

In India's second city, home to Bollywood and nearly 19 million people, food is akin to religion

Story **Christine Manfield**

Mesmerising Mumbai is the seductive cosmopolitan heartbeat of modern India, driven by corporate and international business. It's the economic powerhouse of the country, rich with educational opportunities amid the thriving, mad and glamorous Bollywood movie world. It's a key tourist destination, big on personality and style, exhilarating at every turn. Everyone, local or visitor, wants a piece of Mumbai's fame and fortune. India is a land of paradoxes, contradictions and contrasts, of highs and lows, of beauty and despair, of joy and sadness, of wealth and poverty – and Mumbai has it all in unequal measure. Sensory overload is an understatement.

India is a country defined by its festivals; one seems to be happening every day somewhere. Any excuse to party, to find and express joy. If you have seen a Bollywood movie you will have gleaned a glimpse of the drama of daily life in Mumbai, operatic and exaggerated as it may appear, which underpins the essence of India. A large, sprawling and massively overcrowded metropolis, where the squalor on the street competes with incredible luxury, it is a city of dreams where eternal optimism and enthusiasm fill the air. It lures an endless procession of eager hopefuls from across the country in search of opportunity and a better future. Yet, there seems to be some kind of perverse grounding as all walks of life mix on the streets. I am inspired and moved by the people, the architecture and the food. I love the chaos of Mumbai, where it is possible to find peace and tranquillity amid the mayhem, and gain an understanding and appreciation of its cultural complexity.

Contemporary India is incredibly diverse. Despite its long history of invasion and occupation, from Persians, Arabs, Portuguese, French and British, the subcontinent has maintained a strong sense of itself, using foreign influences to its advantage. This is most evident in the food. India's varied and ancient gastronomic tapestry is underpinned by a masterful and enviable use of spice. Flavours coaxed out by the astute and diverse use of spices and aromatics give each dish its particular character and flavour profile. The subtle nuances and variations are extraordinary and delightful, a joy to discover. And the neon brightness of saris is mirrored in the colours of many of the ingredients.

Mumbai's restaurant scene is the nation's most vibrant and its street food is brilliant. Nothing beats munching on delicious bhel puri – a snack of potato and peas dressed with tamarind and with crispy puffed rice flakes scattered over the top. Incredibly addictive, the taste sensation is firmly implanted in my memory bank. Equally addictive are pani puri – small puri puffs with spicy chick peas spooned into the hollow and dressed with tamarind yoghurt and mint – the best snack imaginable. I also love the piquancy of chat (highly spiced snacks) – such as broken puris mixed with steamed potato chunks and tossed with chat masala spice mix, the distinctive sour taste coming from amchur (dried mango powder). Also essential are crisp bhaji – vegetable fritters fried in a besan (chickpea flour) and turmeric batter. Vegetable-filled samosas and the luscious sweet threads of syrupy orange jalebi complete the picture. These treats give new meaning, dimension and credibility to fast food.

Part of the charm of visiting India is hitting the streets, sampling these snacks and watching the chai wallahs work at a furious pace; eating with the locals on Chowpatty Beach at sunset and joining the queue at the Great Pani Puri Seller, one of many food carts there. It's so unlike our understanding of beach culture. Everyone is totally covered, there's a sea of colour and saris and scarves, kurtas and kaftans; family groups and friends meet to share chai, snacks and gossip. No one swims. You can kick back over a cocktail at one of the new bars along Marine Drive and look across the bay to the Hanging Gardens and Malabar Hill, which has some of the most expensive real estate in the world. It's magical at night, the lights stretch out like a perfect pearl necklace.

My favourite Mumbai base is the opulent Taj Mahal Palace Hotel and

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Mumbai



Tower, which overlooks the grandiose Gate of India on the shores of the Arabian Sea and resembles a multi-tiered wedding cake. The damage done to this grand building in the dreadful terror attacks in late 2008, which numbed locals and the world alike, has been addressed but it seemed almost perverse to be tracing the footsteps of those intent on destruction.

However, from this central location it is easy to access the sights of the city and experience its exhilarating pace. Visit the historic railway station Victoria Terminus, all Gothic architectural splendour (and now officially named Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, or CST) and the bustling, noisy and frenetic Crawford Market and then have lunch at one of the local eating houses. I head for the Gujarati cafes around Churchgate and the densely populated Marine Lines area. It is mandatory to order a thali – start from the left and work your way around, mixing little bits with the mound of rice in the centre each time, using your right hand to scoop the food like a spoon – and turn to see hundreds of eyes fixed on you, seeing if you can do it like a real pro, as in a local.

Tiffin – or dabba – wallahs are an urban marvel. Theirs has to be the most ingenious way of serving millions of working people lunch every day – the food coming from home kitchens and delivered across the city in round, three-tiered metal containers called dabbas. Chai wallahs, with their mobile drinks service are on every street. Glasses of milky tea are served from a central point, carried by boys to passers-by, shop owners, people waiting at stations – anyone who wants one – and all for a pittance. Chai is the drink of the masses, transcending caste and creed.

There's beauty in the chaos. Now, more than ever, it's appropriate to marvel at the splendours that India and Mumbai have to offer – the people are engaging, the spirit is extraordinary, tested by terror attacks but never dulled. Glitzy skyscrapers and high-end shops blend seamlessly with ancient bazaars; and, as Danny Boyle's movie *Slumdog Millionaire* shows, the city

accommodates the filthy rich, a middle class and the numbingly poor in their squalid slums.

