

The Temples of Khajuraho



Introduction

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Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food or wine.

The magnificent 10th-12th century Hindu temples of Khajuraho — with their soaring towers and engaging sculptures — represent the pinnacle of the North Indian temple style. Still infused with their historical magic, they are yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Art and architecture review.** We provide an overview of Hindu architecture, isolating trademark features that you will see again and again while touring Khajuraho's temples. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **The Khajuraho style.** We then turn our focus to the temples of Khajuraho, highlighting the architectural advancements that were undertaken to make them the culmination of the North Indian temple style. To help travelers understand the groundbreaking nature of these advancements, we compare the temples of Khajuraho with those in the neighboring state of Orissa.
- **Tour of the highlights.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we offer a tour of Khajuraho's premier temples: Lakshmana, Vishvanatha, Chitragupta, Devi Jagadambi, and Kandariya Mahadeva. For each, we reveal its most important architectural and decorative features and offer a discussion that ties it all together.
- **The reliefs.** Since the inevitable highlight of any visit to Khajuraho is seeing the famous erotic reliefs that adorn its temples' walls, we reveal their stylistic features, their symbolism, and the religious philosophy of Tantra that likely inspired them.
- **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.

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We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Khajuraho's Hindu temples and sets

you on a path to making your own discoveries.

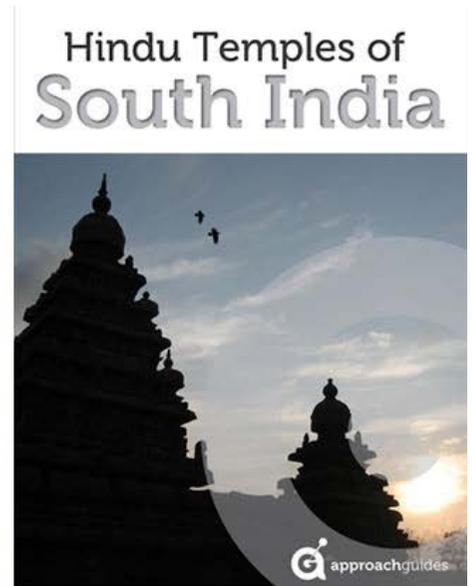
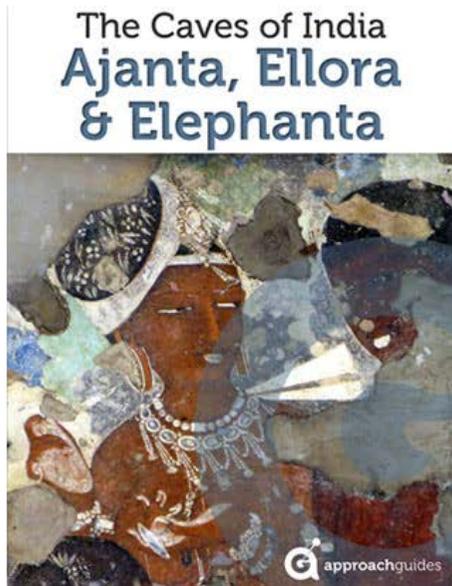
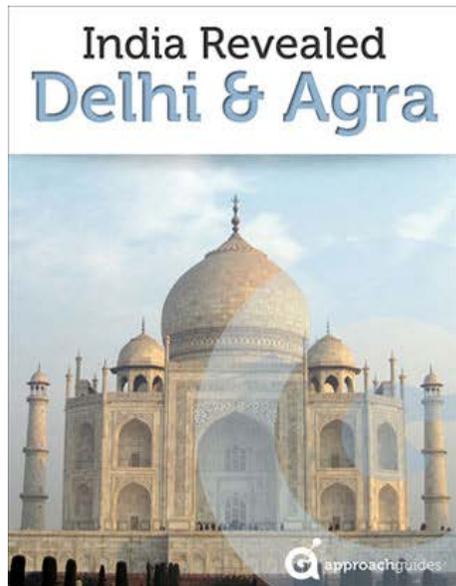
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Guide to the Temples of Khajuraho (India)

