

Agra



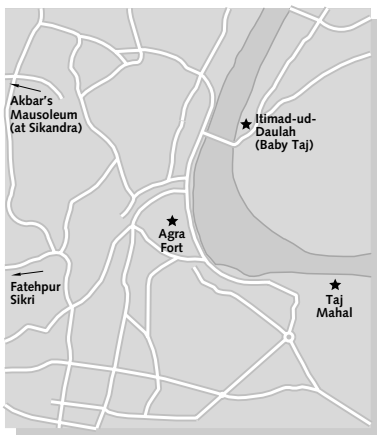
Agra is home to one of the most famous monuments not only in India, but in the world: the semitranslucent, dreamlike Taj Mahal, a building that seems to glow with an ethereal light. The city was the Mughal capital from 1526, established by Emperor Babur on the banks of the Yamuna River, and for the next century Agra witnessed a remarkable spate of architectural activity as each emperor tried to outdo the grandiose monuments built by his predecessors – leaving behind a remarkable collection of Mughal masterpieces.

Today the city is sprawling, industrial and, for many travellers, just a bit too much hard work; the clamour and hustle a strident contrast to the otherworldly grace of the Taj Mahal. The hordes of rickshaw-wallahs, touts and souvenir-vendors are as persistent as monsoon rain and would test even the patience of Akbar, the most tolerant of Mughal emperors.

If you're on limited time, it's easy to visit the Taj on a whistle-stop day trip from Delhi, though Agra contains many other worthwhile Mughal wonders. Just an hour away by bus is the deserted city of Fatehpur Sikri, a destination highly recommended for its evocative sense of the Mughal empire at its peak.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gaze in wonder at the **Taj Mahal** (p133), a quintessentially Indian jewel
- Explore the nooks and crannies of the awesome riverside **Agra Fort** (p135)
- Wander the eerie red-sandstone palaces of the lost city of **Fatehpur Sikri** (p142)
- Stroll the deer park at **Akbar's Mausoleum** (p136), final resting place of the greatest Mughal emperor, at Sikandra
- Admire the **Itimad-ud-Daulah** (p136), or Baby Taj, constructed of white marble and semiprecious stones



■ AREA: 82 SQ KM

■ POPULATION: 1,321,410

■ TELEPHONE CODE: 0562

FESTIVALS IN AGRA & FATEHPUR SIKRI

Taj Mahotsav (18-27 Feb; Agra) Held in Shilpgram, a crafts village and open-air emporium, this festival features live music and dance, food-tasting and a Mughal procession with elephants and camels.

Kailash Fair (Aug-Sep; Kailash) Convened at Kailash, a 14km drive from Agra, the fair commemorates the appearance of Lord Shiva, in the form of a stone lingam, at its temple.

The Taj Mahal Marathon (Sep; Agra; www.thetajmahalmarathon.com) The new Taj Mahal marathon, running from the village of Niyamat Pur to the Taj Mahal, is set to become an annual event.

Eid al-Fitr (Dec/Jan; Fatehpur Sikri) Join the happy crowds in the bazaar and mosque at Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra, for end-of-Ramadan celebrations.

HISTORY

In 1504 Sultan Sikander Lodi established his capital here, but the city fell into Mughal hands in 1526, reaching its pinnacle of architectural innovation between the mid-16th and 17th centuries during the successive reigns of Akbar, Jehangir and Shah Jahan. In 1638 Shah Jahan built a new city in Delhi (now known as Old Delhi; see p96); his son Aurangzeb moved the capital there 10 years later, marking the end of Agra's munificence as imperial seat.

In 1761 Agra fell to the Jats, who looted its monuments, including the Taj Mahal. The Marathas took over in 1770, but were replaced by the British in 1803. Following the Indian Uprising of 1857, the British shifted administration of the province to Allahabad. Deprived of its administrative role, Agra developed as a centre for the chemicals industry and, consequently, atmospheric pollution – an environmental problem it still struggles to shake off – before tourism became a major source of income.

ORIENTATION

Agra sits on the Ganges plain on the western bank of the Yamuna River and has no real centre, its attractions being spread out in between a number of bazaar districts over an area more than 20 sq km.

Most of the city's Mughal masterpieces hug the banks of the Yamuna: Agra's massive fort and the city's main marketplace, Kinari Bazaar, are both in the northern half of the city, close to the riverbank. The Taj Mahal, meanwhile, is about 1.5km southeast of the fort, also beside the river.

The congested, confusing network of alleys immediately to the south of the Taj Mahal is known as Taj Ganj. Here you'll find the bulk of Agra's budget hotels, while most midrange and top-end hotels are located further south on

Fatehabad Rd. West from Taj Ganj, on the opposite side of the leafy, British-built Cantonment district, is Sadar Bazaar, a smarter, more relaxed and serene alternative to Taj Ganj.

Most trains arrive and depart from the Agra Cantonment station in the southwest of the city, while long-haul buses arrive and depart the Idgah bus stand directly to the station's north. A few other trains also leave from the Agra Fort train station in the north of the city, just east of the Kinari Bazaar.

INFORMATION

A decent online guide to the city can be found at www.agra-india.net; there's also the state tourism website at www.up-tourism.com.

Bookshops

Aanee Bookshop (Map p137; Taj South Gate) Sells secondhand books at reasonable prices.

Emergency

Tourist police (Map p132; ☎ 2421204; UP Tourism office, Agra Cantonment train station; ☎ 24hr) The guys in sky-blue uniforms are based at the tourism office.

