

TRAVEL | PURSUITS

# Hotels With History in Goa, India

By ABBY AGUIRRE FEB. 6, 2014

Half an hour before our plane touched ground in Goa, a crew member announced that we would be turning around and flying back to Mumbai. It was the middle of monsoon season, and the rain and lightning had grown so heavy, the pilot no longer thought it safe to land. I'm not sure what metrics led the flight crew to change their minds, because heavy rain and lightning are exactly what we lurched through when, moments later, our plane began its jarring descent to India's good-time state.

Already this was not the Goa of popular imagination: land of sun, sand, casino cruises and trance raves. And I was glad, as that was not the Goa I was looking for. To hear the guidebooks tell it, this small western territory along the Arabian Sea is the Ibiza of India and not much more, with little in the way of lodging beyond its beach shacks and five-star fortresses.

I did not know what I was after when I began looking into Goa, two weeks before I boarded that plane last August, but I knew I had found it when I arrived at the website for Siolim House. Situated in a quiet village a few miles west of Mapusa, the hub of north Goa, Siolim House is a 350-year-old Hindu-Portuguese manor that has been painstakingly restored and converted into a hotel by its owner, Varun Sood, a Goan businessman with a passion for his state's old colonial homes. Over a few rainy nights in the Macao Suite — a decadently proportioned room with a four-poster bed, polished wood floors and exquisite Indian rugs — I learned that Siolim House is one of a modest but growing number of such inns, elegant yet laid-back guesthouses where visitors can take in not only Goa's distinctive Indo-Latin architecture and cooking, but also a culturally rich, less techno-centric way of life.

People in Goa will tell you that the province is “India for Beginners” or “India Light.” The point seems to be that what you are seeing is not the real India but some sort of hybrid, imbued with a Latin influence from more than four centuries of Portuguese, not British, rule, which ended relatively late, in 1961. Locals tend to refer to themselves and one another as “Goan” and to their other countrymen as “Indian,” implying that there is more than a minor distinction. To the foreign eye, the differences are more apparent in the buildings and food. This is the only part of India where pork sausage is as much a menu staple as masala, and certain neighborhoods are so filled with Moorish tilework that if you squint, it could be Lisbon. The Portuguese left their mark on the language, too. Old homes are often referred to as “casas,” and the Portuguese word for tranquil, “sossegado,” has become “susegad,” the Goan word for their relaxed, easygoing approach to life and hospitality.

Over three centuries, the Goan gentry, many of them descendants of the Portuguese, built all over the state. A range of architectural styles evolved, but the purest examples of the Goan aesthetic share a few features: brightly painted exteriors; Hindu-style sunken courtyards in the center; and window panes made of oyster shells. By the 1980s, many of these grand colonial buildings were largely crumbling. But in recent years, as Goa became a fashionable place for Mumbaikars and Delhiites to maintain vacation homes, the old houses have become prize investments.

The first to become an official heritage hotel is in the capital city of Panjim, in a district called Fontainhas. That's where Ajit Sukhija opened the **Panjim**

**Inn** in the 1980s. Tired of his corporate job, Mr. Sukhija fixed up the family home — built by his great-grandfather, a landed businessman named Francis Assis D’Silveria, in the 1800s — and started renting out rooms to travelers. Mr. Sukhija’s guesthouse was quickly established as an alternative to the Dionysian beach scene, a family-run base from which to explore Panjim’s Latin Quarter, where Catholic churches are as common as mosques and Hindu temples.

The Panjim Inn is now run by his son, Jack Sukhija, who is an active member of the Goa Heritage Action Group, which works to preserve the state’s historic buildings. Situated on a lively corner, the hotel offers 24 simple but comfortable rooms and a restaurant that serves tasty Goan and Indian food on an airy, tree-lined veranda. The house is eclectically decorated with Indian antiques, the odd Scandinavian landscape painting and light fixtures salvaged from shipyards. “I’m the town’s leading junk collector,” the elder Mr. Sukhija said. “It’s amazing what you can do with rubbish.” His son, who is often behind the front desk, is available to give guests a tour of the neighborhood’s most interesting old buildings.

Not until the past decade have comparable hotels multiplied around Goa. Now there is a range of options. **Siolim House**, the stunning colonial inn in the north Goan village of Siolim that so charmed me when I stumbled across it on the web, once belonged to the governor of Macao. It was dilapidated when Mr. Sood, its current owner, first spotted it in the 1990s. The effort to track down its previous owner took Mr. Sood on a chase around the world that passed through Switzerland before ending, improbably, in Compton, Calif. Mr. Sood has done a beautiful job restoring the home. It offers seven rooms, all handsomely furnished. Handsome enough for Kate Moss, in fact, who once rented the house for a week. “We have a kind self-selection,” Mr. Sood said. “It’s not over-the-top fancy. What you get is a kind of village life. People come here because they are driven by a sense of finding the authentic.” The room I stayed in, the Macao Suite, is particularly elegant. Meals are served in an outdoor courtyard next to a pool lined with lush palms, and the friendly staff can arrange on-site yoga classes, ayurvedic massages and Indian cooking lessons.

