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A Rich Slice of Goan Heritage

The famous Figueiredo Mansion in Loutolim is to be converted into a living museum of Goan heritage, in collaboration with the Xavier Centre of Historical Research. **CLAIRE THERESA ANTÃO** joins in the celebrations of the traditional *ladainha* for St Anne's feast, hosted by the gracious Maria de Lourdes Figueiredo de Albuquerque, and gives us a preview of the wonders that await us when the house is opened to the public



gorgeous floral print set of porcelain crockery, displayed in a cupboard at the far end of the grand salon. Maria de Lourdes immediately switched on the inner lights, adding effect to the beautiful display, as she proclaimed that it was a set made especially for the Figueiredo family by the East India Company and there was no other piece like it. Beautiful!

There was so much to see and so many stories still to be heard. Maria de Lourdes is full of amazing and fascinating stories that have you hooked and enthralled but it was time to leave. I entered the house expecting to be impressed, and I left enchanted beyond my expectations. This house has so much to offer us: a culture and heritage that makes me proud to call it mine. One visit certainly is not enough to drink in every detail, every drama that unfolds along the story pages of its salons, its little kitchen garden, where Maria de Lourdes grows her own herbs and ingredients, its peaceful oratory and quiet library, and, of course, the shelled windowed *balcao*, which is just breathtaking. The house is a living breathing museum, and from the moment you step in, it breathes Goan culture and our romantic past right into us, leaving us mesmerized.

[For more information, visit <http://sites.google.com/site/oldheritageinn> or contact Donna Figueiredo de Albuquerque on 0832 2777028 or at Figueiredo.heritage@rediffmail.com. Author email: Pen_travel@hotmail.com]

Sitting in an elegant corner in the right wing of the house on an intricate woodwork settee, huge open windows letting the bright sunlight pour in generously, while strings of mandolin and violin infuse the air with their melody as voices sing praises to 'Senhora Santana'; I looked around the detailed furniture, the woody ceiling, searching desperately for some aid in my struggle for words.

The view from inside the house was as stunning as it had been getting there. Even from a distance, it exuded an aristocratic vibe as it sat in royal tranquility, watching over verdant, lush, moonsooned paddy beds. On the majestic way in stood two colossal Cuban royal palms, home to a colony of weaverbirds chirping happily and as tall as if raising the glory of the house to the skies.

The small band played in the little library consisting of a few small book cupboards that stood proudly against the walls as if knowing the greatness of treasures contained within them. The library, though small, consists of books in five different languages dating back to the 19th century. This little reader's cove gives way to the peaceful wooden altered oratory of Santana (St Anne), the patron saint of the house. We were celebrating the feast of St Anne; the *ladainha* continued with Tomazinho, 60 years *Sacristan* of Loutolim church and senior member of the village, leading the singing.

The 2nd of August at the regal Figueiredo Mansion, set amidst the rustic landscape of Loutolim, was a sunny Sunday afternoon. Built in its present form around the cusp of the 18th and 19th centuries, though not the grandest of Goan colonial houses as far as size goes, it definitely radiates grandeur. Vivek Menezes, the well-known Goan writer calls it, "the most immaculate living document of Goan aristocratic architecture" and emphasises, "This is not a Portuguese house. It is a Goan house containing influences of both the East

and the West."

After having colonized Goa, after some time the Portuguese saw it as a no-profit colony and found more lucrative deals in its other colonies, especially Brazil, where they focused their interest. Goans, being Portuguese citizens then, used their ticket to the outside world to travel widely, see the world and learn trades. During this period, there was a flowering of these magnificent mansions in Goa that were built by Goan aristocrats and now dot our little villages and towns.

Like a slice of *bebinca*, Goa is made up of several layers; and houses such as this one stand as a testament of the aristocratic layer that prevailed when front doors were left open and siestas never missed. What amazes one, however, is the way the whole place looks today, perfectly preserved in its entirety. Nothing has changed, right from the Indo-Western furniture and dramatic upholstery to the beautiful patterned crockery and cutlery. It is like walking into a history book and living it. Many a Goan story is based on divided properties, stolen family heirlooms, selling of family chests - selling out our culture, our roots, our history for a price. Yet this house stands impeccably intact and proud to tell its story, thanks to the two women who held it, nurtured it and lived it: the late Dona Georgina and her sister Maria de Lourdes Figueiredo de Albuquerque.

Maria de Lourdes is the perfect embodiment of her home, dressed in a youthful green, tinted hair styled away from her face. She looks younger than her years, and has a fiery passion that strikes you at the first instant. Always ahead of her times, no words could do justice to her numerous achievements. She's been a member of the Portuguese Parliament, head of her own PR company, restaurateur, artist, dedicated wife and mother, doting grandmother... the ultimate woman of substance.

