

# INDIAN INTRIGUE

Our travel writer **Aoibheann McNamara** hits the otherworldly shores of India

**I**ndia is a vast microcosm of craziness and mystifying order, of 1.3 billion people, of countless religions and endless sun rises and sunsets. India is my great love affair. I have endured and been deeply pleased by this country over ten times since I first visited 15 years ago. It is very much like going home - a home of warmth, compassion and intense fascination.

I often start my trips in Goa, a place I like very much but which I almost don't consider to be India as it is too easy. It was described very accurately by a friend as a real life version of the body and soul section at the Electric Picnic. Since the 60s, Goa has been the focal point of the lost generation and those hippies with a lot of time on their hands. This mixes with a wonderfully rich

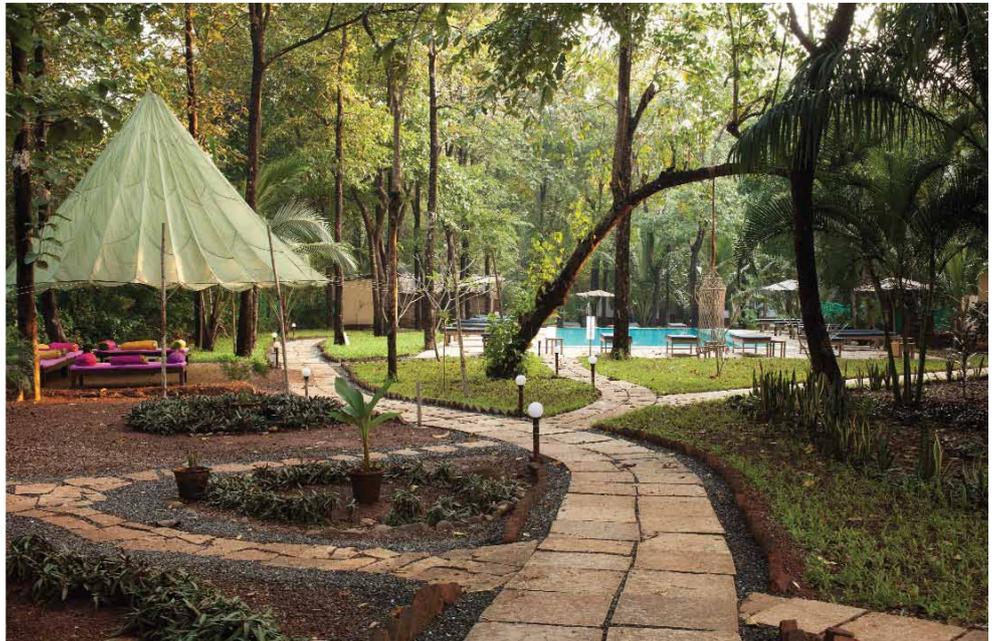
## TRAVEL

Portuguese heritage, which has resulted in a beautiful region architecturally.

It is to Purple Valley Yoga Centre I keep returning to as it is, for me, one of the best yoga centres in the world. It is an oasis of calm in a busy enclave of North Goa and it stands alone as a dedicated Ashtanga yoga centre, with the world's top teachers coming year after year. I was there to do David Swenson's two-week course over Christmas and was delighted by the teaching of this wonderful man who at 56, has been doing yoga since he was 13 and whose practice, tuition and deep understanding was inspirational.

The mornings start on the mat at 6am and a 90-minute intense practice follows - pure bliss. The focused consideration of the practice over the time in Purple Valley is second to none and your yoga moves forward in an extraordinary way. Purple Valley is unique in many ways - not least for the ease of the set up with three wonderful vegetarian meals provided daily, beautiful boho surroundings and exceptionally warm staff. It also attracts a very eclectic and interesting group of practitioners which keeps conversation fun at the dinner table. It is difficult to leave purple valley to explore North Goa, but you should rent a moped and really get the laid back feel of this busy, cool place.

The main focus of the area tends to be Anjuna, a busy hub with a meandering beach with lots of busy bars and restaurants. Other highlights include the Saturday night market which has endured since the sixties and still has some interesting vintage finds. What sets this market apart from others in India is the exceptional European fashion designers who have escaped the cold of Europe and relocated to Goa for ease of living and inspiration. One of the most interesting designers by far is the German designer Miriam Strehlau who I buy season after season. She combines club cool with old Indian fabrics to create the most exotic of collections. She has a wonderful work shop beside the famous shore bar and it epitomizes the life-meets-work design space that so many of these artists/



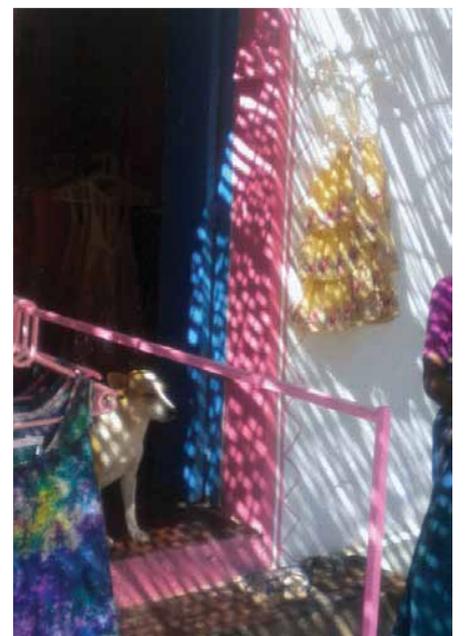
musicians/fashion designers inhabit here in Goa and it is inspiring to see.

Another designer is Akal, an Italian woman I first came across at the market when I saw a frenzy of woman around her tall. She designs amazing wool scarves which are very inspired by the Italian designer Missoni, but at a fraction of the cost. The quality is exceptional, the pieces are timeless and she is such a warm and gentle woman.

There are also countless places to eat. I love to brunch in Villa Blanch in Assagao; it is especially nice on Sunday when it draws an interesting crowd of the extensive group of Europeans that live here. Food is average, but the place itself is loungy and tastefully done - not like the aged hippy décor of most places. Another wonderful place where the food is amazing and yet the décor is challenging (we can never have it all?) is Jam Connection. Janet, the owner, is from Austria and makes everything herself. She knows her way around a Sacher chocolate cake and she knows how to welcome people so you never forget her.

Goa is a place of ease, with warm people and relaxed attitudes. It is very much not the real India, but it's a great place to land first in order to acclimatise, settle the stomach, find your feet and have a great few days before hitting off to the vast crazy expanse of the real India.

With body limbered up, bronzed and massaged, we fly to Dehli in the wonderful North India and prepare then for our 17-hour sleepy train trip to Varanasi and to the Dalai Lama's teachings in Sarnath. Now the fun really starts and the magic is tangible as we enter the beating heart of





India and we spend days looking at the holy River Ganges and let the drama unfold.

*Follow Aoibheann's adventures in Sarnath in part two of Indian Intrigue next month. Purple Valley Yoga Centre [www.yogagoa.com](http://www.yogagoa.com) Miriam Strehlau [www.miriam-strehlau.com](http://www.miriam-strehlau.com) Villa Blanche, Assagao*

*Aoibheann Mac Namara, Owner of Ard Bia and Nimmos Restaurant, Galway*

