

# LITTORALLY Laid-Back

The hippy-chic attractions of Goa's beaches have been on the radar for a generation, but discerning travellers keen to top up both their chi and their tan are now discovering the allure of the uncluttered south of India's smallest state, reports **Peter Swain**



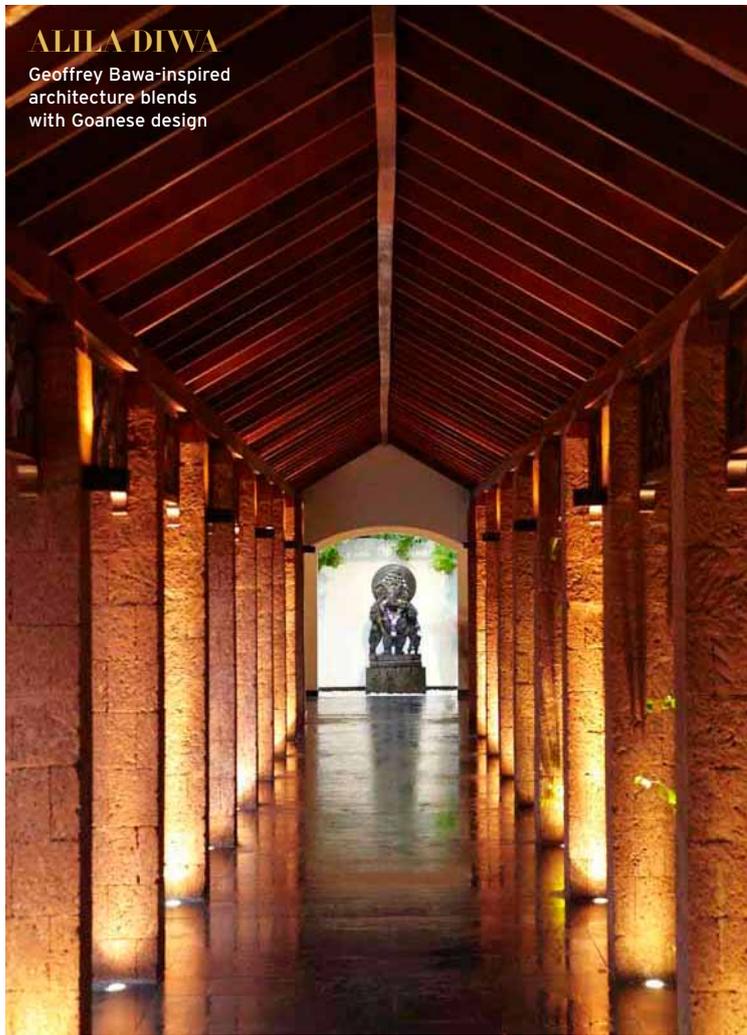
**t**he frangipani-scented stroll from the shady verandah of the Portuguese colonial-style Shanthi Vanam guesthouse in the village of Varcá to the coconut palm-fringed beach passes an ornate Catholic church, shimmering green paddy fields, a fighting bull resting in the shade of a flowering cashew tree, and a traditional wooden-hulled outrigger pulled high up onto the shoreline. It takes ten minutes, and embodies 500 years of history.

Ever since Portuguese navigators first arrived on these fecund shores in 1510, sailing east in their search for spices worth literally more than their weight in gold, this exotic locale on the Subcontinent's western seaboard has been the most cosmopolitan of Indian destinations. Trading in Chinese porcelain, Thai silk, pearls from the Arabian Gulf and nutmeg, cloves and cinnamon from the Molucca islands, European



**PARK HYATT**

Fresh from a full renovation,  
the Sereno spa offers  
specialised treatments



## ALILA DIWA

Geoffrey Bawa-inspired architecture blends with Goanese design



## KENILWORTH

Indo-Portuguese windows permeate the beach resort



## KENILWORTH

A luscious gin-blue swimming pool for colonial-class lounging



## LEELA

Classic Indian offerings and the latest amenities

## LEELA

Cuisine sweetened  
by the local spice  
garden



## PARK HYATT

Local spices make  
for a unique spa  
experience



merchants transformed Goa into an opulent 16th-century Bond Street bazaar. Colonial ties proved strong, so while the rest of India gained independence in 1947, Portugal hung on to Goa until 1961, with full Indian statehood only being granted in 1987.

This semi-detached relationship with the rest of country, and the exuberant Catholic traditions which inform many aspects of life, from dress to architecture, food and local customs, explains why so many European travellers feel an affinity with the chilled-out milieu; after a good dinner, when the party crowd's local liqueur of choice, coconut Fenny, kicks in, you could almost be in the Côte d'Azur of the 1920s.

