
GWALIOR

TAAAN SENSE

The birthplace of Tansen, and subsequently, Hindustani classical music as we know it today, Gwalior's magnificent forts and palaces seem to resonate with the songs and stories of its royal past

By YD Bar-Ness

There is an old song, many hundreds of years old, that whispers through the air in Gwalior. You can hear it as you walk through the streets of the city, and as you climb up to explore its impenetrable fort. It is a song of history, and like most classical Indian songs, it follows a structured vocabulary of ragas and swaras. The song, of course, is the story of Tansen, Gwalior's most celebrated son. Tansen, the musical genius of myth and history, created a musical fusion that bridged the gap between the Hindu Bhakti tradition and the Islamic Sufi one, earned an unsurpassed reputation in the court of the Mughal Emperor

Akbar, and created a lasting legacy of sonic genius which, 500 years later, forms the living skeleton of today's Hindustani Classical music.

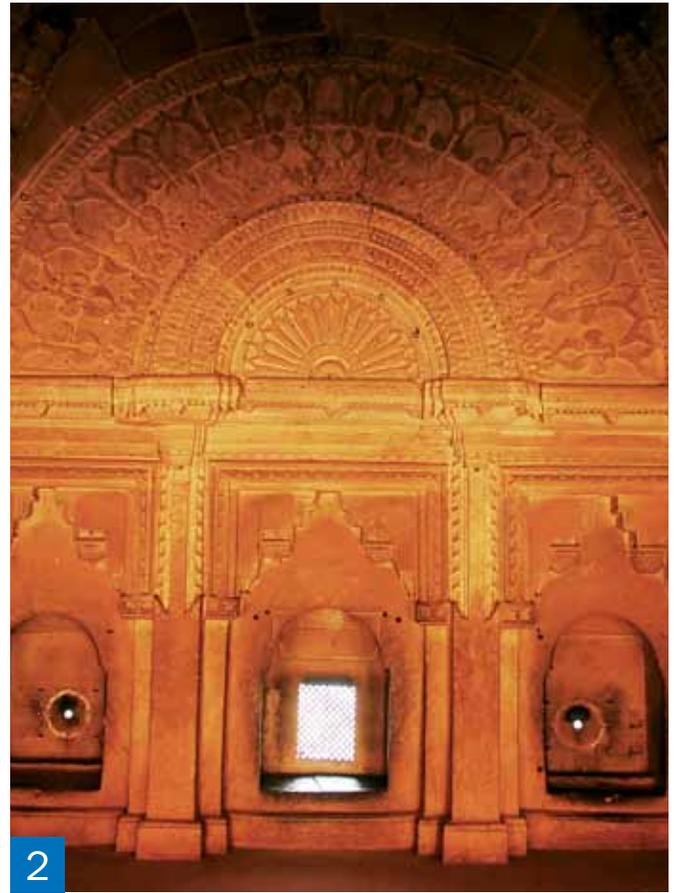
His year of birth might be disputed, but Tansen, born Ramtanu Pandey, was clearly an intelligent child. His vocal talents came to the fore only around the age of five, when a group of sages heard him mimic the roar of a tiger. The group's leader, Haridas, a music teacher and sage, was impressed by the boy's range and took Ramtanu on as his disciple.

