India's Lesser Known UNESCO World Heritage Sites

The striking thing about a country as vast as India is the sheer, overwhelming variety that it encompasses—of landscapes, cultures, languages, cuisines, and even UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Yet of its 35 cultural and natural heritage sites, travellers frequent only about a dozen. They miss some of India’s most outstanding wonders either because they are tucked in a little known, far-flung corner, or because they’re hiding in plain sight, in the shadow of an oft-visited attraction.

Up for a surprise? Here are seven of India’s little-known UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

**KHANGCHENDZONGA NATIONAL PARK: HIDDEN LAND**

This forest in Sikkim, one of India’s north-eastern states, has been included on the UNESCO World Heritage list as a place of mixed natural and cultural importance. The two are intrinsically tied: The Rathong Chu River, which runs through Khangchendzonga National Park, and its surrounding valley are held sacred by the local Lepcha people and in Tibetan Buddhism, ensuring the forest survives intact.

The park has tremendous geographical diversity. The landscape varies from slopes covered with thick rhododendron forests to rocky mountains with 18 glaciers. There are 19 peaks towering more than 5,971 metres, crowned by the Khangchendzonga, the world’s third highest at 8,585 metres.

The forest provides refuge to the rare red panda, while its higher mountainous reaches are the haunt of the elusive snow leopard. It’s also popular with birders, with over 500 species found here.

Don’t Miss: The area can only be explored on foot, and one of the more popular ways to do this is the ten-day Yuksom to Goecha La trek. With the aid of a non-profit NGO, the residents of Yuksom run homestays, work as guides and porters for standardised rates and ensure the trails are always clean.

**AGRA FORT: MIGHTY BASTION**
Fortress of shining sandstone

PHOTOGRAPH BY JMMF, GETTY IMAGES
If the jostling crowds at the Taj Mahal seem overwhelming, make a trip to Agra Fort, only a 15-minute rickshaw ride away. Older than the Taj, it was the home of Mughal emperors for over a century, until they shifted their capital to Delhi in the mid-1600s.

Built of striking red sandstone, the military stronghold was designed by Akbar, one of the most powerful rulers of the Mughal Empire. Six metre high ramparts wrap around the complex, running over 2.4 kilometres. Akbar’s grandson Shah Jahan added palaces, mosques, and other white marble structures to the complex, giving it a softer touch.

Agra Fort affords one of the best views of the Taj Mahal. Shah Jahan often looked out of its windows at the marble mausoleum built in memory of his beloved Begum. In particular, check out the view from Musamman Burj, the tower where Shah Jahan was imprisoned by his son Aurangzeb for eight years until his death.

**Don’t Miss:** The throne room of the Diwan-i-Khas, where the famous Peacock Throne embedded with the Kohinoor diamond was kept. The stone is now part of the British crown jewels.

**CONVENTS AND CHURCHES OF GOA: PORTUGUESE TOUCH**
Goa’s **convents and churches** have been on UNESCO’s list for over 30 years. Yet the thousands of visitors who come to its sunny beaches each year rarely travel inland to explore the southern state’s cultural side.

Rent a scooter and ride into the balmy air for a tour of the highlights. The most famous is the **Basilica of Bom Jesus**, which houses the remains of St. Francis Xavier, known as the “Apostle of the Indies.” Though partially in ruin, the church is a great example of Baroque architecture in India.

Goa’s oldest surviving church is the Church of Our Lady of Rosary, built soon after Portuguese general Alfonso de Albuquerque conquered Goa in 1510. It’s decorated with naval motifs like anchors and sea shells to reflect the Portuguese mastery of the seas.

Dedicated to St. Catherine of Alexander, **Se Cathedral** is one of the largest in Asia. The 16th-century structure had two towers of which only one still stands today. This contains the gigantic Golden Bell, named so for its dulcet tones.

Don’t Miss: Church feasts in Goa are incomplete without the Tiatr, a performance tradition more than a century old. It is a musical drama accompanied by a brass brand. The comic story lines ensure the little guy comes out on top.

**WESTERN GHATS: FOREST WONDERLAND**
Ozarde waterfalls in the Western Ghats
PHOTOGRAPH BY BERT WILLAERT, NATURE PICTURE LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES

At least 325 plant and animal species that are globally threatened flourish in the Western Ghats of India. That’s the best indicator of the rich biodiversity of this range of mountains, much older than the better known Himalayas.

