

• PULSE OF • india

Mumbai pulsates with a cosmopolitan vibe and vital energy.

Words & Photography by **Liani Solari**



THE TAJ MAHAL PALACE

Located opposite the Gateway of India, the luxury 105-year-old hotel is in the vibrant Colaba district of Mumbai.

Mumbai's continuing story of transformation has recently seen India's most populous city in the grip of Oscars fever, the world turning its spotlight from the November 2008 terrorist attacks on the city to the success of the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and the changing fortunes of its child actors plucked from the obscurity of the city's slums. That is not to say the world does not continue to mourn Mumbai's tragic loss, but the city is again registering on the radars of international travellers who are keen to immerse themselves in its fascinating melange of contrasts.

Though *Slumdog Millionaire* has more fans than detractors, some have argued that it gives the West the wrong impression of Mumbai. However, its title aptly reflects the socioeconomic extremes that characterise India's financial and commercial capital. A vibrant, cosmopolitan city that never sleeps, Mumbai pulsates with some 20 million residents who comprise the mega-rich, the emerging middle class and eight million slum dwellers.

According to our guide in Mumbai, about 20 per cent of those people living in the city's slums are true to the usual media portrayals of poverty and squalor, while the majority have electricity, televisions and refrigerators and operate small-scale recycling and exporting industries.

As film director Danny Boyle recently told *Time* magazine in response to the suggestion that *Slumdog Millionaire* romanticises poverty in India, "I tried to make the film with a kind of energy that reflects what the place [slums in Mumbai] is like, that it has a vitality despite its poverty." Even in Mumbai's poorer communities you will encounter a flash of flamboyant colour, a ready smile and the vital, industrious energy of a city determined to continue moving forward while preserving the best of its cultural past, including two World Heritage sites.

The legacy of 90 years of British rule, cricket is India's unofficial religion and language. Most people in Mumbai also speak English, which makes the city easy to navigate, as does their renowned hospitality towards visitors. The city's population is primarily Hindu (68 per cent), followed by Islamic (17 per cent), Christian (4 per cent) and Buddhist (4 per cent). The remainder are Parsi, Jain, Sikh, Jewish and atheist.

A harbour city on the west coast of India, Mumbai originally comprised seven small islands. The earliest inhabitants were fishermen (*kolis*), their home taking its name from their Hindu patron goddess, Mumbadevi. Enamoured of the bay when they captured Mumbai in 1534, the Portuguese renamed the city "Bombay" (from *bom*, meaning good, and *baia*, meaning bay). In 1661 the Portuguese relinquished the islands of Bombay to Charles II of England as a dowry for their infant daughter, Catherine of Braganza. The islands were later leased to the British East India

Company in 1668. Land reclamation projects in the 19th century transformed the island city into the single land mass it is today.

India came under the control of the British Crown after 1857, gaining its independence in 1947. However, it was not until 1996 that Bombay began to erase the nominal vestiges of foreign rule by reverting to its original Hindu name and renaming landmarks such as Victoria Terminus, the Prince of Wales Museum and the international airport after its Hindu hero, the 17th century Maratha warrior-emperor Chhatrapati Shivaji.

Mumbai continues to reinvent itself today, the overall plan being to modernise the city, to make Mumbai the "Shanghai of India". The run-down appearance of many buildings, including the historic former Watson's Hotel (India's oldest surviving cast-iron building), is the ironic long-term result of the Bombay

Rent Control Act of 1940 intended to preserve the fabric of society by protecting tenants from financial hardship during World War II. Conceding that Mumbai's grandeur had become a little chipped and faded, in 1999 the state government introduced the Maharashtra Rent Control Act in an attempt to enable landlords to collect enough rent for the upkeep of their buildings. Mumbai is gradually getting a new lick of paint.

Sadly, in Mumbai's eagerness to modernise, its ubiquitous vintage black-and-yellow metered taxis have become an endangered species. Converted several years ago to CNG (an environmentally cleaner fuel than petrol and diesel), these locally made Fiats introduced in 1962 are expected to be extinct within five years.

With the exception of last year's terrorist attacks, Mumbai has enjoyed a reputation as a relatively safe city to visit. Security has now been stepped up,

especially in the tourist haunts and luxury hotels frequented by Westerners (expect to enter these hotels via a metal detector and to have your hand luggage scanned), and a sense of order has been restored. Strolling around the city in the evening does not feel unsafe but, as with any travel, you should take the usual precautions to ensure your personal safety.

