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EMPTY
BEACHES,
NOSTALGIA
& PEACE

Goa

It's 30 years since he was last there, but **Nick Redman's** back, in search of the sleepy nirvana of his youth

Through the car windscreen their blissed-out faces said it all. As the couple driving towards us along the bumpy track passed, we waved. The driver wound down her window and, delivering vital beach directions, confirmed it: 'You're going to pa-ra-dise.'

Little Cola beach fitted the brief: a frill of palms on a far hill, a baby-sigh of surf, yogic murmurings from the group at the inevitable shabby-chic glampsite. Nirvana in a nutshell. Reports of Goa's demise? Greatly exaggerated...

Depending, that is, on where you stay on its famous shores, which unravel for 100km or so beside the Arabian Sea. I got the lowdown at the five-star W Goa, my base for the first few nights: 'The north is chic – a stunner,' said the guy at the Rock Pool bar as his squeeze sipped a G&T overlooking the waves. 'So is the barefoot south. But Goa has sagged around the middle, just like the clientele.'

The middle? He circled my map: Calangute, Candolim, Baga... Sorry piles of carbuncular hotel complexes, cheap charter crowds and waves of budget beervana-seekers.

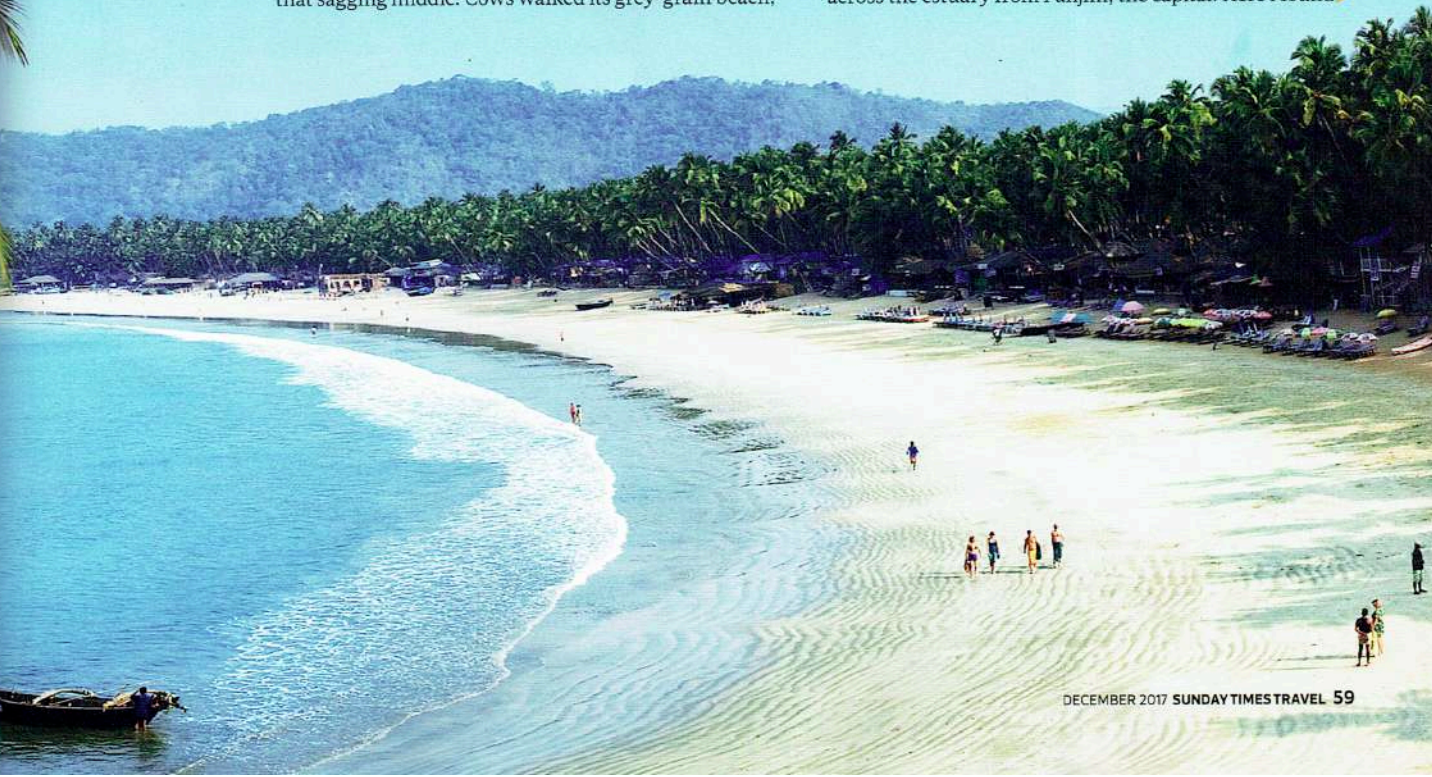
Last here 30 years ago, I wanted nostalgia. Vagator, home to W Goa, certainly made a valiant attempt to deliver on the rose-tinted front, being slightly north of that sagging middle. Cows walked its grey-grain beach,

