

DIU

Words : 1747

Characters : 10247

*Blending Indian and European culture, the ex-Portuguese colony of Diu, located on India's north-western coast, is the perfect destination for the traveller who wants to discover "another India".*

"There's Diu, the bridge, and then the rest of India." a Dutchman who has been travelling to this country for 20 years tells me. Looking around, I have to agree : gone are the crowds of India's one billion strong population. The quiet and sunny streets of Diu city, with their brightly painted houses, give off an air of lazy tranquility, and the old colonial architecture, the 16th century Portuguese fortress and the whitewashed catholic churches give it a distinctly European flavour.

Located at the southern tip of Gujarat state, the 39 square kilometre island, separated from the mainland by a narrow inlet, is today a union territory administered directly by New Delhi.

For hundreds of years, however, Diu belonged to Portugal. In 1509 a fleet of 18 heavily armed vessels defeated a coalition of ottoman, Egyptian and Gujarati warships, securing a highly profitable spice trade route for Portugal.

Bearing witness to the strategic importance of Diu is the impressive fortress that lies just outside the town at the eastern tip of the island. This massive structure is almost a town in it's own right. Ringed on three sides by sea cliffs, and protected on the fourth by no less than three rows of battlements, the fortress was able to repel the most furious assaults from the Gujaratis who tried to retake Diu during the 16th century. In 1537 it endured a month long siege, at the the end of which only 40 out of 600 Portuguese soldiers were left standing.

Even today, evidence of the Portuguese presence can be seen everywhere, from small colonial houses to three storey mansions with ornately decorated balconies and inscriptions written in Latin or Portuguese.

Though colonial rule ended more than forty years ago, some people can still remember what life was like under the Portuguese administration. "Some things were easier then", recounts Mr Pravin Bhai, now in his 60's, "If you needed a problem solved, someone from the local government would come in person, assess the situation, and take whatever action was necessary immediately. Today it can take months or years for the Indian authorities to get anything done, and usually only after paying heavy bribes". Other residents paint a different picture. "Before the Indian take-over the island was badly neglected." say Mr and Mrs Servulo dos Remedios, also in their 60's. "You would have hardly believed we lived in the 20th century. There was very little electricity, hardly any roads, and even the water supply was inadequate. The Indians brought badly needed infrastructure."

Indeed, with the rise of the British Empire, Diu and the other Portuguese holdings in India had gradually lost their importance. In 1961 the Indian government decided to retake them by force. The few and badly equipped forces defending them offered only a token resistance, despite orders to fight to the last man by the Portuguese dictator of the time, Oliveira Salazar.

"Indian planes flew overhead dropping leaflets", remembers Mr Bhai, "on them it was written that the Indians were not our enemies and that while they were retaking the

island we should avoid going out in the streets or on the rooftops."

Mrs Servulo has darker memories : "We heard the bombardments and gunfire. We could not believe that this was happening in our own town. There was looting, and one of our neighbours, a 16 year old girl, was raped by Indian soldiers."

By this time, most of Diu's Portuguese community had been evacuated. Lisbon having granted Portuguese citizenship to all of Diu's inhabitants, many chose to leave for Europe. From several thousand before the take-over, the island's Christian community has dwindled to a few hundred today.

Of the three churches, only one, St Paul's, still conducts services. The others have been converted into a museum-hotel and a health clinic.

Nevertheless, the Christian community, centred around St Paul's, is still very much alive. Well kept catholic shrines can be found on many street corners with effigies of the virgin Mary or St Sebastian and the sound of Portuguese conversation can be heard when walking by the colonial houses and their immaculately kept gardens.

In December the neighbourhood's front porches are aglow with Christmas decorations and groups of people wearing Santa Claus hats walk from house to house singing carols in Portuguese and English, including not only traditional songs but also Christmas pop hits. Catholics in Diu can usually be recognised by the women wearing occidental clothing and western hairstyles, but at mass on Christmas day I notice many women wearing traditional Indian saris. I later ask a group of visitors who have just lit a candle and whispered some prayers inside the church what their religion is. "We are Hindus", replies a teenage girl, "but because we are very religious, when we step inside another religion's temple, we will pray out of respect for it's beliefs."

