

INDIA'S LOST WONDERS

Victoria Lautman, a Chicago writer and photographer, rediscovers the subcontinent's ancient stepwells.

Stories of suicides, betrayed kings, warring brothers, and witchcraft may sound more like Shakespearean tragedy than architectural history. But these are precisely the kinds of tales that haunt India's stepwells, the ancient subterranean structures that are spread throughout the subcontinent. They were commissioned by wealthy patrons, including queens seeking to honor their husbands, and the earliest dates back to the year 600. And while these ornate monuments were considered places of mystery, they also served a crucial function in providing access to water in a climate with long dry spells punctuated by heavy monsoons. By the 18th century, over 3,000 stepwells dotted the landscape.

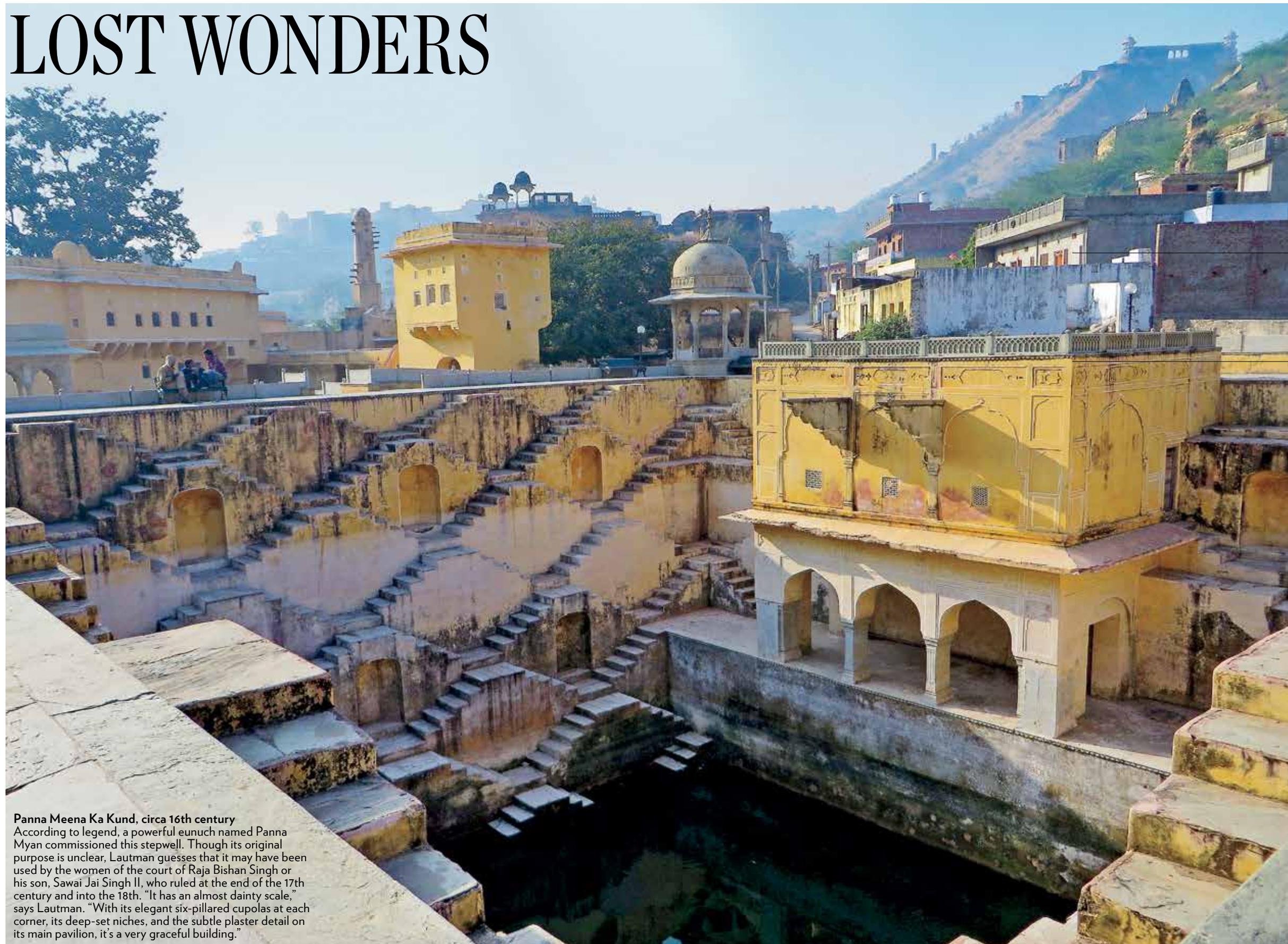
Today, however, the stepwells are largely forgotten. In some towns, they've become de facto trash pits. In others, encroaching houses and public buildings have made their entrances difficult to access. "People don't even know they're there," says Lincoln Park writer Victoria Lautman. "They're hiding in plain sight."

