



Arambol's Kalacha Beach is backed by a sweetwater lake

MINI GUIDE

COASTAL GOA

The swaying palms, white sands and warm waters of this Indian state justifiably draw plenty of visitors, but on its less-beaten paths you'll discover an altogether different side to Goan life.

Best for relaxing

1 BENAULIM

Much of the accommodation is in family guesthouses in this peaceful village in southern Goa, which gives on to a long stretch of largely empty beach. Benaulim is the location for the very plush Taj Exotica hotel, set in 56 acres of tranquil gardens, with a Jiva spa offering traditional Indian holistic treatments by qualified Ayurveda doctors and therapists (tajhotels.com; rooms from £180).



West-facing beaches such as Arambol enjoy beautiful sunsets

2 POLEM

Goa's southernmost beach is set around a small bay by the village of Polem. It's a wonderfully isolated and distraction-free area that's escaped development – so there's little else to do but stroll the seashore, have a picnic on the sand and enjoy the sound of the waves. Fishermen return to shore at the northern end of the beach; enjoy their catches for lunch among the palms at the Kamaxi shack bar (00 91 934 136 7429; Nov–May; fish curry £1.80).

3 ARAMBOL

This former 1960s hangout still has a laidback traveller vibe, with a curved beach that's great for swimming. Best of all is the Himalayan Iyengar Yoga Centre by the sand dunes. In the winter months it's the base of the Iyengar yoga school, offering five-day courses in hatha vida as well as shorter courses combining yoga with ayurvedic treatments (hiyogacentre.com; Arambol Beach; open mid-Nov–mid-Mar; five-day courses £35).

Best for food

4 PANAJI

Slung along the banks of the Mandovi River, the easy-going state capital is the base for Holiday on the Menu, which offers a range of Goan cooking holidays. Try a morning session and learn the art of creating a sofiani biryani and a Goan fish curry, or sign up for a full-week programme, with a trip to a spice plantation (holidayonthemenu.com; morning courses from £60).



Fresh ingredients laid out in the market in Goa's capital Panaji

5 CALANGUTE

Former hippy hangout Calangute arguably provides the greatest concentration of dining options in Goa, with everything from stalls selling bhelupuri – a Mumbai snack of puffed rice and mango – to restaurants dishing up bhindi jaipuri (crispy fried okra). Try the main beach strip, which is thick with vendors serving breakfast favourite pav bhaji (a buttery bread roll dipped in curry). The market area is filled with local chai and thali joints that do veg lunches (thalis around 45p).

6 SIOLIM

This village is often overlooked by travellers, due to its riverside location some way from the nearest beach. It makes for a pleasant stay if you're seeking a break from the sea and sand, and is home to a daily fish market near the ferry landing on the banks of the Chapora River. Tours of the market are available as part of classes operated by the Siolim Cooking School, which offer an insight into Goan culture and faith (cookingclassesgoa.com; Siolim-Assagao Rd; classes £20).

Best for local culture

7 OLD GOA

On the banks of the Mandovi River in northern Goa lies the old 'Rome of the East' – the former principal city of Portugal's eastern empire. A handful of its imposing churches and convents remain from its glory days, the highlight of which is the Sé Cathedral – Asia's biggest church. Visit on a weekday morning, when you can join locals in attending Mass and explore the cathedral.



Old Goa was largely abandoned in the late 18th century

8 ANJUNA

Wednesday's flea market is as much a part of the Goan experience as a day on a deserted beach. The market sprawls on and on, hawking so many mirrored bedspreads and floaty Indian-cotton dresses that'll you never want to see one again. It's a great place for people watching, and if you trawl carefully you can find some interesting one-offs. Bargain hard and take plenty of stamina and patience.

9 DIVAR ISLAND

Ferries leave from Old Goa to this beautiful riverine island, which feels like a land that time forgot. Piedade is the largest settlement, filled with old Portuguese palaces and ladies gossiping at the roadside. In January, the men who have left the island to work elsewhere return for the Festa das Bandeiras, or Flag Festival, taking to the streets for singing, dancing and, bizarrely, firing peashooters at one another.

TURN OVER FOR MAP AND NUMBER LOCATIONS

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Coastal Goa



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Goan essentials

TRANSPORT

Dabolim in central Goa has the state's only airport, with charter flights (mostly November to March) departing from London and Manchester (from £560; thomson.co.uk). Alternatively, travel to Mumbai (from £540; virgin-atlantic.com), and fly on to Goa with domestic airlines such as GoAir and Indigo (from £65; goair.in). Goa is ideal for cycling: rent or buy a good-quality bike (rentals from 90p, second-hand cycles £11). It also has a bus network serving most towns and villages (singles from 25p).

WHERE TO STAY

1 Palolem Beach was largely undiscovered 15 years ago, and although that's no longer the case, it is still a good base for exploring southern Goa, including Polem. **Sevas** is one of the better beach hut hotels here, with well-maintained cottages set in pretty gardens, and it also offers daily yoga classes (sevaspalolemgoa.com; Palolem; huts from £10).



Panjim Peoples is typical of Goa's Portuguese colonial architecture

2 Within an atmospheric 19th-century mansion, **Panjim Peoples** has elegant rooms with mosaic-covered bathrooms, deep bath tubs, and lots of antiques. There's also a luxury tent and self-contained cottage (from £120; Panaji; panjiminn.com). 3 **Noi Varo** is an understated, luxurious Portuguese mansion. Hang out in its river-view treehouse, consult its gourmet chef and float the afternoon away in the water lounge (villa rental £300, two-night minimum; Siolim; shunyachi.com).

The know-how

CAUSES FOR CELEBRATION

Goa plays host to religious and cultural events all year round:

Reis Magos Festival
The journey of the three wise men to Bethlehem is re-enacted every 6 January.

Shigmotsav (Shigmo)
Spring is ushered in around March with parades and revellers flinging huge quantities of water and coloured tikka powder at one another (pictured below).

Feast of St Anthony
On 13 June, if the monsoon has yet to appear, Goan families will lower a statue of the saint into their well to bring it about.

Easter
Churches fill up statewide for High Mass and family feasting.



TOP TIP

In non-Western restaurants in Goa, eat only with your right hand; the left is considered unclean and for the purposes of ablution only. If you're invited to dine with a family, always take off your shoes and wash your hands before eating.

FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Goa & Mumbai* (£13.99) contains everything you could possibly wish to know about the state. Individual chapters from the guide are available to download (£2.99) from lonelyplanet.com. The official state tourism website is at goa-tourism.com. Goan TV chef and cookery writer Odette Mascarenhas can be found blogging about Goa's distinctive cuisine at odettemascarenhas.com.

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