Internet Access

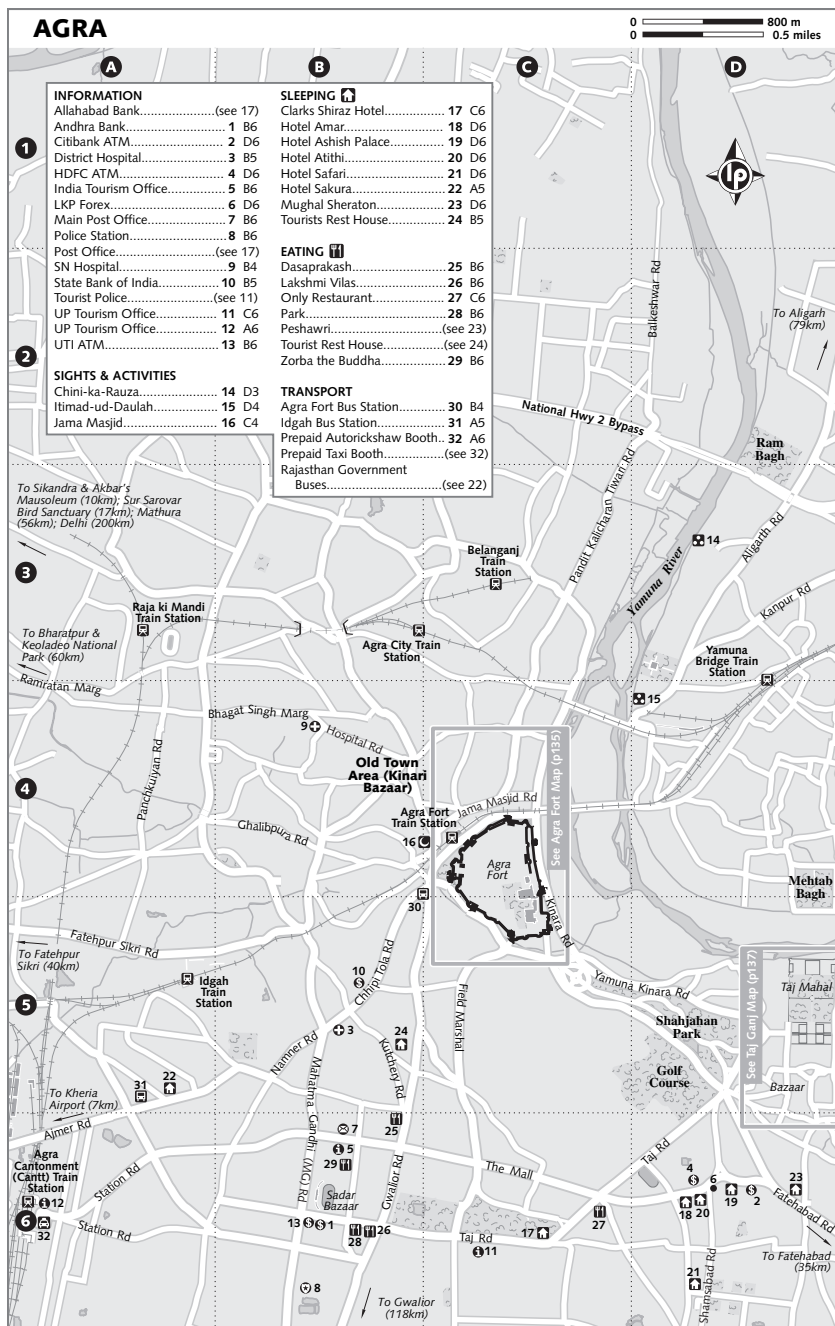
There's internet access available all over Taj Ganj, usually costing around Rs 30 to Rs 40 per hour. One reliable option in Taj Ganj is **iWay Internet** (Map p137; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 8am-11pm).

Left Luggage

Agra Cantonment train station (Map p132; ☎ 24hr)
Yash Café (Map p137; Taj South Gate) A stone's throw from the Taj Mahal; this place charges Rs 50 for a whole day's luggage storage, with access to its showers thrown in.

Medical Services

District Hospital (Map p132; ☎ 2361099; Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Rd; ☎ 24hr)
SN Hospital (Map p132; ☎ 2361314; Hospital Rd; ☎ 24hr)



Money

Allahabad Bank (Map p132; Clarks Shiraz Hotel;

☎ noon-4pm Mon-Fri, noon-2pm Sat)

Andhra Bank (Map p132; Sadar Bazaar; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat)

Citibank ATM (Map p132; Fatehabad Rd)

HDFC ATM (Map p132; Fatehabad Rd)

LKP Forex (Map p132; Fatehabad Rd; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Part of a reliable India-wide chain; exchanges currency and travellers cheques.

State Bank of India (Map p132; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Just off Chhipi Tola Rd.

UTI ATM Sadar Bazaar (Map p132); Taj East Gate (Map p137)

Photography

Rahley Lal Colour Lab (Map p137; Taj South Gate) Can handle all your print and digital requirements.

Post

Main post office (Map p132; ☎ 2363886; the Mall; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat)

Post office (Map p132; Clarks Shiraz Hotel; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat)

Tourist Information

India Tourism office (Map p132; ☎ 2226378; www.incredibleindia.org; 191 the Mall; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & government holidays) Offers brochures, advice on hotels, and will fix you up with an official guide (up to 4 people half/full day Rs 350/650).

UP Tourism office (www.up-tourism.com) Agra Cantonment train station (Map p132; ☎ 2421204; ☎ 24hr); Taj Rd (Map p132; ☎ 2226431; 64 Taj Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Many hotels, tourist shops and moneychangers pay hefty commissions to taxi drivers and rickshaw-wallahs who bring in customers; suspiciously cheap – or even free – rickshaw rides will often lead to a gem or souvenir shop.

Scams

Don't fall for the 'gem import scam', which has been conning tourists for decades. Travellers are invited to earn a quick buck by helping a shop avoid import duty. All they have to do is carry gems back to their home country, where a company representative will hand them a tidy profit. The travellers are asked to make a small credit-card payment 'as a sign of good faith'. Without exception, the gems are worthless, the representative never materialises and travellers are lumped with a huge credit-card bill.

Credit-card fraud is another scam operating widely in Agra. If at all possible, pay cash for everything and if you do decide to use your card, don't let it out of your sight. It's worthwhile checking your account regularly for errant transactions.

Several years ago, a few Taj Ganj restaurants allegedly went to the extent of deliberately poisoning travellers and rushing them off to crooked doctors who then billed insurance companies thousands of dollars. Lonely Planet has received several word-of-mouth traveller reports suggesting this has resurfaced: it's worth keeping an ear out for further news on this nasty practice.

Finally, in September 2007, two female Japanese tourists were allegedly raped in their hotel in Agra. Though this appears to have been a highly disturbing isolated incident, female travellers should remember the Staying Safe tips included on p372.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The vast majority of Agra's sights are based around the heady, extravagant and highly cultured world of the Mughals, who left their legacy dotted about the city.

Taj Mahal

ENTRY & INFORMATION

Described as the most extravagant monument ever built for love, this sublime Mughal mausoleum (Map p137; ☎ 2330498; Indian/foreigner Rs 20/750, children under 15 free, video Rs 25; ☎ 6am-7pm, south gate from 8am, closed Fri) is India's greatest tourist emblem. Many have tried to sum up its beauty – 'a teardrop on the face of eternity' according to Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, 'the embodiment of all things pure' according to Indian-born British writer Rudyard Kipling.

Usually quiet and exceptionally magical at sunrise, it doesn't get invaded by tour groups until mid-morning. It's also great to visit around sunset, though you might find its iridescent sparkle subdued by lengthening shadows. Bear in mind that though the entrance price is pretty steep, it does entitle you to a modest saving at Agra's other points of interest. You'll get Rs 50 off entry to Agra Fort, and Rs 10 off entry to Akbar's tomb, Fatehpur Sikri and Itimad-ud-Daulah, provided you visit on the same day.

If you're in town on the night of the full moon plus two nights on either side, there are moonlight viewings of the Taj for the same

price as a regular entry ticket. Batches of 50 visitors are allowed in at a time, with strict security measures, between 8pm and midnight. Tickets should be purchased a day in advance from one of the Taj's three ticket offices.

