

LEVELLED BOOK • W

Taj Mahal



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Taj Mahal



Focus Question

Why is the Taj Mahal an important historic landmark?

Words to Know

artisans
banned
dominates
dynasty
geometric
Islamic

marble
mausoleum
memorial
restoration
symbolize
tomb

Front and back cover: The main building of the Taj Mahal is considered one of the most beautiful buildings ever created.

Title page: Four tall, thin towers surround the main building of the Taj Mahal.

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Agra, India: Home of the Taj Mahal



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Known for its perfectly balanced design, the Taj Mahal is the most magnificent creation of the Mughal dynasty.

In Loving Memory

If you were to draw a picture to honor someone who meant a great deal to you, how would you begin? Whatever your ideas, you'd most likely want to include the most beautiful things imaginable in your drawing.

A place in India was created to do just that—to honor the memory of someone who was loved very much. It was built in the 1600s during the Mughal (MOO-guhl) **dynasty**. The Mughals are famous for the rich works of art and beautiful architecture they left behind. Their family name, Mughul, gave rise to the word *mogul*, which refers to someone as wealthy and powerful as the richest king. Their most famous creation—the Taj Mahal—was built by the fifth Mughal ruler, Shah Jahan.

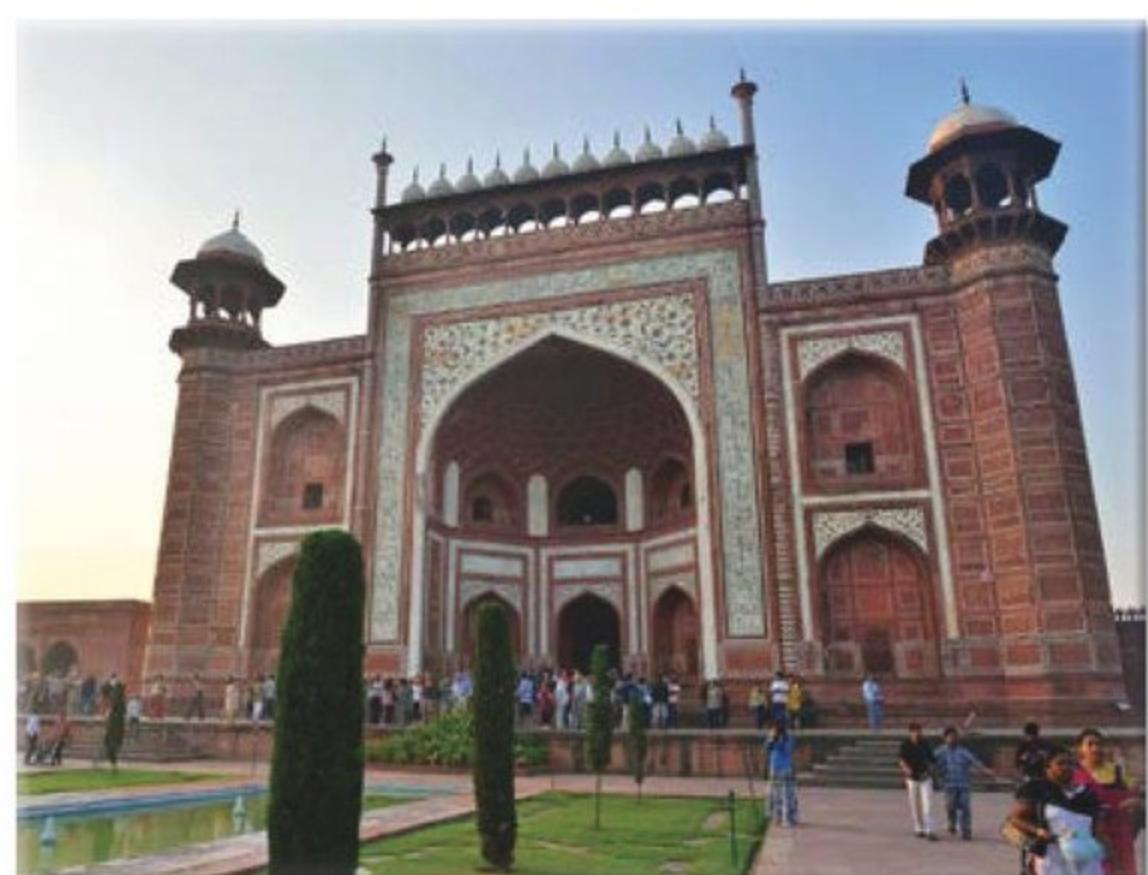
The Taj Mahal Complex

When people think of the Taj Mahal, most picture the **mausoleum** with its huge white dome. However, the Taj Mahal is actually a 16-hectare (42-acre) area designed to represent the paradise home of Shah Jahan's favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. Buildings, walls, gates, and gardens are all laid out to reflect the **Islamic** idea of a perfect heaven.

