



Panjim's Church of the Immaculate Conception

# Sur Jahan, Goa

Simon Broughton hops off the tourist trail and instead heads to Goa's capital for its annual festival that's intent on reviving the local folk music

Goa is a gorgeous place. Palm-fringed beaches, cheap cocktails and rave parties. But what about music and culture? Does it have any? This is one of the things that Sur Jahan is about. Goa has a population of 1.5 million, but during the tourist season (October-March), it inflates to 4.9 million – including the tourists and those that service them. This influx brings a huge economic benefit, of course, but largely at the expense of the local culture.

Panjim, Goa's capital city, has a Portuguese heart around the 17th-century church of the Immaculate Conception, and becomes more and more Indian as it spreads into the suburbs. For many tourists, Panjim is just a stopping-off point for the beaches to the north and south. But as visitors to Sur Jahan

discover, it's worth spending some time in town. The festival takes place in the Kala Academy, built in the 1970s by Charles Correa, Goa's most famous architect.

Sur Jahan is the new name for the Sufi Sutra festival organised out of Kolkata by Banglanatak Dot Com. It's held in both Kolkata and Goa. "We changed the name because a lot of the groups we have invited are not Sufi, so it's a more accurate description of what we're doing," explains Banglanatak's Amitava Bhattacharya. "Sur means 'Music' and Jahan means 'the World' in Hindi, Bengali, Urdu – several of the subcontinent's languages – and so 'Sur Jahan' means 'Music of the World'."

At last year's festival groups came from Portugal, Hungary, Scotland, Burkina Faso, Brazil, the US and India. Only the (slightly

hippy) American Sufi Project and the Warsi Brothers, a wonderful *qawwali* group from Hyderabad, could be described as Sufi. The eight-strong Warsis pack a spiritual punch with all their vocal ecstasy; lead singer Nazeer Ahmed Khan Warsi soars up to a top note and holds it for about a minute. Stunning.

And it was certainly interesting to see the Portuguese folk group Karrossel. "How many people here speak Portuguese?" asks percussionist and leader Hugo Osga, and a lot of hands go up. There's still a strong Portuguese influence in Goa, including a lively *fado* scene. But alongside guitar, accordion, clarinet and bagpipes, there's one extraordinary instrument in Karrossel, namely the *bulbul tarang* (nightingale waves) – a sort of zither that Osga bought in India. It's an extraordinary hybrid



Clockwise from above: Karossel's Hugo Osga with his *bulbul tarang*; the Warsi Brothers; the Kala Academy; Bengali singer Debalina Bhowmick

with a main string plucked by the left hand and accordion-type buttons pressed with the right. "It's an Indian banjo playing traditional Portuguese music," says Osga on stage and adds, laughing: "The world is getting much too small!"

The whole ethos of the festival is about bringing people and communities together. Bhattacharya deliberately invites groups that aren't big names and are prepared to get involved. During the day there are workshops, and in the evening, full concerts in the 1,000-seater main hall of the Kala Academy – all free thanks to support by the Goan Art and Culture Department. The audience is a mixture of local residents, long-term expats living in Goa and holidaymakers. What's nice is some of the performers also do small gigs in clubs at nearby beach resorts like Anjuna or even participate in the Panjim carnival.

Mihály Rosonczy-Kovács, the violinist with Hungarian Gypsy group Romengo, says: "The festival is a very good opportunity to get to know other cultures and other kinds of music and I think the concept of bringing the world together through music works very well."

Banglanatak have done very successful work back home in West Bengal to create an interest and market for the local folk musicians. Last year they brought a masked dancer from Purulia, West Bengal, along with other Bengali musicians. And at the festival they are trying to showcase Goan musicians alongside Bengalis in a band rather awkwardly called East West Local. It features excellent Bengali singer Debalina Bhowmick, with Bengali colleagues on flute, *tabla* and

*dhol* and Goans on guitar (Elvis Lobo), bass guitar (Steve Francis) and *djembe* and *darbuka* percussion (Carlos Gonsalves). To my ears the Bengali ingredients sound more interesting than the Goan ones, but that's because the Goan music is Westernised and neglected. Until recently, there was an excellent popular music scene, sung in Konkani, the local language, with Portuguese-sounding melodies backed by African and Caribbean-sounding rhythms, which was even popular outside the state.

To try and kick-start the local scene, Banglanatak has also started a folk *mela* of traditional music and crafts with 150 artists at the Ravindra Bhavan campus, Margao, in the south of Goa (March 24-30 2017). "The city youth in Goa are not into folk art forms, but they are into music," says Bhattacharya. "And there's an interest among the tourists. But there's a serious disconnect between Goa and folk music. So my attempt is to bring back Goan folk into the main scene through other stages. And once recognition starts, artists will revive their folk practice and will find a new pride in them."



Masked Chhau dancer from Purulia

So what Sur Jahan brings to Panjim is a high-profile event featuring both Indian and international artists, which may help to regenerate the local scene. It's certainly something well worth visiting if you are in the vicinity on holiday. Next February's artists include Otava Yo from Russia, Ale Möller from Sweden, BraAgas from the Czech Republic and Virelai from Denmark.

The grand finale last year comes from *balafon* player Mamadou Diabaté and his band, who create a storm of percussion. The irrepressible Amitava Bhattacharya leaps up on stage at the end. "Music for peace and music for all," he says, "let's give peace a chance." It's a cliché of course, but the sentiment and ambition is absolutely genuine and wins a huge round of applause. ♦

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+ DATES Sur Jahan Kolkata takes place from February 3-5 and in Goa from February 8-10 2017

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