

Winding roads surrounded by lush green fields, mountains on both sides — even the drive to Nashik is an experience. Cursory glances at Google Maps suggested it would be around three hours to Nashik, but remember that Soma is around 12 kilometres beyond limits, comfortably settled along the backwaters of Gangapur Dam and surrounded by the imposing Sahyadris. Watching the wipers sweep large drops of rain off the windscreen, I wondered what was in store once I was in the little lanes leading up to India's famed wine district.

First impressions

If you've been to Beyond, the luxury villas that kiss the vineyard, you'll be confused when you drive up and see a sign for Soma Vineyard Resort now proudly placed at the gate. Back with its original owners, the property is as impressive (if not more, now that it's been spruced up and attached to the boutique winery), with luxury villas, rooms and infinity pools that dip straight down into the sunset as dusk beckons. In the midst of a downpour, you can see hazy outlines of the mountains rising up through a Scotch mist. Most traces of Sula and Beyond have been erased, but look down at the phone in your room and you'll still see the cheery yellow sun on the piece, albeit a slightly duller version of it.

Visions of vine

It's no Napa, and it's not a French wine village, but the vineyard has its own laidback charm. Far removed from the city, the winding country roads and quaint courtyards help you feel as though you're in a private vineyard and not a commercial wine producing estate. Even with such gorgeous scenery outside, the room had to be a good fit. With villas, suites and rooms, each space comes with a view, amenities you'd expect in a luxury hotel and a private balcony you can sit at when it's not raining too heavily.

WINE & DINE

Soma is home to two restaurants and a wine lounge. Suffiana, their multi-cuisine space is the most popular, while Sensation is a lounge that offers you a gorgeous view of the vineyards. If you want grills and roasts, head over to Vintage-Rotisserie. We enjoyed our meals at Suffiana — pick their kebabs and starters over their mains, but do try the surprisingly good sizzlers too.

Budding enthusiasts

Forget boozy bars and dingy discos, vineyards and wine sojourns are the new trend. Hold a delicate glass by its stem or cup a full-bodied red and sniff it to try and discover the fragrances and ingredients (and don't be surprised if a lot of them are capsicum, peppers and freshly cut grass) as you dive into the subculture that's slowly taking over the country.

If you know the basics of wine tasting, that's great. However, Soma is well equipped to handle novices too. Sitting in an intimate group that included founder Pradeep Pachpatil and his wife, we were taken through a fun, informative session by Martin, a French student on a summer break. We dove impatiently into the adventure; the long drive had left me thirsty for wine and I was eager to try the new varieties I had been told about on a tour of the process and barrels. No vintage oak-barrels here though — the modern equipment may be much more effective, but lacked the romanticism of a little wine chateau with dingy ceilings.

We sniffed, we tilted, we swirled, we sipped and then we prepared ourselves politely for another. It very quickly moved



>> Soma's villas offer tranquility just hours away from the city

« WE RECOMMEND WEEKEND GETAWAY IN NASHIK

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT SOMA

Two days in the wine capital of India and you'll forget all about a week in the city. **Rhea Dhanbhora** tells you why you should pick **Soma Vineyard Resort** for your next weekend getaway

from a quiet, informative session to a fun discussion, complete with loud chatter, industry tit bits, experiences and a whole lot of conversation that wasn't necessarily about what was on offer, but which definitely enhanced the experience for me. As I quickly realised, the warm, homely atmosphere, with the owners making you feel right at home, is woven into every breadth of the space, without them trying too hard. And then there's that genuine love for the process of course, that adds to the allure.

Experiences that count

After the tasting, a satisfying lunch (and a sampler of the most delicious home-grown pink guava, grown only for personal consumption usually) and a quick afternoon siesta on my king-sized bed, I explored the property, walking into Dhuan, a bustling hookah lounge that's brimming over (with thick reels of smoke and a lot of people). Unless you're part of the hookah-generation, you wouldn't want to step in here. Food at Soma isn't spectacular, but it's very, very good. Some dishes stand out more than others and they have a wide variety to choose from.

UNWIND AT NILAYA

Step into Nilaya after a day exploring Soma. A spa is a spa, you say? Not when you're in the middle of a vineyard and warmed up by a tasting session. The reception is small, but don't let that fool you because you're soon led into spacious rooms with heavy wood doors and shingled partitions. Couples should check out the spacious couple's room — and make sure you ask for a therapy that lets you sink into a bubbling Jacuzzi after. The treatments are soothing, but do remember that if you ask for intense pressure, they're not going to go easy on you! If you don't want to put an end to your wine journey, get a Red Wine Therapy Body Polish (₹2,000), a Red Wine Therapy Masque (₹2,200) or a Rose & Red Wine Body Soak (₹2,200). And take home a little lavender oil too — a few drops on your pillow is all you need.

DRINK UP

Soma has an impressive portfolio of young wines from the company launched in 2007 — new reds, whites and rose that are crafted to suit Indian palettes and are a step above the budget wines from other fledgling wineries in the area. While those who prefer their wines fruity will enjoy the whites, my favourites were the drier varieties — the Shiraz in particular. They have everything from Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc to a Shiraz Rose in silver and gold varieties. The sparkling wines, made using a traditional Champaignoise method (ask them to explain the bottling and the bubbles when you visit — it's quite impressive!) are also worth a try.

it just sounded like an overexcited kitty party. The signature spa tunes in the background were missing and the steam wasn't working — two things that would have helped complete the experience. But while that could ruin the experience for some, with the day I'd had, none of it was a big deal unless I was looking to nitpick.

The next morning, with the heavy drapes drawn and rain that had been lashing down all night, I can't say I was treated to sunlight streaming in through the window. However, once I dragged myself out from under the plush covers and drew back the curtains, I was greeted to a wall of rain and that hazy sight of the mountains. Remember, if you want to

make the most of their breakfast buffet, head over before 10am.

As pellets trickled in through the open-top brick wall in the bathroom (the open format suddenly so popular across the country) and the sun played peek-a-boo behind the clouds, we prepped ourselves for a long drive back to reality.

Should you visit? Definitely! But make sure you've got enough time to

recover after the trip because you're not going to want to get back to the hustle and bustle of Mumbai in a hurry!



>> Relax on the balcony as you take in the scenic sunset

I then made my way up the winding wooden staircase — look for the interesting tit bits on the walls, from tribal plates to pretty designs onward to the spa, where I settled in for a relaxing therapy to complete a day of indulgence. Ducks (I assume) cackled in the distance, a low murmur that got louder as my therapy went on. Face down on the massage table, I couldn't help but let out a chuckle (well, several) as the sound intensified. The sound did stop me from drifting into a massage-induced stupor, but after a while

HEAD OVER

The drive from Mumbai to Nashik takes around 3 ½ hours — more if you visit on a particularly rainy weekend.

Where Survey No. 1, Village Ganghavare, Gangapur-Ganghavare Road, Nashik
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