

Goa's Russian revolution

WRITTEN BY VIVEK MENEZES PHOTOGRAPHED BY BHARAT SIKKA

SUNSET STRIP

As the sun dives into the Arabian Sea, the stretch of sand from Morjim to Arambol in Goa teems with its newest residents: the Russians

Nearly a century after Red October, the Russians are at it again. Only this time, they've set their sights on an empire across the seas, and they're armed with nothing more than a business plan. Goa may be best known for its Portuguese mix, but these days the tanned bodies lying across its sands speak a whole new language

THE SUN DOESN'T linger on the horizon at day's end on Morjim beach in North Goa. Instead, it smoulders orange and dives into the ocean in what seems like an unseemly hurry. Almost instantaneously, the day's heat dissipates, giving way to brisk breezes whipping off the ocean. This is the precise moment that the occupants of the shacks lining these broad sands have been waiting for all day. They pour out of the shadows and head straight down to the waterline, and the beach soon teems with gamboling toddlers and young families, with tattooed tranceheads and their impossibly slender Barbie-doll girlfriends.

Just a few years ago, you would have found it difficult to locate a single tourist on the stunning beach belt that extends north from Morjim to Ashvem,

Mandrem and beyond to legendary Arambol – now there are tens of thousands enjoying the sunset every evening in high season, and their numbers are only growing. There's a revolution taking place under the Goan sun, and you can see it right in front of your eyes. The favourite beach of the Russian tourists to Goa, Morjim has become a household name. Just a few short years after they first discovered the Indian state, Russians have become the most significant foreign contingent here, staying on in droves, starting businesses and families, right here on this once desolate coastline.

Several hours later, past midnight at the famous Saturday Night Bazaar in Arpora, there are further signs of the dramatic shift that has taken place. A

unique marketplace, the Bazaar is a dense warren of stalls containing boutiques run by artisans from all over the world. Picking your way through the crowds, it is easy to see that everyone is looking, but it's mainly one nationality doing the buying – the ones with big smiles on their faces, toting several bags in each hand, are the Russians. By the Bazaar organizer's count, more than 5,000 of them will visit the market over the course of this one evening alone. And more than 60,000 Russians are expected to visit Goa this season, with the majority flying direct to Dabolim Airport from Russia.

This dramatic tourism boom has taken place almost by stealth; it came long after Goa had become a global tourist hot spot. When the first →



HEY, MR DJ
At Shanti, DJ Sasha's popular hot spot, guests have included the likes of Talvin Singh, spinning to a packed house

Russian charter plane arrived from Moscow in 2001, the couple of hundred tourists who disembarked for a fortnight's visit represented a mere drop in the Arabian Sea compared to the tens of thousands of Brits, Germans, Israelis and other foreign nationalities who had already crowded on to this sun-kissed slice of the Konkan coast, part of a huge tourism influx that was showing signs of reaching 2 million visitors per year. Alexander Mamedov was on that first flight, and the Muscovite says that his eyes were immediately opened to the possibilities for Russian tourism in Goa. "Like many other Russians, I found India amazing, a taste of pure freedom," he says. "Even if I found someone pissing on my shoe, I had a smile on my face, I said, 'Wow, amazing.'" Previously a junior partner in a company that ran charter flights to Dubai, Mamedov began to promote Goa widely in Moscow, and then the rest of the country, eventually starting his own charter tourism agency, Goa.Ru. He is personally responsible for a huge chunk of the annual influx from Russia to Goa.

The growth has been almost unimaginable: from that sole charter flight

from Moscow in 2001, the number went up to 54 the very next season. By 2007, Russians were the second largest tourist contingent in Goa, inching closer and closer to the huge British numbers which has been established slowly over decades. As of 2010, it is no longer a race. As many as 300 flights are scheduled to land in Dabolim from Russia this year, more than double the number expected from Britain – more, in fact, than Britain and Germany combined. And these visitors aren't Moscow hipsters alone; there are now regular direct flights from cities you've never heard of – Samara, Ufa, Rostov-on-Don and Yekaterinburg. Incredibly, more than 100 flights come in from Siberia alone, ferrying thousands from far-flung cities like Krasnoyarsk and Novosibirsk for a beach-side holiday off the Arabian Sea. Many of these are first-time travellers, who haven't even visited Moscow.

The Russians pouring into Goa in such mind-bending numbers aren't the same people Indians became familiar with in the long years of non-alignment and the Soviet era. You will be hard-pressed to find dowdy babushkas or bearish Brezhnev types among them.

