



In love with  
*Rajasthan*

**Natalie Bannister** makes like a Maharani to experience the royal romance of  
India's most colourful and flamboyant region

# Jaipur

**W**e begin, and end, our journey in the gateway to India's desert state, Rajasthan, and in typical Indian style, it's chaotic and bursting at the

seams. With a seductive blend of grand palaces, imposing forts and shopping gems, long-time visitors, including myself, can attest that there is a beauty to the chaos. Rajasthan's capital city, Jaipur, remains a treasure trove of old India.

Known as the Pink City, thanks to its profusion of salmon-hued façades, Jaipur boasts some of the most photographed scenes in all of Rajasthan – the blush tones of the Old City walls and intricately-painted murals of palace doors provide the backdrop to many a traveller's Instagram posts. The streets are a riot of colour and character – peacocks still roam the gardens of grand old palaces, monkeys scamper across rooftops, and brightly-painted elephants lumber down the streets on the outskirts of the city centre, absorbing the new while embracing the old. It's a feast for the senses.

There's plenty of luxury to be found here too, as Jaipur is home to some of India's most splendid hotels, many of which are centuries-old palaces and *havelis* (traditional-style mansions) that have been converted into plush boutique retreats.

If there's one place in Rajasthan where you can feel like both an intrepid traveller and like royalty in the space of a single day, Jaipur is it!

Join an organised walking tour, like a morning or evening Heritage Walk with Vedic Walks ([vedicwalks.com/jaipur-walking-tours](http://vedicwalks.com/jaipur-walking-tours)) through the bazaars, artisan centres and historical sites in the quieter hours. Or take to the sky at sunrise or sunset in a hot-air balloon with SkyWaltz Balloon Safari ([skywaltz.com](http://skywaltz.com)) for a sensational bird's eye view of Jaipur's three forts which once formed a vital defence ring for the city.



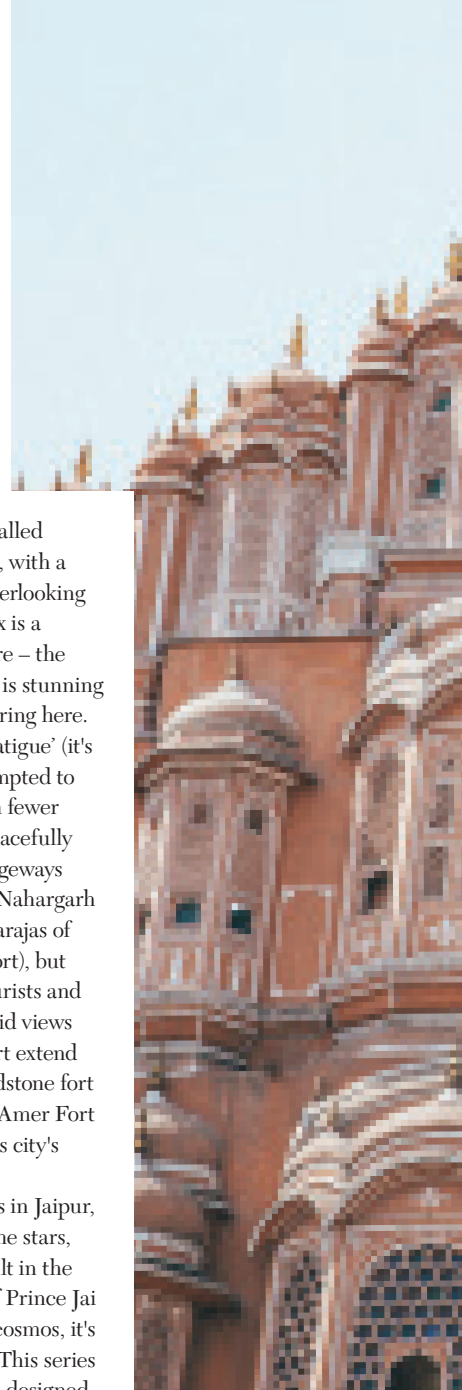
The 16th-century Amer Fort (also called Amber Fort) is the largest of the three, with a commanding position high on a hill overlooking the city. This sprawling palace complex is a perfect example of Mughal architecture – the mirrored Sheesh Mahal, in particular, is stunning – and you can spend a few hours exploring here.