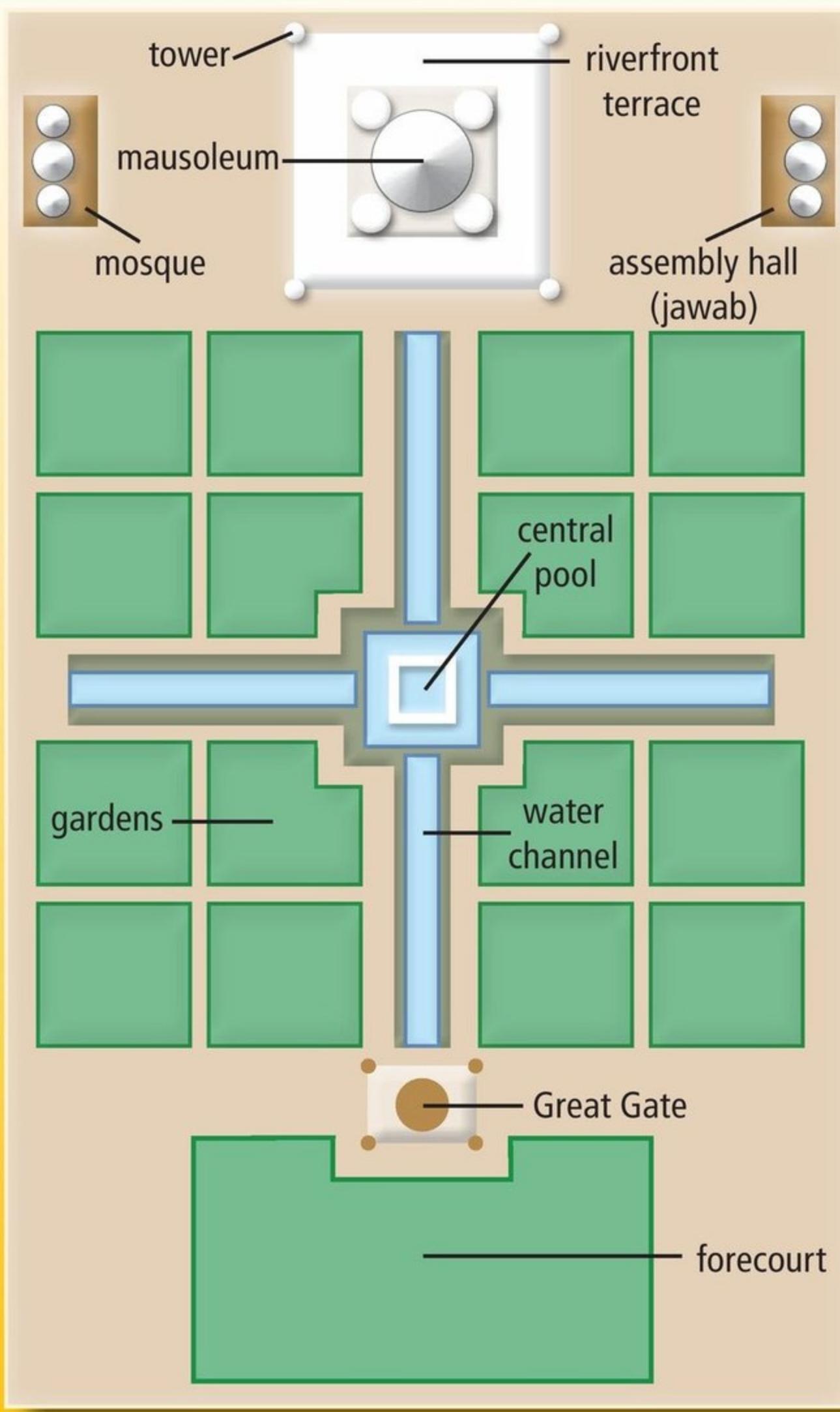
Although grass now fills the grounds, beautiful flowers and fruit trees once suggested paradise's gardens. Four water channels divide the garden into four equal parts that meet at a pool in the center. They **symbolize** the four heavenly rivers described in the Koran, the Islamic holy book.

To enter the Taj Mahal today, visitors pass through the Great Gate, an impressive building made of red sandstone and **marble**. Words from the Koran welcome visitors.

The Great Gate is made of red sandstone and marble, and is decorated with inlaid flowers and flanked by two eight-sided towers.



