

Maharashtra



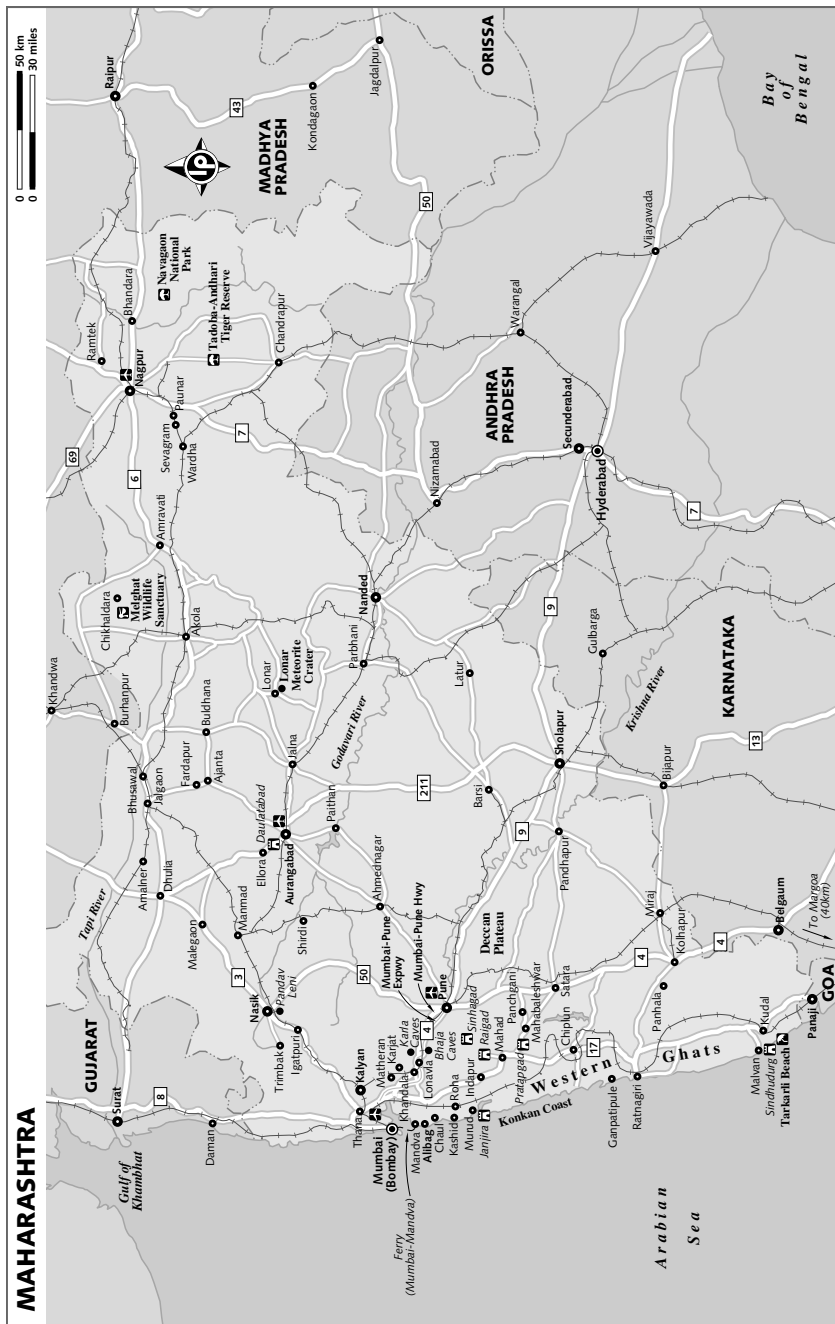
Sprawling Maharashtra, India's second most populous state, stretches from the gorgeous greens of the little-known Konkan Coast right into the parched innards of India's beating heart. Within this massive framework are all the sights, sounds, tastes, and experiences of India.

In the north there's Nasik, a city of crashing colours, timeless ritual and Hindu legend. In the south you can come face to face with modern India at its very best in Pune, a city as famous for its sex guru as its bars and restaurants. Further south still, the old maharaja's palaces, wrestling pits and overwhelming temples of Kolhapur make for one of the best introductions to India anyone could want. Out in the far east of the state towards Nagpur, the adventurous can set out in search of tigers hidden in a clump of national parks. On the coast a rash of little-trodden beaches and collapsing forts give Goa's tropical dreams a run for their money and in the hills of the Western Ghats, morning mists lift to reveal stupendous views and colonial-flavoured hill stations. But it's the centre, with its treasure house of architectural and artistic wonders (topped by the World Heritage-listed cave temples of Ellora and Ajanta), that really steals the show. Whatever way you look at it, Maharashtra is one of the most vibrant and rewarding corners of India, yet despite this, most travellers make only a brief artistic pause at Ellora and Ajanta before scurrying away to other corners of India, leaving much of this diverse state to the explorers.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Feel dwarfed by the monumental Kailasa Temple, the shining jewel of the cave temples at **Ellora** (p809)
- Follow in the footsteps of pilgrims heading to **Nasik** (p801), and its colourful riverside ghats
- Ponder the reasons for hiding a gallery of Buddhist art in the jungle at **Ajanta** (p812)
- Hunt out serene beaches, elephant temples and tumbling fortresses on the **Konkan Coast** (p818)
- Gallop on a horse to Echo Point in **Matheran** (p820) and then chug back home on a toy train
- Search for snakes and 'zennis' (Zen tennis) courts in **Pune** (p825).





History

With a relatively small army, Maratha leader Shivaji (1627–80) established a base at Pune and later Raigad, from where he controlled the Deccan and conquered more than 300 forts during his reign. Shivaji, still highly respected, is credited for instilling a strong, independent spirit among the region's people.

From the early 18th century the Maratha empire came under the control of the Peshwas, who retained power until 1819 when, after much tussling, the British barged them aside.

After Independence, western Maharashtra and Gujarat were joined to form Bombay state. Today's state has Mumbai (Bombay) as its capital and was formed in 1960 when the Marathi- and Gujarati-speaking areas were once again separated. The state is currently controlled by a Congress-NCP coalition.

Climate

The monsoon hits most of Maharashtra hard from May through to September. The rest of the year you can expect the coastal and interior regions to be hot; for some respite head to the hill stations of the Western Ghats.

Information

The head office of Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC; Map p776; ☎ 22026713; Madame Cama Rd, Nariman Point; 🕒 9.45am–5.30pm Mon–Sat) is in Mumbai. Most major towns throughout the state have offices, too, but they're generally only useful for booking MTDC accommodation and tours.

ACCOMMODATION

In Maharashtra rooms costing Rs 1199 or less are charged a 4% tax, while those that are Rs 1200 and up are hit with a 10% tax. Some hotels also levy an extra expenditure tax (up to 10%). Rates in this chapter do not include tax unless otherwise indicated. High-season rates are quoted but prices might rise higher still during holidays such as Diwali.

Getting There & Away

Maharashtra's main transport hub is Mumbai (p793), although Pune, Nasik and Nagpur are also players.

Getting Around

Because the state is so large you might want to consider taking a few internal flights (eg Mumbai to Nagpur) to speed up your explo-

FAST FACTS

- Population: 96.8 million
- Area: 307,690 sq km
- Capital: Mumbai (Bombay)
- Main language: Marathi
- When to go: October to March (coast); September to mid-June (hills)

rations. Otherwise there are plenty of trains and private long-distance buses, with rickety state transport buses connecting up the more remote places.

NORTHERN MAHARASHTRA

NASIK

☎ 0253 / pop 1.2 million / elev 565m

Standing on the Godavari, one of India's holiest rivers, Nasik (also known as Nashik) is the kind of town where you can't walk more than a couple of steps without tripping over yet another exotic temple or colourful bathing ghat. It's an absorbing and exciting place and has many associations with the Hindu epic Ramayana. Lord Rama and his wife Sita were exiled here and it's where Lakshmana hacked off the *nasika* (nose) of Ravana's sister, thus giving the city its name.

Nasik also serves as a base for pilgrims visiting Trimbak (p804) and Shirdi (79km southeast), birthplace of the original Sai Baba. Every 12 years Nasik plays host to the Kumbh Mela, the largest religious gathering on earth. The next one is due in 2019, but a smaller gathering, Ardhha Mela (Half Mela), is held every six years; see the boxed text, p1136.

Orientation

Mahatma Gandhi Rd, better known as MG Rd, a couple of blocks north of the Old Central bus stand, is Nasik's commercial hub. The temple-strewn Godavari River flows through town just east of here.

Information

Cyber Café (8 Twin Centre, Vakil Wadi Rd; per hr Rs 20;

🕒 10am–10pm Mon–Sat, 10am–3pm Sun) Near Hotel Panchavati.

HDFC Bank (MG Rd) Has a 24-hour ATM.

MTDC tourist office (☎ 2570059; Paryatan Bhavan, Old Agra Rd; 🕒 10.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) About 700m south of the Old Central bus stand. Has a pretty useless city map (Rs 5).

State Bank of India (☎ 2502436; Old Agra Rd; 🕒 10.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-1.30pm Sat) Across from the Old Central bus stand. Changes cash and travellers cheques and has an ATM.

Sights

RAMKUND

This **bathing tank** is the centre of the Nasik world and sees hundreds of colourful pilgrims arriving daily to bathe, pray and, because the waters of the Ramkund provide moksha (liberation of the soul), even to die. For a tourist it all promises one of the most intense experiences in Maharashtra. The scene is further enhanced by the colourful **market** just down river.

TEMPLES

A short walk uphill east of the Ramkund, the **Kala Rama** (Black Rama), is the city's holiest temple. Dating to 1794 and containing unusual black-stone representations of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, the temple stands on the site

where Lakshmana sliced off Ravana's sisters nose. Nearby is the **Gumpha Panchivati**, where Sita hid from the evil Ravana.

The ramshackle **Sundar Narayan Temple**, at the western end of Victoria Bridge, contains three black Vishnu deities, and the modern **Muktidham Temple**, about 7km southeast of the city and near the train station, has the 18 chapters of the Bhagavad Gita lining its interior walls.

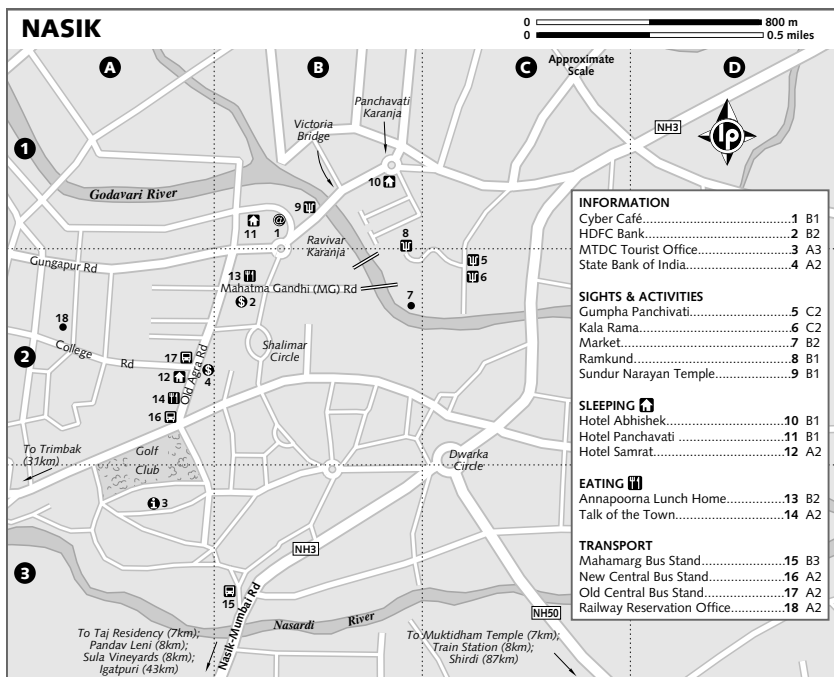
All of the temples listed here are open from 6am to 9pm.

Tours

An all-day tour of Nasik, conducted in Marathi and including Trimbak and Pandav Leni, departs daily at 7.30am from the Old Central bus stand (Rs 94) and returns at 5.30pm.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Abhishek (☎ 2514201; hotabhi_nsk@sancharnet.in; Panchavati Karanja; s/d from Rs 215/290) A couple of minutes' walk uphill from the Godavari River, this is the best budget base from which to be totally overwhelmed by sacred India at its best (and nosiest). Rooms are good value with hot showers and TV.



FESTIVALS IN MAHARASHTRA

Sarai Gandarvar (Feb; Pune, p825) Classical Indian music and dance performances that last all night.

Matharaj Naag Panchami (Aug; Pune, p825 & Kolhapur, p835) A slithery snake-worshipping festival.

Ganesh Chaturthi (Aug & Sep; Pune, p825) Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated with fervour across Maharashtra, but one of the best places to be is Pune, 163km southeast of Mumbai, where special arts and cultural events accompany the general mayhem for the elephant-headed deity.

Dussehra Festival (Sep/Oct; Nagpur, p816) Thousands of Buddhists celebrate the anniversary of Dr Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism.

Kalidas Festival (Nov; Nagpur, p816) A music and dance festival dedicated to the Sanskrit poet Mahakavi Kalidas.

Ellora Dance & Music Festival (Dec/Jan; Aurangabad, p805) Classical music and dance festival held at the Soneri Mahal.

Hotel Samrat (☎ 2577211; fax 2306100; Old Agra Rd; s/d from Rs 450/625, with AC from Rs 775/925; 🏠) Its position close to the bus stands means you don't have far to stumble with your bags, and the rooms, which come with balconies and cable TV, are clean and comfortable enough to make for a pleasant stay. Its spick-and-span restaurant is open 24 hours and makes delectable Gujarati thalis (Rs 70).

Hotel Panchavati (430 Chandak Wadi) You can save yourself some time and effort by heading straight for this excellent complex – the four hotels cover every pocket from budget to top-end. Kicking off at the cheaper end of the market is the Panchavati Guesthouse (☎ 2578771; dorms/singles/doubles Rs 250/400/500), which has clean, cramped rooms and very few foreign guests. Brilliant-value midrange rooms with piping-hot showers and spot-on service are on offer at the Panchavati Yatri (☎ 2578782; singles/doubles from Rs 710/910, with AC Rs 920/1040). The Hotel Panchavati (☎ 2575771; singles/doubles from Rs 950/1190, with AC from Rs 1140/1340) is a pricier option for midrange travellers but the rooms are classier. Last of all is the sumptuous Panchavati Millionaire (☎ 2312318; singles/doubles from Rs 1350/1650).

Taj Residency (☎ 2536604499; www.tajhotels.com; MIDC, Ambad; d from US\$95; 🏠 📺 📺) Nasik's most luxurious hotel is on the Nasik–Mumbai Rd, close to Pandav Leni and well away from all the noise and excitement of the town centre. It's a lovely and calm modern business-class hotel, which also has a regarded restaurant.

Annapoorna Lunch Home (MG Rd; snacks & meals Rs 10–80) There might not be any surprises on the menu but it would be hard to find fault with the cheap eats dished out by the friendly waiters here. The list of dosas on offer is almost as long as the dosa itself!

Talk of the Town (Old Agra Rd; dishes Rs 60–150) Set inside a glass-plated building next to the New Central bus stand, Talk of the Town has a long menu of Indian and Chinese favourites, smartly suited waiters and a tranquil atmosphere.

Getting There & Around

BUS

Nasik is a major player on the road-transport scene, with frequent state buses operating at nearly all hours from three different stands.

The **Old Central bus stand** (CBS; ☎ 2309310) is useful mainly for those going to Trimbak (Rs 17, 45 minutes). A block south the **New Central bus station** (☎ 2309308) has services to Aurangabad (semideluxe Rs 153, five hours) and Pune (ordinary/semideluxe Rs 110/170, 4½ hours). The **Mahamarg bus stand** (☎ 2309309), has services hourly to Mumbai (semideluxe Rs 140, 4½ hours) and twice-hourly to Shirdi (Rs 60, 2½ hours).

Many private bus agents are based near the CBS and most buses depart from Old Agra Rd. Destinations include Pune (with/without AC Rs 220/150, 4½ hours), Mumbai (with/without AC Rs 320/150, 4½ hours), Aurangabad (without AC Rs 130, 11.30pm only) and Ahmedabad (with/without AC Rs 500/280, 12 hours). Note that most of the Mumbai-bound buses terminate at Dadar.

TRAIN

The Nasik Rd train station is 8km southeast of the town centre, but a useful **railway reservation office** (☎ 134; 🕒 8am–8pm Mon–Sat, 8am–2pm Sun) is on the 1st floor of the Commissioner's Office, Canada Corner, 500m west of the CBS. The 7am *Panchavati Express* is the fastest train to Mumbai (2nd class/chair Rs 56/211, four hours) and the 9.50am *Tapovan Express* is the only convenient direct train to Aurangabad

(2nd class/chair Rs 56/211, 3½ hours). Local buses leave frequently from Shalimar Circle, a few minutes' walk northeast of the CBS, to the train station (Rs 6). An autorickshaw costs about Rs 70.

AROUND NASIK

Pandav Leni

The 24 Early Buddhist caves of **Pandav Leni** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/US\$2; ☎ 8am-6pm), about 8km south of Nasik along the Mumbai road, date from the 1st century BC to the 2nd century AD. Caves 19 and 23 have some interesting carvings; the rest are virtually empty and of limited interest to the lay-person.

Below the caves is the **Dadasaheb Phalke Memorial** (admission Rs 10; ☎ 10am-9pm), dedicated to the pioneering Indian movie producer of the same name.

Local buses (Rs 7) run past the caves from Shalimar Circle, near the CBS, in Nasik, but the easiest way there is by autorickshaw; a return journey including waiting time costs around Rs 200.

