

Chambers Of Secrets

Not for nothing are the Ajanta and Ellora caves world-renowned. Even repeated visits do not dim the beauty of these 64 caves.

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The *Jataka Tales* are indelibly etched in my mind, being favourite reading when I was a child. These stories were full of Buddhist ideals yet, laced with humour, they were entertaining and unforgettable. The life of the Buddha has been a fascinating Indian perennial and the *Jataka Tales* are a voluminous narrative of his previous births, his lives in both human and animal form and the future Buddha.

And so, when I first set foot in the gorge around the Ajanta caves, I was enveloped by a sense of the miraculous—as if the stories I had read as a child were going to come alive in these caves. The Buddha's glorious life and times are narrated through illustrative forms such as paintings, sculptures, carvings and inscriptions—all on a vast scale and with stupendous magnificence.

“Architecture should speak of its time and place, but yearn for timelessness,” said Frank Gehry. And the Ajanta and Ellora caves are a standing testimony to the timelessness of India's heritage. Located in Aurangabad in Maharashtra, they are one of India's best-preserved sites and are on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

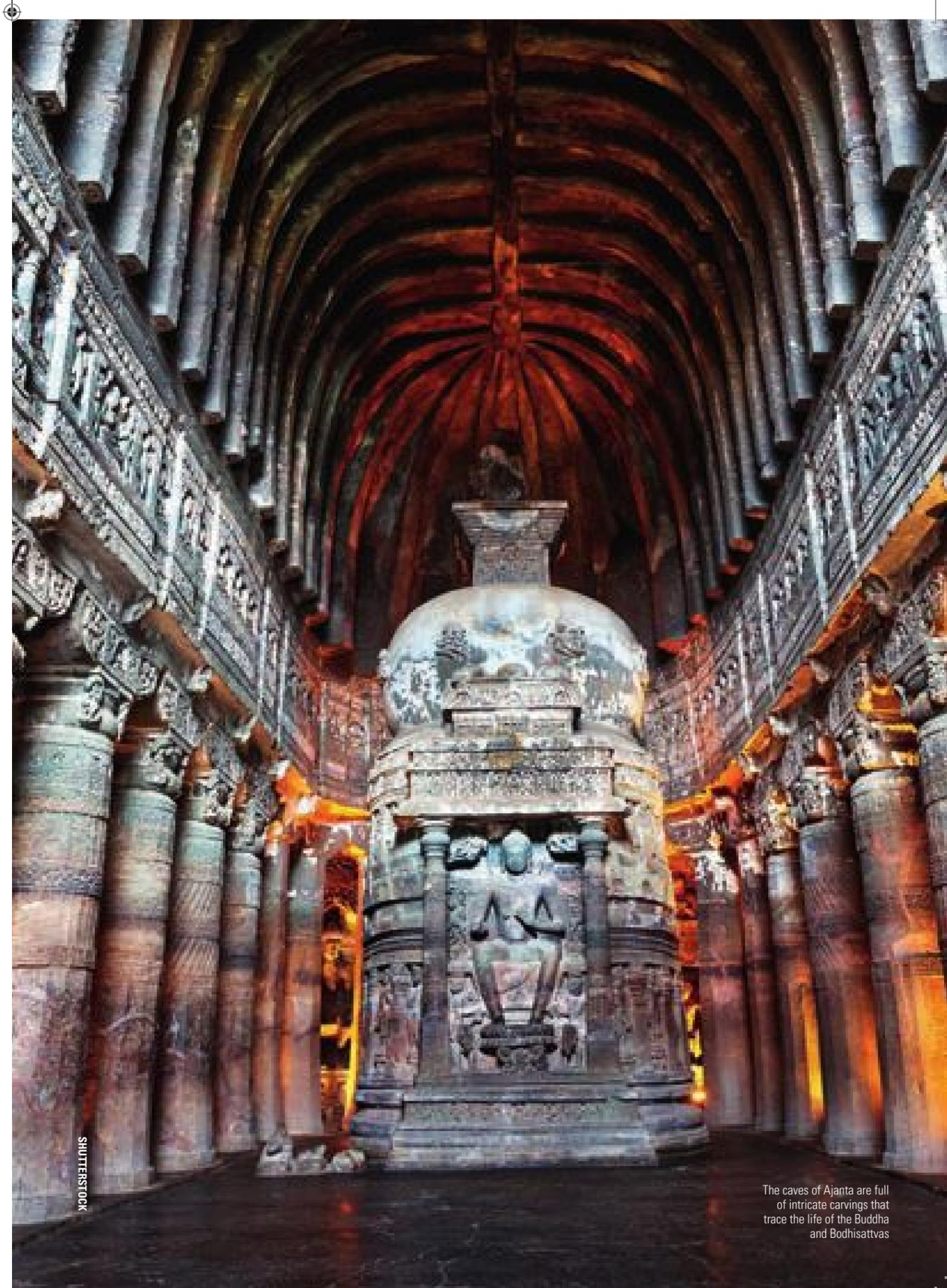
AJANTA

The Ajanta caves date from the second century to about 480 CE. Abandoned in the fifth century and unknown for close to 1,400 years, except perhaps to the local Bhils,

this magnificent monument of architecture and art was rediscovered in 1819. A young British cavalry officer, John Smith, and his British soldiers, on a tiger hunt, accidentally discovered the Ajanta caves. Spotting the mouth of a cave high above the Waghora stream, they thought that it could only be man-made, at that height. So they scrambled up, entered the cave with a flaming grass torch and came upon a colonnaded hall, superbly vaulted with faded paintings on its walls. Beneath a dome, Smith saw a statue of a praying Buddha. This was the rediscovery of Ajanta.

