

INDIA

COLOURS, CHAOS AND CALM



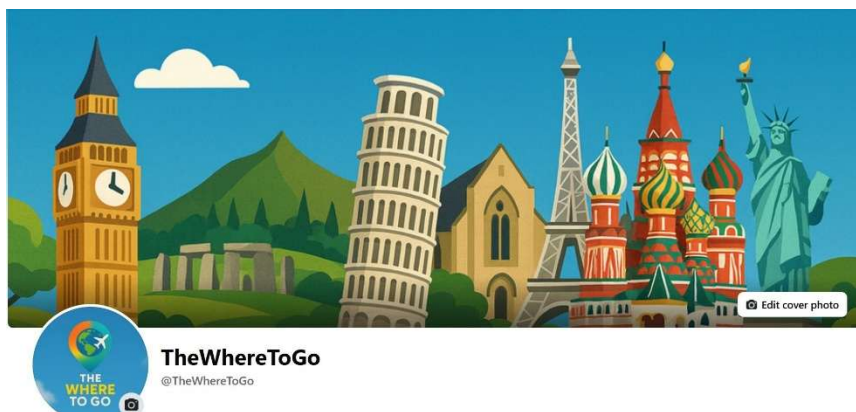
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India - Colours, Chaos and Calm

India is unlike anywhere else on Earth. It is a country of astonishing contrasts, where ancient traditions exist comfortably alongside modern ambition, and every journey reveals something unexpected. From the snow-capped Himalayas in the north to the palm-fringed beaches of the south, bustling megacities to peaceful rural villages, India is a destination that constantly surprises, challenges and rewards those willing to embrace its extraordinary diversity.

With a history stretching back more than 5,000 years, India has been shaped by great empires, powerful religions and countless cultures. Majestic Mughal forts, colourful Rajput palaces, sacred temples, colonial architecture and thriving modern skylines all tell the story of a nation that has continually reinvented itself while remaining deeply connected to its past. It is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, making it one of the world's great spiritual centres.

Yet India is far more than its monuments. It is found in the aroma of spices drifting through ancient markets, the sound of temple bells at sunrise, the energy of crowded railway stations and the quiet moments watching life unfold along the banks of the Ganges. It is a place where hospitality comes naturally, where every region has its own language, cuisine and traditions, and where no two days ever feel quite the same.

This guide follows a carefully planned route through some of India's most remarkable cities, from the imperial grandeur of Delhi and Agra to the royal splendour of Jaipur, the vibrant streets of Mumbai, the tropical beauty of Goa and Kochi, the cultural richness of Kolkata and the timeless spirituality of Varanasi. Along the way, you will discover UNESCO World Heritage Sites, magnificent architecture, colourful festivals, spectacular landscapes and unforgettable local experiences.

India can sometimes feel overwhelming, but it is precisely this blend of colours, chaos and calm that makes it one of the world's most compelling destinations. Travel with an open mind, allow time to wander beyond the obvious, and embrace the unexpected. You will leave with far more than photographs—you will leave with memories, stories and experiences that will stay with you long after your journey has ended.



CHAPTER 2

Amritsar: Faith, Freedom and Sacrifice

Introduction



Amritsar is one of India's most important and deeply moving cities. Founded in 1577 by Guru Ram Das, the fourth Sikh Guru, it grew around the sacred pool, or Amrit Sarovar, from which the city takes its name. At its heart stands the magnificent Golden Temple, the spiritual centre of Sikhism and one of the most visited religious sites in the world. Yet Amritsar is much more than a place of worship. Its streets tell stories of devotion, resilience and sacrifice that have helped shape modern India.

Few places capture the country's struggle for independence more powerfully than Jallianwala Bagh. It was here, in 1919, that hundreds of unarmed civilians were killed when British troops opened fire on a peaceful gathering, an event that shocked the world and transformed the independence movement. Nearby, the Partition Museum tells the equally emotional story of the division of India and Pakistan in 1947, when millions of people were displaced and countless lives were changed forever. Just a short drive away, the daily Wagah Border ceremony provides a dramatic reminder of the continuing relationship between the two nations.

Today, Amritsar remains a thriving city of around 1.3 million people and an important centre for religion, commerce and tourism. Pilgrims arrive from every corner of the globe, while visitors are drawn by its remarkable history, famous Punjabi cuisine and warm hospitality. Whether you come to admire the Golden Temple reflected in the sacred waters at dawn, explore the city's rich heritage or simply experience the atmosphere of one of India's most welcoming destinations, Amritsar offers an unforgettable introduction to the country's faith, courage and enduring spirit.





Partition Museum

Located in the historic Town Hall building, the Partition Museum tells the deeply moving story of one of the largest and most traumatic migrations in human history. When British India was divided into the independent nations of India and Pakistan in August 1947, around 15 million people were forced to leave their homes while an estimated one to two million lost their lives in the violence that followed. Amritsar found itself on the frontline of this upheaval.

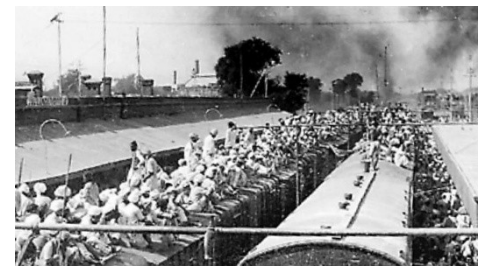


Opened in 2017, the museum preserves the memories of those who experienced Partition through personal testimonies, letters, photographs, newspaper reports and everyday possessions carried by refugees during their journeys. Rather than concentrating solely on politics, it focuses on the human stories behind the statistics, making it one of India's most emotional museums.



Several galleries chart the events leading to Partition, the mass migration, and the rebuilding of lives on both sides of the new border. Interactive displays and recorded interviews allow visitors to hear survivors recount their experiences in their own words. The museum has become an important centre for preserving memories before they are lost forever.

Visitors with little prior knowledge of India's history often leave with a much deeper appreciation of how profoundly the events of 1947 shaped the area.



Golden Temple



The Golden Temple, known to Sikhs as Sri Harmandir Sahib (meaning the abode of God), is the spiritual heart of Sikhism, one of the world's most beautiful places of worship and one of the most visited places of worship in India. Its history begins in 1577 when the fourth Sikh Guru, Guru Ram Das, excavated a sacred pool, which became known as the 'Amrit Sarovar', giving the city of Amritsar its name.

The temple was founded in the late sixteenth century and, unlike many religious buildings that stand on elevated ground, the Golden Temple was deliberately built lower than the surrounding streets to symbolise humility. Its four entrances, one on each side, represent openness and equality for all humanity. The temple was completed and the Sikh holy scripture, the Adi Granth, was installed within it in 1604.

The history of the Golden Temple is marked by periods of persecution and resilience. The temple was destroyed and desecrated multiple times by invading Mughal and Afghan forces throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Each time, the Sikh community defiantly rebuilt and restored their shrine.

The spectacular gold-covered upper storeys were added during the early nineteenth century under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, whose generous donation of gold leaf gave the temple its famous appearance. He used approximately 162 kg of gold, with a further 500 kg of gold foil added in a major renovation in the 1990s.

In more recent history, the temple complex was the site of the tragic 'Operation Blue Star' which was a controversial Indian military operation ordered by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and carried out in June 1984. Its primary objective was to remove militant Sikh separatists, led by the firebrand preacher Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who had fortified themselves inside the Golden Temple.

The military assault involved troops, heavy artillery and tanks, entering the sacred complex. The fighting was intense as the militants put up fierce resistance. Bhindranwale and many of his followers were killed, but the operation resulted in significant casualties among soldiers and civilians with heavy damage to the Golden Temple complex.

The consequences were far-reaching and tragic. The assault deeply offended the Sikh community, who viewed it as a desecration of their holiest shrine. On October 31, 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards in an act of retaliation for the operation. Her assassination, in turn, sparked horrific anti-Sikh riots across India, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Sikhs.

Despite the trauma of 1984, the Golden Temple endures as Sikhism's unwavering spiritual heart. Its shimmering sanctity draws millions, while its legendary langar (a free community kitchen that serves freshly prepared vegetarian meals to over 100,000 people daily..... regardless of faith, caste, or background) embodies the Sikh principles of equality, humility and selfless service.



Jallianwala Bagh Samarak



Just a short walk from the Golden Temple lies Jallianwala Bagh Samarak, one of India's most important national memorials. It commemorates the tragic events of 13 April 1919, when thousands of men, women and children had gathered peacefully inside the enclosed garden during the festival of Baisakhi.....primarily a spring harvest festival celebrated in the Punjab region.

Without warning, Brigadier General Reginald Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on the unarmed crowd. The soldiers continued shooting, leaving hundreds dead and many more injured. The only narrow entrance to the garden meant that escape was almost impossible. Many people jumped into a nearby well in a desperate attempt to avoid the gunfire.

His intention was to 'punish the Indians for disobedience' and to deliver a 'moral lesson' to the entire Punjab region, an act intended to intimidate the entire population into submission and reassert British dominance. The event is remembered as one of the most shameful acts in British colonial history, with subsequent British Prime Ministers and officials expressing deep regret for the atrocity.

Needless to say, the massacre shocked the world and transformed the Indian independence movement. Public outrage spread across India and Britain, convincing many that British colonial rule had lost all moral authority. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi cited the tragedy as a turning point in the struggle for independence.

Today the memorial contains the preserved Martyrs' Well, bullet marks still visible in the surrounding walls, and an eternal flame honouring those who died. Carefully landscaped gardens now provide a peaceful setting, but the site remains a powerful reminder (and a significant embarrassment) of the sacrifices that shaped modern India.



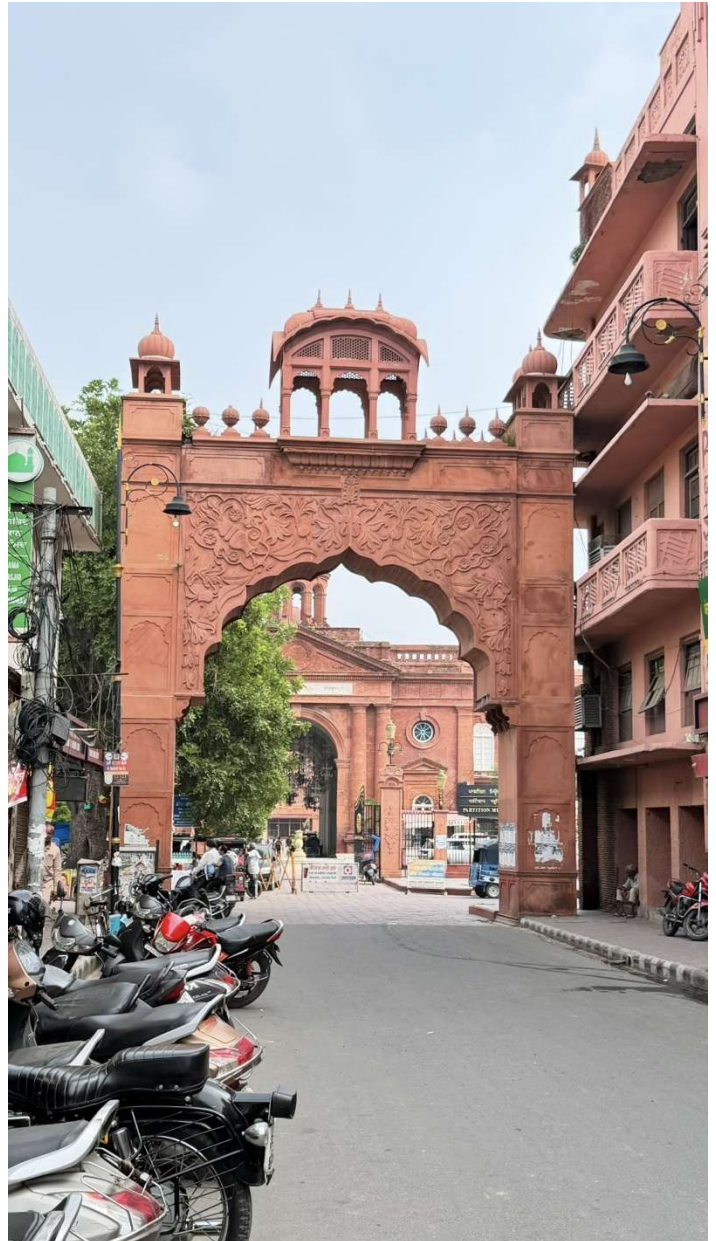


City Gates

Although much of modern Amritsar has expanded far beyond its historic centre, the old walled city still retains several of its original city gates, reminders of the days when the settlement was protected by defensive walls. The city grew rapidly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the Sikh Empire, and a network of imposing gateways controlled access to the bustling commercial heart.

Originally there were twelve principal gates, each leading towards important trade routes or neighbouring towns. Among the best known are Hall Gate, Lahori Gate, Hathi Gate, Hakima Gate and Rambagh Gate. Hall Gate, also known as Gandhi Gate, remains the most recognisable and has become an unofficial symbol of the city. Its distinctive red sandstone façade, topped with decorative turrets and illuminated in the evening, makes it one of Amritsar's favourite photographic landmarks.

Beyond the gates lies a fascinating maze of narrow streets packed with traditional bazaars selling textiles, spices, jewellery, religious items and Punjabi street food. Many family-run businesses have traded here for generations, preserving the atmosphere of old Punjab despite the city's modern growth.



Reflection on Amritsar

There are cities that you visit and then there are cities that speak to you. Amritsar definitely belongs to the latter. I had heard about the Golden Temple, of course, and seen countless photographs, but nothing quite prepares you for seeing those golden domes reflected in the Amrit Sarovar for the first time. More than the building itself, though, it was the people that made the greatest impression. Watching thousands of pilgrims arriving, praying, eating together and simply spending time within the complex gave the place a sense of purpose that is difficult to describe. Even late at night, when I had expected the crowds to have disappeared, the Golden Temple was still heaving with people.

Amritsar also reminded me that India is not simply a country of beautiful buildings and spiritual experiences. Jallianwala Bagh is an uncomfortable but necessary visit, and standing beside the bullet-marked walls and the well into which people desperately jumped to escape the gunfire brings the events of 1919 much closer than any history book can. The Partition Museum adds another layer of human tragedy. Yet somehow Amritsar has emerged from all of this with an extraordinary sense of identity. It is a city of faith, sacrifice, resilience and warmth, and one of the places from this journey that I know I will remember for a very long time.



CHAPTER 3

Delhi: India's Historic Capital

Introduction

Few cities in the world have witnessed as much history as Delhi. For more than a thousand years, successive kingdoms, sultanates, emperors and governments have risen and fallen here, each leaving behind magnificent monuments that together form one of the richest historical landscapes anywhere on earth. Although India's capital has shifted location several times throughout history, Delhi has remained at the centre of power for centuries, making it a fascinating blend of ancient heritage and modern ambition.

The city that visitors see today is really two destinations in one. Old Delhi, established by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century, remains a maze of bustling markets, narrow lanes and remarkable monuments, including the imposing Red Fort and Jama Masjid. In contrast, New Delhi was designed by the British in the early twentieth century as the capital of the British Raj. Its broad avenues, grand government buildings and elegant gardens reflect a hugely different architectural vision. Beyond these famous landmarks lie even older reminders of Delhi's past, including Qutub Minar, Humayun's Tomb and the remains of earlier cities that once flourished before disappearing into history.

Today, Delhi is a vast metropolis of more than thirty million people, making it one of the largest urban areas in the world. It is India's political heart, a major financial and cultural centre, and home to people from every corner of the country. Modern metro lines sit alongside medieval forts, luxury shopping malls neighbour centuries-old bazaars, and ancient temples share the skyline with gleaming office towers. Delhi can feel busy, noisy and overwhelming, but nowhere else captures India's extraordinary contrasts quite so completely. It is a city where every street seems to reveal another chapter in the story of the nation.



Delhi Railway Station

For many travellers, New Delhi Railway Station is their first introduction to India, and it is certainly an unforgettable one. Opened in 1926, the station was constructed to serve the newly planned imperial capital designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and Sir Herbert Baker who were two of the most influential architects of the British Empire.

The station handles well over 400 trains every day and serves hundreds of thousands of passengers, connecting India's capital with virtually every corner of the country. From here, luxury trains such as the Maharajas' Express depart alongside humble local services, reflecting the extraordinary diversity of India's rail network.

Stepping outside the station is an experience in itself. Rickshaws, taxis, street vendors, porters carrying impossible loads and a constant stream of travellers create an atmosphere that can seem chaotic yet somehow functions with remarkable efficiency. The nearby district of Paharganj has become one of India's best-known backpacker neighbourhoods, packed with budget hotels, travel agencies and colourful markets.

Recognising the importance of this gateway to the capital, Indian Railways is presently embarking on one of the most ambitious station redevelopment projects in its history. The historic station is being transformed into a modern multi-modal transport hub, with a vast elevated concourse spanning all the platforms, improved passenger facilities and seamless links with the Delhi Metro and other forms of transport.

Designed to accommodate the city's rapidly growing passenger numbers, the redevelopment aims to create a station that is more efficient, accessible and environmentally sustainable while preserving New Delhi's role as the nation's principal rail gateway. Construction is taking place in phases so that rail services can continue operating throughout the project.



Jama Masjid



Dominating the skyline of Old Delhi, Jama Masjid is one of India's largest and most revered mosques. Commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, who also built the Red Fort and the Taj Mahal, construction began in 1650 and took six years to complete. More than 5,000 craftsmen worked on the project using red sandstone and white marble to create one of the finest examples of Mughal architecture.

The mosque stands on a raised platform overlooking the bustling streets of Old Delhi. Visitors climb broad flights of steps before entering an immense courtyard capable of accommodating around 25,000 worshippers. Three elegant marble domes crown the prayer hall, while two soaring minarets, each over 40 metres high, offer spectacular panoramic views across the city.

Despite being one of Delhi's busiest tourist attractions, Jama Masjid remains a living place of worship. The inside is famous for its richly carved arches and beautifully proportioned colonnades. It also houses several revered relics believed to be associated with the Prophet Muhammad, including a hair, a sandal and pages from an ancient copy of the Qur'an.



Red Fort

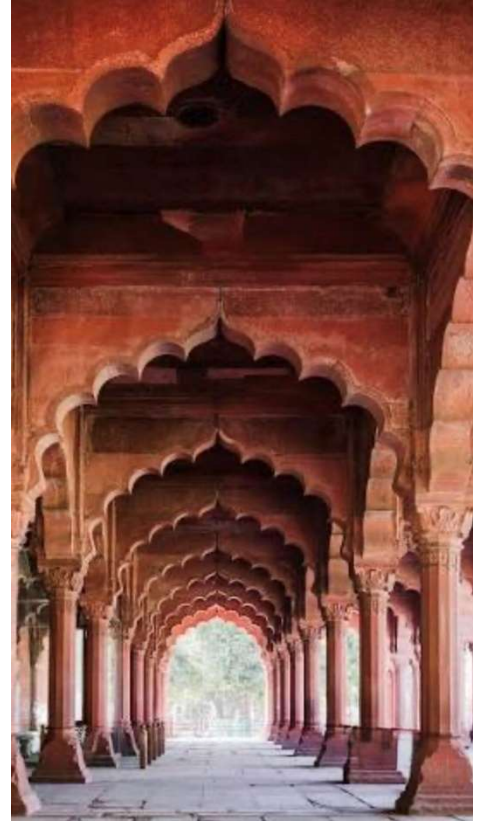
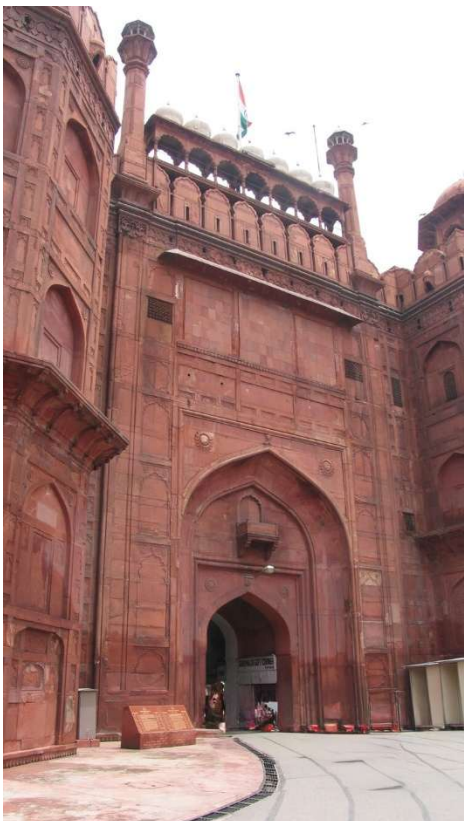
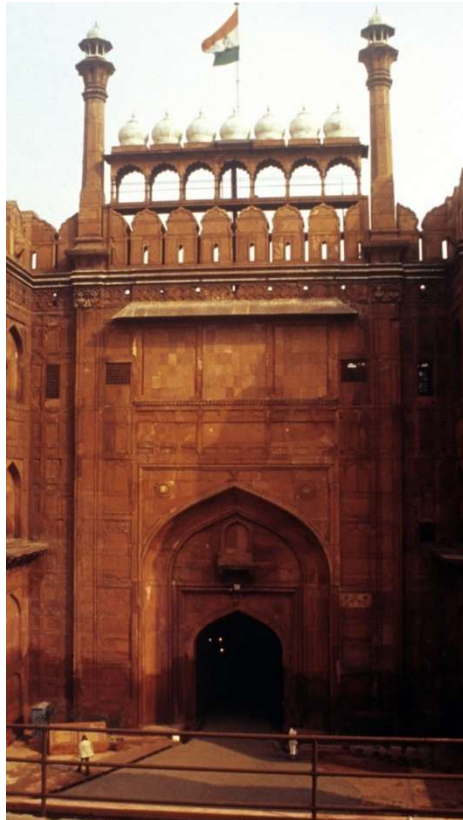


The imposing Red Fort, or Lal Qila, is perhaps Delhi's most iconic monument and stands as a lasting symbol of India's rich history. Constructed between 1638 and 1648 by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, it became the centrepiece of his newly established capital, Shahjahanabad, now known as Old Delhi. Behind its massive red sandstone walls lay one of the most lavish royal palaces ever built.

The one and a half miles of defensive walls reach heights over 100 feet and enclose a remarkable complex of palaces, audience halls, gardens and pavilions. Although much of the original decoration disappeared following the Indian Rebellion of 1857, visitors can still admire elegant buildings such as the Diwan-i-Aam (Hall of Public Audience), the Diwan-i-Khas (Hall of Private Audience), the Rang Mahal and the beautifully designed royal gardens.....all closed on the day of my visit.

The fort has witnessed many defining moments in Indian history. It was occupied by Persian forces under Nader Shah in 1739, became a British military headquarters after 1857 and was the site where the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah II, was tried before being exiled.

Today the Red Fort remains a powerful national symbol. Every year on 15 August, India's Independence Day, the Prime Minister raises the national flag from its ramparts and addresses the nation, continuing a tradition established by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1947 following India's independence from Britain.



India Gate

Standing proudly at the eastern end of Rajpath (now Kartavya Path), India Gate is one of Delhi's best-known landmarks and an enduring symbol of national pride. Designed by the British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens, the triumphal arch was completed in 1931 as part of the construction of New Delhi, the new imperial capital of British India. Inspired by the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, the monument rises to a height of 42 metres and dominates the broad ceremonial avenue leading towards Rashtrapati Bhavan.

The memorial commemorates more than 70,000 soldiers of the British Indian Army who lost their lives during the First World War and the Third Anglo-Afghan War. The names of over 13,000 soldiers are engraved on the stonework, creating a lasting tribute to their sacrifice. Following India's victory in the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, the Amar Jawan Jyoti (Flame of the Immortal Soldier) was installed beneath the arch to honour India's unknown soldiers. In 2022 the flame was ceremonially merged with the nearby National War Memorial.



Agrasen ki Baoli



Hidden among the modern office blocks of central Delhi lies Agrasen ki Baoli, one of the city's most intriguing historical treasures. This impressive stepwell descends through more than one hundred stone steps to a deep-water reservoir that once supplied the surrounding community. Although tradition attributes its construction to the legendary King Agrasen, the founder of the Agrawal community, historians believe the present structure was probably rebuilt during the fourteenth century under the Delhi Sultanate.

Before modern plumbing, stepwells were essential across much of India. They provided water throughout the year while also serving as cool gathering places where local people met, rested and escaped the intense summer heat. Agrasen ki Baoli is one of the finest surviving examples in Delhi, with its elegant series of arched niches creating a striking sense of symmetry as visitors descend towards the bottom.

The Baoli has also acquired a reputation for mystery. Local legends claim it is haunted, while paranormal television programmes have helped reinforce its eerie atmosphere. Although these stories have no historical basis, the deep shadows and quiet isolation of the stepwell certainly create a unique ambience quite unlike the bustling streets above.



Gurudwara Bangla Sahib (Delhi's Golden Temple)

With its gleaming golden dome, Gurudwara Bangla Sahib is one of Delhi's more recognisable religious landmarks and the city's most important Sikh place of worship. Often referred as Delhi's Golden Temple, the shrine commemorates the stay of Guru Har Krishan, the eighth Sikh Guru, who lived here in 1664 while caring for victims of a devastating smallpox and cholera epidemic.

Despite being only eight years old, the Guru became renowned for his compassion and is said to have provided comfort and healing to the sick regardless of their religion or social status. Following his death later that year, the site gradually developed into a revered shrine. The present marble complex, with its gold-plated dome, welcomes thousands of worshippers and visitors every day.

Like all Sikh gurdwaras, Bangla Sahib embodies the principles of equality and service. Its enormous langar, or community kitchen, serves free vegetarian meals to many thousands of people every day, prepared almost entirely by volunteers. Amid the noise of India's capital, Bangla Sahib offers an oasis of peace, generosity and spiritual reflection.



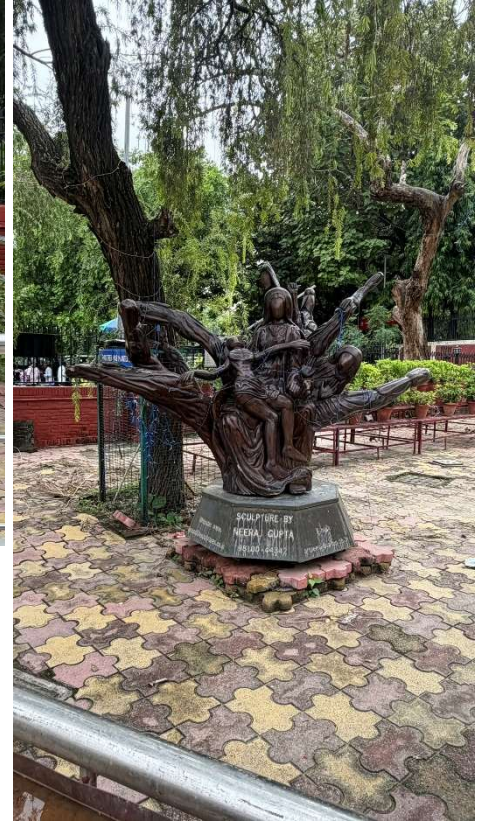
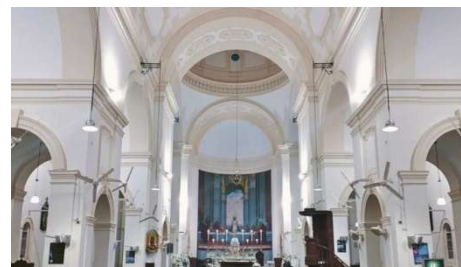
Sacred Heart Cathedral

On my very first visit to India, I remember visiting the Sacred Heart Cathedral, so it was nice to be back again although not much has changed since that visit. The Sacred Heart Cathedral, is the largest Roman Catholic church in Delhi and one of the city's finest examples of early twentieth-century ecclesiastical architecture.

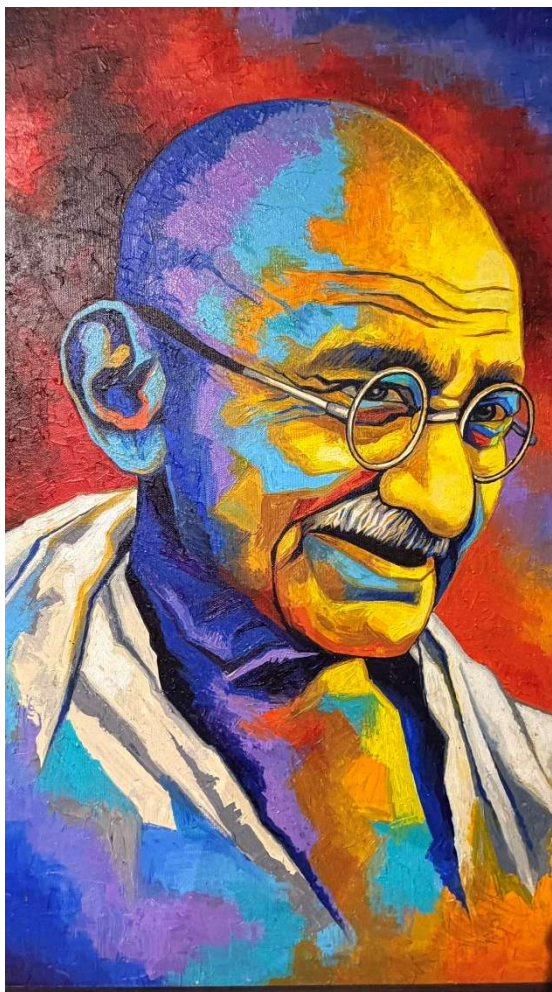


The cathedral's elegant Italian Renaissance style presents a striking contrast to the Mughal and Hindu architecture found elsewhere in Delhi. Its red and cream façade, graceful colonnades and tall central tower create an atmosphere of understated dignity, while the spacious interior is illuminated by colourful stained-glass windows depicting scenes from the life of Christ.

Throughout the year the cathedral hosts regular services in several languages, reflecting Delhi's cosmopolitan population. Surrounded by gardens and shaded trees, the cathedral provides a welcome retreat from Delhi's busy streets. It serves as a reminder that Christianity has been an important part of the city's cultural landscape for centuries and continues to flourish alongside the many other faiths represented in Delhi.



Gandhi Smriti (formerly Birla House)



Something else I recall from that first visit is the beautiful gardens of Birla House, now renamed as Gandhi Smriti, which is where Mahatma Gandhi spent the final 144 days of his life. Originally built in 1928 as the residence of the wealthy industrialist Ghanshyam Das Birla, the elegant mansion became one of Gandhi's regular homes whenever he visited Delhi.

It was here, on the evening of 30 January 1948, that Gandhi was assassinated while walking across the garden to conduct his daily prayer meeting. Today the building has been transformed into a museum dedicated to Gandhi's life, philosophy and enduring influence. Visitors can explore the modest room where he lived, preserved almost exactly as it was on the day of his death, complete with his simple bed, spinning wheel and personal belongings.

Perhaps the most poignant feature is the series of stone footprints marking Gandhi's final steps before he was shot. At the spot where he fell stands the Martyr's Column which is a place of quiet remembrance visited by people from around the world and which was not in position on my very first visit. Elsewhere, galleries trace Gandhi's remarkable life and his principles of non-violence, civil disobedience and peaceful resistance.

These ideas were later to inspire such prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. Today, Gandhi Smriti is far more than a museum.....it is a powerful reminder of one man's extraordinary impact on the course of world history.





Humayun's Tomb

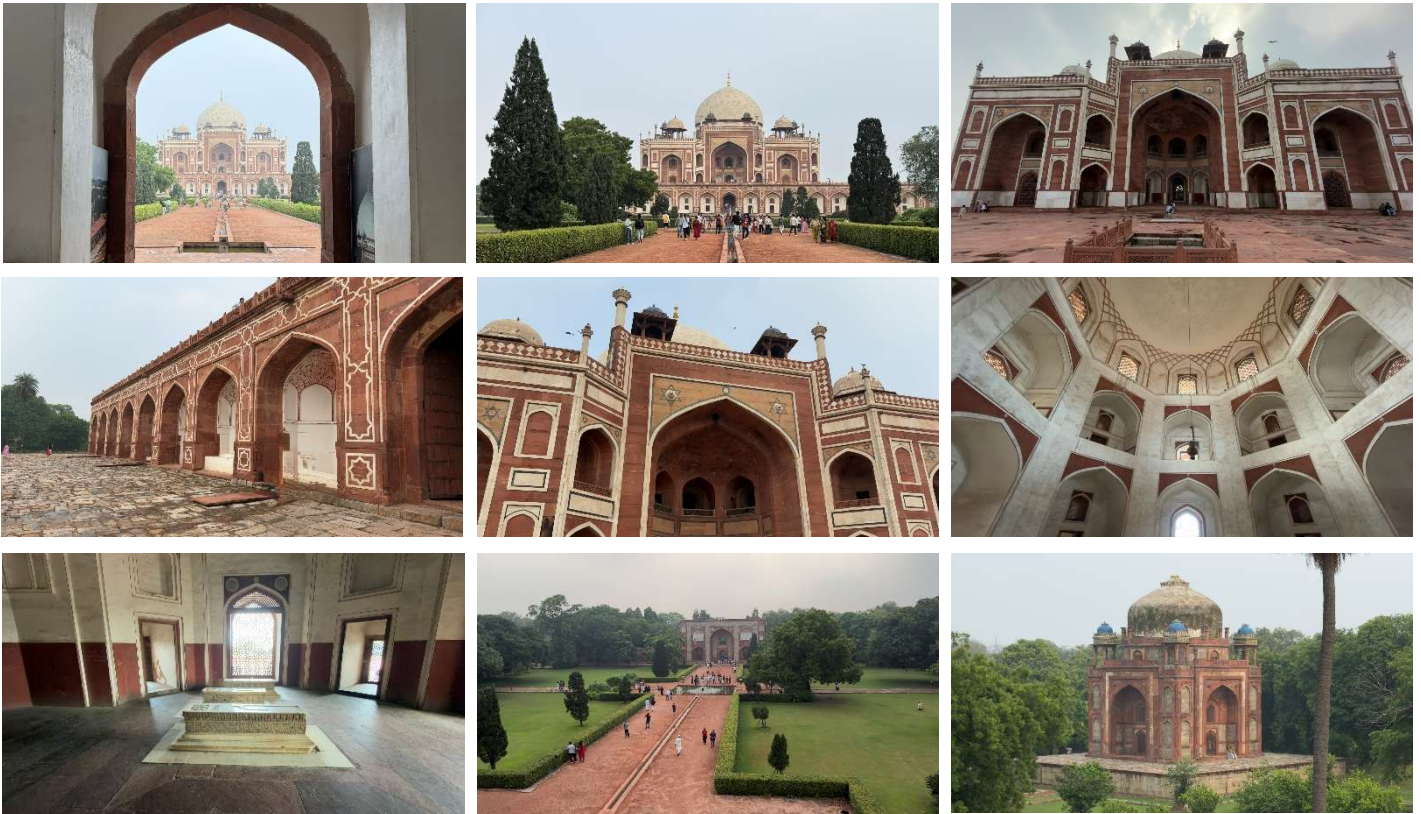
Completed in 1570, Humayun's Tomb is one of Delhi's greatest architectural masterpieces and marked a turning point in the development of Mughal architecture. It was commissioned by Empress Bega Begum in memory of her husband, the Mughal Emperor Humayun, becoming the first grand garden tomb on the Indian subcontinent.