Putin's Russians are overwhelmingly young, fit, entrepreneurial, self-confident and, often, rich. Many take to India immediately, recognizing a place where they can fit in easily, where the ever-present corruption and thuggery in the system is merely a minor-league version of what they have to deal with back home. Together, they have unleashed an entrepreneurial tsunami that is reshaping North Goa. Where Morjim had exactly one beach shack 10 years ago, it now boasts more than a dozen Russian restaurants, each more ambitious than the next, featuring satellite television, lightning-fast free Wi-Fi, live DJs, and much more.

The most impressive of the Russian establishments is probably Shanti, run by Alexander Sukhochev. Just up the beach from Morjim proper, it is stylish, multi-storeyed and fabric-draped, perched on one of the most picturesque spots in all of Goa, where a freshwater rivulet meets the sea, with one of the best swimming areas right out front. This Goan Shanti – part of a group that includes outposts in Moscow, Kiev and the Crimea – has a popular presence on Facebook, a spiffy website, a separate

menu of pricey green teas, an astonishingly well-stocked bar, live electronic music, a comfortably sized dance floor and regular evening events featuring renowned DJs from Russia and beyond, including really big names like Talvin Singh and Cheb i Sabbah.

When I first met Sukhochev in 2005, DJ Sasha (as he referred to himself) was among a crowd of young Westerners looking for a way to stay in Goa and make a living by any means necessary. His determination was apparent even then – he told me he would write a best-selling book, start a restaurant and make a permanent home for himself. I remember his eyes shining brightly as he told me about his spiritual awakening during his first monsoon in Goa, far away from other Russians: "I felt myself opening up, I felt myself connected to the mother of the world. I want to share it with my generation of Russians – this is what we are looking for."

Since then, Sukhochev has made his dreams come true. He wrote *The Goa Syndrome*, about a young man like himself finding life's meaning and purpose after engaging with India under the coconut palms of Goa, and the book became a best-seller, setting another wave of young Russians on the road to Goa. He made a home for himself in the village of Siolim and started Shanti. In every way, this is a man who has arrived.

Sukhochev is representative of the generation of Russians who are steadily remodelling Morjim in the same way that previous waves of tourists from Britain remade the seaside village of Candolim, and the way the "Goa Freaks" of the Seventies reconfigured Anjuna. He is ceaselessly energetic and resourceful, endlessly adaptive and persistent – this is not a generation content to lie back on a beach bed and guzzle beer until it's time to return home.

Born in 1977, in the small city of Kursk, Sukhochev came of age in the desperate, chaotic period when Russia left the certainties of the Soviet era behind and began to engage uncertainly with the rest of the world. "I always felt like a white crow when I was young," he tells me, using a Russian expression to describe how he stood out in his hometown, and later at university in the nearby city of Voronezh. The very moment he finished his studies, Sukhochev

strapped on a backpack, headed to the highway and hitch-hiked his way out and away. He recalls standing for hours in the bitter winter cold, snow piling up around his ankles, with his thumb outstretched and not a single thought about retreating or turning back. Since then, his life has continued to be about "moving, moving, moving" with the same intensity: he arrived in India with just \$50 in his pocket, but 40 kilos of LP records in his bags, completely certain that the only way to go was forward. "My search has always been about getting the chance to feel the moment that is happening, to live this moment," he says. "I was not able to get there in Russia, but here I have begun to find what I am looking for." He links eyes with his girlfriend, Victoria, and they admit that they are considering starting a family.

Across the bridge over the Chapora River, in the sprawling, historic village

of Siolim, it's immediately apparent that Sasha and Victoria's baby will be part of an entire generation of Russian children growing up in Goa. I am touring Siolima-mama, a Russian kindergarten that is the only 24-hour child-care facility in Goa – besides being the only one in the world with a full drinks menu. Fair-haired children are being gently shepherded from playground to dining room to balcony by a watchful staff of young Russian women. On the rooftop, shaded by fabric canopies, a circle of mothers are in the middle of an exceptionally arduous yoga routine. When the session ends, owner Diana Taratuta hands over a gurgling, content baby girl to her equally beatific mother.