Version 1.2

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

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Contents

Introduction

Basics of Hindu Architecture

History of Indian Temple Building

Understanding a Hindu Temple

Architecture

Decoration

North and South Indian Temples Compared

North Indian (Nagara) Temple Style

South Indian (Dravidian) Temple Style

Khajuraho's Temples

Background

Pinnacle of North Indian Temple Style

Reliefs and Sculptures

Style and Types

Erotic Reliefs – History and Meaning

Tour of Western Group Temples

1. Lakshmana

2. Vishvanatha

3. Chitragupta

4. Devi Jagadambi

5. Kandariya Mahadeva

Featured Southern Group Temple: Chaturbhuj

TRAVEL TIPS

Continuing Travel in India

India Reading List

Packing List

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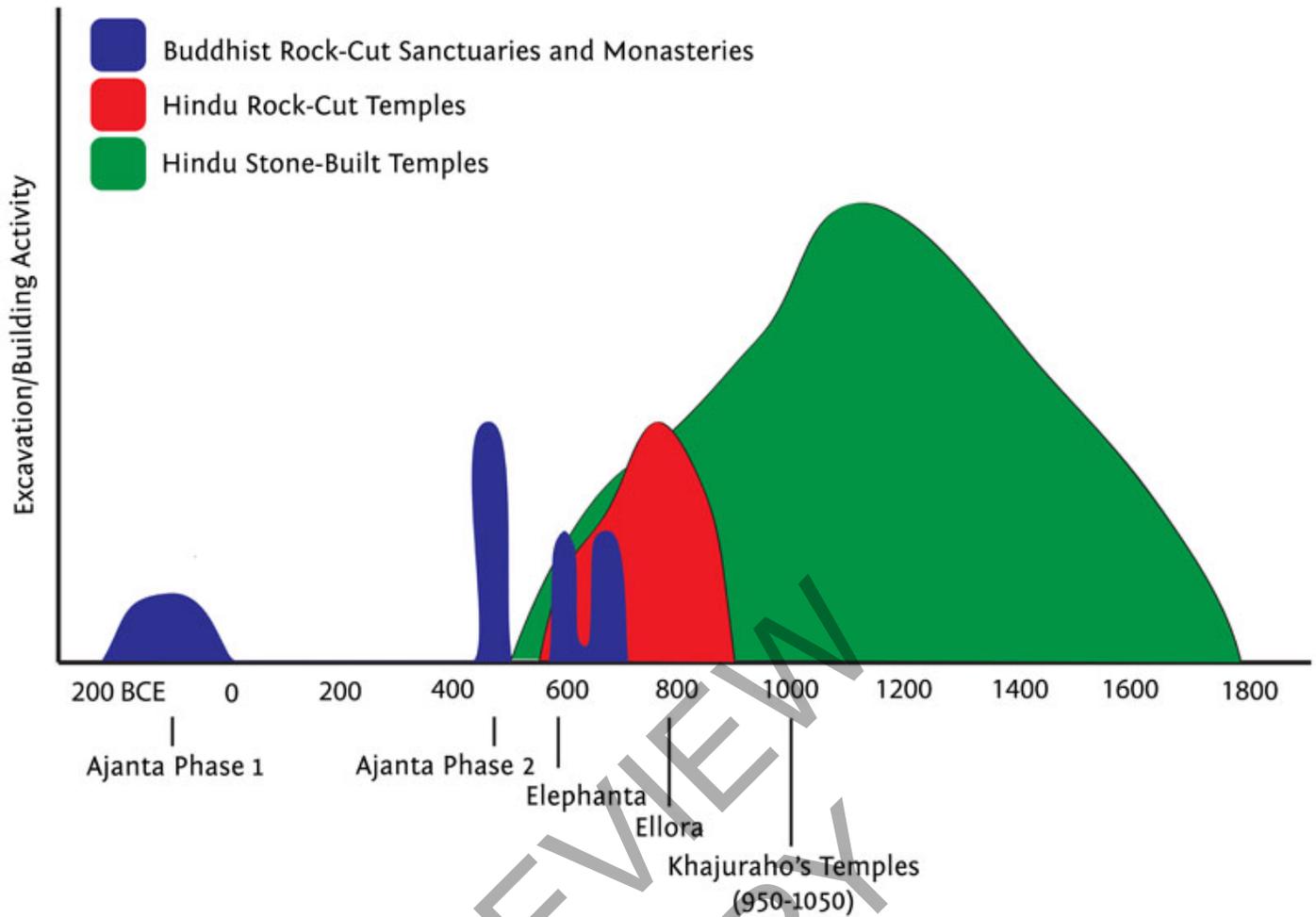


