

Land of beaches, forts and monuments



PRIDE OF MAHARASHTRA: The Ellora caves illustrate the artistry of ancient Indian craftsmen

Bustling Mumbai might mesmerise you with high-flying business deals and investment opportunities, but do take a weekend break and experience the enchanting land that is Maharashtra.

INDIA'S financial and commercial capital offers a lot of opportunities for the global business traveller in terms of investments into the country, starting joint ventures, setting up subsidiaries, or takeovers and mergers.

But what does the tired business executive do on a weekend? Sit by the hotel poolside and sip chilled beer, or do the rounds of the new crop of shopping malls?

Better still, why not hire a car and explore the neighbouring countryside.

The western state of Maharashtra - of which Mumbai is the capital - offers more than a weekend's worth for the traveller to enjoy. But even if one is hard up for time, those two days can be spent by undertaking a fascinating journey to some of the most alluring places in India.

Maharashtra, especially those parts of

the large state - area: 307,690 sq km, population: 96.75 million - that are within a few hours drive or under an hour's flying time from Mumbai, offers miles of exquisite beaches, scores of historic forts, a handful of quiet hill-stations, dozens of ancient caves, temples and monuments, beautiful lakes, and colourful towns and bazaars.

Unlike other coastal states - notably



KONKAN COAST: Maharashtra has several beautiful beaches along its 720-km long coastline

Kerala and Goa - Maharashtra's beaches are yet to be 'exploited' by the hotel industry, or 'discovered' by the global tourist. So if you are one of those who'd like to enjoy a quiet weekend by the seaside, head for the Konkan, south of Mumbai.

SERENE BEACHES

The state's 720-km-long coastline has several beaches, some lying at the foothills of the Western Ghats. Mandwa-Kihim, near Alibaug, is about 120 km south of Mumbai. Mandwa is a beautiful beach and on a clear day, one can enjoy a long, breathtaking view across the bay, right up to the Gateway of India in Mumbai.

Kihim is an isolated beach, where you can enjoy a tented holiday. The serene beach is surrounded by coconut groves and woods that are brimming with wild flowers, rare butterflies, and birds. Located near-by at Chaul, which is a historic place with Portuguese ruins and Buddhist caves, is a clutch of forts, churches, even synagogues. Also worth visiting is the Kolaba Fort, close to the shore.

Drive down further south and you come across Harnai beach, followed by Murud Janjira, a coastal fort town. Quite close to Murud Janjira are two other quaint beaches, Nandgaon and Kashid. As you head along the Konkan coast you will come across other quiet beaches: Shriwardhan-Harihreshwar, and Tarkarli (in close proximity is the sea fort of



GANAPATIPULE: The lush green and sun-kissed beach is a major draw for tourists

Sindhudurg).

Tarkarli, about 550 kms from Mumbai, is a long and narrow stretch of beach with pristine water. On a clear day, one can see the seabed through a depth of 20 ft. Sindhudurg is one of Maharashtra's most popular and important sea forts, built in the 17th century. The Padmagarh fort is also close to the beach.

The state government owned Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) runs 'Konkani huts' at the beach and the restaurant there offers delectable seafood.

Other prominent beaches along the Konkan coast include Ganapatipule, Jaigad, Velneswar, Vengurla Malvan, and Vijaydurg. The lush green and sun-kissed

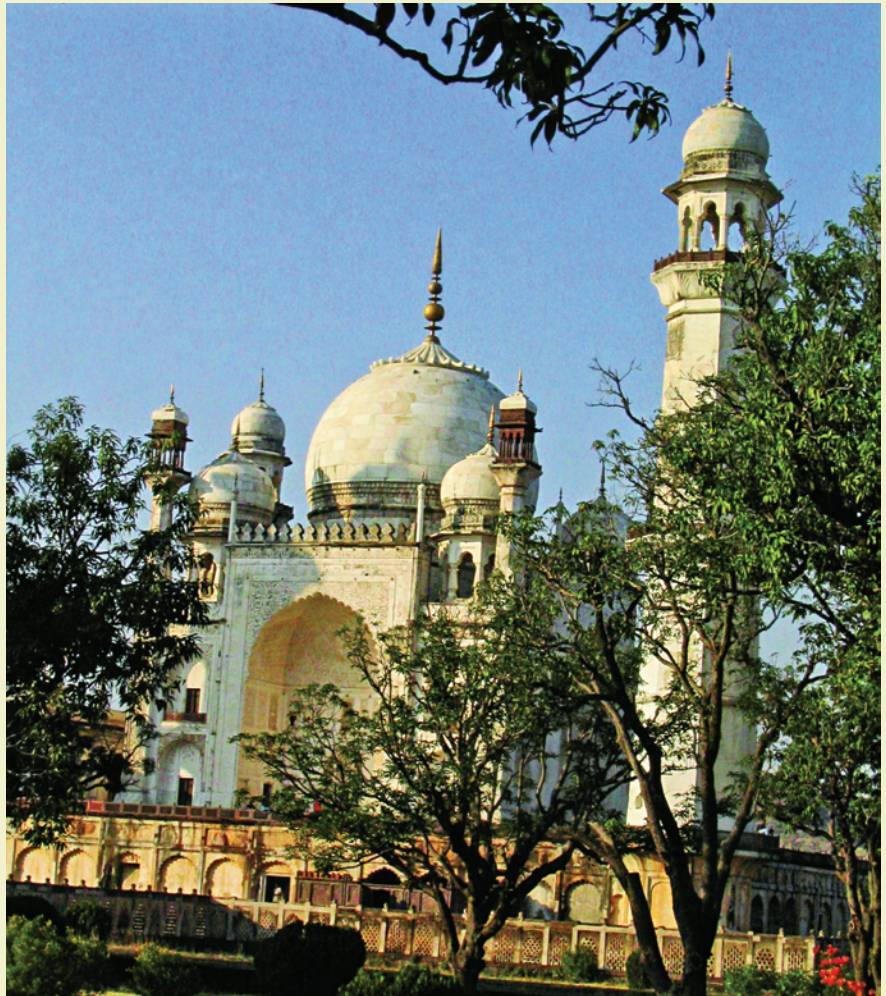
beach of Ganapatipule is a major draw along the Konkan, with the added attraction being a 400-year-old temple housing the Swayambhu Ganapati.