In attempts to preserve the monument for as long as possible, there's a long list of prohibited items (including food, drinks, drawing materials, tobacco, matches, mobile phones and camera tripods) all of which can be left without charge at the east and west gates. Cameras and camcorders are permitted, but you can't take photographs inside the mausoleum (there are instant fines in place). The top shot is of the gem-encrusted building reflected in the watercourse that runs through the gardens. Another popular choice is the 'Princess Diana' photo, with visitors seated on the famous bench where she was pictured alone in 1992. Note that the chances of obtaining a similarly solitary shot are pretty much impossible these days, though you can queue for a try.

TOURING THE TAJ

The Taj was built by Emperor Shah Jahan as a memorial for his second wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who died giving birth to their fourteenth child in 1631, aged 39. The death left the besotted emperor so heartbroken that his hair is said to have turned grey overnight. Construction began the same year and was not completed until 1653, with specialists brought in from as far afield as Europe to produce the exquisite marble screens and *pietra dura* (marble inlay work). The construction bill is believed to have run to Rs 3 million, equivalent to about US\$70 million today.

Legends abound about its construction. Some say that Shah Jahan rather uncharitably cut off the chief mason's hand once the Taj

was finished, to prevent him from making another one; others, that the emperor wanted his own black-marble mausoleum on the opposite bank of the river. As he was imprisoned by his own son for his final years, however, this was never to be.

The Taj can be accessed through the west, south and east gates which all lead to an outer courtyard known as the **Chowk-i-Jilo Khana**. From here, entry to the inner compound is through a 30m red-sandstone **gateway** on the south side of the forecourt, inscribed with verses from the Quran. The **ornamental gardens** are set out along classical Mughal *charbagh* (formal Persian garden) lines – a square quartered by watercourses, with an ornamental marble tank, representing the Quran's celestial pool of abundance, at the centre. To the west is a small **museum** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu) housing original architectural drawings of the Taj, miniature paintings, and, most compellingly, some celadon-glazed plates, said to split into pieces or change colour if the food served on them contains poison.

The Taj Mahal **mausoleum** itself stands on a raised marble platform at the northern end of the ornamental gardens. Decorative slender white **minarets** grace each corner of the platform, which may have been designed to lean slightly outwards so that in the event of an earthquake, they would fall away from the Taj. The domed red-sandstone **mosque** to the west of the main structure is an important gathering place for Agra's Muslims. The identical building to the east, the **jawab**, was built for symmetry and probably used as travellers' accommodation.

The mausoleum is made of semitranslucent white marble, carved with flowers and inlaid with thousands of semiprecious stones. The whole structure is capped by four small domes

SERENITY NOW

Alongside security fears at the Taj, which suspended moonlight visits for two decades, there's another, more pressing danger to Agra's monuments. Air pollution, caused by a combination of heavy industry and traffic fumes is as sure a corroder over time as a vat of acid, and fears for the Taj's delicate marble work have been mounting.

To try to combat this, there is nowadays a 500m 'exclusion zone' around parts of the Taj Mahal, which prevents motorised vehicles from getting any closer. Though, in practice, there's still plenty of traffic around its south and west gates, the east gate is extremely peaceful. This may not really help save the Taj, but it does mean that if you're staying on its eastern side, roughly between the Amarvilas and Hotel Sheela, you'll likely be spared the traffic noise and fumes right outside your window.

surrounding the bulbous central dome, topped by a 17m brass spire. Entrance is through the south side, inside which is the **Centotaph of Mumtaz Mahal**, an elaborate false tomb surrounded by an exquisite perforated marble screen. Beside it is the **Centotaph of Shah Jahan**, who was interred here with little ceremony by his usurping son Aurangzeb in 1666. The real **tombs** of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan are directly below, in a locked basement room which cannot be viewed.

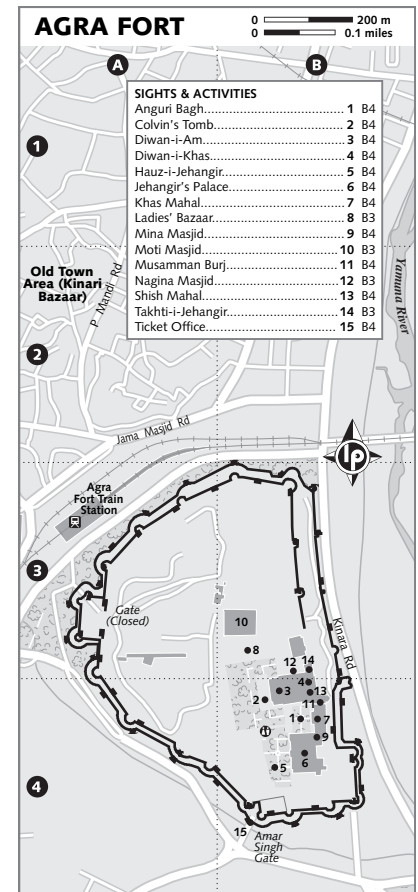
Agra Fort

Construction of this massive, majestic red-sandstone **fort and palace** (Map p135; ☎ 2364512; admission Indian/foreigner Rs 20/300, video Rs 25; ☎ sunrise-sunset) was begun by Emperor Akbar in 1565, with later additions made by Akbar's grandson Shah Jahan, who quite predictably (considering his efforts on the Taj Mahal) incorporated buildings using white marble. The fort, which stands on earlier Rajput fortifications, was built primarily as a military structure, but Shah Jahan upgraded it to a palace, and it became his gilded prison for his final eight years after his son Aurangzeb seized power in 1658. It was Aurangzeb, the last of the great Mughal emperors, who added the fort's ramparts.

The half-moon-shaped fort's colossal sandstone double outer walls rise over 20m in height and measure 2.5km in circumference, broken by a series of huge gates. Inside is a maze of buildings, forming a city within a city, of which only select parts are open to the public. Many of the fort's structures were, over the years, destroyed by Nadir Shah, the Marathas, the Jats and finally the British who used the fort as a garrison.

Nowadays, the **Amar Singh Gate** to the south is the sole entry point to the fort, its confusing design, comprising three separate gates, intended to flummox attackers. From here, a ramp leads to a second gate and a courtyard surrounding the beautiful **Diwan-i-Am** (Hall of Public Audience). This pillared hall was used by Shah Jahan for domestic government business, and features an ornate throne alcove where the emperor listened to petitioners, seated on the famous jewel-encrusted Peacock Throne. The throne itself was looted in 1739 and taken to Persia, where it was later destroyed.

In front of the Diwan-i-Am is the small and rather incongruous Gothic-style **tomb of John**



Colvin, a lieutenant-governor of the northwest provinces who died of an illness in the fort during the 1857 Uprising. To the north of the Diwan-i-Am courtyard, the **Moti Masjid** (Pearl Mosque) is usually closed to visitors, but don't miss the tiny but exquisite **Nagina Masjid** (Gem Mosque) on the upper level of the fort, built in 1635 by Shah Jahan for the ladies of his harem and made entirely of marble. Down below was the **Ladies' bazaar** where the court ladies were brought fine goods, which they could inspect in modesty from up above, standing on the small latticed balcony at the rear of the mosque.

