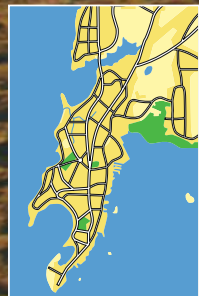


THREE PERFECT DAYS

Hemispheres MAY 2015

MUMBAI

FEW CITIES CAN EXCITE and exhaust a visitor as much as Mumbai. Teeming, muggy and full of noise, the city exists on a precipice, endlessly teetering between energy and anarchy. It is, above all else, a place of contradictions, of gloss and grit, of *chalta hai* fatalism and fierce ambition. Some might say Mumbai has a dark heart, but few would deny that it's got soul. →



WRITER
AMIT GURBAXANI

PHOTOGRAPHER
MANJARI SHARMA

INTERESTS
SPOTTING
BOLLYWOOD
CELEBRITIES,
EATING VAST
AMOUNTS OF GHEE,
HAGGLING POORLY

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THREE PERFECT DAYS: MUMBAI

“I TAKE ANOTHER RICKSHAW AND HEAD TO JUHU BEACH TO CATCH THE SUNSET. THE BEACH IS LESS A PLACE TO SWIM AND MORE A PICNIC SPOT WHERE FAMILIES SPREAD SHEETS AND LAZE, FULLY CLOTHED, ON THE SAND.”

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DAY ONE

In which Amit tucks into the best berry pulav in India and buys a bunch of stuff he doesn't need

ABODE, THE 20-ROOM “ANTI-CHAIN” HOTEL that opened in late 2013 in the tourist hub of Colaba, represents a departure from the over-the-top opulence that has long characterized high-end hospitality in Mumbai. In contrast to the aptly named Taj Mahal Palace nearby, Abode goes for the mix-and-match aesthetic popular with hipster hotels everywhere: patterned Bharat floor tiles, flea market knickknacks, Art Deco furnishings. And if that's not enough quirk for you: They keep packets of cookies by the lobby door, to give to the street children you will inevitably encounter after you leave.

I grab a few packs and head for the gleefully artistic South Mumbai neighborhood of Kala Ghoda, a five-minute stroll from the hotel, pausing along the way to take in a couple of the city's 19th-century architectural gems: the Romanesque Transitional Elphinstone College

and the neo-Gothic Indian Mercantile Mansion. I also pop into the Rhythm House, Mumbai's most famous music store, where I grapple with a purchasing decision: *Bombay Lounge* or *Bombay Chill Out*?

Breakfast is at the Nutcracker, a small, funky vegetarian eatery that's known for serving excellent comfort food. I have the eggs Kejriwal, a dish of fried eggs on toast topped with cheese and chilies, which puts a spring in my step. I head out into the bright sunshine, passing the caricaturists, palm readers and rice writers lining the sidewalk, on my way to the largest, most unpronounceable museum in Mumbai.

The Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya is still commonly referred to as the Prince of Wales Museum, which was its official name until the mid-1990s, when Bombay became Mumbai and many of its landmarks were renamed to reflect national rather than colonial traditions. The museum is housed in a huge domed building, an exceptional example of Indo-Saracenic architecture, which fuses European, Indian and Islamic styles to dramatic effect. The collection here is equally eclectic, encompassing everything from sixth-century religious statues to a stuffed white tiger. “Grrroar!” it says as I walk by—or maybe that's my stomach.

Lunch is a short taxi ride away at Britannia & Co., one of Mumbai's last remaining Parsi cafés, which were established in the early 20th century by Iranian immigrants. The crystal chandelier aside, this is not a swanky place—the paint is peeling, and the most prominent artwork is a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II (the nonagenarian owner, Boman Kohinoor Irani, is a staunch royalist and can generally be found wandering among the diners extolling the virtues of the British Raj). Food writer and *Vogue India* contributing editor Roshni Bajaj Sanghvi insists, however, that you'd be hard pressed to get a better berry *pulav* anywhere in India.

To prove her point, Roshni is joining me here, the first stop in a whirlwind tour of her favorite Mumbai eateries. “For me, one of the things that make Bombay such a great place is old restaurants like this,” she says. “For a lot of people, it's almost as if their life depends on these places being open, because they go there to eat every day.” We order the berry *pulav*, a richly flavored rice dish of chicken or mutton, spices, fried onions and tart barberries imported from Iran, and round things off with fluffy caramel custard. Boman stops at our table to soak up some deserved praise. “My son is the chef,” he says, beaming, then sends us off with wishes for “a pleasant life and a safe journey.”