Lautman is trying to change that with the publication of *The Vanishing Stepwells of India*, in which she documents in words and arresting photos (plus GPS coordinates) 75 of the 200 stepwells she's researched. It's the product of five years of stepwell hunting—and a decades-long obsession.

—NISSA RHEE

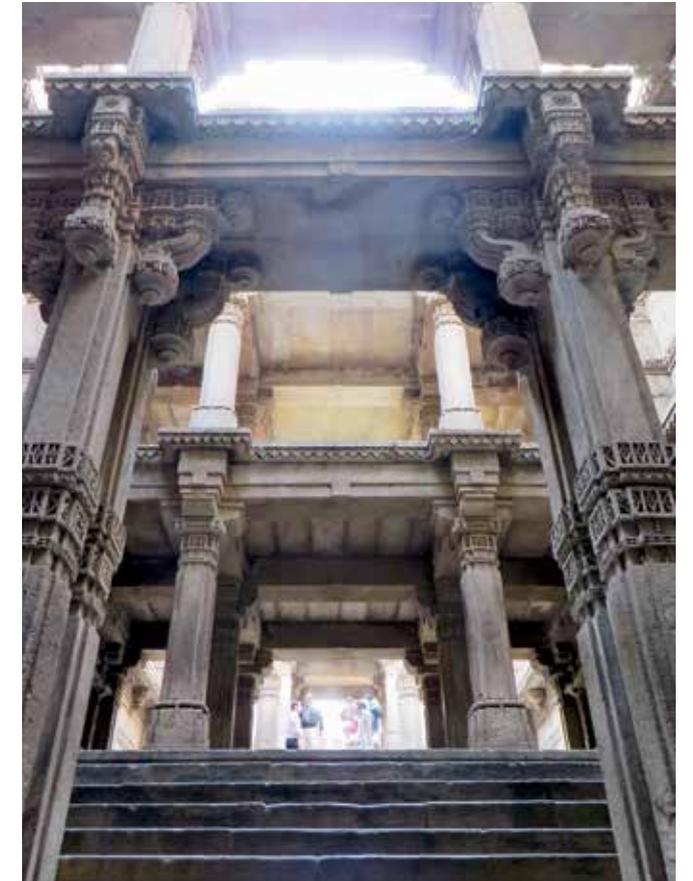
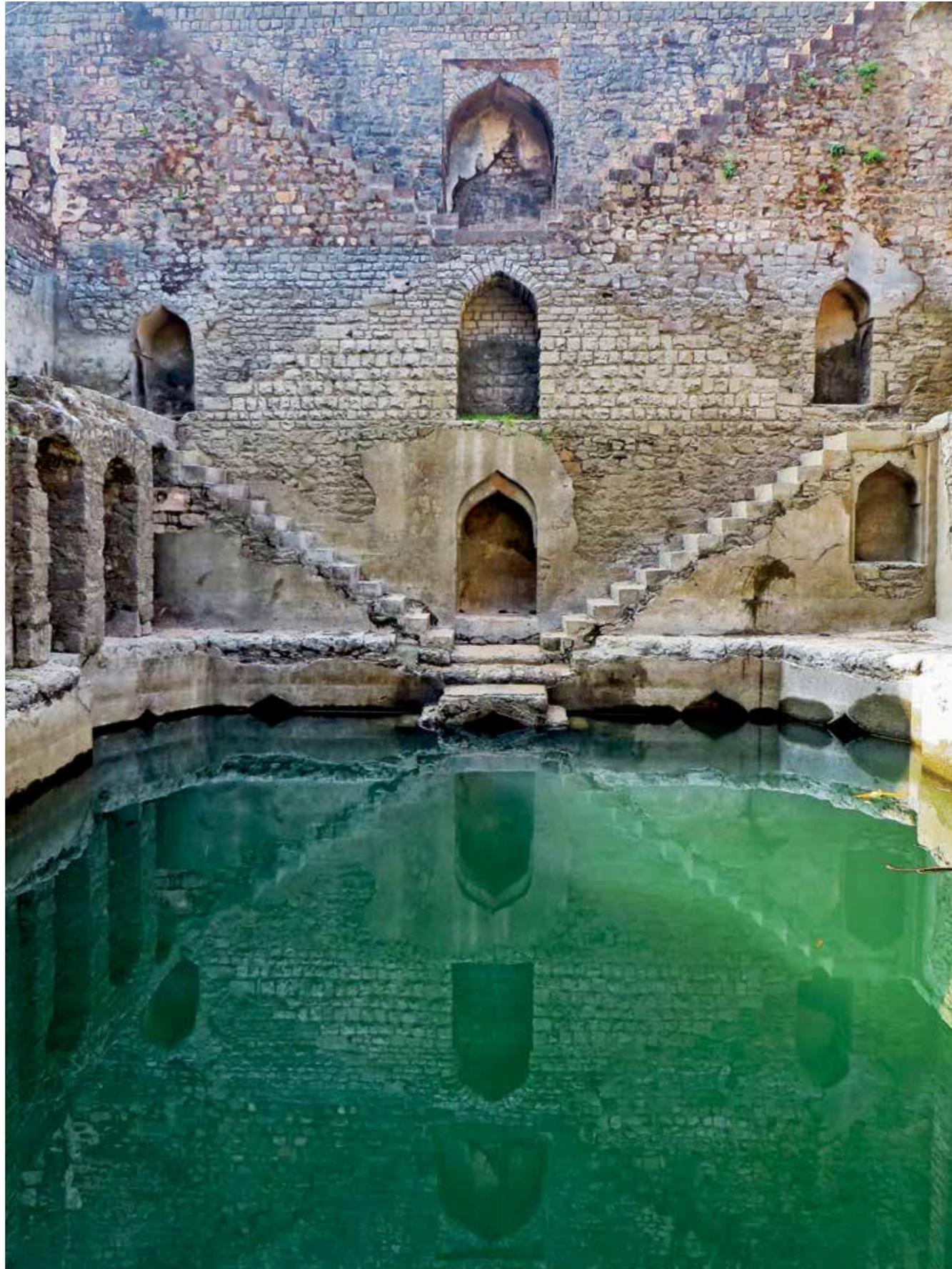


