

GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY



Qin Shi Huang's buried army

TOMBS, GRAVES & MAUSOLEUMS



Travelling abroad wouldn't be half as much fun if it wasn't for dead people. If long-ago emperors, rulers and pharaohs hadn't built themselves massive tombs, monuments and burial sites, we would've had far fewer touristy things to point our cameras at ...

Take China, for example. There's an eerie, silent place near the city of Xi'an where an emperor once had 8000 fully-sized, fully-armed clay soldiers buried alongside him when he died. Life-like and battle-ready, they stayed underground, unknown, for more than 2,200 years ... emerging only yesterday like some spooky, long-forgotten army.

Qin Shi Huang was that emperor's name, a capable but nasty piece of work, who murdered his critics, turned a hotch-potch of warlords into a unified empire, and had these terracotta warriors parked inside his enormous tomb – to protect him from even nastier guys in the afterlife.

Some 200,000 workers spent 36 years on this project. As a finishing touch, their kind-hearted emperor had them buried alive – to ensure that his top-secret tomb remained a top secret.

And that's the way it stayed ... until one spring day in 1974, when peasant farmers dug up a pottery-soldier's head. Before you could say "Qin Shi Huang!" the most astonishing archaeological excavation of the 20th century was underway: a vast burial ground covering 20,000 square metres ... crammed with warriors, archers, war-horses, chariots, the works!

I'm not often left speechless, but I was the first time I eyeballed this ancient wonder:



Qin Shi Huang's buried horses

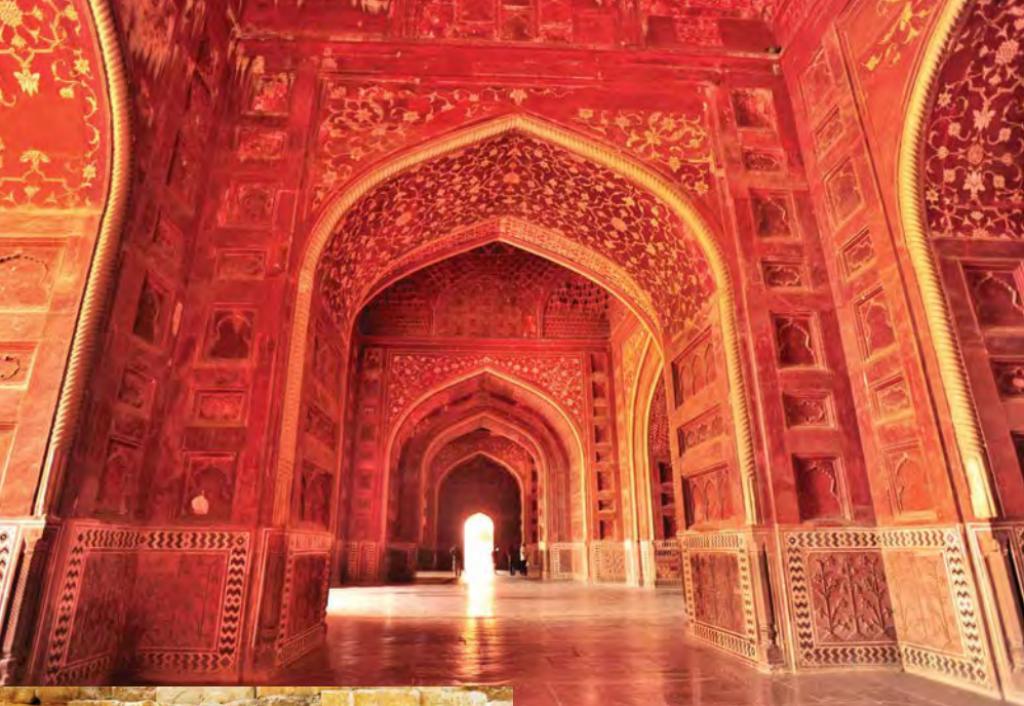


rank-upon-rank of imperial soldiers, looming up out of the mists of history. It gave me goosebumps, I tell you ...