New species continue to be found here with regularity. A recent find, a tiny spider (Eriovixia gryffindori), became quite popular because of its resemblance to the Sorting Hat from the Harry Potter tales.

The length of the range—it stretches 1,609 kilometres through six states—means it incorporates quite a variety of sights. In late summer, Maharashtra’s Kaas Plateau becomes a carpet of 1,500 varieties of flowers. Giant herds of Asian elephants roam the thick forests of the range’s southern half. And the lion-tailed macaque, one of the world’s rarest primates, lives in the treetops in Kerala. Not surprisingly, UNESCO lists the Western Ghats among its eight biodiversity hotspots in the world, right up there with Madagascar and Brazil’s Atlantic Forest.

Don’t Miss: In April to June, when it is mating season for the fireflies, the hills come alive with the twinkling lights of the bioluminescent insects.

RANI-KI-VAV: STORIES IN STONE
Mesmerising sculptures of Rani-ki-Vav

PHOTOGRAPH BY HEMIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Like the Taj Mahal, which immortalises a man’s love for his wife, the Rani-ki-Vav stepwell in Patan, Gujarat, is a queen’s homage to her husband. But for many, long years, its beautiful stepped terraces were swallowed up by the silt of the nearby River Saraswati.

It was only sometime in the 1980s that the Archaeological Survey of India completed its excavation, uncovering an outstanding example of stepwell architecture. More than 500 major statues of Hindu gods and goddesses, and over a thousands little ones, cover the walls and pillars of seven terraces that descend to a central water tank.

Commissioned in the 11th century, the stepwell wasn’t just a place to collect water, but also an important social and spiritual spot. In fact, it is rather like an inverted temple; one dedicated to the sanctity of water.

Don’t Miss: While in Patan, a 3.5 hour drive from Ahmedabad, visit the weavers of Patola saris who take up to six months to make a single piece. Some of the patterns they use are inspired by sculptures at Rani ki Vav.

BHIMBETKA: ANCIENT ART GALLERIES
Sheltered by rock near Bhopal, India
PHOTOGRAPH BY DINODIA PHOTOS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO
Bhimbetka boasts cave paintings up to 30,000 years old.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SUBHENDU SARKAR, GETTY IMAGES

Drawn in dull red, stick figures holding spears and carrying bows and arrows chase a herd of horned creatures. On Zoo Rock, there is a traffic jam of sorts, with dozens of deer, buffaloes, elephants and others, scrawled on the stone facade. These are the Rock Shelters of Bhimbetka, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in central India that few visit.

The massive natural caves are located in the sandstone cliffs at the foothill of the Vindhya Range, a 1.5 hour drive from Bhopal. There are about 500 spread over seven hills. Some have only one or two paintings, while the walls of others are completely covered. The artwork sprawls the centuries, with the oldest from the Mesolithic Period.

A one and a half kilometre path guides visitors through 15 of the best caves. The trail winds through the surrounding forest, with black-faced langurs frequently providing company.

Don't Miss: The painting of a gigantic red, horned animal chasing a miniature stick man. This is the only artwork here that shows a human being hunted, hinting to ancient man’s complicated relationship with the wild.

CHANDIGARH CAPITOL COMPLEX: CONCRETE ART
The broad, tree-lined avenues of Chandigarh—about a 5-hour drive north of New Delhi—are a sharp contrast to the chaos of other Indian cities. The city is part of a 2016 addition to UNESCO’s list that spans 17 sites across seven countries. It celebrates the work of Swiss-French architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris, better known as Le Corbusier. He is credited with inventing “a new architectural language that made a break with the past.”

Le Corbusier designed Chandigarh’s Capitol Complex, setting in place an aesthetic that informs the entire city. The complex comprises three important government buildings—the Secretariat, High Court, and Legislative Assembly—built against the backdrop of the Shivalik Hills, and separated by large piazzas. There’s also the Open Hand monument, a giant metal hand symbolising openness and peace. Architecture buffs can sign up for a guided tour of the complex at the visitor centre next to it.

**Don’t Miss:** While in Chandigarh, drop in at the Rock Garden, started in secret by a government official during his spare time. A twisting walled path winds past manmade waterfalls and sculptures made from scrap and waste.

**Header Image:** Trekking through Khangchendzonga National Park PHOTOGRAPH BY AMITABHA GUPTA, GETTY IMAGES