Trimbak

Trimbakeshwar Temple, stands in the centre of Trimbak, 33km west of Nasik, and is one of India's most sacred temples, containing a *jyoti linga*, one of the 12 most important shrines of Shiva. It's open to Hindus only, but it's possible to see into the courtyard. Even with this restriction Trimbak is a fascinating town, whose narrow streets and explosive markets fit every idea of exotic India. Nearby, the waters of the Godavari River tumble into the **Gangadwar bathing tank**, where pilgrims gather to wash away their sins. Non-Hindus are welcome. The real highlight of a visit to Trimbak is to make the four-hour-return hike up the sheer **Brahmagiri Hill** behind the town to the

WINE COUNTRY

India makes chai, not wine – but wait, what's this? A vineyard near Nasik? As it turns out, the fertile soils and cooler climate of Nasik (at around 600m above sea level) aren't that different from Bordeaux at all, making this town the Grand Cru of India's fledgling wine-growing industry. One winery welcoming visitors is **Sula Vineyards** (☎ 9970-090010; www.sulawines.com; Govardhan, Gangapur-Savargaon Rd; ☎ 11.00am-10.00pm, tastings 11.30am-5.30pm), 8km southwest of Nasik. This pioneer of the Indian wine industry has produced decently drinkable drops since 1998. A tasting room has recently been added; call in advance if you're planning on visiting to try out a drop or two.

source of the Godavari. Pilgrims from across the nation clamber up to the flower encrusted summit where the Godavari dribbles forth from a spring and into a couple of temples soaked in incense. On the route up to the top you will pass a number of other temples, shrines and even some caves in which sadhus have made a home. Don't attempt the ascent if rain looks imminent, as the trail can quickly become a dangerous raging torrent.

If you want to stay the night, the **MTDC Resort** (☎ 02594-233143; d Rs 300, tr ste Rs 800) is a modern building housing spacious suites with creature comforts such as cable TV.

Regular buses run from the New Central bus station in Nasik to Trimbak (Rs 17, 45 minutes).

Igatpuri

About 44km south of Nasik on the rail line to Mumbai, the village of Igatpuri is home to

THE GOD WHO CAME TO STAY

His calm, smiling face is seen on posters throughout India and many regard him as a living god, but who exactly was Sai Baba? Well his real name, date of birth and knowledge of his childhood are unknown, but at around the age of 16 he appeared in the small town of Shirdi, not far from Nasik, where he spent the rest of his life sleeping alternately in an old Mosque or a Hindu temple and praying in them both equally. His message of tolerance between the faiths and the many miracles attributed to him meant that by the time he died in 1918, he had established a large following. Today, his temple complex in Shirdi draws an average of 40,000 pilgrims a day. However, like Elvis, he is possibly not even dead – in Andhra Pradesh another famous holy man who also commands huge respect, Sathya Sai Baba, claims to be the reincarnation of the original Sai Baba (see p959).

the world's largest *vipassana* (a type of meditation) centre, **Vipassana International Academy** (☎ 02553-244076; www.vri.dhamma.org).

Ten-day residential courses in this strict form of Theravada Buddhist meditation are held throughout the year. *Vipassana* was first taught by Gautama Buddha in the 6th century BC, but was reintroduced to India by teacher SN Goenka in the 1960s.

AURANGABAD

☎ 0240 / pop 872,667 / elev 513m

They say that every dog has its day and for dog-eared Aurangabad that day came when the last Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, made the city his capital from 1653 to 1707. Though its claim to fame was only brief, the city retains a number of worthwhile historical relics, including a tempting Taj wannabe and some grandly carved caves, but the real reason for traipsing all the way out here is because the city makes an excellent base from which to explore the World Heritage site of Ellora.

Silk fabrics are Aurangabad's traditional trade but the city is now a major industrial centre with beer and bikes being the big earners.

Orientation

The train station, cheap hotels and restaurants are clumped together in the south of the town. The **Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation bus stand** (MSRTC; Station Rd West) is 1.5km to the north. Northeast of the bus stand is the buzzing Old Town with its narrow streets and distinct Muslim quarter.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Sharayu (☎ 2335220; 119-A Kailash Market, Station Rd East; ☎ 10.30am-9.30pm) Aurangabad's best selection of English-language books.

INTERNET ACCESS

Café Internet (Shop 12, Station Rd East; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9.30am-11pm)

Cyber-dhaba (Station Rd West; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 8am-11pm) Also changes money.

Global Access (Konark Estate, Osmanpura; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9.30am-11pm) Doubles as a travel agent and money exchange centre.

MONEY

ICICI has ATMs on Nirala Bazaar and Station Rd East.

Bank of Baroda (☎ 2337129; Pattan Darwaza Rd; ☎ 10.30am-3pm Mon-Fri, to 12.45pm Sat) Near the Paithan Gate, gives cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

Trade Wings (☎ 2322677; Station Rd West; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun) Charges a Rs 50 fee.

POST

Post office (☎ 2331121; Juna Bazaar; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Government of India tourist office (☎ 2331217; Krishna Vilas, Station Rd West; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 1.30pm Sat) A friendly and helpful tourist office with a decent range of brochures.

MTDC office (☎ 2331513; Station Rd East; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Ashoka Tours & Travels (☎ 2390618; Hotel Panchavati, Station Rd West) City and regional tours, car hire and hotel pick-ups.

Classic Tours (☎ 2335598; aurangabad@classicservices.in; MTDC Holiday Resort, Station Rd East) Trusty place to book transport, tours and even accommodation.

Sights

BIBI-QA-MAQBARA

Built in 1679 as a mausoleum for Aurangzeb's wife, Rabia-ud-Daurani, the **Bibi-qa-Maqbara** (☎ 2400620; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/US\$2; ☎ dawn-10pm) is known as the 'Poor mans Taj'. This is a slightly ironic comparison considering it was Aurangzeb's father who built the original shortly before being overthrown and imprisoned by his son on account of his extravagance! The comparison is also a little unfair because, despite the obvious weathering, it's still a damn sight more impressive than the average gravestone.

AURANGABAD CAVES

With goats more numerous than tourists, the **Aurangabad caves** (☎ 2400620; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/US\$2; ☎ dawn-dusk) might not be a patch on Ellora or Ajanta, but they are very quiet and peaceful. Carved out of the hillside in the 6th or 7th century AD, the 10 caves – consisting of two groups 1km apart (retain your ticket for entry into both sets) – are all Buddhist. Cave 7 with its sculptures of scantily clad lovers in suggestive positions is everyone's favourite. A rickshaw from the Bibi-qa-Maqbara shouldn't cost more than Rs 100 including waiting time.

PANCHAKKI

Panchakki (Water Wheel) takes its name from the mill which in its day was considered a marvel of engineering. Driven by water carried through earthen pipes from the river 6km away, it once ground grain for pilgrims. You can still see the humble machine at work.

Baba Shah Muzaffar, a Sufi saint and spiritual guide to Aurangzeb, is buried here. His **memorial garden** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 6am-8pm) has a series of fish-filled tanks, near a large shade-giving banyan tree.

SHIVAJI MUSEUM

This dull **museum** (☎ 2334087; Dr Ambedkar Rd; admission Rs 5; ☎ 10.30am-1.30pm & 3-6pm Wed-Mon), dedicated to the life of the Maratha hero Shivaji, includes a 500-year-old chain-mail suit and a copy of the Quran handwritten by Aurangzeb.

Tours

Classic Tours (☎ 2335598; www.aurangabadtours.com) run daily tours to the **Ajanta** (Rs 270; ☎ 8am-5.30pm) and **Ellora** (Rs 170; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm) caves, which include a guide but no admission fees. The Ellora tour also includes all the other major Aurangabad sites, which is a lot to swallow in a day. Tours start and end at the MTDC Holiday Resort.

Sleeping**BUDGET**

YHA Hostel (☎ 2334892; Station Rd West; dm/d Rs 60/160) The woman who runs this decrepit old hostel is a real gem, but you really do have to be counting your pennies to stay here. Breakfast is available for Rs 17 and a thali dinner costs Rs 25.

Tourist's Home (☎ 2337212; Station Rd West; s/d Rs 150/200) As basic as basic gets and with a truly memorable aroma (think long-dead roadkill), but at least it's cheap and the staff are cool.

Hotel Panchavati (☎ 2328755; www.hotelpanchavati.com; Station Rd West; s/d Rs 300/400, with AC Rs 550/650; ☎) We've received mixed reports about this establishment over the years but it seems that its bad patch has passed and it now offers immaculate rooms that have actually had a bit of love shown to them. The managers are efficient and friendly and it sits easily at the top of the value-for-money class.

Hotel Shree Maya (☎ 2333093; shrimaya_agd@sancharnet.in; Bharuka Complex; d with/without AC Rs 495/345; ☎) Presentable and welcoming budget ac-

commodation close to the train station. The plain rooms have TVs and hot showers in the morning, but the real plus is the outdoor terrace where breakfast and other meals are served. It's a good spot to tap into the travellers' grapevine.

MIDRANGE

MTDC Holiday Resort (☎ 2331513; Station Rd East; d low/high season Rs 650/750, with AC Rs 800/900; ☎) Set in its own shady grounds, this slightly disorganised (in the nicest possible way) hotel is one of the better MTDC operations, offering spruce, spacious rooms. Some rooms suffer a bit from road noise. A restaurant, bar and travel agency are on site.

Classic Hotel (☎ 5624314; www.aurangabadhotel.com; Railway Station Rd; s/d from Rs 1000/1200; ☎) This sparkling new hotel next to the Goldie Cinema has very clean rooms, but is let down by pushy staff.

Hotel Amarpreet (☎ 6621133; www.amarpreethotel.com; Jalna Rd; s/d from Rs 1410/2100; ☎) A chintzy, glitzy lobby leads to slightly less impressive rooms, but it's much cleaner and more professional than any other hotel in its class.

TOP END

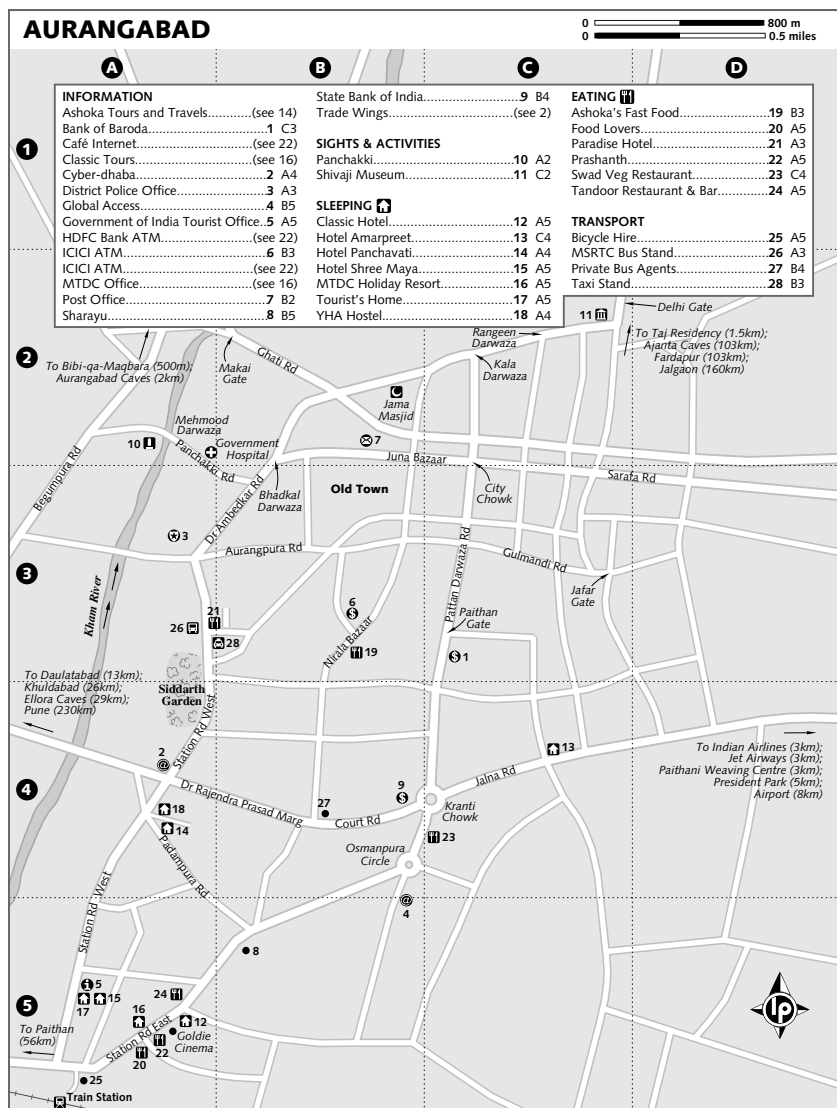
President Park (☎ 2486201; www.presidenthotels.com; R-7/2, Chikalthana, Airport Rd; s/d from Rs 2300/2800; ☎) On the road to the airport, this classy hotel needs a bit of a polish but the setting around the half-moon pool makes this a good top-end option. Nonguests can use the pool for Rs 175 per hour.

Taj Residency (☎ 2381106; www.tajhotels.com; Ajanta Rd; s/d from US\$75/85; ☎) Set in 2 hectares of pleasantly landscaped gardens, the Taj is an oasis of well-appointed rooms on the northern fringes of Aurangabad. Most rooms have romantic Mughal-style swings on the balconies.

Eating

Swad Veg Restaurant (Kanchan Chamber, Station Rd East; mains Rs 20-55) As well as a pile of cheap-eat Indian staples there are pizzas (Rs 30 to 40) and lots of ice creams and shakes – all of which is gobbled up under the benevolent gaze of swami Yogiraj Hansthirth. It's quite hard to find – look for an orange circular sign (in Marathi) pointing the way down to the entrance just below the Saraswat Bank.

Ashoka's Fast Food (Nirala Bazaar; mains Rs 20-60) Offering both indoor seating and an outdoor



terrace that is all the rage at night, Ashoka's Punjabi staples, piles of sweet Indian cakes and Western-style burgers make the trek out here well worthwhile.

Prashanth (Siddharth Arcade, Station Rd East; mains Rs 25-90) Prashanth wins trophies from travellers for its delightful vegetarian-only dishes, epic fruit juices and enjoyable patio setting.

Paradise Hotel (Station Rd West; mains Rs 40-60; 11am-3pm) Directly opposite the MSRTC bus stand the Paradise Hotel is a reliable lunchtime bet with quick curries and endless thalis.

Food Lovers (Station Rd East; mains Rs 50-200) This restaurant is full of aquariums stuffed with catfish. Oh and the Punjabi and Chinese food isn't bad either.

Tandoor Restaurant & Bar (☎ 2328481; Shyam Chambers, Station Rd East; mains Rs 60-200) Offering fine tandoori dishes and flavoursome North Indian and Chinese vegetarian options in a weirdly Pharaonic atmosphere, this is one of Aurangabad's top restaurants.

Shopping

Hand-woven Himroo material is an Aurangabad speciality. Made from cotton, silk and silver threads, it was developed as a cheaper alternative to Kam Khab, the more lavish brocades of silk and gold thread woven for royalty in the 14th century. Most of today's Himroo shawls and saris are mass-produced using power looms, but there are a couple of showrooms in the city which still run traditional workshops. Traditionally the craft was passed from father to son but today this is a dying art. One of the best places to come and watch the masters at work is the **Paithani Weaving Centre** (☎ 2482811, Jalna Rd; ☎ 11am-8.30pm), behind the Indian Airlines office. It's worth a visit even if you're not buying.

Himroo saris start at Rs 1000 (cotton and silk blend). Paithani saris range from Rs 5000 to Rs 300,000, but before you balk at the price bear in mind that they take more than a year to make!

Getting There & Away

AIR

The **airport** (☎ 2483392) is 10km east of town. En route you'll find the offices of **Indian Airlines** (☎ 2485241; Jalna Rd) and **Jet Airways** (☎ 2441392; Jalna Rd). Indian Airlines has daily flights to Mumbai (US\$54, 45 minutes) and Delhi (US\$129, 3½ hours). Jet Airways flies daily to Mumbai (US\$116, 45 minutes). Air Deccan offers dirt-cheap daily flights to Mumbai.

BUS

Local buses head half-hourly to Ellora (Rs 17, 45 minutes) and hourly to Jalgaon (Rs 90, four hours) via Fardapur (Rs 74, two hours). The T-junction near Fardapur is the drop-off point for Ajanta (see p814 for more details).

Buses leave regularly from the **MSRTC bus stand** (☎ 2242165; Station Rd West) to Pune (Rs 140, five hours) and Nasik (Rs 110, five hours). For longer-distance journeys, private luxury buses are more comfortable and better value. The private bus agents congregate around the corner where Dr Rajendra Prasad Marg becomes Court Rd, and a few sit closer to

the bus stand on Station Rd West. Deluxe overnight bus destinations include Mumbai (Rs 180, with AC Rs 250, sleeper Rs 550, eight hours), Ahmedabad (Rs 350, 15 hours) and Nagpur (Rs 320, 12 hours).

TRAIN

On the southern edge of town is Aurangabad **train station** (☎ 131). It's not on a main line, but two direct trains daily (often heavily booked) run to/from Mumbai. The 2.30pm *Tapovan Express* (2nd class/chair Rs 94/344, eight hours), from Mumbai, leaves at 6.10am, and there's also the 11.25pm *Devagiri Express* (sleeper/2AC Rs 158/641, nine hours).

To Hyderabad (Secunderabad), the *Manmad Express* departs daily at 7.20pm (sleeper/2AC Rs 236/954, 10 hours). To reach northern or eastern India by train, take a bus up to Jalgaon and board one of the major trains from there.

Getting Around

Autorickshaws are as common as mosquitoes in a summer swamp. The taxi stand is next to the bus stand; share jeeps also depart from here for destinations around Aurangabad, including Ellora and Daulatabad.

Hiring a bicycle from a stall near the train station (Rs 4 per hour) is an option for a pollution-filled day's sightseeing around the city.

Ashok T Kadam (☎ 9890340816; a_t_kadam@yahoo .co.in) is a recommended and trustworthy rickshaw driver who won't try and wrangle every rupee he can from you. He can normally be found around the train/bus stand. He owes the fact that he owns his own rickshaw to a Lonely Planet reader!

AROUND AURANGABAD

Daulatabad

Halfway (13km) between Aurangabad and the Ellora caves is the ruined but truly magnificent hilltop fortress of Daulatabad. The **fort** (☎ 2615777; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/US\$2; ☎ 6am-6pm) is surrounded by 5km of sturdy walls, while the central bastion tops a 200m-high hill – originally known as Devagiri, the Hill of the Gods. It's a peaceful spot, with numerous monkeys and squirrels playing on the battlements and pompous peacocks strutting their stuff on the lawns.