This house keeps her on her feet and she loves tending to it. Whether it is

cleaning or repair work, she always gets it completed on time. Maria de Lourdes spoke about how just two days before the *ladainha*, a portion of the roof of the right-wing *balcao* area came crashing down. She was alone, and sprang into action quickly to get it repaired. Come Sunday afternoon at the *ladainha*, the roof looked as good as new - or rather, as good as its 18th-century self.

How does she do it? "All thanks to Mary, Jesus, Santana and to God's grace," she is quick to reply. Towards the end of the *ladainha*, she prays in a special way for her sister Georgina and the mood grows sombre. Everyone gathered for the celebration is a close friend or a relative, all there to support Maria de Lourdes, who plans to open the house completely to the people of Goa. The house itself is a living museum, and every painting, every room, every chair, every vase has its own unique story to tell. In the hall of the left wing upon the wall, facing the open windows looking at the fields, two people still watch over it all. Vincento João Figueiredo and wife Amalha Santa Rita Vaz Figueiredo, alive in two beautiful paintings, are Maria de Lourdes' great-grandparents. While Senhor looks European in his suit, Senhora is draped in a *torop baju* (Goan Mando dress) and adorned with jewelry that is a replica of the jewellery of Marie Antoinette, the last French Queen.

The furniture is a classic *mélange* of Eastern and Western elements, fused together seamlessly. Sitting on a low armchair with delightful cut-work and weaving, Vivek points out an Indian figurine. The little touches are everywhere: influences of Portugal, France, Italy, Belgium, Spain, China, Macau, Mozambique, Brazil, India, and even Persia.

Snacks are served in the right wing on a lovely round table, with trays full of stuffed cones, beef *samosas*, home made *paté* and home-made cheese with toasted bread. While sipping on the lovely "*limonada*", everyone was praising Maria de Lourdes for her cooking; her culinary expertise featured in many articles. She still makes her own bread and cheese - and I must add that the cheese is something to cherish. Guests were engrossed in interesting banter, a mixture of history, family names, Lisbon, Goa and politics. The Sangria was so refreshing that I had to have another glass. We were then served *Sopa de bacalhão* by the house help, some of whom have been there since they were very young.

Father Delio de Mendonca SJ, director of the Xavier Centre of Historical Research (XCHR), Porvorim, spoke to me

about heritage and how important a role it plays. "It is our duty to preserve our culture and heritage and we support Maria de Lourdes in her noble idea," he says, as he speaks of the XCHR supporting Maria de Lourdes and the trust that is set up to look after and maintain the house as a living museum, open to the public. Maria hopes to have a curator to tell the many stories of this house, to have lectures on heritage and culture, and have school students, researchers and scholars walking through its halls and absorbing enlightenment from its wealth.

Maria de Lourdes has travelled the world, and her family is based in Portugal. Yet she is in Goa, all for the love of Goa. She has given this house as a gift to us, the Goan people. She, along with sister Georgina, fought against anyone who tried to divide or separate it. "She is a gracious lady with a sense of custodianship for the people of Goa, and she is hereby setting an example that should be emulated as much as possible," continues Vivek, also a member of the Trust.

We are ushered into the sweeping salon, the dining table set with an impressive buffet of Goan and Portuguese cuisine: *Pulao*, *Bacalhão Zé do Pipo*, *Pork Assado*, *Tuna Mousse*, *Liver Paté* and *Chicken Fejoada*, the last named because Maria de Lourdes was expecting Muslim friends later that day and could not let them go without trying her *Fejoada*. Groups of people often order a meal prepared by her at the house or the Heritage Inn. Acclaimed Goan musician Emiliano Da Cruz, who lent his mandolin music to the *ladainha* earlier that

day, updates me on the desserts. The *Bebinca*, *Toçinho Rançozo*, fresh cream cake and *Manjar dos Deuses* (food of the Gods) - which just melted on the tongue - were exquisite. It is no wonder Maria de Lourdes' restaurant - 'Mogarim' - was once voted among the top five restaurants of Lisbon by a British magazine.

Also present this day are Father Joaquim Loiola Pereira, Trevor Saldanha and his wife, guests from the Portuguese Consulate and Fundação Oriente, among close friends and family. While they chatted on, Magdalena, the granddaughter of Maria de Lourdes showed me around the Heritage Inn. The right wing is converted into a small inn with five rooms, typically old Goan style. Magdalena graciously guided me around with her English Portuguese expressions and showed me beautiful paintings, embroidery work and porcelain art done by Maria de Lourdes.

Just before leaving, Magdalena showed me the *piece de resistance*: a

