The Forgotten Empire

A UNESCO world heritage site, Hampi Group of Monuments, spread over 4,187.24 hectares, is home to more than 1,600 remains of architectural marvels of the bygone era.

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On the southern banks of Tungabhadra river in Northern Karnataka stand the ruins of the ancient temple town of Hampi that was part of the flourishing capital of Vijayanagara Empire (1343 to 1565). The township brims with temple complexes, and civil and military buildings. To make a trip to Hampi is like taking a detour off our mainstream lives and the conundrum of contemporary lives and stepping into an era in Indian history that is both incredible and inspiring.

Historically, the town of Hospet was a gateway to the city of Vijayanagara. Krishnadevaraya, legendary king of Vijayanagara Empire, is known to have built Hossapete in 1520 AD in honour of his queen Nagala Devi. Although none of the forts and old structures can be traced today, it seemed apt that we started our journey to Hampi here. It was one October evening that we took a bus ride from Hospet (on the South Western Railway) to Hampi. Paddy fields were not ripe yet, and palm trees swayed in the breeze that held promises of rain. Large boulders began to emerge in the landscape.
THE MONOLITHIC GANESHA ON Hemakuta Hill is an unbelievable piece of art.

We arrived at dusk and checked into one of the several thatched hut backpackers’ accommodation options along the river. The rocks seemed to emanate hues of rust. The breeze was chilly and a hawk moth hovered over white flowers of a Parijat tree.

The rocks and temple ruins of Hampi have been celebrated in several history texts, researched by geologists, and sought after by international tourists. A bird’s eye view of this ancient town would probably look like pebbles piled carelessly across the terrain. The architectural style is distinctive in that most buildings, their pillars and steps, are all cut out of the large boulders around. All of this combined together renders Hampi a nearly exotic touch.

We covered one temple after another in the northern part of Hampi, flanked by the river on one side and Hemakuta and Matanga Hills on the other. The Vittala Temple with its iconic stone chariot and musical pillars, Hazara Rama Temple, Virupaksha Temple with three majestic gopuras, reliefs of Jain temples, and so on. The monolithic Ganesha on Hemakuta Hill is an unbelievable piece of art. Some of the Shiva shrines are known to date back to the Chalukya Empire (9th
Lotus Mahal, also called Chitrangini Mahal, located within the Zanana Enclosure.

THERE IS AN EXTENSIVE network of stone aqueducts and canals that are connected by the step wells of Hampi.

century AD). We walked up to the temple tank—a step well, near Virupaksha Temple, flanked on two sides by rows of pillars—and one can only imagine the sheer grandeur of it on a moonlit night.

The step wells or water tanks (called pushkarnis) are mostly dotted across the temple complexes but one of the most impressive ones is located within the Royal Enclosure. The holiday might be short, but one must take time off to visit the pushkarni located at the end of Courtesan’s Street. It is part of Achyuta Raya Temple, which historians believe, was one of the last grandiose temple projects completed in the capital, before the fall of the empire. The absolute symmetry of these step wells fills you with awe, and the foresight of the architect who conceived them is truly inspiring. There is an extensive network of stone aqueducts and canals that are connected by the step wells of Hampi.

Having a rented moped for mobility meant we could ride up and down the entire town independently. The lunch place we were recommended was a restaurant that had cozy seating on rock cut steps and a view of the gently flowing Tungabhadra behind tall river grasses. Food was a mix of traditional Kannadiga cuisine with a handful of options for the continental taste, particularly in the dessert menu.

Musical pillars at Vitthala Temple.

Hemakuta Hill has a historic connect to Lord Shiva, and many Shiva temples are situated here.
Normal rural Indian life seems to be woven seamlessly around Hampi: small children on tall bicycles, shepherds in their soiled white dhotis lazing while their cattle grazed, kolam outside thatched roofed houses, and women balancing water pots on their heads and hips. We even spotted a young college boy preparing for his exam on top of a hillock in the pillared verandah of a temple! You may be rushing from one monument to another, but there must always be time for a chat with the tender coconut vendor or the chai wala; they are friendly with a tinge of shyness.

The most mundane of things takes on an extraordinary outfit in Hampi: the police station, for instance, is housed along a pillared corridor at the eastern end of Hampi Bazaar; or a red KSRTC bus parked in the Hampi bus stand is almost surreal in the backdrop of the sandstone boulders over the hill. If only one could travel back in time!

There was fog over the waters when we woke up the next morning. Bird calls emerged from the riverine thickets as if to replace the frog orchestra at night. Two tourists waited for the coracle to take them across to the other bank.

We had reserved day two to cover the southern side of the township. The palaces, elephant stables, a zenana, and royal baths in what historians refer to as the ‘Islamic or Moorish Quarter’ are set between Malavanta Hill and Talakadu Gate. It is possible that high-ranking Muslim officials resided in this area. We were hard pressed for time and only managed a glance of the grand elephant stables—a building with eleven domed chambers. The ride from the south to the north end of Hampi has a few spots where one is tempted to stop and rest. Sit and stretch your legs on one of the road side rocks and you might see goats graze in the distance on parched earth. You might follow a playful squirrel or hum a song or two. You might find that life has indeed slowed down in this sleepy ancient town in Deccan India.

Just after lunch, when we should ideally have been lazing by the river under a neem or tamarind tree, we opted for a rushed visit to the ‘Broken Bridge’. One can only imagine a time when the river would have flowed full. It acted as a natural barrier protecting the capital from any invasion from the north. Legend has it that the bridge was constructed in a strategic manner: if a few specific slabs were removed, the bridge would come down, disconnecting the south and north banks of the river.

We were going to forego our host’s sinful banana pie and go straight for dinner, for the climb up to the top of Hemakuta Hills was definitely more luring. Troops of monkeys were wrapping up for the day. The view from the top is of Virupaksha Temple. In an otherwise treeless, expansive landscape, silhouettes of coconut trees etched a breathtaking sunset.

Standing on top of one of the several hills in Hampi and spanning over the carefully crafted layout of the sprawling town is indescribable.