More than seventy years later, its elegant design would inspire the architects of the Taj Mahal, earning it the nickname 'the forerunner of the Taj.' Constructed from red sandstone with intricate white marble detailing, the monument rises from the centre of a vast Persian-style garden, divided into four symmetrical sections by water channels representing the rivers of Paradise.

The magnificent double dome, graceful arches and perfect geometric proportions reflect the influence of Persian architecture, blended with emerging Mughal styles that would later flourish across northern India. The complex contains over 150 Mughal graves, making it something of a royal necropolis. Several later emperors and members of the imperial family are buried here.

Following an extensive restoration programme, Humayun's Tomb has regained much of its former splendour and is now recognised as one of India's finest UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Surrounded by peaceful gardens and shaded walkways, it offers visitors a welcome escape from Delhi's bustle while providing a fascinating glimpse into the origins of one of the world's greatest architectural traditions.





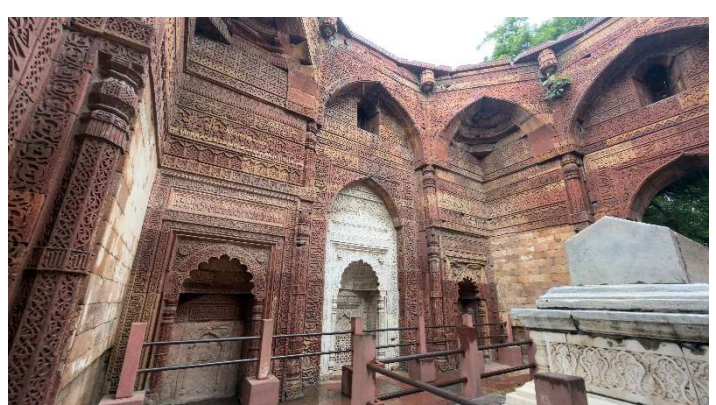
Qutub Minar



Rising dramatically above the southern suburbs of Delhi, the Qutub Minar is the tallest brick minaret in the world and one of India's finest examples of early Indo-Islamic architecture. Standing 240 feet (72.5 metres) high, the tower has dominated the Delhi skyline for more than 800 years and remains one of the city's most celebrated landmarks.

Construction began in 1199 under Qutb-ud-din Aibak, founder of the Delhi Sultanate, shortly after his conquest of northern India. Only the first storey was completed during his lifetime, with successive rulers adding the remaining levels over the following decades. Built from red sandstone and later incorporating bands of white marble, the tower is richly decorated with intricate carvings, geometric patterns and verses from the Qur'an. Its five tapering storeys are separated by projecting balconies supported by elaborately carved stone brackets.

The minaret forms part of the larger Qutub Complex, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that contains several remarkable monuments. Among them are the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque, one of the earliest mosques in India, the elegant Alai Darwaza gateway and the famous Iron Pillar. Dating from around the fourth century, the pillar has puzzled scientists for generations because it has resisted significant corrosion despite standing exposed to the elements for more than 1,600 years.



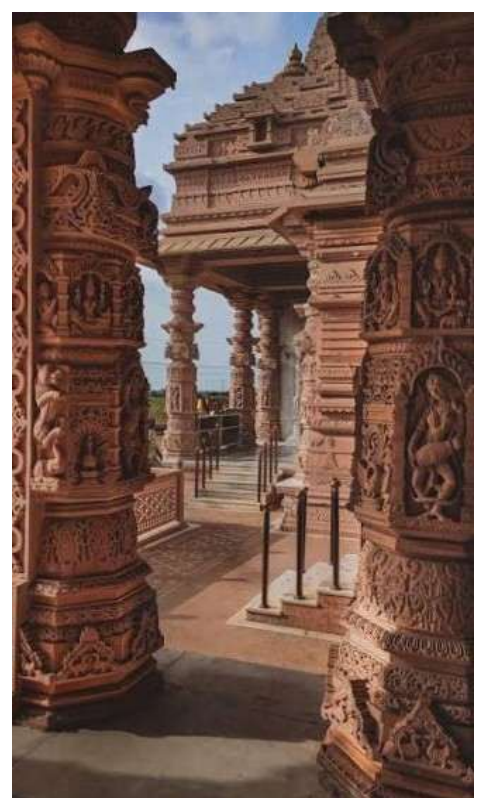
Swaminarayan Akshardham

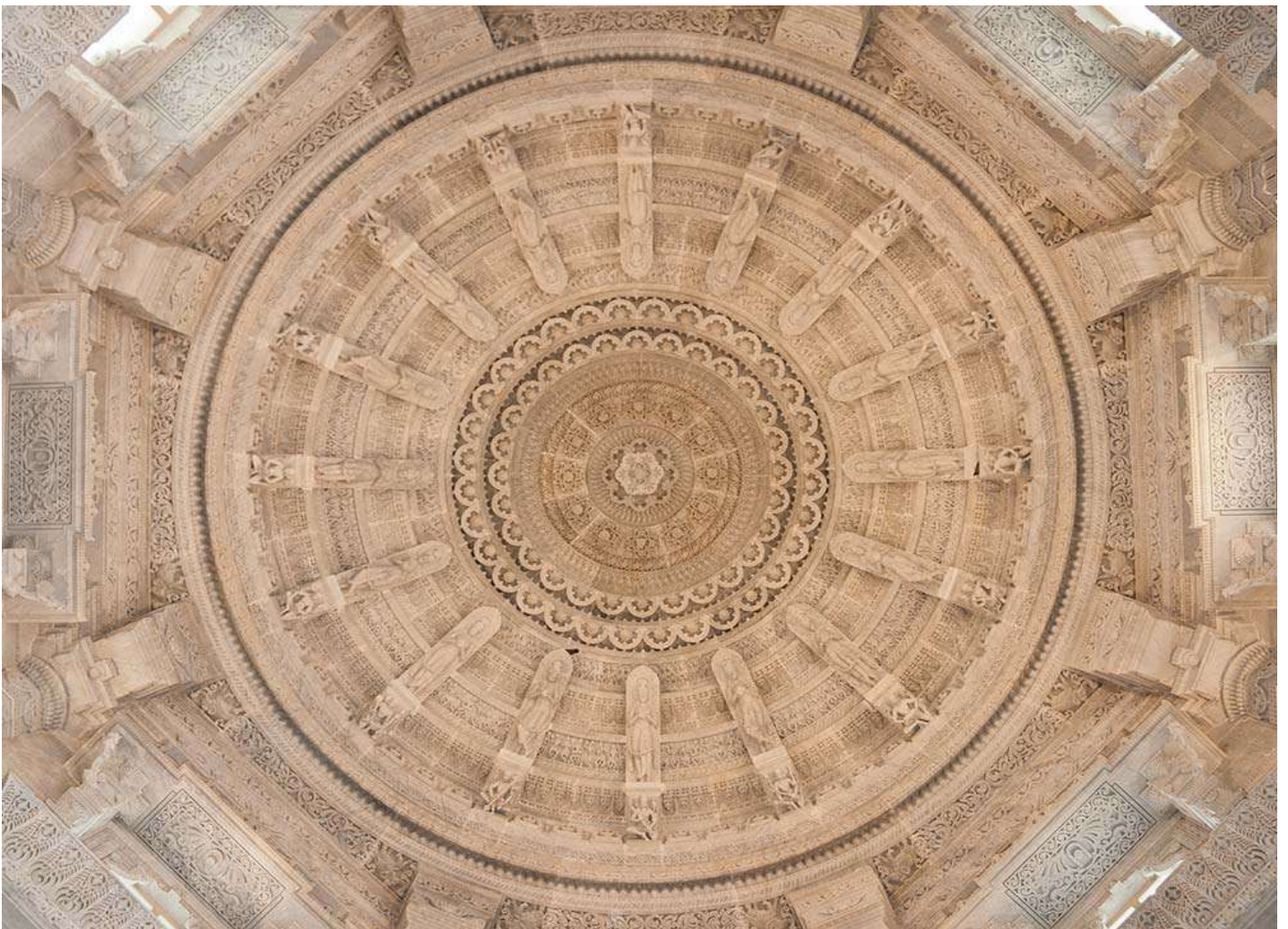


Opened in 2005, Swaminarayan Akshardham is one of the largest and most spectacular Hindu temple complexes ever constructed. Built by the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, the complex celebrates the life and teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan while showcasing the extraordinary craftsmanship of traditional Indian temple architecture.

The central monument is a breathtaking achievement. Standing over 130 feet (40 metres) high, it was constructed without the use of structural steel, relying instead on ancient building techniques that have been perfected over centuries. More than 6,000 tonnes of pink sandstone from Rajasthan and white marble from Italy were used in its construction. The exterior is adorned with over 20,000 intricately carved figures depicting deities, saints, dancers, musicians, animals and scenes from Hindu mythology, each carved by hand by skilled artisans.

Although millions visit each year, the atmosphere inside remains calm and reverential. Photography is not permitted within the complex, encouraging visitors to experience the temple directly rather than through a camera lens. The majority of my pictures are therefore collated from what I believe to be copyright photos with appropriate copyright permission.





Lotus Temple

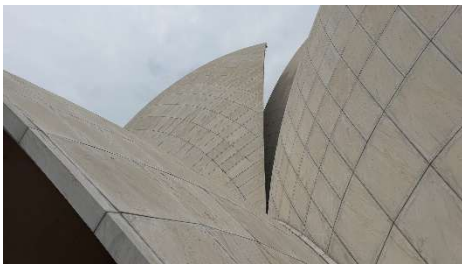


Few modern buildings have become as instantly recognisable as the **Lotus Temple**, one of Delhi's most visited attractions and an architectural icon of contemporary India. Completed in 1986, the temple serves as the Bahá'í House of Worship for the Indian subcontinent and welcomes people of every religion, nationality and background. Unlike many places of worship, there are no sermons, rituals or religious ceremonies held here; instead, visitors are invited simply to sit in silence and reflect.

Designed by the Iranian-Canadian architect Fariborz Sahba, the building takes the form of a giant white lotus flower, a symbol of purity, peace and spiritual enlightenment in many Eastern religions. Twenty-seven free-standing marble-clad petals are arranged in clusters to create the striking flower-like appearance. The marble itself was quarried from Mount Pentelicus in Greece, the same source used in the construction of the ancient Parthenon in Athens.

The temple is surrounded by nine tranquil reflecting pools and beautifully landscaped gardens that help cool the building naturally during Delhi's intense summers. The number nine, considered significant in the Bahá'í Faith as a symbol of unity and completeness, is reflected throughout the design, with nine entrances leading into a vast central prayer hall capable of accommodating around 2,500 people.

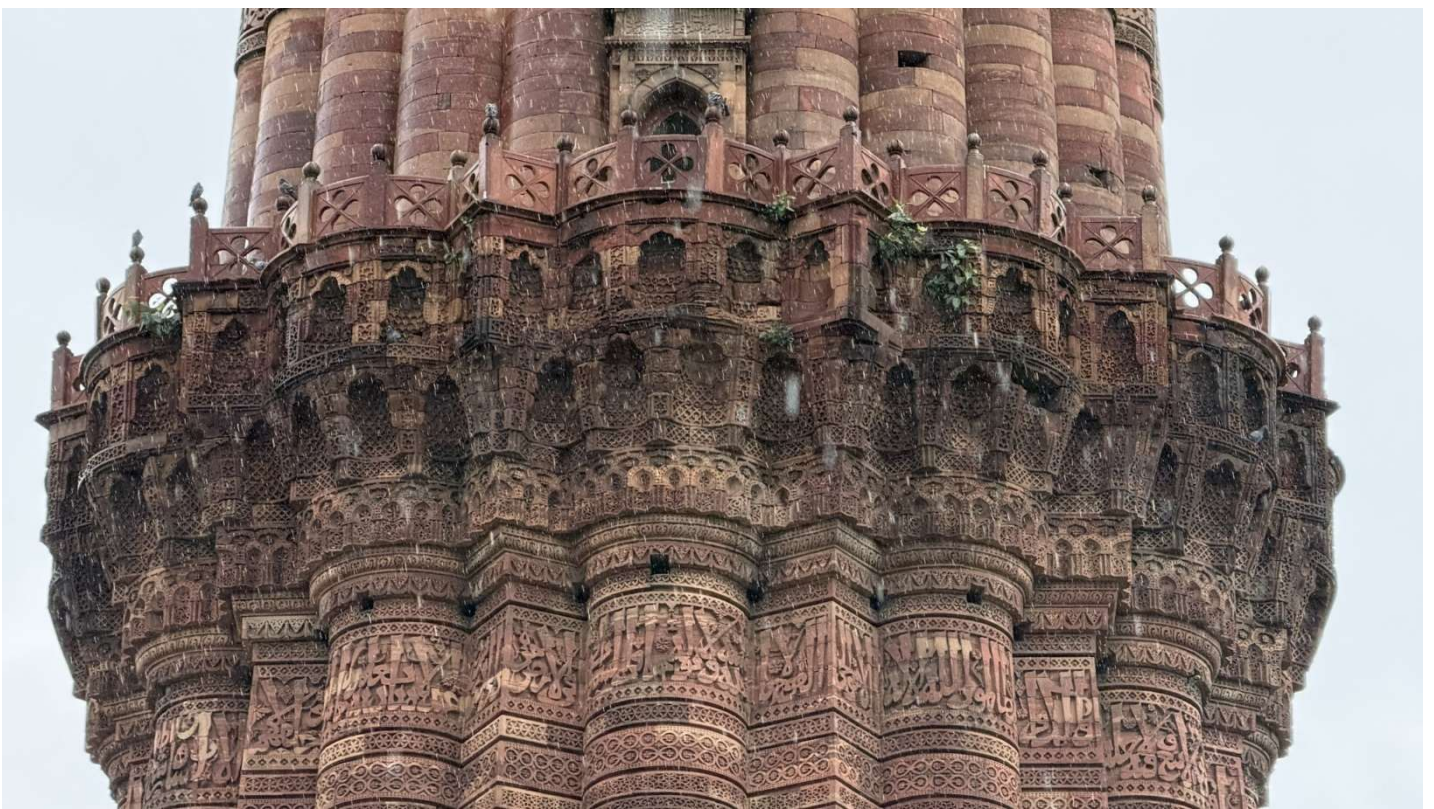
Receiving several million visitors each year, the Lotus Temple has won numerous international architectural awards and has become one of Delhi's defining landmarks. Its message of unity, tolerance and harmony between all faiths makes it a fitting symbol for one of the world's most diverse cities.



Reflections on Delhi

Delhi is difficult to sum up because it seems determined to contradict itself at every turn. It is India's capital, a city of more than thirty million people, yet alongside the crowds, traffic and grime there are moments of extraordinary tranquillity. Mughal monuments sit alongside British colonial buildings, ancient religious sites appear beside modern developments and tree-lined avenues provide unexpected breathing space in a city that can otherwise feel claustrophobic. Delhi wears its history everywhere, and there is a sense that the city has been through an enormous amount and simply carried on regardless.

I have to admit, however, that Delhi and I did not entirely hit it off. It can feel grubby, exhausting and overwhelming, and I found myself wondering whether it was the best place to begin a holiday in India. There is no shortage of things to see: the Red Fort, India Gate, Humayun's Tomb, Qutub Minar, the extraordinary religious buildings and, for me, the particularly memorable Gandhi Smriti. The latter provides a welcome escape from the noise and offers the opportunity to reflect on a remarkable man and his philosophy of peaceful resistance. Delhi is unquestionably worth visiting for its history, architecture and extraordinary cultural mix. I just think I would not start here.



My thanks to Jatinder for showing me around the city and making sure I didn't miss anything.

CHAPTER 4

Agra: Beyond the Taj Mahal

Introduction

For many travellers, Agra means just one thing: the Taj Mahal. It is easy to understand why. This extraordinary marble mausoleum is one of the world's greatest architectural achievements and has become the defining image of India itself. Yet to view Agra only through the lens of the Taj Mahal is to overlook a city whose influence once stretched across much of the Indian subcontinent. As the capital of the Mughal Empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Agra was one of the richest and most powerful cities in the world.

Founded long before the Mughals arrived, Agra reached its golden age under emperors such as Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan. They transformed the city with magnificent forts, palaces, mosques and gardens that reflected the wealth and artistic brilliance of the empire. The vast Agra Fort served as both a royal residence and military stronghold, while nearby monuments such as Itimad-ud-Daulah's Tomb and the abandoned city of Fatehpur Sikri reveal how Mughal architecture evolved before reaching its pinnacle in the Taj Mahal. Together they tell the story of an empire that shaped India's history for generations.

Today, Agra is a thriving city of around two million people and one of India's most visited tourist destinations. Millions arrive each year to admire the Taj Mahal, but those who stay a little longer discover a city rich in history, craftsmanship and culture. Bustling markets, traditional marble workshops and vibrant local life provide a welcome contrast to the serenity of its famous monuments. Agra deserves to be appreciated not simply as the home of the Taj Mahal, but as one of the great historic capitals of the Mughal world and an essential stop on any journey through northern India.



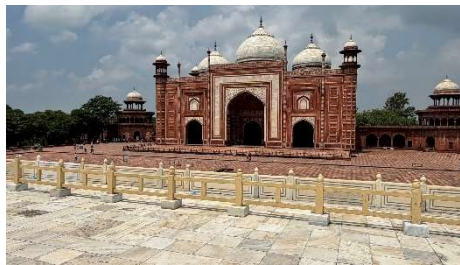
Taj Mahal

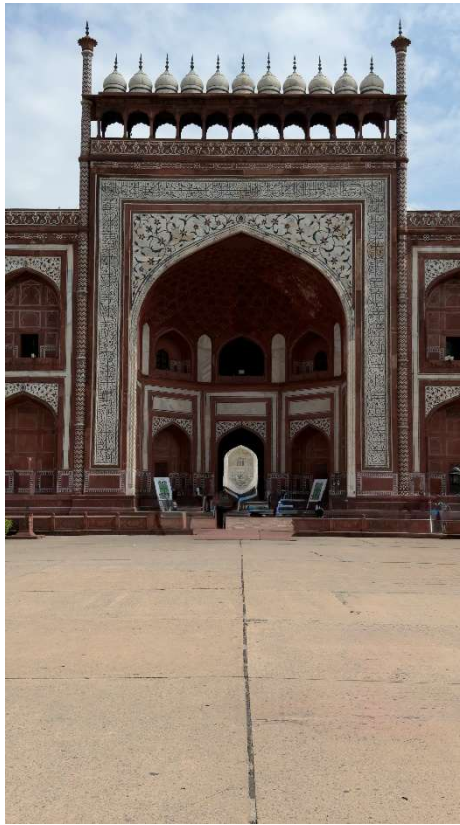
No visit to India is complete without seeing the Taj Mahal, which is why I am back here again after so many years. The Taj Mahal is widely regarded as one of the most beautiful buildings ever created. Commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in 1631 following the death of his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal, the magnificent mausoleum took 22 years to complete and is believed to have employed more than 20,000 craftsmen and artisans. Today it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the New Seven Wonders of the World.

Although often described as a monument to love, the Taj Mahal is equally a masterpiece of engineering and design. Built predominantly from white Makrana marble, its walls are exquisitely decorated with semi-precious stones sourced from across Asia. Every aspect of the complex is perfectly symmetrical, from its gardens and reflecting pools to the four minarets that surround the central dome. Interestingly, each minaret leans very slightly outwards so that, in the event of an earthquake, they would fall away from the tomb rather than onto it.

The monument also changes colour throughout the day, appearing soft pink at sunrise, dazzling white at midday and golden under the moonlight. Less well known is that Shah Jahan himself is buried next to Mumtaz inside the mausoleum....which is the only feature that breaks the building's perfect symmetry. Legend has it that Emperor Shah Jahan had intended to build a second mausoleum for himself on the opposite bank of the Yamuna River. Whereas the Taj Mahal for Mumtaz Mahal was built from brilliant white marble, his own tomb was intended to be constructed from black marble, creating a dramatic contrast.

Today, most historians reject the Black Taj story. There are no contemporary Mughal records, architectural plans or court chronicles mentioning such an ambitious project. Given the meticulous records kept by Shah Jahan's court, many scholars consider this absence compelling evidence that no such mausoleum was ever intended. That said, the legend refuses to die because it fits so perfectly with Shah Jahan's love of symmetry and the fact that the opposite bank because dark-coloured stones and ruins could be seen in Mehtab Bagh (Moonlight Garden), directly opposite the Taj Mahal.





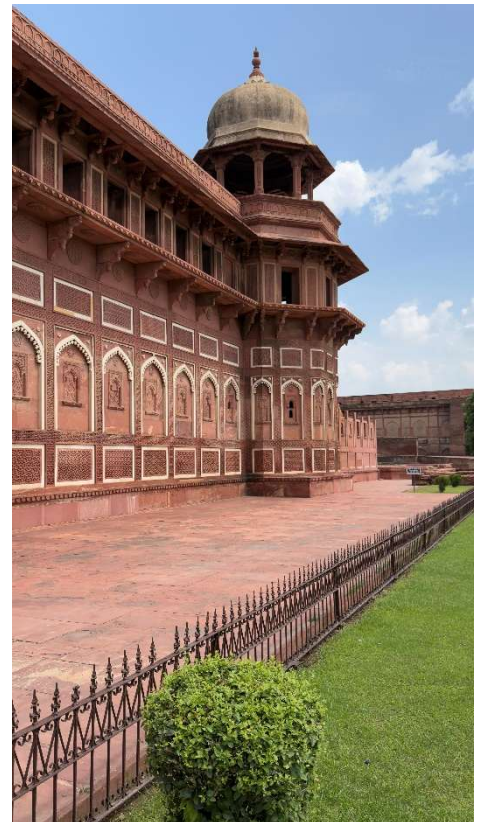
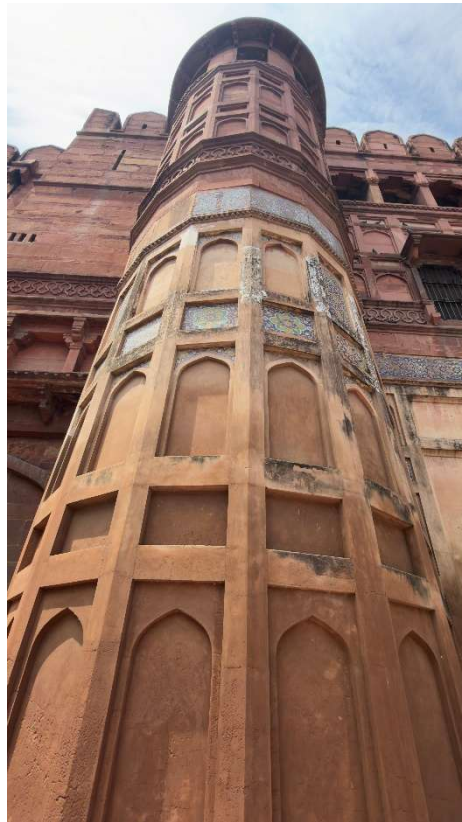
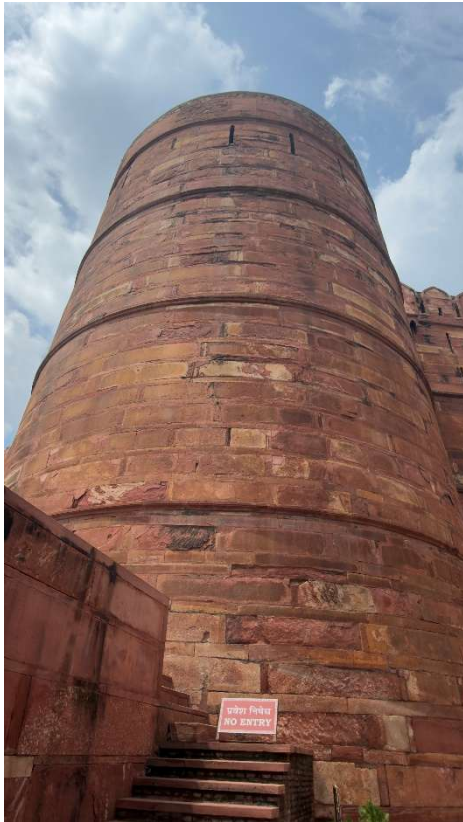
Agra Fort

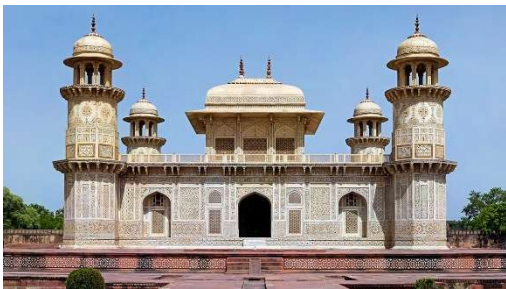
Standing a short distance away from the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort was the principal residence of the Mughal emperors before the capital moved to Delhi. Although a fort had existed there for centuries, the impressive structure seen today was commissioned by Emperor Akbar in 1565 using red sandstone. Later rulers, particularly Shah Jahan, transformed much of the interior by replacing sections with elegant white marble palaces, creating a remarkable blend of military fortress and royal residence. The fort is now recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Behind its towering 70-foot-high walls lies a fascinating collection of palaces, audience halls, mosques and gardens. Highlights include the Diwan-i-Khas (Hall of Private Audience), the beautifully decorated Sheesh Mahal (Mirror Palace), and the Musamman Burj, an octagonal marble tower overlooking the Yamuna River.



Agra Fort is forever linked with one of the Mughal Empire's greatest tragedies. After seizing power in 1658, Aurangzeb imprisoned his father, Shah Jahan, within the fort. Legend says the ageing emperor spent the final eight years of his life gazing across the river towards the Taj Mahal, where his beloved Mumtaz lay buried. Whether fact or romantic embellishment, the view from the Musamman Burj remains one of the most memorable in Agra, providing a poignant connection between the two monuments.





Tomb of Itimad-ud-Daulah

Often referred to as the 'Mini Taj' or 'Baby Taj', the Tomb of Itimad-ud-Daulah is one of Agra's finest yet least crowded attractions. Built between 1622 and 1628 by the powerful Empress Nur Jahan in memory of her father, Mirza Ghiyas Beg, the mausoleum represents a crucial turning point in Mughal architecture. It was the first Mughal monument to be built entirely from white marble and introduced many of the decorative techniques later perfected in the Taj Mahal itself.

Unlike the grand scale of the Taj Mahal, the Mini Taj has a more intimate, jewel-like appearance. Delicate marble lattice screens filter the sunlight into the interior, while colourful floral designs and intricately carved panels reward close inspection. Many historians consider it the architectural blueprint for the Taj Mahal, earning it the nickname 'the jewel box' of Mughal architecture.



Reflections on Agra

Everyone comes to Agra for the Taj Mahal, and quite rightly. Even knowing exactly what it was going to look like, seeing it in person was still one of those travel moments when photographs suddenly seem inadequate. The scale, symmetry and sheer perfection of the marble make it easy to understand why the building has become one of the world's great symbols of love. There is also something rather satisfying about finally seeing a place that you have encountered so many times in books, films and photographs.

What surprised me was that Agra did not end with the Taj Mahal. The Agra Fort tells a much larger story about the Mughal emperors and provides a fascinating counterpoint to the delicacy of the Taj. I also found myself enjoying the lesser-known stories and possibilities surrounding the city, including the enduring tale of a proposed Black Taj Mahal.

Whether the story is historically credible or simply a wonderful piece of legend, it adds another layer to Agra's fascination. The main lesson is to choose your time carefully because the crowds around the Taj can be considerable. But despite the congestion and the inevitable tourist machinery surrounding one of India's biggest attractions, Agra is somewhere you have to visit. The Taj Mahal really is every bit as impressive as everyone says it is.



Chapter 5

Jaipur: The Pink City



Introduction

Jaipur is one of India's most distinctive and colourful cities. Founded in 1727 by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, it was one of the first planned cities in India, carefully designed according to principles of astronomy, geometry and traditional Hindu architecture. Unlike many older cities that evolved gradually over centuries, Jaipur was laid out with broad streets, organised markets and impressive public squares, creating a city that still feels remarkably ordered despite its lively atmosphere.

The city's famous pink appearance dates from 1876, when many of its buildings were painted terracotta pink to welcome the Prince of Wales during his visit to India. The colour proved so popular that it became a permanent feature, earning Jaipur its enduring nickname, the Pink City. Within its walls lie some of Rajasthan's finest landmarks, including the magnificent City Palace, the iconic Hawa Mahal with its delicate honeycomb façade, and the fascinating Jantar Mantar observatory, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Overlooking the city, the imposing Amber Fort provides a reminder of the military power and artistic achievements of the Rajput rulers who once dominated the region.

Today, Jaipur is a modern city of more than four million people and the capital of Rajasthan. It serves as the gateway to one of India's most culturally rich states, celebrated for its forts, palaces, textiles and vibrant traditions. Visitors come not only for its remarkable architecture but also for its bustling bazaars, colourful festivals and thriving artisan workshops producing jewellery, block prints and handcrafted goods. Jaipur successfully combines its royal heritage with the energy of a modern Indian city, making it one of the country's most rewarding destinations and a highlight of the famous Golden Triangle.

Jantar Mantar

My first stop in Jaipur is Jantar Mantar which is one of the world's most remarkable astronomical observatories and a masterpiece of scientific thinking. Constructed between 1728 and 1734 by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, the founder of Jaipur, it reflects the ruler's passion for astronomy and mathematics. Dissatisfied with the accuracy of the astronomical tables available at the time, Jai Singh commissioned five observatories across northern India, although the Jaipur complex is by far the largest and best preserved.



The observatory contains nineteen enormous instruments, each designed to perform a specific astronomical calculation. Unlike the brass instruments commonly used in Europe, these structures were built from stone and marble, making them both more stable and more accurate. The most impressive is the Samrat Yantra, the world's largest stone sundial. Rising to almost 90 feet (27 metres), its triangular tower casts a shadow capable of measuring time to within just a few seconds. The site was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2010.

Far from being decorative monuments, these instruments were once used to predict eclipses, determine planetary positions and prepare astronomical calendars. Nearly three centuries after they were built, many still function with astonishing precision, providing a fascinating glimpse into India's advanced scientific achievements during the eighteenth century.

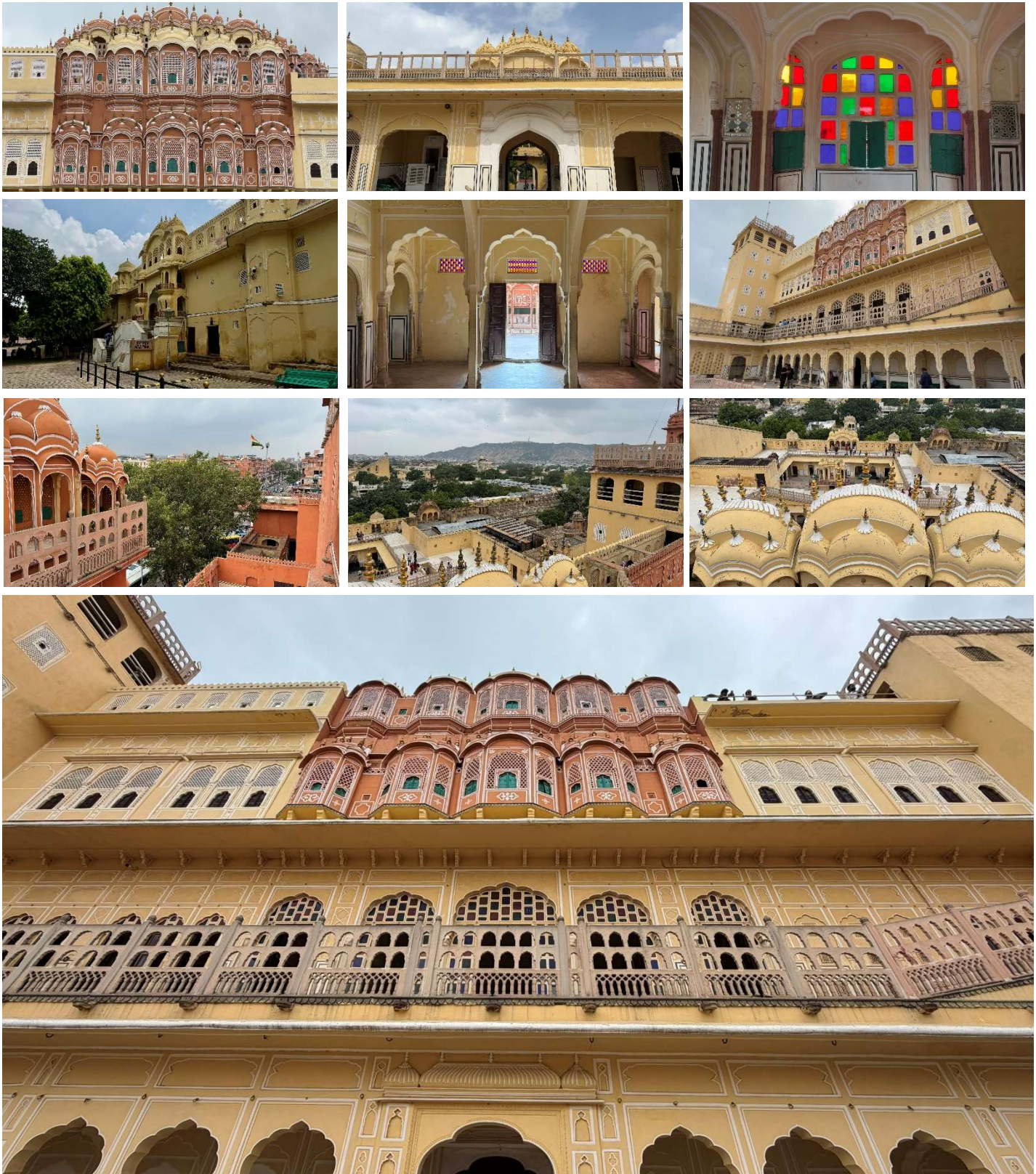


Hawa Mahal

Few buildings are as instantly recognisable as Jaipur's Hawa Mahal, or Palace of Winds. Completed in 1799 by Maharaja Sawai Pratap Singh, the striking pink sandstone façade resembles the elaborate crown of Lord Krishna and has become the enduring symbol of the Pink City. Although it appears to be a grand palace, the structure is actually an elegant extension of the adjoining City Palace.

