
Traveller/ First Person



DO GO TO GOA

Putting on weight and suffering from mood swings and anxiety, **Justin Gayner** was struggling with getting older. Then his therapist suggested he seek out spiritual solace



A trip to India was just what the doctor ordered for Justin's midlife crisis (Photos Justin Gayner)

A troop of monkeys are attempting to steal a pickup truck. Plum-headed parakeets screech overhead. An incredibly large elephant lumbers past hundreds of pilgrims. All the more

surprising given I'm on the steps of a ravishing seventh-century Indian temple. Despite being surrounded by chaos, I feel a deep sense of peace. This is my new normal.

Breathe in. Breathe out. After all, I'm here on doctor's orders. Just days before, I'm fidgeting on my therapist's couch. Ice-cold winter rain lashes against the windows of his Harley Street consulting room. "It's clear you're experiencing a midlife crisis," he says breezily.

"Like, an actual proper one or..."

"The whole nine yards. Think KFC Family Bucket."

"That bad?"

"Much worse. Add four signature fries, BBQ beans and a full-fat Coke and you've got the gist."

He disdainfully eyes up the packet of cigarettes jutting from my trouser pocket before resting his gaze on my middle-age spread. "You've told me you've put on weight, abuse your body and have no discernible routine. You suffer from mood swings, anxiety and don't sleep. Textbook stuff." He clicks his £1,200 Mont Blanc pen to land his point.

The problem is, I know he's right. I've not worked for three years, failed to take any responsibility for my rapidly inflating carcass and have less purpose than a fart in a thunderstorm. It's clearly time for change. "I'm totally up for the work," I say, three-quarters believing it. "But how?"

The therapist is distracted by the enormous white clock that presides over our sessions. "Time's up," he says. "You've got to figure things out for yourself but in your shoes, I'd go to India, get healthy and explore your spirituality."

I nod, entirely safe in the knowledge it will absolutely never happen.



One of the Evolve Back Resorts

But it does. Courtesy of a boozy lunch with encouraging chums, I find myself booking a one-way ticket to India. In truth, I'd always wanted to go. Having never taken a gap year, I recall being slack-jawed with envy as friends told me of their backpacking adventures in the world's most populated country. And by god, Indian food, how I adore thee.

Many recommend Rajasthan in the northwest of the country. Loads of great regal palaces and butter-rich curries in Jodhpur and Jaipur. My more spiritually inclined friends suggest I join the hippy trail on the southwestern beaches of Goa. Meditation! Sound baths! Yoga retreats! Not me at all, but just what the therapist ordered.

I start my adventure in northern Goa, staying near the once-celebrated beaches of Vagator and Anjuna. My hopes of achieving spiritual nirvana are quickly dashed by the spectacle of red-chested Russian partygoers scarfing cocktails in Ibiza-style beach bars. The hippies are a tribe of the past. Many of them left during Covid, fleeing the beaches to the jungles after local laws were passed banning music here after 10.30pm.

I need to head to the local hills to find spiritual connection, I am told; it is here where I will find a psychedelic trance festival. Apparently, I will meet yogis there. They will tell me how to achieve inner peace. I am greeted by a scene of 600



Virupaksha Temple, one of thousands of ancient remains spread across Hampi

twentysomething middle-class Indians in tie-dye T-shirts. It feels like the equivalent of Cornwall for the monied classes.

Many appear to have ingested amphetamines. Many look like David Brent dancing to a metronome. One of the youths kindly offers me a glass pot containing a fragrant ointment.

Assuming it to be a “herbal high”, I slather the substance on my fingers and lick them clean. They laugh. I don’t. I’ve just eaten a considerable

amount of Tiger Balm, the Indian equivalent of Deep Heat.

I rush to the bar for water. The air is dense with smoke and whatever they are smoking is making everyone very hungry. The festival is flanked by food stalls, fresh fruits and pancake makers. I find nirvana of a culinary kind; a grill house serving smoky chicken tikka wrapped in butter-drenched rotis. They get the better of me; I eat two. The diet can wait until tomorrow. Before I leave, I meet my first actual real hippy and one of the last remaining in Goa. I tell him about my quest for enlightenment. “You won’t find it here my friend,” he chuckles. “Head further south.”



