

India@75: The gleaming allure of the Queen's Necklace, Mumbai

Week of 21st February, 2022 | Priya Pathiyan

The year 2020 came and went in a haze of fear and frenzy. What we all missed in the midst of the pandemic, was the centenary of the creation of Mumbai's most memorable feature – Marine Drive. It is just about four kms long, but it holds so much of India's history in every step.



The Marine Drive promenade arcs majestically. Image: Priya Pathiyan.

More than a century ago, fishing boats would glide silently past a sliver of sandy beach along Mumbai's western coast as the sun set in an extravagant explosion of warm tones. Nature's theatre didn't have an audience to speak of at the time. There were just a few homes and huts, and Wilson College in all its brand-new resplendence.

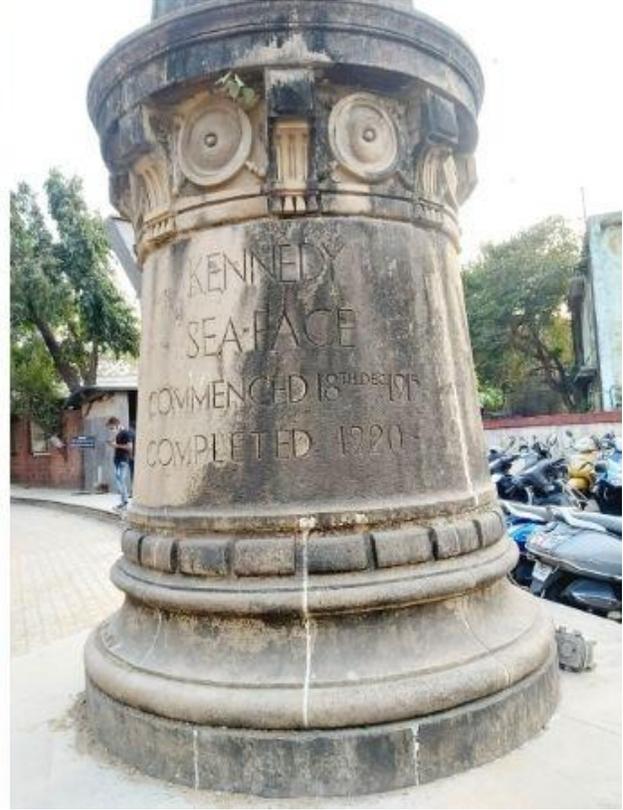
Cut to Marine Drive today. Thousands throng the promenade by the sea, one of India's most iconic and easily recognisable seafronts. One that has been immortalised in several films (there was even a movie directed by GP Sippy named Marine Drive in 1955!) and songs (remember the tender Rim Jhim Gire Sawan picturised on Amitabh Bachchan and Moushumi Chatterjee in Manzil in 1979?), has had poets waxing eloquent, and residents getting militant about preserving its beauty. Officially known as Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Marg.



A place to relax and 'eat' some breeze (as we say in India) while you shoot the breeze! Image: Flickr/Aiva.

Just like Rome, this stunning stretch wasn't built in a day. The various gymkhanas – Parsi, Islam, Hindu, Catholic – all came up one after the other around the 1890s, mainly as members-only clubs for sports activities and social gatherings. Cricket ruled the roost, but other games were played in different seasons. Today, they all have a more diverse membership that cuts across religious identities, and affiliations with clubs across the globe. But their simple, homegrown charm and affordable pricing is what makes their memberships covet-worthy. Apart from the fabulous seafront location, of course!

But it was in 1915 that the most major changes were set in motion. A grand plan to reclaim the land from the sea along the entire length of this shoreline was undertaken, part of the British government's Back Bay Reclamation Scheme, giving birth to what came to be known as the Kennedy Sea-Face. The reclamation reportedly took place in four phases, from north to south, and involved dredging the sea and shoring it up with stone, thus extending the city. The point from where they started to build was later marked with a 20-foot-tall lamp post, a restored version of which can still be spotted today, just outside the Pransukhlal Mafatlal Hindu Swimming Bath & Boat Club (known to the OG Bombayites as Mafatlal Baths, close to where India's first pedestrian bridge came up in 1953 and the city's first public escalator elevated residents to new heights years later!).



Look out for this lamp post that tells the tale of Kennedy Sea-Face. Images: Priya Pathiyan.

By 1920, the Kennedy Sea-Face (named after Sir Michael Kavanagh Kennedy, an engineer who was Secretary of the Bombay Public Works Department and a General in the British Army) was ready to wow the world, and within a decade, the road and broad promenade were the pride of Mumbai.



