



## Amidst the Taj Mahal

LEAVING THE MARKETS, temples, and clamoring street noise of New Delhi, my son and I boarded the 6 a.m. Bhopal Shatabdi express train to Agra, home of the Taj Mahal and the Agra Fort. Like most iconic places, the Taj Mahal seemed familiar because it appears in so many pictures and stories told by others. Yet my anticipation grew during the two-hour train ride. We were made comfortable with an Indian Times newspaper, bottled water, and breakfast ordered from and delivered to our seats. The view outside was dry and dusty. But that would change in Agra.

From the train station our pink faces, fair hair, and light eyes contrasted within the sea of brown. It was January, but our faces shined with sweat. Before reaching the entrance gate we passed some evergreen gardens where monkeys hung in trees and grabbed garbage out of bins. What wasn't there impressed me. Absent were any souvenir shops selling plastic replicas or postcards. There was no graffiti.

The Taj Mahal stands amid an unassuming flat landscape near a sluggish river called the Yamuna. The main entrance gate is a massive stone building with a grand Islamic arch that when standing under it perfectly frames the Taj Mahal, making it appear much closer and larger than it is. It was a moment not to be rushed. The feeling was one of floating or reading a lovely poem. An unexplainable pull entered my body.

### A TRIBUTE OF LOVE

Shah Jahan said of the Taj Mahal, "...Should a sinner make his way to this mansion, all his past sins are to be washed away..." Shah Jahan was India's fifth Moghul emperor (1628-1658). He had the Taj Mahal built as a mausoleum in tribute to his eternal love for Persian



*The elongated reflection pool offers a mirror image of the building.*



*It is estimated that 22,000 to 44,000 people visit the Taj Mahal daily.*



*A view of the recessed balcony, one of the architectural innovations.*

Princess Mumtaz Mahal, his third and favorite wife, who died during childbirth. Writer Rabindranath Tagore described the building this way: “The Taj Mahal rises above the banks of the river like a solitary tear suspended on the cheek of time.”

A well-manicured lawn and symmetrical ever-green gardens represent an earthly paradise. Facing due south, the sun’s light changes the building’s color throughout the day, as well as its image in the reflection pool. The soft morning light teases it with pink. At noon the stone walls turn white, and the orange glow of early evening creates a perfect mirror image in the reflection pool.

What makes the Taj Mahal more than an easily recognizable building is its imperishable beauty. The white marble stone walls are inlaid with mother of pearl, emerald, agate, and coral. Arabic calligraphy graces the entrance doorway and frames the windows. Delicate carvings of flowers and geometric patterns climb the walls. The building is capped with a large white-onion-shaped marble dome and flanked by four turrets that point to the sky.

Before entering the building, we were asked to slip paper booties over our shoes to protect the white marble floors. The interior of the building

isn’t as impressive as its exterior. Arched doorways led to small dark rooms. From the floor above we looked down on two cenotaphs (empty tombs) decorated with semi-precious stones and surrounded by a marble lattice screen. The bodies of the princess and emperor are buried on a floor below at ground level not viewable by the public.

### THE EXOTIC ONES

Outside on the promenade people were draped in exquisite saris and Jodhpuri suits. Henna decorated hands, jeweled faces, and veiled heads passed by us as we sat entrenched on a bench near the building. People slowed to cast their eyes upon us. Some clicked their cameras. Others asked us to hold their babies for a picture. We were the exotic ones!

We spent hours watching people and being watched by people. One such person was a delightful old man with white hair and a beard who stopped in front of us. He wore a knee-length Mundu shirt, a pale-yellow sarong, and a sand-colored shawl swathed over his thin shoulders. He waved a ‘come here’ motion to my son and handed him a camera. A young man wearing a red polo shirt and black slacks joined them. The three stood with broad smiles taking selfie pictures.

“They were dressed so differently,” my son said of the two men, who he learned were father and son. “The old man’s face was withered and wrinkled but when I looked through the camera lens, I saw that they had the exact same eyes.”

Before leaving, we gazed at the building’s mirror image in the reflection pool. It was another nod to the symmetry that makes this a wondrous place.

With some daylight left we headed over to the Agra Fort where the story of Shah Jahan continued. He was betrayed by his son and put under house arrest in the Fort. He lingered there for several years. From his empty bedroom we saw in the distance a misty view of the Taj Mahal. It was then when I felt the grief of a 17th century Mughal emperor.

Later that night on the streets in Agra we watched a wedding march with a bashful groom atop a horse and young ladies in beautiful red dresses walking beside him.



It seemed the perfect place to express eternal love. U

.....  
*Mary Klest is a Barrington-based writer and local journalism advocate. She can be reached at mary@maryklest.com.*