

# GOA'S TOURISM DILEMMA : BOOMING NUMBERS, STUBBORN ISSUES



Goa's tourism industry is navigating a mixed season, with stakeholders reporting steady growth in tourist arrivals yet grappling with long-standing issues like transport, garbage, and infrastructure. While charter flights and high-end accommodations continue to attract visitors, challenges such as the taxi mafia, unclean beaches, and rising competition are raising concerns about the sustainability of tourism in the State. **VITHALDAS HEGDE** and **ANIL KUMAR MISHRA** speak to industry leaders, who stress the need to address fundamental problems to revive Goa's authentic charm



Tourism, a cornerstone of Goa's economy post-mining, continues to thrive despite challenges. The Department of Tourism recently hosted a stakeholder conclave to counter misinformation and reaffirm Goa's appeal as a premier destination. At the conclave, Director of Tourism Suneel Anchipaka reported significant growth in 2024, with a 21% increase in tourist numbers. December 2024 alone saw a 54% rise compared to December 2023, and quarterly growth from October to December was 38%. Domestic tourist arrivals grew by 22%, while foreign arrivals increased by 3%. Dabolim Airport recorded a 27% spike in passenger traffic in December 2024. Anchipaka highlighted a shift toward quality tourism, as indicated by high hotel occupancy rates and rising interest from high-end tourists. Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte shared provisional figures revealing that Goa welcomed over 1.04 crore visitors in 2024—comprising 99.4 lakh domestic and 4.67 lakh international tourists—compared to 86.3 lakh in 2023. The state saw record activity during December, with 200 daily flights. Despite Asia's broader tourism decline of -18% post-Covid-19, Goa's 3% growth in international ar-

rivals underscores its resilience. The number of registered hotels increased from 3,000 in 2022 to nearly 9,000 in 2024, reflecting enhanced infrastructure. Khaunte addressed concerns about overtourism at beaches like Baga and Calangute, citing waste management and overcrowding issues. To tackle transport challenges, the government is enhancing technology-driven services, including platforms like Goa Miles and the Goa Taxi app, aimed at improving tourist experiences. The Minister dismissed criticism from social media influencers, attributing it to unverified data, and stressed Goa's adaptability and strong performance in a competitive landscape. **Goa's tourism growth offset by lingering challenges** While Goa's tourism sector has shown encouraging growth, fundamental issues continue to hinder its full potential, according to Travel and Tourism Association of Goa (TTAG) president Jack Sukhija. "It hasn't been the best season, but it's been decent overall," Sukhija remarked, noting a rise in foreign tourist arrivals and increased charter flights. However, numbers remain below pre-Covid levels across India, including Goa. Domestic tourism,

though minimally improved by 4-5%, has shown significant overall growth in Goa compared to other states. Sukhija dismissed social media influencers' negative claims as unsubstantiated, asserting that the industry is witnessing expansion in terms of new hotels and restaurants. However, smaller and newer establishments face competition from villa accommodations, which are diverting business. He also highlighted key concerns that threaten Goa's long-term appeal. "The lack of cleanliness on beaches, illegal constructions, shanties, and poor road accessibility are eroding the state's laid-back charm," he said. Loud music, overcrowded shacks, and transport issues exacerbate the problem, with traffic congestion in areas like Calangute and Baga harming the tourist experience. "We don't need Ola or Uber, but Goa requires its own modern app for transport management," Sukhija suggested, pointing to issues with touting and inadequate transport infrastructure. Sukhija concluded with a warning: "Quantity-wise, Goa may be thriving now, but without addressing these concerns, we risk losing our edge as a destination." With better international air connectivity, Goa faces stiff competition. Former TTAG president Nilesh Shah says Goa's tourism sector has shown growth, but competition is increasing both domestically and internationally. "It is quite okay because you see there is growth in the benchmark. The flights coming to Goa are more than last year. The number of charter flights has also increased. There are more flights coming from Russia. There are flights coming from Uzbekistan twice a week, a flight coming from Poland once a week. We have Qatar Airways, Air India flights flying from Gatwick to Goa, Air Arabia flights coming to Goa, regular flights from Oman, and flights from the Gulf. If you add those figures, I think more people are arriving in Goa," Shah said. Acknowledging industry challenges, he noted, "A lot of hotels and high-end villas have come up. Many villas owned by outsiders have been put on rent as a villa hotel or as a bed-and-breakfast hotel. There is growth, but what happened is that branded hotels have not experienced a pinch because their revenue has increased. However, for smaller hotels, business has gone down a little bit because there is competition." Shah highlighted the impact of demand-supply dynam-

ics. "Growth ultimately boils down to demand and supply. So supply has been more comparatively than the demand. Overall, the pricing also—if you see, the airlines reduced their fares. In November, they kept it high, but by December 10, they reduced it. Overall, hotels have done well." He pointed out that domestic competition is on the rise. "There is a report which says that Rajasthan was the



