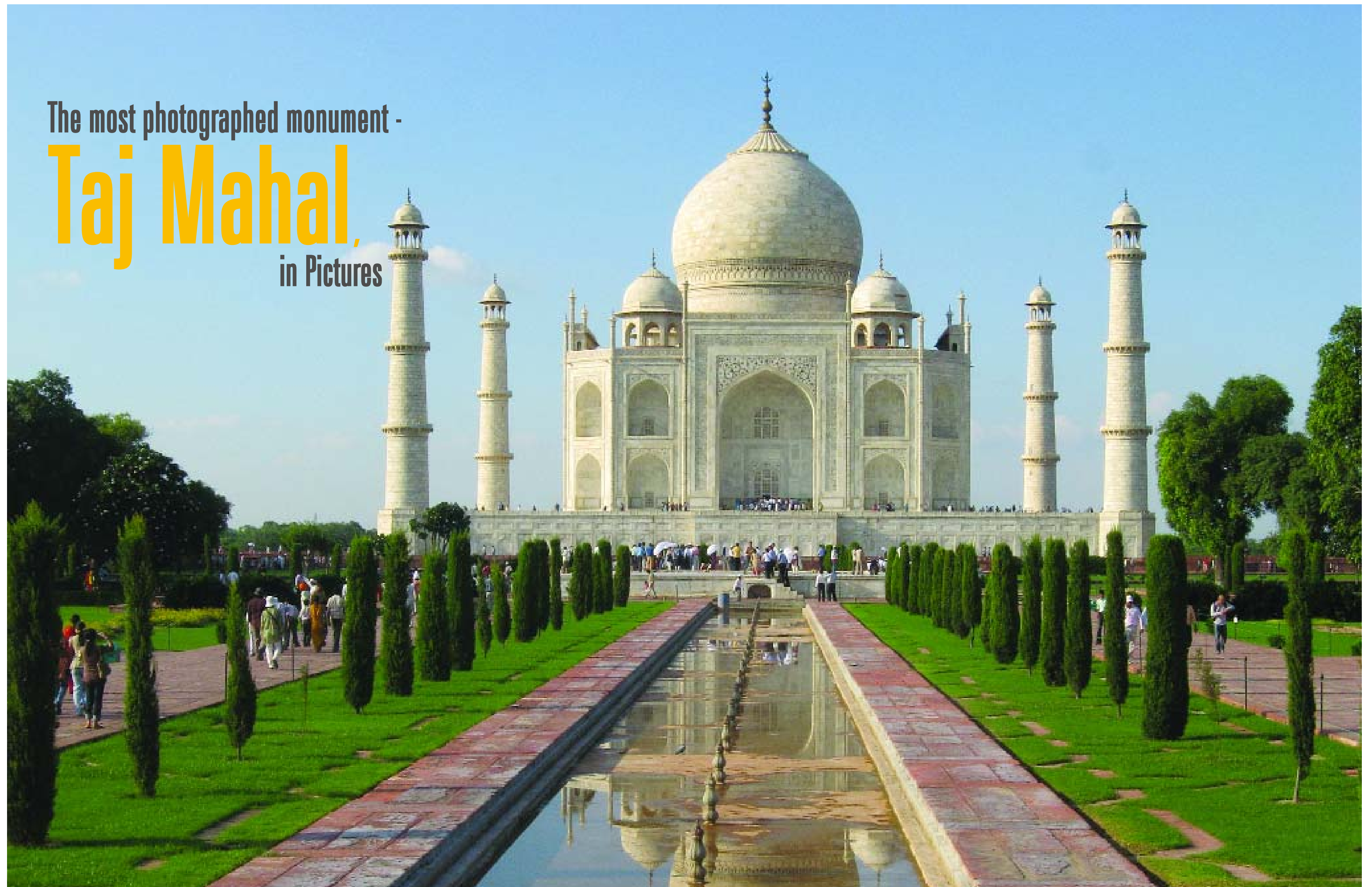
