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The Business Traveler's Guide to Time Off In Mumbai

By SARAH KHAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HITESH SONAR

PEOPLE VISIT DELHI for the history, Rajasthan for the palaces, Kerala for the lush backwaters, and Agra for the Taj Mahal. But in Mumbai, it's more about the vibes. This pulsing metropolis (which many residents still insist on calling by its erstwhile name, Bombay) isn't a city you pass through as much as you live through. Whether you're stopping by for two days or two years, you should approach Mumbai the same way, giving over your spare time to restaurants, galleries and coffee shops. When it's time to take a breath, find a sea-facing perch and soak in the city's kinetic energy.

I never arrive with an agenda. I'm promptly swept away by the city's current. Mumbai may not have the tourist cachet of other parts of the country, but it's likely to be your first port of call if you're doing business in India. In some ways almost everyone is an outsider—and everyone is busy. "A city like Bombay, like New York, that is a recent creation on the planet and does not have a substantial indigenous population, is full of restless people. Those who have come here have not been at ease somewhere else," author Suketu Mehta wrote in *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize. Whether aspiring entrepreneurs or starry-eyed ingenues, everyone has converged on India's financial and entertainment capital with one shared goal: to make it big. That drive is relentless, infectious and addictive.

New York is the only other city that brings out the same quality of unbridled enthusiasm in me, and the similarities are hard to miss: the black-and-yellow taxis dispensing a cacophony of honks and beeps, the soaring towers and lurid lights, the iconic bridges and the eye-watering rents. And the understanding that anything you desire, be it a mango or a life-changing introduction, could materialize at 3 in the morning. "It's fun to visit, but I could never live here," visitors often scoff about either place. But there are some 12 million people in Mumbai who can.

Leave the checklists and tour buses for other stops in the country; here, landmarks aren't so much visited as stumbled upon, easy to spy on the go and between meetings. Type in the name of an experimental cocktail bar or cutting-edge art gallery on Uber, and the rest of your sightseeing can unfold en route. There's a blurry glimpse of the 15th century Haji Ali mausoleum, a white marble island floating in the sea, as you zip past on the Coastal Road. The grand British-built BMC municipal building presiding over a swirl of traffic in the Fort neighborhood. The 1884 Keneseth Eliyahoo Synagogue, ringed by hip restaurants and boutiques in Kala Ghoda. The Gateway of India, erected in 1924 to mark the royal visit of King George V, might have the most conventional crowds, but it's best viewed over afternoon tea in the Sea Lounge at the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel next door. If

you're en route to a business dinner at Taj Lands End in Bandra and are curious about the hordes of people milling about the waterfront Bandstand Promenade, they aren't there for the 17th century Portuguese fort at the end of the road but for the mansion of India's Bollywood legend Shah Rukh Khan. (If crowds travel here for a bucket-list destination, this might be it.) Monuments that would have security guards and ticket booths in any other country are so woven into neighborhoods that you'll notice them only when you turn around for a second glance as you whiz past in a rickshaw. Everything happens on the move, and all you can do is hope to fall in step with the cycle that lurches the city forward.





Walk This Way. Really

When I decamped to Mumbai one winter a few years ago, I arrived with a pair of brand-new white sneakers. By the time I left, after spending five months stubbornly insisting on walking as much as possible, they were a deep shade of ocher. At first glance, Mumbai might not strike visitors as a walkable city. But I love getting lost in the weblike lanes of the historic fishing villages of **Bandra**, a trendy suburban area north of the Sea Link flyover; popping into the temples and flower stalls near **Mangaldas Market** in South Mumbai;

and exploring the colorful Goan-style bungalows of the 18th century enclave of **Khotachiwadi**, hidden in the heart of the city near Chowpatty Beach. It can all be done on foot—as the state of my dusty shoes would attest.

The constant construction and the challenge of crossing the busy streets are not for the faint of heart, so consider navigating with the help of a guided tour. South Mumbai is renowned for its ornate Indo-Saracenic confections such as the **Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus**, but it's also home to one of the world's

largest collections of art deco buildings.

Art Deco Mumbai's weekend walks lead architecture enthusiasts to the apartment blocks and cinema halls of sea-facing Marine Drive and the 22-acre Oval Maidan field. And though Bandra may be the city's hippest burb, with atmospheric Indo-Portuguese villas revived with sleek coffee shops and boutiques, **Khaki Tours** takes travelers to "Bygone Bandra." Visit Portuguese forts and Catholic churches, and learn about the area's history from before it became Bollywood's stomping ground. ►

