

If you want to oscillate from the manic city bustle to secret beaches and a ludicrous amount of greenery, sample the wonders of Maharashtra as a solo traveller. It leaves with you with one feeling—When will I be back?



Mumbai musings

Food, bazaars, shrines and lots of adventure

What: Be sufficiently prepared to be jostled, hurried, incessantly chatted to and be suffused in the trendy yet vintage vibe of the city; we assure you that the concoction of this will be intoxicating! A week may be too little to savour the flavour of the city with mornings by the sea, alternative new age cafes, historic buildings, the rush of great bargains and a memorable nightlife.

Why: Reserve a morning to trawl through the labyrinth of criss crossing perpendiculars draped in bright Bohemian art on mossy walls around Chapel Road in Bandra. The hip kitschy hangout reveals its 200 year-old history in subtle nuances like overhanging balconies from colonial homes and wooden crosses announcing its decidedly Christian composition. Keep time to get lost in the streets of Chor Bazaar, pack in red fizzy Pallonjis raspberry drink and berry *pulao* in Parsi joints of the Fort area, make your way to the Haji Ali shrine (5 am-10 pm) and end the evening in the pubs of downtown Colaba.

How: Visit in the cooler months between October to February to not let the humidity wear you out. Centrally located **Le Sutra** (www.lesutra.in; +91 2266420025; from ₹6,950 onwards) is recommended for a boutique ambience stay. Enjoy a Parsi meal at **Britannia** (Fort; 11.30 am-4 pm, Sun Closed), roam the streets of Chor Bazaar between 10.30 am and 7.30 pm. Worthwhile stops include **Oriental Arts and Crafts** (09819489585) for antiques, **A 1 Corner** (09223439284) for Bollywood collectibles. A trip with Be The Local Tours and Travels is the only way you should opt to explore. (www.bethelocaltoursandtravels.com; 09930027370; ₹1,000 onwards)



Wander in the wild

Jungles, jeep safaris and rare species of reptiles

What: If your goal is to potentially spot a tiger, dhole, hyena, sambar, spotted deer, chital, nilgai and at least twenty species of reptiles and birds, then a wildlife trip beckons from the deep jungles of Maharashtra. An immersion in a thousand shades of green awaits at **Tadoba National Park**, the oldest in the state. Add to that trips to **Bor, Melghat, Umred** national parks and you are sure to have your fill of wild company.

Why: Relatively high on population, the **Tadoba National Park** is where you are likely to hear the roar of a lion quite easily. Spend early mornings and evenings stalking the animals in jeep safaris and stay close to the jungle for easier access. Even the other jungles are wedged on the eastern part of the state, spanning not more than 500 km.

How: The best season for a wildlife trip is in the winter months from October to March. Strictly avoid the monsoons as the national parks are closed during this time.



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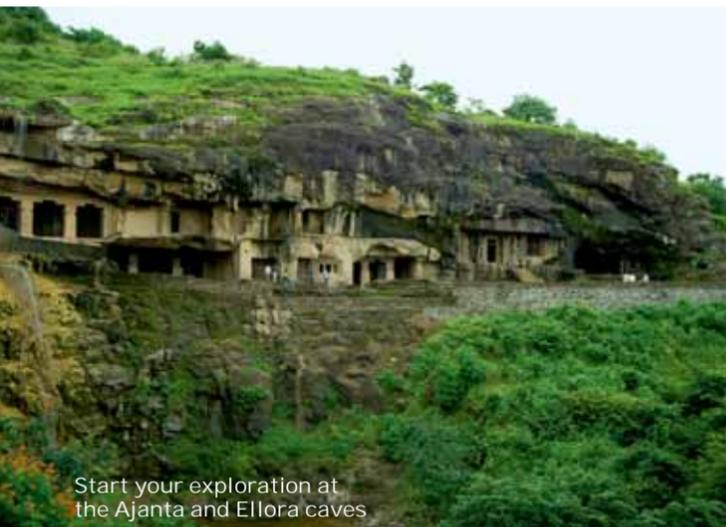
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SECRET

