Nights come alive
The Pink City has a different hue after sundown
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night bus tour is a great way to
experience Jaipur in a new light

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Rajasthan: a great state to be in
Dear Reader,

It is an entirely new experience. When you’re through with that been-there-done-that-routine in Jaipur, there’s still a whole new world waiting for you. Only this time, you need to take off those sunshades and view the city’s attractions in a new light. Monuments, forts, crowded roads, busy markets and yes, a hip and happening nightlife… Jaipur, it seems, has a totally new face after sundown. Drive down to the Amber Fort on the outskirts of the city to chance upon a vision unlike anything you have ever seen before. Muted lighting along the bastion’s ramparts casts a stupendous reflection on the Maota Lake below.

“Amber Fort is almost like the stuff of dreams,” exults Minal Puri, the author of the cover story. And when you see the image of the fort in our issue, I am sure you will agree.

The play of light on the honeycomb exterior of Hawa Mahal, the glittering bed of crystals on Amar Jawan Jyoti, the illuminations at Trimurti Circle, and the eerie, lengthening shadows of Nahargarh Fort… these are only some of Jaipur’s wonders that are best experienced after dusk. Add to it the brightly-decorated shops at Johari Bazaar, or the spectacular strobe lights and pulsating music at popular discotheques and you have a city that is alive with light and sound when the sun has set. Night tourism, something that was not heard of in Jaipur, is here to stay and how!

Also in this issue, you will find Alpana Singh’s story on her tryst with the tiger… well, actually, she was chasing the tiger but it managed to elude her every time. The biting cold, the dramatic chases, wireless messages, frightened cheetals, screeching peacocks, Alpana’s story has all the ingredients of a racy thriller. As for the tiger, it had the last laugh, after all. Akriti Arora visits the blackbuck sanctuary at Tal Chappar and is convinced that man and animal can co-exist happily ever after.

Here’s wishing you a fun-filled 2009. Take care and be safe.
Welcome

Around the city
- The City Palace
- Jantar Mantar
- Hawa Mahal
- Amber Fort
- The Anokhi Museum
- Jaigarh
- Nahargarh
- Albert Hall
- The Sisodia Rani Palace
- The Central Museum
- The SRC Museum of Indology
- The Philatelic Museum
- Rambagh Palace
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Excursions
- Gaitor
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to Jaipur

A window to Rajasthan

Photograph by Amit Chakravarty
Night Vision

Think you’ve already seen the attractions of Rajasthan’s historic capital? The tourism department’s Pink City by Night bus tour is a great way to experience Jaipur in a new light, finds Minal Puri. Photography Amit Chakravarty.
ourselves and were pleasantly surprised at how enjoyable it was. An officer from the tourism department met us at our hotel at around 6.30pm and escorted us to a mini-bus with an open seating area that afforded us good views of the city’s sights (just remember to bring a shawl or sweater as Jaipur gets quite chilly during winter).

The tour started at a fast pace, not pausing at the first sight, Raj Mandir, on Bhagwan Das Marg, at the intersection with MI Road. This famous cinema hall, which refers to itself as the “show place of the nation”, has only been open since the 1970s, but is nevertheless as much of an attraction as Jaipur’s older buildings. It was designed by architect W.M. Namjoshi in the Art Moderne style. With its array of curlicues, jagged lines along with embellishments of stars and fleurs-de-lis, the whitewashed structure is often likened to a giant cream cake. It is especially spectacular at night when coloured lights give it a fairytale-like appearance. Although most visitors come to watch a film in the cinema’s lavish interiors, complete with elaborate chandeliers and plush velvet upholstery, the fast-pace of our tour only allowed us to marvel at the architectural peculiarity of the building’s façade before moving on to our next attraction, the Statue Circle.

Statue Circle, commonly referred to as the Jai Singh Circle, is a popular evening hangout spot for Jaipur’s residents, a little surprising considering the monument is smack in the middle of one of the city’s busiest intersections. We saw families picnicking here, street
vendors selling roasted nuts and children playing in the monument's grassy lawns. The centrepiece of the large circle is an ornately-embellished gazebo surrounded by a fountain. Inside the structure is a life-sized statue of Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II (1688-1743), who founded Jaipur in 1727. The statue depicts the king with an astrological tool in hand, alluding to his keen interest in astrology and futurism. Although we had seen the circle earlier during the day, we were impressed by how much more magnificent it looked at night when it glows with an amber hue. After circling the roundabout, we headed past the BM Birla Science and Technology Centre which houses the Birla Planetarium, one of Jaipur's major attractions. Although very little of the building is visible from the street, we did spot a sign advertising the planetarium's evening celestial shows, which take place at 6pm and 7pm.

Our next stop was the Amar Jawan Jyoti (eternal flame), in front of the Sawai Mansingh Cricket Stadium. This was the first point at which the bus actually stopped and we were allowed to get off. The stoic monument was erected recently in honour of the many Indian soldiers who have died in warfare. A large bed of quartz crystals leads up to the central arches of the monument, while a pair of columns frames the structure giving it a regal appearance. We wanted to spend some more time exploring the place,
stretching our legs and marvelling at the beauty of the illuminated bed of crystals, but the tour had only just begun and we still had a lot to see.

Back on the bus, we headed toward the nearby Vidhan Sabha Bhawan (or house of the Legislative Assembly), a majestic sandstone construction that occupies a few city blocks, before heading towards our next major stop, the Laxmi Narayan Temple (or Birla Mandir). As our bus pulled into the temple’s car park we saw a small fort-like construction on a hillock above the site. Our tour leader told us that it was the Moti Dungri (or pearl hill) palace, an imitation of a Scottish castle. Next to the palace stands a small Ganesha temple that is popular with local people during religious festivals. However, since the palace is used as a private residence, it is not open to visitors. But that didn’t stop us from clicking a few snapshots of the building.

We crossed the car park to the Birla Mandir, a triple-domed temple which was built by the BM Birla Foundation 1988. This is one of Jaipur’s most popular sites, and seems to attract everyone from elderly couples to overly-perfumed teenagers. To enter the complex we had to pass through a metal detector manned by a security guard, who reminded us not to take photographs inside. The first things we noticed upon entering were the stained glass windows depicting scenes from the Ramayana, which stand out in bright contrast to the temple’s pure white marble walls. However, the most impressive parts of Birla Mandir are its interiors. Detailed images of different incarnations of Lord Vishnu adorn the walls. The complex carvings on the domed marble ceilings had visitors craning their necks for a better look. Pilgrims can come here and pray before larger-than-life idols of Lord Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi. There’s even a museum on-site, although the night bus doesn’t stop at the complex long enough to permit a visit to it.

Soon we were back on the bus, en route to our next destination. Passing by the Trimurti Circle, a traffic circle containing an illuminated obelisk surrounded by three statues, we turned towards Ram Niwas Gardens and Albert Hall, home of Jaipur’s Central Museum. Built in the late nineteenth century, Albert Hall was modelled on the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The impressive sandstone and white marble building was designed by Sir Samuel Swinton Jacob (1841-1917) who was well-known for his works in the Indo-Saracenic style (he also designed Jaipur’s Rambagh Palace and the main building of Delhi’s St Stephen’s College). The Hall is breathtaking at night, when its illuminated domes and balconies cast a glow over the gardens surrounding it.

After marvelling at Albert Hall from the bus, we crossed through New Gate into the fortified pink part of the city. We drove past Badi Chaupar, the Old City’s busy main...
square, slowing down for a photo-op at the Hawa Mahal, next to the entrance of the City Palace. The Hawa Mahal, or Palace of Winds, got its name because it is built in such a way that the air circulates through its interiors, like a pre-industrial air conditioning system. With 953 tiny windows and organ-pipe like towers, it looks like a large honeycomb, although it was designed to resemble the crown of Lord Krishna. The pink sandstone structure was built by Maharaja Sawai Pratap Singh in 1799 as a place for royal ladies to observe life on the street below without being seen. It is a fine example of Rajput architecture (with a hint of Mughal influence).

Our journey then took us north to Amber Road and through Jorawar Singh Gate. Making a quick stop at a handicraft showroom, we watched a block printing demonstration. Our next stop was Jal Mahal, a beautiful palace located in the middle of Man Sagar Lake. This structure was originally intended to be a duck hunting lodge. Interestingly, the Jal Mahal is five stories high, but four of its floors are under water. We continued past Kanak Vrindavan, a lush expanse of gardens set in front of the Aravalli mountain range. At night, the Govind Deoji Temple inside the gardens shines with glowing light.

We continued to our next attraction, the famed Amber Fort. "It's India's number-one fort," our driver exclaimed. Not sure what he meant by that statement, we did, however, agree that the fort, which cast its illuminated reflection over Maota Lake below, was one of the most impressive we'd seen. Amber was first developed by the Meenas, the former rulers of Rajasthan who claim to be descen-
The settlement gets its name from Amba, the goddess to whom it was dedicated. The city was conquered in 1037 by the Kachhawa clan. Scholars attribute the majority of the construction to Raja Man Singh I (1540-1614), a Kachhawa ruler who served as a general under Emperor Akbar (although the sandstone fort was built atop the ruins of an earlier structure).