Diu is home to another minority community, albeit one that keeps a much lower profile. One afternoon I notice a young couple walking past me in the street. They are obviously of African descent and yet are dressed in Indian clothes. I strike up a conversation with them. The young man's name is Ali, and the young lady's is Muskan. They are 24 and 19 years of age respectively and are newlyweds. Ali works in a printing press in a town in the interior of Gujarat and today they have come to visit Muskan's family in Diu. Ali and Muskan are Siddis, the descendants of slaves, servants and mercenaries. Siddis can be traced as far back as the 5th Century A.D. Renowned for their fighting skills, they would often be employed to guard valuable merchant vessels from pirates. Some Indian monarchs employed them as elite bodyguards, believing them more trustworthy than their intrigue prone countrymen. Unfortunately for one such ruler, this resulted in him being overthrown by his guards who went on to found a Siddi ruled kingdom so powerful, even the great leader Shivaji of Maharashtra could not conquer them.

In the years leading up to the 80's, Diu developed an important fishing industry. If you travel along the main road to the western tip of the island you will come upon Vanakbara town. Even before you enter the town proper, signs of it's main industry are everywhere. At a crossroads leading into town craftsmen are busy constructing two new fishing boats. Entirely made of wood imported from the mainland, the ships measure 18 by 100 feet and cost 40 000 € to build by 6 workers over a period of 5 months.

As you enter the port, the smell of fish is overwhelming. Everywhere along the 2-km stretch of jetties, sailors are either offloading their catch onto waiting tractors or hauling supplies and great blocks of ice onto outbound ships. Boats can stay out at sea for up to a week, manned by 10 sailors, and are expected to bring back around 1500 € worth of fish. In a warehouse I speak to a buyer busy jotting down numbers in a notebook while workers weigh enormous five feet long fish. I expect him to tell me that the fish are

destined for the restaurants at the eastern end of the island. "Actually we are an export company from the mainland, and these fish will be sold all over the world."

In 1983, at the same time that Diu's administration was separated from that of Goa's, it was realised how much potential it had to offer as a tourist destination. The infrastructure of the island was further developed and the airport, which had been unnecessarily bombed during the take-over, was reopened. Today regular flights from Bombay make it a popular destination for Indian tourists from neighbouring Maharashtra state. On weekends day trippers from Gujarat flock to Nagoa beach and visit the town's monuments. "We come here often," says Mr Raj, an auto-rickshaw driver who has come with his family from the town of Una, "It is a few hour's drive away but it is so different from where we live. There is always something new for us to enjoy". Beaches and culture are not the only reasons Gujaratis come here. In one bar I meet a group of men downing glass after glass of whiskey. They tell me they are government health workers come for an evening out on the town. "Alcohol is banned in Gujarat, but here it is legal, so we make the most of it". I ask them if they will be staying the night to sleep off their drink. "No", replies one of them, "we will be driving back tonight when the bars close". Cars are stopped at the state border and searched for smuggled alcohol but Gujarati police apparently do not conduct breathalyser tests.

Though still largely off the beaten track, Diu is welcoming an ever growing number of foreign travellers eager to escape India's hustle and bustle and tourist traps. accommodations vary from five star beach resorts to cheap and cheerful backpacker lodges. One interesting option is the Sao Tome church, housing the Diu museum, which has a wing that has been converted into a hotel. Restaurants include dishes in their menus adapted to foreign palates and wandering in the streets you will easily find that all-important cybercafe to keep in touch with the outside world. Yet despite all this Diu lacks the unsavoury attributes of most popular tourist destinations. Upon your arrival you will not be greeted by touts in the streets trying to lure you into a hotel that pays them commission and by and large, what you are charged for in the shops is what any Indian would pay. Even in full season, the town does not feel crowded with tourists, yet there are enough around to strike up friendships and organise picnics and parties. Beaches such as Nagoa are fun and lively but all women are expected to stay fully clothed even when bathing. Luckily, there are a great number of empty beaches in and around the island where it is possible to work on that suntan without offending anyone.

Time to cross the bridge. I feel fully rested and ready to confront the subcontinent again, knowing I can always come back to this little oasis of peace.