I had never imagined that there would be 30 hand-chiselled caves nestled amidst the mammoth horseshoe-shaped rocks in the Sahyadri hills of Aurangabad. They were apparently cut into a semi-circular scarp of a steep rock about 76 metres high, overlooking a narrow gorge. Standing amidst the massive expanse of Ajanta, the visitor cannot but be overcome with admiration for the unflinching effort, mastery and passion of the artisans who created these caves. The work began under the patronage of the Satavahana dynasty. Of the 30 caves, five are sanctuary halls or *chaityagrihas*, while the remainder are monasteries or *viharas*. They served as sanctuaries for Buddhist monks during the monsoon.

Visiting the caves in succession, cut out of the amygdaloidal trap rock, I observed that the paintings and carvings were intensely religious in tone and theme, depicting the life and times of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. They are a sort of illustrated history of those times, with



Seen here are the Ellora Caves, which along with Ajanta are UNESCO World Heritage Sites



DREAMSTIME

Set amidst pristine waterfalls in a verdant valley, the caves feature some of the oldest and finest Indian art and sculpture



NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

Road Ajanta is 450 km east of Mumbai near Aurangabad. Ellora is 100 km from Ajanta.

Air The nearest airport is Aurangabad, 15 km away from Ellora.

Rail Daily trains are available from Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad, and so on to Aurangabad, the closest railhead.

STAY

Your best bet is to stay in Aurangabad that has several options such as Vivanta By Taj, The Oberoi and Lemon Tree, among others. There are plenty of properties in the city, across budgets.

DO

- Ajanta has 30 Buddhist caves, look for the Buddha in several postures.
- Visit Kailasha, the world's largest monolith temple, at Cave No. 16 in Ellora.

DISCOVER THIS

- Ajanta is one of those rare places where carvings from the second century BC to AD second century can be seen at the same spot. If you are walking into Cave 9 (Theravada temple), then you are amidst India's oldest paintings.
- The number of caves at Ellora is roughly 100; however, only 34 of them have been numbered by the ASI and the rest—about 66—are not known to visitors. Stand inside Cave 10 and maybe sing a song; it has a magical resonating sound, exclusive to this cave.

street scenes, court scenes, cameos of domestic life, animal and bird sanctuaries, and a variety of statues of the Buddha. My guide from Incredible India, Vinay Pathak, pointed out murals that are breathtaking in sweep and detail.

From Cave No. 16, I could see the Waghora stream descending gracefully as a waterfall on the other side. It attains its utmost breadth and volume in the monsoon. Since it was September, the valley was at its verdant best. The floor levels of the caves are not uniform; the lowest is Cave No. 8 and the highest Cave No. 29. Also, some are incomplete. I could discern the most prominent feature of the *chaityagrihas*—the imitation of wooden construction, including the general contour and details.

After Ajanta's rediscovery, artists from various countries have made copies of the paintings and murals as part of large projects, including the Bombay Cave Temple Commission, which was started by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1848. The Archaeological Society of India (ASI) refers to Ajanta as "the finest surviving example of Indian art, particularly paintings." Its architectural qualities, air of elegance and the serenity of the sculptures have made it world-renowned.

ELLORA

Australian architect Adolf Loos remarked, "Architecture arouses sentiments in humans. The architect's task therefore is to make those sentiments more precise." The Ellora caves are a fantastic example; anyone will experience the sentiments of wonder, awe, admiration, and respect, confronted by this spectacular piece of work.

Excavated out of the vertical face of the Charanadri hills, Ellora's 34 'caves' left me dumbfounded. These ancient caves are bestowed with rich styles, both in scale and detail, of not only Buddhist but also Hindu and Jain architecture. It is a splendid specimen of rock-cut architecture, a testament

to the imagination and artistry of its creators belonging to the Rashtrakuta dynasty.

My guide emphasised the caves that are not to be missed. Of the 34, 17 are Hindu, 12 Buddhist and five Jain. They are spread over a larger area, unlike the Ajanta caves, which are clustered together. I knew that I needed another trip to see them all and was able to visit for the second time in due course. Interestingly, this time, I could deduce a profound difference between the Buddhist caves at Ellora and those at Ajanta in terms of subject, arrangement and details.

Cave No. 16 at Ellora is overwhelmingly impressive, even the second time around. Kailasha (among the Brahmanical caves) is a temple and is awe-inspiring with its imposing proportions and stupendous workmanship. Illustrating Dravidian architecture, it encapsulates history in its sculptural ornamentation and architectural content. Buddha is always shown here with six, eight or 10 Bodhisattvas. Kailasha is also the world's largest monolith temple. Cave No. 10 (Visvakarma) is another must-visit—a fine example of a Chaitya temple, famous for its elaborate façade, open courtyard and a special corridor. Unlike the Ajanta caves, the ones at Ellora were never forgotten, perhaps because they lie on an ancient trade route (*dakshinapatha*).

My second trip left me feeling certain I need a third. Walking out, I thought about a beautiful adage by Dan Rice: "There are three forms of visual art—painting is art to look at, sculpture is art you can walk around and architecture is art you can walk through." As an architecture connoisseur, I had never imagined a day when I would see all three forms of visual art in a single place. At the Ajanta and Ellora caves, I saw exquisite paintings, walked around exotic sculptures and walked through magnificent architecture inside 64 caves, fashioned by human skill and endurance. It had me transported to another era. ♦