On our stroll back to Kala Ghoda, we walk past the wrought iron gates of the Horniman

“BOMBAY IS EASIER TO LOVE THAN MOST BIG CITIES BECAUSE OF THE SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS YOU SO QUICKLY FORM HERE, NO MATTER WHICH CLASS OR CASTE YOU BELONG TO.”

ROSHNI BAJAJ SANGHVI
Food writer and
contributing editor for
Vogue India



→
From top:
The Dr. Bhau Daji
Lad Mumbai
City Museum is as
renowned for its
architecture as its
exhibits; a street
vendor prepares
pav bhaji





Circle Gardens, where, in the 1850s, a group of traders formed the city's first stock exchange, in the shade of a banyan tree that still stands today. It's a picturesque, peaceful spot, but Roshni has her own reasons for coming here. "I love that the park is surrounded by people selling street food," she says, "from *chana chor garam* [fried and spiced chick peas] to *bhel puri* [a snack of puffed rice]."

I part ways with Roshni and head to the nearby home decor and design store Filter, which is filled with things I want but don't need. Having picked up a few vintage Hindi film posters, I head out to explore the many art galleries that have opened in the Colaba-Kala Ghoda area. One of the more prominent of these, Chatterjee & Lal, is housed inside the pleasantly shabby Kamal Mansion. I pop in to find a young couple taking selfies next to a fiberglass Spider-Man, which is a cast of its creator, British-Indian artist Hetain Patel, wearing the superhero suit.

Not far from Patel's Spidey stands a testament to a different kind of power: the 85-foot, basalt-and-concrete Gateway of India, overlooking Mumbai Harbor—a Hindu-Muslim spin on the ceremonial arch. Built by the British in 1911 to commemorate themselves, it was also the point from which the last British troops left the country in 1948, which seems fitting. Today, it serves as a meeting point for locals, who are

catered to by a clutter of street vendors selling roasted corn, ice cream and coconut water. I, however, have another kind of beverage in mind.

A quick stroll along the waterfront brings me to Cafe Marina, a rooftop bar that provides a perfect vantage point as the sun sets over the harbor, dousing the Gateway and the Taj hotel in pink and orange hues. "What's that?" I ask my waiter, pointing at a huge white structure in the distance. "Asvini Hospital," he replies, "where they filmed that movie with Amitabh Bachchan." In Mumbai, you're never far from a Bollywood reference.

From here, I walk five minutes or so for a spritz at the hotel, then cross the street to reunite with Roshni for dinner at Ling's Pavilion, a local institution where the decor, clients and quality of the food haven't changed in 20 years. "That's what I love about Ling's: the consistency," Roshni says. "The way the pot rice smells is exactly the same every time." We eat perfectly cooked salt-and-pepper prawns and meaty mushroom pot rice in view of a portrait of a white cat. "It's a piece of Chinese silk embroidery art," the restaurant's owner, Baba Ling, tells us with pride. "The Chinese consul-general gave it to us in appreciation of what we're doing for China."

Our last stop of the evening is a few blocks northwest at Ellipsis, an artsy restaurant-bar designed by industry darling Thomas Schoos.

↑
blueFROG, Mumbai's best-known music club (and home of the Mega Frog) and a 1960s vision of the future

→
The Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, seen from the surrounding gardens

There's clearly somebody important in the house tonight, because there are two huge bodyguards at the approach and a couple more seated at the table next to ours. Over cocktails, Roshni and I speculate about which Bollywood star might be here, only to learn that the muscle belongs to a local property developer. Ah, well.

On my way back to Abode, I make eye contact with a hand-drum seller. Oops. "Only 600 rupees, sir, 10 dollars," he says. "Five," I respond. We settle on eight and I walk away, fully aware that I've been had, but still tapping a happy beat.

"IF YOU CAN AFFORD IT, THIS CITY CAN GIVE YOU ANY KIND OF EXPERIENCE YOU WANT—CLOISTERED AVENUES, URBAN FEVER, POLYGLOT DINING AND A VIBRANT ART SCENE. THERE IS ALWAYS SOMETHING TO DO IN BOMBAY, OR SOMETHING TO SEE."

