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31 What's the beach scene like?

India has some lovely beaches, from lounge-lined strands and remote rural stretches to shores bustling with city folk or working fishermen. Goa is the first stop for many sunbathers, but with 7,000km of coastline, India has plenty of alternative options...

MOBOR, GOA

Honeymooners looking for Seychelles alternatives would do well to look instead to Mobor, a patch of five-star luxury that's great for those who simply don't want to move for a week – except, perhaps, to swim off a private-hire sailboat. Staff at the few resort hotels can point the way to local beach bars or ferry the truly idle in their golf carts.

● *Abercrombie & Kent* (0845 485 1142, www.abercrombiekent.co.uk) offers seven nights at

the Leela Goa from £1,575pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow and transfers.

MARARI, KERALA

An easy 48km south of Kochi and just north of Alleppey (the 'Venice of the East') is unspoilt Marari. Well-tended gardens separate the few lodges – with their antique teak beds, chandeliers and air-con – from the clean, white, hawk-free beach where everything takes place, from eating to dozing to ayurvedic treatments.

● *Scott Dunn* (020 8682 5400, www.scott-dunn.com) has seven nights at *Carnoustie Resort* from £1,615pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow and private transfers.

MAMALLAPURAM, TAMIL NADU

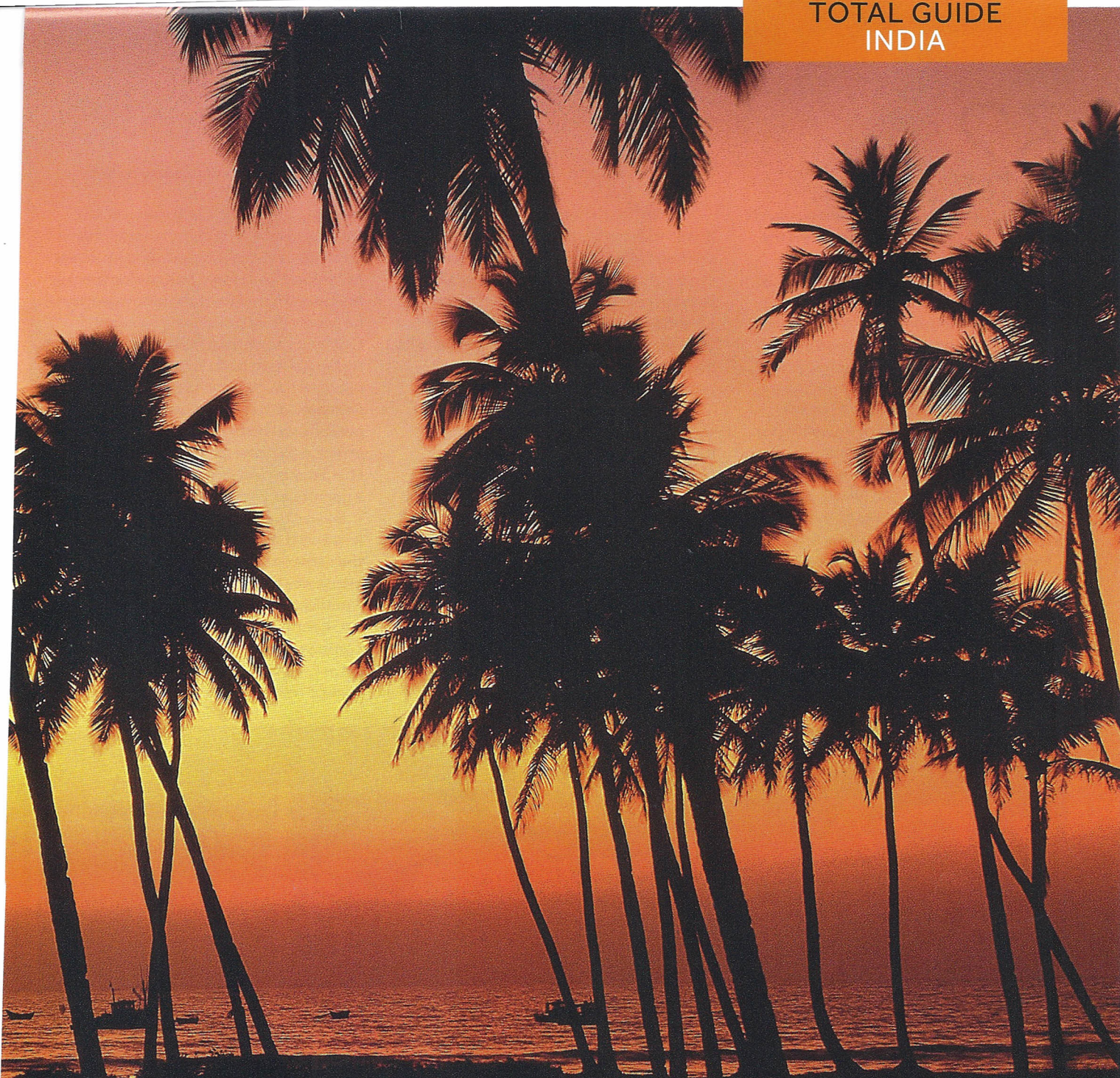
Want beach *and* culture? You'll find both in Mamallapuram, a 7th-century port south of Chennai and a Unesco heritage site, which you