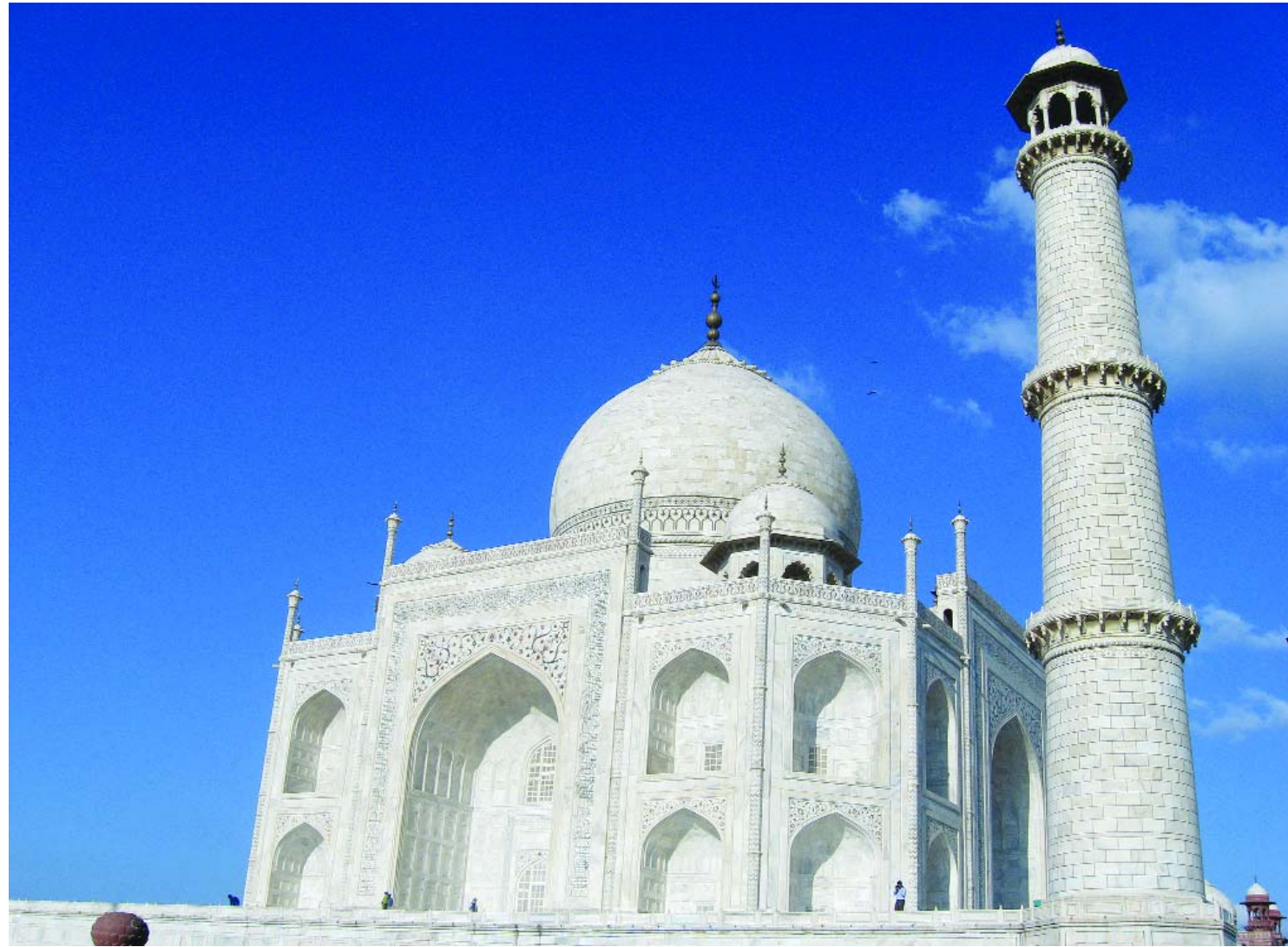


