

KOCHI-MUZIRIS BIENNALE

THE IDEA OF MUZIRIS

The lost city of Muziris, the second name associated with the Biennale, is being reprised from the annals of history by the Kerala state government in an effort to reintroduce this ancient port city, reaffirm the state's heritage and throw open the region to history seekers

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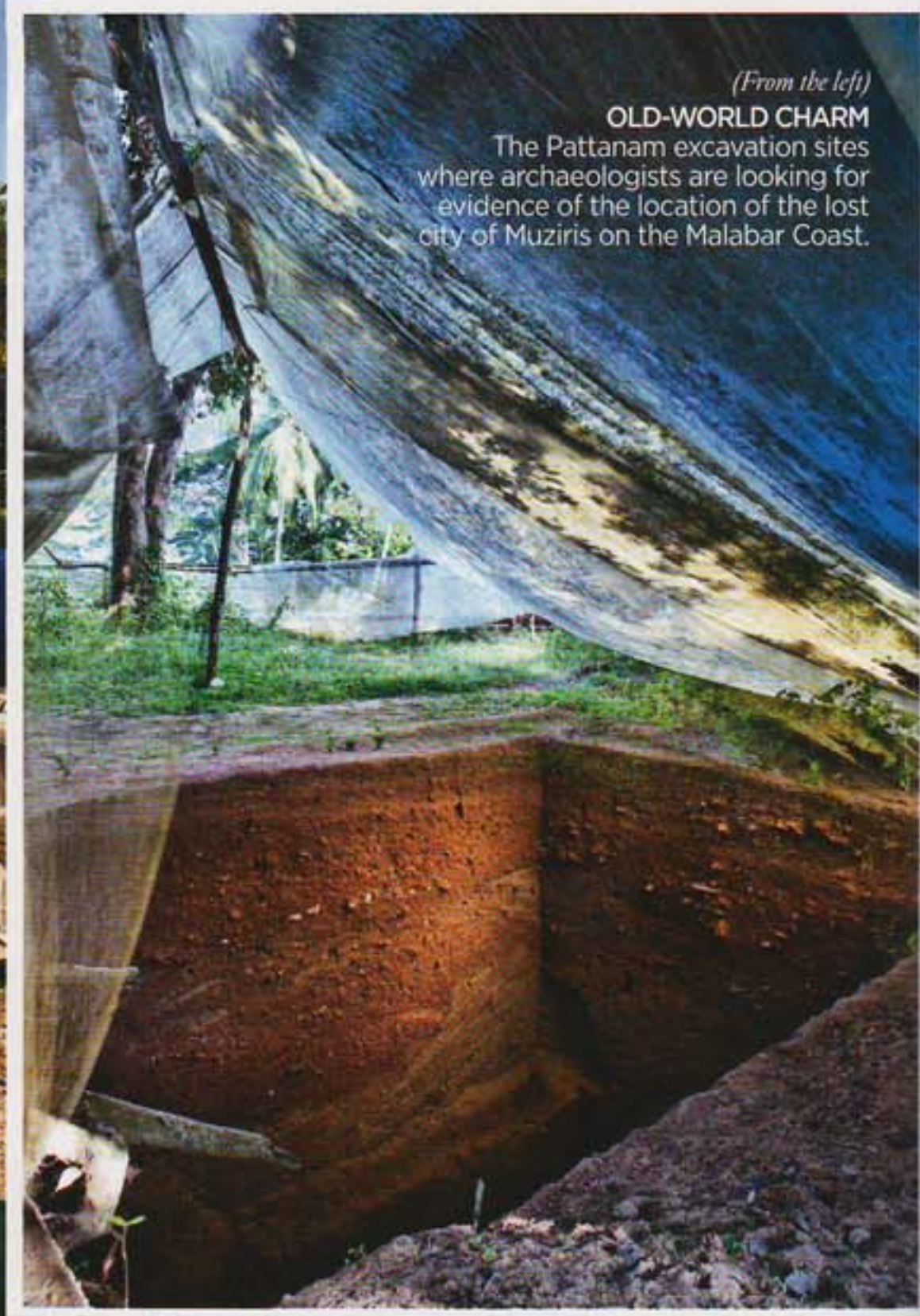
One of the displays at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale is an installation created using old ship anchors, by the artist Alex Mathew. He decided on anchors for two reasons: the first was the heavy sculptural shape, but the more important reason was that they would be a metaphor connecting the trade and sea routes of the region. "Constructing a structure with anchors will evoke the history of the place, metaphorically and symbolically," he says.

Other participating artists are also referencing Muziris in their works. Subodh Gupta made a recent visit to the landlocked Pattanam village located in the Periyar delta, about 25 km from Kochi, which is believed to be the location of the lost seaport, Muziris. The surrounding areas identified with Muziris left him fascinated. His installation, which he will construct on site, will be inspired by this visit. "For me the work embodies a larger corpus of several collected cultural histories... the heritage of Muziris is part of that," he says.

