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## Romantic escapes

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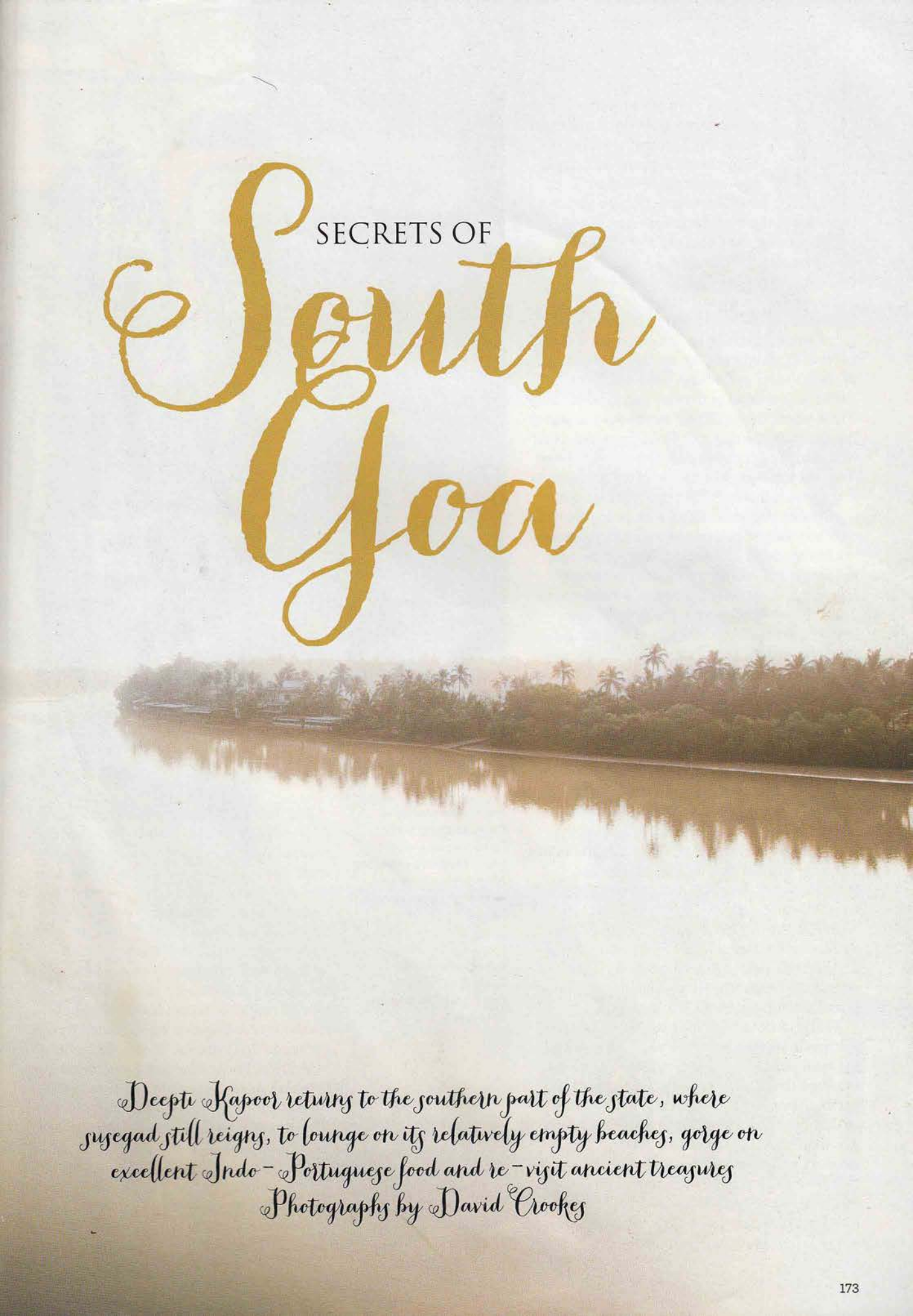
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A photograph of a tropical river scene. The water is calm and reflects the sky and the surrounding landscape. On the right bank, there is a dense line of palm trees and some buildings. The sky is a soft, hazy blue. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

