vanished. It was known to have trade links with the Greeks, Romans, Arabs and Chinese. It came under Portuguese occupation in 1503 and remained its headquarters till 1530. Later, the Dutch and then the British took control of Kochi.





BIMAL NATH

St Thomas has found a flock that is much bigger than those he preached to.

Slipping easily into the Indian weave, the rather permeable world of spirituality, he is a legacy of the Roman trade connection. Keay believes he came from Punjab to Kerala; to Muziris actually, a port that went missing after the great flood in the Periyar. The oldest church, the oldest synagogue and the oldest mosque sit cheek by jowl in Muziris. This is not about Utopia, it is about a society willing to absorb. Goa is no different with St Francis Xavier.

The Spice Route was not just the story of pepper, ginger, or textiles soft as clouds travelling from Indian shores to palaces in Europe. It is the story of movement, of travel, of adventure and discovery, of magic and migration.

Obsessed with food, Pushpesh Pant, an encyclopaedia of food, will tell you that in Sanskrit the word for consumption of food is the word for sex. One of his favourite food memories is about the potatoes his mother made. "They were flavoured with Himalayan chives. These were carried by Tibetans," he says. In the 1960s, the Tibetans and the Dalai Lama became refugees, and the trade route was closed. "The Spice Route was about migration of people," says Pant. "This is what I find interesting. It needs an anthropological study."

**Changing hands:** St Francis Church's ownership has changed as colonial rulers changed in Kochi. Vasco da Gama was buried here, before being exhumed and shipped to Lisbon

The chives still exist, but procuring them could well be a herculean effort. Pant has 100gm locked in an airtight bottle and shares only bits with family. He has also squirrelled away 500gm of Afghan asafoetida; something his friend risked his life for. "You would never have tasted anything like it," Pant insists. If asafoetida from Kabul can still be thrilling enough, it is only understandable why pepper was locked up in safes. And, fairytales were spun about the collection of spices. Cassia, a kind of cinnamon, grew in a lake. To collect it, "winged creatures like bats which screech horribly and are very fierce" are to be battled, claimed Herodotus, the Greek historian in the fifth century. And, these bats went for the eyes, apparently. Wickerwork spectacles were the way out.

The story about acquiring the real cinnamon was equally strange. Raptors in the mountains used cinnamon sticks to line their nests, says the historian. To collect the sticks, "Arabians" lopped off "large pieces of the limbs of the dead oxen" and put these out at a "great distance". The raptors would carry the carrion to their nests. Unable to stand the weight of the meat, the

# coverstory

**Rare vintage:** Amphorae excavated from Pattanam at display in the National Museum, New Delhi

nest would tip over and the collectors would gather the cinnamon.

The Greeks and Romans believed pepper cured impotency and the plague. They also used the black gold to preserve meat. Ayurveda, too, trusts pepper to cure phlegm and to increase the potency of semen. "Ships loaded with gold and silver from Roman Egypt were sent to India's southwestern coast and returned heavy with pepper, which the Caesars stored like precious metals in their treasury," says Lizzie Collingham in *Curry*. Ginger, pepper and cinnamon accounted for 93 per cent of the spices imported annually to Venice from 1394 to 1405. One consignment from India, in Roman times, is believed to have purchased 2,400 acres of Egypt's best farmland.

"In India we use spices for therapeutic use and for sensory flavour," says Pant. "We also perfumed ourselves with what we ate." So, when Nero's consort Poppaea the Younger died, Keay says, it was "reliably reported that more aromatics were burnt than Arabia could produce in whole year".

And, it was not cheap. Pliny talks about how the coffers of Rome were



emptied for a spice that has no nutrition value. In 1496, pepper cost 42 ducats the hundredweight (that's 1/20th of a ton) and by 1499 it nearly doubled in price. By 1505, pepper in Cairo cost 192 ducats the hundredweight. This was quite the incentive to find alternate routes.

Columbus, of course, sailed out in 1492 hoping to find the way to this rich island. And, Vasco da Gama fol-

lowed with the order of the Portuguese king, Da Gama, who changed geography, arrived in Kerala in the wrong season. He had to dock for 111 days off Kozhikode, waiting. His first trip was far from successful. "He did not get any tie-ups, but the Portuguese were still able to make a profit of 100 per cent on their pepper," writes Collingham.

Following the spice route is a bit like solving anagrams and not always correctly. Like in Porto Novo, nothing much remains. From Batuta to Burton, Kozhikode changed. When Burton landed at one of the largest harbours in the ancient world he was surprised. He wrote in *Goa and the Blue Mountains*: "Kozhikode is no longer the Cidade nobre e rica [noble and wealthy city] as Vaz de Camões romanticises in his epic poem *Os Lusíadas* [The poem is about Portuguese discoveries]." But, it is also about smaller places that now have no identity, except to be in the shadow of big cities—Pulicat near Pondicherry and Beypore, from where



**Sailor & spice:** Colonial illustrations of da Gama and pepper vines



SANJAY AHLAWAT

## ■ THE PATTANAM EXCAVATION

# ROOT OF ROUTES

It all started here. There are very few places that can stake claim to that. But, Pattanam, a fishing village outside Kochi, can claim that and more. The excavations that started here in 2007 will rewrite history.

One of the most significant discoveries has been a 2,000-year-old canoe and a wharf that dates back to 15 centuries before Vasco da Gama's arrival in India. The excavation is on show at New Delhi's National Museum, the first excavation show ever put up by the space-constrained institution. The work in Muziris is powered by the Kerala Council for Historical Research and its director, P.J. Cherian.

