

A FIELD GUIDE • INTERESTING PLACES
AND FACTS

Carved Downward

Thirty places in India that were not built up from the ground,
but cut down into it — stepwells, rock-cut temples, cliff
monasteries and stupas mistaken for hills.

30 sites 14 states 2,300 BCE – 1699 CE

Most architecture is addition. Stone is quarried, carried, stacked, and joined until something stands where nothing stood before. A cathedral rises. A fort rises. The verb is always the same.

The thirty places in this booklet were made the other way. They are architecture by *subtraction* — the building is what remains after the rock around it has been taken away. At Ellora, workers began at the top of a basalt cliff and carved downward for roughly a century, removing an estimated 400,000 tons of stone to reveal a temple that was always inside it. At Masrur in Himachal, someone attempted the same feat on a Himalayan ridge and stopped partway, leaving whole shrines blocked out but never freed.

Subtraction is unforgiving. There is no second attempt: cut too deep and the shrine is gone. That single constraint connects a Jain fresco in Tamil Nadu to a queen's stepwell in Gujarat to a monastery hanging off a Zaskar cliff. It is also why so many of these places are hard to find. Architecture that goes down does not announce itself on a skyline. Kesariya in Bihar is among the tallest Buddhist stupas on earth and was walked past for centuries by people who assumed it was a hill.

Each entry carries the figure that matters most about it — how far down, how far up, how much stone removed — where that measurement is recorded. Sites are grouped by what they have in common, not by geography, so a Ladakhi monastery sits beside a Sikkimese one rather than beside a Rajasthani stepwell three hundred kilometres closer.

Chapter One

Carved From Living Rock

14 sites

Chapter Two

The Wells That Go Down

6 sites

Chapter Three

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6 sites

Chapter Four

Mistaken for Hills

4 sites

Appendix

Image Credits

30 photographs

Carved From Living Rock

Fourteen places where the building was removed from the cliff rather than raised beside it. Several were never finished, and the unfinished ones show the method most clearly.

400,000

TONS REMOVED

Kailasa
Temple
Ellora,
Maharashtra
8th century

20.0239,
75.1792



Jorge Lascar · CC BY 2.0

The temple that was excavated, not built

The largest monolithic structure ever carved by hand. Under the Rashtrakuta king Krishna I, workers cut the entire temple — courtyards, pillars, sculptures and towers — from a single basalt cliff, starting at the top and working down over roughly a century. It measures 164 feet long and 98 feet high.

Modern engineers who have studied the site say they could not replicate it today without heavy machinery. Every elephant and every deity was revealed from living stone, with no margin for a mistake.

Ajanta Caves
Maharashtra
2nd c. BCE –
5th c. CE

20.5533,
75.7003



Vu2sga · CC BY-SA 3.0

Paintings that outlasted the empires that made them

Thirty rock-cut caves whose walls carry some of the oldest surviving paintings anywhere, made with lapis lazuli blue, kaolin white, lamp black and ochre in a lime plaster base. Conservationists attribute their durability to an organic adhesive mixed into the plaster, which bonded the surface against moisture.

The caves sat behind jungle for more than 1,200 years until a British officer, John Smith, came upon them while tiger hunting in 1819. Exposure to open air after that long caused some murals to fade within decades. UNESCO listed the site in 1983.

