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Into the Western Ghats

Mumbai is booming. But when it all gets too much, join the city's elite and Bollywood stars and escape to a pioneering retreat, making the most of the wild, mountainous state of Maharashtra, whose backcountry remains a terra incognita for most tourists

WORDS: Sarah Barrell





The cow looks utterly indifferent to my offering. In the merciful shade of Mumbai's grand, turreted Central Telegraph Office, I realise this sacred bovine and I are in something of a standoff: me, determined to fulfil the tradition of giving alms to a cow; she, stuffed to the haunches with densely packed patties of grass that passersby have been plying her with since sunrise.

This is not auspicious. Since arriving in Mumbai late last night, everything has been off-kilter. At Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport, having braced myself for the seething heat and scrum, I was instead met with Arctic air-con, vast canvasses of public art by the venerable Rajeey Sethi and soaring glass ceilings supported by pillars fashioned to resemble peacock fans. This recently reopened terminal, revamped to the tune of \$2bn (£1.2bn), is as contemporary as it is palatial — such a departure from the infamous tourist holding pen of yore, in fact, that I find myself lingering, suddenly immune to both jet lag and airport ennui.

The transfer to my hotel, Taj Lands End, out in the leafy, beachy district of Lands End, is just as discombobulating. Girded for the standard two-hour crawl through this gridlocked city that never sleeps, I'm zipped from south to north in barely more than 30 minutes, thanks to a spanking new circuit of airport access roads and the revolutionary Bandra-Worli Sea Link, a cable-stayed bridge whose cantilevered heights resemble a fleet of tall-masted sailing ships. It elegantly facilitates transit between Downtown and the opulent Bollywood suburbs in mere minutes. I'm checked in and wearing PJs before I'd even expected to be clear of

immigration. In the four years since my last visit, it seems Mumbai has moved on.

Churchgate is my destination the next morning. I need somewhere to steady my sense of place. This densely packed square mile is home to such flamboyant Indo-Saracenic structures as the Mumbai Central railway station, Bombay High Court, and leafy Oval Maidan, where cricket whites glare against the browning grass. If you want to revisit the days of the Raj, this is the spot. Only, outside the Central Telegraph Office (CTO), the cow won't indulge my superstitions and, I then find, the CTO is now defunct.

Last year, after serving the country for over a century and a half, the headquarters of India's telegraph system shut down. The service was said to be losing around £14m annually but was still loyally and widely used, with some 5,000 missives sent daily. When the final dots and dashes were tapped out at this 19th-century redbrick neo-gothic pile, they were the world's last. Journalists from Mumbai to Manhattan punned themselves into knots with such headlines as 'India to send world's last telegram. STOP' and 'Why the full stop? STOP.'

But on Churchgate's wide boulevards, life goes on. Red double-decker buses rumble incongruously under the banyan trees. It's school holidays, pre-monsoon and the city feels oddly deserted. For those who can afford to take time out from jobs, the relative cool of hill stations and calm of family villages are calling. Or, for those who can afford to travel in style — and Maximum City is home to a disproportionate number of such wealthy individuals — it's off to a remote wilderness retreat. "It's a notable trend for hotels to have a remote, rural outpost," says Sudip Sinha, from the JW Marriot Hotel Mumbai, over brunch in its sceney Lotus Cafe. "Many of the big hospitality chains are seeking special places to open destination hotels, most catering to the growing domestic market."

