



A Yellow Splash of Culture

SHRI VITTAL BIRDEV YATRA, PATTANKODOLI



Image courtesy: Dr.Arun Kumar Nalimela



The Pattankodoli Festival, though relatively obscure on the national stage, is an exuberant celebration that stands as one of Maharashtra's most colorful Bhandara festivals. Nestled 17 kilometers from the historic town of Kolhapur, within the breathtaking embrace of the Panhala fort ranges and the Warana River, Pattankodoli comes alive each year during the Shri Vittal Birdev Yatra. This joyous event pays homage to Vittal Birdev Maharaj, a revered figure within the Dhangar community, believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. What makes this festival truly exceptional is the convergence of Dhangar communities from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Goa, collectively painting the atmosphere in vivid shades of yellow, reminiscent of the golden glow of Bhandara.

Pilgrimage and Devotion:

The heart of the festival lies in the unwavering devotion of its participants. Devotees embark on arduous foot journeys, spanning days and sometimes even weeks, to reach the hallowed temple for the Yatra. It's a testament to their profound faith and commitment, which sets the stage for the grand festivities that follow.



Image courtesy: Akshaya B

The Yellow Euphoria:

The essence of the Pattankodoli Bhandara Festival can be encapsulated in a single word "Bhandara." This fragrant, yellow powder, imbued with medicinal properties, takes center stage during the event. Much like the familiar turmeric, it plays a pivotal role in the celebrations, engulfing everything and everyone in a radiant yellow hue. The Shepherd community, deeply ingrained in tradition, showers the idol of God with this vivid yellow powder, artfully combined with fragments of dry coconut. This offering holds significance, with the collected materials reserved for special occasions and medicinal use. Additionally, devotees also present goat's hair, a prized raw material used in crafting blankets.



Image courtesy: Akshaya B

Prophet of Hope:

Integral to the festival is the presence of Shree Kheloba Rajabhau Waghmode, a revered figure who journeys on foot from his village to Pattan Kodoli. His predictions, covering areas as diverse as climate, agricultural prospects, business, and health for the forthcoming year, are a lifeline for the region's farmers. Under the shade of a banyan tree, this symbolic anointment with bhandara and dry coconut powder captures the essence of the festival and its vibrant spirit.



Image courtesy: Akshaya B

The Grand Revelation:

On the second day of the festivities, Baba takes center stage. After a series of sacred rituals, he is entrusted with the holy sword. Believed to be the vessel through which God communicates, Baba wields the sword, guiding the entire gathering into the temple. Here, he imparts his predictions, delivered in a distinct dialect of Kannada understood by a select few. These prophetic messages are subsequently translated and shared by the priest. The atmosphere during this period is electric, as devotees engage in drumming, twirl ornate umbrellas, sing folk songs, dance, and display acrobatic skills, all in celebration of God's message.



