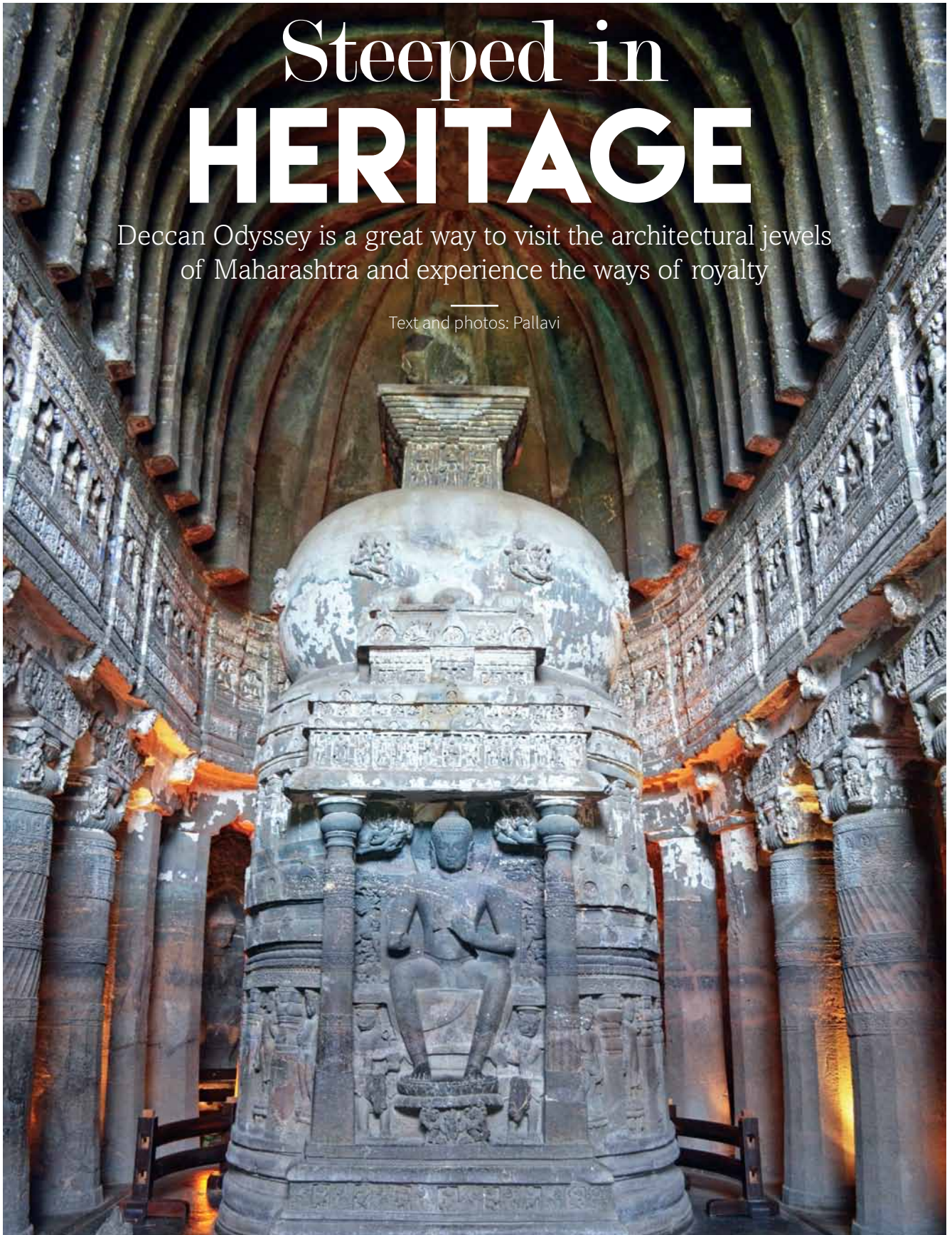


Steeped in **HERITAGE**

Deccan Odyssey is a great way to visit the architectural jewels of Maharashtra and experience the ways of royalty

Text and photos: Pallavi





Deccan
Odyssey was
introduced in
2004 on
Jan 16

The train pulls out of Mumbai's busy and crowded Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus station to its first destination — Aurangabad. Inside the deep blue coaches awaits a world of luxury no lesser than a five-star hotel – the regular chair car and sleeper are replaced by swanky cabins that come with beds with super soft mattresses, high thread count bedsheets and soft feathery pillows.

