

Legacy of the volcanoes

TEXT YD BAR-NESS

Take a trip through Western Maharashtra where million-years-old volcanic activity has shaped a wondrous, colourful and adventure-filled terrain.

It's hard to imagine Mumbai teetering at the edge of a pool of molten volcanic rock. It's even harder to imagine this volcanic mess, with its poison gases blotting out the sun, cooling and hardening into a fantastic playground of curves and needles. But you don't need to imagine it, because it really happened. If you know where and how to look, the mountains behind India's financial capital can be a window to a fiery geological past. Those



curves and needles make for some of the country's best adventuring and trekking. With good linkages by trains and roads from the city, it's also some of India's most accessible terrain.

The Deccan Plateau, with its flat-topped mountains, falls off Central India in dramatic steps, or ghats. With a deep range of colours and an aggressive range of shapes, they are a visual and physical delight. Sixty-five million years ago, the Earth was literally changed by a massive eruption. The changes in climate and sunlight certainly transformed the Earth. You can think of the volcanic basalt as screaming through cracks in the Indian continent and spilling forward in a giant flood to the ocean. This cataclysm is long over though. Now you can find solace and peace within striking distance of South Asia's largest city.

From one of India's premier urban national parks, the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, over the crest of the Sahyadri Western Ghat mountain range, and

into the interior of the Deccan Plateau, let's have a quick look at this landscape and some of the natural delights you can sample. Moving westwards, one comes to six places where you can see some of the most impressive volcanic sceneries on Earth.

SANJAY GANDHI NATIONAL PARK

One of the easiest places to access, the volcanic landscape is Sanjay Gandhi – or Borivali – National Park. It is the largest urban national park in the world, and one of the best remaining habitat preserves close to Maharashtra's coast. In this extensive forest you can find not only leopards, but also ancient rock-cut Buddhist caves, zoological exhibits, and an environmental education centre. Trail walking, rock climbing, a tiger safari, and accommodation are all accessible to those investing the effort. The rocky hills at the lowest point of the Western Ghats come down to the coast here, and you can look up to see the scale of the mountains as they step up to the Deccan Plateau.

Getting there: The park is within the Greater Mumbai City region. You can take the Western Railway suburban train northwards to Borivali. Hop off there and you are near the main entrance to the National Park.



THE COBRA'S HOOD

The dramatic cliff of the Cobra's Hood can be seen on the way towards Pune as you approach Lonavala via train or road. A popular site for rock climbing and rappelling adventures, there is also a very safe and well-marked trail up the shallow slopes of the back side. From the summit, you can look down towards the coast. The commanding position of the peak emphasises the strategic value of the mountain passes between Pune and Mumbai. You can walk back down to the train lines through the forests and trails alongside a water reservoir. If you are feeling more daring, you can arrange an adventure on the ropes with mountain guides from Pune or Mumbai. Lonavala is a town about 6 km down the road that is a much-loved stopping point between the two cities. Several attractive roadside hotels offer food, cold drinks, and views of the mountains.

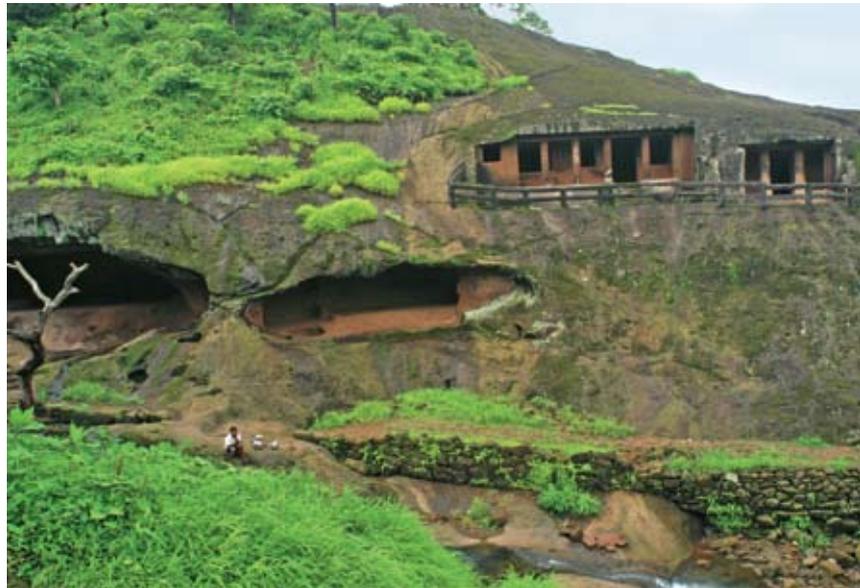
Getting there: Bus, bike, drive or a train towards Pune from Mumbai. Get off at Khandala and you can begin trekking uphill almost immediately. The mountain will rise above you like a cobra.