Its most distinctive feature is the extraordinary honeycomb façade, containing 953 small windows, known as jharokhas. These richly carved screens allowed the royal ladies to observe festivals, religious processions and the busy markets below without being seen themselves, in accordance with the strict customs of their religion which secluded women of the royal household from public view.

The name 'Palace of Winds' comes from the clever architectural design with hundreds of small openings which channel cool breezes throughout the building, creating natural air conditioning long before electricity existed. This ingenious ventilation helped keep the interior comfortable during Rajasthan's scorching summers.



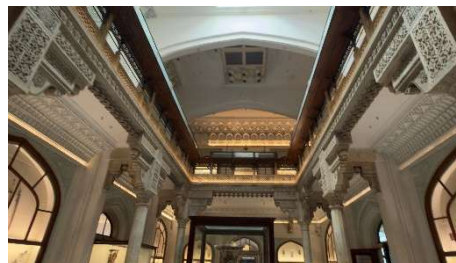
Albert Hall Museum



Set within the beautifully landscaped Ram Niwas Garden, the Albert Hall Museum is Rajasthan's oldest museum and one of Jaipur's finest examples of Indo-Saracenic architecture. Construction began in 1876 during the visit of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, who later became King Edward VII. Designed by the British architect Sir Samuel Swinton Jacob, the museum opened to the public in 1887.

Originally intended as a town hall, the building was instead transformed into a museum to highlight the artistic and cultural heritage of Rajasthan. Today its galleries display an impressive collection of miniature paintings, sculptures, carpets, metalwork, pottery, jewellery, musical instruments and traditional costumes, providing an excellent introduction to the state's rich history.

The museum itself is as impressive as its collections. Combining Mughal, Rajput and Victorian architectural styles, it features elegant domes, intricate arches and finely carved balconies. Among its most famous exhibits is an Egyptian mummy, believed to date back more than 2,000 years. It remains one of the museum's greatest curiosities and is somewhat unexpected in the heart of Rajasthan.



Jal Mahal (Water Palace)

Floating serenely in the centre of Man Sagar Lake, Jal Mahal is one of Jaipur's most picturesque landmarks. Surrounded by the rugged Aravalli Hills, the palace appears to rise magically from the water, creating one of the city's most photographed scenes. Although its exact origins remain uncertain, the structure was extensively rebuilt and enlarged during the eighteenth century by Maharaja Madho Singh I as a royal retreat and hunting lodge.

Constructed in the elegant Rajput style, Jal Mahal is a remarkable feat of engineering. The palace has five storeys, but when the lake is full, four of them remain submerged beneath the water's surface, leaving only the upper level visible. This illusion gives the building its unique floating appearance. Unlike many of Jaipur's historic attractions, visitors cannot enter the palace itself so the closest you can get is the lakeside promenade built specially as a viewing platform.





City Palace

Occupying the heart of Jaipur's old city, the magnificent City Palace has served as the residence of Jaipur's royal family since the city was founded in 1727. Commissioned by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, the complex blends Rajput, Mughal and European architectural styles, reflecting the changing influences that shaped Rajasthan over the centuries. Today, part of the palace remains the private residence of the present royal family.

The City Palace remains one of Jaipur's finest showcases of royal grandeur and living heritage. The vast complex consists of elegant courtyards, ornate gateways, audience halls, temples and museums housing royal costumes, manuscripts, weapons, paintings and ceremonial carriages. Among its most beautiful features are the four elaborately decorated seasonal gates, each representing one of the seasons and dedicated to a different Hindu deity.

One of the palace's most extraordinary treasures is the pair of enormous silver urns displayed in the Mubarak Mahal courtyard. Standing over 5 feet tall and weighing around 50 stone each, they hold the Guinness World Record as the largest sterling silver vessels ever made. Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh II commissioned them in 1901 to carry sacred water from the River Ganges to England for his visit to the coronation of King Edward VII, ensuring he could observe Hindu religious customs while overseas.



Ishwar Lat (Swargasuli Tower)

Rising high above Jaipur's bustling streets, Ishwar Lat, better known as Swargasuli Tower or the Heaven-Piercing Minaret, is one of the city's most overlooked landmarks. Standing approximately 60 feet (18 metres) tall, the tower was built in 1749 by Maharaja Sawai Ishwari Singh to celebrate his victory in a bitter succession struggle against rival claimants to the throne.

Unlike the defensive towers found in many forts, Ishwar Lat was constructed purely as a monument to triumph. Its elegant seven-storey design reflects both Rajput and Mughal architectural influences, while its pale yellow exterior contrasts with the surrounding pink (?) buildings of Jaipur's historic centre.

A narrow spiral staircase leads to the summit, offering panoramic views across the city. From the top, you can appreciate the remarkable grid layout planned by Jaipur's founder, Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, making it one of the best places to understand the city's carefully designed urban plan.

Although overshadowed by other attractions such as Hawa Mahal and the Amber Fort, Ishwar Lat offers a quieter experience and a fascinating reminder of the political rivalries that shaped Rajasthan's history. For photographers and history enthusiasts alike, it remains one of Jaipur's hidden gems and is difficult to get to in spite of its proximity to the City Palace.



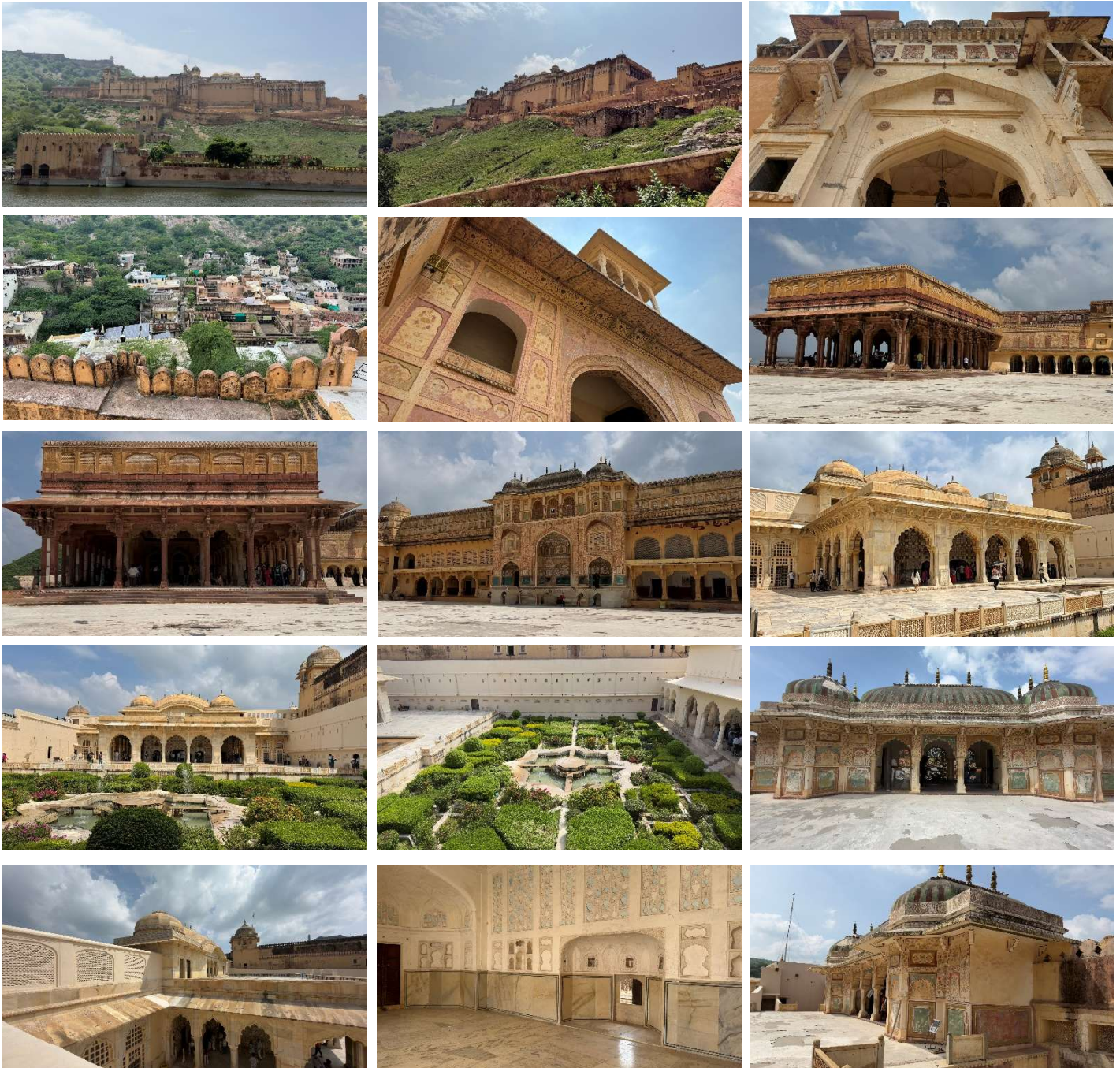
Amber Fort

Perched high on a rugged hillside overlooking Maota Lake, Amber Fort is one of India's most spectacular fortresses and the crowning jewel of Jaipur's historic attractions. Constructed primarily from golden sandstone and white marble, the fort was begun in 1592 by Raja Man Singh I and expanded over the following century by successive Rajput rulers. Before Jaipur was founded in 1727, Amber served as the capital of the Kachwaha Rajput kingdom for almost 700 years.



Although often referred to simply as a fort, Amber is equally a magnificent royal palace. Behind its imposing walls lies a series of elegant courtyards, audience halls, temples and private apartments connected by ornate gateways and hidden passages. Among its finest features is the breathtaking Sheesh Mahal, or Mirror Palace, where thousands of tiny pieces of Belgian glass are set into the walls and ceilings. Legend says that lighting a single candle was enough to illuminate the entire chamber.

Visitors can reach the main entrance by jeep, on foot or, traditionally, by elephant. While elephant rides remain popular, growing concerns over animal welfare have encouraged many visitors to choose the short jeep journey instead or else walk which is what I did. Amber Fort, together with five other hill forts of Rajasthan, was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2013. Its commanding setting, remarkable architecture and fascinating history make it one of India's unforgettable (and unmissable) landmarks.

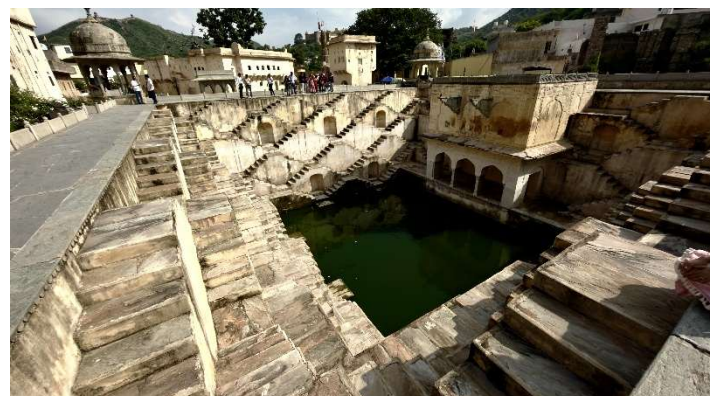


Panna Meena ka Kund

Just a few minutes from Amber Fort lies one of Jaipur's most intriguing architectural gems. Panna Meena ka Kund is a beautifully preserved sixteenth-century stepwell that once provided the local community with a reliable supply of water throughout Rajasthan's long dry seasons. Built long before modern plumbing, stepwells such as this played a vital role in everyday life by collecting rainwater during the monsoon.

The stepwell is famous for its remarkable geometric design. Hundreds of perfectly symmetrical zigzag steps descend towards the central pool, creating striking patterns that have made it one of Jaipur's favourite photography locations. Despite appearing deceptively simple, the layout is so precise that local legend claims it is impossible to climb down and return using the same set of steps without becoming disorientated.

More than simply a water reservoir, Panna Meena ka Kund was once an important social gathering place where local residents collected water, rested in the cool shade and exchanged news during the hottest months of the year. The stepwell offers a fascinating insight into India's traditional water management systems and demonstrates how practical engineering could also produce works of great architectural beauty.



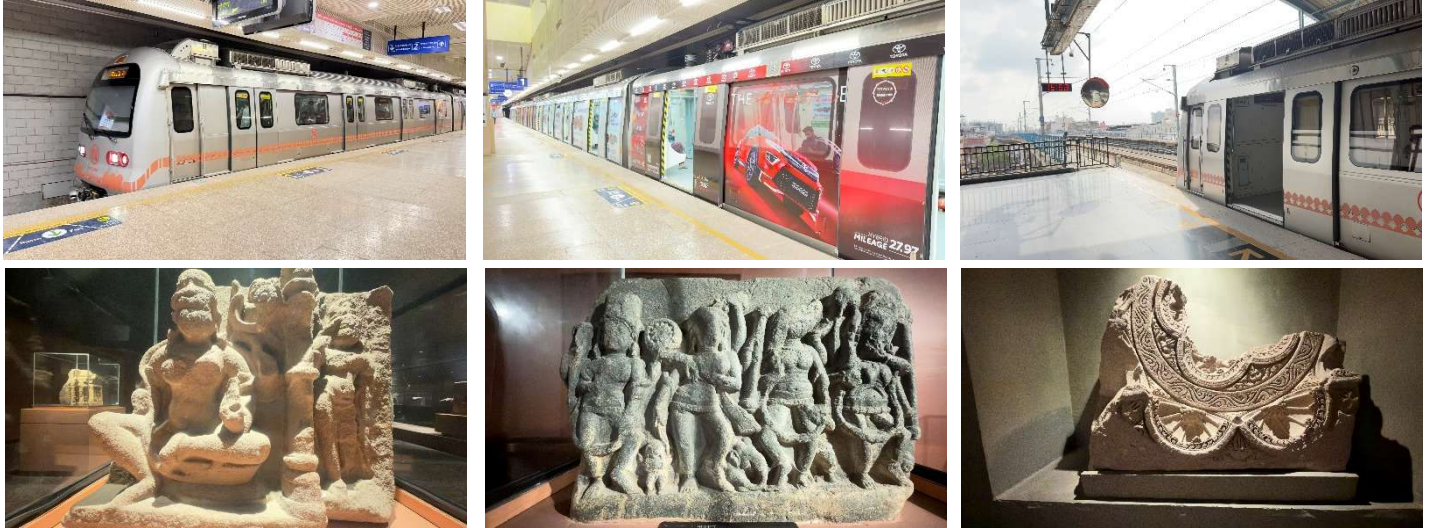
Jaipur Metro and Jaipur Metro Art Gallery

Opened in 2015, the Jaipur Metro is one of India's newest rapid transit systems and provides a fast, clean and efficient way of travelling across parts of the Pink City. Although much smaller than the extensive metro networks found in Delhi or Mumbai, it has become an important part of Jaipur's modern transport system, helping reduce traffic congestion while providing visitors with an affordable means of travel.



One of the most distinctive features of the network is the Jaipur Metro Art Gallery, located at Sindhi Camp Metro Station. Rather than serving simply as a transport hub, the station has been transformed into a cultural space showcasing Rajasthan's rich artistic heritage. Colourful murals, traditional paintings, sculptures and photographic displays celebrate the state's history, architecture, festivals and crafts.

The gallery reflects a growing trend across India to transform public transport into attractive civic spaces rather than purely functional infrastructure. It also provides local artists with an opportunity to exhibit their work to thousands of passengers every day. It demonstrates how Jaipur continues to balance tradition with progress while remaining one of India's most distinctive cities.



Reflections on Jaipur

Jaipur was probably the city that most obviously lived up to the idea I had formed before arriving, although one thing quickly became clear.....Jaipur is not really pink. It may once have deserved the name, but today the dominant colour seems much closer to terracotta. That does not make it any less attractive, however, and there is something immediately appealing about the city's combination of colour, architecture, palaces, forts and constant movement. It has a vibrancy that is difficult to explain until you experience it for yourself.

For me, Jantar Mantar was one of the highlights. There is something particularly satisfying about seeing enormous eighteenth-century astronomical instruments actually occupying a place in the city rather than sitting behind glass in a museum. Perhaps that is partly because of my mathematical background, but even without that connection the scale and ingenuity of the observatory are fascinating.

Amber Fort provides a completely different experience, with its combination of defensive architecture and royal palace spaces. It is easy to lose yourself there, although I would recommend remembering which exit you came through as I exited in totally the wrong direction and ended up walking down the vehicle route. I also remain firmly of the view that climbing to the top on the back of an elephant is frankly unnecessary.

Chapter 6

Mumbai: The City of Dreams

Introduction

Mumbai, formerly known internationally as Bombay, is unlike anywhere else in India. Fast-paced, energetic and endlessly ambitious, it is the country's financial capital and home to Bollywood. Yet beneath the modern skyline lies a fascinating history. What is now a vast metropolis began as seven separate islands occupied by fishing communities before passing through Portuguese and later British hands.

During the nineteenth century, land reclamation projects joined the islands together, allowing Bombay, as it was then known, to develop into one of the British Empire's greatest ports. The name Bombay was established during the Portuguese and British periods and became internationally recognised for centuries. Mumbai, however, reflects the city's older local identity.

The name is derived from Mumbadevi, the city's traditional patron goddess, whose temple has long been associated with the indigenous fishing communities of the region. In 1995, the Government of Maharashtra officially adopted Mumbai as the city's name, replacing Bombay in official use. Bombay nevertheless remains widely encountered in historical references, literature and the names of long-established institutions.

Its strategic position on the Arabian Sea transformed Mumbai into a centre for international trade, particularly during the cotton boom of the nineteenth century. Wealth flowed into the city, funding magnificent Victorian Gothic and Art Deco architecture, much of which today forms a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Landmarks such as the Gateway of India, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus and the grand buildings surrounding the Oval Maidan reflect this prosperous era. At the same time, successive waves of migration created one of the most culturally diverse cities in Asia. Today, Mumbai is home to more than twenty million people.



Navi Mumbai International Airport

My flight into Mumbai arrived at Navi Mumbai International Airport, the city's second international airport and one of India's most ambitious infrastructure projects. Officially inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 8 October 2025, the airport welcomed its first commercial passengers on 25 December 2025. It has been developed to relieve pressure on Mumbai's existing Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport and to provide the rapidly expanding Mumbai Metropolitan Region with additional aviation capacity.

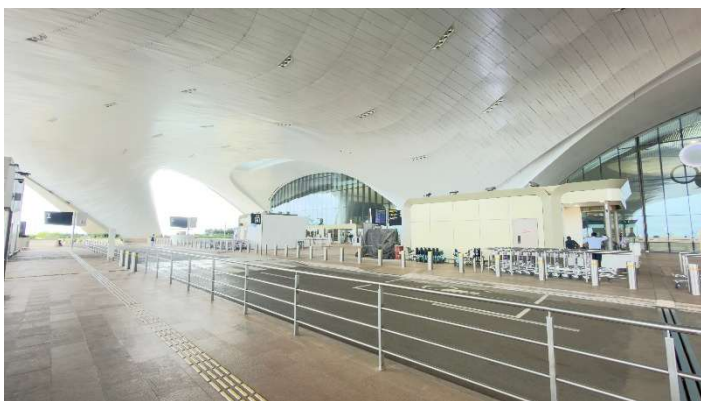
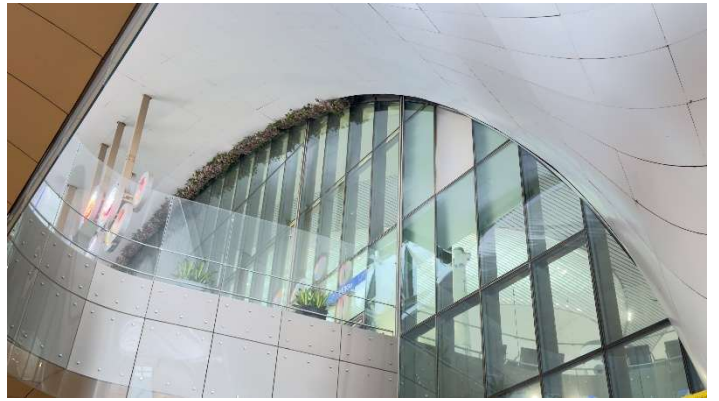
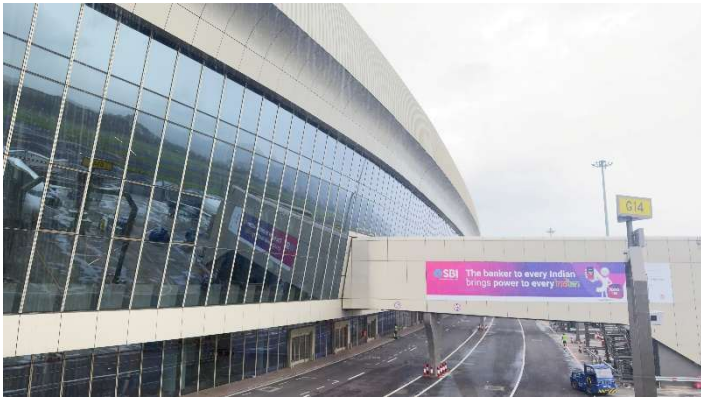
Located in Navi Mumbai, across the harbour from central Mumbai, the new airport is an impressive addition to the city's infrastructure. Its striking terminal has been designed by the internationally acclaimed Zaha Hadid Architects, with the architecture inspired by the lotus, India's national flower. The sweeping roof, shaped like enormous overlapping petals, creates a dramatic sense of space, while the central atrium and flowing forms give the building a distinctly futuristic character. Natural daylight, passive cooling, rainwater management and other sustainable features have been incorporated into the design.

The scale of the project is remarkable. Construction has involved extensive engineering works, including the diversion of rivers, the levelling of hills and the relocation of villages, as well as the development of major road, rail and other transport connections. The airport occupies around 1,160 hectares and is being developed in phases. Its first phase is designed to manage around 20 million passengers a year, while the completed airport is ultimately expected to accommodate up to 90 million passengers annually, alongside substantial cargo operations.

The airport therefore represents more than simply a second gateway to Mumbai. It is intended to become a major transport and economic hub for the region, supporting the continued growth of Navi Mumbai and helping Mumbai develop into a multi-airport international aviation centre. Standing inside its vast, light-filled terminal, it is difficult not to appreciate the ambition behind the project – and, having only recently opened, the sense that this is an airport designed as much for Mumbai's future as for its present.

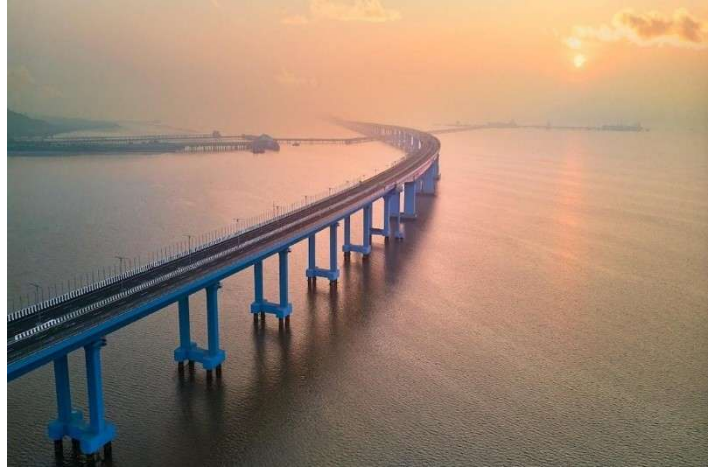


Artist's impressions of the new airport



My pictures of the new airport

Mumbai Trans Harbour Link (Atal Setu)



The Mumbai Trans Harbour Link, officially known as Atal Setu, is India's longest sea bridge and one of the country's most remarkable engineering achievements. Opened in January 2024, the bridge stretches approximately 13.5 miles (21.8 kilometres), including more than 10 miles (16 kilometres) across the Arabian Sea, linking Mumbai to Navi Mumbai and the new Navi Mumbai International Airport.

Designed to transform transport across the region, the six-lane bridge dramatically reduces journey times between the two cities. Trips that once took up to two hours through congested roads can now be completed in around twenty minutes, greatly improving access to Navi Mumbai International Airport, and Jawaharlal Nehru Port.

The bridge was built to withstand earthquakes, powerful sea currents and high winds, while its lighting system has been carefully designed to minimise disturbance to migratory birds and marine life. Thousands of engineers and construction workers contributed to a project that required advanced marine engineering techniques on an unprecedented scale in India.



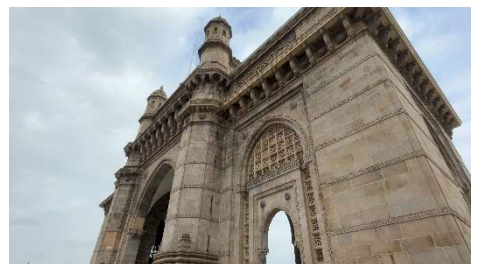


Gateway of India

Standing proudly on the waterfront overlooking the Arabian Sea, the Gateway of India has become Mumbai's best-recognised landmark. Completed in 1924, Scottish architect George Wittet designed the 85 foot (26metre) high basalt arch to commemorate the visit of King George V and Queen Mary to India in 1911, although construction did not begin until several years after their departure.

The monument has witnessed some of the most significant moments in India's modern history. While it symbolised imperial power during the British Raj, it also became the setting for its end. On 28 February 1948, the last British troops ceremonially marched through the Gateway before boarding ships bound for England, marking the conclusion of nearly 200 years of British rule.

Today the Gateway is one of Mumbai's busiest gathering places. Street photographers, food vendors, local families and tourists all congregate here throughout the day, while boats depart from nearby jetties for harbour cruises and Elephanta Island. At sunrise, the monument glows in warm golden light, while in the evening it provides one of the city's most atmospheric waterfront settings.





Victorian Gothic and Art Deco

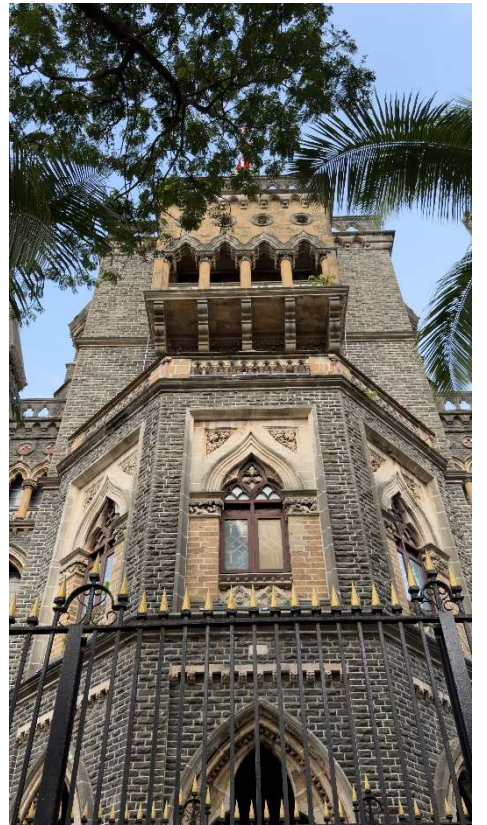
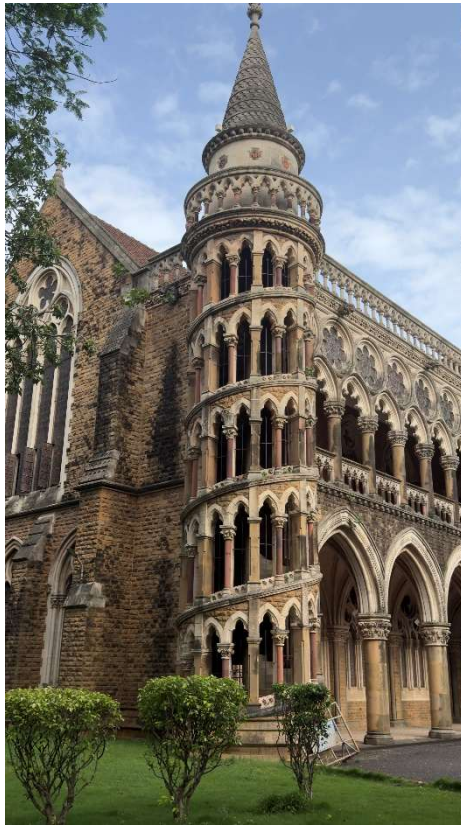
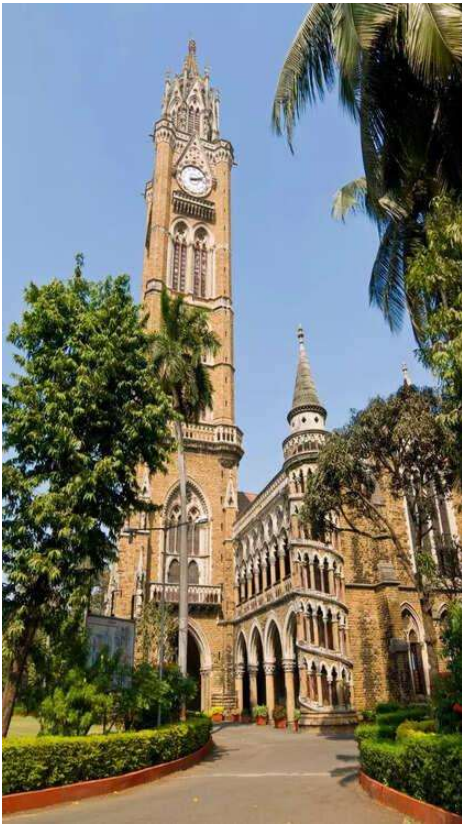


Mumbai possesses one of the world's most remarkable collections of nineteenth and twentieth-century architecture. In 2018, UNESCO recognised the city's Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles as a World Heritage Site, acknowledging the unique way in which two contrasting architectural styles coexist within a relatively small area.

The Victorian Gothic buildings were constructed during Mumbai's economic boom in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the city was one of the British Empire's most important ports. Inspired by London's public buildings but adapted for India's climate, they feature soaring towers, pointed arches, gargoyles and colourful local stone. Highlights include the magnificent Rajabai Clock Tower and Mumbai University, the imposing Bombay High Court, the elegant David Sassoon Library and the richly decorated Army & Navy Building.

Just a few streets away, Marine Drive offers one of the world's largest collections of Art Deco buildings. Constructed mainly during the 1930s and 1940s, these streamlined apartment blocks display curved balconies, porthole windows, geometric motifs and pastel colours inspired by Miami and South Beach. Together, the Gothic skyline and Art Deco waterfront create a fascinating architectural timeline, illustrating Mumbai's transformation from colonial trading port to modern metropolis.





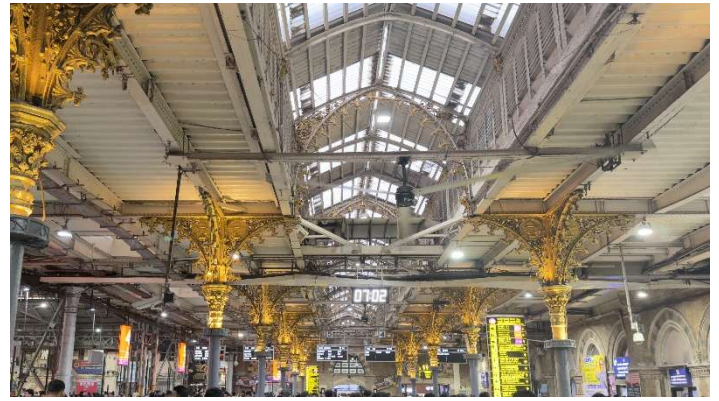
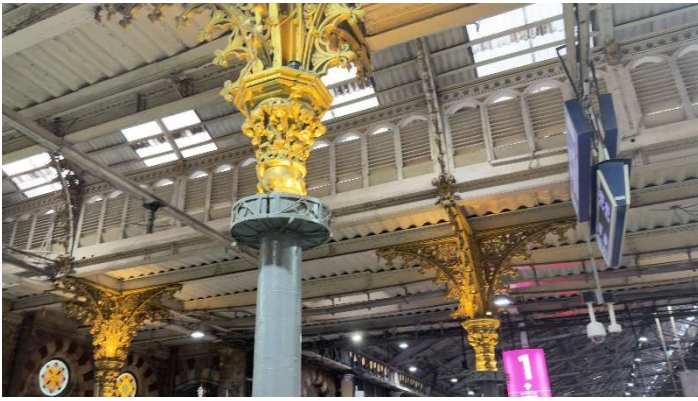


Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CST)

Few railway stations anywhere in the world rival the grandeur of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus, still commonly known by its former name, Victoria Terminus or simply CST. Opened in 1887 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, the station was designed by British architect Frederick William Stevens in an exuberant High Victorian Gothic style blended with traditional Indian influences.

The building is crowned by a spectacular octagonal dome topped by a statue representing Progress, while its richly decorated exterior features gargoyles, turrets, stained glass, carved stone animals and intricate ironwork. Inside, grand staircases and beautifully decorated booking halls demonstrate the extraordinary craftsmanship invested in what was intended to be the headquarters of the Great Indian Peninsula Railway.





Kala Ghoda

Despite its name, Kala Ghoda is not a fort but Mumbai's cultural heart. The district takes its name, meaning 'Black Horse', from an equestrian statue of King Edward VII, then Prince of Wales, which once stood here. The original statue was removed in 1965 and transferred to the grounds of Byculla Zoo, but the name Kala Ghoda survived.

In 2017, however, the black horse returned. The Kala Ghoda Association commissioned a new bronze sculpture, The Spirit of Kala Ghoda, depicting a riderless horse. Deliberately avoiding a recreation of the colonial-era monarch, the new statue was intended as a symbol of the area's contemporary identity as a centre for art, culture and creativity.

The area developed during the nineteenth century as Mumbai expanded beyond the walls of the old Fort. Today it contains one of India's finest concentrations of museums, galleries, historic buildings, cafés and bookshops. Architectural styles range from Victorian Gothic to Art Deco, reflecting the city's rich heritage. The 25-foot replacement sculpture stands close to the original location.



