

Mandu, off the record  
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If you visit Mandu, there are some monuments you can't help seeing. Those on the main road (the gates, Gada Shah's shop, the Jami Masjid, Ashrafi Mahal), and those that everybody will be talking about, tourists, tour guides, and tour books (Jahaz Mahal, Roopmati's Pavilion, Hindola Mahal, Baz Bahadur's Palace, Hoshang Shah's tomb).

And you will read the explanations of these monuments and get a fair understanding of the history of the region.

But there's more to Mandu than meets the eye. There are mysterious monuments tucked away in remote corners and magical myths and legends surrounding and embellishing the dry historical facts.

This is an account of some of those stories. (Needless to say, history books make no mention of these.)

According to legend, there once lived a blacksmith named Mandav Singh in the jungle now called Mandu. He once sold an axe to a woodcutter, who, when he rubbed it on a stone to sharpen it, found that it turned a bright yellow colour. Not realising that it had in fact, turned to gold, he returned to the blacksmith to complain. The surprised Mandava Singh promised him three axes in exchange for this one, if he would show him this amazing stone. And so, the stone which could turn metal to gold came into the possession of Mandava Singh.

He, naturally, soon grew very rich and powerful, and the villagers urged him to engage upon some grand endeavour to ensure that his name would be remembered for all time to come. And thus was Mandu born. (Wonder what happened to that wonderful stone?)

The present road to Mandu leads up a not-very-steep hillside and through four gates: Alamgir Darwaza, Bhangi Darwaza, Kamani Darwaza and Gadi Darwaza. These all lie outside the actual fort wall of Mandu. Our guide, Mangal Singh, informed us that Bhangi Gate was the first to be built, as it was always considered auspicious to start a new day or a new project with the sight of a Bhangi, or sweeper. Strange are the ways of the superstitious.

Bhangi Gate is now a broken down ruin. Only the side walls remain, the superstructure having disappeared. Kamani Gate is a simple structure with 2 high arches side by side.

According to MS, it should be Kabani Gate, as, from this point, in the times of war, the bodies of the enemies were flung into the deep gorge just off the road.

He said that the huge bones and skull of elephants, horses and humans have been discovered below in recent years.

Nearby, there is a path leading up the hill. It is paved with old cobblestones and covered with grasses, but easily negotiable on foot. It emerges at Delhi Darwaza, where it meets up with the modern motorable road. Delhi Darwaza, thus, is just off the motorable road, further uphill. It is a pretty structure with two successive archways. The attached quarters for sentry have been converted to a mosque our guide pointed out. By Akbar, as he passed through, he claims.

Just a bit downhill from Delhi Darwaza, very close to the last of the gates Gadi Darwaza, is a road going off to Chishti Khan's palace, not often found on the tourist map, but quite pleasant and giving an excellent (though distant) view of Mandu's other monuments.

There is only one main road in Mandu, which runs straight from the gates, through the village and on to Roopmati's Pavilion. Going up this road and taking the first right brings you to the Elephant Gate. (Since the signs in Mandu have evidently been painted by someone with only a rudimentary knowledge of the English language, this is also described as the Hathya Por – or more accurately as Hathi Pol – Gate.)

Here two large stone elephants guard the gateway. Unfortunately, each is missing its back and head, and only their bellies and legs remain. Going straight up this road brings you to the back entrance of the Royal Enclosure which houses Jahaz Mahal, Hindola Mahal and other such well known monuments.

Back to the main road and further up, Gada Shah's Shop – massive, and towering structure that it is – is not easy to miss. MS related an interesting (though unlikely) story about this man. Evidently his parents had had a run of sad luck with their earlier children, who all died at birth. So the Dai suggested that future children be named not with human names, but after animals. So it happened that the next two sons were named after donkeys and buffaloes, Gadha and Bhainsa. They grew and prospered, and Gada Shah's fame and fortunes came to virtually rival the King's. (History agrees with this.)