Soona Mahal is one of the most recognisable Art Deco buildings on Marine Drive. Pizza By The Bay on its street level used to be the Talk of the Town. Quite literally! Image: Priya Pathiyam.

This glamorous modern stretch attracted similarly glamorous and modern residents, from the likes of Kuwaiti royals to famous poet Kamala Das. A well-planned building spree resulted in a slew of buildings built in the Art Deco architectural style, which was all the rage internationally. Rounded balconies, windows with arched eyebrow adornments, the stylised lettering, it all added value to this wonderful new wealth of spaces.

[Art Deco Mumbai](#) is a not-for-profit organisation that calls itself a 'digital diarist showcasing Mumbai's Art Deco, chronicling its history, and advocating its conservation'.

Its founder Atul Kumar observes that the new style of architecture was a refreshing change from what the city was all about previously. There was the old city with the Neo Gothic architecture, and dense living spaces of more local design. But, as he points out, after the plague pandemic, more emphasis was being laid on hygiene, which is how the idea for the Back Bay reclamation came about. "And that's how a whole new style of living, the apartment, was born. Which meant that you suddenly had these homes that were completely multi-cultural, with neighbours of different religions and communities becoming friends and celebrating each other's festivals. Their children played together, grew up together, lifelong friendships were born. You had a lobby, you had a compound, you came up in the elevator together. And so that really created a homogenous social structure or fabric. That's the correlation of modern architecture with a deep sense of cosmopolitanism, and the emergence of Bombay as we know it," he says.



Similar but different, each building along the stretch has unique features even while adhering to the architectural style.

Image: Priya Pathiyan.

Construction began from the southern end, just after the Air India building. Atul points out how there was an evolution within the Art Deco style itself, from how it was interpreted at Oval in the 1930s, then on Marine Drive through the 1940s and later in areas further north such as Shivaji Park, Dadar, etc. "You can see today how there was an increased representation of Indian identities in the names and motifs, going from buildings like Queen's Court to the Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan. It was a shift from identifying with the British to becoming more comfortable with your Indian identity. For example, in Matunga you can see Art Deco lettering in Devnagri and Gujarati script." In a way, it was symbolic of India's hard won Independence and how our collective mindset subtly changed.

In 2018, the entire cluster of 35 Art Deco buildings from the early 20th century were inscribed in UNESCO's World Heritage List along with the 19th century Victorian Gothic buildings that are on the other side of the Oval. Atul, who is also on the Board of Directors of the International Coalition of Art Deco Societies (ICADS), has worked actively for over 18 years on civic issues, protecting open spaces and getting recognition and protection for this Art Deco heritage precinct. He says, "The rules to build on Marine Drive were very strict. An exact distance to be kept between two buildings. Each to be only five floors tall and cuboid in structure. The east-west facing consciously planned to catch the breeze. And a startling similarity even though each boasts many creative features. This type of architectural massing offers such a sweep, a visual treat. All of this resonated tremendously with the core committee that came to assess our nomination."

*The largely residential area also became the focal point of the city's leisure, entertainment and style. Towards the northern end of the stretch, the Taraporewala Aquarium, India's oldest one, came up in 1951 and has recently had a refresh. Jazz ruled the roost on the road connecting Marine Drive to Churchgate (once called Churchgate Street) through the swinging 60s, with a clutch of joints that abounded with talented trios, quality quartets, powerhouse crooners and classy cabarets. A golden age that's been chronicled in Naresh Fernandes' book [Taj Mahal Foxtrot](#) and Anurag Kashyap's film *Bombay Velvet*.*

But it was Talk of The Town on the corner facing the sea (its latest avatar is known as Pizza By The Bay), which birthed the careers of many vocal talents, including Usha Uthup, since it came into existence in 1968. The National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA), India's premier cultural institution, was inaugurated the year after. Housed in a sprawling complex built at the southernmost tip of the city's promenade, it was the first such multi-venue, multi-genre cultural centre in all of South Asia. And then there are the sports stadiums, the Brabourne and the Wankhede, which have witnessed many historic Cricket matches and music concerts.