Further up on the terrace, overlooking the river and the distant Taj Mahal, is **Takhti-i-Jehangir**, a huge slab of black rock with an

inscription around its edge. This throne was made for the Emperor Jehangir when he was still just plain Prince Salim, apparently in defiance of his father Akbar. It was from here that he sat and watched elephant fights in the enclosure below, and dreamed of future glory. Facing the river, you'll see the **Diwan-i-Khas** (Hall of Private Audience) to your right, an incredibly ornately decorated reception area reserved by the emperor for important dignitaries or foreign representatives. Further on through the fort, the **Shish Mahal** (Mirror Palace) was another structure built for the ladies of the court, its walls inlaid with tiny mosaic-work mirrors. This is sadly not currently open to the public, so you'll have to crane your neck to catch a glimpse through the window.

Up ahead, you'll reach **Musamman Burj and Khas Mahal**, the wonderful white-marble octagonal tower and palace where Shah Jahan was imprisoned by his own son and from which he could gaze wistfully out at the Taj Mahal, the tomb of his beloved wife. The **Mina Masjid** was his own private mosque.

To the east of Shah Jahan's mosque, in the courtyard of the large harem quarters is **Anguri Bagh** (Grape Garden), a *charbagh* garden that has been brought back to life and now looks somewhat as it might have done in Shah Jahan's time.

South from here, the huge red-sandstone **Jehangir's palace** was possibly built by Akbar for his son Jehangir or otherwise for Akbar's own harem; the palace blends Hindu and Central Asian architectural styles, a reminder of the Mughals' Afghan cultural roots. In front of the palace is **Hauz-i-Jehangir**, a huge bowl carved out of a single block of stone, probably used for the emperor's bathing, when it would have been filled to the brim with rose-water. It's said, though hard to believe, that the emperor liked to lug this thing around with him on his travels, beating a bar of soap and a travel towel hands-down.

Akbar's Mausoleum

This outstanding sandstone and marble **tomb** (Off Map p132; ☎ 2641230; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/110, video Rs 25; ☀ sunrise-sunset) commemorates Akbar, the greatest of the Mughal emperors, who had it built himself, and was responsible for its curious mixture of styles. The huge courtyard is entered through its stunning **Buland Darwaza** (Great Gate). It has three-storey minarets

at each corner and is built of red sandstone strikingly inlaid with white-marble geometric patterns. The tomb itself lies in the centre of a peaceful garden, where deer still graze much as they did in Mughal times.

The mausoleum is located at Sikandra, 10km northwest of Agra Fort. Getting there is tricky but buses (Rs 10, 30 minutes) heading to Mathura from Agra Fort bus station go past the mausoleum. Alternatively, an autorickshaw should cost Rs 120 for a return journey including waiting time, (bear in mind it can be a long journey) while a taxi will charge double.

Itimad-ud-Daulah

Nicknamed the **Baby Taj** (Map p132; ☎ 2080030; Indian/foreigner Rs 15/110, video Rs 25; ☀ sunrise-sunset), this is the exquisite tomb of Mizra Ghiyas Beg, a Persian nobleman and Jehangir's *wazir* (chief minister). His daughter Nur Jahan, who married Jehangir, built the tomb between 1622 and 1628, in a style similar to the tomb she built for Jehangir himself, now near Lahore in Pakistan. Asmat Begum, Mizra Ghiyas Beg's wife, is buried next to him. Many of its design elements – including its marble construction and *pietra dura* work – foreshadow the stupendous Taj itself.

Chini-ka-Rauza

This is the riverside **tomb** (Map p132; ☀ 6am-6pm) of Afzal Khan, a Persian poet from Shiraz and high official in the court of Shah Jahan. It was built between 1628 and 1639, and is Agra's only purely Persian-style building. Rather neglected these days, it's hidden away down a shady avenue of trees. Bright-blue tiles still cover part of the exterior, giving an indication of how it once must have looked, and the interior is painted in floral designs. The upper storey offers fine views.

Mehtab Bagh

This **park** (Map p132; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☀ sunrise-sunset), which attempts to recreate a Mughal-style garden, is situated opposite the Taj Mahal, on the northern bank of the Yamuna River. Though pretty, it's really only worth visiting for its wonderful views of the back of the Taj. Alternatively, walk down to the Yamuna River on the path that runs alongside the park and view the Taj without any tourist crowds in a peaceful ambience of buffaloes and wading birds – though your peace may still be shat-

tered by offers of autorickshaw rides, guided tours or boat rides across the river.

Taj Nature Walk

Follow the stone pathways through this **mini-wilderness** (Off Map p137; Taj East Gate Rd; admission Rs 50; ☀ 9am-6.30pm) exchanging Agra's rumble for a pleasant ramble among birds and butterflies, with the Taj hovering bewitchingly in the background.

Jama Masjid (Friday Mosque)

This fine red-sandstone **mosque** (Map p132; ☀ sunrise-sunset except prayer times) was built in 1648 by Shah Jahan and dedicated to his favourite daughter, Jahanara. It was originally connected, by way of a large courtyard, to the fort's main entrance, until the British ran a railway line between the two in the mid-1800s.

Beneath the Jama Masjid are the busy local streets of the colourful **Kinari Bazaar**, where you can haggle for everyday goods.

Swimming

Most swimming pools in Agra are reserved exclusively for guests of the hotels to which they belong. Some will make an exception, for a generally hefty fee: the best currently on offer are the Clarks Shiraz (p139; Rs 500) and Mughal Sheraton (p139; Rs 400) pools.

TOURS

UP Tourism runs lightning-fast **daily tours** (Indian/foreigner incl entry fees Rs 400/1700; ☀ daily except Friday) that leave the India Tourism office at 9.45am and Agra Cantonment train station between 10.20am and 10.30am. The tour includes the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri with an hour-and-a-quarter stop in each place; for Rs 550 you can also join just for the afternoon portion to Fatehpur Sikri. Tours return to the station so that day-trippers can catch the *Taj Express* back to Delhi at 6.55pm. Contact either of the UP Tourism offices or the India Tourism office (p133) to book a seat.

SLEEPING

Agra, as you might expect, has plenty of hotels, but there's a lack of decent midrange accommodation and prices rise steeply towards the top end. If you're on a midrange budget, you might decide to save a few rupees by going for one of the better budget choices.

TAJ GANJ

INFORMATION	
Aanee Bookshop.....	(See 1)
iWay Internet.....	1 A5
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Budget

The main centre for budget accommodation is Taj Ganj. Prices listed here are for rooms with private bathrooms, Western-style toilets and hot water, except where indicated. In summer, budget hotels tend to provide hot water in a bucket, whereas in winter it arrives more conveniently by pipe.