TASNEEM VAHANVATY
Consultant at the National Centre for Performing Arts



DAY TWO

In which Amit familiarizes himself with India's Great Soul and the potency of the Mega Frog

WAKE UP AND, AFTER A QUICK bang on my new drum, take a long, relaxing soak in my room's claw-foot bathtub, then head to the lobby for a breakfast of *pav bhaji*, a wonderfully greasy dish of spiced mashed vegetables and buttered bread, which is said to have been invented in Mumbai in the 19th century to fortify mill workers for the hard day ahead.

I stuff myself into a black-and-yellow cab and head for the South Mumbai neighborhood of Tardeo, whose biggest claim to fame—or at least tallest—is the Imperial Towers, a pair of pointy skyscrapers that stand more than 800 feet high. The cab takes me down Marine Drive, a pleasant waterfront stretch that's lined with Art Deco buildings on one side and Lycra-clad joggers on the other, before depositing me in front of Mani Bhavan, Mahatma Gandhi's home from 1917 to 1934, now a museum.

It's a nice house, with screened balconies and ample shelving, but, more importantly of course, the chance to delve into the personal life of India's Great Soul is what draws the crowds. On one wall there's a picture of Gandhi with Charlie Chaplin. Nearby, there's a letter Gandhi wrote to Hitler in 1939: "Will you listen to the appeal of one who

has deliberately shunned the method of war not without considerable success?" At a section relating incidents from Gandhi's childhood, a woman turns to a young child and says, "See, he was such a good boy."

Gandhi hailed from the western state of Gujarat, so it seems fitting that I'm having lunch today at Swati Snacks, a family-run eatery that's renowned for its fantastic Gujarati food. I'm joined by Tasneem Vahanvaty, a consultant with Mumbai's National Centre for Performing Arts. We order *panki chatni* (razor-thin rice pancakes rolled and wrapped in banana leaves) and *fada ni khichdi* (baked wheat, legumes and veggies)—then settle down to discuss the city of her birth. "Samuel Johnson said, 'When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life,' and that's how I feel about Bombay," she says. "People have a love-hate relationship with this city, and often both emotions are felt in the same breath."

Over the next half hour or so, as we ride in a sweltering taxi through Mumbai's traffic-clogged and cacophonous roads, it's easy to understand this sort of ambivalence. But then all is forgiven when we arrive at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum, in the South Mumbai district of Byculla. Located in a mint-green Renaissance Revival mansion, this is Mumbai's oldest museum, having opened for business





in 1872. The interior—with its arches and columns and elaborate wrought iron detailing—is so exquisite you'd be forgiven for forgetting the exhibits, which range from industrial art to dioramas of local communities. "Sindhi!" I shout, having spotted mine. Another highlight is a statue of Mumbadevi, the Hindu goddess after whom Mumbai is named.

The sun is going down, which means: time for a sundowner. I say goodbye to Tasneem and take a black-and-yellow to Aer, the Four Seasons bar, which, 34 floors above street level, is the highest in the city. From up here, Mumbai looks like a massive graphic equalizer bar, lit up against the black screen of the sky. Below the bright towers are streams of blue, the tarpaulin roofs of the city's slums. At the next table, a group of youngsters are playing a game of Spot the Building. Quietly, so as not to freak them out, I join in: the blunt pineapple of the Nehru Centre; Antilia, the Jenga-like, billion-dollar home of India's richest man.

Finally, I spot the pyramidal roof of the ITC Grand Central hotel, where I've booked a table at Kebabs and Kurries, a restaurant serving a vast range of Indian cuisine. First, though, I catch a taxi to Juhu, the North Mumbai suburb, where I check

into the J. W. Marriott. Full of bright lights and big columns, the Mumbai Marriott "is the hotel where you're most likely to spot a Hindi film star," says the receptionist. Actors such as Shah Rukh Khan, Akshay Kumar, Kajol and Shilpa Shetty have all been spotted here, she says. I hang around in the bar for a while, waiting for Bollywood royalty to arrive, then realize with a jolt that I'm running late for dinner. Taxi!

