

life  
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travel



Ajanta Caves in the valley of rock-cut complex



The Mendha Tope, a canon with a 'ram head'

## The call of Aurangabad

Aurangabad is named after the Moghul emperor, Aurangzeb Alamgir. ANEETA SUNDARARAJ is fascinated by the Unesco World Heritage-listed sites there

**T**HE city of Aurangabad has yet to make it to the Malaysian list of Top Ten Travel Destinations in India.

Still, when I arrive in the city in the state of Maharashtra and meet my guide, Sanjay Vaswani, I am excited to be here.

Aurangabad is named after the Moghul emperor, Aurangzeb Alamgir (son of Shah Jahan, the man behind the famous Taj Mahal). During his second viceroyalty of the Deccan, Aurangzeb made it his capital in 1653 and named it Aurangabad.

But its history goes further back. With an abundant water supply and a strategic location between north and south India, the city was first built around a village called Khidki.

It's known as the City Of Gates as there are 52 gates into the old city (each one was opened for a week every year). The principal ones were the Delhi gate (in the north), the Jalna gate (in the east), the Paithan gate (in the south) and the Mecca gate (in the west). Most of them are no longer used.

### Not for love

Our tour begins with a visit to Bibi-Ka-Maqbara (which means Tomb Of The Lady), the mausoleum of Aurangzeb's wife, Dil Ras Banu. She wanted her mausoleum to be as beautiful as her mother-in-law's in Agra

(Taj Mahal). However, Bibi-Ka-Maqbara was not built by Aurangzeb to commemorate his love for his wife. Instead, it was built by their son to fulfil her wish.

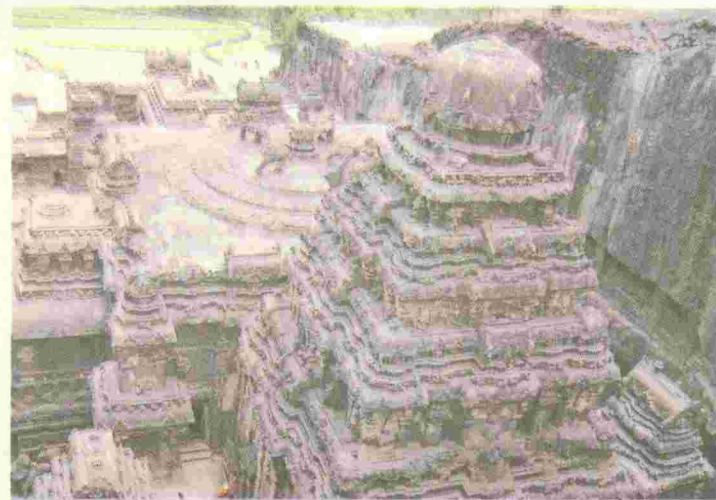
Also known as Taj Of The South and sometimes, The Poor Man's Taj the mausoleum was designed by architects Attaullah and Haspatrai at the cost of about rupees 665,283 (RM43,170).

I ask Sanjay why history tends to remember Aurangzeb as a cruel man. Apparently, Aurangzeb was a puritan and despised anything ostentatious. True enough, his tomb in the town of Khuldabad seems way too plain for the man who was once an emperor.

Sanjay explains, in a matter-of-fact manner: "His mausoleum was Aurangzeb's final slap to his father as he hated the Taj Mahal."

### Cave wonders

Next, we journey to the Unesco World Heritage-listed The Ajanta Caves. This valley of rock-cut complex of Buddhist caves was built between the 2nd Century B.C. and 7th Century A.D. When Buddhism started to decline in India, these caves fell into ruin and oblivion. They were rediscovered in the 19th Century when an Englishman, John Smith, went out hunting and noticed that a tiger



