



# Out of this World

*Incredible journeys, luxurious escapes...*

PALACEWALK  
Anita Kaushal at  
the Samode Haveli  
hotel wears dress  
by Etro, \$4,840, at  
Net-A-Porter.com;  
earrings (sold as  
set with necklace)  
by Amrapali  
Jewels, \$265,070

## Passage to *India*

PORTER visits RAJASTHAN and beyond, in a land where inspiration can be found at every turn – from the creative playgrounds of JAIPUR and an Italianate palace on the GANGES to the hidden leopard safari camp on the edge of the ARAVALLI HILLS...

Edited by Catherine Fairweather

## JOURNEY TO JAIPUR

Rajasthan's magical capital is an epicenter of possibility, a pink city that looks like a mirage but has the power to realize your wildest dreams. *Ajesh Patalay* meets three of its tastemakers who open the doors of Jaipur's sunset-shaded palaces, bazaars and hidden corners, unlocking the secrets of India's sparkling jewel in the crown

Photography by Abhishek Bali Produced by Delilah Khomo

*I am sitting on a long shikari boat, in the middle of the Man Sagar Lake in Jaipur. My oarsman, his face darkened by the sun, rows at a stately pace, drawing us closer to our destination, the floating palace of Jal Mahal. Conceived in the 18th century as a duck-hunting lodge and pleasure pavilion by the city's founder Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, this jewel-like construction has only recently been rescued from years of sewage-swamped neglect. In the afternoon's syrupy light, it takes on the color of ripe apricots, an architectural enticement as honeyed as any Indian sweet.*

Hopping onto the jetty, I am led on a tour of the grounds, which include the jasmine-scented Chameli Bagh gardens above and the marbled hallways below, now a showcase for Jaipur's artisanship, with their elaborate sheesh (or mirror) work and murals depicting the seasons and palace life, based on Indian miniature paintings.

It's a masterstroke of restoration, even more remarkable because, despite the millions of rupees spent on it, the Jal Mahal is closed to visitors and looks set to remain so for >



REFLECTED GLORY  
The magnificent Jal Mahal  
palace in the middle of  
Jaipur's Man Sagar Lake

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the foreseeable future. The reason? An ongoing dispute between the Indian government and the developers who undertook the restoration. The only thing more Indian than that is my being here at all, thanks to my guide, the magnificently well-connected Diggi, from travel specialists India Beat, having pulled some strings. Whom you know in Jaipur can still open some pretty regal doors.

As a rule, though, Jaipur isn't shy about flaunting its treasures, be they jewelry, textiles, crafts or indeed palaces, many of which are now lavish hotels and explain why Jaipur is such a wedding capital: few cities can compete with its wealth of venues. City Palace, in the heart of the old town and a residence of the royal family, is one such location. "This feels like home," jokes Akanksha Arora, wandering through its cloisters, under

a shower of petals on PORTER's shoot. She is the CEO of Amrapali Jewels, not the oldest jewelry concern in Jaipur (that honor goes to The Gem Palace, whose family were court jewelers to the Moguls), but certainly the most fashionable, with a following that extends from Hollywood to Kensington Palace (the Duchess of Cambridge is a fan). Raised in Mumbai but a resident of Jaipur for 14 years, Arora is married to Amrapali's head of design, Tarang ("He wears more jewelry than I do," she reports). She is also a happy regular at City Palace, having just come here for a private party at Holi and back again three times this week to make arrangements for her sister-in-law's wedding, which takes place here later in the year.

"It has so much heritage and character," she says, explaining why the Rajasthani capital is fast becoming the city that visitors love more than Mumbai or Delhi. Now her family is adding to that heritage by opening a museum dedicated to their collection of tribal jewelry and design. Its treasures, on display at Amrapali's flagship store, behind vast, metal, peacock-filigree doors, range from

diamond-studded pendants and necklaces to curios such as an elephant-headed hookah spout and fish-shaped kohl container in silver and gold. The standout piece, however, is the life-sized chariot in the foyer made entirely out of silver and guaranteed to make you gasp.

