

Chanderi's architecture is a fine amalgamation of Mughal and Bundela construction. The Lakshman Temple is believed to have been built by the seventh Bundela king, Anirudh Singh

Whispers From The Past

Linger here, and linger a while longer, for Chanderi in Madhya Pradesh is not in a hurry. History is still alive in this quaint town that is undisturbed by modern times and its progress. This is a laid-back itinerary.

Words SUPRIYA SEHGAL



A light shower brings out the lush green surroundings of the fort. Making a bold statement amid this majestic view is the Badal Mahal Gate that stands in the foreground of Chanderi Fort

Slow travel is the preserve of the wealthy,” is what I could roughly translate from an Urdu saying which my guide smoothly slipped in while exalting the feats of the Bundela Rajputs. Considering that most of Urdu sounds decidedly mellifluous, I was a tad late in detecting the hint of sarcasm – until I glanced at his face and caught the impertinent grin that lingered after the dig. Admittedly, the taunt was pretty accurate.

I had been furiously zipping for seven whole days along the ‘tiger trail’ of Madhya Pradesh before the National Parks closed for the monsoon, and had kept aside no time for detours as I usually do. Midway through the embarrassingly ‘tick off the list’ timbre of the trip, I decided to put a stop to it. It couldn’t have been a wiser decision to pull the breaks in the small town of Chanderi – well, at least for a day.

Aged, yet ethereal, architectural remnants of the Bundela Rajputs and the Malwa Sultans dot the part scrubby, part lush town. That morning, the charred brown

bouldery landscape had got some relief with the first showers, sprouting life in bits and pieces of green. The ramparts of Chanderi Fort, where we decided to start our trip, were the most fitting spot to get a sweeping view of the lego-like town and the low mountains that encircle it. It was also the most apt place for Nadeem, my guide, to dip into a reserve of legends and launch them at me. I admired his quick-wittedness in assigning ample caveats to every sinister tale, hedging any risk of appearing murky regarding his historical facts. Each statement had a vague ‘as interpreted by’ and ‘no one really knows’ prefix. It suited me just fine. I care more for stories than facts etched in stone, anyway.

The first one came right after we had turned away from the view of the town to the front courtyard of the fort. A neat tombstone rose out of the grassy, unkempt ground. I was told that this was the resting place of the great medieval musician, Baiju Bawara. A legendary artiste who lived over the 15th and 16th centuries, he was born into a Hindu family yet was a constant fixture on the region’s

royal Mughal music calendar. Much of the information on Baiju Bawara has been stitched together from hearsay and eludes any historical authenticity. Paying little heed to the legitimacy of his ‘resting’ address, we drifted into conversations about the 1952 classic film that was the closest depiction of the singer’s life – especially his rivetting hustle with the other heavyweight of the times, Tansen. For more on Tansen’s legacy, which is more legit than Baiju’s, I made a mental note to keep a few days for Gwalior.

Sections of the empty fort echoed with our discussion, until we reached the topmost terrace where our voices melted into the wind. I noticed that the ring of mountains around the city had a distinct truck-sized gap on one side – as if a deliberate slice had been scooped out of the mountain and tossed away to make a door. This was the infamous ‘Kati Ghati’ (cut valley), through which Mughal emperor Babur entered to attack Chanderi. A mosque-like sculpture is hewn into one of the walls. It is said that the Mughals said their prayers in front of this in the early morning hours and then commenced the attack.

We strolled down the fort, through the ominous Khooni Darwaza, also known as the ‘bloody gate,’ while Nadeem launched his choppy discourse. His version, as expected, was much more engaging.

The second story revolves around Jiman Khan, the son of the then Governor of Chanderi, Sher Khan. He is said to have commissioned this gate for construction in order to welcome the Sultan of Malwa, Ghiyasuddin Khilji. Considering the paucity of time, Jiman Khan announced a reward for anyone who could cut the rock in one night. A mason agreed to complete the project overnight. But, when Jiman Khan inspected the gate, he found that there were no hinges on it to instal doors and refused to pay him. Angered by Jiman Khan’s broken promise, the mason committed suicide at the very spot. Till date, this massive rock gate bears no doors and an air of beguiled sadness hangs heavily around it.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in more stories of bitter feuds and forlorn lovers, which are just as much part of the monuments as their weary foundations. There



DISCOVER THIS

While guidebooks and the internet insist that the best place to see weavers at work is the satellite village of Pranpur, an NGO, Chandriyan (+91 9691280958), is recommended for two reasons. One, it is in the middle of the town and needs no detour. Second, inside the double-storey structure lies a decrepit *baodi* and an old, very clean, hammam that few people visit. The white-walled hammam is elusively constructed in one corner of the heritage building. A walk through the erstwhile bath tub, jacuzzi and changing room is worth your while. Also, the hammam looks eerily scrubbed, rousing hope in travellers like me of guides breaking out into a story of royal ghosts enjoying it in the middle of the night.

was Shehzadi Ka Rouza, a stunning but reprehensible commemoration of love. The rambling sprawl of Koshak Mahal was still majestic, despite a few floors being unceremoniously beheaded by tyrannical intruders. We scanned the rest of the iconic relics like Badal Mahal Gate, the Jama Masjid, the forgotten mass graves of saint Nizamuddin and his kin. The day passed with velocity, despite our languid pace of sightseeing. The irony struck me only when we looped back into the middle of the town, and the constant clicketting of looms broke my history-induced stupor.

Peek into any home and the constant thrum of the looms is unavoidable. Slim lanes wended their way around low-roofed homes, where weavers hunched over floor looms, wrapped in a web of symmetrical threads. On the opposite end of the frame from the weaver lay recently hatched gorgeous fabric

to entice travellers like me. My black T-shirt looked rather drab compared to the rich colours and intricate motifs of the silk-cotton Chanderi saris. No wonder I swiftly produced my wallet and bought a couple in the hope of wearing them sometime. Besides, getting 'fresh from the oven' saris earned me prospective bragging rights amongst handloom products-loving friends.

Like any small town, Chanderi wraps up business early. At 7 pm, shutters started rolling down and the sound of the looms ebbed into the dusk. My feeble proposition to head along to Orchha, 150 km from Chanderi, was met with the same ribbing smile, reminding me of the hurried itinerary I had jettisoned. In a moment, I changed my mind and asked to be booked into the nearest hotel for the night. After all, the *baodis* of Chanderi were still waiting to be investigated. ♦

Photography ALAMY and SUPRIYA SEHGAL



The Mughals said their early morning prayers at the Kati Ghati gate before they attacked Chanderi. The gate, through which Babur entered and attacked Chanderi, is among the landmarks of the town

NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

Bhopal, Gwalior and Khajuraho are almost equidistant from Chanderi, at approximately 250 km, if you want to use a combination of air and road transport. A train until Lalitpur (42 km) or Jhansi (134 km) is a more convenient option. Trains from Delhi and Mumbai ply to these towns.

BEST TIME TO GO

The winter months of October-February are pleasant.

STAY

The state-run Tana Bana is a well-kept facility with monument-themed tiles that run along the walls, adding a dash of atmosphere to the basic rooms. Amenities like flat-screen TVs, hot showers, clean bedding and laundry service are provided. There is an in-house restaurant (11 am-7.30 pm) which offers North Indian and Chinese cuisine. (07547 252222; www.mptourism.com; Chanderi; dbl deluxe/AC ₹2,290/1,990)