At the *recherché* Anjuna night market in northern Goa, you can still find those original trading commodities, together with hand-loomed Pashminas from Kashmir, exquisitely carved ebony and ivory, gold and silver jewellery, and counterfeit goods of every hue. The beach raves still happen but like an aging rocker past his prime, many feel the north has become a victim of its own sybaritic success, so for those who like their beaches wide, white and a tad more exclusive, the 50km south Goan littoral stretching from Colva, through Varca, down to Palolem is now the playground of choice.

Some describe the ambience as “India-lite”, combining as it does the earthy richness of traditional India with a veneer of European sophistication and service. “We have several very exclusive five-star resorts, a number of boutique hotels and a few very classy B&Bs,” says Shanthy Vanam's Anglo-French *châtelaine*, Carole Hagelauer, from her bougainvillea-bedecked terrace. “People like the tranquility down here – it's all very Zen, with the Ayurvedic centres much in vogue.” In south Goa, your mantra is more important than your Manolos.

The international creatives who call Goa home exude good karma – it's all about lifestyle. So after a leisurely dip in the balmy waters of the Indian Ocean at Colva Beach, and some power tanning under the beady eye of the honey buzzards, kites and sea eagles patrolling the tropical skies on the lookout for discarded comestibles, dead snakes and lost dreams, you might take a light lunch of spicy shrimp curry (*xit kodi*) with a side order of fresh cashew nuts, all washed down by a cold Kingfisher or three, at one of Benaulim's modish waterside eateries.

After an hour in the spa aligning your chakras, you'll find an afternoon visit to Margao's fine indoor market, very ... everything – colourful, pungent, noisy and chaotic; the spices, snapper, pomfret and Bombay duck are fabulous. This vibrant market town is in transition, with half falling down, the other half being rebuilt. In nearby Chandor, those needing a cultural fix head for the Braganza-Perreira house – dating back to the 16th-century, a peach of colonial architecture – before taking in the Chandeshwar temple, dedicated to Shiva, at Parvath. “This part of Goa has such a rich history,” purrs Hagelauer, “but mostly my guests come back for the sort of pristine beaches the Mediterranean hasn't had for decades.”

The most flawless is at Palolem where feathery palms frame the bay like a fine Chopard necklace. Running down to Rajbag a few miles further south, several grand hotels have recently emerged, much sought after not only in the drier high season, from October to March, but also during the monsoon, from April to September, when the flora is at its most pulsatingly exotic, religious festivals are held, and the beaches are practically empty.

Today's footprints in the sand are made not by Portuguese explorers but by sophisticated long-haul hedonists, and whatever the time of year, they find south Goa's unique balance of outward affluence and inner harmony peculiarly seductive.

**PARK HYATT**

Cuisine fit for a  
Maharaja



# TRAVELLER'S HANDBOOK



## BIG BEACH

### THE LEELA KEMPINSKI GOA, CAVELOSSIM

Fabulous spa destination, golf holiday, family playground and beach retreat rolled into one deluxe package. This 186-room place features kitschy Indian-temple-meets-Portuguese-colonial decor, but the manicured 30ha grounds, fragrant spice garden and pristine beach make up for this small folly. Plush suites with private plunge pools are wonderful and the divine 400sq m Presidential Villa attracts the likes of Bill Clinton and Paul McCartney. The best full-facility choice on the coast. Rooms from \$299. [theleela.com](http://theleela.com)

### PARK HYATT GOA RESORT & SPA, AROSSIM

With cobblestone paths and posada-style architecture, this elegant hotel looks as if it's been plucked from the Portuguese coast and placed gently on Goa's most enchanting stretch of white sand. Fresh from a full renovation, the 250 rooms and suites ooze colonial flavour with dark wood furnishings and views over 18 hectares of lush greenery. Thatched and mellow, the celebrated Sereno Spa offers customized treatments to keep your mojo in fine tune. Rooms from \$170. [goa.park.hyatt.com/hyatt](http://goa.park.hyatt.com/hyatt)

### KENILWORTH BEACH RESORT, UTORDA

The Indo-Portuguese theme continues next-door at this 104-room swish beachfront option. Hectares of wicker, overhead whirling fans and

arched Moghul-style windows give the rooms a faded colonial flavour, while a massive gin-blue swimming pool (with scuba pod) beckons guests from dawn to sunset. The excellent Agua Spa specialising in Ayurvedic massages and treatments is a perfect oasis from the bustle of life. The super casual Seahawk beach shack offers innovative seafood dishes and a perfect sunset. Rooms from \$170. [kenilworthhotels.com/goa](http://kenilworthhotels.com/goa)

### ALILA DIWA GOA, MAJORDA

Geoffrey Bawa-inspired architecture and traditional Goanese design blend to create Goa's most elegant new escape. Opened last December to much fanfare, the resort feels more intimate than its 153 rooms suggest and large cool verandahs overlook 40 hectares of verdant rice paddies, swaying coconut palms onto the azure Arabian Sea. The new Diwa Wing is an enclave of exclusivity, boasting its own lap pool with an open-air jacuzzi. Rooms from \$145. [alilahotels.com/diwagoa](http://alilahotels.com/diwagoa)

