



# Kochi Express



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**28.11.2024**  
THURSDAY



*'I approach tech through a philosophical lens'*

PG 4

## DAY'S DIARY

### Mariner 4 launch

The Mariner 4 mission, the second of two Mars flyby attempts, launched in 1964 by NASA, was one of the great early successes of the agency

## THE ROUTE

The total cost of the Mariner 4 mission is \$83.2m. It journeyed to Mars making its closest approach on July 15, 1965 and took the first photos of another planet from space

## CAPTURING PHOTOS

The pictures, played back from a small tape recorder over a long period, showed lunatype impact craters, some of them touched with frost in the Martian evening

## MISSION CONTINUES

The Mariner 4 spacecraft, lasted about three years in solar orbit, continuing long-term studies of the solar wind environment coordinated



MAHIMA ANNA JACOB

**T**HE sharp crack of paddles meeting the ball echoes across the court, filling the air with tension and excitement. In the evening, just after work, two players — one with a bright red paddle, the other with a sleek black one — are locked in a fast-paced game of pickleball.

The serve is underhand, the neon yellow ball bounces off the ground with a soft pop, only to be returned with a swift flick of the wrist. Under the bright lights, a crowd of young professionals and senior citizens gathers along the sidelines, watching intently. It's not just a game; it's a community — a perfect blend of fitness and fun.

Slowly but surely, pickleball is taking root in Kerala. Before we get to that, some basics. Pickleball is reported to be "one of the fastest-growing sports in the world", particularly popular in the US and Canada.

Over the past few years, the sport has grown rapidly, reaching 13.6 million players in the US. By comparison, tennis, with its deep history and legacy, has 23.8 million players.

An easy-to-play mix of tennis, badminton, and table tennis, it uses paddles and a plastic ball with holes. Pickleball is typically played on a smaller court with a lower net, using a paddle larger than a ping-pong paddle but smaller than a tennis racket.

### Now, a bit of history

The sport originated in 1965 as a backyard game in the US, created by Joel Pritchard, a congressman from Washington, and Bill Bell, a businessman. After returning from a round of golf, they found their families bored.

Though they initially planned to play badminton, the shuttlecock was missing. To en-

*TNIE hops onto the court to check out the city trend of what's said to be 'the world's fastest growing sport' — pickleball*

tertain everyone, Joel and Bill began experimenting with different balls and rackets on a badminton court, even using table tennis paddles. Their friend Barney McCallum joined them, and together, they developed the rules, drawing heavily from badminton.

The name 'pickleball' is said to have been coined by Joel's wife, inspired by the term 'pickle boat' in rowing, which refers to a crew made up of leftover rowers from other teams. Joanne likened the game to a mix of different elements coming together.

In 1976, the first known pickleball tournament was held at South Center Athletic Club in Tukwila, Washington. By 1990, the game had become common in all 50 US states. In 2022, pickleball was named the state sport of Washington.

The sport's popularity surged post-pandemic as people sought outdoor activities. It has since attracted prominent international tennis players.

In February 2025, tennis legends Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf will face off against Andy Roddick and Eugenie Bouchard in Pickleball Slam 3.

### The Indian scene

India, too, has embraced pickleball. According to estimates, about 10,000 players play professionally in the country. Add amateur players, and the tally touches 70,000.

Reports say over 1,000 pickleball courts have come up across the country, with Mumbai and Ahmedabad emerging as major



Thomas Mathew, governing council member of Recca Club, in action

## WHAT'S THIS PICKLE-WICKLE?



Members of Recca Club in Kakkanad enjoy an engaging game of pickleball

PICS | T P SOORAJ

hubs. Other metro cities, such as Delhi and Chennai, are quickly catching up.

Adding to excitement, Agassi is set to visit India in January 2025 to flag off the PWR DUPR Indian Tour & League, which is aimed at popularising pickleball as a competitive sport.

Unlike sports that are often associated with urban elites, pickleball has been gaining popularity in tier-2 and tier-3 cities as well. "Over the past three years, the sport has seen exponential growth. Places like Madurai, Vellore, and Salem now boast talented players showcasing their skills in state championships," says Kochi resident Prakash C, a chartered accountant, who has been playing pickleball for two years.

