

Nirvana On The Fast Track



PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI
THE CUISINE IS A HIGHLIGHT OF THE DECCAN ODYSSEY: Bearers dressed in the style of the Peshwas serve travellers aboard the luxury train

Life aboard the luxury train Deccan Odyssey is a never-ending journey of discovery and celebration. **Gustasp and Jeroo Irani** report on their second trip on the train which runs along the scenic spots of Maharashtra's famed Konkan coast and its hinterland.

After a hot and dusty day at the pristine swathe of beach at Ganapatipule, 370 km south of Mumbai, along the Konkan coast, we were longing to get back to the comfort of our train. No, it wasn't the legendary Orient Express nor even South Africa's deluxe Blue Train but the ultra luxurious Deccan Odyssey which toots in style down the unblemished Konkan coast of Maharashtra state. It travels south till the former Portuguese enclave of Goa and then swings inland to Pune, the state's cultural capital. It also takes in historic Aurangabad in central Maharashtra, the awesome caves at Ajanta and Ellora, and the holy city of Nashik.

As we clambered on board, we were welcomed like heroes returning from battle. Cold towels were pressed into our hands and tall glasses of chilled juice cooled us down as we relaxed in the lounge. We were then ceremoniously escorted via endless wood panelled corridors to our coupe by staff in period Peshwa garb. (The Peshwas were ministers in the once powerful Maratha empire. Incidentally, all the 21 coaches have been named after the various regions of Maharashtra such as Sindhudurg,

Ratnagiri etc. and adorned with landscape photographs and portraits of royalty of yore.)

We showered in the *en suite* granite and marble bathroom of our coupe stocked with complimentary toiletries and soft bathrobes and fitted with comfortable double beds and watched the lush landscape of Maharashtra unspool outside our large curtained picture windows. We were in a state akin to nirvana.

The Deccan Odyssey doesn't just pamper you; it spoils you for another train experience. An aromatherapy massage was next on our agenda and in that perfumed spa, we self-indulgently surrendered our bodies to the ministrations of the masseuse whose hands felt powerful yet gentle. The deep sleep massage seemed to smoothen the flabbiness of a life well lived and the rocking of the train gave us a sensation of womb-like security. There were other singularities to be countenanced; like dressing for dinner aboard a moving train...

Those who get hopelessly hooked on this sybaritic lifestyle can work out at the gym or have their hair styled or get a pedicure or a manicure done en route. After a drink in the convivial bar, Mumbai Hi, listening to the rhythm of the chugging train and a landscape mantled in velvety darkness, we headed for the chic Peshwa restaurant for dinner. The restaurant was done in restful hues of ochre and rust and laid with gleaming napery and cutlery that was heavy at the base so that it wouldn't slide off the table when the train moved.

We mulled over the extravagant menus that offered a choice of Continental and Indian cuisines. The Continental Choice included Scottish smoked salmon roll, minestrone soup, chicken breast a la plancha, Mediterranean grilled vegetables, English vegetables tossed in wine and almond sauce while the Indian Experience spanned the spectrum from *kasoori murgh lababdar*, *paneer khatta pyaz*, *dal makhani*, *guchhi pulao* and desserts such as apple pie with sabayon sauce or *shrikhand*.

The pressure did not let up on subsequent days and the line-up of exotica continued with mushroom cappuccino soup, grilled fillet of fresh pink salmon, *khada masale ka gosht*, cannelloni stuffed with chargrilled vegetables, fish Koliwada and other delights that seemed to do a



ANYTHING BUT A RAILWAY CAR : The lounge which comes alive between stops

FACT FILE



DECCAN ODYSSEY TRAVELLERS CAN VISIT THE ELLORA CAVES

THE DECCAN ODYSSEY leaves Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (formerly Victoria Terminus) every Wednesday evening and returns the following Wednesday morning. It makes two stops along the Konkan coast that allow tourists to discover the backwaters of Maharashtra and the golden beaches of Ganapatipule and Tarkarli Beach Resort. From here it runs south to Goa; it then turns around and pushes north to Pune, the cultural capital of Maharashtra and then covers the heritage circuit of Ellora and Ajanta caves with stops at

Aurangabad and Jalgaon respectively. On its final leg back to Mumbai, it swings past Nashik.

