



Cafes

Taj Mahal Tea House

A small, sun-dappled patio welcomes you into this small cafe that reveres not just the finest teas, but also the nuanced joys of the refined culture of tea-drinking. Nestled in the quaint neighbourhood of Bandra, this restored heritage bungalow retains the dreamy, transportive quality of the city's best hideaways.

Wood-panelled ceilings and de-stressed beige walls lined with blue and white porcelain tiles, punctuated every so often with intricately-framed mirrors, wall art, or a few vintage kettles up on shelves, enclose three rooms separated by large archways. The furniture scattered across these is inviting; a motley collection of cane-webbed wooden chairs arranged around tables, standalone antique rocking chairs and plush armchairs tucked away in alcoves.

Drinking chai has become an ubiquitous part of Bombay, but Taj Mahal Tea House takes it up a notch with its flavour-filled offerings: from milky masala chais and infusions of black and green teas, to chai lattes, chai lemonades, and even chai smoothies. Their blends include house blends, handcrafted gourmet teas as well as Indian blends; for the customer who might amble in and find himself vaguely overwhelmed by the sheer range of options, the smiling staff seems genuinely happy to come to the rescue with some choice suggestions.

The tabla (a Hindustani classical percussion instrument) of the iconic tabla virtuoso, composer and percussionist Zakir Hussain, famous for his ‘Wah Taj!’ Brooke Bond Tea ads from the nineties, adorns a place of honour in one corner. As strains of classical Hindustani music weave unobtrusively through the hours, languid afternoons blend seamlessly into dusk through the sheer, white curtains here, in the company of over a hundred books neatly arranged in various recesses, from where titles by authors ranging from Toni Morrison to Urvashi Butalia beckon.

With its air of elegance and warmth, Taj Mahal Tea House lets you choose your experience with every visit — whether it’s a savoury High Tea Platter you’d like to treat yourself to for brunch, or a blissful afternoon of daydreaming over a glass of saffron-infused Kashmiri kahwa tea.

B Merwan & Co

Amongst the oldest surviving Irani cafes in Bombay, B Merwan & Co has carved its own niche in the cultural fabric of the city. Located opposite South Mumbai’s Grant Road Railway station in a rundown edifice, the cafe is always bustling with a range of customers: daily wage earners, raucous schoolchildren, brusque sari-clad women, young working professionals, a few mavericks, and the occasional millennial visitor looking for some old-world charm to accompany her chai.

The high ceilings with exposed wooden beams overlook a large room set out in floral tiles, and filled with marble-topped tables and vintage bentwood chairs that are synonymous with Irani cafes. The mirrored walls running the length of the room make you wonder about the various milestones they have witnessed, from political rallies during the independence movement, to the recent rumours in 2014 of the cafe closing shutters, that had much of the city downcast in their wake.

The century-old establishment has weathered the passage of time gracefully; the curtain call never came, and it reopened after a brief renovation; a no-frills refuge for anyone looking for the staple bun maska (an Indian bun slathered generously with a dollop of fresh cream and butter), to be dipped into milky masala chai. The scrumptious mawa cake served at this establishment is truly a thing of legend, with early birds and night

owls alike rushing to line up to get their share from as early as 5am. The buttery, fluffy cardamom-infused cupcakes made with mawa (evaporated milk) often run out before 10am, and other treats on offer include mawa puffs, mawa samosas, biscuits and walnut cakes. A somewhat disgruntled board hung towards the back makes you smile; it reads, “Cakes and biscuits once ordered will not be taken back.”

The faded allure of B Merwan & Co endures in the fast-moving city, its name at the entrance welcoming you warmly in a bold, bronze font.

Leaping Windows Cafe

Located in the leafy, suburban neighbourhood of Versova, the cafe doubles as Mumbai’s first comic book library, and it is nothing short of an escapist haven. The quirky joint opened in 2012, inspired from Japanese comic cafes, and the decor — right from the canopied outdoor seating area — revolves solely around the universe of comic books, graphic novels and manga. As you peruse the cafe menu, which has quite a few tempting offerings, comic book characters gaze down at you from the walls, painted in exquisite detail. Their divine house blend of coffee is a treat, including single estate coffee from the hills of Coorg.

Down a small, spiral staircase in the corner of the room and into the reading room, though, is where the magic really lies. Towering shelves stock a range of over 2, 000 comic books, and the floor has been laid out with cosy mats, cushions and bean bags, catalysts to the visiting readers’ journey down the rabbit hole.

