Chandigarh remains 'the City Beautiful'

India's first planned city chock full of architectural and eccentric art wonders for tourists

JANE MUNDY

"The City Beautiful," as Chandigarh is called, is the only city in the world with monumental architecture set alongside acres of whimsical and fantastical art installations. Its public gardens have 800 types of roses and a tranquil lake connected by wide, tree-lined boulevards. And if that isn't reason enough to visit, consider luxuriating just outside the city at a 25-acre resort focused on wellness.

Chandigarh has also been called "a time capsule of Mid-Century Modern and Brutalist architecture." The dream city of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, was designed by Le Corbusier. Construction began in the 1950s, and by the early 1960s architecture lovers and students were coming here to see and study India's first planned city, based on a grid pattern.

Raj, our exceptional tour guide with Micato Safaris, drove us along wide boulevards lined with trees, past kids in playgrounds, past exercise groups and yogis in parks to swanky Section 17 with its posh residential homes and the city's shopping hub before our noon appointment at Section 1.

"Don't forget to look down — even the manhole covers in Chandigarh were designed by Le Corbusier. One was recently sold on the black market, so really watch your step," said Raj as we walked along boulevard to Section 1. Here is the famous Chandigarh Capitol Complex: several concrete and modernist public buildings designed by Le Corbusier.

Not yet noon, we stopped for shade under a Mulberry tree and Raj picked for us the sweet, juicy berries. Another shady spot is the "Shadow Tower," a sculpture intended to hang out in and designed by Corbusier. Not one ray of sunlight enters (apparently at any angle of the sun) but it lets in a much-needed breeze.

Next, we entered he "Palace of Justice," the geometric rainbow building (bring your passport for entry). Thanks to Micato Safaris, we didn't have to line up.

Around the same time that Chandigarh was under construction, Nek Chand, a road inspector for the public works department, was building off the grid. Chand collected debris — electric plugs, broken ceramic mugs, kitchen tiles, bottle tops and oil cans, virtually anything he could carry on his bike — from the villages destroyed in the 1950s to a secret spot in the forest outside the city.

The Rock Garden of Chandigarh is filled with eccentric things — among them, a wall built entirely of light sockets and another filled with chipped porcelain cups — and includes 25 acres of surreal sculpture park, curved walkways, waterfalls and turrets and arches. — JANE MUNDY

Chand's walls and sculptures were discovered in 1975 by the authorities. Thankfully, his vast creation was recognized for what it was, and the Rock Garden of Chandigarh was opened to the public one year later.

Just past the entrance, we were gob-smacked with a wall built entirely of light sockets, and another filled with chipped porcelain cups. Going further into the 25-acre, surreal sculpture park we strolled a maze of curved walkways, past waterfalls and turrets and under arches and everywhere is filled with eccentric and undpredictible stuff. You can easily spend a day or two gawking at thousands of totemic-looking human figures and animals that Chand sculpted out of rubbish. Talk about recycling!

> **We only knew of pilgrims stopping here on their way to the holy shrine of sikhs at Amritsar.**
>
> Tour guide Raj

Despite Le Corbusier and the Rock Garden, Chandigar was still off the beaten track for many tourists, and rather far off the usual "golden triangle" route for most visitors to India. I fortunately discovered the "green city" as part of a 10-day Indian tour with Micato Safaris. "We used to bypass Chandigarh on our way to Shimla. Us boys went to the mountains on our motor bikes to camp," says Raj. "We only knew of pilgrims stopping here on their way to the holy shrine of sikhs at Amritsar."

Capitol Complex became a UNESCO World Heritage destination in 2016, coincidentally the year that Oberoi Sukhvilas Spa Resort opened its doors. If you aren't familiar with Oberoi hotels, they are more than a typical luxury resort. Think palace with culture and superb cuisine. Smack in the middle of a peacock forest, with a backdrop of Siswan Forest Range and the foothills of the Himalayas, you can sleep in "glamping" tents that have more amenities than most hotel rooms and swim in your private plunge pool before traditional Punjabi breakfast is served, sourced from ingredients on their two-acre farm.

The Ayurvedic spa wasn't open for business, but we did see the impressive building. And judging from the Oberoi standard (I went to three other Oberoi hotels with Micato Safaris India, including two spas), it won't disappoint. Instead, we splashed around the indigo-blue Olympic-sized swimming pool and had a terrific yoga session on the lawn.

Next morning, we drove to the Siswan Forest Range, to a cacophony of giant peacocks in about the ash trees and below, a dense forest of marijuana far as the eye can see. But you won't find many humans in this part of the forest because you can only get here on a guided tour with an Oberoi naturalist.

After hiking about an hour (guests can also arrange to have mountain bike delivered to the lake) the Oberoi staff delivered our picnic, complete with smoked salmon canapés.