

Travel & Tourism



A paradise on earth

by Chris Beall

FOR a prison cell, it was remarkably palatial: carved marble walls and pillars inlaid with semi-precious stones and gold ornamentation, fountains and formal gardens, a retinue of liveried servants, and cool breezes blowing through archways and delicately latticed windows. But above all, there was the view — shimmering in the distance beyond the clear placid waters of the Yamuna river was the majestic marble masterpiece of the Taj Mahal. The prison was the Musamman Burj (octagonal tower) of the Red Fort in Agra, and it was here that Shah Jahan, fifth of the great Moghul emperors, spent the last eight years of his life gazing wistfully at the mausoleum he had built for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal.

Agra was established as the capital of the Lodi Empire in 1502 by the sultans of Delhi, but their rule proved to be very short-lived. In

title of padishah and proclaimed himself the first of the Great Moghuls.

The Golden Age of the Moghul Empire lasted 150 years, beginning in 1556 with the ascension of a fourteen-year-old grandson Akbar to the throne. Akbar's immediate task was to reconquer and consolidate the fragmented empire he had inherited from his father. The youth was able to achieve this objective within four years: he was a natural general and politician. Under Akbar, the Moghul Empire expanded until it covered more than two-thirds of the Indian subcontinent, from Kabul in the west to the Ganges delta in the east, and from the Himalaya in the north to the Deccan Plateau in the south.

Akbar also displayed a genius for administration and for social, religious, and artistic unification. Peace between Hindus and Muslims was finally established by the sim-

Having consolidated his control, Akbar then embarked on the building spree which was to characterize the next century of Moghul rule and leave a lasting legacy of magnificent monuments. In 1565 he demolished the lodi brick fort in Agra and began construction of a new fort of red sandstone on the banks of the Yamuna. The Red Fort was built on a massive scale, with twenty-metre-thick walls stretching two and a half kilometres. It was completed in only five years.

But even before the Red Fort was finished, Akbar turned his attention to other projects. In 1568 the childless Emperor consulted the holy man Shaikh Salim Chishti in the village of Sikri west of Agra; Chishti correctly predicted the birth of

raphy of the land. The architecture was a fusion of Muslim and Hindu styles, elaborately carved from red sandstone and white marble. The town was christened Fatehpur Sikri (Sikri, city of Victory) to commemorate Akbar's subjugation of Gujarat. It functioned as the Moghul capital until 1586 when it was abandoned due to a rapidly diminishing water supply.

Today, only the ruined walls remain to indicate the location of the city, but the imposing palace complex still stands, as perfectly preserved as the day that Akbar moved his capital back to Agra. The deserted buildings throb with the memories and ghosts of the Moghul court: the cloisters of the Diwan-i-Am (Hall of Public Audiences) surrounding the Panchi Courtyard where Akbar played an early variation of chess using slave girls as the pieces; the delicately sculpted five-tiered Panch Mahal palace; the unusual Diwan-i-Khas (Hall of Private Audiences) where Akbar would consult with his ministers; and the elegant Birbal Bhavan which the French author Victor Hugo described as being either a very small palace or a very large jewelry box!

Adjoining the complex are the Dargah Mosque and the white marble tomb of Shaikh Salim Chishti, which is still visited today by childless women hoping for a son. Entrance to the mosque is through the Buland Darwaza (Gate of Victory), an imposing fifty-four-metre-high sandstone and marble archway.

Having returned to Agra, Akbar began construction of the Jahangri Mahal palace at the Red Fort. This building marked the beginning of a change of emphasis in design at the fort, moving from strict military applications to more luxurious living quarters.

In his last years Akbar concentrated on the design of his own mausoleum at Sikandra, north of Agra. The four red sandstone entrance gates to the complex are adorned with white marble inlaid in polygonal patterns, and each gate represents a

different religion: Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and dimitlahi (Akbar's own creation, combining elements of other religions). The main building is a five-storied structure surrounded by galleries and minarets and is an interesting stage in the evolution of Moghul design, which eventually culminated in the Taj Mahal. The upper level houses a false tomb, while the real tomb is actually buried deep in the heart of the building. This double burial place system is peculiar to the people of the steppes and recalls Akbar's Mongolian ancestry.

