

Holy Hamlet

Suzan Crane heads for one of the country's holiest towns, which is shaped like a cow's ear.

Bored by the palm trees and surf of our familiar paradise, we hopped on the bikes one morning for the scenic six-hour journey to Gokarna, a quaint village on the Karnataka coast and one of India's holiest sites. Considered an important centre of Shiva, Gokarna is home to the Aatma Lingam, enshrined in the ancient Mahabaleshwara Temple, a major calling card for hordes of Hindu pilgrims and Sanskrit scholars. Literally meaning "Cow's Ear," the village is formed by the ear-shaped convergence of two rivers, although locals believe that the name derives from a legend in which Lord Shiva emerged from the ear of a cow.

As soon as we cross the border between Goa and Karnataka it is clear that we've entered another state. "We're back in India," Guy intones as we pull up to a *dhaba* that serves authentic *chai* and a killer *thali* (a lunchtime staple consisting of a tin tray with different dishes) for 20 rupees. Off the main roads and past an enormous Indian naval base, we are soon swallowed by imposing mountains and the Western ghats on one side and the Arabian Sea on the other. Children wave and scream when we fly past on our loud two-wheelers, tropical air wafting over us like a sultry veil.

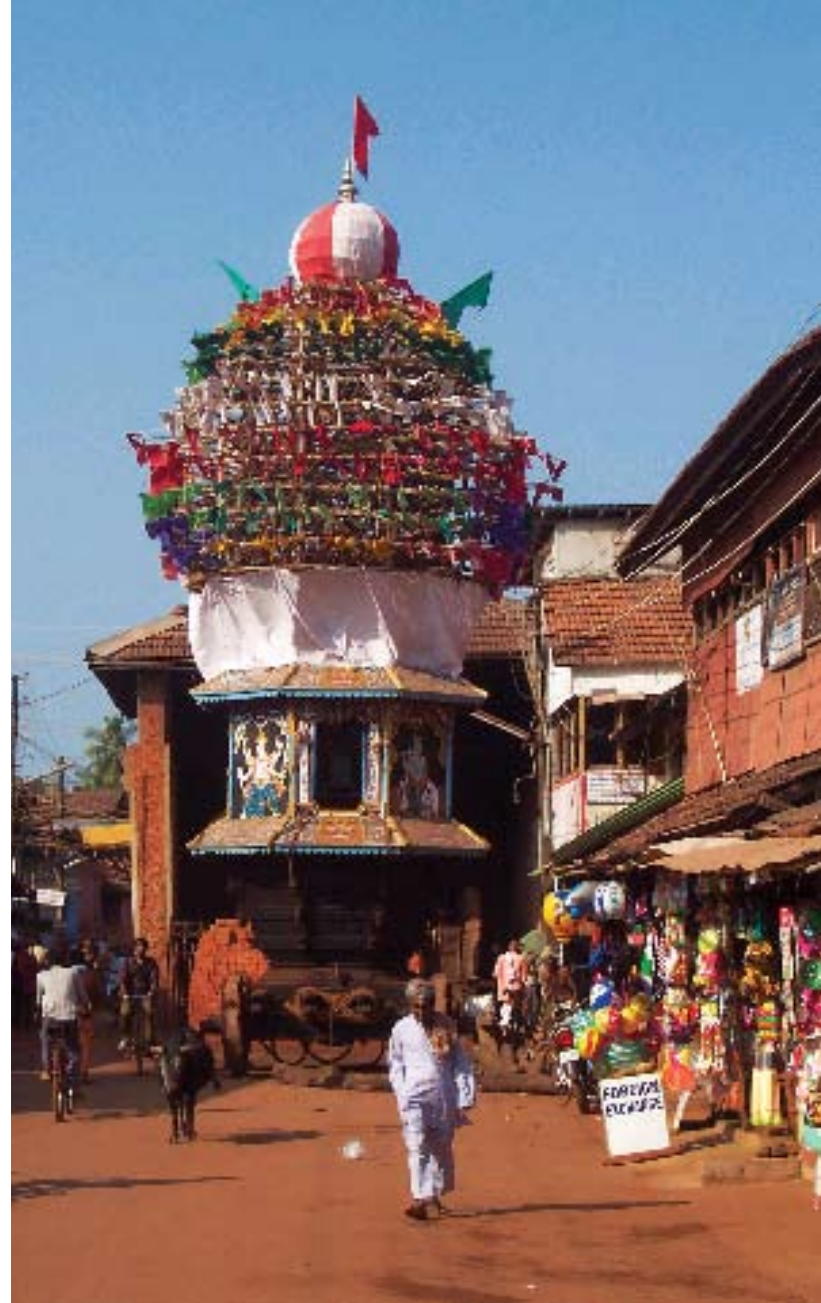
We are leaving the chaos and commerce of (mainly) Christian Goa behind and heading towards the legends, religious fervour and quieter beaches of Hindu Gokarna where Brahman priests and devout pilgrims mix with Westerners who prefer the slower

pace and more authentic vibe of the area. Those settling in for the long term often use Gokarna town as an anchor; it's a relaxed spiritual enclave where residents watch the world go by from the verandas of wooden houses and candles burn in the narrow canal bisecting the small village.

Travelers with a penchant for tribal drums, bonfires and badly prepared Western food generally opt for one of the pristine beaches that loom over the hillside: Kudlee, Om, Half Moon and Paradise, the latter requiring the bravery of a rock climber as one must negotiate slippery stones and thickets of thorny bushes to reach a small bay with just a handful of basic lodgings and eating options.

Long a stopover on the backpacker trail, the unsullied beaches ringing Gokarna are about to take a hit as developers attempt to lure the moneyed masses. Om Beach, whose geography actually resembles the spiritual symbol, is the first victim, with a recently erected Goliath resort perched on a plateau beside a new road, well above the rudimentary shacks dotting the shoreline below.

But Gokarna proper – where temples pepper the tapered streets and white dhoti-clad Brahmans meander leisurely alongside orange-clad sadhus and bare-armed women with saris casually knotted around their necks in homage to the searing climate – retains its charm. Upon arrival, you sense immediately that you're in a place where the



tourist industry is secondary to the business of faith. Alongside nylon hammocks and sequined Indian skirts, small stalls sell tools of the spirituality trade: brass bells and coloured powders used in religious ceremonies. The townspeople appear to simply put up with the Westerners, as long as we don't interfere with their rituals and seemingly endless stream of festivals. Some temples, including Mahabaleshwara, deny access to foreigners while others accept our presence pending appropriate attire and etiquette.

It is during Shivarati, the celebration of Shiva's birthday in late February (this year) or early March, when the confluence of cultures endures the ultimate test. Thousands of pilgrims and uninitiated foreigners clutter the

serpentine streets, voyeurs and devotees side by side – all carried away by the great spectacle and boisterous reveling that earmarks this festive occasion. On that day, two great temple *raths* (chariots) lead a jubilant procession through the town while priests and pilgrims chant hymns in praise of Shiva and a hailstorm of bananas shower the parade for good luck.

Some Western visitors, caught up in the fervour, join the pageant, nosing their way into the line of Brahmans and pilgrims carrying the gargantuan chariots. But, as always, the denizens of Gokarna amiably accept the curious foibles of their Western guests. It all just adds spice to the south Indian masala mix, providing a taste of 'real' India that leaves one with many gut feelings.