In the 14th century it was renamed Daulatabad, the City of Fortune, by sultan Moham-

med Tughlaq, who came up with the crazy scheme of not only building himself a new capital here, but marching the entire population of Delhi 1100km south to populate it. Those who didn't die on the way sloped back to Delhi a couple of years later when Daulatabad proved untenable as a capital.

The climb to the summit takes at least 45 minutes and the rewards are the superb views over the surrounding countryside. On the way up you'll pass through an ingenious series of defences, including multiple doorways with spike-studded doors to prevent elephant charges. A tower of victory, known as the **Chand Minar** (Tower of the Moon), built in 1435, soars 60m above the ground, but unfortunately it's not possible to climb it.

Higher up is the **Chini Mahal**, where Abul Hasan Tana Shah, king of Golconda, died after being imprisoned for 12 years from 1687. It was once coated in blue-and-white tiles but now only a few fractured fragments remain. You will also find a 6m **cannon**, cast from five different metals and engraved with Aurangzeb's name.

Part of the ascent to the top goes through a pitch-black spiralling tunnel – down which the fort's defenders hurled burning coals, arrows or even boiling water at invaders. (Allegedly the fort was once successfully conquered, despite all these elaborate precautions, by simply bribing the guard at the gate.) There's normally a guide waiting near the tunnel to light the way with a flame for a small tip, but on the way down you'll be left to your devices. Note that the crumbling staircases and sheer drops can make life difficult for the elderly, children and vertigo sufferers.

If you take an organised tour from Aurangabad to Daulatabad and Ellora, you won't have time to climb to the summit.

Khuldabad

The scruffy walled town of Khuldabad, the Heavenly Abode, is a cheerful little Muslim pilgrimage town just 3km from Ellora. A number of historical figures are buried here, including Aurangzeb, the last great Mughal emperor. Despite being the Sultan of Brunei of his era, Aurangzeb left instructions that he should be buried in a simple tomb constructed only with the money he had made from sewing together Muslim skullcaps – and an unfussy affair of bare earth in a courtyard of the **Alamgir Dargah** (☎ 7am–8pm) is exactly what he

got. The contrast with that of his wife's fantastical mausoleum, the Bibi-qa-Maqbara, in Aurangabad couldn't be greater. Heads must be covered when visiting the tomb and women are not allowed into the inner sanctum.

Generally a calm place, Khuldabad is swamped with millions of pilgrims every April when a robe said to have been worn by the Prophet Mohammed, and kept within the dargah (shrine), is shown to the public. The shrine across the road from the Alamgir Dargah contains hairs of the Prophet's beard and lumps of silver from a tree of solid silver, which miraculously grew at this site after a saint's death.

ELLORA

☎ 02437

The World Heritage-listed **Ellora cave temples** (☎ 244440; Kailasa Temple; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/US\$5; ☎ dawn-dusk Wed–Mon), about 30km from Aurangabad, are the pinnacle of Deccan rock-cut architecture.

Over five centuries, generations of monks (Buddhist, Hindu and Jain) carved monasteries, chapels and temples from a 2km-long escarpment and decorated them with a profusion of remarkably detailed sculptures. Because of the escarpment's gentle slope, in contrast with the sheer drop at Ajanta (p812), many of the caves have elaborate courtyards in front of the main shrines. The masterpiece is the breathtaking Kailasa Temple (Cave 16). Dedicated to Shiva, it is the world's largest monolithic sculpture, hewn from the rock by 7000 labourers over a 150-year period.

Altogether Ellora has 34 caves: 12 Buddhist (AD 600–800), 17 Hindu (AD 600–900) and five Jain (AD 800–1000). The site represents the renaissance of Hinduism under the Chalukya and Rashtrakuta dynasties, the subsequent decline of Indian Buddhism and a brief resurgence of Jainism under official patronage. The sculptures show the increasing influence of Tantric elements in India's three great religions and their coexistence at one site indicates a lengthy period of religious tolerance.

Official guides can be hired at the ticket office in front of the Kailasa Temple for Rs 280 for up to four hours. Most relay an extensive knowledge of the cave architecture. Touts offer a selection of pictorial guidebooks. If you only have time to visit either Ellora or Ajanta then make it Ellora.



Sights

KAILASA TEMPLE

Neither a simple cave, nor a plain religious monument, this **rock-cut temple**, built by King Krishna I of the Rashtrakuta dynasty in AD 760, was built to represent Mt Kailasa (Kailash), Shiva's home in the Himalaya. Three huge trenches were cut into the cliff face and then the shape was 'released' with tools – an undertaking that entailed removing 200,000 tonnes of rock! Kailasa covers twice the area of the Parthenon in Athens and is 1½ times as high.

Size aside, the Kailasa Temple is remarkable for its prodigious sculptural decoration. Around the temple are dramatic carved panels, depicting scenes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the adventures of Krishna. The most superb depicts the demon king Ravana flaunting his strength by shaking Mt Kailasa. Unimpressed, Shiva crushes Ravana's pride by simply flexing a toe. This is still a functioning temple and many people come to pray in the main shrine.

Don't forget to explore the dank, bat-filled corners of the complex with their numerous forgotten carvings. Afterwards take a hike up the path to the south of the complex and walk right around the top perimeter of the 'cave', from where you can appreciate its grand scale.

BUDDHIST CAVES

The southernmost 12 caves are Buddhist *viharas* (resting places), except Cave 10, which is a *chaitya* (assembly hall). While the earliest caves are simple, Caves 11 and 12 are more ambitious, probably in an attempt to compete with the more impressive Hindu temples.

Cave 1, the simplest *vihara*, may have been a granary. **Cave 2** is notable for its ornate pillars and its imposing seated Buddha figure facing the setting sun. **Cave 3** and **Cave 4** are unfinished and not as well preserved.

Cave 5 is the largest *vihara* in this group, at 18m wide and 36m long; the rows of stone benches hint that it may have once been an assembly hall.

Cave 6 is an ornate *vihara* with wonderful images of Tara, consort of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, and of the Buddhist goddess of learning, Mahamayuri, looking remarkably similar to Saraswati, her Hindu equivalent.

Cave 7 is an unadorned hall, but from here you can pass through a doorway to **Cave 8**, the first

cave in which the sanctum is detached from the rear wall. **Cave 9** is notable for its wonderfully carved façade.

Cave 10, the Viswakarma (Carpenter's) Cave, is the only *chaitya* in the Buddhist group and one of the finest in India. It takes its name from the ribs carved into the roof, in imitation of wooden beams; the balcony and upper gallery offer a closer view of the ceiling and a frieze depicting amorous couples. A decorative window gently illuminates an enormous figure of the teaching Buddha.

Cave 11, the Do Thal (Two Storey) Cave, is entered through its third, basement level, not discovered until 1876. Like Cave 12 it probably owes its size to competition with the more impressive Hindu caves of the same period.

Cave 12, the huge Tin Thal (Three Storey) Cave, is entered through a courtyard. The (locked) shrine on the top floor contains a large Buddha figure flanked by his seven previous incarnations. The walls are carved with relief pictures, like those in the Hindu caves.

HINDU CAVES

Where calm and contemplation infuse the Buddhist caves, drama and excitement characterise the Hindu group (Caves 13 to 29). In terms of scale, creative vision and skill of execution, these caves are in a league of their own.

All these temples were cut from the top down so that it was never necessary to use scaffolding – the builders began with the roof and moved down to the floor.

Cave 13 is a simple cave, most likely a granary. **Cave 14**, the Ravana-ki-Khai, is a Buddhist *vihara* converted to a temple dedicated to Shiva sometime in the 7th century.

Cave 15, the Das Avatara (Ten Incarnations of Vishnu) Cave, is one of the finest at Ellora. The two-storey temple contains a mesmerising Shiva Nataraja, and Shiva emerging from a lingam (phallic image) while Vishnu and Brahma pay homage.

Caves 17 to 20 and numbers **22 to 28** are simple monasteries.

Cave 21, known as the Ramesvara, features interesting interpretations of the familiar Shaivite scenes depicted in the earlier temples. The figure of goddess Ganga, standing on her *makara* (crocodile), is particularly notable.

The large **Cave 29**, the Dumar Lena, is thought to be a transitional model between the simpler hollowed-out caves and the fully

developed temples exemplified by the Kailasa. It has views over the nearby waterfall.

JAIN CAVES

The five Jain caves may lack the artistic vigour and ambitious size of the best Hindu temples, but they are exceptionally detailed. The caves are 1km north of the last Hindu temple (Cave 29) at the end of the bitumen road.

Cave 30, the Chota Kailasa (Little Kailasa), is a poor imitation of the great Kailasa Temple and stands by itself some distance from the other Jain temples.

In contrast, **Cave 32**, the Indra Sabha (Assembly Hall of Indra), is the finest of the Jain temples. Its ground-floor plan is similar to that of the Kailasa, but the upstairs area is as ornate and richly decorated as the downstairs is plain. There are images of the Jain *tirthankars* (great teachers) Parasnath and Gomateshvara, the latter surrounded by wildlife. Inside the shrine is a seated figure of Mahavira, the last *tirthankar* and founder of the Jain religion.

Cave 31 is really an extension of Cave 32. **Cave 33**, the Jagannath Sabha, is similar in plan to 32 and has some well-preserved sculptures. The final temple, the small **Cave 34**, also has interesting sculptures. On the hilltop over the Jain temples, a 5m-high image of Parasnath looks down on Ellora.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Kailas (☎ 244446; www.hotelkailas.com; d from Rs 300, cottages from Rs 900) A mixed bag of rooms that range from cheap budget cells that get very hot to clean, stone cottages with warm showers and inviting views over the caves. There's a good restaurant and a lush lawn where you can sit and have a drink.

Locals say the best food emerges from the kitchens of the **Milan Hotel** (dishes Rs 20-50), across the road. Also reliable is the spotless **MTDC Ellora Restaurant & Bar** (dishes Rs 30-150), which will also provide lunch boxes for you so you can have a picnic beside the caves.

Getting There & Away

Buses travel regularly between Aurangabad and Ellora (Rs 17); the last bus returns from Ellora at around 7pm. Share jeeps leave when they're full and drop off outside the bus stand in Aurangabad (Rs 12). A full-day rickshaw tour to Ellora with stops en route costs around Rs 350 and a taxi will be somewhere between Rs 500 and 600.

AJANTA

☎ 02438

A World Heritage site, the **Buddhist caves of Ajanta** (☎ 244226; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/US\$5; 🕒 9am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) – 105km northeast of Aurangabad, and about 60km south of Jalgaon – are the Louvre of central India. The caves date from around 200 BC to AD 650 and, as Ellora developed and Buddhism gradually waned, the glorious Ajanta caves were abandoned and forgotten until 1819, when a British hunting party stumbled upon them. Their isolation contributed to the fine state of preservation in which some of their paintings remain to this day.

Information

Flash photography is banned in the caves; a video-camera permit costs Rs 25. Many of the caves are too dark to see much without a torch, so bring your own if you really want to glimpse any detail. Avoid visiting on weekends or holidays when everybody and their second cousin turns up.

A cloakroom near the main ticket office is a safe place to leave gear (Rs 4 per bag for

four hours), so you could even arrive in the morning from Jalgaon, check out the caves and continue to Aurangabad in the evening. There's a short, steep climb to the first cave from the entrance; if you're not up to the hike, a chair carried by four bearers (Rs 400) can be hired at the foot of these steps.

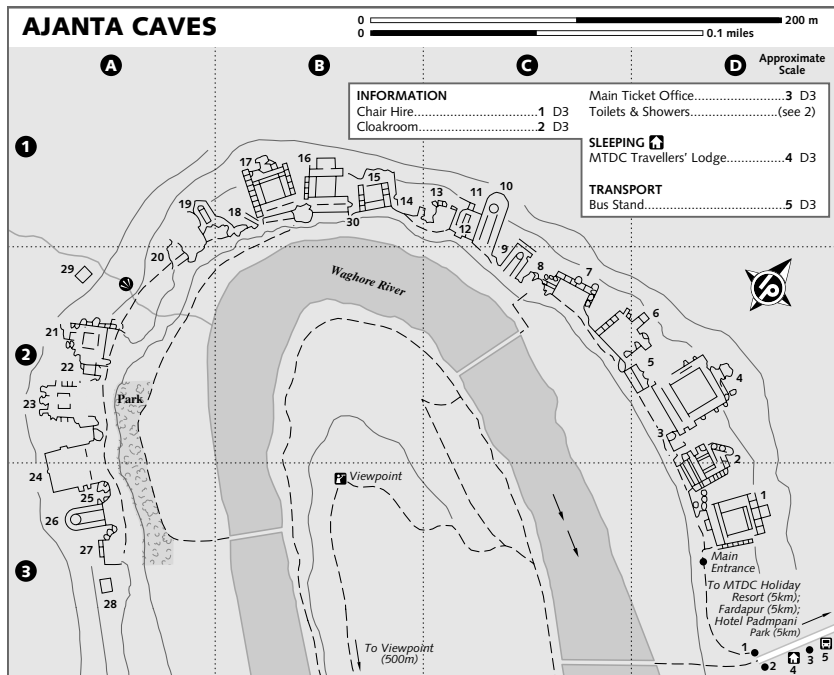
Government of India tourist office guides can be hired at Cave 1 for up to four people for an approximately two-hour tour (Rs 350). They have extensive knowledge and bring the frescoes to life with their stories.

Sights & Activities

THE CAVES

The 30 caves are cut into the steep face of a horseshoe-shaped rock gorge on the Waghere River. Apart from Caves 29 and 30, they are sequentially numbered from one end of the gorge to the other. They do not follow a chronological order; the oldest are mainly in the middle and the newer ones are close to each end. At busy times viewers are allotted 15 minutes within each cave.

Five of the caves are *chaityas* while the other 25 are *viharas*. Caves 8, 9, 10, 12, 13 and part



of 15 are older early Buddhist caves, while the others are Mahayana (dated from around the 5th century AD). In the simpler, more austere early Buddhist school, the Buddha was never represented directly – his presence was always alluded to by a symbol such as the footprint or wheel of law.

Of special note are the Ajanta ‘frescoes’, which are technically not frescoes at all. A fresco is a painting done on a wet surface that absorbs the colour; the Ajanta paintings are more correctly tempera, since the artists used animal glue and vegetable gum mixed with the paint pigments to bind them to the dry surface.

Caves 3, 5, 8, 22 and 28 to 30 are closed and/or inaccessible; Cave 14 is sometimes closed.

Cave 1, a Mahayana *vihara*, was one of the latest to be excavated and is the most beautifully decorated. A veranda at the front leads to a large congregation hall, with elaborate sculptures and narrative murals. Perspective in the paintings, details of dress and daily life, and many of the facial expressions are all wonderfully executed. The colours in the paintings were created from local minerals, with the exception of the vibrant blue made from Central Asian lapis lazuli. Look up to the ceiling to see the carving of four deer sharing a common head.

Cave 2 is also a late Mahayana *vihara* with deliriously ornamented columns and capitals, and some fine paintings. The ceiling is decorated with geometric and floral patterns. Mural scenes include a number of jatakas

surrounding the Buddha’s birth, including his mother’s dream of a six-tusked elephant, which heralded the Buddha’s conception.

Cave 4 is the largest *vihara* at Ajanta and is supported by 28 pillars. Although never completed, the cave has some impressive sculptures, including scenes of people fleeing from the ‘eight great dangers’ to the protection of the Buddha’s disciple Avalokiteshvara.

Cave 6 is the only two-storey *vihara* at Ajanta, but parts of the lower storey have collapsed. Inside is a seated Buddha figure and an intricately carved door to the shrine. Upstairs the hall is surrounded by cells with fine paintings on the doorways.

Cave 7 has an atypical design, with porches before the veranda, leading directly to the four cells and the elaborately sculptured shrine.

Cave 9 is one of the earliest *chaityas* at Ajanta. Although it dates from the early Buddhist period, the two figures flanking the entrance door were probably later Mahayana additions. Columns run down both sides of the cave and around the 3m-high dagoba at the far end. The vaulted roof has traces of wooden ribs.

Cave 10 is thought to be the oldest cave (200 BC) and was the one first spotted by the British soldiers who rediscovered Ajanta. Similar in design to Cave 9, it is the largest *chaitya*. The façade has collapsed and the paintings inside have been damaged, in some cases by graffiti dating from soon after the rediscovery.

Cave 16, a *vihara*, contains some of Ajanta’s finest paintings and is thought to have

WHEN WAS AJANTA’S GOLDEN AGE?

Theories on major archaeological sites continuously undergo review and there’s no exception with the Ajanta caves.

American professor Dr Walter M Spink (who has studied the caves for more than 40 years) suggests that the splendour of the later Mahayana group may have been accomplished in less than 20 years – rather than over centuries as previously thought.

Scholars agree that the caves had two periods of patronage: an early group was crafted around the 1st and 2nd centuries BC and a second wave of work began centuries later. Spink pinpoints the Vakataka emperor Harisena as a reigning sponsor in the incredible renaissance of activity. Soon after his rise to the throne in AD 460 the caves began to realise their present forms, until Harisena’s unexpected death in AD 477. The site was probably deserted in the AD 480s.

The silver lining to the tragedy is, according to Spink, that the sudden downfall of the eminent Vakataka empire at the pinnacle of the caves’ energetic crafting is solely responsible for their phenomenally preserved state today.

If you’re interested, Spink’s book *Ajanta: A Brief History and Guide* (1994) can be bought from touts near the site.

been the original entrance to the entire complex. The best known of these paintings is the 'dying princess' – Sundari, wife of the Buddha's half-brother Nanda, who is said to have fainted at the news that her husband was renouncing the material life (and her) in order to become a monk. Carved figures appear to support the ceiling in imitation of wooden architectural details, and there's a statue of the Buddha seated on a lion throne teaching the Noble Eightfold Path.