Muziris is a metaphor for these artists. But there also existed a real Muziris about 2,000 years ago, a major port town on Kerala's coast. In his book, *A Survey of Kerala History*, A Sreedhara Menon says that '... Muziris was the gate of India and apart from serving as an emporium of trade for the Phoenicians, Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans in turn, it also gave shelter for the first time to the Christian, Jewish and Muslims communities.'

In the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a 60 AD trader's handbook on coastal markets in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, its anonymous author writes (William H. Schoff's translation): 'Muziris... abounds in ships sent there with cargoes from Arabia, and by the Greeks; it is located on a river, distant from Tyndis by river and sea five hundred stadia, and up the river from the shore twenty stadia.' Tamil Sangam literature writes about foreigners coming there to buy black pepper with gold. It continued as a gateway to the New World, till a flood in the Periyar destroyed Muziris, and diverted the course of the river to other ports. It was around this time that Kochi rose to prominence.

ANCHORED IN THE PAST
The mouth of the Periyar, where Muziris is believed to have been located, was the gateway of the world into Kerala.



(From the left)

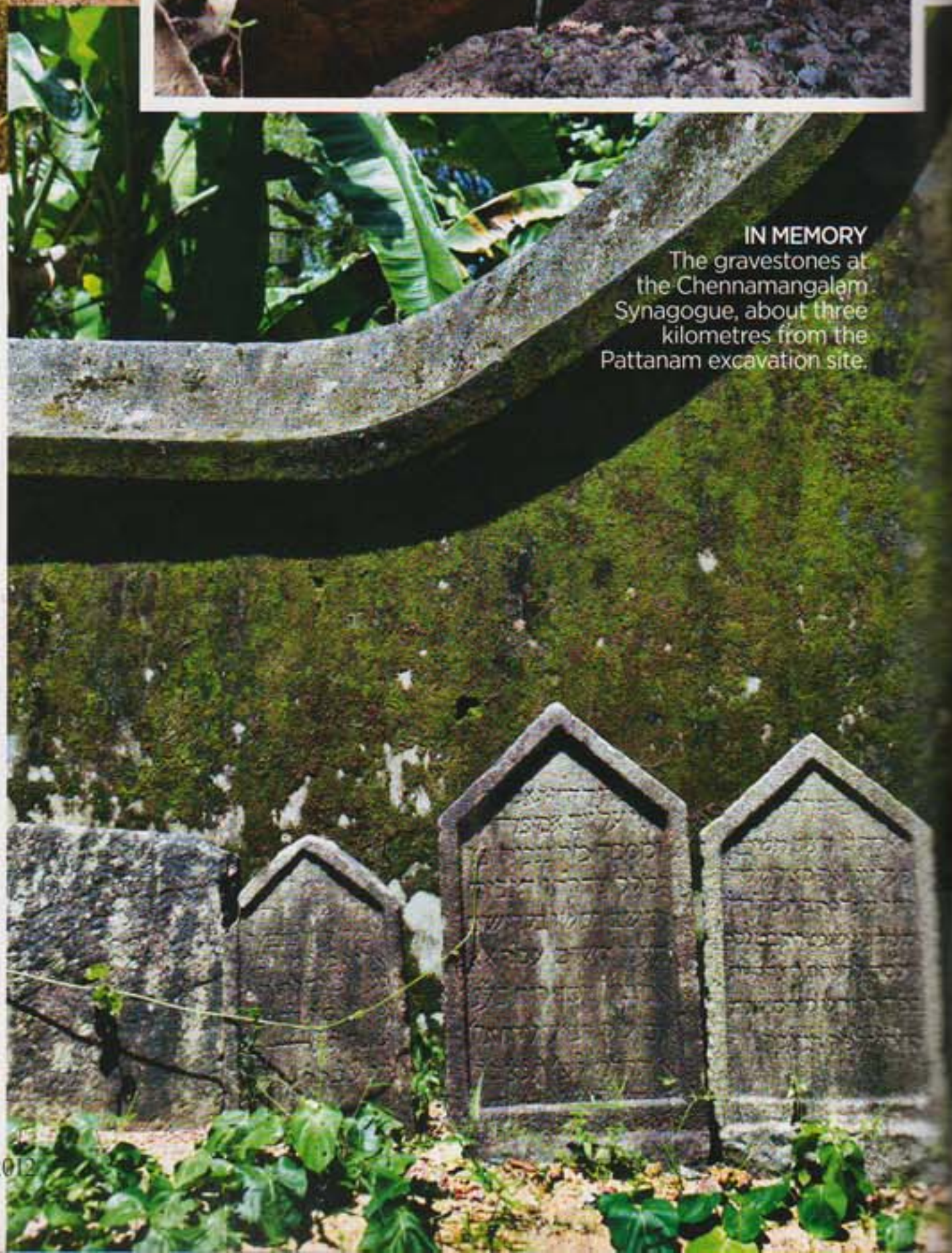
OLD-WORLD CHARM

The Pattanam excavation sites where archaeologists are looking for evidence of the location of the lost city of Muziris on the Malabar Coast.

