

Romancing PHALTAN

Breakfast by the river, sundowner at the windmills, a farm visit on a bullock cart, riding a tractor... **Sharmila Chand** samples a slice of sustainable tourism in Phaltan, Maharashtra

Phaltan is where you can do what you dream to and can't do anywhere else, the thought crossed my mind as I walked in towards a restaurant to have my lunch of local, traditional Maharashtra food. However, at this point, my sole focus was on food—the spread looked fabulous and I was famished after my two-and-a-half hour drive from Pune to Phaltan.

Phaltan is a perfect offbeat getaway, situated about 50 km away from Satara city. It is a small municipal council in Satara district which enjoys pleasant weather throughout the year and is a great getaway since it is blessed with acres of farmlands and picturesque landscapes.

As I finished my lunch, I was escorted to the porch where I saw a beautifully decorated bullock cart belted by the natty Bibha Bibha—rope in one hand to control the two bulls and a mobile phone in the other. "This is your Merc for the day," said Anil, my escort for the entire trip, with a naughty smile. I couldn't have found a better vehicle and quickly jumped on the cart that was made comfortable with a rug.

I stretched out my legs and thought how heavenly the arrangement was, especially after a sumptuous lunch.

Our journey began... slow and bumpy. With bells ringing on the bulls' neck, their horns decorated with coloured strings and my chauffeur all smiling, our first stop was the sugarcane farm. Once we were there, Bibha commanded me to get down and handed over a sugarcane stick. "Eat," he said. And that was the real test. A crazy urbanite who does not even venture to have sugarcane juice in the city, had to chew. I did and felt good that my teeth did not embarrass me!

Sundowner at Pussegao Windmills

In the evening, we went for a drive and there was another surprise waiting for me. I was on a most picturesque drive going past lush fields and mountains when suddenly I saw myself dwarfed by huge windmills all around. We had reached the mountain-top windmill farm and there was a nice sundowner picnic arranged for me. Chilled wine and chocolates, could I ask for more? A picnic at the windmill plateau is amazing.



"PHALTAN IS WHERE YOU CAN DO WHAT YOU DREAM TO AND CAN'T DO ANYWHERE ELSE."

Roach there at sunset and have sundowners—a trip to cherish all your life!

Kaas Pathar – a stunning panorama

Phaltan is blessed with a valley of flowers called Kaas Pathar, which has been declared a Biodiversity World Heritage Site by UNESCO. I was lucky to be there in the right season and see some rare flowers >

Top: Entry to the Ajinkyatara Fort. Bottom: The fort in the dying rays of the sun.



Clockwise from right: A lush field full of flowers at Kaas Pathar; the ancient Ram Mandir; picnic at the windmill farm.



blooming. Nearly 300 different kinds of species of flowering plants, orchids (more than 150 types), shrubs and grasses can be spotted here. Interestingly, many of the flowering plants are insect eaters. The valley also has a beautiful lake called the Kaas Lake which has water throughout the year.

Kaas Pathar and Kaas Lake, Satara, are also very popular trekking and rappelling sites apart from being a treasure house of flowers.

Majesty of nature at Thoseghar Waterfalls

A dramatic landscape of gurgling waterfalls form a spectacular sight. I was quite taken aback by the beauty of Thoseghar Waterfalls, a scenic spot located near the small village of Thoseghar. There are a series of waterfalls, some of them 15 to 20 metres high and one 500 metres in height. The immediate area is calm and quiet with a clean lake and dark woods. Sipping a hot cup of tea with cookies, that was my adventurous picnic while enjoying the view of the waterfall.

History steeped in the Rajwada Palace

Home to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's first wife Sai Bai, the Rajwada Palace or Madhaji



Where to stay: There are many hotels and resorts in Phaltan, and you can find a good one. There are also many small, rustic, and budget-friendly hotels. The Green Leaf Hotel is a good option. **How to reach:** Phaltan is 50 km from Pune. It is a beautiful three-hour drive from Pune. **When to go:** Phaltan is best visited during the monsoon and winter months. During winter, you can take a walk from Pune.

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Mamobhan Rajwada is an architectural marvel. I was told many Bollywood movies have been shot here including Akshay Kumar's *Khata Meetha*. I was very impressed at the way the palace is immaculately kept and each corner tells a story. The furniture, chandeliers, carpets and paintings take you back in time. Intricate hand-carved wood work seen in the columns and arches to the rich colour palette in the paintings and tapestries is remarkable.

Ram Mandir

Close to the Rajwada Palace is the Ram Mandir. The temple has stunning architecture and I could not tear my eyes off the beautifully coloured chandeliers along a large public corridor.

The legend goes that the idol of Lord Vitobha had been placed in the temple by one of the ruling queens after she survived an air accident. After visiting the temple, I also walked around the quiet streets to see the old jail and a few other ancient buildings.

Ajinkyatara Fort, Satara

A 16th century fort Ajinkyatara or The Impregnable Star has aged like fine wine. This fort has witnessed several crucial moments in Maratha history. Perched gloriously on one of the

seven mountains surrounding the city Satara, it got its name Ajintara during Aurangzeb's regime, based on Aurangzeb son's name, Azam. It is said that Marathi novelist, Narayan Hari Apte named the fort Ajinkyatara, when he wrote his very first novel of the same name.

In 1708, Shahu Maharaj won Ajinkyatara, which remained with the Marathas till 1818. It is worth visiting to get a fabulous view of Satara city. Take a walk and see temples of Devi Mangalji, Lord Shankar and Lord Hanuman on the northeast side of the fort. **U**