

15.2993° N, 74.1240° E

# The *beat* of a new *drum*

Once the sole preserve of backpackers and bongo-loving hippies, Goa now attracts altogether more urbane visitors thanks to a growing collection of smart design hotels and world-beating restaurants. It's the dawn of a new age, says *Vivek Menezes*



Photography by Tom Parker

For as long as anyone can remember, the string of beachfront villages that curves northwards to Goa's border with Maharashtra has retained an edge-of-the-world feel, even compared to the rest of this famously laid-back destination. Simple bamboo huts and bare beach shacks punctuate the sands, while the dense inland jungle was best known for hosting the last original hippies standing, who could sometimes be found by the water at nightfall, welcoming the day's end with rhythmic drumming sessions.

More recently, an effusion of new age chic was added to the crusty old vibe, even while the distant, legendary Arambol fishing village remained at the very furthest reaches of Goa's tourism infrastructure. It's definitely not the kind of place you'd expect to find a chef who's worked at two of the world's most acclaimed restaurants, but that's exactly how Gome Galily likes it. "I realise my place is quite remote," explains the young cook, whose resumé includes the world-famous Noma in Copenhagen and Nahm in Bangkok. "But what happens here is my clients have to be a bit motivated to get to the restaurant, and to eat my presentations. That works out for both of us."

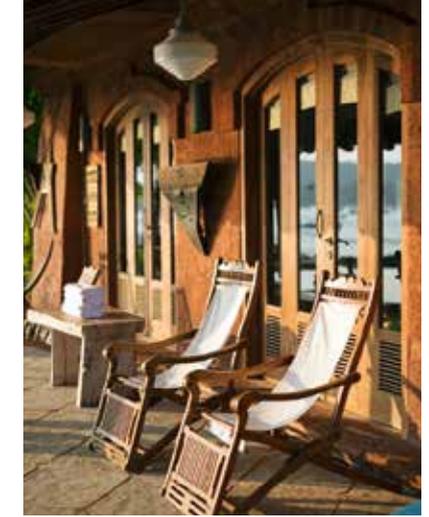
His restaurant, Matsya Freestyle Kitchen, located in the Samata yoga retreat, is tucked far down a country road. It's difficult to find even if you manage to reach the centre of Arambol, but the journey is worth it. There are no menus. Instead, Galily will chat with you about your preferences, before conjuring up a mind-expanding multi-course tasting menu of small plates. It's the exemplar of a bespoke, destination dining experience which still manages to feel entirely appropriate, despite the remote location.

"I use a lot of unusual ingredients from all over the world, which could be challenging for many

**"The area is still quite rustic still, but there are more than enough worldly, sophisticated and adventurous people who really get what I'm trying to do"**



Clockwise from above Ahilya by the Sea is one of the smart, new hotels changing the face of Goa tourism; Gome Galily's CV includes two of the world's best restaurants



Ahilya's terrace looks out onto the Arabian Sea

people, but actually that's not been a problem here," explains the chef, whose CV also includes a stint on superyachts in Monaco and a multi-million dollar project in Ibiza. "I've found this place can be deceptive; it's not what you might imagine from first impressions. The area is quite rustic still, but there are more than enough worldly, sophisticated and adventurous people who really get what I'm trying to do."

Galily is a quiet standard bearer for something entirely new under the Konkan sun. Long renowned as an idyllic place of escape from modern existence, Goa has begun to attract the most sophisticated world travellers, thanks to a growing number of smart hotels, designer boutiques and world-beating restaurants. At the same time, a new generation of artists, entrepreneurs, musicians and fashionistas from around the world are settling in to establish residence, adding muscle and zest to an already buzzing creative community.

These changes have been evident in Panjim, the tiny riverside capital of India's smallest state, where there's widespread renewal of the centuries-old Latinate buildings and neighbourhoods that give the city its timeless, charming character. But what's happening in Goa's far north is both unlikely and unprecedented. Just 15 years ago, the beaches of Pernem taluka – Morjim, Ashvem, Mandrem, Kerim and Arambol – really felt like another world. You had to take a slow ferry across the Chapora river, and the roads from that point onward were legendarily abysmal. Very few visitors to Goa ever took the trouble.