You may begin to suffer from 'fort fatigue' (it's a *thing* here in Jaipur), but don't be tempted to skip the nearby Nahargarh Fort – with fewer crowds than Amer, you can wander peacefully through the empty halls, hidden passageways and ornately-painted royal chambers. Nahargarh was the hunting residence of the Maharajas of Jaipur (the name translates to Tiger Fort), but these days the only hunters are the tourists and locals who come to capture the splendid views over the Pink City. The walls of the fort extend over the hills to the sprawling red-sandstone fort of Jaigarh, built in 1726 to protect the Amer Fort and its palace complex, completing this city's impressive fortifications.

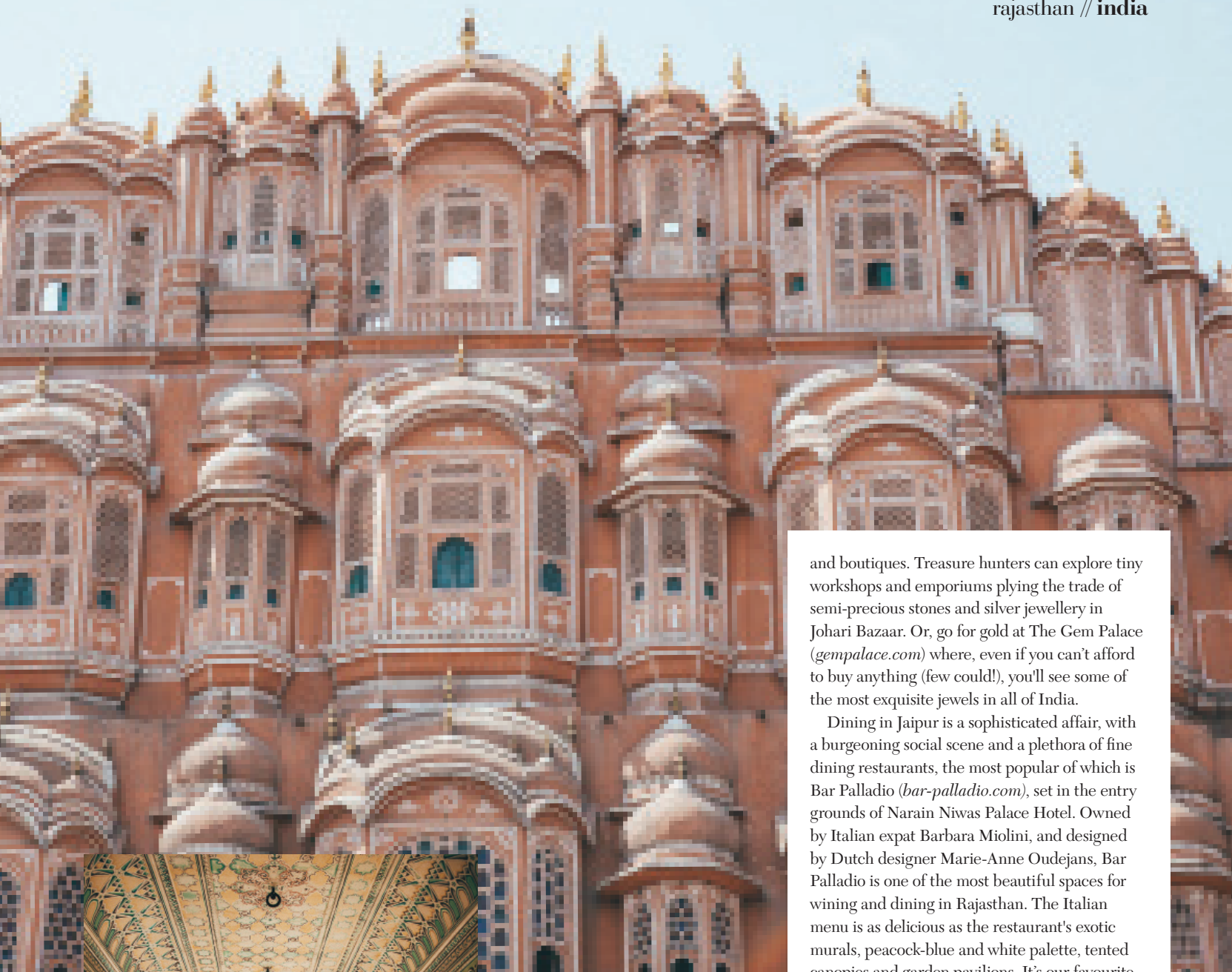
There are many palaces and temples in Jaipur, but make sure you head to temple to the stars, Jantar Mantar ([jantarmantar.org](http://jantarmantar.org)). Built in the early 18th-century under the orders of Prince Jai Singh II, a passionate observer of the cosmos, it's now a UNESCO World Heritage site. This series of architectural monuments, that were designed for observing and measuring the distances and positions of celestial objects, are remarkable.