Their mother then went on a pilgrimage of the four dhams (holy places). The brothers gave her a gold box containing a hair each from their moustaches, saying, "If you run out of food or money, just offer this hair and say it is from us." So off she went, on a long

pilgrimage, and when she neared the end, the story goes, sure enough she did run short of provisions. She then duly presented the box containing the hairs to the king of the region, who mockingly replied, “Donkeys and buffaloes roam free in the forests. Why should I give you money for these tokens?”

Deeply offended, she left. And, after enduring much hardship and suffering, she completed her journey back to Mandu. There she told her sons all. To make sure than their names were never again unknown in the land, the brothers went to that kingdom and, being immensely wealthy, bought every last drop of oil and every morsel of grain and took it back to Mandu, where they stored it in two tanks.

There are, in fact, two tanks near Gada Shah’s shop: Andheri and Ujjala Baoli. These are quite interesting in their own right, but there is nothing to suggest they were used for oil or grain.

A short walk across the fields connects these baolis to Elephant Gate.

Sat Sau Siri, or the Seven Hundred Steps, is one of the more inaccessible of Mandu’s treasures. You need to take a left into Mandu village (as you progress up the main road from the Gates towards Baz Bahadur’s Palace). It is an untarred road and seems longer than it is. It ends at Lal Mahal (Ruby Palace) a large, broken building with a tank and what seems to be a mosque. From here, it is a trek through wild grass and no proper path, if you want to reach the Sat Sau Siri, which can be see from the very edge of the hill. Most of Mandu’s 42 km perimeter wall is visible from this vantage point and there is a steep drop to the valley below. A tiny red building is nestled in the shade at the bottom – a hunting cottage, our guide informs. The 700 steps evidently represented an attempt by some enemy army to climb down the facing hillside and climb straight up this one, atop which we stand. Their attempt was noticed and repelled before completion, MS says. There is a path going down, but we don’t quite fancy it: it is quite steep.

Throughout Mandu, there are a number of small domes, simple, plain, standing alone, sometimes at a height. These domes (gumbaz, or gumbad) acted as the ancient telegraph office for the army, declares MS). Sentinels posted here could shout or signal each other about enemy movements and other significant events. This seems to be one of the more realistic explanations our guide has offered about the history of Mandu.

Now he points to another small dome and embarks on a fairy tale. There once was a chamar who used to tan hides and make leather. He had a small tank, which he used for his work. Some travellers who were journeying north to bathe in the waters of the Ganga,

stopped there awhile to rest. When the chamar learnt of their destination, he gave them a paan to give to Ganga, as he was a sincere devotee.

The pilgrims continued their journey and reached the Ganga. There, remembering their promise, they offered the paan to the river, saying it was from the chamar in Mandu. As they did so, a hand appeared from the water, palm upturned, to accept the offering. The hand was adorned with a gold bracelet. Greed got the better of these men, so as they placed the paan in the hand of Ganga, they pocketed her gold bracelet.

On their return, they stopped at the chamar's house again. He at once thanked them for their favour and then reproached them for stealing the bracelet. They staunchly denied it. So telling them to wait, the chamar went and did a puja at his tank and made an offering. And lo! The same hand appeared to accept it, missing the gold bracelet. Shamefaced, the pilgrims meekly returned the bracelet and left.

The walls of Mandu were once broken by several gates, (Jahangirpur, Bhagawaniya) now mostly inaccessible or rarely visited. The first gate which originally allowed access to Mandu was Tarapur Gate. This stands now mostly forgotten, in a quiet corner of the hill. Local people do scramble up and down the hillside there, but tourists hardly ever find their way to it. There is no road now leading to it from outside Mandu, and from inside, only a very tenuous connection survives. The road goes down past Chorkot towards Neelkanth and forks to the left. It gives way to an untarred but motorable path which -- when the rain has been plentiful -- appears to stop at a lake (after a few years without rain, it is just a dry, sandy depression). Actually the road goes right up to this, then turns a corner and carries on. Around the last corner is the silent, almost austere, overgrown Tarapur gate, lonely in its old age.

