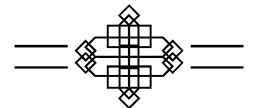




DECO DREAMS

The sophisticated Art Deco architectural style that became popular in the Bombay of the 1920s-50s continues to delight even today.

Text & photographs **Kunal Bhatia & Shuvajit Payne**



Strolling down the sweeping arc of Marine Drive is one of those characteristic experiences of Mumbai. On one side are the endless waves of the Arabian Sea, and on the other are a set of stout apartment blocks. Painted mostly in pastel colours, they seem to have a confident poise that neither screams for attention, nor is lost in the mundane. Even for the uninitiated, there is something about them that catches the eye. And for good reasons, too – these buildings are part of Mumbai’s stunning Art Deco architecture, and even if you aren’t quite sure what Art Deco is, you probably have heard that Maximum City has one of the world’s largest collections of it!

This spread: Eros is a prominent Art Deco cinema hall in Churchgate.



Courtesy of Art Deco Mumbai



Clockwise from left:
The lovely Art Deco style window grill at Nalini Kunj in Matunga; Devoid of ornamentation, Empress Court's charms lie in its graceful curves; Broadening of vertical and diagonal strokes are the Deco influences in Rajesh Mansion's nameplate.

A style for the avant-garde

So, what exactly is Art Deco? To put it simply, it's a refined style of design that sought to strike a balance between ornamentation that was popular in the past and a sense of modernity fuelled by industrial progress and advances in technology. Art Deco became popular in the West after World War I and soon spread across continents not only in architecture but also in the arts, furniture design, jewellery, everyday products and even automobiles!



Mumbai, then Bombay, was destined to be a part of this global wave. In the early decades of the 1900s, reclamation along the city's Back Bay created new parcels of land, including the much-loved Marine Drive. These plots were bought by wealthy Indians who had made their fortunes in trade and industry. Global in their outlook, they commissioned architects to design structures that would be a testimony to their affluence, showcase their aspirations, and stand out from the earlier neo-Gothic architecture that was favoured by the British for their colonial creations.

Across the Oval

Nowhere is the contrast between Art Deco and its predecessors more striking than at Oval Maidan, and that's among the reasons why this precinct was given the tag of a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO earlier this year. On one side of the Oval are the 19th-century heavyweights – Mumbai University, Rajabai Tower, Bombay High Court, to



Clockwise from left: A trio of colours – blue, green white – and medley of patterns run across Rajjab Mahal; Empress Court’s steep stairwell has a unique design combining curves and straight lines; Green and mustard yellow wrap the Art Deco exteriors of Shiv Shanti Bhuvan.

DECO ACROSS MUMBAI

Though the most prominent Art Deco buildings are in South Mumbai, clusters of them are found in other neighbourhoods, too:

- A treasure trove of Art Deco is found along the bustling Mohammed Ali Road, where the buildings might be a tad crowded, but are as ornamental as their South Mumbai counterparts.
- The charming lanes of Bandra boast subtle Deco influences on many of its quaint bungalows. Keep an eye out for name boards and subtle bands that wrap around these low-rise structures.
- On the other hand, in the leafy streets of Matunga, the Art Deco is decidedly more Indian-ised in its ornamentation, choice of colours, and motifs.



through an arched doorway above which rises the staircase block with graciously curved balconies on either side. The structure’s height is emphasised by two vertical bands and a metal-stepped grill that continues all the way to the top floor.

In stark contrast to Empress Court, is the adjoining **Rajjab Mahal**, beautifully painted with vibrant blues and greens over white walls. There is plenty to take in here: from the zig-zag horizontal bands to the fluted vertical lines; geometric patterns on the metal railings; diagonal mullions on windows; and even a sunburst pattern inset into the building’s walls on the ground floor.