Cave 17, with carved dwarfs supporting the pillars, has Ajanta's best-preserved and most varied paintings. Famous images include a princess applying make-up, a horny prince using the old trick of plying his lover with wine and the Buddha returning home from his enlightenment to beg from his wife and astonished son. A detailed panel tells of Prince Simhala's expedition to Sri Lanka. With his 500 companions he is shipwrecked on an island where ogresses appear as enchanting women, only to seize and devour their victims. Simhala escapes on a flying horse and returns to conquer the island.

Cave 19, a magnificent *chaitya*, has a remarkably detailed façade; its dominant feature is an impressive horseshoe-shaped window. Two fine standing Buddha figures flank the entrance. Inside is a three-tiered dagoba with a figure of the Buddha on the front. Outside the cave to the west sits a striking image of the Naga king with seven cobra hoods around his head. His wife, hooded by a single cobra, sits at his side.

Cave 24, if it had been finished, would be the largest *vihara* at Ajanta. You can see how the caves were constructed – long galleries were cut into the rock and then the rock between them was broken through.

Cave 26, a largely ruined *chaitya*, contains some fine sculptures. On the left wall is a huge figure of the 'reclining Buddha', lying back in preparation for nirvana. Other scenes include a lengthy depiction of the Buddha's temptation by Mara.

Cave 27 is virtually a *vihara* connected to the Cave 26 *chaitya*.

VIEWPOINTS

Two lookouts offer picture-perfect views of the whole horseshoe-shaped gorge. The first is a short walk beyond the river, crossed via one of the concrete bridges below Caves 8 and 27. A further 20-minute uphill walk

leads to the lookout from where the British party first saw the caves. It's also possible to take a taxi up to the latter viewpoint from Fardapur.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation options close to the caves are limited and you're better off using Jalgaon as a base. However, during the lifetime of this book a luxury holiday complex, just beside the T-junction, is due for completion. In the meantime, if you wish to stay within spitting distance of the caves choose from one of the following.

Hotel Padmpani Park (☎ 244280; padmpanipark@yahoo.co.in; Aurangabad-Jalgaon Rd; d with/without AC Rs 350/450). Small and clean rooms come with a hospitable welcome.

MTDC Holiday Resort (☎ 244230; Aurangabad-Jalgaon Rd; d with/without AC from Rs 700/600; ☎) At Fardapur, 1km from the T-junction, there are rumours that the prices of rooms here are going to drop to just Rs 650/450, which makes these adequate and spacious rooms a good deal, but the staff are a bit sleepy.

The MTDC Travellers' Lodge, just beside the ticket office, was closed for much-needed renovations at the time of research. It's expected to reopen sometime during 2007.

As far as filling your stomach goes there is a string of cheap (but not very appetising) restaurants in the 'shopping plaza' – our advice is to pack a picnic and enjoy it in the shady park below Caves 22 to 27.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Aurangabad (p808) or Jalgaon (opposite) will drop you off at the T-junction (where the Aurangabad-Jalgaon Rd meets the road to the caves), 4km from the caves. From here, after paying an 'amenities' fee (Rs 5), race through the 'shopping plaza' to the departure point for the green-coloured Euro I buses (Rs 6, with AC Rs 10), which zoom down to the caves. Buses return on a regular basis (half-hourly, last bus at 6.15pm) to the T-junction.

During the day all MSRTC buses passing through Fardapur stop at the T-junction. After the caves close you can board buses to either Aurangabad or Jalgaon outside the MTDC Holiday Resort in Fardapur, 1km down the main road towards Jalgaon. Taxis are available in Fardapur; Rs 500 should get you to Jalgaon.

JALGAON

☎ 0257 / elev 208m

Built on the passing rail trade, you might be forgiven for thinking of Jalgaon as nothing more than a dreary transit town – which, in fact, it is. However, it's not all bad news because the town keeps a couple of alluring aces stuffed up its sleeve. Firstly, despite a population of some half a million, Jalgaon feels like a small country town full of happy people. Secondly, and much more practically, Jalgaon makes a great base for the Ajanta Caves, 60km to the south.

Information

You can find a couple of banks, ATMs and internet cafés along Nerhu Rd, which is the road running along the top of Station Rd.

Sleeping & Eating

Most of the hotels in Jalgaon have 24-hour check-out.

our pick **Hotel Plaza** (☎ 2227354; hotelplaza_jal@yahoo.com; Station Rd; dm/s/d from Rs 150/200/250; 🚻 📺) Hotel owners throughout Maharashtra take note. With just a little love, care and a few licks of paint you too could create an establishment like Hotel Plaza. The snow-white rooms are simple and efficient and come in a pick-and-mix range of styles and sizes. The effusive owner is a mine of useful information.

Anjali Guest House (☎ 2225079; Khandesh Mill Complex, Station Rd; s/d from Rs 250/300) Just past the autorickshaw stand. The tiny beds in this guesthouse certainly aren't designed for fat or tall people, but for anyone else it will just about pass for a night. Much better than the rooms is the downstairs vegetarian restaurant which has Kashmiri pilau and *malai kofta* (veggie balls) to die for.

Hotel Kewal (☎ 2223949; shreeekewal@ip.eth.net; Station Rd; d with/without AC from Rs 775/525; 🚻 📺) Another in India's legion of drab hotels. Despite this, after the Hotel Plaza, this is the best bet in town and the eccentric mix of Pharaonic Egyptian, Hindu Indian and European Romantic wall decorations are certainly memorable.

Hotel Arya (Navi Peth; mains Rs 20-60) Opposite Kelkar Marke, near the clock tower. Serving colourful Indian food that won't set your taste buds aflame. It's so popular you may have to queue for a table.

Silver Palace (mains Rs 45-150) Next door to the Hotel Plaza this restaurant's claims of luxury might be overstating things a tad –

you wouldn't come for here for tea with the Queen, but the food is good, so if she can't make it then it'll do just fine.

Getting There & Away

Several express trains between Mumbai and Delhi or Kolkata (Calcutta) stop briefly at Jalgaon **train station** (☎ 131). Expresses to Mumbai (sleeper/2AC Rs 170/691, eight hours) are readily available. The *Sewagram Express*, leaving from Jalgaon at 10.10pm, goes to Nagpur (sleeper/2AC Rs 170/691, eight hours).

The first run from the **bus stand** (☎ 2229774) to Fardapur (Rs 38, 1½ hours) is at 6am; buses depart every half hour thereafter. The same bus continues to Aurangabad (Rs 77, four hours).

Jalgaon's train station and bus stand are about 2km apart (Rs 12 by autorickshaw). Luxury bus offices on Railway Station Rd offer services to Aurangabad (Rs 120, 3½ hours), Mumbai (Rs 250, nine hours), Pune (Rs 250, nine hours) and Nagpur (normal/sleeper Rs 300/350, 10 hours).

LONAR METEORITE CRATER

Around 50,000 years ago a meteorite slammed into the earth leaving behind this massive crater, which measures some 2km across and 170m deep. It's the only hypervelocity natural impact crater in basaltic rock in the world – impressive stuff, hey! Assuming this means nothing to you then take faith in the fact that, with a shallow green lake in its base, it's as tranquil and relaxing a spot as you could hope to find. The lake itself is highly alkaline and, apparently, taking a dip in its waters is excellent for the skin. Scientists suspect that the meteorite is still embedded about 600m below the southeastern rim of the crater.

In addition to being an all-natural beauty treatment, the crater's edge is home to several **Hindu temples** as well as wildlife, including langur monkeys, peacocks, gazelles and an array of birds. The **Government Rest House**, which is the starting point for the trail down to the bottom, is about 15 minutes' walk from the bus stand.

MTDC Tourist Complex (☎ 07260-221602; dm/d Rs 100/450), has a prime location just across the road from the crater, but don't expect much electricity. There's also a basic restaurant here.

Getting There & Away

There are a couple of buses a day between Lonar and Aurangabad (Rs 110, five hours).

Lonar can also be reached by bus from Far-dapur with a change at Buldhana.

It's possible to visit Lonar on a day trip from Aurangabad or Jalgaon if you hire a car and driver. A full day there and back from either town will cost at least Rs 1800.

NAGPUR

☎ 0712 / pop 2.1 million / elev 305m

Nagpur, the geographic centre and orange-growing capital of India, is a clean and affluent city which makes a good jumping-off point for a series of trips into the far eastern corner of Maharashtra. In addition to its proximity to Ramtek (opposite) and the ashrams around Sevagram (opposite), Nagpur is a convenient stop for those heading to the isolated **Navaqon National Park**, 135km east, and **Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve**, 150km south of Nagpur. The former has bears, wild dogs and elusive leopards, while the latter hosts gaurs, chitals, nilgais and seldom-spotted tigers.

The countryside around Nagpur might be interesting but the city itself has such a dearth of attractions that locals list a shiny shopping mall and a less shiny prison in the towns' roll call of sites. What is worth prodding about in is the colourful central market – the star buys are the near-fluorescent clay pots. The one time Nagpur is worth visiting for its own sake is during the **Dussehra Festival** (September or October); see the boxed text, below.

Information

Computrek (18 Central Ave; per hr Rs 20) Internet access on the main drag.

Cyber Zoo (54 Central Ave; per hr Rs 15; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Sun) Another central internet café.

MTDC office (☎ 2533325; Sanskrutik Bachat Bhavan, Sitabuldi; ☎ 10am-5.45pm Mon-Sat) In the compound opposite Hotel Hardeo.

State Bank of India (☎ 2531099; Kingsway) A two-minute walk west of the train station. Deals with foreign exchange.

Sleeping & Eating

The majority of the budget and midrange hotels are clustered along noisy Central Ave, a 10-minute walk east of the train station. An autorickshaw to Central Ave from the bus stand costs around Rs 20. The accommodation here is more focused on Indian businessmen than tourists.

Hotel Blue Diamond (☎ 2727461; fax 2727460; www.hotelbluediamondnagpur.com; 113 Central Ave; s/d with shared bathroom from Rs 150/200, with private bathroom Rs 250/350, with AC Rs 550/650; ☎) The mirrored ceiling in the reception is straight out of a bad '70s nightclub and the rooms are pretty much the type you'd expect to find above a seedy '70s nightclub. However, it has the cheapest beds in town.

Hotel Blue Moon (☎ 2726061; ktcbaja_ngp@sancharnet.in; Central Ave; s/d with TV from Rs 350/500) One of the closest hotels to the train station with large, plain and clean rooms that don't win any awards for imagination.

Hotel Skylark (☎ 2724654; fax 2726193; 119 Central Ave; s/d Rs 450/575, with AC Rs 775/850; ☎) This is the best budget hotel, but it's nothing to rave about. Rooms are drab, dreary and none too clean. The receptionist is very helpful and the restaurant, which has regular live music, has a diverse range of Indian and Chinese food (meals Rs 50 to 120).

Hotel Hardeo (☎ 2529116; hardeo_ngp@sancharnet.in; s/d Rs 1700/2200; ☎) Around 1km east of

UNTOUCHABLE CHAMPION

One of the most highly respected humanitarians in Maharashtra's history was Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a low-caste Hindu who became Law Minister and Scheduled Castes leader. He was born into a Dalit household in the district of Ratnagiri in 1891. After studying in the West, he returned to India to encounter discrimination with even his workmates refusing to hand him anything for fear of ritual pollution. Thus began a lifelong campaign for Dalit rights, in which he unrelentingly sought equality for the depressed classes.

Despite his victories for the people, Dr Ambedkar lost faith that Hindu prejudice against Dalits would ever be eradicated and, on 14 October 1956, he converted to Buddhism in Nagpur, an act that was repeated by an estimated three million low-caste Hindus. Along with vows embracing tenets of the Buddha, he stated, 'I shall believe in the equality of man'.

Every year thousands come to Nagpur during the Hindu Dussehra Festival to commemorate his life. For more information on Dr Ambedkar, Buddhism and the fight for Dalit parity, see www.ambedkar.org.

the train station. You only have to look at the drooping moustache and tail coats of the doorman to know that this business-class hotel is the best of the bunch. Even so the large, clean rooms are past their sell-by date. There's a good restaurant.

Krishnum (Central Ave) This is one of the better eating choices on the main road and once you sample its thalis (Rs 30 to 60), great *upma* (spicy South Indian semolina pancake), fruit juices and other South Indian snacks you'll understand why.

Shivraj (Central Ave; mains Rs 25-80) Directly opposite the Krishnum, the Shivraj has similar South Indian tastes and a mean dosa.

The dozens of *dhabas* (snack bars), food stalls and fruit stands opposite the train station rouse in the evening. Summer is the best time to sample the famed oranges.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Indian Airlines (☎ 2533962) has flights to Hyderabad (US\$75, one hour, twice weekly), Mumbai (US\$93, 1¼ hours, twice daily), Delhi (US\$108, 1½ hours, daily) and Kolkata (US\$93, 1½ hours, three weekly). **Jet Airways** (☎ 5617888) has flights to Mumbai (US\$126, twice daily). Air Deccan has cheap daily flights to Mumbai and Hyderabad. Kingfisher hooks Nagpur up with Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Chennai (Madras), Hyderabad and Pune, and IndiGo zooms to Mumbai and Kolkata. Taxis/autorickshaws from the airport to the city centre cost Rs 300/150.

BUS

The main **MSRTC bus stand** (☎ 2726221) is 2km south of the train station and hotel area. Buses head regularly for Wardha (Rs 40, two hours) and Ramtek (Rs 24, 1½ hours). Two buses roar off daily to Jalgaon (semideluxe/deluxe Rs 300/350, 10 hours), and a semideluxe bus to Hyderabad (Rs 350, 12 hours) leaves at 6pm.

TRAIN

Nagpur Junction **train station** (☎ 131), on the Mumbai–Howrah line, is an impressive edifice in the centre of town. The overnight *Vidarbha Express* originates in Nagpur and departs for Mumbai CST (sleeper/2AC Rs 288/1165, 14 hours) at 6.10pm. The same train departs Mumbai at 7.40pm for Nagpur. Heading north to Kolkata the *Mum-*

bai Howrah Mail departs from Nagpur at 11.05am and arrives at Howrah at 5.50am (sleeper/2AC Rs 345/1398, 1138km). Five Mumbai-bound expresses stop at Jalgaon (for Ajanta caves; sleeper/2AC Rs 170/691, seven hours). There are also connections between Nagpur and Bengaluru, Delhi and Hyderabad.

AROUND NAGPUR

Ramtek

About 40km northeast of Nagpur, the interesting 600-year-old **temples** (🕒 6am-9pm) of Ramtek squat happily atop the Hill of Rama and are positively bubbling with playful monkeys. It's said in the epic Ramayana that Rama spent time here with Sita and Lakshmi. Autorickshaws will cart you the 5km from the bus stand to the main temple complex for Rs 25 and you can walk back down to the town via the 700 steps at the back of the complex.

On the road to the temples you'll pass the delightful **Ambala Tank**, which is lined with small temples most of which appear to be slowly dissolving back into the lake waters or disappearing into the undergrowth. An hour or so spent poking your nose into nooks and crannies here can make you feel like a real explorer. Boat rides around the lake are available for Rs 20 per person.

The **Kalidas Memorial** (admission Rs 5; 🕒 8am-8.30pm), on the top of the hill beside the main temple complex, is dedicated to the famous classical Sanskrit dramatist Kalidas (also spelled Kalidasa). There is a number of other temples in the area, including a Jain temple at the base of the hill and a **mosque** on the opposite hill.

On the hilltop and not far from the temples, **Rajkamal Resort** (☎ 07114-255620; d with/without AC Rs 900/700; 🕒) has large but overpriced rooms that come with TVs. The hotel has a basic restaurant-bar.

Buses run half-hourly between Ramtek and the MSRTC bus stand in Nagpur (Rs 24, 1½ hours). The last bus back to Nagpur is at 8.30pm.

SEVAGRAM

☎ 07152

Sevagram, the Village of Service, is where Mahatma Gandhi set up base in the long run to Independence and established the **Sevagram Ashram** (☎ 284753; 🕒 6.30am-6.30pm).

The peaceful ashram, encompassing 40 hectares of farmland, as well as residences and research centres, is a long way from anywhere and, with very little to see, it's only to be recommended to die-hard Gandhi fans. The highlights of a visit are the original huts that Gandhi lived in, one of which contains the great man's toilet (Western style!), as well as some of his personal effects, including his famous walking stick.

Across the road from the ashram, the **Gandhi Picture Exhibition** (admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon), traces his life through old photographs. For such an important figure, it's unfortunate the exhibition is so dull and poorly presented.

Very basic lodging is available in **Yatri Nivas** (d Rs 80), across the road from the entry gate – book in advance through the ashram. Vegetarian meals are served in the ashram's dining hall.

Getting There & Away

The ashram can be reached from Wardha or Sevagram train stations, both of which are on the Central Railway. There are around five express trains from Nagpur to Sevagram (Rs 16 on the slow country trains or Rs 42 on the faster, one-hour expresses). Express MSRTC buses run more frequently between Nagpur and Wardha (Rs 40, two hours).

Local buses go regularly to the ashram from Wardha (Rs 5, 20 minutes), or an autorickshaw will cost Rs 60 for the 8km trip.

AROUND SEVAGRAM

Just 3km from Sevagram on the road to Nagpur at Paunar is the **Brahmavidya Mandir Ashram** (☎ 07152-288388; ☎ 6am-10am, 11am-noon & 2-6pm), the ashram of Gandhi's disciple Vinoba Bhave. This persistent soul walked through India asking rich landlords to hand over land for redistribution to the poor – he managed to persuade them to fork out a total of 1.6 million hectares.

With just 33 members, the ashram is run almost entirely by women. Dedicated to *swarajya* (rural self-sufficiency), it's operated on a social system of consensus with no central management. Basic accommodation and board (about Rs 75) in two rooms sharing a bathroom is available; call ahead. The bus from Nagpur runs past the ashram; otherwise it's Rs 50 in an autorickshaw to Paunar from Wardha or Sevagram. There's little for the casual visitor to see.

