

Celebrating Indian *heritage*

India's tally of World Heritage Sites reaches 35 as three locations, including a mountain, make it to the list

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Earlier this year, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee added four new sites to the World Heritage List.

The Nalanda University ruins, Chandigarh's Capitol Complex and the Khangchendzonga National Park in Sikkim were added to the list of protected sites in July at the 40th session of the committee, bringing India's total to 35 recognised heritage sites.

The programme to list and protect heritage sites around the world started in 1972 with the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage being adopted by the UNESCO general conference. Over 44 years, 192 countries have ratified the convention, making it among the most adhered to global treaties.

The prestigious heritage list includes places recognised for their historical,

The World Heritage List consists places significant for their history and culture



The High Court of Chandigarh designed by architect Le Corbusier



Left and above: The ruins at Nalanda, a large Buddhist monastery, in the ancient kingdom of Magadha

cultural and scientific significance, and are legally protected from endangerment by human and animal trespassing. At present, 1,052 important world heritage sites across 165 countries are included in it – 814 cultural sites, 203 natural sites and 35 mixed sites (places that exhibit the qualities of natural and cultural significance). At 51, Italy leads the list of the countries with the most world heritage sites, followed by China (50), Spain (45), France (42), Germany (41) and India.

The Nalanda university is the most ancient university in the Indian subcontinent

Other sites across India in this illustrious list include the Taj Mahal in Agra, the monuments in Hampi, Goa’s churches and convents, the Sundarbans in West Bengal and Assam’s Kaziranga National Park.

Nalanda University ruins

The Nalanda site in Bihar comprises the archaeological remnants of a scholastic and monastic institution dating to the third century BC. Located about 100 km from Patna, Nalanda was a centre of learning until the 13th century AD. Celebrated for its role in the transmission and dissemination of knowledge over an uninterrupted period of 800 years, Nalanda is also the most ancient university in the Indian subcontinent.

According to UNESCO, “The historical development of the site testifies to the development of Buddhism into a religion

and the flourishing monastic and educational traditions”.

The ancient university thrived under the culturally liberal Gupta Empire and the rule of Harsha, the emperor of Kannauj. It was so revered that at its height, scholars and students from around the region, including China and Central Asia, thronged it. Mahavira is said to have spent many seasons at Nalanda, as did Buddha. In fact, the ties between Buddhism and Nalanda are strong; the Buddha is believed to have delivered lectures near the university and Shariputra, among his chief disciples, was born in the area and attained nirvana there. Mauryan

ruler Ashoka is also said to have built a temple at Shariputra’s shrine.

Much of the site remained undiscovered until the 19th century when the

Archaeological Survey of India began to excavate the area.

A trove of excavated coins, sculptures and inscriptions have given great insight into the university’s long and rich history.

What remains of the university is vast, extending around 1,600 feet north to south and around 800 feet east to west. The site includes stupas, shrines, *viharas* – residential and educational buildings – and important art works in stucco, stone

Mauryan emperor Ashoka is said to have built a temple at Shariputra’s shrine



The ruins of Nalanda Mahavihara



The Assembly building in the Capitol Complex of Chandigarh

and metal and excavations have revealed 11 monasteries and six major brick temples.

Although many details about Nalanda remain unknown, the site is believed to have been a flourishing centre for Buddhism. In fact, the decline of the university coincides with the waning of Buddhism in India. The site is now a well-known tourist destination and part of the popular Buddhist tourism circuit.

Capitol Complex, Chandigarh

Chandigarh's Capitol Complex is part of 17 sites across seven countries. These are transnational serial properties chosen to celebrate the work of famed modern architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, better known as Le Corbusier.

Tasked by the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to build a new capital city for Punjab and Haryana in the 1950s, Corbusier designed India's first planned city and what was meant to symbolise the future of modern India.

Chandigarh, India's first planned city, was designed in the 1950s by Le Corbusier

Recognising Corbusier's role in the "invention of a new architectural language that made a break with the past," UNESCO has listed it alongside National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, the House of Dr Curutchet in La Plata, Argentina and the Unité d'habitation in Marseille, France.

Spread over 100 acres, the Capitol Complex is popular among tourists. It is home to many administrative buildings and monuments, including the Palace of Assembly (Legislative Assembly), the Government Secretariat, the

Punjab and Haryana High Court, the famous Open Hand monument, Geometric Hill and the Tower of Shadows.

Khangchendzonga National Park

Sikkim's Khangchendzonga National Park is India's first mixed world heritage site. Located in the Himalayas in northeast India, the national park includes a vast diversity of valleys, plains, caves, lakes, glaciers and forests.

According to UNESCO, the park exhibits one of the widest altitudinal ranges of any protected area worldwide and is home to the

world's third-highest peak, Mount Khangchendzonga or Kanchenjunga.

Covering a quarter of Sikkim's area, the park is a favourite among trekkers for its biodiversity. Khangchendzonga is home to many animals such as the musk deer, Himalayan tahr, the red panda and the snow leopard. This makes it an important ecological site. It is also an important cultural site. According to folklore, the mountain, lakes, caves and other natural elements are important objects of worship for the indigenous community in Sikkim. These together with Buddhist beliefs form the basis for Sikkimese identity.

Dzongri-La trek trail which passes through the Khangchendzonga National Park



SOME OF THE LESSER KNOWN WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN INDIA

Group of monuments at Pattadakal:

Designated in 1987, the group cover a series of nine Hindu temples and a Jain sanctuary in north Karnataka.

Bhimbetka rock shelters: Designated in 2003, the sandstone rock shelters are a magnificent repository of rock paintings. These are located at the foothills of the Vindhya mountain range.

Mountain railways: Designated in 1999, 2005 and 2008, the mountain railways represent the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, the Nilgiri Mountain Railway and the Kalka-Shimla Railway.

Rani ki Vav (Queen's stepwell): Designated in 2014 and located in Patan, Gujarat, the site is a famous stepwell known for its size and sculpture.

Western Ghats: Designated in 2012, the Western Ghats are also known as the Sahyadri mountain range, located along western India. Thirty-nine properties were designated as heritage sites including national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.