Our next stop was Nahargarh Fort, which was built in 1734 by Maharaja Jai Sawai Singh. Nahargarh was the first of three forts constructed by the ruler and was once used as a picnic spot by members of the royal family. Although Nahargarh means ‘tigers' abode’, local legend has it that the grounds on which the fort were built had been haunted by a prince, whose spirit agreed to leave only if the fort was named after him. Although the ghoul allegedly left centuries ago, the fort and the roads leading up to it still have an eerie feeling, especially at night.

To get to Nahargarh from Amber, we had to ascend a winding (and bumpy) road, occasionally slowing down to avoid water buffaloes blocking our passage. Jaipur sparkled below us as we made our way up towards the entrance of the complex. Our bus was unable to pass through the low arches that separated the fort from the outside world, so we got down and started to trek up to the main building (a car was provided to shuttle those who did not want to walk). Those of us who wanted to stretch our legs walked down a dark
lane, past an old (and seemingly unused) amphitheatre and to the fort, where we were led to the fort’s small restaurant. We moved up a ramp, across a spookily dark courtyard and into a warmly-lit dining area that had a view of the city below. There was quite a feast waiting for us when we arrived—a buffet of dal, channa, aloo gobhi and raita served with rice and roti—on a long table in the restaurant’s main dining hall. One of the other rooms in the restaurant had been taken over by large groups of locals who had come to take advantage of this amazing piece of heritage. There is also a single hotel room available for Rs 750 per night for those who want a first-hand experience of fort life without a five-star price tag.

We finished off our dinner with a bowl of sweet payasam and made our way back down to our bus. Many of the people on the tour dozed as we retraced our route towards Jaipur. It was past 10 pm and most of the sites that had been brightly lit during our tour were now masqued by shadows. The bus halted at Badi Chaupar to drop a few of our tour mates off before heading towards MI Road and the main strip of hotels. The central square—which is normally filled with hawkers, shoppers and tourists—was now desolate, save for a few auto rickshaws. Over four hours had passed since we boarded the bus, yet we felt like it had not been more than an hour—the whole experience had been so interesting and information-packed that time had flown by.
Although Jaipur has fewer nightlife options than Delhi or Mumbai, the Pink City’s afterhours scene is gradually perking up, finds Margot Bigg. Photography by Anshika Varma.
All-night parties and strobe-lit discotheques are not among the images commonly associated with Jaipur. However, friends had told us that it was possible to spend a night out on the town in Jaipur and we were keen to find out if Rajasthan’s capital was really the nightlife destination that many had claimed it to be.

We started our evening at Café Kooba, a double-storey lounge in the new city that is known for its relaxed vibe and thin crust pizzas (from Rs 200). We loved the colourful first floor dining area, which has low seating and is decorated with framed replicas of vintage posters. However, we were blown away by the beautifully-decorated rooftop terrace. With gentle lighting, cushioned benches and plenty of hookahs, it looks like it has been plucked right out of a scene from 1001 Arabian Nights—definitely beyond what we would have expected from a city the size of Jaipur. The café’s owner, Vikramaditya Singh, drew his inspiration for Kooba from lounge culture in Delhi, Mumbai and overseas. He even plans to turn Kooba into a wi-fi hotspot, pushing Jaipur’s fledgling café culture to the next level.

Although Kooba is technically a café and not a nightclub, we were fortunate enough to be in town for a special event. The first floor had been converted into a dance area complete with DJ and club lighting, but as it was early in the night, most patrons flocked to the rooftop chill-out area. After checking out the extensive wine list (from Rs 225 a glass), we decided to try the Classic Bellini (Rs 225), a flute full of champagne subtly flavoured with a few slices of peach. We could have easily spent the rest of our evening lounging about on the roof, sipping wine and enjoying the fresh winter air, but we had not yet set foot in any of Jaipur’s nightclubs and it was getting late.

Our next stop was Spark, located in the industrial area near the Sanganer airport on the road to Chokhi Dhani. We were initially a little hesitant to visit a place somewhere outside the city centre. After all, what sort of crowd would a nightclub in the middle of nowhere attract? But we were curious nonetheless. The nightclub’s website promised ‘oozing beer’ and had a picture of a fire dancer spinning poi (kerosene-soaked balls lit on fire). So we ignored our uncertainty in favour of potential adventure and drove half an hour in search of the nightspot.

Spark occupies the second floor of a stand-alone shopping complex on an otherwise desolate road. A huge neon sign promising a family restaurant beckons visitors from the nearby motorway. We were a bit confused at first—wasn’t Spark supposed to be a nightclub? As it turned out, the concept is more of a something-for-everyone deal—along with the nightclub, there’s a restaurant with indoor and rooftop seating. Private parties can also be arranged.

We followed the sound of pop-infused house music to the door of Spark’s small club. When we entered, we were immediately accosted by a thick billow of smoke that stung our eyes but added a hazy dream sequence effect to the colourfully-lit dance space. We were still a little nervous as we were the only women in sight, but were comforted by the fact that the men were too concerned with enjoying themselves to even notice us.

Everyone seemed to be having fun dancing and just being themselves, a refreshing relief from the ostentation common to most night-club-goers these days. Even the bar menu was simple and straightforward, with the classic cocktails (Rs 160-Rs 300) called as they are, again a nice break from most clubs’ overzealous attempts at cute names.

We would have liked to spend a bit more time watching people at Spark, but had heard that clubs close early in Jaipur and we wanted to make the most of our night. So we drove back towards the city in search of our next stop, The Fire Ball (known locally by its acronym, TFB) inside the Jaipur Ramada hotel. We were greeted at the base of a staircase by Partho, who mans the entry of the
Cover story

Spin City

DJ and promoter Shirish Setia has been DJing in Jaipur and beyond for almost a decade. He gives us his take on the city’s emerging nightlife scene.

What kind of music is popular in Jaipur?
Anything put together in the right fashion is appreciated, although regular pop music is what you hear the most at nightclubs.

How has Jaipur’s nightlife scene evolved since you started going out?
The scene here hasn’t yet evolved actually—it’s still undergoing that process!

Okay, so do you have any predictions for the future of nightlife in Jaipur?
Nightlife within the city has a long way to go and I say this because the potential is huge. An average of 1.5 million foreign tourists come to the city every season (October to March) and many more come from within India on business, and they all need a place to go hangout in the evening. And to top it all, with the kind of exquisite locations it has to offer, Jaipur can be an international (nightlife) destination very soon.

On the flip side, there is a group of people who comes in and actually sets all of these amazing places up for their events, weddings etc. Rajasthan is fast becoming a hot address for weddings, and properties like Samode Palace, Rambagh Palace, Jai Mahal and the City Palace host some really elaborate weddings. That doesn’t go out to Jaipur’s residents, who are growing not only in numbers but also in terms of spending capacity. All of these properties will have to open up clubs or bars at some point. That will mark the beginning of a new trend.
down a flight of stairs into the upper level of the whitewashed and minimally-decorated club. Apart from us there was a small group seated in a glass-enclosed private room which made them look like they were on display in a storefront. We peered over the balcony to the dance floor one level below, where we saw a few couples dancing. Unlike Spark and TFB, the clientele at B2B seemed a bit more grown up. The place enforces a strict couples-only policy (single women are not allowed either), making it the best place for young couples who want to have a good time away from the singles scene. Of the three proper nightclubs that we visited, this was the cleanest and the least smoky. It was also the only one where pure house music was playing without any American pop or Bollywood hits mixed in.

We descended to the bottom level to check out the bar menu. Interestingly, they serve up shooters of foreign liqueurs such as Kahlua and Cointreau (both Rs 350), although we would recommend sipping (and not knocking back) these sweet drinks unless you are after a bellyache. They also had a decent selection of Indian whisky (Rs 175) and mocktails (Rs 200)—try the signature Pink City, made with pineapple, coconut cream and grenadine. We got bored after a while and headed upstairs. It was almost 2am at that point—too late to go to another club but never too late to eat. Although Country Inn has a 24-hour coffee shop, we thought we would try a change of scene and, instead, head to the Chandravanshi Pavilion, a 24-hour restaurant in the Sheraton Rajputana Hotel.

We were impressed by the Pavilion’s open-air design and high ceilings, which gave it the spacious feeling that we needed after hours spent in cramped clubs. Even more impressive was the 24-hour selection, which included everything from basic fried appetisers to full thalis. We tried the restaurant’s Namesake salad (Rs 450), a mixture of lettuce, olives, cucumbers, tomatoes and peppers topped with creamy goat cheese. The melange also included asparagus, but sadly the tops of the spears were not to be found. We suspect the chefs were saving these for one of the more expensive dishes. Nevertheless the salad was fresh, delicious and surprisingly filling. We also liked the Fusilli with pesto (Rs 525)—the chef wisely put most of the creamy sauce at the bottom of the plate and below the pasta so that we could mix the sauce with the pasta to our own liking. We were tempted to order water from the pretentious ‘Water menu’, which provides suggested food matches for waters such as Evian and San Pellegrino (both Rs 225), but we just couldn’t bring ourselves to be so naive, even for the sake of a good laugh. So we settled for fresh orange juice (Rs 200) and called it a night.