Plastic trays have given way to delicate, bone-China cutlery and the regular railway omelette and cutlets have been junked for a menu that would do even a fine dining restaurant proud — from crunchy waffles and pancakes, sausages and eggs for breakfast, red Thai curry with rice, fragrant biryani, pan-seared Norwegian salmon, risotto, butter garlic prawns for meals to cheesecakes and chocolate ganache for dessert.

I had no idea of just how luxurious this journey would be till I parked myself behind the double-glazed windows of the Deccan Odyssey train — one of India's finest luxury trains. My new abode was all of 21 coaches,

out of which two were restaurants and one a lounge and bar. Little did I know that here I would be spoiled silly and pampered for the next four nights and five days with a personal butler assigned to me.

Our stop for the day, after disembarking at Aurangabad, were the famous Ellora caves. Having read about the place many times, I couldn't wait to see what they were all about. First we had a quick stopover to view Daulatabad Fort in the distance. Earlier known as Deogiri (hill of gods), it was renamed when the Tughlaqs shifted their capital from Delhi here. Located on a 200 metre high hill, it looked quite hazy from the distance.

It is unbelievable to learn that the Ellora caves were all patiently hand-carved out of single rock over centuries. There are 34 caves in all – 12 Buddhist, 17 Hindu and five Jain. They make you marvel at the patient and meticulous workmanship at that time and leave you awestruck that with no technology or advanced machines, they were able to create masterpieces which we cannot even dream of now. The most impressive among

(Clockwise from facing page) Buddha at the Ajanta Caves; Cultural dance before the Deccan Odyssey's departure; The Jain temple at the Ellora Caves which consist of 34 caves built between 5th and 10th century CE under the patronage of *Rashtrakuta* Dynasty





(Clockwise from top left) The restaurant, TV lounge and the double occupancy cabin of the Deccan Odyssey

Do buy a paithani sari which is made of silk and has a zari palla with traditional motifs

these was Cave 16, the Kailasa Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva. This huge temple was carved out of a single piece of rock and is among the largest rock sculptures in the world. Our guide told us to take a short hike and view the temple from top – it was impressive.

Famished by the time we reached our new abode, we were given cold fresh juice and lunch where I chose Caesar Salad with butter garlic prawns and classic roast chicken. Both tasted divine. The dessert of chocolate truffle gateau was sinful and I gorged guiltlessly, forgetting about the calories going inside me.

After a little snooze and some TV, it was time to head for drinks at the lounge. The bartenders were mixing interesting cocktails, but I stuck to sparkling white wine – it seemed so appropriate for the super duper luxury.

QUICK FACTS

The Deccan Odyssey has 21 carriages that can carry 96 guests and 30 staff members. There is a valet per cabin.

There are four presidential suites, 44 deluxe cabins, two restaurants, a bar & lounge, a conference room cum library and a spa as well.

7N/8D journey:

Deluxe cabin

Single occupancy:

₹3,71,900

Double occupancy:

₹5,36,710

Presidential suite

Single and double

occupancy:

