

THE 2008 BEST LIST: THE DETAILS THAT MAKE TRAVEL DIVINE

VANITY FAIR

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ON TRAVEL

BURMA

THE ETHICS OF TRAVEL AFTER
THE SAFFRON REVOLUTION

BY PETER HUGHES

BEYOND MACHU PICCHU REDISCOVERING PERU

BY SOPHIE CAMPBELL

BLONDES! HERRING! SOCIALISM!

STOCKHOLM

IS THIS THE MOST CIVILISED CITY
IN NORTHERN EUROPE?

BY A.A. GILL

[Plus] PAUL THEROUX, LUCIA VAN DER POST,
PRINCESS OLGA OF GREECE

GOLDEN GOA

Bauhaus by the beach at
Aashyana Lakhonpal villa.



THE NEXT BIG THING

Where to go next? Such a worry. Dived in the Maldives, trekked in Bhutan, fished on the Kola Peninsula, sailed the Chilean fjords, shopped in Shanghai – so what are the new names to drop in the traveller's global dinner-party conversation? We are insatiable for the sensational, the last frontiers and the first Four Seasons to crack open another little nut of an island, previously leading a blameless life, populated by fishermen and backpackers smoking pot. Contemporary travel is the great game of having pushed the boundaries, but with a vodka martini to hand. Today's must-have is the sheen of luxury combined with visceral experience. Are you brave enough to weather the vicissitudes of whither the next safari, beach and island? Read on for three destinations that are breaking the surface.

BY VICTORIA MATHER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON UPTON

GOA THE NEXT BIG... ALTERNATIVE

In Goa, at the glorious Aashyana Lakhanpal villa on Candolim beach, you swim in a diamond-blue pool being dive-bombed by dragonflies; a mongoose washes his whiskers; butterflies skim the water to drink. One is having a Scheherazade moment on the edge of the Arabian Sea.

Once Goa was totally exotic. In 1839 Captain Marryat wrote in *The Phantom Ship* that “the square behind the palace and wide streets were filled with living beings: elephants with gorgeous trappings; led or mounted horses in superb housings; palanquins carried by natives with splendid liveries, running footmen”. Such was the wealth, the splendour and luxury of the proud city of Goa, “the Empress of the East”. There’s but a whiff, a tatter, of that splendour now, but a collective will for luxury to be resuscitated. For Goa Dourada, Golden Goa, to glitter again—and that this time the golden epithet will refer to the beaches, not the precious metal of the original altars and *revedos* of the Portuguese colonisation.

Here’s the crux of the matter: fashionable travellers are like a flock of starlings, on to the new hot destination at the drop of five stars. Suddenly, in the 90s, the Caribbean became the Indian Ocean and—whoosh!—they were up and off to Mauritius and Seychelles. Then the Maldives got in on the act and—whoosh!—they were up and off from Mauritius. So where’s the new Maldives? Seychelles slid off the go square when British Airways withdrew their flights, leaving high-end travellers without the flat-beds or service to which they are accustomed. And there’s only one truly wow-factor place to stay—North Island—despite lots of chat about other big players, including Four Seasons, going in. Poor Sri Lanka suffers from small civil wars and political corruption; Mozambique showed willing, but is a pig to get to; Sol Kerzner is going to build a One&Only resort on the Tanzanian coast, and Luke Bailes may create the first beach Singita. Yet Goa has everything going for it, including two deluxe domestic services on Jet Airways and Kingfisher (see Best List, page 32).

There is a go-go-Goa crowd: the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, the Marquess

and Marchioness of Douro, Christopher Balfour, the former chairman of Christie’s, all Aashyana guests. Kate Moss hung out at the graceful Siolim House. Lady Hamlyn has bought and restored her own divine house with stratospheric panache. If the *grande dame* with the world’s best taste loves Goa, there’s a lot to love. When her husband Paul was alive, before she had the house, she took the whole of the boutique hotel Pousada Tauma. It is simple, endearing, a synonym for Goa.

