

THE RISING STAR

From the glistening skyscrapers of Parel, to the colonial architecture of old Bombay, Mumbai is as multi-faceted and versatile as a Bollywood movie star, discovers NELLIE HUANG.

Mumbai: chaotic, seductive and unpredictable. India's

financial powerhouse and vogue centre of film and fashion, erupts with invigorating energy. During a visit to a city with one of the fastest growing economies in the world, I find myself swinging from one extreme to another, ultrachic boutiques to kitsch street bazaars, stylish fine dining restaurants to grimy pushcart hawkers.

It is every cliché that you can think of; stylish malls amid slums and grinding poverty, polished Mercedes sedans cruising alongside rickety rickshaws, and humble peasants rubbing shoulders with glamorous Bollywood starlets. Here is a modern Asian population ferociously battling against long-standing issues of economic debacle, and it's slowly, but surely, marching towards a brand new epoch.

For the first-time visitor, the city's human masses and raucous traffic can be overwhelming. Only once the initial shell shock of Mumbai's chaos subsides, does one start to appreciate its allure: a wealth of colonial relics, sanctified temples, bazaars and modern districts. Hectic as it may be, there's an ensemble aesthetic here. ➔

MUMBAI

A local friend tells me how to see Mumbai proper. Take tuk-tuks everywhere; these three-wheelers are cheap, ubiquitous and supply a mild, pleasurable level of risk. Watch Mumbai swirl by through gaps in the flow of riders, while soaking in an inebriating mix of sounds, smells and sights.

To get a real feel of Mumbai, one has to trace back to its old roots. Despite having its name changed in 1997, the metropolis is still known affectionately amongst its residents as Bombay, meaning "good bay" in Portuguese.

Rusi Khambatta, having spent over forty years flaunting his knowledge on Mumbai, shows me his side of old Bombay. "Our city has changed so much I can hardly recognize it today. But one thing's for sure, the Bombay spirit is still very much alive."

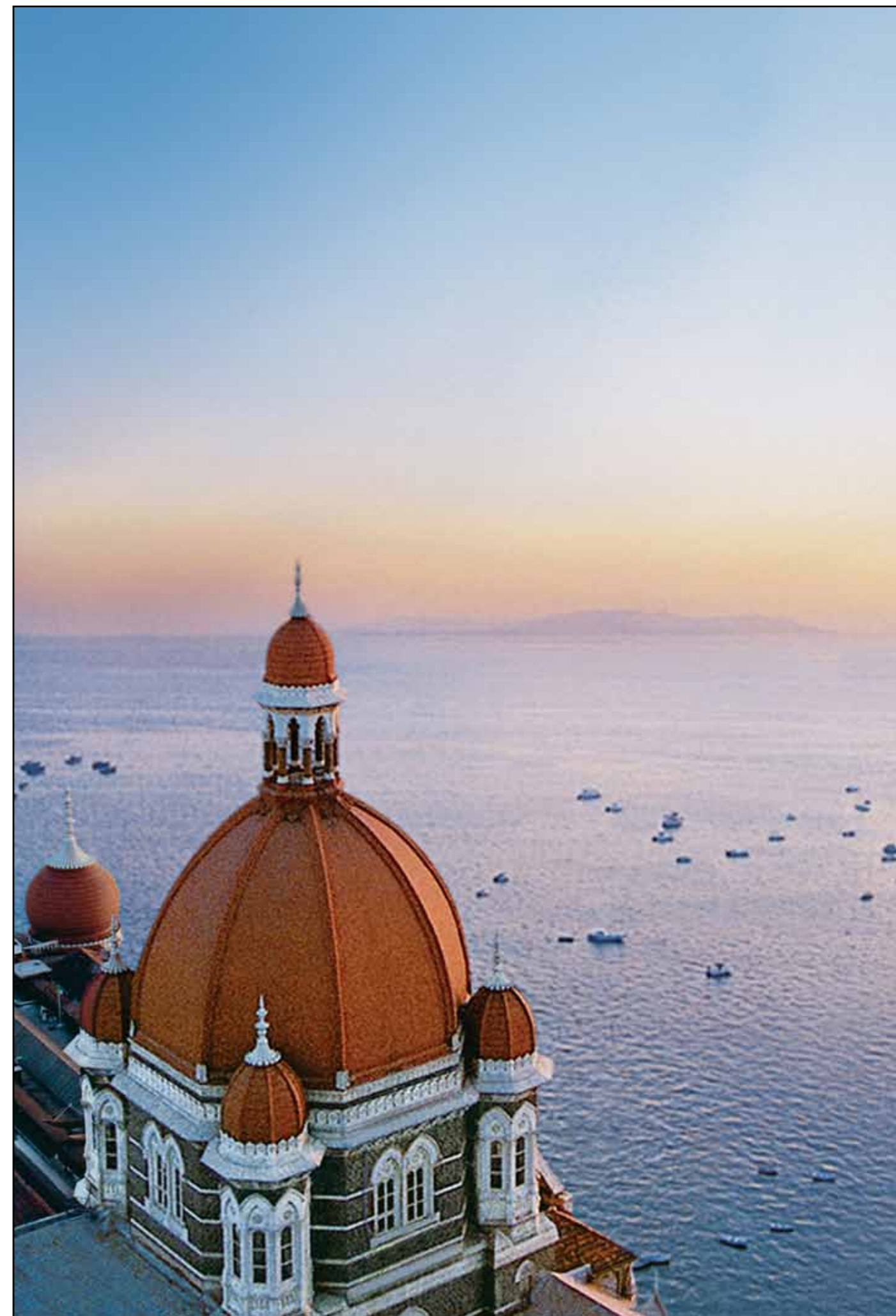
We start our journey at the city's most renowned monument, the Gateway of India, a majestic monument poised at the tip of Mumbai Harbour. In the olden days, the 26-metre high basalt arch was the first landmark you would see when approaching old Bombay from the sea. These days, it's a popular gathering spot for balloon sellers, cigarette vendors, photographers and touts.