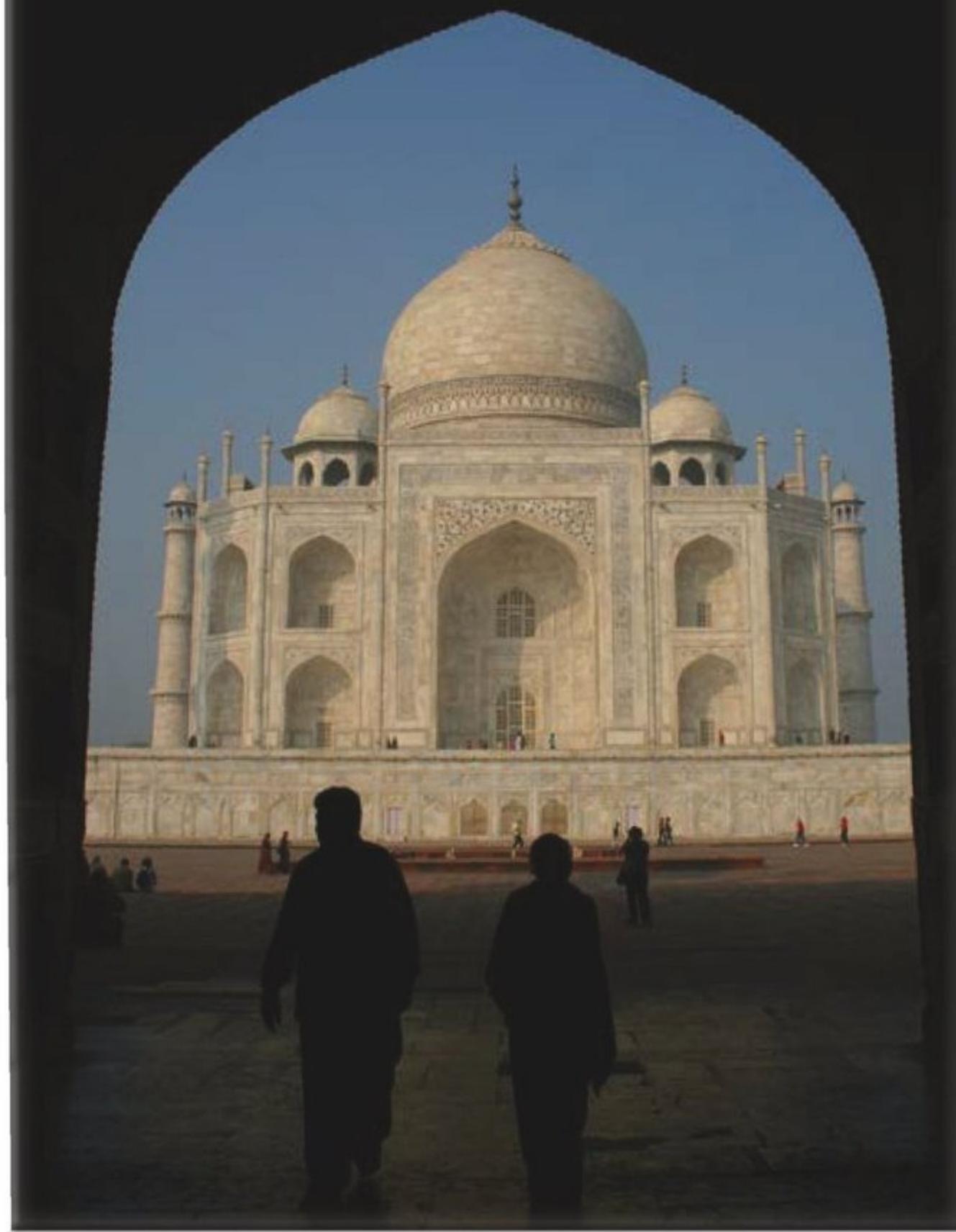
Layout of the Taj Mahal Complex



The Mausoleum

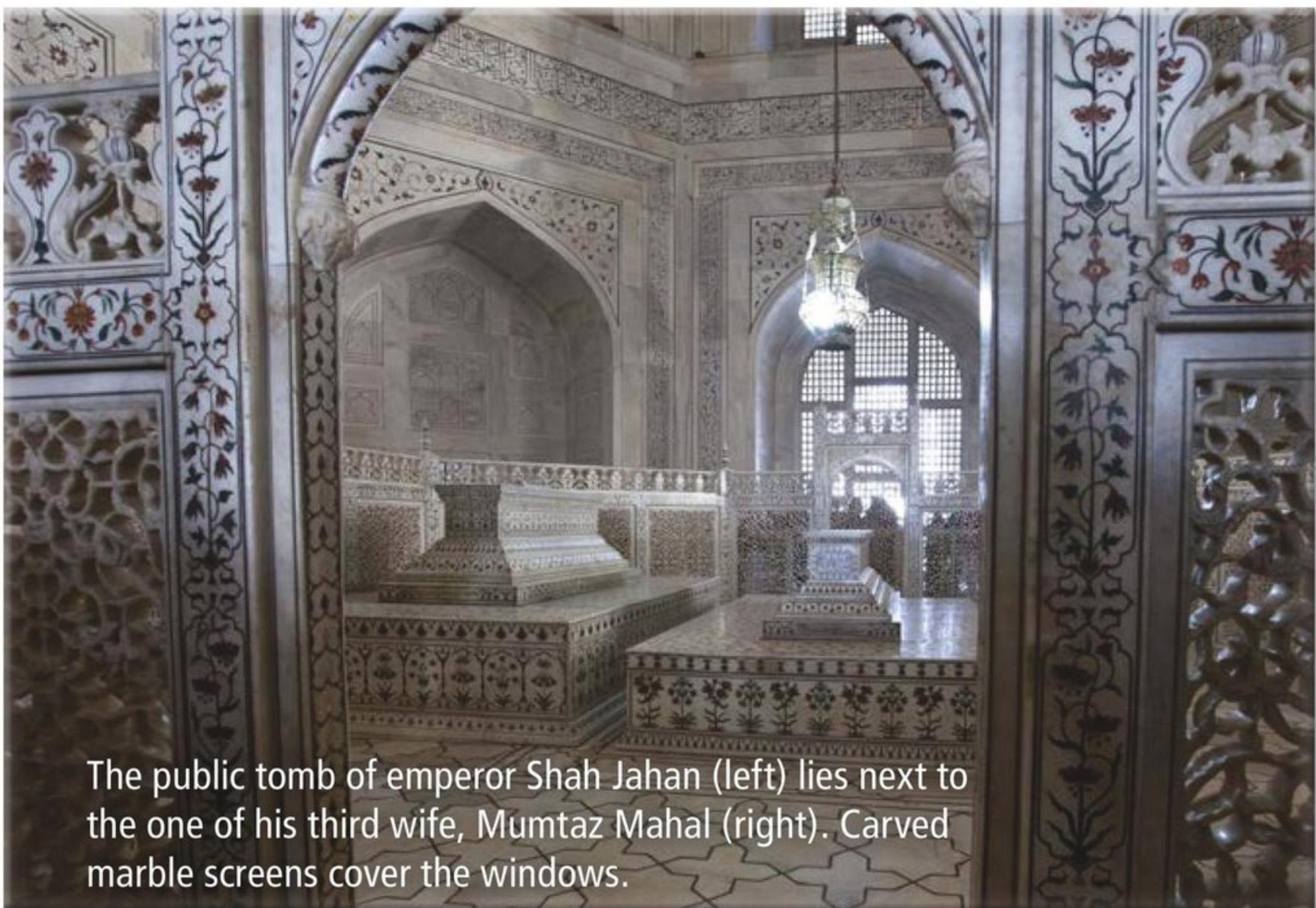
Everything in the Taj Mahal points visitors toward the large mausoleum where Mumtaz Mahal is buried. From inside the Great Gate, the mausoleum's onion-shaped dome appears perfectly framed in the arched entrance. In the Taj Mahal gardens, the water channels shimmer with the mausoleum's reflection.

The perfectly framed mausoleum is the first thing visitors see when they enter through the Great Gate.



The mausoleum is built on a raised marble platform that **dominates** the Taj Mahal grounds. Four tall towers surround it, each more than 40 meters (130 ft.) tall.

Most structures on the Taj Mahal grounds are made of red sandstone. However, the mausoleum, the platform holding it, and the surrounding towers are covered with white marble. White is the Islamic color of mourning. On a **tomb**, white shows the faith of the person buried within.



The public tomb of emperor Shah Jahan (left) lies next to the one of his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal (right). Carved marble screens cover the windows.

The mausoleum was designed to represent Mumtaz Mahal's mansion in the gardens of paradise. From the outside, the marble appears to change color with the changing light and weather. At times, the building seems to glow.