Since the train runs through the night, guests get to relax in 5-star comfort and arrive fresh the next morning to explore the destination during the day. Breakfast and dinner are served on the train while lunch is generally provided at the destination.

Tickets for the train are priced at \$350 per head per day (double occupancy) and are all-inclusive except for the drinks and use of the health spa. There are three, four and seven-day options.

tango with our taste buds. The food and beverage and housekeeping are handled by the Taj Group of Hotels. But the on board dining was indeed a feat, considering that it was all concocted on the swaying train in two small state-of-the art kitchens where Chef Rupak Mitra and his team used the limited space creatively.

Mitra's creations would be served by waiting staff in period garb, whose boat shaped Peshwa headgear would wobble as they sashayed up and down the corridors bearing platters of food that had us reaching for superlatives. While the visual reigned supreme, the fare had intense flavour and satisfied our hearty appetites as well.

After our gourmet repast we would chat with other guests and later head for our coupe where the beds would be turned down for the night. A chocolate and a sprig of blossoms would be placed on our pillows, filling our moving bedroom with a delicate floral perfume.

Slowly we fell into the train's leisurely rhythm and were surprisingly unruffled by long stops between stations. We knew that the train had its own schedule and, given the restful luxury within, were in no hurry to reach our destination. We would wake up to soft mornings, when swirls of mist chased each other over soft verdant hills like ghost children in a silent land. A timorous sun would soon break through a cordon of fluffy clouds beyond our curtained window while we would have steaming hot tea in bed.

Later we would head for breakfast in the restaurant — fluffy omelettes, *pohe*, fruits and tea/coffee — and then sallied forth to explore a number of destinations. The first day we disembarked at a rustic little station called Bhoke where the local populace gave us a rousing rose-petalled welcome. Our path was strewn with flowers, our foreheads smeared with *tilaks* — vermilion marks of welcome — and our necks festooned with garlands. We felt like minor royalty, as we clambered into waiting buses that sped us onto various sights which were visual delights.

At virtually every stop it was the same — locals seemed to exhibit uninhibited joy breaking into a jig or a well-rehearsed dance of welcome. At Sawantwadi, near Goa, we even met a maharani who was the epitome of regal grace. While we toured the region, the blue snake-like train streaked with gold would wait at the station for our return.

The days were spent exploring Maharashtra — the known, unknown and the unsung. And superimposed on the cameos of the train were the awesome sights — the mighty ramparts of the Jaigad Fort surging out of the landscape where the river Shastri meets the sea; Ganapatipule beach, a sun-kissed crescent

of white sand along a flawless turquoise bay; Tarkarli beach with the seatouching Sindhudurg Fort, strong and sinewy, straddling the water like a ghostly galleon; Goa with its soaring cathedrals; Pune, the cultural capital of the state; historic Aurangabad from where we drove to view the awesome rock-hewn Kailash temple at Ellora and rustic Jalgaon, which was the base to check out the famous frescoes of Ajanta. From here the Deccan Odyssey swept through Nashik before heading back to its base in Mumbai.

This was our second trip on the Deccan Odyssey, a \$7 million joint venture of the Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation and Indian Railways which was launched in January 2004. Over the span of a year, we had expected the standards to have slipped a wee bit. Apart from the fact that the exterior showed a few signs of wear and tear, the train experience was an unblemished one.

Our ride on the Deccan Odyssey did not qualify as a long epic journey but it was a short memorable one. The world had not changed when we disembarked at Mumbai's historic Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, earlier known as Victoria Terminus, nor had fate too much time to meddle in our affairs!

Life outside our train carriage suddenly seemed chaotic and disordered. Gradually we were sucked into the real world and into the vortex of an unquiet city's welcome. 🌈

On the Web

www.mtddeccanodyssey.com