



An inheritance in stone

TEXT CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

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The temples at Aihole, Badami and Pattadakal in north Karnataka are known to be some of the earliest and finest examples of Dravidian temple architecture. Just an overnight train journey from Bengaluru, these temple groups remain off the beaten track for most travellers who turn back from Hampi without venturing further into what was once the territory of the Chalukya dynasty.

A glimpse of the ten temples that make up the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Pattadakal. A small village, Pattadakal is situated on the banks of River Malaprabha in the Bagalkot district of north Karnataka.

The cradle of Indian temple architecture.' Before I leave for the Chalukya temples of north Karnataka, I come across this phrase in all the guidebooks I read. And once there, I find that this phrase rolls off the tongues of tourist guides with a practised smoothness. And not just 'cradle'; other well-worn metaphors like 'abacus' and 'blackboard', too, are soon pouring out of my ears. All right, I get the point. The sculptors learnt, slowly and painfully, to carve these magnificent temples using nothing but their imagination, under the patronage of their Chalukya rulers, especially Pulakesi I.

Pulakesi I is the kind of ruler that we, today, would have called a dude. Back then, in the 6th century AD, he built over a hundred temples across his kingdom, stopping briefly from time to time only to conquer and annex further kingdoms to his own. At the height of his reign, he ruled a vast swathe of south India, extending all the way to what is now Maharashtra in the west and Orissa in the east, and the architecture in these temples reflects the influences from diverse parts of his empire.



The Pattadakal temples show a level of sophistication that came from centuries of practice.



‘The more likely explanation for the name reveals itself as I near the town: the sandstone hills around the region reflect the colour of almonds—‘badam’ in most Indian languages.’

The Chalukya temples comprise three main groups: those in Aihole, Badami and Pattadakal. For centuries, these temples have remained in the shadow of their more famous cousins in Hampi, built much later and just over 100 km away. And it remains so even now, even though Pattadakal was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987 and the other two are now in the running.

TEMPLES OF TRAINING

I first head to Aihole, a bumpy ride through roads lined with sunflower fields glowing in the mild morning sunlight. This route is more the dreamy countryside of north India—immortalised by countless Hindi movies where the heroine dances to a catchy tune waving her yellow chiffon sari in the wind—than the rugged landscape of Karnataka. At the entrance to the temple complex, Basava

waves his tourist guide badge and latches on to us. As an introduction to Aihole, he says, on a skills scale, this group of temples ranks as elementary school. According to him (and other experts, I presume), the architecture and carvings are at a very basic level here, going right up to the college level in Pattadakal.

Many of the original hundred temples survive in Aihole today, though some of them lie hidden behind thorny bushes, dusty rubble and thatched huts. Aihole, which served as the capital of the Chalukyas for two centuries, is today a forgotten village, the locals looking with wonder at the way we tourists look at their temples. Living in the middle of so much grandeur, they have come to take it for granted.

There is nothing elementary about the first temple I step into that is dedicated to Durga, the all-powerful goddess. The sun has just begun to climb the sky

Clockwise from above: A carving of Shiva as Nataraja inside the Ravana Phadi cave; One of the oldest rock-cut temples in Aihole, the Ravana Phadi cave dates back to the 6th century AD; Aihole’s finest architectural specimen, the Durga temple is dedicated to Vishnu and has an apsidal (orbital) shape.

