

Victoria Terminus Station – A Jewel in India’s Architectural Crown

Bombay or Mumbai of today, as charming and as charismatic, is a bustling 20-million overpopulated megacity with its past, present and future mixed into one irrepressibly vibrant whole. As you walk around the Colaba district on its southern tip amidst remnants of colonial structures of the British Raj, it sometimes feels like being in a tropical London.



Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus (formerly Victoria Terminus) or simply better known as abbreviation’s CST or VT is a historic railway station in Mumbai and one of the busiest in India. Located conveniently in the Fort area, en route Colaba, it is the headquarters of the Central Railways with over 1,000 trains and over 2 million passengers passing through it daily! The VT serves long-haul trains terminating in Mumbai as well as two of the Mumbai Suburban Railway lines – the Central and Harbour (locally known as locals after the local trains) instrumental in keeping the city running.

VT is one of India’s most impressive railway stations and an architectural landmark. It has been a symbol for Bombay as the ‘Gothic City’ and a major mercantile port on the Indian sub-continent within the Commonwealth. It looks more like a decorated palace or a cathedral than something as mundane as a transport depot. However, it lacks the serenity of either for the place buzzes with millions of commuters starting and ending their day here.



It is definitely worth entering the station even if you do not have the pleasure of taking the train. With entrance along the eastern side of the building, passengers do not actually get a chance to walk through the main building although one gets a pretty good view and a sense of the scale from outside.

VT was designed by British architect Frederick W. Stevens who carefully studied several European train

stations before starting his project in lieu of Rs. 16.14 lakhs. Stevens earned the commission to construct the station as the headquarters of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway after a masterpiece water colour sketch by draughtsman Axel Haig.

It took ten years (1878–1887) to complete the station and christen it after Empress Victoria who opened it on her Golden Jubilee (1887). The final design resembles St. Pancras station, London. Rumours persist that the design was originally designated for Flinders Street Station, Melbourne. However, no convincing evidence, other than architectural similarities to the buildings in their respective cities has been produced.

In 1996, in response to demands by the local party – Shiv Sena and in keeping with the policy of renaming locations with Indian names, VT was renamed by the State Government after Chatrapati Shivaji, the famed 17th century Maratha king. On 2nd July 2004, the station was nominated as a World Heritage Site by the World Heritage Committee of the UNESCO.

VT is an example of 19th century railway architectural marvel for its advanced structure and techniques worked upon by the British architects in collaboration with Indian craftsmen. The building, exhibiting a fusion of influences from Victorian Italianate Gothic Revival architecture and traditional Indian forges a unique style. At the entrance standing as guards are the statues of the British lion and the Indian tiger. The remarkable buttresses, turrets, arches and eccentric ground plan are close to traditional Indian palace architecture adorned with carvings of bizarre fabled beasts, peacocks, monkeys, lions and snakes amidst trees.



Internally, the beautiful wooden carving on the panels, colourful tiles on the platform floors, ornamental iron and brass railings, grills for the ticket offices and balustrades for the grand staircases were the works of Indian students under supervision of John Lockwood Kipling of the Bombay School of Art.

The outer surface is bedecked with statuettes. Do not miss the portrait medallions with busts of Raj-era men and Indian leaders in the façade. The stained glass windows decorated with locomotives and elephant images to keep out the sunlight, are a treat to the eyes. The 160ft central dome is the most captivating site of this station with its 4m/13ft figurine of a woman holding a torch denoting 'Progress'. The dome also has eight decorative ribs and water spouts protruding from its base and shaped liked animals. There are 4 gateways to the main entrance and a fine-looking ornamental garden on one side of the rectangular area. The rest are administrative offices.

The station also bears certain other unique distinctions. India's first steam engine puffed out to neighboring Thane (45 kms.) from here. In 2008, the station featured prominently in the Academy Award winning film, Slumdog Millionaire. In November 2008, terrorists armed with AK-47 rifles entered the station to open fire which killed about 50 innocent people. Today, photography of the interior is not permitted due to security reasons and pictures of its incredible architecture are restricted only to travelogues available in the station bookshops.

Scores of people who pass the station daily to earn their living – hawkers, urchins, prostitutes or the sari-clad beauties to half-naked fakirs, have no time to appreciate the friezes, gargoyles and lofty vaulted ceilings.

On the other hand, there are tourists from all over the world who make it a point to visit this epitome of architecture while in Mumbai. Get here just before lunch to watch the famous dabba-wallas stream out into the city transferring some 200,000 cooked lunches, prepared by housewives for their office-bound husbands and kept warm in identical dabbas (metal tiffin boxes), through a unique sorting and multiple-relay distribution system. Guided tours of the station are provided by few tour agencies in Mumbai.

If your destination is Mumbai, make sure to allow some time to walk around and check out this station – undoubtedly, one of the jewels in the global architectural crown.

By Dr. Ilika Chakravarty

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

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

ilika_c@yahoo.com

Date: 2010-11-29

Article link:

<http://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-victoria-terminus-station-an-attraction-to-travelers-article1370>