

Memories Etched in Stone

Adorning India's spiritual landscape are beautiful shrines, which are also repositories of history. Here's a tribute to the stunning beauty of a few of these UNESCO World Heritage sites

TEXT: BINDU GOPAL RAO

India, a tapestry woven with threads of spirituality, unfurls its divine essence through an array of enchanting shrines. These sacred sanctuaries, repositories of history, stand proudly etched into the annals of time. As World Heritage Day graces us annually on April 18, here's a curated list of spiritual heritage sites with celestial architecture.

HAMPI GROUP OF TEMPLES

Nestled amidst a landscape of majestic granite boulders, Hampi, in Karnataka, once stood as the pulsating heart of the formidable Vijayanagara empire. The ensemble of monuments, proudly standing against the backdrop of the Tungabhadra River and rugged hills, encompasses temples, regal enclosures, grand pillared halls, and intricate water management system. Among these treasures lies the resplendent Vijaya Vitthala temple complex, harbouring the iconic stone chariot.

The temple's grandeur unfolds through a main hall, a ceremonial marriage hall, a divine abode for the Goddess, a festive celebration hall, and the renowned musical pillars, each emitting enchanting notes. The Virupaksha temple, a solitary sanctuary of worship, boasts a splendid spire visible from afar, while the Queen's Bath and Elephant Stables stand as additional must-visit marvels.



FOOD

Sample local dishes like *chitranna* (lemon rice), *tambuli* (curd-based side dish), and *Haalbai* (sweet cake).



GOOD TO KNOW

Around 140 km away is the formidable Chitradurga Fort, famed for its water harvesting system.



Image: jeffreyszaw.compendium.com

KHAJURAHO TEMPLE COMPLEX

In Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, stands a captivating complex of medieval temples. Constructed by the Chandela rulers, this UNESCO-listed site is one of India's most popular tourist destinations, renowned for its Nagara-style architecture and elegant sculptures depicting *nayikas* (Hindu mythological female protagonists) and deities. According to historical records, Khajuraho boasted 85 temples during the 12th century. However, only 25 have withstood the ravages of time. Notably, the Kandariya Mahadeva temple reigns supreme among them, with a height of 117 ft, its spires ascending in a sequence reminiscent of rolling hills. Visit other temples such as the Vamana temple, Javari temple, Parsvanatha temple, and the Duladeo and Chaturbhujia temples. Check out the Adivart Tribal and Folk Art Museum to round out your cultural excursion.



FOOD

Try *murar ke kebabs*, *kodu til ka baat* (rice with black sesame), *samosa* and *daal baati*.



GOOD TO KNOW

Located about 45 minutes from the temple complex is the beautiful Panna National Park on the bank of Ken River. Enjoy wildlife safari and river rafting.



AD

MAHABODHI TEMPLE

The Mahabodhi Temple complex at Bodh Gaya, Bihar, shares a profound connection with the enlightenment of Lord Buddha, tracing its origins back to the 5th and 6th centuries. A testament to the enduring strength of early brick constructions, the temple, believed to have been erected during the late Gupta period, stands as an architectural marvel. Its soaring spire is adorned with niches, arch motifs, and exquisite engravings, cradling a Lord Buddha's shrine encased in glass. Within the expansive complex, the Bodhi tree, witnessing the transformative moment of Buddha's enlightenment, stands as a sacred witness to history. Beyond the central temple, the complex unfolds with six sacred locations, accompanied by an enchanting Lotus Pond. The Animeshlochan Chaitya, a prayer hall, cradles the aura where Buddha is thought to have spent the second week post-enlightenment.

GOOD TO KNOW

Visit the colossal 80ft Buddha statue nearby and the Dungeshwari caves, believed to be the place where Lord Buddha meditated. One of the cave temples here is dedicated to Goddess Dungeshwari.



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FOOD
Savour *litti chokha*, and *dahi vada*. For dessert, try *thekua* and *laung lata*.



KONARK SUN TEMPLE

Built under the rule of King Narasimhadeva I from the Eastern Ganga dynasty in 1250 AD, the Konark Sun Temple in Odisha stands as an awe-inspiring testament to the architectural prowess of Indian artisans. Adorned with 24 intricately carved wheels, each bearing symbolic designs, this temple is a majestic representation of the Sun God's celestial chariot, gracefully drawn by seven majestic horses. Explore the remnants of the main temple, the regal Jagamohana audience hall, and the sun dials adorned with intricately carved wheels and spokes that serve as sundials. Wander through the roofless Nata Mandapa, featuring 16 pillars adorned with exquisite carvings, and discover the echoes of the kitchen and the Chhayadevi temple within the expansive complex. The temple site is also where the annual Konark Dance Festival is held, attended by people in large numbers.



GOOD TO KNOW

For insight into the temple's history, visit the ASI Museum that has galleries that display hundreds of artefacts recovered from the temple complex.