SOUTHERN MAHARASHTRA

KONKAN COAST

Maharashtra's Konkan Coast – the narrow strip between the Western Ghats and Arabian Sea – will suit those travellers really wishing to deviate from the beaten track. It's a remote, little-explored fringe of superlative beaches, disco-green paddy fields, heaped-up hills and collapsing cliff-top forts. It's not the easiest region to travel through; accommodation is scarce, the food monotonous, transport painfully slow and the locals completely unaccustomed to foreigners. However, the Konkan Railway provides access to some of the bigger towns while local buses help connect up the dots. If you want to gain the most from this area then rent a car and driver in Mumbai and drift slowly down the coast to Goa. You may have to spend some nights sleeping in villagers' houses – be generous with how much you give. The rewards for your efforts are beaches of which the Maldives would be jealous!

Murud

☎ 02144 / pop 12,551

About 165km south of Mumbai, the sleepy fishing town of Murud is the most obvious first port of call. With a striking beach (though suffering from a little pollution carried down from Mumbai) and the commanding island fortress of **Janjira**, 5km south of the village, you'll be happy you came.

Standing a little way offshore, the fortress was built in 1140 by Siddi Jahor and became the 16th-century capital of the Siddis of Janjira, descendants of sailor-traders from the Horn of Africa. Although constructed on an island, its 12m-high walls seem to emerge straight from the sea. This made the fort utterly impregnable, even to the mighty Marathas – Shivaji tried to conquer it by sea and his son, Sambhaji, attempted to tunnel to it. Today the fort has finally been conquered by none other than Mother Nature: its walls are slowly turning to rubble and its interior back into forest.

The only way to reach Janjira is by local boat (Rs 12 return, 10 minutes) from Rajpuri Port, about 5km south of Murud. Boats depart from 7am to 6pm daily, but require a minimum of 20 passengers. On weekends and holidays you won't have to wait long.

To get to Rajpuri from Murud, either take an autorickshaw (Rs 45) or hire a bicycle (Rs 4 per hour) from the small shop opposite the midroad shrine on Darbar Rd, Murud's main beach road.

Back in Murud you can waste away the days on the beach, peer through the gates of the off-limits **Ahmedganj Palace**, estate of the Siddi Nawab of Murud, or scramble around the decaying mosque and tombs on the south side of town. If you want a quieter spot to swim, there's a near-pristine beach a couple of kilometres to the north.

SLEEPING & EATING

Several accommodation options are strung out along Murud's beach road.

Mirage Holiday Homes (☎ 276744; opposite Kumar Talkies, Darbar Rd; d with/without AC Rs 1500/600; 🏠) A small and friendly hotel with a pretty garden and clean, simple rooms – so simple that not all the bathrooms have a roof!

Golden Swan Beach Resort (☎ 274078; www.goldenswan.com; Darbar Rd; d with/without AC from Rs 1800/1000, cottages Rs 4000; 🏠) The first place you come to as the bus enters town and also the plushest. The rooms are clean and brightly decorated.

If you want to be right on the sand, the beach to the north of Murud has a number of places to stay either in people's homes or in simple guesthouses.

Both the above serve food, but the Golden Swan Beach Resort offers the best selection. Otherwise, in the town centre, try **Patel Inn** (☎ 274153; mains Rs 40-60), serving fresh fish dishes that make you drool.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

In Mumbai regular ferries (Rs 60, one hour) or hydrofoils (Rs 110, 45 minutes) from the Gateway of India cruise to Mandva. If you take the hydrofoil the ticket includes a free shuttle bus to Alibag (30 minutes), otherwise an autorickshaw will be about Rs 120. Rickety local buses from Alibag head down the coast to Murud (Rs 27, two hours). Alternatively, buses from Mumbai Central bus stand take almost six hours to Murud (Rs 130).

The nearest railhead on the Konkan Railway is about two hours away in Roha.

Ganpatipule

☎ 02357

Ganpatipule, on the coast 375km south of Mumbai, has several kilometres of almost

perfect beaches and clean waters that leave those of Goa for dead. For much of the year life plods along very slowly but woe betide anyone coming here for a bit of peace and quiet during the Indian holidays (Diwali is especially busy). These tourists haven't come for the hedonism of sun and sand though, but rather for the town's seaside **temple** (☎ 235223; ☎ 5am-9pm) with its Swayambhu Ganpati, or 'naturally formed' monolithic Ganesh (painted a lurid orange), allegedly discovered 1600 years ago.

Foreign tourists do not frequent Ganpatipule often and you are likely to be an object of considerable curiosity. For a quieter patch of sand, head towards the beach in front of the MTDC Tent Resort.

There are several places to stay in and around the town but a kilometre or so from the beach is the unforgettable **Hotel Shiv Sagar Palace** (☎ 25147163; shivsagarpalace@yahoo.com; d with/without AC from Rs 1000/1500; 🏠). This massive pink structure, full of colonnades, domes and arches looks like a tacky Las Vegas hotel on LSD. The sweeping driveway is big enough to park a 747 on and, once inside the hallowed halls, you'll discover a kitsch world of orange plastic palm trees, towering chandeliers, gold tables and mirrors. It's worth staying for the novelty factor alone. The stunning sea views, good vegetarian restaurant and a professional attitude bring an unexpected class to the place.

The **MTDC Resort** (☎ 235248; fax 235328; d with/without AC from Rs 1400/1200; 🏠) is nicely ensconced among the palms and has the prime beachside spot. Its **Tent Resort** (☎ 235248; 2-/4-bed tents Rs 300/500), might be a cheaper option but the tents have no security and can get very hot. The resort offers a variety of water sports, has a **Bank of Maharashtra** (☎ 235304), which can change travellers cheques but not currency, and the **Tarang Restaurant** (mains Rs 40-90), serving local specialities such as Malvani fish curry. MTDC can also organise tours (Rs 1200 day tour, Rs 500 evening tour) of the region that include a boat cruise and village visits.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

One MSRTC bus heads daily to Ganpatipule (semideluxe Rs 250, 10 hours) from Mumbai, leaving the state road transport terminal near Mumbai Central bus stand at 7.30pm. The bus rumbles back to Mumbai from Ganpatipule at 6.00am. Frequent ordinary buses head down to Ratnagiri (Rs 30, one hour).

Ratnagiri

☎ 02352 / pop 70,335

Around 50km south of Ganpatipule, Ratnagiri is the largest town on the south coast and the main transport hub (it's on the Konkan Railway), but for a tourist that's about all that can be said for it. It's a hot, sticky workaday town with little to see and do aside from visiting the former home of freedom fighter Lokmanya Tilak, which is now a small **museum** (Tilak Alley; admission free; ☎ 9am-7pm), and the remnants of the **Thibaw Palace** (Thibaw Palace Rd), where the last Burmese king, Thibaw, was interned under the British from 1886 until his death in 1916. A more exciting option is to take an evening stroll along **Bhatya Beach**, but you certainly wouldn't want to swim or sunbathe here.

There is no shortage of ATMs or internet cafés along the main road into town.

Just west of the bus stands, **Hotel Landmark** (☎ 220120; fax 220124; Thibaw Palace Rd; s/d Rs 495/695, d with AC Rs 995; 🍴) has clean rooms and a restaurant serving good Indian food.

Ratnagiri **train station** (☎ 131) is 10km east of town; all express trains stop here, including the 10.33am *Jan Shatabdi* south to Margao (2nd class/chair Rs 122/390, 3½ hours, Thursday to Tuesday) and north to Mumbai (Rs 137/455, five hours, Friday to Wednesday). The **old bus stand** (☎ 222340), in the town centre, has state buses to Kolhapur (Rs 97, four hours) and Ganpatipule (Rs 30, one hour). The **new bus stand** (☎ 227882), 1km further west, has two buses daily to both Malvan (Rs 110, five hours) and Panaji (Panjim) in Goa (Rs 200, seven hours).

Tarkarli & Malvan

☎ 02365

Two hundred kilometres south of Ratnagiri and within striking distance of Goa, Tarkarli has the compulsory white sand and sparkling blue waters that every tropical beach should have. In fact it's actually considerably nicer and a good deal cleaner than many of the Goan beaches. The only thing it's really lacking is a tourist industry kitted out for foreigners. There are a few places to stay on the bumpy 7km road in from Malvan, the nearest town, the **MTDC Holiday Resort** (☎ 252390; d from Rs 1200) being only the most obvious. Here you will find an array of simple but sturdy (and a little overpriced) chalets and an excellent restaurant. Get up early and you may see turtles on the beach or a school of dolphins playing

in the waters. Also inquire at the resort about backwater tours on its houseboat.

The monstrous **Sindhudurg Fort**, dating from 1664, is easily visible floating on its offshore island and it can be reached by frequent ferry (Rs 27) from Malvan. It's said that the great Chhatrapati Shivaji helped build this almost impregnable island citadel; his hand- and footprints can be found in one of the turrets above the entrance. A village and several temples lie within the 3km of fort walls.

The closest train station is Kudal, 38km west of the coast. Reasonably frequent buses (Rs 35, one hour) run between here and Malvan **bus stand** (☎ 252034). Otherwise an autorickshaw from Kudal to Malvan or Tarkali is Rs 300. Malvan has several buses daily to Panaji, Goa (Rs 85, five hours) and a couple of services to Ratnagiri (Rs 100, six hours). An autorickshaw between Malvan and Tarkarli costs Rs 60.

MATHERAN

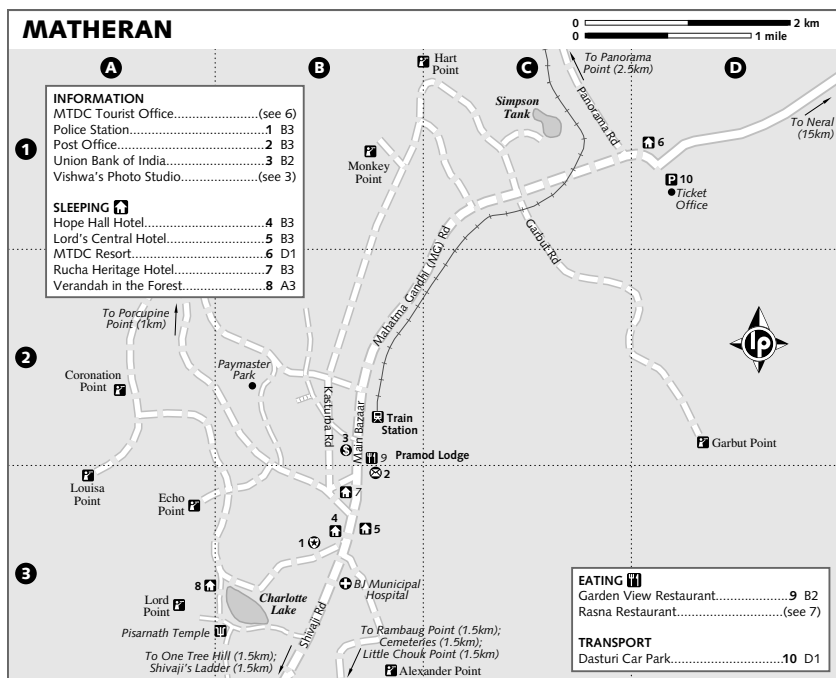
☎ 02148 / pop 5139 / elev 803m

Matheran (Jungle Topped), resting atop the Sahyadris Mountains amid a shady forest crisscrossed with walking tracks and breath-taking lookouts, is easily the most gorgeous of Maharashtra's hill stations.

Hugh Malet, collector for the Thane district, 'discovered' Matheran in 1850 while climbing the path known as Shivaji's Ladder; thereafter it quickly became a popular hill station. The place owes its tranquillity to a ban on motor vehicles and bicycles, making it an ideal place to rest the ears and lungs. It's a very friendly town, well geared up for Indian tourists, but less sure of foreigners.

From around mid-June to early October the monsoon-mudded village practically hibernates. Otherwise weekends generally see Matheran clogged with day-trippers, while during the true high season – the peak holiday periods of May to June, Diwali and Christmas – it's packed to the gills and hotel prices get ludicrous.

Getting to Matheran always used to be half the fun; from Neral Junction a narrow-gauge toy train (mini train) chugged along a scenic 21km route to the heart of the village, but the devastating monsoon of 2005, which left hundreds across the state dead and Mumbai crippled, also put a temporary end to such shenanigans thanks to track damage. At the time of research repair work was ongoing and



it's hoped that the train will once again be chugging through 'One Kiss Tunnel' by the time this book hits the shelves.

Information

Entry to Matheran costs Rs 25 (Rs 15 for children), which you pay on arrival at the train station or the car park.

Vishwa's Photo Studio (☎ 230354), on Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Rd, sells useful miniguides (Rs 25) and is actually a far better source of information than the so-called **tourist office** (☎ 230540) inside the MTDC Resort next to the car park. The **Union Bank of India** (☎ 230282; MG Rd; ☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) changes travellers cheques only.

Sights and Activities

You can walk along shady forest paths to most of Matheran's viewpoints in a matter of hours and it's a place suited to stress-free ambling. If you've got the early morning energy then **Panorama Point** is the most dramatic place to glimpse the sunrise, while **Porcupine Point** (also known as Sunset Point) is the most popular (read: packed) as the sun drops. **Louisa Point**

and **Little Chouk Point** also have stunning views and if you're visiting **Echo Point**, be sure to give it a yell. Stop at **Charlotte Lake** on the way back from Echo Point, but don't go for a swim – this is the town's main water supply. You can reach the valley below **One Tree Hill** down the path known as **Shivaji's Ladder**, allegedly trod upon by the Maratha leader himself.

Horses can be hired from people along MG Rd – you will certainly be approached – for rides to lookout points; they cost about Rs 200 per hour.

Sleeping & Eating

A few budget places sit near the train station, but most of the midrange and upscale 'resort' accommodation is between 10 and 20 minutes' walk away (1½ hours from the Dasturi car park). Checkout times vary wildly in Matheran – they can be as early as 7am. Rates quoted here are standard high-season prices, but if it's a very busy weekend then most hotels will do their best to push prices even higher. Regardless, all the accommodation is highly overpriced and standards are some of the lowest in Maharashtra.

Rucha Heritage Hotel (☎ 230072; MG Rd; d from Rs 500)

This grand and formal white-pillared building is in the thick of the action. First impressions don't last long and the rooms don't match up, but at this price who's complaining?

MTDC Resort (☎ 230540; fax 230566; d with TV from Rs 650) Next to Dasturi car park and good for those who are too lazy to walk all the way into town with their gear. A peaceful, wooded location and the tidy rooms are good value.

Hope Hall Hotel (☎ 230253; MG Rd; d from Rs 1500)

This lovely ramshackle building has overpriced rooms with squat toilets and hot bucket showers. Junior, the Iron Maiden-adoring brother of the woman who runs this joint, is quite a character. Checkout is 24 hours.

Lord's Central Hotel (☎ 230228; www.matheran.com; MG Rd; s/d Rs 800/1600, valley view Rs 1700/3400; 📞 📺) The Lord's Central wins the award for most stunning view. It also deserves to win another award for having the cleanest and most inviting swimming pool as well as the largest chess set. The owners are a wealth of information and the rooms are decent. Be warned that when they quote prices they mean per person rather than per room.

Verandah in the Forest (☎ 230296; www.neemranahotels.com; d weekdays/weekends from Rs 2000/2500) Set amid the forest close to Charlotte Lake, the 19th-century aura and period furniture of creaky Barr house will send Raj-lovers' hearts racing. The hotel is completely without modern distractions and the electricity can be a bit hit and miss. It's let down by lousy service and a reception that certainly wouldn't amuse Queen Vic. The set meals (Indian lunch, continental breakfast and dinner) are very good.

Garden View Restaurant (☎ 230550; MG Rd; mains Rs 60-100) Locals insist that the tastiest meals in Matheran come with a garden view. This is the star attraction.

Attached to Rucha Heritage Hotel, **Rasna Restaurant** (☎ 230072; MG Rd; mains Rs 70-110) is good value and includes a few Matheran surprises such as milk shakes and burgers.

Matheran is famed for its locally produced honey and for *chikki*, a rock-hard workout for the jaws made of *gur* (unrefined sugar made from cane juice) and nuts. Find it at the numerous '*chikki* marts' and shops on MG Rd.

Getting There & Away**TAXI**

From Neral to Matheran taxis cost around Rs 250 and take 20 to 30 minutes. A seat in a

shared taxi is Rs 50. Taxis stop at the Dasturi car park, an hour's hike from Matheran's bazaar area. Horses and rickshaws are waiting here in abundance to whisk you in a cloud of dust to your hotel of choice – bargain hard and expect to pay Rs 200 per horse or cart.

TRAIN

The toy train was put out of action by the monsoon of 2005 and repair work to the tracks is expected to continue until late 2007. Prior to the closure of the train there were three departures daily from Neral Junction train station and an equal number of return journeys. During the monsoon period trains were far less frequent. When the repair work is completed, you can expect a similar number of trains per day. If possible, make reservations in advance from any computerised reservation office.

From Mumbai Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST) the most convenient express train to Neral Junction is the *Deccan Express* (2nd class/chair Rs 34/142, 7.10am). The *Koyna Express* (9am) doesn't arrive at Neral Junction until 10.31am. Most expresses from Mumbai stop at Karjat, down the line from Neral Junction, from where you can backtrack on one of the frequent local trains. Alternatively, take a suburban Karjat-bound train from Mumbai CST and get off at Neral (2nd/1st class Rs 20/120, 2½ hours).

From Pune the 7am *Sahyadri Express* (sleeper/2 AC Rs 101/280, two hours) is the only express stopping at Neral Junction, arriving at 10.09am. Alternatively, take an express that stops at Karjat and get a local train from there.

Getting Around

Matheran is one of the few places left in India where you'll find hand-pulled rickshaws (though even these are more barrow cart than rickshaw); they charge Rs 200 to haul you up from the Dasturi car park to the town. Apart from the rickshaws the only other transport options are your own feet, or a horse. For some reason nobody appears to have thought of attaching a cart to a horse.

LONAVLA

☎ 02114 / pop 55,650 / elev 625m

Lonavla, 106km southeast of Mumbai, caters to weekenders and conference groups coming from the big city and is promoted by the local

tourist board as a 'hill resort'. This is a bit of a misnomer – there are certainly no soaring peaks in the background or precipitous drops to peer fearfully over, but the surrounding countryside is relatively pretty, if a little overdeveloped, and the air cooler and less humid than Mumbai. Lonavla is a long way off being an attractive town – its main drag consists almost exclusively of garishly lit shops flogging *chikki*, the rock-hard nut brittle sweet that is made in the area. But Lonavla does have one very worthwhile calling card – the nearby Karla and Bhaja Cave Temples, which after those of Ellora and Ajanta, are the best in Maharashtra.

