

A Goa in Goa
By Karen Goa

"Welcome to my hotel Mr and Mrs Goa!" booms the owner of the Star beach resort, pumping our hands like jack handles. "I am Mr India! Hahaha!"

What did we Goas expect in Goa? My blond, Nordic-cheekboned husband Ken is an obvious imposter, no more Indian or Portuguese than he is a space alien. I am worse, a hanger-on who dropped my own ordinary English surname for Ken's more exotic one. Since becoming a Goa I'd plotted to go there – to the palms-and beaches Goa, not the cold Norwegian city of Goa, where Ken's ancestors – and his name – came from. In our more delusional moments we imagined receiving the keys to the ex-Portuguese colony from the awed Goanese, or at least a free drink.

From day one, we get jokesters.

The plane to Mumbai touches down at midnight. At sunrise a check-in attendant for the flight to Goa appears. We leap up as fast as our withered leg muscles allow after spending the night squashed up on a marble window ledge with a pair of snoring Dutch backpackers.

"I am very pleased to meet you Mr and Mrs Goa," says the check-in attendant, handing over our boarding passes with a gratifying little bow.

I check to see which of us has the window seat. The boarding passes are clearly marked 'Destination: Calcutta'.

Once that's sorted (the check-in attendant not batting an eye) we catch the flight to Goa, then throw ourselves into the back of a Oxford Ambassador taxi voluptuously upholstered in plum and black velvet. Fleeing rooms grim as interrogation cells on offer at other budget hotels, we fall dizzy and delirious into the Star resort, near Colva beach. Despite the owner's welcoming guffaws the Star treats us with as much respect as a hotel with mended towels, sheets thin as a pauper's shroud and fickle electricity can muster. I count among its amenities a sturdy, hot shower, a small balcony from which to view the footpath-wallahs sweeping leaves off, then on, then off the paths, and a swimming pool tinged green.

In the morning we walk to the beach down a dirt road hazardous with lugubrious cows, pigs snouting through rubbish and small boys rolling car tyres along with sticks. A vendor staked out at the end of the footbridge to the beach shouts, "Ice cream! Ice cream!"

I shake my head.

"Ice cream madam! Fifty per cent lower fat!"

"Do I look fat?" I demand.

"Yes madam!" he caws, grinning hugely.

As I huff my way across the footbridge I overhear a man greeting a woman acquaintance.

"Hello, you've got fat!"

"Hello, you too!" says the woman.

Maybe I've got it all wrong, and being called fat is a compliment. Maybe not.

The best spot on Colva beach is under an umbrella at the Sucorina Beachshack. Each morning we wander over the footbridge, past the impertinent ice cream vendors, the touts importuning us to go parapunting, take a boat ride, buy sarongs, pineapples, necklaces,

drums. Sinking our toes in Sucorina's white-sugar sand we order fresh orange juice and, later, Kingfisher beer, pakoras, fruit salad.

We tell no-one about our last name, although Ken, who's a boatbuilder, prowls the beach snapping photos of boats with 'Goa' written on them. But from the beginning Dharmesh, our prescient, moustachioed Hindu waiter, calls me Her Highness.

"If Her Highness wants something, just clap when you need me, like this," he says, clapping like a flamenco dancer.

Now that I've got the go-ahead to act like a Person of Importance, I don't. It's too ridiculous.

In the afternoons we snooze in the hotel room, or swim lazy laps in the Star's pool. As the days go by, more guests arrive: it's almost Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. The swimming pool turns greener.

At night we walk back to the Sucorina, to the table Dharmesh sets for us on the sand. He brings us fresh-caught seafood laid on a silver platter. We choose from tiger prawns, jumbo prawns, lobster, black snapper, red snapper, baby tuna, barracuda.

We eat black snapper masala and veg biriyani, keeping an eye out for flea-raddled dogs and toe-snapping warrior crabs glaring at us from their sandy holes.

"This is very good," I tell Dharmesh. "You must have an excellent chef."

"Yes," he says. "We are chaining his legs so he doesn't leave."

On Diwali Dharmesh takes the night off, but we dine at Sucorina anyway. All the beachshacks and shops are lit up from end to end. It's too much for Colva's overwrought electrical systems. The lights flicker, flutter, and die. We stumble back to the hotel in almost total blackness, clutching each other. We can't see the hotel, but it's there somewhere.

Then a great white star blazes out of the gloom. We scurry towards it and our hotel room, marveling at the irony of a shining star in this Christian state guiding the pilgrims on the night of a Hindu festival.

The next night is our last in Goa. We eat spicy tiger prawns Goan style, on lemon rice.

Dharmesh gazes out to sea and says maybe he'll be reborn as a tuna.

I ask him how we'll recognize him.

He smiles. "By my moustache."

We talk with Dharmesh about the beachshack business the three of us will have: Ken will build it, Dharmesh will run it, Her Highness will clap for whatever she wants.

We don't want to leave. Dharmesh says he could chain our legs, if we want.

At the airport the check-in attendant does a double-take at our passports.

"You like Goa so much you changed your name?"

"Yes," I say. "That's right. We like Goa that much."