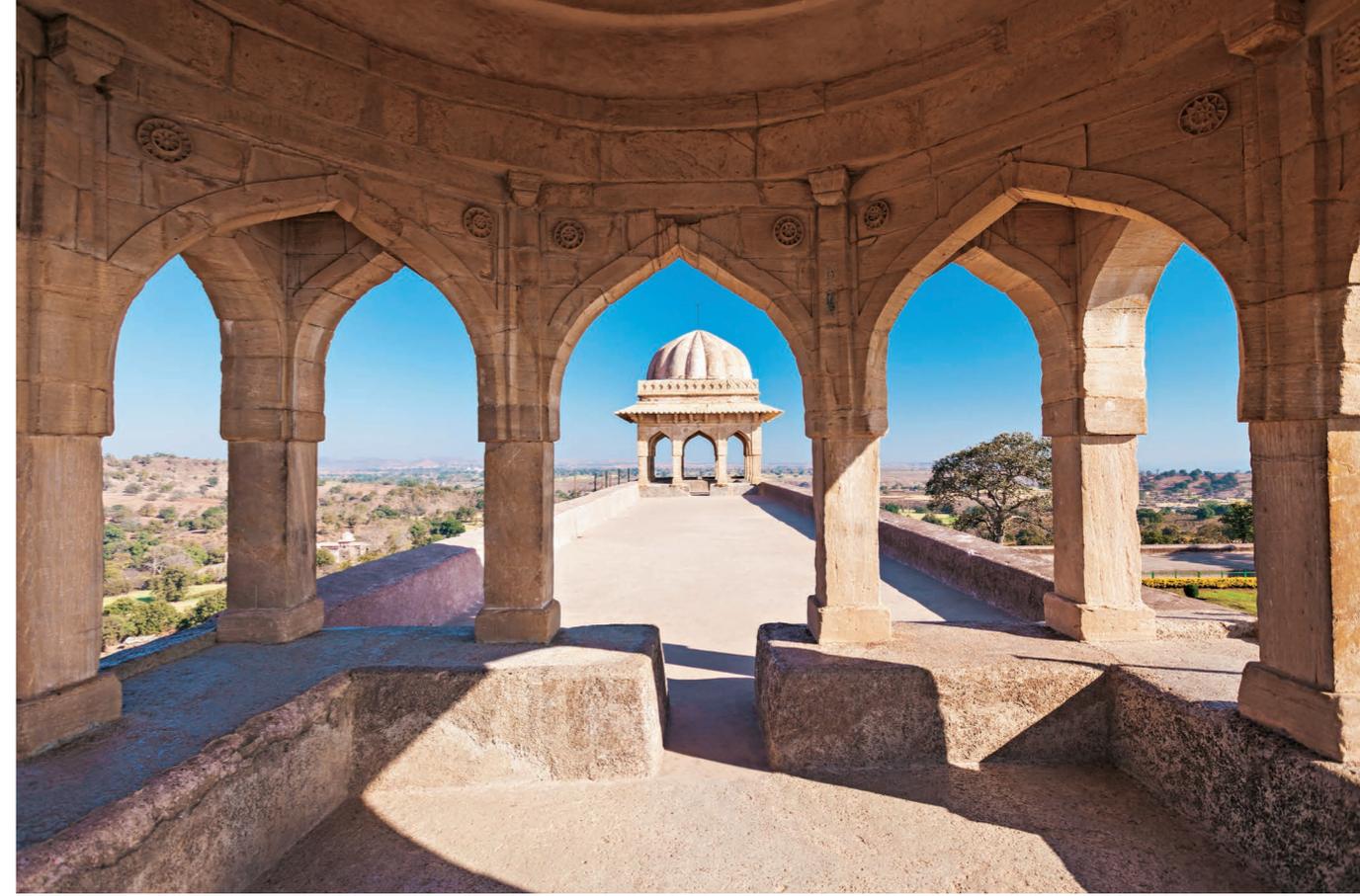


MONUMENTAL LOVE

Take in the allure of the charming cities of Mandu and Maheshwar.

TEXT CHARUKESI RAMADURAI



The sky is getting darker, and the storm clouds gather—plump and menacing—bringing with them the faint smell of wet earth. Shivering in the cold breeze of Mandu, I wrap my thin shawl closer around my body and look at the tableau on the terrace. Families are sitting together inside the domed alcoves that bookend this balcony. Groups of local women from the neighbouring villages, perhaps on a day's outing, are putting up a brave fight to hold their quick-dry saris in place. Suddenly the clouds burst open, making the women turn around, and one woman rushes for cover inside the monument—silver anklets clinking melodiously and rubber slippers flapping on the stone floor.