Australian author Gregory David Roberts, whose novel, *Shantaram* (2003), was inspired by his living as a fugitive in a Mumbai slum from 1982 after he escaped from Melbourne's Pentridge Prison, appeals to travellers to keep the faith with India and his beloved city: "If we continue to visit the country and meet the people, if we spend our time in the beautiful chaos and chaotic beauty, if we spend our money in the bazaars and hotels, if we buy the books by great Indian writers, listen to the music by brilliant Indian composers and musicians, marvel at the splendour of Indian dancers, watch the captivating movies, wonder at the art galleries – in other words, if we go on opening our hearts to the best that India teaches us – the people who did this violence can never win."



Mumbai's vintage Fiat taxis are being phased out in a bid to modernise the city, to make it the "Shanghai of India".



THE TAJ PALACE & TOWER

The building combines Moorish, Florentine Renaissance, Oriental, Rajput and Victorian Gothic styles.

WHERE TO STAY

THE TAJ MAHAL PALACE & TOWER

Apollo Bunder

tajhotels.com

T: (91-22) 6665 3366

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The Taj Mahal Palace & Tower reopened its doors to the world on December 21, 2008, following the terrorist attack on the hotel in November 2008. Repairs to the temporarily closed Palace are expected to be completed within a year, however, the Tower wing is again open to guests, offering the gracious Indian hospitality for which this luxury harbourside hotel is renowned. Opening its doors to its first 17 guests in December 1903, the imposing edifice that is the Palace was built by Mr Jamsetji N. Tata, whose response to being refused admission to the "whites-only" Watson's Hotel in the city was to found a grand hotel that would enhance Bombay's standing as one of the great cities of the world. The building itself is a unique combination of Moorish, Florentine Renaissance, Oriental and



Rajput features. The project was initiated by Indian architects, who were responsible for the onion-shaped corner domes, and was completed by an English designer, accounting for the Victorian Gothic-style main dome. The Tower wing is a later addition dated to 1973. The swimming pool, also a later addition, was originally the main entrance, allowing all guest rooms to enjoy water views. Today, additions include enhanced services and facilities available to guests of the hotel's Taj Club Rooms; for example, airport transfers, express check-in, a butler service, evening cocktails and two hours' use of a meeting room – hospitality that is designed to start at the

The Tower wing is again open to guests, offering the gracious Indian hospitality for which the Taj is renowned.

airport and is a favourite with corporate guests. Executive suites enjoy water views, a lounge and dining area and the sanctuary of a master bedroom. Wireless access is available across the hotel. The luxury and service are unsurpassed in this hotel that is a favourite with the local and international who's who.

WHERE TO EAT

MASALA KRAFT

The Taj Mahal Tower

tajhotels.com

Internationally renowned restaurants where time-honoured ingredients are given a new lease of life, Masala is the realisation of chef Hemant Oberoi's dream to present authentic Indian cuisine with a modern twist. Extra-virgin olive oil has replaced the heavier ingredients – butter, cream and gravy – but without compromising authentic flavours. The experience at Masala Kraft starts with the hand-washing ritual in brass containers, followed by signature dishes, such as atta chicken and *langarwali dal*, and piping-hot Indian bread from the *phulka* trolley. The wine menu includes Indian sauvignon blancs to rival those produced Down Under. Masala Kraft's central feature is the interactive kitchen counter with separate stations for seafood and vegetarian fare. Inspired by Mumbai's famous *dabbawala* service, the chef has introduced three signature Mumbai tiffins: non-vegetarian Bohri, non-vegetarian Parsi and vegetarian.

THE ZODIAC GRILL

The Taj Mahal Tower
tajhotels.com

Enjoy French cuisine and soft piano music under the starry dome of the Zodiac Grill, which specialises in à la carte and degustation menus and serves a fine selection of single malts, cognacs, armagnac brandys and international spirits, liquors and wines. Signature desserts include kahlua mousse and camembert dariole. Velvet cushions embroidered with the zodiac signs add interest and luxury to the themed decor.

WASABI BY MORIMOTO

The Taj Mahal Tower
tajhotels.com

Recently re-created at the Rooftop Rendezvous in the Taj Mahal Tower, Wasabi by Morimoto offers unsurpassed views of the Gateway of India and delectable vegetarian and seafood dishes created by Japanese celebrity chef Morimoto, better known as the Iron Chef. Seafood is flown in every second day from Japan, ensuring that the restaurant's patrons enjoy the freshest exotic kumamoto oysters, shrimp tempura and melt-in-the-mouth sashimi.