The visual feast doesn’t end here, for on the other side of Rajjab Mahal – and designed by the same architecture firm, Merwanji Bana and Co. – is **Shiv Shanti Bhuvan**, painted from ground to terrace in mustard yellow with its architectural details highlighted in green. Apart from the usual horizontal bands, fluted vertical elements, railings, and staircase grills that are so characteristic of the Art Deco movement, this building also features stylised semicircular *chajjas* (eaves) over each of the windows at its central corner!

name a few – all of them being rather majestic and imposing. On the other side are a set of 17 apartment blocks, that surely must have been cutting edge and eye-popping when they were built in the 1920s. For unlike their counterparts across the Maidan, these structures appeared more lightweight than massive, free-flowing rather than rigid, and were constructed in concrete instead of stone.

The most impressive buildings here are in the central block, beginning with **Empress Court**, designed by the prolific architect GB Mhatre. The apartment building’s entrance is right at the street corner,

Apart from broad architectural elements, the Art Deco style also extended to smaller details including flooring patterns, door handles, safety grills, and more. For instance, at **Fairlawn** the metal railing of the compound wall seems to be in beautiful harmony to the railings along the windows. The architects went down to detailing the name boards as well, and these are quite a delight to spot! **Sunshine** and **Moonlight**, two adjoining apartments, have a radiant sun and stylised “S”s in the name board of the former and intertwined “O”s for the latter.

Down the Drive

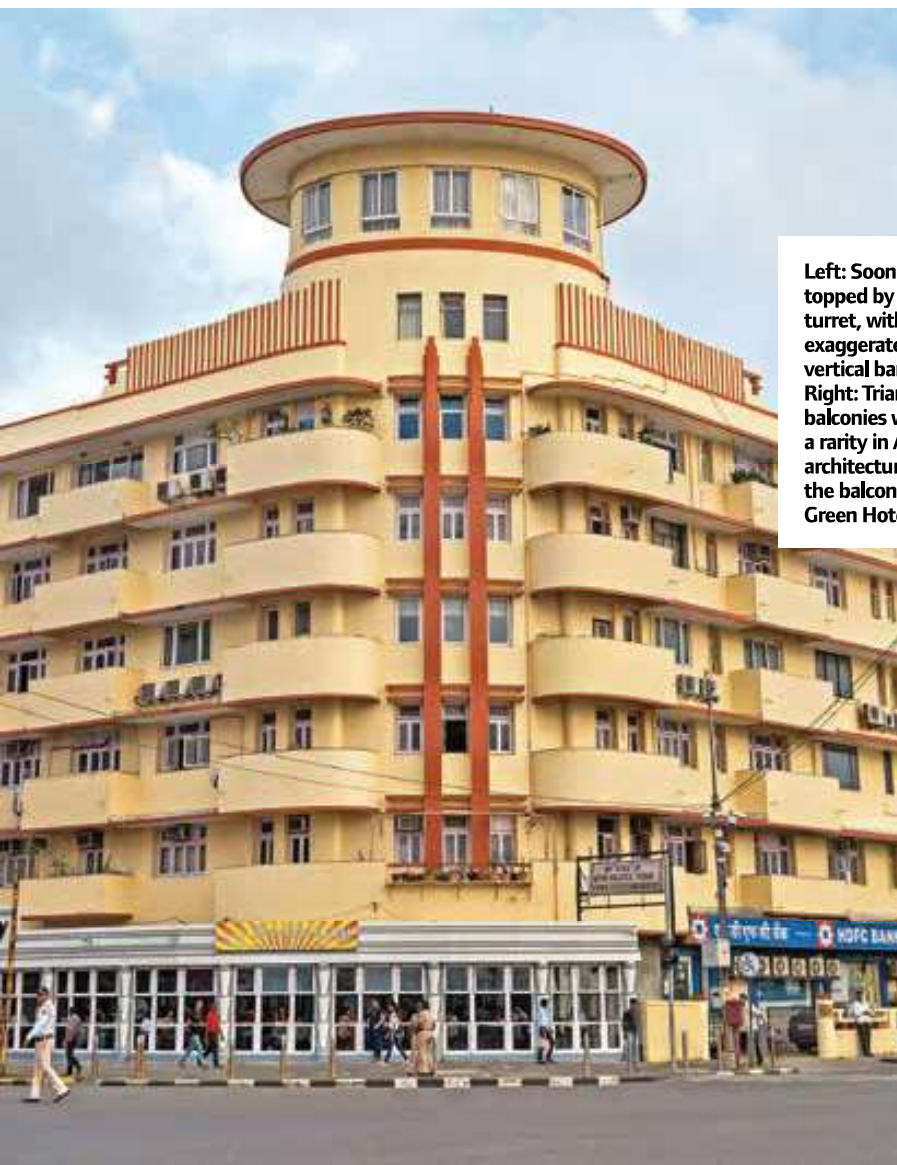
The second stretch of Art Deco buildings that now shares the UNESCO tag is of the 30-odd apartments along Marine Drive. Due to strict regulations back in the day about heights and construction materials, they have a striking cohesiveness; yet, observe carefully, and one can notice a myriad of influences and details.

