Just because the drive between Mumbai and Pune has come down to a zippy three hours, it doesn’t mean that one cannot stop, pull down the windows and enjoy all that the Western Ghats have to offer. Whether you are on a weekend trip all about leisure or well in time for a business meet-up, especially, when you know that making that meeting deadline is a certainty stopping to stare along the way becomes just that much more enjoyable!

Top of mind recall is naturally the Lonavala - Khandala hill station combo, where getting a禤顶 in pouring rain, shopping for wholesale chiffon and fudge from the factory outlets dotting the main road, a camel ride at Tiger Point or coveting in the overflow of Bushi Dam is always a possibility. But a little more effort will take you to the Karla and Bhaja Caves that are located 11 km from the town - these rock-cut cave temples date back to 1st century BC and exhibit one of the oldest and finest examples of Buddhist temples, belonging to the Himayana sect of Buddhism, (the historical importance of Lonavala stems from its being a centre of Buddhist learning).

One can even get down to angle at the many artificial lakes of Bushi, Tungari and Pavna. Or sample the delicacies of the Celebrity Wax Museum, where the likes of Gandhi, A R Rahman and recently Chhatrapati Shivaji have been immortalised in life-size wax statues.

At Kune Ghat, just off the Expressway is Bella Adventure - a modern recreational and adventure sports facility with 66 activities. Get dirt biking or onto the world’s largest All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) - Polaris Ranger 800 cc, or attach yourself securely to a 500 feet zip line strung from the mountain to get the ultimate rush. Zorbing, paintball, a petting zoo for small children and spa for their harassed mothers - it’s all here.

The popular trekking spots of Vasupur, Leleghad and Rajmachi are all accessible from Lonavala. The best way to enjoy this activity would be to get an early start from Lonavala (4 am is the preferred departure time, get to the fort ruins by lunchtime, and start back well in time before night fall. All of these are do-able by a fairly fit person, with panoramic views and a leisurely stroll through scenic fort ruins as the ultimate prize.

A little further down, toward Amber Valley, is quaint little Korigad. Another fort, it sits atop a steep-sided hillock accessed in large part by steps that even a five-year-old can master. It has the most beautiful lakes and ruins - a maximum joy trek with minimum effort.

Closer to Mumbai is the Karnala Bird Sanctuary and an exhilarating trek till the upright ‘thumb’ visible miles off. Climb the small waterfalls along the way to feel brave, though keep in mind that this is possible only during the monsoon.

On the Pune side is Talegaon, a riverside village that is now being developed as a weekend resort place with made-to-order second homes. Mulshi is another popular lake, where boating is available, a short drive from Pune.

Most of Maharashtra has these little caves and crags where either the Pedwals, Shivratri, religious sects like Buddhists or even the Pandavas have left their mark - not counting the more obvious choices like Mahadeeshwar, Panchgani and Aliourg.