

The Caves of India

Ajanta, Ellora

& Elephanta



Introduction

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Built by Buddhist, Hindu and Jain monks as mountain retreats, **India's magnificent rock-cut sanctuaries, monasteries and temples** offer travelers an unrivaled cultural experience, transporting them back to the formative stage of art and architecture for India's indigenous religions.

This Approach Guide serves as an ideal companion for travelers seeking a deeper understanding of this fantastic landscape, profiling India's three premier rock-cut religious sites: Ajanta (Buddhist), Elephanta (Hindu) and Ellora (a mixture of Buddhist, Hindu and Jain).

What's in this guidebook

- **Comprehensive look at rock-cut art and architecture.** We provide an overview of India's rock-cut art and architecture, isolating trademark features that you will see again and again as you make your way through Ajanta, Elephanta and Ellora. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **A tour that goes deeper on the most important sites.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we offer detailed tours of the most impressive and representative caves at Ajanta, Elephanta and Ellora, walking step-by-step through their distinctive artistic and architectural highlights. For each, we present information on its history, a detailed plan that highlights its most important architectural and artistic features, high-resolution images and a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Plus, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at founders@approachguides.com to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope that this cultural travel guidebook offers you fresh insights into India's rock-cut art and architecture and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

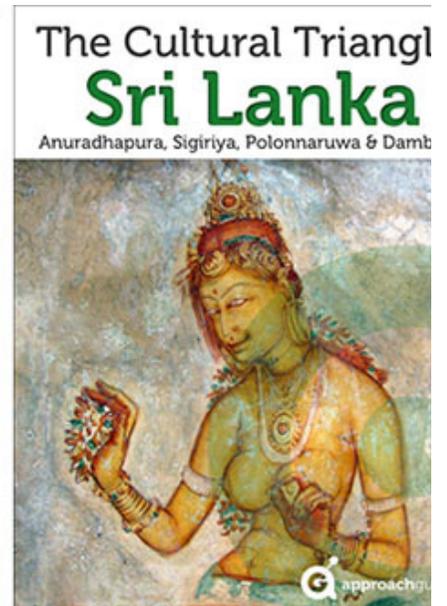
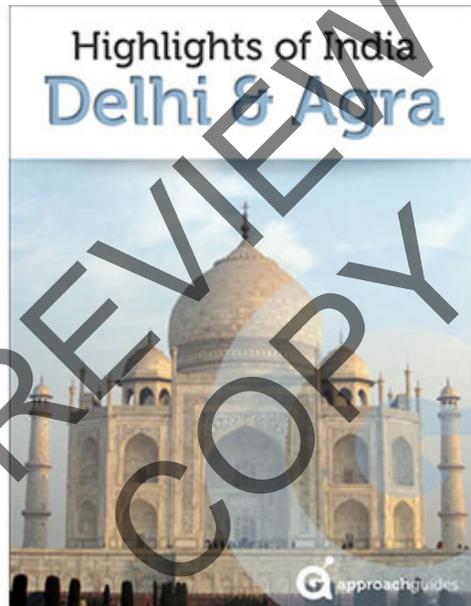
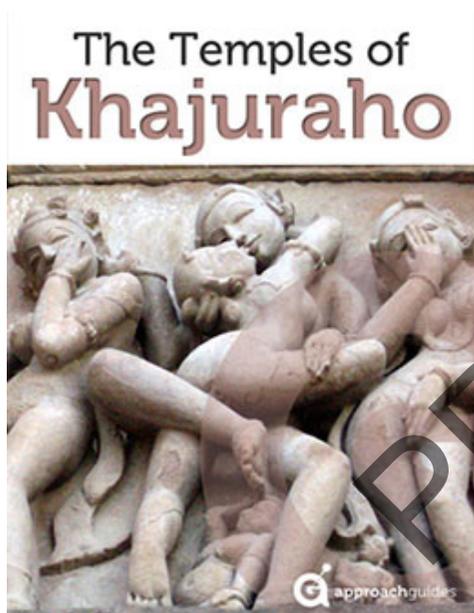
Have a great trip!

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The Caves of India: Ajanta, Ellora and Elephanta

Version 1.1

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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Rock-Cut Architecture in India

The Premier Sites for Indian Rock-Cut Architecture

This Approach Guide explores the three premier sites for rock-cut architecture in India: Ajanta, Elloranta and Ellora. In doing so, it provides insight into the development of the Buddhist and Hindu rock-cut architectural traditions (see Fig. 1), from their origins at Ajanta in the 2nd century BCE through to their end at Ellora in the 9th century.

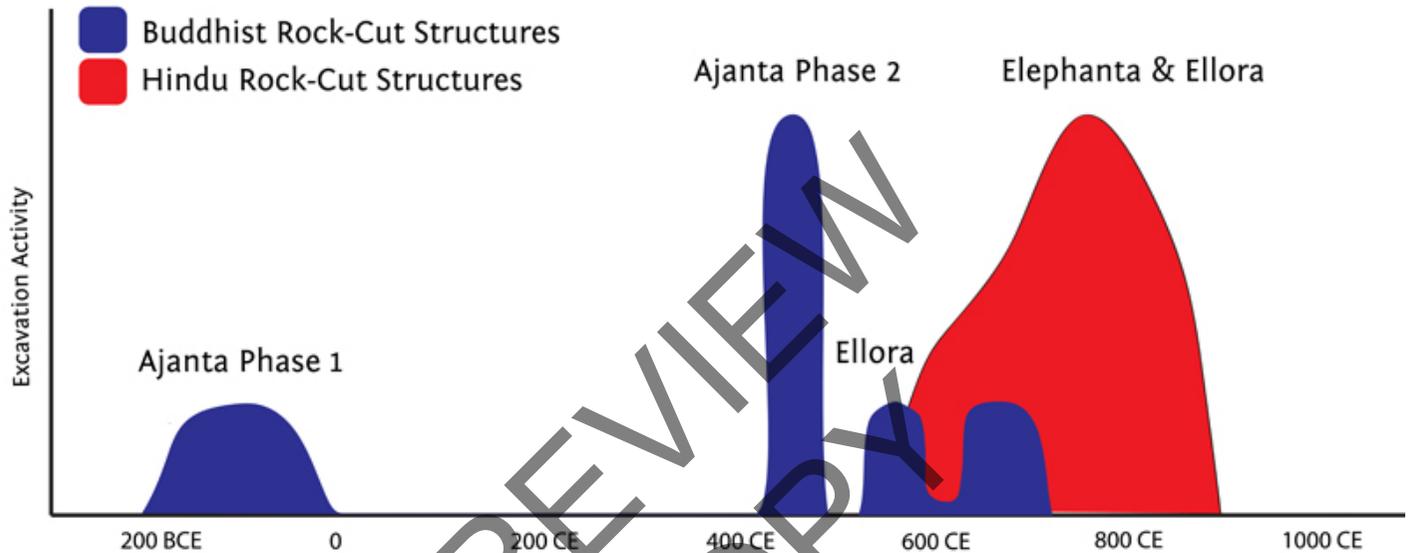


Fig. 1. Timeline of excavation activity for India's rock-cut architecture.

Types of Stone Architecture

There are two types of stone architecture:

- **Rock cut.** The focus of this guidebook, rock-cut architecture is made by carving into natural rock. Usually hewn into the sides of mountain ridges, rock-cut structures are made by excavating rock until the desired forms are achieved.
- **Stone built.** Stone-built architecture, on the other hand, involves assembling cut stone pieces to form a whole.

Buddhism as Driving Force

Buddhism gets the ball rolling

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TOURING ITINERARY



View in [Google Maps](#).

AJANTA

PREVIEW
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Background

Author Tip: *Ajanta is unique among India's cave sites because it includes not only elements of significant architectural interest, but also well-preserved 5th century wall paintings of a caliber that is unrivaled in the history of Indian art.*

Overview

Ajanta consists of **29 Buddhist caves** (some unfinished), the **grandest achievement of the first wave of rock-cut architecture in India**. The caves are clearly numbered from one to 29, moving east to west; for a map of the site, see the section entitled "Ajanta Map."

The caves at Ajanta have served as the reference point for Indian architectural and artistic endeavors throughout the centuries. Further, the styles initiated at Ajanta went on to influence cultures outside of India, as Buddhism migrated out of India via the Silk Road to Central Asia, China and Southeast Asia.