SECRETS OF  
*South  
Goa*

*Deepti Kapoor returns to the southern part of the state, where  
susegad still reigns, to lounge on its relatively empty beaches, gorge on  
excellent Indo-Portuguese food and re-visit ancient treasures  
Photographs by David Crookes*



For most visitors who come to the area around Dabolim Airport, an unseemly agglomeration of agro-chemical plants and vulgar new construction, is their introduction to Goa. From here, they absorb the unremarkable views of the highway, crane their necks to gawp at Panaji while crossing the Mandovi River and quickly embrace the thrills of North Goa.

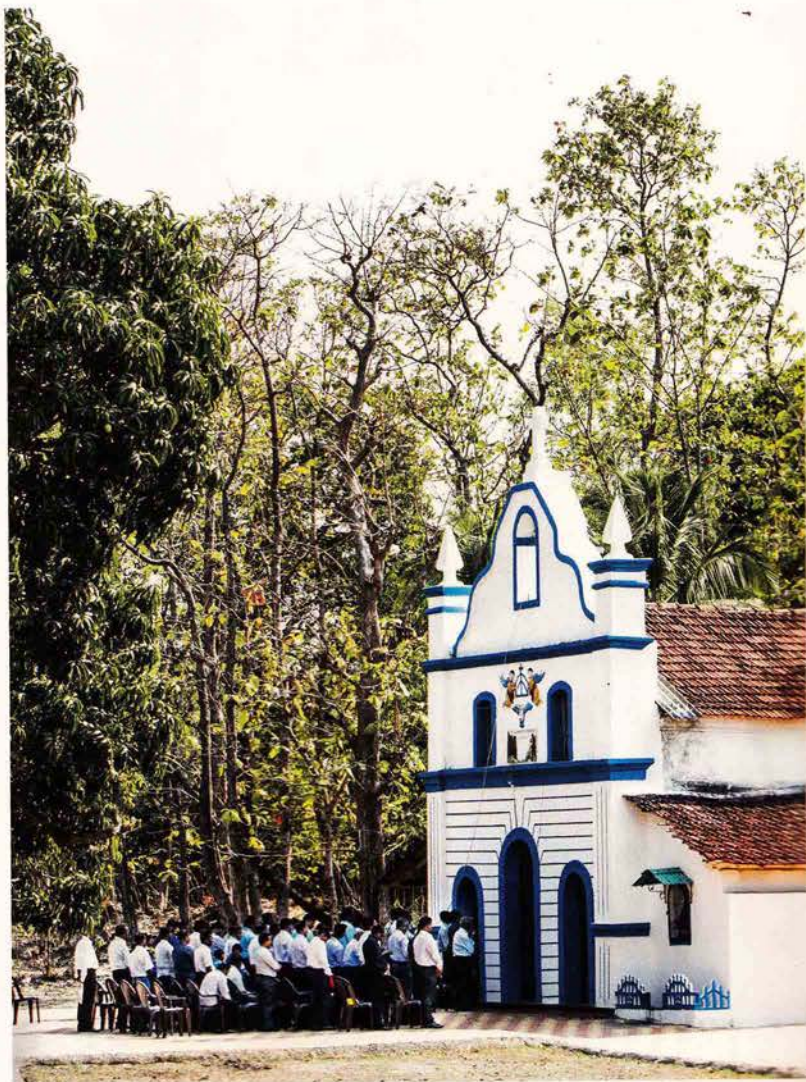
Yet only a few kilometres south of Dabolim, industrial outcrop gives way to the neon-green paddy fields of the Salcete plain, and another Goa emerges. An undisturbed expanse of golden sand to the west, a bucolic Goan-Catholic heartland to the east and, further south, where the Sal River carves out the end of the flatlands, the rugged hills of Canacona. And then into Sanguem taluka, another South Goa: the Sahyadri Range in the distance, hemming in mining sites, tribal villages, dense forest, spice plantations and astonishing archaeological finds.

