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NOT MY GRAND

Manju Sara Rajan moved back to the land of her childhood to rediscover her roots. Instead, she



256





FATHER'S KERALA

found a whole new breed of Malayalis shaking things up. Photographs by **Raymond Patrick**



The sound of falling rain was the background score of all my childhood vacations. Every July for years, my family abandoned the heat of the Arabian desert for the wet gush of Kerala's perumazhakkalam or 'downpour season'. Sometimes we spent a month here, sometimes two. If I had to pick emoticons to represent the memories of those years I'd choose an umbrella, a Walkman, an Ambassador, a fish, a book, jackfruit, bangles and a pair of dentures to represent my grandfathers (though only one of them used it). The playlist of my recollections: the rain, of course; Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, Roxette and whatever was popular on Top of the Pops in the late '80s and early '90s. My grandparents lived in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital. At our busiest, we had 'house-visiting' appointments back to back; the rest of the time, my brother, cousin and I were luxuriously bored. We went to the beach on occasion, the zoo maybe, but mostly, we just bummed around, listening and reading, imagining ourselves elsewhere engaged in vastly more entertaining activities. In Kerala, it felt like we were voluntarily marooned in pop-culture wilderness. Malayali monsoons were endured with imported Quality Street candy, Brit-pop music, books,

naadan (home) food and adoring grandparents. A gooey cultural mashup, like a bowl of ramen carbonara.

Fast forward to 2015, when I moved from Mumbai to Kottayam. If my childish mind once imagined my home state as a wasteland for contemporary culture, a little over a year since becoming its resident, I stand corrected. In the past few years, a determined bunch, mostly Malayalis, have been instigating changes in the lifestyle of this luscious state. Many, like me, are comeback kids; folks who've retired from other places for one reason or another, and live here as outsiders-insiders. That means there are new realms of engagement—in music, contemporary art, design, fashion, food and sport. Much of it is rooted in our Mallu-ness, in this contrarian culture that is both cosmopolitan and tenaciously conservative. In the 2007 movie *Big B*, Malayali superstar Mammooty renders a line that's become something of a slogan: "Kochi pazhaya Kochi alla" ("Kochi isn't the same old Kochi anymore"). I'd go a bit further, to say, "Ee naadu pazhaya naadu alla" ("This land isn't the same anymore"). It certainly isn't the same place I ignored during all those childhood staycations.

There's no greater proof of this than the **Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB)** (www.kochimuzirisbiennale.org), the third edition of which begins this December, in Fort →



Maneesha Panicker of Kayal Island Retreat. Opposite page: **mango French toast, mushroom French toast and a beetroot salad at French Toast.** Previous pages, clockwise from top left: **inside Joe Ikareth's store; Ikareth at his store; jewellery by Annah Chakola; the backwaters around Kayal; Theresa Joseph George of ViaKerala; clothing by Sreejith Jeevan; the backwaters near Kayal; food at Kayal**



The interiors and products of ViaKerala. Left: Ayaz Salim of French Toast. Opposite page: a sculpture in the courtyard at the Kashi Art Café

Kochi. Malayalis don't consider themselves contemporary art connoisseurs. Nevertheless many successful Indian contemporary artists have risen from Kerala and its art colleges. Six years ago, a minister of the state government goaded Mumbai-based artists Riyas Komu and Bose Krishnamachari to use their success to do something for their home state. It is a common and effective refrain; most Malayalis would heed a call for the homeland. Begun in December 2012, the Kerala government-supported event has grown into the region's largest art exhibition, drawing almost a million in audience and some of the world's best artists. The nearly four-month-long 2016 edition, curated by Sudarshan Shetty, will feature more than 90 international names working with all sorts of media, from modern art to dance and poetry. But perhaps the most important takeaway from the Biennale is simply that it can be done. In Kerala.

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It is 8.30pm in Kochi. I've just walked up a two-storey suburban bungalow, to an unmarked door and an inquiring female face. "Yes?" "Music..." I mumble. "Muse Room?" asks the gatekeeper. "Yes!" She opens the door to another world, albeit a tiny one. Some 20-odd people are milling around an acoustically kitted performance space. Outdoor camping chairs are lined up in front of a small stage all set for a show. An hour later, I'm nodding along with 30 other people enjoying the spontaneity and brash vocals of Mumbai band Daira. The ebullient frontman, Piyush Kapoor, goes through a set of classic rock — mostly Pink Floyd — and

original music while continuously charming his Mallu audience in pidgin Malayalam. "Hello chetta [brother]," he says, and all of us giggle in collective adoration.