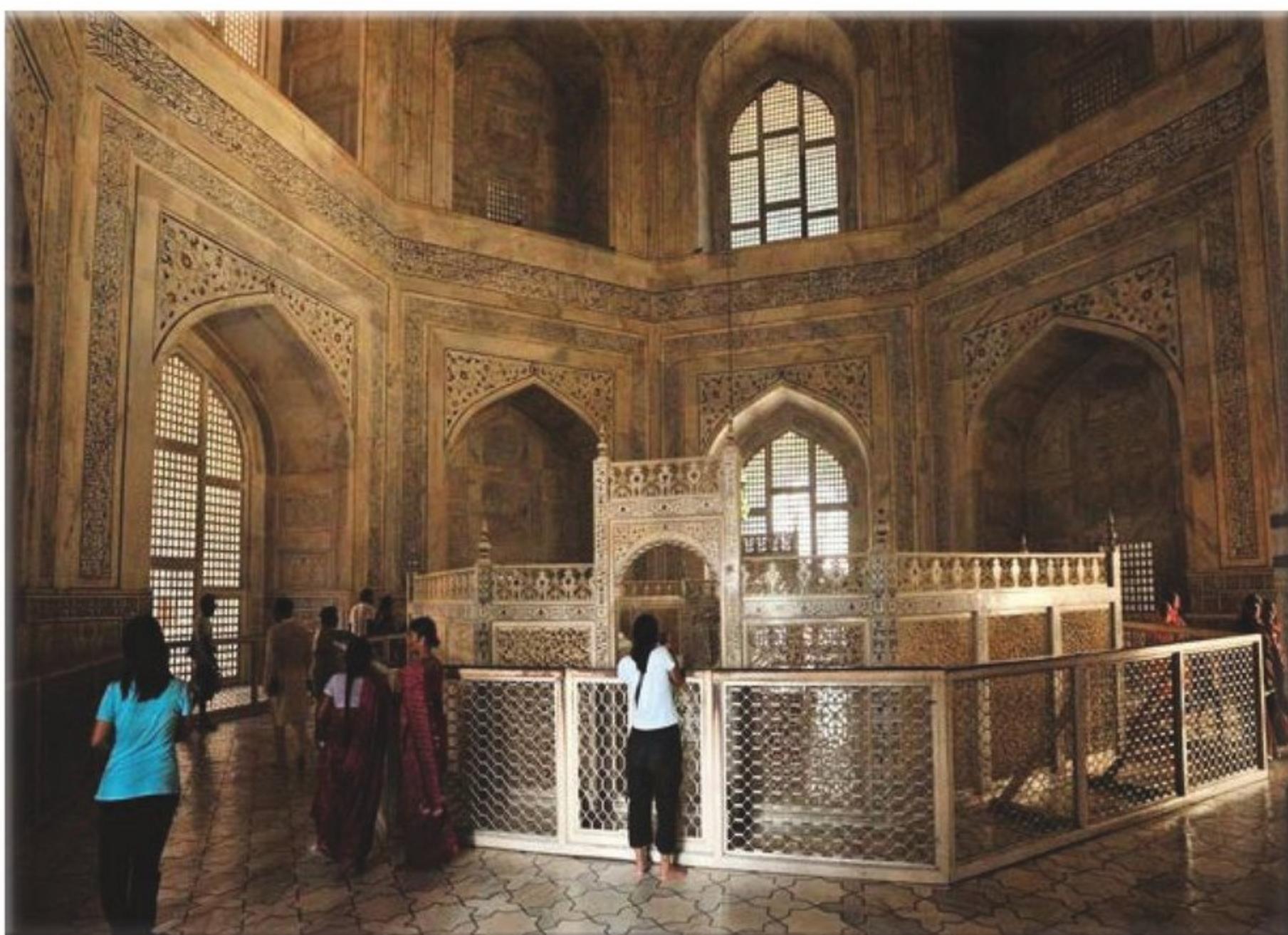
Like many Mughal tombs, Mumtaz Mahal's mausoleum has eight sides, with four long and four short outer walls. Massive arches provide entry on the four long walls of the building, with smaller arches on either side.

Inside the mausoleum, Mumtaz Mahal's coffin sits at the center of an eight-sided room in the middle of the building. Beside it, a second coffin marks her husband's burial site. Beautifully carved marble screens surround the coffins.

Both coffins are fake burial sites for visitors to view. The real burial sites are located in a private room on the lower level, directly below the coffins.

Some experts believe the mausoleum—the most richly decorated structure in the Taj Mahal—represents Mumtaz’s heavenly crown. The word *taj* comes from the Persian word for “crown.”

Geometric designs cover nearly every inch of the floor. Vines, flowers, and butterflies decorate the walls, bright with precious and semiprecious stones—jade, jasper, turquoise, and lapis lazuli (LAP-is LA-zuh-lee). **Artisans** set thousands of diamonds, rubies, amethysts, and other gems into the designs.



Thousands of people visit the mausoleum every day.



Emperor Shah
Jahan and
Mumtaz Mahal

A Wife and a Friend

The Taj Mahal was not the first tomb created by Mughal rulers, but it was one of the few created for a woman. Shah Jahan's other two wives are buried in unmarked tombs. What inspired him to build such a magnificent **memorial** for Mumtaz?