The building was eventually completed after Akbar's death by his son, Emperor Jahangir (Seizer of the World). Jahangir was in fact a weak ruler who effectively handed control over to his wife Nur Jahan (Light of the World) and her family. However, he was an enthusiastic patron of the arts, encouraging the Moghul school of miniature painting and funding the construction of the tomb of Itimad ud-Daulah, his father-in-law and chief minister of the empire. Its mausoleum is notable as the first Moghul structure built entirely of marble and the first to make extensive use of *pietra dura* inlay. It is also a prime example of the definition of Moghul architecture given by Reginald Heber in 1849: "They build like giants, but with the precision of jewellers."

The *pietra dura* technique of inlaying semi-precious stones into marble is still practiced by some 5,000 craftsmen in Agra. After a seven-year apprenticeship, they specialize in one particular process, choosing between marble cutting, gem cutting, gem setting, or marble chiselling.

Today it is possible to watch these craftsmen at work building the Dayal Bagh Temple in the northern suburbs of Agra. Unlike the Moghuls, who were able to complete Itimad ud-Daulah's tomb in only six years, construction of the Dayal Bagh Temple began in the early 1900s and won't be completed until sometime in the next century.

When Shah Jahan (Ruler

of the World) ascended to the throne in 1628, he initiated a building programme more opulent and magnificent than any of his predecessors could have imagined. Aided by his wife Mumtaz Mahal, who assisted him with all matters of state (and even accompanied him on military expeditions), he set about converting the Red Fort in Agra into a luxurious palace by adding a series of *pietra dura* marble rooms along the riverfront. These included the Diwan-i-Khas Mahal palace, the Shish Mahal (Mirror Palace), and the Musamman Burj, where he was later incarcerated.

All activity came to an abrupt halt, however, when his beloved wife died in childbirth in 1630 (she had

photographs. The white marble building, its texture and colour constantly changing with the shifting light and clouds, must be experienced.

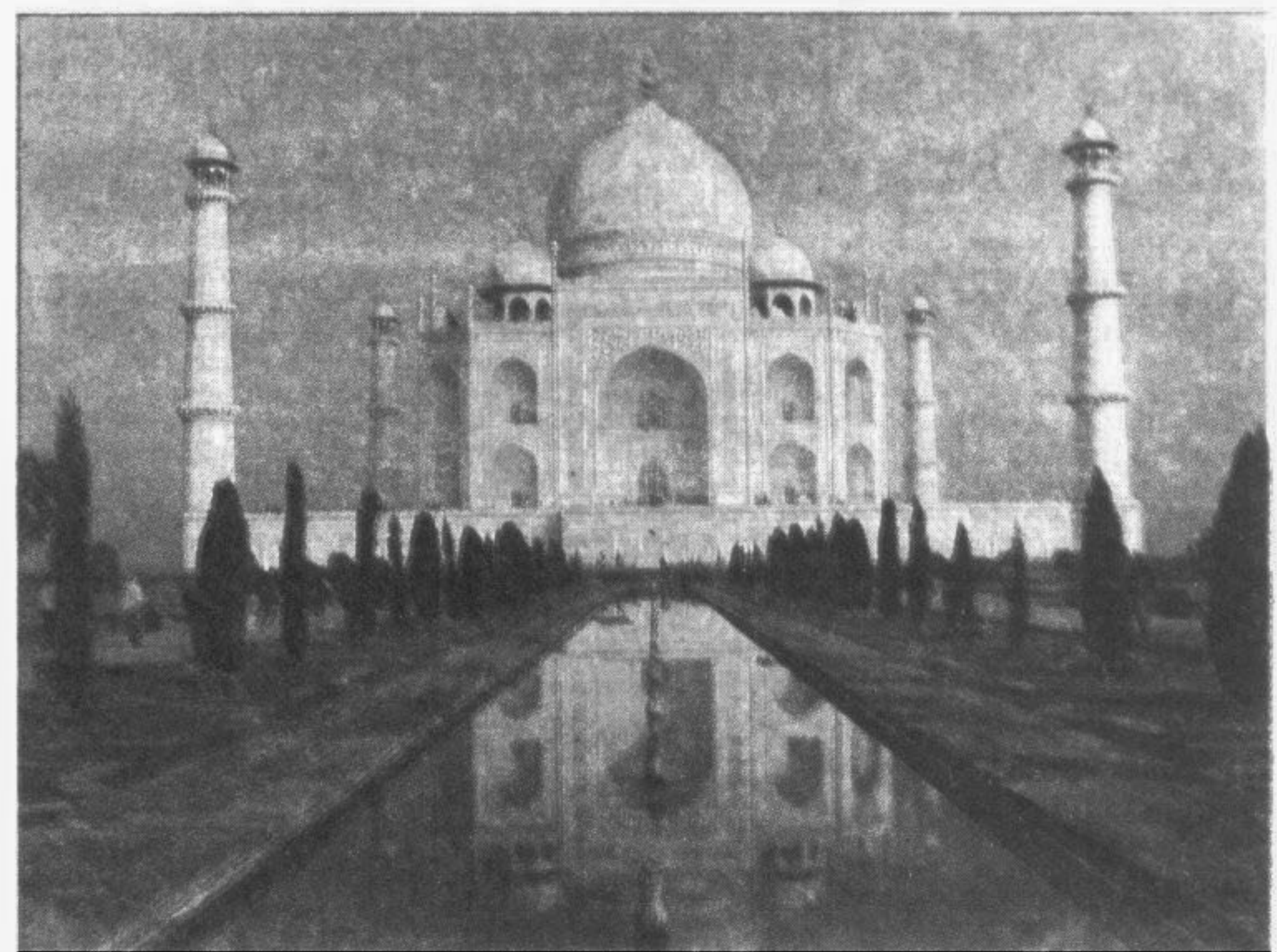
Shah Jahan spared no expense in its construction — the finest Makrana marble and the most gifted craftsmen were employed. More than 20,000 people worked around the clock for twenty-one years to complete the majestic complex.