Along with the company of old comrades like Asterix, Tintin and Calvin & Hobbes, fans can find themselves in the hands of writers like Alan Moore, Craig Thompson, Joe Sacco and Neil Gaiman, to name just a few. What Leaping Windows has succeeded in doing is creating a space where enthusiasts can ‘leap’ from one comic panel to another within their favourite books — a space where that leap of imagination is understood, and veritably celebrated.

Culture

Liberty Cinema

Built in 1947, Liberty Cinema is one of Bombay’s last art deco single-screen theatres. As old as independent India itself, the creator of the theatre, Mr. Habib Hoosein, derived its name from the nation’s then-imminent independence. Located in the heart of South Bombay, it has a long, illustrious history behind it leading up to its status as a cultural centre today.

The grandeur and magnetism of the theatre, acknowledged as a Grade 2A heritage building in India, is one thing that the ravages of time haven't been able to strip away, despite various hiccups in its journey.

The coved ceilings, carpeted interiors and the Plaster of Paris work are bound to make your jaw drop as you step into the velvet lobby. A small kiosk amiably sells popcorn here, and the lobby is filled with stalls of books and merchandise when the theatre hosts film festivals such as the annual Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival, South Asia's biggest queer film festival. A staircase to your right with a polished wooden banister leads upstairs to a waiting area.

Initially opened to screen Hindi films in an age when most of the theatres in South Bombay would only screen English ones, Liberty today has thrown open its doors to various cultural activities, including stand-up comedy and music concerts, while retaining a special focus on world cinema.

Inside, the 1200-seater theatre faces a majestic stage flanked by two golden, frozen fountains; as the ivory curtain falls at the end of the last show, Liberty reminds you of the ways in which an authentic cinematic experience can really move you.

Deepak Cinema

Deepak Cinema is easily one of the most heartening revival stories that Bombay has witnessed in the recent past. The 90-year-old theatre was transformed just a few years ago from an erstwhile landmark built on ancestral property in Worli, to a haven for arthouse cinema.

After buying tickets outside, an iconic archway ushers you into a spacious courtyard where two white cut-stone statues of elephants stand guard. A small cafe in the corner caters to visitors with a range of finger food, and the sprawling seating area offers one a chance to sit and enjoy the late afternoon sunlight playing on the patterned roof before heading in for the film; a welcome breather from the hectic city outside. The 500-seater theatre has screened everything from Rashomon to Breakfast at Tiffany's to Annie Hall, and their next announcement is always awaited with much anticipation by the small but steady stream of regulars.

The cinema house got a new lease of life when its third-generation owner, well aware of its vintage charm, had the theatre refurbished in 2014 while retaining its inimitable aesthetic style. He also set up 'Matterden' (from 'matter' and 'den', denoting dark energy) in collaboration with Enlighten Film Society to bring independent and arthouse films to the average cinema-goer. For those that enjoy quality cinema transcending time and geography, Matterden brings to life their dreams of watching these films on the big

screen, a feat that might not otherwise have been possible. Close to a century after declaring their small ticket window open, Deepak Talkies' biggest achievement yet is possibly the new and promising future it has scripted for itself.

Bars

Ghetto

There are pockets of Bombay where the grunge rock movement of the eighties and nineties is still thriving; Ghetto is one such den. The building that houses Ghetto itself seems to have withdrawn from the main road slightly, slouching back brooding from the ongoing bedlam of Breach Candy traffic.

A small wooden door leads inside to a small bar and seating area — a space that has, since the mid-nineties, witnessed the shenanigans of an Indian generation basking in a post-liberalisation age. Rock music shreds the air as you enter, greeting you with guitar riffs like old friends and leading you into a large room with two pool tables at the back.

You're as likely to chance upon an AC/DC tune as a Dire Straits one here, and find yourself singing along with the rest of the bar as the evening goes on, cast in UV lighting that makes every white in the room pop, and teeth gleam, ghoulish.

Filled with glowing graffiti, Ghetto's walls feature paintings of rock icons and psychedelic one-eyed monsters alike, glowering down at you as the beers keep coming. The walls are also crawling with words — scribbles and limericks from past patrons in what we can only guess were varying states of inebriation, with the 'vandalism' ranging from the quaint to the hilarious.

For many who have grown up in Bombay, Ghetto is a nostalgic reminder of their hormonal, rock-fuelled teenage years. For every new visitor, it is a reminder that rock never dies.

Yacht

There are countless watering holes in the nooks and crannies of Bombay, but Yacht on Hill Road, bang opposite St Andrew's Church, is a dive bar that occupies a special place in several regulars' hearts (and possibly, livers).

