



Abhaneri stepwell, India

Numerous in, but not exclusive to, northern India, stepwells are large open structures excavated down to the water table and lined with stone steps. Their purpose was to provide dependable access to clean groundwater through the year, and their styles of architecture vary hugely. Most are no longer in use, and some have collapsed or filled with sediment. The largest and finest in the country is the Chand Baori stepwell, in the village of Abhaneri, tucked away in the countryside of Rajasthan, 95 km east of Jaipur. This glorious feature is around 20 metres deep, with more than 3000 stone steps ranged in beautiful symmetry down the thirteen levels of three of its sides. Most of the fourth side is occupied by the terraces and pavilions of a former royal palace. It dates from the ninth century, and its stepped walls are clad entirely in blocks of locally derived sandstone, originally placed without mortar. Besides reaching to the water table in both monsoon and dry-season conditions, the stepwell became a gathering place for the people of Abhaneri, because down by the water it was about 5°C cooler than on the open plains during hot summers. Today it is just architectural symmetry at its best for the relatively few visitors who are amply rewarded for making the journey to this remote site. © *Photographs and text by Tony Waltham Geophotos*

