

It's a warm Sunday afternoon in South Mumbai and all around us at the iconic Oval Maidan are scenes of happy chaos.

Dozens of cricket games are in play as locals claim the space. Looking south from the top of Maharshi Karve Road across the almost 9ha oval, families are picnicking on the sidelines, kids trying out their ball skills on the dusty ground, and groups of young fans passionately discussing proceedings while cheering on their favourite players.

While it's hard to take my eyes off the cricketers, framing this scene is another equally fascinating sight. To the left of the Maidan, the magnificent Gothic architecture of colonial India rises above the tree canopy. On the right, one of the world's most significant art deco precincts, even rivalling Miami's South Beach, stretches several blocks to the Arabian Sea.

Last year, the entire area was acknowledged with a UNESCO World Heritage listing as the Mumbai Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles. This collection of 92 buildings, together and individually, make an extraordinary sight.

Until the campaign to secure the World Heritage listing, Mumbai's art deco treasures received very little attention, even from locals. Art Deco Mumbai, a not-for-profit organisation founded in 2015, has been determined to change that. Its website offers a comprehensive visual catalogue of the city's art deco neighbourhoods, maps and extensive resources.

But there's no substitute for getting up close to the buildings on a walk with Art Deco Mumbai. I'm off on a 75-minute Art Deco at the Oval tour that takes in the three blocks of art deco buildings facing the Maidan. Our small group, a mix of locals and visitors, gathers in front of the whimsically named Moonlight Building, a luxurious block featuring sharp horizontal lines and Italian marble.

"In the early 20th century, such buildings expressed the modern aspirations of Indians," explains our enthusiastic and well-informed guide, conservation architect and Art Deco Mumbai staff member Nityaa Lakshmi Iyer. "In the next 10 years, India would become an independent nation. These buildings reflected the modernity they aspired to in the world city they thought Bombay [Mumbai] would become."

Of the 18 buildings on this strip, 17 are apartment blocks, and strict regulations limited their design. Each block was allowed to be no more than five storeys, flat roofs were mandatory, and each structure was separated by breezeways, allowing air and light to each apartment. In a city where real estate was, and still is, at a premium, the designs offered the rare luxury of space.

"All the buildings were built to provide people with healthy living conditions. So they were very conscious of the way light and air moved through these spaces," says Iyer, pointing out deep balconies, shutters, "eyebrows" over the windows and stairwells with windows that open.

Like every other apartment building opposite the Maidan, and in contrast to the city's Gothic temples, each block was designed by an Indian architect hired by local developers and intended for mostly Indian residents. The buildings were all completed between 1935 and 1938 in a building boom on land reclaimed from the sea.

Echoing the global movement, Indian art



ART AND STROLL

Soona Mahal, main; below from left, staircase of Court View apartments, Eros Cinema box office; Dhanraj Mahal

A walking tour of art deco Mumbai

JUSTINE COSTIGAN

deco was optimistic and future-focused, Iyer explains. Its themes were modern, even though many motifs reflected the past, including a fascination with ancient Egypt, spurred by the significant archeological discoveries of the 1920s, such as King Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922, and a passion for the forms of classical Greece.

Equally influential were obsessions of the era, including the work of iconic French designer Rene Lalique, jazz and mass transport, which opened up the concept of leisure travel to the middle classes.

You can see these motifs in every building - curves that mimic the hub of a car, ziggurats from ancient Egypt, the contours of an ocean liner. There are hints of tropical art deco, too, a unique variation on the movement, and also seen in Miami, that embraced a hot and steamy climate with airy rooms, wide doors and windows and maritime motifs. More than 80 years on, the designs still look beautifully

modern and all are well-kept, with heritage protection ensuring original features are intact despite some small modifications.

Once I've caught the art deco bug, it's hard to stop seeing its influence throughout the city. A short walk from the Maidan is the Cricket Club of India, built in 1937 in nautical style. Without a membership or a guest pass, I'm only able to poke my head around the entrance to the ground to admire the stadium before being shooed away, but Australians with affiliated club memberships can access the grounds and clubrooms.

Don't let a lack of Hindi deter you from buying a ticket to a screening at the 1200-seat Liberty Cinema, one of a handful of art deco cinemas in the city still in operation. Built in 1947 and named in celebration of India's independence, it has been carefully maintained and its interior is a temple to the past glamour of cinema. A movie ticket for the equivalent of a few dollars is worth it for a look inside, even if you don't stay for a screening.

Marine Drive, a sweep of art deco architecture with views to the sea, is home to many restored 1930s examples. But at the Eros Building, where we finish our tour, the apartments make way for a mixed-use complex including offices, apartments and the now-closed Eros Cinema, with its layer cake-shaped tower dominating the skyline. It's a worthy challenge to the Mumbai High Court, built in Gothic style by the British in 1878, and visible above the tree-line across the Maidan

Justine Costigan was a guest of Art Deco Mumbai.

MORE TO THE STORY

Extend the experience with a stay at the 20-room Abode Bombay, a luxury boutique hotel in the heart of Colaba featuring original art deco pieces and bespoke local textiles and furniture. In walking distance of the Gateway of India, Oval Maidan, the art deco precinct and Marine Drive, it's also very close to Regal Cinema, built in 1933, and another of the city's grand movie houses.

Abode Bombay sells limited-edition posters, a collaboration between local photographer Kuber Shah and graphic design student Shivani Parasnis, featuring illustrations of Mumbai's art deco buildings, or pick up a copy of *Bombay Deco: Hidden In Plain Sight*, an illustrated guide to the city at design store Filter in the hip Kala Ghoda district. For travellers with ample space in their luggage, the elegant Phillips Antiques in Colaba specialises in art deco furniture and objets-d'art.

Accommodation at Abode Bombay from INR4500 (\$95) for a Basic category guestroom to INR10,750 a night for Superior Luxury, plus taxes.

- abodeboutiquehotels.com
- filtershop.in
- phillipsantiques.com

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Art Deco Mumbai tours run regularly and by special request.
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