Two Distinct Excavation Phases

Cave excavation occurred in two distinct phases.

Early Phase caves

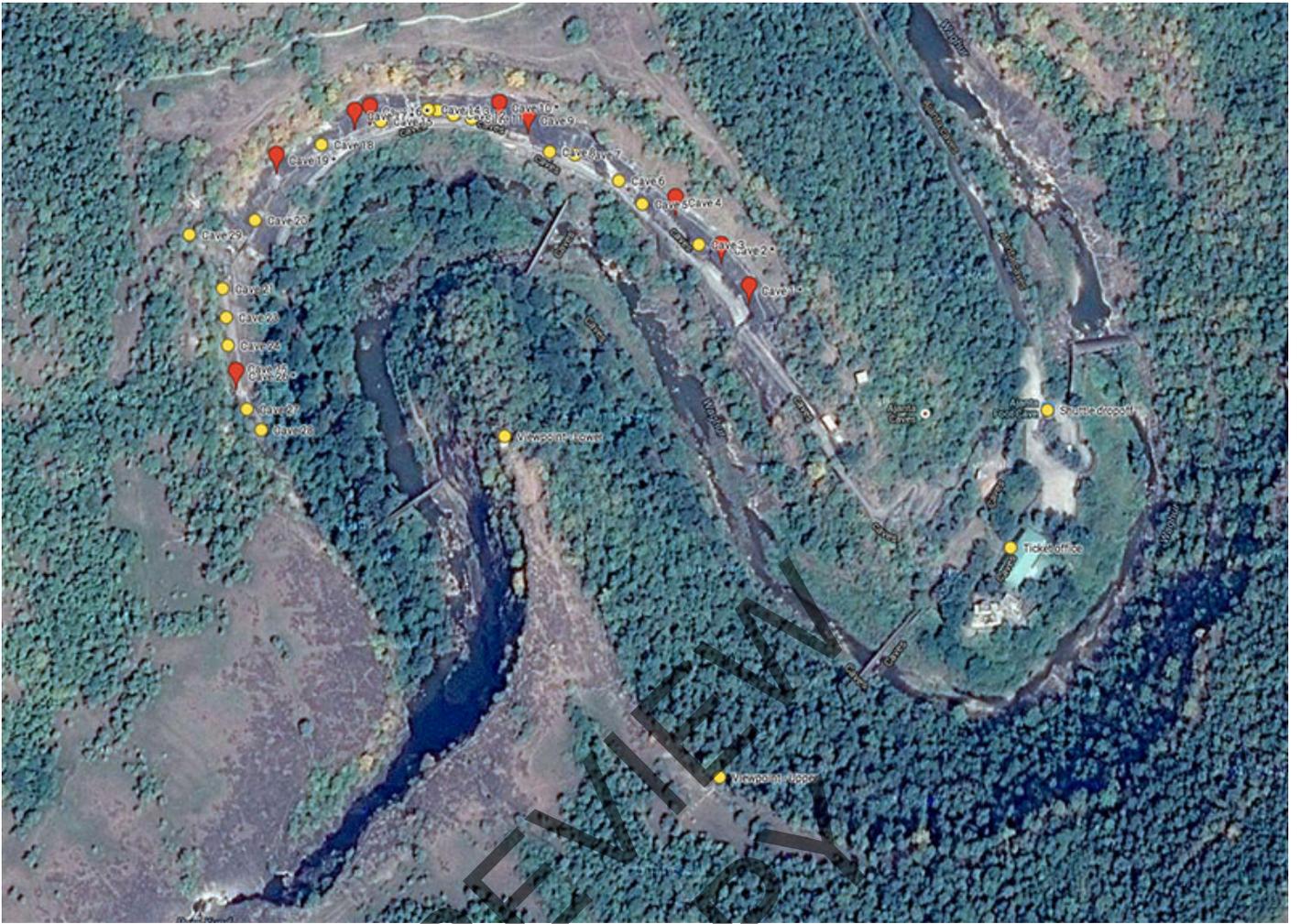
- Ajanta's oldest caves date from the 2nd-1st centuries BCE under the **Satavahana dynasty**: Caves 9 and 10 are **chaitya halls**; Caves 8, 12, 13 and 15A are **viharas**. All of these caves are associated with the **Theravada school** of Buddhism.
- The location for these early excavations offered monks close proximity to an ancient trade route that connected the Satavahana capital in Pratishtana (modern Paithan, just south of Aurangabad), with trade ports on India's western coast and cities in India's north; Ellora was also located on this same route.

Late Phase caves

- Excavations did not resume until five centuries later under the **Vakataka dynasty's** King Harisena, likely from 460-478; with Harisena's death, and the subsequent collapse of the Vakataka dynasty's control of the region, construction at the site abruptly stopped at the end of the 5th century. These caves are associated with the **Mahayana school** of Buddhism.
- All of the remaining caves date from this period: **chaityas** (Caves 19 and 26) and **viharas** (Caves 1-7, 11, 14-18, 20-25 and 27-29) are both in evidence.

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Satellite view of Ajanta caves. See in [Google Maps](#).

Itinerary

Visiting

- **Location.** The cave temples at Ajanta — located 100 kilometers northeast of Aurangabad and 455 kilometers northeast of Mumbai — occupy a 0.6 kilometer curve in a southeast-facing horseshoe-shaped valley cut by the Waghora river.
- **Visiting hours.** The site is open from 9am - 5:30pm. It is **closed on Mondays**. For more information, visit the [official website](#).
- **Logistics.** A shuttle bus takes all visitors from a staging point (called the T-Junction) to the cave temples, approximately 5 km west. The locations for shuttle pickup and ticket purchase are marked in our [Google Map of the site](#).
- **Viewpoint.** Depending upon your fitness level and desire for a little exercise, it is also worth considering a 30-minute trek to the “viewpoint,” which offers an unrivaled view of the entire complex (also marked on our [Google Map](#)). To get there, look for the signs as you approach the eastern entrance to the caves; it can also be accessed from inside the site by following the steps in front of Caves 16 and 17 down to a footbridge.

This is a complete list of the nine Ajanta caves profiled in this guidebook. It represents our picks for the premier caves in Ajanta. Next to each, we indicate its period (Early Phase or Late Phase), its type (chaitya or vihara) and what makes it special.

***Author Tip:** To make things easier and allow you to focus on the real highlights, particularly if you have limited time, we have marked those caves that we believe are must-sees with asterisks (*).*

Featured Caves

- **Cave 1.*** A Late Phase vihara, Cave 1 has the most dynamic, best-preserved paintings in Ajanta.
- **Cave 2.*** A Late Phase vihara, it has good reliefs (in the secondary shrines) and high quality paintings throughout.
- **Cave 4.** A Late Phase vihara, the largest in Ajanta, Cave 4 has impressive reliefs.
- **Cave 9.** Excavated in the Early Phase, Cave 9 is the simplest chaitya in Ajanta. Along with Cave 10, it sets in motion quintessential Buddhist forms that would go on to influence all future architecture — Buddhist, Hindu and Jain alike — in India.
- **Cave 10.*** An Early Phase chaitya, likely the first excavated cave in Ajanta, Cave 10 offers a trademark Theravada stupa, detailed reliefs and deteriorated Early Phase paintings.
- **Cave 16.*** A Late Phase vihara, Cave 16 has its original entrance stairway (unique in Ajanta) and a few high quality paintings.
- **Cave 17.*** A Late Phase vihara, Cave 17 has a great collection of paintings; those that remain on the exterior pillared gallery are particularly interesting, as they can be inspected in the full

light of day.

- **Cave 19.*** A Late Phase chaitya, Cave 19 has a highly decorated facade, in contrast to the plain facades of Early Phase chaityas; this is consistent with the move from Theravada to Mahayana Buddhism. Inside, there is a fully intact stupa (the only one remaining with its triple umbrella chattra).
- **Cave 26.*** A Late Phase chaitya, Cave 26 is the most stunningly decorated chaitya at Ajanta; with an ornate facade and detailed all-over reliefs on the interior, it represents the culmination of the chaitya style begun nearly 700 years before.