Two factors changed everything in the first years of the new millennium. First, the state government completed a bridge across the river from the village of Siolim to the town of Morjim. Then, almost simultaneously, young Russians discovered Goa. From zero, pretty much overnight, scores >



## “The very fact an urbane, lifestyle brand has seen fit to pitch up in Goa says everything about where the destination is headed”

busily set about creating relationships, starting businesses and raising families, causing powerful ripple effects throughout the villages of the north.

of direct charter flights began to arrive at Dabolim airport from the countries of the former Soviet bloc, spilling thousands of eager travellers who headed almost en masse to the newly accessible beaches of the north. The novelist and musician Alexander Sukhochev signalled the phenomenon, declaring “there used to be only one famous beach that Russians called their own: Brighton Beach in Brooklyn. But now there is another one in Goa, called Morjim.”

Just adjacent to Siolim, the reconfiguration of once-edgy Vagator beach is particularly marked. Here you can find Genacvale, India’s only authentic Georgian restaurant, with cheese and wine imported directly from the Caucasus. High on a cliffside is Thalassa, the Greek restaurant which has become a storied Indian institution, constantly crammed with Bollywood stars and Delhi bigwigs. Close by is Antares, the brand new ambitious Indo-Aussie restaurant headed by Australian *MasterChef* finalist Sarah Todd. And in a prime location sloping down to the beach (access is sealed off pending a legal dispute) is India’s first W Hotel, from the youth-oriented “luxury lifestyle destination” brand of Starwood Hotels.

Unlike many of the young travellers who came before them, the mass of Russians in Goa weren’t particularly peripatetic – they liked what they saw, and wanted more of it. They put down instant roots in a burst of frenetic energy. Basing themselves mostly in Siolim, these Russian hipsters

Even after just a few weeks jostling for place in Goa’s increasingly crowded hospitality landscape, it’s evident that the W has set some new benchmarks. Staffed by hip, young things, there is a steady emphasis on slick design and clubby music to create “exclusive and extraordinary experiences”. The common areas are meticulously appointed, while vivid and modern architectural touches lend the feel of an urban boutique. Best of all is a unique laterite-lined rock pool tucked directly below the ramparts of Chapora fort, giving an extraordinary sweeping view across the expanse of Vagator beach.

The significance of the new W goes beyond its mere presence. The very fact that an urbane, lifestyle-oriented brand, popular with smart city types, has seen fit to pitch up in Goa says everything about where the destination is headed and who’s now heading here. There has been nothing like the W before in Goa, where the luxury experience has been previously determined >



**Clockwise from right**  
On the W Hotel’s terrace; the W’s interior is full of smart design touches; Goan crab, as imagined by Matsya Freestyle Kitchen



by gargantuan resort complexes like the Grand Hyatt in Bambolim or tiny boutique hotels like the peerless Elsewhere in Mandrem. The pocket-sized Ahilya by the Sea in Nerul, across the river from Panjim, has also attempted to set a new standard for exclusive, secluded rooms in gorgeous locations. Once the family home of the hotel's owner Leela Ellis, a Goan who represented India at the Olympic Games, it is filled with antique furniture and set right next to the estuarine bay where the Mandovi river meets the Arabian Sea. Together these smart stays are defining a new visitor experience.

Directly down the road from Vagator, the densely forested village of Assagao is another centre of gravity for the new Goa. Its informal clubhouse is 6 Assagao, a 100-year-old colonial villa which houses the brilliant, one-of-a-kind restaurant Gunpowder and the wildly eclectic People Tree boutique. Under the guidance of the

## "Today Goa attracts people who offer experiences that are enviable and exclusive compared to the rest of India"



**Clockwise from above** Peter and Rosie in their Kitchen Garden; pineapple is one of the many items grown in their food forest; Indian and Sri Lankan Curry at Gunpowder; Gunpowder's unique community space



energetic "community and cultural practitioner" Nilankur Das, it also hosts film screenings, discussions, debates and a variety of concerts. Stop by any evening and you will find a hub of passionate idealism, alive with an endlessly diverse mix of young people who are committed to using Goa as a base for change.

That's the motivation for Rosie Harding and Peter Fernandes, an Australian-Indian couple who've created a stunningly bountiful "kitchen garden and food forest" on a previously degraded strip of land. Notably influential evangelists for organics and permaculture, they told me Assagao was the perfect location for their experimental venture because "Goa's distinctive balance between natural landscapes and cosmopolitan connections is a fertile environment for creative folks. It's the best of both worlds, because cross-pollination and diversity are the key not only to rich and stable natural ecosystems, but also to rich and inviting communities where people can lead great lives."