MATHERAN TOY TRAIN

It's difficult to contain ones excitement when the Matheran Toy Train approaches the 'One Kiss Tunnel' that falls enroute Neral to Matheran. The story goes that the tunnel is just long enough to steal a quick kiss with a loved one. Whet the legend or get drowned in the buzz and giggles as you cross the short dark tunnel. The excitement slowly ebbs away as the train chugs towards Matheran, Asia's only automobile-free hill station.

Experience the excitement of travelling in the Matheran Toy Train



Start your exploration at the Ajanta and Ellora caves



Rock marvels

Tripping on history and spirituality

What: While **Ajanta** and **Ellora** caves have already etched a deep place in travel guidebooks and itineraries, combine the wonders of **Bhaja**, **Elephanta**, **Bahrot** and **Bedse** for a historic appeal. A unique tinge to your exploration, a cave themed trip can be enlightening. **Why:** Though you need at least a week to cover the 600 km cave trail of Maharashtra, it is sure to throw enigmatic insights and a peek into the illustrious history of the state. These craggy rockscapes offer an amalgamation of history, spirituality, intrigue, meditation and adventure.

How: Start your cave exploration in Ajanta and Ellora off Aurangabad, and then loop down to the Bedse and Bhaja caves. Continue northwest to base yourself in Mumbai for Elephants caves before ending the journey in Bahrot. The best season to do this trip is in the cooler months from October to March.

ANEESH BHASIN

a summer retreat, Amboli might have now lost its colonial charm, but that's no reason for scores of tourists to ditch this over the weekends. Stick to the weekdays to avoid the weekenders. Detour to **Savantawadi**, (30 km away from Amboli) peering through a foggy ride against the mosaic of green surrounds. Waterfalls, high viewing points, valleys full of rich bio-diversity and angling are in order at Amboli.

How: Amboli lies about 500 km south of Mumbai and is connected by road. Plenty of buses ply from the capital. There are a few decent options to stay here. Settle in at Whistling Woods for its proximity to the forest (09970735635; www.amboliww.com; ₹2,000 onwards)



Eco hot spot

Enter the rustic lanes of Amboli

What: You wouldn't want to blink in Amboli! Undoubtedly, one of the most serene spots in the **Sahayadris**, **Amboli** feels like its rising out of a postcard. The thickly wooded forests, hasty waterfalls, relaxed creeks and great accommodation options are reason enough for a short rustic break for the solo traveller. Reserve this break for the monsoons, when traversing the Amboli hills offers enchanting shades of green and swollen waterfalls. **Why:** Developed by a British officer in the late 19th century as



Vineyard hopping

Get high, or simply chill by gushing streams

What: Get drenched in India's lush wine country, **Nashik**, for an indulgent solo trip. Having taken the country by storm with its revolutionary outlook towards making the beverage a popular accomplice for having a good time, the city's vineyards are the new destination for a flavour of luxury.

Why: Spirited sessions of wine tasting, trips to the vineyards and even an annual festival attributed to the wine culture of the country, this is the place for you to spoil yourself silly. Apart from

wine, the trip can be spruced up with cycling around the vineyard flanked narrow roads, a picnic by countryside streams, kayaking in still lakes or just settling in with a good book.

How: Book yourself at **Beyond Vineyard Resort** (+91 253 3027777;

www.sulawines.com; ₹5,500 onwards) close to the Sula vineyards in Nashik. The resort promises unplugging from the urban bustle to be soaked in all things wine during your stay. Nashik is 185 km from Mumbai and is well connected by rail and road. The Sula Fest will be held on the 7th and 8th of February.