PREVIEW
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Cave 1 *

Author Tip: *The tour of Ajanta starts out with a bang at this cave, which gets our vote for having Ajanta's highest quality, best-preserved and well-lighted paintings. Spend as much time in this cave as possible; this is Ajanta at its finest.*

Background

Cave 1, a **vihara**, was built in the middle of the 5th century, just after Cave 2; it corresponds to the **Late Phase** of excavation and is **Mahayana Buddhist** in religious orientation. This cave is special in that it was **sponsored by the great Vakataka King Harisena**, under whom the Late Phase of excavations at Ajanta was undertaken.

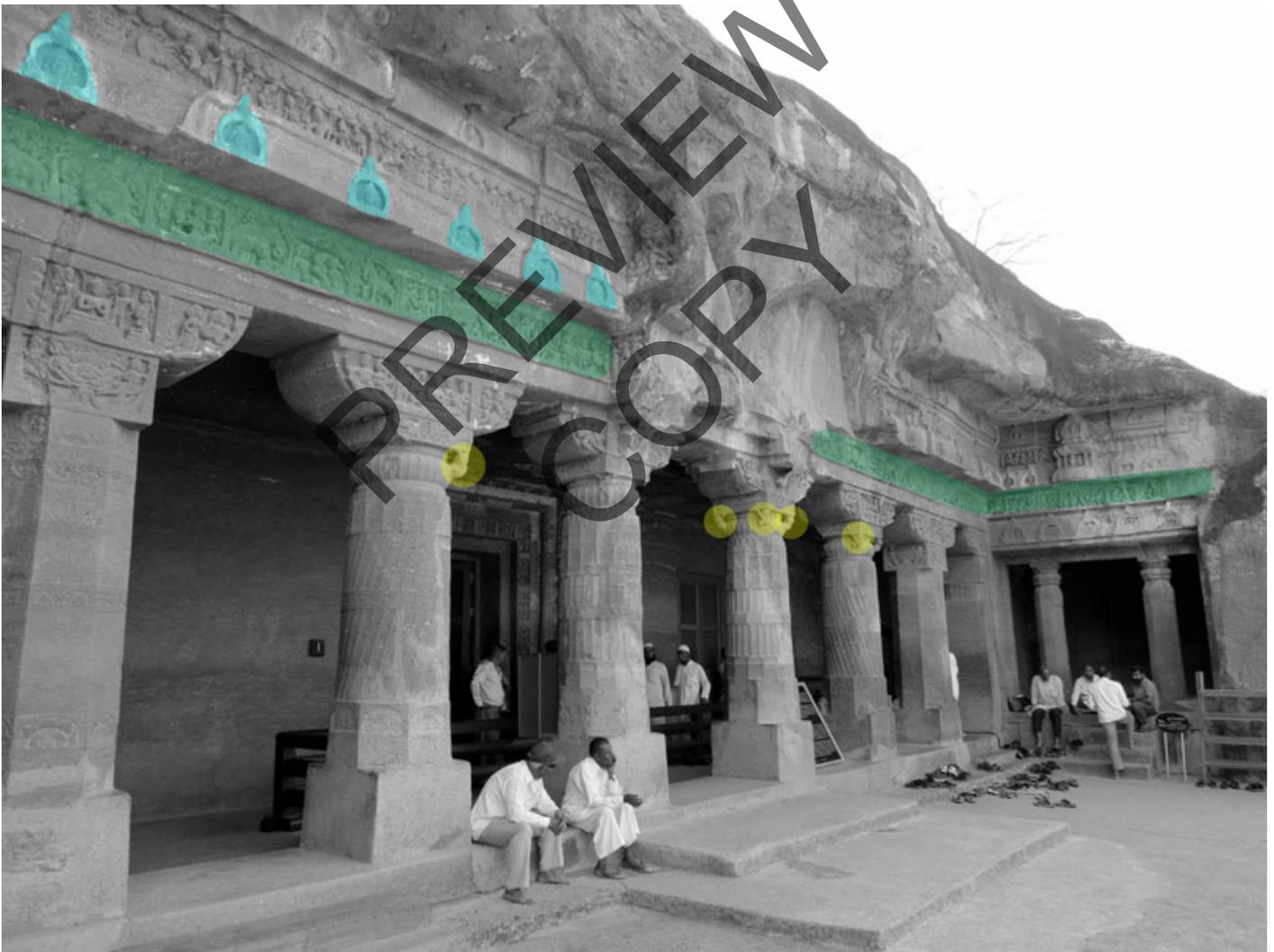


Fig. 14. Facade, view from inside the courtyard, Cave 1, Ajanta. Highlights added.

Facade

Cave 1's facade has the most impressive decoration of any vihara at Ajanta.

- On the **delicately fluted central columns**, miniature dwarves stand with arms raised (yellow highlights in Fig. 14) on the four corners of the compressed cushion capitals, as if supporting the massive brackets above.
- A **frieze** (green highlights in Fig. 14) running along the top of the open **pillared gallery** depicts scenes from the life of the historical Buddha.
- Above the entrance to the left porch is a partially damaged **frieze of the Three Signs**: a sick man, an old man and a corpse. As a young prince, the Buddha saw each of these on his first journey outside the walls of his palace; these signs convinced him that all life is suffering, a realization that led him to become a monk and embark upon finding a solution this predicament.
- The eaves — projecting out ever-so-slightly from the face of the facade — are decorated with **miniature chaitya arches**, with faces of deities at their centers (light blue highlights in Fig. 14), marking this cave as a residence of the gods.

PREVIEW
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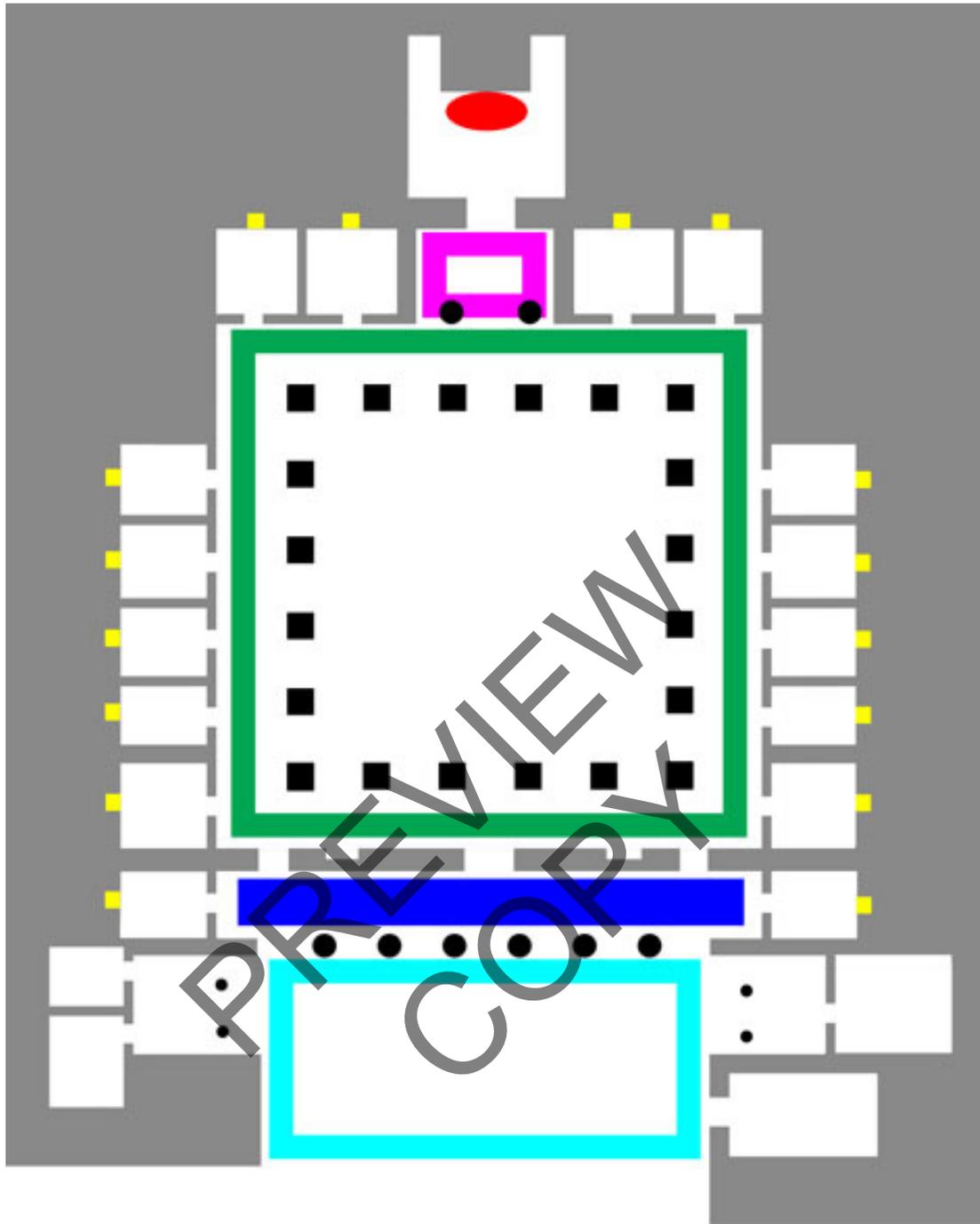


Fig. 15. Floorplan, Cave 1, Ajanta. Highlights added.