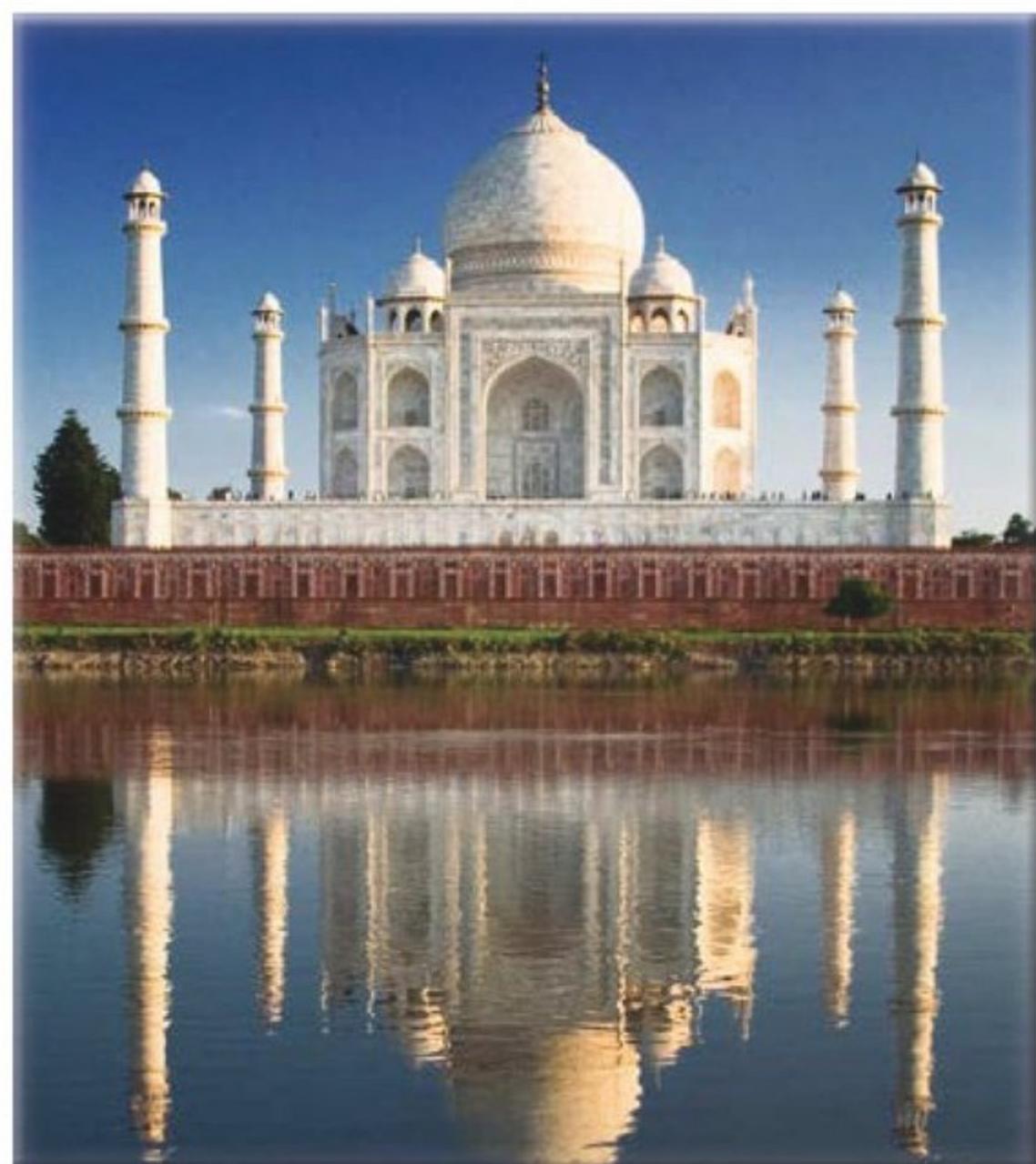
Shah Jahan met Mumtaz Mahal, then called Arjumand Banu, when he was a fifteen-year-old prince and she was fourteen. They were engaged shortly afterward and were married five years later, in 1612. Shah Jahan gave her the title Mumtaz Mahal, which means "Chosen One of the Palace."

Mumtaz became Shah Jahan's constant companion. She traveled everywhere with him, even when he went to war. She was in his battle camp when she died giving birth to their fourteenth child in 1631. She was only thirty-eight years old.

Shah Jahan was heartbroken. According to the court historian, Shah Jahan's beard turned white, and he cried so often that he needed glasses. He gave up jewelry, fancy clothes, and music. Every Wednesday, the day on which Mumtaz had died, Shah Jahan **banned** celebrations. On the yearly anniversary of her death, he required his court to wear white in her memory.

Shah Jahan chose a site for Mumtaz Mahal's memorial shortly after returning to the capital city of Agra. He selected land beside the Yamuna (YAH-moo-nah) River, where Mughal royalty lived in riverside garden mansions.

The mausoleum would be built along a bend in the river where slower water kept the banks from washing away. The river created a natural mirror to reflect light onto the mausoleum's white marble walls.



Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal on the western bank of the Yamuna River. The water in the gardens' channels comes from the river.