costliest destination last year. Earlier, this tag was attached to Goa. We have to understand that within domestic tourism, winter tourism has picked up in Kashmir in a big way. People are going to Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh. All these places have picked up as far as domestic tourism is concerned," he said. As for international tourism, Shah remarked that expanded flight connectivity to competing destinations is also a factor. "Reports say that you have direct flights to many Far East places. For example, earlier it was only till Bangkok, but now flights are available to Pattaya, Malaysia, which are all beach destinations. There are many flights connecting to Sri Lanka. There are flights from Vietnam to at least five destinations in India," he said. **Hotel industry stable for now, but improvements needed** President of the Small and Medium Hoteliers Association (SMHA), Santosh Divkar, acknowledged the challenges faced by the industry but emphasised the importance of adapting. "Ups and downs are there in every industry, so we have to realise that the situation is not the same as it was earlier. There are some changes. We have to improve on certain things where we have gone wrong. Mistakes are there, but there are things that will improve too," he said. He noted that the industry is currently stable. "At the moment, the industry is neither suffering a loss nor making a profit. We are in a stable position to improve ourselves. We have identified the problem

and we are working on resolving those problems." Divkar pointed to geopolitical factors affecting international tourism. "We have to understand there is geopolitics—Russia, Ukraine, and Israel. International tourism is on the decline for various reasons. But at the same time, you have to see markets too. It's true that games have been played to destroy the Indian economy. We have to



understand where we are going wrong and work on those areas," he said. **Over tourism and dirty beaches may deter well-heeled tourists** Former TTAG president Savio Messias reflected on the past season, observing a mix of positives and unresolved issues. "To me, the season is as good as last year. Although there have been some media reports of influencers giving different versions, I think it was a good season this year," he said. Messias cautioned against overcrowding Goa. "I too would not like to see Goa oversold. People who come to Goa should feel comfortable, and this is what happened. However, the challenges have not been rectified. They are the same. The issues like the taxi problem, garbage problem, and dog menace have been going on for too long, but nothing is happening. There is no point in starting new projects if the basic problems are not being solved," he emphasised. He highlighted the importance of cleanliness to attract international tourists. "International tourists will come to Goa only if the state welcomes them with proper sanitation and clean beaches. Otherwise, why would foreigners come? They can go to other countries which are cleaner and have no problems. We may have the best beaches, but if we cannot maintain them, then what's the point?" **Charter arrivals up this year** Ernest Dias, COO of Charters Sita, noted a significant

increase in charter arrivals this season. "This year, tourism is better than last year. We had a good number of chartered flights arriving in Goa. New destinations, namely Uzbekistan and Poland, opened up. So, it is much better than last season. I would say numbers are double that of last year because during the last week of December 2024, the number of flights landing at Dabolim and Mopa airports were over 200 flights per day," he said. Dias urged addressing persistent issues to sustain growth. "However, there are some areas which need to be addressed, like garbage and the taxi mafia. We should also look at visas on arrival because today's travellers do not plan much in advance. We have to cater to all fliers so that we get the right numbers. With so many hotels opening up, it is a good sign," he added. **Focus on sustainable tourism, bring back Goan hospitality** The solution lies in prioritising sustainable tourism. "We need to shift the focus to sustainable tourism where benefits percolate to every part of Goa. This will require addressing basic issues and ensuring that tourism benefits locals as well," say stakeholders. Current practices like overcharging tourists also damage Goa's image. For instance, rent for a scooter during peak season reportedly soared to Rs 1,500, far above the usual rate of Rs 300. Tourists feel trapped due to high taxi fares and fear of being cheated. "Our focus should be on attracting well-behaved tourists and addressing the 'Chalta Hai' attitude with a more pragmatic approach to marketing," say industry insiders. Concerns were also raised about losing the essence of "Goanness" in day-to-day interactions, as more local services are being outsourced. "Goa's economy thrives on tourism, and it's crucial to restore our hospitable and authentic identity in dealings with tourists," they said. Incidents of locals clashing with tourists are particularly damaging to Goa's image. **Social media and Goa's image** The influence of social media cannot be ignored. Negative trends around issues like the "taxi mafia" and garbage tarnish Goa's reputation. "We need to acknowledge and address these feedback points. It's not that Goa is gone—Goa still sells. But if we focus on these basics, it will go a long way in improving our overall image," they conclude.

“We do not have technology in transport. We are not saying that you get Ola or Uber, but at least you can have your own app. Traffic congestion in prime areas is a significant problem. If you are going to spend half an hour in traffic at Calangute or Baga, then it is as good as staying in Bengaluru. Why should someone come to Goa for a bad experience? Tourists come to Goa to relax” — Jack Sukhija, TTAG president “A lot of hotels and high-end villas have come up. Many villas owned by outsiders have been put on rent as a villa hotel or as a bed-and-breakfast hotel. So, branded hotels have not experienced a pinch because their revenue has increased. However, for the small hotels, business has gone down a little bit” — Nilesh Shah, Former TTAG president “Foreigners are not coming to see garbage. At least the beaches and approach roads should be clean. There should not be dogs on the beaches, and we have to get rid of hawkers, beggars, and touts. These are simple things, and we do not require rocket science for this” — Savio Messias, Former TTAG president “This tourism season was better. In December 2024, many flights and more tourists arrived at Dabolim International Airport. However, October and November were a bit slow, but December was better this season. Even January, so far, has been good as far as inflow is concerned. Flights are coming to Dabolim airport” — Sanjay Naik, vice president, All Goa Yellow and Black Taxi Association “As far as domestic tourism is concerned, it's not that Goa is at fault. If you see the rates for flight tickets, they are almost the same as tickets to some countries like Vietnam from Delhi. So they choose those countries over Goa. Airlines too need to understand that flight tickets to Goa cannot cost the same as tickets for international destinations” — Santosh Divkar, president, Small and Medium Hoteliers Association (SMHA)