

Bhimbetka Rock Shelters Are a Display of Human Art

The Rock Shelters of Bhimbetka is an archaeological UNESCO World Heritage Site found at the foothills of Vindhyan Mountains of Madhya Pradesh, India. It is made up of imposing rock caves that were evidently used by early man as shelter. The points of interest in the area are the vivid rock paintings which archaeologists date back thousands of years. It is believed that Homo erectus inhabited the area during the Mesolithic and Paleolithic period. The rock art is a clear indication that civilization started thousands of years ago in India as they depict the way of life during those eras.



The vast area around the rocks is covered by dense lush forest and has numerous water streams which experts believe could have been a great motivator to the Paleolithic and subsequent settlers. The accidental discovery of the rocks is credited to V.S. Wakankar, who while on his way to Bhopal via train noticed rocks similar to what he had come across in Spain and France. He gathered his team and explored the area in 1957 and discovered some of the most remarkable evidence of human life and culture during pre-civilization. However, Indian sources of 1888 cite local adivasis, who are a minority group of aboriginal settlers, terming the rocks as part of the Buddhist worship site.

Detailed excavation works have identified 750 shelters in an area covering 1,839 hectares. UNESCO eventually listed Bhimbetka, located within the Ratapani Tiger Sanctuary as a World Heritage Site in 2003, effectively putting it under protection of the international community. The shelters are categorized into two – Bhimbetka group and Lakha Juar group.



What you would find fascinating as a visitor is the ingenuity and sophistication with which the rock floors were carved out by early man for comfort. They have interesting contours and spectacular tinges. Then

there are the amazing paintings on the walls and the floors. The pictures portray a lifestyle where communication was key with drawings showing a diverse range of animals that lived around the area. They also bring to light scenic aspects such as religion and dancing celebrations, cultural rites such as burials and childbirth, hunting, gathering, and the general outlook of the surrounding at that time.

Archaeologists believe that rock art impressions of men on horses carrying shields, spears, and arrows were added in later years as life took a turn due to interaction of several cultures. Drawings also show battle scenes of warriors carrying swords while riding on elephants. It is like a chronological story being passed from generation to generation. The oldest of the paintings that have been discovered so far dates back 30,000 years while the recent ones are believed to be drawn in the medieval era.

Researchers have gone a step further to classify the breathtaking paintings into respective epochs:

Period I is the Upper Paleolithic era depicted by large linear representation of the environment and the animals of that time such as tigers, bison, and rhinoceroses. Most of the paintings are colored in red and green splashes.

Period II represents the Mesolithic era whose linear drawings are relatively smaller and with decorations on the bodies of animals. The paintings illustrate scenes of human figures hunting animals using spears, sharp sticks, and arrows. There are drawings of birds, women and children, pregnant women, burial and dancing ceremonies, and drinking and celebration scenes complete with musical instruments.



Period III represents the Chalcolithic period which is denoted by drawings of interaction and trading with agricultural communities. The paintings show the inhabitants exchanging goods.

Periods IV and V are classified as Early historic and are marked by a considerable shift in the colors used in the rock art: red, yellow and white are dominant with drawings showing a dramatic change in dress and style, religion which is depicted by flying chariots and other symbols, and riders on horses.

Periods VI and VII are a clear representation of the medieval era with more schematic drawings and sophisticated methods of color making. There is some bit of degeneration in what they painted. One drawing shows a bison attacking a man with two other men watching helplessly.

As excavations continued in to the 1980s, tools such as axes, choppers, and knives were discovered. The petroglyphs and the caves are an interesting spectacle that would attract any person who would like

to delve into man's early life. Tourists are not only treated to the archaeological aspects but also the abundant wildlife of Ratapani Tiger Reserve which boasts of leopards, striped jackals, sloth bears, Indian rock python, among other rare animals in a remarkably preserved natural habitat.

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