For the love of outdoors

Skydiving, snorkelling, scuba diving and a lot more

What: Adventure capital of India' is a befitting moniker to the western state with its umpteen options for outdoor enthusiasts. Skydiving, snorkelling, scuba diving and rafting down on a rushing river are some of the things that the *active* traveller can plug into an itinerary. From the dare-devil tryst with gravity while skydiving to a rendezvous with the otherworldly marine life below the sea, this is the perfect destination to amp up the adrenalin rush.

Why: One of the most professionally run sky diving schools in Pune gives you the opportunity to dive mid-air from the dizzying height of more than 10,000 ft. The **Phoenix Academy** is equipped with top-of-the-line equipment and instructors to usher you into a sport of ultimate thrills. For scuba diving and snorkelling, head to **Tarkarli**. If hurtling down the rough rapids of the Kundalika River is your idea of adventure, then head in the direction of Kolad.

How: All the adventure activities are weather dependent but the best period to explore are the months between October and March. Pune's Phoenix Sky Diving Academy is just four hours from Mumbai (09822097452; www.phoenixskydivingacademy.com; from ₹33,000 onwards for courses). For ocean adventures, book with **Tarkarli Scuba Diving** (09167571732; www.tarkarliscubadiving.com; ₹1,500 onwards). White water rafting on the rapids of Kundalika can be experienced with **Kolad Rafting** (+91 9820 60 66 88; www.koladrafting.com; ₹1,400 onwards).



Live the village life

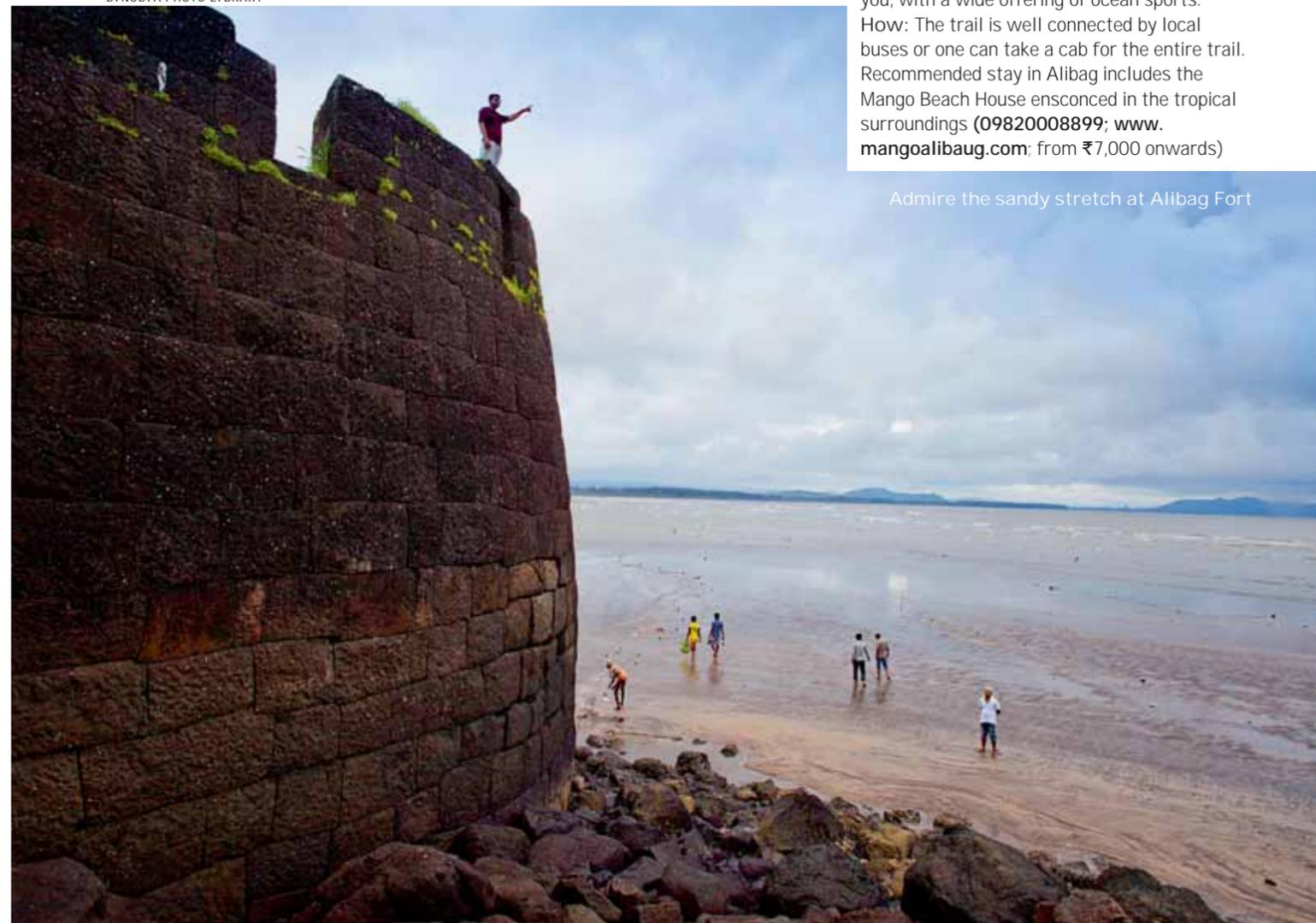
Switch off technology and live like a local