When we first moved to Goa eight years ago, my husband and I rented a village house near the jungle in Colomb, a rocky bay between Palolem and Patnem. The rooms were dim and unfurnished, light came in through the gap between the wall and the roof, as did the jungle rats, who had the run of the place. The owners had locked everything of worth—TV, blender, toaster—in “God’s Room”.

We didn’t need them anyway. We swam at sunset, partied at night, swam again at sunrise if we were awake. We were subletting from a handsome French antique-dealer gone native. He had a restaurant next door that only opened when he felt like it. He shouted and cursed, cigarette in mouth. He swore by Mumsnet for recipe ideas and shot at marauding monkeys with an air rifle. So, ill-tempered, temperamental, somewhat doomed. But what food! When it came.

Across the road was a tapas restaurant run by Dani, a Catalan who made the best Gambas al Ajillo this side of Barcelona. And on the way to the beach was Boom Shankar, the finest sunset dining spot in the world, according to us.

This idyll lasted one long season until it was too much. We retreated to a year’s penance in Mumbai and Delhi, before returning to Goa, this time to settle in the tamed, developed north, to practice yoga, to write, to be healthy, to lead productive lives. For a while, the south was forgotten, Canacona dismissed as a fond memory of hedonistic impracticality, the rest of it simply unknown. Then gradual forays were made inland, crossing the wide Zuari River back into Salcete, looking down on the enormous iron-ore barges chugging along the coast.



**Above:** the church at Cabo de Rama Fort; **Opposite page from top left:** a lifeguard patrolling Agonda beach; beach huts on Agonda; lunch at Palacio do Deao; the restored interiors and façade of the mansion; a fishing village near Canacona. **Previous pages:** sunrise over the Sal River

Jila Bakery, in Ambora village, became a pilgrimage point. One simply could not pass by without stopping to pick up Reginald Antao’s mindblowing éclairs, the pleasure of holding a dozen of them, packed in a white cardboard box tied with string, never diminishing. And since they were always sold out by 10am, it became our first port of call in the day.

There were other pit stops: little Casa Bela, in Chandor, a restaurant that served incredible rose-flavoured chai, and Indo-Portuguese restaurant Nostalgia, in Raia, started by chef Fernando da Costa and continued by his widow, Margarida. I tasted my first proper vindaloo here and, against expectation, learned to love salted ox tongue, while listening to Margarida’s story of the visiting Portuguese ambassador who tasted a bacalao so wonderful that he called for the chef, convinced he was a Goan Catholic. He was amazed to meet, instead, a Nepali boy who had imbibed the wisdom of Portugal so completely that he could have been a citizen himself. →



It wasn't only the food. Driving through the villages—Raia, Maina, Curtorim, Macasana, Chandor—scenes of daily life were so compelling, so different from Candolim, Anjuna, Mapusa and Morjim that one wondered if it was the same state at all. There was a gentler state of being here, attuned to a natural rhythm of life. A decency manifested everywhere, in the politeness of traffic, in the schoolchildren who waved and said hello, in the patient and detailed directions that were given on the roadside, in the way no one yelled “Taxi, Madam!” or “Come see my shop!”

Then there were the mansions, heritage homes with names redolent of the colonial past: Menezes-Braganza, Braganza-Pereira, Figueiredo, Fernandes. The Braganza mansion in Chandor has a certain opulence, and the Figueiredo house in Loutolim is entertaining, (due to the presence of the exquisitely named, compellingly loquacious and ever so slightly cantankerous Maria de Lourdes Filomena Figueiredo de Albuquerque). But the Fernandes house, also in Chandor, had something else: faded grandeur, yes, but also a schizophrenic character, split between Hindu foundations and a Portuguese upper floor, ancient Hindu stonework propping up a corner of the ground floor, a delicate teacup from Macau upstairs. The real star, though, was a secret passageway hidden inside a... well, to say anything more would be to spoil it.