**KONKAN CAFÉ**

Taj President Hotel
90 Cuffe Parade
tajhotels.com

Konkan Café offers a fine selection of cuisine from India's west coast. Modelled on a typical Mangalorean home, the restaurant has a fresh seafood display and open bread kitchen. Prawn gassi, appam and neer dosa are signature dishes.

LEOPOLD CAFÉ & BAR

Colaba Causeway
leopoldcafe.com

One of the sites of the terrorist attacks in November 2008, Leopold travellers' bar is again packed to the rafters with tourists downing ice-cold Kingfisher ("India's favourite beer") and a menu that covers all bases, from Indian and continental to Chinese. Try the chicken tikka masala.



Popular street snack pav bhaji.



Mani Bhavan Gandhi museum.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO**GATEWAY OF INDIA**

Opposite the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower, the Gateway of India arch at Apollo Bunder (port) in Mumbai Harbour was erected to commemorate the landing in India of King George V and Queen Mary on December 2, 1911. Gandhi received a hero's welcome here on January 9, 1915, on his return to India from South Africa, where he had lived for 21 years. Today, early risers may catch a glimpse of the Mumbai Laughing Club's daily ritual. Ferries to Elephanta Caves depart from here, offering the opportunity to capture those images of the harbour that have become synonymous with Mumbai.

MANI BHAVAN

gandhi-manibhavan.org

Mani Bhavan, a modest two-storey home owned by Mahatma Gandhi's friend, Shri Revashankar Jagjeevan Jhaveri, was Gandhi's headquarters from 1917 to 1934 whenever he was in Mumbai. Now a museum and research centre dedicated to the political and spiritual leader of the Indian independence movement, it was from here that Gandhi initiated Satyagraha (non-violent resistance to foreign rule) in 1919 and Civil



Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus.



Disobedience in 1932. Open seven days, the museum's library holds about 50,000 books and periodicals on (and by) Gandhi, Gandhian thought and freedom movements. The room on the second floor where Gandhi lived and worked (pictured, top right) has been preserved as far as possible in its original state. A bronze plaque on the terrace where Gandhi slept and prayed marks the place where he was arrested for sedition by British authorities at 3am on January 4, 1932.

CHHATRAPATI SHIVAJI TERMINUS

Formerly known as Victoria Terminus, this splendid Gothic Revival edifice was built over 10 years (from 1878) to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee,



Market stalls on Elephanta Island.

though she never visited India. In 2004 it was declared a World Heritage site, “an outstanding example of the meeting of two cultures, as British architects worked with Indian craftsmen to include Indian architectural tradition and idioms, thus forging a new style unique to Bombay”. Used by up to three million commuters each day, this busy railway station provided the backdrop for the closing dance number in *Slumdog Millionaire* and was one of the sites of the terrorist attacks in November 2008.

GIRGAON CHOWPATTY

This famous Mumbai beach at the northern end of Marine Drive comes alive in the evening with fairground rides, street entertainers and food stalls offering popular street snacks such as *bhel puri*, *pani puri* and *pav bhaji*. Though the beach is unsuitable for swimming or sunbathing, it's the best place to witness the annual Ganesh Chaturthi festival in August/September when huge effigies of the elephant-headed Lord Ganesha are carried to the



Shiva shrine, Elephanta Caves.

sea and immersed. Adjacent Nana Nani Park, exclusively for the use of seniors, is a unique initiative aimed at providing Mumbai's older citizens with a sanctuary from the urban congestion.

SEWRI MANGROVE PARK

Visitors to Mumbai in winter include lesser flamingos that feed on the blue-green algae in the mudflats between Sewri and Trombay – a surprising spectacle in a bustling metropolis. Take your binoculars.

THE REGAL

As the term “Bollywood” is specific to the Mumbai-based Hindi-language film industry, a visit to the city would be incomplete without an authentic cinematic experience. The first theatre in India with airconditioning, a lift and a basement car park, the art deco Regal cinema on Colaba Causeway opened in 1933 with a screening of Laurel & Hardy's *The Devil's Brother*. Today, its screenings of the latest Bollywood and Dollywood (from Delhi) films,



despite not having English subtitles, are melodramatic extravaganzas in anyone's language. Be on the lookout for films starring Bollywood's leading lady, Aishwarya Rai, and those with a wedding scene to rival the lavish productions that are real-life upper-class Hindu weddings.