## FOR CITY SLICKERS

### VIVANTA BY TAJ PANAJI, PANAJI

This savvy city hotel has the look and services of a fully wired London property and is Goa's best corporate retreat for mixing work and play. The 170-room contemporary gem is centrally located in the state capital making sojourns to the historic city a snap. A chic rooftop pool and superb

Indian-themed spa are relaxing diversions. Rooms from \$90. [vivantabytaj.com](http://vivantabytaj.com)

## FOR BAREFOOT LUXURY

### ASHIYANA YOGA RETREAT, MANDREM

A spectacular retreat fronting a sleepy backwater where you can expand your inner consciousness and shrink your outer waistline. Funky accommodation in beach huts or adobe houses from \$50. [ashiyana-yoga-goa.com](http://ashiyana-yoga-goa.com)

### ELSEWHERE, NEAR PANJIM

Oozing chic simplicity with just four pastel colonial-inspired bungalows and three tents set on a hidden beach accessed by a bamboo bridge, it attracts glitterati. Tents from \$530 per week. [aseascape.com](http://aseascape.com)

## FOR HISTORIC HERITAGE

### PRESA DI GOA, CALANGUTE

The restaurant menu may be Middle East-inspired, but this enchanting seven-villa getaway is infused with old-world charm such as Indo-Portuguese red tiles, ornate verandahs and muslin draped four-poster beds. Nestled in a quiet coconut grove near the lively Calangute and Baga beaches. Villas from \$70. [presadiqoa.com](http://presadiqoa.com)

### FORT TIRACOL HERITAGE HOTEL, TIRACOL

There are just seven dramatic rooms in this gloriously secluded 16th-century Portuguese fortress opened by the stylish hotelier Hari Ajwani and his French wife, Claudia Derain. Set on a snippet of land with stunning views of the Tiracol River and near the deserted Kevi Beach. Rooms from \$185. [forttiracol.com](http://forttiracol.com)

### CASA PALACIO SIOLIM HOUSE, SIOLIM

This converted 17th-century Portuguese governor's mansion has been lovingly transformed into a fashionable private hotel with 10 enormous suites flooded with light from tall windows, some glazed with oyster shell. Below lofty ceilings are net-draped beds and formal furnishings. Sleepy beaches are minutes away. Rooms from \$75. [siolimhouse.com](http://siolimhouse.com)

## FOR TRANQUILLITY

### NILAYA HERMITAGE, ARPORA BHATI

A former Indo-Portuguese 17th-century hermitage with 11

cosmic-themed suites blasting vibrant colours, terrazzo flooring and Gaudi mosaics (think Peter Max posters). A wonderful poolside restaurant serves up breathtaking views of the Arabian Sea. There's a superb spa. Haunt of Giorgio Armani, Philippe Starck, et al. Rooms from \$450. [nilaya.com](http://nilaya.com)

### POUSADA TAUMA, CALANGUTE

Ultra cool and unpretentious as a pair of comfy espadrilles. The 12 delightful Portuguese red earthenware rooms are set amidst a ravishing garden. Steps to the frantic Calangute Beach scene, but far enough away to feel serene and exclusive. Exquisite Ayurvedic spa and kids are barred. Rooms from \$200. [pousada-tauma.com](http://pousada-tauma.com)

### CASA BRITONA, CHARMANOS

An isolated romantic 10-room hideaway in a refurbished 300-year-old warehouse in a tiny fishing village on the Mandovi backwaters. Colonial-era furnishings, hand-painted frescoes and four-poster beds add Goan glamour, while brilliant river views set the chilled-out mood. Fifteen minutes from the coast. Rooms from \$150. [casaboutiquehotels.com](http://casaboutiquehotels.com)

## RESTAURANTS

### LA PLAGES, ASHWEN

This French-inspired super-hip cluster of beach shacks on Ashwen Beach serves an innovative fusion of East meets West dishes. Push aside the billowing muslin curtains, pull up a deck chair, sit back and ponder how grand life can be. The caramelised tuna and heavenly chocolate cake are a must. [frenchfoodindia@hotmail.com](http://frenchfoodindia@hotmail.com); 98-2212-1712

### BOMRA'S, CANDOLIM

This modest Burmese al fresco haunt is deservedly hailed as the best restaurant in Goa's crowded dining scene. The genius behind the success is chef Bawmra Jap who draws on his Burmese roots and Goa's fresh produce to create a sublime pan-Asian menu. Highlights include the seared tuna and steamed snapper. [bomras.com](http://bomras.com)

### SOUZA LOBO, CALANGUTE

This plastic chair-casual bamboo and thatched seaside restaurant has been serving some of India's best traditional Goan curries since 1932. Old timers bemoan the fact that the sublime stuffed crab, heavenly lobster and celebrated Goa prawn curry have been discovered by visitors making reservations a must. [souzalobo.com](http://souzalobo.com)