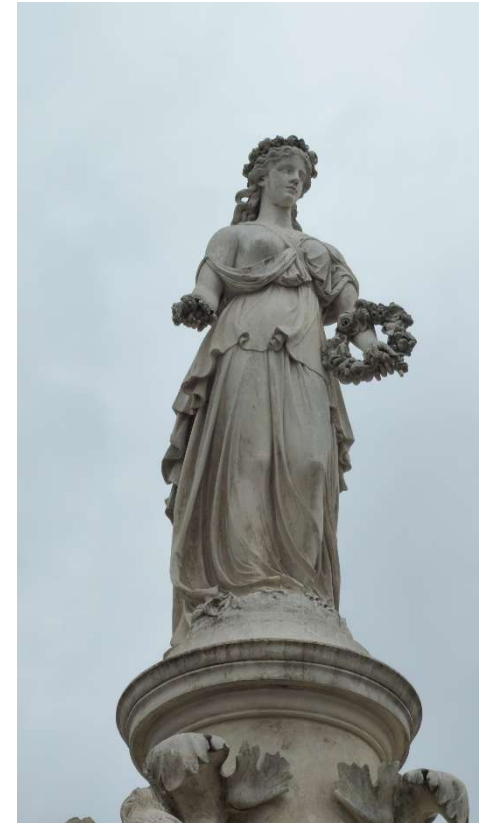
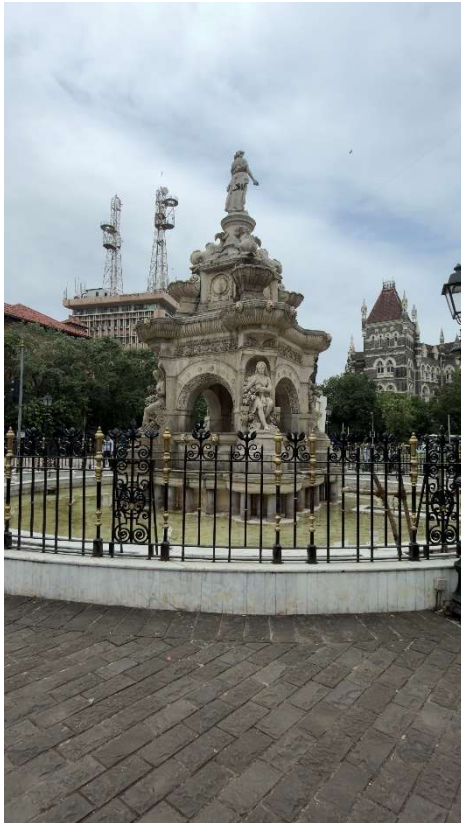


Flora Fountain

Standing at the heart of the historic Fort district, Flora Fountain is one of Mumbai's best-loved landmarks. Completed in 1869, the fountain was designed by British architect Richard Norman Shaw and sculpted from imported Portland stone.

It was originally intended to commemorate Sir Bartle Frere, the Governor of Bombay, whose vision transformed the city through major public works. Rather than honouring Frere directly, the fountain was crowned with a statue of Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers and spring, giving the monument its enduring name. Richly decorated with mythological figures, carved animals and ornate basins, it remains one of the finest examples of Victorian civic sculpture in India.

Following Indian independence, the surrounding square was renamed Hutatma Chowk, or 'Martyrs' Square', in memory of the 106 people who lost their lives during the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, which campaigned for the creation of the state of Maharashtra in 1960.



Mani Bhavan

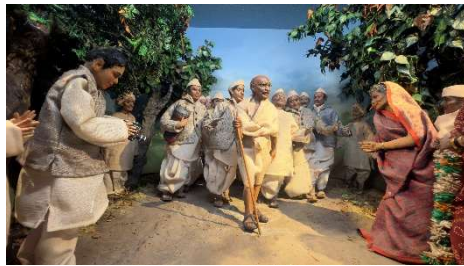


Tucked away on a quiet street in central Mumbai, Mani Bhavan offers a fascinating insight into the life of Mahatma Gandhi and India's struggle for independence. Gandhi stayed in this modest two-storey house between 1917 and 1934 whenever he visited the city, and it was here that many of his most important campaigns were planned.

During his time at Mani Bhavan, Gandhi launched movements promoting non-cooperation with British rule, civil disobedience and the use of khadi, the homespun cloth that became a symbol of Indian self-reliance. Many leading figures of the independence movement visited the house, while international guests included Martin Luther King Jr., who later described his visit as deeply inspiring.

Today the building is preserved as a museum containing photographs, personal possessions, letters and an extensive research library. One of its most charming features is a series of three-dimensional miniature displays illustrating key moments in Gandhi's life. Visitors can also see the simple room where he stayed, complete with his spinning wheel and modest furnishings.

The building is remarkably simple with maximum impact, reminding us that one of history's most influential political leaders chose to live with remarkable humility.



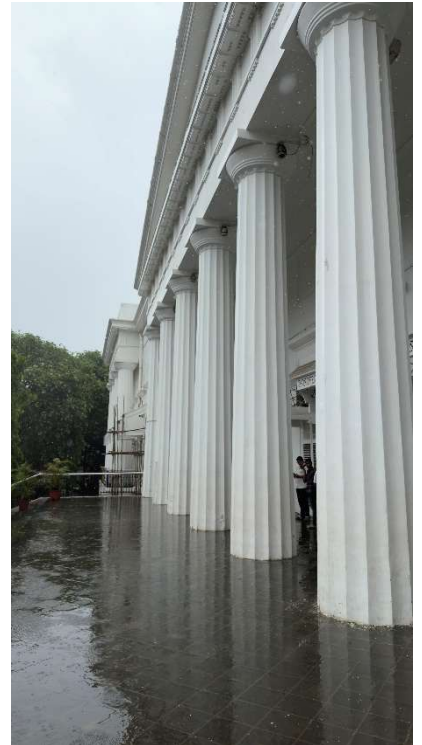


Town Hall

One of Mumbai's finest neoclassical buildings, the Town Hall has dominated the city's civic landscape since its completion in 1833. Designed by Colonel Thomas Cowper, its imposing Greek Revival façade, with eight massive Doric columns and a broad flight of thirty steps, was intended to reflect the ideals of learning, order and civic pride that characterised the British Empire.

The building originally served several purposes, including government offices, public meeting rooms and the city's principal library. Today it houses the prestigious Asiatic Society of Mumbai, founded in 1804, whose remarkable collection includes more than 100,000 rare books, manuscripts, maps and historical documents. Among its treasures are ancient Sanskrit texts and medieval Persian manuscripts as well as one of the few surviving copies of Dante's *Divine Comedy* from the fifteenth century.

The grand staircase has appeared in numerous Bollywood films and television productions, becoming one of Mumbai's most recognisable architectural backdrops. From the top of the steps there are excellent views across Horniman Circle and the surrounding heritage district. Although quieter than many of Mumbai's better-known attractions, the Town Hall remains an important symbol of the city's intellectual and cultural heritage.



Dhobi Ghat



At first glance, Dhobi Ghat appears to be a maze of concrete washing pens filled with brightly coloured clothes. In reality, it is the world's largest open-air laundry and one of Mumbai's most extraordinary working communities. Established in 1890 during British rule, it continues to process thousands of kilograms of laundry every day from hotels, hospitals, restaurants and households across the city.

The name 'dhobi' simply means washerman, and generations of families have continued the profession here although the traditional hand-washing methods are now being replaced by industrial sized washing machines and the occasional dryeralthough the use of outside washing lines is still prevalent except in the rainy season when it is merely covered over with tarpaulins.

Dhobi Ghat remains surprisingly efficient, and it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of garments pass through the complex every day.... with an exceptionally low error rate. The best views are from the pedestrian bridge beside Mahalaxmi railway station, where visitors can appreciate the sheer scale of the operation without disturbing those at work.

Inside, the outlook is rather bleak and gloomy with families working closely together sorting out the garments, washing, drying and ironing with considerable efficiency and speed. Far from being simply a tourist attraction, Dhobi Ghat remains a vital part of Mumbai's daily life and an enduring example of traditional skills surviving in a modern megacity.



Elephanta Island



I had the Elephanta Island on my list of places to visit but nearly changed my mind when I saw the ferry boats and decided that an organised trip might be a better (and safer) alternative. Unfortunately, my organised tour did not materialise and I was left, like a jilted bride, at the harbour front. Regardless, with a sense of determination, I bought a ticket for the ferry and made my own way.

The ferry journey was every bit as bad as I had anticipated and when the locals are all donning life jackets, it seems the only safe option is to comply. Regardless, the inconvenience was worth it, and I even managed to get an excellent guide on arrival with the overall cost considerably lower than the original tour which was subsequently refunded.



Located on Elephanta Island, around 10 kilometres across Mumbai Harbour, the Elephanta Caves are among India's most important archaeological sites and have been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1987. The caves date from approximately the fifth to eighth centuries AD and were carved directly into solid basalt rock by unknown artisans, probably under the patronage of local Hindu rulers.



The complex consists of several caves, the largest of which is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Its most celebrated masterpiece is the magnificent 6-metre-high Trimurti sculpture, depicting Shiva in three forms: Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. This extraordinary sculpture is widely regarded as one of the greatest achievements of Indian rock-cut art.



The Portuguese, who occupied the island during the sixteenth century, named it 'Elephanta' after discovering a huge stone elephant near the shore. Unfortunately, they also caused considerable damage to many of the sculptures, reportedly using them for target practice. The original elephant that gave Elephanta Island its name is no longer on the island.

By the 19th century the elephant had deteriorated badly. Its head and trunk had broken away, apparently through weathering and structural weakness. By 1859 it was described as little more than a shapeless mass of rock. Then, in 1864, the British decided to remove it from the island. They apparently hoped eventually to take it to England which was rather ambitious given the state and weight of the sculpture.

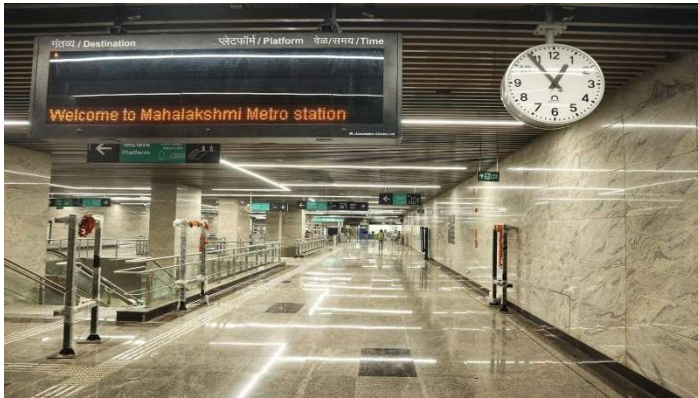


During the attempt to lift it, the chains of the crane broke and the elephant shattered into pieces. The fragments were subsequently transported to Mumbai, where they painstakingly reassembled, and in 1914 the reconstructed elephant was placed outside what is now the Mumbai City Museum where it remains today.





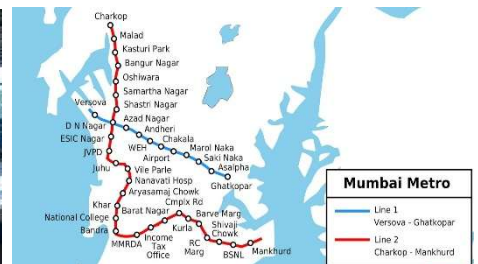
Mumbai Metro



Mumbai's Metro is transforming the way India's financial capital moves. For decades, the city's overcrowded suburban railway carried millions of passengers each day, but rapid population growth created an urgent need for additional transport capacity. The first Metro line opened in 2014, marking the beginning of one of the largest urban transport projects in the world.

When complete, the network will extend to well over 300 kilometres, linking the city's northern suburbs with the historic south, the eastern and western districts, and the rapidly developing satellite city of Navi Mumbai. New underground tunnels, elevated viaducts and modern interchanges are dramatically reducing journey times that once took hours by road.

The trains are fully air-conditioned, equipped with modern passenger information systems and designed to cope with the enormous numbers of commuters who travel across Mumbai every day. Several stations also feature public art celebrating Maharashtra's culture and heritage. Together with new roads, bridges and airports, it forms part of Mumbai's ambitious transformation into a truly global city.



Reflections on Mumbai

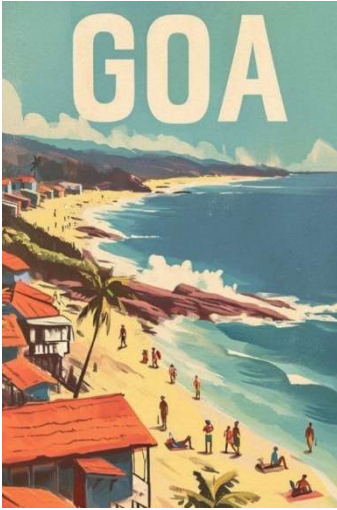
By the time I reached Mumbai, I think I was finally beginning to warm to India. I am still not entirely convinced about the expression 'City of Dreams', but Mumbai certainly has an energy unlike anywhere else I had encountered. It is enormous, crowded, noisy and demanding, yet there is an unmistakable sense of ambition and movement. The city also appealed to my interest in architecture. Gothic buildings and Art Deco masterpieces seem to appear around every corner, creating a remarkable architectural landscape that reflects the city's colonial past as well as its modern identity.

Unfortunately, some of these magnificent buildings are in surprisingly poor repair. I found myself wondering about priorities when I saw the railings around the High Court receiving a fresh coat of paint while the much more important building behind them appeared to need considerably more attention! The Gateway of India is the obvious starting point, and the boat trip to the Elephanta Caves was well worth the ferry ride — even if the compulsory life jackets were perhaps less glamorous than the caves themselves. CST is another unforgettable building, particularly when you watch the sheer number of people using it. Mumbai is not an easy city, but it is an exciting one. Somewhere among the chaos, architecture and relentless movement, I think I finally began to understand why people fall for it.

Chapter 7

Goa: Sun, Sand and Portuguese Heritage

Introduction



Few places in India combine tropical beauty and European history quite as vividly as Goa. Stretching along the Arabian Sea, this small state is famous for its long sandy beaches, palm-fringed coastline and relaxed atmosphere, but its character has been shaped by a much longer and more complicated history. For more than 450 years, Goa was the centre of Portuguese power in Asia, and the legacy of that period remains visible in its churches, forts, architecture, cuisine and cultural traditions.

The most extraordinary reminder of Goa's Portuguese past is Old Goa, once one of the great cities of the eastern world. At its height, it was a wealthy and cosmopolitan capital filled with magnificent churches and religious institutions. Although the city subsequently declined and much of it disappeared, buildings such as the Basilica of Bom Jesus, Se Cathedral and the Church and Convent of St Francis of Assisi survive as remarkable evidence of its former importance. Elsewhere, forts such as Aguada and Reis Magos guarded the coastline and approaches to the Mandovi River.



Modern Goa is a fascinating mixture of old and new. Panaji, the present capital, combines Portuguese-influenced architecture with a distinctly Indian character, while colourful Hindu temples, markets and villages provide a contrast to the churches and colonial houses. The state's beaches range from busy resorts such as Calangute and Baga to quieter stretches of coastline in the south.

Today, Goa is India's best-known beach destination and a major international tourist centre. Yet its appeal goes far beyond sun and sand. Portuguese and Indian traditions have become so deeply intertwined that they have created a cultural identity found nowhere else in India. Goa is simultaneously a tropical holiday destination, a living historical landscape and one of the country's most distinctive regions.

Viceroy's Arch



The Viceroy's Arch is one of the most evocative surviving reminders of Old Goa's importance as the capital of Portuguese India. Standing beside the Mandovi River, it originally formed one of the ceremonial entrances to the city and was particularly associated with the arrival of Portugal's Viceroys. The present arch dates from the late sixteenth century and was erected by Francisco da Gama, a great-grandson of the explorer Vasco da Gama. It commemorated Vasco's voyage to India and reinforced the connection between the Portuguese monarchy and its Asian empire.

The arch was built from laterite and originally carried a statue of Vasco da Gama above the gateway. Its position was significant: arriving officials could enter the city from the river and proceed towards the centre of Portuguese power. The ceremony surrounding the change of Viceroys was equally symbolic, with the keys of the city traditionally handed over at the gateway.

Like much of Old Goa, the arch suffered after the capital was gradually abandoned in favour of Panaji. It collapsed in 1948 and was reconstructed in 1954. Today it is a relatively modest structure, but its location beside the river and its association with the Portuguese Empire make it an important starting point for understanding Old Goa.



Cajetan's Church



St Cajetan's Church is one of the most elegant churches in Old Goa and stands slightly apart from the better-known Basilica of Bom Jesus and Se Cathedral. Built in 1665 by Italian members of the Theatine order, it was originally dedicated to Our Lady of Divine Providence, although it became popularly associated with St Cajetan, the founder of the order. The Cajetan iChurch is one of Old Goa's quieter but most architecturally accomplished monuments.

The church is particularly interesting because its architecture was deliberately influenced by St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Its great hemispherical dome, Corinthian columns and classical proportions give it a noticeably different appearance from some of Goa's more overtly Portuguese churches. Four statues – St Peter, St Paul, St John the Evangelist and St Matthew – occupy niches on the façade.

Inside, four massive pillars support the dome, while the main altar is dedicated to Our Lady of Divine Providence. A Latin inscription around the cupola quotes Christ's words from the Gospel of Matthew: 'Seek first the Kingdom of God.' Perhaps its most striking feature is the contrast between its relatively compact exterior and the sense of space created by the dome within.

The church is also a reminder that Goa's Catholic heritage was international from the beginning. The Portuguese were not the only Europeans involved in missionary activity here; religious orders from Italy and elsewhere became part of the religious and architectural landscape.



Chapel of St Catherine



The small Chapel of St Catherine is easily overlooked beside the much larger churches of Old Goa, yet it has an extraordinary historical importance. It marks the site where Afonso de Albuquerque is traditionally said to have entered Goa after defeating the forces of the Bijapur Sultanate on 25 November 1510, the feast day of St Catherine of Alexandria. Albuquerque ordered a chapel to be erected here to commemorate the victory.

The original structure was subsequently rebuilt and enlarged. In 1534, Pope Paul III granted the chapel cathedral status, although this was short-lived as Goa's ecclesiastical centre developed elsewhere. Further alterations were made in the sixteenth century, including an enlargement ordered by Governor Jorge Cabral.

The present building is deliberately simple compared with the monumental churches nearby. Its plain whitewashed façade and relatively small scale make it easy to miss, but that simplicity is part of its appeal. It represents the very early phase of Portuguese religious construction in Goa, before the enormous churches and convents that came to dominate Old Goa.

Its historical significance extends beyond religion. The chapel effectively commemorates the beginning of the Portuguese conquest of Goa and the establishment of a European colonial presence that would last for more than four centuries. It therefore stands at the meeting point of religious history, military conquest and Portuguese imperial expansion.



The chapel forms part of the Churches and Convents of Goa UNESCO World Heritage Site, making this modest building considerably more important than its size might suggest.



Convent and Church of St Francis of Assisi

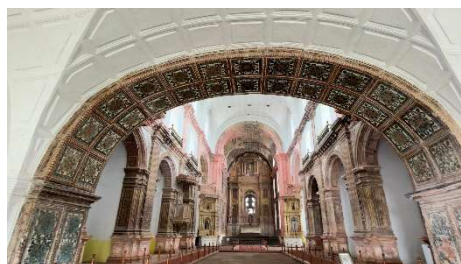
The Church and Convent of St Francis of Assisi form one of the most impressive historic complexes in Old Goa. Their origins go back to 1517, when eight Franciscan friars arrived and established themselves in the Portuguese capital.

They initially occupied existing houses before constructing a small chapel. A church dedicated to the Holy Spirit was built in 1521, but this was eventually replaced by the present structure, completed in 1661.

The church's exterior follows the Tuscan style, while the main entrance is in the Manueline tradition associated with Portugal. Inside, the decoration becomes much more elaborate, with a Baroque main altar, gilded carving and painted wooden panels.

One particularly interesting feature is the collection of paintings depicting episodes from the life of St Francis. The main altar is dominated by statues of St Francis and Christ, beneath which are references to the saint's vows of poverty, humility and obedience.

The attached convent now houses the Archaeological Museum, making the complex particularly useful for visitors interested in Goa beyond its churches. The museum contains sculptures and other artefacts associated with Goa's long history.



Se Cathedral

The enormous Se Cathedral dominates the main square of Old Goa and is one of the grandest surviving monuments of Portuguese India. Dedicated to St Catherine of Alexandria, the cathedral commemorates the Portuguese victory over the forces of the Bijapur Sultanate in 1510, which occurred on St Catherine's feast day.

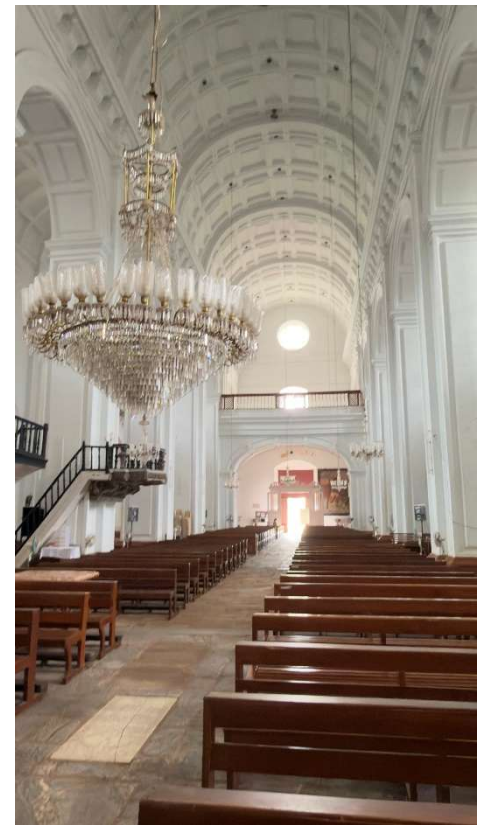
Construction of the present cathedral began in the sixteenth century, with the foundation stone laid in 1619. It was consecrated in 1640. Built on a raised laterite platform and covered with lime plaster, the building is enormous, with a long nave, two aisles, transepts and a vaulted interior. Its exterior is relatively restrained, reflecting the Tuscan architectural tradition, while the interior provides a much more imposing experience.

One of its most famous features is the Golden Bell, traditionally regarded as the largest church bell in Goa and celebrated for the quality of its tone. The cathedral originally had two towers, but one collapsed and was never rebuilt. This gives the building its distinctive asymmetrical appearance.

Inside are numerous chapels and altars, together with paintings depicting the life and martyrdom of St Catherine. A sixteenth-century baptismal font is also preserved; tradition holds that St Francis Xavier used it when baptising converts.

The Se Cathedral is part of the UNESCO-listed Churches and Convents of Goa, and its enormous scale illustrates the wealth and ambition of Old Goa when it was one of the most important cities in the Portuguese East.





Arch of Conception

The Arch of Our Lady of the Conception, usually called the Arch of Conception, is a much less celebrated monument than the nearby Viceroy's Arch, but it provides another glimpse of the lost city of Old Goa. It was one of the entrances through the former fortified city and occupies an area where the Portuguese adapted and incorporated elements of the earlier Muslim defensive perimeter.

The gateway was originally known as the Gate of the Punished, or *Porta dos Justicados*, a grim name reflecting the harsher side of life in the colonial capital. During the period of the Goa Inquisition, people condemned by the authorities were reportedly led through the gate on their way to Mandovim Square, where sentences were conducted.

Before proceeding, the condemned would stop to pray before an image of the Virgin Mary positioned in a niche above the gateway. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the gateway had been renamed the Arch of Our Lady of the Conception, reflecting its association with the Virgin Mary. The original image has disappeared, but the large niche where it once stood can still be seen.

Old Goa was once a heavily defended and densely occupied city containing palaces, churches, convents, administrative buildings and substantial walls. Most of that urban landscape disappeared after the city declined and the Portuguese capital gradually moved to Panaji. Consequently, surviving gateways such as this are particularly valuable because they help visitors understand the scale and layout of the vanished city.

The arch is relatively modest and can easily be missed, particularly when compared with the enormous churches nearby. Yet its history makes it one of the more intriguing remnants of Old Goa. It is not primarily a religious monument, but a surviving fragment of the city's old street and defensive network, with a history that also provides an uncomfortable reminder of the power and punishments of colonial rule.





Basilica of Bom Jesus

The Basilica of Bom Jesus is probably the most famous church in Goa and one of the most important Christian pilgrimage sites in India. Construction began in 1594, and the church was completed and consecrated in 1605. Its name means 'Good Jesus' or 'Infant Jesus'. In 1946 it became the first church in India to be elevated to the status of a minor basilica.

The building is particularly notable for its Baroque architecture and its striking façade. Inside are the mortal remains of St Francis Xavier, the sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary who played a major role in the early Christian missions across Asia. Xavier died in 1552 while travelling towards China. His body was eventually brought to Goa, where it became the focus of an enormous pilgrimage tradition. His remains are contained within an elaborate silver casket placed on a marble mausoleum designed by the Florentine sculptor Giovanni Battista Foggini.

The basilica forms part of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Churches and Convents of Goa. More than four centuries after its construction, it remains both a functioning religious centre and one of Goa's most notable landmarks.

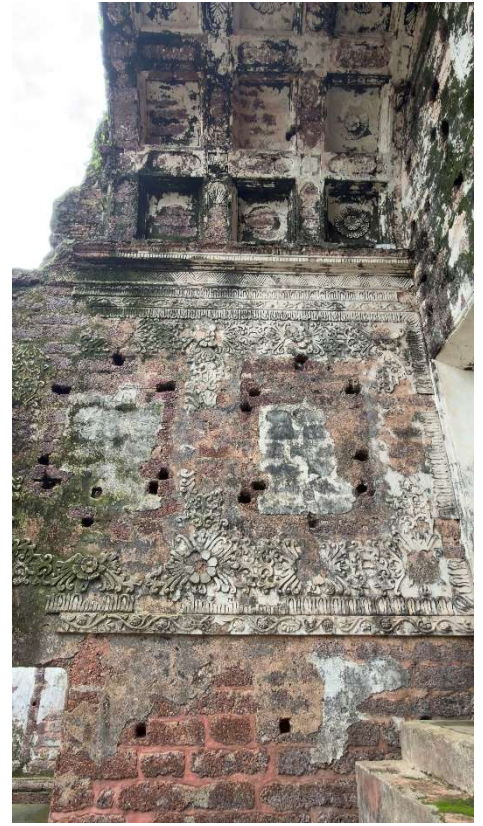




St Augustine Tower

The ruined St Augustine's complex is one of the most atmospheric sights in Old Goa. Today, only part of the enormous tower and fragments of the church survive, but they give some idea of the scale of the Augustinian monastery that once stood here. The Augustinian friars arrived in Goa in 1587, and the church and monastery were constructed on Monte Santo, or Holy Hill. The tower was built in 1602 and originally stood about 150 feet (46 metres) high, making it one of the most prominent structures in the old city.

The complex began its decline in the nineteenth century. The Portuguese government ordered religious orders to leave Goa, and the Augustinians abandoned the monastery in 1835. The great barrel vault of the church collapsed in 1842, accelerating the destruction of the building. Further sections of the façade and tower collapsed during the twentieth century, leaving the dramatic ruin visible today. The ruins are perhaps the clearest physical reminder that most of the former city has disappeared.





Panaji

Panaji, usually pronounced *Panjim* by many English-speaking visitors, is the capital of Goa and sits beside the Mandovi River. Unlike Old Goa, which was the great Portuguese capital until its decline, Panaji developed from a much smaller settlement into the administrative centre of Portuguese Goa.

For centuries Panaji was little more than a fishing village surrounded by coconut palms, fields and waterways. Its fortunes changed dramatically during the Portuguese period. In 1632, Viceroy Miguel de Noronha, Count of Linhares, ordered the construction of a 2-mile causeway connecting Panaji with Ribandar. Known as the Ponte de Linhares, it was an impressive engineering project for its time.

As Old Goa declined, government and commercial activity increasingly shifted to Panaji. By the nineteenth century the town had become the effective centre of Portuguese administration in Goa. Today, Panaji is perhaps best known for its distinctive Portuguese-influenced streetscapes, although photographers and influencers are particularly NOT welcome.





Reis Magos Fort

Standing on a promontory above the northern bank of the Mandovi River, Reis Magos Fort occupies one of the most strategically important positions in Goa. The Portuguese constructed the fort in 1551, to protect the narrow entrance to the Mandovi and provide an additional defensive barrier for Old Goa. It was subsequently enlarged and substantially rebuilt, with the fort reaching its final major form in the early eighteenth century.

Its location explains its importance. From the fort there are commanding views across the river towards Panaji, while ships approaching the Portuguese capital could be observed from its walls. The fort was also associated with the accommodation of Viceroys and other senior officials arriving from Lisbon.

When its military purpose disappeared, the building was repurposed as a prison but was eventually abandoned and fell into considerable disrepair. Restoration began in the early twenty-first century and today the fort is one of Goa's more rewarding historic sites.

Its relatively compact size makes it easy to explore, although I recommend taking the transport provided to the top of the fort. From its elevated position you will be provided with excellent views across the Mandovi towards Panaji.

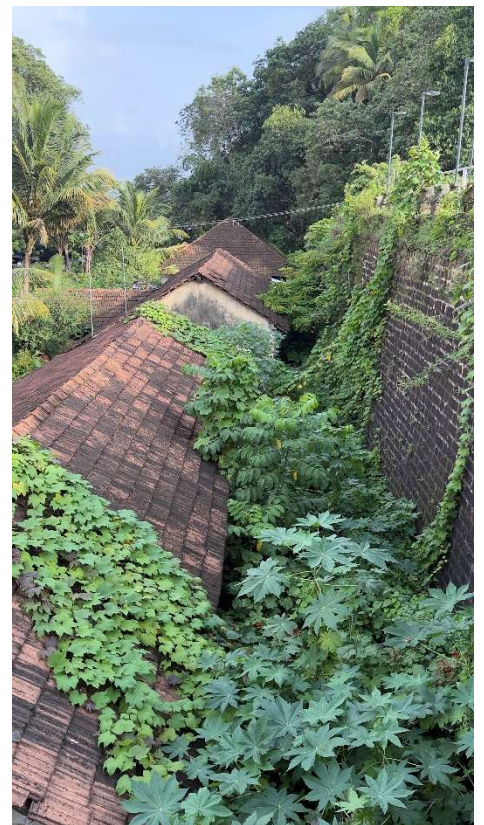


Reis Magos Church

The whitewashed Reis Magos Church stands beneath the fort overlooking the Mandovi and is one of the oldest surviving churches in the area. It was built in 1555, only a few years after the Portuguese established their fortifications at Reis Magos. Franciscan friars subsequently took responsibility for the church and established a small seminary there.

The name Reis Magos means the 'Three Wise Men' or Magi, referring to the biblical visitors who followed the star to Bethlehem. The church therefore has a particular connection with the Feast of the Epiphany, and Reis Magos is one of only a small number of places in Goa where the traditional Feast of the Three Kings is celebrated.

The church was most likely constructed on the site of an earlier Hindu templean example of how Portuguese religious buildings sometimes occupied locations that had already possessed religious significance. The church was dedicated to St Jerome.



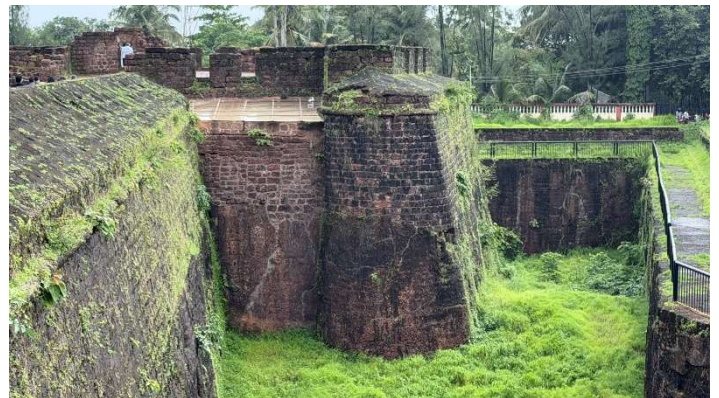
Fort Aguada

Fort Aguada is one of Goa's most impressive reminders of the military power of the Portuguese Estado da Índia. Built in 1612, it occupies a strategic headland overlooking the Arabian Sea and the mouth of the Mandovi River. From here, the Portuguese could monitor shipping approaching Goa and protect the river route towards Old Goa, then the capital of Portuguese India.

The name comes from the Portuguese word *água*, meaning water. A freshwater spring within the fort supplied passing ships, while an enormous underground cistern could hold more than two million gallons of water. This made Aguada not simply a military stronghold but an important watering station for vessels arriving after the long voyage from Europe around the Cape of Good Hope. The complex was more recently used as a prison during Portuguese rule.

One of its most recognisable features is the Aguada lighthouse, built in 1864 and regarded by Goa Tourism as the oldest lighthouse of its type in Asia although the tower visitors see today is not actually the original lighthouse. In 1841, the Portuguese installed an oil lamp on a mast within the fort to guide ships approaching the mouth of the Mandovi River. Before even this, ships were reportedly guided towards Goa by enormous bonfires lit on the nearby hills.

A purpose-built, 52 foot (16 metre) circular masonry lighthouse was constructed in 1864. It used an oil-burning lamp, and its rotating mechanism originally produced a flash approximately every seven minutes, later improved so that the light appeared every 30 seconds. The old tower was eventually decommissioned in 1976, after more than a century of service. A new lighthouse was constructed nearby between 1972 and 1976, with its electrically operated light commissioned on 20 July 1976.



Sinquerim Fort/Lower Aguada Fort

At the southern end of Sinquerim Beach stands a much smaller fortification usually known as Sinquerim Fort, although it is also widely called Lower Aguada Fort. The latter name explains its relationship with the much larger Fort Aguada above as this was essentially the lower, seaward component of the Aguada defensive complex, rather than an entirely independent fortress. It was constructed as part of the Portuguese fortification system established around 1612.

Its position was carefully chosen. The low bastion projects towards the sea at the mouth of the Mandovi River, while the larger upper fort occupies the high ground behind it. Together they created a layered defence of the coastline and river entrance. The lower fort could also serve as a protected point for vessels and helped control the shoreline immediately below Aguada. Ships travelling between Europe and Goa would have recognised the fortifications as they approached the harbour.

