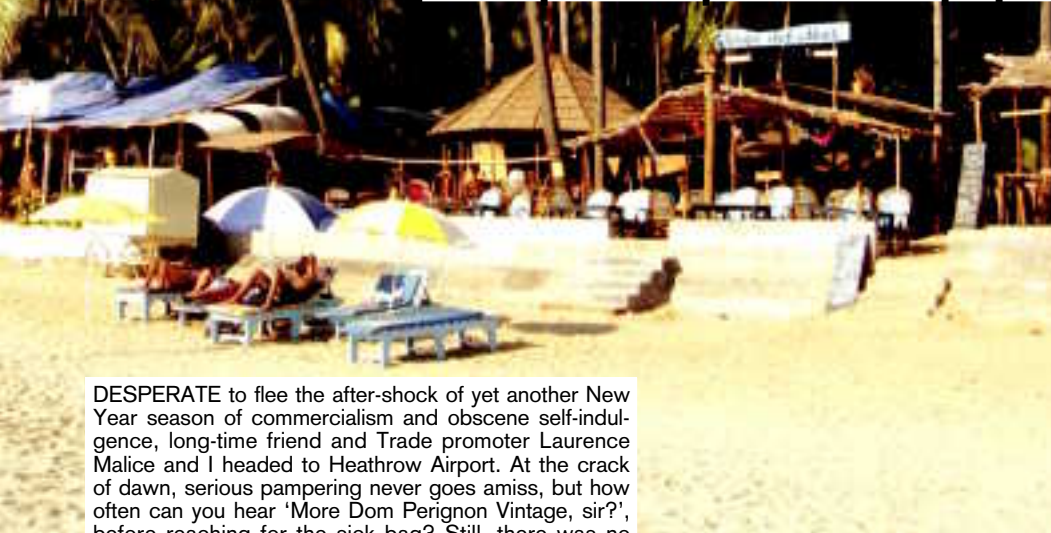


# GORGEOUS GOA

**Trade promoter Laurence Malice, Neneh Cherry, the Aga Khan and a brush with the Boxing Day Tsunami... ALEX GERRY visits Goa, the spiritual paradise & popular Indian destination**



DESPERATE to flee the after-shock of yet another New Year season of commercialism and obscene self-indulgence, long-time friend and Trade promoter Laurence Malice and I headed to Heathrow Airport. At the crack of dawn, serious pampering never goes amiss, but how often can you hear 'More Dom Perignon Vintage, sir?', before reaching for the sick bag? Still, there was no turning in on our Mumbai-bound business flight. The crew's constant silver-service-with-a-smile put the Savoy to shame. Ten hours did fly by. Stopover tax-free haven Doha came in handy for snapping photo/IT at knockout prices, oh, and the new Celine Dion Aftershave! Of course, you can fly straight to Goa and avoid the stopovers, but with time on our hands we were up for taking in the sights of other parts of India's rich cultural diversity.

However, a southbound flight beckoned before we could say bottoms up and what better than with **Jet Airlines**, India's youngest airline? Even the pilots are international playboy-types, while the cabin crew make a laughing stock of British Airways trolley-dollies.

**Goa** looks like a little corner of paradise. The gorgeous coconut palm-tree-fringed, silver-white sandy beaches stretch some 70 miles, from **Arambol** to **Palolem**. 450 years of Portuguese rule explains the flood of Catholics. They built picturesque towns like **Margao** and stunning churches, such as **Old Goa's** Basilica De Bom Jesus, which boasts St Francis Xavier's tomb. Tourism began in earnest with the 60s' hippies, first in **Calangute**, then shifting to the adjacent **Anjuna**. Full-moon beach parties and flea markets meant big business. Nowadays, the rave scene has moved north to **Ashwem** and **Mandrem**. Generally, Calangute, Anjuna and **Baga** cater for hedonists, while the South's Palolem proves more upmarket.

