

Taj Mahal (Agra, India)

India's most famous building was a labor of love by Emperor Shah Jahan



"[The Taj Mahal is] like a solitary tear suspended on the cheek of time."

Rabindranath Tagore, poet

- ☑ Shah Jahan, the emperor of India, built the Taj Mahal for his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal, pictured.
- ☑ Although it belongs to a larger complex, the white mausoleum remains the most famous part of the Taj.

Only the worst cynic could fail to be moved by the beauty of the Taj, despite it being one of the world's most frequently photographed monuments. A 20,000-strong workforce labored for about twenty years to produce what is simultaneously a true wonder of the world, a major expression of Indian culture, and one man's tribute to his favorite wife. This man was the Indian Mughal emperor Shah Jahan. He conceived the lavish Taj Mahal complex as a mausoleum dedicated to his beloved wife of twenty years, Mumtaz Mahal, who died in childbirth.

Visitors approach the building via a monumental red sandstone gateway that hints at the treasures to come—one inscription here welcomes the faithful to paradise. The main domed mausoleum stands at the end of decorative gardens, reflected beautifully in a centrally placed watercourse. A massive vision in fine white marble, it seems to float against the open sky behind it—a deliberate effect.

Blinding white in the daytime heat, the marble glows red at sunset and blue in the moonlight. The four almost identical sides, the giant central dome—about 240 feet (73 m) high—four lesser corner domes, and four surrounding minarets form an essay in harmonious symmetry. The mausoleum's walls shimmer with *pietra dura*—incredibly delicate decoration traced with gems such as lapis lazuli and amethyst—and the special acoustics of its main dome make each musical note echo five times. Inside are the false tombs of the shah and his wife, placed over real ones buried beneath.

Its architecture, decoration, and Arabic calligraphy make this complex the finest example of Mughal art, fusing Indian, Persian, and Islamic influences. Other attractions include twin mosque buildings (placed symmetrically on either side of the mausoleum), lovely gardens, and a museum. **AK**

