

You must try it once

By Sachin Agarwal

Dear Students,

Every now and then, we all complain about having nothing fun or new to do in Mumbai. I would like to share with you some of the hidden gems of our city. These gems do not have the advertising budgets of the latest Bollywood blockbuster or the new fancy mall or the exotic foreign café. Consequently they don't get as much attention as they should. And if you don't know about them, then you are not likely to visit them, are you? This is my shameless plug for six of Mumbai's really cool things to do.

1. Heritage walk in South Mumbai: When you visit the swanky Starbucks store at Fort, look for a small church with a Gothic tower diagonally across the street. You will be looking at perhaps the oldest British building in Bombay - the St. Thomas's Cathedral. This is not an ordinary church. It opened on Christmas Day, 294 years ago. This is the church which gave Churchgate its name. Think about why the area you are in is called Fort. Why is Churchgate called Churchgate? You can see the church, but where is the gate and where is the fort? Walk inside. Look at the stained glass windows. Enjoy the atmosphere. Think of what your city must have been like 300 years ago.

In fact this is only one of several important and beautiful heritage structures in that area. Gather your friends, engage a qualified guide and do a Mumbai Heritage Walk. She will share lots of entertaining trivia with you and also help you visualize the fort and the gate. You must try it once.

2. Mumbai theatre: As all of us college professors know, nothing is more important to you than love and friendship. So why not watch a play about love and friendship? Rajit Kapur and Shernaz Patel have been performing the play Love Letters since 1993. It is almost impossible to describe the everlasting joy that their performance brings. If you think courting and flirting via BBM is new, think again. Love letters have always been exchanged. Love Letters is a beautiful play about a friendship that lasts a lifetime and is told using only letters.

And if you enjoy Love Letters, then consider going to the theatre a regular activity – similar to the cinema. The Mumbai theatre scene is phenomenal. Prithvi Theatre is in the neighbourhood. On some nights you can see Naseeruddin Shah perform for hundred rupees! Hundred rupees! If you lived in the U.S., to watch an actor of that calibre perform live on stage from that distance, it would cost you an arm and a leg. So treat yourself.

3. Chai & Why – the science talk: You think your calculus syllabus is hard? Did you know that scientists at the CERN push neutrinos in the earth near Geneva in Switzerland and that they come out near Rome in Italy after traveling 732 kilometres through the earth's crust? Can you imagine the mind-boggling technology that must be involved in conducting an experiment like that? Next time you are taking a flight, pause for a minute before you board the plane and look at the jet engines. How do these engines make the plane fly so safely? The answers to several of these questions can be found if you come for the free popular science talk called Chai & Why organized by the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research on the first Sunday of the month at Prithvi Theatre in Juhu. The audience comprises of fourth-graders, college students, college professors, parents, grandparents, businesswomen, accountants, in short anybody and everybody. It has a great vibe. You will not feel

stupid asking questions. The speakers are usually eminent scientists who are doing cutting-edge research. They are taking out time to explain their extremely esoteric research to a lay audience. Don't miss it.

4. Mumbai ComicCon: I don't deny that science can be taught better. As a child I always wished that science would be more fun – like my comics. If you are a comics fan, then you cannot miss the Mumbai ComicCon. Held once a year, this two day event is a celebration of comics for comic lovers organized by comic lovers. This year's event was attended by more than thirty thousand comic enthusiasts. More than a hundred people came dressed as their favourite comic character. The sense of camaraderie and a shared love for all things comic gives it a really nice vibe. So get dressed as your favourite character and go. But be prepared to be repeatedly asked to pose for photographs with fans.

5. Kanheri Caves and the National Park: Surprise quiz - where is the world's largest national park within city limits? Answer: Mumbai – The Sanjay Gandhi National Park. And deep within the forests of Sanjay Gandhi National Park are the beautiful Kanheri Caves. The oldest is two thousand years old. If you want to get a sense of what the wooden architecture of that time must have looked like, take a look at the stone fences. The monks who stayed here tried to replicate the wooden architecture found in the cities. The columns that seem to be holding the roofs are actually not bearing any load – since everything has been carved out of rock. Cave 3 has two statues of Buddha which are 22 ft tall -they are probably the only surviving giant idols of Buddha in India.

Not a history fan? Then go for the forest. It is hard to believe that such a forest exists within this concrete jungle. Don't drive all the way to the caves. Park your car at a distance and walk through the forest. When you exit the park the cacophony of the Western Express Highway will jolt you and you will long to come back again.

6. Vasai Fort: In the sixteenth century, tony South Bombay was a group of unconnected islands with fishing villages whereas Vasai (or Bassein as it was then known) was an important and prosperous Portuguese base. For almost two hundred years entering the wealthy Vasai Fort was forbidden for all but the Portuguese aristocracy. Today the fort lies in ruins as do the important churches that must have been the centre of the city's activities. They are in ruins but are hauntingly beautiful. Do not be surprised to find toddy-trappers inside the fort as they go about their traditional occupation.

Visit the Vasai Fort to experience the ephemeral nature of pomp and glory.

These are only a few of the hidden joys that this crazy and wonderful city has to offer. If you know of any other, please tell me. I would love to try it. If I want to try something, I always try to do it sooner than later. Because if I like it, I can go again and again. So gather a bunch of friends and go.

Have fun.