

The Taj Mahal Redux

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I have visited the Taj Mahal at least four times. I found it irresistibly picturesque every time I looked at the Taj. My first visit to the Taj Mahal was with my parents when I was twenty-one years old. My father decided to take us from Patna to Agra, a distance of 500 miles in our family car which was a Fiat sedan. There were six of us including the driver. We all were cooped up inside the car for the entire journey. It took us two days and two nights to reach our destination via Grand Trunk Road of India which was constructed 2,500 years ago and ran from the border of Myanmar to Afghanistan.

My first impression of the beauty of the Taj standing at its main entrance was sublime, wondrous, and out of this world. I was in awe. It was more fabulous than I had ever imagined to be. Seeing Taj was like a dream. It felt as if I was floating in clouds. Simply said, I was swept off my feet at its sight. I could probably just stand there and look at it for eternity.

I remember having a family photograph taken sitting on the bench in front of the Taj, the same bench on which millions of people have sat and been photographed including the kings, queens, and presidents of almost every country of the world. The same bench on which the

queen of Iran, Elizabeth Taylor, and Princess Diana sat.

The second time I saw the Taj was in 1970 when I started working in Delhi. This time I hired a professional guide who let me look at the Taj Mahal from an entirely different perspective.

He took me to the maroon gate which is the entrance to the Taj Mahal and asked me what I saw.

“A maroon gate,” I replied.

“Look again. That is a picture frame,” he contradicted me.

“What do you see behind the Taj?” He asked.

“Blue sky,” was my answer.

“No, you are looking at a blue velvet screen,” he corrected me.

“What is on that blue velvet screen?”

“Taj Mahal,” was my obvious answer.

“No, look again. That is an embroidery in white silk thread,” he corrected me again.

I was mesmerized. I was really looking at a picture frame with a blue velvet background on which Taj was embroidered in white silk threads. That was the most spectacular embroidery I had ever witnessed in my life.

I marveled at the intricate design and inlays throughout the exterior of the mausoleum. We (the guide and I) walked along the pathway next to the reflecting

pool. A visitor to the monument may very well stand agape at this spectacle, the romanticism and sheer majesty of the structure was unbelievably true.

I visited the Taj Mahal a third time during the full moon. Its sensuous appeal was more heightened as on a full moon night. The dome is what was highlighted, while the other aspects of the structure were, nevertheless, united in look, the balance was perfect. The rows of cypress trees offset by the green carpet of grass completed the picture of idyllic proportions, resplendent in royal dignity.

I must also mention the history of the Taj Mahal. Shah Jahan the fifth emperor of the Mogul empire built the Taj Mahal to hold the body of his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who died in 1631. Built on a terrace above the Yamuna River, it took 20,000 craftsmen and laborers over a decade to complete.

The tomb chamber houses the emperor and his bride in highly decorated marble fashioned into exquisite floral patterns and calligraphy of Koranic script. The story is given added poignancy by Shah Jahan's fate. Deposed by his ruthless son, Aurangzeb, he spent his last years imprisoned in the nearby Agra fort, with a view of the Taj.

It's a symbol of love for people all over the world. Of all the structures of the world, the Taj Mahal to me is still the most wonderful.