

The Buddha's Journey 3



BUDDHIST CACHE

13. Archaeological Buddhist Remains of Vaishali

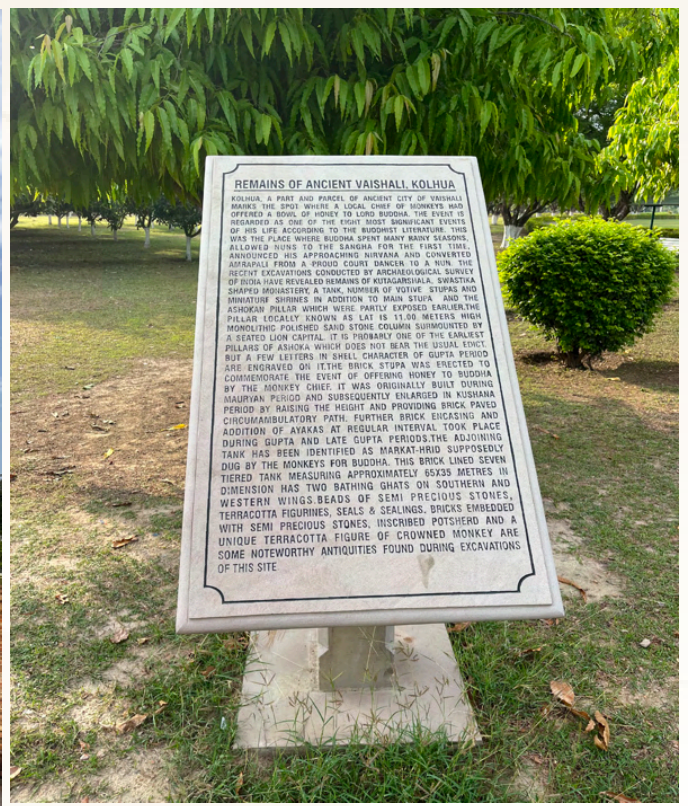
Vaishali, on the north bank of the Gandak River in Bihar, was the capital of the Vriji Lichchavi republic from the 6th century BCE and an early example of an elected oligarchy.





The Buddha frequently preached here, delivering his last sermon on impermanence, and the Second Buddhist Council was held at Vaishali around 383 BCE to settle monastic discipline. Following his parinirvāṇa, a portion of the Buddha's ashes was enshrined in the Buddha Relic Stupa, making it one of the earliest archaeologically attested stupas in India. Emperor Ashoka visited in 249 BCE, erecting the polished monolithic lion pillar beside the stupa.

Vaishali continued to flourish through the Kushan and Gupta periods, with coin hoards, terracotta plaques, and remodelled brickwork testifying to continuous occupation. Key monuments include the Ashokan Pillar, the relic stupa, and the foundations of the Kutagarshala Vihāra, the Buddha's rainy-season retreat, which reveal multiple construction phases from Shunga-Kushan to post-Gupta periods. The Abhishek Pushkarini, a stepped tank used in civic rituals, and the new Buddha Samyak Darshan Museum (2025) link historical significance with contemporary educational and pilgrimage functions.



The site embodies political, religious, and architectural innovation: as the earliest republican capital in South Asia, the venue of the Second Buddhist Council, and the keeper of one of the original relic stupas with its intact Ashokan lion pillar. Its layered remains illuminate the evolution from timber to brick architecture, the rise of relic veneration, and Mauryan imperial symbolism. Ongoing conservation and museum initiatives situate Vaishali within the ancient Lumbini to Bodh Gaya pilgrim route and India's modern Buddhist Circuit, ensuring its continued significance for scholarship and global pilgrimage.

14. Swoyambhu Mahachaitya

Swayambhu Mahachaitya, commonly called Swayambhunath or the Monkey Temple, crowns a forested hill about three kilometres west of central Kathmandu, offering panoramic views of the city and Himalayan rim.

The site is accessible via a south-side road or a historic eastern stairway of 365 steps. According to Newar chronicles, a luminous lotus emerged from the primordial lake that once filled the Kathmandu Valley, eventually transforming into the self-arisen stupa, giving the monument mythical origins over 2,000 years ago.





Archaeology and Licchavi inscriptions suggest a chaitya existed here by the 5th–6th century CE, with subsequent renovations under the Malla kings and after natural disasters.



