

City of magnificence

Agra is still known as the city of Shahs and Kings. Each monument tells a part of the history of India. While Taj Mahal depicts love, Agra Fort talks about the might of the Mughal Empire. Here is a small snapshot of this magnificent city.

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The moment you step in the city of Agra, you can feel the history beckoning you. The hustle and bustle of the city reminds one of Old Delhi. With its narrow streets, rickshaws, and small shops, no one can mistake it for anything else but the once capital of the Mughal empire. The city has held back its old roots yet it has gone ahead with the times. Agra has its share of malls and multiplexes. The city, however, is predominantly 'Mughal' in its look and feel.

Taj Mahal

Taj Mahal needs no introduction. Most people know Agra because of Taj Mahal. This white monument is revered far and wide because of its fascinating history. Mughal emperor Shahjahan built it for his wife Mumtaz Mahal, who had died while giving birth to her 14th child. It is considered the finest example of Mughal architecture, a style that combines elements from Persian, Turkish, Indian, and Islamic architectural styles. In 1983, the Taj Mahal became a UNESCO

World Heritage Site and was cited as "the jewel of Muslim art in India and one of universally admired masterpieces of the world heritage." The focus of Taj Mahal is the white marble tomb, which stands on a square plinth consisting of a symmetrical building with an iwan, an arch-shaped doorway, topped by a large dome. Like most Mughal tombs, basic elements are Persian in origin. The exterior decoration of Taj Mahal was done by applying paint or stucco, and by stone inlays or carvings. In line



with the Islamic prohibition against the use of anthropomorphic forms, the decorative elements can be grouped into calligraphy, abstract forms or vegetative motifs. The interior chamber of the Taj Mahal steps far beyond traditional decorative elements.

VITAL INFO

Location: Northern India

Best time to visit: During the winter months (October – January)

Local language: Hindi, Urdu

Near to Taj Mahal, foundation was laid for a black Taj Mahal, which Shahjahan was building for himself. He wanted his mausoleum to stand right next to Taj Mahal, as he wanted to stay united with his wife even after death. Mumtaz Mahal's grave is in the basement of Taj Mahal, but unfortunately it is out of bounds for visitors.

Taj Mahal is the perfect example of Indo-Islamic architecture. It is believed that it took nearly 20,000 workers, 32 million rupees and 22 years to complete this epitome of love. Taj Mahal is adorned by delicately executed inlay work known as Pietra Dura. Many precious and semi-precious stones like Jade, Jasper, Sapphire, and Turquoise had been weaved into the architecture.

Fatehpur Sikri

Fatehpur Sikri narrates the most glorious chapter of the Mughal history. It was under the rule of Jalaluddin Mohammed Akbar that Fatehpur Sikri was built. There are different theories pertaining to its construction. Akbar was a devout of Saint Salim Chishti. He regularly prayed for a son and finally when he was blessed with Salim, who later became popular as Jahangir, he built the Fatehpur Sikri in the honour of Salim Chishti. It is said that the 'forbidden city' was built exactly as per the saint's guidance. The other reason cited for the construction of the city is that Akbar saw Fatehpur Sikri as the perfect middle point between his northern and southern part of the empire. By shifting his capital here, he could rule over his entire empire efficiently. While there is no definite story, it is a delight to unravel and discover these interesting bits of news.

Fatehpur Sikri remained the capital of Agra for 13 years. After that, the capital had to be shifted again due to water shortage.

The architecture of Fatehpur Sikri was done so as to accommodate a whole city there. With effective drainage system, earmarked residential area, Meena Bazaar, and earmarked entertainment area (Anup Talao), Fatehpur Sikri is no less than an urban city complex. It has

always been an enchanting study for architects and historians.