Today, relatively little remains of the original complex compared with the upper fort. What survives is largely a bastion and sections of defensive wall, dramatically surrounded by rocks and sea. The location is particularly attractive because the fort effectively divides Sinquerim Beach, giving excellent views along the coastline and across the Arabian Sea. The two forts are a car ride away from one another, but it is best to see them both together to appreciate the scale of Portuguese military engineering.





Reflections on Goa

Goa is slightly difficult to describe as a destination because it is not really one place at all. It is a large area that demands considerable travelling if you want to understand more than its beaches and resort hotels. The beaches are undoubtedly part of its attraction, but I found the Portuguese legacy just as interesting. Five centuries of Portuguese rule have left an extraordinary architectural and cultural imprint, from Catholic churches and Baroque buildings to food, customs and a rather more relaxed approach to life.

Getting around, however, was another matter altogether. Transport in Goa can be frustrating, particularly when the obvious options do not seem to work. Uber is not available and the local alternatives can be unpredictable. At one point I ended up walking four miles back to my hotel at night because I could not find a taxi, only to be inundated with offers of transport about fifteen minutes after I finally arrived. Despite the frustrations, the combination of tropical scenery, Portuguese history and Indian culture makes it distinctive, and it rewards anyone prepared to explore beyond the obvious holiday resorts.



Chapter 8

Kochi: The Gateway to Kerala

Introduction



Kochi, formerly known as Cochin, is one of India's most atmospheric cities and the natural gateway to the southern state of Kerala. Spread across a collection of islands, peninsulas and mainland districts on the Arabian Sea, the city has been shaped by centuries of maritime trade. Arab merchants, Chinese traders, Portuguese explorers, Dutch administrators and British colonists all passed through or settled here, leaving behind an extraordinary mixture of cultures and architectural styles.

The historic district of Fort Kochi provides the clearest expression of this international past. Its streets contain colonial buildings, churches, warehouses and traditional houses, many of which recall the centuries when Kochi was one of India's important spice-trading ports. The Portuguese established themselves here in the early sixteenth century, while the Church of St Francis is traditionally associated with Vasco da Gama, who died in Kochi in 1524 and was initially buried there. The Dutch later captured the settlement before British influence became dominant.

Modern Kochi is very different from the fortified settlement encountered by European traders centuries ago. It is a busy commercial centre, an important port and a growing cultural destination, yet its historic quarters retain an extraordinary sense of place. Visitors can move within minutes from colonial streets to colourful markets, Hindu temples, Jewish heritage sites and the busy harbour. Kochi is therefore more than simply an entry point to Kerala. It is a city where the history of India's contact with the wider world can still be seen, tasted and experienced in everyday life.



Cochin International Airport

There was something slightly unusual about my arrival at Cochin International Airport. As the IndiGo aircraft came to a halt and the doors were opened, I prepared, almost automatically, to leave the aircraft on the left-hand side. After all, that is what happens on virtually every other commercial flight I have ever flown. Passengers board and disembark through the left-hand doors, while the right-hand side is generally reserved for catering, baggage, cleaning and other ground operations.

This is such an established convention that you barely notice it until something different happens. But this time, something was different. We were directed to disembark from the right-hand side of the aircraft. For a frequent traveller, it was an oddly disconcerting experience. The aircraft itself was perfectly familiar, the procedure entirely orderly, but the side from which we were leaving seemed somehow wrong. It was one of those minute details of travel that you normally take for granted until somebody changes it.

The convention dates back to the early days of aviation and is generally linked to maritime practice. Ships traditionally disembarked on the left and early aircraft adopted the same convention. The left-hand side subsequently became established as the passenger side of an aircraft so that passenger doors, airport terminal buildings, aerobridges and boarding procedures were designed with passengers entering and leaving on the left-hand side while catering, baggage and service equipment operate on the right.



So, my arrival in Cochin began with a small surprise. Nothing dramatic had happened.... the aircraft was operating perfectly normally. Yet stepping onto the airport apron from the right-hand side felt strangely unfamiliar. After thousands of miles of air travel, it was a reminder that even the most routine part of a journey can occasionally offer something unexpected.....and, in a journey through India where the unexpected is often part of the experience, it seemed an appropriate way to arrive.



St. Francis Church

St. Francis Church in Fort Kochi (which is an area and not a fort) is one of the most historically important churches in India and is widely regarded as the oldest European-built church in the country. The original church was constructed by the Portuguese in 1503, shortly after they established themselves in Kochi and built Fort Emmanuel nearby. Originally dedicated to St Anthony, it was subsequently occupied by the Dutch and later came under British influence.

Its greatest historical association is with the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, who died in Kochi in 1524. He was initially buried there before his remains were transferred to Portugal fourteen years later. The building itself is relatively plain, with a simple whitewashed exterior and a tiled roof, reflecting the successive changes made to it over the centuries. The church marks the beginning of a period when European trade, religion and political power became deeply intertwined with the history of Kerala.



Dutch Cemetery

Hidden behind high walls close to Fort Kochi's seafront, the Dutch Cemetery is considered to be one of the oldest surviving European cemeteries in India. It was consecrated in 1724 and was founded by the Dutch East India Company after they captured Cochin from the Portuguese in 1663. The cemetery contains 104 tombs and epitaphs belonging principally to Dutch governors, commanders, merchants and officials.

The inscriptions (many in old Dutch script) provide an intriguing record of the people who formed part of the Dutch colonial administration and trading network. The oldest monument belongs to a merchant named Johann Dymigen, who died in 1784.

The last burial took place in 1913 marking the end of its active use as a burial site. The cemetery is now essentially a historical monument rather than a functioning burial ground. Together with nearby St. Francis Church, it provides an unusually tangible reminder that Fort Kochi was once a contested European colonial settlement rather than simply the picturesque heritage district it appears today.



Santa Cruz Cathedral Basilica



The Santa Cruz Cathedral Basilica is one of the most impressive religious buildings in Fort Kochi and one of India's historic minor basilicas. Its origins go back to the arrival of the Portuguese. Construction began in 1505 after the Portuguese viceroy, Dom Francisco de Almeida, received permission from the Raja of Cochin to build a church. It was elevated to cathedral status in 1558.

The church survived the Dutch conquest of Kochi in 1663 because the Dutch converted it into an armoury rather than destroying it. It was less fortunate during the British takeover in 1795, when the original structure was demolished. The present building dates largely from the nineteenth century and was reconstructed in 1887. It was finally declared a basilica in 1984.

Inside, the building is considerably more elaborate than the relatively plain exterior suggests. The high nave, painted decoration, murals and religious artwork create a dramatic interior, reflecting both European Catholic traditions and the artistic character that developed in Kerala. The building remains the cathedral church of the Diocese of Cochin.





Chinese Fishing Nets

The enormous Chinese fishing nets along the waterfront are probably Kochi's most recognisable symbol. Known locally as Cheenavala, they consist of large cantilevered wooden structures carrying enormous nets which are lowered into the water and then raised using a system of ropes, counterweights and manually operated levers.

Their origins are uncertain, but tradition attributes their introduction to Chinese traders during the medieval period, possibly during the fourteenth century. Whether they actually came directly from China is debated, but the association has become an enduring part of Kochi's identity. Similar shore-operated lift nets are found elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, but the surviving examples at Kochi are particularly distinctive.



The mechanism is surprisingly simple. Fishermen work together, using heavy stones as counterweights to balance the enormous net. The net is lowered into the water and left for a brief period before being hauled back up, hopefully containing fish. The nets are a reminder of Kochi's origins as an international trading port, when Chinese, Arab, Portuguese, Dutch and Indian merchants all interacted along this stretch of coast.



Dhoby Khana

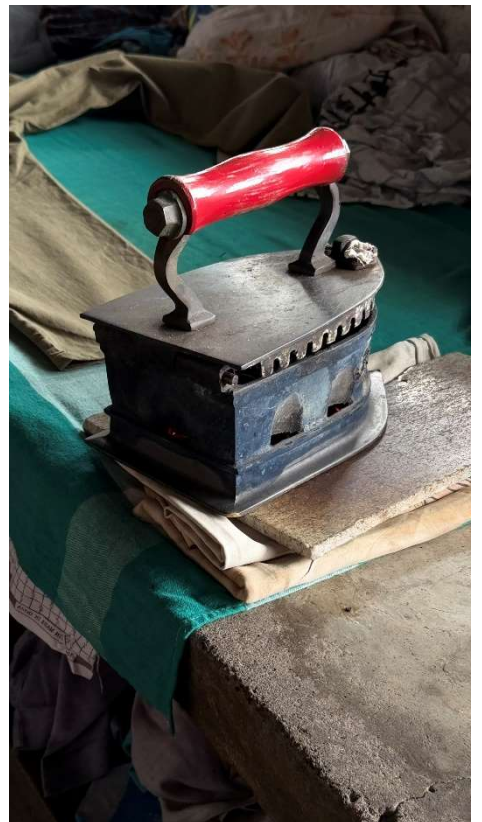
The Dhoby Khana at Veli, near Fort Kochi, offers a glimpse of a vastly different side of Kochi's heritage. Rather than being a monument, it is a working communal laundry where traditional washing and ironing techniques have survived into the modern era. The laundry is associated with the Vannan or Vannar community, traditionally involved in washing clothes.



Local accounts state that members of the community were brought to Kochi from Tamil Nadu to provide laundry services, including washing military uniforms during the colonial period. The present communal Dhoby Khana was established at Veli in 1975, with assistance from the Greater Cochin Development Authority.

The site is divided into individual working areas allocated to different families. Clothes are soaked, washed and beaten against traditional washing stones before being rinsed, starched and dried. Some workers have continued to use charcoal irons (making use of burning coconut shells), although electric irons have increasingly replaced them.

What makes the Dhoby Khana interesting is precisely its ordinariness. It demonstrates that heritage is not always found in churches, palaces or monuments; sometimes it survives in everyday occupations passed from one generation to another. The laundry also illustrates how communities connected with colonial Kochi continued their traditional work long after European rule ended.



Cochin Thirumala Devaswom Temple

The Cochin Thirumala Devaswom Temple is the centre of Kerala's Gowda Saraswat Brahmin community, whose ancestors migrated south from Goa during the period of Portuguese religious persecution. The first consecration took place in 1599, but the original temple was destroyed by the Portuguese in 1662. Following the Dutch defeat of the Portuguese, a new temple was consecrated in 1719.

The present temple is particularly interesting architecturally. Its sanctum follows the Nagara style of Hindu temple architecture, while the complex contains elaborate wood carvings depicting scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The northern gateway has a distinctive two-storey, pagoda-like form with a copper roof, giving the temple an unusual mixture of Indian architectural influences.

One of its most distinctive features is the sacred pond, or Papanasam Lake, immediately outside the eastern entrance. At its centre stands the Kulamandapam, a small pavilion surrounded by water. During the annual Arat festival, the temple deities are ceremonially taken across the lake to the mandapam, where prayers and purification rituals take place.



Mattancherry Spice Market



The Mattancherry Spice Market is not a single market building, but a historic trading quarter centred on the streets and warehouses of Mattancherry, particularly around Bazaar Road and Jew Town. For centuries, this was one of the great centres of the spice trade on the Malabar Coast. Pepper, cardamom, ginger, cloves, turmeric and cinnamon were brought here from Kerala's spice-growing regions before being stored, traded and exported overseas.

Kochi's importance in the international spice trade was one of the principal reasons that Portuguese, Dutch and later British interests competed for control of the city.

The character of the market is still visible in the long, weathered spice warehouses, or godowns, that line some of the older streets. These substantial buildings were designed for storing commodities rather than displaying them, and their worn façades, tiled roofs and large doors provide an atmospheric glimpse of Mattancherry's commercial past.

The spice trade has not disappeared. Workers can still be seen sorting, drying, weighing and packing spices, while trucks and handcarts move goods in and out of the warehouses. The market a surviving piece of Kochi's commercial history, where the buildings, smells and everyday activity help explain why this relatively small coastal city became an important link between India, Arabia and Europe.

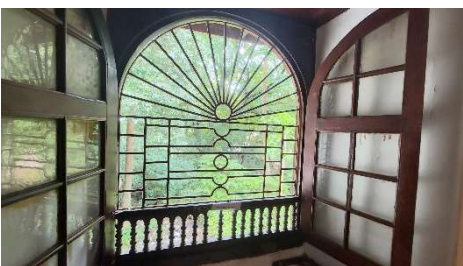
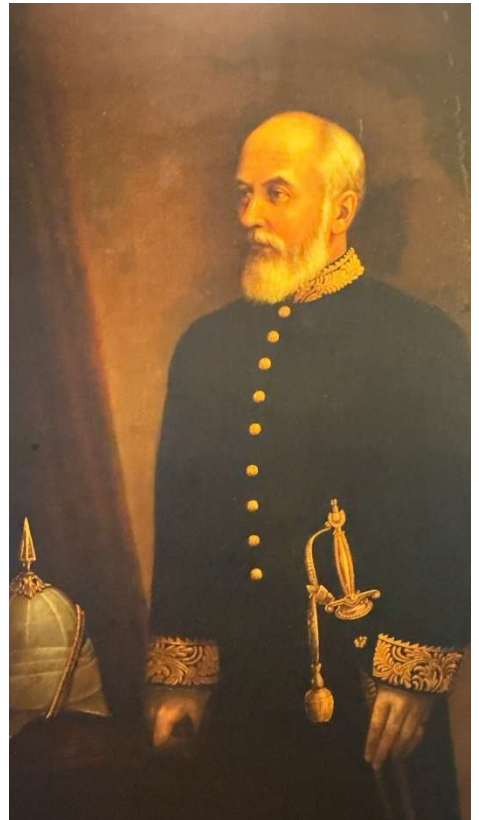


Mattancherry Palace (Dutch Palace)

Despite its familiar name, the Dutch Palace was actually built by the Portuguese, not the Dutch. Constructed around 1555, it was presented to the Raja of Cochin, apparently as an attempt to repair relations after Portuguese actions against local temples. When the Dutch captured Kochi in 1663, they renovated and repaired the building, which led to its later name.

The palace is particularly interesting because its architecture is not European. It follows the traditional Kerala plan, with four wings arranged around a central courtyard. This combination of a royal Kerala architectural form with a building commissioned by European colonial powers is characteristic of Kochi's cultural history. The palace was never really a Dutch residence. Instead, it became the royal house of the rulers of Cochin and was associated with important royal ceremonies, including coronations.

Today it houses a museum containing portraits and possessions associated with the Cochin royal family. Its most remarkable feature is the collection of Hindu murals, many depicting scenes from the Ramayana and other Hindu religious traditions. These paintings cover the walls and are among the finest surviving examples of Kerala mural art.



Jewish Cemetery

The Jewish Cemetery at Mattancherry is a quiet and easily overlooked reminder of the Jewish community that once played a significant role in Kochi's commercial life. Located at one end of Jew Street, it contains tombstones bearing inscriptions in both Hebrew and Malayalam, an unusual combination that reflects the way the Cochin Jewish community became deeply rooted in Kerala while retaining its Jewish religious identity.

The Jewish presence in Kerala stretches back many centuries, although the exact date of its origins is uncertain. By the medieval period, Jewish merchants were participating in the lucrative trade in spices and other goods. The community later became divided into distinct groups, including the older Malabari Jews and the Paradesi Jews who arrived from Europe and the Middle East.

The cemetery is particularly poignant because the Jewish population of Kochi declined dramatically after the creation of Israel in 1948. Most Cochin Jews emigrated during the 1950s, leaving behind houses, businesses, synagogues and burial grounds. Today only one extended family remains in Kerala. The cemetery provides a tangible record of a community that once lived here.



Jew Town

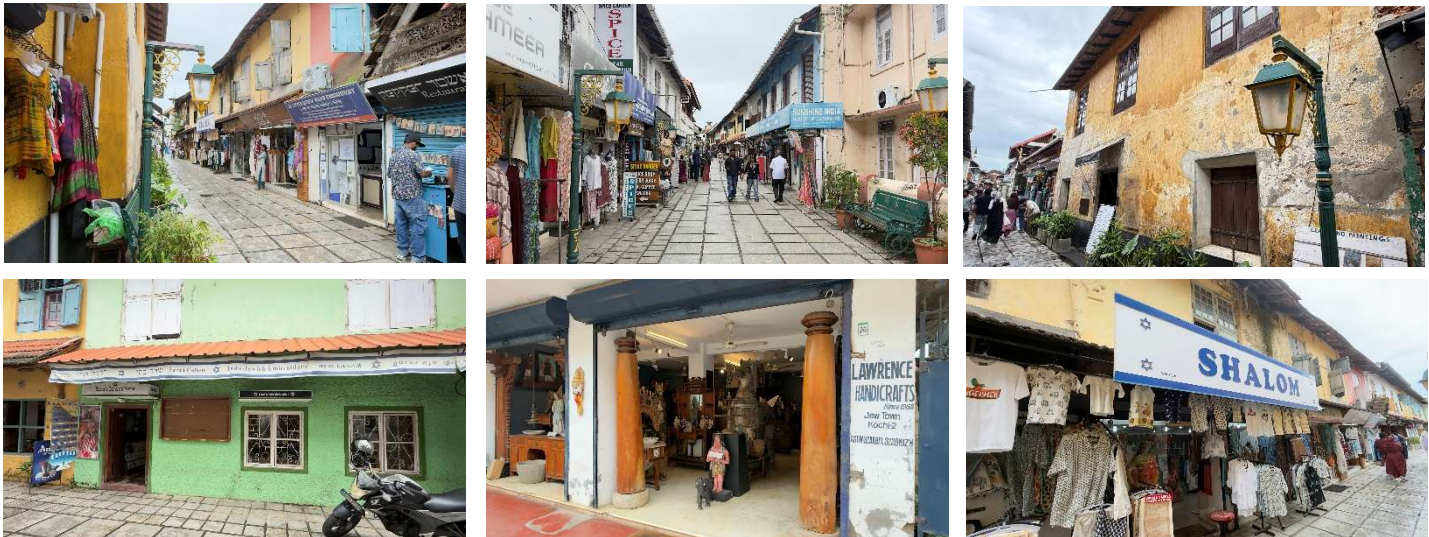


Jew Town is the historic heart of Kochi's Jewish quarter and lies between Mattancherry Palace and the Paradesi Synagogue. The name refers to the Jewish settlement that developed here after the Cochin rulers granted land to the Jewish community. Today the area is one of Kochi's most atmospheric heritage districts, although its present character is vastly different from that of the past.

The narrow streets are lined with old buildings, antique shops, cafés, spice stores and businesses selling handicrafts. Many of the buildings were once Jewish homes or commercial premises. Their long, narrow facades and courtyards provide glimpses of the neighbourhood's former residential character.

Jew Town was intricately connected with the spice trade. Jewish merchants engaged in Kochi's international commerce, particularly the trading networks that linked Kerala with the Middle East and Europe. The community lived alongside Hindu, Christian and Muslim neighbours, contributing to the remarkably multicultural character for which historic Kochi is known.

The community declined sharply during the twentieth century, particularly after the establishment of Israel in 1948, when many Cochin Jews emigrated. The result is a fascinating but poignant district: the physical neighbourhood survives, but the community that gave it its name has almost disappeared.



Paradesi Synagogue



The Paradesi Synagogue is the most famous surviving Jewish monument in Kochi and is widely described as the oldest active synagogue in the Commonwealth. It was built in 1568 on land granted by the Raja of Cochin beside Mattancherry Palace. The name Paradesi means 'foreigner' and referred to Jews who had arrived from outside India, particularly Sephardic Jews and communities from the Middle East and Europe.

The synagogue suffered during the Portuguese attack on Mattancherry in 1662 but was reconstructed under Dutch rule two years later. Its present interior contains several remarkable objects, including a beautifully carved teak Torah ark, Belgian crystal chandeliers and distinctive blue-and-white Chinese porcelain floor tiles.

The synagogue is also notable for its architecture. The women's gallery is situated above the main prayer hall, while the interior combines Jewish religious traditions with materials and craftsmanship associated with Kerala and the wider trading world of Kochi.

Its importance goes beyond its age. The building is one of the clearest surviving reminders of a Jewish community that lived in Kerala for centuries and became deeply involved in the spice trade. Today the community has dwindled to almost nothing, making the synagogue a particularly poignant monument to Kochi's multicultural past.



Kochi Water Metro Ride

The Kochi Water Metro provides a quite unique way of experiencing the city. Rather than simply being a tourist boat trip, it is an integrated public transport system designed to connect Kochi's mainland with its islands and waterfront communities. Services began in April 2023, making Kochi one of the first cities to develop a modern urban transport network based around electric-powered passenger boats.

The boats are designed for frequent commuter services and use dedicated terminals rather than operating like conventional sightseeing cruises. For visitors, however, the journey doubles as an inexpensive way to see Kochi from the water. The city makes far more sense when viewed from its waterways: islands, harbour facilities, ferries, fishing boats and densely developed waterfront districts are all part of the same landscape.

The Water Metro has also expanded into the historic areas of Kochi. In October 2025, terminals at Mattancherry and Willingdon Island were opened, bringing modern water transport directly into areas associated with Kochi's colonial and maritime heritage. The city's waterways were once the routes used by traders, fishermen and colonial powers; today, they are becoming part of the city's modern public transport system.



Marine Drive

Kochi's Marine Drive is not actually a road. It is a waterfront promenade overlooking the backwaters and harbour, stretching from the High Court area towards Rajendra Maidan. The name originated with plans to create a conventional waterfront road, but coastal regulations prevented this, and the project evolved instead into a pedestrian walkway.

The promenade provides views across the water towards Kochi's islands and harbour, while boat jetties allow visitors to see the city's constant movement of ferries and other vessels. Marine Drive is quite different from the colonial atmosphere of Fort Kochi. Here the emphasis is on modern Kochi: high-rise buildings, shopping centres, restaurants, families taking an evening walk and boats moving across the backwaters.



London Bridge Exhibition – Tower Bridge Replica



One of the more unexpected sights along Kochi's Marine Drive was this recreation of London's Tower Bridge, created as part of a temporary amusement and entertainment exhibition. Despite being promoted as the London Bridge Exhibition, the structure is actually a representation of Tower Bridge, recognisable by its two elaborate Gothic towers, blue suspension framework and raised central walkway.

The replica is surprisingly substantial, with detailed towers, arches and decorative stonework creating an impressive three-dimensional interpretation of the famous London landmark. A large scenic backdrop showing the River Thames and London skyline adds to the effect, while the surrounding landscaped area provides space for visitors to walk around and take photographs.

The attraction is primarily aimed at families and forms part of a wider entertainment area featuring amusement rides, food stalls and other attractions. It is vastly different in character from Kochi's historic churches, temples and colonial buildings, but adds a touch of light-hearted entertainment to the waterfront and offers a slightly surreal combination of Victorian London architecture to the Kerala waterfront.



Reflections on Kochi

Kochi was one of the pleasant surprises of the journey. Perhaps it was because, by this stage, I had become accustomed to the intensity of Indian cities, but Kochi immediately felt more manageable. Even the people seemed different. If you politely explained that you were not interested in something, they generally accepted the answer and moved on.....which, after some of the experiences elsewhere, felt like a considerable improvement!

Seeing familiar names such as Lulu Hypermarket and Holiday Inn shortly after leaving the airport also provided a rather amusing sense of reassurance that civilisation had not completely disappeared. Kochi is nevertheless unmistakably Indian, and if you really want to experience that side of the city, take a bus. It is certainly not for the faint-hearted, but it is an experience in itself.

What I particularly enjoyed was the contrast between modern, forward-looking Kochi and the older communities and landscapes around it. Fort Kochi, with its colonial buildings, narrow streets and historic waterfront, reveals the city's extraordinary mixture of Portuguese, Dutch, British, Chinese and Jewish influences. The waterways add another dimension, particularly when travelling on the modern Water Metro. Even leaving Kochi proved memorable, thanks to an Air India Express booking problem that created a bizarre situation in which I could not enter the airport without a ticket, but could not collect my ticket without entering the airport. India occasionally has a wonderful talent for creating such situations.



Chapter 9

Bengaluru: India's Garden City

Introduction



Bengaluru, formerly and still widely known as Bangalore, is one of India's most modern and dynamic cities, yet its reputation as a technology powerhouse tells only part of its story. Situated on the Deccan Plateau at an elevation of more than 3000 feet (900 metres), the city enjoys a comparatively mild climate, which helped earn it the enduring nickname 'India's Garden City.' Tree-lined avenues, parks and gardens remain an important part of its character.



The name Bangalore has a long history, but in 2006 the Karnataka government announced that the city would officially revert to Bengaluru, the Kannada name traditionally associated with it. The change was formally approved and came into effect in 2014, along with the renaming of several other cities. Bengaluru was chosen to reflect the city's Kannada heritage but Bangalore survives in the names of many institutions and landmarks.



The city's origins go back several centuries, although Bengaluru expanded significantly under Kempe Gowda I, who established a fortified settlement here in the sixteenth century. Later, the city came under the control of Mysore's rulers, including Tipu Sultan, before becoming an important British military cantonment. The resulting city developed two distinct areas: the older Indian settlement and the British-influenced cantonment, each leaving a distinctive architectural and cultural legacy.



Some of Bengaluru's most interesting landmarks reflect this history. Bengaluru Palace recalls the city's royal connections, while Tipu Sultan's Summer Palace survives as a reminder of the eighteenth-century Kingdom of Mysore. The magnificent Vidhana Soudha, completed in 1956, represents a much more modern expression of Indian architecture. Meanwhile, Lalbagh Botanical Garden and Cubbon Park provide expansive green spaces in the heart of the metropolis.



During the late twentieth century, Bengaluru underwent another extraordinary transformation. Universities, scientific institutions and technology companies helped establish the city as India's leading centre for information technology. It subsequently became internationally known as the country's 'Silicon Valley,' attracting major global companies, entrepreneurs and a young professional population.



Today, Bengaluru is a city of remarkable contrasts. Traditional markets and temples exist alongside multinational technology campuses, fashionable restaurants and start-up offices. Its gardens and historic buildings provide reminders of the city it once was, while its technology industry points firmly towards the India of the future. The result is a city where centuries of history and one of the world's most dynamic technology economies exist side by side.

Vidhana Soudha

Few buildings define Bengaluru as dramatically as Vidhana Soudha. Completed in 1956, this vast granite complex is the seat of the Karnataka Legislature and state government and was conceived as a powerful architectural statement about the newly independent India. The foundation stone was laid by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in July 1951.

The intention was a 'people's palace' that would symbolise the transfer of political authority from the former princely rulers to democratic government. The result was an extraordinary combination of traditional Indian architectural influences on an enormous scale; the building is around 700 feet long, 350 feet wide and 150 feet high to the top of its central dome.

The building's imposing entrance is approached by a broad flight of steps and framed by twelve huge granite columns. The building involved around 5,000 labourers and 1,500 skilled stonecutters, masons and woodcarvers. Government records also show that many unskilled workers were prisoners whose sentences were subsequently commuted after the building was completed.



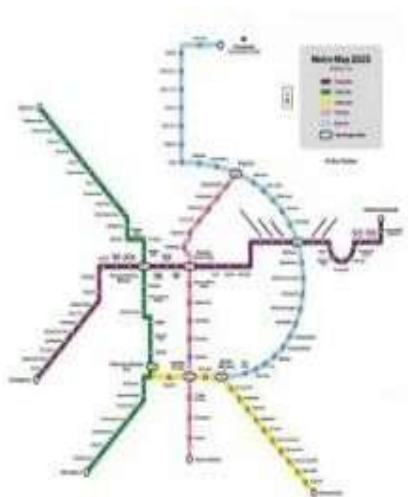
Vikasa Soudha

Standing immediately beside the much more famous Vidhana Soudha, the Karnataka Vikasa Soudha is sometimes described as its 'sister' building. That description is understandable given its monumental architecture which deliberately echoes the older structure, creating one of Bengaluru's most striking concentrations of government architecture.

The building was inaugurated in February 2004 and was intended to provide additional accommodation for government departments, ministries and legislative offices. Although it looks historic at first glance, Vikasa Soudha is very much a modern building. The intention was clearly to make a functional government annexe that would also complement one of Karnataka's most recognisable landmarks.



Bengaluru Metro – Namma Metro



Bengaluru's metro system, officially known as Namma Metro, is one of the clearest symbols of the transformation of the city from a relatively quiet administrative and educational centre into a vast modern metropolis. The first section opened in 2011, running for approximately 6.7 kilometres between Byappanahalli and M.G. Road.

The system was developed to tackle Bengaluru's traffic. The city's rapid growth, particularly following the expansion of its technology and IT industries, resulted in enormous increases in car and motorcycle use. Roads that had once comfortably handled traffic became severely congested.

Namma Metro was therefore not simply another transport project. It represented an attempt to reshape how a rapidly expanding city moves. Subsequent phases have progressively extended the network across Bengaluru, connecting major residential districts, commercial centres, railway stations and employment areas.

The metro is also interesting from an architectural and urban-planning perspective. Elevated tracks dominate many parts of the city, while underground sections pass beneath the historic central districts. Stations provide useful access to several major attractions, including Cubbon Park and Vidhana Soudha. By 2026, the network had reached 60 miles (96 kilometres) with 83 stations, with further expansion underway.



Jawaharalal Nehru Planetarium



Bengaluru's reputation as India's technology and science capital is perfectly reflected in the Jawaharlal Nehru Planetarium. Established by the Bangalore City Corporation in 1989, the planetarium has been administered since 1992 by the Bangalore Association for Science Education (BASE), an organisation dedicated to making science accessible to students and the wider public.

The centrepiece is its Sky Theatre, beneath a 15-metre dome with seating for around 210 people. Here, the ceiling effectively becomes the night sky, allowing visitors to explore the planets, stars, galaxies and the wider universe through a combination of projection, animation and sound.

The Planetarium incorporates a Science Centre and an outdoor Science Park containing interactive exhibits designed to demonstrate scientific principles in an accessible and often playful way. Astronomy lectures, science films, educational programmes and special astronomical events are also part of its programme.

For a city better known internationally for software, technology and start-ups, the planetarium provides a useful reminder that Bengaluru's scientific identity has much deeper roots. It is both an educational institution and an enjoyable way to look upwards from one of India's most technologically ambitious cities.





National Military Memorial

The National Military Memorial in Bengaluru is a place of remembrance rather than conventional entertainment, commemorating members of the Indian Armed Forces who lost their lives in service of the nation after Independence. Located opposite the Jawaharlal Nehru Planetarium, the memorial occupies about 7.5 acres of landscaped ground.

It was opened to the public in 2013 after a lengthy and sometimes controversial development process. The memorial was conceived as a ceremonial journey through trees and open spaces. Granite plaques carry the names of thousands of fallen service personnel, while an underground memorial hall provides further information about their service and sacrifice.

Military hardware displayed around the site includes tanks, aircraft, missile systems and other equipment, giving the memorial an educational dimension as well as its commemorative purpose. Among the exhibits are a MiG-23 aircraft, a Vijayanta tank, an Arjun tank and models of Indian naval and missile systems. The park is a particularly poignant attraction in a city with such a long military history.





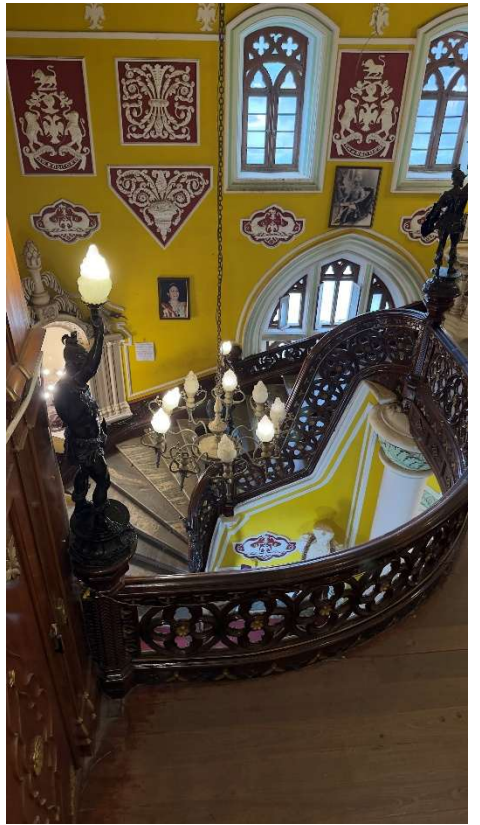
Bengaluru Palace

Bengaluru Palace looks as though a piece of medieval England has somehow been transported to southern India. With its turrets, battlements, fortified-looking towers and Tudor-style detailing, the palace was deliberately designed to evoke an English country castle. Construction began in 1873 for Chamarajendra Wadiyar X, the Maharaja of Mysore, and was completed in the late 1870s.

The palace was built on land associated with John Garrett, the principal of the Central High School, and reflects the close connections between the Mysore royal family and British India during the nineteenth century. Its architecture was influenced particularly by Windsor Castle, although the result is distinctly Indian in its adaptation.

Inside, the palace contains elaborate woodwork, paintings, furnishings and displays. The interiors are considerably more intimate than the enormous Mysore Palace, with dark timber, decorative ceilings and richly ornamented rooms creating an atmosphere more reminiscent of an English aristocratic residence. It is a reminder of how profoundly British influence affected the architecture and culture of India.





Cubbon Park

In a city famous for traffic, technology and rapid development, Cubbon Park provides a remarkably large and peaceful green heart. The park was laid out in 1870 by Major General Richard Sankey, the British Chief Engineer of Mysore State, and originally covered about 100 acres. It was subsequently expanded and today forms a substantial green landscape in central Bengaluru.

The park was initially named Meade's Park, after Sir John Meade, the acting Commissioner of Mysore. In 1873 it was renamed Cubbon Park in honour of Sir Mark Cubbon, the influential British Commissioner associated with the development of nineteenth-century Bengaluru. It has also officially been known as Sri Chamarajendra Park, reflecting the Wadiyar dynasty.

Today, the park is much more than a landscaped garden. Its network of paths passes beneath huge, mature trees and through lawns, flowerbeds and areas of dense vegetation. Cubbon Park is particularly enjoyable early in the morning, when walkers, joggers and families make use of its paths before the city becomes busy. It is also an important part of Bengaluru's identity as the 'Garden City'.





St Mary's Basilica

St Mary's Basilica is one of Bengaluru's most important Christian landmarks and one of the city's most impressive examples of Gothic architecture. Its origins are considerably more modest. A small chapel was established there in 1818 by the French missionary Jean-Antoine Dubois. As the Catholic community grew, the original building was replaced by the much larger Gothic church that stands today, completed in 1874.

