The very mention of Goa conjures up images—stunning beaches, hospitable people, and all night parties. It’s all those things, no doubt. But to me, Goa means food. If I had to describe Goanese food in just three words, they would have to be—fish, coconut and rice.

As I pack my bags on a balmy October morning in Delhi, ready to take my mid-morning flight to heartwarming Goa, thoughts of masala prawns, pungent pork vindaloo, and sticky sweet bibinca, just over two-and-a-half hours away, put me in a happy place. Sunblock: check; beachwear: check; appetite: oh yes, check! Check! Check! Settling down in my seat on the plane, I flip through the Lonely Planet. Here goes: situated on the southwestern coastline, Goa is—and no prizes for guessing—the place for a perfect holiday by the beach. Add to that: hospitality, cuisine, heritage, and adventure sports, and we have a winner.

As I emerge from the Dabolim Airport, I can’t wait to explore. Into a cab and I am off to capital Panjim, 30 picturesque kilometres away. There, a luxurious Portuguese style villa awaits my arrival—a place I will call home for the next few days. A couple of mind-stilling hours later, I am warmly welcomed, smilingly checked in, and profoundly comfortable. Now, some soul food.

I meet a local friend, and we rent a bike to head north. Goa is small, and the easiest way to get around...
is by renting a bike or a car. The rates are reasonable. Most vacationers prefer bikes, and so, my friend and I hop on to an Enfield and zip away.

We are headed for Calangute, also called the queen of beaches for its unmatched beauty, parasailing, water skiing and wind surfing. In the shade of palm trees, feast on stalls selling everything from fried prawns to seashell trinkets. Here, the more than 400-year old church of St Alex is a must-see, with its twin towers, magnificent dome and ornate altars.

Hitting the beach, we make our way to Souza Lobo’s, one of Goa’s oldest and most popular restaurants. I order fish curry and rice, while my friend goes for the stuffed crabs, and we decide to share a plate of Goan masala prawns. As we sit back and watch the waves wash over the beach, I think — can life get any better than this?

Well, it can. And I find out soon enough when our food arrives. My tender fish curry is tangy and mildly spicy. I take a nibble of the stuffed crab — it’s cheesy and mouth-watering. The prawns are fresh, and fried in the traditional red Goan masala. As I take a bite, the fire of the red chilies and the tanginess of the vinegar sock my palate alive. As we tuck into the sumptuous lunch we promise ourselves we will return for the renowned lobster thermidor.

By early evening, we had digested our lunch and were ravenous once again. Goa cuisine is a fine blend of Indian and Portuguese influences. So, to get a taste of authentic delicacies, particularly Fish Ambotik, we decided to head south, to Betalbatim this time, tucked between the famous Majorda and Colva beaches. Majorda is known not only for its breathtaking sunsets, the restaurant is known to serve fresh fish.

On a Wednesday, head for this famous north Goa bargainers’ paradise, and shop till you drop. For me, no food exploration is complete without chicken. Most people would not really travel to Goa to eat chicken, but I would say, do give the chicken Xacuti a try. Pronounced sha-ko-tee, it is chicken curry flavoured with coconut and dry roasted cinnamon, cloves and poppy seeds. You can easily find this at any of the mentioned restaurants.

Of course, I declare my favourite to be the Chicken Cafreal, the best version of which can only be had at Florentine’s in the village of Saligao with a population 5,000, and not far from the Calangute beach. Saligao is small but neat, and has an appeal distinctly its own. Here, do visit the nearly 140-year old church of Mae de Deus. Its stunning Gothic architecture makes it one of the most attractive churches in Goa.

Now back to the Chicken Cafreal — tender and succulent, the meat is grilled in a delicious masala of chillies and coriander. I had mine with pao, washed down with a glass of fresh coconut water.

Every meal has to be rounded off with something sweet. Simona bakery, a quaint little boulangerie, at the Mapusa market provided the perfect experience. An important north Goanese commercial centre, Mapusa (pronounced map-sa) is made up of two konkani words that mean measure and fill. Famous for its heavy-bargain Friday markets, Mapusa is situated 13 km north of capital Panaji, and is also an important gateway to the north Goa beaches of Calangute, Baga, Anjuna and Arambol, among others. At Mapusa, take some time out to visit the Bodhgeshwar temple, and then, the Hanuman theatre right across, where you can watch local actors and musicians performing. The place is also home to the church of Our Lady of Miracles, built in 1594.

At the Simona bakery, first, a taste of the famed Bebinca, or behinc. An eight-layered cake, it is made of eggs, milk, sugar and coconut. Then it was on to dodol, made with rice flour, coconut milk, jaggery and cashew nuts. Yummy, but a bit too sweet for my taste.

People leave Goa with trinkets and souvenirs as keepsakes; I head back with a slightly expanded waistline and a bag full of local foods as souvenirs. I may have eaten all kinds of curries and breads the place has to offer, but will I be back for more — certainly.