

Sugarland Gem

Akluj, a small town near Pune, offers soothing natural environs, a modern entertainment zone, hilltop temples, a fort, and a peek at village life.

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Located about 170 km from Pune, this town is a little gem—thanks to its salubrious climate, local attractions and the fact that it makes you reconnect with nature. Once you visit Akluj, you come back with fond memories that linger long after you are back home. The highway that leads to Akluj is well-maintained and the pleasant environs make the four-hour journey seem shorter. I would recommend you stop at one of the cateries on the highway and sample a simple yet traditional Maharashtrian *thali* with *Bhakri roti*, eggplant curry and spicy groundnut chutney powder. They even serve you hot *jalebis* sprinkled with dried rose petals!

Heading into Akluj, on this rather sweet note, the first thing I noticed was







the abundance of grapes on either side of the road—especially since it was the harvest season. The vegetation lends an air of calm and Akluj provides a perfect getaway for a couple seeking to spend quality time together or even a family that wants to bond by simply chilling. There are several small but neat hotels in the town which offer simple accommodation and great food.

Located in Solapur district, this town is not just culturally rich but also offers much for the religiously inclined. Apart from sugarcane, cotton, wheat, groundnut and jaggery are the most popular produce and a weekly cattle market is held every Monday and is a local attraction. This sleepy town owes the origin of its name to Goddess Aklai. There is a temple in the town dedicated to the goddess and local legend has it that the idol of the deity was discovered by shepherds in the waters of the Nira river. Naturally, this is an important tourist stop here.

What sets this destination apart is the fact that there is really nothing much to do. Therein lies its charm. This is exactly what a holiday should

be—a time to recharge one's batteries and reconnect with loved ones. The vast expanse of nature here is perfect for long pleasant walks in an unpolluted environment—something that all citydwellers nowadays yearn for.

I must specifically mention that the sunrise is spectacular. The loveliness of the changing hues of the sky is matched only by the chirping and tweeting of a variety of birds. And if you are taking a walk amidst vineyards in the right season, you will be amazed to see the quantity of grapes that can grow in a field! And, yes, they certainly taste as juicy as they look.

Unlike the seasonal grapes, however, there is one thing that you will always see, irrespective of when you are here. And that is an endless trail of lorries, bullock carts, tractor-trailers and even bicycles laden with sugarcane stems—all headed to the Sahakar Maharishi Shankaran Mohite-Patil Sahakari Sakhar Karkhana, the co-operative sugar factory. My hosts, Arjunsinh Mohite-Patil and his wife, tell me that these are local farmers transporting their produce to the

factory for crushing and conversion to sugar granules.

Set up in 1960, the factory employs more than 1,000 people and is on the must-see list of many visitors. When I went into the factory, I felt a rush of sweetness in my throat thanks to the tonnes of sugar that were being processed and packed. It was also my first time in a sugar factory and the process of converting sugarcane to sugar turned out to be fascinating. Incidentally, the Mohite-Patils are pioneers in the co-operative movement in the region and set up Maharashtra's first sugar factory. With a crushing capacity of 6,000 tonnes per day, the factory is certainly the pride of Akluj and is driving economic growth in the region. It is quite a sight to see vast numbers of 50-kg bags of sugar stacked in rows to be transported to the rest of the state and country.

And that's not all. If you are looking for fun, games and amusement, head to the Sayajiraje Park, a recent local attraction modelled on the lines of an entertainment zone that has something for the entire family. With a water



(From far left) The beauty of the vineyard at Akuj is comparable with vineyards anywhere in the world; visitors can see omis here. This one peers curiously at the camera.

park, an amusement park, a children's park, boating and a safari park, there is no dearth of options here. A must-see here is the Mamacha Wada (meaning maternal uncle's house), a display of a traditional Maharashtrian house. The entire model village recreates life in rural Maharashtra and is ideal for both children and adults to experience village life first-hand.

Subject to weather conditions, you can even take an ATV ride on the track around the park for a bit of speed, excitement and adventure. Kids will also enjoy the remote-controlled speed-boat here. The water rides, complete with a slide, a wave pool and even a rain dance, ensure that you have a whale of a time, literally. A large lake in which boats of different capacities are available for boating is a popular option with families. A dense forest surrounds the lake and is home to seasonal birds, while the waterfall adjacent to the lake makes for an enchanting sight.

If you are looking to take an amazing souvenir back home, check out the Sayajiraje Shoppe that offers a range of gifts like handicraft articles, home décor