Jantar Mantar can be combined with a tour of the City Palace, finishing with a glimpse of the extraordinary Hawa Mahal, the *Palace of Winds*. This exquisite hive of latticed windows, carved out of pink sandstone, is undeniably the city's most distinctive landmark. It was built in 1799 to enable the ladies of the royal household (who at the time strictly observed *purdah*) to be able to watch the processions and life of the streets below without being seen by the public. Now, you can take in the superb views and the mayhem of Sireh Deori Bazaar, one of Jaipur's many bustling bazaars, from the screened niches.

Jaipur is a major centre for textiles, gems and block printing, and couples will find plenty of reasons to shop up a storm in the city's markets







and boutiques. Treasure hunters can explore tiny workshops and emporiums plying the trade of semi-precious stones and silver jewellery in Johari Bazaar. Or, go for gold at The Gem Palace ([gempalace.com](http://gempalace.com)) where, even if you can't afford to buy anything (few could!), you'll see some of the most exquisite jewels in all of India.

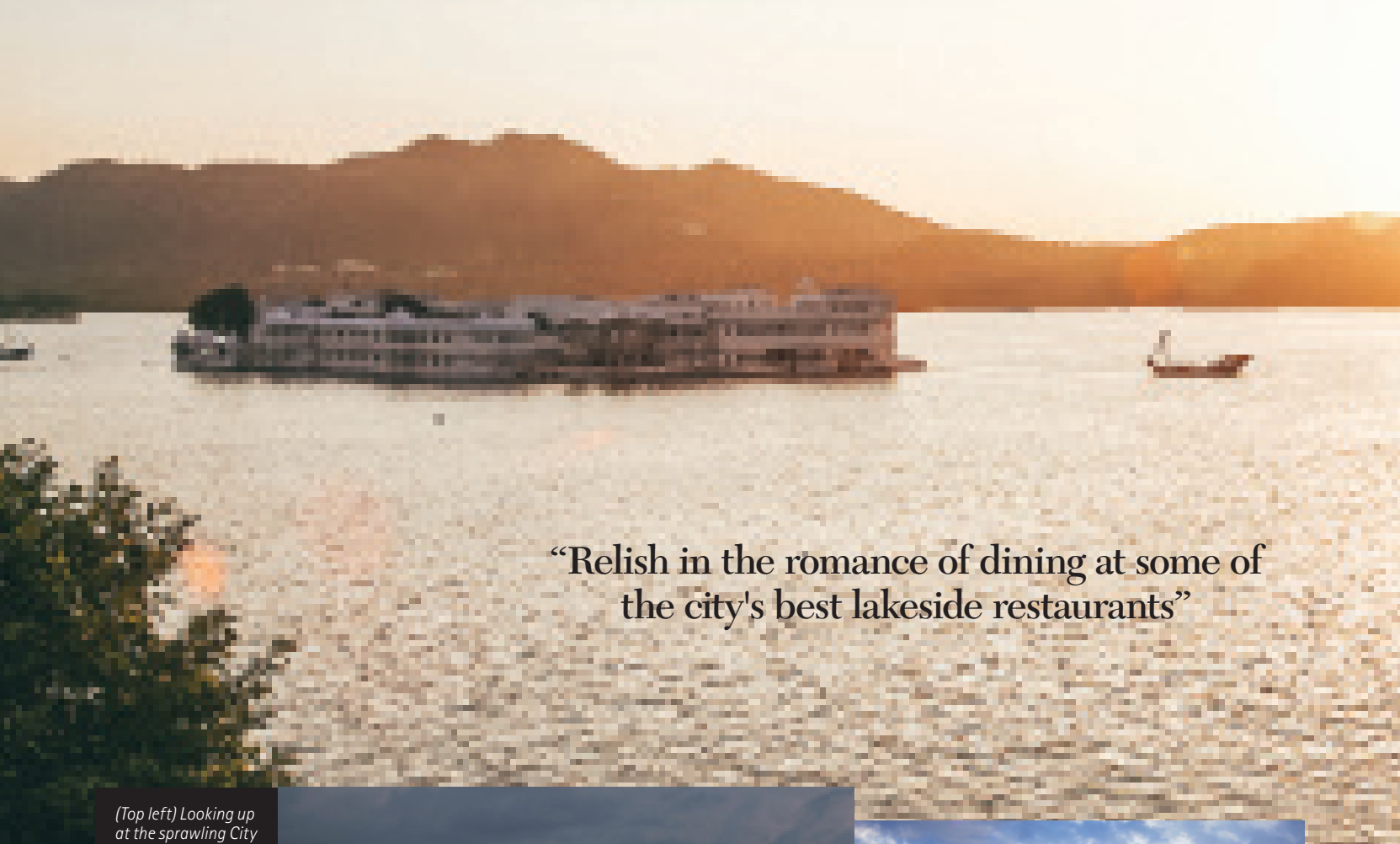
Dining in Jaipur is a sophisticated affair, with a burgeoning social scene and a plethora of fine dining restaurants, the most popular of which is Bar Palladio ([bar-palladio.com](http://bar-palladio.com)), set in the entry grounds of Narain Niwas Palace Hotel. Owned by Italian expat Barbara Miolini, and designed by Dutch designer Marie-Anne Oudejans, Bar Palladio is one of the most beautiful spaces for wining and dining in Rajasthan. The Italian menu is as delicious as the restaurant's exotic murals, peacock-blue and white palette, tented canopies and garden pavilions. It's our favourite place to unwind here, cocktail in hand, after a hectic day of shopping and sightseeing.