The father of music

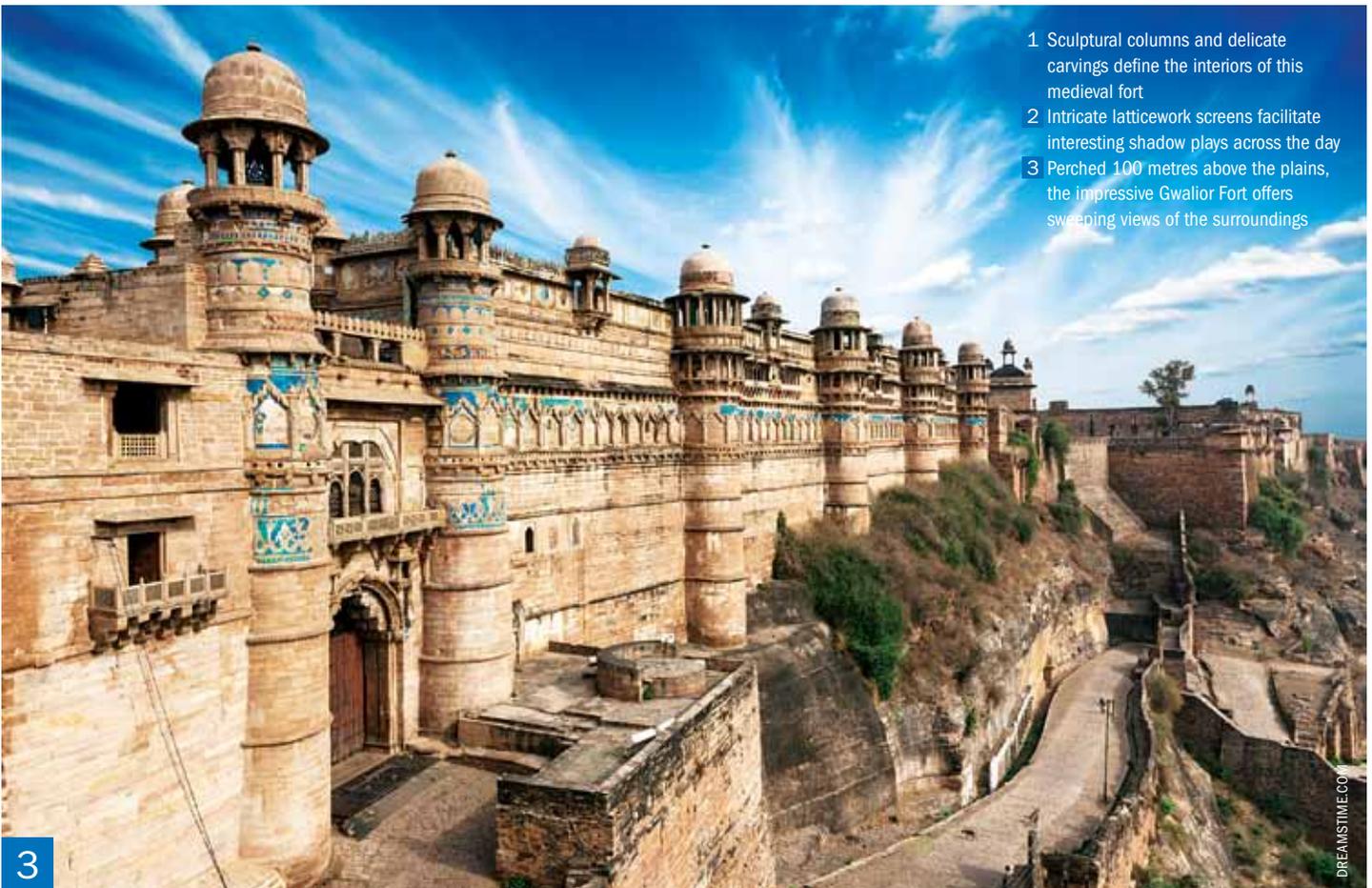
As a young man, Tansen helped popularise the traditional songs of his time, translating them from liturgical



