

COVER STORY

CITIES

century and hosts a sound and light show every evening which is a great way to understand the royal history of the city. Also head to the Nahargarh fort to see a beautiful sunrise as well as admire a huge stepwell here.

BHOPAL

With a history of Begums who have ruled and shaped the city, Bhopal has always had a strong connection with women leaders. The City of Lakes as it is popularly known has the Upper Lake built by former ruler Parmara Raja Bhoj after whom the airport is also named. A large statue of the king is on the lake here. The Lower Lake is where you can enjoy a spot of boating. The city is dotted with several monuments that date back many centuries. The Taj-ul-Masajid mosque built by Shahjahan Begum is a fine example of Muslim architecture and has pink hued façade that houses a hall, recessed archways, octagonal minarets and a spacious courtyard. Also make a stop at Moti Masjid built by Sikandar Jahan in 1860, and is a copy of Delhi's Jama Masjid. If you are a foodie, do try some of the signature dishes here like the qorma (a meat based gravy), kebabs (cutlets from minced meat) and Gulati (rice pudding). Head to Mahavir Giri, a beautiful hillock that offers a bird's eye view of the city.

GWALIOR

Gwalior has a history of royalty, music and culture that makes for an interesting visit. Known as the Fort City of India, start your tour of the city at the majestic Gwalior Fort. This fort is also known for the Queen of Jhansi, Rani Lakshmbai's heroics as part of the Rebellion of 1857. The Jai Vilas Palace is where you can learn more about the city's Scindia legacy. The cream-hued palace has Italian, Tuscan and Corinthian influences and houses the Scindia Museum which has a crystal staircase and a mini silver train used by the royal family

for serving food. This is where you can see two of the largest chandeliers in the world that weigh a whopping three and a half tonnes as well as the largest hall carpet in Asia. The Gwalior Gharana is one of the oldest Khayal Gharanas and legends like Tansen and Baiju Bawara belonged to Gwalior. Apart from the music, the city has a spiritual side with Sahastra Bahu Ka Mandir dedicated to Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu, Teli Ka Mandir, Sun Temple, Gopachal Parvat and Surajkund, a large tank that locals believe has magical water.

MUMBAI

Call it Maximum City, The Financial Capital of the Country or the City which Never Sleeps, Mumbai wears all its sobriquets with an ease that is like no other. One of the most populous cities of India has an abundance of sights that are waiting to be explored. The city has a distinct British influence seen in the Fort area which has buildings inspired by Neo-classical and Indo-Saracenic styles of architecture. You can start at the famed Gateway of India, a waterfront landmark built in Indo-Saracenic style in yellow basalt stone. The 26 metres high archway is connected with four turrets and is easily the most photographed monument of the city.

Do visit the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus or Victoria Terminus building which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site whose edifice was built in 1887. The stone building with stain glass windows, arches, turrets and domes is a visually compelling sight. Around the Marine Drive you can

see several buildings that have an art deco style.

PUDUCHERRY

The beach town of Puducherry with its distinct French charm is a favourite holiday destination. At the heart of the White Town or the French sector is the Aurobindo Ashram that was built in 1926. This is where you will experience all things calm and is the resting place of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The serene resting place is covered with bright flowers and you will see a steady stream of people paying their respect. Also visit the Manakula Vinayagar Temple close by which has been in existence since 1666. The colourful temple with a bright outer façade has an impressive 18 feet tall gold plated tower and is an ode to India's most loved God, Ganesha. You can meet the temple elephant Lakshmi who is usually outside, and will bless you in return for some money.

Puducherry is also home to an international community living model at Auroville, a place founded by Sri Aurobindo's spiritual collaborator, Mirra Alfassa or the Mother. The Matrimandir here is golden sphere shaped building that houses a meditation hall. All around Auroville you will see a bustling community. If you like handmade pottery this is the place to buy it from. Do take a walk along the Promenade beach that has the French War Memorial. Do sample the cuisine of Pondicherry that blends South Indian and French styles of cooking.



Cityscape of the business district in central Mumbai