

Getting To Know Goa

As a person of Goan ancestry living elsewhere in the world, the opportunity to visit the pearl of the orient is an extremely attractive prospect. We have all heard tales of the beauty of Goa from our relatives, be it the arching palm trees, the gorgeous bungalows, the colourful culture or the exquisite beaches. In terms of the participants of the 5th Know Goa programme, which took place from the end of November to December 2012, many of us had never previously had the chance to spend much time in our homeland- in fact, some had actually never set foot on its red mud before. What follows is a brief (had I the chance, I'd have no trouble detailing our incredible trip to you for hours on end) snapshot of the programme. Before I begin, please note that, although the views presented in this account are my own and thus I take full responsibility for any errors henceforth, having held numerous interesting conversations with my terrific companions during and after the trip, I can state with great confidence that they too would undoubtedly echo many of these thoughts.

I will start by mentioning these companions! A wonderful aspect of the programme is the assortment of nationalities and ages of the participants, all whom are of Goan origin. There were students from various fields; from marketing to agriculture, hotel management to travel and theology to philosophy and economics; a real mix of disciplines. There were also those already excelling in their chosen fields; from architecture to nursing to NGO social work. The upshot of bringing together such a combination of young people from different disciplines, was the creation of a tremendous group possessing a breadth of perspectives and ideas. Our extremely varied upbringings meant a medley of interesting responses, which in turn prompted further interesting discussion, were a frequent occurrence following presentations we received throughout the programme. Also commonplace were happy reactions to finding out numerous parallels from our respective Goan communities abroad, plus genuine intrigue when discovering subtle differences between them. It was a joy to spend even such a short period of time with these wonderful people and sharing this experience; we have forged real friendships and will surely meet again as a group- perhaps even in Goa itself!

But it is important that I am absolutely unequivocal on one point. While our next meeting will no doubt be more relaxed, the 5th Know Goa Programme was neither a group partying vacation nor a typical tourist sunsoaking endeavour- it was in fact far from either. Our itinerary was jam-packed with countless visits to places of social, historical and cultural interest, furthermore, included interactions with some fascinating, influential people. As I mentioned, while I am unable to delineate wholly the entire itinerary we followed, I will outline some indubitable highlights.

Because one always leaves the best till last, and there was universal agreement that our best memories were captured in Goa, I will start with the end of the trip. We are very appreciative of the fact that we were given the opportunity to spend the last few days of the trip in Delhi. To Delhi we were escorted by the man who made it all possible; Mr UD Kamat. As I mentioned, the days spent in Goa were by far the best of the trip (partly due to the fact that the organisation of the 'Delhi leg' by the Indian Government fell far below the high standard set by the Government of Goa), nevertheless, up North we again were taken to see some remarkable places; the Taj Mahal in Agra, the Lotus Temple and the Qutub Minar, all stunning, were among the destinations. While in Delhi we also encountered some extremely inspirational people. These included Mr Ramesh Bijlani, a resident at the stunning Aurobindo Ashram (I would not know how to term his role there), who spoke to us about spirituality and finding our path in life, as well as Sandhya Sinha, the founder of the NGO Grihashti. She is a lady who has done an amazing job helping women whom have often been subjected to domestic violence and suffered shame, due primarily to misogynistic men and repressive social norms, stemming from the caste system still prevalent in certain areas. She achieves this by providing them with employment designing and sowing beautiful garments which she then sells, with high end boutiques among the purchasers. It was wonderful to see the impact that one person can have.

A similar story of a one-man-show can be told in Benaulim, Goa, which is home to Victor Hugo Gomes' ethnographic museum; one of the undisputed highlights of the programme. Both the tour itself, and the discussion which ensued, were real eye-openers for all of us. We were taken on a trip through time to learn about the care our ancestors took of the picturesque environment we have been blessed with here in Goa; from their commitment to compassion towards animals, to their attempts to ensure that farming was completed efficiently, but sustainably. We also learned of the genuine issues facing Goans today. Examples include the diminishing culture, for instance the fading of Konkani, plus the raging issues with land ownership and encroachment; both certainly aggravated by the migration of Goans overseas. It is extremely laudable that Victor has managed to create this haven, known as Goa Chitra, with no corporate assistance. Right from the musical welcome the museum is a stirring spectacle. More Goans should visit! Having conversed with a few people residing in South Goa, including my own Godmother, who visited for the first time with us, it is clear that many literally living on its doorstep have not yet seen what it has to offer.