Image courtesy: Dr.Arun Kumar Nalimela

New Hotel Openings

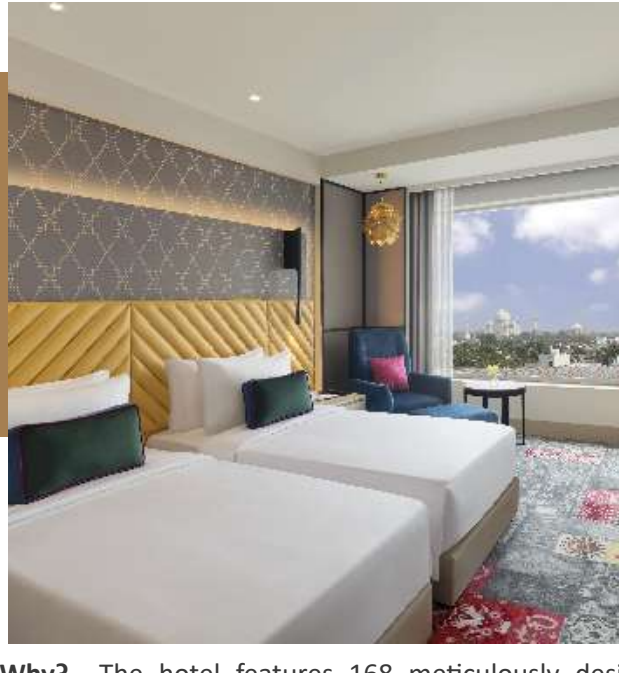


Where? Agra, Uttar Pradesh

What is Unique? Strategically located on Fatehabad Road, Grand Mercure Agra lies within a short drive from the Taj Mahal. Start your day with a breath-taking view of the Taj Mahal from your room, and enjoy the city's ambiance while dining at the rooftop restaurant by the poolside, with the iconic Taj Mahal as your backdrop. Bello Italiano, the culinary gem of the town nestled within the heart of hotel, it is the sole Italian restaurant in town, where every dish is a masterpiece crafted with passion for those seeking an enchanting Italian dining experience. Grand Mercure Agra welcomes you to experience the essence of Agra and the Taj Mahal. Enjoy the curated dining and stay, rooting in the culture.



Grand Mercure Agra



Why? The hotel features 168 meticulously designed rooms, half of which offer breath-taking views of the Taj Mahal. Apart from Bello Italiano, you can also enjoy a variety of dining options. Lattice, an all-day multi-cuisine dining restaurant with a lavish buffet and à la carte menu offers chef's specially crafted recipes including Indian, International, and authentic regional food. Other is Sky Grill, a rooftop restaurant which has Live entertainment. Sky Grill's setting at the rooftop, with magical views of the Taj Mahal, is a mesmerizing sight. Additionally, a Brew Café awaits to gratify discerning coffee connoisseurs. For distinguished events and gatherings, the hotel boasts an array of banquet spaces, headlined by the Grand Crystal Ballroom, capable of accommodating up to 500 esteemed guests, complemented by two meticulously equipped meeting rooms. Indulge all your 5 senses as the hotel captures the city's essence in its architecture, flavours, and experiences. Come experience Agra like never before at Grand Mercure Agra.



Where? Ranthambore, Rajasthan

What is Unique? Just like the word 'ZANA' means a rare purple lily, each experience at this resort is an escape from the ordinary into a world of indulgence and exclusivity. In line with the ZANA philosophy, this resort offers experiences that are new to the Indian hospitality landscape and give the guests many stories to tell and reasons to return. Resort offers exceptional recreational activities, including a 'Gaming Arena' with video games, bowling alley, flying hockey, etc., kids play zone named 'Toddle Wobble', golf, tennis, badminton, football, yoga, cycling, and more. You may also enjoy karaoke & movie under the stars, perfect for the much-desired break. Here, every visual is SERENE and each experience TIMELESS.

Why? ZANA Forest Resort, Ranthambore is the best resort to experience a luxurious getaway while staying just 10 minutes away from the Ranthambore National Park and Tiger Reserve.



ZANA Forest Resort, Ranthambore



The resort is a tasteful amalgamation of traditional architecture and modern aesthetics, a contemporary take to immerse travellers in the local beauty and distinct character of the destination. This enchanting resort features 20 tastefully designed cottages and rooms that merge effortlessly into the lush surroundings, an all-day multi-cuisine diner 'Mayfair', a stunning swimming pool, outdoor dining spaces for magical dining experiences and the best recreational facilities in the city. The 40,000 square feet lush green lawns and an intimate indoor venue sets the stage for extraordinary events and cherished memories. At ZANA, each room is named after a smart and thoughtful traveller like 'Arthur', 'Daniel', 'Michael' and more, who likes to explore unique locations and experience everything out of the ordinary. So when you are staying at ZANA, you will not only experience a stay but a unique lifestyle of an avid traveller, along with a crisp hospitality that can only be defined as the 'ZANA Way'.



Where? Morjim Beach, Goa

What is Unique? Praya Villas is a five-acre property on Morjim beach in Goa, India, offering luxury villas with private pools, lawns, and living spaces done up in Indo-Portuguese style. The villas are situated on a private stretch of beach, just a few meters off an Olive Ridley turtle-nesting site, offering guests the unique opportunity to witness these amazing creatures hatch. The resort also has a beachside restaurant and cocktail bar, 'Barraca', which serves an à la carte menu and also tailors special meals to suit the mood and occasion. The restaurant also offers vegan options, and the vegan pineapple dessert is an absolute winner!



