

CHENNAI

01 > Footprint Bed & Breakfast

There's no hoarding, no brass nameplate, no neon sign to signal that this urban apartment block at the end of a lane contains anything to distinguish it from the ten you drove past to get here -- only a beer-coaster-sized glass frame containing the screen-printed impression of a bare tootsie on the wall outside apartment 2A. Then the door opens, and Chennai's swelter dissolves in a waft of cool, lemongrass-scented air.



Hidden down a side street behind the ITC Park Sheraton in the south-central suburb of Alwarpet, Footprint B&B may represent the brave new hope for urban accommodation in India. Owners Rucha and Ashish Gupta have hollowed out three apartments in their block and created a place that's more homely than a hotel, more private than a homestay. The nine rooms here are cool, bright and effortlessly stylish, featuring white bedspreads accented by green pillowcases and matching bamboo runners, and writing desks festooned with flowers. The bathrooms don't attempt to be anything other than sparkling clean, but they do come with platters of handmade soap and incense from Auroville.

A Wi-Fi signal beams through each apartment and there's a tethered computer in the small library for free surfing, plus any number of Chennai lifestyle mags scattered around to help you get your bearings. Radha, the ever-serene cook/concierge/chambermaid, can help arrange taxis or advise on rickshaw fares, and even more importantly, brings your breakfast -- muesli and coffee followed by the special of the day, which may be dosa, idiyappam or, if you ask nicely, beans on toast.

You might meet anyone here from Bangalore businesswallahs to Colombian pilots' wives to holidaying French families. The Guptas come with a formidable hospitality pedigree -- Ashish is one of the directors of primo Andamans resort Barefoot at Havelock -- and Rucha pops in every day to check that things are ship-shape. But there's never any sense that you're living in anybody's pocket.

Footprint B&B

Flat 2a & 2b, Gayatri Apartments
16 South Street
Sriram Nagar, Alwarpet
Chennai, t: (044) 3255 7720

Rooms from Rs 3000



MUMBAI

02 > Ascot Hotel

Let's make no bones about it: Accommodation in Mumbai is painfully expensive compared to everywhere else in the country. And given the fact that what you need to accomplish determines where you'll stay in the city, it's near impossible to recommend a one-size-fits-all option.

In value terms, though, the Ascot is a clear standout. Sure, its location is both a blessing and a curse -- five minutes stroll through leafy streets from the Taj and half a block from the mêlée of Colaba Causeway -- and the tan-wood rooms, shoehorned into a graceful 1930s building, veer dangerously close to that IKEA look we wish would die a quick and graceful death. But they're generously proportioned, spiffy and new, with safe deposit boxes and granite shower stalls.

Even the relatively lowly Superior rooms sport frosted glass office desks and Wi-Fi, while the street-facing Deluxe models

reward your extra 600 rupees with greater space and elegant bay windows facing a cute green rectangle of parkland. Ask for one on the higher floors and you can be lord and master of a view that encompasses all of South Mumbai, including a number of towering hotels where people are paying at least twice as much as you for similar privileges.

From the slick lobby bar, where you can tuck into a basic free breakfast, to the immaculate corridors with their funky curving walls, there's a gratifying sense that the place is taken care of. Best of all, South Mumbai's best patisserie, Theobroma, is just a well-buttered croissant's throw away.

Ascot Hotel

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www.ascotahotel.com

Rooms from Rs 6050 (including taxes and breakfast)