

Incredible Maharashtra – Exploring with the Deccan Odyssey

If Europe is all hearts for the Orient Express and South Africa has the Blue Train, Maharashtra echoes majestically with the Deccan Odyssey, the latest addition to the legacy of India's luxury trains.



A week long seamless royal sojourn commencing in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) and continuing onto Ratnagiri–Sindhudurg–Goa–Pune–Aurangabad–Nashik–Mumbai traverses about 2,200 km of diverse and visually delightful terrain showcasing some of the world-class tourist attractions of western India. This is past brown hills, lush green valleys, echoing tunnels, unblemished beaches, defiant forts, gorgeous palaces, mythical sculptures, dazzling urban centres steeped in art, history, culture, festivals, cuisines, museums, ancient temples and baroque cathedrals.

Constructed in the Integral Coach Factory (Chennai) and designed by architects Pendse and Pendse, the train's essentially Maharashtrian décor matches any world-class 5-Star hotel on wheels. Brainchild of MD Ashish Kr. Singh, Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) the fully air-conditioned Rs. 40 crores train (€ 6 million) was launched on 16th January, 2004. The MTDC promotes and maintains it and the Indian Railways operates it between October–March (closed in summer and monsoons). With a capacity of 104, the train is pulled on modern diesel engines running at a speed of up to 110 km/hour.

Comfortable Coaches

The train travels mostly at night for passengers to relax and arrive fresh next morning at the destination. Of the 21 coaches, 11 are Deluxe Cabins each with a combination of 4 twin bedded chambers, closet, dressing table, plasma TV and en suite bathroom with hot/cold water, shower and toiletries. The 2 Presidential Suites with 2 salons have a king-size bed, writing table, chairs, attached bath and TV lounge. There is 1 conference car, 2 restaurant cars, 1 spa car, 1 bar car, 2 generator cars with luggage store and 1 staff carriage. Wall-to-wall carpeting, massage centre (Swedish, ayurvedic massage and aromatherapy), channel music, intercom, DVD, CDs and MP3s are available.

The blue coaches streaked with gold and beautifully decked with contemporary lavish furnishings provide an ambience amidst modernity and comfort. The soft peach designer upholstery and artistically sculpted teakwood furniture add to the aesthetic royal look and opulence. The coaches are evocatively

named after the tourist destinations in Maharashtra – Anjaneri (near Nashik), Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, Ajanta, Verul (later day Daulatabad), Vijaydurg and Ambagad (near Amravati). The Spa Plumeria coach has a gym and yoga centre to relax one’s mind and body. The 50–seater Samvad coach with a state–of–the–art conference hall (dance floor at night) caters to meetings equipped with satellite communication, computers, printers, internet connectivity, FAX, STD/ISD, well–stocked library and theatre style screen.



Set Off from Mumbai

The Deccan Odyssey starts on Wednesday evening from the Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST), Mumbai – an agglomeration of 7 islands around 300 years back and the present financial capital known for its legacy of the British Raj amidst modernity. As you gingerly step with boarding pass onboard, your luggage is borne by staff smartly garbed in Peshwa (18th century Maratha ministers) attire. You are handed stationary items for use, a complimentary bottle of wine and bottled water. The slums outside contrast brutally with the grandeur of the ornate interiors – plump silk cushions, portraits of royalty and seemingly endless wood paneled corridors.

Dinner, a stylish, white–gloved affair in the Peshwa I and II restaurants in shades of beige, rust and turquoise is over memorable delicacies of high standards, localized according to regions (continental in Mumbai and traditional Maharashtrian in Ratnagiri) and prepared by chefs of the renowned Taj Group. Menus change seasonally for breakfast, tea and dinner. Mumbai Hi, the bar named after the port serves the choicest Indian and international wine/spirits.

On day two, arrive at the quaint station of Bhoke – launch pad to the Konkan coast. Nestled amidst the hills and backwaters, its mesmerizing silence is broken by the songs of exotic birds and punting fishermen casting their nets like graceful dancers. Sail from Rai Bhatgaon Jetty on the caressing waves in a romantic cruise for the 17th century cliff top Jaigad Fort with ancient ramparts and long silenced rusted cannons. Post lunch, visit Ratnagiri, birthplace of freedom fighter Lokmanya Tilak and the famous alphonso mango.

In 1670, the Maratha warrior king Shivaji strengthened Ratnagiri Fort built by a Bijapur ruler. Ratnagiri was the internment home to the last Burmese king in the Thibaw Palace. Visit Ratnadurg Fort, Tilak Smarak and Ganpatipule beach, one of the finest in Maharashtra where the Lord Ganesha temple is flocked by millions. The MTDC resort offers a Konkani spread laced with tangy kokum and coconut. Explore trails leading from the beach or laze to the gently lapping waves on the coast.

Discover Local Culture

On day three, alight at Sindhudurg Nagari. From Malvan jetty, ferry half a kilometer for the 17th century Ocean Fort – Sindhudurg on a 48 acre rocky island on the wrinkled Arabian Sea. It looks like a ghostly galleon with 42 bastions and 12 ft. thick battlements soaring about 30 ft. Marvel the work of 6,000 skilled hands who toiled from 1664–1667 AD to complete the strong naval base of the Marathas. Presently, there are about 20 Hindu–Muslim hereditary families living here. Their numerous temples dedicated to Hindu deities are remnants of native culture. On a turret above the main gate are the hand and foot imprints of Shivaji on a dry lime slab.

