

Pune' my perspective

The “expressway” between Mumbai (Bombay) to Pune' is like any other highway in a developed country. It features 3 lanes each way and speeds close to 100km/hr is quite normal. The highway features rest areas and rest stops often with 24x7 restaurants as well. Once you exit the highway and enter Pune' you get your first reality check – Pune' is not like Mumbai at all – The roads in Hinjewadi are quite bad, with pot holes and narrow. The sides of the roads are covered with rows of shops and/or slums for the most part.

One of the niceties of the IT boom brings nice fancy buildings often rivaling those in the developed nations and nice hotels. I was fortunate enough to stay in one such nice hotel – Hotel Lemon Tree. Easily western in its décor and service, the interiors are neat, nice and very acceptable. I am sure westerners will find this on par with Ramada, Comfort Inn, and Marriott etc. The restaurant serves excellent continental and domestic flavors. All of the hotel staff is extremely friendly, speaks English and service oriented – eager to help. This hotel is highly recommended, especially to foreign travelers.

The IT companies are quite fancy – a ride through Phase I will reveal quite fanciful building architectures – almost giving the impression of walking through Las Vegas. I found pyramid shaped buildings (UGS/Geometric software), fanciful glass buildings (Cognizant) and huge sprawling buildings (Infosys, Wipro etc). One is unlikely to find such buildings, housing IT companies in the US of A. I guess it probably costs considerable less to build such buildings here than in other developed countries.

The Culture of pune' is quite slow paced – probably similar to that of the silicon valley in the U.S.A. Life starts late – people stumble into work around 10:00AM – 10:30AM and a leisurely lunch around 12:00 Noon through 2:00 PM and eventually leaving work around 7:00 PM or so. Its taboo to leave work around 4:00PM – 5:00PM – No early birds encouraged or accepted. People often commute by company provided transportation (bus) although a few people closer to work commute either by low powered ~100cc motorbikes or cars. Due to extreme heat during the summer months – women often drape their heads and entirely cover their heads in scarves – often leaving only as much space around their eyes as necessary, sometimes sporting dark glasses as well - My initial reaction when I saw the first few were that they looked like “terrorists”.

The people of Pune' are sometimes friendly, but often rude. The week I spent here - I visited the “City” several times, in an effort to see and learn the local culture, its food and its people. Most local shops recognize the fact that you are not local - if you do not speak “Marathi” and charge you more than double for everything. Examples include being charged Rs. 7/- for a cup of tea, while locals pay about Rs. 2/- or Rs. 3/-, and Rs. 10/- for a small packet of roasted peanuts, while locals pay about Rs. 5/-. Although I never used rickshaws myself, I have been warned that they are the same - often charge travelers twice as much.

Although there is not much to see here in Pune', the local folks publicize their attractions with great pomp and zeal. The usual attractions are:

- Shaniwar Wada: A fort completely destroyed and is in ruins - except for the entrance wall. While the entrance fees itself is quite nominal - it's different for foreign travelers (read as more expensive - Indian travelers pay Rs.5/- while foreign travelers pay Rs. 100/-). While the cost is not an issue for foreign travelers, the extra money does not buy you anything else - I would have expected an English speaking guide or a guide book that guides foreign travelers with descriptions of what the place really is - historically speaking. Shame on the Indian Department of Tourism!
- Aga Khan Palace: A palace (not really a palace in the traditional sense, but a huge mansion) that has historical value as Gandhi was in house arrest at this location during the Quit India Movement. His wife Kasturba and his secretary also died here.
- Raja Dinakar Museum: A 4 storied building featuring varied exhibits from 18th and 19th century South and North India. There are sculptures, kitchen utensils, dolls, paintings and musical instruments. Worth a visit - highly recommended.
- The usual shopping districts in Lakshmi Road for clothing (again - read as ripoffs for foreign travelers. My recommendation is to travel with a local guide, often available in hotels or take your car driver with you), Deccan for general window shopping. Recommended location for local clothing - Sapthapadi in Sadashiv Peth on Lakshmi Road. English friendly and has good collection of local stuff.
- The city has plethora of temples - every god possible from Chatur Shringi temple, to Parvati Temple to the Ganesh Mandir (heard that this one sports the most expensive jewels during Ganesh Chaturthi festivities) - If this is a pilgrimage - there are enough to satisfy to your heart's content.
- There are a few more things to see - National Defence Academy, Pune University, Symbiosis University, Bala Gandharva, Lakhadi Bridge, Pune Mahanagara Palika, Mangalavar Peth, Bhudavar Peth etc. But, I would recommend skipping these in the interest of covering a few other nicer places near Pune'.
- Lonavala and Khandala are two hill stations near Pune'. Both are quite well developed and offer scenic spots - although there was no "Wow" factor here - I felt this was similar to any other hill station (Panchgani and Mahabaleshwar) .These two locations are quite traveler friendly, albeit for the double treatment of travelers.
- Two other locations near Pune' is Panchgani and Mahabaleshwar. Both are again hill stations - and are quite unfriendly to foreign travelers - I would recommend not traveling here if you are with family. Both places are pretty undeveloped in terms of tourist attractions although a hiker's paradise. The trails are often unmarked with crisscrossed forks with no idea where to go, locals provide no directions and scare travelers about wild animals. Do not venture out to visit "Scenic Points" alone.
- Two notable locations that make your visit to Mahabaleshwar worth of your time and visit are the "Pratapghad fort" and "Old Mahabaleshwar". Do take a guide (available near the parking lot) - Licensed ones speak English, and explain the history quite well. The fort is incredible in its design - although very little of it is

left. The fort features a strategically built entrance - hardly visible from down below, fooling the enemies into thinking that the entrance is elsewhere. The entrance is well guarded and capable of being protected by a 2nd level port in the adjacent wall - that allows one way guarding (the enemies cannot even see where the arrows are coming from) - The overall structure of the fort is triangular to ensure visibility from all directions (360 degree view from the 3 lookout posts), The fort is in 3 different levels - so as to face enemies better - and features tunnels to escape etc. Very impressive constructions and ingenuity esp. considering the fact that this was built in the early 1600s.

- Old Mahabaleshwar features a very old and ancient temple - often visited by Shivaji. Considering the geography of this location (very hilly region) - it's a wonder looking back on how people traveled between locations - it would have typically taken days to travel from the fort to this temple.
- While I have been told about Osho center, I decided not to visit it - due to the fact that I am neither into religion nor spirituality and have seen enough of these in all other places in India.
- Some of the local foods to try are:
 - Vada Pav from Joshi Wadavallas - a small franchise shop specializing in this delicacy. You are likely find an outlet close - there are several of these all around the city.
 - Bhaker Vade from Chitale's - a very popular store specializing in this. The shop is closed everyday in the afternoon for a siesta, visit late night or late morning. Ask for a sampler and you will be happy.
 - Misal - A local delicacy to try from one of the several small shops around Mandai (also worth a visit - this is the local vegetable market - quite exhaustive and large - good time to visit is around 7am). Misal literally translates to "headache" or "crazy" - refers to a mix of various ingredients that goes into the making of this breakfast snack.
 - Masala Pav - a unique very hot and spicy sandwich - to try for fun at Shiv Sagar in Aundh.
 - Chats - Pani Puri et. all - try at Ozone at Aundh.
 - Maharashtrian lunch - Try at Shreyus restaurant in Apte - one of the city's best local food - Advance reservations may be necessary to ensure seat.
 - Strawberries in Mahabaleshwar - small, tart and tangy - try Straberries with Cream - an excellent combination often available near Venna lake.