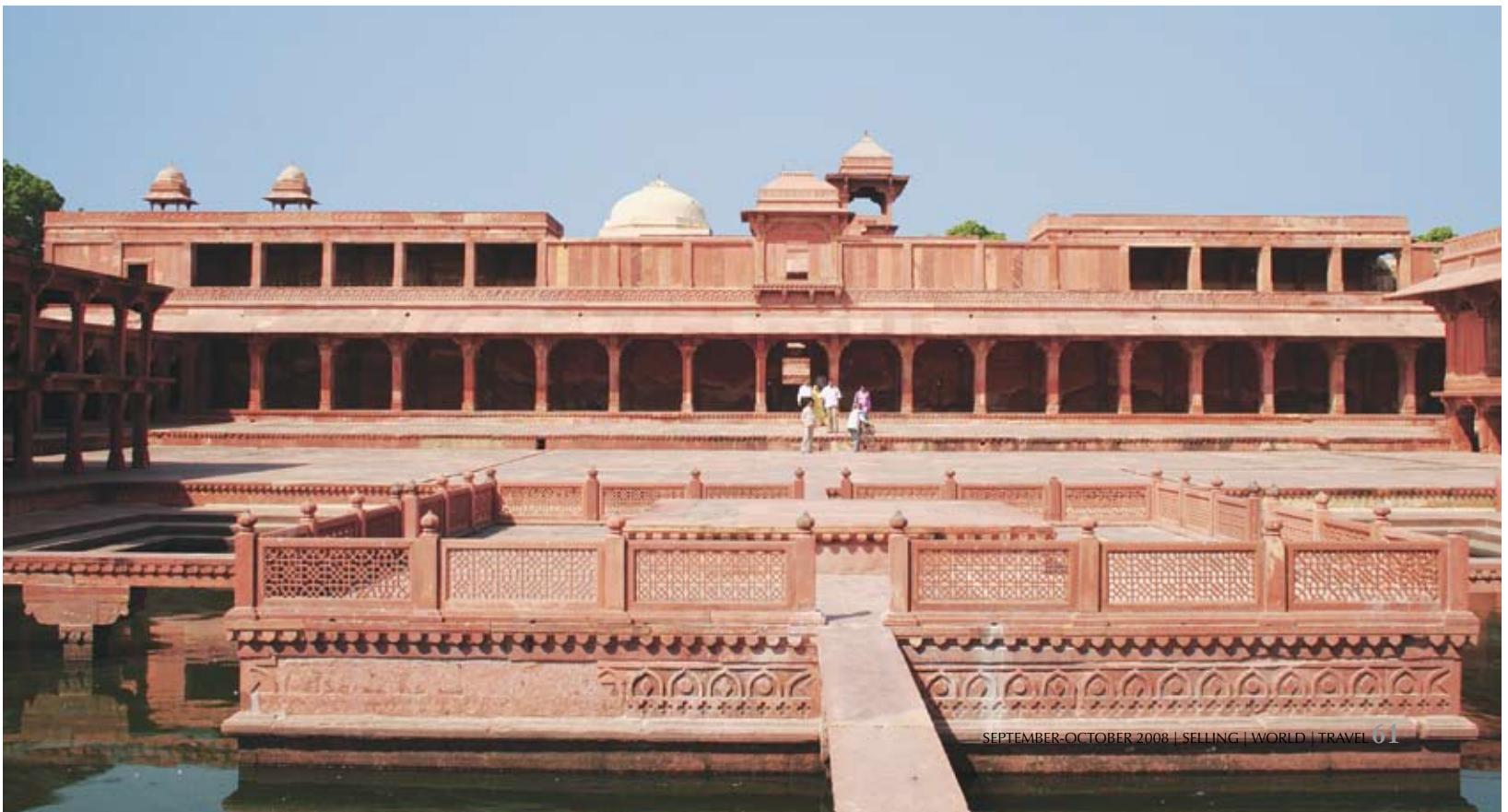
HOW TO REACH

■ **By air:** Agra airport is 7 km from the city center and 3 km from Idgah bus stand. Major Indian airlines operate daily tourist shuttle flights to Agra. It only takes 40 minutes from Delhi to Agra.

■ **By road:** Idgah bus stand is the main bus stand of Agra. Regular buses ply to this stand.

■ **By rail:** Agra is well connected by railroad. The main railway station is the Agra Cantonment station. Agra is well connected by rail to Delhi, Varanasi and cities of Rajasthan. Trains like Palace on Wheel, Shatabdi, Rajdhani, and Taj Express are the best choices if you want to reach Agra from Delhi in luxury.

Fatehpur Sikri has been built in red sandstone. Salim Chisti's dargah was also initially made of red sandstone. It was laid with marble later during Akbar's period. The architecture of Fatehpur Sikri is done by amalgamating the features and art of each religion. Akbar, who was considered to be a secular king, had incepted the religion Din-I-Ilahi. The



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religion was formed keeping in mind the ideologies of various other religions like Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. The architecture, therefore, was also done according to all religions.

The entrance of Fatehpur Sikri is known as Buland Darwaza. This huge doorway is built with red sandstone with ornate marble carvings. Calligraphic inscriptions from the Quran on the door, the pillars and the chhatra, make it a truly impressive structure.

Some of the landmarks in Fatehpur Sikri are Hawa Mahal (Jodha Bai's palace), Salim Chisti ki dargah, Diwan-e-khas, Diwan-e-aam, Anup Talao, and so on. Also, there is a mammoth chessboard made on the floor. Human beings were used as pawns instead of the usual chess pieces to play the game.

Agra Fort

Agra Fort was built by Akbar in 1565. Though it was constructed mainly for military purposes, Shahjahan later converted a part of it into a palace. This 20 meter high fort is surrounded by a moat which was constructed to provide security to the fort. The moat was filled with water, and crocodiles swam in the water to prevent invaders from entering the fort.

Inside the Agra Fort, Akbar had taken care to build an effective drainage system. The Fort is much famous for this feature which many city builders have not been able to accomplish till today. It also



houses the Diwan-e-khas and Diwan-e-aam like other Mughal structures.