Praya Villas



Why? The 14 idyllic private villas are situated on a five-acre property, right between the sweet spot of indulgence and homeliness. The villas feature four bedrooms, four bathrooms, a fully equipped kitchen, a grand living and dining room, a private pool, and a beautifully landscaped garden. There is also a gym and indoor and outdoor games, as well as water sports such as scuba and surfing on offer. The interiors of the villas are a masterclass in composition, with dainty chandeliers, statement curios, and elegant furniture. Some of the villas also have a terrace with views of the sea and surrounding greenery. Praya's talented culinary team can create culinary masterpieces in the privacy of your villa, with exemplary butler service. If you are looking for a boutique villa in Goa that offers sustainable luxury, unmatched hospitality, and a truly unique and unforgettable experience, then Praya Villas is the perfect choice for you. Praya Villas is the perfect place to embrace the Susegad way of life.



Where? Mumbai, Maharashtra

What is Unique? Taj The Trees is a melange of two iconic legacies coming together for the first time, the Tata Group and the Godrej Group. Every corner of the hotel is designed keeping in mind the ethos of both landmarks, every detail here echoes precision and perfection. Dine at The Mangrove Bar on the 12th floor under the canopy of tranquil skies and the company of exuberant Mangrove views. The Gin Story experience at The Mangrove Bar is an exquisite sensory journey tailored for true connoisseurs of luxury. Indulge in Signature Experiences at Taj The Trees like The Mangrove Safari, The Art Walk, The Little Gardener, The Mumbai Talk, The Night Runner, The Grape Escape that make this stay a truly memorable one.



Taj The Trees, Mumbai



Why? Taj The Trees is adorned with 151 rooms, an array of quaint restaurants and an exquisite Sculpture Park. The spectacular Mangrove vistas and impeccable shoreline offer the perfect setting for your Gram-worthy uploads. Spend a few hours of the day treating yourself in the signature spa, J Wellness Circle. Their celebrated chefs in their award-winning restaurants, Shamiana, Nonya and Mangrove Bar are sure to give your taste buds an enthralling time. The bespoke banquets offer an idyllic setting for cherished celebrations with indoor and outdoor facilities. They also extend as function lawns where you can revel in tailored revelry amid a quaint ambiance. With an indulgent infinity pool, ergonomic meeting rooms, and much more, here's a landmark where you'd wish time to pause forever. The hotel rolls the carpet to enjoy every moment you spend here with luxury crafted to soothe your esoteric tastes and exclusive choices.



Where? Bodh Gaya, Bihar

What is Unique? Conveniently located near the UNESCO World Heritage site, Mahabodhi temple, and the Bodhi tree, Hyatt Place Bodh Gaya offers easy access to the city's most revered Buddhist pilgrimage sites. The hotel offers a variety of amenities and experiences to promote physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, including Meditation Room, Spa, Library Lounge, and Gallery Café. You can indulge in a stimulating read or engage in stimulating conversations with fellow travellers at the hotel's Library Lounge, which boasts a curated selection of international magazines and books. Their Gallery Café answers guests' cravings with its divine offerings, offering an all-day dining buffet experience and embracing their inner pilgrim.

Why? With its minimalist design and sensory-rich ambiance, Hyatt Place Bodh Gaya fosters a sense of calm and well-being.



Hyatt Place Bodh Gaya



The hotel's rooms are designed to offer a glimpse of the iconic Mahabodhi temple, allowing guests to embrace their spiritual being. The spacious rooms fuse modern design with local flair, featuring separate living and sleeping areas, a cozy relaxation nook, a dedicated work desk, and top-tier amenities. The hotel's Spa offers you a divine therapy, with signature treatments to rest your mind and soul or recharge at their 24-hour fitness center, featuring cardio equipment's, earbuds and energy drinks. Hyatt Place Bodh Gaya offers a large and open event space to host private ceremonies be it a conference, spiritual gathering or an intimate wedding, in the land of Buddha. Their casual dining restaurant offers food enthusiasts authentic Asian, Western, and Indian cuisine along with a variety of locally inspired food, using the freshest produce. Whether you're seeking a spiritual journey or a relaxing getaway, Hyatt Place Bodh Gaya offers the perfect blend of comfort, functionality, and holistic well-being.

