



Clusters of white marble temples at Sonagiri present a stunning view

Around Datia

SONAGIRI

Located 15 kms from Datia, one comes across with rows of sparkling white marble-clad temples on the slopes. This is the famous Jain pilgrimage of Sonagiri (literally the 'golden mountain'). Known as Swarnagiri or Shravangiri in ancient times, it is revered by the Digambara sect of Jains.

Sonagiri has 77 temples on the hill and 26 in the village below, many of them built recently, and all of them brilliantly white. The most beautiful among these is possibly the temple dedicated to Chandranatha, the eighth of the 24 tirthankaras.

Sonagiri is also known for a large annual fair held here in the month of Chaitra (March-April), when 'thousands of pilgrims gather at this religious site set in a landscape of tranquil beauty'.

How to Reach

By Air: The nearest airport is Gwalior (74 kms)

By Rail: The nearest railhead is Jhansi (35 kms)

By Road: Cars can easily be hired from Jhansi

Your Host

Tourist Motel, Datia

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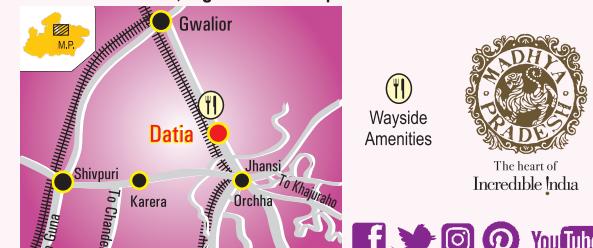
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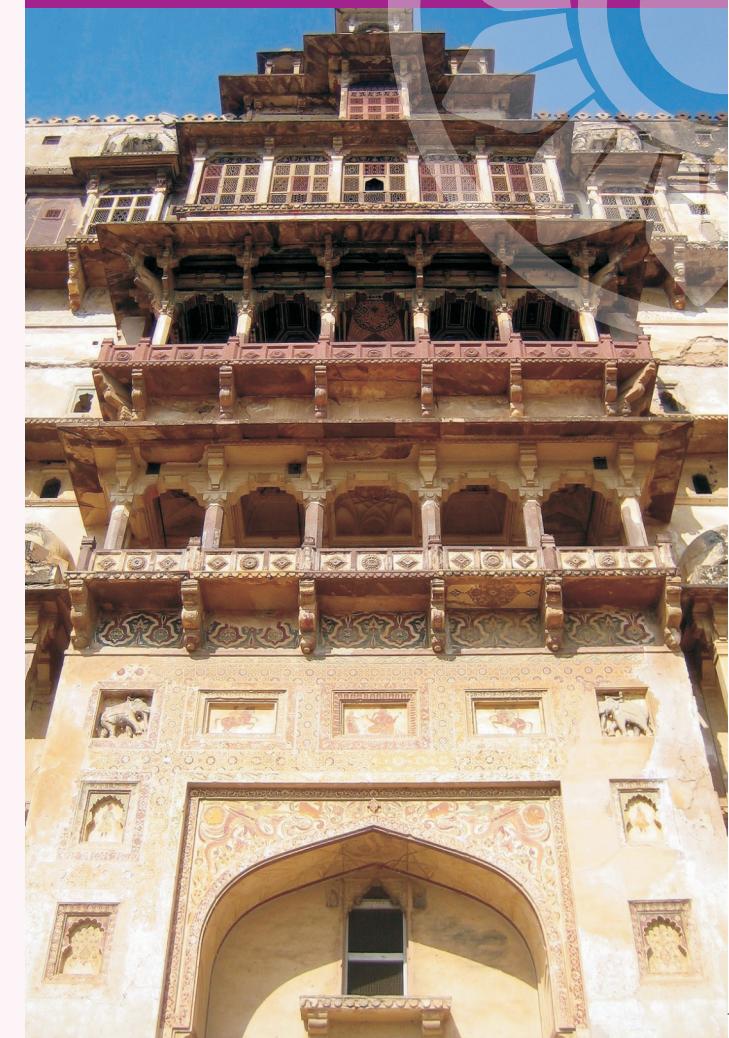
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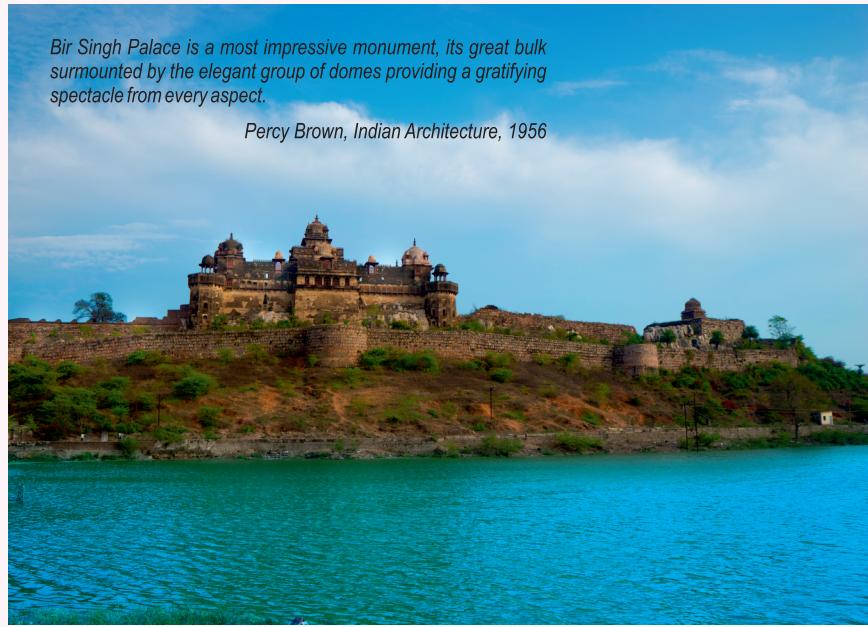
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DATIA
A Bundela Treasure





Bir Singh Palace is a most impressive monument, its great bulk surmounted by the elegant group of domes providing a gratifying spectacle from every aspect.