And well they might. At the adjacent table to ours sits not one but two Bollywood stars, polished, worldly individuals who'd surely put implicit trust in their favourite hotel brand to take them into the bush while providing just the right amount of five-star back-up. And a key part of this refined rural experience, it turns out, is a helipad. Because, of course, there's romantic-remote and then there's hours-on-coccyx-crushing-unsealed-roads-with-no-wi-fi-signal remote. Which clearly won't do for the Twitter-fuelled Bollywood glitterati. It has to do for me, however, as the resort I'm bound for, the new Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa, has yet to obtain a licence for helicopter landings. The much-vaunted seaplane transfer (surely the glammest way to exit Mumbai) is suffering from the same bureaucratic hold-ups. Such is life for a five-star hotel in the midst of Maharashtra nowhere. ➤

Clockwise from top: Tiffin wallah delivers food outside Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus; taxi interior, Mumbai; Bandra-Worli Sea Link

INDIA

A rural retreat

High above the cool blues and scattered islands of Lake Pavna, Shillim is set in a 3,500-acre privately owned estate, deep in a scantily populated section of India's Western Ghats. Until helicopters or seaplanes start making the short hop, the three-hour journey by road from Mumbai has to suffice. Once the hotel's plush transfer car has fought its way through Mumbai's snarling, signpost-lacking streets and out of a seemingly endless sprawl of identikit satellite cities, the journey becomes entirely green and pleasant. Rice fields give way to bamboo plantations, which occasionally open onto a village, where blossoming flame trees burn scarlet against the dun and dust.

A final, tightly snaking ascent sees the valley fall hundreds of stomach-lurching metres below, and the sheer size and scale of the Ghats becomes apparent. Older than the Himalayas, this vast range runs parallel to the Indian Ocean, almost uninterrupted through the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Goa, Gujarat and Maharashtra. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, this mountainous wall climbs to a height of 8,841ft and is recognised as one of the world's eight 'hottest hotspots' of endemism and biological diversity. Its high montane forest ecosystems govern India's monsoon, moderating the region's tropical climate. These are some pretty momentous mountains on which to build a hotel.

"We get peacocks roaming around the bar," says Shillim's general manager, Andreas Kraemer, on arrival. "They often appear at the same time of day, while the guests are having a sundowner. It's like they're waiting to be offered a drink."

Deer, too, he tells me, make skittish appearances around the reception area: a theatrical, stage-like terrace overlooking an endless landscape of densely layered ranges receding to the horizon. The resort's 99 villas are spread across the estate, resembling a scattered rural village; their Californian ranch-style aesthetic, all cool muted tones, bare concrete and oversized cactuses somehow perfect against the crackling-dry, pre-monsoon forest. With desiccated riverbeds and a crisp forest canopy, it's hard to imagine this place in the rain.

"There are waterfalls all over the estate in wet season," says Shillim's spa director, Dr Rajneesh Kumar, as I head out for a quick orientating walk around the estate's *raison d'être*: a sprawling 70-acre wellness centre. "You can count 40 of them from the Mountain Bar & Bistro alone. Cloud and mist come down around the trees, rivers fill and jungle crabs reappear. It's a different world."

The cracked ground looks far from supportive of these amphibious creatures but in any season, Shillim's setting is instantly soothing. As we walk, lemongrass rustles in the Ghats' ever-present breeze, releasing a sweet citrus scent. We find cooling henna, used in the spa's body wraps, pungent wild figs are good for treating inflammation, and the 'miracle' neem tree, used in ayurvedic medicine for thousands of years.

Such is the bucolic stupor induced by these surroundings I barely need attend the morning's yoga class. But as with everything in this resort, from restaurants to strategically placed sun loungers, the yoga pavilion is nothing if not tantalisingly positioned for panoramic vistas. Tailored to each guest's abilities, classes are as rigorous or relaxed as required. I go through a blissfully stretchy series of sun salutations with time to take in the views, before flopping down for *yoga nidra* meditation, guided by Shillim's white *lungi*-clad yogi who chants "Relaaaaax, relaaaaax, relaaaaax," with every outbreath. My efforts to relaaaaax are only slightly hampered by an eagle-eyed member of housekeeping brandishing an electronic flycatcher that zips and sizzles with every victim. Om; zzzt!