can explore in digestible bites between sessions on the honey-coloured beaches. Highlights are the ornate Shore Temple, and the ancient relief rock sculptures of elephants.

● *Mahabalipuram Chariot Beach Resort* (00 91 44 2742 5000, www.chariotbeachresorts.com) has doubles from £57, B&B. *BA* (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Chennai from £593 return.

GOKARNA, KARNATAKA

Of course the hippies were going to seek a better place to beach once Goa caught on. They chose Gokarna, a lush peninsula two hours up the coast, with the same golden sands but a more low-key vibe. There are nearly a dozen temples to explore south of Gokarna town, so with the salt air comes the whiff of incense. Sleep under modest thatched roofs set back from secluded beaches and choppy but swimmable waters.



● *Ampersand Travel (020 7289 6100, www.ampersandtravel.com) has seven nights at the SwaSwara Retreat from £1,560pp, full board, including Heathrow-Goa flights, yoga and massages.*

NEELESHWAR, KERALA

This unsullied sweep of sand on the remote Malabar coast is much less developed than its southern neighbours, but the sleepy fishing community has now welcomed in an eco-resort, The Hermitage. Cottages are cosily simple, but turtles, marine birds and other wildlife are plentiful. Far more scarce are tourists – which more than compensates for the indirect flight and two-hour transfer.

● *Audley (01993 838355, www.audleytravel.com) offers seven nights at the Neeleshwar Hermitage from £1,510pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow and private transfers.*

BENAULIM, GOA

The saying in Goa is that no two beaches are the same. Colva beach (above), for instance, attracts madding crowds of Indian families – whereas nearby, quieter Benaulim is a hit with their western counterparts for its warm sea (possibly the cleanest in the country), high-standard mod-con hospitality and hotels crawling with babysitters. It's also a cinch to get to from the UK, with direct flights.

● *Kuoni (01306 747008, www.kuoni.co.uk) has five nights at the Taj Exotica from £1,385pp, B&B, with Heathrow flights and transfers.*

VARKALA, KERALA

Edged with red cliffs, Varkala's sands are pummelled by surfing waves (hire gear from beachfront kiosks). It's also on the pilgrimage trail for Hindus, who scatter ashes in the sea (safely downwind) and pay homage to Vishnu at glistening temples. The mood around the

seafront guesthouses is mellow, with yoga tourists stretching out on the sand at dawn.

● *Family-run Varkala Marine Palace (00 91 47 0260 3204, www.varkalamarine.com) has doubles from £5, room only. Etihad (0845 608 1225, www.etihad.com) flies from Heathrow to Trivandrum from £499 return.*

PARADISE BEACH, TAMIL NADU

The French may have left Pondicherry (now named Puducherry), but their influence lives on in peeling Colonial villas, boulevards and *bouillabaisse*. There are brilliant beaches walkable from town, but the very best, Plage Paradiso, is accessible only by boat – once there you can enjoy the sands undisturbed or swim with the dolphins.

● *Hotel de l'Orient (00 91 97 8610 0269, hotel-de-lorient.neemranahotels.com) has doubles from £49, B&B. BA (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) has Heathrow-Chennai returns from £593. >*