

# TOURISM UPDATE



PHOTOS BY AJAY SOOD (TRAVELURE)

**In Memoriam:**  
The cenotaphs and the *chattris* along the Betwa river stand in sweet reverie.

**Fort for the Lord:**  
Lakshmi Narayan temple is one of the architectural wonders and a huge draw.

**Royal Abode:**  
Emperor Jahangir's visit to Orchha was frozen for eternity by the Bundelas in this abode in his name.

## Uncovering History & Mystery

Orchha has a rich and distinct past all encompassed within 2 sq km.

BY **BINITA SINGH**

If you are looking for a quiet date with history and some moments for self, then this is the perfect time to head to Orchha. Far away from the madding crowds of urban centres, this tiny village town in transition in Madhya Pradesh, offers a vacation that promises to be a medley of absorbing details, relaxation, peace and rejuvenation. Orchha is not the done to death commercial touristy hotspot where no sooner that you step off a train, bus or any other mode of transport, you are overwhelmed by the gaggle guides, tour operators, vendors and street sellers of many hues and colours. Stepping into Orchha is akin to stepping back in time—here time seems to have stood still beguilingly. This tiny city hides within it centuries of India's past—a legacy carved in stone—mute yet evocative.



If heading from Delhi, just take a train to Jhansi, which is a 15 km ride from this ancient city. You can come back to explore Jhansi again, but for now, catch an auto or a taxi and head out to the erstwhile seat of the Bundelas. The sight of Orchha is like an artist's impression, drawn on a canvas of blue, grey and blue—a line of stone palaces and temples with rising domes etched between the blue of the sky above and reflected in the still waters of Betwa river below—mesmerising in its beauty and the architectural excellence of the bygone era. Orchha is a true reflection of

India of the Maharajas. Built in the 16th and the 17th centuries, its monuments hide within their walls the rich history of the region.

Literally meaning “the hidden” in Bundelkhandi, Orchha, justifies its name. The barely 2 sq km historical city was founded by Bundela Rajput chieftain, Rudra Pratap, who discovered this island shrouded in dense forest and found it to be an ideal spot to build his capital in 1501 AD. At the time, for almost two decades, the Bundelas had been flitting from one place to the other in search of a safe and secluded haven, having lost Gardhkunder, their last capital. Gardhkunder, with its magnificent fort atop a hill amid picturesque surroundings, originally belonged to the Khangars, who had captured it from the Chandela chieftain. Later, the Khangars lost it to invading Mughals and it was finally handed over to the Bundelas, who were feudatories of the Mughals, in recognition of their services.

Bundelas though had a chequered history. They ruled the province of Bundelkhand, a province under the Moghul empire in the 16th and the 17th centuries. Their time was marred with much war and strife. They could not hold Orchha for long. But before they left for their new capital at Tikamgarh in the 1820s, in the interim period, they left an indelible imprint of their rule and majesty on Orchha. It is amazing how the Bundelas, who were not native to Madhya Pradesh, enriched its history beyond measure. Descendants of the Gaharwar Rajputs of Benares, they had been forced to flee their homeland due to multiple invasions. Today, each stone of the magnificent kingdom, the many cenotaphs, palaces, chhatris and temples, speak a thousand words of love, treachery, warfare, pain, anguish and pleasure that defined the history of the Bundela chieftains. Folklore mixes with history and what you hear from the locals makes for a fascinating tale. The late discovery of Orchha’s tourism potential ensured that it remained dreamily slumbering as though in a trance hidden from encroaching outsiders. For centuries, the surrounding Dhak forests acted as its natural cover and Orchha remained a spot unmarked by the ravages of modernity. Till today, it retains its aura and seems to be living in its illustrious past. Drive down to the banks of Betwa, and the haunting beauty of the place silently beckons you.

An ideal weekend getaway, Orchha is like an oxygen chamber, away from the pollution of cities with their honking cars, dust, smog and chaos

**FOUR KEY HIGHLIGHTS**

**1. RIVER WALK**



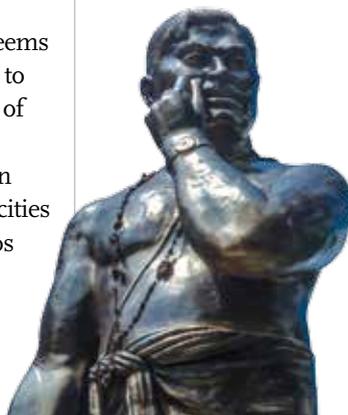
The fantastic experience of crossing a river on foot is one of the many attractions that this small city packs in for tourists.

**2. DISCOVERY TRAIL**



In just 2 sq km of area, Orchha offers tourists a rich experiential stay with varied offerings, each unique.