Layout

- Just beyond a small **courtyard** (light blue highlights in Fig. 15) and an **open pillared gallery** (dark blue highlights in Fig. 15), three doorways lead into the **central hall** (green highlights in Fig. 15).
- Inside, twenty square columns surround the square hall, with **small cells** — originally for the monks to sleep and study — lining the periphery on the north, east and west sides; each

has a **miniature shrine in its rear** (yellow highlights in Fig. 15). The open area inside the columns was used as a prayer area.

- The **columns** — with compressed cushion capitals — support elaborate brackets with scenes from the life of the historical Buddha; these scenes are flanked by flying apsaras (see Fig. 16).
- Through an **antechamber** (pink highlights in Fig. 15) on the side opposite the entrance, a shrine room holds a **seated Buddha image** (red highlights in Fig. 15) displaying dharmachakra (teaching) mudra.



Fig. 16. Columns with compressed cushion capitals and elaborate brackets, Cave 1, Ajanta.

Paintings

Cave 1 and 2 were likely the two last caves painted at Ajanta. While the paintings in Caves 2 and 17

are also world class, **we believe this cave houses the most impressive 5th century paintings in the entire complex.** Further, they are better preserved and illuminated, making them even better for viewing.

The paintings line the walls around the central hall. The most important paintings are reviewed in the order that they are encountered, beginning at the entrance and continuing in clockwise rotation around the periphery of the central hall. To help focus your viewing, **we mark our favorite frescoes with asterisks (*)**.

The overarching theme of Cave 1's paintings centers on enlightened kingship; perhaps this is attributable to the identity of the sponsor, King Harisena.

Front wall

The **Sibi Jataka** covers the inside of the front (entrance) wall, to the left upon entering. The Sibi Jataka tells the story of King Sibi, a prior incarnation of the Buddha, who protects a pigeon fleeing a hawk. Sibi, recognizing the hawk's right to kill the pigeon, agrees to give the hawk an equal weight of his own flesh on the condition that it spare the pigeon's life. The pigeon, when placed on a scale, continues to increase in weight until it approaches that of the king himself. Nevertheless, King Sibi keeps his word and prepares to die for the pigeon, revealing his divine quality of fairness. Look for the crowned King Sibi standing next to the scale used to weigh the pigeon (see center of [Fig. 17](#)).

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Map and Itinerary

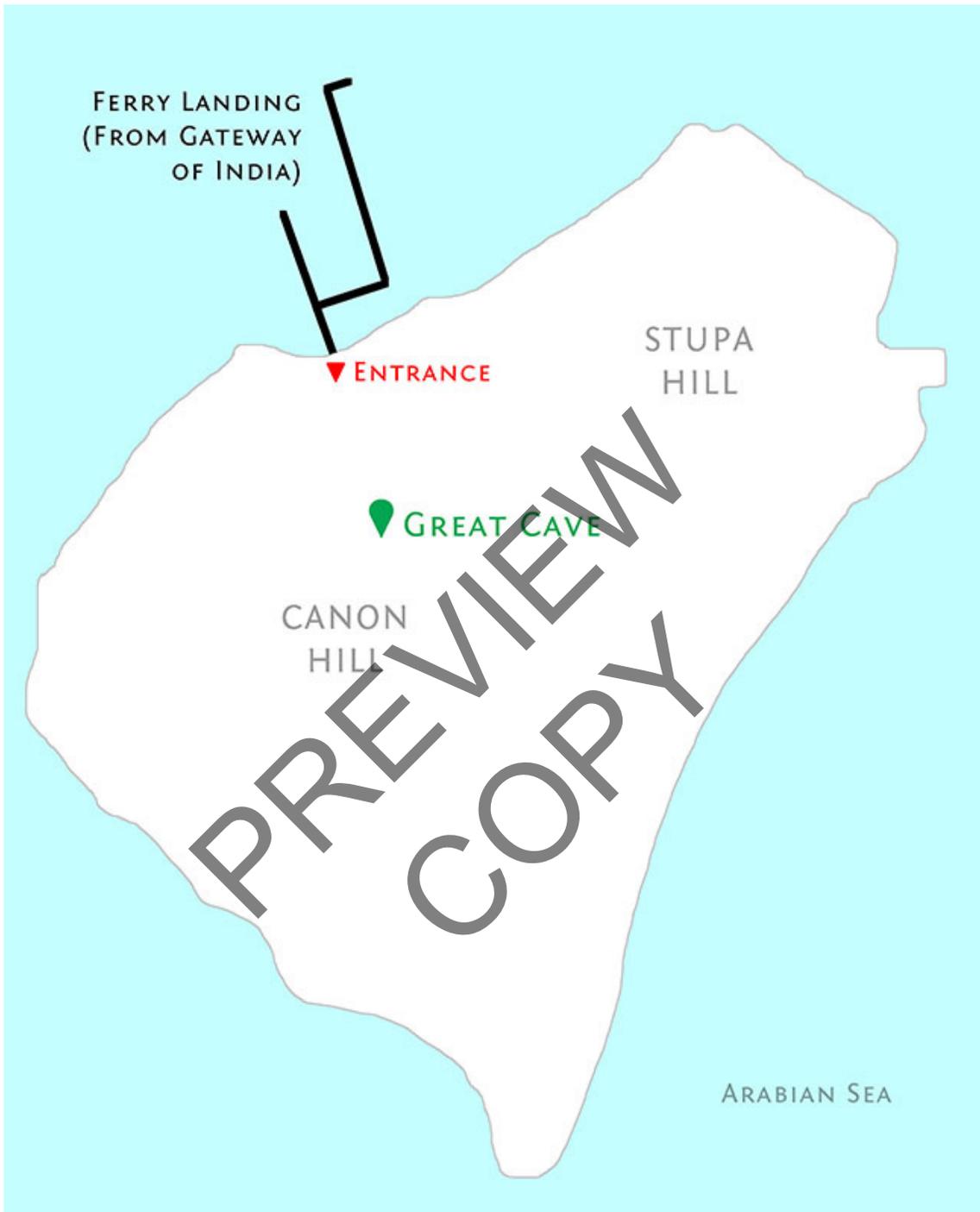


Fig. 64. Elephanta Island, Mumbai. See detailed satellite view in [Google Maps](#).

Itinerary

We provide a detailed tour of the island's premier site, the Great Cave, profiling its chief architectural features and its world-class reliefs.

