



Taj Mahal

Romantic under the moonlit sky, glistening under the sun, and ethereal under the dark moonless sky, the Taj Mahal inspires awe. Located in Agra, India, it is one of the most famous symbols of love.

Shah Jahan, the fourth Mogul emperor of India, commissioned the Taj Mahal, as a mausoleum for his favorite wife Mumtaz Mahal or, Arjumand Bano Begum. It took almost twenty-five years to build. The construction began in 1631 and ended in 1654. Behind it was the labor of 22,000 people, including with some best-known architects, masons, artisans, in-layers and more.

Legend says that Shah Jahan was greatly affected by the death of his wife. A popular story speaks about how his hair turned a silvery white overnight when his favorite queen died.

To create the Taj Mahal some of the best material was sourced, these came from far and wide. From Rajasthan in India, came translucent marble and jasper from Punjab. From the neighboring country of China came jade, while crystal, turquoise was sourced from Tibet, from Afghanistan came lapis lazuli, sapphire from Sri Lanka, and carnelian from Arabia. These were inlaid in the beautiful structure. At one time, there were 28 types of precious and semi precious stones, but over the years, much of it has been plundered.

Of course, all this came at a cost, and that was a whopping 32 million Rupees, which is equivalent to millions of US dollars today. This was unfortunately juxtaposed to the thousands of starving people across the length and breadth of the country; history raises many questions on this fact.

The land chosen was around the walled city of Agra, and belonged to Maharajah Jai Singh, near the river of Yamuna. The entire structure eventually became 180 feet tall, with a dome that is 60 feet in diameter and 80 feet high.

The designer of the building is said to be the famous Persian architect, Ustad Muhammad Effendi. Supervising the construction was 'Puru' who came from Benarus, in Persia. Ismail Khan, from the Ottoman Empire designed the dome, while Qazim Khan, a master goldsmith cast the solid gold finial on it. Chiranjilal was the chief sculptor and designer of the mosaic. Behind the exquisite calligraphy was Amanat Khan from Persia, his name is part of the inscriptions at the gateway. There were artists from all over northern India, Bukhara, Syria, Persia, and even Baluchistan.

The Taj Mahal faces the river, and set within a three-sided red sandstone wall. The main arched doorway is also made of red sandstone. There are two major sandstone buildings; these are the mosque and its answer or "jawab" at the other end. The mosque has a niche that faces Mecca, while its mirror image has none.

The main tombs are that of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan. There are tombs of his other wives, and a large tomb of a favorite servant. Some of the smaller buildings have watchtowers; one of them is now a museum. Though based on Islamic aesthetics and architecture, Hindu symbols can be seen, like the columned arcade, and many other kiosks in the walls.

The pishtaq arches around the building, have intricate calligraphy, bas-relief and inlaid decorations. Each sanctuary has a vaulted dome and the ceilings are adorned with superb geometrical designs.

The white marble tombs of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal are on a square plinth. These have an arched doorway with large domes. The graves are way below and four minarets surround the building, adding to the balance of form and design.

Topping the structure is the magnificent marble dome; called the onion dome. A lotus decorates the dome, and standing on it is the beautiful and complex gold finial. The smaller domes also have the finials. Spires from the base upwards, make the dome seem even grander.

The Taj Mahal has been decorated with calligraphy, carvings, vegetable motifs and inlays. Every inch has a design that adds to the harmony. The calligraphy passages reflect on life and death, while the designs enhance these passages in many intricate ways.

The Taj Mahal is one of the most important architectural marvels in the world. Over a million visitors every year come to see this fascinating structure.