Besides its precious stones, another big draw here is the Jaipur Literature Festival, which takes place every January, and attracts visitors from across India and the world (half a million at last count). When they arrive,

Jaipur works its special magic, which can be best summed up in one word: possibility. The sense that anything could happen runs through the festival like electricity. The crowds spilling into the main venue, the Diggi Palace Hotel, from schoolgirls in uniform to statesmen in dhoti, come armed with questions and giddy with curiosity. Alexandra Pringle, editor-in-chief at Bloomsbury, attends with authors including Richard Ford, Candace Bushnell and Margaret Atwood, and calls it the liveliest, most engaged audience in the world. She recalls one talk at which her author, Brigid Keenan, recited *Little Miss Muffet* in Hindi and was met by cheers of thousands. But then, there's always been a tradition of literary performance here, dating back to the Moguls when

verses were competitively tossed about at court.

The air of possibility extends to the shopping too. I have rarely felt more exhilarated, or been more profligate, faced with the excess of ravishing things to buy. Such as the red poppy design quilting at Brigitte Singh's haveli (+91-141-253 0229) on the outskirts of the city, where you can see woodblock printers decorating fabrics in her workshop. Or the lustrous wares – bangles, figurines, silverware – on sale at any number of the street markets in the walled city, where each trade has its own designated lanes, and you walk past shop upon shop to find vendors sitting cross-legged on the floor sipping chai or crouched over their benches fashioning trinkets. >

## Akanksha Arora

CEO of Amrapali Jewels  
(pictured right)

"STAY at Alsisar Haveli, a small oasis in the middle of the city that has been converted into a hotel. It has the most beautiful cloistered swimming pool. ([alsisar.com](http://alsisar.com))

EAT the best Rajasthani thali at 1135 AD, the most opulent and theatrical restaurant housed in the Amber Fort. For a really special occasion, they will set up a table for two in the romantic courtyard with a private classical music concert just for you (+91 98290 37170).

SHOP for fail-safe presents at the Amrapali store, the signature photograph frames or small elephants made of silver are perfect to take back for friends ([amrapali.com](http://amrapali.com)).

ESCAPE the city in a hot air balloon (September to April), which can be arranged by Greaves of India ([greavesindia.com](http://greavesindia.com))."



### PRETTY IN PINK

Clockwise from above: Akanksha Arora, at Jaipur's City Palace, wears dress by Temperley, \$1,795, at [Net-A-Porter.com](http://Net-A-Porter.com); shoes by Tabitha Simmons, \$895; earrings, \$39,730, ring, \$10,415, and necklace, \$95,650, all by Amrapali Jewels; Akanksha wears dress by Temperley, \$2,995; necklace, \$168,815, and ring, \$2,655, both by Amrapali Jewels; traditional Rajasthani puppets at Jaipur's Johri Bazaar; the 51 Shades of Pink restaurant at the Suján Rajmahal Palace Hotel





**BLUE NOTES**  
Clockwise from above: the courtyard of the Hotel Narain Niwas Palace with its fountain and resident peacock; Anita Kaushal, at the Samode Haveli, wears dress by Etro, \$5,190, at Net-A-Porter.com; shoes by Manolo Blahnik, \$695; rings by Amrapali Jewels, from \$1,705; the beautifully ornate Blue Room at Jaipur's City Palace; Bar Palladio, with its murals designed by Dutch designer Marie-Anne Oudejans



I am not the only one to be seduced. “An orgy of shawl buying” is how Pringle describes her standing appointment with Kishor at the Aladdin’s cave that is Saurashtra Impex (+91 141 2630233). And her purchases rarely stop there, with antique rugs, curtains, and shirts from Hot Pink boutique ([hotpinkindia.com](http://hotpinkindia.com)) regularly on her wish list. Nor does she miss the chance to visit one of the city’s storied jewelry showrooms, where she recalls how she and the author Donna Tartt once experienced “sensory overload” trying on diamond necklaces.

But why not indulge? Jaipur is the world’s envy for its artisanal goods, thanks to the enlightened thinking of the city’s noble founders, who invited craftsmen from across India to come here, and granted them royal patronage and an esteem that endures to this day.