Dingy and decades old, Yacht is what is referred to as a 'quarter' bar, where the smallest alcohol order comes by the quarter bottle, a place many retire to at the end of a long day

to nurse a cheap drink (or five). It's an interesting stream of patrons that frequent Yacht, from broke college students, to broke 'creative types' as well as working professionals and the working class. Old monk, the iconic vatted Indian dark rum, reigns supreme here, topped with a cola mixer and some ice.

We'll be honest: Yacht is not for the faint-hearted or those easily offended; its three rooms, two of which are air-conditioned, are pretty filthy, alternating between seedy dim lighting and lurid white lighting. The conversations similarly have been known to turn heated sometimes, bordering on the aggressive. There is the occasional rat underfoot, while a cat prowls the beams over head and the tiled roof upstairs.

Most regulars consider these a small price to pay for the dirt cheap prices on the bar menu, though. With its brusque waiters, no-nonsense food and quick service, Yacht has become a bit of an iconic refuge from the snazzier, Drake-blasting pubs of Bandra, a place for conversation and catching up until the last drink is done.

Cityscapes

Bandra Bandstand

Bandstand, one of the sea-facing promenades in the city, is a classic example how it is the people, more than any architectural structure, that really make the place. A kilometre long from end to end, it begins just off of Hill Road and tapers into the Bandra Fort amphitheatre, followed by the vast expanse of the Arabian Sea.

In a city that witnesses a gross disparity in wealth and lifestyle every single day, people of all walks of life stroll by the sea here, with an 'Artist's Court' along the promenade frequently hosting weekend jam sessions and evening singalongs led by street musicians.

Navigating through chai wallahs on cycles, selling seemingly endless quantities of tea and cigarettes, and hawkers selling peanuts and bhutta, corn on the cob seasoned with salt and spices, you are surrounded by joggers, families and countless couples. This promenade is also referred to as 'Lover's Point' sometimes, owing to these couples getting cosy by the sea. As much of conservative Indian society considers such open displays of intimacy or affection, many of them find solace by the sea, stealing and cherishing the few moments they can away from the eyes of authority.

Bandstand is generous with its space, though, allowing everyone into its dusk-tinged folds as the sky begins to fade to dark, in a lovely sense of community that is so rarely free from the shackles of class. Whether it's a small cup of tea you want to nurse here for

an hour, a friend you want to catch up with, or just some time watching the sea and the sky that you're seeking, Bandstand will always find a spot to accommodate every one of its many admirers.

Architecture

Bandra Fort

Beyond the luxury five-star hotel Taj Land's End in Bandra West, and at the far end of the waterfront promenade that is Bandstand, lies Bandra Fort. Built in the early 17th century by the Portuguese as a watchtower overlooking the Arabian Sea to the West and Mahim Bay to the south, parts of it endure today as a Grade 1 heritage structure.

Bandra Fort has a long and interesting history behind it, but perhaps what makes it so special today is the respite it offers from the brutal traffic and general chaos of Bandra.

A small gate beyond the Taj hotel leads you inside, with one path leading to the remains of the fort itself, while moulded steps to the left lead into the Bandra Fort amphitheatre, a picturesque sea-facing venue playing host to concerts, classical dance performances and events such as the Mumbai Festival and Celebrate Bandra.

Initially named 'Castella de Aguada' translating into 'Fort of the Waterpoint', Bandra Fort derived its name back in 1640 from the freshwater spring nearby from where passing ships used to source potable water. It's mind-boggling, sitting on those stone steps today, to imagine the wars being fought over the vantage point over the centuries, as the 'kill' passed hands from the Portuguese rulers to the British, then to the Marathas, who eventually lost it to the British in the first Anglo-Maratha war. The fort was eventually donated to a Parsi philanthropist, Byramjee Jeejeebhoy, in the 19th century, after whom the region is named today.

Late afternoons and evenings spent here can border on the meditative, all sea breeze and lapping waves. Weekends do find the Fort area crowded with selfie stick-toting couples, families and groups of friends; but the sprawling promenade and surrounding rocky areas ensure there is enough space to explore, so one can find a quiet spot just to themselves.

Restaurants

Bastian

While Bombay boasts of several traditional seafood restaurants with lipsmacking fare,

Bastian flips the script: it shifts the focus from the overwhelming masalas (spices) in dishes to the flavour profiles of seafood itself, with produce as fresh as it gets. The proprietor, Chef Kelvin Cheung, has become a bit of a culinary legend in the city over the past few years, and a visit to Bastian, named after the friendly crustacean from Disney's 'The Little Mermaid', would tell you why.

