



Shaniwarwada

Pune, Maharashtra

## Being young in the Peshwa Capital

Pune, the Queen of the Deccan Plateau, is a place to be enjoyed better if you are young, if not by age, at least by heart. The city, once the capital of the Maratha Kings, today is a university and IT town and exudes a young vibe and the weather makes it better as the summer time is short. *Text and Pictures by Shivani Pandey*

**P**anoramic views of hills, an undulating landscape, the famous Western Ghats, offer beauty on a platter as you take the expressway route from Mumbai to Pune. This enchanting journey does give you an overactive time with your camera, but that is if you are there during the rains. While my visit was in the month of April the pictures that I clicked were filled with the heat of the

season as if waiting for the greens. It was pretty hot and the leaves and trees had not seen a shower in a long time. I picked up the famous chikki from Lonavla, a sweet made out of jaggery and very popular with the locals.

Closer to Pune, I took a detour to the Bhaja caves. These are a group of 22 Buddhist caves from 200 BC, with a rich collection of Buddhist art from that period. I was quite



Osho Ashram in Koregaon Park



disappointed as I saw a small cave-like structure on top of a hill, with a few hundred steps. Despite the hot weather, I made it right to the top and the effort was definitely worth it these caves can very much rival the more famous Ajanta Ellora.

After recovering from the journey to the caves, which had sapped me, I continued on my way to Pune. Near the city, I stop by for a refreshing drink and I decide on my itinerary for the next day over a very refreshing and cooling Kokam. The refreshing summer drink is made out of Kokam fruit, which is indigenous to the Western Ghats region of India, along the western coast.

Pune has been a major educational hub for Indian and foreign students as the city has hundreds of colleges and institutions with thousands of overseas students, mainly from Africa, Asia and the Middle East, studying in all disciplines. Post-graduate schools of Medicine, Engineering, Law, Management and even the famous Film & Television Institute of India are located here. These institutes are spread across the city as I see them driving through the city.

Next morning I head straight to Koregaon Park where the famous Osho Ashram is located. The famous Indian spiritual guru who primarily influenced the West during the 80's used to preach his philosophy from this ashram in India. I am greeted by Noorie (a name given to her by the ashram), a Japanese woman, who took me on a tour of the place. Noorie tells me she has stayed in the ashram since 2007. The ashram has mostly foreign guests and Noorie tells me that one can register and stay in the ashram but for a minimum stay of one month.

The ashram is split into two different campuses located on both sides of the street. One section has a guest house and

grocery store and a beautiful pool of water with wonderful reflections. There is a meditation hall on the first floor of the guest house building. Across the street is the official section. There is a huge courtyard at the end of which is a stage from where I was told Osho used to give his discourses. These days it is more of a relaxing place and the DJ was playing some international pop music. The residents of the ashram wearing maroon robes were dancing and swirling to the music, which is part of their letting go process before meditations. This section has a library, a pool and a spa as well as a food court. The library has a big section of books written by Osho.



Osho Centre

The music from the world of Osho features some great uplifting music, mostly instrumental. I pick up a few CD's but get confused with books as there is such a huge collection. If one is interested in spirituality then it is ideal if you make your choice of the books before coming here to save time. I really wanted to pick up some good titles as the bargains here were good and almost 25% lesser than the price in the outside market. As I stroll inside I see beautiful



*Aga Khan Palace*

water elements placed all around the immense greenery. The vibes are calm as expected from a place boasting spirituality. A lady cleans the Rolls Royce of Osho parked in the backyard. Osho incidentally had 99 Rolls Royce’.

My next stop is the Aga Khan Palace, which is also called the Gandhi National Memorial. The palace was built by Sir Sultan Muhammed Shah Aga Khan III, in the year 1892. His



grandson Prince Shah Karim al-Hussayni Aga Khan IV donated the palace to the Government of India in 1969, in memory of Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy. Mahatma Gandhi was held captive in this palace in the 1940’s. Kasturba Gandhi, his wife and Mahadev Desai, his long-time aide both died in this palace while in house arrest.