And now we're in the village of Majorda, at Vivenda dos Palhaços, the idiosyncratic boutique hotel that's become a home away from home, and its owner, Simon Hayward, a friend. South Goa, largely, is the realm of high-end hotels, with Alila Diwa, the Park Hyatt Goa Resort and Spa, The Leela Goa and the Taj Exotica Goa. But you wouldn't necessarily guess that from here (or from the nicely designed Turiya Villa and Spa in Chaudi). A herd of buffaloes rests in a palm grove, young boys ride two to a bicycle, shouting good morning in stereo. Konkan Railway trains pass north to south, 1km away. All day long, train horns cry, coming closer, going away, a sound that elicits goosebumps in the deep night. I lie in The Chummery, a garden room full of books, listening to the horns again at dawn, falling into one more hour's sleep.

We wake up to a breakfast of strong coffee, fruit, soft-boiled eggs and toast, and a plan to explore a part of South Goa previously ignored, in Sanguem taluka, the deep south, past Quepem. We're seeking two treasures today: a Buddhist cave in Rivona and petroglyphs on the banks of the Kushavati River. But first: the best drive in Goa. The Canacona coast road, a passage of

supreme beauty from the mouth of the Sal to Agonda, starting at Quitol, winding through gorgeous fishing villages, up sun parched plains, down a hairpin bend, past a canopy of coconut trees spreading for miles and graffiti on a wall saying: “KFC BOY'Z CANAGUINIM” followed by the heartbroken counsel: “IF U WANT TO BE HAPPY IN YOUR LIFE STAY AWAY FROM LOVE”

It's a short detour to Cabo de Rama, believed to be a refuge of Lord Ram during his exile from Ayodhya, the site of an ancient stronghold and later, a great Portuguese fort, the remains of which still stand. A few kilometres before this is an almost deserted beach, with cliffs on either side dropping precipitously into the Arabian Sea. Here, we search out a steep path in the rocks and scramble down until we can go no further. Coconut palms cling to wave-beaten rocks, arching upwards. Not far off, a local man hunts for crabs. Before you know it, he's scuttling up the track with his haul. We try to follow him, ask what he caught and where he's going. →

**Below:** a thali at the Park Hyatt Resort and spa.

**Opposite:** the porch of Turiya Villa and Spa







malas for a cult of carnivores. But we take a right at Chinchinim, towards Chandor. We're looking for an early lunch, so we walk into Casa Bela, hungry and expectant. It's quite empty, the window display is anaemic and... there's no beef! The Maharashtra ban has had an effect here as well. We lament and a framed Virgin Mary takes pity on us from the wall. "Two days," assures the young man behind the counter. "Beef will come from Margao in two days." Good for him, not for us. We're resigned to a meal of poi bhaji, vegetable samosa and several glasses of chai. Then we hit the road again, over the Kushavati, on a winding lane to the Tilamola crossroads.

In the past, each time we reached this point, we'd take a right. It happened without fail. A right turn leads to Quepem. The road to Quepem is the road to Palacio do Deao, the 18th-century mansion restored by Ruben Vasco de Gama, who now lives there with his family. The house and gardens are remarkable and the mansion, unique for its architecture—Portuguese structures adapted to Hindu custom. But the greatest draw is the multi-course Indo-Portuguese feast, cooked with love by Ruben's wife, Celia, and served on the rear veranda. Rissóis de camarão. Pumpkin pie. Stuffed squid and prawn curry. There should be a maxim: When in Quepem, eat at Palacio! But when I called to reserve a table (strongly recommended), I was told Ruben's daughter was studying for her exams, so meals were off the table for a week. So we drive straight over the Tilamola crossroads.

Uncharted territory, a garish arch, then the world takes a marvellous turn. Not too long ago, a flat sense of order prevailed. Now, there's an exuberance of natural chaos, the earth swells in wavy rolls, the undergrowth is out of control, branches grow over branches. We wind toward a mountainous horizon. Tulsi shrines shine in front of houses, temples pop up on the side of the road.

