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Order in chaos: experiencing the other side of Mumbai

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Tied in a single bundle by their webbing straps, I count a dozen lunch bags on the shoulder of the *dabbawala*. He will mount the bundle on the front of his bicycle, another is already slung across the back, and take his deliveries from this informal sorting station on the corner of a busy Mumbai intersection to office workers waiting for food prepared at home by their wives or mothers a few hours earlier. There are nine *dabbawalas* (roughly translated as "lunch-box men") in his group, and another 5,000 in the city at large, and although he is most likely illiterate, coded labels on every bag tell him where to go. No computers. No barcode scanners. No central sorting staff. No hierarchy at all except for an overseer elected from and by his group. He will weave calmly through Mumbai's traffic free-for-all, recognisable if not by his loaded bike then by his white forage cap, and, remarkably, he and his colleagues will make a mistake just once in every 16 million deliveries. The *dabbawalas* are so efficient, in fact, that their operation is often cited by academics at the Harvard Business School, and when you know a little of the way they work you know a little about the way the city around them works; practices that survived centuries of European bureaucracy stoke one of the 21st century's most important commercial engines.

Goa has its beaches, Agra the Taj Mahal, but witnessing the anarchic inner workings of Mumbai is a sight that's worth the eight-hour flight. This is the Indian New York: the financial hub, a migrants' city, its coastal islands claimed and raised up by 21 million inhabitants and its vertiginous skyline. And like New York, they even named it twice. Bombay was the Portuguese name for their 16th-century colony, while Mumbai, the city's name since 1995, is the patron goddess of the fishing caste that lived here first and still operates from ramshackle villages now surrounded by the city's towering business district in Colaba - a region where the price of an apartment would not look out of place in the window of a London estate agent.

Stay at: a Taj Hotel

Built in 1903, the Taj Mahal Palace hotel was founded by the father of Indian industry, Jamsetji Tata, whose family name can be seen everywhere from the fenders of every other truck on the road to the hoardings above every Starbucks. The Palace has opened its doors to India's most illustrious residents and visitors, from Kanye West to Ravi Shankar, who legend has it taught John Lennon to play the sitar here. However, its nearby sister hotel, the Vivanta by Taj President, is more *GQ*'s speed, a super-sleek five-star where that famously formal Indian service culture is tempered. This is business-class hospitality at premium-economy prices. That said, if you've promised yourself (or, just as likely, your partner) you'll keep work emails till when you get home, the Lands End is the third Mumbai Taj (told

you the Tatas are ubiquitous), this time in the Bandra district, its more typical holiday vibe presents a place to more properly switch off.

Where to party: Bandra

If Mumbai is India's New York, Bandra, located north of Colaba, is its Beverly Hills. Known as the home of Bollywood, Bandra is where its stars reside and the quality of the clubs and restaurants here are as colourful as their local patrons. If you're staying at the Lands End, drinks at [Bungalow 9](#) are a short walk away on St John Baptist Road. A little further north, on the busy Linking Road strip, you'll find the [Great Punjab Restaurant](#), whose tandoori dishes in particular are worth the excursion. If you somehow manage to exhaust Bandra (you won't), neighbouring Juhu is becoming known as a hotspot among Mumbai's young executive class, and if business keeps you in Colaba, the Vivanta's Wink bar is the most kicking night spot in tuc tuc distance.

Where to eat: Masala Bay (and its neighbour)

If you prefer to ease your palate into the strong flavours of true Indian cuisine, the Taj Lands End has just opened an outpost of Knightsbridge's famous Italian restaurant San Lorenzo. Its linguine is laced with more chili than you'd expect in London, but at least you'll be prepared for the feisty fare available next door at the Lands End's other restaurant, Masala Bay. We recommend the Kesari Murgh Ki Chaamp, a clay-oven-cooked chicken starter, and the Anardana Tawa Macchi, a fish main with pomegranate seeds. Street food is readily available across the city, but take an experienced guide to help steer you clear of dishes less palatable to European visitors.

What to see: Mumbai's extraordinary infrastructure

In fact, an experienced guide will stand you in good stead throughout your visit. Mumbai is not a threatening city - far from it - but it is vast, sprawling and daunting. Local firms can arrange tours of the city by coach or by foot and show you corners of the city you might never find on your own. The Sassoon Docks is a working fishing jetty that appears to function much the same today as it did a century ago. Dhobi Ghat is the world's largest outdoor laundry, hardly an unknown attraction, but curious visitors will need to be accompanied by a local host. The expert guides at Greaves Travel can arrange bespoke tours of the city by coach and by foot, and will even arrange a brief and insightful meeting with the *dabbawalas* - just don't distract them for long; they won't thank you for prompting that one mistake in 16 million.

Greaves Travel offer tours to Mumbai - including return flights on Virgin Atlantic, four nights accommodation at Vivanta by Taj - President and Taj Lands End - from £1,350 per person. greavesindia.co.uk

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