The over-attentive service can be commonplace at five-star retreats, but is often counter-intuitive when you've come to a



place to be left alone, flies and all. The preferred service style of India's domestic and foreign guests can be poles apart. I'm bamboozled by the fleet of butler-driven golf buggies that buzz like worker bees, transporting guests around the grounds. Walking — let's face it, they're at a spa retreat — would surely be more fitting. But each to their own, and if you're expecting ageing Bollywood luminaries like Amitabh Bachchan (the prolific actor who recently played Meyer Wolfsheim in *The Great Gatsby*) to fly in on your inaugural helicopter transfer, I guess it behoves you to have all bases, and hilly paths covered.

Shivaji's legacy

But it's the paths into mountains that are calling me. Until the Shillim was built, the tiny local village after which it was named — no more than a scattered settlement of mud brick houses — didn't appear on any maps. It's wild out there. ➤

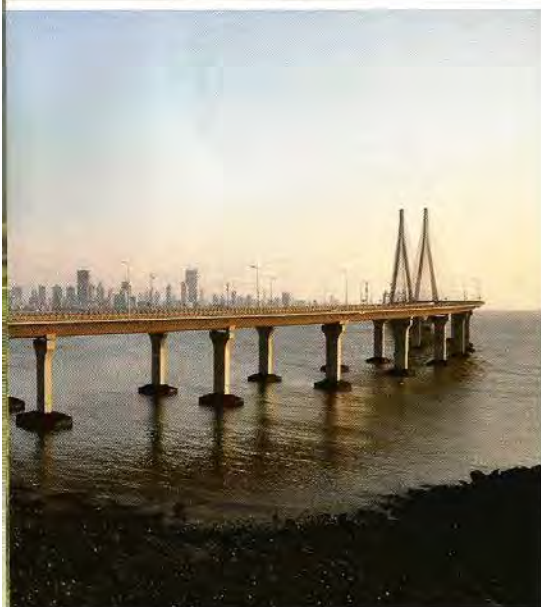
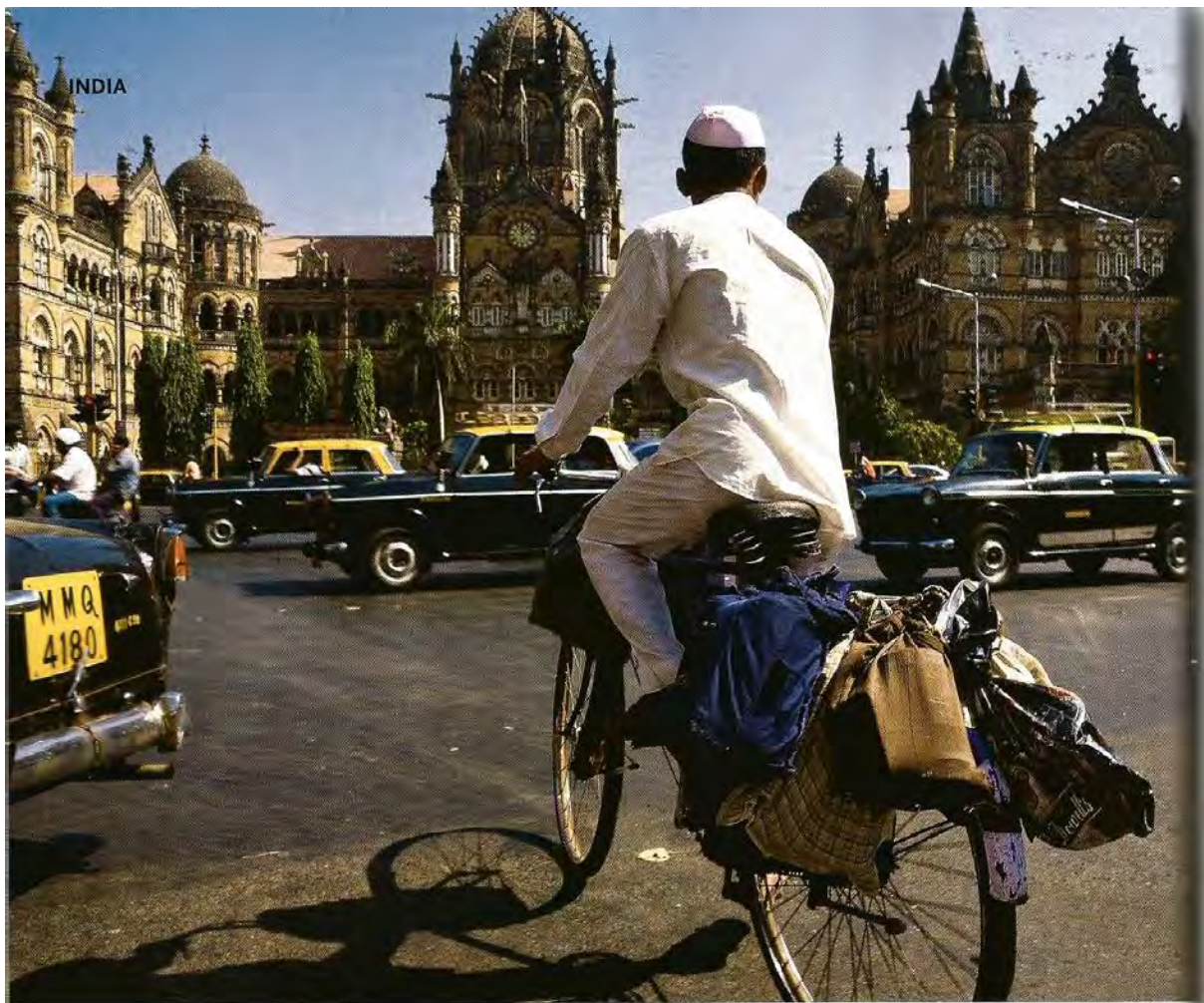
Clockwise from top: Villa, Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa; pool, Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa; Lohgad, Karla Caves