There may be no gorgeously caparisoned elephants or running footmen in Panjim, the state capital, but there is a market

will yet hold their nose and jump into Goa to get it going. Four Seasons pulled out in 1999; the site they were to manage is now run by the Leela, a promising new Indian hotel group, where the Leela Club—many suites with pools, all suites butlered to bits—is certainly luxurious but in a curiously soulless way. Don’t even think about the main hotel, or the cavernous restaurants therein. The Park Hyatt is Disney World, utterly unlike its sleekly designed city cousins. The Taj Exotica means well, and you can’t say anything more depressing than that. The Taj Holiday Village should change its name

THE ARISTO CROWD LOVE GOA BECAUSE IT’S NOT SANITISED LUXURY BUT STILL A REAL PLACE

vivid with flowers, fruit and the scent of frangipani; a delicious cathedral façade, redolent of past grandeur; and a breezy square in which one can imagine the *passaggiata* of colonial ladies with parasols. Today it is home to Blooming Dales and the Hindu Pharmacy—“Sharing Your Faith Since 1911”. I definitely have faith in an establishment which places Winalot next to the suntan lotion and has no hesitation about dispensing sensible advice: “Self-medication may lead to 1) death, 2) severe toxic effects and 3) under-effects”. Safer to head for Barefoot, a slick linen shop, just below the shabby-chic Hotel Venite, where, if you breathe in, you could have lunch on the narrow balcony suspended over the wiggly old street.

Goa was a colony for 450 years, one of the longest-held in the world, and is India’s smallest state. Handed back in 1961, the contradiction muddles along companionably. Across one verdant green field there may be a Goanese church shimmering white in the distance, in another field a sassy modern billboard advertising “Share Khan, Your Guide to the Financial Jungle”. The practicalities of the matter are that no über-luxury outfit

(so common) and have at least two swimming pools. The rooms are immaculately unexciting, service is spot-on, the food delicious (the spiced crab is a wonder), but what a chance Taj has missed not going for the wow-factor. Not going for anything at all yet, bar a spa, at Fort Aguada, which was a flagship for templed-out travellers to flop on the beach. Oberoi has land in Goa; if Biki Oberoi opened a Vilas property, a beach cousin to his glam Rajasthan properties, the state would be in a state of ecstasy. The dear little pumpkin, the pimple on India’s west coast, is trembling to become a coach.

Meanwhile, it is closed-door glamour. Intriguing villas, boho small hotels. Aashyana is a dreamboat: a modern design in lush gardens, right on the beach with masses of space for everyone to get away from everyone else (such a blessing as the week progresses). There is Marmite at breakfast, so reassuring. The masala omelette may look as if it’s been run over but the lime soda, sweet combined with salt, is a winner. Along the positively Bauhaus corridor of polished concrete are old framed posters: “Pears’ Soap, Pure as the Lotus”, “Learn Without Sorrow the Eternal Truth that Youth is Godlike, and Beauty is Youth”. If over a certain age,

not read before tottering to the pool. Ashyana's trump card is the beach—same beach as the Taj Awfully Named Age, but much further along. It's also Goa's social-central on the north coast, where interior designer Jivi Sethi is the master of ceremonies. He's the King King, his house a theatre but not on the beach, and it might be a good idea to do landscaping the pool. Siolim House in the silence of shaded courtyards, big rooms with Goanese Farrow & Ball floors. No beach. Helen Hamlyn's Pousada Tauma has a quiet stone elegance but could be astrophobically hot and cramped; it's a drive to the beach. Hell, why take the whole hotel?

Nilaya Hermitage is a boho-boutique, kaftan zone. Stars in your eyes, and the ceiling, and, guess what? No! A denial of the beach. I actually think this is more than in a Scarborough sort of way, if ever, ever Goa became so smart as the dusty, rusty ferry across to Fort Col (100 rupees, about £1.20, for exclusive use) was replaced by a bridge, ferry. One's allowed to steer the ferry, everyone smiles at one's cleverness. On the river, up the hill, is the best food in Goa, Bloody Marys (see Best List, page 10) and Dom Pérignon. It's a tiny, dotty sister to Nilaya, with a sweet suite of views along miles of beaches. Miles.

Dolphins play. Go there with a picnic or use the fort's own boat.