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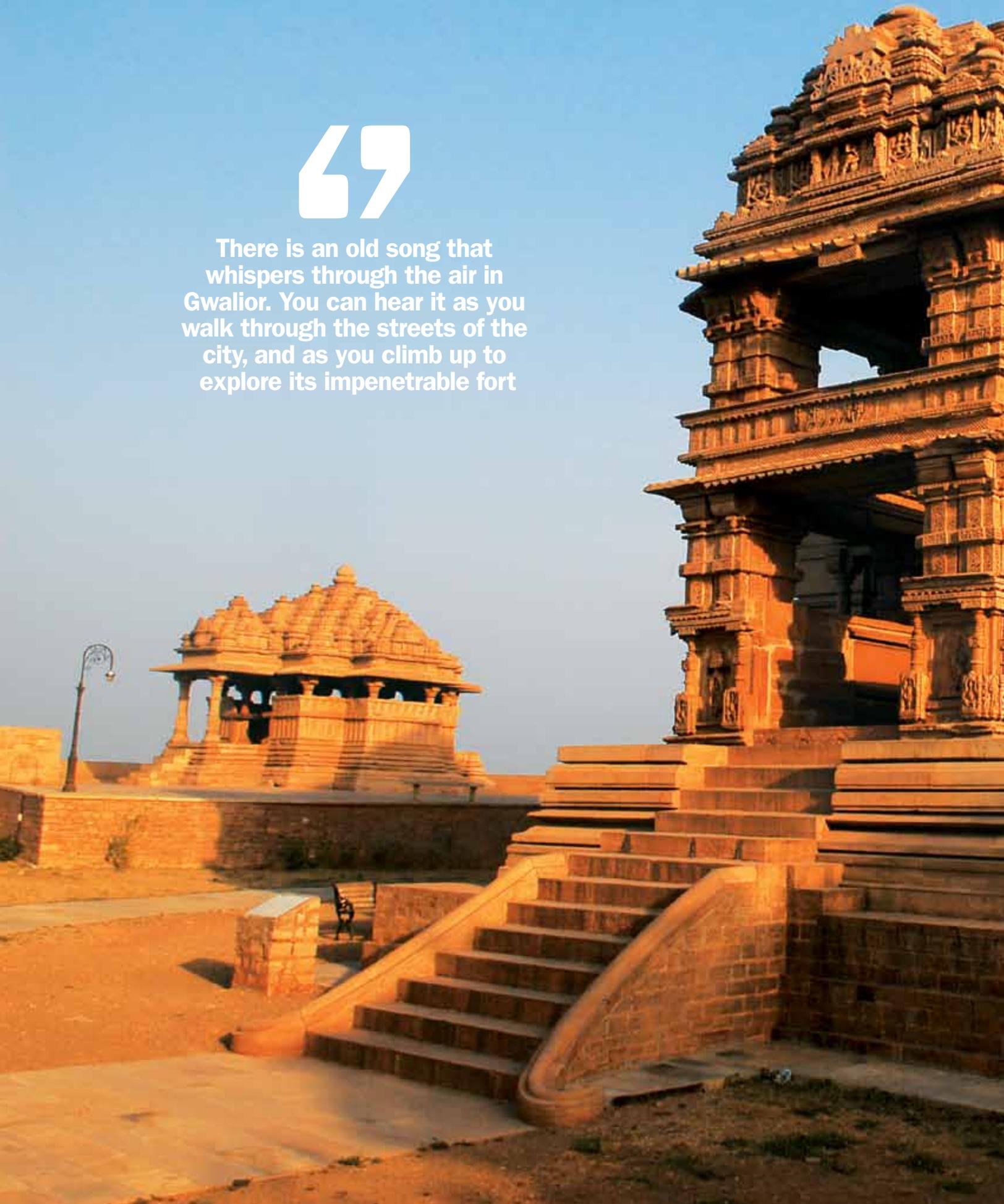
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- 1 Sculptural columns and delicate carvings define the interiors of this medieval fort
- 2 Intricate latticework screens facilitate interesting shadow plays across the day
- 3 Perched 100 metres above the plains, the impressive Gwalior Fort offers sweeping views of the surroundings

