

A WATERY VISIT TO INDIA: ASSAM, GOA, THE GANGES, AND THE SUDARBANS

PART 3 GOA

Following the Brahmaputra River cruise I spent my final night at the Taj New Town (Kolkata). I flew Air India and was upgraded to Economy Plus on the flight to Mumbai and served the fruit platter I had ordered. On the flight to Goa there was a plane change due to a mechanical issue and my former seat no longer existed on the new plane, so I was middle seat in the last row! Win some, lose some. Fortunately, I had changed my close connection Mumbai/Goa to a later flight as the Kolkata to Mumbai was delayed. I was providing time to stock up on books at W. H. Smith to take to Morocco. Fewer than 1% of the travelers are non-Indian, perhaps a few more in North Goa.

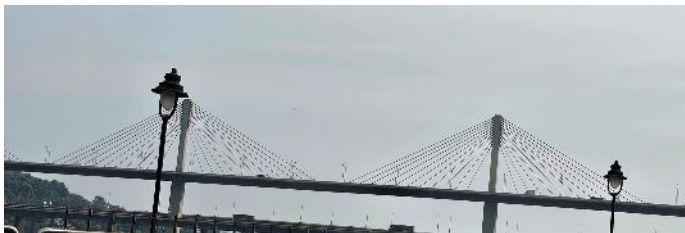
The Goa airport had some beautiful art, as had Mumbai and Kolkata!



The route from the airport to Calangute in North Goa where I am spending the next four nights first follows a bay with rusted freighters tied up, then one of the excellent 4-6 lane



highways I would experience throughout Goa, and which abruptly stopped with 11 km remaining. All the traffic now slowly merged onto one of the typical local town center very congested streets. We passed Panaji on a beautiful bridge crossing the Mondavi River and saw what I thought were several cruise ships berthed. A couple days later when I did a day



trip there, I discovered that they are floating casinos and local party boats! I have been on the road from 7:30 am to 8:30 pm and am ready for a quick dinner and bed. There are still



people around the pool and on the beach at The Park and fortunately the breakfast buffet will go until 11 am.

While I am having breakfast the staff is removing the outside seating, are installing pavers, and painting them in a black and white checkerboard pattern. This is where the New Year's



Eve buffet will be served. This part of North Goa is a very busy beach full of snack shacks, fishing boats and active lifeguards.

My wristband entitled me to non-Indian alcohol for the New Year's Eve party, but they were serving Jacob's Creek, an Australian mass producer whose wine is no better than the Indian Sula and Fratelli that I had been happily drinking and I don't drink spirits. I was joined at my table first by two



Indian brothers, one from San Francisco, the other from Melbourne, then by an Indian family from San Francisco. So, it was a fun night, but I had no energy to stay up for dancing and fireworks.

With the help of the hotel staff, Get Your Guide and the fantastic tourist maps of North Goa I was able to arrange a New Year's Day walking tour of Fontainhas, in Panaji, the historic capital of Portuguese India from the 17th C. The port dates to the 11th C having provided the protected harbor for access to the Arabian Sea. It was not until 1961 that India annexed Portuguese India and in 1984 this neighborhood became a UNESCO World Heritage Center, thus preserving its unique architecture and character. It was laid out in a grid pattern climbing the hillside and is nicknamed Goa's Latin Quarter.



My driver headed back the way I had arrived and I joined six others on the walking tour. Goa still has a significant Portuguese speaking population and is about 25% Roman Catholic and 66% Hindu. The architecture in this neighborhood varies with the wealth of the building owner with fan lights the most basic feature and a complex façade (with



features illustrated by our guide, Rachana) for



the wealthy. We first see



one such façade not yet restored and then others fully restored. The most unique feature to me are the windows which instead of glass are made from strips of a local translucent river oyster shell which allows light to the inside while providing privacy.

Many are B&Bs, and some areas have posted 'no photography' due to the large number of tourists. The brightly colored buildings were

required to be repainted every year after the monsoon by the Portuguese, a tradition that continues today. Balconies are another attractive feature of many of the buildings.



There are often altars outside the residences and I learned that Portugal's fascination with Azulejos tiles began in Morocco when they conquered Ceuta in 1415.

According to our guide a number of saints' days are celebrated and the streets become very crowded.



We took a break at a bakery to sample the Portuguese pastels, a small custard tart that I love.



The rooster sculptures on many roofs arose from a

story about a botched hanging, and the roofs with this statue means a family member served in the military.

The small chapel of St Sebastian was, unfortunately, closed. It was built in 1818 and is famous for a crucifix that was originally at the Palace of the Inquisition in Old Goa on which Christ's eyes are open. St Sebastian was



known for his interventions. The Feast of Our Lady of Livrament is held on this square every mid-November.



This building takes decoration to the extreme! I did not get close enough to discover whether it is tiles or painted street art.