The Taj Mahal rests on an enormous marble pedestal covering an area of one hectare, with a minaret at each corner. The main structure is surmounted by four small domes surrounding a large bulbous, seventy-metre-high dome. In the basement are the tombs of both Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan; traditional false tombs are above them at ground level. The

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Shah Jahan had only a short time in which to appreciate his masterpiece. A machiavellian power struggle between his sons in 1658 left Aurangzeb by his father's profligate spending and rumored intentions to build a black marble Taj Mahals on the opposite bank of the Yamuna river. Aurangzeb seized power and imprisoned his father in the Red Fort.

Today, one of the finest vantage points for viewing the Taj Mahal lies not within the complex itself, but on the northern banks of the Yamuna where it winds around the outskirts of the city. Here villagers still live in simple thatched houses and plant their crops close to the river's edge, living a life largely unchanged since the era of the Great Moghuls, far



The Taj Mahal reflected on a pool of water

— photo by Chris Beall

1526, Babur, the Mongolian ruler of Kabul, grandson of the central Asian conqueror Tamerlane (Timur) and a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, marched his army east over the Khyber Pass into the domain of the Lodis. At Panipat, north of Delhi, he defeated the forces of Sultan Ibrahim Lodi and thus gained control of Delhi, and Agra. Babur promptly assumed the

ple expedient of allowing religious freedom and fully integrating the Hindu community into the empire. After centuries of religious persecution, Hindus were now protected, and many were appointed as generals, advisers, and administrators. They responded by pledging their loyalty to Akbar and helping to create a unified secular state.

a son and heir the following year. When Prince Salim was born in 1569, Akbar placed the boy in the saint's care and built a new capital at Sikri.

Construction began in 1570. Akbar's designs broke away from traditional concepts of town planning and architecture. Instead of a rigidly laid out set pattern, the city followed the topog-