I am at Rani Roopmati's Pavilion, a three-storeyed building perched prettily on top of a hillock. From a recess in the terrace, I can see the Narmada snaking its way through the arid plains in the distance. The countryside, dotted with brown monuments, comes to life in this unexpected spell of rain...

A LOVE STORY

Apart from an abiding fascination for the Taj Mahal, I have never delved into the Mughal period. But in the case of Mandu, I have to agree with Emperor Jahangir's words: "I know of no other place that is so pleasant in climate and with such attractive scenery as Mandu in the rainy season." No surprise, then, that this town also served as the monsoon

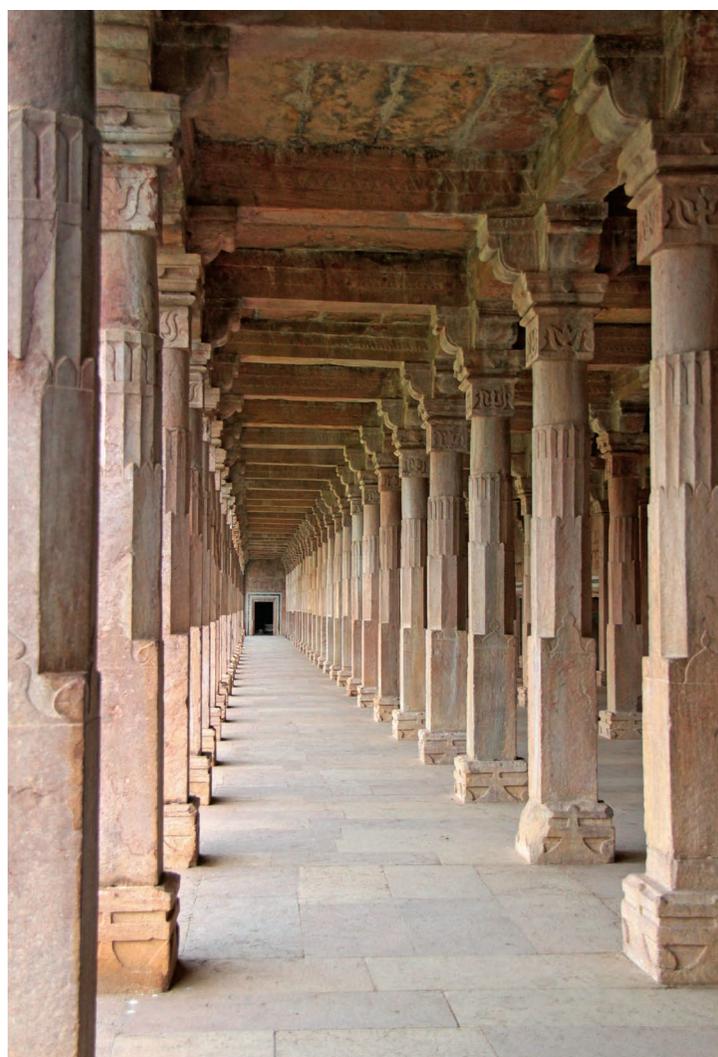
retreat of a succession of Mughals, who sought the cool breeze and green spaces of Mandu. Once the capital of the Malwa kingdom in Madhya Pradesh, Mandu is known for the 16th-century love story between a king—Baz Bahadur, the ruler of Malwa—and a commoner—Roopmati, a shepherdess. The story goes that on a hunting trip, Baz Bahadur caught sight of Roopmati by River Narmada, and, captivated by her beauty, made her his queen. It was idyllic for a while, but like all great love stories, this one, too, ended in tragedy ('happily ever after' never makes for exciting history). When captured by Akbar's general, Adham Khan, the king deserted his queen and kingdom. And Roopmati committed suicide by consuming poison.

Despite this less-than-perfect conclusion, remnants of this romance lie scattered everywhere in Mandu. The Roopmati Pavilion itself, for instance, was built by the indulgent king to ensure that his queen was able to see her beloved Narmada whenever she pleased. However, Baz Bahadur's Palace, despite its open terraces and luxuriant surroundings, does not carry any whispers of romance for me.

My guide, no doubt quoting from unverifiable sources, says that Mandu was once a massive fortified city, dating back to the 6th century BC. Today, it is a small dusty town in the heart of India, dotted with monuments and ruins that hold their own stories.

