

# THE HINDU

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ARCHITECTURE

## Ethereal beauty

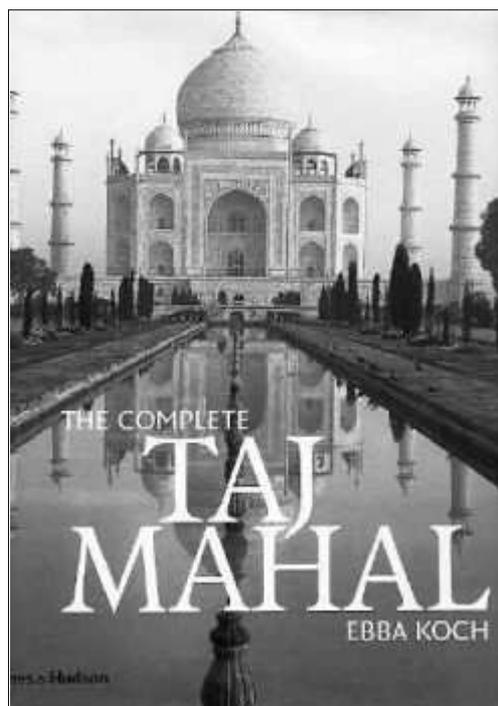
LUCY PECK

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**The Complete Taj Mahal;** Ebba Koch. Thames & Hudson, London, 2006,

THIS lavishly produced book more than lives up to its title. Ebba Koch explores every aspect of the Taj Mahal, from its setting in one of the riverside gardens of Agra, through its construction, to its symbolic significance, and finishes with an entertaining chapter that places the building in its `modern' cultural context, from early European perceptions to the stubborn persistence of non-facts, such as the rumour first aired by Tavernier in 1665 that Shah Jahan planned to build a matching black mausoleum for himself on the other side of the river, and the even more absurd story promulgated more recently by P. N. Oak that the building was once a Shiva temple.

These chapters will undoubtedly appeal to a large number of readers but the bulk of the book, which is more technical and not at face value so interesting to the general reader, will in fact be found to be equally absorbing.

### Refreshing clarity

It contains a clear and very well illustrated description of every nook and cranny of the building, which Koch and her architect colleague, Richard Barraud, painstakingly measured over several months of often dirty work as they plunged into areas of the building that are normally visited only by bats. The drawings subsequently produced by Barraud are wonderfully helpful and, being hand-drawn, have a refreshing clarity often missing from computer-drawn plans.

The building is described in this central section in great detail. Every feature of the building is explained in its art historical context as well as in its specifics — its use, design, materials, and decorations.

This is leavened all the time with fascinating observations, revealing features that might normally be overlooked, such as the full-size outline of the finial of the dome embedded in the paving in front of the Mihman Khana (the pavilion that, together with the Mosque, frames the mausoleum).

### Well chosen images

The book is illustrated with judiciously chosen images, often Koch's own brilliant photos but also 'Company drawings', the superior equivalent of our modern post cards made by local artists in the early days of the Raj that European tourists would buy to illustrate their journals and their ecstatic descriptions.

Even in comparison to Koch's excellent photographs, excellently reproduced, it is intriguing to see how much more effective the pen can sometimes be than the camera.

### Truly a wonder

Best of all, alongside these images and drawings explaining the technical aspects of the complex, Koch has not failed to provide the evidence to support the conviction that this is truly one of the architectural wonders of the world. Her photographs brilliantly evoke the beauty of the building. For instance, it is often said that the building is seen afresh on every visit, such are the subtle changes on the white marble wrought by the changing light and sky. This is well illustrated by a set of six photos taken from the upper level of the main gate at different times of day, starting with the creamy white of early morning, the bright white of mid-day, followed by a series of four taken at the end when the subtle difference in stone colour is visible; in bright golden sun; in low golden shadow-less light; and finally ethereal, against a darkening sky.

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