Across it stands another quintessential landmark: the Taj Mahal Palace. Since its opening in 1903, it has been

dubbed as Mumbai's finest luxury hotel - for its unique architectural design and contemporary luxuries. Its prestigious guests include a string of kings, Presidents and celebrities. Although the hotel fell victim to terrorist attacks in 2008, little evidence of the shootings remain. The hotel has re-emerged, striving to keep up with the relentless drive towards modernity.

The heart of Mumbai's railway network, Victoria Terminus, is an excellent display of Gothic British Indian architectural designs, including a meringue of peacock carvings, gargoyles, turrets and spires spread across its extravagant façade. The neighbouring Rajabai clock tower, modelled on London's Big Ben, is embellished with some of the best stained glass windows in the city. Another flamboyant masterpiece from the British colonization era is the Prince of Wales Museum, home to a vast collection of Hindu sculptures, terracotta figurines and war weaponry.

Crossed by massive flyover bridges, and bounded by numerous bays, Mumbai is a patchwork archipelago of seven islands. Today, it has gone through a facelift with overnight modernization; many of its original islands have been transformed into gleaming modern districts including up-and-coming trendy commercial district of Parel. ➔





The hodgepodge of newly-erected shopping malls, high-street fashion boutiques and lifestyle stores makes this Mumbai's Soho. The district's newest addition is Palladium, a marble-floored entertainment centre home to the highly-acclaimed Comedy Store and numerous high-end fashion brands. Nearby is the Tulika Arts Gallery, a showcase of the works of young, local rising artists. The Freedom Tree Design Space, housed in one of the few remaining mills of the area, offers avant garde home furnishing items influenced by traditional Indian crafts and modern technology.

Another newcomer in the district is The ITC Grand Central Mumbai hotel. As a member of the Luxury Collection, the five-star hotel is a decadent treat for comfort creatures – sassed up with plush chandeliers, Kashmir carpets, colossal paintings of old Bombay and an exclusive VIP-only rooftop bar. Its in-house restaurants also dish up some of the finest in town, with the tandoori speciality restaurant Kebabs & Kurries and oriental fine-dining establishment, Shanghai Club, worth checking out.

The residential suburb of Bandra is a perennial favourite with models and Bollywood stars, where travellers can get a taste of Mumbai's hedonistic nightlife. Bandra's hottest nightspots – The Elbo Room and Mumbai Times

Cafe – pulsate with a contemporary beat, drawing in a hip and stylish crowd with its selection of urban dance music and international DJs. For a quieter evening, the chilled out lounge at Olive Bar & Kitchen and Bonobo set you in the right mood.

The night ends with a glass of Moët & Chandon on Aer, Mumbai's highest rooftop bar perched on 34th storey of the Four Seasons Hotel. It manages to get everything quite right – from the minimalistic all-white furnishing to the soothing R&B music and the panoramic view of old and new Mumbai in one clean sweep. Aer is definitely on the forefront of Mumbai's rising entertainment industry. A look around tells me it's just the beginning of a new era for Mumbai.

Getting There: Jet Airways (jetairways.com), Cathay Pacific (cathaypacific.com) and Singapore Airlines (singaporeair.com) have direct flights to Mumbai.

Where to Stay: ITC Grand Central Mumbai (itcwelcomgroup.in), Taj Mahal Palace (tajhotels.com) and Four Seasons (fourseasons.com/Mumbai) offer the best quality of accommodation in Mumbai.

More Info: www.maharashtratourism.gov.in

Samui continues to thrill travellers looking for the unique Thai combination of white sandy beaches and world-class hospitality. One hilltop villa promises to add a slice of luxury to your next Siam soirée.

ANGEL'S HAVEN



While beachfront property around the world is under risk from rising ocean levels, guests staying at Suralai, a stunning six-bedroom villa nestled high in Samui's mountains, will be quite safe. Located at the end of a long, steep winding path, Suralai is one of those unique retreats that once you've found it, you'll need a very compelling reason to leave. ➔