TAJ GANJ AREA

Hotel Host (Map p137; ☎ 2331010; Taj West Gate; d from Rs 200, s/d without bathroom Rs 150/175) Though a bit shabby on the outside, this is a cheap, serviceable and solid-value Taj Ganj option, made more pleasant if you avoid the rather claustrophobic windowless rooms. A perk for this price range is that all rooms come with TV.

Shanti Lodge (Map p137; ☎ 2231973; shantilodge2000@yahoo.co.in; Taj South Gate; d from Rs 200, with AC from Rs 500; 🏠) One of the most popular backpacker destinations in town, though the rooms vary dramatically in quality; the best bets are in the hotel's new section, where some rooms come equipped with TV and the top-floor room has a Taj view.

Hotel Kamal (Map p137; ☎ 2330126; hotelkamal@hotmail.com; Taj South Gate; s/d from Rs 300/400, with AC from Rs 600/700; 🏠) This hotel wins the competition for the best close-up view of the Taj from its rooftop restaurant. Ask to see a number of rooms, as they vary greatly regarding size, shape and amount of available natural light. The restaurant Stuff Makers (opposite) is recommended.

Hotel Sheela (Map p137; ☎ 2333074; www.hotel sheelaagra.com; Taj East Gate Rd; d with fan/air cooler/AC Rs 400/600/800; 🏠) Despite the lack of Taj views this is the best budget option in Taj Ganj due to its serene situation in the city's 'no-pollution zone', its calm garden, clean though spartan rooms, and helpful staff. The shady restaurant (meals Rs 25 to Rs 70) is the perfect spot to sip a mixed-fruit lassi.

Hotel Sheela Inn (Off Map p137; ☎ 3293437; Taj East Gate Rd; d with fan/air cooler/AC Rs 500/600/800; 🏠) An offshoot of Hotel Sheela, it might lack the atmosphere of its sister, but it's nevertheless a clean, smart and friendly option. The rooftop restaurant has a nice view of the Taj, there's free luggage storage, and reliable 24-hour hot water.

SADAR BAZAAR

Our pick **Tourists Rest House** (Map p132; ☎ 2463961; dontworrychickenurry@hotmail.com; Kutchery Rd; s Rs 150-300, d Rs 250-350, s/d with AC 350/450; 🏠) Helpful owners, a secure atmosphere, and spotless rooms grouped around a shady garden make this place widely regarded as Agra's best budget option. Though nowhere near as well-placed for the Taj Mahal as places in Taj Ganj, it's still such a perennial favourite that you need to book well ahead. There's internet, TV in most rooms and free pickup from the sta-

tion or bus station with 24 hours' notice. Also recommended are the trips around Rajasthan; ask for details and current prices.

OTHER AREAS

Hotel Sakura (Map p132; ☎ 2420169; ashu_sakura@yahoo.com; Ajmer Rd; d Rs 200-500; 🏠) Another long-running favourite with clean rooms and a very friendly owner. It's close to Idgah bus stand, useful if you're planning an early start. The restaurant is recommended – try the butter chicken followed by a tasty *kheer* (rice pudding).

Hotel Safari (Map p132; ☎ 2480106; hotelsafari@hotmail.com; Shamsabad Rd; s/d Rs 300/350, with AC Rs 400/450; 🏠) Owned by the same people as the Tourists Rest House, this might lack the ambience of the former, but it's clean, comfortable and all rooms have TV. There's a rooftop terrace with a distant view of the Taj and the atmosphere is relaxed.

Midrange

Agra has very few midrange hotels worth their tariff card; most of them are clustered together in Fatehabad Rd. It's well worth poking around a few, to make sure you get the best possible deal.

Taj Plaza (Off Map p137; ☎ 2232515; www.hotel taj plaza.com; Taj East Gate Rd; s/d Rs 600/900, with AC Rs 1000/1200; 🏠) A budget hotel gone upmarket, this place is small, clean and modern. Four of its pricier AC rooms are recommended for their Taj views, as is the rooftop restaurant.

Hotel Ashish Palace (Map p132; ☎ 2230032; Fatehabad Rd; s/d Rs 1200/1500; 🏠) Though it's one of the newer places on the Fatehabad Rd, its rooms equipped with fridge, TV and even shower caps, travellers have recently reported that it's starting to show telltale signs of wear and tear.

Hotel Atithi (Map p132; ☎ 2230040; www.hotel atithi.com; Fatehabad Rd; s Rs 1600-1900, d Rs 1900-2500; 🏠) Indoors, it's not an exciting choice, but the pool and lawn are the main draw here. There's also a restaurant serving good Indian food, where an evening meal will set you back Rs 400.

Hotel Amar (Map p132; ☎ 2331884; www.hotel amar.com; Fatehabad Rd; s Rs 2500-4000, d from Rs 3000; 🏠) The hotel, so the website boasts, 'beholds you with ultimate comfort'. This might be a bit much, but the rooms are certainly comfortable as well as colourful, ranging from an almost blindingly orange 'Mughal

Room' to a selection of lurid but airy suites. There's a good Indian restaurant, bar, pool, Ayurvedic health club and gym.

Top End

Clarks Shiraz Hotel (Map p132; ☎ 2226121; www.hotel clarksshiraz.com; Taj Rd; s with Taj view Rs 4800-7100, d with Taj view Rs 5200-7500; 🏠) Despite the evocative name, this is a set of high-rise executive rooms which are comfortable, cosy and equipped with all mod cons. The hotel boasts a gym, Ayurvedic massage, a bank, post office, shops and airline offices. Some parts of the hotel, however, are better than others (the tower wing has recently been refurbished).

Trident Hilton (Off map p132; ☎ 2331818; www.trident-hilton.com; Fatehabad Rd; d from US\$130; 🏠) A tranquil, relaxed top-end choice, with particularly good reports of its pool and kids' club from travellers staying here with children. At the time of research, this hotel was about to cease to be part of the Hilton chain, so it's worth bearing in mind that the service, and the prices, could go up – or down.

Mughal Sheraton (Map p132; ☎ 2331701; mughal.sheraton@welcomgroup.com; Fatehabad Rd; s/d/ste US\$150/160/400; 🏠) This sprawling red-brick luxury hotel is set amid tranquil gardens that include a tree planted by actor Peter O'Toole. Everything is shiny and elegant, and its Peshawri Restaurant (see p140) is especially recommended. Invigorate with a game of tennis or minigolf, and then have your fortune read by the in-house astrologer.

Amarvilas (Off Map p137; ☎ 2231515; www.oberoi hotels.com; Taj East Gate Rd; d from US\$600, ste US\$1350-3300; 🏠) A world-class hotel, considered the very best Agra – and, indeed, one of the best India – has to offer. Suffused with Mughal style, some of the most expensive rooms even have windows in the bathroom, so you can soak your aching feet while regarding the eternal Taj. If you're not flush enough to shell out for an overnight stay, stop in at the beautiful bar for a drink or two, and enjoy the splendour without the price tag.

