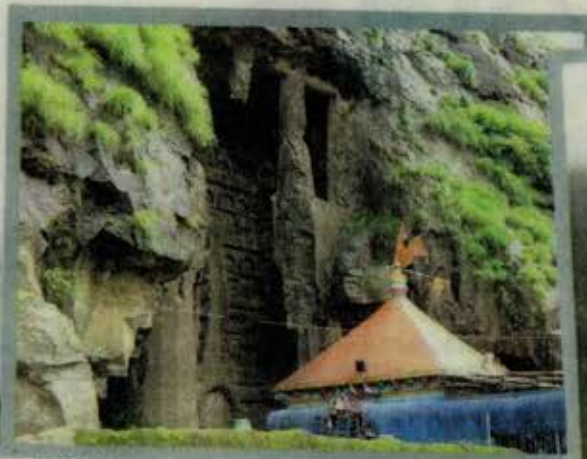




>> Bhor Ghat



>> Karla Caves



>> Lonavala Lake



>> Bushi Dam

Just because the drive between Mumbai and Pune has come down to a zippy three hours, it doesn't mean that one cannot stop, roll 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 combine, where eating a *bhutta* in pouring rain, shopping for wholesale *chikki* and fudge from the factory outlets dotting the main road, a camel ride at Tiger Point or cavorting 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 2nd century BC and exhibit one of the oldest and finest examples of Buddhist temples, belonging to the Hinayana

Off the beaten path

Well known or tucked away - there are innumerable places of interest for even the most jaded traveller along the Mumbai - Pune belt, says Deepika Mital

sect of Buddhism; (the historical importance of Lonavala stems from it being a centre of Buddhist learning).

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

At Kunegaon, just off the Expressway is Della Adventure - a modern recreational and adventure sporting facility with 86 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 harried mothers - it's all here.

The popular trekking spots of Visapur, Lohagad 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 Amby 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 Peshwas, Shivaji, religious sects like Buddhists or even the Pandavas have left their mark - not counting the more obvious choices like Mahabaleshwar, Panchgani and Alibaug.



>> Waterfall in Khandala



>> Zorbing



>> Adventure sports galore



>> The upright 'thumb' at Karnala



>> Bird's eye view of the Expressway and ghats