

## Letter #5 - Aurangabad

or Warriors and Faith

Located in central India, Aurangabad has always been a contested prize. The fabled Maratha warrior Shivaji was finally defeated by 17C Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, a great strategist as well as artist, creator of the Taj Mahal. Nowadays visitors are drawn, not to conquer, but to pay homage to its famous World Heritage cave complexes.

Unlike Ajanta, another ancient site we will see tomorrow, the Ellora caves were never lost to time. Built during a period of communal harmony between the 5th and 11th centuries



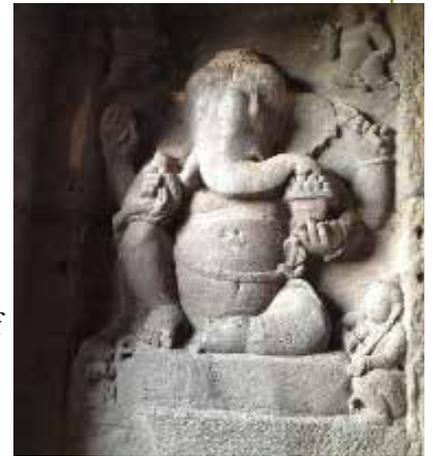
AD, this is a complex of Hindu, Jain and Buddhist holy places excavated from the scrubby, granite hillsides—by hand! Cave #16, the Kailasa temple, is the largest monolithic structure in the world, with a U-shaped second story that curves around the great central shrine. This is a monumental architectural achievement with elephant and monkey guardians, gods and goddesses, pillared verandas and painted ceilings, detail piled upon detail by monk carvers in a testimony to faith. God of good luck, the mellow elephant Ganesh monitors cave #17, while a stolid white cow sits on a pedestal outside: icons of India.

Some of the 30 or so other caves are less visited and we stumble in the dimness amid fetid animal smells, screeching bats: this is their world, while we are here but for a moment, respectful intruders. Despite the heat, I shiver in awe at these marvels, the stone porches and portals, railings and rafters, Buddhas and Shiva lingams, fading painted decor, time-slickened steps, cells for sleep

and prayer, rooms and halls extending deep in the mountain where one could become lost in eternity.

Early the next morning, we set off for Ajanta, passing through old Mughal gates, then beginning a gradual ascent amid tawny scrub country, the road lined with acacia and eucalyptus. Beyond are fields of sugarcane, cotton and corn, banana palms, some fallow, some cultivated in an alternating pattern. In harvested fields we see “teepees” of drying jawari leaves—for fuel?—and around them, little tent communities, perhaps migrant workers. Or simply the wretched poor. We have entered old India, a land dependent on the annual rains. This year the monsoon was bad and water is short. People can only pray and wait for next summer. Cars and tractors are fewer here, replaced by people on foot or in carts drawn by sturdy bullocks, their big curving horns painted blue, yellow, orange.

Jagged hills rise around us and sharp curves, but our gentle driver Saleem is steady and sure, his red-dyed hair a testimony to his own Muslim faith. After about two hours, we turn



*Ellora Cave #17 - Ganesha*

## *Letter from Asia #5*

right at a fork toward Ajanta village with its small bazaar of fruit, grains, tires, nibbling goats and cows...its white Nehru caps, turbans and skullcaps, blue jeans, black veils, pink saris. Red dust.

We round a bend to see a burlap-wrapped cargo of cotton seeds spilled onto the road... far below, the tumbled truck and men climbing the steep hill with more bags while others collect the contents of ruptured sacks. We recall women on the highway to Delhi gathering fallen rice in a lane of traffic.

As we approach, I reflect on the scene from my book that is set here, when Nancy, fuming over an earlier insult—not by her prince Bhaiya—flees and becomes lost in one of the caves while he searches frantically. I am eager to find the right cave, the texture and smell of the place.

And then we reach Ajanta, a site of true pilgrimage for many. Along with Indian tourists and students, we join groups of Buddhist monks and lay people from Japan, Vietnam, Thailand.



*Pilgrims at Ajanta*

This is a demanding visit, hundreds of steep steps up to elaborate caves carved from the sheer, horseshoe-shaped cliff above a deep gorge...temples and monasteries with grand portals opening onto deep halls of painted columns and ceilings, walls lined with recessed monks' cells and famed frescoes—sadly deteriorated stories from the life of the Buddha—and always in the center back shrine, a great seated Buddha. Saffron-clothed monks pay homage and take photos. In the second to last cave, worshipers prostrate themselves before the immense shrine and a huge, reclining Buddha along one wall.

The 27 caves were begun in the first two centuries BC. There was another flurry of construction in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, although a few were never completed. It is both harrowing and awe-inspiring to enter cave 25 and see the initial construction with the rear Buddha shrine, entry pillars and roughed-out monks' cells. Massive boulders remain as if left there by some impatient god, jagged floor, rough walls and ceiling. Whatever happened, the culture came to an end and the caves were eventually forgotten, grown over, reclaimed by the land, the monkeys and bats... until in 1819 a British soldier on a hunting expedition looked down a deep ravine and spotted a series of caves. As difficult as it is now to reach Ajanta, then it was arduous and dangerous—besides the tigers there were bow-and-arrow hunting Bhil tribesmen to contend with.

On our return we see an overturned truck of sugar-



*Ajanta - the Caves*



*Ajanta cave art*

## *Letter from Asia #5*

cane, the driver on his mobile, a helper chewing a stalk: it may be a long wait. This is rural rush hour: a lane of hump-backed white cows plodding home with their keeper, a herd of goats, bullocks drawing carts of cotton, their horns striped red and green, the colors of India's flag. A fleet mongoose darts across the road, followed by a naked saddhu and a lively game of cricket in a fallow field. And of course, there are schools everywhere, and temples and mosques.

After these long, grueling days, we find comfort at Aurangabad's beautiful Taj Residency, welcomed with true Indian warmth and hospitality by a most gracious staff—one of whom is a titled descendant of royalty, coincidentally a former princely state in east Bengal, quite close to Cooch Behar, setting for *The Star of India*. She is a lovely, dignified woman, living almost a courtly life in this fine hotel, with its own ways of hierarchy, protocol, diplomacy. I leave with a new sense of the old royal India, the world of my book.

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