Their memorials were built inside the premises of the palace. The museum inside the palace has not just pictures but some of Mahatma Gandhi’s personal items including utensils, clothes, mala, chappals (slippers), a letter written by Gandhi on the death of his secretary etc. A small quantity of his ashes are kept here as well.

Before going to my next destination I stop by for lunch. My driver suggests eating the famous Misal Pao from Pune. It is an interesting and spice mixed dish eaten with bread buns. An overwhelmingly grand gate welcomes me at the Shaniwarwada. This was the seat of the Peshwa rulers of the Maratha Empire until 1818 when the Peshwas surrendered to the British. Built in 1736, a large part of it was destroyed in an unexplained fire that broke out in 1828.



*Shaniwarwada Outer View*



*Shaniwarwada Inner View*

Peshwa Baji Rao I, Prime Minister to Chattrapati Shahu, King of the Maratha empire, laid the foundation ceremonially on Saturday, January 10, 1730. It was named Shaniwarwada from the Marathi words Shaniwar (Saturday) and Wada (a general term for any residence complex). The fort has five gates. Dilli Darwaza (Delhi Gate), facing north, Mastani Darwaja also facing north, Khidki Darwaja facing east, Ganesh Darwaja facing south-east Jambhul Darwaja or Narayan Darwaja facing south. The Mastani gate was supposedly used by Baji Rao's mistress Mastani while the Narayan gate is named after Peshwa Narayan.

In the present times the fort has fountains and manicured grass inside its compound. The heat of the warm afternoon is not a deterrent for many young couples that I see enjoying a moment of solitude inside the premises. The broken walls and ruins are filled with love messages that lovers have written dedicating to their beloved.

My next day was spent at Raja Kelkar Museum, which is



*Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum Outer View*



*Peshwa Baji Rao Wife Painting*

my last stop in the itinerary. It has quite an exhaustive collection of artifacts and antiques from all over India. There is a whole gamut of sculptures, wooden objects, earthenware, paintings, coins, arms, textile, lamps and musical instruments. The collection is very impressive and has some beautiful antiques from many years ago and very remote parts of the country. There is also a section dedicated to the charming lady love of Peshwa Baji Rao called Mastani Mahal.

Think of the Pune sarees and you get to see authentic Indian wear at the Laxmi road market. These sarees with special Pune prints are very famous and sold all across the



*Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum Inner View*



Shree Siddhivinayak Temple

country. I find some very beautiful prints in a variety of colors. As the price difference is a lot compared to other cities I pick up a whole range in many shades. The trip to Pune would not have been complete without a night out with friends. As a city with a lot of youngsters and college goes the night spots are open till late and play some great music. Hard Rock Café is one of the main hotspots in the city. The ambience, the music and the food rocked hard as the name suggests.

Pune as a whole is a place to be enjoyed better if you are young, if not by age, at least by heart. The city exudes a young



Fergusson College - Pune

vibe and the weather makes it better as the summer time is short. Most of the year the weather remains cool with long monsoon season from May to October. My friends tell me they do not need a shower during monsoon as they shower a couple of times during the day when they step out. The city is cool and vibrant and peps you up even in two days.

The Marathas soldiers are gone and no longer does Pune hear the clash of swords over national pride. They have been replaced by the new age IT warriors and their soft warfare. Competing technologies mark the city, which is becoming the hub of education and software. The Film Institute produces graduates, year after year, some of whom have become legends of Bollywood. To say that Bollywood thrives on what talent Pune produces would not be an overstatement. It led the region then in history and leads now in the present too.

With music from the Osho Ashram and Hard Rock Café reverberating in my mind in an unusual symphony of sorts; the broken walls of Shaniwar Wada and the plush IT company facades presenting two faces; the larger than life appeal of the Film Institute over Bollywood; the awesome presence of Mahatma Gandhi's life and personal loss in the city; the simplicity and gaiety of Pune sarees, all combined to present an impression on the soul that was meditative, charming and heartwarming at the same time. ■