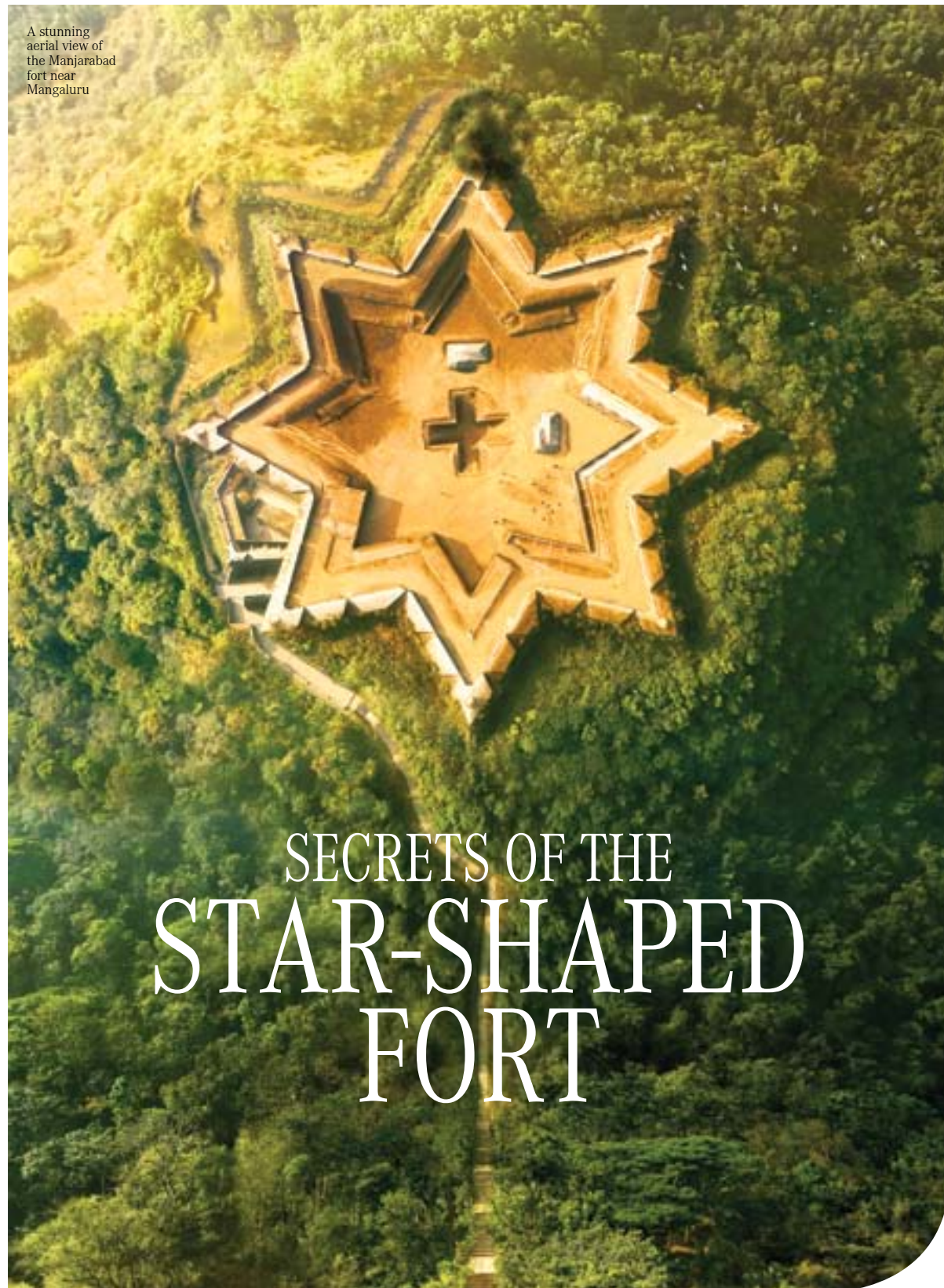


A stunning aerial view of the Manjarabad fort near Mangaluru



SECRETS OF THE STAR-SHAPED FORT



The star-shaped engraving on the ceiling of the main gate of the fort

Almost forgotten, the spectacular Manjarabad Fort in Karnataka, is a design marvel even today, says Ami Bhat