For Anita Kaushal, whose family roots are in Jaipur, the Pink City is all about sparking ideas. “I come for the colors and inspiration,” she says, picking her way through the flower market, where garlands in every shade carpet the ground. Kaushal runs the Ayurvedic beauty company Mauli ([maulirituals.com](http://maulirituals.com)), whose products are developed here, and she thrives off the city’s entrepreneurial spirit. For instance, in talks with her supplier recently, they hit on the idea of embedding the handmade cards that come with each product with holy basil seeds. “It’s about a supplier who cares enough to think outside the box,” she says. “That would never have happened if I had been sitting at my desk in London.”

But isn’t that India’s enduring gift? To open our eyes to new things and new ways of seeing. I hear it from all the designers I meet, many of them expat Europeans, who add to the city’s cosmopolitan flavor. Jewelry designer Marie-Hélène de Taillac, who first came here in 1995, says simply: “Anything you dream of, you can make here.” And Thierry Journon, a Frenchman who used to work with John Galliano and now designs clothes and homeware in rococo prints (Tilda Swinton is a fan), agrees: “Jaipur is

like Disneyland for creative people.” He recalls moving here 15 years ago and being struck by the sight of women on the back of scooters with their embroidered saris fluttering in the wind. “It was a magical vision.”

For enchanting things you otherwise wouldn’t see, put yourself in the hands of Bertie and Victoria Dyer, the British husband-and-wife team behind India Beat ([indiabeat.co.uk](http://indiabeat.co.uk)), who have a home here. As Bertie puts it: “The main street has its beauty, but the back alley has its own intensity.” Under his charge, a trip to the Amber Fort, a tourist mainstay thanks to its stunning views and mirrored Sheesh Mahal, will be followed by a detour through the deserted side lanes to an ancient stairwell, where the zigzagging steps resemble something out of an Escher lithograph, and then on to a chattri memorial overrun with gray langur monkeys.

**Anita Kaushal**  
Co-founder of Mauli  
(pictured left)

“STAY at Samode Haveli, whose charm lies in its slightly faded elegance and exuberant Rajasthani-style interiors ([samode.com](http://samode.com)).

EAT a home-cooked meal from Bungalow80’s owners, and meet their mother, Shani, who is an amazing astrologer (+91 998242 0000).

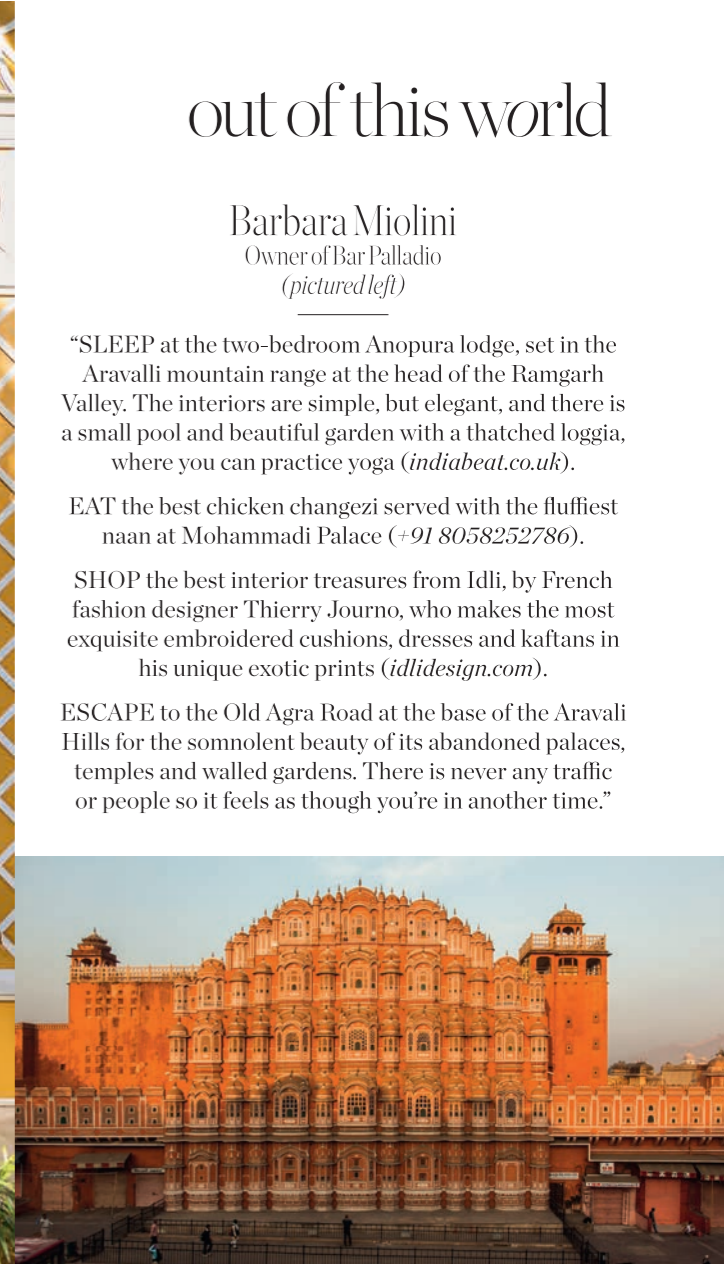
SHOP for antiques and rugs at Handicraft Haveli on Amer Road ([handicrafthaveli.in](http://handicrafthaveli.in)). I always take back Suman Bajaj’s long-flowing, Mogul-inspired dresses and easy-drape saris ([sumanbajaj.com](http://sumanbajaj.com)).

