



Hampi

Timeless City

By Anu Kumar and Gauraang Pradhan

The Lotus Mahal at the Zenana enclosure, one of the secular buildings of note in Hampi

The city of Hampi has its mythical origins in a story told in the ancient epic, the *Ramayana*. Sita, the wife of Rama, the exiled Prince of Ayodhya, is kidnapped by Ravana, the evil demon king. Rama and his brother Lakshmana look desperately for her, and days later encounter a group of monkeys in a hilly boulder-infested place. The *vanara* as they were called, lead them to their king Sugriva and with their help reach Lanka, fight bravely against Ravana and rescue Sita.

Located in the Deccan Plateau, Hampi is over 700 years old and was where Rama and Lakshmana first met the *vanara*. Centuries later, two young princes picked the site to set up a new capital for their kingdom of Vijaynagara (City of Victory). It remained for over 200 years and was filled with such wonders that travellers from such faraway places as Arabia, Portugal and Russia left behind glowing descriptions of it in their accounts.

Hampi is 225 miles (350km) from Bangalore, India's premier IT city, but we decided to travel on motorcycle all the way from Goa, the idyllic state on the west coast that lies only 193 miles from Hampi. We could have taken the train to Hospet, just nine miles from Hampi, or a flight from Panjim in Goa to any of the other major nearby cities such as Bangalore, Bellary or Belgaum, but travelling on motorcycles offers its own adventures.

For tourists and visitors, the few hotels in Hampi offer essential comforts. There are other places across the river at Virapur Gaddi as well. In times of heavy rainfall though, the last boat from Hampi leaves in the evening.

The old boulders that overlook Hampi were visible from a distance. It was August, the rainy season, and the river Tungabhadra had turned the landscape a lush green, though the area had seen extensive recent mining. In the space of the 15 miles that make up Hampi are the most astonishing temples, palaces and statues that successive rulers have built. The dynasty's greatest ruler was Krishnadeva Raya (1509-30 CE); he built most of the buildings in the royal citadel that makes up one section of the city.

The royal citadel of the kings has some wonderful monuments. The Queen's Bath is a huge structure accessed by numerous steps. The Royal Enclosure, where important state functions were held, still looks as it must have done long ago, with stone slabs overlooking a vast grassy expanse. The zenana (women's apartments) enclosure has high arches, tall columns and intricate wall carvings that reveal a mix of Islamic and other local styles of building. There is the Lotus Mahal and the extensive Elephant Stables where pachyderms belonging to the royal family were housed.



Holy men (sadhus) from Nepal visiting Hampi's temples

On our first morning, we took a walk along Hampi Bazaar, the city's main thoroughfare. It leads to the 11-storeyed Virupaksha Temple dedicated to Shiva, the powerful destroyer god of Hindu religion. All of Hampi's temples have lovely wall sculptures; even the pillars and pavilions reveal a high quality of craftsmanship. The Virupaksha Temple is nearly 1,400 years old and is older than Hampi; later rulers only made additions to it. The beautiful carvings on the temple walls show scenes from the epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. A man with a long ancient trumpet played something nice for us, insisting his forefathers had played it for the Vijayanagara rulers too. We also met Laxmi, the temple elephant who lives on the grounds. She blesses those who make offerings to her by placing her trunk on donors' heads. We stayed to watch her keeper give her a fine lunch of rice and *ragi* (millet) balls.

At the other end of Hampi Bazaar is an impressive statue of the bull Nandi, the vehicle of the god Shiva. This is also where the annual dance festival of Hampi is held.

A series of nearby steps leads to the Achyutaraya Temple, a Vishnu temple. This is one of the last grand temples built before the empire fell in the 1560s. The Matanga hill, Hampi's highest point, is very near. This offers breathtaking views of daybreak and sunset. Not too far away, the Hemkunt hill is popular with rock-climbing enthusiasts. The Sule Bazaar offers another approach to the Achutaraya Temple. This was once a centre for trade in gold and diamonds and drew merchants from all over the world.

The massive Kondarama Temple is where Prince Rama is believed to have crowned Sugriva, the *vanara* king. As we emerged, boatmen on the shore hailed us, offering a riverside tour on their bouncy coracles. A friendly boatman pointed to temples we had missed and told us of the hippies who had once camped in the temples before Hampi was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Vithala Temple is known for its musical pillars. We tapped firmly on every pillar and did hear a low drumming noise. In front is a lovely stone chariot engraved with an image of the mythical half-bird, half-man Garuda, who



The Elephant Stables of Hampi

served as the vehicle for Vishnu. 'The King's Balance', a big beam of stone set on two parallel standing pillars, is an unusual structure. Kings and queens of Vijayanagara were weighed against precious gems and diamonds that were later offered to the temples and deserving people.

We chanced upon a poignant reminder of Hampi's timelessness – some former cart ponies grazing aimlessly. On our last day, we met some *sadhus* from Nepal. They lived by the river, the orange glare of their small fires always visible from afar. The next morning it was time to leave, we on our motorcycles and the *sadhus* on foot, tridents raised in a solemn goodbye. We reached Bangalore later that day, but somewhere the *sadhus* are still walking on a dusty road like any other in India.

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All photos courtesy of Gauraang Pradhan



Retired ponies grazing inside the old city