



The mansions of old Goa

Indian state's heritage architecture offers a glimpse of Portugal's colonial legacy

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QUEPEM, India In the small town of Quepem, in India's western state of Goa, lush green fields fringed by palm trees morph into a narrow path that leads to the stately Palacio do Deao, built in 1787 by the town's founder, Portuguese nobleman Jose Paulo de Almeida. After his death, the palace was occupied by a priest from the nearby Holy Cross Church, and then by nuns who ran it as a home for destitute women.

Today, the house and its beautiful terraced gardens are open to the public following restoration by the present owners, Reuben Vasco da Gama, an engineer, and his wife Celia, a microbiologist, who bought the then-dilapidated site in 2002 and restored it. With their two children, they live in the sprawling palace, conscious of the onerous task of preserving it.

"We wanted to retain the unusual architecture and also furnish it with artifacts and furniture pieces that were true to that era," says Reuben Vasco da Gama. Erected during Portuguese colonial rule of Goa (1510-1961), the house is built in the Indo-Portuguese style with adaptations to accommodate local customs. After buying it, the Vasco da Gamas went to Portugal to learn about the architecture and gardens, and then returned to Goa to begin a three-year process of restoration.

Each room is furnished with artifacts and motifs with connections to the past -- a 130-year-old stamp collection that provides a narrative of the 450 years of Portuguese rule, a chest of camphor wood that opens out into a desk, windows and doors with shutters made of oyster shells that filter translucent light. There is even a folding cupboard that opens up to become a toilet. The Vasco da Gamas serve a typical Indo-Portuguese lunch to guests who have made reservations.

The Palacio do Deao is just one of many heritage buildings strewn across Goa, which was annexed by India in 1961 and

< [Heritage buildings built during Portuguese colonial rule of Goa \(1510-1961\) can be found across the western Indian state. Some have been impeccably restored, while others lie in disrepair.](#)



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The Palacio do Deao, built by a Portuguese nobleman in Quepem, has been lovingly restored.



became a state in 1987. Some have been restored to their previous glory, while other languish in poor condition or have been largely demolished. Menezes Braganza House, in Chandor village, is another 17th-century mansion filled with antiques, Chinese porcelain, crystal chandeliers and vintage furniture with a grand ballroom and a salon. The family still lives in the rambling house and shows visitors around for a small fee.

These lavish mansions, which were built by prosperous Goan merchants and landowners, most of them Catholic, provide a glimpse of Goa's rich history and architecture. With porcelain from Macao, Belgian chandeliers, Italian tiles and locally crafted rosewood furniture the houses are full of historical treasures. Many also had their own dance halls and chapels.

Though loosely called Portuguese houses, the buildings fuse vernacular influences and elements of Portuguese, Indian and Goan architecture. Motifs such as serpents and Hindu deities are common, and other local touches include covered porches, long verandas, cement or iron railings with floral and geometric designs and floors inlaid with broken crockery.

"The housing in Goa has had a history of a very environment-friendly construction," says Goa heritage promoter Sanjeev V. Sardesai, who runs a local organization called Hands-on-Historians. "The use of naturally and amply available laterite stones, seashell lime coats as waterproofing for walls and terracotta roof tiles resting on an array of wooden beams like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, creatively combine to create an airy, well illuminated and aesthetic house," says Sardesai.

"It was probably this ideal malleability in construction material options which attracted the attention of the Portuguese colonizers. They, along with skilled local artisan support, combined the European architecture with the established local building designs to craft out a majestic, eye-pleasing and a very practical style of housing."

Fontainhas, the so-called Latin quarter in the state capital of Panaji (also known as Panjim), is home to numerous heritage houses, many developed in the early 1800s when the headquarters of the colonial government moved from Old Goa town because of outbreaks of plague.

Walking down the narrow streets of this neighborhood -- a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1984 -- feels like a journey through time. Winding alleyways are lined by tiled-roofed houses in spectacular shades of blue, bottle green and reds. Whitewashed churches, small bakeries, walls and entrances with ceramic tiles typical of the Iberian Peninsula offer a slice of old Portugal. Many of these buildings are still used as family homes, while others have been converted to boutiques, restaurants and heritage hotels.

Local tourist guide Jonas Monteiro says the houses of Fontainhas are protected under state law, along with those in a few other areas, but the rules cover only a small proportion of Goa's heritage properties. Many old houses lie unrestored because they are difficult and expensive to maintain but hard to sell because they have multiple owners and are subject to protracted court battles. Rapid urbanization and a real estate boom "have led to a land grabbing mafia that has destroyed many old houses," Monteiro says.

Quite a lot of houses have been acquired and renovated, however -- often by Goans who want to go back to their roots and preserve their ancestral heritage. For example, the beautifully restored Casa Susegad in Loutolim village,



Photos by Kalpana Sunder



< The Menezes Braganza House in the village of Chandor, South Goa, is a 17th-century mansion where the family still lives.

surrounded by jungle, is now a five-bedroom boutique hotel available for rent, with colorful interiors by the British designer Carole Steen.

Vivenda dos Palhacos, in the village of Majorda in South Goa, is a lovingly restored Hindu house with rammed earth walls, fronted by a Portuguese manor built in 1929. Siolim House is a 17th-century Indo-Portuguese manor in the small village of Siolim, North Goa, which has earned a UNESCO World Heritage award nomination for its sensitive restoration. Most of the boutique heritage hotels offer home-cooked Goan food, tours and a glimpse into local culture and simple village life.

Goan architect Rochelle Santimano, of Studio Praia, who has restored many old mansions, says a "marriage of the old and new" is essential to make restorations work. "Since these structures were built more than a century ago, the main challenge is to retain their bones in a way that the heritage charm, structural integrity and distinct architectural features are preserved while introducing elements of design that are representative of us as designers in the 21st century."

However, activist and writer Heta Pandit, who co-founded the Goa Heritage Action Group in 2000 with architects Raya Shankwalker and Poonam Verma Mascarenhas, says it is not clear how many heritage properties and sites there are in Goa, and is campaigning for an official list, prepared according to international guidelines, as a first step toward comprehensive protection for the state's unique heritage.

"How can we protect anything unless we know what we have in stock?" says Pandit, who first drew attention to the problems facing heritage sites in her book "Houses of Goa," published in 1999. Her most recent book, "Stories from Goan Houses," documents the histories of some of the families that

have rebuilt and renovated significant Goan houses, including beauties such as Figueiredo Mansion in Loutolim, which was built in the 1580s and is older than the Taj Mahal, completed in 1648.

The mansion's former owner, Maria de Lourdes Filomena Figueiredo de Albuquerque, was a well-known Goan who represented the former colony in the Portuguese parliament in Lisbon from 1965 to 1969, even though it had been under Indian rule since 1961.

"Much as I would like to, I cannot restore each and every heritage house in Goa, turn it around and make it a vibrant reflection of Goan culture and identity," says Pandit. "But I can create awareness about the beauty, the value of these houses as containers of Goan culture, family history, community history and the history of Goa. I believe that everything begins with love and passion for these homes. The rest just follows." **N**



> Many old Portuguese-style houses have been converted into boutiques.