Instead of the fork left, if you take the right fork the road leads towards Neelkanth. Passing this and persevering on another long stretch of untarred road brings you to Sonpur Gate. This is not one of Mandu's fort gates. It belongs to Songadh Qila, a fort of a later period. Few venture this far, and even fewer go farther. Inside, deep inside, is the shell of Songadh fort. There's literally nothing to see: only the boundary wall, several feet high and mostly whole. A hole allows access to its interiors, but there is only a mound of stones and shrubs. Come here if it is the thrill of the chase that excites you more than the pot of dust at the end of it.

There is a lake too, and some ancient temples are said to be hidden among the weeds. Our trusty guide offered to lead us to one of these, but it was perched at the top of a small hill

the thought of assaying which amongst this shrubbery was quite daunting. Time for the tough to get going, we decided, and left.

Compared to the rest of the fort here, the gate is in an excellent state of preservation. It is charming and romantic with the fort's exterior wall sloping steeply (but not very high) against the hill. Hardly surprising that there is a tale of the fleet footed escape of a horse and rider by jumping over the parapet, attached to it.

The path to Lohani Caves leads off from the road going to the formal entry of the Royal Enclosure. At a scenic spot called (unimaginatively) picnic spot, a path leads down to the caves. We didn't venture down it, but that didn't deter MS from narrating another long and fanciful story which finds no mention in the history books.

A ruler of Mandu once waged war upon Alauddin's father. Emerging victorious, he picked as his spoils of war, a flying horse, a magical baby elephant, a servant woman and a beautiful, valuable necklace.

Years later, Alauddin and his brother came to Mandu in the guise of sadhus. As they were only youths (11 years old, says MS) at the time, they were not perceived as a threat and were allowed in. They elected to sit near a tank and sing their devotional bhajans. Now this was the same tank where the women of the palace would come to fill water. And these two were so heavenly looking that the women used to stop for longer and longer to gaze at them and hear their songs. Eventually the King himself came to know about them and convinced of their skill at bhajans, invited them into the palace itself.

Time passed and one day the King, pleased at their performance, gifted these two young men the very same necklace he had stolen from their father. Now they could be sure that it was he who had attacked their father and their kingdom, so the two of them planned their sweet revenge.

A princess of the kingdom had fallen in love with Alauddin, meanwhile. She promised him that Mandu would be his, if he would then marry her. He agreed, and it was decided that he should arrive with his army at Lohani caves and fire a single Canon to signify his attack.

And so the war began. With the all-powerful elephant and flying horse fighting for them, Mandu's army seemed to have the upper hand. Then, in the thick of battle, Alauddin's mother, who had herself reared and fed the elephant, called to him and chastised him for fighting against his own people. He recognised her voice, reconsidered his options, and

he and the flying horse quickly switched sides. After considerable battle, the victory was ultimately with Alauddin.

And what does that gentleman do towards fulfilling his promise to the lovely princess? He marries her, true to his word, and then, immediately kills her. She was of the enemy, explains MS prosaically.

True or not (and one usually tends to think not) these legends do add a certain flavour to the place, the ruins, the already existing air of romance and mystery. And, in the fading light of dusk, with nature gradually reclaiming the old stones and tenderly covering them in a blanket of greenery, you need only a little imagination to revive the glory of how it once must have been.

MS tells us of even more remote ruins: of boodi Mandu, a village which predates the modern settlement, with its own set of ruins. Of gates now too far or too ruined to visit. Of underground passages from Champa baoli to as far as Ujjain, and to Songadh Qila and Lohani Caves. (Did Alauddin, with the princess' help, traverse this passage to arrive in the very heart of the Royal Enclosure? It almost seems possible, as you stand peering into the cool depths of Champa baoli, trying to unearth her secrets.)

There's more to Mandu than one can discover in a single visit. Perhaps there's more here than is worth discovering as a tourist, just passing through? But that's something you can never know, until after you discover it.