We drove back to our hotel through an empty city—no drunken revelry on the street, no erratic driving, no sign that the city had anything going for it after the dinner hour. While the Pink City may not exactly be a place for all-night revellers, it definitely has a burgeoning nightlife scene. We expect that if we revisit the city in a few years from now, we’ll be able to dance well into the twilight hours to a choice of music that extends beyond the pop, Hindi and house varieties.
On a warm December afternoon we set off from New Delhi for Ranthambhore Wildlife Sanctuary in the Sawai Madhopur district of Rajasthan. Expectations and spirits soared high as we boarded the Jan Shatabdi that leaves Nizammudin Railway Station at 1.20 pm. I sat back in my chairseat and anticipated the moment when I would finally meet the beautiful and majestic tiger.

The five-hour train journey was a breeze, with vendors keeping us happy with a constant flow of delicious munchies, such as bread pakoras, vegetable cutlets and cups of steaming tea and coffee. The train pulled up late at Sawai Madhopur station at 7.30 pm. From there we were ushered to the tourism office to meet our hospitable hosts, the Rajasthan Tourism officials.

We were told that we would be staying at Hotel Jhoomar Baori, the erstwhile hunting lodge of the royal family of Jaipur. Eager to get a glimpse of wildlife, we decided to make our way to the park first thing the next morning. Driving through the town towards Ranthambhore National Park, we were informed that the hotel was located on the periphery of the forest. Our hearts started beating faster at the prospect of staying in tiger territory. We noticed the signpost directing us towards the hotel, and driving through a narrow road we reached it in no time. The forest on either side looked forbidding.

After dumping our bags in our respective rooms, we rushed up to the terrace of the hotel, which resembled the parapets of a Rajasthani fort. Photographers were clicking away, trying to capture our arrival in the tiger country.

The cat that got away

After playing hide and seek with tigers for two days in Ranthambhore National Park, Alpana Singh realises that there is a lot more to the place than the elusive predator. Photography Chirodeep Chaudhuri
The fort in the forest

As we marched up the 175 stairs to the majestic Ranthambhore Fort, we discovered how strategically it had been built to outwit enemies. Obviously the fort had once been an important bastion of Sawai Madhopur.

The fort has a tumultuous past. The exact date of its origin is disputed, but it is said that the construction was started around 1000 AD by the Chauhan kings. The Golden age of Ranthambhore Fort was during the reign of the Rao Hammir, the last ruler of the Chauhan dynasty (1282-1301). In 1300 Alauddin Khilji, the ruler of Delhi, sent his army to capture the fort since Ranthambhore controlled the trade routes between north and central India. After three unsuccessful attempts, Khilji’s army finally conquered it in 1301, putting an end to the rule of the Chauhan rulers. In the next 300 years the fort changed hands several times till Emperor Akbar finally took control and dissolved the state of Ranthambhore in 1558. The fort stayed in the possession of the Mughal rulers till the mid-18th century. To check the growing influence of the Marathas, Sawai Madho Singh, the then ruler of Jaipur, requested the Mughal Emperor to hand over the Ranthambhore fort to him. That did not happen. In 1763, Sawai Madho Singh fortified the nearby village of Sherpur and renamed it Sawai Madhopur. Two years later, the Mughals handed over the fort to the state of Jaipur. Finally, in 1964, it was handed over to the Archaeological Survey of India.

Climbing up to the ramparts, we passed three of the total of seven gates: Naulakha, Ganesha, and Andheri Pol. The gates, our guide told us, had been made on a turn, so that elephants could not charge directly towards it and break the fortification. The most interesting, of all the gates, however, was Andheri Pol, a gate that leads to a dead end, and inside the forest. This was meant to be the perfect trap for enemies who had made it this far. We stopped at Ganesha Pol and looked at the endless stretch of purple dhaou trees in the park below. In fact, at every corner of the path, there are spectacular views of lakes and forests.

It is only when we reached the top that we saw the actual size of the fort. There were four lakes in the vicinity, chatriis, various temples and even a mosque. The most visited place, though, is the Ganesha Temple. Even as we continued our journey, hordes of devotees thronged the temple singing jubilant devotional songs. But the most alarming sight was that of hundreds of silver langurs in the temple area. Children and parents kept a watchful eye on these simians, but there were no untoward incidents. We went inside the temple to pay our respects to the elephant-headed god. Interestingly, here Lord Ganesha is presented as a headless deity. Idols of his wives Riddhi and siddhi, as well as two children, are also present in the temple’s precincts.

The fort is beautiful, but is, sadly, in need of urgent repairs. Dark, ash-ridden spots mark the place where people have lit fires. As with monuments in any part of India, walls have been defaced by graffiti or betel stains. Even though the tourism department is making every effort to check vandalism, it is for us to make a sincere attempt to help it.
the magic of the night, we decided to call it a day. After all, we had to be up early for the forest safari.

At 5.30 am, we woke up to the shrill cacophony of bird calls. Drunk on expectancy, I took a bath, had a cup of tea, and ate two slices of buttered toast. It was going to be my first date with the tiger! With camera in tow, I rushed downstairs to meet the rest of the entourage. Accompanying us was a Rajasthan Tourism officer and renowned photographer and artist M.D. Parashar, who has won several accolades for his photographs and etchings of the tiger.

With the freezing wind whipping our faces, we huddled inside our jackets and boarded the safari jeep. As soon as the vehicle sprang to life, a lithe jungle cat crossed our road, fuelling our excitement. Surely we would also spot the big cat soon!

As the jeep sped towards the main park area, we passed many small pools, where, apparently, the tiger had been sighted several times in the past. This is considered to be a rarity because the area is quite close to habitation, and known as leopard and vulture territory. Wildlife experts believe that no two canines will share the same territory, but maybe this was just an aberration? As if to lend credence to his statement, Parashar informed us, “Priyanka Gandhi Vadhera had seen one of the Park’s famed tigress’ resting in a pool of water.” But we had no such luck.

As the jeep went around a turn, our attention was drawn to a huge fort atop a hill. How did the fort appear so suddenly in the horizon? “Ranthambhore Fort was built in a strategic way to ensure that it could not be viewed from everywhere,” explained Parashar. “The whole purpose was to ensure that it would appear suddenly taking the enemy by surprise.”

Even before we could marvel at the vision of the majestic fort, one of the forest guards came rushing out of the checkpost to tell us that a tiger had been spotted at Jogi Mahal, a forest rest house that overlooks Padam Talao, or lotus lake. Sure enough we could hear the distress calls of the spotted deer in the bushes. Shabbir, our driver, powered the jeep immediately as we rushed towards Jogi Mahal. In the distance, three spotted deer stood quivering on an incline, their tails upright in fear. We waited silently, but to no avail... the big cat had just passed by.

A walk in the woods
A sambhar crosses the tracks; (inset) a langur
Stopping at Jogi Mahal, we admired the picturesque Padma Talao and watched ruddy shelducks swimming near the edge of the waters. Close to Jogi Mahal is one of the world’s largest banyan trees, also called the ‘walking tree’, named so because its roots have spread like tentacles over a large area. Interestingly, the single tree looks like many trees put together. For no apparent reason, I was in a hurry to get out of the canopy of that tree as quickly as possible.

The sun had come up and it was time to head back. We spotted crocodiles basking in the sun, while naughty langurs threw half-eaten fruits on our heads. I was disappointed about not seeing the tiger, but then I consoled myself with the thought that the trip was not really wasted. There was so much I had seen and experienced. And, of course, there would always be another time. We stopped on the way back to the hotel for the pink guavas that Ranthambhore is so famous for. Nothing like a sweet ending to your holiday, after all!

**Pathfinder**

**By air:** The nearest airport is at Jaipur (180 km).

**By rail:** Sawai Madhopur (10 km from the national park) is on the main line between Delhi and Mumbai. There is a direct link between Sawai Madhopur and Jaipur.

**By road:** Sawai Madhopur is well connected by road to major cities in the state. There is a good, motorable road between Jaipur and Sawai Madhopur via Tonk.

**Places to stay**

- **Hotel RTDC Vinayak**
  Ranthambhore National Park Road
  Sawai Madhopur – 322001
  Ph: 221333
  Tariff: Rs 700 to Rs 1,600 per person

- **Castle Jhumar Baori**
  Ranthambhore Road
  Ranthambhore – 322001
  Ph: 220495
  Tariff: Rs 700 to Rs 1,600

- **Vanyavilas**
  Ranthambhore Road,
  Sawai Madhopur – 322001
  Ph: 222399
  Tariff: Rs 20,000 upwards

- **Aman-i-Khás**
  Ranthambhore
  Sawai Madhopur – 322001
  Ph: 252052
  Tariff: Rs 20,000 upwards
The common perception is that you can get to Tal Chappar from Ranthambore. Well, you can, of course, but it’s like travelling twice the distance to get to the sanctuary which is famous for its blackbuck population. The best way would be to spend a couple of nights in Ranthambore—if that’s also on your itinerary and it should be—and proceed towards Jaipur (170km), almost a three-hour-drive away. Stay overnight in Jaipur and then visit Tal Chappar the next morning, another 220 km ahead. By then you are ready to go through the drive of another four hours.

