

GOA BEGINS PEAKING

*In her second column,
Suzan Crane writes
about the awakening of
her comatose village for
the high and dry season.*



Naked. The seaside community in northern Goa where I have planted tentative roots seems naked when I return from my Indian Summer up north. Like a tree stripped of its leaves, it resembles the simple fishing village it was before the hippies, spiritual seekers and party crowd discovered it.

It's mid-September, the prelude before the storm of tourists, and the rain is overstaying its welcome. The sea is inky, and the sand is grey. Driftwood litters the beach where fishermen tend to their rickety boats. The shacks that normally fringe the coconut groves are now just bundled palm fronds marking spots from where soon drinks will be slung and music will blare. A few foreigners – the hardy ones who remain through the monsoon – mingle with the locals who impatiently await a reprieve from The Big Drench. They need to rebuild, repair and prepare for the impending high season. Only a few local *dhabas* and places catering to Westerners are open and serve as meeting points for the shrunken community. There are no parties, few potential sex partners and the drugs are less visible. People interact in a way that is not possible during high season when the distractions are many.

Finally, the rain stops. Hammers and nails come out and the naked village begins to dress for the party. Overnight, it seems, structures sprout up, with concrete tending to replace bamboo as the building material of choice. Neon from newly erected signs competes with the natural sparkle of the night sky. The tourists, recently arrived to India or migrating from the North, trickle in. Slowly at first so that you still recognise faces, then in increasing numbers. By early December the small village is awash in dreadlocks, tattoos and piercings, Osho devotees, experienced India-heads and the random two-week holiday-maker.

Attire and verbiage distinguish long-termers from the "I'm Spending A Year In India" crowd. Garbed in fisherman pants and hippie gear, the newbies regularly insert "*acha*" – the first Hindi word most first-timers learn – into their conversations (which, admittedly, I still do too) while the others – Goa veterans wear Levis and surf shorts and almost never use the phrase. Every day, another repeat offender turns up, some with new mates or unexpectedly solo, some pregnant and others wielding newborns, the next India-obsessed generation. A distinct scent of anticipation permeates the air. "Where's the party?" is an oft-heard mantra.

The symphony of waves is now obscured by pulsating music, the whining of the cows drowned out by screaming Enfields. Posters for reiki, yoga, tai chi and other more obscure spiritual practices (do people make this stuff up?) blanket polls and walls. There are more potential sex partners and the drugs are flowing more freely. The days heat up and the nights get steamy as bare flesh and raging hormones provoke inevitably short-lived romances. The keen observer can easily detect the fresh trysts while keeping a surreptitious eye out for her own potential playmate.

There are tons of new restaurants – many foreign-run – and more huts along the shoreline. The road down to the beach is inundated by shops and makeshift stalls, most selling the same crap. I don't recall such an overwhelming commercial glut in the past, but I'm in no position to judge as I, too, have entered the entrepreneurial arena. I share a shop with friends and although we sell cool stuff I have become a *Westerner Doing Business in India*, one of the group I ridiculed when first arriving in Goa.

This is my third season here so I'm no longer considered a voyeur, tourist or passer-by. As we've barely turned the corner into December, who knows how the season will unfold. But so far, it's been good. I've just returned from Loekies where the music was fine and spirits were high. There's a party at the lake tonight, but I've opted to come home and write. Presumably, there will be many more parties to come, although officials are diligent in their efforts to thwart them. The guy who'd been sniffing around me for the past month lifted his leg and pissed on someone else, but that's cool because I'm sniffing around others as well. Perhaps I'll have marked my territory by next month's installment. Right now I've got friends squatting in my house and I wake up to the smell of male sweat, dirty laundry or, like this morning, three macho bikers washing floors and cleaning the kitchen.

As has happened in formerly unspoiled areas of Thailand, my personal paradise is succumbing to expansion, Westernisation, and the bastardisation of the formerly shanty vibe. I'm not thrilled by "The Disneyland Factor," but as they say in Hindi, *kyakarega*... what to do? Tomorrow night I'll be dancing, sniffing around and perhaps pissing at the Surf Club.

Please note that due to threats of bodily harm I am not at liberty to disclose the name of this village. But if one checks a map or clues into the India travellers' grapevine, it's easy to find.