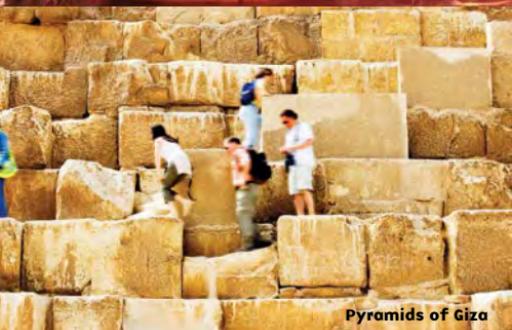
Egypt's another example: the oldest tourist destination on earth. Ancient Greeks and Romans once came to do what we still do today – ogle at the pyramids.

For centuries, long before the over-crowded city of Cairo had spread out to meet them, the Great Pyramids of Giza stood alone on the desert sands ... looking like the world's largest paper-weights, and guarded by the colossal crouching Sphinx.

The Great Pyramids were built for a trio of pharaohs (father-son-grandson) who reigned some 4,500 years ago. According to Egyptologists, the mummy of each ruler (after he'd died, of course) was carried in solemn procession across



Taj Mahal



Pyramids of Giza

the River Nile – then deposited in its sacred resting place at the heart of the pyramid.

They reckon it took 10,000 men 11 years and more than two million limestone blocks (each weighing 2.5 to 15 tonnes each) to build the biggest of the three. And its total weight is an estimated 6,000,000 tonnes.

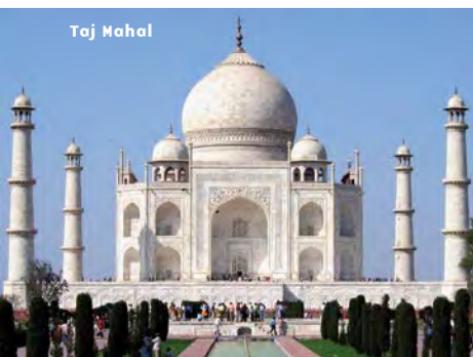
Some backyard tomb, huh?

I'm not normally given to feats of bravado, but (like all good pyramids) the Great Pyramid of Cheops is riddled with tunnels and shafts. So while my claustrophobic wife stayed outside and played with the camels, I joined a queue and followed someone's oversized bum through an undersized opening in the blocks – then down, down, down a narrow, descending corridor into the gloomy burial chamber.

Scared? Nah, not me. But it was kinda stuffy. And it did smell of tourists. And I couldn't help wondering what I'd do if the lights went out. (Can you believe this? Some nutters actually bribe guards to let them stay inside a pyramid overnight! Me, I'd rather be fed to sacred crocodiles ...)

We've hardly started, of course. If it's Seriously Old Graves you want, there's the Valley of the Kings (also in Egypt) with the tunnelled-down tombs of later Pharaohs – like Tutankhamun's treasure-laden burial chamber, and the grander-but-sadly-looted grave of Ramses II (whose creepy, shrunken mummy is now in the Cairo museum). There's the Beehive

Photo: Dreamstime.com



Tomb of Agamemnon – built 1250BC in Mycenae, Ancient Greece. There are the catacombs beneath the streets of Paris (holding six million stacked-up French skulls). And there's the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, deep in the heart of Old Jerusalem – a dark labyrinth of chapels

and naves, icons and chandeliers that marks the likely site of Jesus' death and burial.

But the mother-of-all-mausoleums is still on my 'bucket-list'. It's a true love story brought to life – the stunning, white-marbled Taj Mahal.

An Indian poet whose name I can't pronounce described it as "*a teardrop on the cheek of eternity ...*" and the squillion visitors who pass through its gates each year all say "Ohh! Ahh! Isn't-it-gorgeous!"

The Taj Mahal was built by Moghal Emperor Shah Jahan for his wife Mumtaz Mahal, after she died during childbirth. He employed 20,000 workers over 22 years, following which his career went a bit pear-shaped. But when he died in 1666, he was buried next to Mumtaz in this monument to eternal love.

The most exquisitely beautiful tomb in the world? Ask me next year and I'll tell you ...

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