IMAGES: GETTY; HILTON



INDIA







A short trek from the resort's confines and concrete paths narrow to sandy tracks. Here, along dried riverbeds, I immediately find leopard footprints, fresh from the night before, according to local guide Saga Gama. Clearly delighted to lead a tourist who's not reliant on a golf buggy, we stride up the mountainside, pausing to pick up some scattered porcupine quills (the work of the leopard?), try to name some of the Ghats' impressive tally of endemic birds, and gawp as a 10-strong troop of langur monkeys crash through the treetops above us.

Ridge walks here can take you across the ranges for days without descending; most offering top-of-the-world 360-degree panoramas. It was here in the 17th century that Shivaji, India's most revered warrior, leader and all-round dude, set up his home, the strategic hub of the once all-powerful Maratha Empire. Shivaji controlled territory extending thousands of miles across the Western Ghats using a chain of over 300 forts — most Portuguese-built. Their angular outlines are ever present in these mountains, squaring off peaks with military precision. Today, everything from Mumbai's airport to suburban kebab shops bear his name.

Cresting the summit above the village, I can see the twin Shivaji forts of Tikona and Tung eyeballing each other at 3,280ft, a strategic line of sight that continues to the nearby fortifications of Visapur and Lohgad, and across the Ghats. These are no forsaken foundations. Within the outer walls, which snake along the mountainsides as if grown from the rock itself, trekkers make pilgrimage to find intact temples — once a powerful inspiration to Maratha fighters — and, at Visapur, a 10ft-long cannon lying across the ground like a fallen tree.

The vestiges of Shivaji's realm can be seen down on the ground, too. The town of Lonavala sits just below Visapur, a monsoon season retreat and home to two rock-cut cave temples. Directly in the line of cannon fire, pockmarked and crumbling as they are, these still rank among the oldest and finest examples of early Buddhist art in India. After the calm of the mountains, the crush and clamour of Lonavala comes as a sharp contrast — most of it seems to be concentrated around the steps leading up to Karla Caves. Here, heavy-skirted women from the local Adivasi tribe sit shoulder to shoulder,

selling wild blueberries, fresh limewater, peeled cucumbers eaten with generous pinches of salt, and cooling buttermilk. At the summit, I find a goat chained up outside a packed little Hindu temple, a string of jasmine around its neck. It's the weekend of the Palkhi Festival, with sacrifices honouring Ekvira Devi, goddess of this clamorous place of worship.

