

Exclusively hand-painted tiles, which were once almost forgotten, have become an inseparable part of the landscape of Goa



Mario Miranda's famous cartoons, besides other works, are portrayed on the azulejos displayed on the walls of Orlando de Noronha's studio (top) in Panjim. PHOTOS BY THE WRITER

Every azulejo tells a story

PREETI VERMA LAL

AZULEJO. To say this Portuguese word, you'll have to twist your tongue and keep 'j' silent. It is not so simple, though. The Spanish pronounce it ah-soo-le-haw, the Portuguese, ah-zoo-le-zhoo. Do not blame the word. For it borrows from three languages (Portuguese, Spanish and Arabic). The word origin is a mish-mash, not this art of painting on ceramic tiles which originated in the 15th century Portugal and travelled to India when the Portuguese settled in Goa.

So, azulejos are painted ceramic tiles? No. These are hand-painted. These incredibly beautiful tiles are created over hours — clay and water mixed into a dough, spread on a tray, cut to size, dried and fired in a kiln. It is, then, glazed with powdered glass.

When the tile is ready, drawings are transferred from a tracing paper by sprinkling the perforations with powdered charcoal. Or, drawn straight on the tile and painted. The paint used in azulejos is made of glass powder and oxides and does not fade with time. Dinnerware paint is different; the oxide colours of azulejos are toxic. Poisonous, actually. The tile with finished painting is fired again at 1,050 °C to fuse the glaze, definitively setting the painting. It is, then, soaked in water. And lo! The arty azulejos are ready.

In India, these tiles are made only in Goa. Interestingly, during the Portuguese reign, there were no Goan azulejo artists. These were imported from Portugal. The Portuguese came with the azule-

jos; the Portuguese went back with azulejos. Their departure almost killed the art — and market — of hand-painted tiles in India.

Then, the art returned to Goa. With Orlando de Noronha, a man with a five-year degree in commercial art from Goa Art College. Orlando went to Lisbon (Portugal) to hone his guitar skills and returned home after two years with a bagful of azulejos. That excess baggage was to change Orlando's fate and with him, the fate of Goan azulejos. In the beginning, he was hesitant about azulejos as his mainstay but one opportunity led to another and gradually Goa woke up to the forgotten art. In his studio in Panjim, the walls are cluttered with azulejos with Mario Miranda's famous cartoons. Orlando has been doing Miranda's drawings on tiles for nearly a decade which have found takers across the world.

Miranda's caricatures sure are the favourite azulejo design but these are not the only one. The common motifs include Goan fisherwoman, toddy tappers, ferries, boats, kunbi dance, bhatkar, churches, taverns, rural life, among others.

Azulejos, which were almost forgotten, are now everywhere in Goa. Artists have embraced the art and buyers/patrons are loosening their purse-strings. Walk around Goa and azulejos almost seem like a part of the Goan landscape. In railways stations and shops. In homes and hotels. As murals and nameplates. As wall decor and sidewalks. As style and as statement. Each azulejo tells a story. A Goan story.

Dipped in chocolate



Models dressed in outfits made with chocolates present creations at the Brussels "Le Salon du Chocolat" chocolate fair. PHOTOS: REUTERS/YVES HERMAN

The Spanish city of Mijas, which has charmed artists and writers for ages, has retained the donkey 'burro' taxi as a salute to the old days

The donkey express

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IN this age of fast-moving cars, inter-continental flights and superfast trains, where does the poor donkey, a transport 'system' of yore, stand? But that's what you will encounter in Mijas, a pretty little village — pueblo, perched on a hilllock. It is near the famous Costa del Sol beach areas off Malaga city. Though you can see cars going up and down the meandering lanes of the town between the pristine white buildings, the donkey 'taxi' is quite popular too. And, of course, it's a magnet to tourists looking for something different in this digital age.

Malaga is in the Andalusia region in southern Spain. Mijas, near another famous resort city Marbella, is about 45 minutes drive from there. A day trip to

both the places can be planned from Malaga to get a taste of Costa del Sol.

A statue of a donkey greets as you alight in front of the tourist office located at a lower level and the burro taxi stand is just across. It's reminiscent of the early 1900s when the beast of burden doubled as a mode of transport to go up the hilly roads. When tourists started visiting this area from other parts of Europe, they often took back as souvenir a straw donkey.

Times have changed but Mijas has retained the donkey 'burro' taxi as a salute to the old days, and obviously, as a tourist attraction. As the story goes, in the 1960s when the farmers returned home with their donkeys, they were often accosted by tourists requesting to be photographed with them, and also, if possible, give a ride. The farmers soon

found out that the rides with some tips worked out better as earnings than toiling hard in the farm. So they decided to introduce it as a formal 'taxi' service. Today they also need to have licences to operate their donkey-pulled carts.

The donkeys are profusely decorated with colourful gear. For one visiting from India, they would seem like the ceremonial garbs elephants and camels are dressed up with during festivals.

The ride introduces the visitor to the pretty village with cobbled stones skirted by attractive houses with hanging baskets of multi-coloured geraniums which contrast with the white walls of the houses. At corners, you will discover little shops, restaurants, bars where locals hang around generally exuding an atmosphere of easy-goingness which is



THINKSTOCK

A donkey ride in Mijas takes one through streets with cobbled stones, skirted by attractive houses

perfect for a holiday.

The charm of Mijas has enticed artists and writers for ages. There are quite a few good galleries. The Contemporary Art Museum, opened in 2013, is considered as the sixth most important Picasso museum in the world with the second largest collection of his ceramics. Works by his contemporaries are also there.

However, there have also been concerns of animal lovers about the condition of the donkeys. Now the city fathers have endorsed the standards set down by El Refugio del Burrito, a non-profit association working to improve the conditions for donkeys and mules in Spain, also a subsidiary of The Donkey Sanctuary, a non-profit charity based in the UK.