Sumesh Lal, founder of **The Muse Room** or TMR (www.facebook.com/insidethemuseroom) began as an engineer at a TV network. But he rerouted his career through his musical interests to propose and, eventually, launch two channels here. Dubbed the godfather of Kerala's indie music scene, Lal is the chieftain of Aum-i Artistes, a company that, besides being a production and design house, also specialises in artist management, with a clientele of TV personalities and new, cultish bands like Thaikkudam Bridge. Music Mojo, the programme he produces for the Mathrubhumi group's Kappa TV, is a hugely popular avenue for indie bands like Daira. Lal decided to create TMR as an alternative concert space after the state government banned live performances on college campuses, previously the main arena for political and artistic theatrics. Since its opening, TMR's line-up has included everything from rock to traditional performance arts like Chakyar Koothu.

If TMR is the latest in the new wave of cultural spaces, the **Kashi Art Café** (www.kashiartgallery.com) in Kochi is more contemporary trivia. Kerala's first modern art gallery-café was opened by Anoop Skaria and Dorrie Younger in 1997, in an effort to introduce visual arts to a larger audience. "I remember the man who sold us eggs looking at paintings. One day, he told me, 'I really liked the black drawings in the last show.' I was thrilled," remembers Younger. Kashi is now run by businessman Edgar Pinto, who's expanded its size and role by making Kashi an active participant in the Biennale. →



There are new realms of engagement—in music,



A ferry to one of the islands near Kayal. Clockwise from left: Annah Chakola wearing her designs; Riyas Komu at Pepper House; a tuna and papaya salad at Kashi Art Café; Tinky Mathew and Isaac Alexander of Pepper House; inside Studio Kokaachi; t-shirts at ViaKerala; a room at Kayal Island Retreat





modern art, design, fashion, food and sport





The pair's pioneering patronage of art included a residency on Kakkathuruthu, or the 'island of crows'. Years as a muse have left the property with a mosaic of eccentricities, including a cow sculpture by Kochi-based Reghunadhan K. A few years ago, Maneesha Panicker quit her job with Estée Lauder in New York and returned to be an entrepreneur in Kerala. She took over the almost-16,000sq ft plot on the island and converted it into the charming two-cottage **Kayal Island Retreat** (www.kayalstrandretreat.com). That's after she started an experiential travel company, **Silk Route Escapes** (www.silkrouteescapes.com). This is not an easy place to do business, and certainly more complicated for women. "They're always looking for 'saar' ['Sir'], so I tell them I am saar," says Panicker.

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When it comes to art or culture, the rule is, or should be, 'those who can, must'. Tinky Mathew and Isaac Alexander can, and they do. The couple, who settled in Kochi after stints in Mumbai and Bengaluru, owns **Pepper House** (www.pepperhouse.in), a former warehouse in the Dutch style. In 2012, they began to collaborate with the Kochi Biennale Foundation, offering Pepper House as a venue for exhibitions, an art residency and a library. Now it hosts events through the year. There's even a café and a design store with an eclectic selection of objects and design publications.

It was at Pepper House that I discovered graphic novels by Kochi-based **Studio Kokaachi** (www.store.kokaachi.com).

This high-quality graphic novel publisher is run by the husband-and-wife team of Tina and Pratheek Thomas. An NID-trained designer, he is the co-founder of erstwhile Manta Ray, which enthusiasts of the genre will remember as one of the earliest graphic novel publishers in India. She was an engineer working for Wipro when she met Pratheek on a train. They stayed in touch, eventually getting married, and she became the writer she'd always wanted to be. When Manta Ray closed, the couple moved back home from Bengaluru for reasons that ranged from professional to otherwise: "We've adopted three dogs and in Kerala, we could have a house for them to run around," says Tina. Their Kokaachi—the name is taken from that of a monster in popular Malayalam storytelling—is an animation hub that works with film-makers like Mani Ratnam, a venue for drawing camps called Vara and the maker of graphic anthologies like *Mixtape#1* and #2.

My sons, who are growing up in Kerala, often wear t-shirts that read 'Kerala Kutti'. The second word—meaning child—is spelt out in the Malayalam script. A slice of cultural branding, "wearing their Mallu-ness," a friend calls it, which has made it so easy to indulge in Mallu-isms. The t-shirts are from **ViaKerala** (www.viakerala.in), a design collective and chain of stores owned by typographer Theresa Joseph George. Like many of the Malayalis in this story, she's a bit of here and a bit of elsewhere. We don't think in Malayalam, but our sense of the language comes from the written word and its buxom script. "There was very little that reflected the way I thought and spoke," George says. So she decided to fix that →