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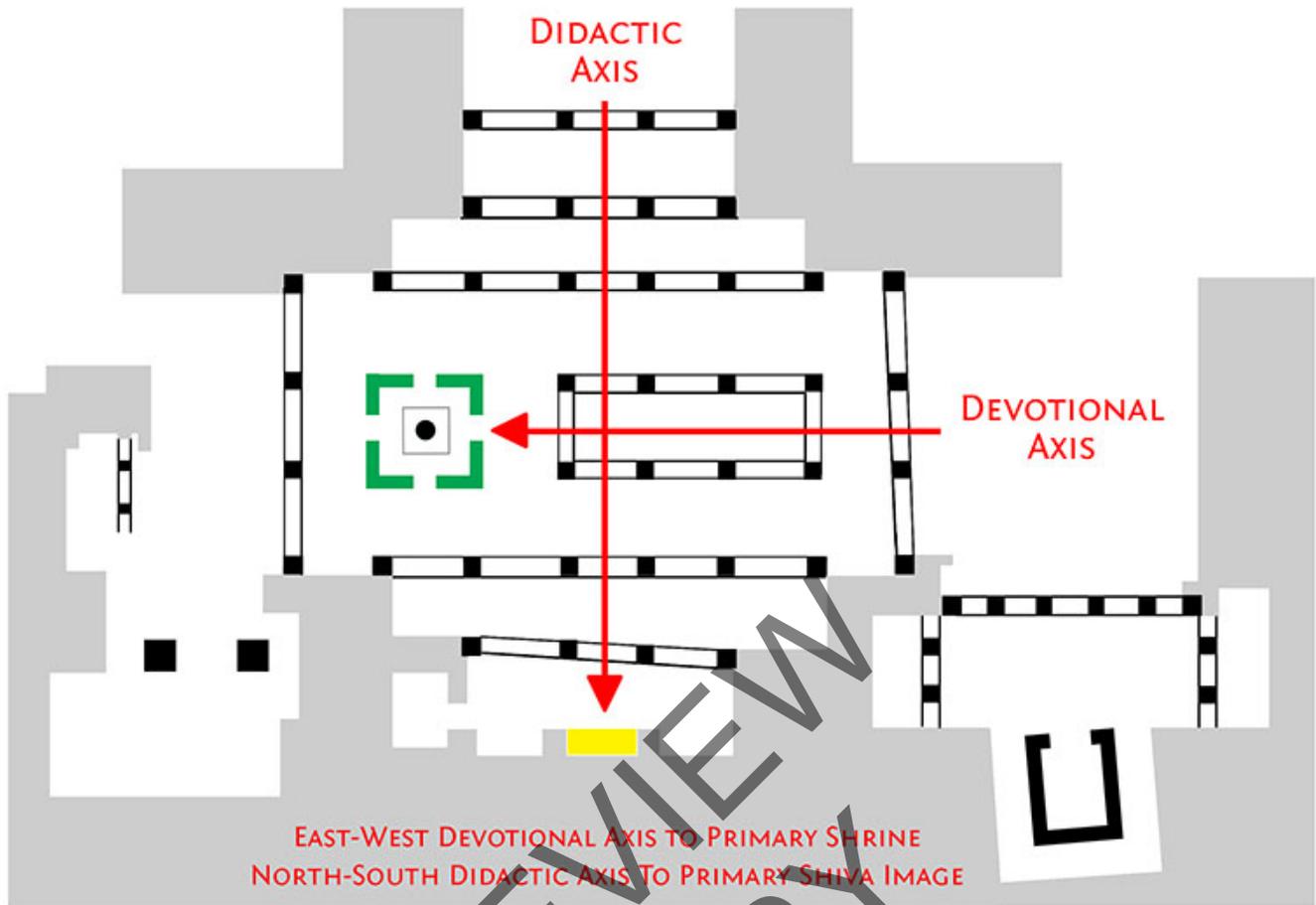


Fig. 67. The two primary axes, Great Cave, Elephanta. Highlights added.

Two Primary Axes

The Great Cave's new three-entrance layout naturally encouraged the introduction of **two primary axes** (marked with red arrows in Fig. 67) along which devotees were encouraged to move; this compares with the single-axis arrangements of earlier Buddhist excavations. Both axes in the Great Cave direct devotees to abstract images of the presiding deity, Shiva.

East-to-west axis: the devotional axis

On the east-to-west axis, visitors enter through the eastern entrance and proceed toward the shrine (green highlights in Fig. 67), at the center of which is a linga. **The eastern entrance was likely designed to be the cave's principal one** and the east-west alignment of the ceiling moldings (between the columns) attests to its primacy.

We view the east-to-west axis as the **devotional axis**, as it leads the devotee to a direct interaction with the Shiva linga — a direct manifestation of the deity — in his shrine. Such personal interaction is the foundation of Hindu temple ritual. Along this axis, devotees move toward light, as the tem-

ple's west side is open; this serves to backlight and highlight the linga (see Fig. 68), infusing it with an divine radiance.

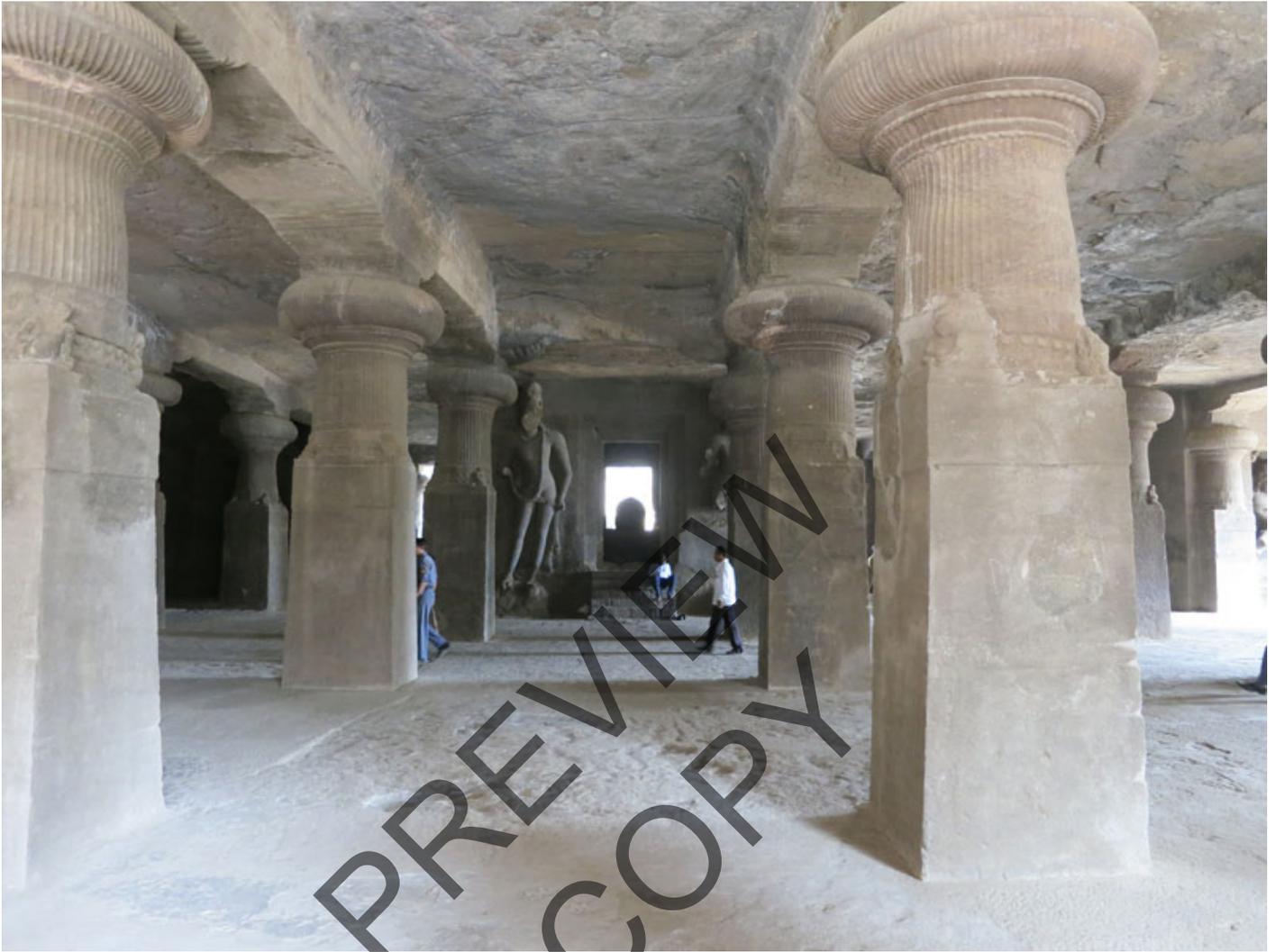


Fig. 68. View from eastern entrance along east-west axis, Great Cave, Elephanta.

North-to-south axis: the didactic axis

On the north-to-south axis, **devotees enter through the northern entrance (which serves as the modern entrance)** and proceed southward toward the temple's most important relief, that of Sadashiva (see yellow highlights in Fig. 67). See more on this image in the next section on "Reliefs."

We view this as the temple's **didactic axis**, as visitors would engage with the Sadashiva relief to learn of Shiva's complex, opposing natures and contemplate their meanings. In opposition to the east-to-west axis above, it represents a moving into mysterious darkness, as the Sadashiva relief lies in the darkest spot in the cave, farthest from all entrances; darkness is symbolic of the infinite and unknowable depths of divine consciousness.

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4. Sadashiva *



Fig. 75. Sadashiva, Great Cave, Elephanta.

