

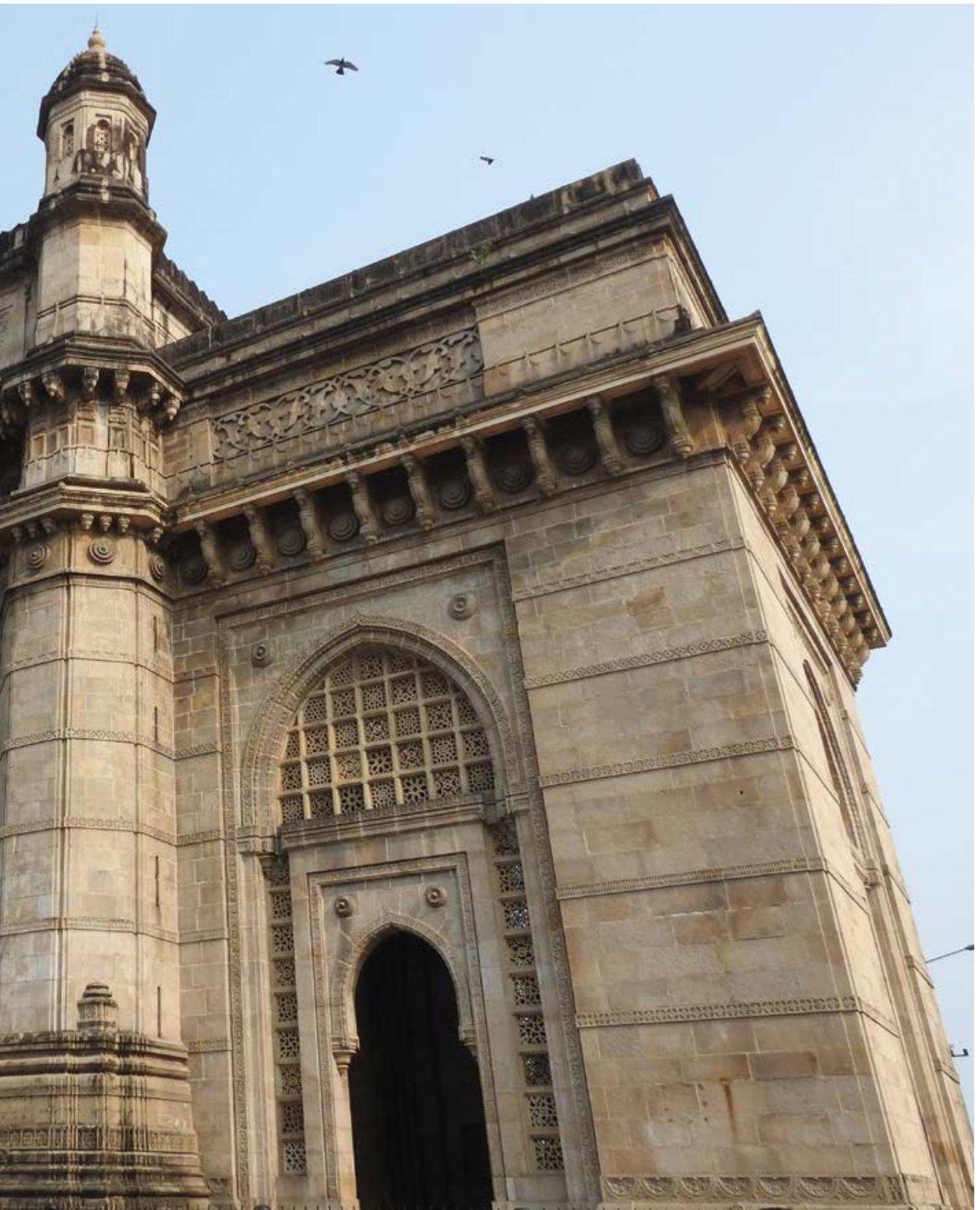
48 Hours in Mumbai

As we step off the train at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj station, I hear many locals still interchangeably referring to Mumbai as Bombay. I wonder if it's solely for our benefit. Two decades have passed since the name change – so that it honours the city's patron deity, Hindu goddess Mumbadevi, and speaks of India's independence – and yet it still only seems to be catching on now.

Home to over 22 million people, Mumbai is India's largest metropolis. It's not called the City of Dreams for nothing as hundreds of thousands of people journey here to study, pursue their Bollywood careers, become part of the IT work force, and with hopes of becoming *crorepatis* (what the locals call millionaires). Their aspirational grit has mixed with the humidity and the flavoursome scent of the popular street food *pav bhaji*.