In part because foreigners who buy a Goan home must operate a business on the property as a condition of the sale, it is not uncommon to find inns and villas owned and run by Europeans. Antonia Graham, for instance, the owner of the Notting Hill interiors shop Graham and Green, renovated a magnificent

150-year-old Goan house in the village of Assagao, called **Casa Tota**, which she rents out by the week.

And only seven miles down the coast, near the beach in the village of Candolim, is **Quelleachy Gally**, an inn operated by Marie-Christine Rebillet, a Parisian antiques dealer who drove from France to India in a Volkswagen bus in 1973 and has been coming back ever since. Ms. Rebillet's 40-year love affair with the country led her to hunt down and restore this gorgeous Indo-Portuguese home. "I fell in love with the houses," she said of her decision to move to Goa over other parts of India. There are four bedrooms in the main house and two in a cozy garden cottage, all filled with splendid antiques Ms. Rebillet has collected over the years. Ms. Rebillet, who once made chandeliers out of ping-pong balls for the Jean Paul Gaultier boutique in Paris, has a lovely eye and an idiosyncratic touch; in a sitting room, a vintage photograph of a couple embracing in front of the Taj Mahal hangs above an antique side table on which sits a 1980s plastic radio. She is also an excellent cook and hostess who has made a hobby of ferreting out India's best rosés.

The most opulent examples of Goan architecture are in south Goa, about 20 miles south of Panjim, where there is a concentration of lavish colonial mansions. Though some offer accommodations, these are best visited for lunch or an afternoon tour as they are in a state of slight decay. The grandest are the **Palácio do Deão** in Quepem, the **Braganza House** in Chandor and the **Villa de Figueiredo** in Loutolim, where an octogenarian matriarch of Portuguese heritage, Maria Lourdes Figueiredo de Albuquerque, serves traditional fish curry amid her family's stately collection of East India Company antiques and a large mural of Vasco da Gama arriving in India.

Visitors to **Vivenda dos Palhaços**, also in south Goa, are greeted on the porch by Toby, the inn's regal host and resident basset hound. The actual owners, Simon and Charlotte Hayward, are a British brother-and-sister team who were born and raised in India, mostly in Calcutta. (Their grandfather developed the Bengal Distilleries Company, which produced gin and brandy and distributed opium and marijuana throughout Bengal.) The siblings bought this century-old home near the beach in the village of Majorda about a decade ago and turned it into a hotel with seven extremely charming rooms. Guests are treated like family. Delicious meals cooked by a Keralan chef are served in a homey dining room, at a large communal table carved from a single tree, under

antique fans from Mumbai's Chor Bazaar. The Haywards, from the fourth generation of their family to live in India, are marvelous guides, standing by to recommend restaurants and day trips around Goa or give you a quick lift to the beach in their striped tuk-tuk.

“I fell in love with the house that was to become Vivenda dos Palhaços in 15 minutes. Luckily almost all our guests do the same,” Mr. Hayward said. “Five-star hotels are perfectly comfortable, but they are designed to be pretty much the same all over the world. When you stay in an old Portuguese house, you can only really be in Goa.”

## **IF YOU STAY**

The **Panjim Inn**, E-212, 31st January Road Fontainhas, Panjim; [panjiminn.com](http://panjiminn.com). Rooms start at 3,000 rupees, about \$49 at 61 rupees to the dollar, during high season, November through March.

**Siolim House**, opposite Wadi Chapel, Wadi, Siolim; [siolimhouse.com](http://siolimhouse.com). Rooms start at 8,700 rupees during high season.

**Casa Tota**, 200 Mazal Vaddo, Assagao; [www.grahamandgreen.co.uk/goa-villa](http://www.grahamandgreen.co.uk/goa-villa). The house rents for 50,000 rupees per week during high season.

**Quelleachy Gally**, 511 Murrod Vaddo, Candolim; [goaluxuryhouseforrent.com](http://goaluxuryhouseforrent.com). Rooms from 4,200 rupees during high season; the house can be rented from 290,000 rupees per week during high season.

**Vivenda dos Palhaços**, Costa Vaddo, Majorda; [vivendagoa.com](http://vivendagoa.com). Rooms start at 6,250 rupees during high season.

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