

Bucolic Bliss Amid Wine & Windmills

Tucked away in Satara district of Maharashtra, Phaltan is a hidden gem where you can get into the rural rhythm and gorge on authentic local cuisine



Ram Mandir at the Rajwada Palace

By Shikha Shah

As city dwellers, we often yearn to run away from the chaos that's somehow become a part of our day-to-day lives. We are always on the lookout for places that offer serenity and opportunities to connect with our roots. And why not? The rural setting exposes us to many marvellous things – pristine nature, fresh air, the simple ways of small-town life, the chance to pick fruits and vegetables straight from farms and invigorating vast open spaces. Indeed, there's nothing quite like the Indian countryside. If you're looking at an unconventional break this monsoon season, look no further than Phaltan, a little town in the

land of Marathas. Located in Satara district of southwest Maharashtra, Phaltan and the surrounding region is packed with ample natural beauty, historical sights, temples and more. Famous for its tall sugarcane fields and pomegranate orchards, this little-explored town is a fresh slice of bucolic bliss.

We arrive in Phaltan after a comfortable five-hour drive from Mumbai, thanks to the broad, well-maintained roads

to this heaven. The magic of the changing landscape and cloudy skies seduces us in a unique way. We set up base at the Jakson Inns, India's first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Green platinum-rated hotel that actively promotes rural tourism, thus offering a sustainable livelihood to local communities.

If you've imagined yourself engaging in simple farming activities like milking of cows, this is where you can do it all. Go on a tractor ride, ride a bullock cart, watch sugarcane turn into sugar crystals, sample local cuisine or even try horse riding. For those who prefer building a deeper connection with a destination, Phaltan will touch your soul. Moreover, it is close to the Fratelli winery (73 km) and Four Season Vineyards (63 km).

Phaltan was once a princely state of British India ruled by the Nimbalkars, descendants of Naik Nimbaji Nimbalkar. We begin our trip with an afternoon at the architectural marvel called Rajwada Palace or Mudhoji Manmohan Rajwada. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's first wife Sai Bai was from Phaltan. For a cultural history buff, it's a sheer delight to witness the grandeur of her stately home, which is a 30-minute drive from Jakson Inns. While its construction began in 1861, it was completed only in 1875. The spacious halls and chowks (courtyards) remind us of the rich history of the Maratha empire. Well-preserved ornate ceilings, columns and arches with intricate woodwork, long corridors and massive windows and balconies leave us amazed. Portraits framed in gold, velvet upholsteries, exquisite chandeliers and the use of a rich colour palette throughout the palace add to its opulence. With all the rooms in the palace opening out onto a central courtyard, there's enough air circulation, a per-



A pomegranate farm

HOW TO GET THERE

Phaltan is around 250 km from Mumbai and 110 km from Pune. The closest train station is Lonand, around 18 km from Phaltan and well-connected from both cities. The nearest airport is Pune, about 110 km from Phaltan

WHERE TO STAY

The fully-equipped, eco-friendly hotel, **Jakson Inns Phaltan** offers specially curated tours to help you experience village life in Maharashtra in all its purity. **Tariff: ₹6,500 (inclusive of all meals and taxes) per couple**

IDEAL TIME TO VISIT

Between mid-July and September. This is when you're likely to see trees loaded with pomegranates waiting to be plucked. Phaltan enjoys cloudy skies and pleasant weather during these months

TOP MUST DOS

Visit a pomegranate farm

Sip on wine amid the magical landscape of Pusegaon windmills

Delve deeper into history of the Maratha empire at Rajwada Palace

Indulge in traditional Maharashtrian thali at Jakson Inns

Enjoy a bullock cart ride

Visit the 800-year-old Jabreshwar temple

Explore trekking trails around Ajinkyatara Fort, Santoshgad and Varugad

Bathe in Thoseghar waterfalls (88 km from Phaltan)



The Phaltan Rajwada

windmill farm. There are more than 200 windmills in this area, producing enough electricity for the whole of Phaltan. About an hour's drive from Jakson Inns is a dreamy hill-top location with huge, stark-white windmills stretching as far as the eyes can see. The drive to this place is also blissful – landscapes with oak and coconut trees and hills with small herds of lamb. Jakson Inns arranges a fantastic picnic basket with everything from wine and sandwiches to fruits, juices, cookies and kathi rolls for a private, relaxing time with loved ones. Take it all in amid the swish sound of the rotating blades and cloudy skies.

Maharashtrian cuisine has always been known for its strong flavours that vary from region to region. In ancient times, meals in affluent families would often begin at mid-day and end only at sunset. When staying at Jakson Inns, we savour the traditional thali, which is an excellent mix of extremely mild and very spicy dishes. It can be called a gastronomical experience for good reason.

While the table is set with fragrant rose petals, we are asked to put on a traditional avatar. All women must adorn their hair with a floral veni (typical Maharashtrian gajra) and men must sport a pink safa (turban). The meal consists of more than 25 authentic delicacies along with solkadhi (a drink made out of kokam and coconut milk) to aid digestion. Then there are kothimbir vadi (fried snack made from gram flour, coriander leaves and spices), koshimbir (tomato, onion raita), thaalipeeth (multi-grain pancakes), bhareli vaangi (stuffed brinjal cooked in peanut curry and masala), pithla (gram flour curry), matki (a dish made with sprouted moth beans, boiled potato and spices), aamti (dal with Goda masala), pandhara rassa (mutton in white-coloured gravy), tambada rassa (Kolhapuri-style spicy chicken) and more.

Phaltan is truly a place to pamper your five senses. ■

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Paintings at the Rajwada



A picnic spot amid the Pusegaon windmills



Maharashtrian thali

fect example of how architectural expertise can help deal with climate change. The descendants don't stay here anymore. The adjoining Ram Mandir is also a must-visit. The once Maratha princely state of Phaltan also has a lot of religious significance. According to mythology, Ram, Laxman and Sita halted in Phaltan during their exile.

One of the most romantic things to do in Phaltan is to sip a glass of wine, while taking in the sunset at the nearby Pusegaon