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WAAH TAJ

To The Most Marbleous Wonder Of The Entire World!

India is a land abounding with wonderful UNESCO heritage sites to feast one's eyes on. Some of them being natural wonders to some being exquisite architectural marvels to many being reflection of magnificent history and some even a sanctuary for biodiversity to flourish. Here's presenting Part IV of the Heritage Series, giving an insight into Taj Mahal, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983.

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Taj Mahal - the name itself is enough to transcend one to a world of beautiful posh white marble shining with the history of the footsteps our ancestors left behind, captivating us with its aura, and enchanting us with a magnificence that could only be possessed by a Wonder of the World. The story behind these stones, dipped in reminiscent of royal romance, is just as charming as its exterior. From one of the biggest attractions of its native country, India, to standing as the symbol of eternal love, Taj Mahal reminds you of something new every time you look at it, so let's find out the wondrous history buried deep in the mausoleum that still stays alive in everyone's heart.

...to the bricks it was built on

This 'Crown of the Palace', constructed with ivory-white marble in Agra, stands on the banks of river Yamuna as a mausoleum for Mumtaz Mahal, the favourite wife of Shahad-ud-din Muhammad Khurram a.k.a. Shah Jahan. Commissioned to be built in 1632, the monument contains Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan's tombs, a mosque, a guest house, and gardens bounded by crenellated walls on three sides. Around 3 acres of land was allotted to the project, which was filled with dirt to reduce seepage and for it to be levelled at 150 ft above the riverbank. For the tombs, land was specifically dug up to form a firm footing, and instead of utilising bamboo, an enormous brick scaffold was constructed to mirror the tomb. With over 1000 elephants used for transportation, the construction of Taj Mahal employed raw materials from all over Asia. Translucent white marble brought from Rajasthan, jasper from Pun-

jab, jade and crystals from China, turquoise from Tibet, Lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, sapphire from Sri Lanka, and carnelian from Arabia. The construction of this masterpiece was first completed in 1643, and with the final touches being done by 1653, the complex was ready in its entirety, costing nearly 32 million INR at that time, an equivalent of the modern day 70 billion INR. With around 20,000 artisans and workers lending their skills to the building, this architectural wonder was led by Ustad Ahmad Lahauri, who made it the Taj Mahal we look at in awe today!

...to the times it has seen and overcome

The 'illustrious tomb', as Abdul Hamid Lahauri called it, has seen its own share of tough times since its construction and has a history that is just as much soused in trauma as it is in love. As the Jat rulers of Bharatpur invaded Agra in the 18th century, Taj Mahal lost its two chandeliers, gold and silver screen, and shield to the desolation. Falling a victim to the test of age, parts of the monument fell into disrepair by the late 19th century when the British viceroy, Lord Curzon, ordered a restoration project where a large lamp in the interior chamber modelled after the

one in a Cairo mosque was added, along with the remodelling of the lawns in European style that still remain in place till today. When the anticipation of air attacks by Japan was still high in the air in 1942, scaffolding around the Taj were erected to disguise it, and the same preventive measure was again taken

during the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971.

With environmental pollution being its newest enemy, acid rain and such elements have turned its ivory white marble to a musty yellow-brown, and the decline in the ground-water level in Yamuna has also raised concerns about the tomb's structural integrity. Some cracks in the tombs and the minarets surrounding it have been noticed recently, and it can only be hoped that this beauty, which withstood the test of time, will somehow also stand the test of humankind.

...to the amazement it causes

Taj Mahal, being the jewel of Indian heritage and an epitome of art, stands to be not only one of the best examples of Mughal architecture, but also a masterpiece of the finesse mankind has attained. First designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983, the monument attracted almost 6.5 million people in 2018, according to the

Indian Ministry of Tourism. Moreover, because of its popularity and the over-tourism it caused, the government was forced to institute fines for visitors who stayed longer than three hours, starting in 2019. Winning the poll of New Seven Wonders of the World with around a million votes, Taj Mahal has always captured the attention of every human on the planet, celebrities and common man alike. With notable figures like George Bush, Barack and Michelle Obama, Princess Diana, Mark Zuckerberg, etc., visiting the monument and awing at its beauty, no one would disagree when Rabindranath Tagore described it as "a teardrop on the cheek of time!" From iconic international movies like The Namesake, Slumdog Millionaire, Million Dollar Arm being shot here to Indian cinema highlighting our *desi* gem in 'Mere Brother Ki Dulhan', 'Jhoom Barabar Jhoom', 'Bunty Aur Bubly', etc., Taj Mahal is no longer a building composed of beautiful bricks, but rather a testament of love, culture, history, art, and everything in between.

The name Taj Mahal being etched in every to-visit list proves the enormous admiration the monument has, maybe even bigger than any other landmark in the world. With its glittering history of every lover's dream to its shining arcs being every history buff's love, the place no longer just holds a stagnant history, but rewrites its present and its relevance with every new year, so much so that the only words that could ever fully encompass its feeling are 'Waah, Taj!'

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