It's not easy to find the Buddhist cave; we have to ask for directions several times. We get precise instructions, but precision here is faulty. Trees have conquered the sign supposed to mark our turn. So we go back and forth again, until finally, a kid points to a large red mining truck before a Maruti temple.

The cave—in a glade by a stream next to the truck—is tiny in the grand scheme of things. But think of it: Buddhist monks arrived here in the 6th or 7th century, at a time when India was producing some of its finest art. The Chalukyas of Badami were ruling Goa. And Buddhism in India was in decline. So where did these monks come from, what did they speak, how hard was the journey? Did they thrive, did →

But it's impossible, he's too fast. Barefoot, he all but flies upwards. So we return to the car and drive on, winding to the peak of Karmali Ghat, after which the bays and islands and beaches of Agonda and Palolem reveal themselves, a glorious sight, all the more so because it vanishes as the road turns toward Cola beach.

From Canacona, visiting Sanguem is fairly easy, if you take a right off the NH17 after Chaudi (perhaps after visiting Parthgali Math temple and the banyan tree reported to be 2,000 years old), heading past the Mallikarjuna junction to drive on through the hills. We go back north on the highway instead, negotiating the switchbacks and crazed taxis overtaking at blind corners, mindful of the trucks that, over the years, we've seen tail up the hillside, metal barriers bursting open before them like frozen water. We "drive slowly" (the fond words of farewell used by so many Goan friends) and after half an hour, ease out on the road towards Margao, which, by the way, is the best place to buy strings of spicy Goan sausage, crimson

**Above:** the oven at Jila Bakery. **Right:** the interiors of the Braganza mansion in Chandor



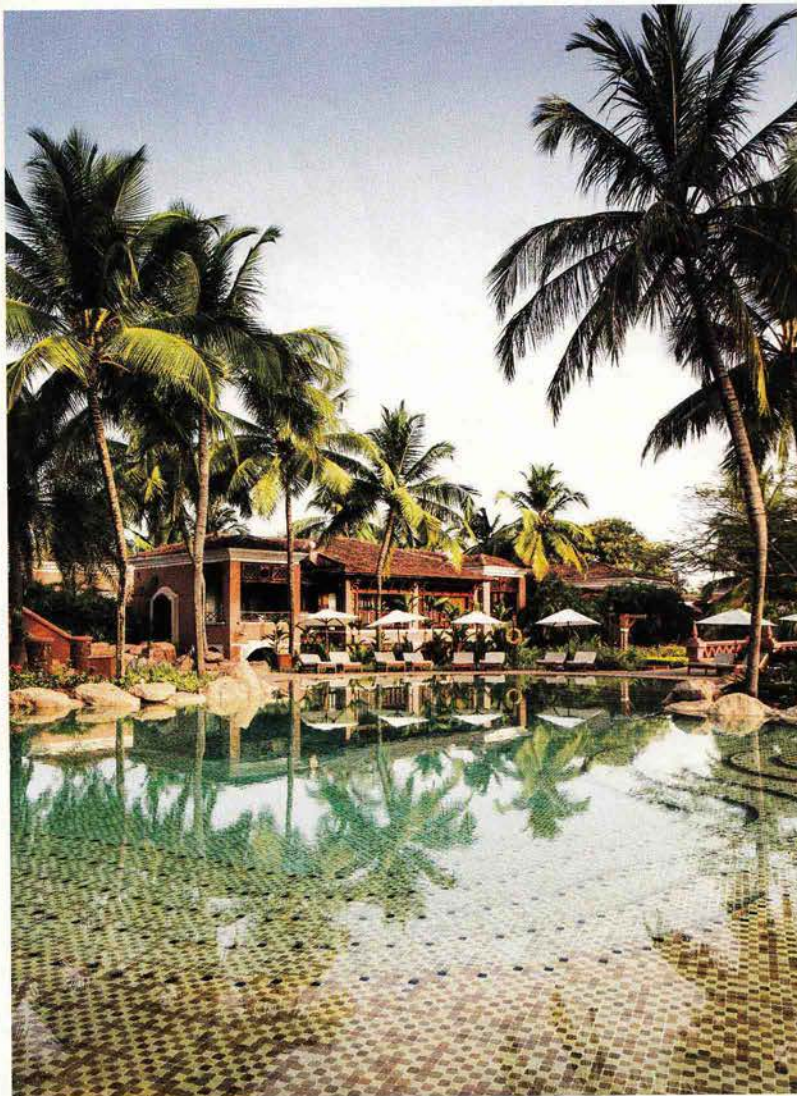
they die? Impossible to say. Yet in this isolated spot surrounded by areca palms, they fashioned a cave from an overhanging piece of rock, and created cells to meditate, sleep and live inside.

