

Chicago Tribune  
**TRAVEL**

# Peace and love in Goa

Vibe decidedly friendly in former Portuguese colony and hippie haven

**STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER**  
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"No fighting about religion in Goa," called our driver over his shoulder as we bounced down a rutted road to the beach in this tiny state in southwest India.

We'd remarked about the number of churches we'd seen during our stay — a whitewashed steeple in what seemed like every village — and wondered how Christians fare in a country that's 80 percent Hindu, 13 percent Muslim.

His answer echoed what others told us: no problem. Goans get along.

"I invite my neighbors for Christmas, and I go to their houses for Diwali," said Shailesh Pai, a long-time resident.

Christians — 35 percent of Goa's population — place crosses outside their homes, said Pai, and often share a common wall with Hindu dwellings where carved stone planters grow tulsi, or holy basil, in the front yard. Stars come out on Christian houses in December; colorful paper lanterns hang from Hindu homes during the festival of lights.

Even in a nation known for diversity, Goa stands apart. Residents refer to themselves as Goan, not Indian, as if they live in another country. Not that long ago, they did.

## European influences

Portugal established a colony here in 1510. Not until 1961 did the Portuguese leave, giving Goa its freedom. It wasn't until 1987 that Goa officially became a state in India.

Architecture, especially that of churches, resembles southern Europe. Music contains strains of Portuguese fado. The Portuguese introduced potatoes, tomatoes, pineapples and cashews into the cuisine, and Goans use the apple of the cashew tree to make feni, their version of white lightning.

While many Indians follow a vegetarian diet, Goans eat meat, primarily pork. And with 66 miles of coastline on the Arabian Sea, fish is a staple. Rice and curry dishes also abound, thanks to a tropical climate where spice plantations flourish.

The Portuguese practice of afternoon siestas continues to be followed by some Goans, and an attitude of so-called *susegad* prevails. Derived from the Portuguese word *sossegado*, meaning quiet, it refers to a state of tranquil contentment, peace and tolerance.

Perhaps that's why hippies flocked to Goa. They came in the '70s, their laid-back lifestyle



The Vagator beach is among the most popular in North Goa.

fitting right in with life in the beach towns of North Goa. Wild, all-night parties and scantily clad sun lovers roaming the beaches were all part of the scene.

The hippies are mostly gone now, though a few with gray dreadlocks might be spotted on the beaches.

The D'Souzas, a proud Portuguese family name, run the Sunset Guesthouse, Bar & Restaurant overlooking Anjuna beach, once one of the biggest hippie hangouts. Back in the day, Anthony D'Sousa said, hippies would stash their backpacks in the brush behind the beach, strip and go for a swim.

Anjuna still has a Wednesday night flea market, and partiers might find a rave in one of North Goa's beach towns. Most visitors, though, are of the

mainstream variety, on package tours from Russia and the U.K. or on family vacations from Mumbai and New Delhi. They come for the same reason our family came: a day at the beach and another touring Goa's impressive historical sites ([goa-tourism.com](http://goa-tourism.com)).

## Two Goas

The state of Goa comprises two districts, South Goa and North Goa, with the latter being more developed.

Rocky outcroppings divide North Goa's popular beaches: Anjuna, Vagator and Calangute. Women in brightly colored saris stroll the sand, approaching sunbathers reclining under beach umbrellas to hawk scarves, jewelry and trinkets. A massage or manicure, maybe?

Cows, revered in India, wander the beaches at will, their curved horns framing idyllic scenes of palm trees and surf. On Vagator beach, one pokes its snout into a tote bag left on a chaise. A server from a nearby food shack picks up a stick and chases it away.

Visitors wanting a change from the beach can book a driver through their hotel and go exploring.

The Tropical Spice Plantation in North Goa welcomes guests with herbal tea and a flower garland before a tour of the grounds. A buffet lunch follows, with traditional Goan fish curry among the options. Servers offer samples of kaju feni, a lighter version of the cashew liqueur made only in Goa. Full-strength feni has an alcohol content of nearly 43 percent, not an



The colonial architecture of Se Cathedral resembles churches in southern Europe. It's one of several churches in Old Goa's UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Evidence of Goa's Christian heritage can be seen in almost every village in the southwest Indian state.

ideal beverage before taking the elephant rides the plantation offers.

Goa's colonial past unfolds in Old Goa, a UNESCO World Heritage site in North Goa. A bustling city of traders, merchants and missionaries in the 16th century, it nearly vanished after waves of cholera epidemics forced the Portuguese to move the capital to Panaji (or Panjim) in the 18th century. Of the mile-long strip of monasteries, cathedrals and churches that remain, two stand out.

Catholic pilgrims from around the globe come to the Basilica de Bom Jesus, built by the Jesuits in 1594. A silver reliquary contains the body of St. Francis Xavier, Goa's patron saint. His marble and jasper tomb stands near the main altar, with the glass-sided casket at such a height it

offers only a glimpse of the relic inside.

Old Goa's other significant church stands across a main road, its white exterior gleaming under the tropical sun. Se Cathedral, one of the largest churches in Asia, looks as if it might be in Tuscany.

Outside, only one of two bell towers remains, giving the facade a lopsided look. The ringing of its Golden Bell took on an ominous tone in the 16th and 17th centuries during the Goa Inquisition, when the condemned were executed in the nearby market square.

But just as the city of Old Goa has disappeared, that dark time of religious intolerance has been relegated to the history books.

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