Mumbai's architecture also tells a story of this vast melting pot. It's worth checking out the 19th-century, Portuguese-style houses and villas in the heritage village of Khotachiwadi. I am also intrigued by the faded grandeur of the enormous Parsi houses and mansions around Malabar Hill and Kemps Corner and equally enamoured of Parsi food traditions. They have a strong presence in Mumbai and their repertoire offers a further dimension to the city's food.

The Parsis are Zoroastrians who arrived in India about 11 centuries ago as refugees fleeing religious persecution in Persia. Their cooking style is distinctive and they have assimilated their Arabic heritage perfectly with Indian and Western influences – yet another excellent example of the age-old practice of fusion. Parsis have adjusted and adapted to the ways of their adopted land and mingled with its people, respecting their customs and way of life while maintaining their own identity and remaining faithful to their religion and customs.

Parsi food offers another layer and perspective to Indian cuisine, with its mix of spices, dried fruits, nuts, eggs, chutneys and coconut that is different again to the Moghul cooking of the Arabs who settled in northern India. Sauces are simultaneously sharp and rich, with liberal use of pomegranate, tamarind and lime, and have been influenced by the Gujarati love of sweet and sour. The procession of dishes at any Parsi dinner is enough to stop you in your tracks.

This is the story of India and I continue to be amazed by its depth and diversity. As soon as I think I have a pretty good handle on it all, the regional differences and ingredients, something else just pops up to confuse and make me look at it all over again. Subtly, it continues to charm and inspire and confound. India is deeply spiritual and the unofficial religion is cricket – everyone is a zealot of the sport – but food is also a religion.

I keep coming back to Mumbai; it's like no other city, it feels like it's under constant reinvention. Most people speak English and are extremely helpful, and it's easy to navigate (having a driver is an affordable and stress-free option). The ubiquitous black and yellow vintage Fiat taxis are becoming endangered though, as the government enforces its plans for petrol reduction and a cleaner environment.

It's safe to walk around, although it pays to keep your wits about you and take the usual safety precautions that you would anywhere, even at home. Hawkers, touts and beggars are persistent, especially in the Colaba area and around the Gateway of India where they congregate. The occasional hashish dealer mutters his wares as he walks past but not enough to distract me from buying bangles (great presents to take home) on Shivaji Marg.

The world-class hotels in Mumbai (or Bombay as many locals call it, political correctness doesn't prevail) offer faultless service and a welcome respite from the frenzied street life. Security measures have been cranked up so expect to be scanned at a couple of checkpoints before entering them. Some middle-class residents are opening their houses as homestays, providing another viable accommodation option. And like any cosmopolitan city, Mumbai offers regional food at its restaurants, as well as Italian, Thai, Japanese, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Iranian, Iraqi and Chinese – the hard part is choosing.

The Beatles were on the money when they penned *The Magical Mystery Tour* in the '60s, capturing India's passionate spirit. The energy is palpable, there are deals to be had for the savvy traveller and you are guaranteed to be greeted with overwhelming optimism. Whatever time you choose, India offers exceptional value, in every sense. It's impossible to be indifferent to Mumbai, it penetrates the soul. There's never been a better time to go and I can't wait to return.

Christine Manfield is hosting a 13-day, small group tour to India starting on February 9, 2010. Details: www.epicurioustravel.com.au



SLEEPING

Taj Mahal Palace & Tower

Apollo Bunder, Colaba
tajhotels.com

The service in this grand old hotel is impeccable and it's hard not to want to just move in here. I prefer the glamour and charm of the heritage wing but the more modern Tower wing does have a terrific rooftop bar and restaurant – called Souk – splendid vantage points from which to enjoy the glittering city backdrop after sunset.

EATING

Swati Snacks

248 Tardeo Road (in the Karai Estate building)

Gujarati staples and Bombay snacks and queuing with the locals is part of the fun. Constantly heaving, its popularity has never dimmed and it serves some of the best street food in Mumbai. Try pani puri and bhel puri.

Bade Miya

Tulloch Rd, Apollo Bunder (behind the Taj Mahal Hotel)
Get the best kebabs in town

and sensational made-to-order roti breads from this legendary Muslim kebab stall. It's street food as live theatre, with an electric atmosphere.

Konkan Cafe

Taj President Hotel
Cuffe Parade, Colaba
tajhotels.com
Chef Ananda Solomon's food of India's Konkan coast (Maharashtra to Goa to Karnataka) is refreshingly authentic and honest – wonderfully complex flavours, astute seasoning and beautifully cooked.

Trishna Restaurant and Bar

7 Sai Baba Marg, Kala Ghoda
T: +91 (022) 2270 3213
Some of the best seafood is served in this smart restaurant, a favourite with the food savvy and businessmen alike.

Leopold Cafe

Colaba Causeway, Colaba
T: +91 (022) 2202 0131
Something of a travellers' institution, a rite of passage upon entering the city, the cafe (which opened in 1871) was made more famous by its mention in Gregory David

Roberts' *Shantaram* (an essential read during your stay). The food is pretty forgettable – but lounging over an icy beer or soft drink is the way to go.

Rajdhani

Shaikh Menon Street, Juma Majid, Crawford Market
T: +91 (022) 2344 9014
This Gujarati canteen feeds a multitude of office workers. The thali plate is beyond compare; for a mere 220 rupees (about \$6), your plate is quickly filled with all manner of vegetarian delights.