

Ready, steady Go

This tropical hot spot has more going for it than just good winter weather, finds Meera Dattani

It's India - but not as you know it. Goa's palm tree-lined coast and fantastic beach resorts have made it popular with British travellers, but there's more to India's smallest state.

Inland lies a landscape of spice farms and river valleys, while 450 years of Portuguese rule left magnificent churches, colonial mansions and tasty Indo-Portuguese cuisine. And with the new e-Tourist Visa available up to four days before departure, planning a trip to India just became a whole lot easier.

▶ SELL: COAST, CUISINE AND CULTURE

"Goa is a fantastic add-on for beach time after a touring itinerary," says Nikhil Chhibber, Western & Oriental's India product manager. "There's good

connectivity to other cities in India such as IndiGo Airlines' new route from Varanasi."

Boasting more than 65 miles of coastline, Goa's beaches are its biggest attraction, with budget, boutique and luxury resorts along the whole stretch, and plenty of opportunities for watersports and beachfront dining.

"North Goa continues to provide the majority of our sales," says Ann Ashley, Thomas Cook's regional product manager for the Middle East, Far East, Africa and Indian Ocean. "We've also seen growth in family holidays, and more than half our bookings are for 14 nights or more."

North Goa beaches such as Baga, Calangute and Anjuna found favour with the hippy and party crowd in the 1960s, but the scene has mellowed



It's worth suggesting B&B stays for clients who enjoy trying local cuisine

over the years and this stretch has room for everyone, with a range of resorts and hotels, plus less-crowded options at Candolim and Mandrem.

South Goa is generally quieter. Starting south of the inland town of Margao, it ranges from the 12-mile white-sand Majorda beach to the headland of Cabo de Rama, taking in the sandy beaches of Agonda, Varca, Colva, Cavelossim and Mobor in between.

Away from the beach, explore Panjim and Old Goa's colonial architecture, historic forts, churches and Hindu temples. Then there's the food. Many local restaurants are within walking distance of hotels, serving fresh seafood and delicious Indo-Portuguese dishes - it's worth suggesting bed-and-breakfast stays for clients who enjoy trying local cuisine. Intrepid Travel's 15-day Real Food Adventure [→](#)



Hayes & Jarvis offers a week at three-star Colonia Santa Maria hotel on a B&B basis with three evening meals, transfers and Oman Air flights from Gatwick, priced from £899 based on a November 23 departure. hayesandjarvis.co.uk

Cox & Kings has a seven-night stay with breakfast at Ahilya by the Sea, including Jet Airways flights from London via Mumbai and transfers, from £1,595. coxandkings.co.uk

Thomson offers seven nights' B&B at the 4T+ Grand Mercure Goa Shrem Resort, including flights from London and transfers. Prices start at £825 for travel on December 2. thomson.co.uk

Travel 2 provides seven nights with breakfast at the Alila Diwa Goa in a terrace room, with return flights from London and transfers, for £959 in November. travel2.com



ends with three days in Goa, with visits to local markets, a spice farm and chance to sample the local feni spirit, made from cashew apples or coconut palm sap. Yoga breaks attract many too, and it's easy to book classes once there through hotels and yoga centres. Nature lovers will enjoy birdwatching trips along the mangrove-lined River Sal, nature walks with Goa Nature Trails or crab-fishing, either via hotels or companies such as John's Boat Tours.

SEE: SPICE FARMS, MARKETS AND CHURCHES GALORE

Beach life, sunset cocktails and seafood suppers keep many happy, but those who want to explore won't be disappointed. Suggest the 16th-century Portuguese fort, Fort Aguada; grand churches such as St Catherine's Cathedral in the former capital of Portuguese-India and Unesco World Heritage Site of Old Goa; trips to Panjim or Margao town; or a peek inside restored colonial mansions such as Palacio do Deao by the Kushavati River in Quepem. Built in 1787 by a Portuguese nobleman and founder of the town, owners offer guided tours and an Indo-Portuguese lunch.

Goa's spice plantations are beautiful, and include places such as Sahakari Spice Farm, Tropical Spice Plantation and Savoi near Ponda, and Tanshikar's Working Organic Spice Farm near Sanguem, where guided tours include lunch and a sip of feni. Other ideas include Dudhsagar Falls, one of India's highest waterfalls, and the boat to Chorao Island, home to Dr Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary, which was named after a renowned Indian ornithologist.



FAR LEFT: Taj Exotica Goa

LEFT: A potter at work

BELOW: The Leela hotel, Goa



Visitors can sample the local feni spirit, made from cashew apples or coconut palm sap

Agents can add many of these experiences with Viator, which also offers a trip to Loutolim where the Ancestral Goa Centre, known locally as the Big Foot Museum, showcases local customs in a re-creation of a Goan village. Opposite is the restored colonial mansion Miranda House.