Sadashiva — depicting the five aspects of Shiva — is **the most important in the Great Cave and the most visually striking**. It is also known as **Trimurti**, meaning three-faced.

Style

From a stylistic standpoint, this represents **the most advanced stage of Elephanta reliefs**. Sadashiva — carved so deep in relief and projecting so far from the back of the niche — takes on the appearance of an in-the-round sculpture. As a result, the massive three-headed figure appears to be rising from the basalt stone of the mountain itself.

Narrative

Sadashiva represents **Shiva in his most enigmatic form, the embodiment of all the opposing forces in the universe**. Shiva's five aspects are: Aghora, Vamadeva, Tatpurusha, Sadyojata and Ishana. Of these, only three are visible here:

- **Aghora** — represented by the male deity, Bhairava — faces east (the left side). It is symbolic of the terrifying aspect of Shiva, in which he serves as the **destructive, renovating force of the universe**. Aghora holds a serpent and is shown with serpent locks in his hair and a snarling face.
- **Vamadeva** — represented by the female deity, Uma, the earth goddess — faces west (the right side). It is symbolic of Shiva's opposite aspect, that of **the healing and preserving force**. Vamadeva is depicted with gentle features and holds a lotus flower.
- **Tatpurusha** faces north, directly at the visitor. It represents duality (manifest in Aghora and Vamadeva, male and female) resolved into the **unity of absolute knowledge, the controlling and sustaining force of the universe**. Tatpurusha naturally combines both male and female facial characteristics; it holds a lemon in its left hand, symbolic of fecundity.

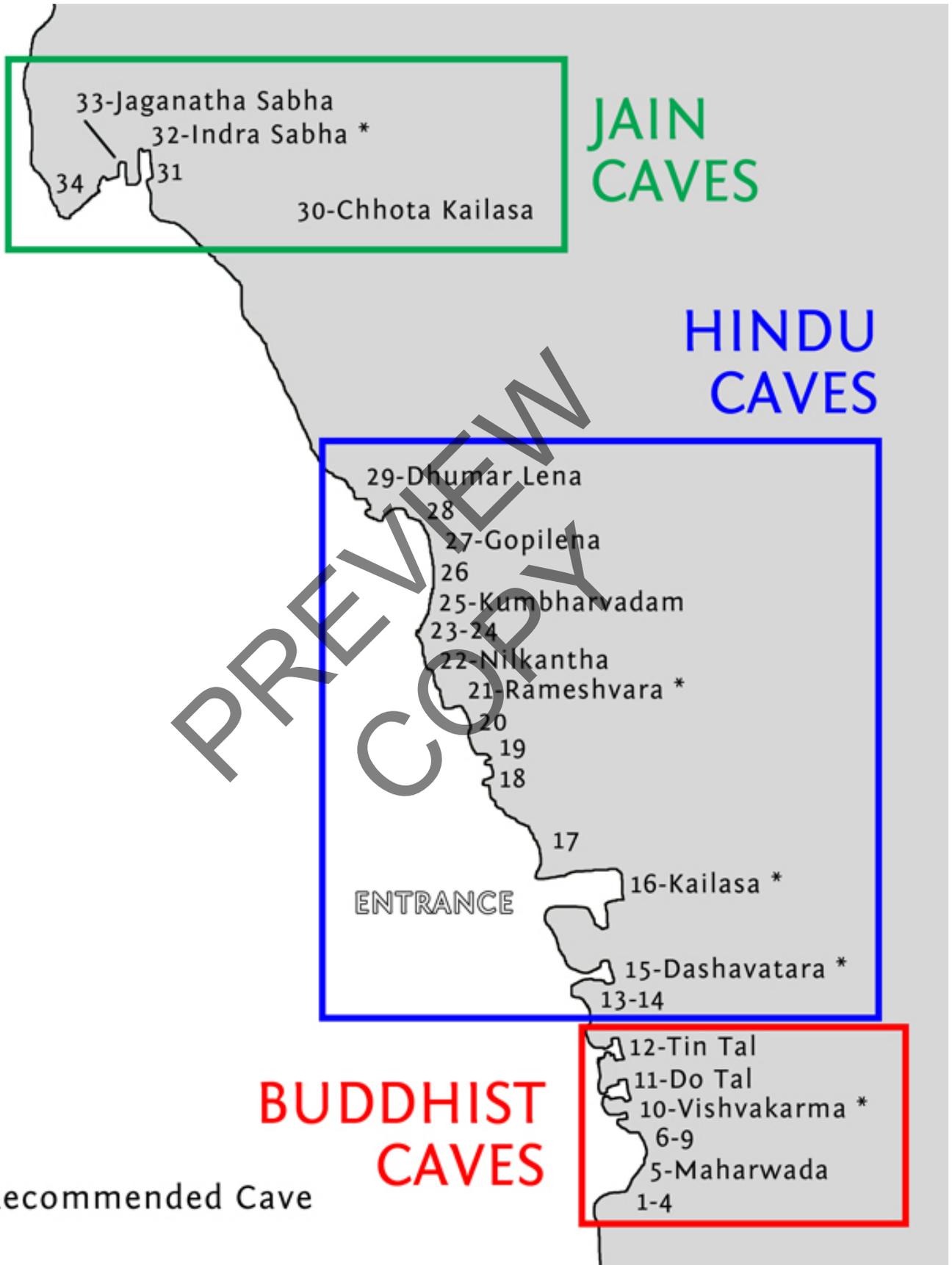
The two others are not shown:

- **Sadyojata** — represented by Mahadeva — faces south, away from the viewer; its presence is implied, as a fourth face could not be depicted in this arrangement. It represents the **creative power of the universe**.
- Finally, **Ishana** — Sadashiva itself — faces upwards and is Shiva's supreme aspect, responsible for granting *moksha* (liberation) from the cycle of rebirths that accompanies enlightenment. This aspect is never depicted, as it lies beyond human comprehension.

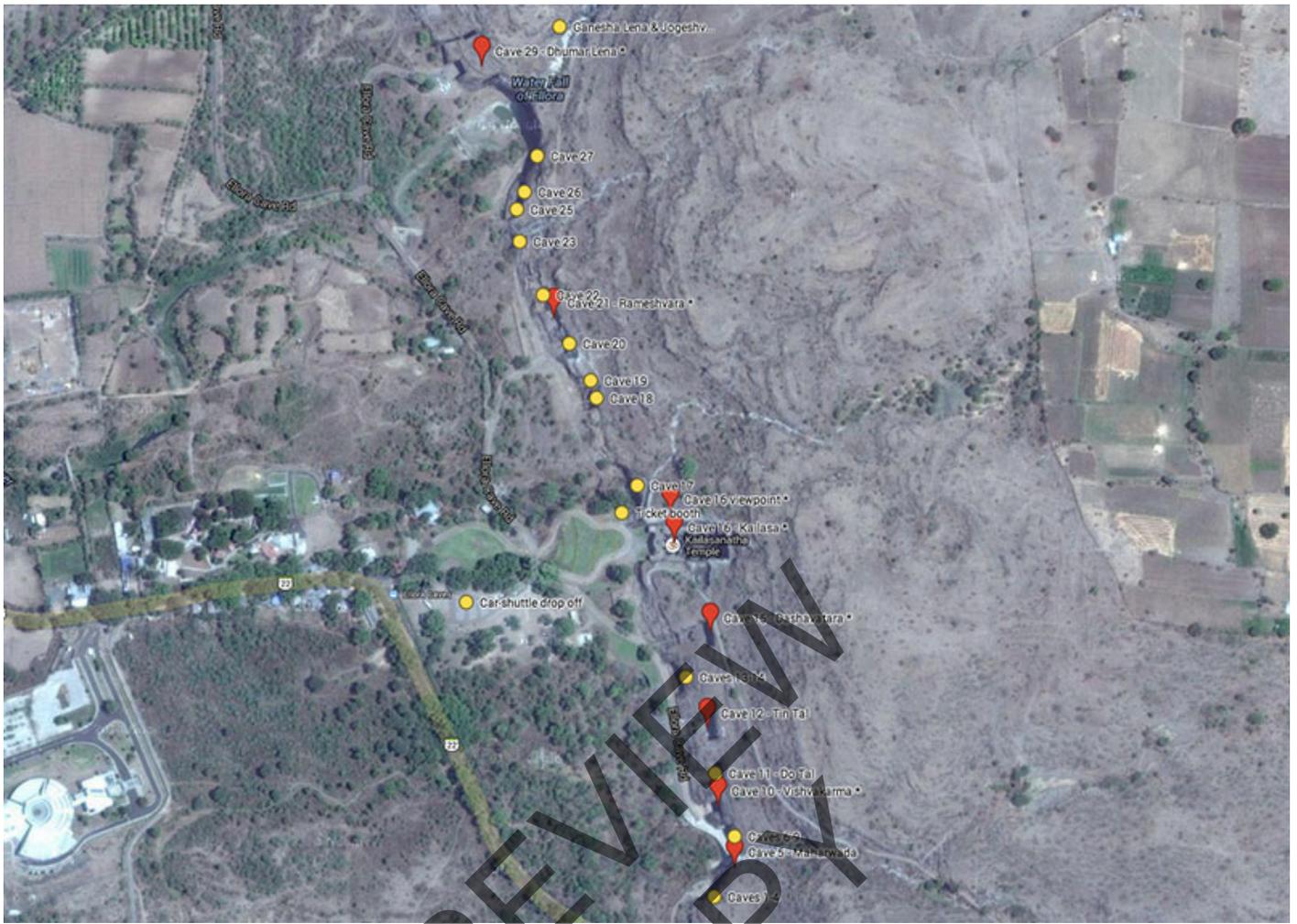
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Ellora Map



