

Diu Believe in Magic?

Until fairly recently, the charming isle of Diu wasn't even a blip on the tourist radar. And that is why, a holiday here is the perfect panacea for the intrepid traveller.

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Photographs Ritika Sharma



When you look out from your seafront balcony and see a cow sunbathing on the beach it can only mean one thing – you're in India. In my case, the balcony in question was on the tiny island of Diu, an often overlooked slice of the subcontinent, and the beach was a small yet deserted (save for the cattle) stretch of golden sand facing mainland India.

The quintessential ruins

Lying just off the coast of Gujarat, Diu is still largely undiscovered by the hedonists and hippies that flock to Goa – surprising since this is closest place to the dry state of Gujarat where you can find a cold beer! We crossed the bridge from the mainland on a well-loved, if slightly wobbly, rickshaw and instantly felt the difference – Diu seemed to be a quieter, less crazy version of the India we'd come to

love. Keen to get rid of our bags, we quickly chose a hotel – clean, well-priced and right on the beachfront – and headed out to explore the island.

Our wandering took us to the vast fort east of the town, a vestige from the Portuguese incursions of the 16th century. It took six years to build the massive garrison, surrounded on three sides by the lapping ocean, but at the time it wasn't an unwelcome addition to the island. In fact the Sultan of



▲ The Ahmedpur-Mandvi beach near Diu is a good introduction to the laid-back ways of the island.

Travelogue

► Right: The quiet little Jalandhar Beach lies just across the road from Chakratirth.

Below: Built between 1535 and 1541 AD, the ramparts of Diu Fort are still lined with menacing old cannons.

Gujarat made an alliance with the Portuguese, uniting against their common enemy – the Mughal emperor Humayun. Of course, relations soon turned sour and the Sultan spent another decade or so trying to convince the Europeans to dismantle their stronghold – not a proposal they were as open to as constructing it in the first place.

After spending the afternoon surrounded by European architecture we were eager to step back into India, and the fabulous aroma of fish curry quickly transported us there. My somewhat out-of-date guidebook was less than complimentary about Diu's culinary offerings, but either the local chefs had been practising or else the guidebook's author had temperamental taste buds, for we found the Fish Tikka (barbecued fish) and Prawn Rogan Josh (curried prawns) to be among the finest sampled on our jaunt around India.

Sand in my toes

The following morning we were itching to get to the beach. The Portuguese ruins juxtaposed against everyday Indian life were indeed striking, but it was the beach that we'd really come for. We wandered through the



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◀ Left: Renting a pair of wheels is the best way to go sightseeing in Diu.

Below: This lighthouse at Diu Fort once warned passing ships about the island's shoal.

Diu in a downpour

The monsoon can put a literal dampener on your beach break, but in fact Diu is still doable in the rain. Less affected than more southerly coastal areas, Diu's beaches can still be enjoyed between showers and the worry of a wet vacation keeps many visitors away, leaving you with more sand for your towel and special deals on hotel rooms. Diu's main attraction, the fort, seems yet more atmospheric with a hazy backdrop and the crashing waves guaranteeing prettier pictures for your album.

higgledy-piggledy backstreets of Diu Town, getting gloriously lost as we attempted to seek out a short cut to the southern coast. Eventually we found our way out of the old town's irregular alleys and landed on Chakratirth Beach, finding it blissfully deserted.

There might be finer stretches of sand elsewhere in India, but nothing can beat having hundreds of metres of golden beach to yourself – no high-rise hotels casting a shadow over your towel, no touts disturbing your snooze with their attempts to sell cold drinks, massages or hair braids. The only interruptions here were the occasional mopeds zipping behind the beach, or a family paddling in the ocean as the sun began to lower.

Although we'd come to Diu in search of sand and were thrilled with the beaches, the wanderers within needed to see the rest of the island and we happily discovered a few activities to fill the gaps between our morning and evening sunbath and swim sessions. On our fourth day we decided to follow the locals and hired a moped to investigate further afield. Just 13-km-long and 3-km-wide, you can easily traverse Diu in a day and while there's



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not a lot to satisfy the more demanding traveller, driving along the beaches and hamlets of the more isolated west is a delight for those who simply like to wander.

Island blues

Rural, remote and startlingly green, it was a gem to explore, especially for weary souls who've spent too long indulging in the oddly enjoyable stress of India's large cities. Here, honking is kept to a minimum, traffic is mostly of the two-wheeled (or four-legged) variety and rickshaws are conspicuous only by their absence. The icing on Diu's picture-perfect cake was its citizens; perpetually grinning and waving, keen to welcome visitors to their idyllic and surprisingly overlooked portion of India.



▲ Above: Located on the western end of Diu, the Gontimata beach is usually secluded and always beautiful.

Below: The main facade of the St Paul's Church is perhaps the most elaborate of all Portuguese churches in India.



We enjoyed a late lunch of *dal* (lentil curry) and rice in a two-table café and a stroll on another empty beach then started to wind our way slowly back towards Diu Town. Before heading for the final fish curry of our all-too-short trip, we followed the crowds to the only place on Diu where crowds tend to form – Sunset Point. Settling on the sand with a well-deserved beer (waving from the back of a moped is thirsty work, you know) we marvelled at the sight of a Diu beach, where we weren't the only patrons, and waited

for the sun to drop into the ocean — a fitting end to our short island break.

Back on our balcony after dinner, we felt sad to be packing up our rucksacks, but recharged and ready to return to the entertaining mayhem of urban India. Yet, as I watched the beach-loving cows settling down on the sand for another uninterrupted bout of sunset bathing, I couldn't help feeling a little envious of their lazy lifestyle.

Whereabouts

How to go

Jet Airways has regular flights between Mumbai and Diu.

Where to stay

Head to Diu Town for well-priced hotels with sea views and don't be afraid to haggle in the low season.

Travel tips

- Dress appropriately. Diu is a little more liberal than other areas in Gujarat but skimpy bikinis on the beach are likely to attract attention.
- Don't get upset if you encounter some inebriated visitors. Many people go to Diu for beach and beer and the latter can sometimes get out of control. Keep smiling and you'll likely make some great, if slightly tipsy, friends.

JetEscapes package

Book a JetEscapes package to have a worry-free vacation in Diu. For customised packages contact our JetEscapes Service Center at +91 22 4249 5999 or write to us at jetescares@jetairways.com.

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