

Mumbai (Bombay)



Mumbai is big. It's full of dreamers and hard-labourers, actors and gangsters, stray dogs and exotic birds, artists and servants and fisherfolk and *crorepatis* (millionaires) and lots and lots of other people. It has the most prolific film industry, one of Asia's biggest slums and the largest tropical forest in an urban zone. It's India's financial powerhouse, fashion capital and a pulse point of religious tension. It's evolved its own language, Bumbaiyya Hindi, which is a mix of...everything. It has some of the world's most expensive real estate and a knack for creating land from water using only determination and garbage.

But wait. Mumbai is not frantic; it's not *overwhelming*. Or at least, it doesn't have to be. Contrary to what you might think, you may not have almost just died in that taxi or been rushed by that station crowd or run over by that guy with the funny outfit and the monkey. The city just has its own rhythm, which takes a little while to hear: it's a complex but playful raga, a gliding, light-footed dance that all of Mumbai seems to know.

So give yourself some time to learn it and appreciate the city's lilting cadences, its harmonies of excess and restraint. The stately and fantastical architecture, the history hanging in the air of the markets, the scent of jasmine in the ladies' car of the train, the gardens, the street vendors, the balloon-wallahs, and the intellectuals in old libraries – it will all take you in if you let it. So sit back, develop your equanimity, and let yourself become part of the song.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Eat in one of India's best **restaurants** (p131), then watch – or be one of – the beautiful people at a posh **bar, lounge** (p135) or **club** (p136)
- Stock up on odd and exquisite things at Mumbai's ancient **bazaars** (p139) and outsource your wardrobe to its **boutiques** (p138)
- Admire the grandiose frilliness of Mumbai's colonial-era architecture: **Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus** (p117), **University of Mumbai** (p116) and **High Court** (p116)
- Resist the urge to bow down before the commanding triple-headed Shiva sculpture at **Elephanta Island** (p143)
- Feel the city's sea breeze among playing kids, big balloons and a hot-pink sunset at **Chowpatty Beach** (p119)



FESTIVALS IN MUMBAI

Banganga Festival (Jan) A two-day classical-music festival held at the Banganga Tank (p120).

Mumbai Festival (Jan) Based at several stages around the city, it showcases the food, dance and culture of Mumbai.

Elephanta Festival (Feb) Classical music and dance on Elephanta Island (p143).

Kala Ghoda Festival (Feb) Getting bigger and more sophisticated each year, this two-week-long offering has a packed program of arts performances and exhibitions.

Nariyal Poornima (Aug) Festivals in the tourist hub of Colaba kick off with this celebration of the start of the fishing season after the monsoon.

Ganesh Chaturthi (Aug/Sep) Mumbai's biggest annual festival – a 10- to 11-day event in celebration of the elephant-headed deity Ganesh – sweeps up the entire city. On the first, third, fifth, seventh and 10th days of the festival families and communities take their Ganesh statues to the seashore and auspiciously drown them: the 10th day, which sees millions descending on Chowpatty Beach to submerge the largest statues, is particularly ecstatic.

Colaba Festival (Oct) A small arts festival in Colaba that sometimes overlaps with Diwali festivities.

Pritivi Theatre Festival (Nov) A showcase of what's going on in contemporary Indian theatre; also includes performances by international troupes and artists.

HISTORY

Koli fisherfolk have inhabited the seven islands that form Mumbai as far back as the 2nd century BC. Amazingly, remnants of this culture remain huddled along the city shoreline today. A succession of Hindu dynasties held sway over the islands from the 6th century AD until the Muslim Sultans of Gujarat annexed the area in the 14th century, eventually ceding it to Portugal in 1534. The only memorable contribution the Portuguese made to the area was christening it Bom Bahai, before throwing the islands in with the dowry of Catherine of Braganza when she married England's Charles II in 1661. The British government took possession of the islands in 1665, but leased them three years later to the East India Company for the paltry annual rent of UK£10.

Then called Bombay, the area flourished as a trading port. So much so that within 20 years the presidency of the East India Company was transferred to Bombay from Surat. Bombay's fort was completed in the 1720s, and a century later ambitious land reclamation projects joined the islands into today's single landmass. Although Bombay grew steadily during the 18th century, it remained isolated from

its hinterland until the British defeated the Marathas (the central Indian people who controlled much of India at various times) and annexed substantial portions of western India in 1818.

The fort walls were dismantled in 1864 and massive building works transformed the city in grand colonial style. When Bombay took over as the principal supplier of cotton to Britain during the American Civil War, the population soared and trade boomed as money flooded into the city.

A major player in the independence movement, Bombay hosted the first Indian National Congress in 1885, and the Quit India campaign was launched here in 1942 by frequent visitor Mahatma Gandhi. The city became capital of the Bombay presidency after Independence, but in 1960 Maharashtra and Gujarat were divided along linguistic lines – and Bombay became the capital of Maharashtra.

The rise of the pro-Maratha regionalist movement, spearheaded by the Shiv Sena (Hindu Party; literally 'Shivaji's Army'), shattered the city's multicultural mould by actively discriminating against Muslims and non-Maharashtrians. The Shiv Sena won power in the city's municipal elections in 1985. Communalist tensions increased and the city's cosmopolitan self-image took a battering when nearly 800 people died in riots following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992.

They were followed by a dozen bombings on 12 March 1993, which killed more than 300 people and damaged the Bombay Stock

FAST FACTS

Population 16.4 million

Area 440 sq km

Telephone code ☎ 022

Languages Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati

When to go October to February