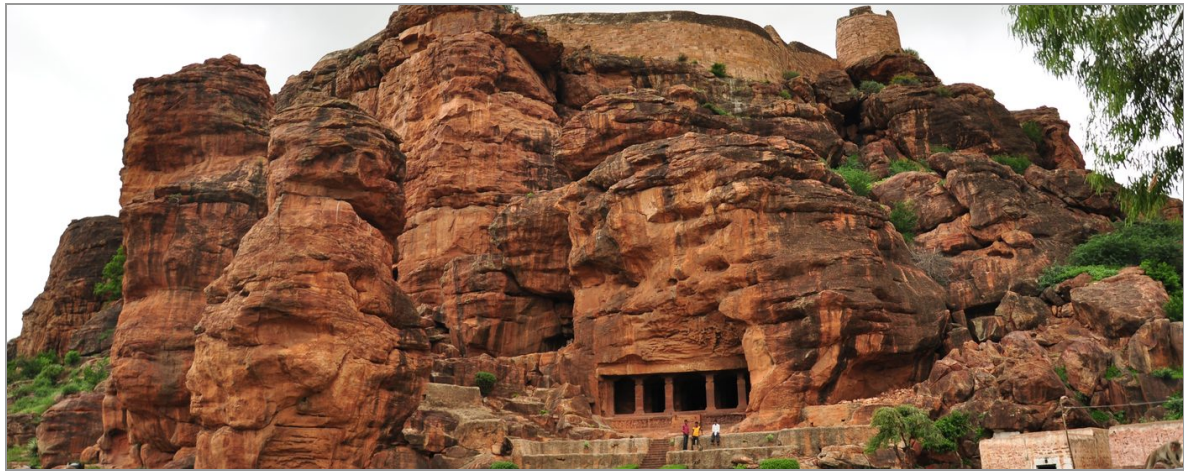
543

CE, BEGUN

Badami Cave
Temples

Karnataka
543 – 597 CE

15.9183,
75.6842



amara · CC BY-SA 3.0

Where South Indian architecture was invented

Four caves cut into red sandstone cliffs above a sacred lake by the early Chalukyas under king Mangalesa. Cave 1 holds an 18-armed Nataraja carved in exact proportion; Caves 2 and 3 show Vishnu's three-step Trivikrama form spanning a whole wall; Cave 4 is Jain, displaying the Tirthankaras.

Read together, the four caves make a deliberate theological statement about the coexistence of Hindu and Jain traditions. Agastya Lake below the cliffs is still treated as sacred.

6 m

SCULPTURE
HEIGHT

Elephanta
Caves

Mumbai
Harbour,
Maharashtra
5th – 6th
century

18.9633,
72.9314



Christian Haugen · CC BY 2.0

An hour from the Gateway of India, and most Mumbaikars have never gone

Cave 1's centrepiece is the Trimurti, a six-metre three-faced bust of Shiva: Tatpuruṣa serene and forward-facing, Aghora fierce and skull-adorned to the left, Vamaḍeva gentle and creative to the right. Art historians rank its psychological depth alongside the greatest sculpture anywhere.

Portuguese soldiers used the carvings for target practice in the 16th century. UNESCO listed the caves in 1987; they draw around a million visitors a year.

| Getting there – roughly a 45-minute ferry from the Gateway of India.

3rd c.

BCE —
INDIA'S
OLDEST

Barabar Caves

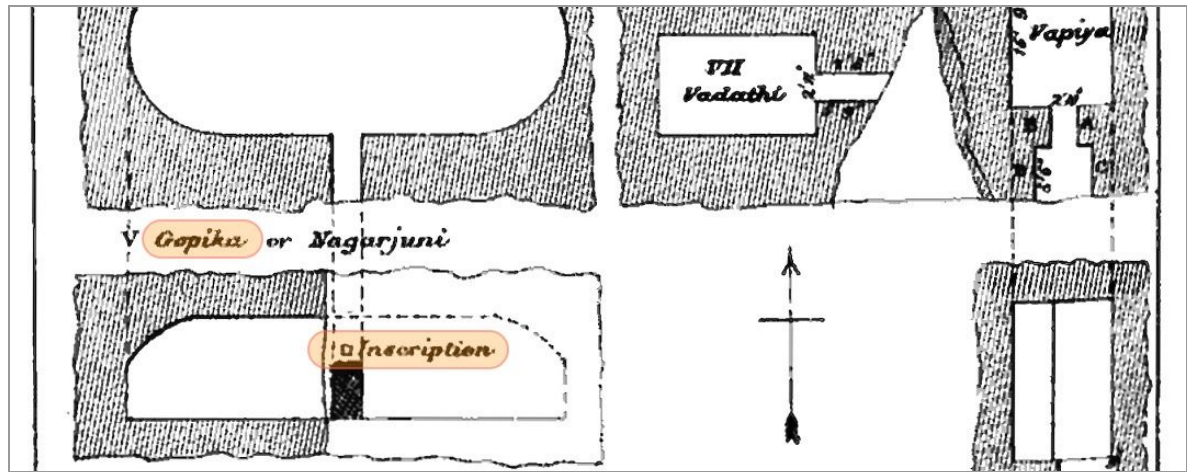
Bihar

Reign of

Ashoka

25.0050,

85.0630



Ms Sarah Welch · CC BY-SA 4.0

Granite polished to a mirror, and the echo it produces

The oldest surviving rock-cut caves in India, cut into hard granite during Ashoka's reign with some added later under his grandson Dasharatha. They were made for Ajivika ascetics, a philosophical sect contemporary with early Buddhism and Jainism.

The interiors were polished to a near-mirror finish, a standard of stoneworking still difficult to reproduce. The polish gives the chambers an unusually long, resonant echo that visitors often describe as unsettling. E. M. Forster took them as the model for the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*.

