

TRAVEL

A Short Introduction to Art Deco in Mumbai



An unverified claim, but too compelling to ignore, is that Mumbai has the second highest number of Art Deco buildings in the world, after Miami (it has over 800). Mumbai does indeed have some of the finest examples of the architectural style, and this was validated in June 2018 when [UNESCO](#) awarded a cluster of over 90 Victorian-Gothic and Art Deco buildings in the city World Heritage status. More than 70 of these structures are Art Deco delights.

What is Art Deco?

Art Deco, which began in the 1920s, gets its name from the Exposition Internationale des Arts decoratifs, a trade fair held in Paris in 1925 where it was introduced to the world. Mumbai architects G. B. Mhatre and Master, Sathe and Bhuta embraced the movement wholeheartedly and in the 1930s and 1940s, the city saw a profusion of homes that mirrored an Art Deco aesthetic. For a country on the verge on Independence, this modern, streamlined form offered a refreshing contrast to the ornate Victorian-Gothic style. The introduction of Reinforced Cement Concrete at the time also enabled and propelled the construction of the curvilinear designs that characterise Art Deco.

The website artdecomumbai.com – a “digital diarist showcasing Mumbai’s Art Deco, chronicler of its history, and advocate for its conservation” – has been tallying the structures since 2016. It has documented over 330 so far and they’re only getting started, says founder Atul Kumar (a finance professional by day, and Art Deco connoisseur by night).



Eros Cinema • bodom – Shutterstock.com

How to identify an Art Deco building

You don’t need a guide to check out Mumbai’s Art Deco. Just use our design checklist and explore neighbourhoods across the city on your own. Kumar’s teams, comprising architecture students and photographers, work with a checklist of “20 different things, such as balconies, turret formations [and] design elements”, when they’re out cataloguing.

Art Deco’s most distinguishable features are rounded corners and balconies; horizontal and vertical bands; elaborately designed grills, railings and gates; “eyebrows” or shades above windows that block sunlight; fluted columns; nature-inspired and nautical motifs such as sunrays and portholes; turrets or viewing galleries; and pyramid-like, tiered ziggurats that add height (most buildings are between three and six storeys).



Soona Mahal on Marine Drive • Image credit: Anil D – Shutterstock.com

Where to see it

The UNESCO tag for Mumbai covers a stretch of over 30 residences on Marine Drive, from *Meghdoot* near the Princess Street flyover to *Riviera* opposite the Air India building, 18 structures along the Oval Maidan from *Eros* cinema to *Moonlight* apartments, as well as few individual buildings in the surrounding neighbourhoods of Churchgate, Fort, and Colaba.

It's easy to forget that Mumbai, even in the early 20th century was more than just South Bombay. But make your way to Byculla, Chembur, Dadar, Mahim and Matunga, and even western suburbs like Bandra and Juhu, and you'll see just how far Art Deco reached. In other parts of South Bombay too, the style can be seen in varying densities, across Marine Lines, Mohammed Ali Road, the adjacent streets of Altamont Road, Carmichael Road, Pedder Road and Breach Candy, Gamdevi, Malabar Hill, Tardeo and Worli.

Kumar recommends walking along Oval Maidan to see Art Deco buildings with the “most decorative elements”, along Marine Drive “if you want to see homogeneity and a skyline”, Carmichael Road and Juhu “for bungalows”, and Matunga “for Indian Deco or Indo Deco, which is Art Deco with a lot of Indian influences” including motifs such as the India flag (Ram Nivas), Om signs and names in Devanagari script (Nalini Kunj).

Most of the places on those trails are private residences, and can only be viewed from

the outside, so here are five public and semi-public Art Deco institutions worth visiting for a more immersive experience.

Dhanraj Mahal, Apollo Bunder

The former Mumbai home of the Dhanrajgir royal family from Hyderabad and one of the largest structures of its kind, Dhanraj Mahal, as the name suggests, was a palace. Today, it's a semi-public building thanks to its row of street-facing bars and restaurants. To get a sense of its expansiveness, visit the contemporary art gallery Tarq, the entrance to which is through the compound.

Liberty Cinema, Marine Lines

"It's been called an ode to the [decorative element known as the] frozen fountain, a symbol for the fountain of youth," said Ruchita Madhok about Liberty, where frozen fountains adorn the cinema doors and the sides of the screen. Madhok runs graphic design firm Kahani Designworks, which recently published the zine *Bombay Deco*.

New India Assurance, Fort

One of the grandest examples of Indo Deco, which can be seen in several structures used as the offices of financial institutions in Fort and Ballard Estate, New India Assurance stands out for sculptor N. G. Pansare's numerous reliefs on the façade, such as those of Indian farmers, labourers and potters and two Egyptian-looking sentinels.

Noor Mahal, Matunga

Noor Mahal offers two Mumbai experiences in a single setting. Situated on a corner with a Hindu swastika-bearing balcony, it's one of many buildings in Matunga that showcase the hybrid Indo Deco style, but it's perhaps better known as the home of the Irani café Koolar & Co. where, along with standard fare such as chai and bun-maskas, they serve their signature Wrestler's Omelette made with five eggs.

Regal Cinema, Colaba

The first public Art Deco building in the city, and one of the last standing single-screen cinemas, it's worth buying a ticket for a film at Regal just to see the vintage interiors, which include marble flooring, a teak staircase, a mirror engraved with the figure of an Oscar award, and reliefs of comedy and tragedy theatre masks on the sides of the screen.

As for the veracity of that much-cited claim, we might have to wait for artdecomumbai.com to complete its survey, but until then, we can say for sure now that in terms of quality and range, Mumbai is right up there with Miami.

Bombay Deco: Hidden In Plain Sight by Kahani Designworks's Storycity division is available from storycity.in/bombay-deco. artdecomumbai.com conducts guided 'Deco on the Oval' walking tours on request.

<https://www.cleartrip.com/stories/a-short-introduction-to-art-deco-in-mumbai/>