Jaipur offers plenty of ways to indulge in royal romance, whether it's a meal at 51 Shades of Pink or high tea at The Colonnade, both found at Sujan Rajmahal Palace Hotel ([sujanluxury.com/raj-mahal](http://sujanluxury.com/raj-mahal)). Or, you could have cocktails out in the courtyard or by the pool, followed by a lovely candlelit dinner at regal Samode Haveli Hotel ([samode.com/samodehaveli](http://samode.com/samodehaveli)). Stop by Baradari, the newly-renovated contemporary restaurant within Jaipur's City Palace, for al fresco dining in a courtyard that's several centuries old ([facebook.com/baradarijaipur](http://facebook.com/baradarijaipur)). Or, take your seat at the opulent 1135 AD, set in the grounds of Amer Fort, which recreates centuries-old royal recipes that were once closely guarded by palace cooks. The restaurant has an open-air courtyard, a formal dining room and a private dining space, Sheesh Mahal, which has been crafted entirely in silver and gold to make you feel like royalty. >



Previous pages: Bar Palladio, Jaipur; Arches at Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur. Opposite page: Hot-air ballooning over Amer Fort. This page: (Top) Hawa Mahal, the Palace of Winds. (Right) Sujan Rajmahal Palace Hotel. (Above) A royal chamber at Nahargarh Fort.

PHOTOS: NATALIE BANNISTER



“Relish in the romance of dining at some of the city's best lakeside restaurants”

*(Top left) Looking up at the sprawling City Palace. (Top right) Cow and birds at Gangaur Ghat. (Above) Views over Lake Pichola and the Taj Lake Palace Hotel at sunset. (Bottom right) Jagmandir Island Palace is situated on an island in Lake Pichola. (Bottom left) Romantic dining can be experienced at Ambrai at Amet Haveli, as close to the water's edge as you can get.*



PHOTO: FOTOLIA, NATALIE BANNISTER



Udaipur enchants with its regal romance and intoxicating beauty. The City of Lakes bursts to life with lush gardens, stunning marble palaces, mighty mansions, and a charm that could only be bestowed upon India's very own 'Venice of the East.' The city is home to three lakes, the biggest of which is Lake Pichola, where the magnificent and world-renowned Taj Lake Palace Hotel takes centre stage – the epitome of luxury and true decadence and floating on a private island (the hotel was famously the setting for the 1983 James Bond movie, *Octopussy*).

A shimmering jewel in the desert state, Udaipur has an ambience unlike anywhere else in the country. The city makes for a remarkably peaceful escape, in stark contrast to the frenetic pace of other Rajasthan cities, and thanks to its easy access from road or air, an ideal few days can easily be slotted in here on any itinerary. Udaipur also offers some incredible accommodation options, from the uber-luxe to the more affordable (however, still undeniably enchanting) hotels and traditional havelis, many set right on the lake's shore, and all fit for a Maharani or Maharaja.

Explore the city on foot, and don't be afraid to get a little lost amongst the serpentine alleyways teeming with shops and stalls selling trinkets, spices, leather, clothing, miniature paintings and traditional crafts.