Several questions crossed my mind on the last 10-km-stretch before the sanctuary. Would we see plenty of blackbuck? Were there other animals as well? What about a fox?
lurking behind a bush? And lastly, why was the sanctuary named so? Surat Singh Poonia, the range forest officer informed us that Tal meant flat land. Strange, but I was expecting bushes! And no, he pointed out, seeing me with binoculars in hand, I wouldn’t need those. The topography was desolate and plain. Tal Chappar was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1962. It is the second largest blackbuck breeding centre in Asia.

Visitors can explore the sanctuary on foot or by car. We had opted for a car as it is impossible to get around most of the 719 square-hectare area in one day on foot. As the car manoeuvred dirt tracks and careened wildly on loose soil, we swayed from one side of the car to the other, thanking our stars that we had skipped breakfast. The excitement gave way to stupefied silence when we saw a magnificent vision in the distance. A herd comprising 25 or 30 elegant adult blackbuck watched the car. It was curious about the strange creature—our car—in its midst, but not frightened by our presence. Obviously the blackbuck had seen humans several times in the past. Then, as if to signal that they were no longer happy about being showpieces, the animals cantered away in a single file. As we moved ahead, completely awed by what we had seen, Poonia pointed out patches of Lana grass. These served as nesting grounds for the female blackbuck during labour. The grass is also supposed to have medicinal properties that impart a ‘protective’ smell to the fawn, keeping it away from predators.

Interestingly, in the arid summers of the desert state, blackbucks roam in herds that can have as many as 500 to 700 adults and fawns, perhaps in search of water. In fact, the numbers are so huge that, at times, it is impossible to count how many there are in the herd. The wildlife enthusiast, however, can differentiate between the sexes. Usually several females and a few males roam together. The adult males are black in colour while the younger lot is brown. Both young and adult males have horns, but the females do not have any. A healthy adult has a lifespan of 15 years, but an average of 300 blackbuck is added to the population every year. The female blackbuck reaches sexual maturity between 10 and 23 months, and the male in three years.

As we moved further, we spotted a lone eagle majestically spreading its wings in the azure skies. Poonia claimed that it had migrated all the way from Europe. I didn’t know whether that was an exaggeration, but something about its flight made me stare at it for several minutes. Later, we spotted a vulture satiating its thirst at a watering hole and an ibis on a tree stump drying its wings. We even saw a fox lurking behind a bush. Was it searching for prey?

For the blackbuck, however, the real threat comes from scavengers, especially dogs. In a bid to protect the animals and encourage breeding, a wall has been built around the sanctuary. Reinforced wiring ensures that stray dogs do not have access to the blackbuck. An animal rescue centre is geared to handle emergencies. Obviously much effort is being undertaken to ensure a safe haven for the blackbuck. Even the local people in the neighbourhood are benefiting from the exercises. Bangladeshi designer Bibi Russel visited the sanctuary in 2007 and spent six months touring the villages. She initiated many workshops to help villagers supplement their earnings. This initiative was supported by Rajasthan Urban Development Area (RUDA).

As we made our way out of the sanctuary, a pair of blackbuck ambled towards the car. Was it bidding us goodbye? Maybe… I took a final look at the two and left. In my dreams that night, I was visiting Tal Chappar again.

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**GETTING THERE**

**By air**
The nearest airport is at Jaipur (220 km/4 hours).

**By rail**
The nearest railhead is Chappar.

**By road**
Tal Chappar is well connected by road with Jaipur, Sikar and Ranthambore.

**Best time to visit**
October to March

**Tariff**
- Entry fee for vehicles
  - Car: Rs 65
  - Bus: Rs 100

- Entry fee for individuals
  - Indian nationals: Rs 10
  - Foreigners: Rs 80
  - Students: Rs 2

**Contact person**
Deputy Conservator of Forests, Churu
Ph: 01562-250938

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Back off: Adult male blackbuck lock horns in a show of strength
Ah Amanbagh!

Romance and luxury go hand in hand

Photography Preeti Verma Lal
Rose and marigold, wine and biscotti, yoga and a cuisine to die for… Amanbagh resort, near Jaipur, is truly a slice of paradise, writes Preeti Verma Lal.

Pretty and perfect... I had heard those descriptions and a lot about the luxurious Amanbagh resort. I was told that the resort was as close to heaven as it could get; that I could forget the stress of urban living once I had reached Amanbagh. As soon as I walked into the reception, I knew that the eulogies were not unfounded. I walk in and peace descends. Uncanny serenity… unknowingly, silently seems to take over my senses.

I will discover more of that later. When the Amanbagh itinerary fell my way, I knew that I had to discover the place for myself. Sprawled over 46 acres of land, the resort sits smug by a lake and an ancient temple town dotted with more than 500 trees, sandstone villas, unending verandahs and countless birds. All this is far, far away from the urban chaos and everyday mayhem in the village of Ajabgarh.

The jeep takes me through the Aravallis, past men with seductive fire in their eyes, veiled, elegant women going about their daily chores, temples with clanging bells and chirpy children waving out wildly. I have left the city way behind and can already feel the metropolitan malice shedding its iniquity. And then I see it—a square sandstone slab with Amanbagh embossed in stenciled letters. Amanbagh… that is all it reads. No flourishes. No gimmick… as if tell to me that the resort, lying a few metres ahead, doesn’t believe in frills and fancies. At the entrance, a man sporting a beige turban bows graciously. As the jeep swerves to the patio, I see a tinge of marigold, the colour women employees wear at Amanbagh.

The marigold saris have thin gold borders. There are neither motifs nor sequins, all adding to the sense of tranquillity that prevails.

‘Om…Om…’ the staff chant the Gayatri Mantra and tie a red thread on my wrist, wishing me a pleasant and peaceful stay at the resort. The gesture takes me by surprise; I do not remember the last time I was welcomed like this anywhere. I see more red and marigold—there are rose petals floating in flower-shaped fountains in the lobby and marigold petals on the staircase that leads to the library and the terrace. I walk into an open courtyard where two palm trees lean carelessly. The statuesque palms have been standing there for ages and instead of felling them, Amanbagh incorporated them as an aesthetic add-on; their ebony trunks adding a stark...
contrast to the buff walls. In a colossal vase, a bunch of lilies looks pretty; by it stands a bronze statuette that talks of the Andrew Harper award, one of the most prestigious hospitality awards that the resort so deserves.

From the verandah I can see a large pool of beryl water, the palm fronds lending their shade generously with birds twittering background music as a refrain. Minutes later, sipping fresh pomegranate juice served in dainty flutes, I hear Amanbagh’s story from Manish Sharma, Room Division Manager. Not too far from where the resort now stands, the Pandav brothers are said to have trudged during the last years of their exile. And several centuries later, it was here that Maharaja Jai Singh of Alwar would spend nights on his hunting expeditions. The date palms are said to have witnessed the splendour that Emperor Akbar brought along every time he caught a breath here between skirmishes and wars.

The 38-room resort that took 10 years to build is part of the international chain of Aman Resorts that was founded by Adrian Zecha 20 years ago. All the properties live the Aman philosophy of ‘less is more’ and of a lifestyle that is not about counting room numbers but about ‘shared values, a lust for faraway cultures, for the world around that excites, shapes and nourishes. It is an appetite for pampering and a deep appreciation of the creative and elegant — the way light falls on the table or water fills a pool.’

The light falls casts pretty shadows on the table. Inside my suite, numbered 39, a flight of stairs takes me to the pink arch with a brown door beyond which lies my room. But I do not step in rightaway— an open space vies for attention. Potted plants sit in the midst of pebbles and in one corner a large chhattri covers a bed rimmed with large bolsters. Completing the setting perfectly are two lazy chairs. From that vantage point I can see the Aravallis in the distance. It is where the sun will dip in the evening. Inside the room, lilies smile by the table and marigolds look lush by the green granite bath tub. On the fluffy bed, lies a tiny mirrored elephant packed in a
diaphanous potli (small bag). Thankfully, there is no television to foil the peace. The wine and biscotti on the table look inviting. Every little detail has been taken care of; there’s a mosquito repellent cream and a flashlight stacked tidily in a black box and a stringed jute bag to carry them, just in case you want to take a midnight walk!

I curl up amidst the feathery duvet and muse whether I can afford to rent a room forever in Amanbagh. But before I can add up the zeroes, my stomach growls, reminding me that it’s a while since I have eaten. I could call for room service, but decide to opt for a lavish dining experience in the verandah where neat linen and gorgeous cutlery mark the beginning for a great gourmet experience. The menu is exhaustive and I have a hard time choosing what I want to eat. Not only is the food fit for the gods, everything comes fresh from the resort’s kitchen garden and bakery. The bread is made everyday and the lettuce and spinach in your salad bowl gets picked after you have ordered. I dig my fork into the pomegranate and chick pea salad and wonder whether the gods ordered their lunch from Amanbagh.

At Amanbagh I feel like a princess. The resort has a spa, the services of a Reiki master and a yoga teacher. The choices are confounding me—I can get pampered, become a historian and go on a guided tour of the ancient temple town of Neelkanth, hear some haunted stories in Bhangarh, the ‘Abandoned City’, now a Heritage site, hop into a camel cart and watch the cows come home or find room on the camel’s hump and ride along the village. At Amanbagh, you utter your wish and it gets fulfilled.