We've brought you a captivating piece from Hindustan Times Brunch penned by Vir Sanghvi, chronicling the remarkable two-decade journey of restoring the 15th-century Palazzo by Four Seasons Hotel Firenze, now among the world's top 50.

Under the Tuscan sun

Courtesy- Hindustan Times Brunch

When the world thinks of Italy, it's really Florence they're thinking of. But amidst all the art, history and beauty are now touches of modern comfort and style.

-Vir Sanghavi

Even if you think that you know nothing about Florence, the truth is that you probably do much of what the rest of the world thinks of as being typically Italian is actually Florentine.

Opera was invented in Florence Even the piano was invented in Florence. You have probably heard of the Renaissance. That began in Florence.

Think of some famous Italian artists: Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli, Cellini, Rubens or Raphael. They either came from Florence or worked in the city. Even the modern Italian language is based on the Florentine dialect.



Yet, history is not Florence's claim to fame it is a great tourist attraction mostly because it is so beautiful. There are the famous structures, such as the Duomo, the cathedral that has the largest dome of its kind in the world, and the great palazzos or palaces associated with the Medicis, the family that ran Florence for centuries. But nearly every street in Florence is beautiful you don't need to go looking for charm: It is all around you.

Each time I go to Florence, I discover something new. There are now far superior hotels than there were say, a decade-and-a-half ago and though the restaurants are the usual mix of tourist traps and local favourites, there are now some great restaurants as well.

I stayed this time at the Four Seasons, a hotel that did not exist when I started going to Florence. It was recently rated one of the 50 Best Hotels in the world (It made it to number nine on the list). But nothing prepares you for how stunning it is. Its acres of grounds constitute the largest private park in Florence and its history goes back to the 15th century. It combines a medieval palazzo with a convent and like nearly everything else in Florence it is mainly all about art.



Gucci Osteria has a Michelin star and two tasting menus. There is no restaurant like it anywhere else in the world.



The Four Seasons in Florence is on the list of the World's 50 Best Hotels. The rooms in the palazzo are over 500 years old and the hotel celebrates both classic and modern art.



I was lucky enough to stay in one of the most historical rooms in the palazzo (over 500 years old) When the Four Seasons began to renovate the property nearly two decades ago, it discovered beautiful 19th century frescos that had been painted over in many parts of the original building The hotel waited for years until they were completely restored before opening. It tried also to match the fittings to what they would have looked like when the palazzo was at its peak.

Ready for more?



Ganjifa and the Sawantwadi Palace: Reviving a Royal Legacy

Our Tammie Anjali Tolani describes her 25 hours at the Sawantwadi Palace where the Sawant Bhonsles have found meaningful ways to preserve the lost art of Ganjifa!

In a bygone era, kings and queens were not just rulers; they were also patrons of the arts and custodians of specialized skills. Their roles extended beyond governance to nurturing the rich tapestry of their culture, often through the support and encouragement of local artists and craftsmen. Their efforts ensured that traditional skills and cultural expressions flourished within the kingdom. However, with the abolishment of monarchies following India's independence, many of these art forms faded into obscurity, lost to the world. One such art form is Ganjifa, a traditional playing card game introduced to India by the Mughals in the early 15th century.



Ganjifa: The Artistry of Playing Cards

Ganjifa cards were not mere instruments for a game; they were considered intricate works of art. Each card was a labor of love, meticulously hand-painted to depict figures and symbols closely associated with the imperial courts of the time. The Persian Ganjifa set comprised 96 cards divided into eight suits, each with 12 cards. These suits were further subdivided into two parts, with each part containing four suits, including two court cards referred to as "shah" (king) and "wazir" (minister), as well as numerical cards from one to ten.

