

A pilot's favorite Mumbai landing spots

BY MARK VANHOENACKER

One of the perks of my job as a Boeing 787 pilot for British Airways is the opportunity to explore the cities I fly to around the world. The challenge is to make the most of my frequent short layovers — typically 24 or 48 hours — and to balance favorite hangouts and precious downtime with new adventures.

Mumbai is one of my favorite cities and I've flown there dozens of times. Here's how a visit last spring unfolded.

FIRST STOP: HOTEL

We touched down in a light headwind on Runway 27 at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport at 8:30 a.m., but it was 10:15 by the time my colleagues and I reached our hotel north of Mumbai's traffic-clogged historic core. In every city I follow my 10 a.m. rule: If I reach my hotel before then, I'll sleep for three hours (we get early check-in). If I arrive after, I'll stay up until a reasonable bedtime. So, no nap for me.

My other rule — pilots love rules — is to try to banish jet lag with a swim. After 1,500 meters of freestyle in my hotel's nearly deserted pool and an instant coffee in my room, I headed down to the lobby.

SECOND STOP: THE BYCULLA NEIGHBORHOOD

Raja, a Mumbaikar friend, first recommended the Dr. Bhaui Daji Lad Museum to me years ago — it's Mumbai's oldest museum — but I'd never been, so I fired up the Uber app to book a taxi. (Autorickshaws, India's ubiquitous three-wheeled vehicles, while cheaper than taxis and easily booked on ride apps, aren't permitted in Mumbai's core districts.)

The 16-mile (26-kilometer) ride to the Byculla neighborhood took 50 minutes in Mumbai's traffic. Arriving just after midday, I found the museum's main building, a Palladian masterpiece, closed for renovation, so I detoured to the botanical gardens and



Clockwise from top: the bustle of Dr. Dadabhai Naoroji Road as viewed from the deserted terrace of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, which is best explored in a 90-minute guided visit; a harbor cruise, which provides city views and a cooling breeze; the 101-year-old Britannia & Co., a restaurant with a shabby-colonial vibe that is known for its carbonated sodas; the botanical garden, a popular destination for locals in Mumbai.



zoo next door. Entering through a grand triple archway, I strolled past several restored pavaas, the city's traditional public drinking fountains, and paused in the welcome shade of lush trees whose names — Ghost, Arjun, Pride of India — reminded me how far I'd flown. Mumbai's oldest public garden was festive and crowded — I spotted no other obvious foreigners, and twice I was asked to join a Mumbaikar family's photos.

THIRD STOP: LUNCH

By then it'd been seven hours since my breakfast in the cockpit, as dawn broke over the coast of Oman. So instead of a bite at one of my favorite Mumbai cafes (the Kala Ghoda Café or the vegetarian Café Knead), I decided on a proper lunch at Britannia & Co., a cash-only Parsee restaurant in the Ballard Estate, a portside business district developed in the early decades of the 20th century.

This 101-year-old restaurant's shabby-colonial vibe — ornamental metalwork in the arched entrances, a pendulum clock, dust-blotched chandeliers and swirling ceiling fans — is eminently Instagrammable, but it's the warm service and tasty food that draw me back. When I sat down around 2 p.m., my bow-tied waiter recommended the Paneer Berry Pulav (white and saffron rice with cheese, topped with cashews and barberries; 500 rupees, or about \$6) and — eyeing my soaked brow — a bottle of Palloni's neon-yellow ginger soda. Founded in 1865, Palloni has long been associated with Mumbai's Zoroastrian community, which helped popularize carbonated drinks throughout India (some merchants even adopted surdashes such as "Sodawaterwala").

As I ate, I did a bit of preparation for the next morning's flight home to London. I looked at an app that provides aviation-tuned weather forecasts: hot and dry here, gray and breezy back home. Then I read through the latest administrative notices for Mumbai's airport and for Heathrow.

FOURTH STOP: A HARBOR CRUISE

With six hours until my dinner with colleagues back at our hotel, I had time for a full loop around the New Custom House, one of my favorite examples of



Mumbai's Indo-Saracenic architecture. Then, in search of a cooling breeze, I walked down to the tourist-mobbed waterfront arch known as the Gateway of India.

From here boats leave for Elephanta Island, home to a UNESCO World Heritage collection of cave temples. I opted instead for an hourlong harbor cruise, and found a bench on the small boat's lower deck, where a westerly wind gusted through the open sides. I love to listen to podcasts about the cities I fly to, and as our vessel bobbed through the heat-glazed waves and the frothy wakes of freighters — Mumbai is home to India's finest natural harbor and one of its busiest ports — I fired up a podcast from the Economist maga-

zine by my Mumbai friend Leo Mirani about the future of his fast-changing city.

When the boat turned, I went to the bow to await the view of the Gateway. The gulls jabbered and dove and at the sea gate took form again in the peninsula's gray-gold veil of pre-monsoon haze. I imagined a journey to this city in a time before jetliners.

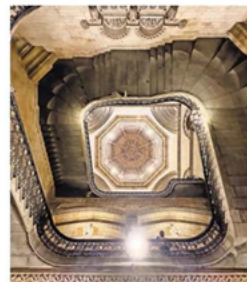
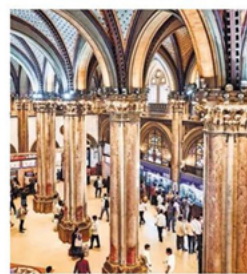
FIFTH STOP: TRAIN STATION AND BACK TO THE HOTEL

After disembarking at around 5 p.m., I walked to Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, which opened in 1887 on the site of Bori Bunder station, from which India's first passenger train departed in 1853. The station was designated a



UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004. To access its hidden treasures — including the balcony that offers a close-up view of the booking office's star-spangled ceiling and the station's deserted terraces, which look out over the bustle of Dr. Dadabhai Naoroji Road — I recommend Raconteur Tours' 90-minute guided exploration. A staff member helped me purchase my train ticket, and a businessman showed me where to stand on the platform. I was grateful for their assistance, because Mumbai's commuter trains are not for the fainthearted. Well beyond the inbound train stopped, arriving passengers were jumping off and departing ones were jumping on. When the train was finally stationary, I

joined the rush to board, snagging a window seat that faced backward, south toward the city center. My train wasn't air-conditioned. Indeed, my window had no glass, and the carriage entrances had no doors. One commuter was seated cross-legged on the floor in the entryway, reading a book, his knees out over the tracks as the train pulled out. Above him a young guy wearing a skinny necktie and headphones was hanging halfway out of the carriage, squinting in the slipstream as he typed on his smartphone with his free hand. I've long been fond of the term "place lag," which captures the bewilderment induced by the speed and planetary scale of the journeys enabled



Far left, a couple taking photographs at the botanical garden and zoo in Mumbai's Byculla neighborhood. Left, visitors helping themselves to water from one of several pavaas, or traditional public drinking fountains, that have been restored across the garden. Top, the ticketing hall and, above, the octagonal dome of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

by airliners. Surges of place lag are inevitable, even for pilots, so I've learned to embrace them. Yesterday I was in London; today I'm in Mumbai. It's an ordinary Thursday evening, not long before the monsoon; I'm seated on this rumbling train, looking into the blur of the receding city.

At my hotel, I joined my colleagues for dinner. After that I returned to my room, ironed a shirt for the morning's flight and then, at last, I slept.