



Phaltan

Nature Steeped in Heritage

In the day and age of packaged deals, what's your bet on finding a laidback town where jaggery-laden air still drips rich tradition and heritage? I say, garnish it with heart-warming camaraderie of the locals, and you have a trip worth making and cherishing forever.

Text & Photos: Rathina Sankari

“**W**here are you heading to next?” queried my Indian friend, Archana, over the phone from the cold, cold New Jersey. “Phaltan,” I said nonchalantly, but it sure did catch her attention. “That is a rural area, a taluka in the Satara district of Maharashtra. But, you will love it, for its history and its amiable locals,” was Archana’s verdict, who hails from the same town.

I for once decided to visit the rural expanse which has recently opened up to

tourism with an open mind and a no-frills outlook. One morning after driving for an hour and half from Pune on the NH4, followed by an hour’s bumpy ride through the village roads, I found myself in the picturesque town of Phaltan. Flanked on either side by sugarcane, onion and pomegranate fields, the drive had taken me through endless vistas of verdant beauty. It was the harvest season and the labourers were busy in the sugarcane fields cutting the cane and loading them on bullock carts or trucks to be taken to the sugar mills for further processing. Nomadic shepherds walked past with their

flocks of sheep and goats.

A rural taste

I stopped en-route at a pomegranate orchard and was greeted by the smiling wiry farmer, Adsool. His farm had been harvested few days back and he had sold his yield at the market. As he took me around his farm, he remarked that trade has been hit due to the recent demonetisation drive. Most markets were closed and he had managed to get a cheque payment due to the limited availability of liquid assets. But, he seemed content with what little he had. As I left





(Clockwise from left to right): In the interiors of Jabareshwar temple the Jain deity Mahavir is flanked by the monkey faced Hindu God Hanuman; Gold mounds ready to be packed and sold in the market; Normadic shepherds with their flock of sheep and goats; The liquid gold is cooled by gently stirring with long ladles

thanking him for his time, he handed me the amaranth fruits. “These are all that are left and you should take them home. Your kids will enjoy them,” he exclaimed.

That was my early taste of the hospitality of the locals of Phaltan, which is regarded the Kashi of Southern India. Legend has it that the Hindu god, Lord Ram passed by this region with his wife Sita when on exile. To quench her thirst, he had shot an arrow at a boulder which then released water to form the Banganga River. Today, the river is bone dry, but, the conviction that whosoever visits Phaltan is sure to realise the fruits of his labour is profound; hence, the name Phalpattan (Phal meaning fruits, pattan meaning town) which over the years transformed to Phaltan.

I checked into the comfortable Jakson Inn and after sipping their freshly made pomegranate juice, I started immediately with the efficient manager, Sachin, who agreed to be my guide. We drove through the narrow streets and reached the old quarters of the town with its rambling walls that stood defiant during the royal era.

A royal affair

Phaltan was ruled by the descendants of

the Maratha ruler, Naik Nimraj I Nimbalkar since the 13th century. Interestingly, the daughter of the 15th ascendant to the throne, Sai Bai married the charismatic Maratha Emperor, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. “Shivaji Maharaj was the son-in-law of this town,” voiced Sachin. In the heart of the town stands the Rajwada or palace which was the power centre of the Nimbalkar family. The old portion of the palace was constructed in the 19th century by the then ruler Shrimant Mudhojirao Janrao and later extended in the 20th century.

I walked through the beautifully done Rajwada which today is not occupied but maintained by the current descendants of the royal family. Some sections of the palace have been rented to a bank and a library. The rest of the area is a must visit when you are in Phaltan. The palace isn't open for the general public, but, if you stay at Jakson, they could secure the required permission from the royal family for a tour. The Rajwada also called Mudhoji Manmohan Palace has six open courtyards and majestic halls. The Suruchi Hall studded with teak pillars that have intricate carvings is the most beautiful of the lot. Every hall has a unique theme which distinguishes it from the rest

and brings out the grandeur and opulence of the heritage building. The decors of the Durbar Hall, Hirva Hall, Badami Hall and Gulabi Hall are in accordance to their names. Huge portraits of the royal family members, magnificent chandeliers, sprawling settees are peppered around the interiors of the palace. I am told that the beauty of this palace has been captured on silver screen in Bollywood films like ‘Bhool Bhulaiyaa’, ‘Khatta Meetha’ and the super-hit Marathi movie, ‘Katyar Kaljat’.

