

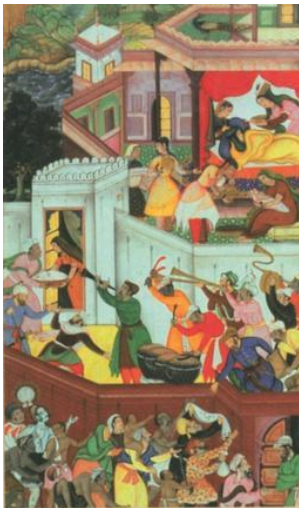
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Mughal mystique



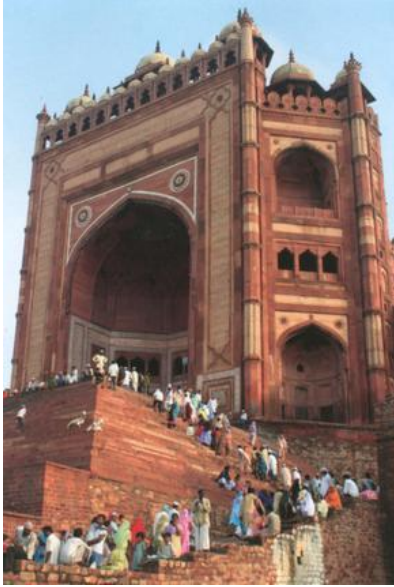
The Hindu

The tomb of Sheikh Salim Chisti. Photo: V.V. Krishnan



Special Arrangement

The 'Birth of Salim' from the Akbarnama.



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Special Arrangement

The Buland Darwaza.



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Special Arrangement

Lucy Peck

Architectural historian Lucy Peck's book explores the genesis of Fatehpur Sikri

The Taj Mahal may be the Mughal monument that evokes a thousand languorous sighs but it is Fatehpur Sikri that is described as an epic poem in red sandstone.

Lucy Peck's *Fatehpur Sikri: Revisiting Akbar's Masterpiece* (Lustre Press-Roli Books) is the saga of a city, a saint and an emperor. Fascinated by all things medieval India, Lucy is also the author of two definitive books in the series — *Agra: The Architectural Heritage* and *Delhi: A Thousand Years of Building*.

An architect with a degree in town planning, Britain-born Lucy lived for nearly a decade in Bangalore, where her husband worked before he moved to Delhi for two years. It was during this time that she fell in love irrevocably with India's rich architectural heritage. "My training as an architect helped me recognise some of this country's gems. I have always been fascinated by urbanism and conservation, and this helped me work on some of INTACH's interpretation projects. I have helped with the organisation's education division when they put up signboards at Lodhi Gardens, Delhi," says Lucy in a telephone interview from London, where she spends half the year.

The other half she spends in India, trekking in the Himalayas or discovering new angles to old cities. Lucy, who spent all of five days exploring the physical architecture of Fatehpur Sikri, says, "It gave me a background against which to analyse the Great Mughal's principles and beliefs."

And so, the glossy 134-page book that begins with maps of Fatehpur Sikri and its surroundings also lists an impressive bibliography that includes tomes as varied as G.A. Bailey's *The Indian Conquest of Catholic Art: The Mughals, the Jesuits and the Imperial Mural Painting*, *The Journals of William Daniell*, Ebba Koch's *Mughal Palace Gardens from Babur to Shah Jahan* and Chob Singh Verma's *The Wonder That Was Sikri*.

It is also filled with beautiful photographs (by colonial-era photographer Samuel Bourne) and colourful miniatures (some from the *Akbarnama*), highlighting the charm of the place. "I shot many of the pictures using a Canon basic model SLR. Some of the other pictures are reproduced with the permission of the Chester Beatty Library, the British Library, the Roli Collection and The Victoria and Albert Museum. I am grateful to the ASI for allowing me to see parts of the complex that are usually not accessible," says Lucy.

The book that draws from court history, commissioned memoirs and records of foreign travellers, does not merely describe iconic buildings such as the Ibadat Khana, Birbal's House or the tomb of the revered saint, Sheikh Salim Chisti, to whom Akbar is said to have prayed for an heir. It begins its story with the 35-km journey from Agra, whose small-town sprawl gives way to the quintessential Indian country road where women pound grain, and boys and buffaloes wallow in moss-green ponds. And how this ordinariness gives way to a grand vision — the city of Fatehpur Sikri that crowns a ridge far above the plains.

Built in 1569, it was the glittering seat of empire for nearly 15 years and vast tracts of it, although in various states of ruin except for the central area, still continue to be occupied by descendants of the Mughals. Lucy travels through its many gates — Delhi Gate, Agra Gate, Chandanpal Gate, Ajmere Gate — to describe the beauty of the Buland Darwaza, the victory arch built in Sikri sandstone that lords over the complex, the Jama Masjid and the white tomb of Salim Chisti crowded with pilgrims and prayers conveyed through sacred threads that pack its

fragile marble screens. Parrots and pigeons soar above the fields that surround the city, and after many pages that describe in great detail the various buildings, Lucy steps outside to reconnoitre the later additions to a city that still thrives because of its fabled name.

Does she see it last another five centuries? “I don’t see why not, given the kind of skilled labour available in India,” says Lucy. “There are a lot of Mughal buildings that are stunning — that marry Hindu style with Persian geometry and Sufi mysticism. If there is one spot you can see this from, it is when you approach Fatehpur Sikri from Bharatpur. Across the fields, Akbar’s principal gateway, the Buland Darwaza, still stands unchallenged, framed against the sky as it has done these five centuries.”