What: If books have been your only insight into the villages of India, its time you took a solo trip into the very pulse of the country with those who know the place the best. Maharashtra's well thought out and sensitively crafted rural tourism programmes are the best in the country. Whether you are seeking a brush with voluntourism or just plain insight into simple living, this is the state for you.

Why: Maharashtra's rich countryside still remains largely untreaded. Those with an offbeat palate will appreciate rural tourism in **Jawahar** or the **Purushwadi Fireflies** viewing trip with Grassroutes. If you are taken in with the village life then you might just want to spend a night in the door-less village of Shani Shignapur, located about 35 km from Ahmednagar. Jawahar is often given the tag of 'Scotland of India' for its green expanses and unassuming ambience. A couple of days in the low mountains offer a near-cathartic break for city slickers. Come May and the valleys of Purushwadi turn into a canvas of stars—look closer and you have millions of fireflies for company. Leave your wallet, camera and any other valuables to serendipity or just divine custody at Shani Shignapur, as the village doesn't have doors.

How: Plan your village wanderings with Rural Mania for **Jawahar** (+91 99673 58853) and **Grassroutes** (www.grassroutes.co.in; ₹1,500 onwards). For **Shani Shignapur**, travel about 300 km inland, beyond Ahmednagar. The best time to do this trail is pre-monsoon in late April.

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Sandscapes

Eat, pray, love on these pristine sands

What: Framed by a flat stretch of golden sand, swaying palms and spiraling Sahayadris in the backdrop, the Maharashtra beach trail exemplifies the beauty of the state. Start from **Gorai**, hopping all the way to **Alibag**, **Kashid**, and **Diveagar**, then heading south to **Ganpati Pule** and then finally making a dash to **Tarkarli**. The 600 km stretch can be broken into a couple of days at each destination or use one base to cover a few. For example, Alibag makes for a veritable pit stop for Kashid and Diveagar too.

Why: Although weekenders descend on these destinations by droves, you can still find paradisiacal spots along the stretch. Alibag is especially equipped with top of the line resorts and boutique stays for you to enjoy the wide swath of sand but come back to be indulged in luxury. Tarkarli challenges the adventurer in you, with a wide offering of ocean sports.

How: The trail is well connected by local buses or one can take a cab for the entire trail. Recommended stay in Alibag includes the Mango Beach House ensconced in the tropical surroundings (09820008899; www.mangoalibaug.com; from ₹7,000 onwards)

Admire the sandy stretch at Alibag Fort