We immediately fell under the charm of the locals (whether Hindu, Islamic or Christian), thanks to their warm welcome and infectious smiles. Our lovely friends

from London, Gareth and Leo, had booked us Swedish-style beach bungalows at **The Bridge and Tunnel** (which I renamed 'The Prick & Tunnel'), south of Palolem. The ex-Navy captain/owner took an instant shine to Laurence. He'd pander to his every whim. That involved building fencing, shelves, clothes rails and, naturally, providing more mirrors. Delegating pretty houseboys and builders to our disposal worked wonders and we got on like a house on fire. We look upon these guys, who have so little, give so much and expect nothing in return but our friendship, as role models; a far cry from some of the obnoxious c\*\*\*s we know back home!

Palolem's beaches range from the trendy **Laughing Buddha** to the spectacular **Sunset Point** and **Neptune's Point**. Other engaging hangouts include **Titanic**, **La Raja/Big Fish** and **Darcy's**. They all provide bungalows and elevated coco-huts, with attached bathrooms, from 200 to 2000Rs (£2.20, £22/night). Guest houses and hotels also offer comfortable abode, a snip at 300 to 1200Rs. Check out the gorgeous **Oceanic Hotel** and **Palolem Beach**, or be extravagant and book into the splendid, newly-built **Intercontinental**



on **Panjem Beach**. Alternatively, discover **Backti Kutir**, a striking regenerated rain forest created by Panta Ferro and German wife Ute. They both promote ecological development and spirituality. Prices range from 500 to 1200Rs for dark bamboo cabanas, and 3000Rs for a stunning stone cottage. The garden restaurant is lovely, especially at breakfast. We befriended great folk there, from all corners of the world. Amongst the gaggle of yoga teachers on parade, the one turning the most heads was Lara Bauman. The Victoria Beckham of yoga, flanked by her millionaire Indian boyfriend, has to get over herself. She craves Hello!-type exposure, and might just get it before long. You heard it here first! Our favourite lunch meeting haunt was **Brown Bread**, on Palolem Road, if only for its wheatgrass, ginger-lemon juices, and succulent palak-tofu dishes. Naturally, as the Boxing Day tsunami devastated the South and South East coastlines of Asia emotions ran riot and our conscience took a real beating. Can you behave like high-maintenance plonkers, when there's a trail of death and destruction happening so nearby? We had hairy moments ourselves, not



least running for our lives, when all we could hear was dogs howling, screams and demented waves washing our shores. Water surrounded our bungalows and it suddenly dawned on us that we might never be home and dry, not carrying passport, airline ticket, keys or cash (never mind the vanity case). Taking our lives into our hands, we risked a potentially fatal walk downhill, in pitch darkness, to retrieve essentials. Half-way down, I tripped over a poison ivy-infested fence. Something resembling a giant praying mantis and stinging like fuck, clung to my chest. My sudden screaming terrified Laurence, who hid behind railings. It attracted the attention of local boys, who kindly informed me that giant insects no longer exist in India!

The daily threat of after-shock waves got Leo and Laurence quite nervous. The latter would only sleep fully clothed and, conveniently, in his black silk body bag. Personally, my motto was, if the sea wants to claim me, I'm ready for it! We could've moved uphill, but the irresistible lure of danger kept us there. In truth, we really loved being there.

The next day, Neneh Cherry and hubby Cameron McVie arrived on our doorstep. Blissfully unaware of the events, they were seeking accommodation. Once settled on a hillside, Neneh and I met regularly, usually for a swim at **Big Fish**. She's very much the laugh-a-minute ladette-type.

To leave the brouhaha behind, we eventually opted for pastures new. After visiting the market town of **Margao**, a beautiful mix of pastel-coloured houses and lush greenery, we stopped in **Old Goa** to see St Francis Xavier's remains. Little did we know thousands of worshippers would mob us. Without a taxi in sight, our only salvation

was to catch a rattling old coach. It was so rammed; it came complete with crushed faces in the windows. Oddly, the conductor let Laurence and me into the front cab, alongside a psychopathic-looking driver, leaving Gareth and Leo fending for themselves. En route, an over-zealous local kept thrusting his pelvis towards Laurence through the glass door. When we came out, he groped his clenched buttocks. Miss Malice's feigned indignation fooled nobody.