100+

CAVES

Kanheri Caves

Sanjay Gandhi

N.P., Mumbai

1st c. BCE –

10th c. CE

19.2083,

72.9064



Vaibhav Gupta · CC BY-SA 3.0

A rock-cut city inside Mumbai, with plumbing that still works

More than a hundred caves cut into one basalt hill over a thousand years of continuous work — prayer halls, monks' quarters, and a full water system cut into the rock alongside them. Precisely angled channels catch the monsoon and funnel it into storage chambers.

Several of those cisterns still fill today, nearly two thousand years on. Kanheri sat on the trade route running inland from the Konkan coast, and its inscriptions record who paid for it: merchants, sailors and travellers passing through.

2nd c.

BCE

Pitalkhora
Satmala
Hills,
Maharashtra
c. 2nd
century BCE

20.3135,
74.9942



Ms Sarah Welch · CC BY-SA 4.0

Older than Ajanta, with a waterfall running through the middle

Around fourteen excavations split into two groups on either side of a ravine, among the earliest rock-cut caves anywhere in India. In the monsoon a waterfall drops through the gap, and you cross a small bridge to reach the far group.

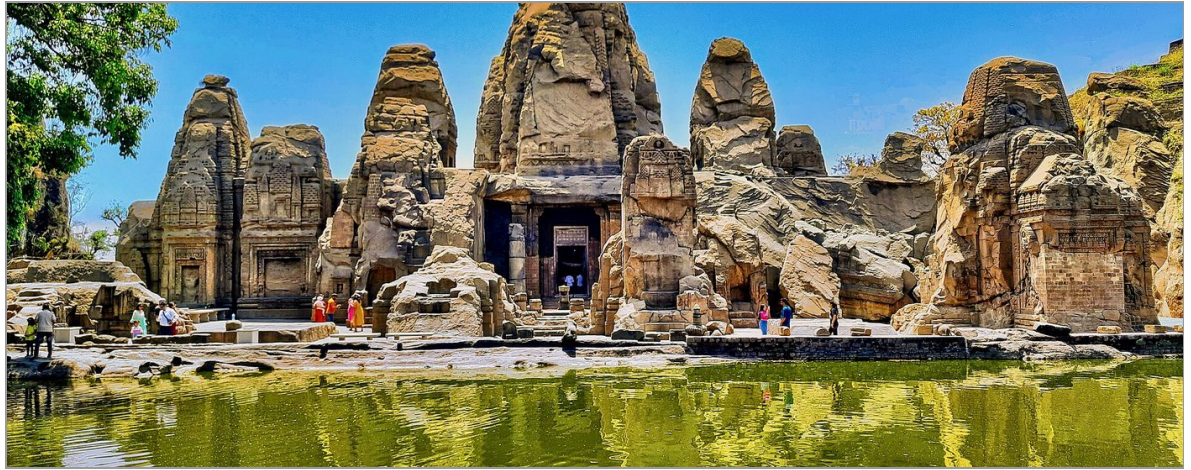
The rock was a poor choice — friable, and much of it has collapsed. What survives is startling: guardian figures, elephants carved in the round supporting a platform, and a finely detailed pair of doorkeepers. Some sculpture has been moved to museums for safekeeping.

15

SHRINES, ONE
RIDGE

Masrur
Himachal
Pradesh
c. 8th
century

32.0726,
76.1371



Ms Sarah Welch · CC0

A Himalayan Ellora that nobody finished

Around fifteen shrines cut from one continuous sandstone ridge, carved downward from the top in the same removal method used at Ellora. The work stops partway through. Whole sections are blocked out but never completed, and no record explains why.

An earthquake in 1905 brought down much of what had been finished. A reflecting pool sits in front of the shrines; on a clear day the Dhauladhar range stands behind them.

1,600

YEARS OF
COLOUR

Sittanavasal

Tamil Nadu

7th – 9th

century

10.4660,

78.7340



R.K.Lakshmi · CC BY-SA 4.0

The oldest paintings in Tamil Nadu, on a ceiling almost nobody visits

A Jain shrine cut into a rock outcrop, also called Arivar Koil, painted under the Pandyas. The ceiling and pillars once carried frescoes throughout; most are gone. What survives is a lotus pond — elephants, buffaloes, and fish moving between the flowers, rendered with a lightness you would not expect from stone.

The pigments came from the ground: ochre, lime and charcoal in organic binders, by a technique close to Ajanta's. Conservationists spent decades asking why they lasted. The answer turned out to be unglamorous — stable temperature, stable humidity, and no exposure to sun or weather.