Also eye openers, albeit in a different respect, were the trips to Raj Bhavan and the Secretariat, where we were fortunate enough to meet the Governor, Mr Bharat Vir Wanchoo, the speaker, Mr Rajendra Arlekar, as well as the Deputy CM, Mr Francis D'Souza. We had an extremely informative discussion with the latter, who gave us his take on numerous current issues which we questioned him on; in particular mining, the resultant unemployment because of its suspension, the garbage problem and even the potential of politics as a means of pursuing positive change. We also observed politics and policy on the pivotal local level when, accompanied by the passionate District Youth Coordinator Mr Shirish Lawande, we paid a visit to the Zilla Panchayat, headed by the delightful and determined Nelly Rodrigues, who has achieved so much before and since becoming sarpanch. It was certainly a privilege and a pleasure to be permitted entry to each of these fascinating arenas.

Back in Goa; one unanimous reflection from the group was on the admirable social harmony we witnessed, at least during our short stay. The secular setup here, epitomised by the Hindu CM and his Christian deputy, is a beacon to many places in this troubled, contemporary world. On one day we visited the Basilica of Bom Jesus (during the feast of Saint Francis Xavier itself), the Magueshi Temple and the Safa Masjid; beautiful buildings which also signify the assortment of people residing in Goa. Admittedly our knowledge of the demography was limited beforehand, with the whole group being extremely surprised at the figure of 65% presented to us as the proportion of Hindus in the population, but our preconception of the relatively peaceful coexistence of religions in Goa was certainly confirmed during the trip. As, for that note, was the beauty of Goan culture. We listened to Konkani music as a group, even performing a rendition of 'Hav saiba poltodee voitaa' (as well as both a spoken word piece and an improved version of Bill Wither's 'Lean on me'), on our final night in Goa, on stage in front of a thankfully, sympathetic crowd in the Ana Fonte gardens. Of course we also ate plenty of delicious cuisine (even while staying at Goa Niwas in Delhi we were blessed with a fantastic Goan cook, Patrick Barretto). In terms of immersing ourselves in the cultural side of Goa, we also watched the Mando festival at the Kala academy, while we were greeted by folk dances performed by the women of Khotigao village in the south. As members of the diaspora, we are all very proud of this culture. The trip served as a refresher of both its individuality and joyful nature, furthermore, undoubtedly also served as a stark reminder that it is something very much worth fighting to save! It seems that the fact that Goa can, and should, be granted special status, as the CM has made a plea to pursue, looks like it could be the start to this salvation of our inimitable culture (albeit sometimes excessively susegad).

Above all the 5th Know Goa programme can be best described as an unparalleled learning experience for, fundamentally, the trip has made us all more knowledgeable about our roots. Some things are best learned by experience. Among our experiences we saw firsthand examples of the industries which provide employment in Goa, for instance, the shipyard, Smart Link manufacturers and a handicraft workshop in Bicholim's industrial estate. While the closing of the mines definitely signals a need for further diversification to counter the unemployment left in its wake, we saw that Goa is still blessed with numerous opportunities to grow and thrive; from sensible eco-tourism and sustainable fishing to continued effective investment into education. This lucrative land has, as it always has possessed, the potential to enable Goa to reduce dependency from elsewhere and really prosper. Having mentioned education, we also visited two institutions: Goa University and BITS Pilani. The discussions held here were fantastic and fruitful. As a group we appreciated that, coming from different countries, and thus lacking a full comprehension of the situation here, we were in no position to preach, nevertheless, we were also grateful that the programme gave us a platform for information sharing. This opportunity prompted us to divulge some of our own positive experiences, for instance, the benefits of the relatively recent more interdisciplinary approach in academia; an approach which has succeeded in providing new angles from which to tackle complex issues.

It's amazing that, in addition to the Know India programme, Goa alone has its own separate arrangement. Again this underlines the special stature of Goa. The programme is a wonderful initiative extremely well executed by the NRI office; from the organisation of the itinerary, all the way to the staff who looked after us. These included our fantastic tour guide Francis, minibus driver Raj, photographer Sadam Nawar and supervisors Sudhesh Shetty and Nilesh Kamat. It has enabled 9 young people to reconnect with their culture and ultimately has instigated a commitment within all of us to become more involved, more active and to reinvigorate interest and contribution back home. It can be said to have essentially rekindled a lost love for Goa that had simply been resting dormant in our hearts. There's a reason why Goa is such an envied land and has been contested for years on end. In fact, some participants, also recognising the numerous attractions of this beautiful land, have already made a commitment to settle here. Of note this includes those with ideas of pursuing socially driven activities in the future which, I'm sure you'll agree, is wonderful news. So it comes the time to express a huge thank you to all those who worked so hard to make the Know Goa Programme possible, moreover, for making it such an unforgettable experience. We are all exceptionally grateful to have been granted this great opportunity, furthermore, we hope that many more will have the chance to embark on the incredible programme in the years to come; long may it continue.