The journey ended in **Panaji**, where an air-conditioned Toyota drove us to **Anjuna**. We were keen to taste the delights of **The Milky Way**, one of India's best nouvelle cuisine restaurants, on Baga Road. It is run (weeknights only) by Serge and Florence Dorlac, two friends of mine from the South of France, and their partner Morgan from Bristol. The latter's culinary fusion has people travel from all over India. We spotted Bollywood stars and the Aga Khan sat nearby. After ordering just about everything on the menu, the absolute must proved to be the chocolate Thali. The huge silver platter of cooked chocolate-based desserts simply induced ecstasy to our blasé taste buds. Incidentally, the team devote their weekends to running **La Plage** in **Ashwem**, a favourite with Kate Moss and Jade Jagger.

A stone's throw from Milky Way, **Eden** trades nightly (until 4am). It curiously caters for ladyboys/trannie-fuckers upstairs, while the lounge proves cruiser than P&O. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief before the abundance of gorgeous Asian/Oriental employees, wearing jeans so tight, they looked as though they took their blood pressure. As we sipped local Port wine (80Rs a bottle!), a young escort introduced himself to me. When I enquired about the staff, he warned: "Beware, they belong to the English owner. If caught going with punters, they're sacked immediately." Apparently, these boys earn good Rupee, which explains their playing by the rules.

A word of advice: Never underestimate Indian law, as cruising in public is enough to get you nicked for obscene behaviour, while carnal intercourse against the order of nature (gloriously up the jacksie, to you and me) carries a ten-year sentence.

The huge Wednesday **Anjuna Market** attracts punters/traders from afar. Shopping with Laurence is a joy to behold. Beating the dealers at their own game, he'd bring them right down, bagging a 1500-Rupee article for a mere 500 and getting compliments for his haggling skills too! **Arpora Market** is Saturday night's



Photos by Alex Gerry

▶ must-see. Musicians, artists and magicians provide the entertainment, while local and foreign dealers hold stalls. Nearby, **Baga** boasts many gay-friendly bars, the likes of **Tito's Mix**, **Mambo Mix** and **Kamaki Mix**. The rave/techno scene is more evident in Anjuna, the best exponents being **Primrose Winebar**, **Hilltop** and **Paradiso**.

After a night's stay at the quaint **Vila Goesa** in **Calangute**, a three-hour taxi ride got us back to Palolem, where our daily routine bordered on the ridiculous. Cold shower at 7.30, yoga at 8.30, fruit salad at 9.30 at Backti Kutir, a swim at 11.30, lunch at Brown Bread thereafter, followed by shopping, mud bath or massage, another swim around 5pm, then meditation at 6.30. Dinner took place at the resort's best restaurants, usually Dropadi, the Intercontinental or the Oceanic. We wanted a healthy holiday. The tsunami made us very aware of our co-existence with nature. We longed for spirituality, perhaps enlightenment. Upon hearing that the Himalayas' **Swami Yoganand Saraswati** and **manager Sahwi Amrita** were around, we asked them to coach us. It didn't take them long to convert us. Next thing we knew, we were having lunch at their house, alongside local MPs. Subuddi (the pretty girl responsible for our Ayurvedic massages and mud baths) would also conduct the evening meditation on a secluded hilltop. Could life get better? I think not. Until that is, a puppy entered our lives. Dumped on the beach, his brother had previously died of dehydration. Laurence named the one-month old, love-starved angel, **Puna**. After a visit to the vet in **Chaudi**, the nearest market village, he moved in with us, mostly holding camp in my bed. Laurence and I longed to take him back with us, but our quarantine laws being ridiculous, we resigned ourselves to look for nice tourists to adopt him, unsuccessfully. Thankfully, our local friend John volunteered, realising that having such a sweet thing sit outside his massage parlour could only boost business. Animals are a worry in India. Without a viable neutering programme, hoards of unwanted cats and dogs roam the country and nobody seems to notice or feed them. However, time had come for me to leave, after nearly a month that already felt like another lifetime. 'Was India the trip of a lifetime?' I'm asked. Well, I can't wait to return. Mind you, I'm still gagging to set foot in Brazil.

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