



Wild style



◀ Clockwise from left: Quintessential India, as portrayed inside a tunnel at Bandra Reclamation; Peek-a-boo in Mumbai's coolest suburb; Graffiti artists involved in The Wall Project leave their mark on an ancestral wall in Bandra village.



A couple of spray cans and a streak of madness can go a long way. Follow the journey of graffiti across India.

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Photographs Parikshit Rao

You can see it splashed on a massive wall in one of the world's highest markets, in the medieval-looking Leh Bazaar, set in the barren mountains of Ladakh. Ubiquitous prayer flags, shops selling traditional Ladakhi boots, Kashmiri vendors barbecuing mutton kebabs, and lo and behold, European-style graffiti in bright shades of yellow basking in simple anonymity. How do you explain it?

In a country that has one of the oldest art traditions dating back to the frescoes of the Ajanta Caves, it was only a matter of time until this modern art form made its way into our country. Call it Aerosol Art if you want, but the story of graffiti is a complex and colourful one.

Kilroy was here
Graffiti seems to have begun in 1943, when the famous phrase 'Kilroy Was Here' first made its appearance in the USA. In the 1970s, the young NYC writers took to the city's outdoors and soon, entire masterpieces were running across the subway system. Most experts regard it to be the inception of 'modern graffiti'. Movies such as *Wild Style* and *Style Wars*, which showcased hip-hop culture in association with graffiti, introduced the world to the possibility of streets dabbled with bright dashes of colour. Political stencils,



▲ Above: Varanasi's travellers have left behind a legacy of graffiti infused with Hindu sensibilities.

Left: A portion of a painted house on Bazaar Road, in Bandra.

self-indulgent tags, '80s-style scrawling, sponsored commercial art – the streets of the world capitals today are abuzz with psychedelic art spawned by mixed intentions.

Closer home, the only form of graffiti we previously chanced upon included incomprehensible scribbling outside public loos, or at best, downright uproarious messages on trains that brought to mind images of Katrina Kaif look-alikes awaiting phone calls from daily commuters. Then there is the vandal advertising for bean bags in Mumbai, not to forget the rare smattering of restaurants with graffiti-covered walls, such as Ghetto in Mahalaxmi. Graffiti though is not a mere indoors indulgence; we're talking about art that is more of a subculture.

What began as a little message on the wall, today involves more creativity, spontaneity, a younger feel and a lot more adventure. A writer rides on adrenaline, striving to be original and earn appreciation from other writers for his work and



the risk undertaken. There are writers who can do wild style graffiti in 15 minutes, but usually a mural, depending upon the size of the wall and safety of the spot, takes several hours. An elaborate mural on a large wall can take up to a month.

Introducing graffiti

Popular perception says graffiti is restricted to the progressive Western metropolises. However, there are plenty of walls in far-flung locales around India that are living art exhibitions (unknown ones at that) created by nameless wanderers. During my several years of vagabonding I came across enough wall art for India to look New York squarely in the eye and say, "This is how it's done mate; a heady cocktail of the art of the West on the antique walls of the East."

A walk down the ghats of Varanasi will reveal many artworks on the ancient walls, from a reclining Shiva and world peace messages to quirky French catchphrases. Eco-awareness across



▲ Above: Graffiti on the banks of the Ganga, Varanasi.

Below: Discover the best of graffiti at Bandra Reclamation.

Goa is displayed on walls sprayed with the message, 'I die for some plastic, moo!' accompanied by cow caricatures. A couple of years ago Bengaluru reinstated its political stance with 'Down with Bush' written on streets all over the city. Move up north and you see more evolved signatures of overseas graffiti artists backpacking in the mountains; in Leh, Kashmir and Old Manali. Delhi, Ahmedabad and Kolkata have their share of bona fide masterpieces in odd spots, but perhaps the best case is that of India's biggest, most chaotic city, Mumbai. And what better place in Mumbai than Bandra, its hippest suburb with a history of cultural innovations that it loves to flaunt, much like the quintessential Bandra cutie who goes to church every Sunday wearing heels.

By the people

India has a rich tradition of wall painting by way of political signage, advertising or even Bollywood related artwork marking the latest releases. There is plenty of open public space to capture, but obviously not enough people with the time and inclination to go spray walls without substantial reasons. This is a highly individual form of art, and individuality is a rare quality in the country. Add to that the lack of spray cans and nozzles, which are imported from Thailand and the UK, if at all, and sold at a price range that can hardly be afforded by a man from the masses who wants to express his own views.

Luckily for bohemians though, the art on the rock continues to roll. In a country that has been steeped in music and nourished on colour, there are many such places out there, with free art produced by unknown wanderers. Some leave signatures – such as the artist Jonas Ihlenfeldt



from Germany, who has painted his name in ornamental letters – a European form of calligraphy – in several places, including the main bazaar of Leh, a small guesthouse wall in Old Manali, and some relaxed parts of Delhi removed from the scrutinising eyes of authorities. There are other Europeans too, with marks left behind to discover.

The writing on the wall

Leaving mountains aside, zoom in on Mumbai and its teeming millions. The best example of efforts towards making this city colourful and more pleasant to stroll through, is The Wall Project. It began a couple of years ago in Mumbai, with artist Dhanya Pilo and few others at the

voluntarily, many Indian artists and a host of artists from other countries, especially France. They have created over 60 graffiti pieces across Bandra, from Bazaar Road to the Reclamation area and from the slums of Dharavi to Kala Chowki.

These founders now act as coordinators as well, bringing in international artists who hold ad-lib informal workshops on the spot they plan to spray. They seek permission from the locals; even ask what they would prefer on their neighbourhood walls, and keep this art form congenially public-friendly. You might catch a bunch of artists on a sunny Sunday, thoroughly enjoying

expressing artistic spontaneity, or producing a consciously thought-out artwork. A similar project is in its nascent stages in Bengaluru, and is supported by just about anyone who cares to convert the outdoors into an open-air palette. They plan to extend it across India, and we are not complaining.

It is easy to get addicted, to want to explore further, to find such hidden works of art on anonymous walls. And you can. The next time you head out on the road, give their work more than a mere glance.

With inputs from graffiti artists Jonas Ihlenfeldt and Shaxeb S.



Fact file

How to go
JetLite and Jet Airways have regular flights to Mumbai, Leh, Delhi, Varanasi and Bengaluru, the main centres of graffiti art.

Where to stay
Typically, graffiti art is found in the more budget-friendly, backpacker-friendly areas of these cities. Most of them also have high-end accommodation options for those looking for them.

For more information
www.thewallproject.com

core of the project, and has now evolved into a small movement in itself. Many people joined in as time passed, including the housekeepers of the walls painted, shopkeepers who offered their walls



◀ Clockwise from left: The Gonsalves graffiti is one of the largest in Bandra village; Random art amid others in Mumbai; A French musician practices his Santoor on one of Varanasi's ghats. The graffiti behind him asks 'Will you kiss me?' in French.

