



Splendour in Stone

The Ajanta-Ellora Study Tour

By Andra Leo

The Ajanta Caves seen from the lookout

Of the many architectural wonders in this world, the Ajanta and Ellora Caves, near Aurangabad, India, must be among the most extraordinary. These man-made, cave-temple complexes are two of India's most renowned archaeological sites. Created over several centuries by Buddhist, Hindu and Jain monks, the temples were hewn from solid rock. The Ajanta caves, excavated between the first century BCE and the 5th century CE, contain paintings and sculptures considered to be masterpieces of Buddhist art. The Ellora cave complex is multi-cultural, with three religions represented – Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. The Buddhist caves were the first to have been created, followed by the two others. The highlight in Ellora is the awe-inspiring Kailashnath Temple; many consider it the pinnacle of Indian rock-cut architecture. These exceptional caves were our destination in January 2012, when a study tour group, led by Abha Kaul, set off to visit them.



The Taj Hotel in Mumbai (Bombay)

When the group departed, we were an eclectic mix of people from numerous backgrounds; many of us did not know the others except for brief encounters during the pre-trip meetings. We returned as friends after an immaculately planned trip that included not only the splendid caves, but also visits to other special sites, a driving tour of Mumbai (Bombay), shopping for exquisite textiles and antiques and finally, a social evening at the Walkeshwar home of Abha's friends, Priti and Tarun, a prominent Mumbai couple. The highlight of this event was a talk by well-known historian Sharada Dwivedi, author of the fascinating book *Bombay, the*

Cities Within. At the time, none of us could have imagined that ours might have been the last talk that this erudite and passionately committed lady gave. Tragically, Sharada Dwivedi died on 6 February, just two weeks later.

Located 105 kilometres north of Aurangabad, in Maharashtra, the 29 caves at Ajanta are situated in a spectacular, horseshoe-shaped ravine. The cave temples had long been abandoned, forgotten and eventually hidden from view by the encroaching jungle when they were re-discovered by an English subaltern, John Smith, on 28 April 1819. While out on a tiger hunt, he pushed his way through some



Ajanta, painting of the bodhisattva Padmapani in Cave 1

foliage when a flash of yellow and red caught his eye, but it was no tiger. The sun was being reflected from inside a cave, a cave like none he'd seen before. He found himself looking at a glorious panorama. The cave walls were adorned with exquisite paintings, all dazzlingly colourful. These paintings tell tales from the *Jataka* – stories of Buddha's previous lives. He may appear in them as a king, an outcast, a god, an elephant – in whatever form it may be, he exhibits a virtue that the tale is meant to exemplify and inculcate in its readers. Sadly, the subaltern had no respect for what he was seeing. Walter Spink, the foremost authority on the Ajanta Caves, reported that, "...he scratched his inscription (John Smith, 28th Cavalry, 28th April, 1819) across the innocent chest of a painted Buddha image on the thirteenth pillar on the right in Cave 10". This piece of vandalism is still there today and was pointed out to us.

Our first view of the Ajanta caves was from a high point above the ravine with the entire horseshoe spread out below. At this time of the year, unfortunately, there was little of the lush green one associates with the site; the area was mostly desiccated and brown and the only green was from the trees growing by the riverside in the valley far below. We took



Ellora Caves 1 to 5



Ajanta, Cave 26 - Exterior

some long flights of stairs downward to reach a bridge and then began our visit to the various cave temples. The focus at Ajanta is on the exquisite paintings; 546 are of Buddha's previous incarnations, but many also reveal historical details of the era in which they were painted. Forty-three hairstyles are depicted and 243 textile designs. The detail in the faces is also remarkable – their expressions of joy, hope, despair and sorrow, can clearly be seen. In fact the caves at Ajanta are like a

fantastic art gallery; the painters' craft is apparent wherever you look. Their mastery of complex forms is evident in the way they handled scenes in which large numbers of people are depicted. Clearly they didn't shy away from painting the female form either, since many sensuous beauties adorn the walls. These caves were a feast for the eyes and an unforgettable experience – the scale and depth of the temples are awesome, the tenacity and dedication of its architects are almost beyond belief. Our visit to Ajanta ended with a completely unexpected meeting; Professor Walter Spink happened to be back and came to talk to us. At the age of 84, he is still pursuing his passion for the wonderful artwork in the cave temples, readying a final volume of his Ajanta Caves series for publication.



Group photo at Ajanta with Prof Walter Spink

Closer to Aurangabad are the Ellora caves – the richest depository of rock-cut art in India. Pushpesh Pant (in Ajanta

& Ellora) calls them "the most monumental legacy yet known of early Indian art." The temples represent three religious belief systems and are therefore a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists, Hindus and Jains. We visited all three types, beginning with the Buddhist caves and ending with the Jain temples. These impressive temples stretch deep inside the mountain, one leading to another, and are monumental in size. However, it was the Hindu Kailashnath temple which took our breath away. This temple is not a cave – it is a huge complex cut right out of the mountainside. At its centre, the sanctum to Shiva, Lord of Kailash, sits within the mountain's embrace like an exotic jewel in a gigantic bowl. Three million cubic feet of rock were excavated during its construction, which began from the top down. The sight of this temple is truly unforgettable. The sheer scale of the undertaking is almost unimaginable, yet many centuries ago a deep faith motivated its architects to dedicate their lives to its creation. In the galleries around the sides and within the main temple, we gazed in wonder at the life-like statuary depicting Hindu mythology: Shiva as Nataraja, the cosmic dancer, Shiva as a bridegroom, Ravana shaking Mount Kailash and Parvati seeking solace in Shiva's embrace. There was almost too much to take in – the immensity of the project was most obvious to those of us who climbed up and walked around the top of the cliff from which the entire complex was carved.



The Kailashnath Temple at Ellora seen from above

This was a perfectly organised tour – we mixed history with fun and laughter. As one tour member wrote, "The Ajanta-Ellora Study Tour returned safe, sound and ecstatic. It was a sensational trip in every way. Congratulations to our tour leader Abha Kaul, on an outstanding tour and to all the tour members for being such a fun-loving, intellectually curious, and harmonious group. We had a magical time."

Andra Leo has been an FOM member for many years, is an avid traveller and enjoys writing about her various trips.

All photos by the author