Soona Mahal, at the junction of Marine Drive and Veer Nariman Road, is one of the best maintained ones along the stretch. At its very centre is a pair of stylised columns surrounded by smoothly curved balconies – an architectural nod that acknowledges its location at one of the most prominent intersections of the city. Right next door is the **Sea Green Hotel** painted in a shade of, you guessed it, green! Be sure to walk around the corner before looking up at its triangular balconies; quite a rarity when it comes to Art Deco architecture.

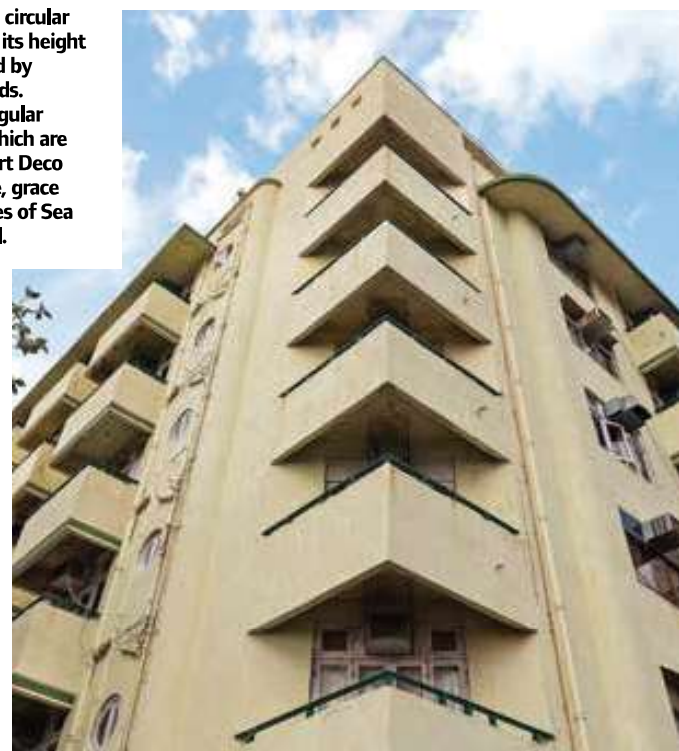
A DAY WITH DECO

With so many options to pick from, how does one make the most of Mumbai’s Art Deco offerings? Here’s a day-long itinerary suggestion:

- Get an early start by grabbing breakfast at one of Bandra’s chic cafes, then wander its streets to spot Deco bungalows such as Desirée. Follow this up by the houses in Matunga such as Nalini Kunj and Pai House, before lunching at the well-known Rama Nayak.
- With a full tummy, grab a window seat for the cab ride along JJ Flyover for an up-close view of Art Deco details along Mohammed Ali Road.
- Then, beat the afternoon heat by catching a show at one of the Art Deco cinemas; or explore the art galleries and boutiques of the grand Dhanraj Mahal.
- Grab some tea before stepping out for a leisurely walk along Oval Maidan’s tree-lined Maharshi Karve Road with a colourful stretch of Art Deco architecture.
- And finally, stroll along Marine Drive from Churchgate to Marine Lines with its Deco apartments strung together as the shining jewels of Queen’s Necklace.