After touring a gallery dedicated to the artist Antonio Xavier Trindade (1870-1935) we stopped for a juice and were

entertained by a local singer guitarist with a broad repertoire in multiple languages.



After the tour I lunched at Hospedaria Venite where I had delicious penne with shrimp, garlic, olive oil and chili flakes. Our chef on the cruise had deliberately not used the local Naja Jalackia chili, which has been named the hottest chili in the world replacing the Mexican habanero.

I am trying to capture photos of the sculptures present at almost every round about on the route. Temporarily for the



Christmas season there are stars hung on roadways and buildings throughout Goa.

Dabolim is where the Goa airport is located.

My full day tour of North Goa began with a dolphin watch from Coco Beach. I got my feet wet in the Arabian Sea getting into the boat having left my shoes in a box next to a vendor selling shell jewelry. Thankfully I had the map from the hotel, so I knew what I was seeing on shore.



Fort Aguada was my next stop but fortunately I saw the ocean-side prison portion which wasn't part of my tour.



We saw lots of dolphins which was very exciting. One came completely out of the water and did a sideways turn, and we had several active around the

boat at once.



In addition to the dolphin watch tour boats there were fishermen and pleasure boats.



Fort Aguada was constructed in 1612 by the Portuguese to guard

against the Dutch. It covered the entire south end of the Bardez peninsula at the mouth of the Mondavi River. Due to a spring, they constructed a tank containing 50 million gallons of fresh water for ships to stop and replenish their supplies, with 79 cannons for protection.



The lower port served as a berth for their ships, then became a prison under the British and was the largest prison in Goa until 2015. It is now a museum of the freedom fight for India's independence.

The lighthouse was built in 1864, is the largest of its type in Asia

and was active until 1976 when a new one was built nearby.

As we worked our way north, the driver wanted to take me to a new tourist attraction, Thunder World which didn't interest me and wasn't on the itinerary. Some of the beaches were on the itinerary but I explained that I was staying on the beach and had already walked it. St Alex Church was on the map, and I asked to go see it but he said it isn't a tourist church. It turns out it was built in 1741 when the Catholic population reached 4000, has a rococo pulpit and seven altars. So I had to import these photos.



Instead, he took me to another, 1875, church.



There are small chapels all along the way and roadside crosses.

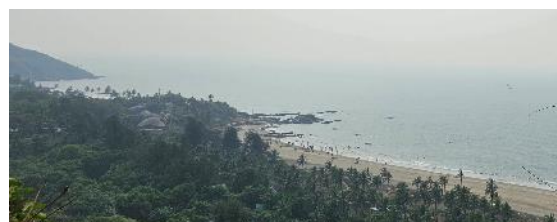


The roads are dotted with banners saying 'We Are Messengers of the Good News' advertising the exhibition of the relics of Saint Francis Xavier at Sé Cathedral in Old Goa



from November 21, 2024 to January 5, 2025, an event that occurs once per decade. Fortunately, during my Panaji walk I had seen a poster for a collateral art show by Goan artists near St Augustine Tower in Old Goa.

The next stop was Fort Chapora, a long walk up to the ruin with fabulous views of the Chapora River and Arabian Sea with many parasailers.





There were lots of families making the hike and stopping at the fruit and sugar cane juice stands on the way up. I was very unhealthy and stopped for a Sprite and potato chips! The fort was built in 1617 and abandoned in 1892 when the Portuguese took over the territory to the north.



I had read about the resto/bar Purple Martini in the Air India in-flight magazine. With spectacular views, especially at sunset, an eclectic menu, signature cocktails plus beer and hookah, it offers something for everyone. I had the Korean fried chicken for a late lunch but found the music way too loud even after turning off

my hearing aids!

With the many rivers in the area, other activities abound.

The towns along the way still have the same energetic Indian vibe, just with more tattoo parlors and wine shops. Cows still have the right of way.



The far north of Goa, Anjuna and Vagator Beach are where hedonism had its peak in the 1960's. This is still a party central area and backpackers' haven, but now primarily enjoyed by Indian tourists.

Unlike in Assam where the rice was being harvested, I am now way further south and the next crop is well underway.



There is a pretty church in the center of Calangute and a large banyan tree.



It is now Friday, January 3 and I am transferring to my new base, Jasminn Hotel Betalbatim Beach. The first part of the trip is totally familiar, then a nice highway until it, too, terminates. South Goa is also very verdant, but now there seem to be more, larger, private homes.

In 1510 Alfonso de Albuquerque conquered the city of (Old) Goa over the forces of the Sultan of Bijapur. This is the primary destination for my touring day. At its peak it had a population of over 200,000 and was known as the 'Rome of the East' due to the numerous Catholic orders/churches present.