You have to be fast to keep pace with the city's energy. And though our 21-day G Adventures guided group tour from northern to southern India is packed with adventure, there's always sufficient free time on the itinerary. We choose to spend our down time exploring our new stop-over, so within the hour we drop off our bags at Supreme Hotel and hail a taxi. Our knowledgeable driver, Idrish Ahmed, doubles up as our guide. Unlike other Indian cities, tuk-tuks are not permitted in the CBD, so taxis are the







best way to navigate the metropolis. Over the next four-and-a-half hours we make 12 stops at the city's most popular landmarks. It also gives us the chance to ogle Mumbai's collection of over 200 Art Deco buildings and Mughal-Gothic style hotels studded along the way.

Canoodling couples sit along the promenade of the 3.6 km-long crescent-shaped Marine Drive. The seaside road is also known as Queen's Necklace as at night the street lights resemble a string of pearls. By day it often hides behind a heavy ocean mist. Children crowd around ice-cream sellers at Chowpatty Beach on the northern end of the stretch, watched over by their parents from the many street-food vendors that serve up *bhelpuri*.

From here we drive through the quieter, upscale Malabar Hills suburb to the manicured Hanging Gardens that float atop the city's underground water reservoirs. From here it offers beautiful views over the Arabian Sea. The pathway leads us past hedges modelled in the shape of elephants and giraffes, as well as locals unwrapping their home-made lunch as they sit on the many benches.

South Africans will appreciate a visit to Mani Bhavan, which was Mahatma Gandhi's home and the epicentre of his political activities from 1917 to 1934. Numerous photographs, press clippings, and letters relate to his time in South Africa, where he practiced Satyagraha. The museum also displays what is most likely Gandhi's most famous letter – to Adolf Hitler asking him to refrain from war.

After gazing up at the 27-storey Antilia building, the ostentatious \$2-billion home of India's wealthiest person, Mukesh Ambani,

we make our way to Dhobi Ghat – the city's largest open-air laundromat, servicing the city's hotels and hospitals. This juxtaposition is an almost perfect real-life illustration of the many contrasts experienced in Mumbai – and indeed in India – every day.

Another of the city's most recognisable landmarks is the Gateway of India. The foundation stones of the 26 m-high basalt arch were erected in 1911 to commemorate the arrival of King George V and Queen Mary on a state visit to the colony, but it was only completed in 1924. Since then it has welcomed many a seafaring visitor, as well as local and international travellers.

Its popular-culture equivalent is Leopold Café, where we dine. Though the food and drinks here may be somewhat pricier compared to other restaurants, the surcharge is due to the fact that it's been immortalised in renowned novel, *Shantaram*. Author Gregory David Roberts was a regular during his time in Mumbai and is the reason for its somewhat cult status.

By 06h00 the following morning, fishing boats start floating into Sassoon Docks and dock along the concrete pier. Fishermen offload their catch, while hunched women start shelling the shrimp we'll most likely eat for dinner. Baby sharks, squids, sting rays, lobsters, barracudas, and small fish are displayed in colourful plastic buckets, polystyrene boxes, and on top of wooden tables. Some merchants catch their clients' attention by waving their catch about in the air. Auctioneers scour the crowds for the highest bidder.

Rainbow-coloured boats go from the Gateway of India to Elephanta Caves every 30 minutes. This UNESCO World Heritage Site, which dates back to the 5th century, is

a collection of cave temples and rock-cut stone sculptures dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva.

After lunch, lace up your sneakers and follow the interactive map of Art Deco buildings catalogued by Atul Kumar and his team at Art Deco Mumbai. The NGO's online inventory filters the localities, features, and elements of each building they have classified. The Regal, Liberty, and Eros theatres are the easiest to recognise. Alternatively, try joining their hour-long guided walking tours led by one of their architects. They'll narrate the characteristic features of Art Deco architecture – or Bombay Deco as it's called here – such as curving balconies, swirling grillwork, cylindrical balconies, and eyebrow window ledges.

For your final rendezvous head off to one of the city's best-known watering holes, The Harbour Bar at the Taj Mahal Palace, for a farewell Bombay Sapphire and tonic before you G-Adventure off to the next city.

For more info about this G Adventures tour, visit www.gadventures.com.

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