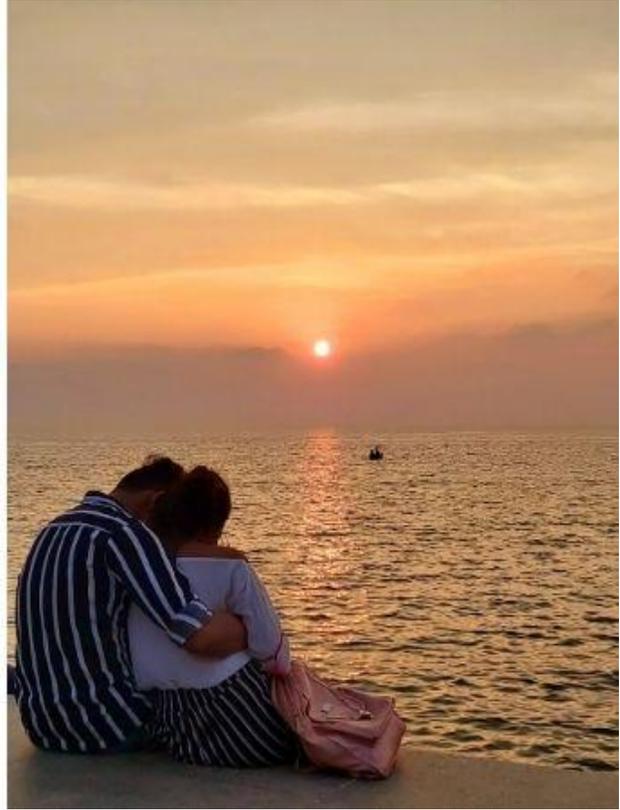
From India's first revolving restaurant atop the Ambassador hotel to the city's first nightclub, Studio 29, in the Bombay International Hotel (now Marine Plaza). To the city's first ice-cream parlour Yankee Doodle and later RGs at the Natraj Hotel (which used to be the Europeans only Bombay Club and stands tall today as The Intercontinental). With The Trident (once the tallest hotel in India) and the Oberoi coming up at the southern tip in the 70s and 80s, the eastern side of the promenade opposite the sea has held a lot of allure for the fun set for decades.

And there's everything, from a simple temple to the palace-like Saifee Hospital, from the Kaivalyadhama Yoga centre to prestigious colleges, from a slew of restaurants to Bachelorr's, famous for its green chilli ice-cream.



Marine Drive has a charm that cuts across seasons, time, and your credit card limit! Image: Priya Pathiyan.

The promenade itself is an enduring image of Bombay then and Mumbai now. A microcosm of the city's multitudes of cultures and vibrant citizens. From morning yoga and bike rides to afternoon love under a shared umbrella to spectacular sunsets and a shimmering nightscape that soothes the soul. Where designer athleisure meets colourful ridas, where people park their million-dollar sports cars to sip on hot 10-rupee coffee sold off a bicycle, where kids and dogs have right of way.



Be it bikers at dawn or lovers at dusk, Marine Drive is where the magic happens. Images: Priya Pathiyan.



Sunsets by the sea transport you to a peace that's not easy to find in a populous city like Mumbai. Image: Priya Pathiyan.

The concrete tetrapods that protect the shoreline have become icons themselves, their likenesses turned into clever paper weights or put on tees. Come monsoon and the turbulent waves rise and crash over the wall, Marine Drive becomes a magnet for adrenaline junkies who brave the wild water at high tide for the thrill of getting drenched. In winter, a haze descends on the horizon and migratory seagulls line the crescent.



Seagulls and fishing boats in the haze of a winter morning at Marine Drive. Image: Priya Pathiyan.

At its northernmost end lies the sandy expanse of Girgaon Chowpatty, where locals and tourists binge on the famous Bombay bhel and a whole lot more. Beyond, starts the gentle ascent that takes you up to the rarefied haunts of Malabar Hill, one of Mumbai's poshest neighbourhoods, where people pay a king's ransom for the stunning view of the

Queen's Necklace from their homes. While lesser mortals go to see the view from Kamala Nehru Park. Whatever your circumstance, no matter which exotic places you've come from or travelled to, those glittering lights coming on at dusk, turning the curving boulevard into the string of diamonds that give it this nickname are still breathtakingly beautiful.



The Queen's necklace sparkles at night. Image: Wikimedia/Aam422.

While we may romanticise it, the fact remains that Marine Drive is also one of the city's arterial roads and the Municipal Corporation has to ensure the movement of traffic and people. Even on days when all of Mumbai wants to come out and play here. There have been lofty plans for its refurbishment, in fact the first phase to revamp this important public space was completed in 2007, using street furniture and signage that maintained the integrity of the architecture and celebrated the ambience. Today, large sections are

under wraps as a new Coastal Road that hopes to connect the different parts of city across the sea is being created.

A whole new reclamation is in progress. 'Mumbai is upgrading' read the signs for the underground metro being created simultaneously nearby. The results will probably be read in an article like this one, a hundred years from today.

<https://www.traveldine.com/gleaming-allure-of-the-queens-necklace-mumbai/>