5

TEMPLES, 5
BOULDERS

Pancha Rathas
Mahabalipuram,
Tamil Nadu
7th century

12.6088,
80.1896



Hiroki Ogawa · CC BY 3.0

Five full-scale prototypes, none of them ever used

Five buildings carved under the Pallava dynasty, each cut down out of a single mass of granite. Nothing was assembled and nothing stacked — the building was removed from the rock.

All five are in deliberately different architectural styles, which is the clue to what they were: full-scale test models for temple designs later built properly as free-standing structures across South India. Not one was completed, and not one was consecrated. They are named for the five Pandava brothers and Draupadi, though there is no scriptural basis for it — someone began calling them that later and it stuck.

401

CE, DATED
INSCRIPTION

Udayagiri

Caves

Madhya

Pradesh

382 – 401 CE

23.5364,
77.7722



Ms Sarah Welch · CC0

A cave built to keep a calendar

Twenty rock-cut shrines in a sandstone hill from the Gupta era. Cave 5 holds the Varaha, a colossal four-metre relief of Vishnu in boar form lifting the earth goddess Prithvi from the cosmic ocean — a masterpiece of Gupta sculpture.

Archaeoastronomers at the University of Michigan found that the Varaha cave is precisely oriented so that at the summer solstice, with the monsoon floods imminent, the rising sun shines directly in and casts a specific shadow across the sculpture. An inscription in Cave 6 names Chandragupta II outright, making this one of very few Indian monuments tied directly to a named king.

30,000

YEARS, EST.
OLDEST ART

Bhimbetka

Madhya

Pradesh

Upper

Palaeolithic

onward

22.9384,

77.6131



Raveesh Vyas · CC BY-SA 2.0

Painted tens of thousands of years before the pyramids

Over 750 rock shelters, more than 500 of them painted, discovered in 1957. The oldest images are estimated at 30,000 years or more, among the earliest known evidence of human artistic expression on the subcontinent.

Successive generations layered work on top of earlier work: hunting scenes, dancing figures, bison and tigers, and later horses and chariots from recorded history. Natural rock overhangs sheltered the pigments from direct weather, which is why a continuous visual record from the Stone Age onward survives in one place.

30 ft

CARVED FACE

Unakoti
Tripura
7th – 9th
century CE

24.3167,
92.0667



Dr. Srimanta Ray · CC BY-SA 4.0

One less than ten million

Dozens of massive bas-relief carvings of Hindu deities scattered across a natural rock face in a remote corner of Tripura. The centrepiece is a carved face of Shiva known as Unakotiswara Kal Bhairava, roughly thirty feet tall, flanked by comparably sized attendant figures.

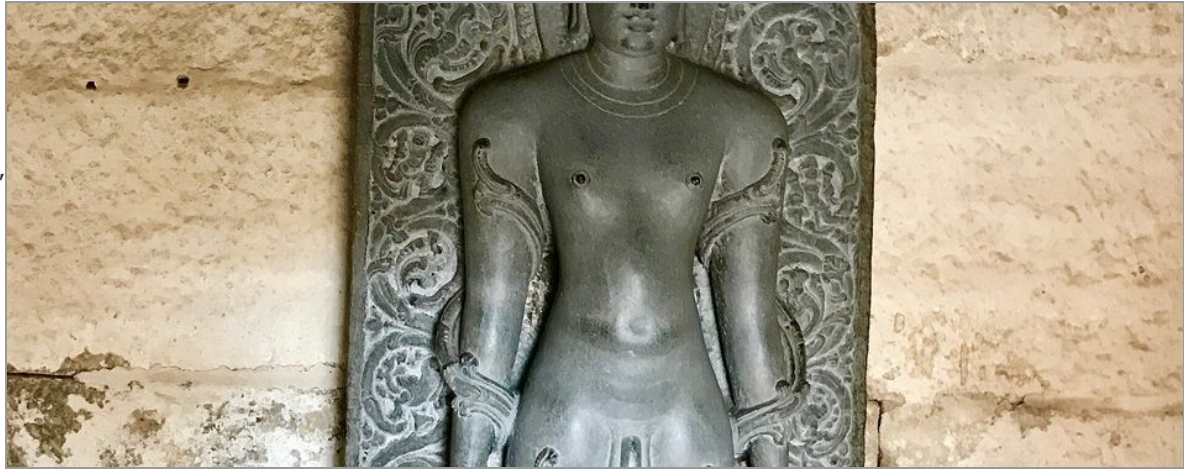
The name means "one less than a crore." By local tradition Shiva was travelling with ten million gods and challenged them to wake before sunrise or be turned to stone. The carvings are said to be the ones that did not rise in time.