Justin at the HillTop Festival in Goa

The next day I book a taxi and travel three hours down the Goan coast to Palolem Beach, ranked as one of India's best. This is much more like it. A one-mile crescent is pleasing to the eye, as are the modest beach huts that flank the coastline. Better still, there are a multitude of calming yoga classes and Ayurvedic massage centres. I pursue inner calm in one of many massage tents down the coastline. The masseur (male, moustached and reassuringly squat) tells me he has an urgent medical appointment and could we start earlier. This will later be chalked up as an error.

In the adjacent tent, a group are embarking on a sound healing course. At one point, it sounds like a woman is having a seismic orgasm, before she sobs uncontrollably. Figuring that this is my new normal, I try to get into the flow, but I can't help but wonder whether I should have waited for a later appointment.

But this is India; anything goes. Apparently, the knots in my back are the size of small walnuts and will take at least three more sessions to remove. I will bring earplugs next time.

After a fortnight (yes a fortnight!) of massage, meditation and largely unsuccessful fat man's yoga, I pluck up the courage to approach the metal detectorist who strides up the beach when the 31C sunshine begins to mellow. His name is Mark. He's from Banbury. He's convinced that there is hidden treasure on Monkey Island, which sits opposite Palolem. "It's The Cross of Goa. Solid gold. Left by the Portuguese."

When at home, Mark drives a medical supplies van, but he comes to Palolem at least once a year. He appears quite rational and indeed philosophically acute. "Life is like detecting. When you start digging, you never know what you are going to find."

That night, I consider Mark's words. I realise I've been on my metaphorical beach too long and have stopped digging. I need a different kind of stimulation. Seven hours later, I'm outside the seventh-century temple battling away monkeys and elephants. I'm in Hampi, an ancient town and Unesco World Heritage Site



**Keep calm and curry on:
two of the many dishes
that caught Justin's eye**

in southwest India that was “rediscovered” in 1856 by Colonel Alexander Greenlaw, an amateur British photographer.

Virupaksha Temple, home to hundreds of mischievous macaque and langur monkeys, is one of thousands of ancient remains spread over 16 miles, encompassing temples, forts, royal palaces and bazaars. The temple’s resident elephant, Lakshmi, has holy status: she is believed by

many Hindus to be the incarnation of the god Ganesha. (If you hand her a 10 rupee note, she’ll give you a blessing).

When I inhale the temple’s fragrant incense, I’m worlds away from the petrol-dense air of rain-lashed west London. The massage, yoga and meditation from the beaches of Goa are beginning to pay off.

In Hampi, history unfurls itself as seamlessly as a damask tablecloth at Claridge’s. There’s so much to digest that taking a guide is highly recommended. I’m with Ramesh, a local who’s been educating tourists for the best part of a decade. Over the course of three days, he (and chauffeur Ramu) drive me, in a classic Mahindra Scorpio, to dozens of sites, each with its own captivating story.

For the first time in years, I feel truly content. Able to let go and be in awe of my surroundings. It’s not just monuments that define Hampi. It’s also the surrounding towns that blend modern Pepsi advertisements with farmers driving ox-pulled carts, serving as a reminder of India’s recent agricultural past.



'If this is what the second half of my life looks like, I'm raring to go'

But it's the boulder-strewn landscape that remains forever unforgettable; an alien mixture of the Arizona desert and the moon. Wherever you look granite rocks frame your eyeline, many of which sit precariously on top of each other like an Indian Stonehenge.

I make the decision to spoil myself and bust my budget to stay a couple of nights at a fancy hotel called Evolve Back. What I didn't anticipate was that I was about to stay in the greatest hotel room of my life; a 2,600 sq ft house with its own private swimming pool, indoor and outdoor showers, an open courtyard and even a pillow menu to ensure the perfect night's sleep.

As I settle into my enormous bath with a gin and tonic after a hard day's sightseeing, I reflect that midlife crises might not be that bad at all, if you are prepared to dig a little bit deeper.

It would be disingenuous to say that I returned to England a completely different person. The author Neil Gaiman was quite right when he wrote that "wherever you go, you take yourself with you". However, I'm 3st lighter, happier than I've been in years and can just about touch my toes. I've dispensed with the expensive therapist, have replaced claret with kombucha and even have a new career as a theatre producer in the West End. If this is what the second half of my life looks like, I'm raring to go.

Justin Gayner is one of the creators of the TV show 'QI'. He flew with Air India

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