State of the Art

The city's southern reaches have long been the epicenter of its art scene. It's where you'll find institutions like the **National Gallery of Modern Art** and **Jehangir Art Gallery**, which both flank a busy intersection in Fort and showcase modern and contemporary Indian works. Clustered amid the heritage villas of the nearby Colaba neighborhood, you can find the galleries **Experimenter** and **Jhaveri Contemporary**, which spotlight emerging and established multidisciplinary talents from across the region. The longstanding **Kala Ghoda Arts Festival** transforms the **Kala Ghoda district** just north of Colaba into a pedestrian-only cultural carnival every February, and a monthly **Art Night Thursday** links the milieu with

a calendar of openings and talks. "With South Bombay, all the galleries have populated themselves right next to each other," says Abhinit Khanna, an arts consultant who co-founded the new experimental gallery **Six Continuum**. "That helps people to jump around." But the landscape is evolving. Six Continuum is housed in a glass tower in the **Dadar district** to the north. Galleries like **Art and Charlie** are sparking cultural conversations in Bandra, and the annual **Art Mumbai** fair convenes serious collectors at the Mahalaxmi Race Course in central Mumbai. In 2023 the sprawling **Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Center** opened in the Bandra-Kurla Complex, the city's financial hub.



Tasting Notes

I'm sitting at a counter in the rafters of a cramped former bakery in Bandra, one floor above a boisterous sandwich shop, sprinkling dried ants on my plate while a playlist of '90s hip-hop pulses through the room—and having one of the most exhilarating dining experiences of my life. **Papa's Bombay** is unlike any restaurant I've ever been to, a seamlessly choreographed 12-seat chef's counter experience in a homey space designed to re-create a tchotchke-filled 1980s Bandra living room that manages to feel completely spontaneous and whimsical. "Fine dining all over the world at some point has just become very solemn, with tasting menu restaurants where guests who walked in were afraid to speak," says chef Hussain Shahzad. "For us, Papa's is more like a dinner party with excellent food and drinks, loud music, amazing conversations every night, a lot of humor—and there has to be some kind of chaos, right?" The dishes Shahzad and his team turn out are somehow deeply nostalgic but utterly unfamiliar all at once: a rasam soup made with pickled watermelon and smoked with hay; a corn broth with yak's milk cheese; a Waldorf salad reimagined as dessert; and a rabbit shawarma, glazed and dusted with the aforementioned red ants. "People ask, 'Is this Indian food?'" Shahzad says. "It's how we see Indian food."

Shahzad, who returned to India in 2015 after an international detour that included a stint at Eleven Madison Park, is at the forefront of Mumbai's culinary scene today. Papa's is part of Hunger Inc., a group that's been redefining diners' perceptions of Indian cuisines with restaurants like the **Bombay Canteen**, which celebrates the diversity of the country's regions and food traditions, sandwich shop **Veronica's** and the Goan-inspired tavern **O Pedro**.

Throughout the city, restaurants across the spectrum are challenging diners in their own ways. **Masque's** chef, Varun Totlani, regularly goes to different parts of India on foraging trips for ingredients to pepper in his 10-course tasting menus—like sea asparagus from Gujarat in a black garlic pulao or Ladakhi

Rabbit shawarma from Papa's Bombay



Masque serves up sea asparagus and more



Paradox's shishito peppers



Sea bass sev puri at the Bombay Canteen



buckwheat in a smoked mackerel toast. At the maximalist cocktail bar **Paradox**, which opened last year, Totlani serves globally inspired bites like corn curd fries with Kashmiri chile hot sauce and shishito peppers with whipped paneer and Doritos. At **Bandra Born**, chef Gresham Fernandes dials up the nostalgia for his childhood in Bandra with playful fare like a chicken curry sando and an East Indian crab dip served with an improbably flaky croissant-inspired hunk of pav. Chef Niyati Rao effortlessly flirts with highbrow at **Ekaa**, where she serves an inventive 20-course tasting menu, as well as lowbrow at **Bombay Daak**, paying homage to India's dive bars. At her newly opened pastry shop, **Ringo**, people line up for her potato podi puffs and Malvani prawn danishes. **Subko** has been melding Indian and Western flavors in its baked treats since its debut in a charming heritage villa in Bandra in 2020. It now has outposts across the country, and it expanded to Dubai last year.

But amid all the new cutting-edge wizardry, Mumbai is a place where the classics still endure: vegetarian Gujarati thalis at **Shree Thakar Bhojanalay**, seekh kabab at **Ayyub's**, garlic butter crab at **Trishna**, Parsi berry pulao at **Britannia & Co.**, chaat at **Elco** and mithai at **Punjab Sweet House**.

It's not just Indian chefs who are inspired by the city's current culinary milieu. In 2010, when Alex Sanchez touched down in Mumbai from San Francisco with a pedigree from Michelin-starred kitchens Manresa and the French Laundry, he was beckoned to open the **Table**, a first-of-its-kind restaurant in Mumbai championing California cuisine. A decade and a half later, he's still here, with two of his own restaurants—farm-to-table **Americano** and Latin American **Otra**—and a third is on the way, all in the winding lanes of Kala Ghoda. "With Americano and Otra, we're adding something with a unique perspective, a unique point of view," he says. "I think as a chef you can actually have an impact here." ●

Khan is a travel journalist who's written for *Bloomberg Pursuits* and other news outlets.