Taratuta is 25 years old, and comes from the city of Rostov-on-Don, though she worked in Moscow for a few years before visiting Goa for the first time in 2006 for a two-week trip. When she came back in 2009, it was with the →

About 300 flights are scheduled to land in Dabolim from Russia this year, more than double the number expected from Britain



TRAILBLAZE
Alexander Sukhochev (aka DJ Sasha) wrote the best-seller *The Goa Syndrome*, setting more Russians on the path to Goa

THE NEXT GENERATION

Diana Taratuta runs Siolima-mama, a Russian kindergarten where a whole new crop of Goa-born Russian tots are being raised



visited the Dalai Lama because they had been unable to have a child. When she conceived soon after, she says she realized that “in India, all dreams can come true”, and promptly converted to Buddhism. Now, she says, “I can’t imagine myself in Russia ever again; it is so unpleasant for me in Moscow when I visit, and I always am so happy when I come back.” She startles me a bit by raising her voice, looking me straight in the eye and saying, emphatically, “Goa is my native village now.” The sentiment rings true, somehow.

The all-colour newspaper that Shlyakhtina edits isn’t the only Russian language publication in Goa – there’s also a glossy magazine and dozens of blogs and websites. Besides the ever-present topics of nightlife and food,

Russian citizens can get visas on arrival in Goa, and excellent diplomatic relations mean it’s easier for them to get business visas

intention to stay. By this time, she was already part of a flood of young Russians who were looking to get out, to escape the economic doldrums that had seized their country since the global financial crisis. “My idea was to make a good retreat for myself,” she says. “Moscow had become difficult, I found it hard to breathe. The city was full of aggressive newcomers and ruthless competition. I could find no peace there. I thought of India. My best friend came here and had a positive transformation.”

Taratuta says that Goa presents challenges, but nothing like Moscow – she was able “to find inner peace here, to become calm and in control.” She, too, is planning to have a baby in Goa: “I insist that the child is raised right here, for the first six years at the least. Russia is a very difficult place right now for raising children.”



HOME AND AWAY
Grooving to beats at Shanti, odds are these Russians are “locals”. As editor of *Goa Express*, Shlyakhtina puts it: “Goa is my native village now”

Taratuta started Siolima-mama after her successful experience babysitting Albina, the tiny daughter of 34-year-old Olga Shlyakhtina, the chief editor of *Goa Express*, a Russian language newspaper that comes out every 10 days. Shlyakhtina credits her connection with India for the gift of Albina, who was born after she and her husband

all of these pages host constant and never-ending discussions about moving to Goa, or “down-shifting” as the Russians like to refer to it. They have many advantages compared to other nationalities: Russia is the only nation whose citizens can get visas on arrival in Goa, and excellent diplomatic relations between the countries mean that



A RUSSIAN IN GOA
Photographed at the Saturday Night Bazaar, Mike offers paragliding services at Arambol

it is easier for them to get business visas than, for example, the Italians or Swiss. More than 200 Russians have bought property legally in Goa, according to the embassy’s representatives, and over 200 business visas have been issued to Russian citizens. To that, one can add hundreds more, people who are hustling without official sanction, entirely comfortable within the system of bought political patronage and corruption that characterizes both the Russian and Indian economies – the only difference being that bribes in India are markedly smaller than those back home.

Late one evening in Siolim, I sit alongside Alexander Mamedov of Goa. Ru on the balcony of his sprawling new bungalow, watching his wife splash in the swimming pool with their baby son. Iosif Mamedov was born in nearby

Mapusa seven months ago, yet another in a growing generation of Goa-born Russians. His father is a veritable grey-beard compared to most of his compatriots in Goa. Born in 1972, he was already in the army when the Soviet ideology and system collapsed. Mamedov recalls the change vividly: “I learnt all the essential lessons right then – that you have to help yourself because no one will help you, about the value and meaning of a monopoly, about the many ways to use *baksheesh*.” He started greasing his officer’s palm and selling aluminium knives and forks from the army stores for their metal content. He shakes his head, remembering how the older generation was at once paralyzed and rendered helpless by the new order.

Still in his late thirties, Mamedov has succeeded in shaping his life to his

satisfaction, and like many self-made men, he has a cockiness and certitude to him that is at once immensely likeable and slightly intimidating. Leaning back on some cushions, he tells me with a chuckle that his daily “work” schedule now includes at least one massage, several hours of chilling on the beach and at least 25 minutes on a water scooter zipping up and down the Morjim-Ashvem-Mandrem coastline.

“My life is beautiful here,” he says. “In Russia, it is complicated, I never know what people really want from me and I am always watching my back. It is nerve-racking. And don’t forget, it is cold, it is so incredibly cold. Today, it is minus-25 degrees in Moscow. Do you know what that does to your body? Why would I want to go back? There is no reason at all for me to go back.” ☺