In the evening, I spare time for fire meditation on the terrace. Naveen, the in-house yoga guru chants mantras as I sit by the havan kund. The smoke billows into my eyes, a tear falls on my hand. It is a moment of catharsis, I feel purified. The embers die but I still sit there. The hymn from the neighbouring Barakhambi Temple adds a surreal touch to the atmosphere. I am quite at peace with myself.

With the soul purged, I step into the dimly-lit bar and admire the ivory frames and charcoal paintings. Even a teetotaler can tell that Amanbagh has the best spirits on offer. I look at other distractions. The library is well-stocked, there is exquisite jewellery in the boutique, a man is playing the tabla, in fact he is there every evening. I sit by the pool that looks resplendent, shimmering with the borrowed light of the votive lamps. At the dinner table, Robyn Bickford, the general manager, is gracious. She has arranged for a candlelight dinner on the terrace with the starlit sky for a canopy but when little raindrops pitter-patter on the sandstone, the table is shifted to a large verandah. Needless to say, the meal is awesome.

The day has ended and I am yet to count the zeroes to figure out whether I can rent a room in Amanbagh forever. That night I am ready to pay any price for tranquillity. And so will you.

Glow and shine

Could a setting be more divine than the Bagh terrace for a quiet evening?
While most historians agree that miniature painting did not really flourish in India until the Mughal era, the art form’s presence in South Asia dates clearly back to the ninth century. Early pieces of miniature art were painted on palm leaves, but the introduction of paper in the twelfth century brought about changes in the style, allowing for more elaboration and a larger scale of production. The first school of miniature painting was set up during the Lodi period, although it was under the Mughal Empire that professional studios started getting established and the art form began to take shape.

As the Mughal Empire went on a decline, Rajput artists took over the craft. But Rajasthan continued to remain the stronghold for miniature art, a position it has held till this day, with much of the pieces coming from Udaipur and its neighbouring villages. On a recent trip to Udaipur, we spoke to a gentleman named Kumawat, one of the several talented miniature artists based in Bari Undri, a tribal village situated about 30km from the famed city of lakes and palaces. He explained to us the process of creating a miniature painting right from the beginning.

The first step, he told us, is get the hair of a squirrel for a brush. Is the squirrel killed?, I asked? “No way,” answered Kumawat. “The animal is released into the wild.” After the hair is sourced, it is cut to a point and placed in water overnight to make it supple. Once it has reached the desired level of pliability, the artist wraps thread around it and attaches it to a...
pigeon feather. The result is a single-haired quill, which is used to paint the delicate lines that characterise the miniature paintings available at seemingly every shop in and around Udaipur.

Of course, many of the paintings you will find in every nook and corner of the city are mass produced in a production-line style, with artists using normal paintbrushes and synthetic, commercially-available paints such as acrylics. However, according to Kumawat, the traditional way of producing miniatures relies on natural herbal colours obtained from plant and mineral sources and then ground in a mortar with chaar gund (gum arabic), which acts as a binding agent. Water is then added to the mixture, turning it into usable paint that binds to cloth and paper canvases. Gold leaf is often used to highlight the paintings, giving them a royal finish.

The most popular paintings on sale in Udaipur district include city scenes and depictions of Hindu deities. While animals are common motifs (see box), the most popular of them is the elephant. Illustrations of horses, camels and elephants marching together in a line are also widely prevalent. These three animals represent the cities of Udaipur, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur, respectively.

If you’re interested in buying some miniature art for your own home or for close friends, you’ll have no problem finding the perfect piece in Udaipur. Exquisite paintings in every style and colour combination that you can think of, are available in the countless souvenir shops dotting the lanes behind the city’s famed Jagdish temple. However, if you have time, head to Shilpgram, a government-sponsored arts village on the outskirts of the city, where you can buy miniatures directly from the artists, often at a fraction of what you would pay at the city centre. And if you are lucky enough to get the opportunity to buy artwork directly from the artist, ask him to paint a little elephant on your fingernail; we’re sure that you will be impressed with the precision with which these skilled artists can create mini nail art!

Animal imagery in modern miniature painting

The depiction of animals occurs frequently in most Rajasthani miniature paintings. Following is a list of the most commonly painted animals and their associated meanings:

- **Camel**: love
- **Cow**: humanity
- **Elephant**: good luck
- **Two elephants**: friendship
- **Horse**: power
- **Peacock**: happiness
- **Tiger**: prosperity

The fine print: An artist paints a miniature elephant

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Scaled down Miniature nail art
Food & Drink

Eat and drink your way through town.

Fullsome goodness

Dal-baati-churma is a complete meal

Photography: Amit Chakravarty
Rajasthani dancers, a bangle seller, meats grilled to perfection and signature dishes from the desert state... all in a setting that is magical. Jaipur’s Spice Court provides a complete culinary experience, writes Akriti Arora

The setting is a little unusual. Spice Court, a fine dining Indian restaurant, is by the side of a well-maintained lawn. At one end of the lawn is a bangle seller waiting for buyers. There is also a canopied enclosure—with billowing curtains—where you can sit for sometime enjoying the cool evening breeze. Arrangements can also be made for meals here. Muted lights lend a romantic touch to the ambience. For those looking for air-conditioned comfort, there is a dining room within the premises. As we opt for our table in the garden area, a group of Rajasthani dancers walks past.

Obviously Spice Court is not just about food, but an entire dining experience. The musician starts playing the strains of a soul melody. As the crescendo builds up, two Rajasthani girls in identical ghagra-cholis break into a dance. Balancing pots on their head, they sway gracefully in the beginning and conclude the performance with power-packed energy.

My friend and I are so engrossed in the performance we forget to place our orders for dinner. The waiter points out the menu card that has been placed on the table 15 minutes ago. After much deliberation, we settle for Tangri kebab (grilled chicken drumsticks, Rs 175) and Raj sula (lamb marinated in traditional spices and grilled, Rs 175) for starters. Like all most restaurants in the Pink City, Spice Court has a part-liquor licence which means that it is authorised to serve only beer and wine. My friend orders a beer that has been nicely chilled. Since the starters take a while to arrive, we nibble at the masala papad. The kebabs are divine. One bite into the succulent meat and we know why they were delayed. Marinated with just the right quantity of spices and grilled just right, they are definitely Spice Court’s signature dishes. The starters have only increased our appetite for the main dishes. With the help of the chef, we opt for Laal maas (mutton cooked with red chillies, Rs 190), Safed maas (mutton in curd and ghee, Rs 190), Steamed rice (Rs 80) and Paneer korma (Rs 110). The mutton dishes are awesome. The chef has gone easy on the red chillies just as we had instructed him to, bringing out the flavour of the other spices. The blandness of the Safed maas is a perfect foil to the fiery Lal Maas. The chef’s recommendation of the Steamed rice with the meats is a wise one as it helps us to really understand the difference in taste between the two meat dishes. The paneer is soft and chewy, but not worth writing home about. Giving desserts a miss I relax over Nimbu pani as the cool breeze of a fast-approaching winter caresses my hair. Surprisingly, I don’t have a bloated feeling despite tucking into all that mutton. I call for the main chef and thank him for the perfect meal.

The manager walks up to the table and asks us if we would like a tour of the kitchen? We jump at the idea. After all, most kitchens, even in five-star hotels, are not open for public viewing. Expectedly Spice Court’s kitchen is clean, modern and high-tech. Utensils are neatly-stacked, chopping boards are spic and span and there are no flies in sight. We are impressed. Just like many others have obviously been. The manager informs us that Spice Court recently found mention in Conde Nast Traveller as one of the restaurants to check out in Jaipur. It has always received several Best Restaurant awards. I would recommend Spice Court to anyone visiting the city. Sitting out in the open with a bonfire by your side and a candle lending a romantic touch, enjoy a scrumptious meal. The experience is sure to make you visit again and again.

Reviews

Tandoori Nights

Balancing act Enjoy cultural performances as you tuck into a scrumptious meal at Spice Court

DHRUBA DUTTA

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But it’s together!

Dal-baati-churma is a cosies threesome that can’t be served individually. Alpana Singh has a hearty meal of this Rajasthani staple at Hotel Neelam and finds out why.

A trip to Jaipur is incomplete without tasting the legendary dal-baati-churma. Most of those who have tried it have loved it or hated it. Yes, it does take some getting used to, and my advice is to try it more than once. Personally, I enjoy the churma more than the dal and baati! The dal is made of four lentils: tur dal, chana dal, green moong dal and masoor dal. The baati is a baked wheat ball, while the churma is powdered wheat that has been fried and then sweetened with jaggery or sugar.

On our recent trip to the Pink City, we decided to find out which was the best place to gorge on the delicacy. Three names kept coming up: Chokhi Dhani, Rawat, and Dal Baati Churma, also known as Parantha Hut at Neelam Hotel.

After much deliberation, we decided to visit the Neelam Hotel outlet, on Moti Lal Atal Road. Much to our delight, for just Rs 133, we were served a huge portion of dal-baati-churma. It consisted of three types of churma—pink-coloured: which was rose flavoured, one made of besan, and then there was the traditional wheat one. Besides the usual baati, there was a masala variety with a spicy potato filling. Along with these was the usual dal.

The best way to eat the speciality is to take a ghee-soaked baati, dunk it in the dal and then mash it with the sweet churma. Mind you, all this should be done with your fingers, it’s only then that you get the true flavour of the dish.

