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Urban Safari: Exploring Mumbai's Histories and Mysteries in a Jeep

Including the café where Ambedkar drafted the Constitution of India.



If you can't beat the traffic, join it! The Urban Safari from Khaki Tours introduces participants to Mumbai's history from a jeep. Illustration courtesy Khaki Tours

BY Kamakshi Ayyar POSTED ON December 12, 2016

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"Mark Twain once stayed in a top-floor suite at this hotel," our guide Bharat told us, pointing at a building across the street from the artsy Mumbai enclave of Kala Ghoda. "And Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founding father, used to come here to play billiards." We scrutinized the structure obediently, looking for signs

QUICK GUIDES

of its former glory. Watson's Hotel, Bharat says, is India's oldest cast iron building and was once the grandest hotel in Old Bombay.

It's hard to imagine considering the façade is crumbling and the window shutters are all but gone, but listening to our guide from Khaki Tours, I begin to see the building differently.

Built during the British Raj-era of the 1860s, Watson's once had an airy atrium and a grand ballroom where guests would often dance the night away. I pictured lords and ladies pulling up to the hotel in their carriages, top hats erect and jewellery sparkling.

Watson's was only one of the many sites on our guided jeep tour of the Fort precinct in south Mumbai. Dubbed an "urban safari" the tour hits about 50 places of historical significance along a 15km-route in four hours. At the start of our tour, we were handed a map of the places we'd be covering in Fort, a bottle of water, and a pair of wireless headphones that would enable us to hear Bharat over Mumbai's noisy traffic. Having been on an actual safari, I was quite excited about riding the jeep through my own urban jungle. Instead of keeping my eyes peeled for crocodiles lazing on rocks, I was scanning for stone reptiles carved into Gothic facades in the neighbourhood.



Guests are provided with wireless headphones so that they can hear the guide clearly despite the din of Mumbai traffic. Photo: Sharrell Cook

It's an immersive way to see the heritage district: far less walking than most tours, which are conducted on foot, and far more engaging, thanks to Bharat Gothoskar, an engineer and a history buff, who has been organising Mumbai heritage walks for a year now under the Khaki Tours banner.

The tour began on the steps of the grand Town Hall building, that houses the Asiatic Society of Mumbai, with a quick lesson on Mumbai's colonial history: How it was once ruled by the Portuguese, how it changed hands to the British, and how it played a crucial role in the freedom struggle and the drafting of the Indian Constitution. Our tour would follow the boundaries of the old fort that the British had built to protect their settlements in Mumbai. Learning about the historic events that took place a few feet from where I was standing sent shivers down my spine. It also reminded me of just how long my city has been around, and how much exploring I still had to do.



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Built in the 1830s, the Town Hall in south Mumbai, was described by Sir John Malcolm, the Governor of Mumbai in 1830, as "The most magnificent structure that taste and munificence combined have as yet erected in India." Photo: Sharrell Cook

Ambedkar's Favourite Chai pe Charcha Spot in Kala Ghoda

Our first stop was Rampart Row in Kala Ghoda. En route, we passed the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute building, once an ice warehouse that stored chunks of ice that were imported all the way from America. Inevitably, they would arrive half-melted but it was a very sought-after commodity, especially among the wealthy. The building now houses a society that promotes the study of religions, histories, and cultures of the East. At the end of Rampart Row, we halted near Silk Route, a restaurant easily identifiable by its red awning. Formerly known as the Wayside Inn, the eatery was a favourite of B.R. Ambedkar, who in fact, framed several parts of the Constitution of India here at table no. 4.

I was flabbergasted. Despite having studied the Constitution as a law student in a college not too far from Kala Ghoda, and having spent hours at the Rhythm House music store only a stone's throw away (and now sadly shuttered), I had no idea this tiny restaurant is where it all came together.

Colaba: The Birth of Mumbai Art Deco

After a brief stop at Watson's, we zipped over to Regal Cinema, winding through the Institute of Science along the way (the building has a herbarium and a butterfly garden which you can try visiting by requesting the security guards nicely). Mumbai has the second-largest collection of Art Deco buildings in the world, and Regal was one of its earliest. I've grown up watching movies at this cinema, staring up at the frowning faces carved on the façade and running up the wide stairs to the balcony seats, but I never knew how significant the building was in the city's landscape: Regal, I learned, was built in the early 1930s, and one of the city's earliest buildings to have air-conditioning, an elevator, and underground parking. As sleek, shiny cars drove past us, I imagined old-school automobiles lining up to disappear beneath Regal, its passengers ready to enjoy the latest flick. What a sight it must have been.