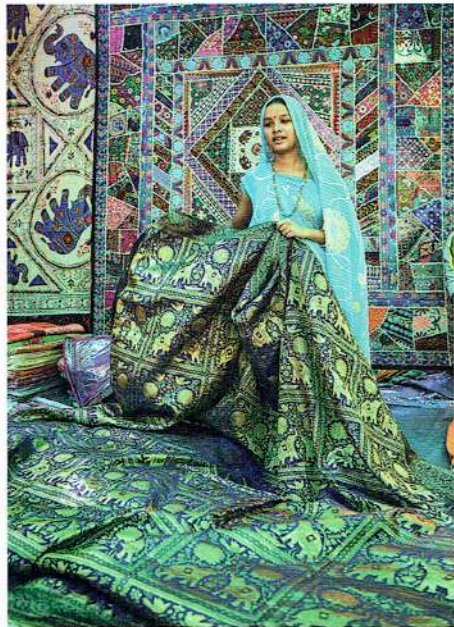
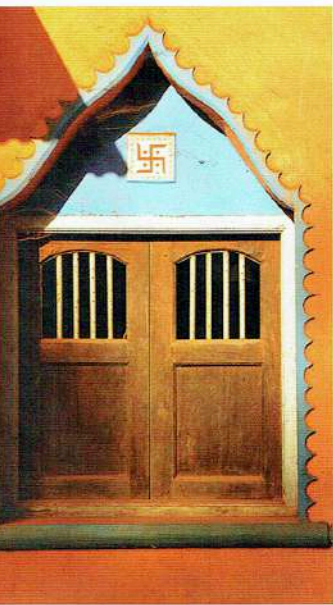
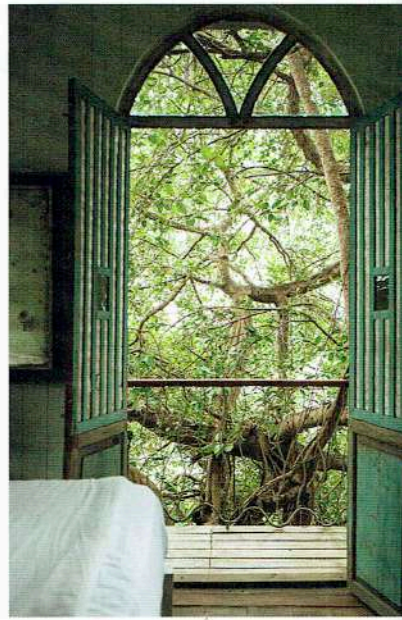
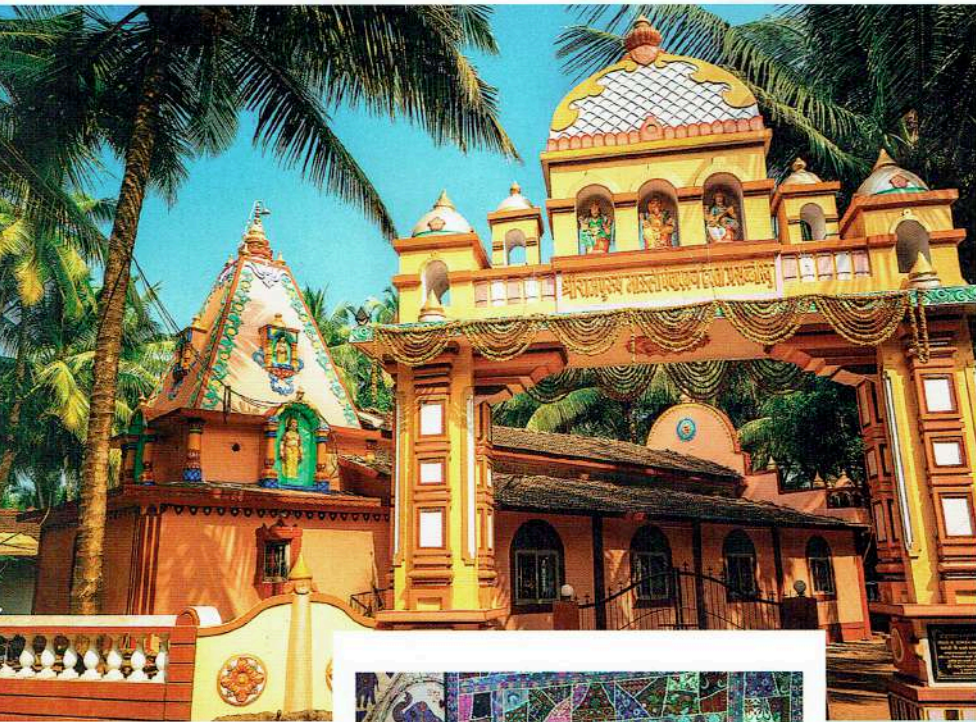
as they'd done back in December 1987 (the crowds ogling the watersports antics were more recent). But W Goa was millennial down to its Mojitos. Its white-cube clutter recalled Barcelona, LA and Mexico, among places where W has planted its hotel-brand flag. Luckily, there were nods to the locality: 'rickshaw' cushion motifs, coconutty curries and Bollyfit classes on the grass: all in all, a safe crash pad for those parachuting into Goa for the first time.

