



Phaltan is part of Maharashtra's sugarcane belt and the abundant sugarcane is transported to distilleries and jaggery-making units in bullock carts.

You can take the girl out of the city but you can never take the city out of the girl." This is one of the many thoughts that crosses my mind as I squat next to a black-and-white cow and try my hand at milking her. Earlier this morning, I bumped along for 20 minutes in a blue-and-white bullock cart drawn by a pair of magnificent white bulls to arrive at the cowshed. It's 8 a.m., I have yet to have breakfast, and I'm trying to judge the exact amount of pressure to apply to the teats without making the cow kick up her heels. The bovine appears unconcerned that there's a foreign pair of hands 'down under' as she calmly chews cud. I try to ignore the fresh mound of cow dung a foot away and manage to get a squirt of milk into the steel pail.

I'm in Nimbhore village of Phaltan, a town and taluka in southwest Satara district in southwest Maharashtra. It is a little-explored part of the state, certainly not on any tourist trail, and until now just known as a stopover on the way to Pandharpur, a major pilgrimage

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Phaltan Maharashtra

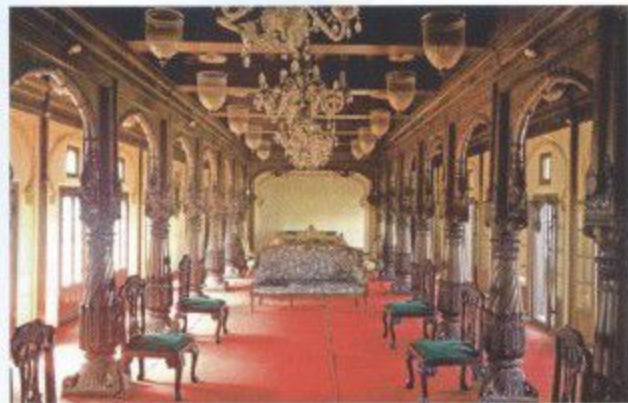
## TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A TRAVELLER

ALONG THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED  
IN A MARATHI HEARTLAND  
TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
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town in the neighbouring Solapur district. But the three-year-old Jackson Inns Phaltan is trying to change that. Opened primarily as a business hotel to serve the many industries in Satara, it is now also showcasing the region as a destination for rural tourism.

I spend a happy day tramping about farms and orchards growing sugarcane, grapes, and pomegranates—the three major crops of the region. This is part of Maharashtra's sugar bowl and everywhere you look, the grassy leaves stand tall and proud in varying shades of green as their fibrous stalks grow to their juicy potential. Sugarcane harvest begins after Diwali and continues for four months. The fields are swarming with labourers cutting down the cane, which is then bundled into bullock carts, tractors and trucks, and taken to the nearest sugar factory. I am offered few stalks of sugarcane, which I bring back to the hotel for juicing—as farm-to-table as it can get.

I visit a grape farm in Katewadi village in neighbouring Baramati,



In Phaltan, pithla, a savoury chickpea curry, is made in earthen pots on a traditional chulha (top left). The Dasra Chovk (top right) at Phaltan Rajwada was the informal meeting room where the royal family would greet their guests. Unlike Nashik, most of the grapes (bottom) grown in the Phaltan area are table grapes usually sold in the markets of Mumbai.



aubergine dish with coconut and groundnut) served with hot *bhakeri* (unleavened flatbread made from jowar and rice flour) fresh off the skillet and accompanied by *shengdana* or peanut chutney, *loncha* or pickle and *thecha*, a green chilli and garlic condiment. "Meals cooked under a tree have a special sweetness," affirms Sulochana *ajji*. I couldn't agree more.

### ESSENTIALS

**Getting There** Phaltan is 255 km/4.5 hr from Mumbai by road. There are daily MSRTC buses from Mumbai Central to Phaltan.

**Must Visit** The 19th-century Phaltan Rajwada, the maternal home of Shri Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's first wife, Sai Bai. The sprawling palace has an ancient Ram Mandir in the central courtyard and rooms with chandeliers, carved pillars, rich upholstery, and gilded ceilings. Ordinarily, closed to visitors, guests at Jackson Inns have special permission ([jacksonhospitality.com](http://jacksonhospitality.com); entry ₹350).

where owner Rohit Kate points out the table grape varieties he is growing: the small, green Tash-e-Ganesh and the Jumbo. He hands me a bunch of the Jumbo—big purple-black grapes that are sun-warmed and juicy, sweeter than any I have tasted from the markets in Mumbai.

Much to my disappointment, the harvest is already done at the pomegranate orchard behind the hotel. However, farmer Satish Ranavre plucks fresh bunches of dill and coriander for me from the farm adjoining the orchard. It goes straight into my lunch the next day when I return to Mumbai. Ranavre has a government

job in Phaltan but he helps out on his uncle's farm during harvest season. He shows me a channel of funky smelling, pale white water running through the fields. "This is a by-product of the dairy nearby; it's nutrient-rich and we only use this in our field so our crops are completely organic."

For lunch, I head to Abhay More's farm just across the street from the hotel. Here, under the shade of a tamarind tree planted by Abhay's grandfather, his grandmother Sulochana *ajji* and wife, Anita, rustle up a rustic feast for me cooked on a *chulha*. There's *pithla* (thick chickpea flour curry) and *bharli raangli* (a spicy