My driver does a fine job of dodging through the traffic to get me to Kebabs and Kurries before closing time. The menu here is dizzying, so I play it safe and order the signature dish, *dal Bukhara*, black lentils lavished with cream and butter and slow-cooked in a tandoor. For dessert I have the *shahi tukda*, India's syrup-soaked version of bread pudding. It's a tasty, filling and somewhat narcotic meal—a nap might be in order. But no. Suck it up. Things to do.

I catch another cab to Lower Parel, a former mill district in the heart of Mumbai and home to blueFROG, the city's best-known music venue. Housed in an old industrial building, the club's interior is right out of 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, a '60s-inspired vision of the future that includes color-shifting circular booths and bubble-wrap bumps on the walls. But people aren't here to admire the decor—they're here to bounce

↑
Few places in Mumbai can rival Britannia & Co.'s quality food

→
Clockwise from top left: seafood thali from Gajalee seafood; mushroom chai tea from Masala Library; dal dhokli from Swati Snacks; eggs Kejriwal from the Nutcracker



Jalebi caviar from Masala Library



Pallonji's raspberry soda, a local favorite



JAS CHARANJIVA
Street artist and co-founder
of Kulture Shop

"A FEW YEARS AGO, MY HUSBAND AND I WERE SUPPOSED TO MOVE TO NEW YORK, BUT I WANTED TO EXPERIENCE LIFE IN BOMBAY. ANY TIME WE CAME HERE, WE'D FEEL CREATIVE AND INSPIRED. I JUST LOVE THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF THE CITY."

around to the music of Mad Orange Fireworks, a jazz-funk band from Bangalore. At the bar, ordering a whiskey-and-watermelon cocktail called a Mega Frog, I start chatting with Suprateek Chatterjee, a local film reviewer and musician, with whom I discuss the club's recent renovations. "Apart from the new sofas," he says, "the washers in the loos have been changed!" This, we decide, calls for another round of Mega Frogs.

of women in bright saris dancing down the street and showering blessings on the bride. It's perfect—almost as if they knew I was coming.

I decide not to use the Sea Link to return to the northern part of the city, heading instead through one of Mumbai's largest green spaces, Shivaji Park, which is filled with kids, canoodling couples and, above all, cricket matches. I stop for a while to lounge in the sun, then continue on to the futuristic Bandra Kurla Complex, a commercial district on the banks of the Mithi River.

Bandra Kurla isn't the most soulful place in Mumbai, but it is home to some fine restaurants, including the "progressive Indian" eatery Masala Library, by Jiggs Kalra. Hailed as the "czar of Indian Cuisine," Kalra has pulled out all the stops at this venture. My meal includes mushroom chai presented like a tea service—a consommé is poured from a kettle into a cup of dehydrated button

mushrooms—followed by mutton *chaap*, an Indian iteration of spare ribs. I also have the *jalebi* caviar, a dessert so elaborate I don't have the space to describe it here. Despite the fanciful presentation, Kalra makes no concessions when it comes to taste—this is a wonderful meal.

From here, I catch an auto-rickshaw and head to the west side of Bandra, where I'm meeting local street artist Jas Charanjiva. Bandra West, as the area is known, is Mumbai's creative hub, home to many of the city's musicians, designers and artists. I meet Jas outside her store, Kulture Shop, which collaborates with Indian artists around the globe to produce prints and T-shirts. The plan is for Jas to take me to her favorite place in town, Bandra Fort, a 17th-century Portuguese fortification overlooking the sea. For Jas, the history is perhaps a little less important than the fact that the spot allows "a quick getaway from the crazy traffic and pollution of the city."

On our way to the fort, we pass Mount Mary Church, outside of which is a clutter of stalls selling wax candles shaped like houses, shops, cars, airplanes, currency notes, computers, babies and body parts. Devotees believe that if they place these candles at the oratory opposite the church, their wishes, as represented by the various shapes, will be granted. In this regard, the stalls provide a snapshot of the hopes and aspirations of this city; the candles include one marked "TV star."