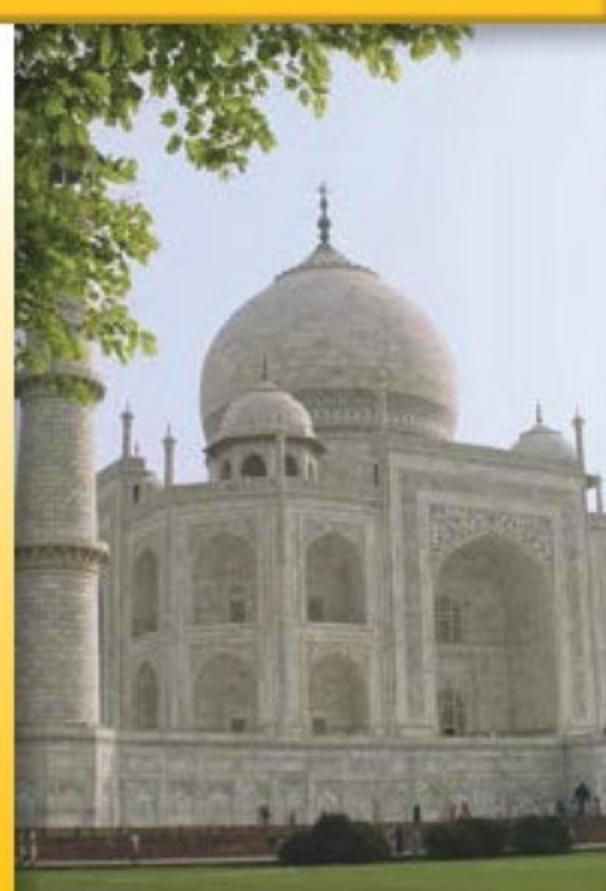
The Taj Mahal Is Built

Construction of the Taj Mahal began in 1632, about a year after Mumtaz Mahal's death, and continued for nearly twenty-two years. It was the largest building project of the Mughal dynasty. More than twenty thousand workers and a thousand elephants worked on its construction. Shah Jahan brought in architects, stoneworkers, and painters from all over the world.

Gems, semiprecious stones, and different colors of marble came from China, Tibet, Afghanistan, and other countries. Some of the slabs of white marble used to cover the mausoleum were enormous. The marble had to be transported hundreds of miles on carts pulled by teams of twenty to thirty oxen. Workers constructed a system of scaffolding, ropes, and pulleys to move the marble into position.

Amazing Facts

- The mausoleum is about 70 meters (240 ft.) tall. Its dome is 44 meters (144 ft.) tall and is estimated to weigh 11,000 metric tons (12,000 tn.).
- The Taj Mahal took 22 years and about 32 million rupees to build in 1632.
- Building the Taj Mahal today would cost about \$1.6 billion—four times as much as it cost to build Disney World.



After the Shah's Death

Today, the Taj Mahal is open from sunrise to sunset every day except Friday, the Muslim holy day. Visitors can also view the Taj Mahal by moonlight on the night of a full moon and the nights immediately before and after, except during the holy month of Ramadan.

However, the Taj Mahal is not the same place that Shah Jahan built in the seventeenth century. In the years after the Shah's death, it was practically abandoned. Thieves took many of the gems and semiprecious stones. Gold lamps, Persian carpets, and other decorations disappeared.

By the late nineteenth century, the British had replaced the Mughals as India's rulers. They began **restoration** of the Taj Mahal. Neat lawns replaced the overgrown gardens. The British repaired damaged marble and replaced missing screens and lamps.

Today the gardens of the Taj Mahal look much like the renovated gardens of 1899 (right).



Since the nineteenth century, new enemies have threatened the Taj Mahal. Air pollution from iron foundries, factories, and other industries damages the marble's soft surface. A yellow fungus known as "marble cancer" causes additional damage and discoloration. Increasing numbers of visitors also place more wear and tear on the monument.