57 ft

ONE GRANITE
BLOCK

Gomateshwara
Shravanabelagola,
Karnataka
c. 981 CE

12.8540,
76.4847



Ms Sarah Welch · CC BY-SA 4.0

Bathed in milk once every twelve years

One block of granite, fifty-seven feet tall, on top of Vindhyagiri hill — among the tallest monolithic statues in the world, commissioned by a general named Chavundaraya. It shows Bahubali standing in meditation, with vines carved climbing his legs: he stood so still, for so long, that the forest grew over him.

Reaching it means climbing roughly six hundred rock-cut steps, which many pilgrims do barefoot. Once every twelve years scaffolding goes up and the statue is bathed from above in milk, sugarcane juice, saffron and sandalwood, with gold and silver coins showered down. The ceremony is the Mahamastakabhisheka, and hundreds of thousands come to watch.

The Wells That Go Down

Six stepwells, where the whole building is below ground level. India has thousands; these are the ones worth planning a route around, plus the vast unlisted majority that nobody has catalogued.

27 m

DOWN, 7
LEVELS

Rani ki Vav
Patan,
Gujarat
1063 CE

23.8589,
72.1017



spackle · CC BY 2.0

An inverted temple, buried for seven centuries

Built by Queen Udayamati as a memorial to her husband Bhimdev I of the Solanki dynasty. Seven levels descend 27 metres, carrying over 500 principal sculptures and close to a thousand minor carvings, largely of the ten avatars of Vishnu. The design treats water as sacred and the structure as a temple turned downward.

Silt from the Saraswati river buried it for centuries — which is precisely what preserved the carving in such detail. It was excavated in the 1980s, listed by UNESCO in 2014, and put on the 100-rupee note in 2022. No mortar was used anywhere: every block is dry-fitted.

46 m

DOWN

Raniji ki
Baori

Bundi,
Rajasthan
1699 CE

25.4402,
75.6394



Prathik · CC BY-SA 3.0

The finest of the sixty wells that named a city

Bundi once held around sixty stepwells and was known as the city of stepwells. This is the grandest survivor, built by Rani Nathavati Ji, queen of Rao Raja Anirudh Singh. It drops roughly forty-six metres through level after level of carved galleries and pillared pavilions.

The entrance is the showpiece — a carved stone torana flanked by sculpted elephants and dense floral work, among the finest carving in any Rajasthani stepwell. The design rewards patience: tiered balconies force a slow descent, and the carving grows more detailed the further down you go.

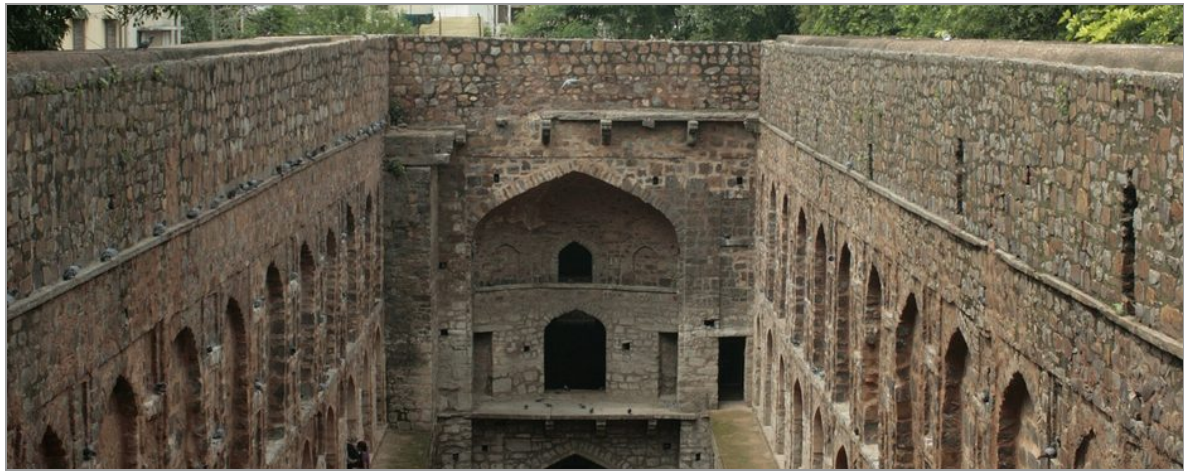
103

STEPS, 15 M
DEEP

Agrasen ki
Baoli

Connaught
Place, Delhi
14th century

28.6261,
77.2250



Hemant Arya · CC BY-SA 4.0

Hidden between skyscrapers in the middle of Delhi

Sixty metres long and fifteen deep across three levels, built or restored by the Agrawal community in honour of the legendary king Agrasen. Historians believe an earlier well stood here around the 10th century and was expanded under the Tughlaqs.