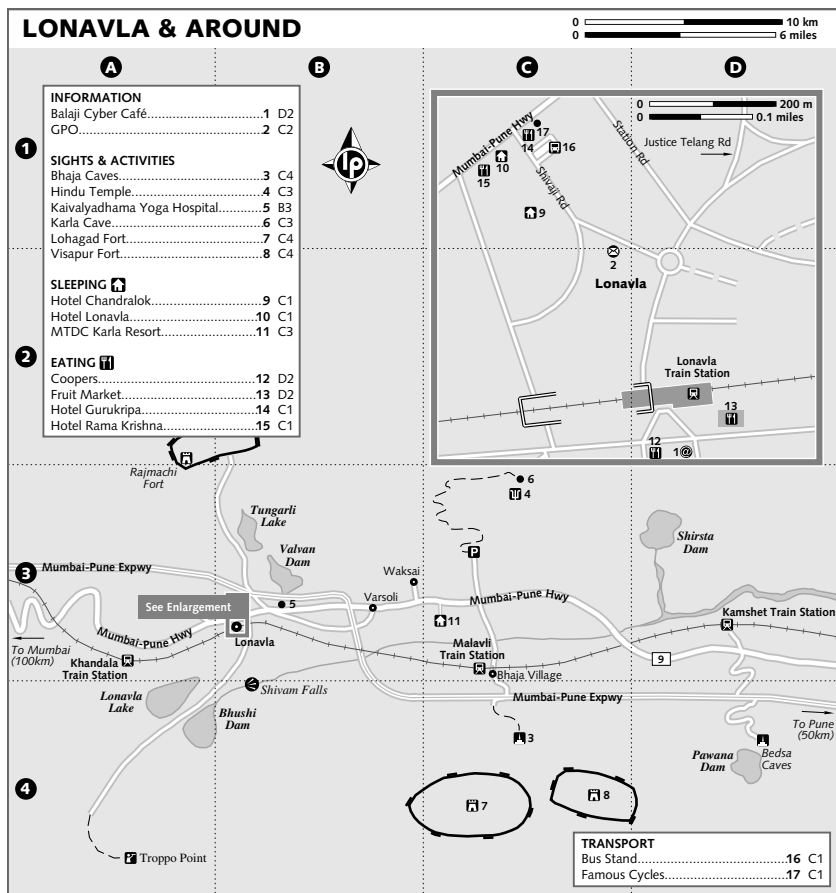
Hotels, restaurants and the main road to the caves are a short walk north of the train station (exit from platform 1). Most of Lonavla

town, which includes a busy market, is south of the station.

Change money in Mumbai or Pune as none of the banks here deal in foreign exchange. Internet access is available at **Balaji Cyber Café** (1st fl, Khandelwal Bldg, New Bazaar; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 12.30-10.30pm), immediately south of the train station.

Activities

Set in neatly kept grounds about 2km from Lonavla just off the Mumbai–Pune Hwy on the way to the Karla and Bhaja Caves, the **Kaivalyadhama Yoga Hospital** (☎ 273039; www.kdham.com; s/d Indian Rs 400/600, foreigner from US\$15/24; ♿) is favoured by those seeking yogic healing. It was founded in 1924 by Swami Kuvlayanandiji



and combines yoga courses with naturopathic therapies. Room rates cover full board and yoga sessions as well as programmes and lectures. The minimum course is seven days. Book in advance.

Mumbai-based **Nirvana Adventures** (☎ 022-26493110; www.nirvanaadventures.com) offers paragliding courses (three-day learner course from ₹250) or short tandem flights at Kamshet, 25km from Lonavla.

Sleeping & Eating

Lonavla's hotels suffer from inflated prices and low standards. Most places are packed out during weekends and holidays (except through the monsoon). All hotels listed here have a 10am checkout time.

Hotel Lonavla (☎ 272914; Mumbai-Pune Hwy; d Rs 795; 🏠) Small fan-only rooms that are comfortable, clean and, after the MTDC Resort (opposite), the best bet in town.

Hotel Chandralok (☎ 272294; fax 272921; Shivaji Rd; d with/without AC from Rs 1200/900; 🏠) Set back from the traffic, this is a friendly hotel with dreary rooms and a fascinating collection of stains on the walls and sheets. Rates are negotiable outside of high season and the in-house restaurant makes a remarkable Gujarati thali.

Hotel Gurukripa (Mumbai-Pune Hwy; mains Rs 40-80) Cheap, cheerful and ever reliable Punjabi and Chinese dishes are served in this cool and dark restaurant.

Hotel Rama Krishna (☎ 273600; Mumbai-Pune Hwy; dishes Rs 45-120) The sleekest place in town with spiffy waiters serving tasty Punjabi fare.

If you've got a sweet tooth, search out **Coopers** (☎ 272564; Jaychand Chowk; 🕒 11am-1pm & 3-5pm, closed Wed), on the southern side of the railway tracks. It's been in business for more than 50 years and is justly renowned for its gooey chocolate fudges.

The bazaar, south of the train station, includes a large fruit market.

Getting There & Away

State buses set to ply the smooth-moving Mumbai-Pune Expressway depart continuously from the **bus stand** (☎ 273842) to Mumbai (ordinary/deluxe Rs 56/70, three/two hours), while their AC siblings (Rs 100) rev up just a few times daily. The many buses for Pune (ordinary/deluxe Rs 44/60, two hours) use the old highway.

All express trains from Mumbai to Pune stop at Lonavla **train station** (☎ 273725). Trav-

elling from Mumbai trains take three hours and cost Rs 35/122 in 2nd class/chair. To Pune there are express trains (2nd class/chair Rs 27/122, one hour, 64km) and hourly shuttle trains (Rs 14, two hours).

Bicycles can be hired from **Famous Cycles** (Mumbai-Pune Hwy; per hr Rs 5).

KARLA & BHAJA CAVES

Dating from around the 2nd century BC, these rock-cut caves are among the oldest and finest examples of early Buddhist rock temple art in India. They may not be on the same scale as Ellora or Ajanta, but the lack of visitors, pretty countryside and zero commercialisation make them worthy of a visit.

It's possible to visit the caves in a day from either Mumbai or Pune if you hire an auto-rickshaw from Lonavla. Karla has the most impressive single cave, but Bhaja is a quieter, more enjoyable site to explore.

Karla Cave

A 20-minute climb brings you to the spectacular **Karla Cave** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/US\$2; 🕒 9am-5pm), the largest early Buddhist *chaitya* in India. Completed in 80 BC, the *chaitya* is around 40m long and 15m high, and was carved by monks and artisans from the rock in imitation of more familiar wooden architecture. Aside from Ellora's Kailasa Temple this is probably the most impressive cave temple in the state.

A semicircular 'sun window' filters light in towards the cave's representation of the Buddha – a dagoba, or stupa, protected by a carved wooden umbrella. The cave's roof is ribbed with teak beams said to be original. The 37 pillars forming the aisles are topped by kneeling elephants. The carved elephant heads on the sides of the vestibule once had ivory tusks.

The beauty of this cave is somewhat marred by the modern **Hindu temple** built in front of the cave mouth. However the temple is a big draw for the pilgrims you'll meet in the area and their presence adds some colour to the scene.

Bhaja Caves

Crossing over the expressway, it's a 3km walk or ride from the main road to the **Bhaja Caves** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/US\$2; 🕒 8am-6pm), where the setting is lush, greener and quieter than at Karla Cave. Thought to date from around 200 BC, 10 of the 18 caves here are *viharas*, while Cave 12 is an open *chaitya*, earlier than Karla,

containing a simple dagoba. Beyond this is a strange huddle of 14 stupas, five inside and nine outside a cave. If you avoid weekends and holidays then there's a good chance you'll be the only visitor here, which helps to lend an air of Indiana Jones-style discovery to your wanderings. From Bhaja Caves you'll see the ruins of the **Lohagad** and **Visapur Forts**, which local kids will happily lead you to for a tip.

Sleeping & Eating

MTDC Karla Resort (☎ 02114-282230; fax 282370; d cottages with/without AC from Rs 1000/600, executive cottage Rs 2500; ♿ ♿) The tidy and spacious rooms on offer here are much better than anything Lonavla can throw at you. Set under the trees, the complex is very peaceful – there's even a little lake where you can go boating. Frequently passing buses and rickshaws can take you either to the caves or back to Lonavla. The resort has a restaurant, and is just off the Mumbai–Pune Hwy.

Getting There & Away

If you don't mind some walking, you can get around the sites within a day by public transport. Frequent local buses run between Lonavla and Karla Cave (Rs 9, 12km); the first leaves Lonavla at 6am. From Karla, walk to Bhaja Caves (minimum two hours, 10km), then follow your feet back to Malavli train station (one hour, 3km) to catch a local train to Lonavla. You can trim some walking time by taking an autorickshaw from Karla to Bhaja village (around Rs 70). The last bus from Karla to Lonavla leaves at 7pm.

Autorickshaws are plentiful, but they drive a hard bargain. The price should include waiting time at the sites (about three hours all up), and a return trip from Lonavla to the Karla and Bhaja Caves will cost Rs 400.

PUNE

☎ 020 / pop 3.8 million / elev 457m

A place where old and new India interweave without a second thought, Pune (pronounced Poona) is a thriving centre of academia and business as well as a historic centre and home to the Osho Meditation Resort.

The great Maratha leader Shivaji would be astonished to see how his city has changed in 500 years. He was raised here after the city was granted to his grandfather in 1599. The town fell to the British in 1817 and became their alternative capital during the monsoon.

Many maharajas had palaces here, too, taking advantage of its cooler climate.

Despite the pollution and clogged traffic that typically go with Indian cities, Pune is an interesting place to hang out for a day or two and a great place to glimpse the much touted, but sometimes hard to find, 'New India'.

Orientation

The city sits at the confluence of the Mutha and Mula Rivers. Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Rd, about 1km south of Pune train station, is the main street and is lined with banks, restaurants and shops. Southwest of here, the streets narrow and take on the atmosphere of a traditional bazaar town. Northeast of the train station, Koregaon Park, home of the Osho ashram and ground zero for the Pune backpacker scene, is where the more upmarket restaurants and bars are to be found.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Crossword (1st fl, Sohrab Hall, RBM Rd; ☎ 10.30am–9pm) On Raibahadur Motilal (RBM) Rd, this offers a diverse collection of books and magazines, as well as a small café.

Manneys Booksellers (7 Moledina Rd; ☎ 9.30am–1.30pm & 4–8pm Mon–Sat)

INTERNET ACCESS

Computology Systems (326 Ashok Vijay Complex, Bootie St; per hr Rs 10; ☎ 9.30am–9.30pm Mon–Sat, 11am–8pm Sun)

Cyber-Net (1B Gera Sterling, North Main Rd, Koregaon Park; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 8am–11.30pm)

Dishnet Hub Internet Centre (Sadhu Vaswani Rd; per hr Rs 30)

MAP

The *Destination Finder* map of Pune (Rs 60) is the best map around. You can find it at most bookshops or at the newspaper stand on platform 1 of the train station.

MONEY

Citibank has 24-hour ATMs at its main branch on East St and at the branches on Bund Garden Rd and North Main Rd. ICICI Bank has an ATM at the Pune train station and another on Koregaon Rd. Southwest of Koregaon Park there is a HSBC ATM, near the Air India office on Mangaldas Rd. On MG Rd you'll find a UTI Bank ATM.

Thomas Cook (☎ 26346171; 2418 G Thimmaya Rd; ☎ 9.30am–6pm Mon–Sat)

MAHARASHTRA



PUNE



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National Hotel.....	30	C1
Osho Meditation Resort Guesthouse.....	31	C1
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Taj Blue Diamond.....	33	C1
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To ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	43	F1
To ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	44	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	45	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	46	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	47	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	48	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	49	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	50	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	51	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	52	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	53	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	54	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	55	F1
ABC Farms (300m), High Spirits (300m), Hops Garden (300m), Swiss Cheese Garden (300m), Gold Ad Labs (1.3km)	56	F1

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Jangali Maharaj Temple.....	17	A2
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Pataleshwara Cave Temple.....	(see 17)	
Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum.....	19	A3
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Hotel Ashwadi.....	24	C2
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Hotel Sriman.....	26	C1
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0 1 km
0 0.5 miles

POST

Main post office (☎ 26125516; Sadhu Vaswani; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

MTDC tourist office (☎ 26126867/24373277; I Block, Central Bldg; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Buried in a government complex south of the train station and not of great help. There is also a small MTDC desk at the train station (open 9am to 7pm Monday to Saturday, and to 3pm Sunday).

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Rokshan Travels (☎ 26136304; rokshantravels@hotmail.com; 1st fl, 19 Kumar Pavilion, East St; ☎ 10am-6pm) Small, friendly and professional outfit. Staff can arrange bus and train journeys and domestic and international flights, as well as taxis.

Sights & Activities**OSHO MEDITATION RESORT**

The Bhagwan Rajneesh's **ashram** (☎ 2066019999; www.osho.com; 17 Koregaon Park) is located in a desirable northern suburb of Pune. Since the Bhagwan's death in 1990, the meditation resort has continued to draw in manifold *san-yasins* (seekers), many of them Westerners. Facilities include a swimming pool, sauna, 'zennis' (Zen tennis) and basketball courts, a massage and beauty parlour, a bookshop and a boutique guesthouse (p829). The main centre for meditation and the nightly white-robed spiritual dance is the Osho Auditorium (a 'cough-free and sneeze-free zone!'). The Osho Samadhi, where the guru's ashes are kept, is also open for silent or music-accompanied meditation.

The commune is big business. Its 'Multiversity' runs a plethora of courses in meditation as well as New Age techniques. If you wish to take part in any of the courses, or even just to visit for the day to meditate you'll have to pay Rs 1280. This covers registration, a mandatory on-the-spot HIV test (sterile needles are used), introductory sessions and your first day's meditation pass. You'll also need two robes (one maroon and one white, from Rs 300 per robe). Meditation is Rs 450/150 (foreigner/Indian) per day and you can come and go as you please. If you want to contribute further, there's the resort's 'Work-as-Meditation' programme.

The curious can watch a video presentation at the visitor centre and take a 10-minute silent tour of the facilities (Rs 10; no children)

at 9am and 2pm daily. Even if you decide not to enter the resort, it's worth checking out the placid 5-hectare gardens, **Osho Teerth** (admission free; ☎ 6-9am & 3-6pm), behind the commune; the gardens are accessible all day for those with a meditation pass.

RAJA DINKAR KELKAR MUSEUM

This quirky **museum** (☎ 24461556; www.rajakelkar-museum.com; 1377-78 Natu Baug, Bajirao Rd; adult/child Rs 200/50; ☎ 9.30am-6pm) is one of Pune's true delights. The exhibits are the personal collection of Sri Dinkar Gangadhar, who died in 1990. Among the 17,000 or so artworks and curios he collected are a suit of armour made of fish scales and crocodile skin, hundreds of hookah pipes and a superb collection of betel-nut cutters.

KATRAJ SNAKE PARK & ZOO

There is a good representation of Indian wildlife on show at the **Katraj Snake Park & Zoo** (☎ 24367712; Pune-Satara Hwy; adult/child Rs 3/2; ☎ 10.30am-6pm Jul-Mar, to 7pm Apr-Jun, closed Wed). Located on the southern outskirts of the city, the large, natural-looking enclosures of the zoo are built with the requirements and breeding needs of the inmates in mind. It provides a home to tigers, leopards, bears and monkeys, but it's the reptiles that are the real passion here. The zoo curator is renowned as one of India's most respected herpetologists.

SHANIWAR WADA

The ruins of this fortresslike **palace** (Shivaji Rd; admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-6.30pm) stand in the old part of the city. Built in 1732, the palace of the Peshwa rulers burnt down in 1828, but the massive walls remain, as do the sturdy palace doors with their angry spikes. In the evenings there is an hour-long **sound & light show** (Rs 25; ☎ 8.15pm Thu-Tue).

PATALESHVARA CAVE TEMPLE

Set across the river is the curious rock-cut **Pataleshvara Cave Temple** (☎ 25535941; Jangali Maharaj Rd; ☎ 6am-9.30pm), a small, unfinished 8th-century temple similar in style to the grander Elephanta Island one near Mumbai. It's an active temple, with people coming here for worship or simply to relax in the gardens. In front of the excavation is a circular Nandi **mandapa** (pillared pavilion). Adjacent is the **Jangali Maharaj Temple** (☎ 6am-10pm), dedicated to a Hindu ascetic who died here in 1818.

THE ARMANI OF ASHRAMS

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (1931–90), or Osho as he preferred to be called, was one of India's most flamboyant 'export gurus' and undoubtedly the most controversial. He followed no particular religion or philosophy and outraged many Indians (and others) with his advocacy of sex as a path to enlightenment, earning him the epithet 'sex guru'. In 1981 Rajneesh took his curious blend of Californian pop psychology and Indian mysticism to the USA, where he set up an agricultural commune and ashram in Oregon. There, his ashram's notoriety as well as its fleet of Rolls Royces (bought to prove that material possessions had no meaning!) grew like weeds. Eventually, with rumours and local paranoia about the ashram's activities running amok, the Bhagwan was charged with immigration fraud, fined US\$400,000 and deported. An epic journey began during which he and his followers, in their search for a new base, were deported from or denied entry to 21 countries. By 1987 he was back at the Pune ashram, where thousands of foreigners soon flocked for his nightly discourses and meditation courses.

They still come in droves. The unveiling of the capacious Osho Auditorium in 2002 also marked the alteration of the centre's name from 'Osho Commune International' to 'Osho Meditation Resort'. Prices for the 'resort' privileges are continually on the rise, facilities become ever more luxurious and, just in case you were wondering, despite Osho's comments on how nobody should be poor, none of the money generated by the resort goes into helping the poor or disadvantaged of the local community. That, resort authorities claim, is up to someone else.