Fig. 1. Timeline of stone architecture in India.

Buddhism gets the ball rolling

The first stone architecture in India was rock cut and executed by Buddhist monks; prior to these structures, all architecture had been made of wood. The most impressive examples were rock-cut religious sanctuaries, excavated directly out of the basalt mountains lining the western edge of the **Deccan Plateau**, the elevated, v-shaped landmass that comprises most of the Indian peninsula. The **caves at Ajanta** — as well as those at nearby Bedsa, Bhaja, Karla, Kondane, Nashik, and Pithkhora — were part of this **initial wave of excavations**.

Inspiration for India's rock-cut architecture

- Early Buddhist architecture was likely **indirectly inspired by that of the Egyptians**. The Egyptians were probably the first civilization in the world to construct stone architecture; they began with stone-built pyramids in the 27th century BCE (Djoser's Step Pyramid in Saqqara) and continued with rock-cut tombs in the 16th century BCE (Valley of the Kings in Luxor).

- At the same time, similar stone-built pyramids, called **ziggurats**, were being built not too far away in Mesopotamia (modern day Iran and Iraq); the earliest probably date from the late part of Sumeria's Early Dynastic period (2900-2350 BCE). The ziggurat pyramid design, however, was never transformed from stepped to smooth edged, as was the case in Egypt.
- **Egyptian and Mesopotamian forms and building practices were borrowed by the Persians, who embraced rock-cut architecture.** In fact, the royal tombs of Darius (522 BCE to 486 BCE) and the rest of the Old Persian (Achaemenid) Empire were rock cut; they are located just outside of the ancient city of Persepolis in modern-day Iran.

Most likely drawing on Persian precedent, India's earliest stone architects commenced building rock-cut architecture in the 3rd-2nd centuries BCE. These architects adapted Persian forms — infusing them with local design preferences derived from their existing wood-based architecture and introducing entirely new features to suit their unique religious practices — to create rock-cut caves with an entirely new aesthetic.

Why were the Buddhists the first to build in stone?

It appears that the Buddhists just happened to have the support of rulers and rich merchants during the critical period in which Persian rock-cut architectural practices began to trickle into the subcontinent.

Keep in mind, although the Buddhist faith was founded in India in the 6th century BCE, it did not gain widespread adoption until it received imperial sponsorship by the powerful Mauryan Emperor, Ashoka, who converted to Buddhism and ruled most of the Indian subcontinent from 269-232 BCE. The faith garnered subsequent momentum as a rising merchant class were attracted to Buddhism given the absence of Hinduism's rigid caste restrictions that would have otherwise restrained their rise in social stature.

Collapse of Buddhism in India

By the start of the 7th century, Buddhism had begun its prolonged decline in India, the result of foreign invasions that negatively impacted the faith's leadership and Hinduism's success in eroding its base of devotees. Although Buddhism enjoyed a strong revival under the Mahayana-oriented Pala Empire (between the 8th and the 12th centuries), this was confined to a small area of India: the Bihar and Bengal regions. For the most part, **by the early 8th century, the construction of large-scale Buddhist monuments had ceased**, as the center of the faith had relocated to China, Japan, Tibet, and Southeast Asia. And by the 12th century, the faith had been eradicated from India entirely.

