

Goa's hippies give way to India's yuppies

GOA, INDIA

New middle class flocks to enclave, bringing a more conservative attitude

BY MARIA ABI-HABIB

Elisabeth Ramnacher, a German who prefers to be called Yogini, wanted to show her employees what Goa used to look like in its hippie days. The only trouble was, she couldn't find a picture of herself with clothes on.

When hippies traveled overland from Europe to India decades ago, Goa, a state in the southwestern part of the country, was often the final stop on the trail, welcoming to its beaches Westerners who wanted to drop out in a place where living was cheap, drugs were plentiful and swimming nude was the norm.

"Goans' attitude and openness allowed the hippie culture to thrive," said Ms. Ramnacher, 58, who first came in the 1980s and now owns the popular Villa Blanche cafe.

But most of the original countercultural community is now gone. It has fallen victim to age, a higher cost of living and the demise of the hippie trail in the late 1970s, as wars closed the route.

The final blow came, remnants of the community say, when the government started cracking down a decade ago on the informal businesses that the hippies had set up to support themselves.

Today, Goa's renegade lifestyle attracts an entirely new type of traveler: young Indians flocking here not to find themselves, as the hippies once did, but to celebrate their bachelorette parties or dance atop bars.

As India's economy booms and builds a middle class that barely existed two decades ago, Goa has been transformed from a laid-back enclave for bohemian Westerners to a mass tourist destination for Indians.

"Goa is not Goa," said David D'Souza, the owner of Tito's, which started as a beach hut restaurant built by his father in 1971 and is now a throbbing open-air nightclub. "It's India now."

Tito's shares a street crammed with similar clubs, like Bollywood Discothèque and Cocktails and Dreams. A stroll through the neighborhood is an assault on the eyes and ears, with neon signs glaring and drug pushers sometimes shouting to sell their merchandise, trying to be heard over a cacophony of electronic music bearing down from all directions.

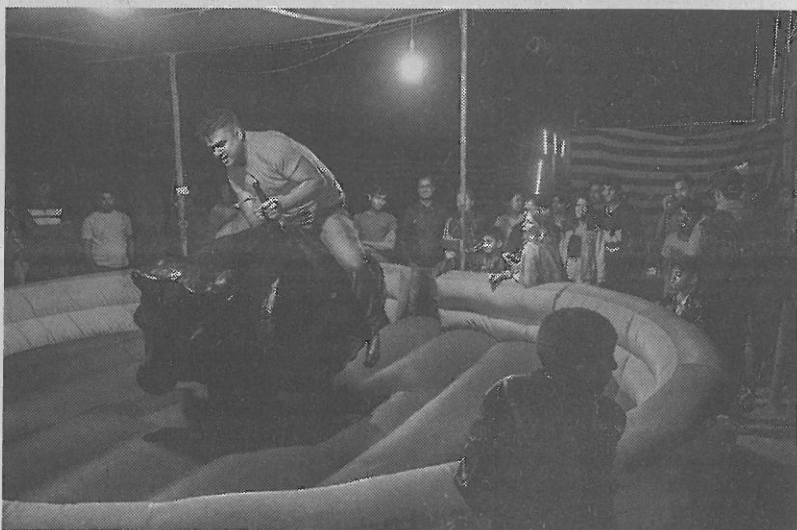
"Lots of Indian youngsters have made bucketloads of money, and they just want to blow it," Mr. D'Souza said. "It's a lot more yuppie now."

The concept of vacation is relatively new for many Indians, a product of the economic liberalization and subsequent boom over the last three decades.

In a country of 1.3 billion, if just 1 per-



Above, tourists in the Anjuna market in Goa, India. Many of the hippies who made the enclave famous are gone, driven away by a higher cost of living and a government crackdown on the informal businesses that allowed their community to thrive. Below, an Indian tourist riding a mechanical bull at a night market in Goa.



cent of the population joins the middle class, that means 13 million more people with the ability to take vacations. The United Nations estimates India will produce 50 million outbound tourists by 2022, compared with eight million a dec-

ade ago. Although India's economy has averaged about 7 percent growth every year for the last 18 years, the typical middle-income Indian family still earns much less than its Western counterpart. This has directed the tourism inter-

nally, to places like Goa. Annually, tourists outnumber Goa's population of 1.5 million by five times.