Kailash is probably the most impressive structure in Ellora

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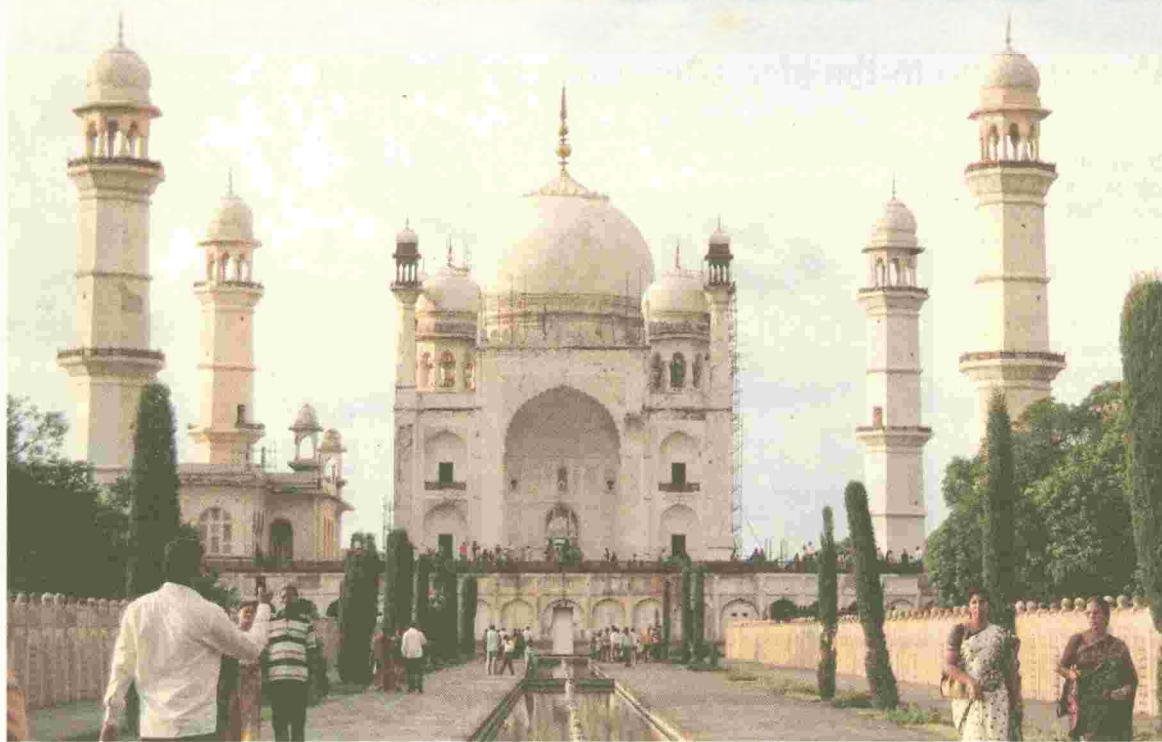
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Bibi-Ka-Maqbara is known as The Poor Man's Taj



disappeared behind dense jungle. Upon further investigation, he found the entrances to these caves. The British undertook excavation works and, in time, all 24 viharas (monasteries) and five chaityas (temples) were opened once again.

One of the sculptures that appeals to me is a panel called The Temptation Of Mara's Daughters in cave No. 26. The story goes that Mara and her daughters tried to tempt Buddha and distract him from seeking enlightenment.

However, Buddha touched the earth with his right hand and formed the Bhumisparsha Mudra pose to humbly seek the grace of Mother Earth to bear witness to the truth of his words and the

moment of his enlightenment. There are many light-hearted sculptures too. For instance, in cave No. Two, there is a classroom scene: With a stick in hand, a teacher stands in front of three attentive students. Meanwhile, two other students are watching a boxing match, another two are playing with a ram and the rest are fooling around.

Noted for their superior quality, the frescoes in these caves are breathtaking with their six basic pigments found in the region and Persian lapis lazuli. Most notable are the three-dimensional bull, the mandala and the flying apsara (heavenly nymph).

We also explored Ellora, another Unesco World Heritage site, located



The door of the grand Daulatabad Fort

29km northeast of Aurangabad. It charms visitors with a different kind of caves, which are the essence of the country's rock-cut architecture.

The 34 caves are actually structures dug out of the face of the Charanandri hills between the 5th and 10th Centuries for Buddhist, Hindu and Jain temples and monasteries.

The most impressive structure here is Kailash. This monolith (50m long, 33m wide and 30m high) took more than 150 years to complete.

Author of the book *Indian Architecture*, Percy Brown, best described its magnificence when he wrote this: The Kailasha (sic.) is an illustration of one of those rare occasions when men's minds, hearts and hands work in unison towards the consummation of a supreme ideal".

**Conquering Daulatabad Fort**

Our tour culminates in a visit to the 182m high Daulatabad Fort, located 15km northwest of Aurangabad. It is said that whoever owns this fort becomes the master of the whole Deccan plateau.

Imagine if you were the first to conquer the fort by force, here's what you might go through:

1. You and your men mount elephants and charge towards the outer door of the fort. Caution: The elephants may not survive this attack as there are spikes placed high up on the door to kill the animals.
2. Once you're inside the compound, there's a fountain for you to quench your thirst. Caution: The water may be poisoned.
3. As you proceed on foot, let your surviving elephants take a dip in the enormous Hati Haud water tank. If you've been dodging a volley of cannon balls

all the while, you'll see that the source of such an attack is the 5.5m long cannon called Mendha Tope with a distinctive design of a ram's head at one end.

4. Make your way across the moat to the main fort's only entrance — a small hole in the wall which you have to crawl through, head first. Caution: Someone may be waiting on the other side to chop your head off and feed your body to the crocodiles waiting in the moat.
5. Then, enter a labyrinth of pitch dark caves. Caution: If you're with friends, hold each other's hands throughout as there is one tricky cavity in this labyrinth — if you keep your hands on the wall, instead of holding each other's hands, you might go to the left and your friend to the right. When the wall of this cavity curves, you'll end up facing each other. Since you're effectively blind, you'll assume your friend's the enemy and kill him.
6. Then, it's another 400 or so steps before you reach a beautiful pavilion. Climb the remaining steps to a lookout point and you'll be rewarded with a 360-degree view of the surrounding area.

**Travel Tips**

- Best time to visit: October to March as the weather is pleasant during winter.
- Use comfortable footwear as there is a lot of walking to do and the ground can be uneven.
- Carry plenty of drinking water as the air is dry and you can become dehydrated.
- Aurangabad is famous for its beautiful and delicate handloom fabric known as himroo — it makes a good buy to take home.

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