The stupa features a white hemispherical dome topped by a gilded harmikā with the Buddha’s “all-seeing eyes,” thirteen gold-plated rings symbolizing the stages to enlightenment, and a parasol finial. Around the plinth are 108 copper prayer-wheel niches and four ornate śikhara shrines, with a colossal Vajra mandala guarding the east stairhead. Smaller chaityas, Tibetan monasteries, Hindu shrines, and hundreds of sacred macaques surround the hill, while the approach—flanked by prayer flags and spinning wheels—is considered an act of devotion.





Swayambhu holds profound religious and cultural significance, revered by Newar Buddhists, Tibetan Vajrayāna practitioners, and Hindus alike. It is part of the Kathmandu Valley UNESCO World Heritage Site, recognized for preserving the earliest surviving Buddhist architecture in the valley. The stupa symbolizes the Buddha's omniscient presence and exemplifies community-led conservation, notably demonstrated by the swift restorations after the 2015 earthquake, maintaining its role as a major pilgrimage and heritage site.



15. World Peace Pagoda

The World Peace Pagoda, also known as the Nipponzan Peace Pagoda, crowns the north-western end of the Lumbini Sacred Garden in Nepal, marking the starting point of the central processional axis that leads to the Mayadevi Temple, the Buddha's birthplace.



Conceived by Nichidatsu Fujii's Japanese Nipponzan Myōhōji order, the stupa was funded through small donations and chanting marches during the 1980s–1990s. Construction began alongside major dredging of the master-plan canal, with a reinforced-concrete core clad in white plaster and four gilded Buddhas installed at the cardinal points. The stupa was dedicated in 2003, with a memorial to a Japanese monk, Unataka Navatame, who was killed during the final construction phase.



Architecturally, the pagoda stands 41 meters high and 46 meters in diameter, featuring a pure-white hemispherical dome, 13 rings symbolizing steps to enlightenment, and a gilt parasol. Pilgrims ascend 32 ceremonial steps, circumambulate terraces with 108 brass prayer-drums, and view the four gilded Buddhas depicting key events of the Buddha's life. Additional features include a three-ton peace bell, the Lumbini Eternal Flame, and a crane sanctuary that creates a symbolic dialogue between spiritual and ecological peace. The lime-wash is renewed every two years, and recent upgrades include solar-powered lamps and CCTV to accommodate large visitor numbers.



The World Peace Pagoda serves as the first landmark for visitors and embodies Lumbini's modern identity as an international centre for peace, intercultural exchange, and pilgrimage. It fulfils Kenzo Tange's master-plan vision, while ideologically realizing Fujii's goal of shrines that foster harmony even among former enemies. As a conservation buffer for the Mayadevi Temple and a focal point for global visitors, the stupa integrates heritage protection, pilgrimage ritual, and tourism, with over 1.1 million visitors recorded in 2024, making it a symbolic gateway to the entire World Heritage property.



16. Matha Kuar Shrine

Matha Kuar Shrine, formally known as Matha Kuar Chaitya Griha, stands on the southwestern edge of Kushinagar's Buddhist archaeological park in Uttar Pradesh, India, near the Mahāparinirvāna Stupa.




Buddhist texts remember the site as where the Buddha, on his final journey, rested and delivered an impromptu teaching on impermanence before entering the śāl grove for Parinirvāna.

The colossal blue grey mica schist Buddha, carved in the late 10th or early 11th century under a local Kalachuri chief, depicts the Buddha in bhūmi sparśa mudrā beneath the Bodhi tree, and the image was rediscovered and restored in the 19th century during ASI excavations.

The shrine features a monolithic 3.05 meter seated Buddha, with an arched prabhā mandala behind the head illustrating key episodes from the Buddha's life. In front, the ruins of a late Gupta/early Pāla vihāra show thirty-two monastic cells, a central assembly platform, and drainage systems, reflecting Kushinagar's role as a scholastic center. A brick-lined ritual tank nearby served pilgrims and monks, and modern digital reconstructions allow visitors to visualize the shrine and monastery as they appeared around 1050 CE.





माथा कुंअर मंदिर MATHA KUAR SHRINE

Matha Kuar embodies Kushinagar's layered heritage as a site of doctrinal memory, late-classical Buddhist art, and ongoing cultural significance. Its inclusion on UNESCO's Silk Road Tentative List situates it within trans Asian networks of pilgrimage and learning. Today, the shrine continues to attract devotees and tourists, offering a tangible link to the Buddha's final teachings while supporting local livelihoods and ongoing heritage conservation efforts.