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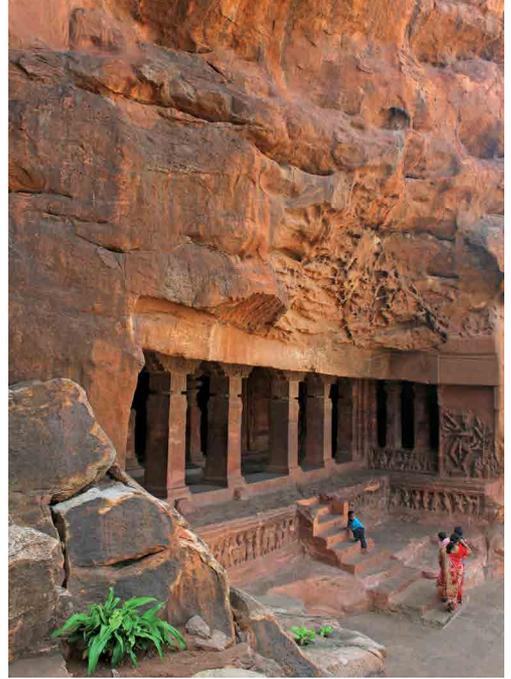
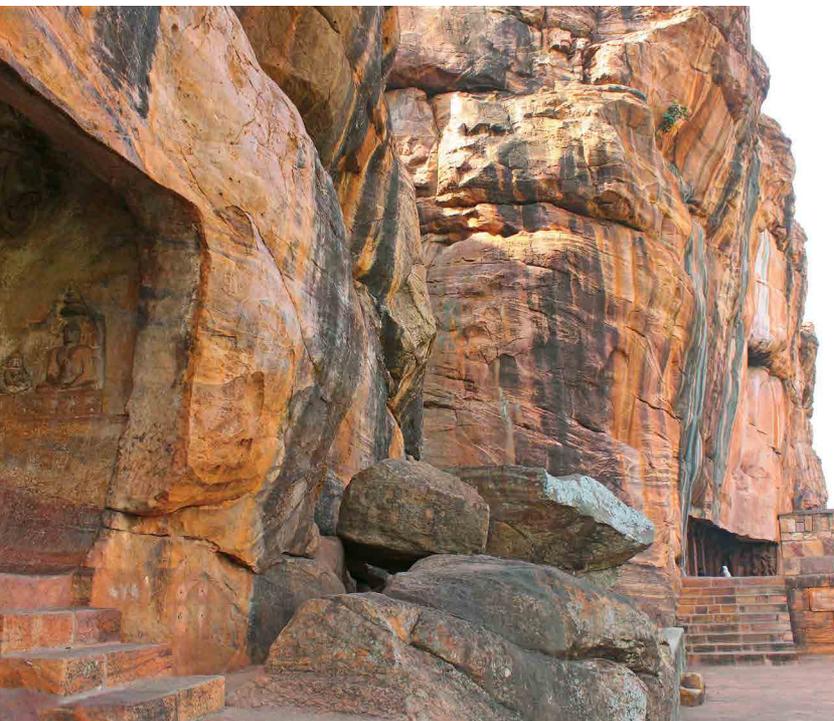
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Clockwise from right: The Badami caves are one of the most iconic attractions in the Bagalkot district of north Karnataka; A wall sculpture of Vishnu seated on Ananta Shesha, the serpent, in Cave 3 at Badami; The Badami rocks are the colour of almonds, which most likely lends the site its name.

as a bunch of giggling schoolchildren make their way into the temple, shepherded by a couple of teachers trying their best to keep them in check. The walls and ceiling are covered with intricate carvings of gods, goddesses, demons and animals. None of the other temples here were consecrated since they were meant to be only learning models; the experimentation is obvious from the different shapes and sizes of the temples dotting the landscape. Behind this temple stands the 7th century Lad Khan temple, which, according to folklore, was named after a Muslim nobleman who lived there for a while.

Outside the temple complex is yet another interesting tableau: the village market under the sprawling banyan tree. Fruit-sellers, vendors of soda, fresh buttermilk and coconut water, and kids hawking picture postcards are geared up to greet the odd tourists who finds their way into Aihole. Every lane I wander into has a few ruins, a cluster of broken temple steps or the occasional intact statue scattered about. In this setting, it is easy to wonder if every large stone lying along the road dates back several centuries.

“The first cave has what is possibly my favourite image from all the temples: Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance, with 81 classical dance poses carved in a single statue.”



Charulkesi Ramadurai

TEMPLES OF PREPARATION

It is believed that Badami gets its name from Vatapi, a demon of the region who, in the manner of all self-respecting demons, terrorised the locals. Why that should be so in a country with enough gods to name all towns and villages, and still have some left over, is of course a mystery. The more likely explanation for the name reveals itself as I near the town: the sandstone hills around the region reflect the colour of almonds—‘badam’ in most Indian languages.