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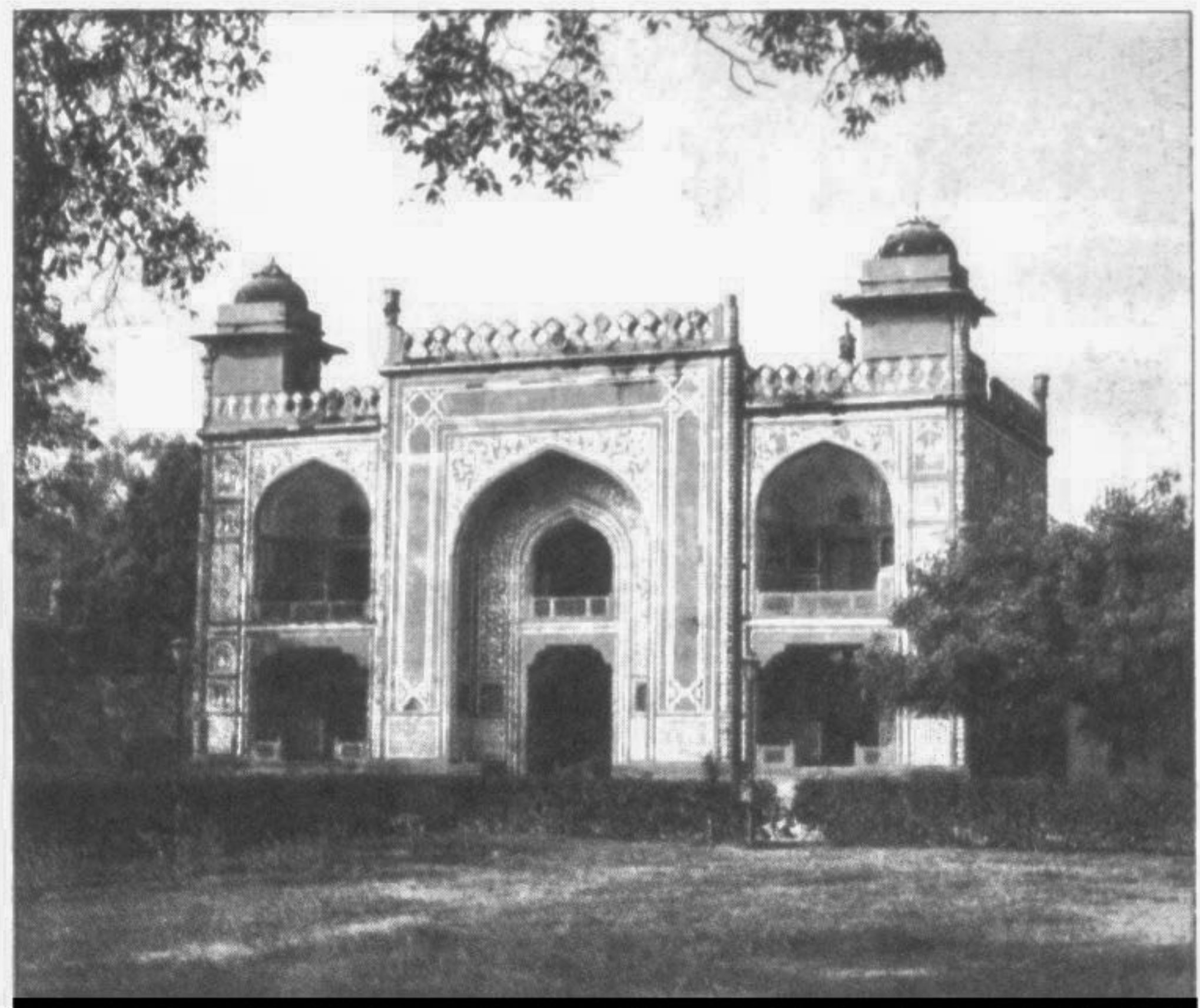
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Source: Digonto (April-June 1994)



The main gateway to the tomb of Itimad ud-Daulah

— photo by Chris Beall

removed from the raucous bustle of modern Agra. From this perspective, contemplating the perfect reflection of the tomb in the still waters, one can measure the success of the architect of the Taj Mahal, whose only intent was to create a Paradise on earth.

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New Railway Authority To Function From Sept 1

THE government formally constituted a seven-member Bangladesh Railway Authority which will be operational from September 1, 1995, relevant sources said.

The formation of the much talked about Bangladesh Railway Authority was announced through an official notification on August 16. The notification was issued by the Ministry of Communication on August 12.

Headed by the Minister of Communication, the newly-formed body includes Secretary of the Communication

Ministry, the Secretary of Ministry of Finance, a member of the Physical Infrastructure Division and Director General of the Railway Division who will also act as the secretary of the authority.

A representative of Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry will be the member of the authority.