TRIBAL CULTURAL MUSEUM

About 1.5km east of the Pune train station, this excellent museum (☎ 2636207; 28 Queens Garden, Richardson Rd; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/10; 🕒 10.30am–5.30pm) opens up a whole new side of India that most visitors are completely unaware of. The ornate papier-mâché festival masks are like something from the Rio carnival.

GANDHI NATIONAL MEMORIAL

Set in 6.5 hectares of gardens across the Mula River in Yerwada is the grand **Aga Khan Palace** and **Gandhi National Memorial** (☎ 26680250; Ahmednagar Rd; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; 🕒 9am–5.45pm). After the Mahatma delivered his momentous Quit India resolution in 1942, the British interned him and other leaders of India's Independence movement here for nearly two years. Both Kasturba Gandhi, the Mahatma's wife, and Mahadoebhai Desai, his secretary for 35 years, died while imprisoned here. Their ashes are kept in memorial samadhis (shrines) in the gardens.

Photos and paintings exhibit moments in Gandhi's extraordinary career, but it's all very poorly presented.

GARDENS

At the **Empress Botanical Gardens** (admission Rs 5; 🕒 6.30am–7pm) cosy couples on park benches enjoy the spots of shade under the trees. In the evening, dozens of food stalls and kiddie carnival rides are set up outside **Peshwa Park** (admission Rs 2; 🕒 9.30am–5.30pm).

RAMAMANI IYENGAR MEMORIAL YOGA INSTITUTE

To attended classes at this famous **institute** (☎ 25656134; www.bksiyengar.com; 1107 B/1 Hare Krishna Mandir Rd, Model Colony), around 7km northwest of the train station, you need to have been practising yoga for at least eight years.

Courses

Kuk@ease (☎ 30938999/09371207599; antimaa@rediffmail.com; C-8, Sapphire Apts, Lane 6, Koregaon Park) offers one-day cookery courses (single person/per person in group of four Rs 1600/600), with equipment and ingredients supplied.

Tours

Good bus tours of Pune leave the **Pune Municipal Transport depot** (PMT; Sasson Rd; 🕒 bookings 8am–noon & 3–6pm), near the train station, at 9am daily, returning around 6pm (Rs 128). They quickly cover all of Pune's major sights.

Sleeping

There's no shortage of accommodation all over Pune but the main hubs are around the train station and Koregaon Park, which, with its proximity to the Osho Meditation Resort, has become the main backpackers' hang-out. Many families rent rooms out to passing travellers and, with prices starting at Rs 150 for a room with a shared bathroom and Rs 250 for private bathrooms, this is the cheapest way to grab a good night's sleep. Quality varies

widely, so check out a few before deciding. For longer-term stays you can negotiate a room in one of these places from Rs 3000 to 10,000 per month. Rickshaw drivers will know where to look.

BUDGET

Grand Hotel (☎ 26360728; MG Rd; s with shared bathroom/d with private bathroom Rs 250/575) Excluding its private rooms in family homes, the Grand has the cheapest beds in Pune, but it's not a place you would chose for a luxurious break. On the positive side the patio bar is a good place for a beer.

National Hotel (☎ 26125054; 14 Sasson Rd; d/tr Rs 450/550, cottages from Rs 500) Located opposite the train station is this charmingly run-down colonial mansion with verandas and high ceilings set in a pleasing garden. While the rooms are basic, they are clean, and the cottages have little porches.

Homeland (☎ 26127659; homeland@satyam.net.in; 18 Wilson Garden; s/d Rs 450/550, with AC Rs 750/850; 🏠) Dirty and run down but if everything else is full it will pass for a night.

Hotel Surya Villa (☎ 26124501; www.hotelsuryavilla.com; 294/1 Koregaon Park; s/d Rs 1000/1200, d with AC Rs 1300; 🏠) With light and airy rooms this could have been one of the better Koregaon Park hotels, but sadly you'll be having threesomes (or even twelvesomes) with the numerous cockroaches that have infested the bedrooms. The downstairs café seems to be cockroach-free and is good value.

MIDRANGE

All hotels listed have a noon checkout and accept credit cards.

Hotel Sunderban (☎ 26124949; www.tghotels.com; 19 Koregaon Park; d with shared bathroom from Rs 800, with private bathroom with/without AC from Rs 1300/1000; 🏠) Next to the Osho Resort this was a popular, but increasingly neglected, heritage property that at the time of research was about to close for renovations. When it reopens (no date scheduled) it's likely to remain just as popular. The prices listed are pre-renovations.

Samrat Hotel (☎ 26137964; thesamrathotel@vsnl.net; 17 Wilson Garden; s/d Rs 1190/1400, with AC Rs 1600/1800; 🏠) Every Indian town has one hotel that shines above all the others and in Pune that honour falls to the Samrat Hotel. This sparkling modern hotel is in a class of its own and represents superb value for money. It's often full so book in advance.

Hotel Ritz (☎ 26122995; fax 26136644; 6 Sadhu Vaswani Path; d with/without AC Rs 2550/1950; 🏠) A ramshackle old building with unharnessed potential. It's friendly and certainly one of Pune's better bets. All rooms have TVs and the cheaper ones are at the back next to the garden restaurant, which serves good Gujarati thalis.

Hotel Ashirwad (☎ 26128585; hotelash@vsnl.com; 16 Cannought Rd; s/d from Rs 2200/2500; 🏠) The smug management don't exactly warm you to this place but the rooms are very clean and it sits nicely near the top of the midrange class. The Akshaya restaurant is a worthy choice that serves Punjabi, Mughlai and Chinese vegetarian fare.

Hotel Srimaan (☎ 26133535; srimaan@vsnl.com; 361/5A Bund Gdn Rd; s/d Rs 2300/2800; 🏠) Clean and functional but lacking any real spark. It's popular with passing Indian businessmen and is good value.

our pick Osho Meditation Resort guesthouse (☎ 2066019999; www.osho.com; Koregaon Park; s/d Rs 2400/2900; 🏠) If your visit to Pune is to attend the Osho Meditation Resort (p827), then its stylish guesthouse, with minimalist rooms, offers the unique opportunity to breathe in deep lungfuls of specially cleaned air! Book in advance and note that you have to be attending courses at the resort to stay.

TOP END

Taj Blue Diamond (☎ 6025555; bdrsv.pune@tajhotels.com; 11 Koregaon Rd; d from US\$180; 🏠 📺 🚿) An elegant, top-class business hotel with all the trimmings from courteous staff in saris to pleasantly decorated rooms and a stylish selection of restaurants.

Le Meridien (☎ 26050505; www.lemeridien-pune.com; RBM Rd; d from US\$235; 🏠 📺 🚿) Styled on a Mughal palace and full of marble pillars and high ceilings, this is the most sumptuous hotel in Pune. Rooms are compact and comfortable. Other assets include three restaurants, two bars, a nightclub, gym and a small rooftop pool (open to nonguests for Rs 450 per day).

Eating

The opportunity to eat, drink and make merry is one of the highlights of Pune. The biggest concentration of well-priced, high-quality eateries are be found around the Lanes in Koregaon Park. Unless otherwise mentioned the following are open noon to 3pm and 7pm to 11pm daily.

RESTAURANTS

Vaishali (☎ 25672676; FC Rd; mains Rs 70) A long established Pune institution on account of its delicious South Indian dishes.

Shabree Restaurant (Hotel Parichay, 1199/1A FC Rd; mains Rs 70-120) Some of the best, cheap Maharashtra thalis you could hope to find.

Flags (☎ 26141617; G2 Metropole, Bund Garden Rd; mains Rs 75-200) With possibly Pune's longest menu, running the global gamut from Mongolian cauliflower to *yakisoba* (fried Japanese noodles), the highly popular Flags has something to please practically everyone, all wrapped up in a comfy contemporary interior.

Premis (North Main Rd, Koregaon Park; mains Rs 80-150) In a quiet, leafy courtyard tucked away from the main road, Premis is a relaxing and very popular place for a decent mixture of Indian and Continental food. It's as popular with Indians as Westerners.

The Place: Touche the Sizzler (☎ 26134632; 7 Moledina Rd; mains Rs 120-200) As the name suggests, this long-running place specialises in sizzlers, but it also offers Indian, tandoori, seafood and Continental dishes.

Third on the Seventh (☎ 26140715; Lane 7, North Main Rd; mains Rs 120-250) In something of a reversal of trends, this classy joint is run by a British-Indian couple who have returned to Pune from the UK bringing with them a bulging recipe book of 'British-style' curries and Continental food.

ourpick Malaka Spice (☎ 26136293; Lane 6, North Main Rd; mains Rs 110-300, ☎ 11am-11pm) A supertrendy little restaurant with excellent Southeast Asian food and a menu that is part artwork, part travel diary. It's very popular with the young and beautiful of Pune.

Arthur's Theme (☎ 26132710; Lane 6, North Main Rd, mains Rs 120-300) This is a stylish place offering decent French cuisine in a slightly formal atmosphere.

The ABC Farms is a complex of midrange restaurants in Koregaon Park, where healthy, organic food is the order of the day. One of the best restaurants is the **Swiss Cheese Garden** (☎ 26817413; mains Rs 100-400), which, alongside delicious pastas, offers good old-fashioned cheese fondues. Almost next door is the equally enjoyable **Shisha Café** (☎ 26818885; mains Rs 100-180; ☎ 10.30am-1.30pm), which is a combination of a jazz bar and an Iranian restaurant, complete with bubbling hookah pipes (Rs 125).

CAFÉS

Juice World (2436/B East St Camp; ☎ 8am-1am) As well as producing delicious fresh fruit juices and shakes, this casual café with outdoor seating serves inexpensive snacks such as pizza and *pav bhaji* (spiced vegetables and bread) for around Rs 40.

German Bakery (North Main Rd, Koregaon Park; dishes Rs 50-150, cakes Rs 25-50; ☎ 6am-11.30pm) A compulsory halt on the Koregaon Park backpacker scene, but also appreciated by locals. This long-running café, with light and healthy snacks and great cakes makes a brilliant lunch stop. Fruit and vegetables are sterilised and water used for beverages is purified.

Café Barista (Sterling Centre, 12 MG Rd; meals Rs 40-80) A branch of the Western-style coffee chain, which dishes up plain sandwiches and cakes with good coffee.

The family-run Kayani Bakery on East St is famous for its homemade Shrewsbury biscuits, but the sweet attractions run to all manner of cakes.

Drinking & Entertainment

With its massive student population, Pune puts a great deal of effort into nocturnal activities and has a large array of ever-changing bars and clubs. Ask around Koregaon Park for the latest. The bar scene in Pune can be a little cliquy and it really helps if you know some locals.

High Spirits (Koregaon Park) Brand new bar that's caught the attention of the student population. Has a nice open terrace. It's next to the ABC Farms.

Lush (Boat Club Rd) It's cool. It's super trendy. It's *the* place to be seen. It's Lush, Pune's sleekest new lounge bar.

Thousand Oaks (☎ 26343194; thousandoaks@vsnl.com; 2417 East St; admission Fri & Sat Rs 200) This cosy pub-style bar is an old favourite but its DJs can't decide what kind of music they are into.

Gold Ad Labs (☎ 26050101; Queen's Garden Rd; adult Rs 130) New state-of-the-art cinema complex surrounded by modern shopping malls, bright lights and about as much Eastern exotica as McDonalds on a Saturday night – which happens to be almost next door.

Shopping

Pune has some good shopping options.

Bombay Store (322 MG Rd; ☎ 10.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun) This place is the best spot for general souvenirs.

Celebrate Shopping Mall (Bund Garden Rd, Koregaon Park) This glass-fronted mall is full of Western high-street labels.

Pune is a good spot to buy modern Indian clothing; try **Either Or** (24/25 Sohrab Hall, 21 Sasson Rd; ☎ 10.30am-8pm, closed Thu) or **Fabindia** (Sakar 10, Sasson Rd; ☎ 10am-7.45pm).

Getting There & Away

AIR

Airline offices in Pune:

Air India (☎ 26128190; Hermes Kunj, 4 Mangaldas Rd)

Air Sahara (☎ 26059003; 131 Sohrab Hall, 21 Sasson Rd)

Indian Airlines (☎ 26052147; 39 Dr B Ambedkar Rd)

Jet Airways (☎ 26123268; 243 Century Arcade, Narangi Bung Rd)

Indian Airlines flies daily to Delhi (US\$153, two hours), and to Bengaluru (US\$102, 2½ hours), Goa (US\$60 45 minutes) and Mumbai (US\$102, 30 minutes). Jet Airways flies twice daily to Mumbai (US\$81, 30 minutes), Bengaluru (US\$146, 1½ hours), Delhi (US\$186, two hours), and daily to Chennai (US\$169, 2½ hours) and Kolkata US\$336, 2½ hours). Air Sahara flies twice daily to Delhi (US\$115, two hours). Of the budget airlines Spice Jet flies to Delhi and Bengaluru, while Kingfisher flies to Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Coimbatore, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Jammu and Nagpur. Air Deccan links Pune up with Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Delhi and Hyderabad, and IndiGo flies to Bengaluru and Delhi.

BUS

Pune has three bus stands: **Pune train station stand** (☎ 26126218), for Mumbai and destinations to the south and west, including Goa, Belgaum, Kolhapur, Mahabaleshwar and

Lonavla; **Shivaji Nagar bus stand** (☎ 25536970), for points north and northeast, including Ahmednagar, Aurangabad, Ahmedabad and Nasik; and **Swargate bus stand** (☎ 24441591), for Sinhadag, Bengaluru and Mangalore. Deluxe buses shuttle from the train station bus stand to Dadar (Mumbai) every 30 minutes (semi-deluxe/deluxe Rs 117/240, four hours).

Plenty of private deluxe buses head to most centres, including Panaji in Goa (ordinary/sleeper Rs 300/400, 12 hours – though high season prices sometimes rise to Rs 600!), Nasik (semideluxe/deluxe Rs 200/250, five hours) and Aurangabad (Rs 160, six hours). Make sure you know where the bus will drop you off (going to Mumbai, for instance, some private buses get no further than Borivali). Try **Bright Travels** (☎ 26114222; Connaught Rd); its buses depart from the service station near the roundabout.

For Mumbai the train is the safest option.

TAXI

Long-distance shared taxis (four passengers) link up Pune with Dadar in Mumbai round the clock. They leave from the **taxi stand** (☎ 26121090) in front of Pune train station (per seat Rs 260, AC Rs 320, three hours). Share-taxi services to Nasik and Aurangabad have been discontinued.

TRAIN

Pune is an important rail hub with connections to many parts of the state. The swarming computerised **booking hall** (☎ 131) is in the building to the left of the station as you face the entrance – take a deep breath before crossing the threshold.

The *Deccan Queen*, *Sinhagad Express* and *Pragati Express* are fast commuter trains to Mumbai, taking three to four hours.

MAJOR TRAINS FROM PUNE

Destination	Train No & name	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departure
Bengaluru	6529 <i>Udyan Exp</i>	325/1327	21½	11.45am
Chennai	6011 <i>Chennai Exp</i>	337/1366	22½	6.05pm
Delhi	1077 <i>Jhelum Exp</i>	417/1691	21¾	9.40pm
Hyderabad	7031 <i>Hyderabad Exp</i>	230/933	13¾	4.40pm
Mumbai CST	2124 <i>Deccan Queen</i>	57/215	3¾	7.15am

Express fares are 2nd class/chair for day trains, sleeper/2AC sleeper for overnight trains; *Deccan Queen* fares are 2nd class/chair. To calculate 1st class and other fares see p1179.

Getting Around

The airport is 8km northeast of the city. An autorickshaw there costs about Rs 50, a taxi is Rs 150.

City buses gather at the PMT depot across from Pune train station, but journeys are slower than a wet Sunday. Useful buses include bus 4 to Swargate, bus 5 to Shivaji Nagar bus terminal, and bus 159 to Koregaon Park.

Autorickshaws can be found everywhere. A ride from the Pune train station to Koregaon Park costs about Rs 30 in the daytime and Rs 50 at night.

AROUND PUNE

Sinhagad

Scene of a victory by Shivaji's forces over those of Bijapur in 1670, Sinhagad (Lion Fort), 24km southwest of Pune, is a fun day out. The ruined fort stands on top of a steep hill cluttered with telecommunications towers and tourist stalls; the real attractions are the sweeping views and the chance for a healthy workout on the hike up from the bus stop in Sinhagad village.

If you don't want to walk, jeeps (Rs 25) are usually around to cart you to within a short stroll of the summit. The Pune city bus 50 runs frequently to Sinhagad village from 7am until evening, leaving from either Swargate or the Architect College bus stop opposite Nehru Stadium (Rs 17, 45 minutes). At the time of research the fort was closed and the access road out of action thanks to damage inflicted by heavy monsoon rains.

MAHABALESHWAR

☎ 02168 / pop 12,736 / elev 1372m

High up in the Western Ghats, the hill station of Mahabaleshwar was founded in 1828 by Sir John 'Boy' Malcolm, after which it quickly became the summer capital of the Bombay presidency during the days of the Raj. Today few traces of those times remain, save for a couple of dilapidated buildings. In fact Rudyard Kipling would positively turn in his grave if he could see how down-at-heel the old girl had become and good gosh, you can't even get a properly brewed cup of tea. While the tea and summer jams are long gone what hasn't changed one jot are the delightful views and equally delightful temperatures and it's for these two reasons that Mahabaleshwar attracts hordes of holidaymakers who fill the main street with loud exuberance. If you are after

just a hint of peace and quiet then avoid the peak periods during the summer school holidays (April to June), Christmas and Diwali.

The hill station virtually shuts up shop during the monsoon (from late June to mid-September), when an unbelievable 6m of rain falls. Buildings are clad with *kulum* grass to stave off damage from the torrential downpours. After things calm down, the reward is abundantly green landscapes.

Orientation

Most of the action is in the main bazaar (Main Rd, also called Dr Sabane Rd) – a 200m strip of holiday tack. The bus stand is at the western end. A Rs 15 'tourist tax' is payable on arrival.

Information

Mahabaleshwar has no internet facilities.

