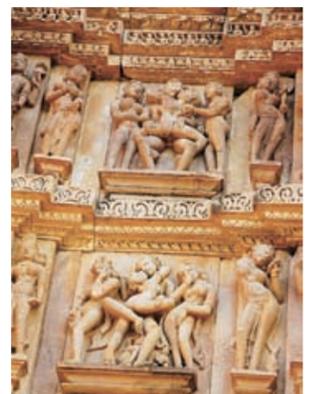




PHOTOGRAPHS BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

**Sexual healing:** For some, these sculptures symbolize the erotic and tantalizing, while for others they are the beauty of the human body personified in stone.



## KHAJURAHO

# Eyes wide open

The erotic and the everyday merge on the sculpted walls of the Khajuraho temples. Love and let love

BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

Al-Sultan al-Azam wal Khaqan al-Mukarram Abdul Muzaffar Muhiuddin Muhammad Aurangzeb Bahadur Alamgir I Padshah Ghazi turned his attention to the chief of internal espionage. He drew a weary breath and braced himself for bad news. His master spy always had bad news these days, what with the Marathas constantly threatening the Deccan and Mewar growing mightier by the day. Plus, there was a growing threat on the western seaboard. The *firangees*, who had arrived barely a century ago as traders, had fortified their factories and were making noises about rights. Aurangzeb suspected that these merchants of silks and spices had military designs on Hindustan.

But it wasn't of mortal combatants that the spy had come to report. His eyes sparkled and his face flushed as he described what he had stumbled upon during his journey to Bengal: a group of temples, overgrown by the jungle and known only to the locals, 152 kos (about 600km) southeast of Delhi. As the spy continued his narrative, Aurangzeb's ears began to burn. To think these displays—graphic acts that could not be condoned even behind the curtains of his harem—were out there, etched in stone, within the boundaries of the realm!

The emperor authorized the spy chief to have the temples demolished asap. But a spy has many enemies and, the next

morning, he was found in a questionable part of Delhi, a dagger in his back. And with him died the location of Khajuraho.

Was this the lucky break for the temples? Or is there another, equally fantastic tale of coincidences and compromises that was key to their survival? When it's Khajuraho, bereft of all but the most skeletal of histories, it's easy to let the imagination run wild.

What's not purely a figment of the imagination, though, is the way the 1,000-year-old temples sustain a village economy in a

Khajuraho, it's as in-your-face as a 70mm cinemascope screen.

The capital of the Chandela Rajputs between the ninth and 10th centuries, Khajuraho earned its permanent place on the modern tourist map over a mere 100 years. Only 22 of the 80-odd original temples are still around in some state of repair. Of these, the Western Group of temples—including the Varaha, Kendriya Mahadeva, Mahadeva and Lakshmana—are the best preserved. Expectedly, these are also the biggest tourist magnets. Blushes, titters and wide eyes are commonplace in front of the Lakshmana Temple, where frieze after frieze depicts poses and positions, techniques and tricks and combinations and convolutions—including a guide on how to use a horse for more than riding.

But why all the sex?

I put the question to Abhyank Tripathi, a guide I met at the local tea stall. There are a few theories, he explained. One is that the explicit carvings doubled up as life lessons for cloistered young temple priests, who would be thrust into matrimony without any real knowledge of the opposite sex. Another theory draws on Indra's supposed voyeurism. The

god of thunder apparently loved watching and the medieval artisans thought the carvings and sculptures were as good a bribe as any to protect their work from lightning. Well, it seems to have worked—if there was ever a grand capital here, nothing of it remains but the temples.

Tripathi's last theory, though,

was the most believable. "There is sex on the walls, but this is not porn: Khajuraho is about erotic art that celebrates the joy of procreation, the fundamental of any society," he says seriously. "That could explain why everyday scenes are woven into the erotica. The sculptors were simply depicting life as they saw it."

The medievals were obviously less conflicted about sex and sexuality, but once you accept that the temples are not about titillation, it's surprisingly easy to appreciate the symmetry of construction and the immaculately manicured lawns (a later addition: in their heyday, the temples are presumed to have been surrounded by trees).