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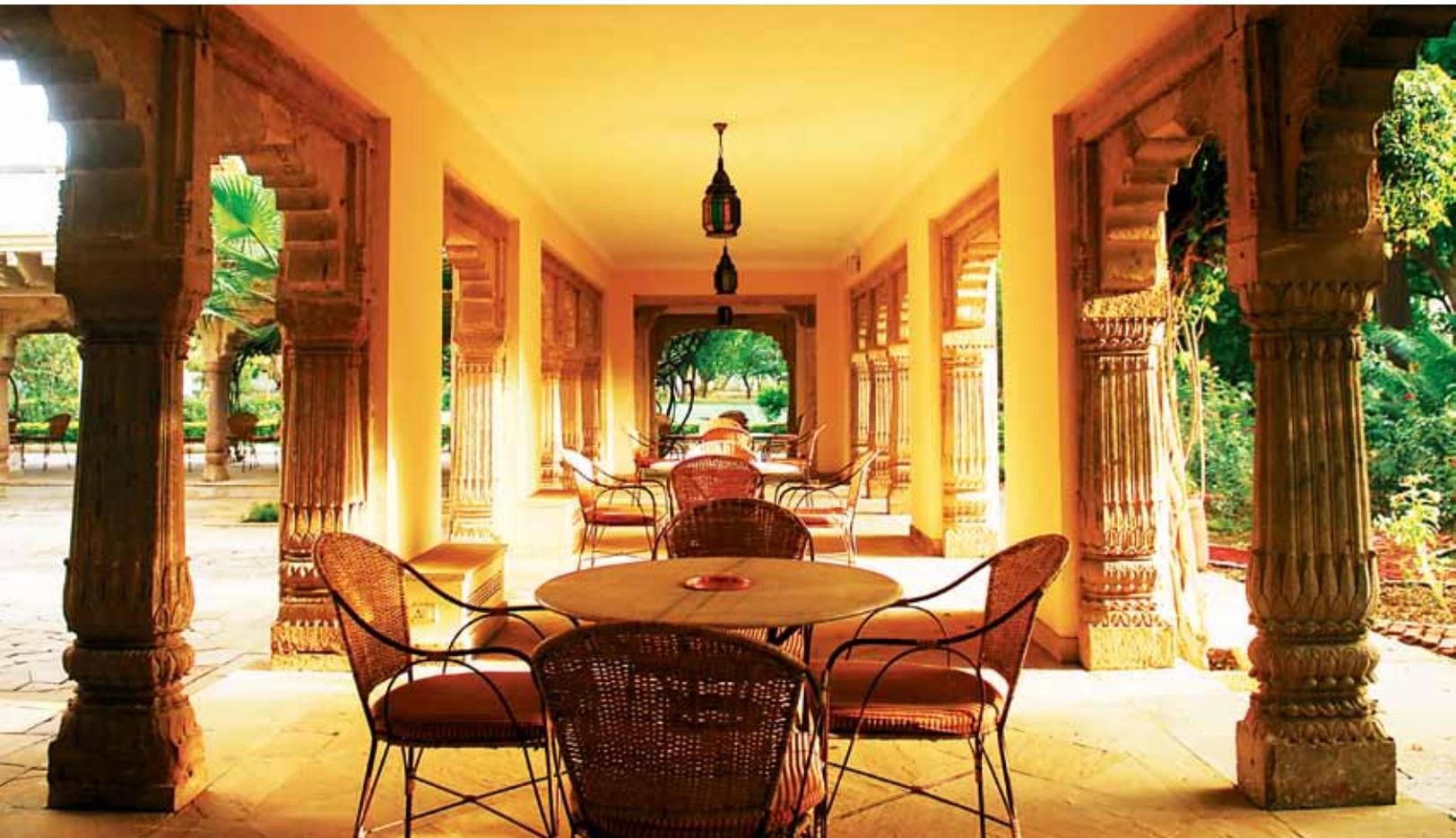
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Dedicated to Lord Vishnu, the Sahasrabahu Temple was built by the regional dynasty Kachchapaghatas, sometime around the 10th century



Once host to the King of England, the 120-year-old Usha Kiran Palace is now a heritage hotel

Sanskrit into the common tongue. Attending the court of Raja Man Singh Tomar at the palace in Gwalior, his fame spread caught the attention of the Mughal emperor, Akbar. Summoned north to the imperial court at Fatehpur Sikri, he was recognised as a musical prodigy, conferred the title 'miyan' (learned one), and from then on sang for the pleasure and patronage of Akbar's court. During his career, he codified and refined the musical system of ragas, which are considered the basic building blocks of Hindustani Classical music and are studied in this form even today.

