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Rags and riches in glorified Goa

By Justine Hardy

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They call them 'raggytaggys', with that Goan knack for finding words both onomatopoeic and visual for everything from bhang to crocheted bikinis - the latter being 'ladee teabags'. There are those who say these raggy-taggy are part of a modern malaise that has hit just about every sun'n'sand strip in south-east Asia. Goa, India's west coast tourist trap, was perhaps the first to be infected by the hippy crowd. Its palm fringes were hemp heaven in the dog-end of the 1960s for kids rolling their nirvana between Rizlas while John, Paul, George and Ringo were rolling out the mantras with the Maharishi beside the banks of the Ganges in Rishikesh.

The flower babies stayed on in Goa, their every trait the antithesis of Paul Scott's veranda-entrenched remnants. These New Age hangers-on just got older, their skin resembling the wrinkled red earth on which they built their bars, their chillout lounges and their beach huts. In Goa, the ladees in teabags are represented by a certain kind of traveller. They are that snobbish variety that snarls if you call them tourists, who laugh at the cleanliness of your clothes, sneer at you for staying in a hotel with a nightly rate that would keep them in dope for months and despise you for not getting into their version of the "real" India. Perhaps they are right. There are those who live happily in trancelike states for decades at a time, but in the haze of passing time they lose the ability to see themselves as they really are. They do not have to watch their own downward spiral of drug use and disengagement, and cannot see the irony in the fact that they wear a uniform - the dreadlocks, the piercings, the tattered tie-dye - like the drudging classes they claim to have rejected. And in that grubby uniformity lurks the genuine belief that they are on some great and important quest. In pursuing this, they block out the ugly reverberations around them, the impact that they have on life in fishing villages from Rajabag to Terekol.

This is not to say that the raggy-taggy have uniformly bad taste. For the past 40 years, they have discovered that Goa is a place where they could explore India's trove of spirituality, massage techniques and narcotics in the balmy comfort of a seaside state that enjoys a higher standard of living than most other Indian states. Of course they want to stay - wouldn't you? - and the local people have made it possible for them to. Da Costa and D'Cruz families by the dozen saw the market opportunity that came with their permanently 1960s visitors. They started to open up bars, seafood restaurants, cheap hotels, beach huts and bakeries where the raggy-taggy could get chocolate cookies and croissants, and so achieve almost a complete escape from rice, dhal and the rawness of the subcontinent. Goa became a destination divided into extremes: the raggy-taggy and five-star resorts. Those that stayed at the resorts were protected by high walls and high prices, rarely straying beyond the big gates, except perhaps to go and look at the raggy-taggy, who themselves had become a bit of a tourist feature. One result was that people began to stay away, heading instead for next-door Kerala because it was better promoted, and had more variety for the middle income western tourist.

Then there came a sea change in Goa. It was not a sweeping thing but a small movement that created a few private hoteliers who opened stylish homes with all the grace of colonial architecture common to the grand houses of this formerly Portuguese colony, with whitepillared cool and a fusion on sunlit colour. One of these is Siolim House, a Portuguese casa de sobrado, a 300-year-old manor house that once belonged to the governor of Macau. Varun Sood bought the property in a state of crumbling decay. With his drive and his French wife's good eye, they restored Siolim as a place that is part palazzo, part home; part air, part light. It exists in a bubble, removed from the rest of Goa on the edge of Siolim village, one of the rare northern coastal villages that somehow managed to escape the interest of the bhang and bhanga set.

Isla Pollack, Belgian by blood, Goa-born and convent-educated in Surrey and Bombay, has brought all facets of her genealogy to bear on her Panchavatti Guest House Retreat on Corjuem Island, near Bardez, again in the north of the state. Loulou, as Isla has become known, has built a house where time slows down on the veranda sitting above the river and the grazing buffaloes, and everything has the attention to detail of Belgian perfectionism, whether it's the freshness of strawberry jam and bread at breakfast or the bowls of

floating frangipani flowers beside the planter's chairs on the veranda. In a different vein, and a little further south, there are those who love The Nilaya Hermitage for its star-spangled ceilings and rock'n'roll connections, and the sense of constantly being in an extended house party. And then there are those, like me, who run away from it because the place seemed to close in around me, and it somehow defied the very sentiments shared by Varun Sood at Siolim, Loulou at Panchavat t i and indeed Csar Ritz: that, to survive the ugliness of the world - and, in Goa, assorted raggytaggys - we need lots of space and light, tempered with luxury. Justine Hardy is the author of 'The Wonder House', a novel set in Kashmir, being published by Grove Atlantic in August and 'Bollywood Boy', which is published by John Murray

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