Warm with wooden furniture, cosy seating areas and yellow lighting from faux candles, Bastian has mounted kitschy plastic crabs and other aquatic icons, including an almost life-sized alligator installation, up on its exposed brick walls dotted with porthole windows.

The Polynesian-style tiki bar and restaurant gets most of its produce locally, and has a menu with dishes generous in quantity that's masterfully layered with flavours. Embracing a confluence of seafood cultures from Hong Kong to Hawaii, their special 'seafood market' menu offers you the choice between prawns, mud crab, lobster, the fish of the day or a vegetarian option, in one of six house sauces. The sweet and sour Sichuan Snapper and coconut curry-based Singapore-style chilli crab emerge clear favourites amongst seafood-lovers, while vegetarians swear by the wild mushroom tom kha made with market veg, king and shimeji mushrooms. The staples menu is rich with promises of crispy and light mantous (Chinese buns, steamed or fried), pillowy naan (Indian bread, with butter, cheese or garlic) along with a few rice options.

Mixologist Arijit Bose holds down the bar, whipping up everything from beertails like 'Michelada', to the rum-based 'Polynasian Pearl Diver', in a nod to Tarantino, to a mean old-fashioned.

Expensive though a visit to this nautical gastro-bar might be, it sheds the pretense surrounding fine-dine culture to welcome their patrons to come experiment with — and truly enjoy — their food. Don't forget your crab bibs.

Nature

Five Gardens

Smack in the heart of the city, Dadar is easily one of the most densely-populated areas in the city. Dadar Parsi Colony here, the largest Zoroastrian enclave in the world, is home to a cluster of five large gardens separated by winding roads lined with trees; step into the lush green space, and the drop in temperature — a departure from Bombay's muggy heat — is immediately noticeable.

Probably one of Bombay's better-kept secrets, Five Gardens under its fluttering green

canopy reminds you to breathe in a way few other places in the city can. Each garden, over the years, has been taken over by a different crowd of regulars: groups of children frolic in playground areas of one, while muscled men execute push-ups with a steely determination in another. If you're lucky, you're likely to come upon a group of young people slacklining in a third, the ropes they navigate strung taut from one mammoth tree to another, as other visitors watch them from the benches nearby, emanating puffs of smoke. Those who have grown up in the area fondly recount blissful evenings of old Parsi 'uncles' blasting rock music from their cars as they enjoyed an evening drink after a long day of work; there are even whispers of Freddie Mercury of Queen, born Farrokh Bulsara, visiting the gardens occasionally for a spliff when he would stay with a relative in the area.

No visit to Five Gardens is complete without a stop at the hawkers stationed around the gardens, offering Bombay's famous chaat dishes as well as ice golas (ice lollies). The kala khatta ice gola endures as a summer favourite, a blackcurrant ice lolly that is as sweet as it is earthy.

Madh Island

Beyond the point where the local Mumbai railway line ends in the north at Malad, Madh Island sprawls quaint and lazy into farmlands and small fishing villages. The quiet charm of Madh island is reminiscent of the countless Konkani villages lining the Western coast of the country, replete with tiny, undulating lanes fringed with waving palm trees.

Koli fishermen, East Indian Roman Catholics and the Marathi community have lived together in this little paradise for years, and the island is a favourite amongst the Bollywood film and advertising industry for shoots, be it on the lesser-known Dana-Pani beach where locals can often be found engrossed in a game of cricket, or in the various massive bungalows that can be rented out. While local transport and cars for hire are available, if you're feeling adventurous, renting a bicycle to explore the area would truly be a treat. The air here is often pungent with the smell of fish from the nearby ice factories, and even as you watch fishing boats bob merrily in the distance, time stands still.

Hotels like The Retreat and The Resort are popular amongst travellers over weekends, but visiting Madh Island during the weekdays when it is less crowded is a far more pleasant experience. Besides soaking in the sun and fresh air away from the manic pace of the city, there is a restored 500-year-old church (the church of St. Bonaventure, built in the 15th century) that's definitely worth a visit, as well as a centuries-old Portuguese fort that stands on naval ground, to access which one needs permission from the navy base at Marve.

Perhaps it is because there is so much space in Madh Island — a rarity in the shoulder-to-shoulder city it adjoins — but as dusk fades to night, there are several ghost stories that do the rounds amongst locals. If the road seems a little too long on the way back, you always have the option of taking the rickety jetty back from Madh Island, that will take you straight back to bustling Versova.