The add-ons were many—Kadi, Gatte ki sabzi, Jeffra rice, Papad and a fiery chutney. We tucked in with gusto. Needless to say, we were bowled over by the baati!
**Gram, garlic, ghee, etc:** Dal-baati-churma

**Dal**

**Ingredients**
- Black gram and Bengal gram or chickpea: ½ cup each
- Crushed ginger: 5 gm
- Green chillies (slit): 2
- Ghee (clarified butter): 1-2 tbsp
- Jeera (cumin seeds): 1 tsp
- Ajwain: 1 tsp
- Laung (cloves): 3-4 nos
- Garlic: 4-5 cloves
- Turmeric powder: 1 tsp
- Red chilli powder: 1 tsp
- Juice of one lemon
- Salt to taste

**Method**
- Wash and clean the dal.
- Soak them together for an hour.
- Boil them with salt, green chillies and crushed ginger.
- Set aside when done.

**Tempering**
- In a tempering bowl, add the ghee, jeera, ajwain, laung, garlic, turmeric and chilli powder and sauté till brown.
- Then drop it into the boiled dal.
- Mix well while giving it a final boil.

**For serving**
- Add the lemon juice to the dal before serving.

**Baati**

**Ingredients**
- Atta (wheat flour): 3 cups
- Suji: 1 cup
- Ghee: 1 cup
- Lukewarm water to knead dough
- Salt to taste

**Method**
- Make a soft dough of the atta and suji with salt, ghee and lukewarm water.
- Set aside for half an hour.
- Make round balls with the atta.
- You can bake them in a microwave or electric oven.

**For serving**
- Once cooled, you can break the baatis and pour ghee into them while serving.

**Churma**

**Ingredients**
- Atta (wheat flour): 3 cups
- Suji: 1 cup
- Ghee: 1 cup
- Warm water to knead dough
- Ground sugar: 2 ½ cups
- Ghee: 1 ½ cups
- Cardamom powder: ½ tsp
- Ground cashew, almonds and pistachios: ½ cup

**Method**
- Make a tight dough in the ratio of 3:1 of atta and suji, with ghee and warm water.
- Roll out round discs with the dough and dry roast them on a tava till they turn reddish brown in colour.
- Once the discs have cooled down, you need to break them into small pieces and grind them in a mixer grinder.
- Now add the coarsely ground sugar, 1 ½ cups of ghee, cardamom powder, crumble an assortment of dry fruits like cashewnuts, almonds and pistachios and sprinkle them on the churma.
Sweet ending

Paan intended

Nothing like a betel leaf to add the final touch to a hearty meal. It acts as a digestive and leaves a lingering aftertaste. Akriti Arora samples one for ten rupees at Jaipur’s Prem Paan Bhandar and becomes an addict. Photography Dhruba Dutta
**1 The beginning** Pasting chuna and kalath on the meetha leaf which is sourced from all the way from Kolkata.

**2 The leaf gets zing** Adding belgam masala to the leaf to add a sweet-sour taste to the paan.

**3 Rustling it up** Meetha paan ki chutney, supari and chuara being put in the paan in a predetermined quantity.

**4 Quite a concoction, this!** It is next to impossible to keep track of the number of ingredients that go into a paan.

**5 Shred it for taste** Kati lui supari and coconut being added to the voluminous paan.

**6 The last of the ingredients** Cherry, dry fruit masala, soft supari and gulaband are finally added.

**7 The final touch** The paans are now ready to be rolled.

**8 How does it look?** The paanwala gets ready to bundle the leaf before serving it to his customer.

**9 Hold it in the middle** Rolled and ready to be broken into half for those who can’t handle the entire paan.

**10 Here, it’s yours** Serving the two halves.

**11 Love’s labour** The shopowner is happy with his creations. And check out his paan-stained shirt!

**12 Easy does it** Oh, what a feeling!
The plane is chock-a-block with passengers bound for Udaipur from Delhi. Most of them are foreigners heading to the City of Lakes for a short holiday. I ask a few if they will be attending the Kumbhalgarh Dance Festival organized by Rajasthan Tourism and District Rajsamand. None of them have heard about it, but when I explain that it is an effort to showcase India’s rich cultural heritage, they nod eagerly. Yes, we will, they say in unison. I hope they keep their word. After all, the three-day festival is a fitting exposition of our country’s cultural diversity.

Strong gusts of wind lash Udaipur’s Maharana Pratap Airport as we land after the hour-long flight. The runway is small and we can walk to the terminal building as soon as we alight from the aircraft. A retinue of Rajasthan Tourism staff is at hand to guide me to the waiting car. The journey from the airport to Club Mahindra Fort Kumbhalgarh where I will be staying for two nights takes a little over two hours. By and large, the roads are good except for stretches where repair work is being undertaken. We pass by nondescript villages, the ubiquitous PCO booths, colourfully attired village women with water urns poised precariously on their heads and rows of little children who wave out to me as the car winds its way. Occasionally, shepherds make an effort to herd their cattle to the sides of roads, but no amount of cajoling will work until the obstinate mule or buffalo - now I know the origin of that phrase - is willing to move of its own volition.

Further ahead, the undulating contours of the Aravallis seem to fringe the mustard fields that are awash in a sea of yellow. Soon it will be time for the mustard plants to be harvested for North India’s sarson da saag delicacy. Drifting off into a slumber, I awaken only when the car comes to a complete halt. The driver tells me that I have reached Club Mahindra. Muted lighting, sounds of gurgling water, staff, statues of Rajasthani guards at the foyer... the ambience is warm and welcoming. After the check-in formalities are over, I am ushered to my room, which, to put it mildly, is a surprise. A huge seating area with sofas, centre-table with ample amounts of goodies like chocolates, cookies and biscotti, tea and coffee in the side cabinet, and a flat-screen television, has a door in one corner. Does it lead to the next room, I ask with obvious discomfort. No, answers the bellboy. He turns the door knob and opens the door. It’s a spacious balcony with ample seating.

Playing Shiva

Yamini Krishnamurthy performs the dance of the Lord
from a fort

The annual Kumbhalgarh festival is the platform to showcase the historical destination. Mitali Kar braves the chill atop the citadel and falls into a magical spell.

Photography Mahesh Shrama

arrangements for four. The view from there takes my breath away. Ahead in the distance, I can see the dark silhouettes of the Aravallis shrouded in the fading light of the sun. The resort looks resplendent with its immaculate gardens and well-maintained structure. Returning to my room, I ascend four steps near the main door to reach the sleeping area. The bed is huge, the sheets and pillow covers spotless white and the windows, frame a fern that is growing outside.

There is no time to rest. I shower and get ready for the drive to Kumbhalgarh Fort, the venue for the festival. Narendraji, the driver, is waiting. I hastily get into the car. The programme is slated to begin at 7 pm. The 3.5km-drive uphill takes about 20 minutes. On the way, I notice several families dressed in finery slowly walking ahead. Where are they headed, I ask. “Events like these evince much interest among locals,” answers Narendraji. Apparently they arrive in busloads and even walk several kilometres to get to the venue.

When I reach the shamiana, the crowds are already present in large numbers. The area

Fast facts

Kumbhalgarh Fort was built by Maharana Kumbha in the 15th century. The rugged terrain almost made the fort unapproachable to the enemy. Even today, the fort has seven formidable gates to guard the entrance. The fort has 360odd temples, the most prominent among them being the one dedicated to Lord Shiva. The palace in the fort is named Hawa Mahal or Palace of the Clouds. It is said to be the place where Maharana Pratap was born. The fortifications of the fort extend to 36km making it the second longest wall in the world after the Great Wall of China.

Turban legend A tourist tries out the elaborate headgear, the symbol of Rajput pride

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The power of the goddess

Devi Durga, the manifestation of Shakti

segregated for the media is relatively empty for the moment, so I make myself comfortable on a gadda — there are no chairs as far as I can see. The previous night’s Manipuri recital by Priti Patel has been a resounding success. Naturally expectations are high for the next two days. I look around at the seated crowd. There is a huge turnout of foreigners waiting for the events to begin. It is well past the appointed time, but no one is complaining. Everyone expects the same verve and excitement of the previous night. Noted Kuchipudi exponents Raja and Radha Reddy, along with the rest of their troupe, first present Ganapati Vandana, which is essentially a prayer to Lord Ganesha to ensure the success of the show.

This is followed by Durga Stuti, an invocation to Goddess Durga who is also known as Narayani, Gauri and Vaishnavi. I am pleasantly surprised to see a foreign dancer in the troupe. She matches their others, step for step and mudra for mudra. There are no slips, no goof-ups, just a spectacular show that has everyone stupefied. As Yamini leaves the stage, it is time for Krishna leela. There are the gwalas and gopis to lend support to Lord Krishna and his consort, Radha. When the performance ends, the crowds cheer lustily.

On the third day, the gathering appears to be larger. Obviously, the festival is making an impact on both tourists and locals alike. Unlike the previous day when camerapersons — there must have been a dozen of them — had taken positions right in front of the performing area — today, they have been asked to occupy a corner. This will give the gathering a better view of the proceedings. I decide to sit with the organisers. Police deployment is heavy. But there’s no cause for worry. The
Jodhpur and Ajmer.

