



Hardwood floors and set-off by travel-inspired wall papers make Sofitel fashionably modern.

Suburban Swagger

With Fortune 500 companies, international fitness centre brands, concept restaurants and dramatic public art, Bandra Kurla Complex's corporate look is getting a cool after-work vibe, finds **SIDDHARTH DASGUPTA**.

CITIES CHANGE, this much is irreversible. And Bombay, that pulsating reservoir of 19 million desires, changes more than most. From its shifting tides to its name (which I've chosen to gently skip over, for the sake of nostalgia), this is a city that revels in its chameleon-like nature. What was once distant now lies familiar, what was once suburban now lies central, and so it flows. In this vast cacophony of magical mayhem, the Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC) appears as a bit of an odd, sterilised stamp on a landscape otherwise characterised either by unfettered street spirit or by exuberant affluence. Given BKC's rather straight-laced clientele that includes the RBI and the Diamond Bourse, the commercial zone's personality actually lies buried beneath waves of glass and concrete... but it's there, to be sure.

SODA BOTTLE OPENERWALA

Take SodaBottleOpenerWala (91/989-2841-456) for instance. A Delhi implant of an original Bombay classic,

COURTESY OF SOFITEL



this loving homage to the Parsi philosophy of life in general and the Irani café in particular is a memorable mélange of atmosphere, memories and deliciousness. Parsi memorabilia and a 'family tree' made out of vintage photographs sourced from Chor Bazaar greet you as you settle down to that archetypal bentwood furniture and a jukebox brimming with yesterday. Savour some Prithvi's Irish Coffee and the Mutton Berry Pulao that packs in sinful amounts of flavour and tenderness for the quintessential SBOW experience.

THE LIL' FLEA

On the randomly bohemian end of the spectrum, The Lil' Flea (thelilflea.in) is a charmingly homegrown ode to artistry and creativity. As a periodic pop-up flea market that aims to be a free-spirited platform for likeminded souls, TLF has quickly become a beacon for artists, designers and musicians. Indie brands such as Bohemyan, Mast Maal, Travellers Trove, and Radio Rani peddle everything from clothes and hippie jewellery to lifestyle workshops and delicious street food. It's a nicely laidback coming-together of everything that this great city is known for—beauty, rebelliousness and spirit. "It brings the whole buzzing soul of Bandra and plants it right in the heart of BKC," attests Tanaaz Treasurywala, a self-confessed Lil' Flea fanatic.

BKC's business zone credentials are never in doubt though. Wherever you turn, you're accosted by towering high-rises, impeccably manicured lawns, eerily spotless lanes, gleaming glass edifices, and a veritable cashgasm of the world's big money players; Google, Tata, Deutsche Bank, ICICI, and IBM to name a few. Reliance makes a predictably gigantic splash in this ocean of business, with its JIO Gardens further offering a curious amusement park-car park feel. It all felt quite alien at first, but there's no denying the fact that BKC has now transformed into a true international destination for business, at par with anything in the world. And along the way, it has, quite

CLOCKWISE:
Soda Bottle
Openerwala's
retro vibe;
vegetable chive
dumplings
at Yauatcha;
live acts at The
Lil' Flea.

sneakily, acquired genuine personality and whisper it slowly, even some swagger. This strut can be put down to the wealth of chic standalone cafés, stunning luxury properties and award-winning restaurants within its fold.

YAUATCHA

On the more fine-dining side of things, Yauatcha (91/9222-222-800) continues to evolve and prosper. This cousin to the highly vaunted Hakkasan and heir to a Michelin-starred London predecessor is sex on a bamboo stick. Its traditional Chinese teahouse ethos is an invitation to gather, share and relish, with not a single Confucius saying in sight. Either choose the sexy, neon-lit bar for their classic Cha La Lai or head for one of the low tables and tuck into Steamed Prawns coated with White Fungus a textured masterpiece that culminates in the hidden surprise of duck liver.

"Being here is like being in Singapore or Dubai," opines Rahul Mirza, a business analyst at one of the leading multinational banks. "It's clean, everything moves smoothly and quickly—just what a commercial zone should be." Ahmed appears particularly pleased with BKC growing lifestyle credentials. "I love the fact that it's becoming a city within a city. I live in Bandra itself, I come to work here, I often take in concerts or shows like the Big Boys Toy Expo at the MMRDA Grounds, and for post-work, you're spoilt for choice when it comes to downing a drink or having a great meal."



SOFITEL'S

For outright luxury, it's BKC's trifecta of the Sofitel (91-22/6117-5000), the Trident (91-22/6672-7777) and the Grand Hyatt (91-22/6676-1234) that delivers with élan. Sofitel's Le Bar Diamantaire is an unapologetically lavish affair, with a Versace-esque wine tower at the heart of things and two elevator pods providing exclusive mid-air drinking for those midnight rendezvous. At the Trident, Botticino is a fine paean to Italian flavours, with the three storey-high wine library housing some exquisite vintages. The Grand Hyatt makes its presence felt, and how, with China House Lounge—an unarguable Bombay legend with its stylish multi-level lounge, an LED-lit central island, the sprawling pagoda... and that remarkable Peking Duck.

MASALA LIBRARY

Staying with food, artistry and a touch of gimmickry define Masala Library (91-22/6642-4142)—acclaimed 'Czar of Indian Cuisine' Jiggs Kalra and his son Zorawar's Indian-accented contribution to molecular gastronomy. Here, liquid nitrogen entices a sense of magic out of your meals and traditional Indian dishes are transformed into quasi-science projects, albeit decidedly gorgeous ones. This is progressive Indian food brimming with sensuality, as with the Wild Mushroom 'Chai' where dehydrated mushrooms and truffle oil replace tealeaves and sugar. Does it descend too often into theatrics? Sure. Are you going to mind? Probably not.

LE PAIN QUOTODIEN

The choices Mirza speaks of are top-notch and eclectic. In Le Pain Quotodien (91-22/6643-1616) and Smoke House Deli (91-22/2653-0762), BKC has the newest members of two of Bombay's breeziest affairs... casual, conversational and very European. You're right at home in the midst of



CLOCKWISE: Masala Library; Le Pain Quotodien; jalebi caviar with saffron glaze and pistachio rabri at Masala Library.

communal tables, IKEA-like colour palettes, inventive wall deco, and delicious cosmopolitan fare... just the sort of places where a sandwich and a good book could lead to something as novel as conversations with strangers. At the Tham Brothers' (of Henry Tham and Trilogy) The Good Wife meanwhile (91-22/4010-9433), it's all about the cocktails, crafted with predictable flair by celebrity bartender Dimitri Lezinska. Savour The Wolf of BKC, a dark and sexy beast, growling with its Jim Beam, cardamom spray and orange zest tenacity.

Final thoughts on BKC's newfound prominence come from SodaBottleOpenerWala's AD Singh, one of India's foremost purveyors of fine dining. "I personally believe that the future of the standalone industry is in hubs like BKC where we don't disturb anybody," he opines. "It offers us a lovely mix of different kinds of customers at different times and is easy to reach from most of Bombay." As a passing thought, he concludes "It's products like SBOW that give spaces like BKC a soul and this is a very important balance for the urban jungle it is." ☺