Viewed from this perspective, the rock-cut caves of Ajanta and Ellora represent the first blossoming of Buddhist architecture in India, as well as its grandest achievements. Buddhist architecture was to continue, but not in India.

A new stage: Buddhism in the Far East

Buddhism spread to the rest of Asia by way of **Silk Road trade routes**, beginning in the 1st century BCE, accelerating under the Indian Kushan Empire in the 1st-3rd centuries, and continuing with momentum through the 8th century.

This prolonged period of exchange sowed the seeds for **Buddhist architecture to bloom again in China and Southeast Asia**. Magnificent Buddhist structures outside of India — Angkor in Cambodia; Borobudur in Indonesia; Bagan in Myanmar; Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Bangkok in Thailand; and throughout China — would be where the rock-cut tradition successfully transitioned to massive stone-built architecture.

The Rise and Fall of Hindu Rock-Cut Architecture

While there is an overlap of nearly two hundred years when both Hindu and Buddhist structures were built in India — from roughly 500 to 700 (see [Fig. 1](#)) — Hinduism emerged triumphant over Buddhism and dominated all subsequent Indian architecture.

Interestingly, the Hindu architectural tradition began with stone-built, rather than rock-cut, temples; these stone-built temples, however, were clearly influenced by the rock-hewn Buddhist monastery (vihara) and sanctuary (chaitya) cave forms. The first experimentation with this transformation from rock-hewn to stone-built structures occurred in Aihole (in the state of Karnataka) and Mahabalipuram (in the state of Tamil Nadu), beginning in the early 6th century.

That said, Hindus did undertake rock-cut architecture for a brief period subsequent to the construction of their first stone-built temples. Elephanta (in the mid- to late- 6th century) and Ellora (mid-6th century to the ninth century) are the fruits of the rock-cut stage of Hindu architecture. As it turns out, Ellora was the last site of rock-cut Hindu architecture in India.

Khajuraho as Culmination of Northern Hindu Temple Style

After the cessation of rock-cut Hindu architecture at Ellora, all subsequent Hindu architecture was stone built. Engineering and design had advanced to a point where temples could be constructed in more populated urban centers, rather than on remote hillsides. The age of large-scale stone-built congregational temples was beginning.

The stone-built tradition quickly **splintered into two distinct styles: North Indian and South Indian**. We explore the details of each style in subsequent sections. With this foundation in place, this Approach Guide continues by reviewing the temples of Khajuraho, the grandest expression of the North Indian temple style.

Basics of Hindu Architecture

Hindu Cosmology Shapes the Temple Form

The Hindu temple recreates the universe and every person's struggle, occurring over multiple lifetimes, to cast aside illusion in order to realize divine truth and oneness with an infinite god.

- **The mountain residence of the gods.** Under Hindu cosmology, the gods have always been associated with mountains. The temple's overall form, dominated by its large central tower (*vimana*), recreates the appearance of god's mountaintop residence.
- **God's cave.** The temple's dark inner sanctuary is designed to represent the cave into which god descends from his mountain home and becomes accessible to human beings.
- **The sacred world axis.** In the Hindu temple, the worlds of the divine and living connect at the intersection of god's vertical axis (mountaintop to cave) and humans' horizontal axis (temple entrance to cave). The entire universe emanates from this intersection, as unity with god is the goal of earthly existence. Remember, in Hinduism, god is believed to temporarily physically inhabit his representation in the sanctuary; the Hindu temple is arranged to enable the **direct devotee-to-deity interaction** that necessarily follows. Unlike other faiths, there is no religious intermediary and no abstraction; god is manifest before the devotee's eyes, a profound encounter.

Temple Layout

East-west alignment

The Hindu temple — set upon a high plinth or platform to symbolize its significance — is laid out in an east-west alignment, with the entrance on the eastern side and the sanctuary on the western.