Those sentiments were mirrored exactly by Bavarian cheesemaker Barbara Schwarzfischer in the scrupulously scrubbed little factory that

produces Swiss Happy Cow Cheese. Long before I met her, I'd been happily eating her delicious and fresh pecorino cheeses laced with rosemary and dried chili peppers. Then her Siolim-made camembert showed up in my neighbourhood supermarket in Panjim and I became really intrigued. After my family tried it along with crusty Goan bread, we became collectively obsessed. This was a frankly unbelievable development – finding a first-rate camembert to match even the best imported French version.

For some years, Schwarzfischer alternated between making cheese in the Swiss Alps and Goa. Then, "I realised how happy I was to make these kinds of cheese right here, with no compromises in quality." Happy Cow now manufactures small batches of a very wide range of cheeses, from semi-hard raclette to unctuous goat brie. Schwarzfischer's Parmesan has been ageing for around a year – it already tastes wonderful – and will soon be widely released. Her first Gruyère-style cheese will be ready for fondue in just four months. Surrounded by her staff of Goan ladies beaming with pride, she's looking to the future. "I'm so excited about this moment," she says. "It's really very satisfying."

No one has been better situated to observe the transformation of his homeland than Wendell Rodricks, native son and Indian fashion icon. "Goa has always been the escape for the creative mind. The land has produced wonderful writers, musicians and other talents and attracts visitors who are of a similar sensibility. Now the number of creative persons and enterprises, from fashion to food, has grown tremendously. Today Goa attracts people who offer merchandise and experiences that are enviable and exclusive compared to the rest of India. They cater to the discerning traveller, looking for the unusual 'off the regular' tourist route. This has resulted in a splendid Goan hideaway retreat that discerning travellers can enjoy." >

The progress Rodricks describes is especially visible in Panjim, which continues to emerge as a cultural capital of India. It hosts a prodigious number of significant events, including the popular Goa Arts & Literature Festival and the International Film Festival of India. The most recent addition is the impressive, biennial-scale Serendipity Arts Festival, which combines an extravaganza of visual and performing arts. The inaugural 2016 edition offered exhibitions mounted by India's leading curators in stunning renovated galleries in the 500-year-old Palacio Idalcao (aka Old Secretariat), now widely acclaimed as one of the finest arts spaces in the subcontinent.

All around the Palacio Idalcao, centuries-old neighbourhoods extend in a profusion of primary colours, overhanging balconies and hidden gardens. After decades of neglect, a new generation of original inhabitants are re-opening their ancestral properties as boutiques, inns, restaurants and taverns. Wendell Rodricks's Design Space spreads across the upper floor of an aristocratic mansion in Campal. Near the centre of town, in a nook of the old house she grew up in, Sacha Mendes tends her quirky boutique, full of clothes you can't find anywhere else. If the new Goan world has a capital, it might just be the Mendes home. There, on the ground floor, you'll also find The Black Sheep Bistro. Owned and operated by Goa's own Prahlad Sukhtankar and his wife Sabreen, it showcases rigorously sourced modern food that riffs on local ingredients, a broad array of Indian wines and >

## Peace, love and psychedelic trance

How Goa went from hippie mecca to upmarket paradise



**From left**  
Fishermen on the beach next to Ahilya by the Sea; Schullen Fernandes, head of design at Wendell Rodricks's boutique

### 1957

The first British bus company offers overland trips to India, beginning the so-called "Hippie Trail" from Western Europe to Asia. The Indiaman's trips start in London and go through the Middle East.

### 1966

Eight Finger Eddie, a 40-year-old US-Armenian expat considered to be Goa's founding hippie ("the Original Freak"), settles at Anjuna beach and offers free shelter to "flower children".

### 1969

Joe Banana, Anjuna's first restaurant, opens. It becomes Goa's busiest hippie hang-out.

### 1968

The Beatles make a much-publicised trip to Rishikesh to attend a Transcendental Meditation session, which sparks a surge in Western kids travelling to India. With its lax laws, Goa becomes popular with freedom-seekers.

