

The Complete Guide To: Goa

This diminutive Indian state packs in miles of relaxed beaches, a rich Portuguese heritage and coconut-laced cuisine.

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Where – and why?

India's smallest state – slightly bigger than Devon – is tucked into the south-west coast of the sub-continent. It makes up for its diminutive size through the diversity of its 1.4 million-strong population and the wealth of experiences on offer in the region.

Although small, the state is among India's richest, largely thanks to tourism. The big attraction is more than 80 miles of coastline, and India's most sophisticated mass-market tourist industry: Indian culture is given a Goan twist, and strange foreign practices are tolerated more readily in Goa than in the rest of India. But if you delve deeper you will find plenty of culture and history, and some seductively accessible nature.

Conquered by the Portuguese in the early 16th century and returned to Indian rule only in 1961, the state has a Lusitanian air in everything from the architectural relics to the names of businesses. The resumption of Indian rule coincided with the development of the image of Goa as a hippy haven in the 1960s, and its allure has continued.

Where do I start?

Most visitors – including those on charter flights from Britain – arrive at the busy and confusing airport of Dabolim. The nearest town is Vasco da Gama, named after the Portuguese explorer. But to start to make sense of Goa, you should begin in the state capital, Panaji. (Like most places in Goa, the "Indianised" name has taken precedence over the Portuguese rendition, Panjim.)



AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Tourists shop at a Goan fruit market

Beside the broad, sluggish Mandovi River, all the paraphernalia of a Portuguese city has been established – and much of it has endured. The church is the most visible symbol: Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception perches on a hill, keeping a maternal eye on the once-splendid villas that clutch at her skirts. Their pastel colours fade deliciously in the hazy sunshine, while their residents ascend for services in English, Portuguese or Konkani – the local language, and also the name of the high-speed railway line from Mumbai that has helped put Goa on the map for Indian visitors.

Some history?

Six miles upriver is the original Portuguese capital, now called Old Goa. In the 16th century it was one of the most opulent places on earth; today the wealth belongs to nature. The sight of a miraculously preserved Portuguese city rising from the jungle is remarkable. Take in the view from the original church of Our Lady of the Mount. Dotted in the thick woodland below are some spectacular relics of the empire. On a far hill, the church of St Augustine has degenerated beyond the point of no return, but in the valley a selection of grand structures remains. The most haunting is St Cajetan's church, which is a lofty imitation of St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. The dome may not be quite as vast as the one in Rome, but the Vatican cannot boast Islamic masonry outside the front door.

The only evidence of the palace of Adil Shah, who ruled Goa before the Portuguese arrived, comprises a lonely arch propped up in the churchyard. The rest of the stone was taken to be used in the promulgation of Christianity.

The riches that the governors and merchants of Goa enjoyed are evident in the Basilica of Bom Jesus, a great ecclesiastical lump plonked right in the middle of Old Goa. It was built to house the remains of St Francis Xavier. He was the Portuguese missionary charged with evangelising the Indies, and became Goa's patron saint. He died while spreading the gospel in China. He lies in a Florentine casket of solid silver.

The best beaches?

Goa's charm lies chiefly in the wealth of beautiful beaches lining the shores, each with its own appeal. Take your pick from about 30 beaches strung out along the coastline. Swimming in the sea is generally safe in designated areas but take care in the months of October and November when the seabed is still settling after the monsoon. While Goa's reputation as one of the most liberal Indian states means that sunbathing in a bikini is entirely accepted, it is important to remember that topless sunbathing is illegal and wearing flimsy shorts or a bikini anywhere other than the beach is extremely disrespectful. The image of loose Western women has been circulated by the Indian media and as a result foreigners can sometimes experience pestering from local men asking for a photo or simply staring. These annoyances are less frequent on the northern beaches which are generally considered to be the most dynamic, developed and tourist populated. This also means that the best deals can often be found on packages to these areas. Calangute and Baga, for example, are prime destinations for tour operators. While lacking much authentic Indian charm, they do cater for all tastes and also house some of the most luxurious hotels.

Anjuna beach, the original hippy hangout, has changed dramatically since its original days but retains a touch of the unconventional. Try to get here on a Wednesday to see the extensive flea market. Here you will find hawkers selling jewellery, fabrics and trinkets from all over India, their wares spread out under the shade of palm trees.

