



THE FORGOTTEN EMPIRE

The ruins of Hampi, a world heritage site, are testimony to the beauty of creation and the

brutality of destruction that the place witnessed over the years, says **Navneet Sandhu**

My four-day vacation at Hampi in Karnataka turned out to be one that left me simply awestruck with its rich heritage. Set on the banks of the Tungabhadra river, Hampi, the capital of the Vijayanagar Empire (1336-1565 AD) is a canvas set in the bygone era, blending tales of gallantry, glory and greatness of the epics and medieval history. Each boulder at the ruins at Hampi has a tale to tell about the beauty of creation and the brutality of destruction at the hands of the confederation of the Deccan kings. Hampi is also the mythological Kishkinda, the kingdom of Sugriva and the birthplace of Hanuman. Traces of the classic exists everywhere, from the temple built on top of the Anjanaye hill where Hanuman was born to the cave where

Surgriva took shelter and the fortress which his brother, Bali had usurped and the splendidly carved *rangoli* on the boulder where Lord Rama coronated Vibhishan as the king of Lanka.

I had put up at the KSTDC Hotel Mayura Bhuvaneshwari at Kamalapur, just three km away from the world heritage site. So, just a short drive later, I came across the first astounding structure, a 6.7-metre statue of Urga Narsimha, carved from a single stone. Its overpowering presence beside the nearly six-feet high Badavilinga Shiva temple set the pace for sighting other monolithic sculptural marvels dotting the whole of Hampi. My next stop was at the Krishna temple, a typical example showcasing the classical designs of all the temples built by the Vijayanagar Rayas. The temples have

intricate carvings of celestial figures on stone pillars while the *gopuram* is made of brick and limestone. A little away from there, I came across the mammoth 4.6 metre-high Kadalekalu Ganesha statue which fell prey to the destructive onslaught. While the huge belly of the beloved deity had been broken and scarred, the amazing idol of Sasivekalu Ganesha nearby remained intact. Carved out of brown stone, the omniscient intelligent eyes and the mustard seed shaped belly took my breath away.

Behind the compound area were several temples scattered on the Matunga Hill, built from time to time by various nobles and royal family members. This place also provides a view of the

HERITAGE TRAIL:
Tourists look for the many historical tales associated with the place as they take a stroll around the ruins of Hampi

majestic Virupaksha temple built in the seventh century on the banks of the Tungabhadra River. The temple dedicated to Lord Shiva and his consorts, Goddess Pampa and Bhuvaneshwari, has been in worship through the troubled times. The architectural delights apart, what makes for every photographer's delight here, is the resident elephant Lakshmi, who blesses all devotees who gather here. And the experience of seeing these magnificent elephants bathing in the river nearby, seemed like an unbelievable moment to be recounted over and over again at evening tête-à-têtes.

After this awe-inspiring feat, I was in for a surprise at the Lotus Mahal and Elephant Stables, both of which are a distinct



Sitting on the stairs of the famous Vithala temple, I lost myself to the bygone era with a statuette

blend of Islamic and Hindu sensibilities. The double-storeyed ladies pavilion amidst wonderfully-manicured lawns with delicate lattice carvings is bound to take your breath away. And the specially-built elephant stables are a reminder about the place of pride elephants occupied during those times. Next on my agenda were the Royal Enclosure, especially the underground royal mint, the bathing well and of course, the Mahanavami Dibba or the platform from where the mighty Krishnadeva Raya, under whom the Vijayanagar empire rose to its peak, watched the sacrifices and procession during the nine-day Navami festivities.

My final destination of the day was the Vithala temple with its 56 musical pillars that reverberate when tapped and the

PRISTINE GLORY: (from left to right) The pushkarani or stepped water tank near Vithala temple; the deity being carried through the frontyard of the Virupaksha temple

magnificent ornate stone chariot in the courtyard, the sheer creativity, ingenuity and originality of which is astounding. It is not surprising that the monument was declared a world heritage site in 1986 and is presently undergoing restoration for posterity. Sitting on the stairs for a moment, I lost myself to the bygone era with a statuette of Garuda guiding the chariot towards the temple, the jingling

bells of the dancing girls to the music created on stone pillars and the legendary Rayas in their sheer finery.

After feasting on history throughout the first day, I decided to pursue mythology on the next. I drove down to the opposite Anjanaye hills where after a steep climb of 532 steps, I reached the place where Hanuman was born. The young *pujari* was more than willing to narrate the



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Navigator

GETTING THERE

By air: [Belgaum is the nearest airport, 190 km away](#)

By rail: [The nearest railway station is Hospet, 13 km away and offers a good number of trains](#)

By road: [A good set-up of roads connect Hampi to all major towns of Karnataka and the surrounding areas. KSRTC buses offer services on regular basis from Hospet to Hampi. Taxis and autos are a good medium to explore the ruins](#)

WHERE TO STAY

[Mandi has a host of places, both big and small, to choose from. You can try Hampi's Boulders Resort, Tariff: Rs 6,000 onwards, Tel: 08394 265939; Kishkinda Village Resort, Tariff: Rs 2,000 onwards, Mob: 9448377364, resort@kishkindaheritage.com; KSTDC Mayura Bhuvaneshwari, Tariff: Rs 1200 onwards, Tel: 241574](#)

heroic tales from the Ramayana and point out various important sites in Kishkinda.

For me, following the footsteps of Lord Rama during his stay at Kishkinda, was like a spiritual journey. I then drove past the longest dam in Southern India, the Tungabhadra Dam and came back to complete the sights of the colossal sculptures in stone comprising the Hazar Rama, Pattabhirama and Achuta Raya's temples. In the evening, I dared to take a coracle ride to Aneundi village. Sitting in the small round boat that was spun around by a single oar on the roaring Tungabhadra was both petrifying and exhilarating.

As the sun set over the silhouettes of the Hampi ruins, the orange hue cast its shadow on the remnants of two golden eras – the Treta yug and the Vijayanagar rule – witnessed by these mute boulders, I left Hampi with a song in my heart. ■