

The Secret Caves of Ellora



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

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The great cave temples of Ellora are one of the most visited tourist sites in India. Between 5th and the 9th centuries CE 34 caves were cut into a scarp which runs for about three kilometres.



Some of these caves are huge, particularly the Kailash Temple which is Hindu, and the three story Tintal Vihara which is Buddhist. Others such as the three Jain caves right at the far end of the scarp are pure perfection in

stone; harmoniously conceived, crisply and delicately carved and beautifully decorated. It has been estimated that at its height there were some 2000 Hindu, Jain and Buddhist monks residing at Ellora.



Since Ellora was declared a World Heritage Site a decade ago even more locals and tourists visit it than ever before. But few of the thousands who flock there every day know that within a short distance of and just above the main caves, secluded and almost hidden, are other caves of equal interest to the main ones.



About two thirds along the scarp where it becomes almost vertical, is a waterfall. During the monsoon this waterfall tumbles over the cliff with a roar, but for most of the year it is little more than a trickle and sometimes it is completely dry. But even when there is no water the black stain on the cliff indicates the former presence of falling water. If the visitor walks along the scarp to where the waterfall is and scrambles up where the ground is not so steep, he or she will be rewarded by a fine view over the Maharashtra countryside. Proceeding in the direction of the waterfall the visitor will soon arrive at the stream that feeds it. Here a prospect of almost Arcadian delight will greet the eye.



The stream runs through a narrow gorge, filling one rock pool after another until it throws itself off the cliff. Into the side of this gorge some 20 small caves have been cut, most of them just big enough for one monk to live in, some with verandas, others with attached shrines, all of them simple and undecorated. Unlike down at the main caves there is no one here and a hushed silence prevails, the only sound being the occasional twittering of a bird and the trickle of water.

It seems likely that the great monasteries and temples of Ellora had their humble beginnings in this gorge. Its first monks; perhaps Jain, Hindu or Buddhist monks, found this gorge and being secluded, having a reliable supply of water and within walking distance of villages where they could go for alms, settled down here to do their meditation. As one

generation of monks gave way to another and more monks came, bigger accommodation was needed and the first large monasteries were cut into the scarp below. In time wealthy magnets and princes commissioned larger and more sumptuous monasteries and temples and the monks came to spend most of their time in study, doing pujas and catering to the ritual needs of devotees. Meditation and solitude gave way to comfort, ease and a worldly preoccupation. But I like to think that at least some monks, remembering the Buddha's words, abandoned the large busy monasteries and retreated to these, Ellora's secret caves.