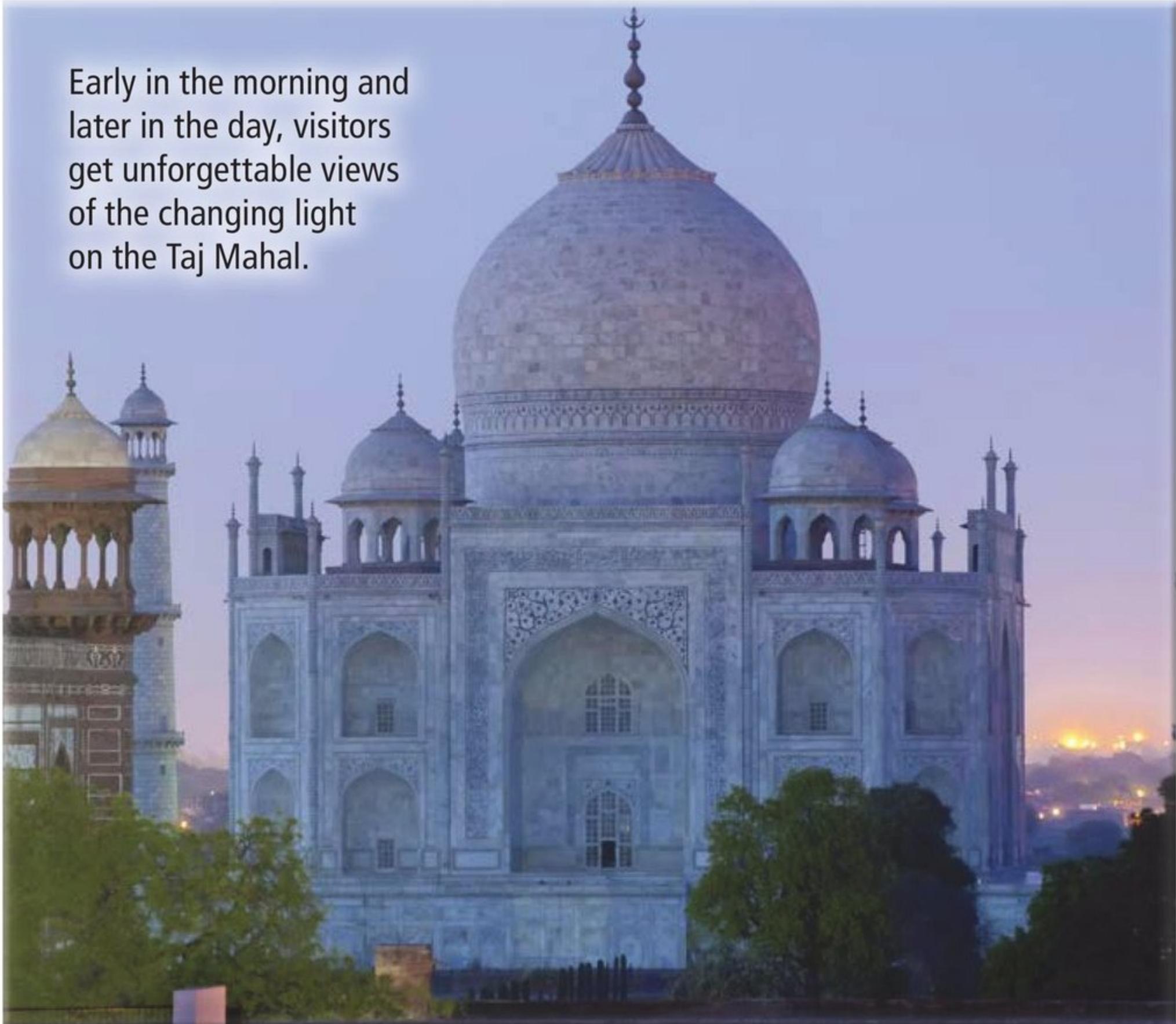
The Indian government has put a number of measures in place to protect the monument. Today, a 2-kilometer (1.2 mi.) traffic-free zone surrounds the Taj Mahal to keep out polluting vehicles. Polluting industries have been banned from a larger protected zone surrounding the monument. In addition, public and private groups are working together to repair and restore the Taj Mahal's structures.

The Taj Mahal may face challenges, but it has already survived earthquakes, lightning, wars, and floods. With a bit of luck and a lot of hard work, it will survive the coming centuries as well.

Artisans work to restore beautiful marble artwork created hundreds of years ago.



Early in the morning and later in the day, visitors get unforgettable views of the changing light on the Taj Mahal.



A Memorial for the Ages

Today, the Taj Mahal sees thousands of daily visitors—millions each year—from all over the world. The United Nations declared the Taj Mahal a World Heritage Site. An international vote established it as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World.

Shah Jahan desired a memorial for his beloved wife that would be admired by the entire world for all time. The Taj Mahal may not last forever, but centuries after its construction, it remains one of the most beautiful memorials ever created.

Glossary

artisans (<i>n.</i>)	people who are skilled at a craft or trade and who create items by hand (p. 9)
banned (<i>v.</i>)	stopped allowing (p. 11)
dominates (<i>v.</i>)	has continuing power or a commanding presence over something or someone (p. 7)
dynasty (<i>n.</i>)	a series of rulers in a country from the same family (p. 4)
geometric (<i>adj.</i>)	relating to the field of math that deals with angles, points, lines, surfaces, and solids (p. 9)
Islamic (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to the monotheistic faith of Muslims (p. 5)
marble (<i>n.</i>)	a kind of hard stone often used in making statues and buildings (p. 5)
mausoleum (<i>n.</i>)	a large tomb or a structure that contains several tombs (p. 5)
memorial (<i>n.</i>)	something that represents the memory of a person, place, thing, or event (p. 10)
restoration (<i>n.</i>)	the act of returning something to its original condition (p. 13)
symbolize (<i>v.</i>)	to represent an idea with an object, picture, or sign (p. 5)
tomb (<i>n.</i>)	a vault, chamber, or grave for a dead person (p. 7)

Taj Mahal

A Reading A-Z Level W Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,327

Connections

Writing

Do you agree that the Taj Mahal should be one of the New Seven Wonders of the World? Write a persuasive essay explaining your opinion. Be sure to include evidence from the book to support your position.

Social Studies

Research to learn more about Shah Jahan and create a timeline of his life, including his birth, death, and significant accomplishments.



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