God's mount at the temple entrance

The approach to the temple entrance (*ardha-mandapa*) is indicated by the presence of the resident divinity's mount or transport:

- **Temples venerating Shiva** (and his consort, Parvati) display stone images of his mount, Nandi (a seated bull), facing the main shrine. See [Fig. 2](#).
- **Temples dedicated to Vishnu** (and his consort, Lakshmi) display stone images of his mount, Garuda (a mythical bird), facing the main shrine.

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Fig. 8. Northern style temple (Kandariya Mahadeva, Khajuraho). Highlights added.

Inward-Bending Convex Towers

The form of the tower (vimana) over the sanctuary is a chief differentiator versus the Southern style:

- **Curvilinear tower profile.** The Northern style's tower (**Fig. 8**) exhibits sharp vertical sides that **bend inwards as they approach the summit**, forming a corn cob-like shape.
- **Vertical emphasis.** Strong vertical lines running the full height of the tower emphasize the vertical axis and the structure's upward momentum. Unlike the Southern style's tower, there are no accentuated storeys or levels, as their horizontal orientations would detract from such momentum.
- **Buddhist stupa inspiration.** The original inspiration for this tower form was likely the Buddhist stupa mound. The modestly projecting vertical face located in the middle of each side of the tower (a characteristic of all Northern temple vimanas) was likely derived from the flight of steps that ran up the side of the stupa.
- **The crown.** Ribbed fruits (*amalakas*) and pot finials were used to top key structures, es-

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Fig. 17. Upward momentum, Kandariya Mahadeva, Khajuraho. Highlights added.

Roofline

Khajuraho's most advanced temple, Kandariya Mahadeva, achieves maximum vertical impact by emphasizing the shape of its curvilinear vimana tower.

- **Curvilinear mandapa roofs.** The curvilinear form of the primary tower is **repeated in the roofs of the mandapas** (maha mandapa, mandapa, and ardha-mandapa); see green highlights in Fig 17. This compares versus temples in Orissa in which the vimana tower above the sanctuary (green highlights in Fig. 18) is the only strongly vertical component; the mandapa's roof maintains a tiered pyramid shape, with strong horizontal moldings that detract from its overall upward thrust (red highlights in Fig. 18).
- **Gradual rise.** Further, the mandapas create a **smooth rise** from the entranceway (eastern end) to the dramatic summit over the sanctuary (western end); see red arrow in Fig. 17.
- **Clinging towers.** The sides of the primary tower over the sanctum are covered with **smaller tower-like forms** (yellow highlights in Fig. 17), further accentuating the vertical momentum and creating a more dynamic three-dimensional surface. With one notable

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Fig. 25. Three registers of sculptural panels, junction mandapa and sanctuary, Khajuraho. Highlights added.

Type 1: deep bas-reliefs in horizontal registers

Khajuraho's most prominent reliefs reside in **horizontal registers (2.5-3 feet in height)** that run around the periphery of the temple; they are positioned midway up the walls of temples in prime viewing positions (red highlights in Fig. 25). The deep, near three-dimensional panels were **carved separately, then inserted into place on the walls of the temples**; in fact, the joints among the individual panels are clearly visible. These horizontal registers serve to balance the

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Lakshmana

Author Tip: *The first temple that you encounter upon entering the Western Group is also its oldest. Lakshmana is a groundbreaking structure, pioneering many features that would come to define the Khajuraho style. Exploring its exterior and interior decoration — still in excellent condition — is an ideal way to begin your visit to Khajuraho.*

Background

- **Constructed:** 930-950.
- **Resident deity:** Vishnu.



Fig. 32. Lakshmana, Khajuraho.

