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daydream believer

The fearless journey
of Alicia Vikander

Escape Routes

INDIAN SUMMER, HERE WE COME

THE INFINITY POOL AT THE ALILA DIWA HOTEL: WE CAN SEE WHY LIZZIE GOT SO ATTACHED



FEAST ON SEAFOOD AND SWIM AMONG PADDY FIELDS IN GOA

Stylist's acting features director Lizzie Pook finds solace and seafood galore in southwest India

I thought I knew what India was going to look like. I assumed that endless childhood viewings of *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom* had seared its jungly valleys and swampy lagoons into my memory. That was until I found out that *Temple Of Doom* was actually filmed in Sri Lanka because they couldn't get the right visas. And of course, that was before I *actually* got here.

The truth is, you'll never really know what India is going to be like until it hits you, square in the face.

I realised this as I emerged clammy and sleep-deprived into Goa's Dabolim airport after 13 hours and two flights (from London via Mumbai). Turns out, this part of India is high-octane as soon as you step off the plane; a frenzy of hooting taxis, haggling guides and stifling humidity. It's intense. But as I speed away from the melee in my gloriously air-conditioned car, the landscape opens up into something truly spectacular.

From my wound-down window I see women in jewel-coloured saris picking tea from emerald fields. We whizz past clusters of vibrantly coloured houses in aquamarine and powder purple

(architectural remnants of the Portuguese who settled here in the 16th century). As we turn one corner, the horizon widens to reveal a burning pastille sun hanging over a vast lagoon (with a few eagles wheeling about in silhouette, just to *really* top things off).

Bounded by Maharashtra to the north, Karnataka to the east and south, and with coastlines meandering along the Arabian Sea, Goa is India's smallest state by area, but remains one of it's most popular. Many use the laid-back region as a base to relax and get sand between their toes before touring up to the golden triangle (Delhi,

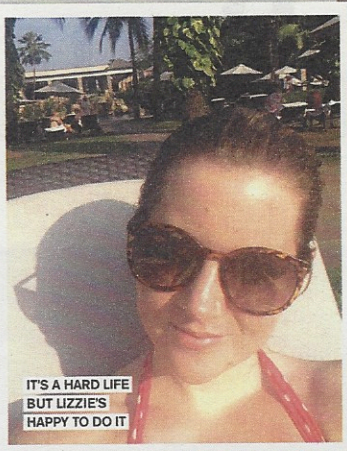


→ Agra and Jaipur) or across to the wildlife sanctuaries

in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. But despite its barefoot vibe, the state is no longer the hippy enclave it became known as in the Seventies. Next month sees the opening of India's first W hotel on Vagator Beach, and with stunning fishing villages, superlative coastlines and a burgeoning food and drink scene, the region has become one of the most sought after destinations for a slice of winter sun (visit mid-November to mid-February; monsoon season starts in June).

Although Goa is primarily 'beachy', its countryside is just as appealing – so I've opted for a hotel set back from the coast: the Alila Diwa in Majorda, about 18 miles from Goa's capital, Panjim. With vaulted ceilings, marble floors and what must be the world's largest banyan tree in the lobby, it's also home to the Diwa club (a collection of 27 particularly fancy rooms with their own private pool and lounge). The biggest draw here, however, is the ridiculously beautiful infinity pool. Set among acres of green paddy fields and surrounded by grazing water buffalo (and cawing peacocks in monsoon season), it also happens to provide easy access to the bar – where I spend an indelicate amount of time sinking watermelon caipirinhas.

Alila Diwa also has a real foodie



IT'S A HARD LIFE BUT LIZZIE'S HAPPY TO DO IT



PALM TREE VIEWS: A SUITE AT THE ALILA DIWA



THE LEELA HOTEL IN GOA: WELL, THIS COULDN'T BE MORE PERFECT IF IT TRIED

focus. Breakfast is a delicious rotation of masala benedict, made-to-order dosas and various juices, jams and chutneys. Its Spice Studio restaurant also fed me the greatest prawn curry I have ever ingested. If you want to get even more involved in your meals, guests can take part in a 'dining in the dark experience' (interesting when you're eating dhal with your bare hands in pitch black). You can also accompany the head chef to the local food market, before returning for an intimate cooking

lesson with your ingredients.