Urban Adventures' cultural tour of Panjim takes in the old Latin quarter Fontainhas, markets and an art gallery. For shopping, there's more than the Anjuna flea market. Suggest Mackie's Night Bazaar and Saturday Night

Market in Arpora and Mapusa Market for textiles, jewellery and souvenirs.

STAY: LUXURY, BOUTIQUE AND HERITAGE HOUSES

Five-star resorts, family-run guesthouses and boutique hideaways: Goa has the lot. Among Carrier and Kuoni's choices are Mediterranean-style Taj Exotica Goa, set in 56 acres of gardens by Benaulim Beach; the luxurious suites of The Leela, with 75 acres of tropical gardens by quiet Mobor Beach; and Park Hyatt Goa Resort & Spa on Arossim Beach, popular for its kids' club, lagoon pool, spa and Portuguese-style pousadas. Signature from Thomas Cook has recently added Goa to its Exotic Escapes brochure, offering six five-star hotels bookable with its charter flights.

Other options include the Taj properties by Sinquerim Beach. Vivanta by Taj Holiday Village has an excellent spa and Goa's first Thai



→ restaurant Banyan Tree, and is sold by operators such as Abercrombie & Kent and Kuoni. Neighbouring hillside resort Vivanta by Taj Fort Aguada is renowned for its food and drink, with the likes of seafood grills at Morisco and creative cocktails at the SFX bar.

Boutique is big too. Cox & Kings' India product manager, Sue Livsey, says: "We're seeing increased interest in small properties, which are often in former Portuguese colonial houses or heritage buildings. They offer the atmosphere of a private home with period decor, but with hotel facilities such as a pool and Wi-Fi."

Among Cox & Kings' options are the seven-suite Siolim House with a private pool, 10-room Casa Britona in a 300-year-old former customs house on the Mandawi River, and Ahilya by the Sea by Coco Beach, which has eight rooms and suites inspired by Goan art, culture and cuisine.

An infinity pool and paddy field setting have made Alila Diwa Goa a favourite with operators such as Audley Travel, Thomson and Thomas Cook. Its new Detox Detour programme includes hypnotherapy, yoga and cooking classes at award-winning restaurant Spice Studio.



ASK THE EXPERT

“Goa is still a great destination for eating out, where visitors aren't restricted to an all-inclusive hotel. The shopping is fantastic, prescription glasses are especially cheap, and there are some great tailors who will tailor-make a suit, dress or whatever you fancy for a fraction of the cost in the UK. Visitors should also ensure they make time to watch the sun go down; I think Goa has some of the most beautiful sunsets I've ever seen.”

Ann Ashley, Thomas Cook regional product manager, the Middle East, Far East, Africa and Indian Ocean:



Boutique properties are often in ex-Portuguese colonial houses or heritage buildings

Behind Bogmalo Beach is the boutique resort Coconut Creek, its luxury two-storey villas set around a lagoon pool popular with clients of Transindus and Insider Journeys. For golfers, suggest five-star all-inclusive Lalit Golf & Spa Resort on Raj Baga beach.

Goa also has an excellent standard of mid-budget accommodation. Olympic Holidays offers several two and three-star spots in the resorts of Calangute, Candolim and Baga. With Insider Journeys, agents can book three-star hotels Sonesta Inn on Candolim Beach and heritage property Cidade de Goa on Vainguinim beach, while Colonia Santa Maria, a Hayes & Jarvis favourite on Baga Beach, features Goan art and a secluded garden setting.

Goa continues to be popular for Thomson. It has added Grand Mercure

New this season

The Goa Experience is a new specialist brand which begins its first season on November 3. Introduced by Serenity Holidays, which also runs The Gambia Experience and several other specialist brands to Senegal, Cape Verde, Corsica and Sardinia, the new programme features 20 hotels, ranging from two-and-a-half to five-star, spread across Goa and including a handful of boutique properties exclusive to the brand. The brochure also features a comprehensive guide to Goa, with ideas for what to see and do, including excursions, multi-centre holidays and short tours of India. goaexperience.co.uk

Goa Shrem Resort, which it gives a Platinum 4T+ rating, for winter 2015, along with the 3T-rated Ocean Palms, in its new Small and Friendly collection. Clients embarking on the operator's new five-night Kerala Backwater Tour, which starts in Goa, can stay on at the Taj Exotica or Heritage Village Club. **TW**



LEFT: Palolem beach
BELOW: Park Hyatt Goa Resort & Spa
BOTTOM: Heritage Village Club