The still-functioning Hamilton Studios, tucked away in a lane in Ballard Estate, opened its doors in 1928 and was the official photo studio of the State of Bombay. Some stories speak of red carpets running from the studio to the main street to welcome royal patrons. Photo: Sharrell Cook

The Heartbreaking Story of Rajabai Tower

A drive along Oval Maidan brought us to the majestic Rajabai Clock Tower, where Bharat shared one of my favourite stories of the tour: Legend has it that Premchand Roychand, then one of Mumbai's wealthiest merchants, built the structure in the late 1870s for his mother, Rajabai, after whom it is named. A devout Jain who always ate her meals before sunset, his mother had trouble telling time because she was practically blind.

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Roychand built her a clock tower so that she would know just when the day was going to end. The clocktower has a grislier story, too. In 1891, two Parsi women fell to their death from the top of the building while trying to avoid an assailant. One of the women, Bachubai, was the wife of Ardeshir Godrej, founder of the famous Godrej business conglomerate. Ever since then, no one has been allowed to visit the top of Rajabai Tower.

The Mr. Universe Wall at the Yazdani Bakery

We needed some fortification after that spine-tingling tale and some shade from the hot mid-morning sun. A few more stops later and we paused at Yazdani, one of Mumbai's most famous Irani bakeries. Squished between low, shabby buildings, Yazdani is a popular stop for chai and butter-toast but I prefer the apple pie, that's full of warm, sweet goodness. The proprietor of the store drew our attention to the Mr. Universe wall that was covered in pictures of past winners. I was more interested in the huge trays of freshly baked pav and mawa cake that had just been filled. But we still had a lot of ground to cover, so the cake would have to wait.



The Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus is a Gothic masterpiece, with incredible architectural detail. Look out for the stone gargoyles and the sculptures of the lion and tiger that guard the main gates. Photo: Sharrell Cook

Our trip wound down with pit stops at CST (read about its architectural details [here](#)), and Flora Fountain—named for its marble statue of the goddess Flora, and also because it was donated to the city by a local agricultural society. We were intrigued by the small chapel next to the Royal Bombay Seamen's Society in Ballard Estate, which Bharat explained, had been built to remind sailors to “practise Christian values and not stray”.

I got off the jeep thinking that I would never see my home city the same way again. Buildings I had grown accustomed to suddenly took on new avatars, as structures of historical or aesthetical value. Roads I'd driven along were now re-imagined as imposing fort walls, built to keep the British safe. To me, the tour was a reminder of how blind I had been to my surroundings. Thankfully, all it takes is a few hours (and a great guide) to clear up the cataracts.





The Greek god Apollo marks the Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada building on Dadabhai Naoroji Road. The road has a number of buildings with fine carvings and sculptures on their facades. Photo: Sharrell Cook

THE GUIDE

Urban safari tours are in English, and run at 8a.m., 4p.m. and 7p.m. through the week.

Each safari jeep seats five, plus the guide and the driver; it can be hired for a group or booked by the seat. ₹2,499 per head; introductory price of ₹1,999 for the first 100 participants.

For details and to customize a tour, contact Bharat at 9820101641. More details on upcoming walks and contact information on Khaki Tours' [Facebook](#) page.



Kamakshi Ayyar is a former member of NGT India's digital team. She is partial to places by the sea and desserts in all forms. When she isn't raving about food, she's usually rambling on about the latest cosmic mysteries. She tweets as @kamakshi138.

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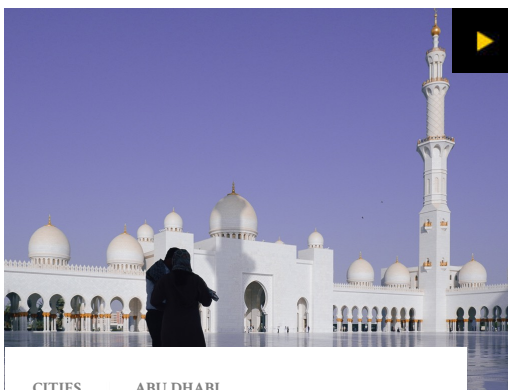
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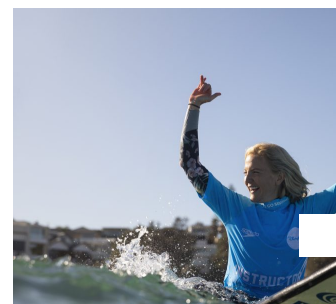
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