ON ANCIENT GROUND

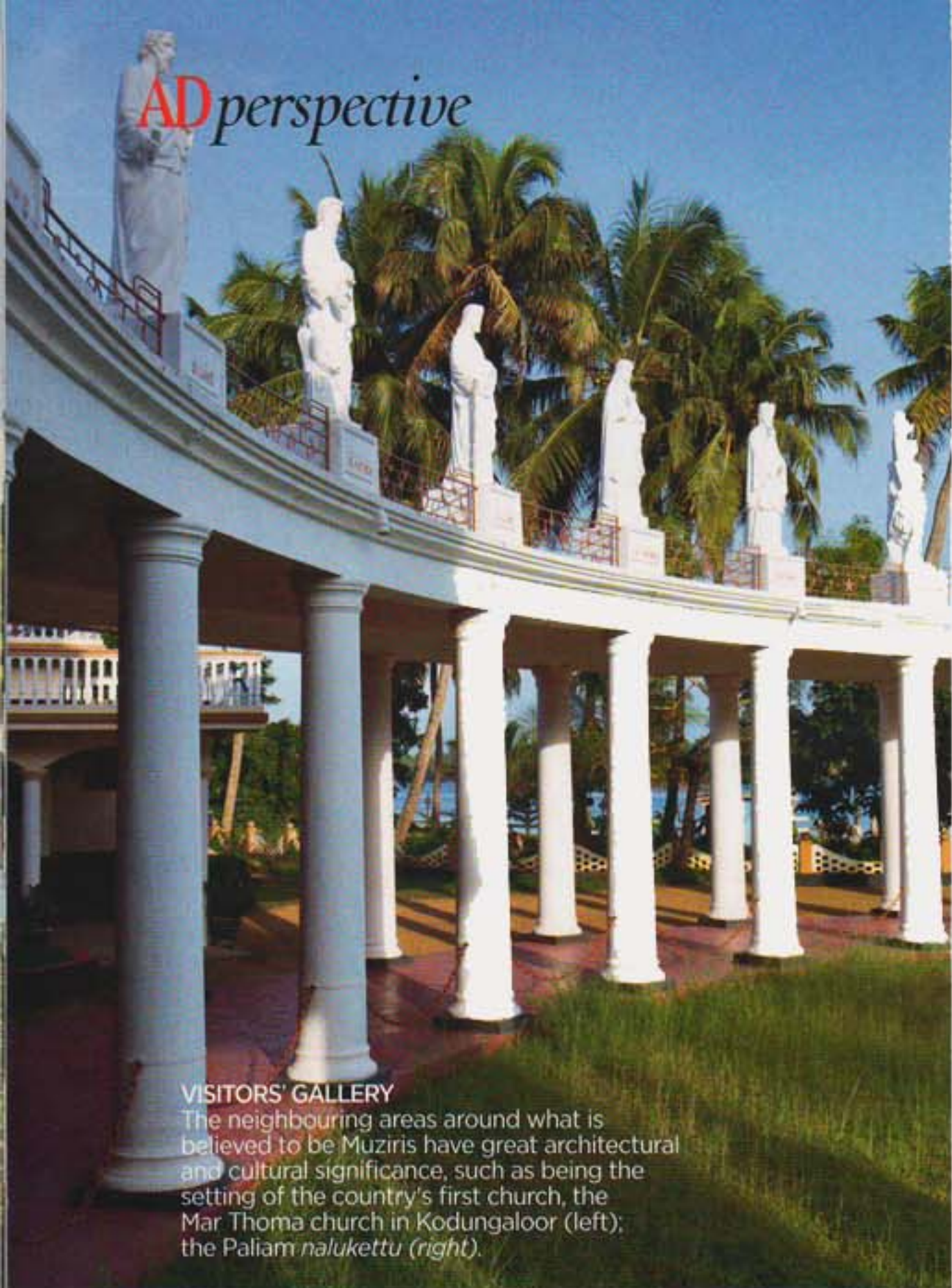
For a long time, it was thought that the small town of Kodungalloor, about 10 km away from Pattanam, was Muziris, but the lens is now shifting to Pattanam, a village with narrow winding roads along whose sides tiled houses stand on little plots lush with trees. One such plot in one such lane is startlingly bare, a square brown island in a sea of green. On this, there are little mounds of earth separated by a few metres. This is where the Kerala Council of Historical Research (KCHR) conducts excavations for a couple of months every year. The rest of the time, the trenches are buried over again—hence the mounds. Six years of excavations are over and what they have recovered is a fantastic amount of artefacts—nearly four million pieces of ceramics and 75,000 other antiquities like coins, hopscotch discs and even counters of a Roman board game.

