

Old European influence still strong in India's Goa

By PATRICK JOHNSTON

V.S. Naipaul writes of the Portuguese influence in Goa that "they had created in India something not of India, a simplicity, something where the Indian past had seen abolished." Whether you appreciate this or not depends a lot on how you feel either toward colonization or Indian history. Nevertheless the results are undeniable; Goa is a world apart from the Indian subcontinent.

The most obvious difference is the churches. White-washed, simple structures, they permeate the landscape and give the place a feeling more reminiscent of the Caribbean than India. A sizable Hindu community does live in Goa but their presence hasn't done much to affect the dominance of Christianity on the landscape.

While most would probably agree that the first Portuguese in Goa were more interested in conquest than converts, later missionaries had Christ on their minds and it is their legacy that is most visible today.

The grandest of Goa's churches are all concentrated in Old Goa, about 10 km inland from the coast. While these massive cathedrals seem somewhat out of place in rural India they give a pretty clear idea of the Portuguese influence in the colony and what they were trying to do there.

But most people, at least those from climates colder than India's, don't come to Goa for the churches — they come for the beaches, and of

those there are plenty to choose from.

Goa's reputation as a seaside haunt predates even the Christian period. Centuries before India was invaded by people to the north and the east its islands and rivers had been important Hindu pilgrimage sights. The area was once so holy that many called it a seaside Benares.

Tourism, at least in its more hedonistic form, really took off in the '60s. Travelers discovered Goa's easy-going temperament perfectly suited their own disposition. They then set out to "recolonize" the beach in their own image.

While the antics of these so-called "hippie" travelers (nude sunbathing, excessive drug use) drew scorn from many corners of Goan society, it did help put Goa on the map and made it what it is today — a place popular with both foreigners and Indians alike.

Interestingly, for many Indians the sole purpose of a trip to Goa is to observe foreigners on the beach. Goan tourist authorities even offer a bus tour. One Indian man I spoke to said he had come to Goa's beaches specifically to learn about Western culture.

There is good reason for this native curiosity. Of the many beach resorts that have popped up in Asia in the past few decades Goa has to be one of the most unique. The hippie culture that made the province its home has come and gone. However, its residue, along with Goa's laidback atmosphere, makes the province more than just another



A RURAL CHAPEL in Baga, Goa, is one of many churches in the region that illustrate Goa's Portuguese heritage.

PHOTO BY PATRICK JOHNSTON

spot to get a suntan.

The children of the '60s now bring their own children, often dressed in the travelers garb that time in India seems to compel you to wear. Occasional police crackdowns have brought back the bathing suit but for many this has

meant little more than donning a somewhat nominal G-string.

With the tourists come the salespeople but in Goa they come with a twist. Self-proclaimed masseuses scout the beach offering to ease your sun-weary muscles, "li-

censed" ear cleaners promise to get at those many years of neglected wax and musicians come by with a song, hoping it would seem, to serenade their way into your pocket book.

For those interested in the absurd, I saw a man walking up and down the beach with an elaborately decorated cow — a photograph would cost you whatever small change you were willing to pay.

Goan beaches stretch all along the coast but the more famous lie to the north. Of these Calangute is the most well developed and probably the least appealing. Just north of Calangute lies Baga and north of this Anjuna. Here the hotel development has been slow to get going so these areas have retained some of the old freewheeling charm that made Goan beaches famous.

A lively flea market takes place in Anjuna once a week during the busy season. Offered are clothes, haircuts (every good flea market should have them) and cures for everything from cancer to indigestion. In an interesting reversal of roles many of the salespeople are Western tourists.

India probably affects its travelers more than most places. It is an intense country with many fascinating extremes. Goa has none of these extremes. The Hindu culture has been if not removed, submerged. Call it cultural imperialism if you like, but for many, Goa's white sand, swaying palms and sunbaked chapels suits their mood just fine.