



MANDU



SANCHI



# MADHYA PRADESH

## A journey into ancient India

ELIZA BINTE ELAHI



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has so far visited more than 50 countries across the globe. Eliza, who teaches at the University of South Asia as an adjunct faculty, considers herself a history and heritage lover.

Nestled in the very heart of India, Madhya Pradesh is a treasure trove of history, spirituality, and nature. With its rich heritage, the state offers a unique window into ancient India. It hosts three Unesco World Heritage sites, 11 natural parks, 24 wildlife sanctuaries and six tiger reserves. However, the state, with all its archaeological sites, turned out to be a treasure trove to me, a traveller drawn to history.

This October, I had the opportunity to visit this place. To my surprise, the archaeological sites there were mostly noise-pollution free unlike the other tourist-drawing states in India. Though my main objective was to visit the Khajuraho temple complex, I ended up visiting six cities in eight days. Bhimbetka, Udayagiri, Sanchi, Mandu, Orchha, Gwalior, Jhansi, Bhopal – all these



BHIMBETKA

underwhelming, but the vibrant food culture of Indore lifted my spirits. At the renowned "56 Dukan" market, I savoured local delicacies like kunafa, kulli, and the unique matka pizza.

The next day, I went to the ancient fort city of Mandu, located 150 kilometres from Indore. It was captivating to say the least.

After returning from Mandu to Indore, I headed towards Bhopal, the capital city of the state. From Bhopal, I journeyed to Bhimbetka, a place believed to mark the beginning of human habitation in India.

The story of Bhopal's founding is a blend of legend and history. It is said that the city was established in the 11th century by Paramara king Raja Bhoj. A reservoir was built to cure his skin ailment, and after bathing in its waters, the king was healed. The name "Bhoj-paal" (with paal meaning dam) eventually evolved into "Bhopal" or "Bhopal." Today, this historic lake is known as "Upper Lake" or "Bada Talab," situated at the city's heart.

In the evening, Bhopal's charm by the side of Bada Talab was undeniable.

From Bhopal, I travelled approximately 150 kilometres to Sanchi, home to India's oldest Buddhist stupas dating back to the 3rd century BCE. Exploring these stone stupas within a limited time was quite challenging. From Sanchi, I headed to Udayagiri Caves, known for their rock-cut temples from the 3rd century CE.

Back in Bhopal from there, I wandered around the courtyard of the majestic Taj-ul-Masjid. This colossal Mughal mosque exuded an enchanting aura as daylight

faded. Before leaving, I indulged in Bhopal's unique tea, which, with its salty taste reminiscent of Pamir tea and aromatic spices, won my heart.

The next morning at 6:00am, I boarded the Bhopal-Khajuraho Mahamana Superfast Express and reached Khajuraho, 386 kilometres away. As I rested in my hotel room in Khajuraho, I reflected on the incredible historical sites I had visited. Had I truly experienced them all, or were they part of a dream? Madhya Pradesh continued to amaze me. Time seemed elusive on this trip – days turned into nights, nights into days, with my presence alternating

The next morning, it was time to head home. After travelling nearly 300 km from Gwalior to Delhi, I boarded a plane to Dhaka, my own magical city.

As I returned home, I carried with me memories of a journey that gave me an opportunity to dive into a part of sub-continent's glorious past. Without exploring Madhya Pradesh, I believe, one cannot truly understand ancient India.

**Mandu: A Timeless Fortress City**  
Mandu, a sixth-century fortress city perched at 2,100 feet on the Malwa plateau, is a treasure trove of history and architecture. With 75 surviving structures, exploring it in a single day is nearly impossible. The city's grandeur lies in its magnificent stone architecture, dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries.

Mandu's majestic Mahals – Ashrafi Mahal, Rupmati Mahal, Baj Bahadur Palace, Hindola Mahal, Jahaz Mahal, and Chishti Khan Mahal – are awe-inspiring. Each boasts intricate designs from floor to ceiling, reflecting a blend of history and artistry that captivates at every turn.

**Bhimbetka: India's Stone Age Legacy**

Bhimbetka Rock Shelters, a Unesco World Heritage Site since 2003, offers a window into the Stone Age. This site marks the earliest traces of human presence in the Indian subcontinent, with evidence dating back 100,000 years.

Primitive humans left behind remarkable paintings on cave walls, offering glimpses into their existence. Over 750 caves have been uncovered here, some adorned with rock art nearly 30,000 years old.

First documented in 1888 by India's Department of Archaeology, Bhimbetka reveals the creativity of early humans. Bhimbetka caves, home to Homo erectus, is not just an archaeological marvel but a testament to humanity's earliest artistic instincts, preserved in stone for millennia.

**Sanchi: Emperor Ashoka's Stupa**

Sanchi, home to the iconic 3rd-century BC Stupa believed to be built by Emperor

Ashoka, is a marvel of Madhya Pradesh and one of India's oldest stone structures. The stupa, with its grand dome and intricately carved gateways, narrates the life of Buddha through Dharmachakras, Jataka tales, and historical events. Each of its four gates tells a unique story: the west gate highlights Buddha's seven births, while the south and east gates depict Mayadevi's vision and Siddhartha's journey. The north gate captures Buddha's serene walk into the void after his teachings.

Ashoka's transformation post the devastating Kalinga War (260-263 BC) led him to embrace Buddhism under the guidance of monk Upagupta. Renouncing violence, he became a champion of peace, building about 26,000 stupas. Sanchi is one of those.

Staying in the oblivion for centuries, Sanchi was rediscovered in 1881 and now stands as a Unesco World Heritage Site, continuing to inspire awe among its visitors.

**Udayagiri Rock-Cut Cave Temples**

The Udayagiri rock-cut temples, carved during the reign of Chandragupta II (3rd century AD), are a breathtaking testament to the artistic excellence of the Gupta Empire. Nestled in Vidisha district, these 20 caves – 18 Hindu and 2 Jain temples – showcase classical Gupta art at its finest.

**Khajuraho Temple Complex**

Built between 950 and 1050 AD by the Chandela dynasty, the temples are divided into three groups: Eastern, Western, and Southern, with the Western group designated as a Unesco World Heritage Site. This group is particularly renowned for its intricate sculptures, blending Artha, Dharma, Kama, and Moksha. The Eastern group houses both Jain and Hindu temples.

It is said that, of the original 45 temples, only 14 remain today.

Khajuraho temples are unique. Built on high grounds and adorned with intricate carvings depicting gods, goddesses, and scenes of life, including battles, mythology, and sensuality, one cannot but wonder how people could carve such arts in stone using imagination.

However, the site is often mischaracterised as being sensual. But the facts remain that only 10 percent of these arts are sensual.

Sensual sculptures in the temples have sparked theories. Some say Chandelas' practiced Tantra, which viewed both spiritual and physical pursuits as paths to salvation. And some say these arts were created in response to Buddhism's asceticism.

Describing Khajuraho in words feels insufficient – it is an experience that transcends simple narration.



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places dipped in history introduced me to a new realm of understanding about ancient India.

With many sites to see in such a short visit, planning and time management were crucial. After landing at Bhopal's Raja Bhoj airport from Delhi, I left for Indore by jeep – a 230 km journey that gave me just half a day to explore this bustling city. Later, a quick drive to the Patalpani Waterfall proved



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