

India, land of mystery and gastronomy

Delighted to be travelling in the comfort of Business Class, I was taken with a sudden sense of excitement when the fasten seat belt signs illuminated signalling the initiation of our descent into Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Airport. One of my most long-awaited desires was on the verge of transforming into reality, just as it was for the over 300 other individuals about to set foot on Indian soil. With our landing came a stark impression of difference, aroused not so much by the early monsoon season heat and rain as by the readily apparent lifestyle, so vastly different from that of the planeload of respectful visitors to the country.

Since the time of my youth, Gandhi has elicited a sense of fascination in me as has Hindu religion and art. Mumbai, known as Bombay up to 1995, stirred a successive mix of uneasiness and thirst to discover and explore this multifaceted region of the Indian subcontinent.

Upon deplaning, I couldn't wait to escape into this sprawling megalopolis which stretches down the ocean shoreline and is home to some 18 million inhabitants and thousands of sacred cows.

Everything about India is a constant source of wonder: the saffron colour of the saris, the fragrant blends of spices such as *garam masala*, the bustling streets, and *dal* soup rich in protein and served on practically every street corner.

India is not home to any single particular style of cuisine. Rather this vast nation and its host of ethnic groups boast a broad array of culinary and regional traditions backed by a storehouse of spices and proven principles of nutrition. The abundance of vegetables and beneficial use of legumes or pulses confers upon India the enviable distinction of "best vegetarian cuisine", even if some fish and meat are not altogether prohibited.

It is easy to find lodging in Mumbai, if a little pricey per square foot. Rates vary according to location and level of interior comfort on offer. Remember always to request a room with air conditioning. You will pay only a few rupees more a night but it is a luxury you will appreciate, if only to escape the din of the streets. My hotel, located in Colaba, in the extreme south of the city, allowed me to visit the magnificent museums and remarkable hanging gardens that are an absolute must on any itinerary.

Undeniably, as in all former colonial cities, the traces of British culture are everywhere to behold from the language to the Victorian style architecture which predominates on a number of buildings. Mumbai remains prized for its cinematic traditions even if today no more than 120 films are produced in the city each year. Bollywood, as it is known, is best visited on foot, by taxi or by pedal rickshaw in the company of a guide who will eagerly explain to you the mix (*masala*, like the spice!) of films of all manner produced in the area.

Having visited both wings of Mumbai's celebrated and palatial Taj Mahal Hotel, I stepped into the hotel's piano bar—with its subdued ambience and teak woodwork—where I paid \$30 to sip on a martini, glance out over the Arabian Sea and admire the seemingly timid lights of the city. Life seemed no less than ideal!

Leaving Colaba, one must visit the city's Jyotiba Phule market, a mere 800 metres from Victoria Station. In the maze of streets, one finds just about anything for sale, from animals—mongooses, monkeys and more, to spices such as turmeric, ginger, nutmeg, mace and, of course the famed *murraya koenigii*, which is native to India and the leaves of which are used in curry preparations. In any one of the small shops, one will be tempted by the shrimp or chicken tandoori, unique saffron *dal* or curried lamb with tea-flavoured basmati rice topped with *ghee*, a type of clarified butter used in India and elsewhere to fry foods or add flavour to a dish.

Specific to Mumbai are *dabbawalas*. From 11:30 each morning, thousands of numbered plates are sorted, washed and laden with hot meals in accordance with the dictates of Hindu rituals of purity before being collected and delivered to their rightful owners.

One cannot leave Mumbai without having visited Elephanta Island which is located about 10 km outside the city. The island's unique grottoes replete with religious art are located in a natural, protected environment. With the exception of one gigantic stone elephant, it is the monkeys which have taken possession on this island domain.

India is fascinating and requires time to visit and appreciate. The country is prized for its culture, variety, inherent difference from the rest of the world, leading-edge IT facilities, hospitality, cuisine and gastronomy which ranges from street food to highly acclaimed restaurants such as the

Léopold in Mumbai. To sip on genuine Ceylan tea accompanied by an almond *barfi* is nothing short of sheer delight.

India is a country one first visits just to get the feel of it only to return for longer periods and partake of the nation's myriad pleasures.

Best hotels in Mumbai

ITC Hotel Grand Central Sheraton and Towers
287 Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Road
Parel, Mumbai – 400012
2410-1010
2410-1111

ITC Hotel Grand Maratha Sheraton and Towers
Sahar, Mumbai – 400099
2830-3030
2830-3131

Grand Hyatt Mumbai
Off Western Express Highway
Santa Cruz (East), Mumbai – 400055
6676-1234
6676-1235

Hyatt Regency Mumbai
Sahar Airport Road
Mumbai – 400099
6696-1234
6696-1235

Le Royal Méridien
Sahar Airport Road
Andheri (East)
2838-0000
2838-0101

InterContinental
The Grand Mumbai
Sahar Airport Road
Mumbai – 400059
6699-2222
6699-8888

The Taj Mahal Hotel
Apollo Bunder
Mumbai – 400001
6665-3366
6665-0323

InterContinental
Marine Drive
Mumbai – 400020
3987-9999
3987-9600

Sun-n-Sand Hotel
39 Juhu Beach
Mumbai – 400049
6693-8888
2620-1811
2620-2170

Taj President Hotel
90 Cuffe Parade
Mumbai – 400005
6665-0808
6665-0303

Hotel Sea Princess
Juhu Beach
2617-5858
2611-7600
2611-3973

The Resort
11 Madh Marve Road
Aksa Beach Malad
2882-3331
2882-0738

The Orchid Hotel
Nehru Road, Vile Parle (East)
Mumbai – 400099

Two museums to explore
www.bombaymuseum.org

www.gandhi-manibhavan.org

Discovery recipe

Spicy Dal

For 4 persons

250 g Indian lentils or yellow peas

2 tablespoons garlic, freshly chopped

1 teaspoon cumin seeds, crushed

½ teaspoon red chilli powder or chilli paste

250 ml plain yoghurt

125 ml 15% cream

2 onions, finely chopped

60 ml *ghee* (available in Oriental groceries)

Salt to taste

Sort and rinse the lentils. Place in a pan and cover generously with water. Add garlic, cumin and chilli. Cook for 50 minutes. Beat together the yoghurt and cream. Add to the lentils and cook for another 10 minutes, seasoning to taste.

In a saucepan, sauté the onions in the *ghee* for 3 minutes. Add to the soup. Cook a further 5 or 10 minutes. Adjust spices as required. Serve with Naan bread and parsley.

Note: You may need a little extra water during cooking. *Ghee* can be replaced with clarified butter or sunflower oil.