

A Local's Guide to Byculla, Mumbai



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Commissioned by The Guardian

There is an air of gentle decay in Byculla in South Mumbai; it was this area — after Fort — that served as the second city centre for much of the 1800's. Away from the upscale bars and pubs of wealthier parts of the city, it offers quieter attractions that are replete with history.

Byculla offers a varied range of experiences for the traveller, from the gastronomical delights at Iranian eatery Sarvi, which is famous for its seekh kebabs, to Mumbai's only Chinese Kwan Kung temple. There's also a lot of interesting history in this area, with the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum, the oldest museum in Mumbai, being located here, as well as many textile mills that used to function here, most of which are now

closed, or on the brink of closure. Byculla is also where Saadat Hasan Manto, the famous writer of the Partition era, lived in 1940's Bombay.

Byculla used to be a part of Mazagaon, which, until the 18th century, was one of the seven islands that originally constituted Bombay. There is plenty of 19th-century architecture that you'll notice as you stroll through the area, dotted with grand British and Parsi houses from a bygone era. The iconic Gloria Church in the heart of the area, meanwhile, boasts of an English Gothic Revival style of architecture. Sir J.J. Road is a major road running through Byculla, leading to the undulating S bridge, considered a 20th-century engineering marvel, that connects East and West Byculla.

Today, the area boasts of a multicultural environment where diverse communities, from Muslims, Parsis, Catholics, and Hindus, to a small Jewish population, have co-existed for centuries together.

Sarvi

No trip to Byculla is complete without a visit to this hole-in-the-wall eatery right opposite Nagpada Police Station. Sarvi has been loyally serving up lip-smacking fare for 50 years, with the succulent, grilled seekh kebabs (Rs. 28) stealing the show.

Served with sprigs of mint, onion slices, wedges of lemon and a spicy chutney, these smoky flattened lengths of meat are fanned on an open grill, and served with hot paranthas or traditional Indian bread. Old wooden chairs and marble-topped tables typical of Irani cafes sit in a simple but clean room that serves as the 'family' area, where you can also try the brain masala fry (Rs 150-170) or the spicy mutton paya (trotters) soup (Rs. 100), rounded off with a caramel custard for dessert.

Address: 184/196, Dimtimkar Road, Opposite Nagpada Police Station

Bhaucha Dhakka

Also known as Ferry Wharf, Bhaucha Dhakka comes to life at dawn as Mumbai's biggest fish market. The fishermen unload their catch every morning from trawlers as early as 6am; from prawns and shrimp to bombil (Bombay duck) and surmai, this wholesale market has it all.

A visit to Bhaucha Dhakka provides an insight into where many households and some of the best restaurants in the city source their fish. You can also take a ferry from here to Mora port in Uran, Maharashtra, (Rs. 51) in the torrential but scenic monsoons, and the ferries go as far as Alibaug (Rs. 180), the popular coastal town famous for its beaches, the rest of the year.

Address: Princess Dock, Mumbai Port Trust, Mazagaon

Magen David Synagogue

Built in 1864 by David Sassoon, patriarch of the Baghdadi Jew dynasty, the Magen David Synagogue is a powder-blue heritage building that stands tall on Sir J.J. Road. David Sassoon settled in Byculla in the 19th century and built the synagogue for the growing population of the community at the time. While security around it has been tightened in recent times, you should be able to take a tour as long as you carry ID or passport with you.

With its spacious interiors with a women's seating gallery upstairs, the Magen David synagogue is one of the largest synagogues in Asia outside of Israel. A small but active congregation continues to offer regular Shabbat morning prayers, and holiday services are also often led here.

Address: 340, Sir J. J. Road, Near the intersection with Sofia Zubair Road,
Indianjews.org

Chinese Kwan Kung Temple

Built in 1919 when Mumbai's Chinatown area was still buzzing with Chinese merchants and sailors, the temple is located in a quiet lane, in a two-storeyed house. While most of the Chinese families moved out during the 1962 Sino-Indian War, this temple remains a landmark of Chinese spirituality for the few families who remained in Mazagaon.

