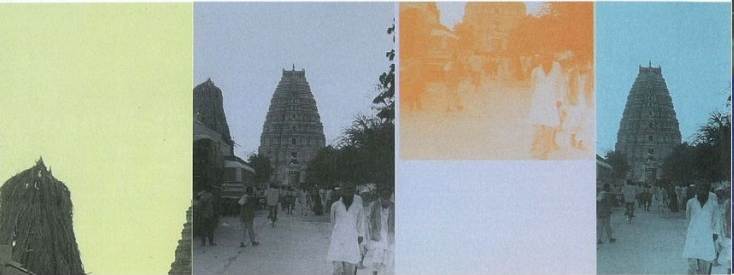




hampi: "city of victory"

Any place with a temple dedicated to the dancing god from the Bhagavad Gita [that is—um, Shiva] is okay by us. It's like a petrified dream taken from storybooks of ancient Hindu mythology: kings thriv-



ing in a royal city.

red rock structures framing the landscape and ruins. This is **Hampi**, the modern-day capital of the Vijayanagar empire.

Located in southern India's Karnataka state, Vijayanagar (which means "City of Victory") was established as a Hindu capital in 1336 A.D. although most historians agree that it had been inhabited for at least one thousand years previous to that date. The empire once stretched from one coast of India to the other and was enormously wealthy. Persian and European explorers often wrote home about the markets, saying they overflowed with jewels and gold. When Muslims invaded in 1565, the site was pillaged for six months and then abandoned.

The first view to greet the traveler is the ten-story tower of the Virupaksha temple complex. The monument's intricately decorated facade overlooks the city's bazaar. The temple, dedicated to the Hindu God Shiva, is still used today, as is the nearby ghat, the town's public bathing place. The Vitthala temple, which was named a World Heritage Monument in the eighties, has fifty-six columns that create musical notes when struck. Although locals strongly discourage visitors from touching the structure, they are still happy to demonstrate how it is done.

Among the other sights is the Lotus Mahal, a reception hall for the king, and the multi-domed Elephant Stables, which once held ten of the royal mammals used for ceremonies and battles. The countless cave shrines and their symbols give more clues to how the majority of the population lived back then. Sadhus, those who have dedicated their lives to their religion and meditation, still inhabit many of the caves.

The few explorers who find their way to Hampi are mostly western hipsters seeking transcendental experiences—or "freaks" as they are commonly called by locals. Most come from Goa on psychedelic buses to attend full-moon parties, and many end up staying long after the party's over, putting an interesting spin on the normally laid-back Hampi life. Locals sometimes invite visitors to join them in washing clothes on the riverbank, or to sip tea at the marketplace where they peddle their wares.

Many of Hampi's 17 square miles of carved-rock buildings were destroyed in the Muslim invasion, but visitors still find its other-worldly flavor endlessly appealing. Interested travelers who double as suitcase-schleppers should beware: getting there can be difficult. The only way to reach Hampi is in a three-wheeled auto-rickshaw that sets out from the dingy service town of Hospet. Comfort doesn't matter: while most trekkers consider themselves lucky to get a room in an ashram without utilities, others just crash among the ruins for the night. Hampi, half a world away and defiantly embedded in another time, will make you feel holy no matter where you sleep.—Stephanie Nicholson (Text and Photos)