The church is particularly striking for its soaring proportions, vaulted interior, pointed arches, stained-glass windows and slender Gothic detailing. Yet its importance extends beyond architecture. The basilica is dedicated to the Virgin Mary under the title of Our Lady of Health, and generations of worshippers have attributed miraculous powers to the image of Mary housed here.

The church received its greatest distinction in 1974, when Pope Paul VI elevated it to the status of a minor basilica. This made it the first church in Karnataka to receive that designation. Its location in Shivajinagar also makes St Mary's an interesting part of the city's multicultural landscape and provides a striking reminder of the many religious communities that have contributed to Bengaluru's development.

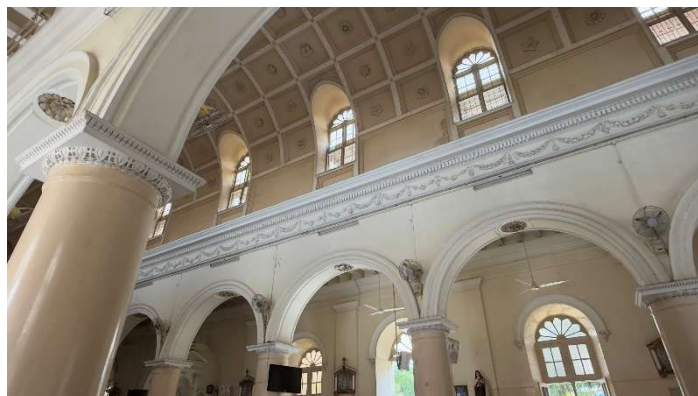


St Patrick's Cathedral



Standing on Brigade Road, St Patrick's Church is one of the oldest Christian landmarks in Bengaluru and an important reminder of the city's days as a British military cantonment. The foundation stone was laid on 22 July 1841, principally to serve the growing Catholic community and the hundreds of Catholic soldiers stationed in the area. The church was completed in 1844 and was originally dedicated to the Blessed Trinity, although Irish soldiers soon began referring to it as St Patrick's, after the patron saint of Ireland.

The church we see today developed considerably from the relatively simple original building. The distinctive high roof, Gothic detailing and twin towers were added later, while the belfry dates from 1845. The interior is particularly attractive, with a graceful series of columns symbolising the Twelve Apostles. In the late nineteenth century, the church underwent substantial renovation and, in 1899, it was consecrated as St Patrick's Cathedral.



St Mark's Cathedral

St Mark's Cathedral is one of the most historic buildings in central Bengaluru, standing on Mahatma Gandhi Road and tracing its origins to the British military presence in the city. The foundation stone was laid in 1808, and the church was completed in 1812, initially serving as a garrison church for the East India Company's troops. It was consecrated by the Bishop of Calcutta in 1816. The cathedral has had an unusually eventful history.

As the congregation grew, the building was extended in the early twentieth century, but parts of the enlarged structure subsequently collapsed. A fire in 1923 caused further damage and, during the restoration, the building suffered another collapse. Reconstruction eventually produced the cathedral that stands today, completed in 1927. In 1961 it became the cathedral of the Karnataka Central Diocese of the Church of South India.



Tipu Sultan's Summer Palace

Tipu Sultan's Summer Palace is one of Bengaluru's surviving links with the late eighteenth-century Kingdom of Mysore. Built largely in wood, the two-storey palace was completed in 1791 during the reign of Tipu Sultan, who used it as a summer retreat. Its architecture is remarkably different from the stone palaces normally associated with Indian royalty.

The palace combines elements of Indo-Islamic architecture including delicate wooden pillars, ornate arches, balconies and carved details. Tipu Sultan, known to the British as the 'Tiger of Mysore', inherited the kingdom from his father, Haider Ali. Bengaluru was an important military and administrative centre for both men, and Tipu greatly strengthened its fortifications.

His defeat and death at Srirangapatna in 1799 brought the Anglo-Mysore Wars to an end and dramatically altered the political history of southern India. After Tipu's defeat, the British took control of the palace, and its history subsequently became intertwined with the colonial administration. The palace provides a fascinating insight into one of India's most celebrated, and controversial, eighteenth-century rulers.





Bull Temple

The Bull Temple, officially Dodda Basavana Gudi, is one of Bengaluru's oldest and most distinctive Hindu temples. It stands on a hill in Basavanagudi, a neighbourhood whose very name means 'Bull Temple' in Kannada. The temple was built in 1537 by Kempe Gowda I, the founder of the city, making it almost five centuries old.

The temple is dedicated to Nandi, the sacred bull and vehicle of the Hindu god Shiva. Its main attraction is the enormous monolithic Nandi carved from a single piece of granite. The statue is approximately 15 feet high and 20 feet long and occupies the central shrine. According to local tradition, the temple was built after farmers in the area experienced problems with a giant bull damaging their crops. They prayed to Nandi for protection and promised to offer their first groundnuts if the problem ceased.

The temple is architecturally associated with the Vijayanagara tradition, although it has been modified and expanded over the centuries. For visitors, the Bull Temple is particularly valuable because it connects directly with the origins of Bengaluru itself. Here, the modern technology capital gives way to a much older city of temples, markets, agriculture and local traditions.



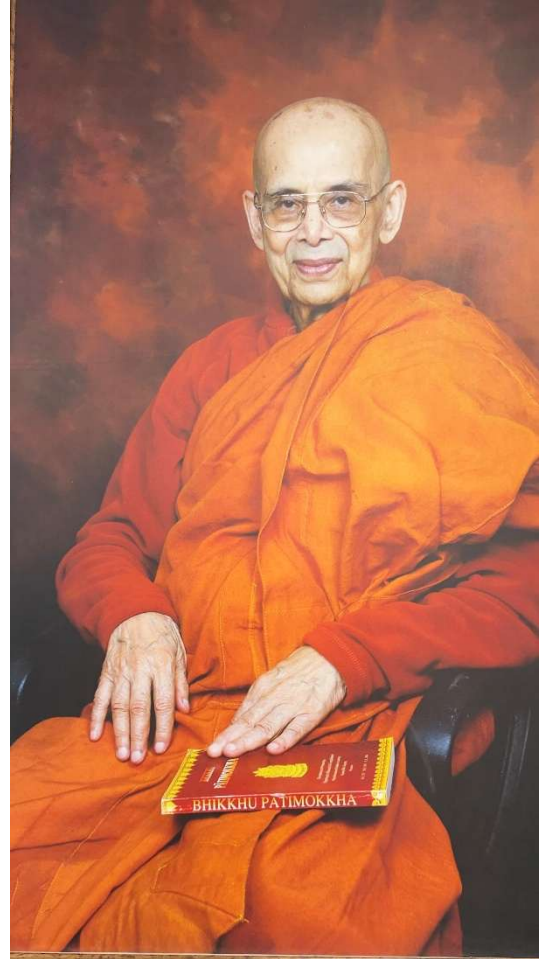
Maha Bodhi Society

The Maha Bodhi Society offers a peaceful glimpse of the city's Buddhist heritage, rather different from the palaces, churches and government buildings for which the city is better known. The society was established in 1956 by the Sri Lankan-born Buddhist monk Acharya Buddharakkhita, with the aim of promoting the teachings of the Buddha through meditation, education, humanitarian service and spiritual development.

The Bengaluru centre is part of a much wider Buddhist revival movement associated with the Maha Bodhi Society, founded in Sri Lanka in the late nineteenth century. Its work has included promoting Buddhist teachings in India and encouraging connections with the sacred sites associated with the Buddha.

The centre is particularly notable for its serene atmosphere. Visitors encounter a monastery and Buddhist shrine rather than a conventional tourist attraction, with images of the Buddha, meditation spaces and landscaped surroundings providing a welcome contrast to the traffic and bustle outside.

The emphasis is on peace, contemplation and service rather than elaborate architecture. An interesting aspect of the society is its deliberately inclusive philosophy: its stated mission is to work for the welfare and happiness of people regardless of religion, race, nationality or background. It therefore represents not simply a religious institution, but an important part of Bengaluru's multicultural character.





ISKCON Temple

The ISKCON Temple on Hare Krishna Hill is one of Bengaluru's most visually striking modern religious landmarks. Rising above Rajajinagar, the enormous complex combines traditional Hindu architectural forms with a distinctly contemporary design of glass, stone and soaring gopurams. The result is a building that looks hugely different from the ancient temples found elsewhere in India.

The story of the Bengaluru temple began in the late 1980s. ISKCON Bangalore obtained a seven-acre rocky hillock from the Bangalore Development Authority in 1988, initially creating a temporary temple on the site. Construction of the present complex began in 1990 and involved hundreds of skilled craftsmen. The completed temple was inaugurated by the President of India, Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma, on 31 May 1997.

The architecture deliberately brings together traditional and modern ideas. Glass and contemporary structural design sit alongside elaborate gopurams, carved stonework and spaces devoted to the worship of Krishna and Balarama. Inside, the atmosphere changes completely from the busy city outside, with devotees, visitors and pilgrims moving through the complex amid chanting, ritual and the fragrance of incense.

ISKCON stands for International Society for Krishna Consciousness and is a worldwide Hindu religious movement devoted to the worship of Krishna..... commonly known as the Hare Krishna movement. It was founded in New York in 1966 by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. The Bengaluru centre grew from a small local organisation into a major religious and cultural complex.



080 Domestic Lounge, Kempegowda International Airport

Bengaluru's 080 Domestic Lounge at Terminal 2 is one of the most impressive airport lounges I encountered during my travels in India — and, indeed, one of the best I have visited anywhere. Located on Level 4 beyond security, it is far more than a conventional airport waiting area. The enormous space has been divided into a series of distinctive zones, each with its own character and purpose.

What particularly impressed me was the design. Rather than the predictable rows of identical airport seats, the lounge contains comfortable leather chairs, intimate booths, curved seating areas, workspaces and quiet corners. A dramatic copper-coloured structure forms one of the lounge's focal points, while timber, plants and warm lighting give the interior a surprisingly relaxed and sophisticated atmosphere.

There is a reading area, private work pods and a dedicated business section, together with the Radio House retro bar. The lounge also incorporates a café, dining areas and a variety of spaces in which to work, eat or simply watch the aircraft movements outside. The design deliberately draws upon Bengaluru's identity, including its reputation as India's Garden City and its café, music and entrepreneurial cultures.

The food offering is considerably more substantial than the snacks often encountered in airport lounges, with hot and cold dishes and live cooking stations at various times of the day. After the bustle of travelling through India, the 080 Lounge provided an unexpected combination of space, comfort, design and calm. It felt less like somewhere to wait for a flight and more like an attraction in its own right.

This description refers specifically to the 080 Domestic Lounge in Terminal 2 although the pictures of the 080 International Lounge on Level 3 at Terminal 2 are similarly substantial and attractive.



Reflections on Bengaluru

Bengaluru is enormous, and I quickly realised that I had barely scratched the surface. The sheer size of the city means that its different districts could almost be treated as destinations in their own right. I arrived expecting India's Silicon Valley and certainly found plenty of evidence of that identity, but Bengaluru also has a cultural personality that is easy to overlook if you concentrate solely on technology and business.

The city's architecture was one of my particular interests. Bangalore Palace, with its Tudor and Scottish Gothic influences, looks almost as though somebody has picked it up from Britain and dropped it into India. Tipu Sultan's Summer Palace provides a completely different experience, with its beautiful teak construction and Indo-Islamic design.

Getting around was less straightforward. The metro network is extensive but does not always take you particularly close to the places a visitor actually wants to see, while rush-hour buses are best regarded as an extreme sport. The auto-rickshaw became my preferred option. My final impression of Bengaluru was unexpectedly formed at the airport, where the 080 Domestic Lounge in Terminal 2 turned out to be one of the most impressive airport lounges I have encountered anywhere.

Perhaps that is Bengaluru in a nutshell: modern, traditional, chaotic, sophisticated and somehow capable of making all of those contradictions work together.



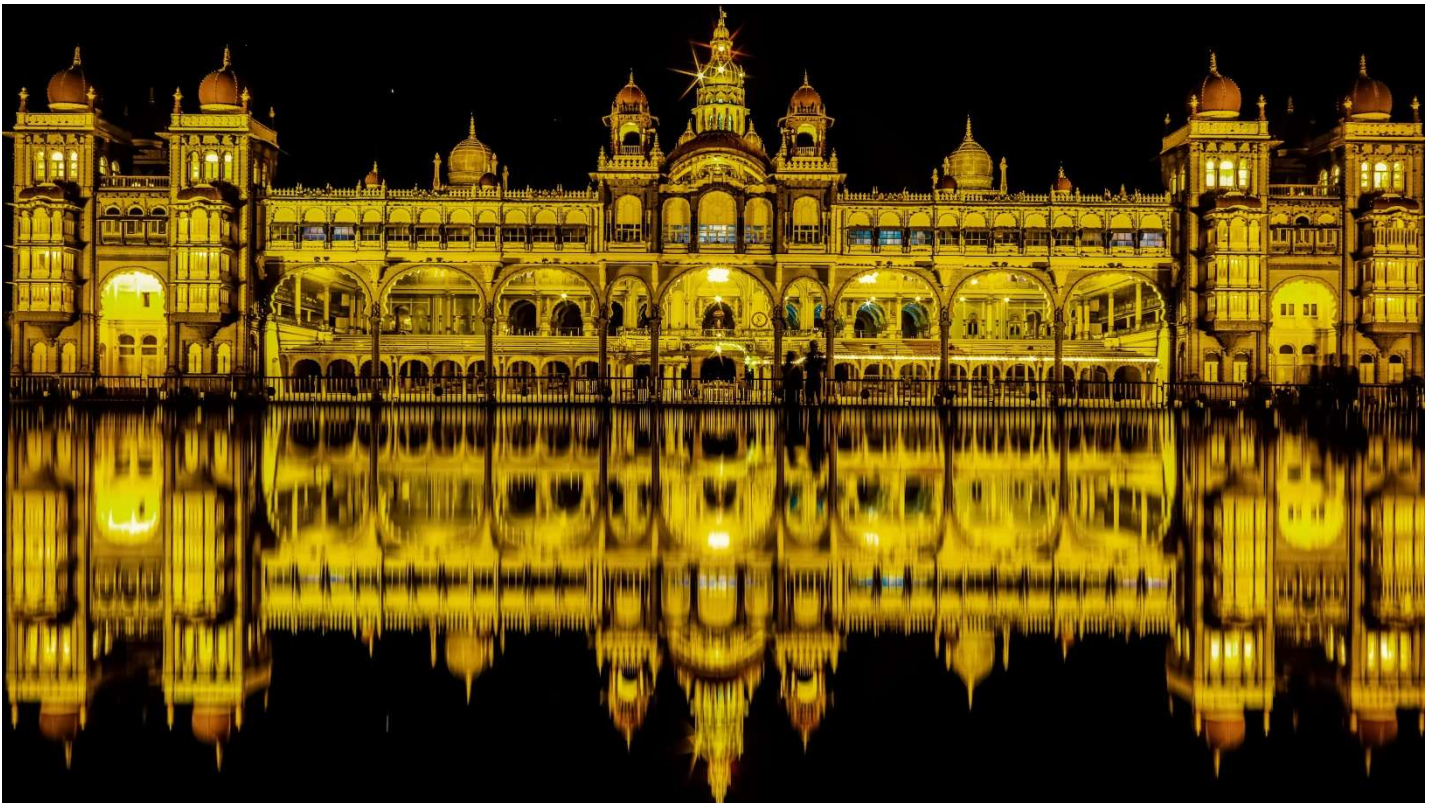
Chapter 10

Mysuru: The Cultural Capital of Karnataka

Introduction

Mysuru, formerly and still widely known as Mysore, is one of southern India's most elegant and historically important cities. For centuries it was the capital of the Wadiyar dynasty, whose rulers transformed it into a centre of royal power, culture, education, craftsmanship and the arts. Although considerably smaller and more relaxed than Bengaluru, Mysuru possesses an extraordinary concentration of palaces, temples, markets and cultural traditions, giving it a distinctive identity and earning it a reputation as one of Karnataka's cultural centres.

The name Mysore derives from the anglicised form of Mysuru, the traditional Kannada name of the city. In 2014, the Government of India approved the Karnataka government's proposal to restore the city's official Kannada name, Mysuru, as part of a wider renaming of several cities in the state. Mysore, however, remains deeply familiar internationally and continues to appear in the names of historic institutions, products and traditions. The city's identity is dominated by the magnificent Mysuru Palace, one of India's most spectacular royal residences.



Mysuru's heritage extends well beyond its palace. Chamundi Hill, rising above the city, is crowned by the important Sri Chamundeshwari Temple and provides sweeping views across the surrounding countryside. The city is also famous for its traditional crafts, particularly Mysuru silk, sandalwood products, incense and Mysuru paintings. Its markets provide an opportunity to experience these traditions alongside the everyday life of modern Karnataka.

Today, Mysuru remains an important educational, cultural and tourist centre, while retaining much of the character that developed under its former royal rulers. Its broad streets, tree-lined avenues, historic buildings and comparatively relaxed atmosphere make it an appealing contrast to the rapid development of Bengaluru. Mysuru's palaces, festivals, crafts and religious heritage provide a fascinating insight into the history and culture of Karnataka.

Jama Masjid, Srirangapatna

Jama Masjid is one of the most important surviving Islamic monuments in Srirangapatna and a reminder of the town's role as the capital of Tipu Sultan's Kingdom of Mysore. Also known as Masjid-e-Ala, the mosque was built by Tipu Sultan in 1784, during a period when Srirangapatna was at the centre of his struggle against British expansion in southern India.

The mosque has a spacious open courtyard, a large prayer hall and two imposing minarets. The minarets are particularly impressive, each containing an internal staircase of around 200 steps. From the upper levels there are extensive views across Srirangapatna and the surrounding countryside. The walls and ceilings are decorated with intricate motifs and Persian inscriptions, including the 99 names of Allah.

Jama Masjid is particularly interesting when considered alongside Srirangapatna's Hindu temples. The town contains major monuments representing both Hindu and Islamic traditions, reflecting the complex religious and political history of Tipu Sultan's capital. The mosque therefore forms an important part of the wider story of Srirangapatna and the Kingdom of Mysore.



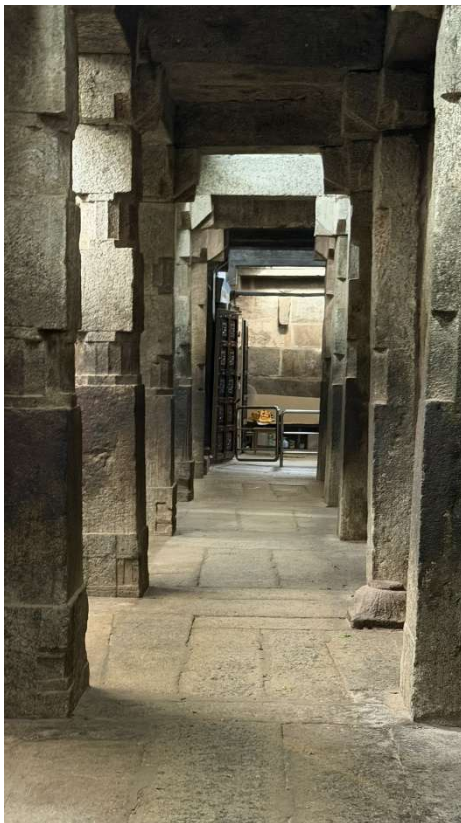
Sri Ranganatha Swamy Temple complex, Srirangapatna



Standing on the island formed by the River Kaveri, the Sri Ranganatha Swamy Temple complex is one of the most important Hindu monuments in Srirangapatna and the building from which the town takes its name. Dedicated to Ranganatha, the reclining form of Lord Vishnu, the temple has origins dating back more than a thousand years. An inscription records its consecration in 984 AD.

Inside the main temple, Vishnu is depicted reclining on the seven-headed serpent Adishesha, with Lakshmi at his feet. Next door is the smaller Sri Lakshmi Temple which is particularly interesting because of its contrasting appearance. While the main temple has a grand, extensively restored entrance tower, the Lakshmi shrine is a much more restrained and weathered structure.

Within the wider complex are further shrines dedicated to deities including Narasimha, Gopalakrishna, Srinivasa and Hanuman. The buildings reveal craftsmanship from several periods of the temple's long history. Across the complex there is not a single monument from a single period. Instead, its buildings, shrines and architectural details record more than a thousand years of religious and political history.



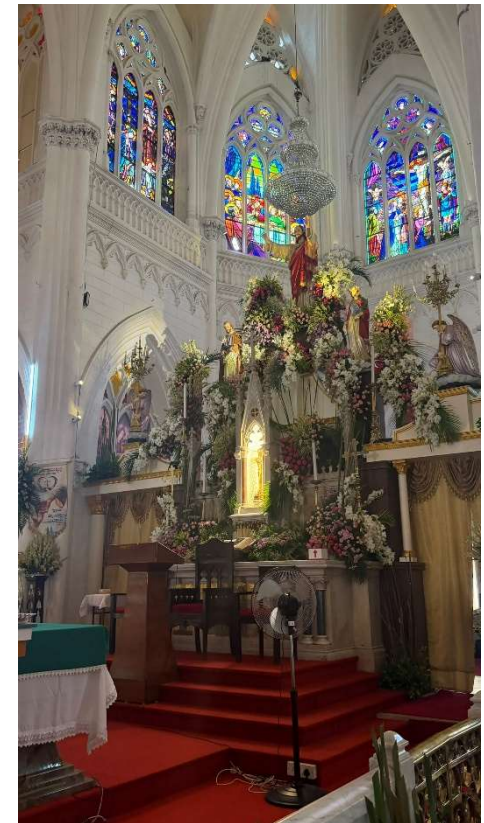
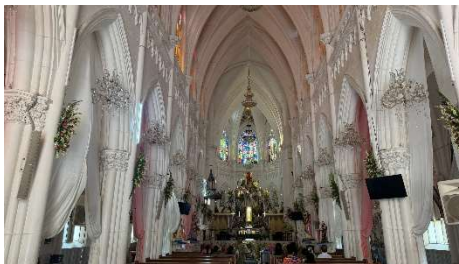
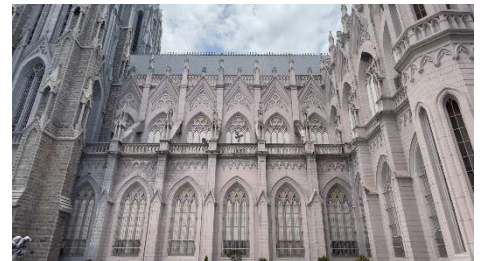


St Philomena's Roman Catholic Church

St Philomena's Roman Catholic Church is one of Mysuru's (previously Mysore's) most dramatic landmarks, its twin towers rising high above the surrounding streets. Although the present building dates from the twentieth century, its history goes back to an earlier church established here in 1843 during the reign of Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar III.

The original church served the growing European Catholic community in Mysuru. By the early twentieth century, the Catholic population had grown sufficiently for a much larger building to be required. In 1926, T. R. V. Thamboo Chetty, Diwan and Chief Justice of the Mysore Kingdom, obtained a relic associated with St Philomena. It was agreed to construct a new church dedicated to the saint.

The foundation stone was laid by the Maharaja on 28 October 1933, and construction took eight years, with the church opening in 1941. Its Neo-Gothic design was influenced by Cologne Cathedral in Germany, while its soaring twin spires and stained-glass windows give the interior a distinctly European appearance. The church is particularly notable for its crypt beneath the main altar, where a relic of St Philomena is preserved.





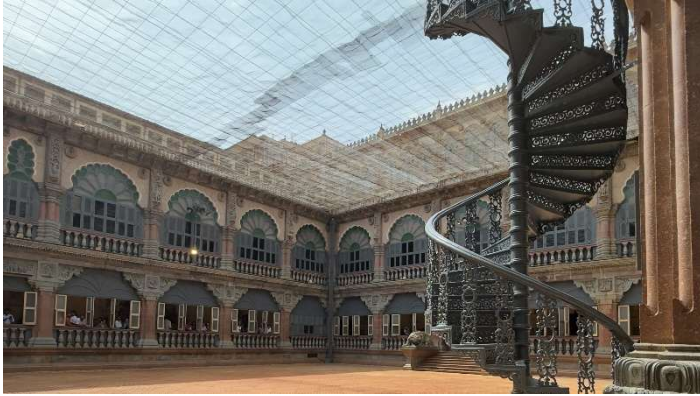
Mysuru Palace

Mysuru Palace, also known as Amba Vilas Palace, is the spectacular centrepiece of the former royal city and one of the most recognisable buildings in India. It was the principal residence of the Wadiyar dynasty, which ruled the Kingdom of Mysuru for centuries and played a significant role in shaping the city's culture, architecture and traditions.

The palace has a complicated history because the present building is actually the fourth major structure to occupy the site. Earlier wooden palaces were damaged or destroyed on several occasions, culminating in a devastating fire in 1897. The present palace was commissioned after the fire and designed by the British architect Henry Irwin. Construction was completed in 1912.

Its architecture is an extravagant mixture of Indo-Saracenic, Hindu, Islamic, Rajput and Gothic influences. Grey granite walls, pink marble domes, monumental arches and ornate interiors create an extraordinary display of royal wealth. Inside are elaborate ceilings, stained glass, carved timber, gilded decoration and magnificent ceremonial rooms.





Brindavan Gardens

Brindavan Gardens is one of the most famous landscaped gardens in southern India and lies approximately 21 kilometres from Mysuru, below the vast Krishna Raja Sagara, or KRS, Dam. Although often described as a Mysuru attraction, the gardens are technically in Mandya district, making them a nearby excursion rather than part of the city itself.

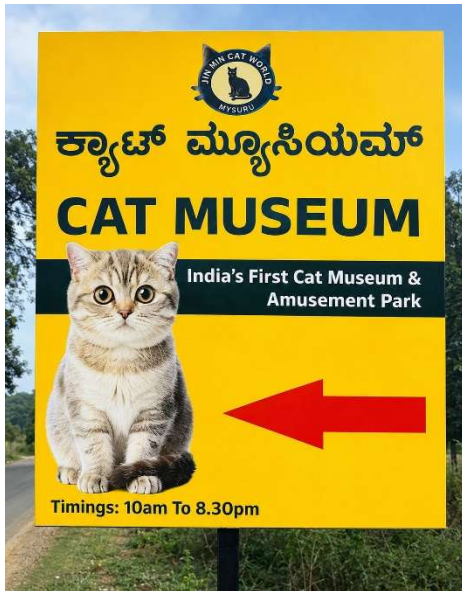
The gardens were created as part of the development of the KRS reservoir, which was constructed across the River Kaveri to provide water for irrigation and other purposes. Work on the gardens began in 1927 and they were completed in 1932 under Sir Mirza Ismail, the influential Diwan of the princely state of Mysore. The design covers around 60 acres and is based on a formal Mughal-style garden layout.

The gardens became particularly famous for their fountains and carefully arranged landscaping. Their most popular attraction today is the musical fountain, in which illuminated jets of water move in time with music after sunset. The combination of water, formal planting, the enormous KRS Dam and evening illumination makes Brindavan Gardens particularly memorable after dark.





Reflections on Mysuru



The journey from Bengaluru to Mysuru was probably not the highlight of the trip. The coach seemed determined to locate every pothole in Karnataka, and equally determined to drive through every one of them. The resulting day trip lasted around eighteen hours, including breakfast, lunch, dinner and shopping stops, leaving just an hour to see Mysuru Palace. That was rather less time than the palace deserved and certainly not the most efficient way of experiencing the city.

Yet the brief glimpse I had was enough to understand why Mysuru feels so different from Bengaluru. Arriving from the frenetic energy of India's technology capital, Mysuru seems to slow the pace almost immediately. It has a graciousness and sense of history that gives it a completely different personality. The palace is the obvious centrepiece, with its extraordinary mixture of Indo-Saracenic, Hindu, Islamic, Rajput and Gothic influences, and I was left wishing I had been able to spend much longer exploring it and the surrounding city.

I was also disappointed to miss the Jin Min Cat Museum, particularly once I discovered that it is home to twenty cats representing fourteen different breeds. There are not many travel guides where a cat museum becomes a genuine regret, but this one does. Mysuru left me with the feeling that this is a place where time is measured in seasons rather than seconds — and, after Bengaluru, that was probably exactly what I needed.

Chapter 11

Kolkata: The City of Joy

Introduction



Kolkata, formerly known internationally as Calcutta, is one of India's most distinctive cities: intellectual, artistic, historic and often gloriously chaotic. Situated on the eastern bank of the Hooghly River, it grew from three villages into the capital of British India and became one of the most important cities in the British Empire. Although the imperial capital moved to Delhi in 1911, Kolkata retained an enormous influence over India's political, cultural and intellectual life.

The name Calcutta was the anglicised form of the city's name that became widely established during the British period. Kolkata is the Bengali form, and in 2001 the city officially adopted Kolkata as its name, reflecting its linguistic and cultural heritage. Calcutta nevertheless remains deeply familiar and continues to appear in historical references, literature and the names of institutions associated with the city's colonial past.

That colonial past is most visible in the grand buildings of the central district. The Victoria Memorial, St Paul's Cathedral, the Writers' Building and the imposing structures around B.B.D. Bagh reflect the wealth and ambition of British Calcutta. Yet Kolkata's history is not simply a colonial story. The city became a major centre of the Bengali Renaissance, producing writers, artists, reformers and thinkers who played a key role in the development of modern India.

Beyond its monuments, Kolkata is a city of everyday contrasts. Elegant colonial mansions stand beside crowded markets; yellow taxis weave through streets lined with bookshops and cafés; and the Hooghly remains a busy artery of life and commerce. The city's famous intellectual culture is still evident in its literature, theatre, cinema, art and political debate. Today, Kolkata is the capital of West Bengal and one of India's largest metropolitan areas. It can be crowded, noisy and sometimes challenging, but it possesses a personality that few Indian cities can match. Its mixture of history, culture, creativity and human energy explains why it is affectionately known as the 'City of Joy.'

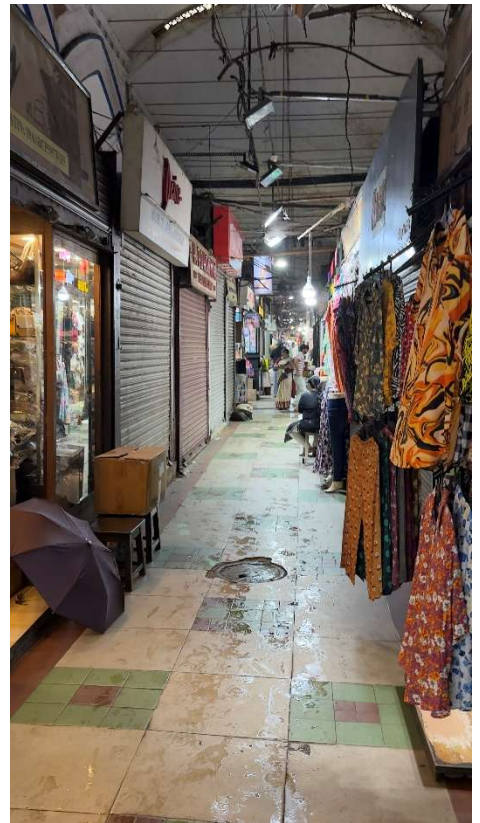
New Market

New Market is one of Kolkata's most atmospheric and enduring shopping landmarks. Opened on New Year's Day 1874, it was originally known as Sir Stuart Hogg Market, after Sir Stuart Hogg, then chairman of the Calcutta Corporation.

The market was designed by Richard Roskell Bayne in a Victorian Gothic style, with red brick, pointed arches, decorative stonework and a distinctive clock tower which was imported from Huddersfield and installed in the 1930s. After falling silent for around a decade, the historic four-faced clock was restored and began chiming again in February 2026.....every 15 minutes as I found out to my cost.

The market was established largely because British residents wanted a smart, hygienic shopping environment separate from the traditional Indian bazaars. It initially catered almost exclusively to European customers, with fashionable retailers selling clothing, shoes, books, food and other imported goods.

After independence, the character of the market changed completely and it became one of Kolkata's great popular shopping centres. Today, New Market is a wonderfully chaotic place, with over 2000 stalls selling everything from clothes and leather goods to fruit, vegetables, meat, cheese and flowers.



Fairlawn Hotel

The Fairlawn Hotel, now known as The Elgin Fairlawn, is one of Kolkata's better-known survivors from the colonial era. The building dates from 1783, making it more than two centuries old. It was built by the European William Ford after he purchased the land in 1781, and the street itself was originally named after him before becoming Sudder Street.

The building passed through several owners before becoming a hotel in 1936, when it was acquired by Rose Sarkies, a member of Kolkata's Armenian community. During the Second World War it was requisitioned for Canadian air force personnel and became known as 'Canada House'. Later, it developed a reputation as one of Kolkata's favourite gathering places for writers, actors, artists and travellers.

Among its most famous long-term guests were the Kendal family and their daughter, Felicity Kendal. The hotel has also welcomed other notables including Tom Stoppard, Patrick Swayze and Shashi Kapoor. I went there too but there is no photographic evidence on the walls to confirm. Notwithstanding, the hotel's appeal is not grandeur but atmosphere. With its garden, terraces, antique furnishings and slightly faded colonial character, the Fairlawn Hotel offers a rare glimpse of an older Kolkata.





YMCA

The Kolkata YMCA occupies an important place in the history of the organisation because the city's movement was among the earliest YMCA organisations in Asia. Its origins can be traced to the Calcutta Christian Juvenile Society, established in 1822, which developed into the YMCA movement in the nineteenth century. The present building in Jawaharlal Nehru Road, was completed in 1902.

The YMCA was established to provide young men with a combination of accommodation, education, recreation, sport and Christian fellowship. In colonial Kolkata it offered an alternative to the drinking establishments and other less respectable diversions associated with a rapidly growing city.

The building provided accommodation and facilities for visitors, missionaries and members. During the Second World War it took on another role, serving as an entertainment centre for American troops stationed in Kolkata. Today the organisation continues to operate from the historic building, combining its heritage role with accommodation, hospitality and community activities.



Indian Museum

Founded in 1814, the Indian Museum is one of Kolkata's greatest cultural institutions and the oldest and largest multipurpose museum in India. Its origins lie with the Asiatic Society of Bengal, founded by Sir William Jones in 1784. The museum began modestly at the society's premises before moving to its present grand building on Chowringhee Road.