However, first we stopped at Shree Manguesh Temple. In 1560 it was relocated to its present site controlled by Hindu kings and the current structure was begun. Its deity is an incarnation of Shiva. As I entered the complex women



were selling fruit and flowers for offerings. I bought some but then really had no idea what to do with them! In the end I left the jasmine at a lesser deity and took the marigold necklace home to enjoy in my room. There was no photography inside of



course so I couldn't capture any of the beautiful shimmering deity images. I did, however, sneak a photo into the Great Hall with its 19th C chandeliers. The water tank is considered to be the oldest part of the temple and there is



a seven-story lamp tower In Saraswat Architectural style as well as a shop selling beautiful saris.



We then arrived in Old Goa where all transport had to drop their passengers for the cathedral. The road is lined with sayings. Mass is being held in a covered

area with at least nine priests and perhaps 1000 worshippers in attendance.



In order to visit Sé Cathedral I will have to join the crowd waiting to see the remains of St Francis Xavier on display



inside. Today is the next to last day of the two-month viewing period. Thankfully they had covered all the area where we are queuing (it is 30°C) and provided drinking water. Banners had sayings from various holy people, and loudspeakers were broadcasting prayers and inspirational messages.



The crowd was very calm, I estimate my cohort at around 400 people and the process consumed 1 ½ hours! This talk on the large screen was filmed inside the Basilica, the only photo I have of its altar since photography isn't permitted in either venue. Unfortunately, this exhibition means I won't be able to absorb the interior of the cathedral as we are herded along!





Goa became a bishopric in 1534 and it took until 1631 to complete the cathedral, the largest building built by the Portuguese in Asia. It originally had two towers but a storm destroyed the right one in 1766. This is a postcard photo of the saint's remains.



The casket is normally in this mausoleum in the

adjacent Basilica Bom Jesus, consecrated in 1605. SFX was



a close friend of St Ignatius of Loyola with whom he founded the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). He had died in 1552 on route to China and his body has remained preserved without any chemicals. The basilica is considered one of the best examples of Baroque architecture in India, is one of the Seven Wonders of Portuguese Origin in the world and was raised to status of Minor Basilica (India's first) by Pope Pius XII in 1946. The white plaster has been stripped to reveal the red stone commonly

found in Goa. Other than the golden altar the church is quite simple inside (as is Sé Cathedral), there are a courtyard and grotto.



Because of the time required for the Cathedral I never got to visit the other churches which

make up this UNESCO World Heritage Site: Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, 1543, oldest still standing; Catarina



Chapel of Santa built where the Muslim city; and

Albuquerque entered Saint Cajetan 1665 which mimics St Peter's Basilica in Rome.



When trying to find my way to my driver pickup point I encountered a huge crowded market complete with amusement park rides. You could spend a whole day just exploring the goods on display! Since lunch doesn't seem to have been factored into the schedule. I treated myself to a Maxim Bar, one of the few things that is as expensive in



India as it is in France!

We found the St Augustine Tower, part of the complex built from 1597 to 1602, but abandoned in 1835 and left to fall into the ruins we see today. When completed, the enormous



Our Lady of Grace church was considered one of the three great Augustinian Churches in the Iberian World.



The art works, displayed in the adjacent convent, were Saint Francis Xavier themed, by 62 artists of various religious persuasions and artistic styles, and, happily for the artists, all had sold!

We followed the Mondavi River back through Panaji to Miramar Beach at the river's mouth. Signs tell me its amenities were a recent project with a nice children's play area and walkways to a large beach. However, there are no apparent snack shacks and I am very hungry. Fortunately, there is a small bakery/snack bar across the main road and I am able to get and wolf down an individual pizza. Here is an aerial of Miramar Beach.



I insist to the driver that I see Betalbatim Beach on our return to the hotel. He explains that the car's owner tracks his routing and watches to see he doesn't pick up additional fares. I pointed out all the places on the itinerary that we didn't go and so we went. The access was



a track barely wide enough for one car with pay parking at the end. I had him pull over and wait while I walked to see it. No services here, just a lovely large beach with a few people. It was already 5:30 pm. My photo suggests that further north at another beach there might be snack shacks. Totally different from North Goa!

There is a lot of greenery including agriculture in this part of South Goa.

On my final day I found one of the pools at the hotel to be the correct depth (1.5 m) to do some water aerobics. I caught up on internet and relaxing reading. I think the non-Indian residents were mostly British. Fortunately, there was a book exchange so I could further augment my supply for 7 weeks in Morocco. Jasminn is laid out with several buildings around garden areas each offering different types



of accommodations and the cuisine choices were varied and well executed.

A short flight to Mumbai, the night in the transit hotel in the international terminal, allows me to conveniently access my uneventful flight home and the transition from bright, colorful, 30° India to gray, 3° Paris, but only for a week before heading towards my second 'home' in Agadir, Morocco.

This concludes part three of my 2024-2025 Watery Visit to India.