Awestruck, I left the palace to reach the adjacent arresting structure, the Ram Mandir, which is housed within the palace premises. I walked through the teak and stone structure below a canopy of glass chandeliers to reach the sanctum sanctorum. Devotees thronged to pay their respect to the striking black idols of Lord Ram, his consort Sita and brother Lakshman, dressed in blue finery. Neelima Petkar, wife of the temple priest, was busy serving the devotees prasad (blessed food). Her day had started at 4 am, after which she had bathed the idols and dressed them in regalia. When I queried about the history of the temple, she informed that it was Sagunabaisaheb from the royal family who commissioned the construction of

The temple is believed to be around seven centuries old

used to fuel the furnace for jaggery making. Continuous stirring of the sugarcane juice for long hours in large cauldrons results in the impurities rising to the surface which are removed by scumming, I was told. The men then transferred the viscous liquid into large pans and stirred them so that it could cool down. The ladies then filled it into numerous moulds which when solidified is extracted and sold as the final product.

The kind farmer handed me a steaming cup of tea prepared with jaggery. It was the perfect antidote on that chilly morning. Armed with two huge organic jaggery mounds, I held onto them as a talisman from the locals of Phaltan who are as sweet as the yields of their land. ■



How to reach

Phaltan is 110 km from Pune (2.5 hours) and 258 km (5.5 hours) from Mumbai by road. The nearest railway station, Lonand, is 29 km away. Trains from Mumbai and Pune do stop at Lonand.

Where to stay

Phaltan has limited options for a comfortable stay. But, with a choice like Jackson Inn, you wouldn't want more. India's first Three Star, LEED GREEN Platinum rated hotel with a contemporary bar and multi-cuisine restaurant, it is the best bet to put your feet up. If you wish, the hotel staff can arrange a picnic below the wind turbines in Pussegaoan. The region is peppered with magnificent forts steeped in history like the Pratapgad, Sajjangarh and Ajinkyatara Forts which deserve a visit. During the rainy season, Thoseghar waterfalls are bountiful and indeed eye-catching. Also, Maharashtra's own valley of flowers, Kaas Plateau is not to be missed when in the vicinity.

the temple. She pointed to the concentric ceiling of the temple and said, "Look at these stones; they have been fixed centuries ago without any support, it is indeed an architectural marvel." Neelima's ancestors relocated to Phaltan from a village near Kashi on the instructions Sagunabaisaheb.

A cultural melange

I strolled out of the palace campus and stood on the busy road as two wheelers and pedestrians breezed past me. Sachin pointed to an old stone structure across the road and stated, "You know, that is an ancient Jain temple, but, the presiding deity is the Hindu god, Lord Shiva." His remark got me intrigued and I was keen to explore its interiors and comprehend its history. We ambled to the temple where men past their prime sat on its steps catching up on the day's gossips. One of them pointed to the little Mahavir bas-reliefs at the doorstep of the temple. Legend has it that the Mughal general, Afzal Khan from the court of Bijapur, demolished the temples on his way to Pratapgad. This temple too suffered the same fate. Later, the Hindus forcibly installed a shivling, hence, the temple is called Jabareswar. "Jabardasti, Mahadeo ki pindh

rakhi isliye bhagwan ka naam jabareshwar hai (It was by force that Mahadeo established the idol, thus, the name)," they exclaimed. The temple is believed to be around seven centuries old and the architectural style is similar to that of Ajanta, Ellora and Khajuraho in line with the Hemadpanthi structures. Today, the monument is managed by the Archeological Survey of India.

On a sweet high

It had been a long and interesting day. I had actually managed to take a leaf from the history books of India in my short stay. A first-hand experience is definitely worth the wait. After a hearty meal at the Green Bean multi-cuisine restaurant in Jackson Inn, I retired to my room. Next morning, we made our way through dirt roads and sugarcane fields to Padegaon village near Phaltan. Savta Nana Shinde, a farmer in his seventies, who owns 300 acres of sugarcane fields, welcomed us to his gurhal, a jaggery making unit. The aroma of fresh jaggery hung heavy in the air, which sure was mouth-watering. The crusher was whirring as the juice was being extracted. I watched the men and women dry the bagasse in the recently harvested open fields. They were

Crushed cane called Bagase dried in the recently harvested open fields

