



Tales of Rajasthan

Renira Pollard, one of Audley's India specialists, recounts a journey through Rajasthan staying in heritage hotels.

Having travelled throughout a large part of India, I would choose the northern state of Rajasthan for a first visit. Within the state borders I encountered the best of the classic images of India, and with my guide I learnt some of the deep history that lies behind each one. I never realised that the turbans were so much more than just a brightly coloured head-dress - that they may be as much as six or eight metres in length, and depending on the colour you can determine if a man is a Rajput or a humble farmer. I knew that all Sikhs wear turbans, and have the surname Singh, but conversely not all Singhs are Sikh.

I ventured out into the capital city, Delhi, and could not help but be distracted by the hustle and bustle around me. One day was enough and I departed for Mandawa, in the Shekhawati region, a rather more rural and quiet area, still little-visited by Westerners. The small towns prospered in the 15th century as wealthy merchants wishing for a city retreat moved to the area, competing with each other to be owner of the most ornate haveli. Entering through what I believed to be an abandoned haveli, I was startled by the guardian, who proudly showed me the floor-to-ceiling



SUNSET CAMEL SAFARI

frescoes, painted in rich ruby red, royal blue and gold leaf. I could only compare such work to the varied frescoes of St Basil's Cathedral. I stayed in the unique and eco-friendly Desert Resort which has been designed to follow the simple structures of a rural village, and each rondavel has an en-suite bathroom - something a villager's home would not have!

Bikaner was my next stop, an expanding town on the edge of the Thar Desert. I could only praise my driver's skills in negotiating camel carts, roaming sacred cows and nippy tuc-tucs as he took me to the Bhanwar Niwas Hotel in the heart of the old city. As the streets grew narrower the noise faded, and there it was. I entered into a large square courtyard, each side sectioned into decorative archways.



GHANERAD ROYAL CASTLE HOTEL

The décor was an eclectic mix of Indian textiles and 18th century European furniture, collected by the great grandfather of the current owner. To occupy the afternoon I visited the splendid Junagarh Fort, part of it still occupied by the late Maharajas family. But I was particularly charmed by the door attendant, who had his moustache curled and kirbi-gripped in place, and upon request took great glee in demonstrating just how far it could stretch!

1,444 carved marble pillars, of which no two are the same!

The following day, after a good lunch of dhal and rice, a snooze seemed quite acceptable while my driver concentrated on the driving to the southernmost town of Jaisalmer. After a while, a courteous "ma'am" awoke me, so that I could witness the dramatic approach to the city. There visible through the haze, was what appeared to be Ayers Rock on the horizon. As we drove in closer to the city, I could distinguish the walled city of Jaisalmer, which I explored fully on foot the next day. The intricacies of the carvings in the distinctive yellow sandstone were incredible.



RAJASTHAN'S COLOURFUL WOMEN

My driver returned to collect me, the Ambassador car gleaming from a recent wax and polish. I felt guilty that he would have to re-clean his car after another drive along the edge of the Thar Desert, but this time turning eastwards to the town of Osian. Upon arrival, I transferred into a jeep, and was driven the last part of the way to Osian Camel Camp. Situated at 180ft, high upon a sand dune, it has a great vantage point over the plains. The host is Reggie, a delightful chap, only too happy to while away the hours with you, chatting and telling stories. My room was a tent – furnished with a double bed, and a teak chest of drawers - so I felt obliged to fully unpack. The attached bathroom was fitted with a shower and porcelain sink and WC, which was rather a pleasant surprise. Before sunset I took a camel ride into the surrounding dunes, an excellent vantage point to observe the Bishnoi villagers going about their business at the close of day.

Jodhpur, also known as the 'blue city', was quite a contrast. Legend has it that the houses in the downtown area were blue-washed by the Brahmans in an attempt to avert mosquito invasion. Others say a Bollywood producer made it that way for a film set. Whichever it is, from the battlements of the impressive Meherangarh Fort, you

can see the city before you, like a lake shimmering in the heat. As evening drew in, I relaxed, seemingly under observation, in the 'Trophy Bar' of the Umaid Bhawan Palace.

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The journey to Udaipur is through the Aravali Hills. I had to see the Jain Temple at Ranakpur, a massive complex comprising 1,444 carved marble pillars, of which no two are the same! Hidden, only twenty minutes away, are the village and castle of Ghanerao. Wandering around I saw oxen drawing water from the well, and barbers with their customers in the shade of heavily branched Banyan trees. The woman and children were curious, as few visitors stop here. The castle still lives in its original era, with only a minimum of modern refurbishments, and I was amused to find old cannonballs and their pot-marks in the walls.

On reaching Udaipur in the evening I was entranced by sounds of drums beating and saw a lantern led procession winding along the streets, this most

romantic of Indian cities is popular for wedding parties. Boarding a private boat, I retreated to the Lake Palace Hotel, serenely positioned in the Pichola Lake. All too soon, I had to travel again, but this time taking the comfortable and quick option of flying from Udaipur to Jaipur, 'the pink city'. The elephant ride to the Amber Fort gave me an idea of how it must have been to be a maharini, while the observatory dating from 1728 was fascinating.

But before I returned home, I had one more stop to make, to Agra, home of the Taj Mahal. A stay at the Amarvilas was a perfect choice, as each bedroom has a view of the stunning marble monument. Shortly before sunrise I watched the sun rise in the sky and the beauty of the Taj Mahal was unveiled, a memory that will always stay with me. Not wishing to leave India, I contemplated the idea of retracing my steps by elephant...

Travel File

A 16-night private tailor-made tour of Rajasthan staying in heritage hotels costs from £2,165 per person based on two people sharing. The price includes direct flights with British Airways and breakfasts. For further details please call Renira Pollard or one of our other India specialists on 01869 276 218.