Karla Caves, meanwhile, the towering 200BC Buddhist temple that's — in theory — the main attraction, is largely being ignored, leaving me free to wander in awe under its wooden buttressed roof. Almost 40 pillars support its musty ceiling, each topped by exquisitely preserved stone sculptures of kneeling elephants, the faces of their mounts animated with expressions of mischief and excitement that utterly belie their antiquity. It's joyous stuff, augmented by the clanging bells and hubbub from the Hindu temple outside. A complete contrast, Bhaja Caves, just across town, is a far calmer experience, at least once the trail of tuk-tuks and trucks and gangs of scrappy dogs we've tailed across Lonavala's sizeable railways tracks have been ditched along the highway.

Set deep into a deserted suburban hillside, these 18 caves and 14 bell-like stone stupors recall the mystical rock churches of Ethiopia. I'm half expecting to see a bearded ascetic appear from a shadowy recess. Instead, I interrupt a family from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu picnicking in the shade. There's just time, before my Mumbai express train, to take up their recommendation of a trip to Lonavala's Celebrity Wax Museum. Expecting selfies with a waxwork Angelina, I instead meet an earnest parade of Maharashtra's great and good, from spiritual leaders to unionists and revolutionaries.

I doze as the Deccan Express cuts through Maharashtra's immense mountain walls. My cosseted foray into Mumbai's hinterland may be ending with a first-class rail ride but this is no heli transfer; the heat is soporific. Yet each time I open heavy, lidded eyes, Shivaji's forts appear like sentinels, peak after towering peak. A wilderness watched over. ►

From left: Wax model of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Celebrity Wax Museum; Lonavala

INDIA



ESSENTIALS *India*

GETTING THERE

Virgin Atlantic, Air India, British Airways and Jet Airways all fly direct from Heathrow. virgin-atlantic.com, airindia.com, ba.com, jetairways.com
Average journey time: 9h.

GETTING AROUND

The state of Maharashtra is vast, with domestic flights connecting the most distant destinations. However, the best way to travel is by land, either hiring a driver (less expensive than it sounds), or using the comprehensive rail network — supplemented by private long-distance buses and rickety state buses to reach remote destinations.

WHEN TO GO

October–March is the most comfortable time to deal with Maharashtra's fierce heat, with daily averages rarely creeping above 35°C. July–September is monsoon season — an atmospheric time to be in the hill stations, road conditions allowing.

NEED TO KNOW

Visas: A pre-paid visa and a passport with more than six-months validity are required for UK citizens. Apply online at least three weeks before you go at: in.vfsglobal.co.uk/touristvisa.html
Currency: Rupee (INR). £1 = INR 1.3.
Health: Standard travel vaccinations for India are required; some areas of the state may be malarial. Check with your GP.
International dial code: 00 91.
Time: GMT+5.5.

PLACES MENTIONED

Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport. csia.in
JW Marriott Hotel Mumbai. marriott.com
Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa. hilton.com
Taj Lands End. tajhotels.com
Abode. abodeboutiquehotels.com

MORE INFO

incredibleindia.org
maharashtratourism.gov.in

South India Handbook. RRP: £15.99.
(Footprint)
mumbaiboss.com bpbweekend.com
burrrp.com

HOW TO DO IT

Greaves India offers seven nights (two at the Oberoi, Mumbai, and five at the Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa) from £1,699 per person, including B&B, transfers, guide and sightseeing entrance fees plus return flights with Virgin Atlantic. Alternatively, 10 nights staying in Mumbai and touring Maharashtra, including three nights in the Vineyards of Nashik, a night in the city of Pune and three nights at the Hilton Shillim Estate Retreat & Spa, costs from £1,950 per person. Includes B&B, transfers, guide and sightseeing entrance fees and return flights with Virgin Atlantic. greavesindia.co.uk

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