Tansen was known as one of the navaratnas (nine jewels), of Akbar's court. These nine jewels were men who were cultural ambassadors and artistic advisors to Akbar. After his primary musical education by sage Haridas, he was mentored by Sheikh Mohammed Ghaus, a scholar and

musician of the Sufi order. Such was their bond that when Tansen died, his body was laid to rest alongside the tomb of his teacher and spiritual guide. He is remembered as an artist, and musician of such prodigious skill and potent power that his songs could light up lamps, cause rainfall and becalm raging animals.

Above Tansen's grave grows a tamarind tree and it is believed that those who eat a leaf from this tree are bequeathed a sweet singing voice; a blessing from the maestro who eternally sleeps beneath it.

Then and now

Today's Gwalior clings to the edges of an intimidating mass of sandstone. The slopes of this flat-topped mountain have been occupied for at least 1,400 years, with recorded history from 12 centuries ago, when the Rajput chieftain Suraj Sen built his palace

here. He named the city after the hermit saint Gwalipa, who is believed to have cured Suraj Sen of leprosy.

Suraj Sen chose the location strategically. The high plateau of the fort rises a 100 metres above the plains, and commands the surrounding region. The plateau is large enough to store water, large garrisons, sprawling palaces, and small patches of forest.

Only one natural path offers easy access to these uplands of basalt and sandstone. In the west, a ravine cuts into the northern portion of the plateau, and it is here that you will begin your pilgrimage to Tansen's tomb. This ravine also provides a habitat for the local flora and fauna in the heart of the city. Carved into the steep walls of the gorge are statues of Jain Tirthankaras (spiritual leaders), each one a masterpiece of proportion and serenity. Sheltered in

their niches, they have weathered the elements well, and solemnly watch over this gateway to the fort. Above the ravine, the red sandstone bricks of the citadel are stacked imposingly. A series of gates and passageways lead onto the tableland, and into the heart of the fortified palace.

Poetry in stone

Explorers of Gwalior Fort will find it full of picturesque structures. On the northern end, massive buildings perch above vertical cliffs. Spindly trees grow between crumbling stone fortifications and stairways lead up to still-solid battlements. Turrets stand tall with shaded pavilions that look eastwards. In the main palace, stonework screens are reminders of the once-sheltered lives of women, and stairs lead down to cold tunnels and dark, bat-infested prisons. Above ground, in the shadow of a massive tree, stands Gujar Mahal, a palace built by king Man Singh Tomar for his Gujar queen, Mrignayani. The well-preserved palace has been converted into an archaeological museum that houses rare antiquities, along with an

SAVE THE DATE

Tansen's tomb is the venue of a national music festival held annually in November-December

especially exquisite sculpture of the Shalbhanjika, an ancient tree goddess.

While exploring the fortress, it is impossible to forget the sheer rock faces that surround you. At some places, the stonework battlements have crumbled, and it seems there is little to prevent careless pedestrians from falling to their death. But descents have been made. It is said that the queen of Jhansi, Lakshmi Bai, during her fight against the British in 1857, made a daring escape from this very fortress. The queen's heroism was ultimately unsuccessful, however, and she later lost her life in combat. The British captured the Fort of Gwalior after a fierce siege, and quashed the regional resistance.

A well-defended ramp way leading down to the east provides an exit to the fort. As you descend, you can imagine the terrors of the unfortunate invading soldier. The palace is defended by large, wooden gates, reinforced with metal spikes, and by narrow avenues constrained by sharp turns. The turrets and windows of the citadel peer onto the ramp, and out towards the horizon.

At the base of the ramp, modern India is alive and well in the 21st century. Automobiles, advertisements, electric lights, loudspeakers,

and more remind you that the days of lamp-lit palaces are long gone.