However, according to the notification, it is not clear whether the railway will retain its East and West zones and the positions of the incumbent two General

Managers.

It may be mentioned that Bangladesh Railway introduced the authority of the General Manager removing the authority of the Director General in 1961.

The Railway was bifurcated into East and West zones in 1982 headed by two General Managers.

The aim of the decision, according to the notification, was to lessen the liabilities of the Railway and delegate self-governing rights to the Railway authority.

Source: Tourism International

The Last Forests of Laos

THE rolling hills of the scenic Nakay plateau in central Laos is draped in forest. But these majestic cypress trees that survived the Indochina war are now threatened by loggers.

In the past year, helicopters have been seen hovering over the treetops airlifting felled trees from the forests that protect the headwaters of the Nam Xot river.

Vietnamese loggers illegally chopping down 100-year-old pine trees at the eastern edge of the plateau and hauling them out of the area have also become a daily sight.

Trucks carry the booty over the Annamite mountains

ious faces abound. Indeed, the discovery of three unknown animal species in the last three years — the saolo, a large mammal, and new types of deer and goats — has brought new pressures to the area as foreign buyers are eager to pay high prices for them.

Some help is on the way. The World Bank is paying for a protection plan for the Nakay plateau through a grant from its Global Environment Facility (GEF), as part of a World Bank-led US \$20 million loan and grant package to improve management of Laotian forests.

Silavanh Sawathvong of the Laotian forestry department announced his office was preparing to hand out a

in need of urgent attention.

World Bank helicopters are surveying the site for a proposed dam, which is to be built by an Australian firm.

Bill Bleisch, a zoologist who works in Laos for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) of New York, says the dam will reverse some of the anticipated benefits of the GEF conservation plan.

He says the project could wipe out one of the last habitats of the white-winged duck, a nocturnal bird, of which only 250 are believed to remain in the world. Notes Bleisch: "The presence of the duck is an indicator of the health of the river forests. Its disappearance means that the entire habitat is under threat."

According to the WCS researchers, a report done for the project by the Snowy Mountain Electricity Corporation of Australia is "substandard and unacceptable as an EIA."

Michel Miron, special adviser to the Industry and Handicraft Ministry and who is supported by a grant from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), admits some of the environmental assessment for dams in the 1980s have been "very sloppy."

Silavanh acknowledges that clear-cutting is not being practised. But he adds, "The companies have a plan and they will probably cut the rest of the trees later."

Meanwhile, a World Bank official has voiced concern over the Vietnamese loggers who are cutting trees in the forests where the Nam Theun river begins, threatening the dam project itself.

The contradictions in their concern — to save part of the plateau while sacrificing the rest of it — is what concerns activists the most. Says one: "The plans are driven by whoever throws money at it, not by what's best for the forests. Meanwhile the loggers and hunters are having a field day." IPS

South-east Asia's last cypress forest in Laos is threatened by illegal loggers and well-meaning development planners. Pratap Chattarjee of Inter Press Service reports.

that form a natural border to the 600-metre-high plateau with neighbouring Vietnam, to the coastal town of Vinh, from where it is shipped to Japan.

The cypress forest that covers a quarter of the 1,600 sq km plateau is one of the last remaining in tropical South-east Asia.

But it is fast being depleted, and even the salt-licks that support some 200 wild elephants that live on the Nakay plateau have been severely damaged by loggers. Hunters are shooting the elephants and rare birds like the crested argues and Siamese fireback pheasant, once hunted there only by royalty.

"Twice a day, a wildlife market (in nearby town) Ban Lak Sao sells all manner of animals," says a conservation official who has just returned from the area. "Vietnamese hunters have been rumoured to offer up to US \$150 a kilogramme for threatened species like the golden turtle."

And while the town itself is experiencing a boom, anx-

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Mood of America: Washington Tourism Has Serious Side

TOURISTS crowding the US capital in the waning days of summer are finding that vacationing can be a somber experience.

From morning till dusk, visitors from around the world pour into America's National Mall, a greenbelt lined by national museums and stretching from the domed Capitol past the White House to the Lincoln Memorial.

In ultra-casual vacation dress, travellers start off in buoyant spirits. But many are soon swept up in contemplation about 20th Century Wars and related tragedies that affected them or their families, and some newer attractions set the mood.