The Mughal court's Ganjifa cards were often crafted from precious materials like ivory and tortoiseshell, while those for the general public were made from more accessible materials such as starched cloth, papier-mâché, palm leaves, and occasionally featured a lacquered finish. Over time, various regional variations of Ganjifa emerged, each with its own unique character and style. Examples include the twelve-suited version introduced by Akbar, Ganjapa from Odisha, Dashavatara Ganjifa inspired by the ten incarnations of Vishnu, Mysore Chad Ganjifa, Naqsh Ganjifa, Sawantwadi Ganjifa from Maharashtra, and Ramayana Ganjapa from Odisha.



Unfortunately, the elaborate game of Ganjifa gradually waned in popularity in India due to the simplicity of Western playing cards, and today, it is scarcely played anywhere in the country. However, Sawantwadi, located in Maharashtra, managed to preserve the tradition of Ganjifa, albeit with a focus on its artistic value rather than its original purpose as playing cards.

Reviving Ganjifa: The Role of Sawantwadi Palace Royalty

One of the driving forces behind the revival of Ganjifa art is the royal family of the Sawantwadi Palace. Shivramraje Bhonsle, the former ruler of Sawantwadi, and his wife Satvashiladevi Bhonsle established Sawantwadi Lacquerwares to promote Ganjifa and lacquer art, providing vital support to the dwindling community of artists. Today, their legacy is carried forward by Ranisaheb Shubhadadevi Sawant Bhonsle, their daughter-in-law, and Yuvrani Shraddha Sawant Bhonsle, their grand-daughter-in-law. They have managed to ensure the relevance and continuity of Ganjifa and lacquer art by finding innovative applications for these ancient art forms.

The Sawantwadi Palace: A Boutique Art Hotel

The Sawantwadi Palace has been transformed into a boutique art hotel, a testament to the dedication of Lakham and Shraddha, the former prince and princess of Sawantwadi. The hotel, built using local red laterite and adorned with native woodwork and lacquer, stands as a tribute to the rich cultural heritage of Sawantwadi.

The room I stayed in was named Narasimha, a fitting tribute to Lord Vishnu in his unique form, with the body of a man and the head and claws of a lion, while Hiranyakashipu lay on his thighs. This room, with its enchanting balcony overlooking the inner courtyard, beautifully harmonizes mythology, history, and the exquisite art of Ganjifa.



The other five rooms in the hotel pay homage to various avatars of Lord Vishnu, including Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Vamana, and Parshuram- primarily through Ganjifa

Every facet of this exceptional establishment has been lovingly curated, thanks to the dedication of Shraddha, who infuses her heart into every detail of the Palace, and Lakham, the quieter force who invests his soul; and not to be forgotten is their playful golden retriever, whose twinkling eyes and innocence add a charming touch to create the perfect ambiance for a memorable holiday.



Shraddha and Lakham, both accomplished chefs trained at the Culinary Institute of America in New York, present a culinary experience that not only showcases their culinary prowess but also pays homage to the rich tapestry of traditional Konkani recipes. Lunch, presented in a traditional brass Thali offers a choice of protein—fish, chicken, or mutton—paired with a delightful potato preparation, raw cashew korma, delicate ghavane (rice flour roti), crispy fried buttermilk chillies, refreshing sol kadhi, and a sweet finale in the form of sitaphal basundi.

Dinner unfolds as an opulent eight-course journey through the diverse flavors of Asian cuisine. A standout moment is the flavorful clear broth that artfully brings the crispy fried tofu, nestled atop a bed of rice, to life before your eyes. The menu also features a delightful twist in the form of the Sawantwadi Po' boy, boasting a fried banana stuffing. Lakham, renowned for his baking and dessert expertise, ensures that you save room for the generously portioned dessert, despite the preceding feast. His artful plating in "Sawantwadi on a Plate" not only captivates visually but also delights the palate with its fluffy and delectable creations.

This culinary partnership between Shraddha's expertise over Asian flavors and Lakham's baking and dessert expertise, ensures that every meal is a sensory delight.

[Discover more](#)

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