FOOD

Taste *dalma* (lentil dish), *pakhala* (fermented rice) and the delicious *pitha* (cereal based steamed cake).



AD

SANCHI STUPA

Situated approximately 50 km from Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, Sanchi boasts an ensemble of stupas, monolithic pillars, palaces, temples, and monasteries dating back to the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. Known as the oldest Buddhist sanctuary in existence, it was a major Buddhist centre in India until the 12th century. The crown jewel of this historical panorama is the Great Stupa, masterfully crafted under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka. The stupa showcases a commanding hemispherical dome encircled by four grand gateways adorned with intricate carvings and sculptures, narrating profound tales from the life of Buddha. Don't miss Stupa No. 2 and Stupa No. 3, perched atop the Sanchi hill, which stand as silent storytellers of a bygone era. To the south of the Great Stupa stands the Ashoka Pillar, an elegant structure featuring four lions standing back to back at its crown, proudly serving as India's National Emblem. Also, explore the nearby Udayagiri caves with ancient rock-cut architecture.



GOOD TO KNOW

Visit the ASI maintained Sanchi museum, at the foothills of the Stupa, to see Buddhist artefacts that have been found during the excavation done here.



FOOD



Try the popular *poha jalebi* for breakfast and the traditional *dal bafli*, among other delicacies.

MAHABALIPURAM COMPLEX

A sublime reverie in stone by the sea is the enchanting narrative spun by the Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram) group of monuments, conceived and brought to life under the Pallava kings during the 7th and 8th centuries. Among the mesmerising structures, the Shore Temple emerges as a masterpiece, hewn from granite and standing as a beacon of Dravidian architecture. Its two sanctums are devoted to Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. The open-air rock relief known as Arjuna's Penance tells a celestial tale, intricately carved onto two monolithic boulders. It vividly portrays the Ganga River's celestial descent from heaven to Earth. As you navigate the complex, the Pancha Rathas (Five Chariots) beckon, paying homage to each of the Pandavas from the *Mahabharata*. These monolithic temples stand adorned with an array of artistic motifs and wall panels that bring Hindu deities to life. Embark on a journey through Mamallapuram, where the echoes of craftsmanship resonate through time.



Image: media.meer.com



GOOD TO KNOW

The Seashell Museum is a must-see to understand how diverse and varied shells can be. There is a display of the smallest shell in the world which is just the size of a grain.



FOOD

Try authentic *elai saapadu* (banana leaf meal), *dosa*, *vada*, and freshly brewed filter coffee.



AD

BASILICA OF BOM JESUS

Located in Old Goa, the resplendent Basilica of Bom Jesus was commissioned between 1594 and 1605, and cradles the sacred remains of the zealous missionary, St. Francis Xavier. Crafted from black granite, the church emerges as an architectural symphony, a captivating ode to the opulence of Renaissance Baroque entwined with the grace of Portuguese colonial design. Step beyond the threshold, and the simplicity of a wooden ceiling warmly embraces you. The focal point, however, is in the grandeur of the ornamental screen that graces the altar. Also explore the art gallery with vivid canvases that depict scenes from biblical tales. Whispers of reverence echo through the hallowed halls, as the gallery stands proudly, said to be one of the largest of its kind in all of Asia.



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FOOD

Taste tangy *ambot tik* (fish curry), *biyaam tondak* (coconut gravy with cashew nuts) and varieties of seafood.



GOOD TO KNOW

A visit to the Se Cathedral, across the road is a must. A museum is also in the vicinity. Visit the Candolim beach nearby and enjoy water activities.

BRIHADEESWARA TEMPLE



Towering sky-high in Tamil Nadu's Thanjavur, the Brihadeeswara Temple stands as a celestial marvel, a testament to the grandeur of Chola craftsmanship under the reign of Emperor Rajaraja I between 1003 and 1010 CE. Aptly christened the 'Big Temple,' this sanctuary sprawls across the town's skyline, its towering silhouette and intricate carvings embodying a meticulously planned architectural symphony. A unique arrangement of stones ensures that no shadow falls on the temple grounds. The colossal 80-tonne granite dome, pays tribute to human ingenuity. Its exterior, adorned with carvings, intricately captures the 81 postures of the classical dance form of Bharatanatyam. The mammoth structure, crafted solely with natural colours, stands proud without the use of cement, soil, or traditional binding agents. Instead, interlocking stones become the poetry of its construction. Earning its place among the illustrious 'Great Living Chola Temples,' this architectural marvel houses a colossal Nandi statue, chiseled from a single rock.

FOOD

Sample *kelyachi bhaji* (made with raw banana), traditional *kichadi*, and the sweet *thirattippal*.



GOOD TO KNOW

Visit the Maratha Palace Complex, which houses the Mahratta Durbar Hall with vibrant frescoes and the Saraswati Mahal Library. Also, pick up the famous Thanjavur dancing dolls.



AD