EATING & DRINKING

Agra is historically famous for its rich, filling Mughlai fare, and simpler delicious local specialties can be found in the bazaars. *Peitha* is a square sweet made from pumpkin and glucose flavoured with rose-water, coconut or saffron, while *dalmoth* is Agra's famous version of *namkin* (prepackaged spicy nibbles).

From October to March look out for *gajak*, a spicy sesame-seed biscuit-strip.

Agra's drinking choices are fairly limited outside the top-end hotel-bars, of which **Amarvilas** (Off Map p132; drinks Rs150-250; 🕒 11am-11pm) is undoubtedly the best, with its exquisite terrace view of the Taj. There's a **beer shop** (Map p137; 🕒 10am-11pm) in Taj Ganj, which charges Rs 60 for a medium bottle of Kingfisher.

Taj Ganj Area

Taj Ganj has plenty of budget rooftop restaurants, where the meals may be basic and similar, but the views of the Taj range from good to fantastic. In general, keep an eye on hygiene: a quick peep into the kitchen can work wonders for your peace of mind. The places listed below are open from breakfast (around 7am to 8am) to dinner (10pm to 11pm) unless otherwise stated.

Joney's Place (Map p137; mains Rs 20-40; 🕒 5am-10.30pm) This tiny travellers' institution claims the best lassis in town, and is a good bet when the desire for hummus or a toasted sandwich strikes – especially useful for hungry early risers.

Stuff Makers (Map p137; Hotel Kamal; meals Rs 25-70) Join the crowd on the rooftop terrace with its fairy lights and great Taj views. The food is reliable, if uninspiring, and includes old favourites such as tasty honey-and-banana pancakes.

Shankara Vegis Restaurant (Map p137; meals Rs 25-70) This relaxed rooftop restaurant has no Taj view but does have plenty of hearty vegetarian favourites, prepared in a clean kitchen open to public view, as well as good music and a sublime lassis.

Hotel Sheela (Map p137; mains Rs 30-90) Hotel Sheela's shady garden café is one of the most reliable options in the neighbourhood, with consistently good reviews from travellers for its simple dishes and unusual, yummy fruit-and-nut lassis.

Yash Café (Map p137; meals Rs 30-95) A very laid-back joint with a '60s feel, Yash shows movies in the evening, offers a shower and storage space to day visitors, and cooks up good-value veg and nonveg thalis.

Shanti Lodge Restaurant (Map p137; meals Rs 50-100) A basic traveller-oriented restaurant but the food is reasonable and the rooftop Taj view is fantastic, making it a good place for breakfast before a day on your feet.

Sadar Bazaar

Lakshmi Vilas (Map p132; Taj Rd; meals Rs 30-60; ☺) A clean, popular South Indian restaurant with all your *idli* (spongy, round savoury rice cake) and *uttapam* (a thick *dosa*-like pancake) favourites. Over 30 *dosa* varieties are available, including a 'family *dosa*', worth ordering if only because it's over a metre long.

Tourists Rest House (Map p132; Kutcheri Rd; meals Rs 30-80) Nice, big breakfasts, great Indian dishes (including a winning *malai kofta*) and a lovely garden location makes this hotel-restaurant a cool, appealing retreat.

Park (Map p132; Sadar Bazaar; meals Rs 70-175; ☺) A popular wood-panelled AC dining room with a long reputation among travellers, Park serves up Indian, Continental and Chinese food with some particularly tasty Mughlai dishes.

Dhasprakash (Map p132; Gwalior Rd; meals Rs 70-180; ☺) Though not brimming with atmosphere, this efficient South Indian restaurant chain serves winning *dosas* (paper-thin lentil-flour pancakes) to loyal locals, along with generous thalis and indulgent ice-cream sundaes.

our pick **Zorba the Buddha** (Map p132; Sadar Bazaar; meals Rs 80-150; ☺) ☺ noon-3pm & 6-9pm, closed Jun; ☺) Vases of flowers on neat little tables greet guests at this clean, quirky Osho-inspired bistro-style vegetarian restaurant. The healthy food and herbal teas are designed to nurture your soul as well as your body, while the ice creams make a nice finishing touch if you feel you've been all too worthy.

Other Areas

Only Restaurant (Map p132; the Mall; mains Rs 60-225; ☺) This bamboo-lined, cosy restaurant is often packed with happy tour groups and has live music every evening from 7pm in the summer. Your best bets are the Mughlai dishes or tandoori options.

Peshawri (Map p132; Mughal Sheraton; ☺) 12.30-2.45pm & 7.30-11.30pm; mains from Rs 500; ☺) One of the best, if priciest, North Indian dining options in the city, this restaurant serves particularly tasty tandoori and North-West Frontier barbeque dishes.

Espahan (Off Map p137; Amarvilas; mains from Rs 550; ☺) Though nonresidents have reported it hard to get a reservation, it's worth persisting if you're in the mood for top-of-the-range North Indian Avadhi cuisine in sumptuous surroundings. You can choose to dine at one of two sittings – 7pm or 9.30pm.

SHOPPING

Agra is well known for marble items inlaid with coloured stones, similar to the *pietra dura* work on the Taj. Sadar Bazaar (Map p132), Fatehabad Rd (Map p132), and the area around the Taj are all full of arts-and-craft emporiums of one kind or another. Be careful, though, as fake marble (usually soapstone, which you can spot by the ease with which it scratches) is common. Other popular buys include beautifully embroidered rugs and leather goods (Agra's tanneries are big shoe producers).

Away from the usual tourist trappings, the Kinari Bazaar (Map p132) is crowded and heady, vending to a largely local crowd. The smaller bazaar south of Taj Ganj is much calmer and tailors there will knock you up a pair of trousers for around Rs 200 or a shirt for Rs 100.

About a kilometre along the traffic-quiet road from Taj East Gate is **Shilpgram** (Off Map p137; ☺) 10am-10pm Oct-Mar, an open-air collection of stalls selling handicrafts and artworks that also has a café and bar. Every February a week-long festival also takes place here (see p131).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Agra's Kheria Airport is 7km from the city centre. Kingfisher Airlines (☎ toll free within India 18001800101; www.flykingfisher.com) flies daily from Delhi to Agra (1 hour), departing Delhi at 7.55am and Agra at 5pm. The return fare is approximately US\$185; it's generally cheapest to reserve tickets online.

Bus

Most long-haul and deluxe buses connecting Agra with Delhi and Rajasthan depart from and arrive at **Ildgah bus station** (Map p132; ☎ 2420324; Ajmer Rd). Hourly buses run to Delhi's Sarai Kale Khan bus station (Rs 105, five hours) via Mathura (Rs 30, 1½ hours). Hourly buses also depart from here to Jaipur (Rs 105, six hours) and frequent local buses head to Fatehpur Sikri (Rs 18, one hour) and Bharatpur (Rs 31, 1½ hours).

