

LIFE BY THE LAKE...

...even if only for a weekend! Now home to **Saj By The Lake**, a boutique resort nestled between the mountains, with scenic views of the lake, **Malshej Ghat** is cementing its place as a captivating tourist hotspot, says **Rhea Dhanbhora**

Breathe in the crisp, cool air, unbridled by pollution as it hops over the rocks, winding through the mountain pass. As you inch closer, look out for a glimpse of the jewel-blue waters, the fiery trees opening out to verdant patches that stretch out for miles...

Yes, you're still in Maharashtra — just three hours away from the city! If you haven't already driven up to Malshej Ghat, plan your trip for the monsoon — and book yourself into a new boutique resort that manages to amalgamate all the sights and sounds in one luxury dwelling.

Driving down

Getting to Saj By The Lake is as much of an experience as visiting it is, especially since the route is scenic and far-removed from the usual traffic that leads you out of the city. Once you get past little villages and grassy green patches, you're on the ghats winding through the mountains, on an uphill climb, nestled between the Sahyadris and sheltered by fluffy white clouds.

VISITING MALSHEJ GHAT

Visit between June and September to make the most of the lush surroundings during the monsoon. However, February and March are also a good time to visit. Even with the rising temperatures, there's a pleasant breeze that rumbles through the resort. Driving is the easiest way to get here — it takes around three hours on the road.



Drive in a leisurely fashion if you're not in a hurry, and stop along the way at the several viewing points. Monkeys hovering on the dividers and swinging from trees offer the entertainment and if you roll your windows down, the easy breeze (even on a hot afternoon) is a pleasant change from the polluted city you've just journeyed out of.

You'll see Saj By The Lake from a distance once you pass the MTDC resort, so don't worry too much about finding your way — it's right by the highway, but not so close for it to interrupt your stay there. The rolling trucks and cars zipping past are visible from the gardens, but far enough not to be a hindrance to your weekend of serenity.

>> The boutique resort is luck enough to have these sweeping views of the lake



Sitting pretty

Once you're comfortably parked and your bags have been taken care of, amble through the manicured gardens, past the stylish lobby and through the corridors to your room. Flowerpots encircle little alcoves and seating spaces inside the hotel, coffee tables (with interesting reads) line the passageways and the fields at the back lead to a dazzling lake. Even with the arid, dry land that stretches for miles beyond the resort, it's all picture-perfect.

The resort has 15 large rooms at very affordable prices for a luxury resort. Most have king-sized beds and flat screen televisions, and while it may be in the midst of a little village, you'll find almost all the luxuries of an upscale hotel in here, including in-room dining, Wi-Fi (which is something the resort invested time and money putting up in an area with generally low connectivity) and tea-coffee makers.

You can pick between lake (the best of the lot), mountain and farm views, with sweeping views of clear blue waters, lush green mountains and sunny fields. Each room has a balcony — my favourite is the one suite room that you have to book well in

advance to get, but is worth it. Rooms here range from ₹3,500 onwards depending on the season. As I walked in, I was shown to a separate living room with wide window seating, gorgeous views and a dining space. The bedroom in the suite has French windows opening out to a balcony with the same, spectacular view and a luxuriously appointed bathroom made prettier by the brick-walled garden outside its glass window. Almost all the rooms have balconies and just a five-minute walk from the resort will lead you to the Pushpawati River, a pretty place to watch the sun set.

Eating around

I settled in for a late lunch in a funky space that included brick walls (they could use a little graffiti work) and swinging cloud light fixtures. The interiors all through the resort have been done up by the Busride Brothers and while they've gone for a balance between a luxury and rural setting (which explains the painted cows by the pool and on the lawns that could freak you out in the middle of the night), it isn't the best I've ever seen. Most areas look stunning though, so there's not much to complain about.

FIVE THINGS TO DO IN MALSHEJ GHAT

- **Sit by the dam** The Pimpalgaon-Joga Dam is one of the most famous around the area and as you will see from the view at Saj, it's beautiful. It is also home to several bird species so you can get some bird watching done by the banks as well.
- **Pray at the caves** More natural sites await when you're out and about here — head over to the Lenyadri Caves, which is actually a temple built into the caves in the mountain. The carved out space is completely handmade and a real sight to see.
- **Trek to the peak** Of Harishchandragad, we mean. It's home to the rock wall (a semi-circular formation) of the Konkan Kada and is also a very good place to trek to, if a little adventure is on your itinerary.
- **Visit a fort** The Ajoba Hill Fort in particular. It's pretty crowded during peak season, so make sure you choose when to visit it wisely. However, if you love trekking and rock climbing, this is the place for you to visit.
- **Find the falls** If you've seen the dam but your thirst for water bodies and natural beauty hasn't been satisfied just yet, you may want to head over to see the Malshej Falls. You will need a guide here since roads that approach it are pretty narrow — but once you're there, you'll never want to leave.

DON'T MISS OUT ON

- Local delicacies at Maati Baani — they're fresh, delicious and some dishes are cooked in earthen pots. Try the *gajar ka halwa* and *nachani* soup in particular, and don't miss the egg preparations at the breakfast buffet.
- The activities such as zorbing, archery and crossbows — I missed out, so I'll be heading back over to check them out.
- A swim in the small pool under the stars after sunset — or you could just dip your toes in after dinner outdoors.
- The view from your balcony — it's interrupted by stray chicken, the occasional cow and scurrying villagers, but it's all part of the rural charm.

We settled in apprehensively for our vegetarian meal, wondering if we would miss our daily quota of meat and chicken. However, food at Maati Baani is delicious, so while carnivores like me may step in with a little foreboding, you will step out completely satisfied.

Although I skipped the outdoor expeditions in favour of exploring the resort, lounging on the balcony and watching the water sparkle under the sunlight, if you're here for more than just an evening and want to see the sights around Malshej Ghat (and there are several), the resort is happy to organise it. In fact, service is so friendly they're happy to organise almost anything you need — within reason, of course.

I spent the night dining outdoors by the pool, which I recommend. We were privy to a cooking pit, delicious paani puri and a buffet of treats that included a surprisingly good biryani and some tasty tandoori starters. Dangling my legs in the illuminated pool as I looked up at the starry sky, my mind was washed clear of the anxieties of the daily hustle and bustle, which is always the mark of a good weekend getaway.

GET IN TOUCH

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>> A glimpse of Malshej Ghat from your room