KOTHALIGAD FORT

Kothaligad, or Peth Fort, is an almost absurdly sharp needle of volcanic rock. Several mountains in the world can be described as sharp, or steep, but this one is even more exceptional. Tunnels leading to the summit have been carved inside the rock spire. Over the last several hundred years, the fort has been captured and recaptured in several pitched battles between the British and the Marathas. A peaceful and quiet place now, it's also much easier to get to the top without military resistance. Rather than climb the difficult cliffs, you can visit the Buddhist caves and military fortifications chipped away from the interior. A steep and defensible staircase can be scrambled up, and you will find yourself floating in the sky on the top of this airy mountain.

Getting there: You can arrange a bus or taxi from Karjat, which is on the railway network. You'll have

One exceptional viewpoint is the One Tree hill, where a fragment of rock creates an island in the sky.



to walk a few kilometres up a sandy road to Peth village, which is just beneath the rock spire fort.

MATHERAN

Matheran combines the elegance of a 19th-century British hill station with the vigour of a modern holiday destination. To arrive in the most romantic and wonderful fashion, you should take the narrow gauge train from the base to the top at 800m. This





tiny railway loops back on itself again and again as it climbs up the sheer sweep of rocks. This plateau is not only forested and peaceful, but mercifully, motor vehicles are banned. You can take long walks to the different viewpoints looking off at the mountain ranges surrounding them, and never worry about honking horns or dangerous speeding vehicles. One exceptional viewpoint is the One Tree



Hill, where a fragment of rock creates an island in the sky. Off in the distance, sharp mountains and broad valleys offer a tapestry of volcanic landscaping.

Getting there: The narrow gauge train begins at Neral. You can get to Neral Junction on trains from Mumbai to Pune.

Some 50,000 years ago, a meteorite slammed into Earth and hit the volcanic rocks here, forming Lonar Crater.

LONAR METEORITE CRATER

Much farther inland, away from the step-like Western Ghats and within the heartlands of northern Maharashtra, a curiously circular lake can be found in the town of Lonar. This is not exactly a volcanic formation. Some 50,000 years ago—just a moment ago in geological time—a meteorite slammed into Earth and hit the volcanic rocks here. Lonar Crater is the only place on Earth where a high-speed, blazing mass from space has collided with a fiery mass of underground oceanic rock, and as such is a site of worldwide significance. A kilometre across and only 140m deep, the lake holds water that is salty and alkaline. It is a trap for water that never flows out to the ocean. From the crater rim, it's a steep 20-minute walk down to the water's edge, where birds congregate and you are truly in a place hidden from the rest of the world.

Getting there: The nearest major railhead is Jalna. Buses periodically head towards Lonar. Alternatively, you can hire a taxi from Aurangabad and combine a visit to Lonar with an exploration of Ajanta and Ellora Caves.

Another broad plateau, Sinhagad was a critical bastion of Maratha resistance to the British.



Brinda Suri

SINHAGAD FORT

Sinhagad, or the Lion's Fort, can be reached as a day trip from Pune. A road leads to the top, but even better, you can trek up the mountain trails winding through the forests. Another broad plateau, Sinhagad was a critical bastion of Maratha resistance to the British. There is no more fighting there now, and it's a quiet respite from the metro cities nearby. While many visitors head directly to the uppermost reaches – with its vendors, parking lots, and radio towers – the slopes and ridges offer some exceptional wildlife viewing and botanising. Even better, you'll be able to look right up the imposing cliff walls.

Getting there: The fort is easily accessible by bus or taxi from Pune. ■