A few services also depart and arrive at **Agra Fort bus station** (Map p132; Power House bus station; ☎ 2364557). Buses leave here for Delhi (Rs 105, five hours) via Mathura (Rs 29, 1½ hours).

Official Rajasthan government deluxe buses (Map p132) depart hourly (on the half-hour) from outside Hotel Sakura (p138), and drop you off at the main bus station in Jaipur. They

run from 6.30am to 2.30pm daily, and cost Rs 174. Tickets can be booked at the Hotel Sakura itself.

Train

Though Agra has six train stations, most travellers will only use either the **Agra Cantonment (Cantt) train station** (Map p132; ☎ 2421204) or the **Agra Fort train station** (Map p132).

The Agra Cantt is an important stop on the main Delhi-Mumbai line, with several trains daily from both New Delhi and Nizamuddin train stations. The fastest is the *AC Shatabdi Express* (chair/executive Rs 395/760, two hours) which runs daily except Fridays. It leaves New Delhi at 6.15am and departs from Agra for the return trip at 8.30pm, making it ideal for day-tripping.

A cheaper alternative is the daily *Taj Express* (2nd/chair car Rs 56/211, three hours). It leaves Delhi's Nizamuddin train station at 7.15am and departs from Agra for the return trip at 6.55pm, connecting with UP Tourism daily tours (see p133).

To Jaipur and Jodhpur, the *Marudhar Express* leaves Agra Fort at 6.15am on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, reaching Jaipur (3AC/2AC Rs 330/473) at 11.30am, and Jodhpur (3AC/2AC Rs 622/892) at 6.20pm.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

For the short hop to Kheria Airport, taxis should charge about Rs 200 and autorickshaws Rs 100.

Autorickshaw

Just outside Agra Cantonment train station is the **prepaid autorickshaw booth** (Map p132; ☺) 24hr. The official rates here are Rs 15 for a short 1km ride, Rs 30 to Sadar Bazaar and Rs 50 to Taj Ganj. A three-hour tour to the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort return costs Rs 160, a four-hour tour Rs 200 and an eight-hour tour Rs 300. A round trip including waiting time to Sikandra for Akbar's Mausoleum is likely to cost Rs 120. Autorickshaws are not allowed to go to Fatehpur Sikri or within the 'exclusion zone' around the Taj Mahal (see p134), so you'll need to take a bus or taxi.

Note, however, that it'll be nigh on impossible to find a driver willing to conform to these rates. Have your best haggling hat on, since you'll generally be quoted around 100% over the odds for any trip.

Autorickshaws to look out for are the green and yellow variety, which run on CNG (compressed natural gas) instead of petrol, and so are far less polluting to Agra's already strained environment.

Bicycle

Bicycles can be hired from **Raja Bicycle Store** (Map p137; per day Rs 50; ☺) 8am-8.30pm but you'll need nerves of steel and a desire to subject yourself to heat, dust and fumes in order to negotiate obstacle-course roads.

Cycle-rickshaw

Best for short distances, this environmentally friendly form of transport is cheaper than using autorickshaws and provides an income for some of the poorest employed sections of society. Rides should cost between Rs 20 and Rs 40, but can be excruciatingly slow and stinky due to Agra's traffic fumes.

Nowadays, it's possible to hire a brand new model of cycle-rickshaw, courtesy of an Indian NGO and the US Agency for International Development. Lighter and more comfortable for the hard-working driver to pedal, they can be rented from outside many of the top-end hotels; a city tour to the Taj, fort and Kinari Bazaar should cost around Rs 150.

Taxi

Outside Agra Cantonment train station is the **prepaid taxi booth** (☺) 24hr. The cost to any five-star hotel is Rs 120 (AC Rs 150), while a three-hour tour costs Rs 300 (AC Rs 375) and a four-hour tour is Rs 450 (AC Rs 650). An eight-hour tour is Rs 650 (AC Rs 950), costing Rs 950 (AC Rs 1400) if it includes Fatehpur Sikri. A four-hour trip to Fatehpur Sikri costs Rs 700 (AC Rs 900). A return trip to the Keoladeo Ghana National Park at Bharatpur (p188) costs Rs 950 including waiting time. Further afield, one way to Delhi is Rs 2500, and Jaipur Rs 2700. As with autorickshaws, however, it may be hard to actually secure a ride for these prices, so you'll have to drive a hard bargain.

Other Transport

Environmentally friendly **electric buses** (Rs 5; ☺) every 15min 6am-7pm ply the route between the Taj Mahal west gate and Agra Fort, another good way of reducing your environmental impact on Agra.

AROUND AGRA

FATEHPUR SIKRI

☎ 05613 / pop 28,750

This magnificent fortified ghost city, 40km west of Agra, was the Mughal Empire's short-lived capital between 1571 and 1585, during the reign of Akbar. Although brilliant and unusual from an architectural point of view, Akbar's city was erected in an area that suffered from water shortages and thus is said to have been abandoned shortly after his death, making the name 'Fatehpur', meaning 'city of victory', somewhat of an irony. The well-preserved palace buildings and the still-used mosque are the main points of interest.

Most people visit this World Heritage site as a day trip from Agra, but it's worthwhile staying in the nearby town if you have the time, since the red-sandstone palaces are at their most atmospheric at sunset. See p360 for details of Eid al-Fitr celebrations at the site.

Orientation & Information

The palace buildings lie on the top of a ridge, with the town of Fatehpur Sikri just to the south. The Jama Masjid and the ruins near it and behind the mint can be visited for free. Swarms of unofficial guides pester visitors, demanding a ridiculous fee of Rs 300, but if you want a guide it's best to hire an official one near a ticket office, which should cost Rs 50 to Rs 100. The purpose of many buildings is uncertain and you can safely assume that much of what guides will tell you is invented.

Sights

JAMA MASJID

The beautiful, expansive **Jama Masjid** (Dargah Mosque; ☞ sunrise-sunset), completed in 1571,

contains elements of Persian and Hindu design. The main entrance is through the impressive 54m-high **Buland Darwaza** (Victory Gate), perhaps the largest in Asia, built to commemorate Akbar's military victory in Gujarat. A Quranic inscription inside the archway quotes Jesus saying: 'The world is a bridge, pass over it but build no house upon it. He who hopes for an hour may hope for eternity', which seems appropriate considering the fate of the city.

Inside the courtyard is the superb white-marble **tomb of Shaikh Salim Chishti**, completed in 1581. Just as Akbar came to the saint four centuries ago hoping for a son, childless women still visit his tomb today and tie a thread to the jalis (marble lattice screens), among the finest in India.