OVAL MAIDAN

Cricket is so revered in India that the Oval Maidan heritage grounds in Mumbai's southern precinct are reserved for the sport. Public meetings, rallies and even picnics might be a no-no in this large park but it's a great place to see Mumbai's residents playing “the game of the gods”. Mention Vettori or Ponting and you'll be treated like a long-lost friend.

A DAY WITH DABBAWALA

mydabbawala.com
Up to 200,000 hot homemade lunches are collected from office workers' homes and delivered to their workplaces via rail and on foot by 4500 to 5000 barefoot *dabbawalas* (box carriers) every day in Mumbai. This finely tuned



Dhobi ghat
(open-air laundry).



Bollywood at
the Regal.

125-year-old service, which has become integral to the city's culture, has an inconceivable error rate of only one per six million deliveries. Watch the spectacle of hundreds of *dabbawalas* unpacking boxes on the footpath for delivery (the best vantage is Church Gate Terminus at 11.30am) or don the *dabbawalas'* signature white Gandhi *topi* (cap) and spend a day with them.

ELEPHANTA CAVES

A one-hour, 10km ferry ride from the Gateway of India transports body and soul to the peaceful World Heritage cave-temples on Elephanta



Oval Maidan.

Island, so-named by the Portuguese because of a large statue of an elephant they saw near the shore. The main temple dedicated to Lord Shiva was carved into the basalt rock between 450 AD and 750 AD. Of the several carvings depicting the life of Shiva and his consort, Parvati, the most renowned is the Maheshmurti, a serenely imposing 6m-high sculpture of a three-faced Shiva as the destroyer, creator and preserver. The annual Elephanta Festival held at the cave-temples in February is a celebration of Indian classical dance and music and heritage art forms.

DHOBİ GHATS

The locals might think it strange that their everyday work should arouse curiosity, however, tourists tend to be fascinated by the spectacle of Mumbai's *dhobi ghats* (open-air laundries) with row upon row of clotheslines and concrete wash pens, each with a flogging stone. The government supplies the water used in these *dhobi ghats*, which were created to address the city's water shortages, to launder items from hotels, hospitals, restaurants and individuals. There is such a laundry in the slum area where Melbourne-


born Gregory David Roberts, author of *Shantaram*, lived as a fugitive from 1982. You'll need to enlist the services of a tour guide to gain access.

BAZAARS AND MARKETS

Mumbai abounds with vibrant bazaars and markets, the standouts being Zaveri Bazaar (jewellery), Mangaldas Market (fabrics), Chor Bazaar (bric-a-brac), Dhabu Street (leather goods) and Crawford Market (fresh produce). Colaba Causeway is a major shopping strip for all manner of items, from pashmina shawls and rugs to handicrafts and silver jewellery. Markets are generally open from 9am to 7pm. Hagglng is the done thing with market stallholders, private shop owners and hawkers, though not in government shops where the items are reliable but the prices are generally higher and always fixed.

GUIDED TOURS

incredibleindia.org

Enlisting the services of an approved tour guide, even for an initial orientation day, will enable you to glean insights into the city from a local and may even help you to avoid paying tourist prices. All India Tourism offices in the country maintain a list of approved tour guides for their respective regions. Guides can be booked through these offices. 

Liani Solari travelled courtesy of India Tourism, Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces and Singapore Airlines. Visit incredibleindia.org.



MINDFOOD.COM

Visit Gandhi's memorial, take a dizzying rickshaw ride and lose yourself in Asia's largest spice market in Delhi.

WHEN IN MUMBAI



JOIN THE FESTIVITIES

Witness the spectacle of the annual Ganesh Chaturthi festival in August/September at Girgaon Chowpatty (beach) when huge effigies of the elephant-headed Lord Ganesha (pictured above) are carried to the sea and immersed. Juhu Beach explodes with colour during the annual Holi festival in February/March. The annual Elephanta Festival at Elephanta Caves in February is a celebration of Indian dance, music and art.

MEET AND GREET

Instead of shaking hands, use the traditional greeting of "Namaste" as you bring your hands into the prayer position and bow forward. Don't offer or accept anything with your left hand; use your right hand or both. Remember to eat with only your right hand. Never touch anyone on the head.

COVER UP

Take a cue from the locals and dress conservatively. Revealing your shoulders or too much of your legs is considered offensive whether you are a woman or a man. Remove your shoes when entering religious sites and homes.

BE WEATHER WISE

Mumbai is warm and humid throughout the year, except during the heavy monsoons and the mild winter, and the best time to visit is between September and April when it is relatively cool and dry. In winter (December to February) the temperatures range from 19C to 29C; in summer (June to August) they range from 23C to 33C.