Ellora caves.



Satellite view of Ellora caves. See in [Google Maps](#).

Itinerary

Visiting

- **Location.** The 34 caves at Ellora — located 30 kilometers northwest of Aurangabad and 350 kilometers northeast of Mumbai — are spread out over 2.2 kilometers along a north-south running escarpment; for the most part, caves face westward. Ellora was located on an ancient trade route that connected the interior part of Maharashtra with trade ports on India's western coast and cities in India's north; Ajanta was one of the original sites on this same route.
- **Visiting hours.** The caves are open from 9am - 5:30pm. The site is **closed on Tuesdays**. Tickets are purchased directly in front of Cave 16. For more information, visit the [official website](#).
- **Starting point.** The car-shuttle dropoff location for most visitors is directly before Cave 16, Kailasa (see our [Google Map](#)).

Featured Caves

Our tour of Ellora features the top cave sites, following the typical progression from south to north:

- Buddhist caves 1-12 (red highlights on our map);
- Hindu caves 13-29 (blue highlights)
- Jain caves 30-34 (green highlights).

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Fig. 85. Facade, Cave 10, Ellora. Highlights added.

Facade

Consistent with Ajanta's Late Phase chaityas, Cave 10's facade has abundant decoration.

- The **columns on the lower level's pillared gallery** have square shafts. The capitals consist of stylized pots, seemingly overflowing with foliage; they are symbolic of prosperity. This is an early manifestation of this capital style; it will become significantly more elaborate in later caves, particularly Caves 12 (Buddhist), 16 (Hindu) and 32 (Jain).

- The upper hall has the **classic chaitya window**, resembling a 3/4 circle (green highlights in Fig. 85). **While its shape is consistent with Ajanta models, it is much smaller in scale and therefore plays a smaller role in shaping the overall appearance of the facade.**
- Each side of the window is flanked by **three flying apsaras** above a twisting naga (serpent).
- There are **two friezes, each decorated with a series of tightly framed scenes** of amorous couples in swaying, dynamic poses. The first is on the stone balustrade on the upper level's verandah (yellow highlights in Fig. 85) and the second is on the pediment of the upper floor (red highlights in Fig. 85).
- The ceiling over the entrance to the upper level is decorated with **stone ribs** that imitate earlier wooden beams (light blue highlights in Fig. 85).

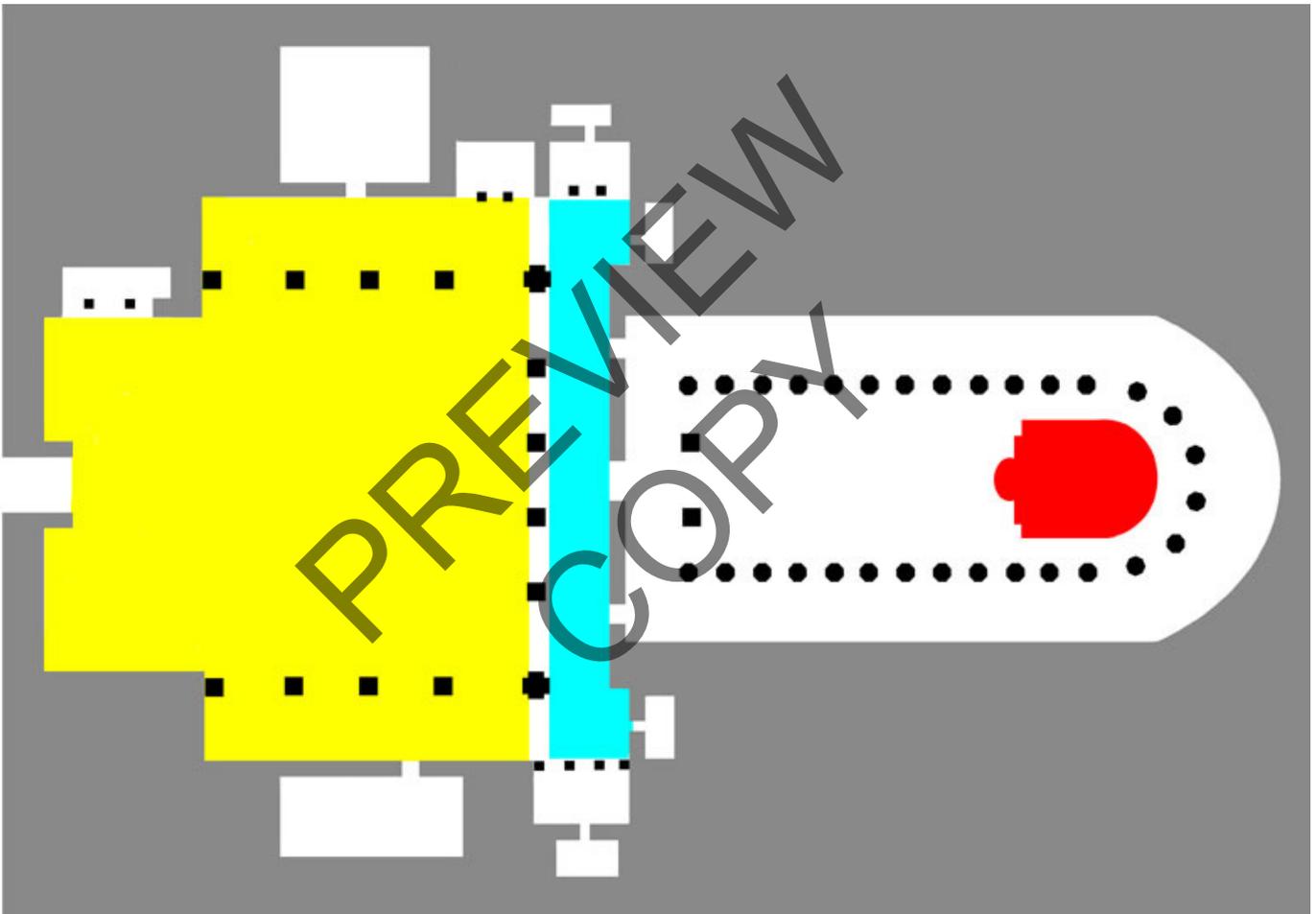


Fig. 86. Floorplan, Cave 10, Ellora. Highlights added.

Layout

This **two-level structure** represents **the ultimate expression of the Buddhist chaitya in India:**

- A **large open courtyard** (yellow highlights in Fig. 86) provides access, through a pillared

gallery (light blue highlights in Fig. 86), to the interior of the chaitya.

- The **apsidal-ended hall** holds 28 octagonal columns that divide the space into a narrow central nave (for prayer) and two side aisles (for circumambulation).
- The **internal stupa** (red highlights in Fig. 86) sits opposite the entrance; it is fronted by a seated Maitreya Buddha, the Buddha of the Future.
- The **upper floor**, consisting of a verandah and a musicians' gallery, is accessed through a stairway on the left side of the pillared gallery.



Fig. 87. Frieze, Cave 10, Ellora.