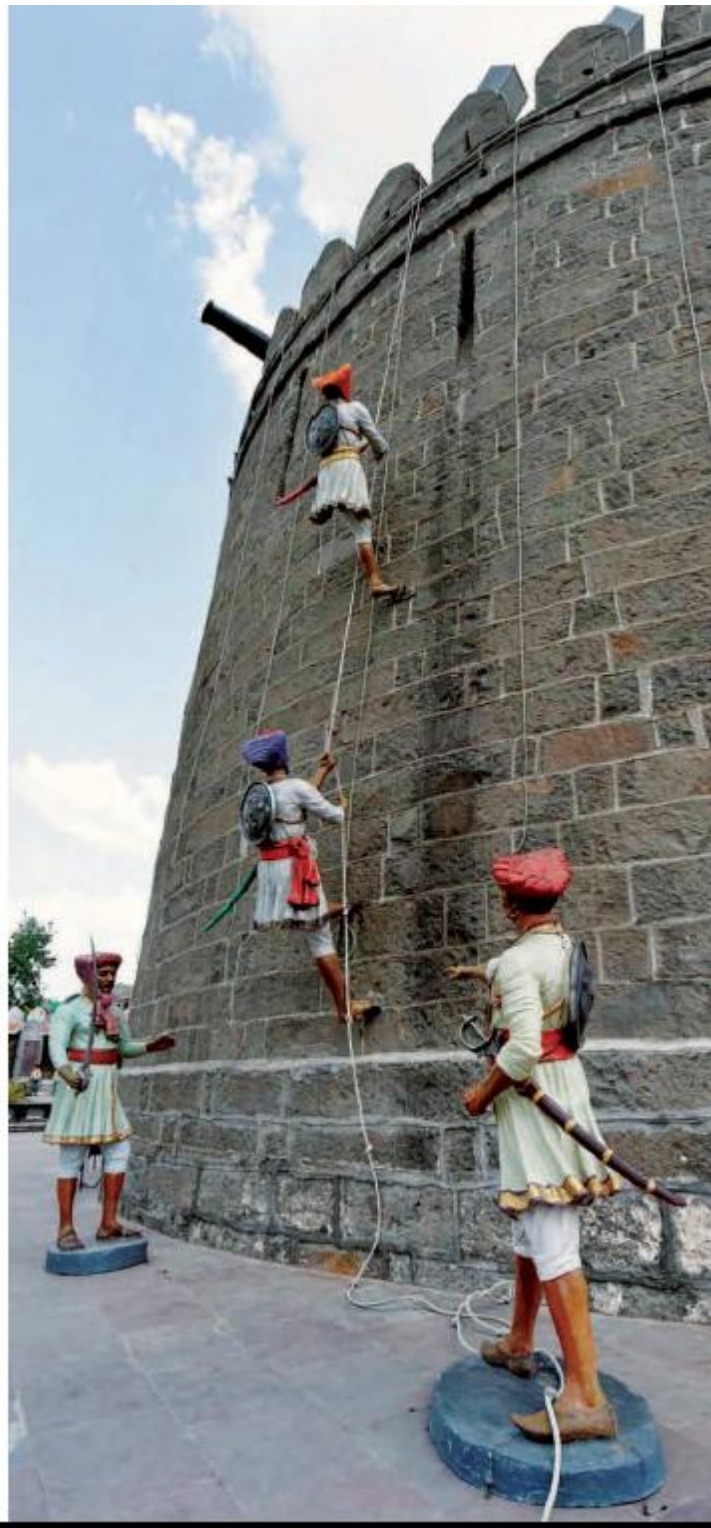
(Left & right) At the Akluj Fort, you can see its historical importance; panels highlighting important events in Shivaji's life through relief murals

items, leather bags and purses, perfumes and quality chocolates, apart from an interesting collection of toys.

The town also has a host of temples located in picturesque locations that afford a sense of serenity like nowhere else. The Parvati Mandir welcomes you with a grand entrance gate, an imposing statue of Shivaji Maharaj and a beautifully landscaped garden featuring a Japanese pagoda. The blissful surroundings give you a bird's-eye view of Akluj and the inner sanctum of the temple, which houses marble idols of Lord Shiva and Goddess Uma.

However, two other prominent temple complexes, devoted to Ganesha and Shiva, erected on the top of a hill, are my personal top picks. Set amidst a sprawling mango farm, the Ganesha temple also has a small emu enclosure attached to it. I was told that at one time there were over 50 emus housed here but most have been released and only a few are left now.

The adjoining Shiva temple also has an interesting story. While construction was going on, the masons found a stone





resembling a *shivaling* and this prompted the building of a temple here. In fact, the original *shivaling* is in the basement of the Shiva temple which also has a library devoted to religious texts. My host told me that the entire property belongs to his family and they acquired it at a very low price. His mother had said that something must be done to benefit the people, as a way of thanking God. Her remark resulted in the building of the two temple complexes.

When in Maharashtra, it is hard to escape Shivaji and Shivshrushti is a great place to learn about the life and times of the Maratha leader. Laser shows are held every day in the morning and night at this venue. Built by Yadav king Raja Singhan in the 13th century, the Akluj Fort, Shivshrushti, has been restored through a unique project initiated by the Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC). The project has been developed over a restored fort of six acres and houses a collection of 172 sculptures of prominent personalities

NAVIGATOR

Reach Akluj

By Air Solapur airport (120 km) is the nearest. Pune is a more convenient airport, 175 km away.

By Rail Kurduvadi Junction, 50 km away, is the nearest railway station.

By Road Mumbai is 261 km away and Pune is 168 km away. Akluj is easily accessible by road from both these cities in all possible ways. The place is also well-connected to all towns and cities of the state through government-run and private buses along with cabs available for hire.

of the era of Shivaji. It also has a collection of 21 replica panels, explaining important events in Shivaji's life through sculptures. The replica panels have been made of fibreglass, and each and every sculpture and scene depicted in the project has been made under the guidance of renowned historian Babasaheb Purandare. A tour around this fort is unique simply because the life-size sculptures are very real.

Given nature's bounty here, make sure you explore every aspect. I was lucky to have lunch at the Syrah hill-top amidst the picturesque settings of the Garwad vineyards. This 15-minute drive uphill on a bumpy road that only an SUV can manage was memorable not just for the food but also for the views of the valley below. The Lavani Mahotsav, held once a year in December or January to promote the culture of Maharashtra, is quite different, compared to festivals in other parts of the state, and is a must-visit. Akluj is your perfect rustic holiday that will leave you asking for more. 🍷