“It was a fine clear day as the commander peered through the spyglass. Spanning the wild waves of the Arabian Sea, he rested his gaze on what seemed to be a small boat filled with men in uniform. He scrawled his observation onto a parchment and quickly dispatched it to the Tiger of Mysore via a horseman. He would know what to do.”

Standing along the same wall, centuries later, I gazed in the same direction imagining the scene above, about which I had read in an old history book. There are several local legends surrounding the impregnable fort that looked like a star and was one of the most important defence tactics of Tipu Sultan, the erstwhile ruler of Mysore (now Mysuru). It was true that the fort I stood in had no visible hand in a battle. However, its design and construction made it evident that the Manjarabad fort must have been an excellent look-out post. At one end were the green plains of the Western Ghats while from where I stood, you could spot the Arabian Sea between the hilly peaks. It wasn't just the location but also, its unusual shape that made this blockhouse unique.

The birth of the fort

Historians date the star-shaped fort to the

year 1792. Commissioned by Tipu Sultan, the Manjarabad fort was designed by a French military architect – Sebastian Le Prestre de Vauban. The fort arose at the time when the Nizams and Marathas had joined forces with the British East India Company against Tipu Sultan – who in turn, allied himself with the French. With a fierce opposition came an innate need to protect all fronts. Thus was the need to build a lookout post between his capital Srirangapatnam and the port – Mangalore (now Mangaluru).

Fortified design

It took around 252 steps for me to get to 3,240 ft above sea level. There seemed to be no other way to go up. Scaling the wall was an impossible feat – not just owing to its height but also, its shape. The walls of the fort are not straight but slope upwards to its pointed ridges. Surrounding these tall granite and limestone walls was a moat, which possibly was filled with dangerous creatures to thwart the creeping enemy.

The eight-point star-shaped design greeted me as I reached the top. Unless you have a drone or are on a hot air balloon, the only way you can capture the star-shaped construction



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1. A tunnel
inside the Man-
jarabad fort

2. The arched
gateway lead-
ing to the fort
premises



Commissioned by Tipu Sultan, the Manjarabad fort was designed by a French military architect – Sebastian Le Prestre de Vauban

In & Around

>> GETTING THERE

The Manjarabad fort lies 45 km from Hassan and 150 km from Mangaluru airport. The road is the best way to get here.

>> WHAT TO EXPERIENCE

There are no entrance fees. You can, however, find a few restaurants at the base of the fort.

>> WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit the Manjarabad fort would be in monsoons and winter.

is on an etched ceiling at its main gate. I admired the ingenuity of the French architect who had blended his creation with the Islamic filigree designs on the domed gateway. A short zigzag path had me emerge onto the main fort area.

Curious cellars and secret passages

Army barracks and store rooms lined the narrow passages along the star-shaped walls. The fort walls towered over them – broken at regular intervals with musket gaps and cannon holds. A deep well formed the epicenter of the fort. Subterranean armories surrounded this well. They might have been the perfect place to store or even hide gunpowder during its heyday but for me, they were a respite from the blistering heat outside.

Somewhere in this layout, were rumors of an underground passage – all the way to Tipu's capital. Legend has it that Tipu Sultan used it to arrive at the fort. The first time he got here, the fort was shrouded by fog. This led to its name; *manjar* refers to fog in Kannada.

The crumbling walls of the fort seemed to be whispering its many secrets... Where none could breach it, many seem to have forgotten it. There were lots still buried in the sands of time. Walking along the edges, I failed to discern the murmurs of these walls. Maybe, I will return at a different time to try my luck again!

The author is an avid traveller and blogger and the views expressed in this article are her own



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