Above: The Roopmati Mahal is a symbol of love. Having gone through restoration, parts of the original structure can be seen from the east.

Facing page: The ogee arches of the Hindola Mahal. This building is known for its simple architecture and construction.



STRUCTURED BEAUTY

Standing in front of the Jami Masjid, I reflect on the way we talk blithely about global influences. As if we, our generation, thought up the very idea. This mosque, built in the mid-15th century, is modelled after the Umayyad mosque of Damascus. I love the bleak brownness of it, with bits of blue enamel work peeping out from the walls of the inner chamber. All this brown is contrasted sharply by the neighbouring Hoshang's Tomb—India's first marble structure.

At first glance, this domed monument seems plain but I walk past beautiful pink granite pillars on to the other side—the main entry into the tomb—and notice the intricate latticework on the windows. This tomb is supposed to be a fine example of a marriage between the Indian and Afghan styles of architecture. Here, again, the Mughal presence makes itself felt.

However, the place I return to again and again is the Royal Enclave—built around the same time—containing the Jahaz Mahal and the Hindola Mahal. While entirely willing to be charmed by Mandu, I still find it surreal to see a ship (Jahaz Mahal) and a swing (Hindola Mahal) here. But these monuments are the highlights of Mandu, adorning all the picture postcards sent out of here.

Jahaz Mahal is 120m long and sits between two artificial lakes, the Munj Talao and the Kapur Talao. During the monsoons, the palace looks afloat—like a ship—between the two full lakes. The only

Charukesi Ramasudraj; Dindodia Photo

embellishments on the open terrace are the small-domed pavilions and intriguing water channels on the floor. The Hindola Mahal—meaning 'Swinging Palace'—is similarly stark, with graceful arches and sloping outer walls, and perhaps sways gently in the calming monsoon breeze.

THE ONWARD JOURNEY

After a couple of days in Mandu, I head to Maheshwar, just an hour's drive away. If Mandu feels like a place from the past, Maheshwar is very much here and now. Life in this town revolves around the ghats of the Narmada; gossiping local women wash their clothes, boatmen call out to tourists for pleasure rides, priests fill river water in their vessels, and tourists record their visit for posterity on cameras.

Despite the many temples in the town, the undisputed goddess here is Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar, who governed this territory in the mid-18th century. The fort she ruled from is now a heritage hotel, and the palace or Rajwada is a small unassuming space filled with a quiet charm—much like the town itself.

But the star of Maheshwar is the gossamer fabric that lends itself to beautiful saris that carry the town's name. The art of weaving Maheshwari saris was introduced over two centuries ago by the queen and revived two decades ago by her descendants. There are now over 2,000 weavers skilled in this art, which once came close to dying out.

Above: Standing between the Munja and Kapur Tanks is a complex that resembles a ship, giving it the name Jahaz Mahal.

Right: The pink granite pillars in the Hoshang Shah Complex.

HPL-MCB

Technology for Safer living



- Range : 0.5 to 100 Amps 240 / 415V
- Available in SP, SPN, DP, TP, TPN & FP
- Protection against short circuit & over load
- Mid trip facility



Ab roshan
ho khushiyaan



Protection

www.hplindia.com

History

Below: The Rehwa Society was set up to revive the weaving industry.

Bottom: Maheshwar is located on the north bank of River Narmada. The city is home to numerous temples, forts and ghats.

After an hour at the ghats and a quick stop at the Shiva temple on the shore, I make my way to the Rehwa Society Store inside the fort complex. A dozen women are at work here, silent and focused, the stillness broken only by the movement of the looms. Some of them look up and smile as I point my camera at them; to others, I am only a mild annoyance. And in the shop, each sari looks more enticing than the other, and I walk out with far more than I had intended to buy.



Back at the Jahaz Mahal at sunset, I think of the various avatars this overgrown village has seen over the centuries: Mandapadurga, Mandavgarh and now Mandu. My favourite, though, comes from the late-13th-century name of Shadiabad — 'City of Joy'. ■

✦ QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways has regular flights from Delhi and Mumbai to Indore, from where Mandu is 90 km (a 2-hour drive) away.

STAYING THERE

The best options in Mandu are the government-managed Malwa Resort and Malwa Retreat. For a more upscale experience, choose Jhira Bagh Palace (www.jhirapalace.co.in) on the Indore Highway. At Maheshwar, stay at the Ahilya Fort (www.ahilyafort.com)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to www.mptourism.com



Olaf Krüger/imageBROKER/Dinodia; Dinodia Photo