SOARING PEAKS

Leaving coastal Maharashtra, one can head for the mountains to the east. The Western Ghats are the most prominent geographical feature in the state. The foothills of the ghats in some places approach the seashore, while in other places it is almost 50 km away from the coastline.

Some peaks along the ghats soar to 2,000 metres above sea level, and the extensive mountain range is home to several hill stations. Many of these hill sta-

If forts, rock-cut temples and caves fascinate you, Maharashtra has a wide range of such monuments. The most renowned of course are the Ajanta and Ellora caves in Aurangabad.



MINI TAJ MAHAL: Aurangabad has several fascinating monuments, such as the Bibi Ka Maqbara

tions offer views of the coastal plains below, and even extend to the sea.

The twin hill-stations of Mahabeshwar and Panchgani are the most popular; Mahabeshwar towers 1,372 metres above sea level, while Panchgani enjoys a salubrious climate, and is dominated by a huge tableland, one of the largest in Asia.

The refreshing atmosphere, the thick



CITY OF PROSPERITY: The fortifications at Daulatabad in Aurangabad have notable monuments

jungles surrounding the 150-sq km Mahabeshwar plateau, and the numerous 'points' are a trekker's delight. The twin hill-stations also have several waterfalls, lakes and plateaus that can be explored all day. About 25 kms from Mahabeshwar is the majestic fort of Pratapgadh.

Mahabeshwar was the summer capital of the erstwhile Bombay Presidency. The near-by Venna lake offers boating and fishing facilities. The hill-station, which gets over 650 cm of rainfall every year, also has several waterfalls. It has colourful bazaars where one can buy tribal trinkets, and a wide range of fruits including strawberries and blackberries, besides jams and jellies.

Panchgani — which derives its name from the five hills that surround it — also has several lovely walkways. Far away below in the plains you can see the



AJANTA CAVES: These caves, carved out of solid rock, have exquisite carvings and magnificent wall paintings

Krishna river snake its way through tiny hamlets, farms and ravines. The hill-station enjoys an old world charm that can be witnessed in the British-style homes, the boarding schools and villas that have been around for a century or more.

Another beautiful hill-station, about 100 kms south-east of Mumbai, is Matheran, at an altitude of about 800 metres. The undulating hilltop is cloaked in green, especially towards the end of the south-west monsoons. The cliffs of Matheran with incredibly steep drops to the plains below offer stunning viewing points. In fact, on a pitch dark night, if you stand at Hart Point, a prominent landmark in Matheran, you will get an amazing view of India's commercial and financial capital, the city lights glowing in all their electric glory. Matheran, where motorised vehicles are banned, offers the old world charm of British and Parsi homes.

STEEPED IN HISTORY

If forts, rock-cut temples and caves fascinate you, Maharashtra has a wide range of such monuments. The most renowned of course are the Ajanta and Ellora caves in Aurangabad, about 400 kms north-east of Mumbai. Take a flight to Aurangabad, and explore the region,

which is steeped in history.

The Ajanta caves, a UNESCO World Heritage site, comprise Buddhist caves dating from the 2nd and 1st century BC. The paintings and sculptures of Ajanta are considered masterpieces of Buddhist religious art.

The 30 caves at Ajanta were created over a span of 600 years. They provide a panorama of life in ancient India, and are a rich historic source to those times.

Ellora caves, which are also classified as a World Heritage site by UNESCO, comprises 34 monasteries and temples extending over two-km and dug from the wall of a high basalt cliff. It has an uninterrupted sequence of monuments dating from 600 AD to 1000 AD.

The rock-cut caves at Ajanta and Ellora, which are the pride of Maharashtra, illustrate the degree of skill and artistry of ancient Indian craftsmen. The caves have been carved out of solid rock. Many of the caves have exquisite detailed carvings on the walls, pillars and entrances, as well as magnificent wall paintings.

The other famous set of caves is found just 10 nautical miles east of the Gateway of India. The green island of Elephanta is home to the 7th century rock-cut cave temple dedicated to the Hindu God Shiva.

The weekend tourist might have to rush through some of these unforgettable monuments, but to really soak in the history and the culture of the state one has to undertake a longer journey.

And one of the best ways to experience fascinating parts of Maharashtra is to book a suite in the Deccan Odyssey, a royal luxury train, and relax and enjoy for a week, as the train chugs its way through coastal villages and beaches, up the Western ghats, and through historic and cultural cities.

The 21-coach train, which takes in 80 passengers, has passenger cars, coupes, presidential suite cars, dining cars, spa car and a bar car, besides facilities like TV, channel music, etc. All one has to do is sit back and relax, sipping a cool beer, or imbibing some of the finest wines made in the state, as fascinating parts of Maharashtra unfold through the window.

And after this relaxing break, you can return to Mumbai, refreshed and ready to cut more deals, sign new contracts, and plan your next strategy. After absorbing the fresh mountain breeze during the 'Deccan Odyssey,' you should be acclimatised to the dizzy rise of the Mumbai stock market indices, and its racy cosmopolitan citylife. 🌈