Layout

- **Five-temple platform.** This is an excellent example of the **five-temple platform** arrangement: rather than a single temple sitting atop an elevated platform, the large central temple is surrounded by **four small shrines** that sit in the corners. The two shrines in the rear point toward the front of the platform; the two at the front point toward its center.
- Visitors enter the temple from the east, passing through an **ardha-mandapa** entranceway (green highlights in Fig. 33), a **mandapa** (blue highlights in Fig. 33) and a larger **maha mandapa** (yellow highlights in Fig. 33) en route to the **sanctuary** (red highlights in Fig. 33). There are **five projecting balconies** (light blue highlights in Fig. 33) and an **ambulatory** (pink highlights in Fig. 33) around the sanctuary.
- As discussed in an introductory section (“Pinnacle of North Indian Temple Style”), Lakshmana marked a major shift in temple design. Here, for the first time, **the sanctuary and maha mandapa were fused into an integrated unit**; in earlier temples, they remained largely discrete elements, connected through a narrow passageway.
- As is typical of the Northern style, the towers are topped by ribbed fruits (amalakas) and pot finials.

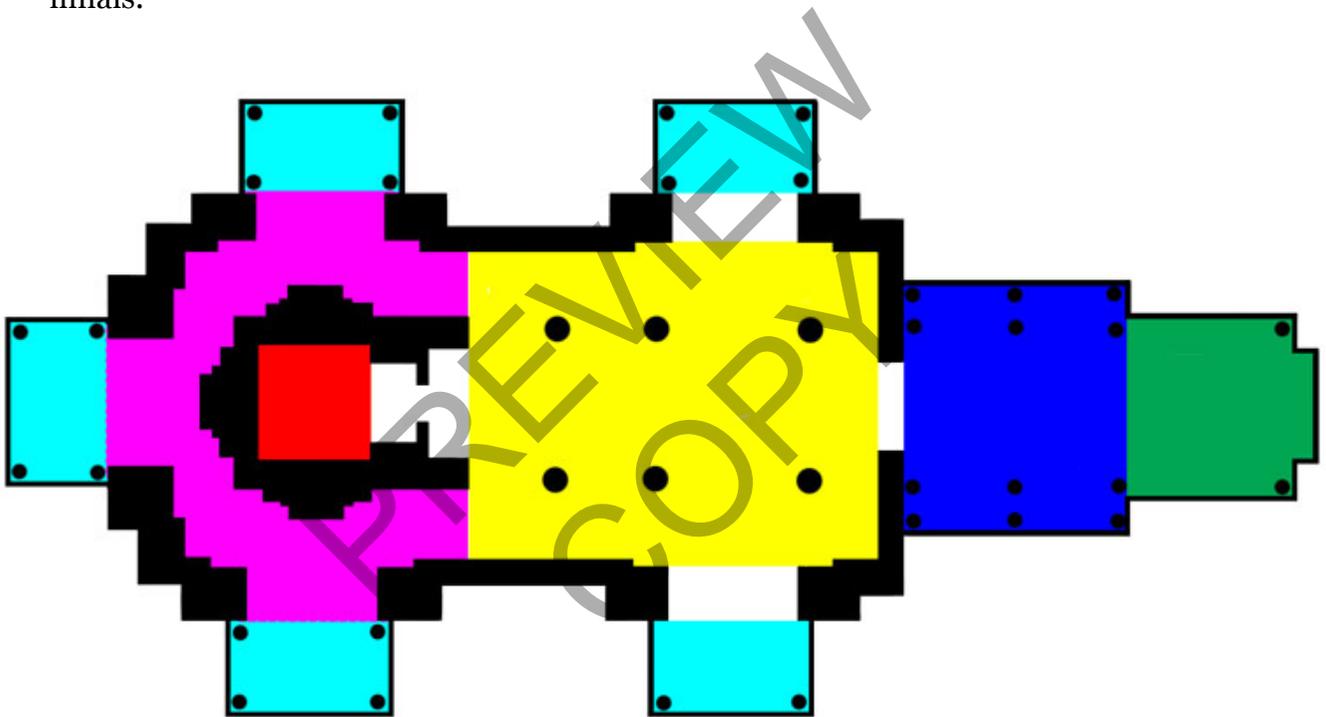


Fig. 33. Floorplan, Lakshmana, Khajuraho. Highlights added.

