



A view of the Ashwem river from The Mandala; and (below) the hotel's eye-catching exterior

[CHECK OUT]

RIVERSIDE RETREAT

At The Mandala, **Anees Saigal** finds there's more to Goa than the sea

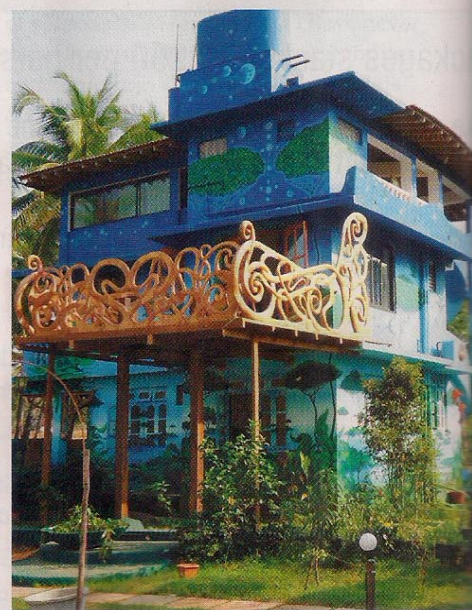
It was once an adventure to drive up to the northernmost tip of Goa. There was no quick road connection to Morjim, so a car ferry would meander across the sparkling sliver of Arabian Sea that isolates the region. You had no choice but to wait patiently to board the slow-moving vessel, but it was all part of the fun of travelling to that remote paradise.

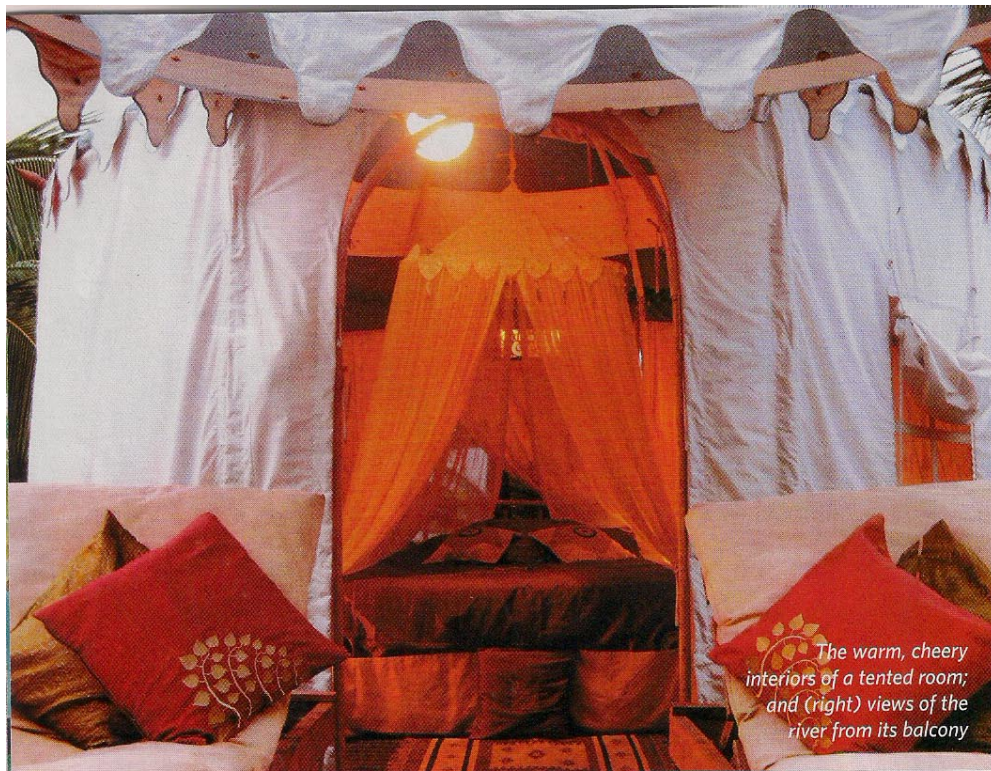
Although a speedy highway has now replaced the gently rocking passage of those days, the pleasures of the north remain undiminished. It's quiet and empty, blessedly open and untamed. There are now several noteworthy restaurants and expanded stretches of rustic accommodation. The beaches are dotted with shacks and tourists. The once-remote idyll is being

reclaimed, and it is not surprising to hear of a new hotel opening here.