The main entrance is accessed via steps that bring you down to the stream. To the right, a wide mouth narrows to a passageway. Light and heat fall away. There's a small central chamber with a square cut in the roof to let light in. The atmosphere is cool and serene.

Despite a fear of snakes, I push on further inside and enter one of the cells. I try to sit inside, my imagination fighting the darkness. Time passes here; like holding my breath without realising, the outside is forgotten, and for a brief moment, I'm only in this place, searching for its ghosts.

The rock carvings of Usgalimal are also hard to find; a group of schoolgirls eventually point the right way. We drive around steep corners of jungle. A few kilometres later, on the crest of a small hill, we see a handwritten sign beside a dirt track saying "Rock Art", as if announcing

**Below:** the pool at the Park Hyatt. **Opposite page:** inside the Fernandes mansion; the façade of the house; prawns with chillies at the Nostalgia Kitchen; a man restoring furniture in Palácio do Deão; the Mallikarjuna temple in Canacona; local school children



a community exhibition.

After five minutes, the track hits a dead end. We come back and examine the sign again, but nothing. Next to it is another sign saying: Kushavati Spice Farm, with a phone number. I call, there's some confusion, the voice wants to know where I'm coming from. Panaji? Margao? Mumbai? No, I'm right here, on the road, can you tell me how to get to the carvings? He doesn't understand, says it depends where I'm coming from. But I'm on the road, by your sign, right here. I want to see the carvings, the rock art. A moment passes, the penny drops, he'll send someone right away.

A bumpy ride past a mining quarry later, I'm standing atop one of the most important prehistoric sites in Western India, the earliest evidence of human existence in Goa. Not next to, not beside. Atop.

The moment we arrive, the caretaker, Ramakant, emerges from his thatched hut and leads us out onto the rock, launching into a routine as if a coin has been pushed into a slot. It's a few moments before I realise we're trampling the carvings underfoot. Ummm... should we... is this...? I murmur reservations and think of those "Do Not Touch" signs in museums. Ramakant is unfazed. With undoubted commitment but indeterminate authority, he says we are looking at a bison. Really? Where? To better illustrate the majesty of the bison, he takes a water bottle with a hole in the cap and squirts into the lines on a rock. The bison appears, quite magical. But again, should we... really... is this...? The water dries in seconds as he moves on to a peacock, illuminating its glorious train in water. And he goes on, leading a whistle-stop tour: a dancing woman, a horse, a deer, a dog, a pair of human feet that might be a signature, see!? A hunting scene, an "X-ray bull" with its internal organs displayed, the mystery of childbirth in the form of a foetus, a placenta and finally, a great circular labyrinth. In the heat, keeping pace with him, it becomes too much to take in. Using my husband as a sacrificial decoy, I move a short distance away.

It's good to take a moment and think about what I've just seen. What we know is this: the Usgalimal carvings sit within laterite rock on a bend in the Kushavati River. This is beyond dispute. What is not is their age, since laterite presents difficulties in carbon dating. But they are thought to be Mesolithic, which means anything between 20,000 and 5000 BCE, a period in which humans were beginning to practice domestication, but were still hunter-gatherers. At this moment in history, the Indus Valley Civilisation was still several →