Spend a few hours wandering through the private chambers, courtyards, and *mahals* of the sprawling City Palace, one of India's few 'living palaces,' as the Maharaja and his family still reside in-part here. If you're still exploring the precinct in the afternoon, end your visit with a sunset drink on the terrace at the adjoining Shiv Niwas Palace, a grand heritage palace hotel, and watch as the sun sinks over the Aravalli hills.

Take a boat ride over to the beautiful Jagmandir Island Palace, an historic palace from the 17th-century, redeveloped as a luxury hotel. Day-trippers should include a pitstop at either the colonnaded Darikhana Restaurant or Picholi

Bar for a cold Kingfisher beer or a snack, while you gaze across Lake Pichola and the imposing City Palace. There's been many an epic wedding held here on the island – it's apparently a popular choice of venues for celebrity Bollywood couples! Boats for Jagmandir Island Palace depart from the jetty near the City Palace.

A sunset cruise around Lake Pichola is a notable activity, and you can purchase tickets from the City Palace ticket counter. But for something more intimate and private, you're best to avoid the tourist masses and charter a private boat (some hotels offer their own) – you'll be rewarded with the best scenic view of the lake and the surrounding mountains, and the freedom to putt around at your leisure. The peace is palpable on the lake at this time of day, and the sunset is spectacular – my favourite memories of Udaipur are watching the sun melt into the waters of Lake Pichola, with the palaces, hotels and islands bathed in a golden glow. End the trip with a slow cruise along the edges of the Old City *ghats* (steps that lead down to the water), the most famous of which is Gangaur Ghat where the beautiful old noble Bagore Ki Haveli resides (it's now a museum, and well worth a visit).

Relish in the romance of dining at some of the city's best lakeside restaurants. Ambrai at Amet Haveli ([amethaveliudaipur.com](http://amethaveliudaipur.com)), is as close to the water's edge as you can get, set on the banks of Lake Pichola with glorious views of Gangaur Ghat, City Palace, Lake Palace, Jagmandir and Sajjangarh Fort. Nearby, the stylish Upre by 1559 AD ([1559ad.com](http://1559ad.com)), an open-air restaurant on the terrace of Lake Pichola Hotel, boasts an informal bar, private cabanas and a restaurant serving up international and local cuisines, cocktails and wines. And you can't beat the rooftop restaurant at Udai Kothi ([udaikeothi.com](http://udaikeothi.com)) – it's the perfect spot for a romantic candlelit dinner, complete with unparalleled views over the Old City.

If you are staying in the Old City area of Udaipur, there is certainly no shortage of rooftop restaurants. One of the best of which can be found overlooking the lake, at Jagat Niwas Palace Hotel ([jagatcollection.com](http://jagatcollection.com)). You can reserve one of the window-seat tables in the restaurant or, if weather permits, at the open-air rooftop, and settle in for a romantic feast of Rajasthani delights, with the lights of the Taj Lake Palace twinkling on the waters of Lake Pichola right in front of you as you dine. →

Udaipur

# Jodhpur

A busy, bustling city with attractions that are unique to this area in Rajasthan, Jodhpur is definitely worthy of a visit en route to the Thar Desert beyond. With its famed indigo-painted houses that give it the name the Blue City, and one of India's most spectacular forts, Jodhpur has an air of regality about it – it's a princely state, with an impressive tale to tell.

Established in the 15th-century by Rao Jodha, the fortress city's 10-kilometre rampart wall still stands as testimony to one of the fiercest and formidable kingdoms of the Rajput states. Exquisite palaces, temples and havelis are dominated by the gargantuan Mehrangarh Fort (one of India's largest) to the west and the majestic sandstone and marble palace of Umaid Bhawan to the east (now a grand palace hotel and still home to Jodhpur's royal family).

It's a desert city that is rich in culture and tradition. Elephants and brightly-painted camels walk down the street next to men in colourful turbans and women dressed in kaleidoscopic-coloured saris, heavily jewelled, many with large jiggling gold anklets and bracelets. A strong culture of music and folk dance, and a people that are known as some of the most hospitable in all of Rajasthan, all lends a unique aura and character to Jodhpur.

There's a bunch of great bazaars to explore, and it's always interesting to walk through the laneways and back streets, too. Go on the hunt for exquisite textiles, antique furniture, traditional handmade and embroidered leather shoes (*juttis*), lacquerware, antiques, carpets, puppets, colourful bangles and the silver jewellery of the nomadic Banjara tribe. You'll tackle a riotous show of classic India – a cacophony of sounds, smells and chaos, with vegetable carts, incense smoke, pungent spices, Indian sweets, Chai *wallahs* and holy cows all jostling for some space and attention.