It is an indication of the desperation for Goa to become a goer that praise has been heaped on Vivenda dos Palhaços, an emergent hotel in the south run by English brother and sister Simon and Charlotte Hayward. Bless them, they don't run it very well. They've wandered out of Somerset Maugham into the snake pit of travel vipers. There's one decent bedroom, communal dining (always horrible) with pleased-to-meet-you grubby people, none of whom one is remotely pleased to meet, particularly old hippies bottle-feeding dribbly babies. The Haywards' hotel expertise embraces, like the pharmacist, three alternatives: 1) shoddy housekeeping resulting in stained sheets, no soap and a "Why didn't you ask?" attitude; 2) brown food from a cluttered and disorganised, if friendly, kitchen; and 3) the underwhelming: the Vivenda is a combination of the pretty old Goan house at the front and the Hindu house at the back. The former has faded beauty, the latter is dark and gloomy. The swimming-pool area is fetid-to-boho disorganised, depending on the monsoon to sun-fun days.

Now for the good news: the Haywards have attempted something very challenging. They have set out towards a charming guest house, not an aspirant boutique gem. It would be more charming

if heavy-smoking Simon could get rid of his barber's/dental chairs in the drawing room: they exude as much appeal as root-canal work without anaesthetic. Possibly, the investment in VDP became a little stretched here, but they are aware it is not the drawing room at Blenheim.

What's unique, fun and fab is the bar that fell off the back of a lorry. Or rather, it is the back of a typically decorated Indian lorry, vibrant with colour, that falls off the back of the kitchen. Let down on chains, it's the perfect bar top and the hub of the house. Black-and-white pictures of Haywards hunting in colonial India are wonky on the walls. Simon wants you to have a drink with him; Charlotte wants to help you and, indeed, is the conduit to lovely Zeebop, an immaculate beachside restaurant (see Swell Party, page 52).

Want, want, needy—that's Goa. Like a child, it wants to be good. But so many want it to be sensational. The aristo crowd love it precisely because it's not sanitised luxury but still a real place; see the pilgrims swirling at the Basilica of Bom Jesus in Old Goa to view the shrivelled relics of St Francis Xavier and it is to do with faith, not tourism. Goa glows in the sun and the beaches shimmer pearl white; the restaurant life from shack to the sybaritic is vibrant. One day in the near future of stardust hotels we'll be saying it's not what it used to be. Goa's gone.

VANITY FAIR TRAVELS TO...

GOA

WAY TO GO

No posh scheduled airlines fly direct to Goa from the UK. Going to Goa is a job for **Greaves Travel** (020 7487 9111; greavestravel/india.com), magicians of getting anywhere in India with maximum comfort and minimum hassle, from the welcome sight of the Greaves representative who meets you virtually at the door of the aeroplane to their pristine air-conditioned cars and safe, smiley drivers. Greaves automatically put their clients in business class on internal flights to Goa on **Jet Airways** or **Kingfisher** at no extra charge; and can advise on villas, hotels and boutique properties. Dying to get to Goa? Then the port of entry is **Mumbai**, now an electric modern city buzzing with excitement. Stay at **The Oberoi**, immaculately run with an outstanding Indian restaurant, **Kandahar** (and it takes some standing out to be outstanding in Mumbai), terrific shops if you want to have a retail orgy in quick time. **The Taj** is whizzo for drinks, lunch, a social hub with wow factor since restoration, but the service

can be uneven. A **Four Seasons** is opening imminently. The new domestic airport at Mumbai is smart and easy, the flight to Goa just an hour. Flopping out on the beach after rushing round Rajasthan? There are now flights to Goa from Jaipur. Warning—bit of a bugbear, this—Kingfisher may alter its schedules.

NEED TO KNOW

Using Goa as a doorstep to southern India? Not the greatest idea, but it is possible to visit the extraordinary **Hampi Caves** from Goa. It's a seven-hour drive or a flight that sometimes gets cancelled. Hmm... Be prepared that Goa is not St Tropez. It's boho. There's a jolly shabby chic that appeals to the upper-class Brit who hates anonymous international luxury. A police car on an urgent mission here consists of the policeman leaning out of the window waving a red flag. Be happy you don't have to pack high heels for low dives; both black tie and a BlackBerry are way too showy. Linens, shorts, sarongs, floaty kaftans and sandals are all that's needed. Do go to **Braganza House** in Chandor, a dustily pristine example of old Goan grandeur. Drink icy beer but avoid Black Dog Indian whisky.

PS

Don't be snobby about eating at the beach shacks, they're fun. Take local advice. Don't be bullied into a guilt trip to Old Goa if you're freaked by seething crowds.