After two days, though, I was craving a trip, so I booked a driver/guide (my nostalgia didn't extend to roof-bussing it this time), and thus I found Little Cola, a secret southern spot so serene that I felt I'd been pre-incarnated as the 24-year-old me. But idyllic though it was, its glampsite – Cola Beach Exclusive Tented Resort (colabeach.com; £66 per night) – was still a bit Goa-meets-Glastonbury.

As for Agonda beach, Goa's other southern star, it was retro enough, with the breeze-flap of menus at Rico's bar, yet marred by signs for naff-sounding spots such as Nana's Nook. Nearby Palolem, with shacks under palm fronds, still had the faint lost-tribe vibe of Alex Garland's *The Beach*. But it also had the 'Om Sa Super Store': not very Bounty Bar (although it did stock Nutella).

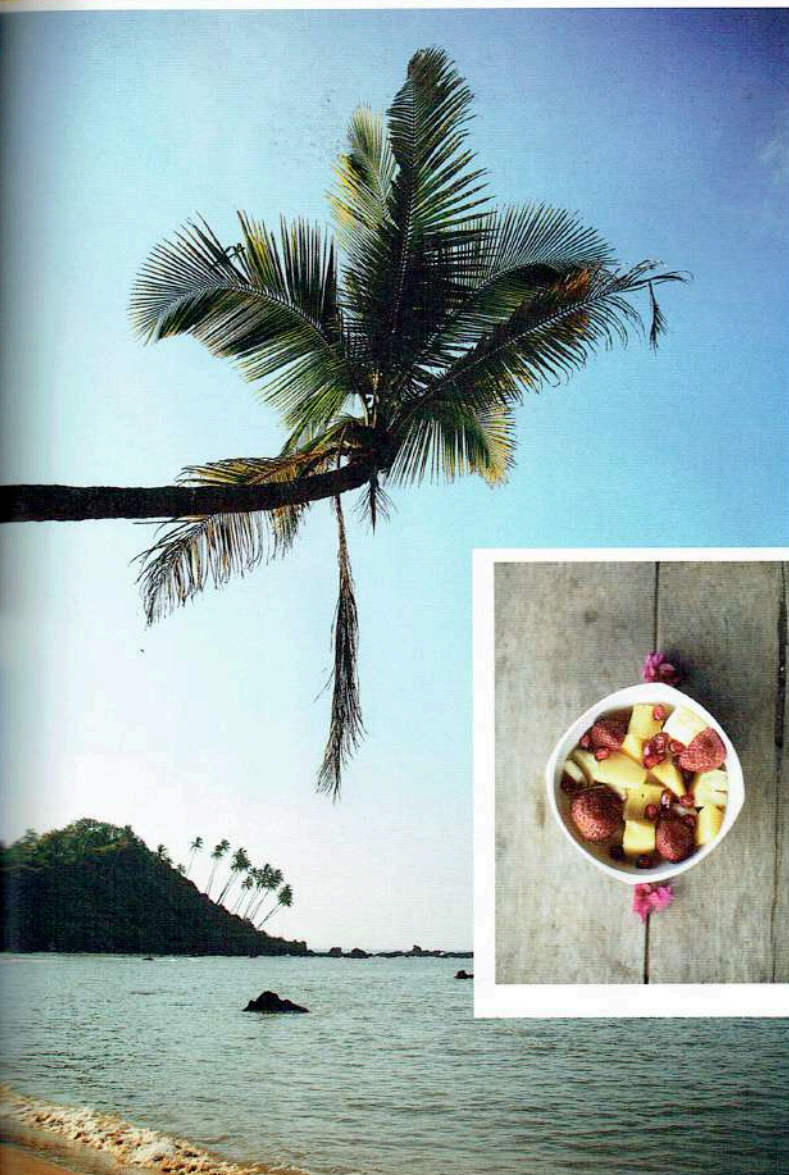
In truth, I was too long in the tooth. So, leaving the barefoot south, I relocated again, north to Coco beach, across the estuary from Panjim, the capital. Here I found ▶