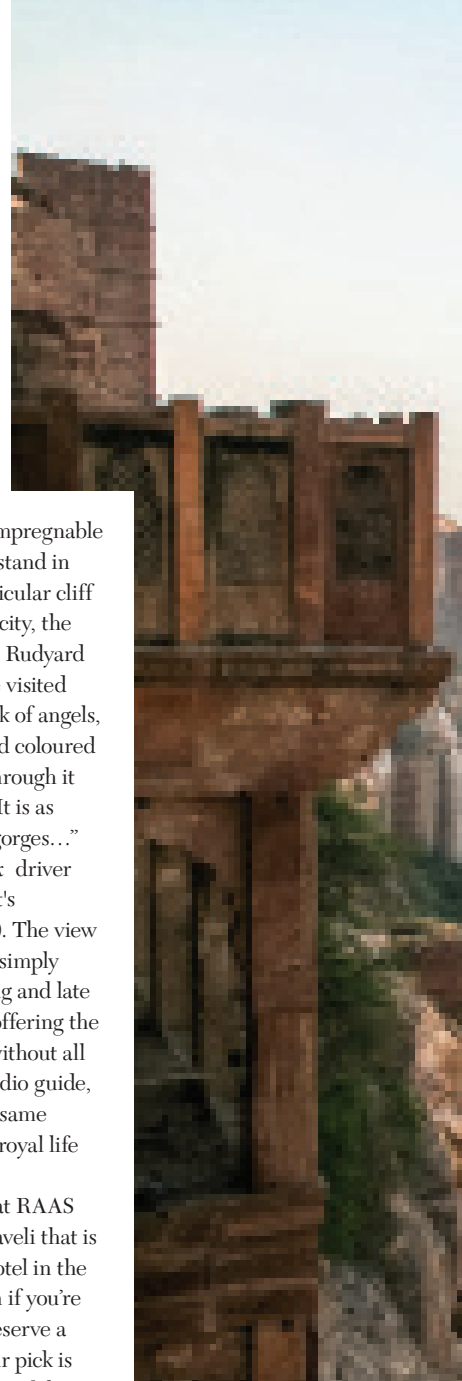


You cannot escape the view of the impregnable Mehrangarh Fort from anywhere you stand in Jodhpur. Chiselled out of the perpendicular cliff on which it stands, 400 feet above the city, the fort is colossal in both size and legend. Rudyard Kipling wrote of Mehrangarh when he visited Jodhpur in 1899, that it was, "The work of angels, fairies, and giants... built by Titans and coloured by the morning sun... he who walks through it loses sense of being among buildings. It is as though he walked through mountain gorges..."

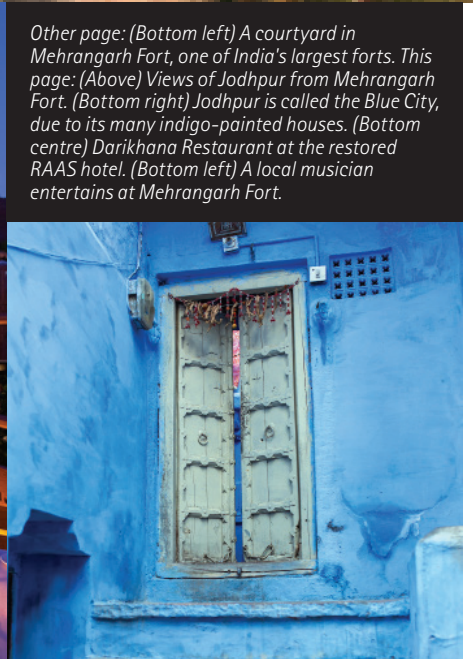
Negotiate a ride from a local *tuk-tuk* driver and head up the hill to explore the fort's fascinating museum ([mehrangarh.org](http://mehrangarh.org)). The view out over the Blue City from the fort is simply outstanding – first thing in the morning and late afternoon are the ideal times to visit, offering the best light and space to really explore without all the crowds. And be sure to hire the audio guide, as the experience just wouldn't be the same without hearing the tales of war, love, royal life and history as you explore.

Take in the romance of an evening at RAAS ([raasjodhpur.com](http://raasjodhpur.com)), an 18th-century haveli that is now a beautifully-restored boutique hotel in the north-eastern quarter of the city. Even if you're not a guest of the hotel, you can still reserve a spot at any of their dining options – our pick is the open-air rooftop bar, which has one of the finest views of Mehrangarh Fort lit-up at night. It's absolutely spectacular! The hotel is right next to the incredible Toorji Ka Jhalara, an 18th-century stepwell, where you'll often see the local kids enjoying their favourite swim hole.

