Ellora

Façade view, Ellora, India. Photograph © John Huntington

30 km north-west of Aurangabad in Maharashtra, the rock-cut cave temples of Ellora were excavated from the vertical face of the Charanandri Hills. Situated on an ancient north-south trade route, Ellora developed as an important stopping point for pilgrims and merchants and probably developed as a result of patronage from various royal Indian dynasties.

This monastic temple complex represents the work of successive Buddhist, Hindu and Jain groups. There are 34 caves on the site, 12 of which were excavated by the followers of Buddhism. These are the earliest structures on the site, being dated between circa 450 and 700 AD.

- The entrance to Cave 2 is decorated with massive sculptures of door guardians (dvarapalas). The pillared hall has side galleries containing image niches with a shrine dedicated to the Buddha at the far end, a layout which would allow pradakshina (ritual circumambulation).

- Cave 5 is similar in layout although the side galleries contain small accommodation cells with two low stone benches stretching the length of the hall, suggesting that this cave would probably have been used as a place for preaching and instruction of novice monks.

- Cave 10, also known as Visvakarma (the celestial architect), has a pillared hall with a huge arched ceiling carved with ribs, resembling a wooden roof. The Buddha image (approximately 3 metres high) is seated in front of a stupa and is flanked by two attendants.

- Cave 12, also known as Teen Thal, is the largest cave at Ellora and has three storeys. The ground floor has a shrine in the middle with cells along the side walls. The hall on the floor above is divided into three aisles by square pillars, with rows of bodhisattvas on either side of an image of the Buddha in earth-touching pose (bhumisparsamudra). A
similar shrine is on the top floor, with images of the bodhisattvas, Padmapani and Vajrapani, standing on either side of the Buddha. The walls of the cave are decorated with Buddhas, bodhisattvas and goddesses of the Mahayana pantheon.

Row of statues, Ellora, India. Photograph © John Huntington
Seated Buddha, Cave 10 (Visvakarma), Ellora, India. Photograph by Y Shishido
Detail of carving, Ellora, India. Photograph © John Huntington
Facade of Cave 10, Ellora Photograph by John Clarke, 2009

Pillars at cave entrance, Ellora Photograph by John Clarke, 2009