The best time to do this is the narrow window between the opening of the gates and the arrival of the package tourists. It is during this calm before the storm of camera flashes and many dialects, when the slanting rays of the rising sun light up the sandstone in the colour of wild Indian honey, that Khajuraho is at its most sublime. Even after the hordes arrive, you can sit on the lawns and soak in the pleasure of being surrounded by the work of some of India's most creative minds ever.

In the evening, just after sunset, there is an interesting sound and light show narrated by Amitabh Bachchan in his fine baritone.

In between these dawn and dusk activities, the village of Khajuraho is a mellow place to explore. It's big enough not to induce claustrophobia and small enough to explore on foot or bicycle.

Clambering over rock and stone, you could be forgiven for feeling a bit like T.S. Burt, the British engineer who discovered Khajuraho in the mid-19th century. He had primly announced that the temples had "more detail than was called for". Obviously, he had never heard of Lord Indra.

Write to [lounge@livemint.com](mailto:lounge@livemint.com)



CHILD-FRIENDLY RATING

You need a certain level of maturity to appreciate Khajuraho. So save it up till that stage.

## TRIP PLANNER

How to get there:

Jhansi is the rail station closest to Khajuraho. A number of trains connect Mumbai, New Delhi and Bangalore with Jhansi, with AC II fares upwards of Rs650. Check 'www.indianrail.gov.in' for details. However, Jhansi is 175km from Khajuraho; the distance would have to be covered by road. Indian Airlines offers connections to Khajuraho from New Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. Return economy fares start from Rs22,000, inclusive of taxes.

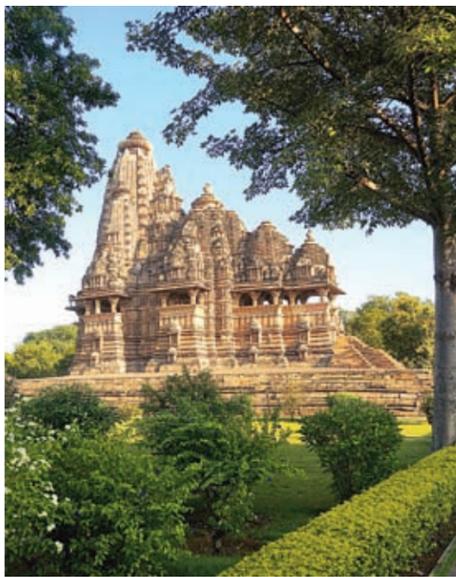
Alternatively, drive down from New Delhi: It's a 12-hour journey.

Where to stay:

A good place is the Taj group's Hotel Chandela ([www.tajhotels.com/Leisure/Hotel%20Chandela](http://www.tajhotels.com/Leisure/Hotel%20Chandela)). Recently renovated and a short drive or a healthy walk from the temples, the hotel's rooms open into a balcony on the first floor or a lawn on the ground floor. There's a swimming pool, a beauty parlour and ayurvedic massage facilities. You can also shoot pool over a beer or a cocktail at Sura Sundari, the cozy bar, and dine at any of the three restaurants: Café De La Paix, Rasna and Rimjhim. Double rooms cost upwards of Rs3,300 per night on double occupancy.

What to do:

Khajuraho is best visited between late October and early April, during which period you can be outdoors most of the day. But there's little to keep you in the town for more than two days, unless you want to explore all the temples at a very relaxed pace. Try combining a trip here with a visit to the Panna National Park, 15km away, where the forests are almost as dense as they were centuries ago, and to Orchha (just ahead of Jhansi), another lost capital, where the skyline is still dominated by medieval spires and tapering temples. Collectively, these three places are the perfect ticket for a journey back in time.



Set in stone: The temples were built over a century.

destination that is still in the middle of nowhere. The perfectly proportioned eternal woman of Khajuraho demands—and receives—constant adulation from a stream of tourists. These aren't the only temples in India to boast of erotica on walls. But, elsewhere, you need a guide to peer furtively at the walls. At