The fabled Blue City is Jodhpur's most iconic of scenes – twisting lanes of indigo homes which stretch along the walls of the historic walled Old City, where the roads are so narrow they cannot be accessed by large vehicle. It's a walking-only affair here, which suits us just fine, as it offers the chance to slow down and take it all in. The blue pigment on these houses used to indicate that Brahmin (the priests of the Indian caste system) dwelled there. These days, locals tell us, the blue has been adopted by non-Brahmin families too, as the colour is a natural mosquito repellent, and cooling in the scorching heat of summer. →



“Jodhpur has an air of regality about it – a princely state with an impressive tale to tell”



Other page: (Bottom left) A courtyard in Mehrangarh Fort, one of India's largest forts. This page: (Above) Views of Jodhpur from Mehrangarh Fort. (Bottom right) Jodhpur is called the Blue City, due to its many indigo-painted houses. (Bottom centre) Darikhana Restaurant at the restored RAAS hotel. (Bottom left) A local musician entertains at Mehrangarh Fort.



# Off the beaten track

## Desert daze

Head to the Thar Desert to experience a few nights in a luxury tented camp. We stayed at chic and alluring Samsara Desert Camp & Resort ([samsaradechu.com](http://samsaradechu.com)), an oasis hidden away in the dunes of Dechu, a two-hour drive out of Jodhpur, where you can take in the beauty of the desert without forsaking any level of luxury.

Access to the camp is from the main resort – guests are taken on an exhilarating off-road adventure by an open-air jeep up and over the sand dunes. It really gets the heart racing for what's waiting ahead at camp. Your 24 hours in the desert camp goes a little something like this: hitch a ride on a regally-attired camel across the dunes, watching women from the local villages as they harvest the yellow mustard flowers and cumin fields below, their colourful saris as much a contrast to the desert as the surprisingly-green farm fields. Find a comfy seat afterward, G&T in hand, to toast the sunset, before settling in on plush bolster lounges by the outdoor fire to feast on equally-fiery Rajasthani delights, all while folk singers and drummers and silver-laden dancers make magic under the stars. Sleep it all off in the comfort of a luxuriously-appointed tent (it's more of a plush suite, really!), before waking up at dawn to hike up the windswept dunes. You might just spot a train of camels passing by, the camel bells jingling and their herdsman singing folk songs. It's an unforgettable experience.

The desert camps of the Thar Desert are an ideal pitstop en route to Jaisalmer, the Golden City, and the last outpost of Rajasthan. Jaisalmer is distinguished by its yellow sandstone buildings, vibrant bazaars and sprawling hilltop fort, as well as the rolling sand dunes of Sam.