Architecturally the striking feature is the repetition: 103 steps flanked by row upon row of identical pointed arched niches. It has become one of Bollywood's most-filmed locations, appearing in *PK* and *Raazi*, and carries a long-standing local reputation for being haunted — the black water at the base was said to draw people in.

170 ft

DOWN, ~9
STOREYS

**Bhainsa Rod
stepwell**

near
Neemrana,
Rajasthan
early 1700s

Near Neemrana,
Alwar
district,
Rajasthan



Chainwit. · CC BY 4.0

As deep as Chand Baori, and almost nobody goes

An enormous stepwell descending roughly nine storeys, about 170 feet, built as a critical water source for an arid region. Symmetrical flights of stairs zigzag downward in a precise geometric pattern, flanked by arched galleries and pillared platforms that once gave shaded rest on the way down.

Its depth is comparable to Rajasthan's most famous stepwells, yet it remains far less visited and far less documented. Recent local restoration work has cleared centuries of silt from the lower levels.

200 m

FROM AMBER
FORT

Panna Meena
ka Kund
Jaipur,
Rajasthan
16th century

Amer, beside
Amber Fort,
Jaipur,
Rajasthan



Jakub Hałun · CC BY-SA 4.0

Built for pleasure, not for water

Constructed under the Kachwaha Rajputs, and unusual in that it was never primarily functional: it was a recreational space where royal women bathed, gathered and escaped the heat.

Its subject is geometry. Zigzag staircases on all four sides mirror one another exactly, producing a pattern that appears to flip and invert depending on where you stand. Built in pink sandstone, open to the sky, it takes a golden cast at sunrise. There is no grand entrance and no signage — you simply come upon it walking down from the fort.

600+

CATALOGUED
IN GUJARAT

The unlisted
stepwells

North Gujarat
& Kutch
c. 1,000
years onward

Scattered
across North
Gujarat and
Kutch



Ninara · CC BY 2.0

The thousand wells nobody has photographed

Gujarat holds over a thousand stepwells, the highest concentration of the form anywhere in the world. A handful are UNESCO sites; hundreds are unknown, unnamed, and visited only by villagers who may not know their age.

These were commissioned not by royalty but by local merchants, wealthy women and community guilds, which is why they range from purely functional to architecturally extraordinary. Many show stepped geometry, carved columns and subterranean prayer niches. A survey by the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology has catalogued more than 600 significant examples in Gujarat alone. Most have never been photographed professionally.

If you want to find something genuinely unrecorded, this is where to look.

Monasteries at the Edge

Six Buddhist institutions built where building is hardest — into cliff faces, above 3,000 metres, or reconstructed from memory after the original became unreachable.

0
ROADS, EVER

Phugtal
Monastery
Zanskar,
Ladakh
c. 12th
century

33.2684,
77.1795



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Built around a cave mouth, reachable only on foot

There is no road to Phugtal and there has never been one. The monastery is built into a cliff face around the mouth of a cave, its buildings stacking downward from the opening in tiers of mud and timber so that the whole thing reads like a honeycomb hanging off the rock.

Monks have lived here continuously since roughly the twelfth century. The cave at the centre is the oldest part, and a spring runs inside it — which is the only reason anyone could live here at all. Reaching it takes several hours on a path cut into a gorge; in winter, people walk in over the frozen river instead. Everything inside was carried there on someone's back.

1,000

YEARS OF
MURALS

Alchi
Monastery

Ladakh
10th – 11th
century

34.2167,
77.1667



Drmaliktariq · CC BY-SA 3.0

Deliberately built on flat ground, and saved by it

Nearly every monastery in Ladakh sits on a clifftop for defensive advantage and spiritual symbolism. Alchi was built on flat ground near the Indus instead — and that obscurity is believed to have spared it from conflicts that targeted more prominent hilltop sites.