Adorned with paper lanterns, windchimes and Chinese paraphernalia and scriptures, it is dedicated to Guan Gong, the god of justice and courage, and Chinese New Year and Moon Festival are celebrated with aplomb here with a gathering of about 500 families.

Address: Wadi Bandar, Dockyard Road Station, Mazagaon

American Express Bakery

Delectable sweet and savoury treats have been whipped up by the Carvalho family since this iconic bakery relocated to Byculla from Grant Road in 1935. The name derives from its speedy delivery to the American cruise ships in the early 20th century. Recipes for almond macaroons (Rs. 80), chocolate crinkles (Rs. 190), and Hungarian coffee cake (Rs. 60) to the coconut meringue cake (Rs. 80), chocolate mousse (Rs. 80), wholesome cookies (Rs. 120-190) and more have been passed down through the generations.

Address: AEB House, 66 A. Mirza Galib Marg, Ashadham Colony, Byculla

Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum

The city's first museum, Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum was established in 1872 as the erstwhile Victoria and Albert Museum, and was renamed in 1975. Named after the prominent Indian physician and Sanskrit scholar who carried out extensive research on the treatment of leprosy, it underwent comprehensive restoration to reopen in 2008, winning UNESCO's 'Cultural Conservation' Award of Excellence.

It showcases Mumbai's cultural heritage from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries through a rare collection highlighting Early Modern Art practices, along with glass negatives that document various aspects of the city. The craftsmanship and livelihoods of the various communities of the city have also been depicted through miniature clay models, maps, lithographs, dioramas, photographs, and rare books.

Address: 91 A, Rani Baug, Veer Mata Jijbai Bhonsle Udyan, Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar Rd, Byculla East, Mazagaon, Mumbai, BDL Museum

Bhendi Bazaar

Bhendi Bazaar has been bustling with activity for over two hundred years, and sells everything from carpets, clothing and antiques to hardware, sunglasses and religious paraphernalia. It is famous for the street food sold on the street called Bohri Mohalla, consisting of succulent beef and mutton kebabs and spicy tikkas. You can often find goods here for throwaway prices, and it is the perfect place to go rummaging for any odds and ends you might want to pick up.

Located North of Fort's Crawford Market, this area began to fill up in the 19th century as Mumbai grew into an important commercial centre. What the British and elite referred to as 'Behind the Bazaar' evolved with time to be known as 'Bhendi Bazaar'.

Bhendi Bazaar is very close to Chor Bazaar, a souk that is full of beautiful antique items, and it is also where the iconic Taj Ice Cream is located, a place that has been hand-churning ice cream since the late 1880s.

Address: Ajmer, Bhuleshwar, Mumbai, Bhendi Bazaar

Regal Restaurant

Regal Restaurant's rustic charm and high ceilings with exposed beams will transport you to a different age. Irani and Parsi food is the best-loved legacy of Persians who migrated to India around 1,200 years ago.

Regal's rundown building welcomes you with the smell of tea and kheema (spicy minced meat, Rs. 60 a plate), and the restaurant has checkered tiles, dark, polished chairs and square marble tables, all brimming with old-world charm. Different types of cookies, cakes, and Khari biscuits are kept in glass jars at the counter, where Darius, whose family has been running the establishment for over a century, sits. Don't forget to try the staple bun maska or brun maska for a nominal price with the milky chai or tea (Rs. 16), along with their specialty — the fluffy cardamom-infused mawa cupcakes made with evaporated milk.

Address: Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar Rd, Near Jijamat Udyan, Byculla East

Joseph Baptista Gardens

Referred to as 'Mazagaon Gardens' by locals, the Joseph Baptista gardens are spread out on the Bhandarwada Hill, the highest point in the area. The Mazagaon Fort that used to

stand at this spot on the hill in the 17th century was eventually razed to the ground by invading Siddi ships, but the 19th-century reservoir that was developed here by the British still endures.

Providing a much needed-respite from the city's chaotic bylanes, and a view of the harbour from the top, here is a lush green space dotted with gazebos and running tracks for you to unwind after a long day in the city. Extremely popular among locals in the evenings, the gardens have been named after former mayor of the city, political activist, and resident of Mazagaon Joseph Baptista.

Address: Ekta Nagar, Mazagaon, Mumbai, no website