Left: Soona Mahal is topped by a circular turret, with its height exaggerated by vertical bands.
Right: Triangular balconies which are a rarity in Art Deco architecture, grace the balconies of Sea Green Hotel.





This page: Liberty Cinema's Art Deco entrance doors in Canadian cedar wood reflect the theatre's overall architecture style.

ART DECO MUMBAI TRUST:

Interestingly, Mumbai is home to a trust – Art Deco Mumbai – that was established in May 2016. In March 2018 it became a public charitable trust. It is dedicated to the Art Deco architecture, design and heritage of the city of Mumbai. There has been limited study of Art Deco in Mumbai. The city does not have comprehensive documentation and inventory of Art Deco. Art Deco Mumbai's photo documentation initiative is aimed at filling this gap. It facilitates the understanding, documentation, and preservation of Art Deco in Mumbai by creating awareness, appreciation, and a sense of identity within residents across the city. Its vision is to put Mumbai on the world Art Deco map using different mediums.

TAKE A TOUR: Art Deco Mumbai periodically undertakes curated walking tours of approximately 60-75 minutes duration of 'Art Deco at the Oval' in South Mumbai. They are led by an architect. The tours are small, up to five persons with a minimum of at least two. Customised tours can be arranged as well. More information is available on their website: www.artdecomumbai.com

While walking along Marine Drive one also notices how most buildings here have Indian names, unlike many of their counterparts at Oval Maidan. Perhaps it was because these were built about a decade later, and the desire to flaunt an Indian identity was even stronger by then. For instance, there is **Sunder Mahal** with its nautical-inspired terrace details, **Shiv Sadan** with vertical bands and faceted corners, **Ganga Vihar** with strong horizontal bands, and **Sonawala** with porthole windows and streamlined balconies.

It's also hard to miss a trio of buildings that look rather similar – **Keval Mahal**, **Kapur Mahal** and **Zaver Mahal**. Built by three brothers and named after themselves, the group's original features are retained by Keval Mahal till today. There are strong horizontal bands in a contrasting colour, concrete *jaalis* (lattice-work) inset into the gently curving balconies, and a viewing gallery on the terrace that looks like something straight out of an ocean liner!



Jet Airways operates direct flights to Mumbai from multiple Indian and international destinations.

Beyond apartments

The Art Deco style was not only adopted by residential buildings in the city, but also by many public ones, including the iconic cinema halls of South Mumbai. Much loved by generations of filmgoers, these include **Eros**, which was designed by architect Shorabji Bhedwar with a tiered central tower; **Regal**, which was the first air-conditioned cinema hall in India; and **Liberty**, which was named so because its construction began during India's year of independence.

In the business district of Fort, there are also some striking pieces of commercial Art Deco architecture such as the New India Assurance building which curiously houses relief sculptures of Indian workers as well as two large Egyptian figurines on its facade; the Bank of India building with stylised corbelled arches; and the Bombay Mutual Life Building with a central turret, wall clock, and decorative bands of circles and ribbons.

Other unique specimens of Art Deco architecture in Mumbai include the Karfule petrol pump in Ballard Estate with an octagonal canopy around a miniature tower; the Vatcha Agiary in Fort that mixes Art Deco and classical elements; and the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan building in Girgaon which has elements from traditional Indian architecture modified into the sensibilities of the Art Deco style. ■

Fact File

Upcoming events

- October 10-19: Watch Ramlila performances at Azad Maidan, Cotton Green, Shivaji Park, Girgaon Chowpatty.
- Between November and January 2019: Enjoy three new plays during the NCPA Theatre Season at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Nariman Point.

For more information

Log on to www.maharashtratourism.gov.in and www.artdecomumbai.com