ESCAPE to Jaipur’s flower market, Phool Mandi, where women sit outside making marigold necklaces and jasmine garlands.

At night, visit Jantar Mantar – an open-air observatory with huge zodiac charts – which is also the best place to see the North Star.”

As for magical places to stay, the Suján Rajmahal Palace hotel ([sujanluxury.com/rajmahal](http://sujanluxury.com/rajmahal)) should be high on your list. The British Residency for over 100 years, then home to the polo-playing Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II, whose jet-set guests included the Windsors, Mountbattens and Jackie Kennedy, the Suján is actually one of the oldest palaces in Jaipur, dating back to the 1720s. But the property’s exuberance rather than its age will impress you the most, thanks to the playful reminders of its recent past (such as the Maharaja’s resplendent 1954 ‘Jaipur 1’ Thunderbird parked in the driveway) and its opulent makeover and relaunch as a hotel in 2015 by designer Adil Iqbal Ahmad. I spent the night in the Prince of Wales suite,

wallpapered and furnished entirely in pink and blue chintz, one of only 15 unique rooms and apartments at the Suján. As vivid and joyful as the interiors are, however (and who wouldn’t thrill to eat breakfast in the fittingly named 51 Shades of Pink room?), this feels like an oasis of calm, particularly around the pool, away from the dust, heat and noise elsewhere. >



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Barbara Miolini  
Owner of Bar Palladio  
(pictured left)

“SLEEP at the two-bedroom Anopura lodge, set in the Aravalli mountain range at the head of the Ramgarh Valley. The interiors are simple, but elegant, and there is a small pool and beautiful garden with a thatched loggia, where you can practice yoga ([indiabeat.co.uk](http://indiabeat.co.uk)).

EAT the best chicken changezi served with the fluffiest naan at Mohammadi Palace (+91 8058252786).

SHOP the best interior treasures from Idli, by French fashion designer Thierry Journo, who makes the most exquisite embroidered cushions, dresses and kaftans in his unique exotic prints ([idlidesign.com](http://idlidesign.com)).

ESCAPE to the Old Agra Road at the base of the Aravali Hills for the somnolent beauty of its abandoned palaces, temples and walled gardens. There is never any traffic or people so it feels as though you're in another time.”

Come dusk, Bar Palladio ([bar-palladio.com](http://bar-palladio.com)), set within the gardens of the Hotel Narain Niwas Palace, is the only place to go for cocktails. Its owner, Barbara Miolini, a Swiss-Italian who spent 15 years working for the Hotel Cipriani in Venice, moved to Jaipur for love of a man, but stayed for love of the city, reinventing herself as a textile manufacturer, then a restaurateur with the launch of Bar Palladio in 2013 and the nearby lunchtime canteen, Caffé Palladio, in 2016, both inspired by grand old European cafés. “Everything is somehow possible in Jaipur,” she says, grateful for her thriving business, which now includes home and tableware too. “If you have the courage and a dream, the opportunity is here.” It’s a familiar mantra. Sitting on one of Bar Palladio’s blue-striped flatbeds, sipping a rose sharbat and watching the resident peacocks strut by, I begin to harbor dreams of my own, namely of staying. I already know I’m going to miss this city – its energy, its style, its bevy of riches – and I haven’t even left. ■

## WHERE TO STAY

**SUJÁN RAJMAHAL PALACE**  
Doormen clad in white jackets and pink turbans welcome you to this jewel box of a hotel, where each of the palatial rooms has a different colorway with custom-made wallpaper and silk brocades, chandeliers and art deco furniture. A highlight is the hotel’s restaurant, 51 Shades of Pink (*from \$645; [sujanluxury.com](http://sujanluxury.com)*).