Bank of Maharashtra (☎ 260290; Main Rd) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

MTDC tourist office (☎ 260318; Bombay Point Rd)

At the MTDC Resort south of town, has crude maps but helpful staff.

State Bank of India (Masjid St) Has a 24-hour ATM.

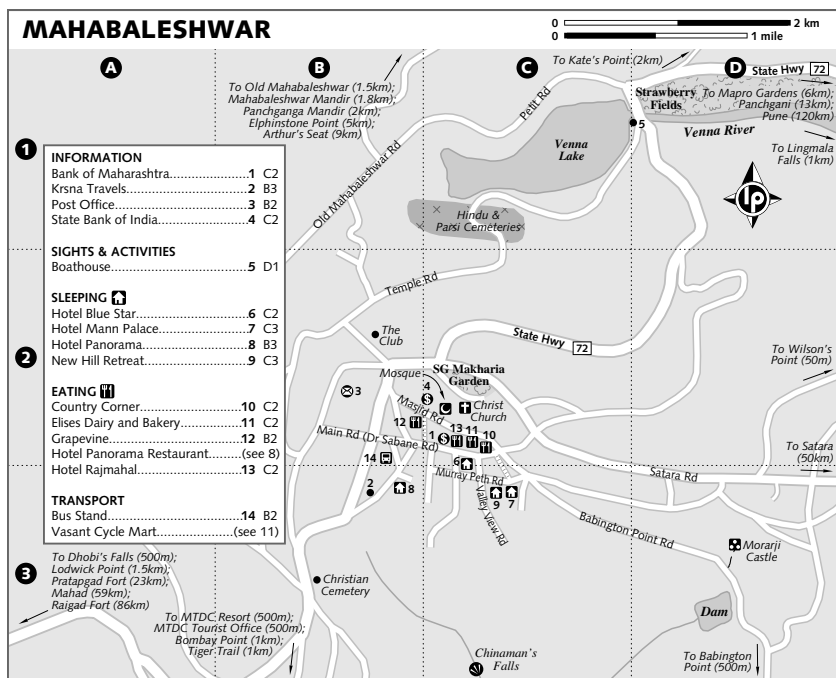
Krsna Travels (☎ 261035; Subhash Chowk, Main Rd,

☎ 9am-8pm) Reliable onward travel information, a variety of local tours and all manner of bus tickets.

Sights & Activities

The hills are alive with the sound of music, though it's usually being blasted out of car windows as people race by in an effort to tick off all the towns viewpoints as quickly as possible. If you can ignore this then fine views can be savoured from **Wilson's Point** (also known as Sunrise Point), which is within easy walking distance of town, as well as **Elphinstone**, **Babington**, **Kate's** and **Lodwick Points**. The latter is dedicated to Peter Lodwick, the first European to set foot in Mahabaleshwar in 1824.

The sunset views at **Bombay Point** are stunning; but you won't be the only one who thinks so. Much quieter, thanks no doubt to being 9km from town, is **Arthur's Seat**, which, should Arthur have ever fallen out of it, would have resulted in him tumbling down a sheer drop of 600m – at least the view would have been good. Attractive waterfalls around Mahabaleshwar include **Chinaman's**, **Dhobi's** and **Lingmala Falls**. On the edge of Venna Lake, a **boathouse** (Temple Rd; ☎ 8am-8pm) rents out rowboats (Rs 160 per hour) and pedal boats (Rs 200 per hour).



By far the most enjoyable way of seeing a couple of the viewpoints is to follow the forest tracks that run between them. This means you probably won't rub shoulders with anyone but the odd troupe of monkeys. One highly recommended two-hour walk is to stroll down to Bombay Point and then follow the very inappropriately named **Tiger Trail** back into town (maps are available from the MTDC tourist office).

The village of Old Mahabaleshwar has two ancient temples. The **Panchganga Mandir** (☞ 7am-9pm), said to contain the springs of five rivers, including the sacred Krishna River, and the **Mahabaleshwar Mandir** (☞ 6am-9pm), which has a naturally formed lingam.

Tours

The MSRTC conducts sightseeing tours (high season only) for the very rushed. The Mahabaleshwar round (Rs 45, 4½ hours) takes in nine viewpoints plus Old Mahabaleshwar; it leaves the bus stand at 2.30pm. Alternatively, taxi drivers will fall over themselves to get you on their three-hour tour for Rs 300. This amounts to a ride out to Arthur's Seat

and back with a stop at Old Mahabaleshwar along the way. Tours are also available to the lookout points south of town (Rs 280, 2½ hours), Panchgani (Rs 300, three hours) and Pratapgad Fort (Rs 450, three hours).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel prices are all about supply and demand in Mahabaleshwar – rates soar during peak holiday times; at other times the budget and midrange hotels can be good value. Most of the budget places are around the main bazaar near the bus stand, but dozens of resort-style lodges (most offering full board) are scattered around the village. During the monsoon the vast majority of places shut up shop. Note that many of the midrange and top-end establishments refuse single travellers – men in particular.

Hotel Mann Palace (☎ 261778; Murray Perth Rd; d from Rs 500) One of the towns' better budget options, with great-value, refreshingly well-cared-for rooms.

Hotel Blue Star (☎ 260678; 114 Main Rd; d low/high season Rs 250/1000) During the low season the cheapest beds in town can be found here, but

you certainly know it! High season prices are completely ludicrous.

MTDC Resort (☎ 260318; fax 260300; d low/high season from Rs 450/650) Assuming you have come to Mahabaleshwar in order to escape the noise and bustle of the nearby cities then the MTDC Resort, a couple of kilometres southwest of the town centre, should fit the bill perfectly. It's blissfully quiet and excellent value. A taxi from the town centre is Rs 40.

New Hill Retreat (☎ 261361; hillsretreat@yahoo.co.in; 187 School Mohalla, Murray Peth Rd; d low/high season Rs 500/1100) A short walk from the heart of the main bazaar, this small hotel boasts dim but otherwise spotless rooms and eager-to-please staff.

Hotel Panorama (☎ 260404; fax 261234; 28 MG Rd; r low/high season from Rs 1500/2800; ♿ ♻) The rooms are past their prime but who cares when you can take a plastic swan-shaped paddle boat for a spin around the pool. The staff are friendly, and its vegetarian restaurant (meals Rs 60 to 100) is one of the best in town.

Elises Dairy & Bakery (Main Rd; Rs 25-60) The big question here is which is better – the carrot cake or the ginger cake?

Hotel Rajmahal (80 Main Rd; meals Rs 30-60) This is a buzzing vegetarian pad frequented by locals for its satisfying thalis and other South Indian and Punjabi eats.

Country Corner (Imperial Stores; Main Rd; snacks & dishes Rs 40-120) So what if they're greasy and unhealthy – the burgers, pizzas and other snacks here are undeniably tasty.

Grapevine (Masjid Rd; dishes Rs 60-160) It's almost worth coming to Mahabaleshwar just to eat at this Mediterranean-flavoured restaurant. The

service is superb as are the Asian and Continental dishes. Wash your meal down with one of its Indian or European wines.

Mahabaleshwar is famous for its berries, which you can buy fresh (in season) or as juice, ice cream and jams (see *Berry Delicious*, left).

Getting There & Away

From the **bus stand** (☎ 260254) state buses leave every hour or so for Pune (semideluxe/deluxe Rs 70/105, 3½ hours) with less frequent buses rolling to Satara (Rs 31, two hours), Panchgani (Rs 10, 30 minutes) and Mahad (for Raigad Fort; Rs 31, two hours), and several services making the long run to Kolhapur (Rs 110, five hours). Outside of the monsoon, one deluxe bus heads to Mumbai Central Station (Rs 180, seven hours), while semideluxe buses (Rs 139) leave at 9am, 1pm and 2.45pm.

Private agents in the bazaar book luxury buses to destinations within Maharashtra or to Goa (seat/sleeper Rs 550/750, 12 hours via Surur where you must change bus). They all quote similar prices and times, but inquire where they intend to drop you off. None of the luxury buses to Mumbai (low/high season Rs 350/550, 6½ hours) go into the city – the furthest you'll get is Borivali. Private buses to Pune (Rs 190) will bid you adieu at Swargate.

Getting Around

There are heaps of taxis and Maruti vans near the bus stand to take you to the main viewpoints or to Panchgani. For trips around town, the minimum charge is Rs 30 (for up to 2km).

The light traffic makes cycling a sensible option, though take care along the narrow lanes with their blind corners if you ride to the viewpoints. Bikes can be hired from **Vasant Cycle Mart** (Main Rd; ☎ 8am-9pm) for Rs 10 per hour or Rs 50 for the day.

AROUND MAHABALESHWAR Pratapgad Fort

Built in 1656, the impressive **Pratapgad Fort** (admission free; ☎ 7am-7pm) dominates a high ridge 24km west of Mahabaleshwar and was the setting for one of the most enduring legends involving the Maratha leader. In 1659 Shivaji agreed to meet the Bijapur general, Afzal Khan, below the fort walls in an attempt to end a stalemate. However, the two men arrived armed and Shivaji disembowelled his enemy with a set of iron *waghnaikh* (tiger's

BERRY DELICIOUS

Mahabaleshwar is ripe with some of India's finest strawberries, as well as raspberries, mulberries and gooseberries.

Fruits are harvested from late November to June, with the best crops coming around February. You can visit the farms and buy direct, or get them from the many vendors in Mahabaleshwar's bazaar. The industry also dips into fruit drinks, sweets, fudge and jam. Free factory tours and the chance to tuck into some samples are offered at **Mapro Gardens** (☎ 02168-240112; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2pm-6.30pm Wed-Mon), between Mahabaleshwar and Panchgani.

claws). Khan's tomb marks the site of this painful encounter.

The fort is reached by a 500-step climb, which affords brilliant views. Guides are available from outside the fort for a negotiable fee. To get here from Mahabaleshwar, you can take the 9.30am state bus (Rs 50 return, one hour). It waits at the site for an hour before returning. A taxi to Pratapgad and back costs Rs 450.

Raigad Fort

Over 80km northwest of Mahabaleshwar, all alone on a hilltop, **Raigad Fort** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/US\$5; ☎ 8am-5.30pm) has stunning views. This was Shivaji's capital, where he was crowned in 1648 and where he died and was cremated in 1680.

You can hike to the top – it's a 2½-hour steep haul up 1475 steps. Or if that sounds like too much hard work then you can glide up the hill via a **ropeway** (☎ 02145-274831; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm). The return ticket (Rs 130) includes a guide, entry into a small museum and the opportunity to view a short film about the site's past.

Raigad is best reached from Mahad (Rs 13, 45 minutes) or you can take a taxi tour direct from Mahabaleshwar (Rs 1100).

KOLHAPUR

☎ 0231 / pop 485,183 / elev 550m

Kolhapur was once the capital of an important Maratha state, but today it's just a forgotten backwood receiving no more than a handful of foreign visitors each month. This is a shame because, with its proximity to Goa, a friendly population and an intriguing temple complex, Kolhapur is one of the best introductions to the splendours of India that you could hope to find.

In August the **Matharaj Naag Panchami**, a snake-worshipping festival, is held here and in Pune.

Orientation

The old town around the Mahalaxmi Temple is around 3km southwest of the bus and train stations, while the 'new' palace is a similar distance to the north. Rankala Lake, a popular spot for evening strolls and the location of the Hotel Shalini Palace, is 5km southwest of the stations.

Information

Internet Zone (Kedar Complex, Station Rd; per hr Rs 20;

☎ 8am-midnight) Internet access.

MTDC tourist office (☎ 2652935; Assembly Rd;

☎ 10am-5.45pm Mon-Sat) On the way to the maharaja's palace, opposite the Collector's Office.

State Bank of India (☎ 2660735; Udyamnagar) A short autorickshaw ride southwest of the train station near Hutatma Park. Deals in foreign exchange.

UTI Bank (Station Rd) Has a 24-hour ATM just west of Hotel International.

Sights

SHREE CHHATRAPATI SHAHU MUSEUM

If you think your house is full of old junk then just wait till you get a load of this place. The maharaja's 'new' palace, completed in 1881, houses an extraordinary **museum** (☎ 2538060; admission Rs 24; ☎ 9.15am-12.30pm & 2.15-6pm), with one of the most bizarre collections of memorabilia in the country. The building, worthy of a visit in its own right, was designed by 'Mad' Charles Mant, the British architect who fashioned the Indo-Saracenic style of colonial architecture, and is a cross between a Victorian train station and the Addams Family mansion.

The maharaja was a bit of an animal lover and he was particularly fond of fluffy wild animals after they'd been shot, stuffed and hung on his wall – the building is a giant horror-house zoo with the stuffed pangolin (a scaly nocturnal anteater) being probably the oddest animal anyone has ever gone hunting for.

Other Mant-designed buildings in Kolhapur include the attractive old **Town Hall**, which now houses a dull museum.

OLD TOWN

Don't fail to devote a few hours to Kolhapur's atmospheric old town. Dominating this compact area is the lively and colourful **Mahalaxmi Temple** (☎ 5am-10.30pm) dedicated to Amba Bai, or the Mother Goddess. The temple's origins date back to AD 10, but much of what you see is from the 18th Century. It's one of the most important Amba Bai temples in India and therefore attracts an unceasing tide of humanity who flock across the temple and its courtyard. Non-Hindus are welcome and it's a fantastic place for a spot of people-watching.

In the grounds of the nearby Old Palace the **Bhavani Mandap** (Shivaji Rd; ☎ 6am-8pm) is dedicated to the goddess Bhavani. It also contains a few more of the maharaja's hunting souvenirs.

Kolhapur is famed for the calibre of its wrestlers and at the **Motibag Thalim**, a courtyard beside the entrance to the Bhavani Mandap,

you can watch young athletes train in a muddy pit. Tourists aren't exactly encouraged and single women travellers may find the sensation of being surrounded by dozens of testosterone filled, sweaty, seminaked men a little uncomfortable. Either way it's certainly a slice of grimy India at its best.

Professional matches are held between June and December in the **Kasbagh Maidan**, a red-earth arena in a natural sunken stadium a short walk south of Motibag Thalim. Events are announced in local papers. Finally, if you're a shopoholic, then the old town streets are rammed with gold jewellery shops where the hard sale of some Indian tourist cities is unheard of.

CHANDRAKANT MANDARE MUSEUM

Dedicated to actor and artist Chandrakant Mandare (1913–2001), this well-maintained gallery (☎ 2525256; Rajarampuri, 7th Lane; admission Rs 3; ☎ 10.30am–1pm & 1.30–5.30pm Tue–Sun), houses stills of his movies as well as his fine paintings and sketches.

Sleeping & Eating

Most of the better hotels and restaurants can be found along Station Rd, which appropriately enough is the busy main street running west of the train station.

Hotel Tourist (☎ 2650421; tourist@epages.webindia.com; Station Rd; s/d/tr Rs 375/475/550, s/d with AC from Rs 600/650; ☎) Exceptionally friendly hotel offering the neatest budget beds in town. The only drawback is a little road noise so ask for a room facing away from all the commotion.

Hotel Radha Swami (☎ 6682485; Station Rd; s/d Rs 450/550, with AC Rs 650/750) A useful standby if the next-door Hotel Tourist is full. The rooms are clean but squat toilets and communication difficulties mean that it cannot quite compete with its neighbour.

Hotel International (☎ 2536641; fax 2536644; 517 A1 Shivaji Park; s/d from Rs 600/700, with AC Rs 800/950; ☎) You'd be hard pushed to find any hotel in Maharashtra with bathrooms as immaculately polished as those of the Hotel International. It's a shame the cleanliness levels haven't extended to the bedrooms, but even so this one's a good bet. Meals are Rs 60 to 100.

Hotel Pearl (☎ 6684451; hotelpearl@hotmail.com; 517 A2 Shivaji Park; s/d Rs 1050/1200, with AC Rs 1350/1500 ☎) The manageress of this classy business hotel should be commended for creating such a beacon of calm. The rooms are large

and well-equipped and the staff have a very professional attitude.

Hotel Shalini Palace (☎ 2630401; fax 2630407; Rankala Lake; d from Rs 1800; ☎) Without doubt one of the saddest hotels in India. This wonderful old British-influenced pile could, with a bit of TLC, be turned into one of the country's finest hotels. Instead it's a shell of its former self. The dirty rooms, should you really want to stay, are ridiculously overpriced. Still it has a certain romance to it – if you really want to stay in a maharaja's palace...

Surabhi (Hotel Sayhadri Bldg; snacks & mains Rs 20–45) This eatery is one of those clustered around the bus stand, and almost moves it's so busy. The crowds come for its thalis, Kolhapuri snacks such as *misal* (a spicy snack not unlike *bhelpuri*) and lassi.

Other than Surabhi, the hotel restaurants are the best places to eat, with the Hotel Pearl having the tastiest Chinese, Indian and Continental dishes at around Rs 140 for a main.

Getting There & Around

Rickshaws are abundant in Kolhapur and most drivers will give you the correct price or even use their meters (though these are outdated and so they'll use a conversion chart to arrive at the real price) without any great fanfare.

From the **bus stand** (☎ 2650620), services head regularly to Pune (semideluxe Rs 200, 5½ hours), Mahabaleshwar (Rs 110, five hours) and Ratnagiri (Rs 97, four hours), as well as to Belgaum (Rs 60, 2½ hours) and Bijapur (Rs 100, four hours). For popular longer hauls, your body will be happier on a deluxe private bus. Most of the private bus agents are on the western side of the square at Mahalaxmi Chambers, just across from the bus stand. Overnight services with AC head to Mumbai (seat/sleeper Rs 300/550, nine hours) and non-AC overnights go to Panaji (Rs 160, 5½ hours).

The **train station** (☎ 2654389) is 10 minutes' walk west of the bus stand towards the centre of town. Three daily expresses, including the 2.26am *Sahyadri Express*, zoom to Mumbai (sleeper/2AC Rs 146/592, 10 hours) via Pune (Rs 101/338, 41½ hours). A variety of express trains embark daily except Wednesday for the long voyage to Bengaluru (sleeper/2AC Rs 298/1208, 21 hours). You can also fly cheaply between Kolhapur and Mumbai on a daily basis with Air Deccan.

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