January - February 2009

Time Out Jaipur

Kalarippayattu artistes, arrive on stage in full force in a fitting finale to the evening. It is a kaleidoscope of sound and colour with the three dance forms blending into a unified whole. The crowds break into thunderous applause. One of the dancers holds the Indian tricolour. The message is loud and clear. Long live India.

Getting there

By air: The nearest airports are at Udaipur (80km) and Jodhpur (102km).

By rail: Ratlam, the nearest railhead, is in Madhya Pradesh.

By road: One can reach Kumbhalgarh by road from Udaipur (84km) or Ranakpur (18km). Many Rajasthan Roadways passenger and deluxe buses pass through Kumbhalgarh from Ajmer, Pushkar,

crowd is quiet and orderly. Today the events include Mohiniyattam, Kalarippayattu and Kathakali by Fact Mohan and his wife, Kalamandalam Sreedevi Mohanan. The Mohiniyattam dancers present Dasavathara where Lord Vishnu is presented in the 10 avatars he assumed when he came down to earth to fight injustice against mankind. The dancers in off-white saris embellished with a thin gold border are graceful as they depict avatars like matsyavatara (fish), korma (fish), vaamana (dwarf) and so on. Behind them the stone walls of the fort look imposing, perhaps revelling in the feeling that it is the venue of such a grand event!

The next act is Kalarippayattu, an ancient form of martial art that originated in India. The music reaches a crescendo as dancer after dancer uses different forms of weaponry - daggers, swords, shields, spears and so on - to display their prowess and agility. No sooner is the act over than two Kathakali dancers with elaborate head gear and costumes take centre stage. After the customary prelude, they step down and mingle with the gathering. Children cower behind parents, youngsters ready their mobile phones for photo-ops while the camera teams, taken unawares, chase the duo. When the dance resumes later, other Kathakali performers make an entrance.

Just before the act is over, all the dancers, including the Mohiniyattam and Kalarippayattu artistes, arrive on stage in full force in a fitting finale to the evening. It is a kaleidoscope of sound and colour with the three dance forms blending into a unified whole. The crowds break into thunderous applause. One of the dancers holds the Indian tricolour. The message is loud and clear. Long live India.
Cattle prattle

It’s the season of joyous celebrations and camaraderie as camels, horses and bovines are bought and sold.

Camel festival

When: Jan 10 to 12
This event, organised by the tourism department in Bikaner, is a delight for all camel lovers. Here, you can see plenty of well-bred camels being traded. Interesting events like camel dances, camel races, and the bumpy camel rides are hugely popular among tourists. The jewellery and decorations on camels are a treat for sore eyes.

Getting there
By air
The nearest airport is at Jodhpur.

By rail
Several trains link Bikaner to important cities like Delhi, Jaipur, Mumbai and Jodhpur.

By road
Rajasthan Roadways runs comfortable deluxe buses from Delhi to Bikaner.

Brij Festival

When: February 2 to 4
This festival is held in Bharatpur, a few days before Holi. Lord Krishna is worshipped during this period and afterwards, villagers perform the ras leela. People from all walks of life come together and celebrate the spirit of bonhomie and good cheer.

Getting there
By air
Agra is the nearest airport (56km.)

By rail
Bharatpur is on the Delhi-Mumbai line.

By road
It is situated on National Highway-11 (Bikaner-Agra).

Nagaur Fair

When: February 2 to 5
Also known as the cattle fair, this festival is known for the good breed of cattle that is traded. This is the second largest animal trading festival held in India. Animals participate in a number of competitive games which is quite entertaining for the visitor. These are popular among visitors.

Getting there
By air
The nearest airport is in Udaipur.

By rail
Rajasthan Roadways has bus services from Banswara, Udaipur and Dungarpur.

Desert Festival

When: February 7 to 9
Jaisalmer is a must-visit during the desert festival. Some monuments in the city are brightly lit up and become the focal point for folk music and dance programmes. The main attractions are various competitions like turban tying and camel races.

Getting there
By air
A flight to Jaisalmer from Delhi operates only in peak season (December-February). For the rest of the year, Jodhpur is the nearest airport.

By rail
Jaisalmer is connected to Delhi via the Delhi-Jaisalmer Express. There is also train from Jodhpur to Jaisalmer.

By road
Rajasthan Roadways runs comfortable deluxe and air conditioned buses from Jaipur, Jodhpur and Bikaner.

Makar Sankranti

When: 14th January
This festival which heralds the beginning of the harvest season is celebrated with much fanfare in Jaipur. Also known as the kite festival, on this day everyone is seen on their rooftops and terraces flying kites in all shapes and colours. On the occasion, Rajasthan Tourism organises a kite festival at Chaugan stadium.

In fact, social messages, faces of bollywood stars and politicians are used to decorate kites. This is one day when Jaipur’s skies are overcast—not by clouds—but by kites.

Getting there
By air
Jaipur airport has direct flight connections with Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Jodhpur and Udaipur.

By rail
Jaipur is well connected with Delhi, Agra, Mumbai, Chennai, Bikaner, Jodhpur, Udaipur and Ahmedabad.

By road
Regular bus services are available.

It’s the season of joyous celebrations and camaraderie as camels, horses and bovines are bought and sold.
Bundi is deliciously behind times," Maharaja Gaekwad of Baroda said of the city, when he visited it in the 19th century. Believe it or not, it still is. Located in the Hadoti region of the desert state, vestiges of Rajput and Raj era frequently peep through the veil of urbanity as one rambles in the narrow, meandering streets. Coppersmiths and blacksmiths beat their wares into shape and tailors service their 'Singer' sewing machines. The boisterous chaos of the main bazaar of Bundi echoes the typically Indian affinity for loudness and noise. Vegetable and fruit vendors, rickshaw pullers, and street hawkers holler for attention; bullock-carts compete for space with tractors; children run behind vehicles to enjoy free rides; elderly folk indulge in leisurely conversations around city's numerous stepwells. Handsome, big-moustached men flaunt flashy headgear tied around their heads in a style typical of Bundi and the surrounding areas; beautiful women in their brilliantly coloured ghagra, choli and odhni giggle behind their veils. I think of Rudyard Kipling, who in his late 19th century work From Sea to Sea, described Bundi as "a beautifully lazy city, doing everything in the real, true, original native way..." I see he is right, even today.

The township of Bundi is sandwiched in a U-shaped valley, garlanding a steep hill in its north. This hill harbours the Garh Palace, clinging to the hillside, midway while Taragarh Fort crowns it. The southern end of
Nawal Sagar, a square-shaped artificial lake, is undoubtedly the best vantage point to view both of them. I stroll through the Balchand Pada area below Garh Palace to skirt the Nawal Sagar Lake and reach its southern end near NH-12. The view from here reminds me again of Kipling sahib, who described Garh Palace and Taragarh Fort in his earlier quoted work as "an avalanche of masonry ready to rush down and block the gorge", and as "work of goblins". A half-submerged temple dedicated to Varuna, the God of water, at the northwestern corner and a beautiful cenotaph in the middle of Nawal Sagar Lake provide a perfect foreground to the battlements of Garh Palace and Taragarh Fort. The view in the night is even prettier with the floodlit golden reflections in the still waters of the lake.

Garh Palace looks like a maze of quarters connected with staircases and disconnected with sheer drops, reminding me of a game of ‘Snakes and Ladders’. A larger portion of Garh Palace is sadly out of bounds for visitors and lies in a state of disrepair. I hike from Hazari Pol (outer gate) of Garh Palace over slippery stones that have been cobbled to make a steep ramp to Hathi Pol (inner gate). The guard at Hathi Pol, however, suggests a 50-metre detour to Chitrashala.

“The place where you are standing used to be the private living quarters of Rao Raja Ummaid Singhji, the 18th century Hada-Chauhan King of Bundi,” says Kirparam, the caretaker of Chitrashala, the painted gallery of Bundi. I think of the first plucky Rajput, Rao Dewaji Hada, who founded Bundi as the capital of the Hada-Chauhan clan in 1342 AD, after annexing it from Jaita Meena, a leader of indigenous Meena tribals. The region then became famous as Hadawati or Hadouti—the abode of the Hadas. Interestingly, Bundi was earlier known as Bundu-ka-Nal, after Bunda Meena, the grandfather of Jaita Meena.

Chitrashala, along with a well-maintained hanging garden is known as Rang Vilas, the
only part of Garh Palace that the local government maintains. Painted during the reign of Ummaid Singhji, the cloisters of Chitrashala are festooned with Bundi-style miniature murals. The themes are as diverse as court scenes depicting kings and their courtiers in consultations, Gangaur and Teej festivals celebrations, armies marching for battles, elephant fights, hunting scenes, royal processions, mythological stories, sermons by saints, views from the palace, local trees, birds, animals and exquisite floral designs.

Influences of the Vallabha sect are evident in the full panel vivid panoramas from Lord Krishna’s life. Depictions of royal Rajput women with large almond-shaped eyes, slender waists and long tresses brilliantly convey beauty in various moods and forms. This exquisite, but fading line-colour-extravaganza survives to tell the tale of art and skill of unnamed, unsung artists who forgot to put their signatures for posterity.