"In the coming years, pickleball will be played in every corner of the country. Nowadays, when a new apartment complex is built, alongside ameni-

ties like a swimming pool, park, and gym, a pickleball court is becoming an essential addition."

Prakash, 62, has participated in Tamil Nadu state championships and the 2023 South India League. "I recently got to play against actor Aravind Swamy during the Masters' Pickleball Tournament in Chennai," he beams.

Pickleball's appeal goes beyond the celebrity buzz. The primary draw lies in its convenience. "Unlike cricket, football, or even tennis, which require mastering techniques, pickleball is easier to pick up, especially for those with basic racquetball experience," says Prakash. "The simple rules and less rigid structure make it easy to learn, which quickly hooks players."

Another key attraction is the sport's ability to provide a solid workout while being gentler on

the body compared to more physically demanding games. "Moreover, it's one of the cheapest sports to set up," adds Prakash.

"All you need is a paddle, a plastic ball, and a court, which can be built for just ₹2 to 4 lakh. The best part is its adaptability to existing infrastructure. Basketball or badminton courts can easily be converted into pickleball courts with a few added lines, making it a multi-use surface."

Pickleball is more than a sport; it's a lifestyle and community building activity, believes Indian team member and Kerala Pickleball Association secretary Vishak V S.

"In Kerala, pickleball has been growing steadily since the association was established two years ago. We have conducted several events. Several hubs are coming up in Thiruvananthapuram and Kochi," he says.

"I foresee a pickleball boom in the next couple of years. It has the potential to eventually become an Olympic sport. I represented India at the Asian Open held in Thailand in 2022. That experience showed me the growing competitive side of the sport, with players switching from tennis, badminton, squash, and table tennis to pickleball."

### Cityscape

In Kochi, pickleball is still in its early stages but is gradually gaining traction in clubs, sports centres, and apartment com-

plexes. At Recca Club in Kakkanad, the sport was introduced in September after a "casual conversation at a club gathering", says Thomas Mathew, a governing council member.

"We started with doubts about how many would stick around after the first week, but surprisingly, 26 players, of all ages and skill levels, are still at it. This was unexpected," he adds.

Thomas, a badminton enthusiast, returned to sports after a leg injury left him bedridden for four months. "I was hesitant to return to the court, but pickleball was the perfect way to ease back into it. It's easy on the body, but provides a good workout. And, most importantly, it's fun," he says.

Noufal G K, another club member, says he is "hooked" on pickleball. "I first heard about it from my friends in the US. When they visited Kerala, they asked about pickleball facilities, so I started researching about it," he adds.

"Pickleball is more accessible when compared with tennis or badminton. Age isn't a barrier, and it's physically less demanding, which makes it en-

joyable and easy to practise regularly."

Cochin Yacht Club member George Vinci Thomas echoes similar views. "Pickleball, for many like me, is a socialising activity. The camaraderie is strong, and we keep the momentum going with internal matches," he says.

For Tracy Thomas, founder of Hola Granola, pickleball has turned into "a regular weekend activity" with her husband and two kids. "We all picked up the game quickly. Whenever time allows, we take part in internal tournaments organised by the

Cochin Yacht Club," she says.

The more the merrier, the say. At BullRing FC in Edappally, primarily focused on football and tennis, plans are underway to introduce a pickleball facility. "Our clients have been asking about it, and decided the rising demand, we decided to give it a shot," says Mohammed Aslam, owner of the facility. "This sport is here to stay; it's not just another passing fad."

It certainly is not, says Kerala Pickleball Association member Jacob Bijo Daniel. "For the first time in Kerala, we are organising a certification programme for pickleball coaches," he says.

"The event will take place on December 7 at the Alpha Sports Academy in Thadiyoor, Pathanamthitta. This certification course is tailored for those keen on coaching and will be conducted by nationally certified trainers."

Jacob adds a one-month training programme will be held after the December 7 event. "Our aim is to organise a state-level tournament in 2025," he says.

*With inputs from Parvana K B*

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