### 1975

Eight Finger Eddie, real name Yertward Mazamanian, founds the popular weekly Anjuna flea market, a vital form of income for the hippie community.

### 1979

Russia's invasion of Afghanistan effectively ends the overland Hippie Trail.

### 1983

A new "cyber-hippie" movement emerges as DJs such as Fred Disko and Goa Gil begin to play psytrance music at open-air parties on Goa's beaches.

### 1993

DJ Paul Oakenfold's two-hour Essential Mix on BBC Radio 1 marks the start of a golden era of "Goa trance". The number of tourists going to "India's Ibiza" rises steadily.

### 2000

Siolim House's opening begins a trend for upscale heritage hotels that sees guests such as Kate Moss and Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan recast Goa as India's glamour getaway.

### 2010

Goa records its highest ever visitor numbers. Eight Finger Eddie dies in Anjuna aged 85. A tribute on his Facebook page reads: "He, more than anyone, put Goa on the map."

### 2013

Chic, beachside yoga resort the Anahata Retreat opens on the fashionable Ashvem beach. Considered another beacon of the new Goa, Ahilya by the Sea, an upscale boutique hotel in Nerul village, follows in 2015. "The hippie days are over," goes a story in the *Guardian*. "Goa has evolved."

### 2017

The state bans two of Goa's biggest electronic music festivals for the first time in their history. Sunburn and Vh1 Supersonic are forced to relocate to Pune. "Goa and EDM are not friends anymore," reads a headline in *India Today*.



award-winning handcrafted cocktails. In a city still enamoured by basic fish-curry-rice holes in the wall, this modish contemporary establishment has become a landmark, the very definition of Goa in exhilarating metamorphosis. It's no surprise that the BSB is already recognised as one of the best new restaurants in India.

One day recently, Gome Galily took the long ride down from Arambol to Panjim. This trip can feel like a voyage through worlds, even different centuries. Coconut groves and paddy fields yield to blinking neon and pounding trance, then hushed dimly lit village bylanes. Finally, he crossed the Mandovi bridge, high above floating casinos and tourist boats, and entered the city's welcoming heritage precincts. There, a genteel Old World ethos still prevails. Formal clothing and mannered exchanges continue to be the norm. For some moments, Galily was nonplussed. But then he entered The Black Sheep Bistro, seamlessly merged with the crowd, and was swallowed up in the revelry.

He'd obviously found home. ■

*Thanks to Greaves Travel, which offers tailor-made trips to India including specialist guides, spa retreats and tours. A five-night Goa tour staying at The W Hotel costs from \$1,912 per person, including flights on Etihad Airways, B&B accommodation, transfers and sightseeing.*



**Above** Sabreen and Prahlad Sukhtankar of Black Sheep Bistro in Panjim; Black Sheep Bistro is the centre of the new Goa

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**Etihad offers daily flights from Abu Dhabi to Goa via Mumbai with partner Jet Airways. Etihad.com**



### Old Goa, remembered

Jonas Coutinho, a local guide of 24 years, recalls the effects of flower power

"Oh, for sure, Goa has changed since its hippie heyday, no doubt. Back then, the beaches were empty and there were no bridges, just boats. And we Goans were a more simple, uncomplicated and contented lot. We had a very easy-going, live-for-today mantra. That's why the hippies of the 1960s and 70s settled here, I think. They were never unwelcome in Goa.

"I remember bunking off college in the late 1980s to go to the Anjuna flea market; in those days, hippies would sell all their stuff there when they'd run out of money: Nike shoes, Adidas T-shirts, even bottles of Coca-Cola, all this Western exotica you couldn't get in India at the time. I remember I bought my first pair of jeans – I was 18, I think – Levis, for 60 rupees (\$1). I was so happy – Europeans and Americans were much bigger than us Indians, so to find anything in your size was a real coup.

"They would teach us naughty stuff, too. I remember one guy told us to chew fermented betel nuts. I never tried it, but others did. Either way, the hippies were never pushed out of Goa. But, after the tourism boom of the 1990s, the economy took off, and they were priced out, basically. The markets are still here. But Goa is much more upwardly mobile now. Back then, we were property-rich, cash-poor. But that's changed. When I was a kid, our fish-curry rice was made from mackerel, sardine. These days, it's snapper, barracuda, bass – we're big-fish people now."