



Panaji & Central Goa

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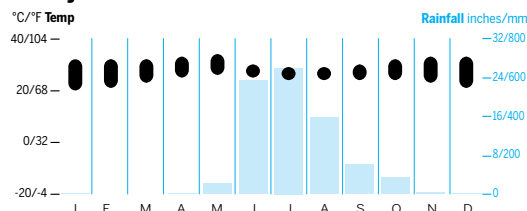
Why Go?

Some travellers see Goa as one big beach resort, but the central region – practically beach-free – is the state's historic and cultural heart and soul. Wedged between Goa's two biggest rivers, the Mandovi and the Zuari, this region is home to the state capital, Panaji, the glorious churches of Old Goa, inland islands, bird sanctuaries and the wilds of the Western Ghats.

No visit to Goa is complete without a day or two spent cruising on the Mandovi River and exploring the old Latin Quarter in laid-back Panaji. Less than 10km away, Old Goa is the state's major cultural attraction, where the grand 17th-century churches and cathedrals are humbling in their scale and beauty. Further explorations will take you to temples and spice plantations around Ponda, to two of Goa's most beautiful wildlife sanctuaries, elephant camps and to India's second-highest waterfall. You could easily spend a week here without making it to a single beach. Don't miss it.

When to Go

Panaji



Nov–Mar High season is the best time to visit Central Goa's bird sanctuaries and national parks.

Christmas, Easter & Carnival Goa's festivals are at their best in and around Panaji.

Aug–Oct Monsoon season offers a different and very green side of Central Goa.

Panaji

POP 115,000

One of India's smallest and most relaxed state capitals, Panaji (also still widely known by its former Portuguese name, Panjim) crowds around the peninsula overlooking the broad Mandovi River, where cruise boats and floating casinos ply the waters, casting neon reflections in the night.

A glorious whitewashed church lords it over the animated city centre, a broad leafy boulevard skirts around the river, and grand colonial buildings rub shoulders with arty boutiques, old-school bookshops, state-of-the-art malls and backstreet bars.

But it's the tangle of narrow streets in the old Latin Quarter that really steal the show. Nowhere is the Portuguese influence felt more strongly than here, where the late afternoon sun lights up yellow houses with purple doors, and around each corner you'll find restored ochre-coloured mansions with terracotta-tiled roofs, wrought iron balconies and arched oyster-shell windows.

Panjim is a place for walking, enjoying the peace of an afternoon siesta, eating well, and meeting real Goans. It's also a place to catch a movie, a cultural show, or to take the kids to the planetarium.

A day or two in Panaji really is an essential part of the Goan experience.

History

The land on which Panaji stands today was once little more than a handful of fishing settlements, known to the 12th-century ruling Kadambas as Pahajani, 'the land that does not flood'.

In the late 15th century Goa came under the control of the Muslim sultan Yusuf Adil Shah, who built five hilltop forts and his own fortified summer palace here, protected by 55 cannons and conceived to guard the mouth of the Mandovi River against attackers.

When the Portuguese nobleman Afonso de Albuquerque arrived in Goa in 1510, he quickly set about conquering the palace and forts, and by the end of the year it was his. Leaving it almost untouched, however, the conquerors' efforts were instead now concentrated on aggrandising their new capital, Ela (now Old Goa), further east up the river.

For the next 300 years Panaji remained little more than a small and scruffy seafaring village, only notable for its church, where Portuguese sailors stopped off to give thanks for having

survived the perilous voyage to India. However, as conditions in Old Goa became increasingly desperate, the land began to support increasing numbers of refugees from the capital, until finally, in 1759, the viceroy moved to Panjim, where he took the old Idalcao's Palace as his own residence, today the Secretariat.

By the early 19th century the city was taking shape. In 1834 Panjim became known as Nova Goa, and in 1843 it was finally recognised by the Portuguese government as Goa's state capital. A spate of building took place; among the public buildings erected were the army barracks (now the police headquarters and government offices). In essence, though, Goa was fast becoming a forgotten corner of the Portuguese empire, and lack of money and political interest meant that building work was low key in comparison to the glory days of Old Goa.

Strolling the streets of central Panaji today, you'll find that little has really changed since then. Modern building and development, for the most part, remains reasonably well planned, and the streets are as wide and leafy as they were under Portuguese dominion. Following the final exit of the Portuguese in 1961, the town's name was officially changed to the Maratha title, Panaji, though today most locals still refer to it as Panjim, as it was christened some 500 years ago on Albuquerque's arrival.

Sights

★ Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception

CHURCH

(cnr Emilio Gracia & Jose Falcao Rds; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 3-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-12.30pm & 3.30-5pm Sun, English Mass 8am) Panaji's spiritual, as well as geographical, centre is this elevated, pearly white church, built in 1619 over an older, smaller 1540 chapel and stacked like a fancy white wedding cake. When Panaji was little more than a sleepy fishing village, this church was the first port of call for sailors from Lisbon, who would give thanks for a safe crossing, before continuing to Ela further east up the river. The church is beautifully illuminated at night.

By the 1850s the land in front of the church was being reclaimed and the distinctive criss-crossing staircases were added in the late 19th century. Today the entrance to its gloriously technicolour interior is along the left-hand side wall. A tangle of ropes leads up to the enormous shiny church bell in the belfry, saved from the ruins of the Augustinian monastery at Old Goa and installed here in 1871. The church is the focus for celebrations