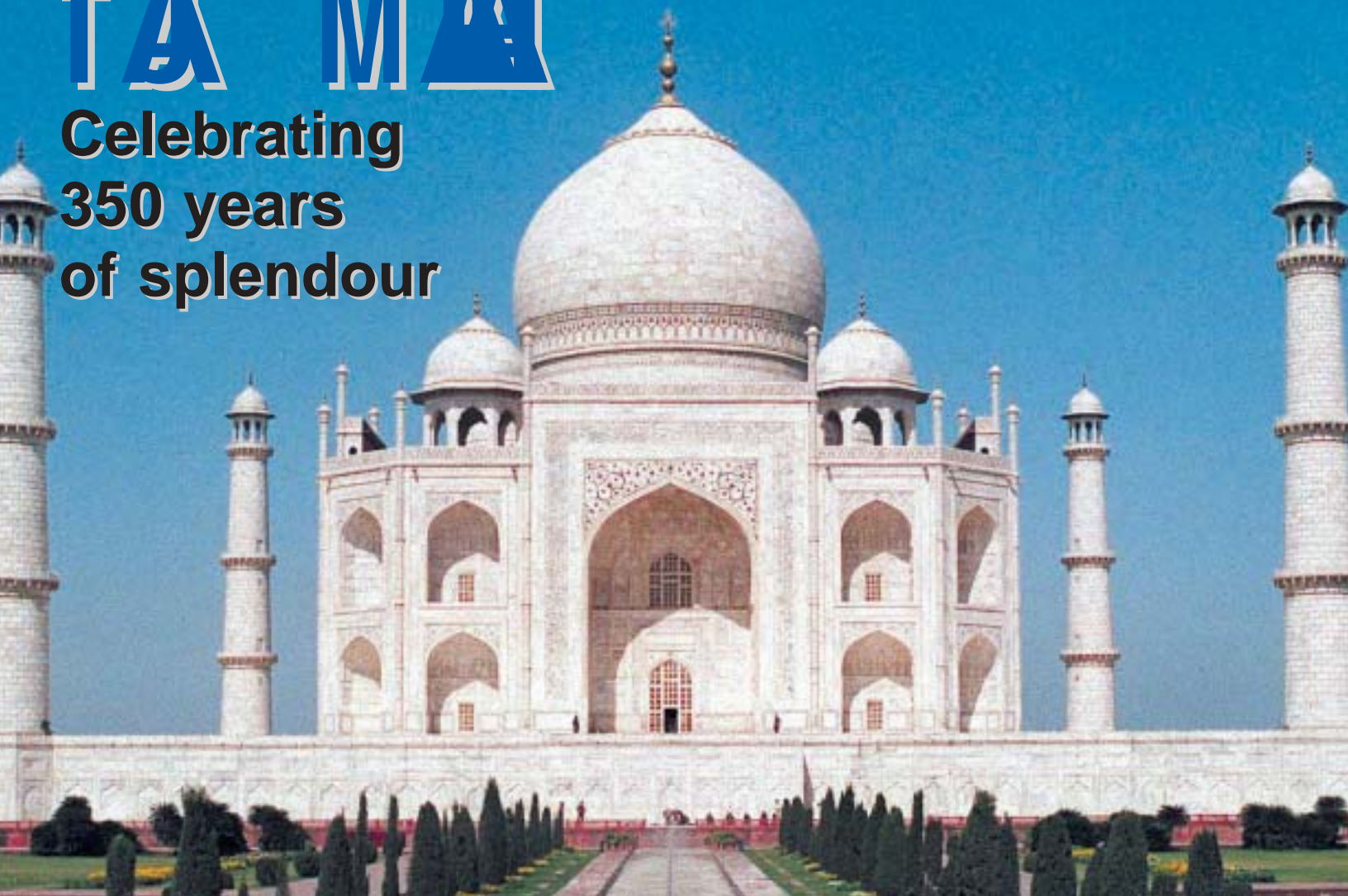


T A M A

Celebrating 350 years of splendour



For 350 years now, the Taj Mahal has inspired poets, painters and musicians to try and capture its elusive magic in word, colour and song. Since the 17th century, travellers have crossed continents to come to Agra and see this ultimate memorial to love, and few have remained unmoved by its incomparable beauty.

The celebrations marking the 350th anniversary of the Taj began in September 2004 and was marked with special events over the next six months.

Standing on the banks of the Yamuna river, this marvel in marble was built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in the memory of his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal.

After Mumtaz's death, Shah Jahan

decided to erect a memorial that the world would never forget. The site selected for the tomb was a garden by the Yamuna river, unshadowed by any other structure.

Over 20,000 workers laboured for 17 years to build the mausoleum. Shah Jahan spent his last years in the Mussalman Burj looking downstream at the Taj where his beloved Mumtaz Mahal lay. After his death, he, too, was laid to rest beside her.

Shah Jahan's two biggest passions were architecture and jewellery and both are reflected in the Taj Mahal. The marble building is decorated with semi-precious stones inlaid with the delicacy of hand-crafted jewellery. For the intricate *pietra dura* the finest gems were collected — crystal and jade from China, lapis lazuli and sapphires from Sri Lanka, jasper from

Punjab, carnelian from Baghdad, turquoise from Tibet, agates from Yemen, corals from Arabia, garnets from Bundelkhand, onyx and amethyst from Persia.