**3. MARTYR'S MEMORIAL**  
Shaheed Chandrashekhra Azad lived in exile in Orchha.



**Ode to Beauty:** The walls and ceilings of Rani Mahal bring alive the canvas of the Bundela royalty's lives.

of life. Breathe in deep the freshness before you succumb to the call of the royal abodes. You can come back for more of the nature surrounding the city, once you have uncovered its intriguing past. The ancient monuments are living annals of the Bundelas’ rich history and breathe it in every detail. Begin your journey of discovery with the Ram Raja temple, a classic example of a bit of history enriched with folklore. According to history, Raja Madhukar Shah I was the son of Raja Rudra Pratap. A religious king, he converted his palace into a temple dedicated to Lord Rama. The palace is today known as Ram Raja Temple where Lord Vishnu’s incarnate Lord Ram is worshipped as the eternal king. The local folklore adds a delicious twist to this tale. Raja Madhukar Shah’s wife, Rani Kunwar, had a holy visitation in her dream. She travelled to Ayodhya for his *darshan* and the lord appeared in the form of an idol. There was a condition though—wherever the idol was set down first would become the lord’s resting place. Rani Kunwar immediately set off on the long journey back, which took her more than eight months. Meanwhile Raja Madhukar commenced the construction of a temple for Lord Rama. Since the construction was taking long, upon reaching home, the queen set the idol in her room. Finally when the temple was ready and she wanted to install the idol in the new premises, the idol refused to budge. The *raja* then converted the palace into a temple. You can visit the towering Chaturbhuj temple in an adjacent compound, still awaiting its lord. The faith of the local residents has kept this palatial temple from falling into ruin

► **History in Pictures:** The beauty of the monuments enriches Orchha's history.



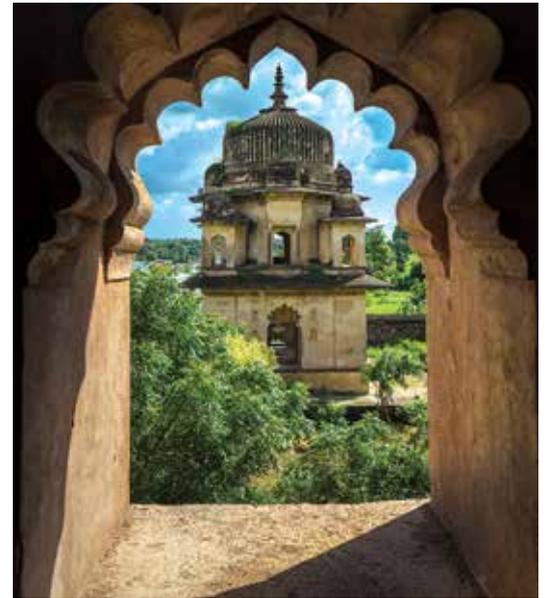
◉ **Framed!:** Orchha is uniquely situated with a natural water body flowing beside it and lush green forests creeping up at its edges. The place is hauntingly beautiful.

as till today, devotees flock to it for the lord's *darshan* and ritual daily *aarti*. This is the only place in India where Lord Ram is worshipped as a king.

The atmosphere in Rai Parveen Mahal though is thick with devotion of another kind. Dedicated to the eponymous paramour, the singer-courtesan of Raja Indramani (1672–76), the Mahal speaks of the purity of love. Hearing of her legendary beauty and talent, Akbar summoned her to court. But the clever courtesan recounted her distaste of being a part of his court in a verse that gave the message that only a dog or a crow eats the carrion meat left over by some other animal. Akbar returned her to Orchha untouched. Jahangir Mahal, on the other hand, tells the tale of loyalty of the Bundela kings. Built by Maharaja Bir Singh Deo (1605–1627), who was a contemporary of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, it commemorates Jahangir's visit to Orchha. Bir Singh was made Raja of Orchha in 1605 as a reward for killing Abul Fazal, Akbar's (Jahangir's father) prime minister.

The most photographed and famous of the historical monuments in Orchha are the cenotaphs and *chattris*. The 15 *chattris* on the banks of Betwa river are dedicated to the Bundela kings. Constructed on raised square platforms, most are designed in the Panchayatana style and are cooled by the breeze blowing over the river. The quietude of the place draws one to linger and from here, Orchha appears to be in a sweet reverie. Raj Mahal, built by the devout king Raja Madhukar, is the oldest monument in Orchha and is an imposing building with elaborate interiors. Inhabited by a succession of Bundela rulers, it smacks of intrigue, love, ambition and the making and unmaking of many a king. There are several other monuments and temples to explore including the famous Swami Narayan temple and Sunder Mahal. The latter is a monument to love by Dhurjaban, a Bundela descendant of Madhukar Shah who converted to Islam for the love of his life.

But Orchha is not just about its monuments. Those little inclined towards such tales can explore the nature beyond the stone walls or immerse themselves in the serenity of the space. The wildlife sanctuary once was the hunt-



## A SLICE OF HISTORY

The decline of the Bundelas began when the next generation after Raja Bir Singh met an untimely end. They lost their powers when the Marathas came to North India. In 1741, Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao came to Orchha with the desire to build a fort in Bundelkhand. They took away the Fort of Jhansi from Orchha state. Later, Bundelas acceded more ground to the Marathas. Beautiful and impressive paintings that are more than 100 years old enhance the beauty of Orchha. Raja Ram temple is unique as this is the only place where Lord Ram is treated as a king and a guard of honour is held everyday. The beauty of the fort dominates the town. The light and sound show held here provides tourists a better understanding of Orchha's history.

ing ground of the Bundela kings. Today, it offers sightings of *neelgai*, spotted deer, peacocks, wild boar, monkeys and jackals, a multitude and variety of chirping birds and the songs of the crickets at night. The flora is as rich as the fauna with several varieties of trees dotting the landscape. Take a safari down the sprawling sanctuary on the far bank of Betwa river and relive the adventures of *Jungle Book*. Pick your stay at either a resort with local live music and cuisine or take a backpack adventure tour with cycling, walking and river rafting thrown in. Whatever your choice, you will come away enriched both in mind and spirit. Go soak in the picturesque environs to the natural song of the rhythmic Betwa while you contemplate Orchha's history and many mysteries. The best time to visit is now—November to June. ■