

Goa



It's green, it's glistening and it's gorgeous: just three of the reasons why Goa has allured visitors – both of the friendly and invading varieties – for so many hundreds of years. Today, the biggest drawcard to its over two million annual visitors is the silken sand, the cocohut culture and the *sosegado* (clunkily translated as 'laid-backness') of which its residents are justifiably proud.

Nowhere else in India will you find the warmth of a Goan household and the lack of hassle when haggling for goods in its bustling marketplaces. Pour in a dash of Portuguese-influenced wine, food and crumbling colonial-era architecture, infuse with a colourful blend of Hinduism, Islam and Catholicism, pepper with parties, and you've got a happy, heady mix that proves just too enticing to long-staying foreigners, who've been clinging to its crystalline shores since the '60s.

But there's far more to discover here than the exquisite pleasure of warm sand between your toes. Pep up your stay with a wander around a vanilla-scented spice plantation, stroll the bird-filled banks of the state's gentle rivers, poke around centuries-old cathedrals, and venture out to white-water waterfalls.

All is not perfect in paradise, however, and Goa has problems aplenty – the state's environment, in particular, being today sorely taxed. Nevertheless, with a slowly growing group of environmentalists and eco-friendly individuals on the scene, the picture remains relatively rosy for this most magical of miniature states. So, come, minimise your impact as much as possible, and unwind to the swaying palms and Portuguese rhythms of Goa's still-irresistible charms.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wander the Portuguese-flavoured old quarters of **Panaji** (Panjim; p191) and linger over lunch at one of its ravishing restaurants
- Shiver in the shadows of grand cathedrals in **Old Goa** (p198), once the ecclesiastical wonder of the Eastern world
- Indulge in barefoot luxury on quiet white-sand **beaches** (p222) in the state's sleepy southern stretches
- Dream of grand times long gone in the slowly crumbling mansions of **Chandor** (p224)
- Peruse the peppercorns and munch a banana-leaf lunch at an inland spice plantation around **Ponda** (p201)
- Worship or salute the sun away from the northern crowds on **Mandrem's beautiful beach** (p219)



FAST FACTS**Population** 1.34 million**Area** 3701 sq km**Telephone code** ☎ 0832**Main languages** Konkani, Marathi, English and Hindi**When to go** November to March**History**

Probably the most influential event in Goan history, the effects of which are still evident today, was the coming of the Portuguese in 1510, who arrived seeking control of the region's lucrative spice routes by way of Goa's wide natural harbours and plentiful waterways, defeating the ruling Bijapur kings, and steadily pushing their power from their grand capital at Old Goa, out into the provinces.

Soon, the conquerors were seeing to it that not only Portuguese rule, but their religion too, was spread throughout the state – by force, if need be – and the Goan Inquisition saw repression and brutality in the name of Christianity. Though the Marathas – the central Indian people who controlled much of India at various points in history – almost vanquished the Portuguese in the late 18th century, and despite a brief occupation by the British during the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, it was not until 1961, when the Indian army marched into Goa, that almost five centuries of Portuguese occupation finally came to an end on the subcontinent.

Today Goa enjoys one of India's highest per-capita incomes and comparatively high health and literacy rates, with farming, fishing, tourism and iron-ore mining forming the basis of its economy. The legacy of the Portuguese can still be found almost everywhere, in the state's scores of crumbling mansions, its cuisine, its churches and even in its language; though it's slowly becoming rarer, if you keep an ear out you'll likely hear elderly people sitting together and conversing in Portuguese during some point in your stay.

Climate

Until recent years, the annual monsoon scoured Goa's beaches clean between June and the end of September reliably, but lately things have gone a little haywire. Sometimes the monsoon can end as late as November, while 2008 saw a poor monsoon and tempera-

tures soaring to unusual heights well before December. In general, though, the tourist season stretches from mid-November to mid-April, with December to February proving the most pleasant (and busiest) time to visit. Temperatures and humidity increase after February, making it great for those who can stand the heat. Out of season, between April and October, you'll find most coastal resorts all but deserted, though towns like Panaji, Mapusa and Margao chug on as usual.

Information

The **Goa Tourism Development Corporation** (GTD; www.goa-tourism.com), provides maps and information, operates (largely adequate but uncharismatic) hotels throughout the state, and runs a whole host of whirlwind one-day and multiday bus trips, as well as daily boat cruises from Panaji. Its main branches are in Panaji (p192) and at Dabolim Airport (see p189), but you can book its tours, its hotel rooms, and pick up a simple map of Goa at any of its hotel branches. Information on the state is also up for grabs at the Government of India tourist office in Panaji (p192).

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation prices in Goa are generally higher than in most other states of India, and vary wildly depending on the season. High-season prices – often more than 100% more than mid-season rates – run from early December to early February, while prices climb higher still during the crowded Christmas and New Year period (around 22 December to 3 January). Mid-season runs from October to late November, and February to April, and low season runs throughout the monsoon, from April to October.

All accommodation rates indicated in this chapter are for high season. Budget-category double rooms come in at under Rs1000 per night. Midrange doubles range between Rs1000 and Rs2500, and top-end choices come in at over Rs2500. Note, however, that prices can fluctuate incredibly from year to year.

Most accommodation options have a standard noon checkout, except, rather inexplicably, in Panaji, where almost all hotels cruelly demand you depart at 9am.

Activities

Goa has, of late, become Activity Central, with a whole host of options for water sports,