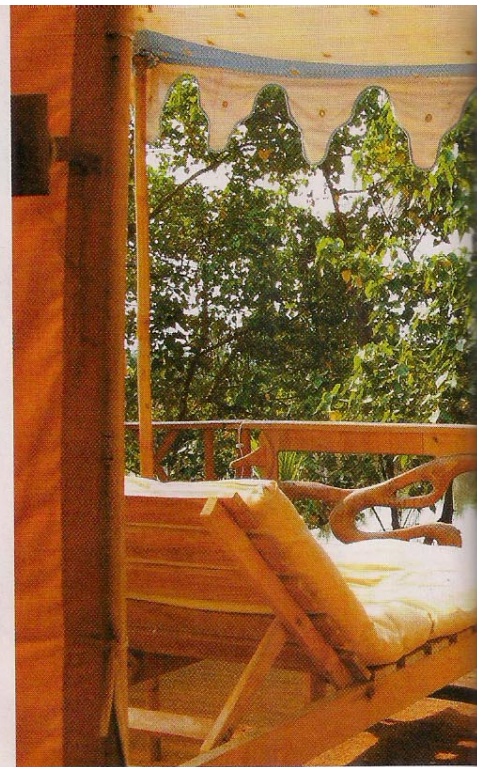
My destination is The Mandala, a new property located just past all the action of Ashwem. It's a beautiful drive that winds ever closer to the sea, initially just a hint in the air until it's suddenly glinting by your side. It was early afternoon as I drove past a scenic point where the open sea folds into shallow bands and narrows into the Ashwem river. The sun transformed the sea into gleaming liquid gold and I decided to come back for a swim after I had checked in.

The centrepiece of the hotel, a tall, bright-blue-and-green building, materialises at the end of a bumpy red-earth path. The Mandala's affable British owner, Angus Young, gives me a tour of the striking house, which took Danish





The warm, cheery interiors of a tented room; and (right) views of the river from its balcony



artist Ulrik Schiodt several years to paint. He has created a mural that wraps across the exterior in a forest of green, a luxuriant vision of nature that melds with the surrounding foliage. It houses the owner's office and music studio, two double rooms—clean, simple and spare—and the crowning glory, a delightful suite that occupies the entire third floor and has a seaview from the balcony. If you're staying at The Mandala, this is where you'd want to be.

Not that the chalets are any less appealing: Young calls them “nomadic mansions,” an apt description. Situated picturesquely along the river, they are an esoteric blend of Rajasthan and Bali, back-to-nature and luxe, tribal and modern: double-storey tents-on-stilts. The living space is all about relaxing: two single beds, a hammock-chair and a writing desk. An outdoor staircase leads to the upper balcony, with inviting daybeds for riverside contemplation. The double-bed, draped in a luxurious cover of silk, is contained within a tent that can be tucked up to welcome in the breeze. With rainwater showers, plug points at convenient locations and light-dimmers for atmospheric effect, the chalets are both pretty and well-planned.


Opposite the chalet is the ‘dome’, a semi-circular tent covered in a canopy of sheer white. Yoga classes and retreats are held here and, in the evenings, Young

converts the space into a cinema. He tells me he hopes to attract the “spiritually conscious visitor”. That night's screening: *Zeitgeist 3*.

A few steps away is the restaurant, a laid-back eatery with comfortable seating and artworks on the wooden beams. The vibe stays true to the foreigner-owned restaurants of the north: an ambient soundtrack, a full bar with a short all-day menu and a live counter, Blossom, run by a Japanese-British couple. They serve organic, vegan and raw food for lunch and dinner. Fronting the counter are those quintessential symbols of the alternative/hippie Goa lifestyle: ads for yoga, healing, an arts and crafts studio, a shiatsu massage centre. At night, Young opens a third counter and dons a chef's hat. He invites me to join the dinner he's hosting that night, a three-course seafood spread. It will turn out to be quite a feast: prawns, stuffed calamari and a wonderful fish that pulls off a surprising blend of Western and deeply Goan flavours. As the diners linger over drinks and then stroll down to the cinema-dome, there's a tangible sense of contentedness in the air.

Young's first year of operation will be wrapping up for the season in mid-April. Next year he'll be adding budget accommodations, and will expand The Mandala's role in the community as a centre for yoga and art, particularly by

founding an artist's colony. The eclectic nature of the hotel reflects his experiences as a globetrotter, musician and an artist, and reflects his vision of “encouraging artistic collaborations.” Art flourishes throughout the property: in the murals of the main house, the aesthetics of the chalets, the paintings for sale in the restaurant and in the wooden carvings that were conceptualised by Young and weave a central artistic theme.

I finally wind up back by the river, which feels like the magnetic heart of The Mandala. There's a quaint jetty with kayaks for personal use and a ‘water taxi’ that runs visitors down to the beach. The sun is setting over the dappled green waters by the time I remember my earlier plan to head to the beach. But on my patio, watching the resident kingfisher perched on a branch by the river, I realise that The Mandala's charm lies in making you forget, for a day at least, about the sea. And in Goa, that's saying something. 

THE INFORMATION

LOCATION Mandrem, North Goa. Look for signs after the highway

ACCOMMODATION 2 AC double rooms, 5 chalets, 1 suite

TARIFF approx. ₹4,000-4,500 (rooms), ₹4,700 (chalets), ₹5,700 (suite)

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