In Badami, I climb up the hill where the famous cave temples are located. As I huff and puff my way up the steps, I am accompanied by a troop of monkeys who seem to think that they have a right to anything I am carrying in my hand, camera included. They play tag with a bottle of Coke and then, in front of my astonished eyes, twist the cap and drink straight from the bottle. The kids all around, who

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have been complaining loudly of boredom while in the midst of these old temples, watch enraptured, and their parents have a tough time dragging them back down the hill.

Badami has four cave temples, each with a beautiful mélange of statues that are primarily of Vishnu and Shiva. I almost get a crick in my neck as I strain to look up at ceilings covered with frescoes painted with glorious natural dyes, which even the passage of time has not managed to fade.

The first cave has what is possibly my favourite image from all the temples: Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance, with 81 classical dance poses

carved in a single statue. I know this because I have read about it, but I am just not able to make out more than a few. And so I shamelessly eavesdrop on the guide pointing out the various poses to the couple standing next to me. On the opposite wall is a statue of Ardhanarishwara—literally, ‘the half-woman God’—signifying the primal and equal partnership between Shiva and his consort Parvati; the right side of the statue is an angled and sinewy male while the left is a soft and curvy female form.

TEMPLES OF GRADUATION

Pattadakal, my final destination, is clearly higher up on the architectural learning curve given the sophistication of the structures here. This cluster

Clockwise from below: A richly carved rock-cut temple at Badami; The Sangameshwara Temple at Pattadakal houses sculptures of Vishnu and Shiva in various stages of carving; The Jambulingeswara Temple at Pattadakal was built in the Nagara style of architecture, where walls have niches containing sculptures.





The benevolent figure of Nandi, the bull, generally placed facing the principal shrine of a Shiva temple.

of ten temples—one of them a Jain sanctuary—was built between the 7th and 9th centuries AD, after the royal sculptors had honed their skills considerably. It is late evening when I get there and the setting sun casts its golden rays on the temple walls, making the old sandstone gleam as if burnished specially for my visit.

Today, the Archaeological Survey of India does a wonderful job of maintaining this temple complex

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(along with those at Aihole and Badami). According to a local official, the sculptors managed to bring in the best elements of north and south Indian architecture to this group. Pattadakal also served as the Chalukyan capital for some time, though historians say that it was used mainly during special occasions such as festivals and coronations. Indeed, the name itself—*pattada kallu*—translates into ‘coronation stone’.

Among the temples, I linger at the almost-perfect 8th century Virupaksha, dedicated to Shiva. Built by Queen Lokamahadevi to honour her husband’s victory in war over the Pallavas, it is considered a masterpiece of Chalukyan architecture. Later, I spend some time by the banks of River Malaprabha, which flows right behind the temple complex, bearing silent witness to centuries of splendour.

Surprisingly, I am not as “temped out” by the end of the trip as I had expected. Each of these towns and temple clusters has been a different experience. And as for the stock guidebook phrase, if such magnificence is the stuff of cradles, then bring on more of them. ■

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QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways flies to Bengaluru from various cities in India. From Bengaluru, you can take an overnight train (Bijapur Express) to Badami or you can hire a cab for the 450 km journey.

TRAVEL TIPS

The best place to base yourself is Badami, from where Aihole and Pattadakal are both less than half an hour away by car. Badami is also your best bet for accommodation and eating, since Aihole and Pattadakal are small villages and do not offer many choices.

ACCOMMODATION

At Badami, stay at the comfortable Heritage Resort, which offers The Heritage Plan at ₹6,000 per couple including stay and a tour to all the important landmarks in the area. Log on to www.theheritage.co.in

The other recommended option is the state-managed Karnataka Hotels, where the tariff begins from ₹990 for non A/C rooms. Log on to www.karnatakaholidays.net/karnataka_hotels_badami.htm

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to www.karnatakaturism.org

From October to January every year, the state tourism board also organises five-day trips to the north Karnataka temples, including Hampi and Bijapur. Log on to www.karnatakaholidays.net