**47 JOBNER BAGH**  
A charming, well-priced guesthouse with whitewashed walls and Indian antiques, whose owner Shiva and his wife will welcome you with wonderful home-cooked meals, followed by a chai on the rooftop overlooking the Nahargarh Fort. Legendary Dr Upal provides the best Ayurvedic and aromatherapy massages in the city (*from \$130; [jobnerbagh.com](http://jobnerbagh.com)*).

Fashion editor Helen Broadfoot. Hair and makeup Riviera Vaz. With thanks to India Beat ([indiabeat.co.uk](http://indiabeat.co.uk))

**HOTEL NARAIN NIWAS PALACE**  
This much-loved, saffron-colored hotel is a city landmark with a generous swimming pool, wide lawns on which peacocks pose, and gloriously faded bedrooms with frescoed ceilings and four-poster beds. The hotel is also home to the city’s most glamorous hot spot, Bar Palladio, where everyone goes for negronis and cicchetti (*from \$140; [hotelnarainniwas.com](http://hotelnarainniwas.com)*).

**RAMBAGH PALACE**  
This iconic grande dame hotel, and former home of the Maharaja, is a Mogul-inspired dream, with butler service, access to the palace’s vintage car collection, a resident palmist and the legendary Polo Bar (*from \$575; [tajhotels.com](http://tajhotels.com)*).

**SAMODE HAVELI**  
Owned by a scion of the Jaipuri royal family, this historic mansion is unique, from the elephant-ramp entrance and

magical courtyard lit with oil lamps to the jasmine- and geranium-scented gardens that wrap around the loveliest pool in Jaipur (*from \$350; [samode.com](http://samode.com)*).

**DERA AMER**  
Escape the city with a stay at this elephant camp in the foothills of the Aravalli Hills, behind the famous Amber Fort. Feed and wash the adopted elephants and ride on their backs on a torchlit safari through the Kukas forest reserve. Stay the night in one of several luxurious private tents (*from \$300; [deraamer.com](http://deraamer.com)*).

## WHERE TO SHOP

Plunder Jaipur’s incredible collection of artisan shops, from Andraab ([andraab.com](http://andraab.com)), specializing in super-fine wool and cashmere shawls, to Ridhi Sidhi Textiles (+91 82901 11555), with its great value

poppy print quilts and antique mirrored textiles, and Anokhi ([anokhi.com](http://anokhi.com)), which specializes in hand-printed fabrics. Be sure to visit the lifestyle emporium Aashka (+91 294 242 3485) and take home a quartz statue of Ganesh, the elephant god, which legend has it ensures you will one day return to Jaipur.

## TRAVEL TIP

Greaves of India can organize a week’s tour of Jaipur, with six nights at Suján Rajmahal Palace (or a combination of any of the other hotels mentioned in the piece), including private tours, transfers and a hot-air balloon ride, excursion to a rural Rajasthan camp, an elephant safari, a royal tour of City Palace and a heritage walking tour, along with other activities (*from \$2,459 per person; [greavesindia.com](http://greavesindia.com)*).

**GOLDEN DREAMS**  
Clockwise from above: the Maharaja’s 1954 Thunderbird in front of the Suján Rajmahal Palace hotel; an aerial view of Jaipur from the city’s Isar Lat minaret; Barbara Miolini, at Caffé Palladio, wears jacket by Etro, \$2,720, at Net-A-Porter.com; shirt, \$990, and pants, \$750, both by The Row, at Net-A-Porter.com; shoes by Jimmy Choo, \$950; necklace (sold as set with earrings) by Amrapali Jewels, \$265,070; Jaipur’s Hawa Mahal palace