Head north and you'll find peace again on the beaches of Mandrem, Asvem and Arambol – broad sweeps of fawn sand, backed by thickets of palm trees and casuarina pines.

Similarly unspoilt is Palolem, one of the state's most southerly beaches. With postcard-perfect views, lazy beach life and a chilled-out nightlife this broad bay has little in common with the more commercialised northern beaches. For something even quieter, wander south to the next beach along, Patnem.

Can I get active?

For divers there is ample choice. Goa Diving was established by an expatriate Scotsman, Willie Downie, and operates from Bogmalo Beach (00 91 832 253 8204; goadiving.com). A single dive costs a very reasonable V C Rs1,700 (£20), while Rs14,000 (about £180) buys an overnight excursion to Pigeon Island.

You can also learn to dive in Goa. Barracuda Diving, based in Panaji (00 91 832 227 9409 14; barracudadiving.com) is accredited with five stars from the Professional Association of Dive Instructors (Padi) and charges Rs18,000 (about £230) for a full Padi Open Water Diving Certification course. If you prefer to remain above the surface then Day Tripper Tours and Travel in Calangute (00 91 832 227 6726; daytrippergoa.com) organises a two-day safari and white-water rafting trip which costs around £75.

The deepest immersion in nature can be found in the largest of Goa's four protected wildlife areas, Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary in the town of Mollem. The sanctuary is on the eastern boundary of Goa, accessible by road or rail from Panaji or Margao. Leopards, spotted deer and cobras can all be seen here.

I want to reconnect with my soul

India was where yoga was born, and Goa is the most Western-friendly place to study the discipline – which also means it attracts a number of charlatans along with genuine yoga teachers. Yoga Magic near Anjuna (00 91 832 652 37 96; yogamagic.net) is a reliable retreat that offers daily yoga classes, accommodation in Rajasthani-style hunting tents and delicious vegetarian meals. Prices start at Rs2,750 (about £35) per person per night.

Before it started offering yoga classes, Yogamagic was built to accommodate people heading to the nearby Purple Valley Yoga Retreat (00 91 937 056 86 39; yogagoa.com) which teaches the dynamic and challenging Astanga style of yoga in a secluded valley. The retreat now offers its own accommodation; a week' stay at Purple Valley including classes, and three vegetarian meals daily, begins at £450.

What will I eat and drink?

Rice, fish and coconut are the staple ingredients in most Goan meals, punctuated with chilli flavourings. The fusion of Indian and Portuguese gastronomy is best characterised by the ultimate Goan dish of fish curry, but the vindaloo originated here too. Brought to Goa by the Portuguese, its name is derived from carne de vinha d'alhos, or meat with wine and garlic. It is traditionally made from pork and is less fiery than you might expect.

The dominance of Hinduism in Goa means that vegetarian restaurants and dishes are widespread and with the prohibition of beef for Hindus and pork for Muslims, lamb and chicken are the meats that appear most often on menus.

Drinking alcohol in Goa doesn't have the same stigma attached to it as it does in other parts of the country. In fact, the region produces and consumes its own variety of fiery spirit made from cashew or coconut sap: feni, made more bearable when diluted with water or soda.

Party like it's 2009

The father of hypnotism

Goa's reputation as a party destination began to be established when it was a Portuguese colony, providing a liberal bolt-hole in a conservative nation. When young Western backpackers began to congregate in Goa, the state became a venue for all-night raves.

The three-day "underground" trance parties take a bit of finding. The best place to begin is at Vagator beach, starting the evening at an established venue such as Nine Bar, Hill Top or Primrose Café (00 91 83 22 273 210,

open until 3am) and asking around to find the jungle location where that evening's party will take place.

However, since the police have started to crack down on these unofficial all-night raves, mainstream club nights and venues are stepping in to fill the gap, such as Tito's in Baga Beach (titos.in).

In the middle of the day, the pace of life in Goa slows substantially. It is as though the whole state has been hypnotised. And, in the city of Panaji, you can find a bronze statue of a dark, sinister figure looming over the limp form of a beautiful woman that just happens to be the founder of modern day hypnotism.

Abbé Faria was born in Goa in 1756. He used a combination of showmanship and science of questionable validity to anaesthetise his subjects.

There is no evidence that Faria enabled anyone to stop smoking, or helped them to lose weight or phobias, but he moved to Paris where his skills made him somewhat of a celebrity.

Despite the statue to his memory close to the waterfront, no discernable tradition of hypnosis remains in Goa.