Vertical Emphasis

Lakshmana represents the first attempt to break from Orissan temple precedent and introduce a more vertically-oriented temple style.

- To further emphasize the verticality of the tower over the sanctuary (green highlights in Fig. 34), Lakshmana introduced **smaller decorative towers that cling to its sides** (yellow highlights in Fig. 34). This was an important first step; these clinging towers will grow in numbers in subsequent temples.

- Nevertheless, Lakshmana remained anchored in earlier Orissan temple precedent: **the roofs over its mandapas still exhibit a tiered pyramidal shape** (red highlights in Fig. 34). Their prominent horizontal moldings weigh on the overall impression of verticality.



Fig. 34. Lakshmana, Khajuraho. Highlights added.

Exterior Decoration

- **A bas-relief frieze on the temple platform** (location marked with red highlights in Fig. 35) depicts a grand procession of dancers, warriors, musicians, and most notably, elephants; all assume dynamic poses.
- On the base of the temple, set upon the centers of the projecting balconies, there are **miniature niches** with deity sculptures inside (locations marked with blue highlights in Fig. 35). The depiction of Ganesha – the son of Shiva and Parvati who acts as the remover of obstacles – on the south side is in a high state of preservation.
- Higher up on the temple walls, there are **two registers of large (2.5-3 feet high) panels** (location marked with yellow highlights in Fig. 35). They display deep bas-relief sculptures; the round-limbed figures are well rendered and extremely naturalistic in pose.

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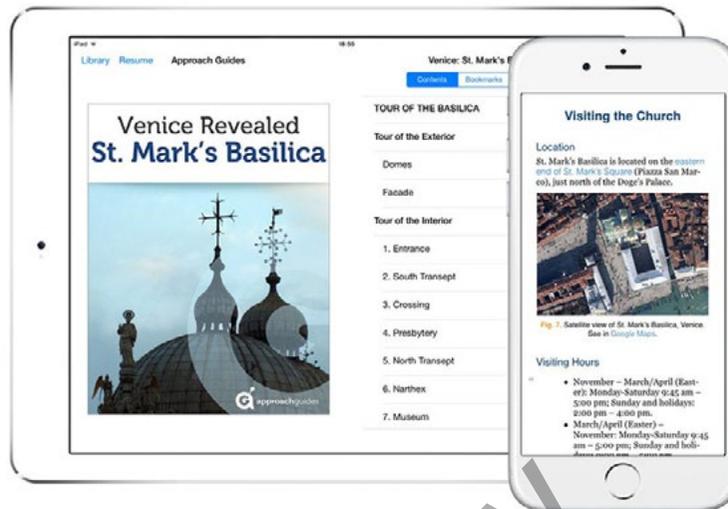
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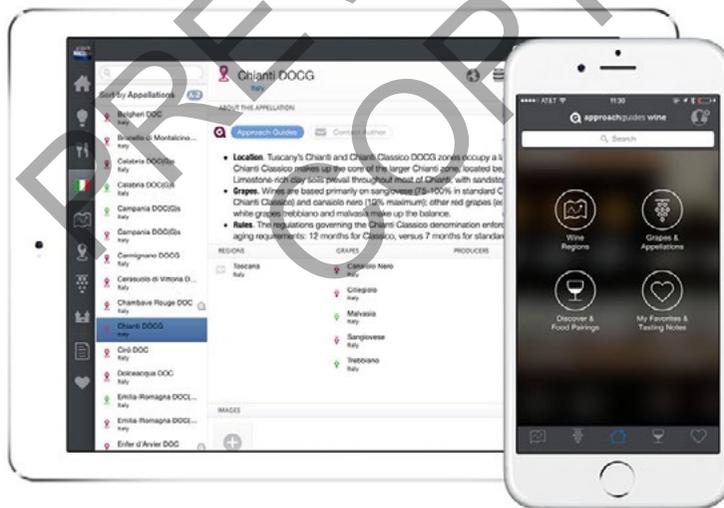
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