Internal Decoration

The **nave's relief decoration is simpler than that of Late Phase Ajanta prototypes**. Perhaps this was done to focus attention on the stupa's primary Buddha figure (discussed next).

- The simple **octagonal columns** surrounding the stupa support **undecorated brackets**, a step back from the ornate capitals of Ajanta.
- A **frieze** — again simpler than those of Late Phase Ajanta — runs above them (see Fig. 87). It

consists of seated Buddhas displaying the dharmachakra mudra; they are flanked by pairs of attendants. At the Buddhas' feet is a thin register of miniature figures, with arms raised, who appear to be supporting the Buddhas' platform; above, bridging the gap from the frieze to the stone ribs of the ceiling, are stout figures, arms clasped to their chests in prayer.

- As is typical, the nave's **curved vault ceiling** has stone ribs (see Fig. 88) that imitate earlier wooden beams.

Ajanta and Ellora: Stupa Forms Compared

In the earlier discussion of Ajanta, we reviewed the changing form of the chaitya's stupa, from its Early Phase in the 1st and 2nd centuries BCE (under Theravada Buddhism) to its Late Phase in the 5th century CE (under Mahayana Buddhism). Altogether, this transformation **yielded an increased emphasis on the Buddha image** and a commensurate de-emphasis of the stupa; these trends are consistent with the Mahayana school.

Cave 10 basically continues the trend where it left off at Ajanta. Accordingly, it shares many features with Ajanta's most developed stupa arrangement, that of Late Phase Cave 26:

- The **anda** (green highlights in Fig. 88) is **smaller and 3/4 egg shaped**, like Cave 26, rather than 3/4 sphere shaped like Early Phase versions. It sits on an **elevated platform** (yellow highlights in Fig. 88), affording the overall structure greater upward momentum.
- The **harmika** (red highlights in Fig. 88) remains generally consistent with earlier prototypes.
- **The Buddha is positioned boldly in front of the stupa.** You will remember that representations of the Buddha were not allowed in the early centuries of the faith under Theravada Buddhism; only with the emergence of the Mahayana sect — this, the progressive school of Buddhism, was formed in the 2nd century CE — did such representations begin. Just as at Ajanta's Cave 26, he is seated and displays the dharmachakra (teaching) mudra.



Fig. 88. Stupa, Cave 10, Ellora. Highlights added.

Despite these similarities, Cave 10 goes a bit further, creating **the most developed chaitya stupa arrangement on Indian soil**. The most notable change is the **markedly increased size of the Buddha figure**. His scale is now massive, in sharp contrast to the more human-sized Buddhas in Ajanta; for comparison purposes, see **Fig. 89** of Ajanta's Cave 26.

Seated in a Western manner (both feet on the floor), he is flanked (for the first time) by attendants and backed by a large Bodhi tree. Further, he is **positioned in an even more forward, approachable position**, as opposed to the enclosed position (under the stupa canopy) at Ajanta.



Fig. 89. Stupa, Cave 26 (late 5th century), Ajanta. Highlights added.

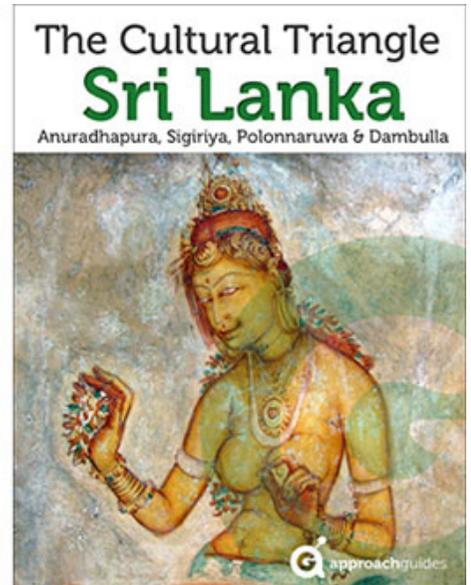
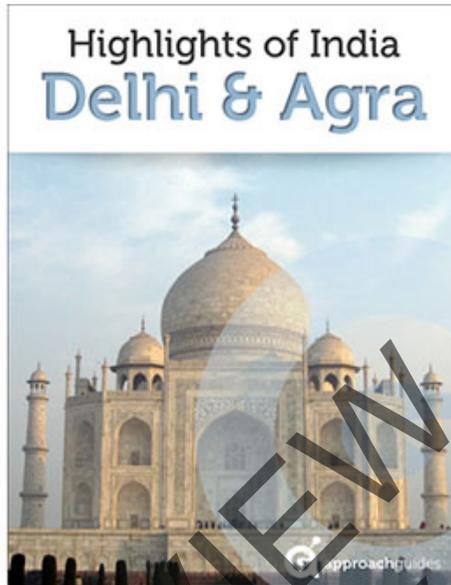
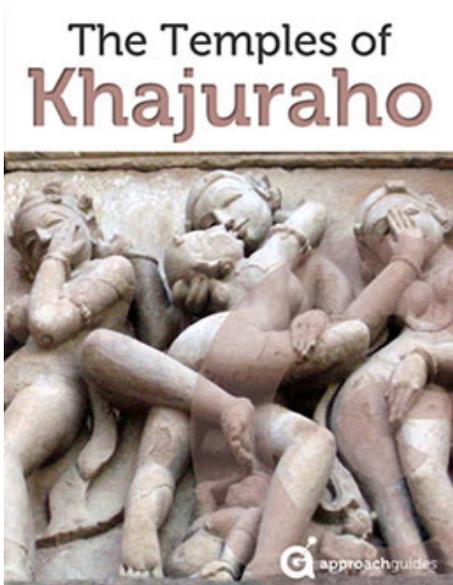
These modifications further attest to the **changed nature of ritual under the Mahayana school of Buddhism**: the worship of an abstract symbol (the stupa) is de-emphasized in favor of a more concrete, identifiable Buddha figure, with whom the devotee can interact on a personal level.

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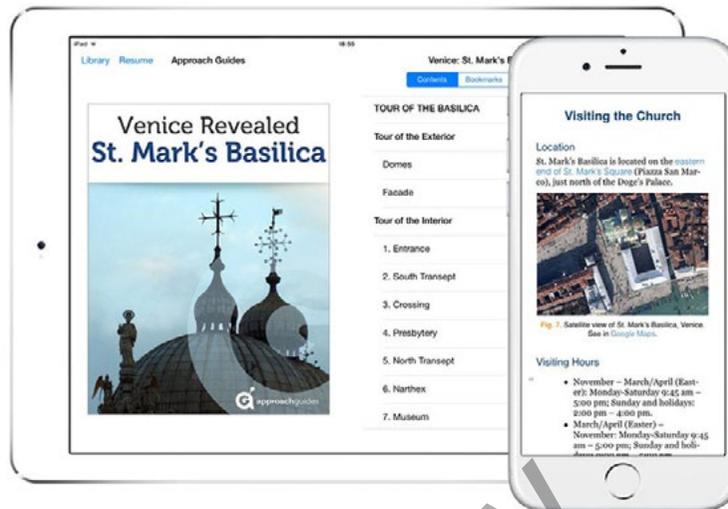
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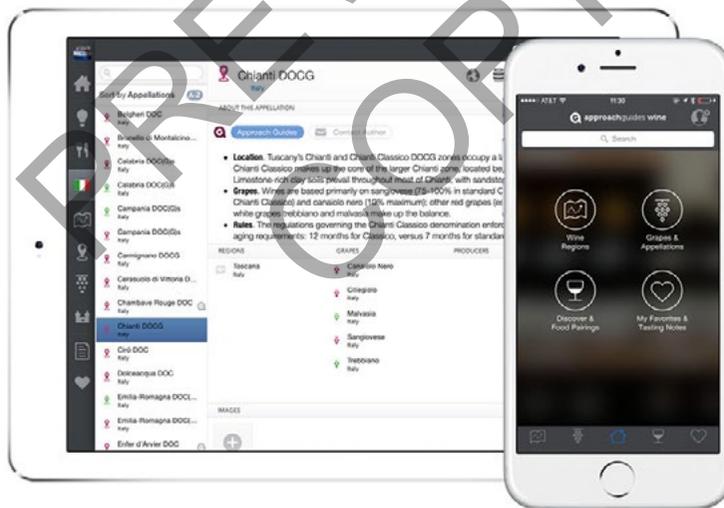
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