Hotels

Grand Residency Hotel & Serviced Apartments

In a city like Bombay where peak traffic time can mean hours of being stuck on the road, Grand Residency Hotel & Serviced Apartments gives you the option of staying in a cosy serviced apartment that is centrally located in the heart of Bandra West.

A smiling mustachioed man in a turban welcomes you through frosted glass doors into the small, in-house Lobby Café, elegant with plush sofas and marble tiled flooring, and a concierge desk manned by courteous staff.

The seven-floored establishment has various options when it comes to types of accommodation: a Deluxe Room, Studio, One-Bedroom and Two-Bedroom Apartments. Besides the Studio, the other rooms have living and dining room areas in addition to a smart kitchenette that is fully-equipped, down to complementary fruits and cookies which are restocked every day. Each room also comes with a lovely balcony, a flat screen LED TV, mini-bar and tea/coffee maker as well as Wifi connectivity.

With their polished wooden floors, modern design and intelligent use of space, Grand Residency manages to create spaces that are reminiscent of home, where extended stays don't have to translate into nauseating homesickness. It's rare to find places you can imagine yourself returning to at the end of a long day and sighing with relief, and with the quiet comforts it offers, this hotel makes the cut. Additional facilities like laundry services, the availability of a doctor on call and a fully-equipped gymnasium in the basement, are a definite bonus.

With both the domestic and international airport close by, the hotel makes a lot of sense for business professionals as it is also close to Bandra Kurla Complex, an industrial hub. Other travellers have a plethora of options to explore as well, from Mount Mary's Church to the Bandra market and shopping areas, to the sea-facing promenades in the area.

Eateries

American Express Bakery

Yet another example of an iconic eatery being run by one family spanning generations, this bakery's name was derived from its speedy delivery to the American cruise ships in the early part of the 20th century. Francesco Carvalho is the man behind this delight that has weathered serious storms over the years, from rationing in World War II, to the Emergency years of the 1970's, to the gentrification that's been spreading like disease in Bandra.

For over a hundred years, sweet and savoury treats have been whipped up by the Carvalho family, whose first branch was located at Grant Road. Of the five outlets opened over the years, two have stood the test of time: American Express Bakery House in Byculla, opened in 1935, that is still housed in a wrought-iron building, and a cosy one on Hill Road. 1950 saw Bertha Carvalho take the reins, the wife of the second-generation owner Joseph Carvalho, in a business dominated by men; in an age when a working woman was an anomaly. She held down the fort until her eldest son took over, thanks to which Bombay still has an array of mouthwatering delicacies for the soul to offer.

Think assorted tea cakes, almond macaroons, puff rolls, plum cakes, tarts, and Hungarian coffee cake sitting pretty next to the Viennese truffle, cream rolls and the best, most wholesome cookies you're going to try in a long time. They aren't joking around when they claim to 'knead your needs'. The recipes come from a family legacy of a recipe book that has been passed down from one generation to the next; besides the establishment's talent and passion for food, it is perhaps their price-list that really set American Express Bakery apart and makes their clientele so inclusive.

There is a simplicity and much genuine affection with which they make their culinary masterpieces that make them all the more delectable.

Taj Ice Creams

Situated in Bhendi Bazaar, in the Bohri Mohalla, Taj Ice Creams has a long and proud legacy of hand-churning ice cream. Opening shutters as 'Saraf Ali's Ice Cream' in the late 1880's, this iconic yet nondescript parlour began the noble quest of bringing the working class the creamiest ice cream they could find, brimming with fruits and nuts.

After changing its name to the snappier 'Taj Ice Creams', and over 125 years later, its fourth-generation proprietors are the three Icecreamwalla brothers: Abbas, Hatim and

Yousuf. The ice cream-making process with a 'sancha' over the centuries has remained the same, from a time before electricity and cold storage were widely available.

Boiled milk and fruits are poured into a copper cannister, which is loaded into a wooden barrel filled with salt and ice, and then hand-cranked before being frozen every night, to be served fresh the next day. Some of the employees who churn the ice cream every day, too, come from families who have worked here for decades. While Taj Ice Creams has expanded its flavours to an impressive fifty flavours, its seasonal mango and sitaphal (custard apple) flavours continue to enjoy a special popularity.

After navigating the pandemonium of the adjoining Mohammed Ali Road or enjoying an aromatic meal at a bara handi eatery (where beef, mutton and curries are cooked in a mind-boggling 12 pots) on the same street, freshly made dessert at this understated establishment is the only way to call it a night.