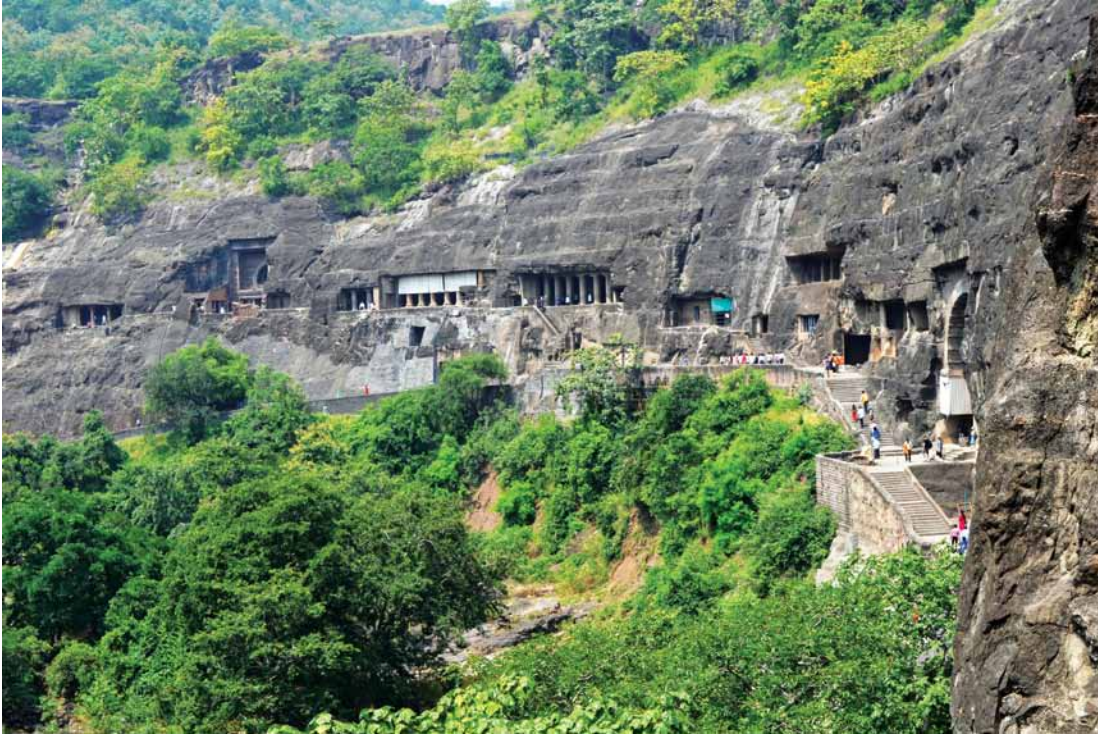
₹8,05,100

www.deccan-odyssey-india.com

After a comfortable night in my cabin, it was time for yet another World Heritage Site the next day – Ajanta Caves, dating back to 480 BC. The world didn't know they existed till they were discovered as late as 1819 by a British officer, John Smith. He was out on a tiger hunt when he stumbled upon these caves. Most people think that Ajanta and Ellora are next to each other since they are commonly spoken of together, but in reality they are 100 km apart.

Cave 1 and Cave 26 were the most impressive. Cave 1 had tempera paintings dating back to the 6th century in which all natural colours were used – white out of lime, green from leaves, and blue from Afghanistan lapis stone. There were Jataka stories on side walls. In Cave 26, there is a large reclining Buddha statue and a prayer hall.

Our next encounter was with the town of Nashik, a town I had so far associated with vineyards. But I was in for a pleasant surprise – we spent some time at the charming *ghats* along the Godavari which bustled with activity and pilgrims.



AURANGABAD
 In the early 17th century Malik Ambar set up his capital here and called it 'Kharki' which literally meant window to South India. After his son Fateh Singh took over, he renamed it to Fateh Nagar. This name continued till Aurangzeb became the viceroy of the Deccan region in 1653, when he changed it to Aurangabad



Nashik ghats & (Top) The Ajanta Caves are 30 rock-cut caves around a gorge, built by the *Satavahana*, *Vakataka* and *Chalukya* dynasties between 2nd and 5th century CE

a dance floor, with Bollywood songs blaring and each person in the train letting their hair down as they swung quite unbelievably inside a train.

Next morning, as the train made its way back to Mumbai, the most impressive and picturesque route of the journey awaited us — the scenic landscape through the gently rolling Western Ghats. I was really glad that the best had been saved for the last — after all staring out of a window and watching the countryside pass by is an intrinsic part of any train journey.

Then it was time for a bit of wine tasting at the Grover Zampa vineyards. Thanks to the rains, the entire hill range had turned lush green and looked gorgeous. Back in the train, we were welcomed by chilled champagne glasses and even better lunch. But the highlight came in the evening when the lounge turned into

As I left my acquired home, I realised that it wasn't just the luxury I was getting used to, it was also the warmth of the staff at Deccan Odyssey, which made the entire experience even more memorable.

TAJ MAHAL OF THE DECCAN

Aurangabad is home to Bibi-Ka-Maqbara, which looks very similar to the Taj Mahal, from which it draws inspiration. It was built by Aurangzeb's son, Prince Adam Shah, in the

memory of his mother Dilras Banu Begum. The mausoleum has four minarets like the Taj Mahal and was constructed with marble brought all the way from Jaipur.