PALACES & PAVILIONS

The first of the **palace buildings** (Indian/foreigner Rs 20/260, video Rs 25; ☞ sunrise-sunset) you enter from the south is the largest, the **Palace of Jodh Bai**. Constructed around a courtyard, it blends Hindu columns, Islamic cupolas and blue Persian roof tiles.

The **Palace of the Christian Wife** was used by Akbar's Goan Christian wife Mariam, and you can see the remains of the paintings that used to cover the inside. **Birbal Bhavan**, ornately carved inside and out, was probably used by two of Akbar's senior wives.

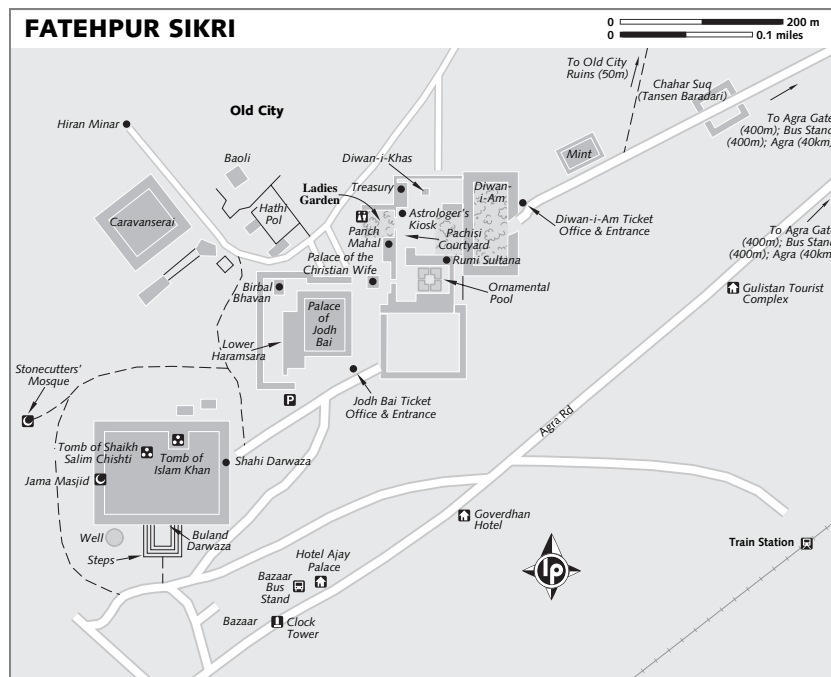
The function of the **Lower Haramsara** is controversial – it may have housed servants but looks more like stables for the horses, camels and elephants.

The most ornate structure is the amazing **Rumi Sultana**, whose surface is covered with intricate carving.

The whimsical **Panch Mahal** is a five-storey pavilion that was used by the court ladies.

SAVE THE BEARS

India's first sanctuary for 'dancing' bears was established by the **World Society for the Protection of Animals** (WSPA; www.wspa.org.uk) in 2002 with help from the UP Forestry Department and **Free the Bears** (www.freethebears.org.au). The 8-hectare Agra Bear Rescue Facility site is inside the Sur Sarovar Bird Sanctuary, 17km west of Agra and provides a refuge for more than 130 sloth bears, rescued from local Qalander gypsies who previously forced them to 'dance' in return for money from onlookers. This cruel entertainment is illegal in India but still enslaves some 800 bears, though ongoing efforts are being made to save them and re-educate the Qalanders; some young Qalander men are even employed to look after the bears at the facility. Visits to the sanctuary are limited so as not to disturb the bears during their rehabilitation period, but can be arranged through **Wildlife SOS** (☎ 011 246 21939 in Delhi; www.wildlifesos.com). Also see Animal Welfare, p83.



Each of the storeys decreases in size until the top one consists of only a tiny kiosk. The lower floor has 84 columns, which are all different.

The **Treasury** has sea monsters, intended to protect the fabulous wealth once stored there, carved onto the ceiling struts, while the so-called **Astrologer's Kiosk** in front has its roof supports carved into a serpentine Jain style.

The **Diwan-i-Khas** (Hall of Private Audience) has an interior dominated by a magnificently carved stone column in the centre. The pillar flares to create a flat-topped plinth linked to the four corners of the room by narrow stone bridges, from where Akbar is believed to have debated with scholars who stood at the ends of the four bridges. Outside is the **Pachisi Courtyard** where Akbar is said to have played the game pachisi using slave girls as pieces.

The **Diwan-i-Am** (Hall of Public Audience) is where Akbar dispensed justice 'without harshness or ill-will', according to the information board.

Plenty of ruins are scattered behind the mosque, including the **caravanserai**, a vast courtyard surrounded by rooms where visit-

ing merchants used to stay, and the bizarre 21m-high **Hiran Minar** tower that's decorated with hundreds of stone representations of elephant tusks. Badly defaced elephants still guard **Hathi Pol** (Elephant Gate), while the remains of the small **Stonecutters' Mosque** and a **hammam** (bath) are nearby.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Ajay Palace (☎ 282950; Agra Rd; d Rs 300, without bathroom Rs 200) Rooms in this small four-room guesthouse near the bus stand have squat toilets, but are neat and clean, and the place receives regular praise from travellers. The restaurant (meals Rs 20 to Rs 80) has the best food in town – try the fried eggplant, then finish off with the *kheer* (rice pudding).

Goverdhan Hotel (☎ 282643; www.hotelafatehpur-sikriviews.com; Agra Rd; s Rs 250-600, d Rs 400-750; ☞ ☎) The Goverdhan proclaims, on its website, 'Cleanliness is Our Strength'; some rooms have decidedly odd décor, but are, as they are at pains to point out, clean. The restaurant serves up good Indian food cooked with filtered water, and in case you need to work up an appetite, there's a badminton court.

Gulistan Tourist Complex (☎ 282490; Agra Rd; s/d Rs 525/600, with AC Rs 850/950; 🚻) Operated by UP Tourism and slightly run-down, Gulistan has a restaurant, bar, and gardens. The rooms can be quite dark and gloomy, though, so see a few before you decide.

Fatehpur Sikri's culinary speciality is *khataie*, tasty biscuits you can see piled high in the bazaar. Try them freshly baked in the evening.

Getting There & Away

Tour buses usually stop for 1½ hours, which isn't really long enough to explore thoroughly. Make a day of it, instead, by catching a bus (Rs

18, one hour) from Agra's Idgah bus station; buses depart every 30 minutes between 7am and 7pm. Be sure your bus heads directly to Fatehpur Sikri town, rather than to Bharatpur, since the latter will drop you near Agra Gate, a 1km walk from the monuments. The last bus back to Agra from the bazaar bus stand leaves at 7pm.

Autorickshaws are not allowed to travel from Agra to Fatehpur Sikri; a taxi should cost around Rs 700 return including waiting time.

Buses from the bazaar bus stand leave regularly for Bharatpur (Rs 15, 30 minutes) and Jaipur (Rs 80, 4½ hours).