Aurangzeb had imprisoned his father, Shahjahan, over here during his house arrest. Shah Jahan breathed his last viewing the Taj Mahal from Agra fort. The Sheesh Mahal is also within this fort. It is, however, closed for tourists to prevent its further degeneration.

Itmad-ud-Daulah

Itmad-ud-Daulah is one of the first few monuments from the Mughal era that was built on a river bank. Also known as 'baby Taj', the structure houses the grave of Mirza Ghiyas Beg, father of Jahangir's wife, Noor Jahan. Itmad-ud-Daulah has many features which were

later incorporated in the structure of Taj Mahal. Interestingly, the inscriptions on it are considered to be better than those on Taj Mahal.

Another unique feature of this monument is that it has been designed in the Central Asian pattern of domed structure, complete with well-laid gardens, waterways and paths laid out in a geometrical pattern. It is also one of the first Mughal structures to use the Pietra Dura style of inlay work.

Dayalbagh Gardens

Also known as the 'garden of the Supreme Lord', the Dayalbagh Garden is located 15 kms from Agra. It is the headquarter of the Radhasoami religious



HOW TO MOVE AROUND

You can travel to different parts of Agra using different modes of transport like taxi, tempo, auto-rickshaw and cycle rickshaw from the Taj Mahal area. Prepaid taxis and autos from the railway station are available. Prepaid transport is also available for excursions in and around the city limits. Bicycles can be hired on hourly basis from different parts of the city. It is to be remembered that no diesel or petrol vehicle are allowed to ply in the Taj Mahal area. Battery-operated buses, horse-driven tongas, rickshaws and other pollution-free vehicles are allowed to conserve the beauty of this great monument.

sect, which was founded in 1861 by Shri Shiv Dayal Singh. The Radhasoami Movement combines elements from Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism.

ACCOMMODATION

Agra has all kinds of accommodation, from budget to luxury.

Shiv Dayal Sahib, popularly known as Soami Maharaj by his disciples, used to live in Dayalbagh. He is worshipped at this grand memorial which is a combination of temple, gurudwara, vihara and mosque. The Radhasoami Memorial is 110 feet high, has impressive pillars and is made of pure white marble. The building is under construction now. Interestingly, it is said that work has been going on at this building for the last 100 years. The Dayalbagh Gardens would surely be an interesting place to visit for connoisseurs of art, who would love to watch the skilled artisans and marble cutters at work.

Akbar's Tomb

This great ruler's final resting place is located at Sikandara. Akbar himself had started the construction of this tomb, but Jahangir completed it. Akbar's Tomb has been built in the beautiful Indo-Saracenic style with a variety of beautiful

designs and carvings covering it. Buland Darwaza has been constructed here also as the entrance of the tomb. Akbar's Tomb is surrounded by lush gardens laid out in the charbagh style.

The splendid gateway is adorned with four minars and displays some striking inlay work of white marble on red sandstone. An open terrace with large panels of jail screens adds to the austere beauty of this structure. Lavish stucco paintings in gold, blue, brown and green colours adorn the portico in front of the grave at the basement. Close by stands the red sandstone tomb of Jahangir's mother.

Shopping

Agra is a haven for shoppers. The variety starts from sweets, souvenirs, to shoes and jewellery. One of the most famous sweet house in Agra is Panchhi. Their *pethas* and *dal-biji* are much famous for their quality and delicious taste. Anybody who goes to Agra, takes a good quota of Panchhi's delicacies back home.

Agra is also famous for its leather goods. The leather factories produce quality hand bags and shoes for shoppers. To add to the bargain, they are affordable too! Inside the Taj Mahal complex, there is a small market which sells such shoes. There are also shops which sell special saris made from banana leaves. The

beautiful design on these saris are much similar to Mughalai design. The unique fabric guarantees that you stand out in the crowd.

Shopping is not complete without buying the mini Taj Mahal. Available in varying sizes, this small white structure is a good gift to express your love. It is also a good souvenir to remember your trip to Agra.

Apart from mini Taj Mahal, artisans also make various other kinds of artifacts from marble that travellers can buy as souvenirs. The most sought after are the *Jali* work creations. *Jali* in Hindi refers to net. Signifying that, the artifacts produce a see-through kind of an effect. A large elephant with *jali* work holds another elephant inside it with *jali* work, which again holds a smaller elephant of *jali* work inside it. The trick is that how many elephants you can discern in the showpiece.

Apart from this, marble candle stands, trays, pen stands, mirror, etc. can be found here. The most popular markets here are Sadar Bazaar, Kinari Bazaar and Munroe Road. So do not forget to take that special souvenir back home!

Agra is a strong reminder of the glorious history of India. It tells the tale of our country in a very beautiful way through all these landmarks. Be sure to keep your ears open lest you miss out on that wafting little story. ■

