



RAIN

ABOUT GOA:

A NEW YEAR'S TALE

Suzan Crane revels in the full-blown hurricane of New Year parties sweeping through her small Indian town.

The New Year has dawned and I'm still awake as the sun paints a rosy hue on the horizon. New Year's Eve in Goa is amped up to 11 and only the lonely dare to call it a night before the following day. My village is packed, not a room to be had, traffic clogging up the narrow arteries running from the bus stand to the beach. It is hectic and noisy and, although good for business, it is not good for the soul. The sand is littered with beach beds. Trash is strewn about and few say hello because few know each other anymore. The freaks have come to roost but they are now commingling with – dare I say it? – package tourists. What is becoming of this fine hippie village? "It's over," many long-termers gripe, unaware that the latest edition of Lonely Planet India now cites Village X as "the place to go" in Goa.

The day of New Year's Eve is rife with anticipation and planning. People stock up on party favours and stockpile sleep before depriving themselves of it over the next countless hours. Our shop is abnormally quiet until 5pm when I get a rush of girls looking for new outfits, as if their clothes will stay on anyway. There are numerous fetes planned. Discussions concern the night's itinerary.

First order of business. What will I wear? Must be comfortable but look cool. Must have layers as it gets chilly and I'm not sure if I'll be dancing *al fresco* or in an enclosed environment.

Stop One: The Pyramid, an open-air structure on a sand dune overlooking the ocean. Despite complaints about it obscuring views and desecrating once-virgin land, the place and vibe is magical. Kundalini Airport, a cohesive troupe of dissident Western musicians playing jambas, sitar, didgeridoos and drums conjure up provocative tribal and Indian sounds. The crowd is moving in unison, but each to his/her own drummer.

One particular woman is dancing with depraved self-indulgence, silently beckoning the crowd to focus on her instead of the band. She undulates and gyrates, lifts her skirt, removes her blouse, and soon she is bare-breasted and suggestively fondling herself. It is an encore performance, a repeat of many prior public exhibitions. She is one of the eccentric characters who inhabit this small village. But we are not in Patpong or Pattaya. We are in India where women swim in their saris – exposed female flesh being anathema to cultural mores despite the hypocrisy proffered by incendiary Bollywood fare; where

men publicly hold hands and otherwise physically engage but any display of affection between genders is considered unseemly.

Actually, we are not in the 'real India'. We're in Goa, a crossroads of cultures, a hotbed of sex, drugs and debauchery, where rules are broken, insanity is tolerated and often provoked. Where the plot is lost more often than written, where people gossip and chide, but accepts the outcasts because they too exist outside dictates of conventional society.

"Lucy" is still topless when the clock strikes midnight. There is no moon tonight and stars glisten behind the explosion of fireworks. The cadence of waves augments the pounding African drums. Contrary to good sense, I make the short coastal walk to my next destination. Normally not a problem, particularly for this hardcore New York native, but tonight a potentially hazardous journey with so many booze-polluted Indian men titillated by the presence of so many scantily-clad foreign females. I arrive unscathed where a second round of Happy New Year's is barely heard above the techno soundscape.

Kidnapped... on my way home. My neighbour, offering me a ride on his trusty rusty Enfield, suddenly decides I'm not to retire, but must join him for the half-hour trip to Anjuna. The Hilltop's annual New Year's rave is kicking off and I'm to grab a jacket for the frosty ride over. So off we thunder into the sunrise, up a one-way road against a stream of traffic. Once inside, we make a beeline for one of the many *chai* mats, helmed with military precision by General Chai Mama. Order a watered-down chai or get off her turf, she declares as she bops one chai-less squatter over the head. No sleeping without her permission, she decrees. Here on the Hilltop, Chai Mamas rule the land.

The night yields to the light and trance-induced Westerners converge from all over Northern Goa. Pre-dawn is for partying Indians, daytime for bleary-eyed foreigners. I hang in there as long as I can, squinting against the reborn sun, drunk with exhaustion but exhilarated by the communal celebration. Choking on red dust kicked up by delirious dancers, I disappear into the mist amidst the all-night ravers. Finally my energy wilts and I stagger into the horde of hungry rickshaw drivers to haggle fruitlessly for a fair fare. It is noon on New Year's Day. Only the lonely dare to call it a night before the following day.