The present building was designed by W. L. Grandville and completed in 1875, with the museum opening its new premises to the public in 1878. From its beginnings as a relatively small collection, it developed into an enormous institution covering art, archaeology, anthropology, zoology, geology and other branches of natural and human history.

Its collections are extraordinary in their range. Among the highlights are ancient sculptures, coins, manuscripts, fossils, decorative arts and archaeological discoveries from across India and Asia. Known locally as the 'Jadughar', or 'House of Wonders', the Indian Museum provides a remarkable overview of India's geological, archaeological and cultural development, making it one of Kolkata's essential attractions.



Victoria Memorial



The Victoria Memorial is arguably Kolkata's most spectacular monument and one of the most recognisable buildings associated with the British Raj. Conceived by Lord Curzon following the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, it was intended to commemorate the late monarch and celebrate Britain's imperial presence in India. Construction began in 1906 and the building was formally inaugurated in 1921 by the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII.

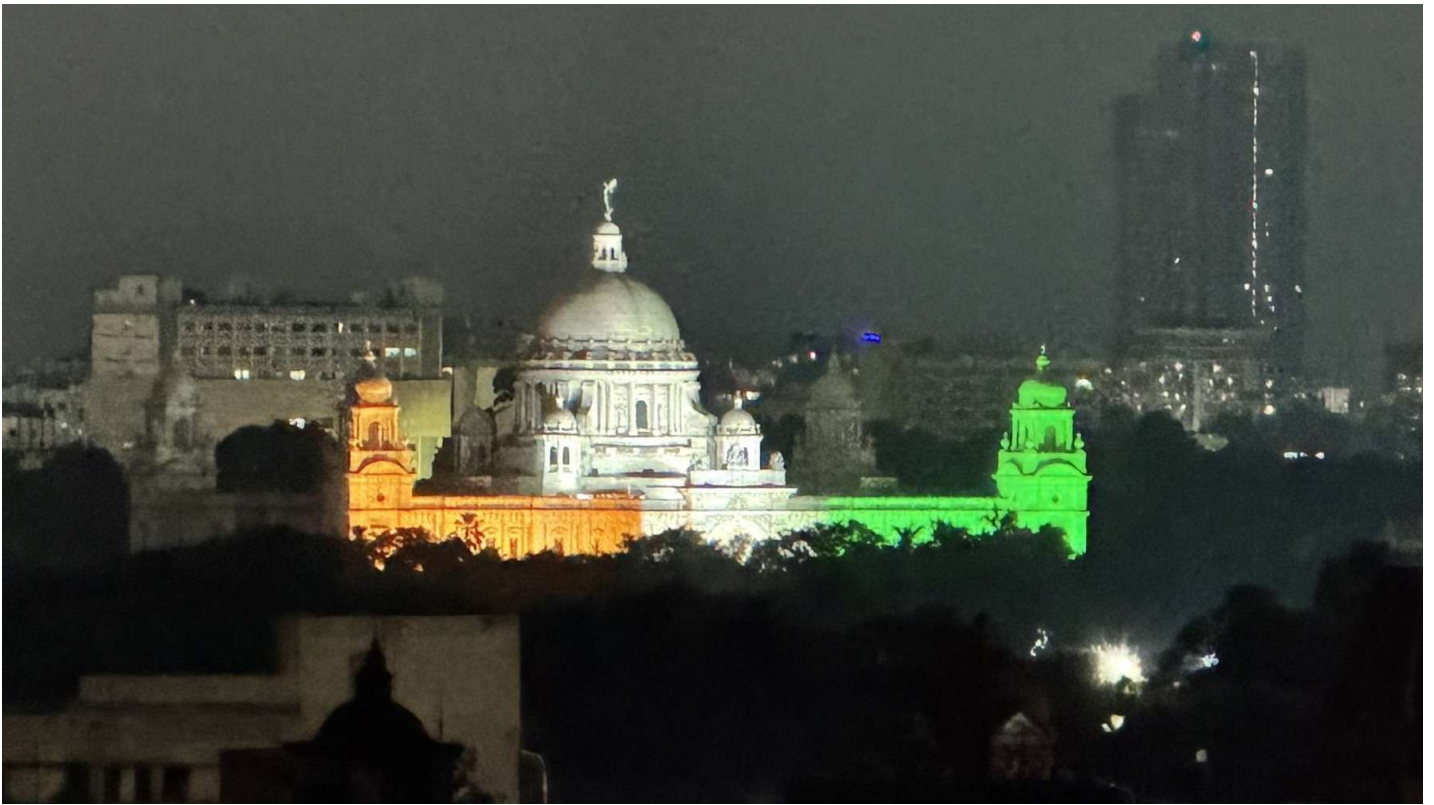
Built from gleaming white Makrana marble, the enormous structure was designed by William Emerson. Its architecture deliberately combines European classical influences with elements drawn from Indian, Islamic and Mughal traditions, creating a distinctive interpretation of a grand European memorial.

At the summit stands a 16-foot (5 metre) bronze figure of Victory, mounted on bearings so that it can rotate in the wind. The building is surrounded by extensive landscaped gardens and faces the vast Maidan, giving it an impressive setting rarely matched by other colonial monuments in India.



Today the Victoria Memorial is a museum rather than simply a memorial. Its galleries contain paintings, manuscripts, photographs, sculptures and other objects relating to the history of Bengal, Kolkata and British India. The monument illustrates both the extraordinary wealth and ambition of the British Empire and the complex legacy of colonial rule in India.





St Paul's Cathedral

St Paul's Cathedral stands beside the Victoria Memorial and is one of the most important Anglican buildings in India. Dedicated to St Paul the Apostle, it was consecrated in 1847 and became the cathedral church of the Anglican Diocese of Calcutta. Today it remains the Mother Church of the Diocese of Calcutta within the Church of North India.

The cathedral was built during the period when Calcutta was the capital of British India and the city's European population was expanding rapidly. Its architect was William Nairn Forbes, working with C. K. Robinson. The design was influenced by the Gothic Revival but adapted to the hot, humid climate of Bengal, with features intended to improve ventilation.

The building has endured several major earthquakes. The original tower was severely damaged by the 1897 earthquake and subsequently rebuilt; another severe earthquake in 1934 caused further damage. The present tower reflects these successive reconstructions.

Inside, the cathedral is notably serene. Its high vaulted interior, stained-glass windows, memorials and Gothic furnishings provide a striking contrast to the noise and congestion of central Kolkata. Among its treasures is a celebrated stained-glass window designed by Sir Edward Burne-Jones.

The cathedral's peaceful gardens and substantial architecture make it one of the most attractive historic buildings around the Maidan and an important reminder of Kolkata's nineteenth-century British and Christian heritage.



Mother House



Mother House is the headquarters of the Missionaries of Charity and one of Kolkata's most significant modern religious landmarks. It was established in connection with Mother Teresa's work among the city's poorest residents and has been the spiritual and administrative centre of the congregation since 1953.

Mother Teresa, born Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu in Skopje in 1910, came to India as a Loreto nun. In 1946 she experienced what she described as a 'call within a call', leading her to leave the convent and devote herself to working among Kolkata's poor. The Missionaries of Charity were formally established on 7 October 1950.

Mother House became the base from which the congregation expanded from a small group of women into an international organisation. Mother Teresa lived, prayed and worked here for decades, and her simple room has been preserved almost exactly as she left it, containing her bed, desk and modest personal possessions.

Following her death in 1997, she was given a state funeral and buried inside Mother House. People of many faiths now visit her simple marble tomb. A small museum beside it contains photographs, personal belongings, letters, awards and other objects relating to her life and work.

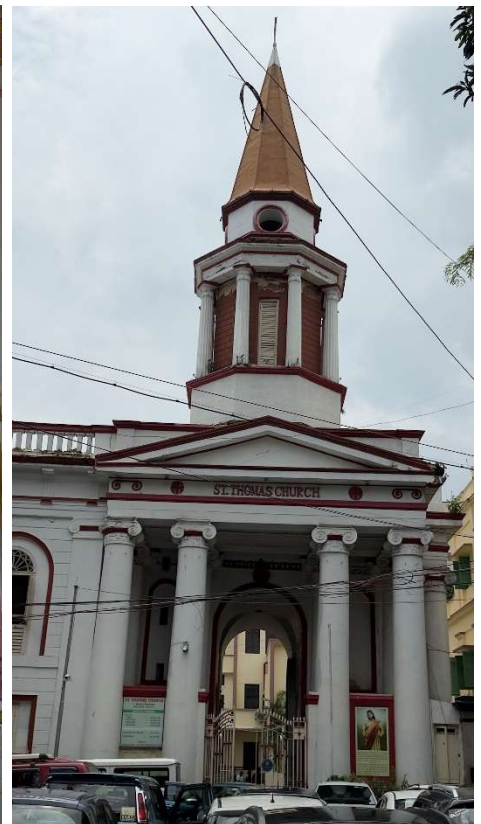


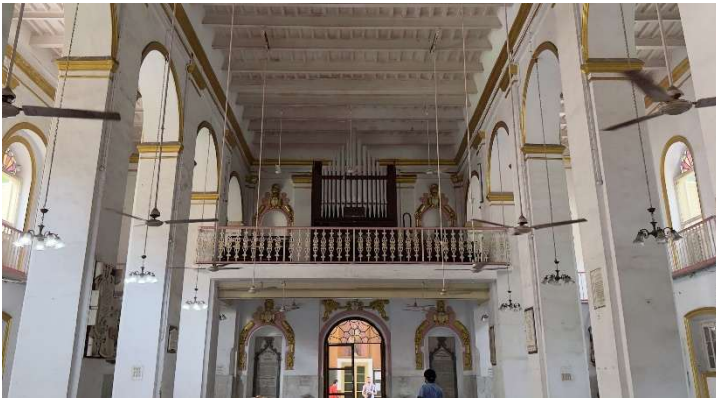
St Thomas Church

St Thomas Church, on Middleton Row just off Park Street, is one of Kolkata's most significant Roman Catholic churches. The present building dates from 1842, with the foundation stone laid by Major Patrick Carew in September 1841. Its restrained colonial architecture includes a distinctive octagonal spire, giving it a rather elegant appearance despite its relatively modest scale.

The church has a particularly poignant connection with Mother Teresa. Following her death on 5 September 1997, her body lay in state here for a week before her funeral, allowing thousands of people to pay their respects. This event gave St Thomas Church a place in the modern history of Kolkata that extends well beyond its religious importance.

The church is still an active place of worship and remains part of the historic Park Street area, where churches, cemeteries, restaurants and colonial-era buildings reflect the extraordinary mixture of European and Indian influences that shaped Calcutta. For visitors, St Thomas is particularly easy to overlook amid the bustle of Park Street, yet its history reaches back to the heart of nineteenth-century colonial Kolkata.





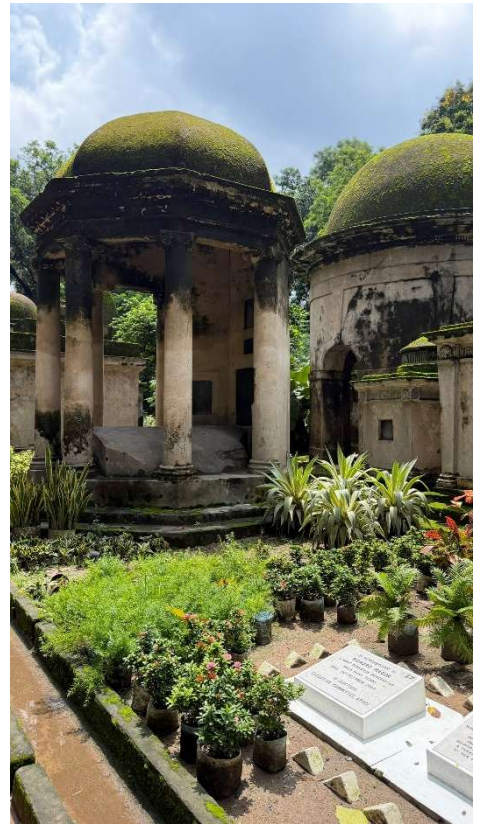
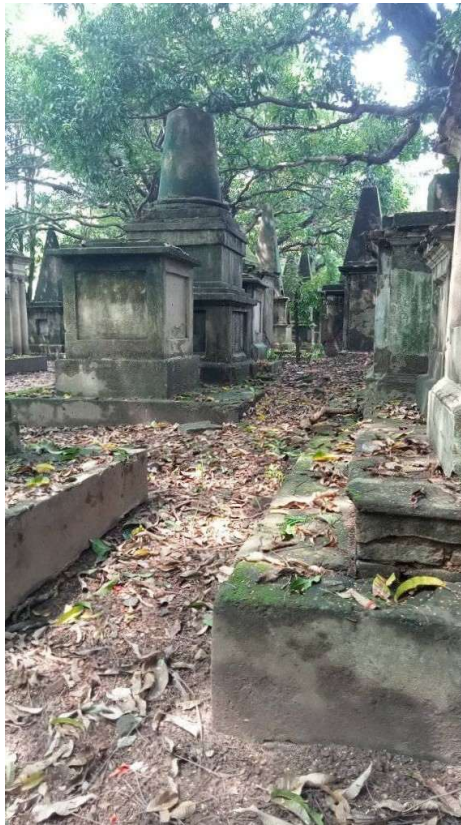
South Park Street Cemetery

The South Park Street Cemetery is one of the more atmospheric historic sites in Kolkata. Established in 1767, it was created partly because the older burial grounds around central Calcutta had become inadequate. It is regarded as one of the earliest substantial non-church cemeteries in the world. The cemetery covers about eight acres and contains around 1,600 graves and monuments.

Its elaborate tombs reveal the wealth, ambition and mortality of colonial Calcutta. Instead of simple gravestones, many of the monuments resemble miniature classical buildings, with obelisks, pyramids, urns, sarcophagi, domes and columns. The architectural vocabulary is predominantly European, but the tropical setting gives the cemetery a distinctly Kolkata character.

South Park Street Cemetery is unusual in the sense that it is the first cemetery I know that requires an entrance fee to get into.....surely that is a first? The cemetery is also a reminder of how different Park Street once was. The road was originally associated with burial grounds and was even originally known as Burial Ground Road. Today the area is very different.





Flurys, Park Street

Few Kolkata institutions are as strongly associated with Park Street as Flurys. The elegant tearoom and confectionery shop were established in 1927 by Swiss entrepreneurs Joseph Flury and Cinzio Trinca. It originally operated as Flury & Trinca, combining a European-style bakery with a fashionable tearoom. The partnership ended in 1939, and the two founders subsequently followed separate paths.

Flurys became famous for its cakes, pastries, chocolates, puddings and afternoon teas, helping establish Park Street as Kolkata’s premier destination for eating and entertainment. Its atmosphere was distinctly cosmopolitan, reflecting the city’s substantial European and Anglo-Indian community as well as the growing appetite among wealthy Indians for Western-style dining.



Trincas, Park Street

Trincas is another one of Kolkata's great survivors from the golden age of Park Street. It began in 1927 as a Swiss tea-room and bakery, founded during the same cosmopolitan period that produced Flurys. Cinzio Trinca had originally been Joseph Flury's partner in Flury & Trinca, the business from which Flurys developed. After their partnership ended, Trinca eventually established his own tearoom, which later became Trincas.

In its day, Trincas became associated with Western food, live music and floor shows, helping make Park Street one of the most fashionable nightlife districts in India during the 1960s and 1970s. It attracted musicians, film personalities, businessmen and Kolkata's social elite, and became part of the city's emerging popular culture. Trincas continues to operate as a restaurant and live-entertainment venue. It serves as a reminder of the era when Park Street was Kolkata's unquestioned centre of nightlife.



Prinsep Ghat

Prinsep Ghat is one of Kolkata's most picturesque riverfront landmarks. Built beside the Hooghly in 1841, it was named in memory of James Prinsep, the nineteenth-century scholar, antiquarian and scientist. Prinsep worked at the Calcutta Mint and became Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Among his greatest achievements was his deciphering of Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts.

The elegant white memorial pavilion was completed in 1843 and was more than just a monument. During the colonial period it became an important embarkation and disembarkation point, particularly for visiting British dignitaries and royal parties. Today the ghat is one of Kolkata's favourite places for an evening stroll as well as a popular film location.



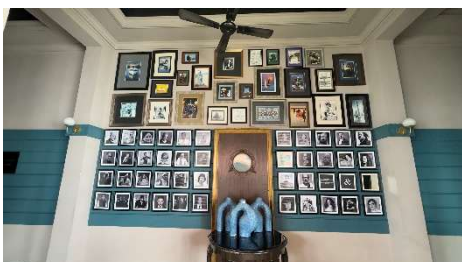


Floatel

The Floatel is one of Kolkata's more unusual attractions..... a hotel literally floating on the Hooghly. The original project was conceived as India's first floating hotel and was constructed at Kidderpore docks before being moved to its permanent position beside Strand Road. In 2004, it was described as the country's first floating hotel, with 73 rooms, restaurants, a coffee shop and conference facilities.

Designed to resemble a ship, the four-storey structure was built on a barge and engineered to cope with the Hooghly's powerful tides. The original project cost around ₹31 crore (₹31 crore = ₹310,000,000 which is just over £2,000,000) which was a substantial investment at the time. The original plan was to site the Floatel near Prinsep Ghat before being relocated to the Strand Road waterfront.

The hotel eventually opened in the mid-2000s and became a distinctive feature of Kolkata's riverfront. It subsequently underwent periods of closure and refurbishment. The refurbished hotel has 58 rooms and restaurants overlooking the river. Its location gives guests unusual views of two of Kolkata's greatest landmarks: Howrah Bridge and Vidyasagar Setu (Hooghly Bridge).



Vidyasagar Setu (Hooghly Bridge)

Vidyasagar Setu, often called the Second Hooghly Bridge, is the newer of Kolkata's two road bridges across the Hooghly. It links Kolkata with Howrah and was built partly to relieve the enormous traffic pressure on Howrah Bridge. Construction was undertaken by the Hooghly River Bridge Commission, and the bridge opened to traffic in October 1992.

The bridge is named after Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, one of Bengal's most influential educationists and social reformers. Its design is quite different from the massive steelwork of Howrah Bridge. Vidyasagar Setu is a cable-stayed bridge, with tall pylons supporting the roadway through a series of cables. It is regarded as one of India's longest cable-stayed bridges.

The bridge is particularly impressive when seen from Prinsep Ghat or the river. Its sweeping cables and illuminated structure form a striking contrast with the older Howrah Bridge. Together, the two bridges neatly illustrate two very different eras of engineering and Kolkata's continuing dependence on the Hooghly as both a physical barrier and a vital transport corridor.



Rabindra Setu (Howrah Bridge)

Rabindra Setu, also known as the Howrah Bridge, is probably the single most recognisable symbol of Kolkata. The present bridge opened in 1943, replacing an earlier floating pontoon bridge that had been in place since 1874. The old bridge could be partly opened to allow river traffic through, but increasing road and commercial traffic eventually made a much larger structure necessary.

The replacement bridge was designed as a balanced cantilever bridge, an impressive engineering solution given the difficulties of building foundations in the shifting Hooghly. The bridge is approximately 2,150 feet long, with a single main span of about 1,500 feet. Around 26,500 tonnes of steel were used in the construction of the bridge.

Unlike many major bridges, Rabindra Setu has no conventional nuts and bolts in its principal steel structure as it was assembled using rivets. The bridge was renamed Rabindra Setu in 1965 in honour of Rabindranath Tagore, Bengal's great poet and Nobel laureate. However, most people still call it Howrah Bridge. Crossing it is one of the quintessential Kolkata experiences....noisy, crowded and chaotic.





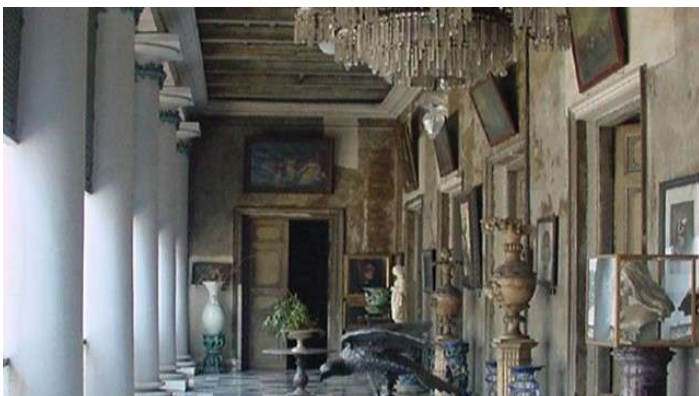
Marble Palace

Marble Palace is a most interesting nineteenth-century mansion in North Kolkata. It was built in 1835 for Rajendra Nath Mullick, a wealthy Bengali merchant and art collector, and was designed with a mixture of European architectural influences. The palace takes its name from its extraordinary use of marble. Around 90 varieties of patterned marble were reportedly used in the floors and interior decoration.

The building contains an eclectic collection of European paintings, sculptures, chandeliers, clocks and other antiques. The grounds are almost as theatrical as the mansion itself. Marble fountains and statues combine figures from Greek and Hindu mythology, while the grounds include a small zoo, although this is now down to a few cages with an assortment of captive birds.

Whilst the palace is well worth a visit, I found the condition of the property to be extremely disappointing. The palace has obvious historical and architectural significance, but it is being let down badly by its present state of repair and the standard of cleanliness. Somebody needs to get themselves a duster and give the place a damn good dusting.

This is really disappointing given that the palace is a valuable piece of heritage which should not be allowed to deteriorate through inadequate maintenance and cleaning. Photography is prohibited, so any internal pictures are copyright free pictures for which I have secured permission. The attraction has considerable potential, and it is a shame to see how badly it has been allowed to deteriorate.





College Street

College Street is Kolkata's great literary and intellectual quarter. Stretching considerably through central Kolkata, it is better known locally as Boi Para, or 'Book Town', because of the extraordinary concentration of bookshops and pavement stalls. New books, used textbooks, rare editions, examination guides and forgotten literary treasures can all be found here.

The street's name derives from the educational institutions that developed in the area including Hindu College, established in 1817, as well as the University of Calcutta, Sanskrit College and Presidency University. The legendary Indian Coffee House is nearby, providing another important link between literature, politics and everyday Kolkata life.



INDIAN COFFEE WORKERS CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY LIMITED
INDIAN COFFEE HOUSE, ALBERT HALL
 15, Bankim Chatterjee Street, Kolkata- 700 073
 Phone : 9007788519 w.e.f. 1st April, 2026

Special Items		MAIN HALL		Special Items	
COFFEE 1. Special Hot Coffee 70/- 2. Hot Coffee 35/- 3. Special Cold Coffee 95/- 4. Cold Coffee 60/- 5. Cold Coffee with Cream 80/- 6. Infusion (Black Coffee) 24/- 7. Tray Coffee (Hot per cup) 85/-					
SANDWICH PER PLATE 1. Chicken Sandwich 100/- 2. Mutton Sandwich 135/- 3. Egg Sandwich 65/- 4. Veg. Sandwich 60/-					
CATERINGS 1. Onion Pakoda (5 pcs.) 60/- 2. Butter Toast (2pcs.) 36/- 3. Bread Butter (2pcs.) 30/- 4. Plain Slice Bread (2pcs.) 20/- 5. Vegetable Cutlet 65/- 6. Veg. Pakoda (5 pcs.) 65/- 7. Paneer Pakoda (5 pcs.) 150/- 8. Chicken Pakoda (5 pcs.) 190/- 9. Mughlai Paratha 130/-					
EGG ITEM 1. Boiled Egg 13/- 2. Egg Fried 25/- 3. Egg Omelette 40/- 4. Chicken Omelette 100/- 5. Mutton Omelette 125/-					
CHICKEN PER PC. 1. Chicken Cutlet 115/- 2. Chicken Kavriri 125/- 3. Chicken Afghani 135/-					
MUTTON PER PC. 1. Mutton Cutlet 135/- 2. Mutton Kavriri 145/- 3. Mutton Afghani 155/-					

Extra 5% GST Will be Charge on Menu Listed Price

Indian Coffee House

The Indian Coffee House on College Street is far more than a café. It is one of Kolkata's great cultural institutions and has for decades been associated with students, writers, artists, academics, politicians and intellectuals. Its history begins with Albert Hall, a building dating from 1876. The Coffee Board established a coffee house there in 1942, and after Independence it became known as the Indian Coffee House.

The café became an informal meeting place for generations of Kolkata's intellectual community. The building itself is deliberately unpretentious, with high ceilings, ageing walls and traditional service. That is part of its charm. It is a place where visitors can sit for a long time over an inexpensive coffee without being hurried away. The Indian Coffee House remains a fitting symbol of Kolkata's love of conversation.



Rabindra Sarobar – Park and Lake

Rabindra Sarobar is one of the most important green spaces in South Kolkata, centred on a large artificial lake surrounded by gardens, paths and recreational areas. Its origins lie in an ambitious urban improvement project undertaken by the Calcutta Improvement Trust during the 1920s. The Trust acquired around 192 acres of low-lying, marshy land and transformed it through excavation, drainage, road building and landscaping.

The lake was originally known as Dhakuria Lake and was part of a wider plan to create healthier residential and recreational surroundings in southern Kolkata. The landscape eventually developed into a substantial park, with trees, gardens, islands and sporting and cultural facilities. In 1958, the lake and surrounding area were renamed Rabindra Sarobar in honour of Rabindranath Tagore, Bengal's celebrated poet and writer.

Today the Sarobar is an important recreational refuge from the noise and density of the city. Residents walk, jog, exercise, practise sport and simply sit beside the water. Its mature trees and extensive open space make it especially valuable in a city as densely developed as Kolkata. What began as marshland was transformed into a major public landscape that continues to serve Kolkata nearly a century later.



Kolkata Transport



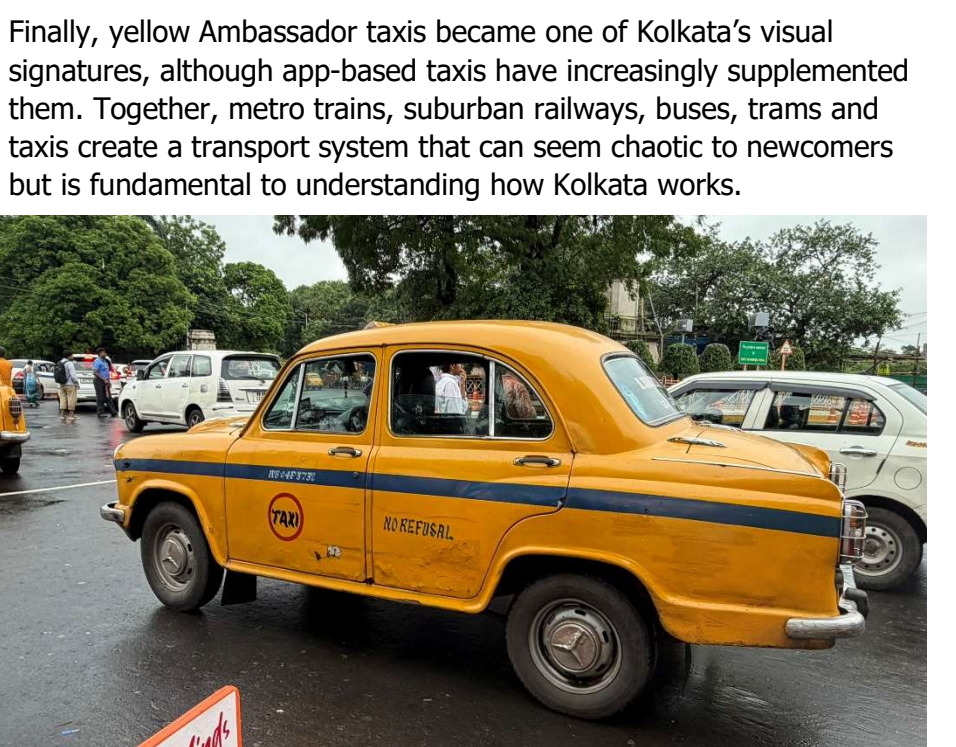
Kolkata's transport system reflects the city's extraordinary age and density. It combines nineteenth-century technology with some of India's most modern urban transport. The Kolkata Metro is the most famous example. Opened on 24 October 1984, it was India's first metro railway, initially operating on a short 2 miles (3.5 kilometre) section between Esplanade and Bhowanipur. Today the expanding network provides one of the quickest ways to cross the congested city.

Railways are equally important. Howrah and Sealdah are among the great railway stations of eastern India, managing enormous numbers of suburban, regional and long-distance passengers. They connect Kolkata with the rest of West Bengal as well as other cities throughout the state of India.





Buses remain the everyday workhorses of the city, operated by both state organisations and private companies. Kolkata also possesses a remarkable tram heritage. The first horse-drawn tram ran in 1873, and electric trams were introduced in 1900. Kolkata remains India's only city with an operating tram service, although the network is now a small fraction of what it once was.



Finally, yellow Ambassador taxis became one of Kolkata's visual signatures, although app-based taxis have increasingly supplemented them. Together, metro trains, suburban railways, buses, trams and taxis create a transport system that can seem chaotic to newcomers but is fundamental to understanding how Kolkata works.



Reflections on Kolkata

Kolkata was one of the cities that appealed to me most through its architecture and its sense of history. There is something fascinating about a city that has retained so many magnificent buildings from the British period, even when some are now showing their age rather more than they should. That slightly faded grandeur is part of Kolkata's character.

The Victoria Memorial was an obvious highlight, but I found myself just as interested in the countless reminders of the city's colonial past scattered through its streets, buildings and heritage hotels. Kolkata also has a wonderfully eccentric personality. I particularly enjoyed discovering that on some major roads the permitted direction of traffic changes at one o'clock in the afternoon. Barriers are moved, vehicles are stopped and the road suddenly operates in the opposite direction. It is fascinating — although perhaps not something to discover while blindly following Google Maps!

The city's transport history is equally interesting. Kolkata had India's first metro, long before Delhi, and the surviving tram system provides another reminder of its past. Away from the traffic, College Street and the Indian Coffee House reveal another side of Kolkata literary, intellectual and argumentative in the best possible sense. Kolkata may be old, congested and sometimes rather shabby, but there is a charm here that comes from the fact that the city has not completely surrendered its past to modernisation.

My thanks to Sachin for showing me around his wonderful city and introducing me to so many interesting and amazing places that the local guide books never covered. I cannot believe how much we covered in the limited time available and I sincerely hope this chapter does it justice.

Chapter 12

Varanasi: The Spiritual Heart of India

Introduction

Few cities anywhere in the world possess the spiritual importance of Varanasi. Situated on the banks of the sacred River Ganges in Uttar Pradesh, the city has been a major centre of Hindu pilgrimage for centuries and is traditionally regarded as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. For millions of Hindus, Varanasi is one of the holiest places on earth, and its relationship with the Ganges lies at the very heart of the city's identity.

The most recognisable feature of Varanasi is its extraordinary collection of ghats, the stone steps descending to the river. At dawn, pilgrims gather to bathe in the Ganges, believing that the sacred water can cleanse them of sin. Throughout the day, the waterfront becomes a constantly changing scene of worship, bathing, boating, commerce and religious ceremonies. At sunset, the spectacular Ganga Aarti brings crowds to the river as priests perform a ritual involving lamps, fire, music and chanting.

Varanasi is also strongly associated with death. Hindus traditionally believe that dying and being cremated here can help release the soul from the cycle of rebirth. At Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghats, funeral pyres burn around the clock, making death an unusually visible part of everyday life. This proximity of death and ordinary activity can be confronting for visitors, but it is fundamental to understanding the city's spiritual character.



Dashashwamedh Ghat

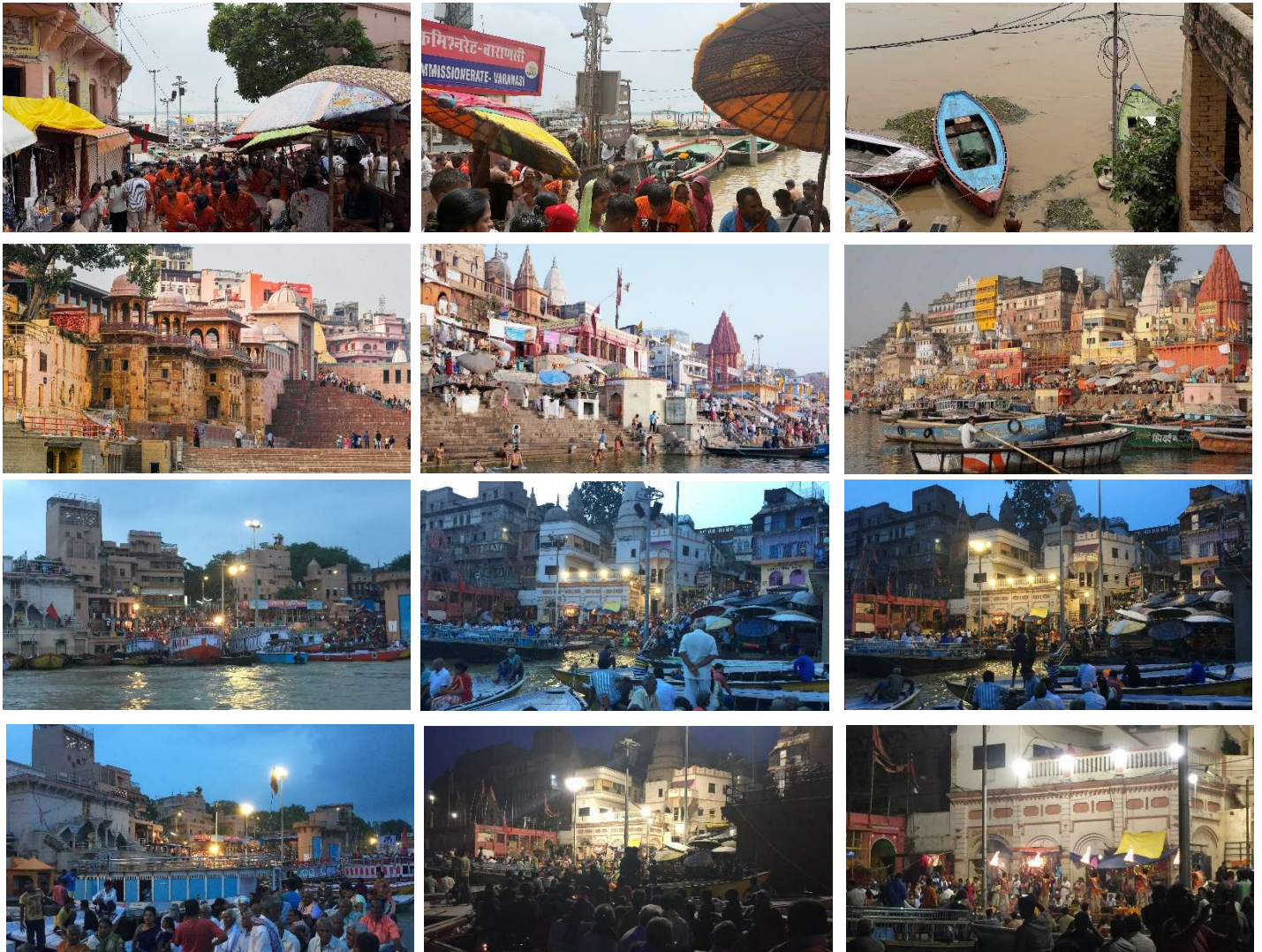
Dashashwamedh Ghat is the best-known and busiest of Varanasi's many ghats, occupying a central position on the Ganges close to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. Its name comes from the Sanskrit *dasha* (ten), *ashwa* (horse) and *medha* (sacrifice).