MATHA-KUAR SHRINE

THIS SHRINE WITH A COLOSSAL STATUE OF BUDDHA FORMS THE PART OF A LARGE MONASTIC COMPLEX. THE STATUE, 3.05 m. IN HEIGHT, IS CARVED OUT OF BLUE STONE OF THE GAYA REGION AND REPRESENTS BUDDHA UNDER BODHI TREE IN THE BHUMISPANSHA MUDRA (EARTH-TOUCHING ATTITUDE). THE INSCRIPTION ON THE PEDestal OF THIS IMAGE DATABLE TO 10-11th CENTURY A.D. RECORDS THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SHRINE BY A LOCAL KALACHURI CHIEF.

THE EXCAVATIONS, CONDUCTED IN 1876 A.D. BY CARLLEYLE AND LATER BY ARCHAEOLOGISTS REVEALED THE ORIGINAL SHRINE ON THE WEST WITH THE BUDDHA STATUE SURROUNDED BY AN AMBULATORY PATH AND A MONASTERY ATTACHED TO THE EAST CONSISTING OF AN OPEN COURTYARD WITH ROWS OF ROOMS ON NORTH, SOUTH AND EAST. THE EXISTING TEMPLE HOUSING THE BUDDHA IMAGE WAS BUILT IN 1927 A.D.

THE ENTIRE COMPLEX ONCE FORMED PART OF A LARGE GROUP OF SUBSIDIARY MONUMENTS SURROUNING THE MAIN STUPA AND NIRVANA TEMPLE.

17. Parinirvana Stupa

The Parinirvana Stupa, officially listed as the “Parinirvana Stupa and Mahāparinirvā a Temple,” marks the site of the Buddha’s final passing in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Texts record that the eighty-year-old Buddha lay between twin śāl trees, delivered his last words on impermanence, and entered Parinirvā a. His body was cremated nearby, with relics distributed among the eight Malla clans. Emperor Aśoka reputedly erected a memorial caitya in the 3rd century BCE, and Kushan patrons later enlarged the mound. The Gupta period saw the installation of a 6.10 meter monolithic reclining Buddha carved from Chunar red sandstone, housed in a vaulted brick shrine, with the donor named as the monk Haribala.





The stupa complex features the reclining Buddha resting on its right side, head to the north, in the canonical Parinirvāṇa pose. The hemispherical brick stupa and rectilinear temple share a single 2.74 meter-high platform, allowing pilgrims to circumambulate while viewing the statue. Beneath the stupa, a stone reliquary and copper plate preserve relics and the Haribala inscription. Surrounding foundations reveal a viḥāra with cloistered cells, drainage channels, and a brick-lined ritual tank, reflecting monastic activity that continued until at least the 12th century.

Parinirvana Stupa is central to Kushinagar's identity as one of Buddhism's four supreme pilgrimage sites. Its inclusion on UNESCO's Tentative List emphasizes its trans Asian significance. Modern conservation, landscaped approaches, interpretive signage, and the adjacent Vipassanā Upvan meditation garden integrate heritage preservation with inclusive tourism. With the Kushinagar International Airport nearby, the stupa continues to draw pilgrims and visitors, ensuring the enduring serenity and spiritual significance of the Buddha's final earthly resting place.

18. The Ramabhar Buddhist Stupa

The Ramabhar Buddhist Stupa, also called Mukutbandhan Chaitya, marks the site where the Buddha's cremation took place in the 5th century BCE. Situated on the east bank of Ramabhar Jheel near Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, the stupa commemorates the garlands (mukut bandhan) placed on the funeral pyre by the Malla clans.

Emperor Aśoka is traditionally credited with the first brick revetment and railing during the 3rd century BCE, while later Kushan and Gupta patrons enlarged the mound, added brick terraces, and left inscribed clay seals. Archaeological surveys in the 19th and early 20th centuries exposed its circular drum and recovered coins, while post-independence conservation included landscaping, drainage, and interpretive signage.





The monument consists of a monumental earthen brick drum rising approximately 15 meters, with a diameter of 34.14 meters that flares to 46 meters at the base. Concentric paths and socket-holes indicate where railings once guided pradaksinā (circumambulation), and the southern apron preserves scores of miniature votive stupas and broken pedestals, reflecting centuries of merit-making offerings. The stupa's location beside the Ramabhar Jheel adds a seasonal visual drama, with reflections in the wet season and cracked clay in summer, symbolizing impermanence.



Ramabhar Stupa holds profound historical and religious significance as the cremation site of the Buddha and one of the eight original relic stupas. Its inclusion on India's UNESCO Silk Road Tentative List underscores its role in pilgrimage networks linking the Ganges valley to Central and Southeast Asia. Today, the austere earthen mound invites meditation on impermanence while modern infrastructure, including nearby airports and visitor facilities, integrates Kushinagar into the global Buddhist circuit.