The most photographed monument -

Taj Mahal, in Pictures





A closer look at the intricate work done on the façade

Text and Photograph courtesy: Apurva Bose

In the legendary poet Rabindranath Tagore's words "The Taj is a tear on the face of eternity". Any amount said on the mesmerizing beauty of the Mughal monument of Agra-the Taj Mahal is redundant indeed. I had a chance of visiting it lately when I was in Agra for an international conference. Having previously visited it as a child and a visitation at this time with a maturity coupled with an architecture degree, its appeal was a multitude times more than it had been the last time.

Envisaged to be the paramount building made by hand, with money exhausted that would amount to one million USD today, the Taj has been eulogized as an epitome of elegance, of sanctity, of the expression of love that Mughal emperor Shah Jahan made in commemoration of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. Taj Mahal standing on the banks of river Yamuna also conveys the self-sacrifice made by this emperor who left everything else to focus on this building - a mausoleum he had promised to his dying wife. Mumtaz died in 1631 A.D. while giving birth to her child and soon enough by the end of the year did the construction of this wonder began. Built over the grave of the empress, this magnificent tomb in white marble stands at the head of a formal garden, as opposed to the centre as found in Mughal gardens.

Nearly 20,000 workers worked on the construction daily. The best builders were coagulated from around the world-from Turkey, Iran, Persia etc. A complete 22 years were taken to build the Taj Mahal, one of the recent additions to the Seven Wonders of the World. It became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983. Shah Jahan's designers visited a lot of other tombs

to accumulate full hand information on the state of architecture all over India to construct this tomb.

I had read and heard about it, but it was only when its first glimpse touched me after crossing the imposing 92 ft high gateway did I get serenaded by the tranquility of the pristine white aura of this monument. A perspective and a depth gets added to this structure as one stands on the end of a marble platformed avenue, water channels and trees. The skyline that gets formed due to the onion domes, canopies and elegant minarets is captivating. The four free-standing minarets at the corners of the platform on which the Taj stands add an unusual dimension to the whole experience. These minarets seem to provide a spatial reference frame for the central tomb. The long walk to the monument got further enriched by the varying reflections of the Taj in the still waters of the pool with *chinar* trees flocking on both sides framing the view. From the end of the avenue one could approach the lower chamber containing the graves or take a stroll to the replicas of the same at an upper level. Going down the central octagonal chamber one comes across the cenotaphs of Mumtaz Mahal at the centre and of Shahjahan on the west. These cenotaphs lay enclosed within an octagonal *jaali screen*.

The plan of the Taj Mahal is a rectangle (1900 ft x 1000 ft) aligned north and south-the central area divided into a square garden. The Taj stands on a square platform (187 ft) of height 22ft. Peppered with expert and flawless sculptures and inlaid design of flowers and calligraphy cut from precious gems the white marble strikes like lighting. A symmetrical design is maintained on both sides of this monument with two similar structures- a mosque on the west and a *'mehman khana'* or



Looking at the gateway through the water channel and trees.



Top: One of the four minarets topped by a chhatra.

Bottom Left: The cenotaph of Mumtaz Mahal enclosed within a jalli screen.

Bottom Right: A view of the recessed arches and inlaid design of flowers.



the guesthouse on the east. Done up in Red Sikiri sand stone these two structures pose a direct contrast in colour and texture to the serene white marble. Supporting triple domes, the arches of both these structures are inlaid with marble panels and contain dados having floral motifs carved in relief. The interiors of the Taj Mahal reflect the ancient Indian ideals of dark and cavernous spaces whereas the external facades of the Taj reflect the Persian ideals. A large central porch and a subsidiary smaller arched recess are the elements being repeated on the two-storied treatment of the facades. Flanked by four domed canopies at each corner, the grouping comes forward as one of the most distinctive combinations in the entire range of Indo-Islamic architecture.

The minarets at 126' height each surrounding the Taj Mahal are topped by octagonal *chhatris*. These tapering minarets have a slight tilt away from the main body of the tomb (around 1"-1½") to mitigate the effect of natural calamities like earthquakes on the tomb. Today, some of them have been further tilted out by around 8'.

It is with a heavy heart that I add that dilapidation has now been happening to this handsome creation. Cracks have emerged in most of the chambers underground. A huge refinery located nearby is liable for the yellowish effect that is encompassing the Taj Mahal today. A conscious effort should be made to save these monuments, which are of international importance.

The seamless Taj Mahal comes across deftly as a culmination of myriad architecture features introduced in Indian architecture at its various stages of evolution. It's said that the Taj seen on a moon lit night is an altogether unique experience. As I have gathered from some talks that I have attended on the Taj it also possesses different colours for different seasons. The words of famous photographer Raghu Rai still ring loud and clear in my ears "One shouldn't go to the Taj with pre-conceived notions, one needs to grab what nature is holding out for you. In short, make yourself available to the situation and the situation will whisper to you what to do".

The story goes that Shah Jahan wanted to build a Taj Mahal in black for himself. But his successor, son Aurangzeb, feared the expenditure on a new monument and hence he imprisoned Shah Jahan. Shah Jahan was imprisoned in the Agra fort from where he had a vantage point to see his Taj Mahal. Day in and day out, he kept on gazing at it for 7 years and 6 months till he died. Such was the ethereal love of the great emperor-love, which reflects in this beautiful creation he left for the world to see and admire till posterity.



One of the two similar structures contrasting the Taj- the mosque on the west



The mehmankhana in red sandstone on the east

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