Silence, sorrow and tears mark visits to Arlington National Cemetery's Tomb of the Unknowns and rolling hills of gravestones, to the Vietnam War Memorial, the new Korean War Memorial and the two-year-old National Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Newer exhibitions draw people together who lived through World War II with those not yet born when Germany and Japan surrendered 50 years ago.

"Sharing Memories," a

50th anniversary exhibit at the National Museum of American History, shows what total war meant at home as well as on the battlefronts. People are invited to write out their wartime memories.

The longest lines are at the much-debated Enola Gay exhibit showing the restored fuselage of the US B29 bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, opening the Nuclear Age.

The National Air and Space Museum trimmed its originally planned show after Congress members, veterans and service groups accused it of tilting toward critics of nuclear weapons and emphasizing devastation and victims more than Japanese war responsibility.

"One cannot judge the logic used 50 years ago to drop this bomb by today's standards," one said. "To do so would make a mockery of those who have to make decisions."

"It was a very good and moving exhibit, but I agree that the damage of Hiroshima should be known by everyone," said another writer. "It is necessary for people to see what kind of animals humans really are."

—UNF

"A sorry time in history presented with dignity," said another.

A critic wrote, "What had to be done at the time is one thing. To celebrate it is another."

Japanese tourists also leave comment.

"Thank you for helping ending the war," said a card written by "some Japanese visitors" on Aug. 18, 1995, 50 years and three days after Emperor Hirohito announced defeat.

There is no information regarding the devastation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki," one said, adding in halting English, "I hope the American people to be more strong to see the facts, as we Japanese should see what we've done in Asia."

Last week the festive Mall itself, with its carousel, crowds and concerts, took on a somber look. Flags ringing the towering Washington Monument and atop all the surrounding museums, galleries and government edifices were lowered to half staff to honour the three US officials killed in a road accident during shuttle diplomacy near faraway Sarajevo, Bosnia.

Travel Briefs

New Brochure from Emirates: Emirates Holiday has just released its first dedicated brochure specially designed for travellers from Asia. Adapted from the mainstream regional brochures under the product the "A World of Choice", the ex-Asia brochure features nine destinations: the United Arab Emirates, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, the Comoros Islands and Kenya. — Emirates

Vietnam, Canada talk air accord: Vietnam and Canada held talks here recently on an accord to provide a framework for future flights between the two countries. They completed most textual issues and discussed route schedules including which cities would be served. Canadian Airlines International and Vietnam Airlines are expected to take decision on flights once the government accord is signed. — BD Shipping Times

USAir to join ANA's scheme: USAir Group Inc will join All Nippon Airway's frequent flyer programme from October 1.

Other members of the ANA's programme include British Airways PIC, Cathay Pacific Airways Ltd and Singapore Airlines. — BD Shipping Times

Aeroflot flying to Beijing: The Russian state airline, Aeroflot, recently started regular non-stop flights between Moscow and Beijing using an Airbus A-310. The seven-hour route are flown on Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. — BD Shipping Times

SITA World to open hotel: SITA World Travel of India plans to open its first hotel enterprise, the Manesar resort, soon.

The resort, located 30 minutes from Indira Gandhi International Airport, offers 84 rooms spread over 12 acres of land. It incorporates Rajasthan and Punjab touches in its design. — Tourism International

Indian Airline flies to Africa: Indian Owned Menon Airways (MAL) said recently it would start flying to a number of destinations in Africa from its United Arab Emirates Sharjah base.

The managing director said that the airline was using a leased Airbus 300 for its maiden flight. — BD Shipping Times

Toll collection on roads to be severely dealt with: Making of check posts on roads and highways for any reason without permission has been strictly prohibited.

Blocking of roads through barricades by individuals or private organisations for collecting tolls on various excuses will be sternly dealt with from now on.

As per a recent government decision, only the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) will be allowed to set up check post on the roads within five miles of the border to curb smuggling.

Collection of tolls illegally by putting up barricades on the roads and highways has increased alarmingly hindering smooth flow of traffic and disrupting communications, a government source said. Creation of such destruction on the roads is a violation of the provision of Bengal Highways Act 1925. — BD Shipping Times