

INDIA UNFOLDED · CITY EDITION

AGRA

The Mughal Capital

No. GT-02 — RAJASTHAN COLLECTION · 32 PAGES

IN 60 SECONDS

A sultan founded it in 1504, five Mughal emperors ruled from it, and one of them built the most famous building on earth for his wife — Agra is the Mughals at their height, and then the long afternoon after.

The Taj Mahal (1632–53) is the reason you come; Agra Fort, where its builder spent his last eight years imprisoned within sight of it, is the reason you stay; Fatehpur Sikri, the perfect city abandoned after fourteen years, is the reason you leave by the western road. Around them is a working city — 1.6 million at the last census, well over two million by now — that makes shoes and petha and breathes the same air the marble does. Come October to March, give it two days — the Taj at dawn is the point — and go in through the east gate.

Founded

1504

Sikandar Lodi founds Agra and soon makes it his capital

Best months

Oct – Mar

Nov and Feb–Mar for clear dawns

Give it

2 days

Taj at dawn, fort, Baby Taj, Mehtab Bagh at dusk

Taj closed

Fridays

and night viewing in Ramzan

01 The Story, in Five Acts

I A SULTAN'S CAPITAL · 1504

Sikandar Lodi founded Agra in 1504 and moved his capital here from Delhi, to hold the Doab and the Yamuna trade. Twenty-two years later his son Ibrahim lost everything to Babur at Panipat, and the city passed to the Mughals with the empire.

II BABUR'S GARDEN · 1526

The first Mughal took Agra in 1526 and laid out the first Mughal garden in India on the Yamuna's east bank — the Bagh-i-Gul Afshan, the Flower-Scatterer, renamed Ram Bagh by the Marathas. His body rested there before it went to Kabul. Every charbagh that followed, the Taj's included, descends from it.

III AKBAR'S RED CITY · 1565–85

Akbar rebuilt the ruined brick fort in red sandstone — four thousand builders, eight years, finished 1573 — and then, after a Sufi foretold him a son, built a whole new capital at Fatehpur Sikri in 1571 and abandoned it in 1585. His son Jahangir's wife, Nur Jahan, built her father the first all-marble Mughal tomb (1622–28): the Baby Taj, the rehearsal.

Stand here. Look for this.

Five things almost everyone walks straight past — where to stand, and what you're actually seeing.

1 The growing script

Up the great gate's arch — the panels are written larger the higher they sit, so the whole reads evenly from the ground.

2 The poppies

On Shah Jahan's cenotaph, among the irises — read as the flowers of death.

3 The lean

Sight up any minaret from a plinth corner: each tilts slightly outward, away from the dome.

4 The answer

The red building east of the tomb is a mirror of the mosque, built for symmetry alone — no mihrab, facing the wrong way.

5 The echo

Stand under the dome and listen — one of the longest echoes of any building in the world, the official site says.

One more thing

East gate at opening, ticket bought online the night before, then Mehtab Bagh across the river an hour before sunset the same day — the two ends of the light. Skip Friday; if you are here on one, Mehtab Bagh and the fort's tower still see it, and the Taj View Point beside Mehtab Bagh is the only sanctioned place to see it after dark.

01 ARRIVAL

The gate frames the dome

The Taj's great gate · The first twenty minutes after opening · 1x · portrait · 1x

Arch as frame; dome centred; family in the archway

02 THE POOL

The reflection

The marble bench on the central axis · First hour after opening · 1x · portrait · 1x

Family on the bench → pool reflection → dome

03 THE DETAIL

Flowers in stone

The mausoleum's exterior dado panels and spandrels · Morning, in shade · 1x · portrait · 1x or 2x

Inlay edge to edge; a small hand

04 THE SCRIPT

Looking up

Beneath a pishtaq — one of the mausoleum's great arches · Morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Arch frame; script; family small beneath

05 THE LEAN

Sighting the minaret

A corner of the marble plinth · Morning · 1x · portrait · 0.5x or 1x

Minaret full height; child at base

06 THE RIVER

The Yamuna side

The river terrace behind the mausoleum · Mid-morning · 1x · landscape · 1x

Family → river → Mehtab Bagh