

# Mumbai malls for miles

Mangroves and deserted factories vanish as more than a dozen mega shopping malls mushroom on a 12-km stretch between Ghatkopar and Thane.

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As late as the turn of the Millennium, driving from the heart of Mumbai to a suburban home was a journey through wilderness, the landscape dotted with either salpans and mangroves, or defunct industrial units. A decade on, the entire 12-km stretch from Ghatkopar to Thane has metamorphosed into a swank residential zone, with as many as 12 mega malls dotting the central suburbs. Tall strident buildings, as well as gated communities line this arterial road, to service their denizens, the plush malls stock everything from a T1 to a Prada. From the living room to the mall lobby is literally a hop, skip and jump.

Among the first mega malls to open shop in the central suburbs — as also in Mumbai — Nirmal Lifestyle not only added a whole new dimension to suburban shopping when it opened in 2004 but also changed the way locals spend their weekends. With an unusual architectural design that boasts a huge glass dome, it instantly became a football magnet, not to mention its emergence as the newest backdrop for many a Bollywood film.

"Malls are the temples of urban convergence, and Nirmal Lifestyle aimed to give Mumbaiers an unprecedented shopping, dining and entertainment experience," says its Managing Director, Dhamesh "Bhadra" Chakr. Close on the heels of this 2.4-lakh sq. ft. retail zone, another big one — R Mall — was thrown open just a kilometre away, putting the suburb of Mulund firmly on the mall map of Mumbai.

Stock up your home, pack in the retail therapy, catch a movie, dine at the food courts — the malls offered all this under one roof and Mumbaiers were only too happy to have more to choose from with each passing year.

While R City Mall at Ghatkopar housed every brand worth its salt and title, the Home Mall at Karjurnagar emerged a value shopping destination, with outlets of leading apparel and sports brands. And at Vikhroli arrived one of the first theme malls — the Home Town, spread over three floors and offering everything one could possibly need to do up the home — from furnishing and furniture, to fuses and fixtures.

## THANE AT THE MALLS

It was only a matter of time before the mall mania spread to neighbouring Thane, which had similar ingredients for success — a large population that is affluent, upwardly mobile, looking for weekend places to visit. First on the scene was Wonder Mall, which was basically a multiplex with shopping experi-

ence thrown in. As the neighbourhood grew, so did the number and the scale of the retail houses.

"When we came to live in Thane in 2002, there was just the Wonder Mall and a D Mart store for groceries. With the opening of the huge Big Bazaar outlet changed the way we filed our shopping trolleys, the Koram Mall brought lifestyle shopping and hi-class entertainment into our lives," says Devika Pujari, a resident of Yashvi Vihar, who is more than happy to unwind at one of the malls in Thane on the weekends after negotiating the tough commute to her office in central Mumbai five days a week.

## MORE IN THE WORKS

After at least half a dozen malls opened in the central suburbs in the past couple of years, the high-density footfalls are fueling the demand for more, and three new malls are under construction now.

Metacasa and carry will open in a couple of months at the Neptune Mall in Bhandup, while Dreamz Mega Mall turns its reality across the road.

The biggest of them all is set for a grand opening this month. Sprung across a whopping one million sq ft, Vivacity will host a multiplex with 4 screens, seven large anchor stores, a 40,000-sq ft food zone and parking for 2,400 cars.

## SUSTAINING FOOTFALLS

The frenzied additions led many to wonder whether it would soon turn out to be a case of one mall too many.

"It would depend on a variety of factors," says Susi Dugarwal, Chief Mall Mechanic, at mall advisory firm Beyond Squarefoot, adding that once the initial novelty wears off, customers will increasingly gravitate towards malls that have the perfect mix of design, services and management.

Citing the example of the neighbouring satellite city of Navi Mumbai, which saw a similar glut of malls and an equally rapid collapse of the mall model, Dugarwal says the challenge for malls would be to maintain consistent levels of service and brand mix.

"In a broader sense, it's already a case of one mall too many in Mumbai, and whether all the malls will co-exist successfully or one will make for the other will become known only in the years to come," he says.

On the flip side, the mall boom has also brought attendant problems for local residents. "It's impossible to negotiate the LBS Road on weekends," complains Mulund resident Padma Jayakumar, adding that the influx of people from across the central suburbs creates huge traffic snarls and inconveniences residents.



Nirmal Lifestyle in Mulund, Mumbai



Koram Mall in Thane

## Shopper's dozen

- R City — Ghatkopar
- Home Town — Vikhroli
- Home Mall — Karjurnagar
- Magnet Mall — Bhandup
- Dreamz — Bhandup
- Metacasa and Carry — Bhandup
- Nirmal Lifestyle — Mulund
- R Mall — Mulund
- Eternity Mall — Thane
- Koram Mall — Thane
- H G Hazar — Thane
- Hyper Mall — Thane



R Mall in Mulund. PICTURES: ARUNA RATHOD