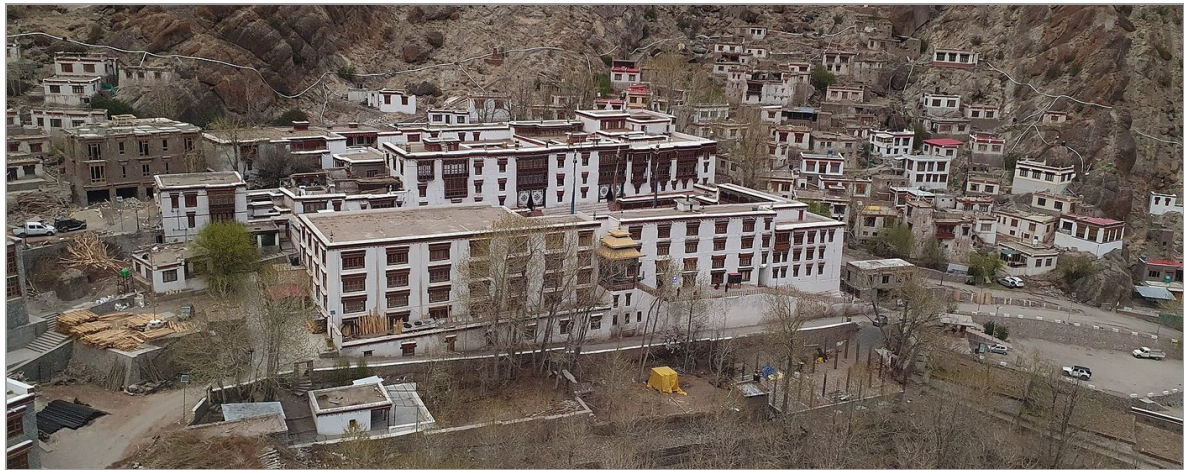
What survived is its greatest treasure: wall murals in a distinctive Kashmiri-influenced style found almost nowhere else in the Himalayan Buddhist world, preserved for close to a thousand years. Their detail in clothing, jewellery and faces is quite unlike the later, more stylised Tibetan traditions that came to dominate the region. Alchi is maintained as a monument rather than a working monastery, specifically to protect them.

12

YEARS
BETWEEN
VIEWINGS

Hemis
Monastery
Ladakh
re-
established
1630

33.9125,
77.7028



Stanzin1945 · CC BY-SA 4.0

A painting so large it is shown once a decade

The largest and wealthiest monastery in Ladakh, of the Drukpa lineage, re-established under the patronage of King Sengge Namgyal. It is built directly into the mountainside, its whitewashed walls and layered roofs blending into the rock — a hallmark of Himalayan monastic building in an extreme climate.

Its greatest treasure stays hidden almost all the time: a colossal appliqué thangka of Guru Padmasambhava, large enough to require an entire wall of the monastery, unveiled by tradition only once every twelve years. Each summer the monastery also hosts the Hemis Festival, with masked cham dances passed down through generations.

3,000 m
ELEVATION

**Tawang
Monastery**
Arunachal
Pradesh
1680 – 81

27.5864,
91.8575



Kingshuk Mondal · CC BY-SA 4.0

The largest monastery in India

Built on the guidance of the fifth Dalai Lama, Tawang is the largest monastery in India and the second largest in the world after the Potala in Lhasa. It belongs to the Gelug school, sits above 3,000 metres, and its three-storey main structure houses an eight-metre gilded Buddha alongside an extensive library of manuscripts.

The region is the birthplace of Tsangyang Gyatso, the sixth Dalai Lama — an unusually unconventional figure who rejected monastic celibacy and wrote romantic poetry, setting him apart from every other holder of the office. Near the India–China–Bhutan border, Tawang remains an active centre of Buddhist learning.

1960s

REBUILT FROM
A COPY

**Rumtek
Monastery**

Sikkim
rebuilt 1960s

27.2886,
88.5614



Mr. Debapriya Hore · CC BY-SA 4.0

A monastery rebuilt in exile, detail for detail

After the annexation of Tibet in the 1950s, the sixteenth Karmapa — head of the Karma Kagyu school — went into exile and needed a new seat, the original Tsurphu Monastery having become inaccessible. Rumtek was built in the 1960s as a close architectural replica of Tsurphu, reproducing its layout, proportions and decorative detail as precisely as possible.

Inside, a golden stupa holds relics and personal possessions of the sixteenth Karmapa, alongside sacred texts, ritual objects and thangka paintings. It is both an active institution and an argument that cultural continuity can be deliberately reconstructed rather than merely inherited.