Outside of the hotel, beach-hop around nearby Majorda, Gonsua and Sunset beaches (look out for the tiny starfish that wash up every morning). Adventurous types can dive among the dazzling corals, turtles and rays at Bogmalo Beach, go crocodile-spotting on Mandovi River, or venture further afield to kayak through the beautiful mangroves of the Sal Backwaters.

But really, you can't travel to Goa without spending at least one night next to the ocean. So the final

stop on my trip, 40 minutes south on Mobor Beach, is the sprawling Leela Hotel – a pastel-coloured palace festooned with lotus flowers and dazzling orchids. By day, I wander around the hotel's medicinal gardens (home to botanical cure-alls for everything from a stiff neck to dysentery) or search for white egrets, kingfishers and cormorants around the tree-lined lagoons and waterfalls. Dinner by candlelight (scallops wrapped in bacon and delicate fresh king fish) is set to an orchestral backdrop of chirping crickets. Just lovely, I think, until a fist-sized cicada scuttles across my foot and I leap onto my chair, *Tom And Jerry*-style.

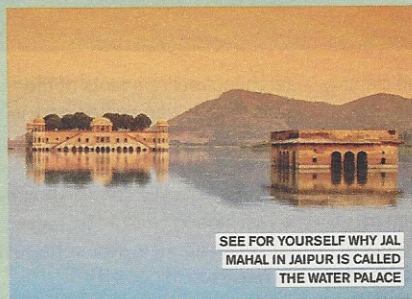
Goa, like much of India, is equal parts messy and divine. It is urban yet enduringly green – a beachy, laid-back state of contrasts that gets right under your skin. And it's much better than what you see in *Temple Of Doom*.



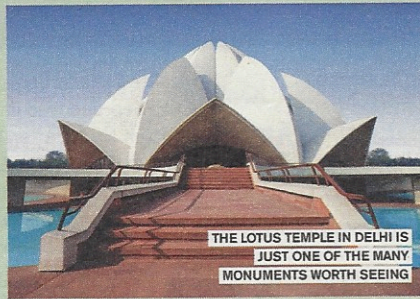
Rooms at Alila Diwa Goa start at £79 per night (alilahotels.com); rooms at the Leela start at £180 (theleela.com)

Plan an Indian grand tour

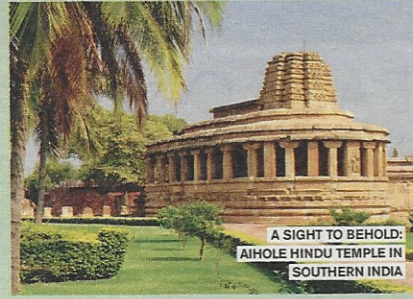
India is vast – with 497 cities and a coastline measuring 4,671 miles. Condense your sightseeing with these handy itineraries



SEE FOR YOURSELF WHY JAL MAHAL IN JAIPUR IS CALLED THE WATER PALACE



THE LOTUS TEMPLE IN DELHI IS JUST ONE OF THE MANY MONUMENTS WORTH SEEING



A SIGHT TO BEHOLD: AIHOLE HINDU TEMPLE IN SOUTHERN INDIA

KOLKATA TO GOA BY RAIL

Get a unique look at the glorious Indian countryside with this 24-day train tour. Visit the sprawling tea plantations in Darjeeling, explore the Rajasthani streets of Jaipur and Udaipur and get spiritual at the banks of the river Ganges in Varanasi.

From £1,699 (flights not included); gadventures.co.uk

GOA TO AGRA TO DELHI

This great value three-day car trip (perfect for culture lovers) not only takes in the Taj Mahal, but also stops off at some of Delhi's best monuments – such as the 11th century Qutb Minar, Humayun's Tomb and the Baha'i Temple, also known as the Lotus Temple.

From £242 (international flights not included); viator.com

DIAMONDS AND DYNASTIES OF SOUTHERN INDIA

This historical two-week tour begins in the Islamic pocket of Hyderabad where you can learn about the trade of pearls, gold, fabric and diamonds, then moves onto the Hindu temples at Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal.

From £2,550 (international travel not included); gravesindia.com