Agananuru, a classical Tamil poetic work, sings about Pattanam: "Beautifully built ships of Yavanas [Greeks] came, agitating the white foam of the Periyaru, with gold and returned with pepper, and Muchiri resounded with noise." The poem is probably close to the truth.

Pattanam has yielded the maximum number of amphora sherds ever found from an archaeological site on the Indian Ocean rim. Beads—glass, pottery and semi-precious—have been found, too. Amphorae have been unearthed, along with sherds of glazed turquoise-ware, fragments of pottery from China as well as of fine tableware from Rome. The glazed turquoise sherds are being analysed, and it is believed that Pattanam had a strong trade link to West Asia even before the Romans came along.

Beyond its trade link, Pattanam was a smart city. The trenches have revealed an elaborate sanitation system. Huge earthenware pots excavated from the site point to an advance system of sewage disposal, something that Indian cities can long for. But, perhaps, what is most exciting is that the site has evidence that ships carrying pepper may have sailed away, but Indians also took to the seas.

the word shawl comes from, in Kerala.

What has stayed on, however, apart from India's own brand of worship, is another obsession—food. And, the melting pot that India is. Jan Huyghen Linschoten, a young Dutchman who wanted to travel the world, arrived in Goa in 1596. He describes Gujarati Baniyas; Tamil and Telugu Chettis; Syrian Christians; Arabs, who by now needed a passport to trade; and the Chinese from Fukien province. In the 21st century, replace the Chinese with the Russians, and Goa is much the same. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dream of millennium cities was fulfilled before he took office.

The Friday market in Mapusa, Goa, is bustling with activity. The bazaar, which traces its origins to the Portuguese period, is chaotic, colourful and probably the only place where you can get a bright yellow teddy-bear and dried fish next to each other. There are flower sellers and pirated DVD stalls. The sharp aroma of fresh coriander competes with the pungent smell of blood-coloured Goan sausages.

At intervals, there are women dressed with their sari *pallu* in front,

hair neatly tied in a bun, speaking fluent English, selling spices in heaps. There is lime green mountain—like Astroturf—which is for "fish masala," says the woman who is vegetarian. The names on the tags are in English and Russian. Scattered across the market, these women, all Gujarati, continue a tradition that dates back a few centuries. Integral to the spice trade are the Gujarati merchants who live across the country and abroad. One of them was appointed by the Zamorin of Kozhikode in 1500 to coach the Portuguese factor in the art of spice trade. "There were Chettis, traders

from Tamil Nadu, too, in the trade," says Mathew.

Gujarat, with its large ports, was the centre of ship building activity. "Ship building itself is a multinational exercise," says Ray. Timber came from India mostly. Key believes it was an Indo-Arab venture, as ships on the "long-haul" even when not built in India would have "conformed to Indian design. But that many ships were built in India seems as certain". Later, Portuguese ships were made in India, as were the "Indiamen" of the English and Dutch merchant navies.

Gujaratis handled the spices and

# coverstory



SANJAY AHLAWAT

**Frozen in time:** Skeletons guard the archway at the Dutch cemetery in Pulicat

times, describes him: “A very disdainful man... ready to anger, very rash, much feared.” Accounts of his trips have details of how he murdered natives and shipped off women with ease.

The price of launching a ship was prohibitive. The story of the trade route has so far been about colonisation. But, with the Pattanam excavations in Kerala and the grand idea of a Spice Route to connect 21 countries, it is also about an E that does not really get talked about—engagement.

The Arabs, the Chinese, the Malays, the Dutch, the Danes, the French, the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Germans and the British came. The Danes had an outpost in Travancore, which they sold to the British. The Italians came as traders. Fuggers from Germany bankrolled Portuguese operations. And, they did a little more than just trade. The Portuguese married Indian women and adopted their food, their habits—including changing personal linen every day, a contribution Swachh Bharat can happily claim.

It is this sort of abstract exchange—where commerce altered the landscape—that the journey of the Spice Route represents. “The history of India has been about the Indo-Gangetic plain. This is the story of Peninsular India,” says Ray. The list that follows this story is by no means complete. It is just a taste, literally.

The Zamorin, the sea king of Malabar, is a key character in the spice epic. One legend says that spies informed him that the Dutch were smuggling pepper saplings to Europe. A calm Zamorin grinned and reassured his courtiers: “They can take away the pepper, but they cannot steal our monsoon.” The monsoon nourished the pepper; the monsoon also brought the pepper-stealers.

As India stands in the 21st century, in a similar moment, this is the wisdom that has endured. ●

travelled the world with them, but chose not to eat them. The story of the commodity, coveted as it were, is as important as those who travelled with it. The Chinese fleet that came to Kerala had 500 ships, and in the van was their famous Muslim eunuch admiral Cheng Ho. The admiral wooed the Zamorin and took away more than just spices. “We took as much as we got,” says Sudha Gopalakrishnan of Sahapedia, the culture equivalent of Wikipedia. “We are equipped to tell the story now. We have the con-

fidence. There have been discoveries like the Pattanam excavation that shows that we had trade relations with Rome about 2,000 years ago. Muziris did exist. Then, of course, there is textual evidence.”

This is not to suggest that the Spice Route was simply just about trade. Or, that it was Ram Rajya. It was about conquest, blood, gore and greed. The Portuguese hero, da Gama, was not a loveable or peaceful man. He was chosen for his warring skills. As Gaspar Correa, a chronicler from da Gama’s