1,000

MONKS, 107
TEMPLES

Vikramashila
Bhagalpur,
Bihar
783 – 1203 CE

Bhagalpur
district,
Bihar



Spotplayerx · CC BY-SA 4.0

The second great university, burned a decade after Nalanda

Founded by the Pala king Dharmapala, Vikramashila was the most important Buddhist university in India after Nalanda. At its height it held around a thousand monk-scholars and 107 temples in a grid around a large central shrine, and it was the intellectual centre of tantric Vajrayana study for the whole Asian Buddhist world. Monks came from Tibet, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Atisha, who later reformed Buddhism in Tibet, taught here in the 11th century.

Bakhtiyar Khilji's forces destroyed it in 1203, a decade after burning Nalanda. Excavation by the Archaeological Survey of India in the 1960s revealed the characteristic Pala plan — a cruciform temple ringed by 108 cells in a square — a design that shaped monastery architecture across the Himalayas. The site is still being excavated and remains barely visited.

Mistaken for Hills

Four Buddhist sites along the oldest pilgrimage routes in India — including one that was walked past for centuries because everyone assumed it was a natural mound.

260

BCE —
INDIA'S
OLDEST STONE

Sanchi
Madhya
Pradesh
c. 260 BCE
onward

23.4792,
77.7397



Bernard Gagnon · CC BY-SA 3.0

A sealed relic chamber nobody has opened

The Great Stupa is the oldest stone structure in India, built by Ashoka after his conversion to Buddhism following the Kalinga war. Its hemispherical dome encloses a relic chamber believed to hold physical remains of the Buddha.

Its four toranas, added in the 1st century BCE and 1st century CE, each stand about ten metres and are covered top to bottom in relief narrating the Buddha's life and the Jataka tales — without ever depicting him in human form. He appears only as a wheel, a throne, footprints, a Bodhi tree. The site was abandoned, then rediscovered by a British officer in 1818; UNESCO listed it in 1989. The relic chamber has never been scientifically excavated.

250

BCE, THE
LION CAPITAL

Sarnath

near

Varanasi,
Uttar Pradesh
c. 250 BCE

25.3780,
83.0251



Preeti Prajapati · CC BY-SA 4.0

The emblem on every Indian passport started here

Sarnath marks where the Buddha is held to have given his first sermon. Around 250 BCE Ashoka raised a polished sandstone pillar at the site, topped with four back-to-back lions above a wheel — Mauryan stone carving finished to a mirror sheen by methods still difficult to reproduce.

On independence in 1947, the new government adopted that exact capital as the national emblem. It now appears on every currency note, passport and government seal in the country. Nearby, the Dhamek Stupa still stands over thirty metres tall, its lower section covered in carved geometric and floral work.

100 ft

UP, FROM
FLAT PLAIN

**Kesariya
Stupa**

Bihar
excavated
1990s

27.1080,
84.4640



myself · CC BY-SA 2.5

For most of its life, it was a hill

For centuries people walked past Kesariya and saw a hill. It is one of the tallest Buddhist stupas anywhere in the world, rising over a hundred feet from the plain in circular terraced tiers, many of whose niches still hold Buddha figures.

The tradition attached to it is quiet and strange: the Buddha, travelling toward his death, is said to have stopped here to tell local people he was leaving — and gave them his begging bowl. Much of the structure remains under earth and vegetation. It was only properly excavated in the 1990s.

2nd c.

BCE, ABOVE
THE BAY

Thotlakonda

near

Visakhapatnam,

Andhra

Pradesh

c. 2nd

century BCE

17.8264,

83.4094



Pinakpani · CC BY 4.0

Named after its plumbing

A monastery on a bare hill above the sea has one obvious problem: water. Thotlakonda looks straight out over the Bay of Bengal with no river anywhere near it, so its builders cut troughs into the rock to catch and hold the rain. *Thotlakonda* means hill of troughs — the place is named for its water system.

The rest of the layout survives well enough to read: a stupa, an assembly hall, monks' cells, refectories. Roman and Satavahana coins found on site show how far west this coast was trading. The monks chose the hill for quiet, then spent their effort solving the water.

APPENDIX

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A new one every day

Every site in this booklet began as a short film on **Interesting Places and Facts**, where a new piece of Indian heritage goes up daily — forts, stepwells, rock-cut temples, and the places that never made it onto a tourist circuit.

If this booklet was useful, the channel is where the rest of it lives.

Carved Downward · 30 sites across 14 states

Compiled from the research notes behind the Interesting Places and Facts video archive.

Measurements and dates are given as recorded in the source research; where a figure is disputed among historians, the entry says so.

No entry fees, opening hours or travel timings are listed here — verify those locally before travelling, as they change.