Masters of the music

Only a short few kilometers east, a fantastic specimen of Mughal architecture dominates a large green park. Multi-tiered, surrounded by lawns and stairs, abundant in turrets and pavilions, this is the tomb of Tansen's mentor, Sheikh Mohammed Ghaus. Within a few dozen metres of this spectacular tomb is your destination: Tansen's tomb.

With modest pillars and an open-air structure, Tansen's grave lies beneath a green drape, insufficiently shaded by the crumbling tamarind tree.

His legacy is unparalleled — no-one else in human history has influenced music in such a profound way. The children playing cricket on the lawns, the caretakers tending the garden, and the tourists appreciating the architecture — all of them will have heard a song based on Tansen's ragas. Even today, musicians trace their lineage of apprenticeship through gharanas, or stylistic houses, to the original students of Tansen.

Tansen may have passed away in the 16th century but his music still lives on. As you explore Gwalior, listen carefully. Perhaps you will hear his song. **E**

FACT FILE

GWALIOR AT A GLANCE

The city of Gwalior, a political, cultural and industrial centre with a population of over a million, takes its name from the fort complex that dominates its centre.

WHEN TO GO

October to March is the best period to visit Gwalior.

GETTING THERE

Gwalior is connected by air and train to Delhi, Bhopal and other major Indian cities. Most hotels offer pick-ups from the airport or railway station for a fee.

Tourist information The

Madhya Pradesh State Tourism Development Corporation (www.mptourism.com) has an office in Gwalior.

Gwalior Railway Station (0751-404-0777). All tourist offices are open 11am-5pm Monday to Saturday; closed on government holidays and the second and third Saturday of the month.

INTERNET

In Gwalior internet access is easily available in the city centre.

EXPLORE

Gwalior Fort Complex
Open 8am-6pm daily.
Admission ₹5 Indians,

₹100 others. Sound-and-light show (English) tickets ₹75 Indians; ₹250 others. Shows 7.30pm summer, 6.30pm winter. Archaeological Museum Open 10am-5pm Tue-Sun. Admission ₹10 Indians; ₹100 others.

Jai Vilas Palace & Museum

Jayandra Ganj (0751-232-1101). Open 10am-5.30pm Mon, Tue; Thur-Sun. Admission ₹40 Indians; ₹300 others.

EAT

Gwalior's eating options are dull. However, some locations with satisfactory food include the restau-

rants in the Landmark (0751-401-1271), India (0751-234-1983) and Central Park (0751-223-2440) hotels. The Silver Saloon (indoor) and the Court (outdoor) restaurants at the Usha Kiran Palace serve excellent food.

STAY

Usha Kiran Palace Gwalior

Everyone in Gwalior knows where the Usha Kiran Palace is, but most cannot give correct directions to it. Gwalior's best hotel is accessed only by a little by-lane. Usha Kiran has one of the most fabulous driveways of any hotel in India. Dazzlingly white, and incorporating a landscaped

courtyard and fountains, the entrance leads to a 120-year-old palace with 30 rooms, eight suites, and private villas. The Taj group, which manages the hotel, has retained the place's century-old elements — including an old-style lift — while discreetly replacing old plumbing and wiring. Images of the much-photographed Maharaja of Gwalior and his family are everywhere, as is the royal crest (it's even tiled into the swimming-pool floor). The larger suites offer a view of the fort (although the panorama is marred by a giant supermarket billboard), and the

largest suite, a modern villa some distance from the palace, has its own pool, dining nook and waitstaff.

But no luxury matches up to a Mangal Snan treatment at the award-winning Jiva spa, which sets a rare oil and herb massage, saffron bath and henna hand design session to live music played by a team of musicians from behind a jali screen.

The only fine dining with service to match in Gwalior is found in the Usha Kiran restaurants. *Usha Kiran Palace, Gwalior Jayandraganj, Lashkar (0751-244-4000, www.tajhotels.com)*