

Echoes Of An EMPIRE

Temples, rivers and ruins reveal the enduring grandeur of the Vijayanagara empire at Hampi, Karnataka.

By Ami Bhat

The stone wheels of a grand chariot crunch across the carriageway leading to the Vitthala Temple. Majestic and bejewelled elephants lead the chariot of Garuda, the celestial mount of Lord Vishnu, as a gentle melody from the musical pillars of the Ranga Mandapa welcomes the dawn procession. That is what the past may have looked like.

Today, standing within the Vitthala Temple complex, it's only too easy to imagine the spectacle that must once have unfolded here. In the 15th century, it stood as a celebrated landmark, and even today, it remains a masterpiece

and an enduring symbol of the mighty Vijayanagara Empire.

The temple is just one of the many awe-inspiring monuments of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Hampi, the capital of the erstwhile Vijayanagara Empire. Spread across

nearly 42 sq km, this ancient city is dotted with exquisite temples and clearly demarcated royal, military and public spaces.

A Glorious Capital

Between the 14th and 16th centuries, Hampi was a picture of wealth and prosperity. Portuguese and Persian travellers have chronicled it as one of the world's most magnificent cities, with rich bazaars and stunning temple architecture. It fell from its zenith after the Battle of Talikota (1565 AD), followed by months of plundering, with the capital city left in ruins.

Exploring the ruins of the city is a fascinating experience. Boulders give way to gateways and courtyards with magnificent structures. And the two distinct parts of the city, the sacred and the royal, become evident. Dominating the religious section is one of the oldest living temples of India. Dating back to the 7th century, the Virupaksha Temple stands tall with its nine-storeyed *gopuram*. A riverside trail that begins here weaves through the remnants of an ancient bazaar, noblemen's homes, and culminates at the Vitthala Temple.

Another path from the Virupaksha Temple leads past Hampi's natural

and structured defensive walls to the Royal Enclosure, where a gargantuan Ugra Narasimha statue stands, dominating the landscape. It is the city's sophisticated water management system that astounds as well. The intricate network of aqueducts, channels and canals around the Queen's Bath and the stepped tank near the Mahanavami Dibba reveals a hydraulic mastery far ahead of its time.

Carvings and Shrines

Just beyond the Royal Enclosures, the Pattabhirama Temple stands in serene grandeur with its intricately carved pillars. Along the banks of river Tungabhadra, the ruins reveal clusters of Shiva lingas etched onto flat rocks.

Across the river is another mythological connection of Hampi. Believed to be Kishkindha, the Vanara kingdom from the Ramayana, the boulder hills hides the caves where it is said Lord Rama and Lakshmana met Sugriva. Additionally, here is the Anjanadri Temple that might have been the birthplace of Lord Hanumana. There's also the Pampa Sarovar named after Goddess Parvati, also known as Pampa, from whom Hampi itself takes its name.

LINGER AROUND

Hampi does not reveal itself in a day or two. The longer one lingers, the more the lost empire seems to whisper through overlooked friezes and hidden bas-reliefs. Days unfold between the Vitthala Temple, the royal enclosure and the riverside ruins, before ending atop Hemakuta Hill.



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