Percy Brown, Indian Architecture, 1956

The small town of Datia, mentioned in the *Mahabharata* as Daityavakra, has one of the most beautiful palaces in India - the seven-storeyed Bir Singh Palace, also called Govind Mandir Palace. Another significant landmark is the famous *shaktipeeth*, Peetambhara Peeth.

The Bundela king, Raja Bir Singh Deo, apparently not satisfied by the majestic Jahangir Mahal palace he had built at his capital in Orchha, went on, in 1620, to build a palace 'of such a distinctive character as to stand in a class by itself' on a rocky mound in Datia, 43 kms away. Historians and architects consider it to be one of the finest representations of Bundela architecture.

An imposing structure, Bir Singh Palace sits like a diadem on a hillock, draped in beautiful pink bougainvilleas. Standing 40 m high, its effect as an architectural entity is grand!

The art historian Percy Brown contends that the palace 'is conceived



A row of arches in the palace

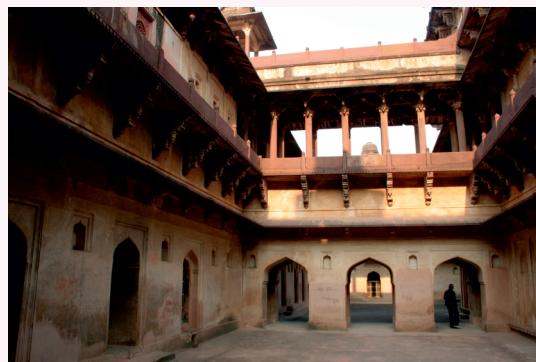
on a principle not unlike the phenomenon of an iceberg'. The structure consists of a series of large underground halls, descending for several storeys, some of which are excavated out of the basement rock. These cool, subterranean apartments would have been most appropriate for the hot summer months in this arid region.

The symmetrical structure of the palace is influenced by the Mughal architectural style. At the same time, the plan resembles the swastika, one of the holiest symbols of Hinduism. This syncretism made it a favourite of Sir Edwin Lutyens, the English architect and planner, who designed most of British New Delhi.

The palace has a profusion of arches, *chattris*, ornamental *jaali* screens, balconies and oriel windows which open to delightful views.

The main entrance is on the eastern side, while the south opens out to the beautiful lake,

Kama Sagar. Designed as a royal rest-house, the palace was meant to serve many purposes like holding prisoners, accommodating soldiers & guards, entertainment, hosting royal guests & secret meetings. The topmost floor had a watch-tower to track enemy movements. Today one may climb to the seventh floor and get a stunning view of the countryside around.



A view of a courtyard in the magnificent palace

A unique feature of the palace is that it is made entirely of stones and bricks with no use of wood and iron. The intricate *jaali*-work, exquisite murals and frescoes on the inside walls of the upper floors, and the stucco figures in the royal apartments are outstanding examples of Bundela art.

However, interestingly, the Bir Singh Palace is not only deserted, but was apparently never occupied.



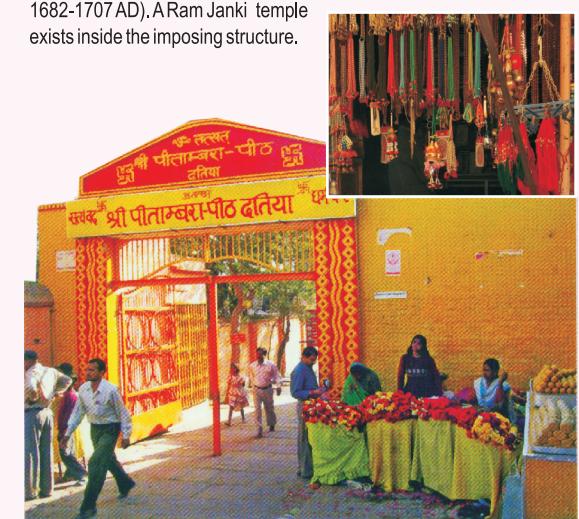
Beautiful murals and stucco work adorn the inside walls

Datia is noted for its many beautiful temples, and thus referred to as *Laghu Vrindaban* or 'small Vrindavan'. The most popular temple in Datia town is Peetambhara Peeth. A *shaktipeeth*, it enshrines two of the ten Mahavidyas, Dhumavati and Baglamukhi, and is much revered by the local population. It is thronged by devotees from far and wide, especially on Saturdays. Apart from the main shrine, the complex has several smaller shrines dedicated to other deities, including Parshuram, Hanuman and Kal Bhairav. Vankhandeshwar Temple, to Lord Shiva, is believed to date back to the time of the Mahabharata.

Some of the other temples in Datia are Avadhi Bihari Temple, Shivgar Temple, Vijay-Raghav Temple, and Bihariji Temple.

Another significant structure in Datia is Rajgarh Palace on top of a hill near Peetambhara Peeth. Bharatgarh Fort and Karna Sagar Tank with its ghats, ruined temples, and surrounding chhatris, are the other attractions of the town.

Bharatgarh Fort, Karna sagar tank, Rajgarh palace are the other attractions of Datia. Bharat Garh was built by Maharaja Dalpat Rao (1682-1707 AD). A Ram Janki temple exists inside the imposing structure.



Peetambhara Peeth Temple, and (inset) trinkets being sold outside