

Goa with the Flow —

One writer takes herself on a new kind of holiday to discover new adventures and rediscover herself.

By Lucinda Shanks

Crazy, busy, noisy, smelly, scary — these are the warnings you're given about India. A chaotic sprawl of millions of people, a thousand spicy aromas and frenetic energy igniting your whole being into sensory overload. North Goa in April is nothing like that: sultry, slow and spiritual — exactly what I was seeking.

Goa has long been considered the spiritual home of hippies. My parents' hippie leanings had intrigued me, and this fascination grew when I was in the musical 'Hair' as a teenager. However, Goa remained a distant thought in my mind, as did India generally, until I approached middle age and began to become more immersed in yoga.

Having spent a long grey winter with numb toes working in industrial East Manchester, I knew I needed some time to reflect and de-stress. By Easter I was desperate for sun, joy and a restful break. A yoga retreat in Goa was the perfect option.

Choosing my destination

My regular hot yoga classes had been one of the only positive and enjoyable parts of my life for months and I wanted to expand and develop my practice. Initially I considered Rishikesh, the 'capital of yoga.' I was tempted by the spiritual location, drawn to the majestic Himalayas and the sacred Ganges, but in the end the 35-degree Goan sunshine and escaping my landlocked life for the beach won me over.

I spent some time evaluating various ashrams in Goa, looking at ratings and top ten lists. I finally decided to go to Preksha Yoga, an ashram-style yoga retreat, hidden in a lush secret garden set back from Mandrem, North Goa. Initially I was hesitant to spend all of my holiday at a yoga retreat. What if it was too hard? Too strict? Full of awful people? I decided to book my last three nights at a local resort which had a pool, and an idyllic beach hut, overlooking the sea.

Arrival and accommodation

After unremarkable flights on Turkish Airlines and India's answer to easyJet: IndiGo, I landed in Goa's newer airport and easily located my taxi to the ashram. I had paid a bit extra for a 'private wooden cottage.' This undersold how fantastic my room was. In the upstairs of a two-storey block of around a dozen rooms, was my sanctuary. In my wood-panelled room I had an ensuite with rainfall shower, a light, airy space with both a ceiling fan and air-conditioning plus astro-turfed balcony. The finishing touches? An overhanging mango tree, and monkeys frolicking nearby. It was everything I could have asked for.

The Yoga Retreat

My yoga retreat included a daily massage. I started the trip with one, which drew out my most prudish, British sensibilities. After covering my breasts with a woefully small piece of paper-thin cloth, I was basted in oil and pummelled head to toe (my bottom denied the dignity I managed to secure for my chest), I was put in a hot wooden box with my head sticking out like I was in the stocks, and roasted at around 200 degrees.

Despite this rather alarming ordeal, I must emphasise the criticism here is only of my British reserve, some insecurities and general suspicion of saunas. The massage therapist was very respectful and after some feedback was gentler on the following days, and never led me to the oven again. The massages and evening meditations were so relaxing that I found myself regularly falling asleep.

The yoga classes were phenomenal. Waking up and heading to a gentle practice each day left me feeling energised and positive. The classes were accessible to everyone, and all of the teachers radiated warmth and calm. There were some relaxing late morning yin sessions, more energetic afternoon flow classes, and a weekly jewel in the crown, sunrise yoga on the beach.

Luckily, our main yoga teacher appreciated my sense of humour, as the beach yoga included some visiting dogs and I thought perhaps they were not happy with us doing cat pose? Or wanted some more downward dog? One slightly mangy hound fell asleep next to my mat, and I took this as a sign that I was exuding calming energy.

The fantastic thing about the yoga retreat is you can engage as much as you choose. There are three delicious and healthy vegetarian meals a day available, as well as filtered water and ginger tea. They are expanding their café so more will be available next season. I did not join the art class or the daily philosophy classes, and I missed most evening meditations. I realised I was there for the yoga classes, and I did two every day. I ate most of my meals there, but not always. There was a lovely local walk to watch the sunset, as well as a special dinner once a week. The atmosphere at the ashram is very calm and surrounded by beautiful bird calls, trees, and the quiet, humid hum of jungle magic.

Beach time and a woman alone

Amongst the yoga I spent daily beach trips (a ten-minute walk away) sipping refreshing local lemonades and fruity concoctions, chatting to 'locals' and paddling in the always balmy sea. I say 'locals' because I barely met anyone who was from Goa. Most people were there for seasonal work and it was the last few weeks of the season. I was surprised how quiet it was, as it was school holidays in the UK and doubtless other places, sunny every day, 35 degrees, and pure paradise. By May everything would be packed up for monsoon season before a return in mid-October. I could have stayed forever.

There were people trying to sell me things, but I was able to manage this, and the pressure never felt overly pushy or aggressive. I am a seasoned solo traveller, and a pasty forty-something (that's thirty-four if anyone asks...ahem) English woman, so I stand out. However, I found my interactions pleasant, and I felt very safe. I am possibly biased on this front

having worked as an East London bar maid in the noughties, so not easily fazed, but any unwanted approaches were easily dismissed.

Surfing

After I had checked out of my retreat I spent a few days in the beautiful beach hut, and ticked off 'surfing lesson' from my bucket list. For many years I had been tempted, but I'd always assumed surfing wasn't for soft, pasty English women like me – or was it? I absolutely loved it. I never quite managed to stand up, I was constantly battered by endless mini salt tsunamis, I was sunburnt until I resembled a pork scratching, and I was exhausted by the repeated long walks out from the shore...But the feeling of pushing up on the board and being able to ride the waves was exhilarating. Of course, it did not hurt that the instructor was everything you hope a surfing instructor would be, cool, patient, and a specimen of physical perfection. Surfing was like living my teenage fantasy in more ways than one! It's such a bargain and an ideal place for beginners, you have to try it.

Conclusion

Overall, my trip to Goa was everything I'd hoped for. The whole experience was peaceful, beautiful and transcendental. I spent my ten days focused on just enjoying the tiny area of Mandrem, an idyllic tropical paradise, and the heat dissuaded me from walking to famous Arambol, down the coast and known for its hippie market, so my trip really was just beach and yoga – and it was such a tonic. If you love the beach, fresh food and drink, yoga, and value — pack your bags. I am sure there are many energetic places to see in India, but if you want to escape the noise and the chaos, then head to Mandrem. Wake up listening to nothing but the soothing lapping of waves and exotic tropical bird calls, where everything is technicolour and you feel a thousand miles away from chaos.