There is also a temple dedicated to him – the only one of its kind. For breathtaking sea views walk on the zigzag ramparts 9m high and 3m wide. The foundation stones were laid firmly in molten lead and iron. Walk barefoot on the virgin sands of Tarkarli at the confluence of the Karli River and the Arabian Sea, 7 km from Malvan. The Konkani wada's (cottages) of the MTDC resort and beachfront restaurant add to a feel of local lifestyle. Rest in the hammocks amidst shuru trees for a laidback afternoon or take a boat from Kalse jetty past unvarnished tropical greenery. Enroute Dhamapur halt at a cashew factory and head for the ancient Bhagwati and Bharadi Devi temples. Visit Sawantwadi to shop for lacquer handicrafts, paintings and furniture at Shilpagram – the arts and craft centre.

On day four, reach Goa, a popular tourist destinations for its sun–kissed beaches, majestic white–washed churches with bougainvillea, red soils and mossy hills offering a magnificent collage of sights, history and experiences. Old Goa or 'Rome of the East', the erstwhile Portuguese capital is dotted with ruined churches in little alleys. Be welcomed with a friendly smile and wave of the locals. The Basilica of Bom Jesus has the mortal remains of St. Francis Xavier in a glass–paneled silver casket sculptured by Giovanni Foggini. The Cathedral and Church of St. Francis of Assisi (presently Archaeological Museum for Goan antiques) are interesting walks. At Panjim visit the palm fringed Dona Paula beach from where Portuguese galleons sailed, the Latin Quarter of Fontainhas for obscure shops selling mementoes and cruise on the Mandovi with Goan music/dance. After traditional lunch at Fort Aguada Resort, unwind in the sauna and enjoy champagne over sunset.



On day five reach Pune, Maharashtra's second largest city, cultural hub and erstwhile Peshwa capital. Satellite city to Mumbai it was home to the young Shivaji. Pune is a mix of the old–world and contemporary with myriad educational institutes, research centres, museums, theatres and home to poets, writers, artists and singers. An early halt at the city's oldest market – Mahatma Phule Mandai,

overpowers one with sights, sounds, smells and colors. The Kelkar Museum in a quaint haveli has an impressive collection of artifacts (17th –19th centuries). Visit David Synagogue, one of the largest in India and the Rajneesh/Osho Ashram, an important centre for spiritual growth. After lunch at Le Meridian, visit the State Tribal and Cultural Museum for tribal artifacts and the historic Aga Khan Palace connected with Gandhiji's Quit India movement. The son-et-lumiere at Shaniwarwada Palace provides a fitting backdrop to enact the rise of the Peshwa's.

The Art of Spirituality

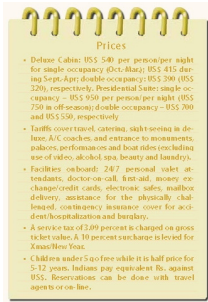
On day six, reach Aurangabad, named after Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, for some fine art treasures. The majestic 12th century Daulatabad Fort poised on a 600 ft. artificial cliff is a stunning example of ingenious defense engineering. Walk around ruins echoing extraordinary tales of Yadava valour. They named it Devgiri and Mohammed bin Tughlak renamed the capital Daulatabad (City of Fortune) in the 13th century. At the World Heritage Site of Ellora, skilled craftsmen sculptured 34 temples on a crescent volcanic cliff – an artistic confluence of Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism amidst tranquility.

The 12 Buddhist caves have Chaityas (halls of worship) and Viharas (monasteries). As the largest monolith structure in the world, the Kailashanath Temple, as the most famous Hindu cave exemplifies the devotion in transforming inanimate rock into living divinity. Post lunch at Taj Residency proceed to Shivaji Museum for its weaponry collection, the Aurangabad Caves, Panchakki – the water mill and Bibi-ka-Maqbara, a mausoleum resembling the Taj Mahal and shop for Paithani, Himroo and Bidri.

The World Heritage Site of Ajanta overlooking the Waghora valley waits next. Lost after the 7th century, they were discovered by sheer accident in 1819 by British officers on a hunting expedition. The caves present a complete spectrum of Buddhist development withstanding the vagaries of time. They boast some fine murals (2nd –7th century BC) as the Birth of the Buddha, Bodhisattva Padmapani, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and Thousand Buddha's and Jataka stories on the walls, ceiling and pillars of this magical wonderland. With lingering images, board the train from Jalgaon to Bhusawal for the ancient city of Nashik on the banks of the Godavari.

Visit Panchavati Ghat famous for the Kumbh Mela and the Kala Ram temple (1794). The sprawling lawn of the Sula winery is perfect setting to cherish memories over wine. Watch daybreak in Mumbai next day. Post breakfast, purchase souvenirs onboard and take a group photo as a memory, disembark at CST standing as a tribute to the city skyline. Later explore leisurely the various sights connected to its past and present.

The Deccan Odyssey unravels Maharashtra's beauties on a silver platter with the known, unknown and the unsung as you imbibe gulps of local flavor served up with dollops of adventure, religion and nature snugly cushioned in a deluxe oasis and protected from the 11 million who travel daily on the largest railway network in the world! This is extravagance while exploring and living life Kingsize! No matter what you see, this unforgettable lifetime voyage will be one of your finest treasures.



By Dr. Ilika Chakravarty

Academy of Business Management, Tourism and Research, Bangalore, India

27, Hazeltree Croft, Acocks Green, B27 7XS, Birmingham, U.K.

ilika_c@yahoo.com

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