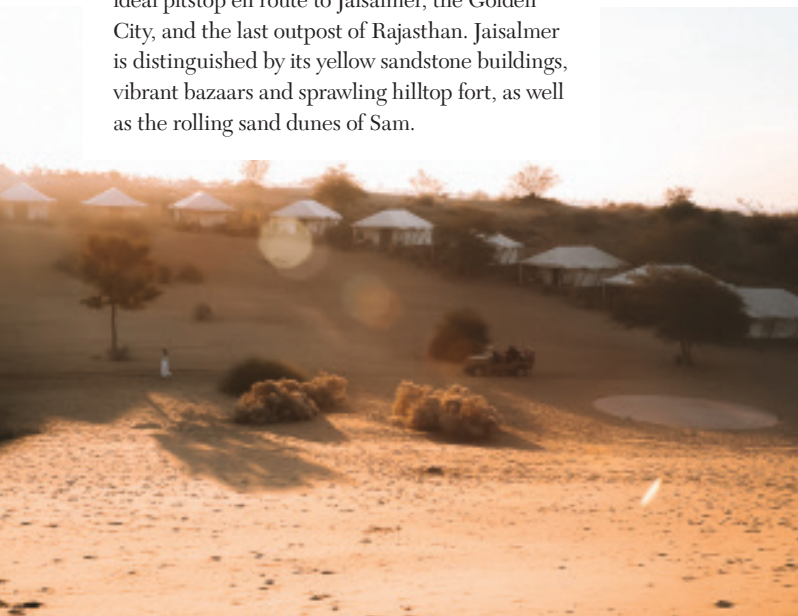


## Ranakpur

Hidden away in a village in the Pali district of Rajasthan is the incredible 15th-century Jain temple of Ranakpur – one of India's biggest and most important Jain temple complexes. Ranakpur is more than just a convenient stop on the road trip between Jodhpur and Udaipur – it's about halfway between the two cities by car – but is a jaw-droppingly exquisite example of the white marble carving of the ancient Jain religious sect. With 29 halls and 84 idols, elaborate domes and over a thousand intricately-carved pillars, the temple is an architectural masterpiece. Each pillar is unique – bar one. As the resident priest explained to us, it was purposefully created slightly skewed because only God can achieve perfection. Be sure to stop for lunch (wood-fired pizza) in the courtyard of the charming little La Pizzeria on the road out of the village – the best Indian pizza you'll find this side of Italy.



*This page: (Top right) A camel master in the Thar Desert. (Centre right) The Jain temple of Ranakpur. (Bottom right) Carved pillars in Ranakpur. (Left) The luxury tents at Samsara Desert Camp & Resort. Other page: (Top) Poolside at the eco-friendly Savista Retreat. (Bottom right) Casual and chilled Inn Seventh Heaven in Pushkar. (Bottom left) A brightly-dressed local woman from the nomadic Banjara tribe in Pushkar.*







## A rural retreat

Escape the hustle and bustle of Jaipur and travel about 45 minutes out of the city to spend a few nights at Savista Retreat ([savista.com](http://savista.com)), a stunning eco-retreat run by owners Bhanwar and Radhika, who are determined to share their ancestral home with guests in a way that is anything but your typical hotel experience. Set on 12-acres of cropland, the estate embraces sustainable living, with a farm-to-fork ethos. Savista grows all of its own vegetables and grain, and everything is free from chemical fertilisers and pesticides, making the delicious three-course, home-cooked meals here a nightly treat to remember.

In keeping with the slow life, Savista's guest rooms are limited to only 14 in total – we had the entire place to ourselves for the week we stayed here (total bliss!). This allows the delightful hosts to connect with every guest staying with them, and tailor the experience to suit each individual. Guests can combine sightseeing with simple pleasures, relaxing by the pool or lounging on one of the daybeds on the sprawling rooftop, with views across the countryside – absolute perfection, especially at sunset! A range of activities and cultural experiences can take you from doing a block-print workshop one day in the nearby village of Bagru, to riding through the local villages by camel cart, or driving to the hidden Chand Baori stepwell in the village of Abhaneri, or the incredible monkey temple of Galtaji, an ancient Hindu pilgrimage site. Savista is the perfect short break on the road to the holy city of Pushkar.

## Sacred Pushkar

Set on the shores of one of India's holiest lakes, Pushkar has a magnetism like nowhere else in India – a town where the holy versus the hedonistic. It's a city where Hindu pilgrims, *Sadhus* (wandering holy men) and a devout Brahmin community coexist with spiritualists and backpackers in search of their own kind of nirvana. It's bohemian and laidback, and for intrepid couples who want to experience the real heart of sacred India, this is absolutely the place to be, even if only for a few days.

*Pushkar Sarovar* (Pushkar Lake) is considered the holiest lakes in all of India – the spot, it is said, where the god Brahma dropped a petal from his lotus flower, falling from the universe and landing here to create these sacred waters. Locals and *Sadhus* gather on the ghats every morning to bathe in the pure waters, while sunset makes way for the evening *aarti* (ceremonial songs and offerings) at the temples that dot the lakeside. It really is such an intoxicatingly beautiful scene. Find a table at any one of the simple rooftop restaurants that line the ghats here, and settle in for the magic.

A constant soundtrack of chanting, drums, devotional songs and gongs competes only with the sounds of the local Indian cows that rule the streets and alleyways. But it's camels that rule the desert, and Pushkar has the most famous of them all, as the home to the annual Pushkar Camel Fair which takes place from October to November (dates change every year according to the Hindu calendar month of *Kartik*).

There are some great accommodation options to choose from around Pushkar, but we always choose to stay at the super-chilled Inn Seventh Heaven ([inn-seventh-heaven.com](http://inn-seventh-heaven.com)), a hundred-year-old haveli which has been restored from disrepair and converted into a small hotel. I love its casual vibe and the many charming nooks for relaxing, and the rooftop restaurant here serves some of the best food in town (try the traditional Rajasthani *thali* – a platter of the region's best dishes). You won't get a cold beer to wash it down with (Pushkar is strictly a dry town with no alcohol served *anywhere*), but you can lose hours taking in the view out over the rooftops and temples. Simple perfection in sacred India. 🇮🇳