During the Biennale, artist Vivan Sundaram is going to use discarded pottery shards from the site to create an extraordinary exhibit at a hall in the 150-year-old Aspinwall House. A month before the exhibition, he will use the material to create a “bizarre magical landscape” 45-50 feet long and then, using crane-mounted cameras, shoot a video of it. During the



IN MEMORY

The gravestones at the Chennamangalam Synagogue, about three kilometres from the Pattanam excavation site.



VISITORS' GALLERY

The neighbouring areas around what is believed to be Muziris have great architectural and cultural significance, such as being the setting of the country's first church, the Mar Thoma church in Kodungaloor (left); the Paliyam *nalukettu* (right).



◀ exhibition, this video will be projected onto the floor. Using special effects it will appear as if there is a river flowing through the landscape. Visitors will be transported into a surreal world which mixes art, history and film-making. "And with all this material that I have used for the video, I will create another formation at the end of the hall," says Sundaram.

The man who facilitated access of these artefacts to Sundaram is Dr PJ Cherian, director of the Pattanam excavations. He says that given the scale of what the historical Muziris must have been, Pattanam was probably only part of it. The excavations show that commercial transactions were at their peak in Pattanam from the first to the third century BC. This corresponds to the period when the Roman empire was at its peak and trade flourished with Muziris. "This is undoubtedly an integral part of Muziris," he says.

Dr V Selvakumar, another senior member of the excavation team who has been studying Pattanam since 2004, says it was a port market where traders and other communities from the interiors could sell their goods. He says that this region was strategically important and a melting pot of cultures because, for the commercial ships travelling between West Asia and China, this region was a convenient place to restock and for sailors to get some rest. "This is the reason why Pattanam gained importance. People from eastern India, southeast Asia, etc, met at Pattanam," he says.

PAST PERFECT

The Muziris Heritage Project is one of the most ambitious tourism projects by the Kerala government in recent times. It will link and

exhibit the entire history of the region. They are reviving boat transport and along the river and its canals, jetties are being constructed. "Every historic place is not more than a kilometre from a boat jetty," says Benny Kuriakose, conservation consultant, Muziris Heritage Project.

This area, encompassing the spot where Muziris was believed to be located, the village of Pattanam, and the surrounding region, is especially significant because of the astonishing number of historic places that can be found within close proximity of each other. There are temples, mosques, synagogues, forts, excavation sites, markets, palaces and houses of historical relevance. About 17 km from Kochi and just three kilometres from Pattanam, is north Paravoor, where the Paravoor synagogue stands decrepit in a street that was once teeming with Jews. They migrated to Israel and took the relics of the synagogue along with them. "We asked for photographs of it from Israel and are now restoring it," says P Vijayan, special officer to the Project. Incidentally, there is a belief that St Thomas, one of Jesus Christ's apostles, came to Kodungaloor because of the familiar presence of Jews here, though there is no historical confirmation of it. Likewise, the Cheraman Juma Masjid, believed to be existing since AD 629, is a symbol of Muslim presence in Kodungaloor. It has been renovated and only the tiled roof, which peeps out from the centre of the structure, gives an indication of its antiquity.

Other interesting monuments around this area are the Paliyam Palace and the nearby Paliyam *nalukettu* (a traditional Kerala home with a central courtyard). When Kochi was a kingdom, the king's prime minister was from the Paliyam family. The Paliyam Trust manages the family's common properties. At the office of the trust is its manager, 70-year-old Krishnabalan Paliath, who remembers another way of life. "The family members stayed in a hostel system. In the *nalukettu*, only women and children stayed. The sons had to move out into separate accommodations once they reached puberty," he says. The *nalukettu* is imposing but inside, the rooms are dark and small. The Paliyam Palace is so called because in the 16th century the Kochi king was hidden here from the Portuguese. It was later renovated by the Dutch as a gift for allying with them against the Portuguese.

Among other things, the Project is also restoring a traditional market in Kottapuram, located at the southernmost border of Kodungaloor, to make it look as it did in olden times. So also the forts where the Portuguese were ousted by the Dutch in the early colonial times. A maritime museum is also being planned near Pattanam to showcase Kerala's ancient links with more than 30 countries. "It will be a history of the world through Kerala," says Kuriakose. And in that history, Muziris will come alive again. ♦