Lautman in Delhi in 2012



Panna Meena Ka Kund, circa 16th century

According to legend, a powerful eunuch named Panna Myan commissioned this stepwell. Though its original purpose is unclear, Lautman guesses that it may have been used by the women of the court of Raja Bishan Singh or his son, Sawai Jai Singh II, who ruled at the end of the 17th century and into the 18th. "It has an almost dainty scale," says Lautman. "With its elegant six-pillared cupolas at each corner, its deep-set niches, and the subtle plaster detail on its main pavilion, it's a very graceful building."



Helical Vav, early 16th century

Just outside the city of Champaner, this simple, spiraling stepwell is so well hidden that it took Lautman three attempts to find it. “Even though I knew it was there, I kept having to drive back and forth along the main road outside the city. It was built under a Muslim ruler, but not much else is known about this stepwell. It’s such a simple shape, like a sliced naturalist shell through the prism of modernism.”

Rudabai Vav, circa 1499

Lautman first stumbled across this Adalaj stepwell 30 years ago and credits it for piquing her interest in the structures. “The story goes that Queen Ruda told a Muslim king that in order to marry her, he would have to build a stepwell in honor of her dead husband. It took 15 years to build it, then on the day it was consecrated, she threw herself to her death in it so that she didn’t have to marry the guy.”

Ujala Baoli, late 15th or early 16th century

Tucked away in the Mandu military fort, this stepwell would have provided a critical water supply to a walled city frequently besieged by warring dynasties. The fort saw drama rivaling any of the Bard’s plays, says Lautman, with “sons poisoning fathers, friends poisoning friends, and beloved consorts taking their lives in preference to being taken captive by enemies.”

PHOTOGRAPHY: (ALL) COURTESY OF VICTORIA LAUTMAN



Rani ki Vav, circa 1063

The only stepwell designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site, this stunning edifice, completely encrusted in sculpture, is the most elaborate, the most expensive, and one of the largest stepwells ever built, says Lautman. Constructed near the Saraswati, a mystical underground river, the stepwell nearly collapsed when the river changed course, filling the structure with silt and mud. "It was abandoned until the mid-19th century, when British officials stumbled upon the ruins. It was like discovering Pompeii."

Chand Baori, circa 800

One of the deepest stepwells in India, this 13-level, 3,500-step marvel is also one of the country's oldest. "I find it incredibly ominous," says Lautman, "looking at those dark arches and the green water. Imagine women having to go down the steps in their saris to get that water, and priests going down and bathing in there."

