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Lost In Time: Unveiling The Ancient Barabar Caves Near Bodh Gaya

The Barabar Caves, older than Ajanta and Ellora, offer a peaceful escape near bustling Bodh Gaya. Rich in history and literary connection, these ancient caves deserve more recognition



The Lomas Rishi cave built into a gigantic boulder at BarabarPhotographs: Arjun Kumar

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Seventy minutes. That's what separates the bustling pilgrim and tourist destination of [Bodh Gaya](#) from the peace of Barabar. While the former is a place of international repute, chances are that a person may never have heard of the latter unless he was a history buff.

On a crisp winter morning, a friend and I set out for Barabar from Bodh Gaya (for a detailed guide, click [here](#)). The hum of Buddhist prayer was soon behind us, and after a turn-off on the main road, heavy traffic also vanished. It was a clear road occasionally punctuated by a motorcyclist driving bang in the middle of the odd tractor-trailer lurching up from dirt tracks on the side. With the motorcyclists startled by our driver's enthusiastic application of the horn, the trip was short.

We arrived at the sound of silence. Barabar would have far fewer visitors than Bodh Gaya had expected, but the absence of a single other person was a surprise. Sitting next to the gate was an elderly gentleman with a red *gamchha* wrapped around his neck. Even he seemed mildly surprised to see visitors on a weekday but agreed to navigate us around the complex.

Barabar comprises a set of caves atop a hill. The place is dotted with boulders, and one particularly massive one is home to the caves. From a distance, this boulder looks like a huge slab some giant had laid on the hill and walked off. The isolation of the setting is stunning. The sound of birds here is as calming as the prayer chants in Bodh Gaya. Perhaps it is this isolation that inspired an author a century ago.

In June 1924, E.M. Forster published his book "A Passage to India." One of the three sections of this acclaimed book was titled "Caves" and was set in the Barabar Caves, albeit renamed "Marabar." The

section featured a turning point in the story, and it was possibly to paint a more vivid picture than Forster has described the caves in considerable detail.

There are four caves at Barabar. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has put an innovative gate for some of them, a lockable metal contraption on wheels that is pulled back to allow access. The most important of the caves, named after a Lomas Rishi, is entered via a *chaitya* arch—the kind seen in [Buddhist caves](#)—and this arch has a pattern of elephants interspersed with stupas.



Elephant and stupa pattern above the entrance to the Lomas Rishi cave

Inside the Lomas Rishi cave, there is an inky darkness. The granite walls seem polished and reflect the glow of a torch. Most caves ~~Confidential~~ in nature and have two chambers within. Any sound made inside is amplified, and a prayer recited seems to linger on, even after the speaker has fallen silent. One imagines monks praying here centuries ago in perfect peace.



Entrance to the Lomas Rishi cave at Barabar

The best description of the caves comes from Forster, and there are no better words than his: “*They are dark caves. Even when they open towards the sun, very little light penetrates down the entrance tunnel... There is little to see and no eye to see it until the visitor arrives for his five minutes and strikes*

a match. Immediately, another flame rises in the depths of the rock and moves towards the surface like an imprisoned spirit...." The description shows that the author visited the caves and did not rely on another's view. The description holds true even today, a century after the book was published. How many places in India can boast that? Isolation helps.

The caves at Barabar are the oldest man-made ones in India, older than more popular ones such as Ajanta, Elephanta, etc. They were created during the reign of Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE, making them over two millennia old. The intent was to provide a place of prayer and seclusion for monks of the Ajivika faith.

The Ajivikas were a faith founded in the 5th century BCE by Makkahali Gosala, considered a contemporary of the Buddha and Mahavira. Apparently, Gosala was initially a follower of Mahavira but broke off to begin his sect. While Buddhism and Jainism both seemed to have had lengthy periods of imperial support across ages, support for the Ajivikas seems to have been short-lived, possibly contributing to the faith dying out.

Less than two kilometres from the Barabar Caves are the even more isolated Nagarjuni Caves. Each of the three caves here carries an inscription, which says Ashoka's grandson Dasaratha Maurya is the patron builder, mentioning that he created the caves for the Ajivikas. At the same time, the faith has vanished, as has the patron dynasty; their memory lives on in these words carved on rock.



The setting of the Nagarjuni Caves with a tiny entrance

Close to the Nagarjuni Caves was a curious sight: a small cluster of buildings inside high walls, behind a closed gate—with not a soul in sight! From a distance, I felt it to be a school, but I was taken aback to find that it was a police station or post. This was the only police station I have come across where the men in khaki seemed to have *barred themselves in*. This is perhaps a result of the area's more recent history, which is a violent one.

The Barabar and Nagarjuna Caves lie in the Jehanabad district of [Bihar](#). Going to Jehanabad for leisure two decades ago would have drawn derisive remarks and comments about returning in one piece. The place was notorious for caste-based clashes, Maoist activity, massacres and even a mass jailbreak. That's in the past, although the cops seemed to have decided to stay cautious.

The most interesting feature of the area lies a short drive from the Barabar Caves, close to a village. Here, a hill made up of boulders causes visitors to stop and look closer. At its base, and almost all around it, is iconography depicting Hindu gods and goddesses. On one side is a set of Yoginis; their fine features now fade with time. The huge stone in front of the rock face with the Yoginis is a *shiva linga*, complete with faces carved on four sides.

On another surface is a Ganesha, a third has a Mahisasura Mardini Durga, while a fourth has more *Shiva lingas*. Inside the village nearby are traces of more carved rocks, some of which have been

incorporated into houses. This hill of icons is called "Kauwa Dol"—"Kauwa" meaning crow. Legend has it that a solitary boulder was crowning the hill, which was so delicately balanced that every time a bird sat on it, the boulder swayed. Even Forster has mentioned it in his book, although he takes the creative liberty of placing this boulder on top of his "Marabar" caves. There is no sign of this boulder today, but the hill itself is unchanged from a photograph taken by a wandering British explorer in the late 19th century. In a country where rock mining has been the bane of such hills, maybe religious iconography has protected the hill all this time.



Carved icons at the base of the Kauwa Dol hill

Excavations from the 19th century at the base of the hill revealed the presence of a large Buddhist **vihara**. Among the **Confidential** remains from that dig that still remain here is a massive seated Buddha icon, thankfully protected.

Despite being a short drive from Bodh Gaya, the Barabar region feels lost in time. Word is that the ASI is seeking to incorporate the two cave complexes into [UNESCO's tentative list](#) for World Heritage Status, but that's in the future.

Today, though, the sites cry out for better descriptions of their historical status and markers to guide people from one site to the other. A decent interpretation centre would help. Mentioning these sites at Gaya airport and various points in the Bodh Gaya circuit would direct visitors here. It just takes seventy minutes to ensure this chunk of [Bihar's ancient history](#) doesn't fall off the map.

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