Holy of holies: clockwise from top left, colourful Hindu temple in north Goa; the tranquil interior of Ahilya by the Sea; the palm-fringed Cola beach; fruit salad at Ahilya; the exotic architecture of Ahilya (literally) by the Sea; fishermen at work; temple gateway, Agonda village; exotic fabrics at a local Goan market; lifeguard on duty





my fantasy retirement home, Ahilya By The Sea. Among banyan branches it basked in tranquillity, all verandas and Burmese antiques. At dawn, I paced Coco beach, past sardines in the sand, their eyes pecked by egrets, and chatted to men bundling nets onto boats. Late that night, after my masala mussels alfresco dinner had been cleared, I saw their mast lights far out, flickering blue and red, as if signalling a secret.

Perhaps they were. It was a tip-off from Ahilya that led me next day to Ashwem beach, an hour's drive north. Boho and becalmed, Ashwem was it. Here I encountered Nigel, from Camden, resident for six months a year, taut from a regime of headstands on the sands (annoyingly demonstrated); and olive-toned Yasha, from Sardinia, perma-folded into a deckchair by her designer stall. Eurasian fashion fusion (bags, espadrilles) was on display. Clearly the tacky trance years had passed Ashwem by.

La Plage beach restaurant could have been in the chic Caribbean (St Barts, say) with a friendly French owner, '70s funk sounds and guests (discreetly monied Mumbai folk, fashion-mag flickers) in casual chairs under palms. For relaxed competition, there was Elevar: hip-but-not-haughty, with whitewashed rough tables under a high raffia roof, and magnums of Italian Prosecco to go with plates of marinated tandoori prawns and tomato *ragout*.

Soon all I could think about was doing a Nigel, running away to settle here – for *vin*, a tan, and days of DIY pilates. So much more alluring than another sofa-bound winter of *Strictly* – lamenting my own sagging middle.

Ampersand Travel (020 7819 9770, ampersandtravel.com) has three nights at W Goa and three at Ahilya by the Sea, as part of a 10-night trip, from £3,530pp, B&B, including a private car and driver, Heathrow flights and transfers. >

Is 'Delhi Belly' real, and how do I avoid it?

A: 'It's real all right, but Delhi Belly (known, too, in medical circles as travellers' diarrhoea) is not exclusive to India. Caused by a bacterial infection of the gut, it is at best inconvenient, at worst immobilising. But not everyone suffers from it, and a few precautions will make a big difference. First, travel with a bottle of antibacterial hand gel, and always wash your hands with soap and hot water before every meal, letting them air dry rather than using a towel. Stick to veggie dishes where you can — meat tends to have a higher risk of bacterial contamination — but avoid

salads, raw veg or fruit you can't peel or wash. Don't drink water that doesn't come in a sealed bottle — no ice, either. If you succumb, the key is to rest and stay hydrated (two litres of water a day minimum), to pass the infection as quickly as you can. Drinking live-yoghurt *lassi* drinks can boost your gut health (stick to plain ones, making sure they're made with bottled water), and abstain from using medical anti-diarrheal drugs such as loperamide, as they don't deal with the cause of the symptoms — in fact, they can actually prolong them.' *Stefan George, junior doctor and member of the College of Royal Physicians with a special interest in global health*