Hindu tradition holds that Lord Brahma performed ten Ashwamedha sacrifices here, either to welcome Lord Shiva to Kashi or to restore the sanctity of the city. The site therefore combines mythology with the everyday religious life of Varanasi.

The present stone ghat is largely the result of rebuilding during the eighteenth century. The Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao is associated with its reconstruction around 1740, while Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar of Indore subsequently renovated it.

Today its greatest spectacle is the evening, Ganga Aarti. Priests perform a carefully choreographed ceremony using large multi-tiered lamps, incense, flowers and conch shells while devotees gather on the steps and hundreds more watch from boats on the river.

At other times, the ghat is a working place of pilgrimage, with bathing, prayer and ceremonies for the dead taking place throughout the day. It is perhaps the clearest single expression of Varanasi's continuing religious life.



Kashi Vishwanath Temple

The Kashi Vishwanath Temple is one of Hinduism's most sacred shrines dedicated to Shiva. Its principal deity is Vishwanath, meaning 'Lord of the Universe', represented by the sacred Shiva lingam. The temple stands in the densely built heart of old Varanasi.

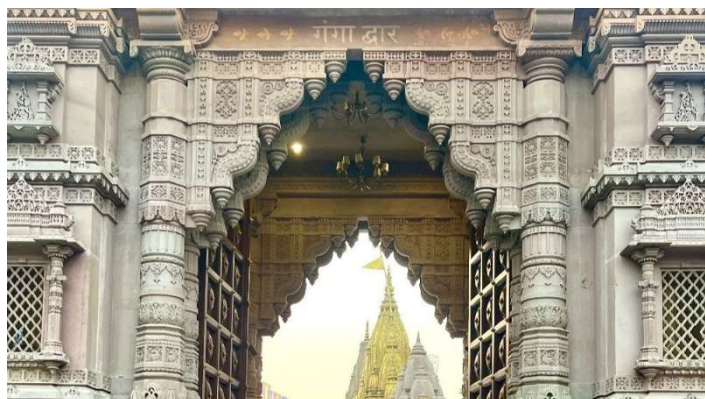
The temple has an exceptionally turbulent history. Earlier temples on or near the site were destroyed and rebuilt several times. The present temple was constructed nearby in 1780 by Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar.

Getting inside the temple proved somewhat elusive and having queued for some time I was told I was in the wrong queue and directed to gate 4. After another long queue I was told that this ticket office did not sell tickets and redirected back to my original queue.

The next day I managed to find the right ticket office although I had no idea which ticket I should purchase...with the tickets priced variously depending on how quickly you wanted to get inside. The prices for foreigners are a lot higher than for locals.

Anyway, my concerns over which ticket were dismissed when I was told that I needed my passport to buy a ticket. I was clearly not destined to see the Kashi Vishwanath Temple and offer some copyright free pictures, so we all know what I was missing.

श्री काशी विश्वनाथ मंदिर न्यास टिकट काउंटर	
TICKET COUNTER	
Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust श्री काशी विश्वनाथ मंदिर न्यास	
Darshan Information	
Sugam Darshan (Queue Less Darshan)	250/-Rs (06:00 AM - Per Person)
Sugam Darshan (With Mewa Laddoo Prasad)	300/-Rs Per Person (06:00 AM - 06:00 PM)
Sugam Darshan (With Mewa Laddoo Prasad & Rudraksha Mala)	400/-Rs Per Person
आरती / Aarti	
Mangla Aarti मंगला आरती (03:00 AM - 04:00 AM)	500/- Rs
Mid Day/Bhadr Aarti भोज आरती (11:00 AM - 01:00 PM)	300/- Rs
Sapt Rishi Aarti सप्त ऋषि आरती (06:00 PM - 08:15 PM)	300/- Rs
Night Aarti शुभार आरती (10:15 PM - 11:00 PM)	300/- Rs



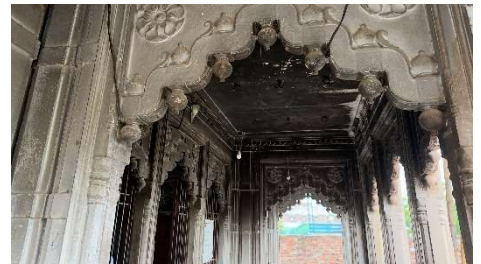
More Ghats

The ghats of Varanasi are among the city's defining features. Stretching for several kilometres along the western bank of the Ganges, these broad flights of stone steps form a remarkable combination of religious spaces, public meeting places and working riverfronts. There are more than 80 recognised ghats, each with its own history, traditions and character. Some are associated with Hindu pilgrimage and bathing, others with particular religious communities, and a small number support the city's funeral traditions.

Ganga Mahal Ghat is one of the quieter ghats and takes its name from the palace built beside it by the former ruler of Narayan dynasty. The riverside palace and ghat illustrate how India's princely families established residences along the Ganges, allowing them to participate in the religious life of Kashi while also enjoying the river views.



Further south, Assi Ghat stands near the meeting point traditionally associated with the Ganges and the Assi River. It is one of the most popular ghats with both pilgrims and visitors and has a more relaxed atmosphere than the crowded central ghats. Religious ceremonies take place here throughout the day, and the early-morning Subah-e-Banaras programme has become a popular attraction.



Harishchandra Ghat is one of Varanasi's two principal cremation ghats. Hindu tradition associates it with King Harishchandra, celebrated for his absolute commitment to truth and duty....the site is presently undergoing redevelopment/reconstruction.



Further north is the Manikarnika Ghat which is the more famous of the two and is regarded as the principal cremation ground of Varanasi. According to Hindu belief, cremation here can help release the deceased from the cycle of rebirth.



Together, these ghats demonstrate why the Ganges is so central to Varanasi. They encompass the full cycle of religious life: pilgrimage, prayer, celebration, death and cremation.

Banaras Hindu University



Banaras Hindu University (BHU) is one of India's great educational institutions and one of the defining landmarks of modern Varanasi. It was established by an Act of Parliament in 1916. Its creation reflected the ambition to combine modern higher education with India's intellectual, cultural and religious traditions.

The university occupies an enormous, tree-filled campus and has developed into a major centre for science, medicine, technology, humanities and Indian studies. Its scale is striking and rather than feeling like a conventional city university, it resembles a self-contained academic town.

One of its cultural treasures is Bharat Kala Bhavan which is the university's museum of Indian art. Its origins go back to 1920, and the present museum building was founded and opened under the patronage of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

The collection contains more than 100,000 objects, including sculptures, terracotta, coins, textiles, jewellery, decorative arts, archival material and paintings. It is particularly renowned for its miniature paintings and textiles so it is well worth a visit.



New Vishwanath Temple (BHU)



The New Vishwanath Temple, officially known as Shri Vishwanath Temple, stands near the centre of the Banaras Hindu University campus. Although it shares its name and dedication with the famous Kashi Vishwanath Temple in the old city, it is a much more recent building and forms part of Malaviya's vision for BHU as a place where education, spirituality and Indian culture could exist together.

The temple was planned under the direction of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and is built principally in white marble. Its architecture is deliberately impressive. The temple rises prominently above the surrounding gardens and university landscape.

Inside is a Shiva lingam, while verses from Hindu scriptures are inscribed on the walls alongside pictorial representations. The building is therefore intended not merely as a place of worship but also as a visual expression of Hindu philosophy and sacred literature.

The temple is maintained by the university and operates as a working temple rather than simply a monument. For visitors, it also provides an opportunity to see how Malaviya sought to incorporate religious and cultural identity into a modern university founded in the early twentieth century.



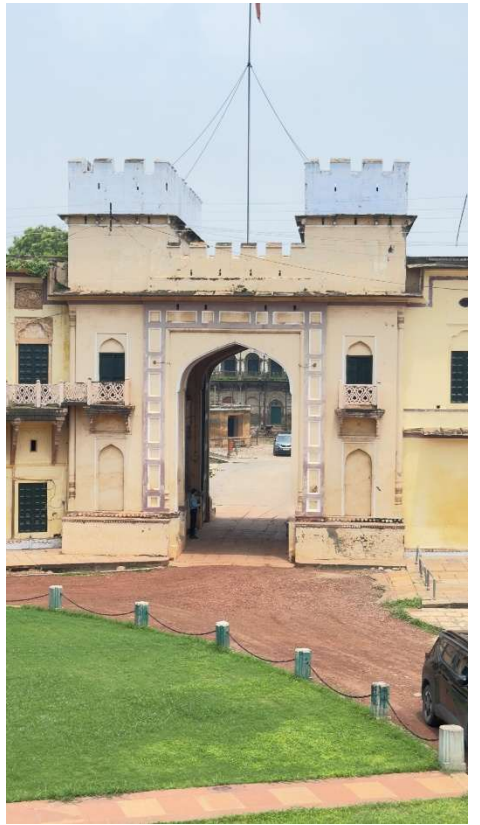
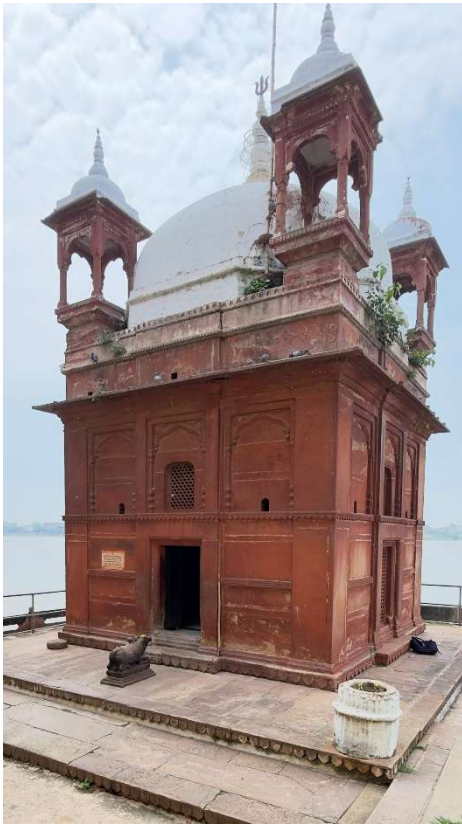
Ramnagar Fort

Ramnagar Fort stands on the eastern bank of the Ganges, directly opposite the Varanasi ghats. Built in the eighteenth century for the Kashi Naresh, Raja Balwant Singh, the fort dates from around 1750 and was constructed from the distinctive creamy-coloured sandstone.

Rather than being a conventional military fortress designed primarily for warfare, Ramnagar is essentially a fortified royal residence. It became the seat of the Maharajas of Banaras and contains courtyards, palaces, temples and ceremonial spaces. The location beside the river was both scenic and practical, linking the royal household with the sacred landscape of Varanasi.

Today part of the complex houses the Ramnagar Fort Museum, established in 1964. Its collections provide an unusually intimate picture of Indian princely life, including royal clothing, weapons, musical instruments, jewellery, portraits and vintage vehicles.....all of them covered in thick layers of dust !!!





Sarnath

Introduction

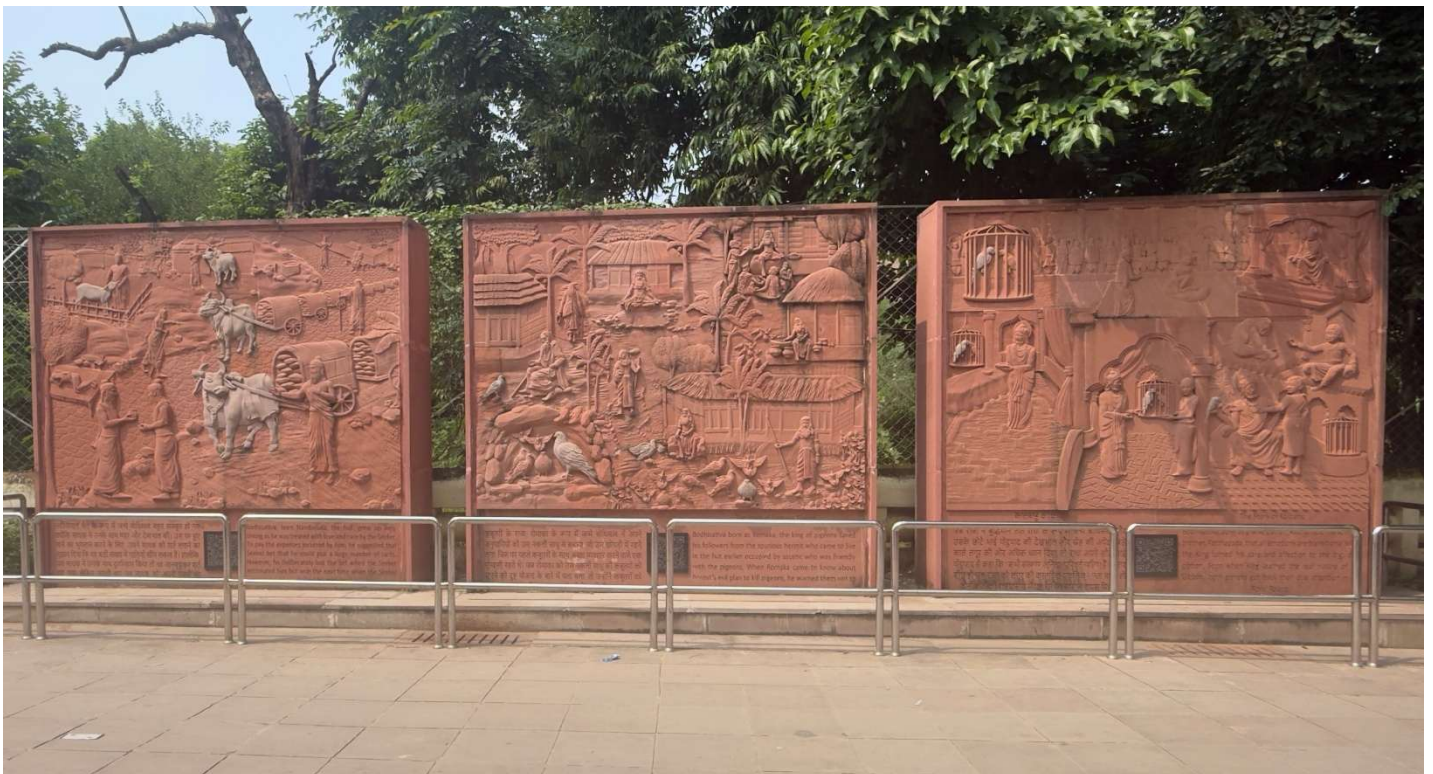
Sarnath lies around 6 miles (10 kilometres) north-east of Varanasi but belongs to a vastly different religious and historical world. It is one of the four principal pilgrimage destinations for Buddhists, alongside Lumbini, Bodh Gaya and Kushinagar. Its importance derives from a single moment of extraordinary significance as the place where Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon. This event is traditionally known as the 'turning of the Wheel of Dharma' and marked the beginning of his public teaching.

The site flourished particularly under the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, who visited Sarnath during the third century BCE and commissioned monuments to commemorate the Buddha and his teaching. Sarnath subsequently developed into a major monastic and educational centre. Archaeological excavations have revealed the remains of many monasteries, temples and stupas.

The great Dhamek Stupa dominates the archaeological complex today and is one of Sarnath's most recognisable landmarks. Nearby are modern Buddhist temples and monasteries representing traditions from Thailand, Japan, China, Tibet and elsewhere in Asia. Sarnath is therefore both an archaeological site and a living international Buddhist centre, linking the origins of Buddhism in India with the many cultures into which the religion subsequently spread.

Another particularly important discovery was the Ashoka Pillar. Although the pillar itself is now broken, its famous Lion Capital survives and is displayed in the Sarnath Archaeological Museum. The four lions standing back-to-back became the national emblem of India in 1950.

The complex is therefore far more than a collection of ruins. It preserves physical evidence of the development of Buddhism in India and provides the historical setting for understanding why Sarnath remains one of the world's most important Buddhist pilgrimage destinations.



Chinese Buddhist Temple, Sarnath

The Chinese Buddhist Temple at Sarnath represents the international character of Buddhism and the remarkable geographical reach of the religion that began in northern India. Sarnath is especially sacred because it was here, according to Buddhist tradition, that Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon after attaining enlightenment at Bodh Gaya.

Sarnath consequently became an important Buddhist centre and attracted pilgrims and scholars from across Asia. Chinese pilgrims were among those who travelled to the site in antiquity. The monk Faxian visited northern India in the early fifth century, while Xuanzang visited Sarnath around 640 CE and recorded a flourishing monastic settlement containing numerous shrines and a large community of monks.

The modern Chinese temple continues this international connection. Its design and religious character reflect Chinese Buddhist traditions rather than the predominantly Hindu architectural landscape of Varanasi. The presence of such foreign monasteries at Sarnath is particularly appropriate because Buddhism spread from India along routes reaching China, Tibet, Southeast Asia and eventually much of East Asia.



Japanese Temple, Sarnath

The Japanese Temple at Sarnath is another reminder that the importance of Sarnath extends far beyond India. The importance of Sarnath itself goes back to the third century BCE, when the Mauryan emperor Ashoka visited and established monuments commemorating the Buddha's teaching. His famous pillar at Sarnath originally carried an edict concerning discipline within the Buddhist monastic community.

Sarnath subsequently developed into a major Buddhist centre. Chinese pilgrims recorded substantial monasteries and large numbers of monks here, while archaeological evidence shows that the site remained active for many centuries.

The Japanese temple therefore has significance beyond its appearance. It forms part of a living international Buddhist landscape surrounding one of the religion's most important historical locations. Together with the Chinese, Thai and Tibetan establishments nearby, it illustrates how Sarnath has become a meeting point for Buddhist traditions from across Asia.



Wat Thai Sarnath



Wat Thai Sarnath is a Thai Buddhist temple and monastery established by the Thai Buddhist community in Sarnath reflecting the strong historical relationship between India and the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia. Thailand pilgrims, monks and religious organisations have maintained links with the Buddha's sacred sites in northern India for generations.

The temple's architecture provides an immediate visual contrast with the ancient ruins of Sarnath. Its Thai-inspired forms, ornamentation and religious imagery demonstrate that Buddhism, although originating in India, developed distinctive architectural and artistic traditions in different parts of Asia.

The setting is historically appropriate. Sarnath became one of Buddhism's great international centres after Ashoka established monuments here in the third century BCE. It later attracted pilgrims and scholars from across Asia, including the Chinese travellers Faxian and Xuanzang.

The modern Thai monastery continues that international tradition. Together with the Chinese and Japanese building, it helps make Sarnath more than just an archaeological site. The juxtaposition of modern Asian monasteries with the ancient Dhamek Stupa and excavated monasteries makes Sarnath one of the best places in India to appreciate the international development of Buddhism.





Other Religious Sites

Varanasi and Sarnath contain an extraordinary variety of temples and religious buildings representing several different Indian and Asian traditions. While the Kashi Vishwanath Temple is the most famous Hindu shrine in Varanasi, the wider area provides an opportunity to encounter places of worship belonging to Buddhism and Jainism as well as Hinduism. These sites are particularly valuable because they demonstrate that the religious importance of the region extends far beyond a single faith.



Mulagandhakuti Vihara in Sarnath is one of the most important modern Buddhist temples at the site. It was established by the Mahabodhi Society in the twentieth century and commemorates the ancient Mulagandhakuti monastery traditionally associated with the Buddha. The temple contains striking modern murals depicting episodes from the Buddha's life, painted by the Japanese artist Kosetsu Nosu. It remains an active place of Buddhist worship and meditation.





The Shri Digambar Jain Temple at Sarnath represents another of India's ancient religious traditions. Jain tradition identifies Sarnath, or Singhpurī, as the birthplace of Shreyansanatha, the eleventh Jain Tirthankara. The temple therefore gives Sarnath significance within Jainism as well as Buddhism.



The Vishwa Shanti Stupa, or Peace Pagoda, is a much more recent addition to the religious landscape. Built as part of the worldwide movement associated with Nichidatsu Fuji and the Nipponzan-Myōhōji Buddhist order, it reflects the modern international character of Sarnath. Its white dome and golden Buddha image are intended to symbolise peace and reconciliation.



Taken together, these temples illustrate the remarkable religious diversity of the Varanasi–Sarnath region. Within a relatively small area, visitors can encounter Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions, many of which have maintained connections with the region for centuries.

Sarnath Archaeological Complex



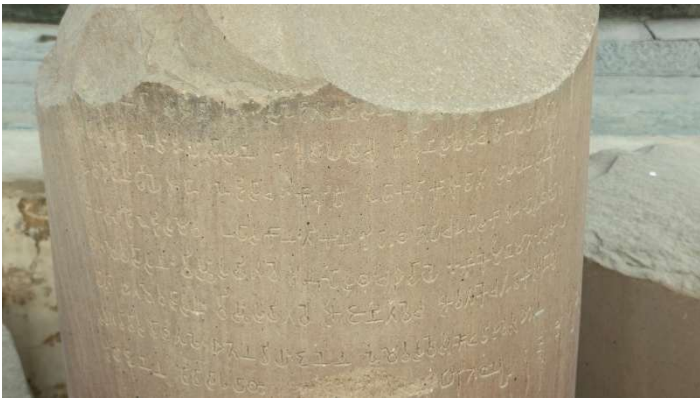
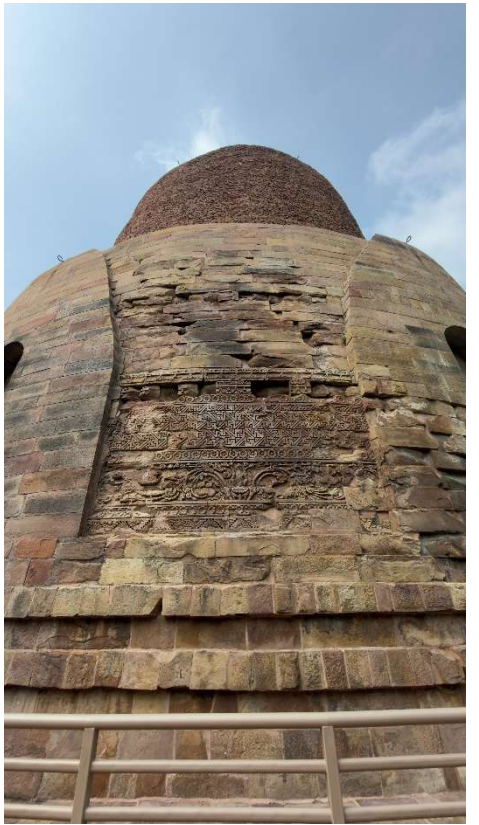
The Sarnath Archaeological Complex contains the remains of one of the most important Buddhist centres of ancient India. It marks the place where Gautama Buddha is traditionally believed to have delivered his first sermon after attaining enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. This event, known as the 'turning of the Wheel of Dharma', transformed Sarnath into a major centre of Buddhist pilgrimage and learning.

The archaeological site contains the remains of monasteries, temples, shrines and stupas dating from different periods, reflecting the site's development over more than a thousand years. The earliest major phase dates from the Mauryan period when Emperor Ashoka visited Sarnath in the third century BCE and established monuments commemorating the Buddha's teaching.

The most impressive surviving structure is the Dhamek Stupa. Its enormous cylindrical form rises approximately 140 feet (43 metres) above the ground and dominates the archaeological complex. The structure incorporates material from several periods, with successive enlargements and renovations conducted over the centuries.

Its lower portion is adorned with richly carved stone decorated with geometric and floral patterns, some of which demonstrate the sophistication of the Gupta-period craftsmanship. The Dhamek Stupa is traditionally associated with the location of the Buddha's first sermon, although the exact identification of the original preaching spot is a matter of archaeological interpretation.





Reflections on Varanasi

Varanasi was always going to be an interesting return visit because I had been here about ten years earlier and, if I am honest, had not been particularly impressed. I knew that millions of people regard it as one of the most spiritually significant places in India, but I had struggled to connect with that aspect of the city on my first visit. This time, I was hoping that seeing it again with different eyes might change my response.

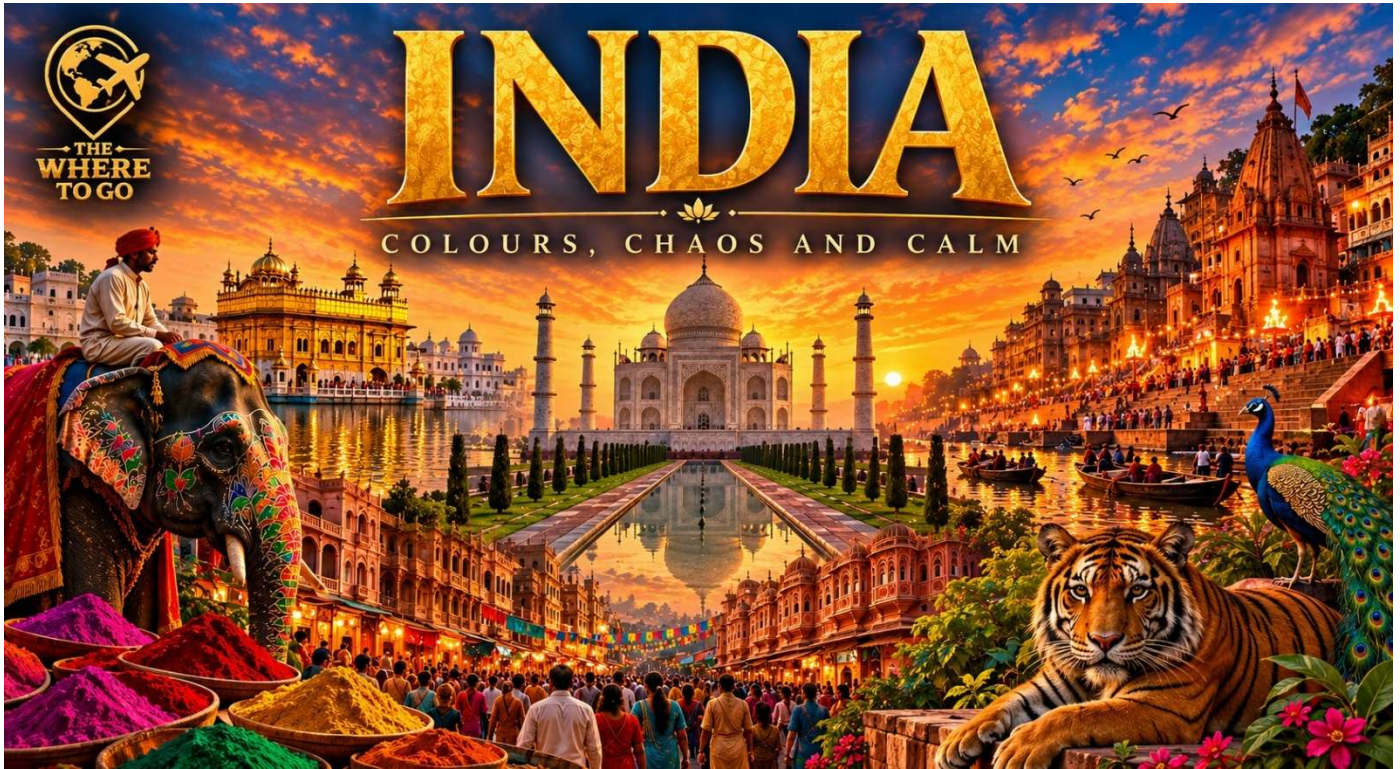
There were certainly moments that were impossible to ignore. The evening Ganga Aarti at Dashashwamedh Ghat is genuinely mesmerising, with fire, music, chanting and hundreds of people gathered along the river. The ghats themselves remain extraordinary because they bring so many aspects of life together in one place: prayer, bathing, commerce, celebration, death and cremation.

Yet I still found Varanasi difficult to embrace completely. The persistent hawkers, particularly those trying to persuade you to visit their silk shops, can become exhausting, and any expression of interest seems to guarantee their company for the remainder of your stay. The excessive queues to visit the temples can also be exhaustive and frustrating.

Interestingly, it was Sarnath that affected me most. Its quietness and sense of contemplation provided a striking contrast with Varanasi itself, and I found the Buddhist archaeological site far more conducive to reflection. Perhaps that is the most honest conclusion I can draw:.....Varanasi remains a city I admire enormously, but Sarnath was the place that spoke to me.



Chapter 13



Reflections on India

So, after travelling thousands of miles, visiting many very different cities and experiencing rather more planes, trains, cars, rickshaws, boats and buses than I care to remember, what do I actually make of India? The easiest answer is probably the one I gave the book from the beginning: colours, chaos and calm. The more I have travelled, the more I have realised that these three words genuinely describe the experience.

The colours are everywhere. They are in the brilliant gold of the Golden Temple, the terracotta streets of Jaipur, the palaces of Mysuru, the churches of Goa, the markets of Kochi and the extraordinary buildings of Mumbai and Kolkata. They are in the food, fabrics, flowers and festivals. India rarely does anything by halves, and even an ordinary street can become a scene worth photographing.

Then there is the chaos. India can be noisy, crowded, dusty, congested and occasionally exhausting. Traffic appears to operate according to rules that are not always obvious, while pedestrians, cars, buses, motorbikes, tuk-tuks, cows and delivery vehicles somehow share the same roads. Railway stations can be overwhelming and travelling between places does not always go according to plan.

Yet the remarkable thing is that the chaos usually works. Somehow millions of people get to where they need to go, trains arrive, markets function and life continues. What initially looks disorganised often has its own logic. Perhaps the problem is not that India is chaotic, but that I was trying to impose my own definition of order upon it.

And then there is the calm. It appears in the most unexpected places: the early morning light around the Golden Temple, the gardens of Gandhi Smriti, the quiet spaces of temples and churches, the backwaters of Kerala and, for me, particularly Sarnath. Away from the intensity of Varanasi, Sarnath provided a sense of contemplation that I found surprisingly moving.

The journey also reminded me that India cannot be understood through its famous monuments alone. Some of my most memorable experiences came from simply watching India function... pilgrims at the Golden Temple, workers at Dhobi Ghat, passengers pouring through CST, fishermen in Kochi and the endless movement of ordinary life.

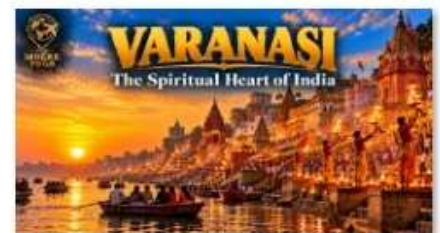
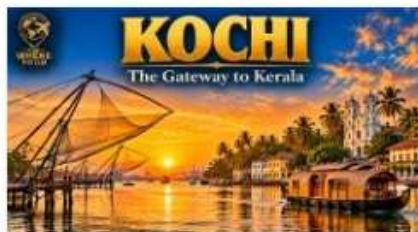
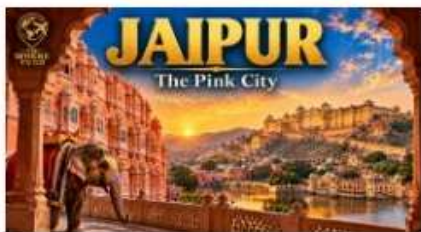
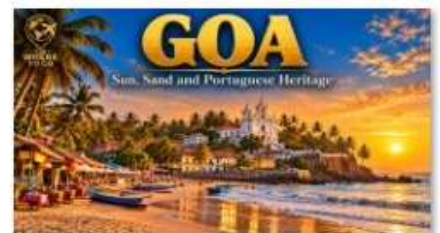
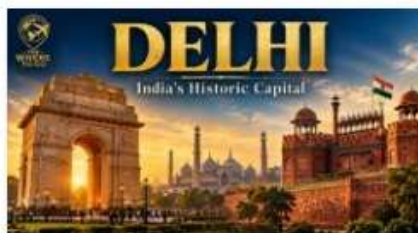
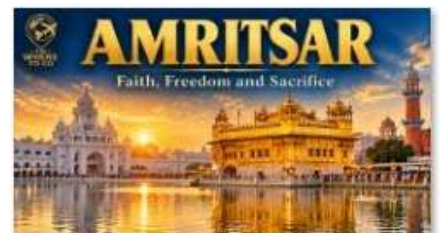
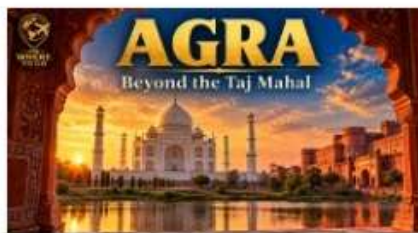
Architecture was inevitably one of the threads running through my journey. India is an architectural history book on an almost unimaginable scale. What makes it fascinating is that these traditions exist alongside modern airports, metro systems and ambitious infrastructure projects. Ancient and modern India exist side by side.

India is beautiful and untidy, ancient and modern, spiritual and commercial, peaceful and frenetic, welcoming and occasionally frustrating. It can leave you exhausted one minute and fascinated again the next. Would I return? Almost certainly. There are still enormous parts of the country that I have not seen, and even the places I have visited have revealed only a fraction of what they contain.

That is perhaps the most exciting thing about India.... the more you see, the more you realise how little you have seen. I leave India with thousands of photographs, countless stories and a slightly greater understanding of a country that is almost impossible to understand completely. India has surprised me, entertained me, fascinated me and, on several occasions, genuinely moved me.

I came looking for the colours, experienced more than my fair share of the chaos, and along the way discovered rather more calm than I expected. Perhaps that is what travel should do. It should not simply confirm what you already expect. It should challenge it. India certainly did that. Colours, chaos and calm.....three words that seem to me to capture India rather perfectly.

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