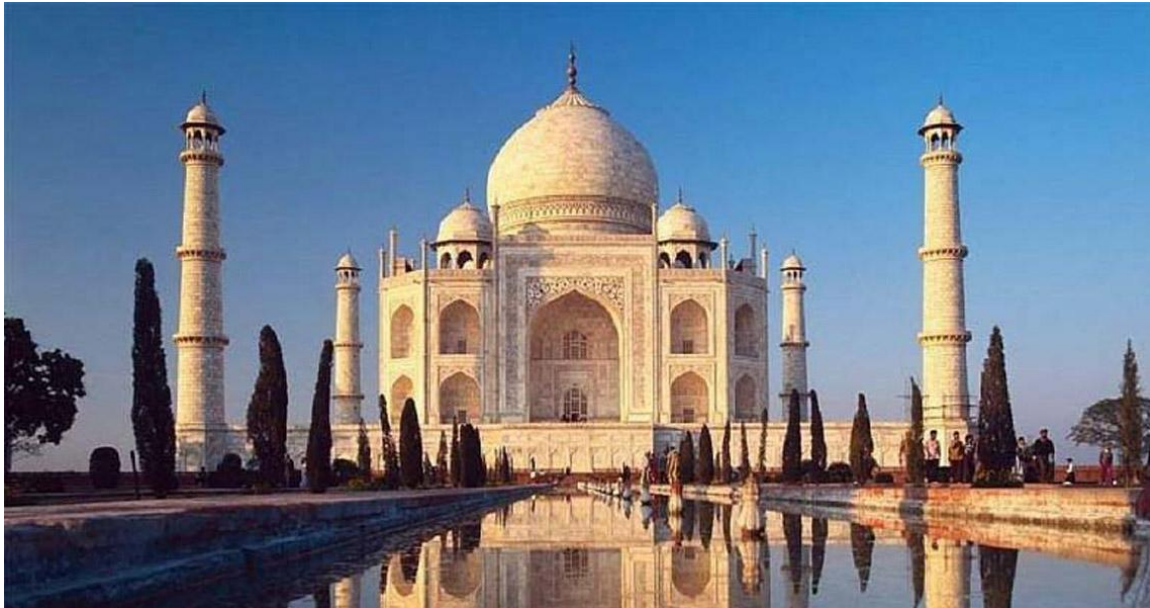


Taj Mahal, Agra



Commissioned in 1632 by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan to house the remains of his cherished wife, the Taj Mahal stands on the southern bank of the Yamuna River in Agra, India. The famed mausoleum complex, built over more than 20 years, is one of the most outstanding examples of Mughal architecture, which combined Indian, Persian and Islamic influences. At its center is the Taj Mahal itself, built of shimmering white marble that seems to change color depending on the sunlight or moonlight hitting its surface. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1983, it remains one of the world's most celebrated structures and a stunning symbol of India's rich history.

Taj Mahal: Shah Jahan's Romantic Gesture

Shah Jahan was a member of the Mughal dynasty that ruled most of northern India from the early 16th to the mid 18th-century. After the death of his father, King Jahangir, in 1627, Shah Jahan emerged the victor of a bitter power struggle with his brothers, and crowned himself emperor at Agra in 1628. At his side was Arjumand Banu Begum, better known as Mumtaz Mahal (â€œChosen One of the Palaceâ€), whom he married in 1612 and cherished as the favorite of his three queens.

In 1631, Mumtaz Mahal died after giving birth to the couple's 14th child. The grieving Shah Jahan, known for commissioning a number of impressive structures throughout his reign, ordered the building of a magnificent mausoleum across the Yamuna River from his own royal palace at Agra. Construction began around 1632 and would continue for the next two decades. The chief architect was probably Ustad Ahmad Lahouri, an Indian of Persian descent who would later be credited with designing the Red Fort at Delhi. In all, more than 20,000 workers from India, Persia, Europe and the Ottoman Empire, along with some 1,000 elephants, were brought in to build the mausoleum complex. Design and Construction of the Taj Mahal
Named the Taj Mahal in honor of Mumtaz Mahal, the mausoleum was constructed of white

marble inlaid with semi-precious stones (including jade, crystal, lapis lazuli, amethyst and turquoise) forming intricate designs in a technique known as pietra dura. Its central dome reached a height of 240 feet (73 meters) and was surrounded by four smaller domes; four slender towers, or minarets, stood at the corners. In accordance with Islamic tradition, verses from the Quran were inscribed in calligraphy on the arched entrances to the mausoleum, in addition to numerous other sections of the complex. Inside the mausoleum, an octagonal marble chamber adorned with carvings and semi-precious stones housed the cenotaph, or false tomb, of Mumtaz Mahal. The real sarcophagus containing her actual remains lay below, at garden level.

The rest of the Taj Mahal complex included a main gateway of red sandstone and a square garden divided into quarters by long pools of water, as well as a red sandstone mosque and an identical building called a jawab (or "mirror") directly across from the mosque.

Traditional Mughal building practice would allow no future alterations to be made to the complex. As the story goes, Shah Jahan intended to build a second grand mausoleum across the Yamuna River from the Taj Mahal, where his own remains would be buried when he died; the two structures were to have been connected by a bridge. In fact, Aurangzeb (Shah Jahan's third son with Mumtaz Mahal) deposed his ailing father in 1658 and took power himself. Shah Jahan lived out the last years of his life under house arrest in a tower of the Red Fort at Agra, with a view of the majestic resting place he had constructed for his wife; when he died in 1666, he was buried next to her. The Taj Mahal Over the Years

Under Aurangzeb's long rule (1658-1707), the Mughal empire reached the height of its strength. However, his militant Muslim policies, including the destruction of many Hindu temples and shrines, undermined the enduring strength of the empire and led to its demise by the mid-18th century. Even as Mughal power crumbled, the Taj Mahal suffered from neglect and disrepair in the two centuries after Shah Jahan's death. Near the turn of the 19th century, Lord Curzon, then British viceroy of India, ordered a major restoration of the mausoleum complex as part of a colonial effort to preserve India's artistic and cultural heritage.

Today, some 3 million people a year (or around 45,000 a day during peak tourist season) visit the Taj Mahal. Air pollution from nearby factories and automobiles poses a continual threat to the mausoleum's gleaming white marble façade, and in 1998, India's Supreme Court ordered a number of anti-pollution measures to protect the building from deterioration. Some factories were closed, while vehicular traffic was banned from the immediate vicinity of the complex.