



Ajanta caves

Contemplating Colours, Caves & Cherubs

A look inside the World Heritage Sites of Ajanta & Ellora

By Parvathy Venkateswaran

The World Heritage Sites of Ajanta and Ellora, near the picturesque town of Aurangabad, the great Mughal capital in central India, were 'found' quite by accident in 1819 by a British army officer on a hunting expedition.

Ajanta

Dating from 200 BCE and 800 years in the making, the Ajanta caves were dedicated to Lord Buddha and fully illustrate the Jataka tales (stories of the Bodhisattvas – enlightened beings who postpone nirvana to help others escape the cycle of rebirth). The site mainly comprises temples, monasteries and viharas (monk retreats).

What look like ant hills from a distance is an expanse of massive boulders hewn into 29 caves using only hammer and chisel! In Cave 1 walls, ceilings and passages dance with forms and colours. The images have detailed hairstyles, ornaments and costumes. Apparently ladies didn't cover their faces much then, but the paintings themselves are now covered by protective glass.

To make the murals, first a layer of mud plaster was applied to smooth out the walls, followed by a coat of lime plaster. The images were outlined in red ochre then other colours – made from crushing the local basaltic rock – were applied.

Cave 5 brings you to the viharas, spaces used by monks for solitary meditation, study and worship. To enter, you have to step over a high threshold then quickly dip your head lest you bump it. Were the gentry short? Stark and empty, a cubicle measuring approximately two-square metres would have held all the worldly possessions of the ascetic. A raised bed made of mud plaster indicates where a monk might have spread his bamboo mat. Was it here that he dreamt his visions in stone, mud and rainbow hues? Faintly visible above the



Kailasa temple at Ellora

bed are depressions that would have held a wooden rod for drying clothes.

The figures in the Cave 10 murals are three-dimensional, with highly differentiated facial expressions – greed, love, compassion – but not a single one looks angry, lost or lonely. A kind of vibrant energy shines through. Outside the myriad colours in the throng's attire seem to have come straight from the paintings within.

Ellora

About an hour's drive from Aurangabad, these 34 caves contain shrines, monasteries and temples with a mixture of themes and influences. The Buddhist caves were carved between 200 BCE and 600 CE, followed by the Hindu caves (500 – 900 CE) and finally the Jain caves (800 – 1000 CE). All were carved as viharas, and later served as refuges for traders, priests and pilgrims.

The Kailasa temple at Ellora is the largest monolithic sculpture in the world – twice as big as the Pantheon in Greece and almost twice as high! The temple is in the centre of a large courtyard, surrounded by lines of pillars holding up a common ceiling – a massive rock structure, a part of which juts out some five metres above like an enormous awning. How is it that this rocky outcrop has not come crashing down after all these centuries?

Most memorable here are the identical dancing cherubic forms, beaming down from the tops of 14 pillars, completely covered with glistening ornaments. You stand next to one of them, a sweet smile plays on the baby's countenance. Painted in the palest of peach shades, the mural looks almost surreal. Such is the experience of Ajanta and Ellora.

Parvathy Venkateswaran, a post-graduate in geography, has a passion for historical places and how they aligned with their environment. She has been a docent at the ACM since 2007.

Editor's Note: The Ajanta and Ellora caves are located near Aurangabad, India (about 400 km from Mumbai). Open 9:00 am to sunset. Ajanta is closed Mondays, Ellora is closed Tuesdays. For more information, see www.maharashtratourism.gov.in

Photos by the author