Taj Mahal stands at one side of a garden laid in the traditional *charbagh* style, with its square lawns bisected by pathways, water channels and rows of fountains. Halfway down the path there is a square pool, its limpid waters reflecting the marble tomb. Unlike other tombs, Taj Mahal stands at one end of the garden instead of the centre. This was done deliberately, to leave its vista uncluttered by any other building.

The tomb stands on a marble plinth six-metres high. The four minarets at each corner beautifully frame the tomb. The plinth stands on a high standstone plat-

form and at the far ends of this base are two identical sandstone structures, a mosque to the west and its *jawab*, or echo, to the east. Thus, the main building is not just of great size but beautifully proportioned and balanced in design.

The actual graves lie in an underground crypt directly below the cenotaphs.

Taj Mahal is 75 metres high and is, in fact, taller than the Qutb Minar in Delhi.

Taj Mahal changes its moods with the seasons and the different times of the day. At dawn, the marble has a delicate bloom in shell pink, by noon it glitters majestically white, turning to a soft pearly grey at dusk. Monsoon clouds give it a moody blue tint and it appears and disappears like a mirage in the drifting mists of winter.

It can be solid and earthbound, fragile and ethereal, white, amber, grey and gold. The many faces of Taj Mahal display the seductive power of architecture at its best. ■

A virtual tour of Taj Mahal

Take a virtual tour of the magnificent Taj Mahal even if you cannot actually visit one of the world's most famous monuments to love.

A website www.taj350years.com imparts the history of the marble mausoleum.



Detail of carving on the Taj

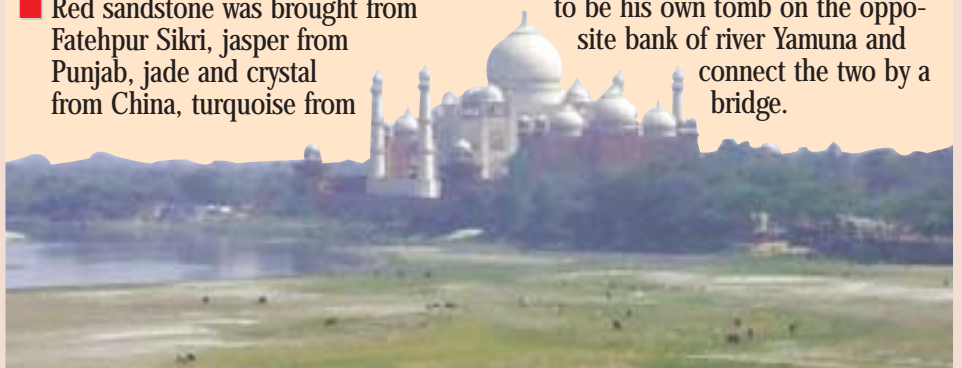
The website, developed by students, enables surfers across the world to learn everything about the Taj, its rich history and exquisite architecture.

Splendid images of the Taj add to the net surfer's virtual experience.

The site will keep the surfers updated on various events to be held till February next year to commemorate the 350-year celebrations.

Taj: Facts and Factoids

- At least 20,000 people were employed to build the Taj Mahal for around 17 years.
- The site selected was a garden by the Yamuna river.
- It stands on a marble plinth six-metres high.
- The monument is 75 metres high.
- It's cost of construction was up ay Rs. 5 million then.
- To date, the identity of its architect remains a mystery. It is said Shah Jahan may have served as his own artistic director. In the official Mughal histories, 37 men are mentioned by name under the category of designers and architects.
- The material was brought in from all over India and central Asia and it took a fleet of 1,000 elephants to transport it to the site.
- Red sandstone was brought from Fatehpur Sikri, jasper from Punjab, jade and crystal from China, turquoise from Tibet, lapis lazuli and sapphires from Sri Lanka, coal and carnelian from Arabia and diamonds from Panna.
- The white marble was quarried from the mines in Aravalli ranges in Dholpur and Jaipur.
- For the accommodation of workers, a small town named after the deceased empress, Mumtazabad now known as Taj Ganj, was built adjacent to the building site.
- A popular belief associated with the monument is that Shah Jahan chopped off the hands of all the 20,000 workers so that they cannot rebuild another monument like the Taj.
- Another belief is that Shah Jahan had planned to build another Taj Mahal in black marble, which was to be his own tomb on the opposite bank of river Yamuna and connect the two by a bridge.



TOURIST INFORMATION

How to Get There

By Air: Kheria Airport is 7 kms from centre of town. Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport is 204 kms away.

By Rail: The Agra Cantonment station is the nearest railhead. It is 6 kms from the city centre.

By Road: Uttar Pradesh Roadways' buses leave for other major cities from the Idgah bus stand.

Timing

8 a.m.-7 p.m.; closed on Mondays.

Taj Museum is open from 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; closed on Mondays and Fridays.

Best time to visit

October to March

Entry Fee

Rs. 15 for the Taj Mahal and the Museum from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Rs. 100 from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. Children below 12 free. Free entry on Fridays.

Foreigners are charged a composite fee of Rs. 500 that allows them entry to all the monuments in Agra — Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Itmad-ud-Daula and Sikandra.

For more information, visit

www.up-tourism.com
www.hcilondon.net
www.tourindia.com
www.tourismofindia.com