When to go

The best time to visit Goa is after the monsoon, which lasts from June until late September. The cooler tourist season begins in November and lasts until March. Even during the cool season temperatures can peak at 31C and drop down to around 23C. There is a massive influx of tourists over the holiday season from mid-December to late January, so prices rocket. The hottest months to visit are usually April and May when temperatures can reach 33C, but it is also very humid during this time.

Getting there

Most British visitors to Goa travel on package holidays.

Thomas Cook (0871 895 0055; thomascook.com) offers a week in a two-star hotel in Baga with breakfast and flights from Gatwick included starting at £609 per person. Cosmos (0871 423 8422; cosmos-holidays.co.uk) offers a similar deal for a week in a two-star hotel in Candolim from £634 per person.

Several adventure operators offer alternatives to beach holidays. Blazing Trails Tours (01293 533338; blazingtrailstours.com) has a two-week guided motorbike tour around Goa, venturing into neighbouring Karnataka. Explore the most remote areas of the region on a 350cc Enfield Bullet. Prices start at £1,399, with breakfast but not flights.

Travelling independently, the main international gateway is Mumbai, which has plenty of cheap flights from the UK – prices start at £300 return. From the city, the Konkan railway – India's answer to the TGV – races south-east to Goa. Frequent trains run from Mumbai to several stations in Goa: Thivim for the north, Old Goa for the centre, and Madgaon for the south. Booking trains in advance is strongly advised, for example through SD Enterprises of Wembley (020-8903 3411; indiarail.co.uk).

Thomson Airways (0871 231 4787; flights.thomson.co.uk) operates direct charter flights from Gatwick and Manchester to Dabolim between November and April. You can also fly from Mumbai to Dabolim in an hour with one of India's numerous domestic airlines for well under £100 if you book online; try flykingfisher.com; spicejet.com; or goair.in.

From late October, Qatar Airways (020-7896 3636; qatarairways.com) will fly from the UK to Goa via Doha. Prices start at £313 return.

Red Tape

British passport holders require a visa to visit India. In the UK the system has been outsourced from the High Commission to a private company. A tourist visa is valid for six months and usually allows multiple entries; the cost is £30 plus £8.86 service charge. You should apply online (in.vfsglobal.co.uk) and then make an appointment to visit one of the visa application centres to collect your passport. Visas are valid from the date of issue and not the date of travel, so you should apply sufficiently close to your date of travel to ensure validity for the duration of the stay in India.

Getting around

Auto-rickshaws – open three-wheelers with small, noisy engines – are the standard way to cover small distances. Fix a fare in advance. In resort areas, you can rent a bike for less than £1 a week. Rented motorcycles are a popular, albeit dangerous, form of transport.

Hiring a car with a driver can often work out cheaper than self drive rentals, and considering the hazardous Indian driving regulations it's safer too. Expect to pay around Rs600-1,000 (£7.50-£13) per day.

Staying there

Ciaran's Camp in Palolem (00 91 832 26 43 477; ciarans10.com) is something of an institution. Rebuilt every year after the monsoon, its cottages are some of the more luxurious huts on this beach. B&B starts at Rs2,500 (£32). Casa Candolim (00 91 981 01 30 518; casacandolim.com) is a boutique hotel located in the northern beach of Candolim. The eight suites all have balconies with a view of either the beach or pool. B&B from Rs7,500 (£96). Further north is Elsewhere (aseascape.com) in Asvem. Here colonial estate buildings and luxury tents offer chic accommodation. Prices from £270 to £549 per week.

For another encounter with the Portuguese way of life head to a renovated mansion hotel, Vivenda dos Palhacos (00 91 832 32 21 119; vivendagoa.com), in Majorda. The beach is 1km by cycle or auto-rickshaw. B&B from Rs12,100 (£153).

More information

India Tourism, 7 Cork Street, London W1S 3LH (020-7437 3677; incredibleindia.org).

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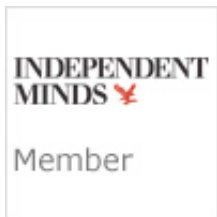
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Beyond Goa

 [solo_travel](#) wrote:

Thursday, 2 July 2009 at 10:15 am (UTC)

You could always catch a train up to Mumbai for an exciting trip away from Goa and then fly back with a number of budget airlines.

<http://www.solotravel.org> has information on Goa and trips beyond the state

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