Jagdeep Singh, 35, from the northern city of Chandigarh, recently chatted with his brother-in-law on Goa's main strip of beach, which was dotted with trash, umbrellas stamped with beer logos and hawkers selling beads and scarves.

Both men were wearing matching black-and-white Mickey Mouse T-shirts that complemented their black turbans. They watched 18 of their family members play in the waves, half wearing the Mickey Mouse T-shirts, the rest sporting Captain America ones.

"My parents weren't from this kind of culture," Mr. Singh said. "If they came here, they would be in full dress and would be uncomfortable because people are in bathing suits and drinking."

He credits the growth of India's private sector for affording him vacations like this.

His father, a government employee, earned a meager salary.

"My family never went on vacation when I was a little boy," he said. "My son

is 2 years old, and this is his second time in Goa. He's seen more of India than my parents."

A little farther down the coast, a group of Indian men on a company retreat wore matching straw hats, chugging Budweiser beers and throwing the empty bottles toward the sea.

Nearby, a family from Gujarat, a state in northern India, hopped on a banana boat, the girls in long-sleeve dresses.

Although tourism has been good for the local economy, not everyone is happy about the heaving crowds.

Most visitors come from the north of India, where conservative mores reign. Goans scoff at their demand for "pure veg" food — observant Hindus avoid meat — and many mock their wearing of jeans to swim in the sea. They also chastise visitors for taking photos of women in bikinis.

Goa, India's smallest state, was a Portuguese colony until 1961, when Indian troops annexed it.

Last year, Goa's state minister for planning called north Indian tourists the "scum of the earth."

Goans describe their own lifestyle as "susegad," from the Portuguese "sossegado," a term conveying the chilled-out contentment that comes with living here.

Residents and long-term visitors are worried the influx from the north could change Goa's tolerant culture.

"Goa was a place to let your hair down, to be who you want to be," said Stafford Braganza, 45, whose is from Goa, but who lives and works in Mumbai as the head of makeup and technique at L'Oréal, the cosmetics company.

Mr. Braganza, who is gay, was sunbathing on the beach with two friends, all wearing red Speedo-like bathing suits, their chiseled chests welcoming the sun.

Even though India's Supreme Court decriminalized homosexuality last year, Mr. Braganza said the presence of northern Indian tourists made him feel less free and no longer quite so "susegad."

"Goans have a special culture of acceptance," Mr. Braganza said. "But lots of Indians are coming from everywhere now, bringing their social customs from their conservative cities. And there's a lot of them."

He acknowledged there could be a false sense of nostalgia for the hippie days, which weren't without tension.

Because hippies would go swimming nude — illegal in India — Mr. Braganza's mother forbade him from going to the beach when he was growing up.

Ms. Ramnacher, the cafe owner, agreed that the Western hippies could sometimes go too far.

"We probably overstepped our bounds," she said.

When the Anjuna market was a hippie bazaar, bartering, not money, ruled. But the hippie merchant community was mostly wiped out when the government started to regulate businesses a decade ago, expecting taxes to be paid and business licenses to be purchased.

Today, there are tensions between the Goan merchants and those who have come from across India to capitalize on the tourist rush. The newer stalls sell things like cashmere, unthinkable attire in Goa's year-round heat but common in northern India.

Remnants of the hippie market can be found, but vendors concede that their days are most likely numbered.

"The pirate days are over," said Michelle Antonio, 53, a Brazilian-Italian merchant selling handicrafts, and a resident of Goa for some 25 years.

"Yes, there's been a clampdown," he said, but he wasn't bitter and was instead grateful for his long run here.

"In our own countries, we aren't so welcoming to foreigners," he added. "We never would have let people live 'susegad' for this long."

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