Inside the fort, we settle down beside some college kids taking selfies with the Sea Link bridge in the background. "I find it fascinating

DAY THREE

In which Amit samples progressive Indian cuisine and avoids the rigors of a seaside massage

WAKE UP WITH A (MEGA) FROG in my throat. With some effort, I manage to drag my head off the pillow and my body off the bed and plod over to the window. I'm looking out over three small bodies of water: a kiddie pool, an infinity pool and a saltwater pool. I could do with some of that. A quick dip later, I grab a croissant at the hotel's excellent Bombay Baking Company before taking a cab back to South Mumbai via the Bandra-Worli Sea Link, a swooshing cable-stayed bridge that offers glorious views of the city (if you're not the one doing the driving, of course).

I alight at the bridge's southern end, in Worli, one of seven islands that were merged, through a series of land reclamation projects started in the 1840s, to form Mumbai. A working fishing village, Worli comprises a warren of lanes where the aroma of fish being dried or fried is ever-present. I pass by a weathered-looking man who, apparently unaware of how good he'd look on a postcard, sits fashioning a net out of rope. Nearby is a fish market inhabited by the world's fattest stray cats. Then there's a wedding party

From top: A wedding celebration in a fishing village in western Mumbai; the popular music shop Rhythm House



A monument from Mani Bhavan, Gandhi's former home





that you see people aiming their cameras at something so recent," Jas says, "while surrounded by something that's 400 years old." We leave the fort and stroll toward the promenade, where we come across another group of smartphone-wielding kids, snapping the actor Shah Rukh Khan's beachfront bungalow.

I take another rickshaw, drop Jas off and head to Juhu Beach to catch the sunset. The beach is less a place to swim than a picnic spot where families spread sheets and laze, fully clothed, on the sand, buzzed by hawkers selling pinwheels, cotton candy and sun hats. As I jostle through the crowd, I am approached by three different men offering seaside massages. Then, just in time, I spot a speeding, oncoming volleyball. I duck and decide to get out of here.

Another rickshaw takes me to the restaurant where I'll be dining tonight. A hugely popular local seafood chain, Gajalee has several branches across the city, including one right by Juhu Beach, but hardcore fans swear by the flagship, in the neighboring suburb of Vile Parle. Once there, I'm happy to find that the golden batter-fried *bombil* (a native lizardfish also known as Bombay duck) has been cooked to perfection. The prawn masala and fish curry are equally delectable.

Stomach full, I return to Bandra, home to Bonobo, a nightclub named after the amorous African apes. Over a few beers, I chat with a jewelry maker about to launch an online store, an indie musician working on an electro-pop album and a foodie entrepreneur who's come from debuting a pop-up night market. It all reminds me of something Jas said earlier, about Bandra being "the Brooklyn of Bombay." This isn't the first time that Mumbai has been compared to New York. It's a melting pot. It never sleeps. Some have even taken to calling the city "The Big Mango."

It's a bit of a hike, but I feel duty-bound to end my trip at my favorite spot in Mumbai:



↑
A Mumbai taxi driver in his colorfully decorated conveyance

←
Fishing boats in a village in western Mumbai

the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, a Gothic Revival masterpiece that was deemed a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004, and which is even more beautiful at night. As I stand and take in its riotous detail—its turrets and Moorish dome, its glorious clash of idioms and styles—it occurs to me that Mumbai is indeed a bit like New York, and London, and Dubai, and Rio de Janeiro. It is a city where, as one visitor put it, "you go five yards and all of human existence is revealed."

Amit Gurbaxani is the co-founder and editor of thedailybao.com, a website that covers food, culture, nightlife and fashion in Mumbai. H

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RITUPARNA CHOUDHURY (MIRANDA)



MUMBAI MADNESS
The colorful, chaotic cityscapes of Mario de Miranda

Few artists have captured the chaos and energy of Mumbai as well as Mario de Miranda. The Goan cartoonist—who died in 2011 at the age of 85—created colorful, witty caricatures of life in countries across the world but always did his best work close to home.

Despite having no formal training in art, de Miranda

enjoyed a long and successful career as a cartoonist for *The Times of India* and other publications. He rose to global fame in the 1970s, when his work attracted the attention of "Peanuts" creator Charles Schultz and other international cartoonists. Even Juan Carlos, the king of Spain, was a fan.

Today, you can pick up a wide array of the artist's work at the Mario Gallery in the West Mumbai suburb of Bandra, including prints of the inspired clutter of "Sidewalks of Bombay," with its streetside vendors ("Instant Onion Slicer: Rs. 2.25") and saucy magazine stall ("Psst," "Peep" and "Ah!").