Hathi Pol, the more beautiful of the two gates of the Garh, is flanked by towers bearing an octagonal cenotaph on top. Two charging elephants sculpted before the pointed arch of the gate seem to declare an entry into a war zone. Unlike Mughal courts, which have an element of luxurious serenity, Ratan Daulat (Diwan-e-Aam), with built-in stables for nine horses and elephants, indeed appears to be more of a warrior’s retreat than a royal court. A skilfully chiselled white-marble throne is fixed onto a beautiful cenotaph-styled balcony so that those who were not privileged to be seated in the hall could see and hear their king from the court below. This early 17th century court was built by, and named after, Ratan Singhji, the 12th Rao Raja of Bundi, a Jehangir contemporary, and the last ruler of the undivided Hadouti kingdom.

Unlike Ratan Daulat, the palaces surrounding it display finesse and elegance. They include Chhatra Palace, Phool Palace and Badal Palace, all further south of Ratan Daulat. The latter two belong to the zenana.

PATHFINDER

GETTING THERE
By air
The nearest airport is at Jaipur. (214km).
By rail
Though Bundi road is the nearest railhead, it is still convenient to reach Kota Junction (36km/45 mins). Kota Jn is connected with Jaipur, Delhi, Mumbai, Chittorgarh, Indore, Ujjain and Bhopal by Express trains.
By road
Bundi is situated on NH-12, only 36km away from Kota. The road is often in a state of disrepair. The bus service between Kota and Bundi is reasonably frequent and the journey takes about an hour. Jaipur is 214km away from Bundi (5 hours) and well-connected with bus service via Niwai, Tonk, and Dehli. The route from Delhi (470km) is via Jaipur.

WHERE TO STAY
Accommodation close to the palace and near Nawal Sagar Lake
Royal Retreat
Within the Garh Palace compound. Ph: 0747/244-4426
Haveli Braj Bhushanjee
Below Fort, opposite Ayurvedic Hospital. Ph: 0747/244-2322.
(www.kiplingsbundi.com)
Haveli Katkoun Guest House
Ph: 0747/244-4311.
(raghunandansingh@yahoo.com)
Lake View Paying Guest House
Ph: 0747/244-2326
(lakeviewbundi@yahoo.com)

Accommodation near Jait Sagar
Ummed Bagh Resorts
Luxurious tented accommodation on the northern banks of Jait Sagar Lake near Smriti Kunj, Bird-watching equipment and facilities available. Mobile: 91 94141 75111
(http://www.hadotiholidayresorts.com).
RTDC Hotel Vrindavati
Ph: 0747-244-2473

Accommodation in Bundi
Ishwari Niwas
1, Civil Lines, near bus-stand. Ph: 0747-244-2414.
Kasera Paying Guest House
Near Chogan Gate in the Main Bazaar. Ph: 0747-244-4679
(kaserapayingguesthouse@usa.net)

SHOPPING
Local artists paint replicas of Chitrashala murals on silk cloth. They are cheap and make great souvenirs and gifts. The Doria saris of Kota are light and comfortable to wear in the hot summers of the plains. Prices start from Rs 200 and may go up to Rs 20,000.

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(for women) portion of the Garh. They have a few gorgeous marble screens done in geometric designs with figures of flowers, birds and elephants. The miniature murals of all three palaces precede and excel Chitrashala in their merit, composition and excellence, though the themes are similar. Unfortunately, many of them have been completely destroyed. Chhatra Palace has some interesting riezes with glass and mirror work and wooden doors inlaid with ivory. A columned hall, called Hathiya Sal, on the western side of Chhatra Palace is notably distinctive as I see models of four painted elephants incorporated into every column.

The eerie presence of Taragarh Fort perched atop a 1,426-ft-high hill above Garh Palace seems to beckon me. Rao Bir Singhji constructed it in 1411 AD as a final retreat for the Hada kings. Taxis or auto-rickshaws are the most convenient ways to reach the fort. Opting for neither, I trek from Garh Palace on a faint trail leading to the fort. The derelict bulwarks of the bastion conceal a water reservoir carved out of single rock but the 16-pilared sun cenotaph is conspicuous, as is the majestic Bhim Burj, the fort’s highest and only bastion. The residents of Bundi love spending their evening gazing at the breathtaking grandeur of the city from the fort. I, too, join them.

After a leisurely amble through the town, I arrive at the biggest and most stupendously constructed cenotaph of Bundi, standing on as many as 84 columns etched with floral designs. Surrounded by a small garden, it is a memorial of affection by Anirudh Singhji, the 15th Rao Raja of Bundi, for his foster brother, Dewa. Rani Nathavatji, wife of Anirudh Singhji, also left an indelible mark on the architectural landscape of Bundi by constructing the biggest stepwell of Bundi in 1699, aptly it Rani-ji-ki-Baori (queen’s stepwell). I particularly like its elaborately carved pillars, arched gates and relief sculptures of Vishnu incarnations. Situated near Indira Market, a short walk away from Garh Palace, this stepwell is 46-m-deep and resembles the equally beautiful stepwell at Patan in the state of Gujarat. Other stepwells of Bundi, particularly, Nagar-Sagar Kund (near Chougan gate), Dhabhai Kund (further south of Raniji-ki-Baori), and Boraji-ka-Kund (north of Nawal Sagar) are well constructed, but look sadly neglected.

Three kilometres away from the town, and nestled among the hills is Jait Sagar, arguably the best of Bundi’s lakes. On the southern rim of Jait Sagar stands the famous 19th century Sukh Palace constructed by the 20th ruler, Rao Raja of Bundi, Vishnu Singhji. Interestingly, this lake is considered to be the inspiration behind Kipling sahib’s well known book, Kim.

On the northern edge of Jait Sagar is Smriti Kunj, a nondescript, but calm retreat, and further ahead is Kshar Bagh, a field of memorial cenotaphs of the Bundi royalty built between the 16th and 19th centuries. The crackling sound of fallen dry leaves getting crushed under my shoes alerts the monkeys, the only inhabitants of this abode of bygone royalty. They look at me in surprise, probably why I am intruding on their space.

I walk on regardless, determined to explore the cenotaphs closely. Each one is replete with fine relief sculptures particularly along the staircase. The gate to Kshar Bagh is locked. The guard manning the barricade asks me to get written permission at Moti Palace near Garh Palace.

Disappointed I head back. My exploration will have to end. I board a boat on the banks of Jait Sagar, and float aimlessly amongst lotus bouquets. Gradually, slanting sun rays paint the valley in dark tones of yellow. The lengthening shadows of hills encroach upon the colour to cast shadows on the panorama as if drawing curtains on my sojourn.
Jaipur

Ready reckoner

Historical facts about the Pink City, including nuggets of information to help you get around and find your bearings

STD Code: 0141
Population: 2,324,319

History

Jaipur, also referred to as Pink City, was founded in 1727 by Maharaja Jai Singh II, a Kachhwaha Rajput, who ruled from 1699-1744. Initially his capital was Amber, lying 11 km from Jaipur. With the increase in population, and the growing scarcity of water, the raja felt the need to shift his capital. He took interest in designing Jaipur (city of victory), which, incidentally, was the first planned city in the country. He consulted books on architecture and architects before planning the layout of Jaipur.

There are many stories about Jai Singh. A popular one is that when Jai Singh was 15, Emperor Aurangzeb summoned him to court. Jai Singh had contravened the imperium of not waging war against the Marathas in the Deccan. Legend relates that when Aurangzeb met Jai Singh, the Emperor clasped the young boy’s hand in greeting and demanded an explanation. Jai Singh, then 15, replied that since the Emperor had extended his hand, it implied that he would protect Jai Singh and his kingdom. Impressed by his reply, Aurangzeb conferred the title ‘Sawai’, meaning one and quarter, a title that all Jai Singh’s descendants also adopted.

When Jai Singh came to power, there was a moment of unrest when he supported Aurangzeb’s son, Azam Shah’s bid to the throne. Azam Shah lost the battle of succession to his brother Bahadur Shah who demanded Jai Singh’s removal and the installation of Vijay Singh on the throne of Jaipur. Jai Singh, not one to take setbacks lying down, formed a formidable front against the Mughals by aligning himself with other Rajput states and reinstated himself.

After several battles with the Marathas, Jai Singh was keen on developing the security of the city. To begin with, he focused on his scientific and cultural interests to make a brilliant city. Being a lover of mathematics and science, Jai Singh sought advice from Vidyadhar Bhattacharya, a Brahmin scholar of Bengal, to aid him in planning Jaipur’s architecture. Vidyadhar, in turn, referred to ancient Indian literature on astronomy, books of Ptolemy and Euclid.

With a strategic plan, the construction of the city started in 1727. It took around four years to complete the major palaces, roads and square. The city was built following the principles of Shilpa Shastra, which spells out the guidelines for Indian architecture. Divided into nine blocks, (inspired by the nine planets of Hindu astrology) of which two comprise the state buildings and palaces, the remaining seven blocks were allotted to the public. Huge fortification walls provided security along with seven formidable gates. In those days, architecture of the town was very advanced and certainly the best in the Indian subcontinent.

After Jai Singh’s death in 1744, the obvious happened – his sons squabbled for power and without a monarch, the kingdom became open to invasion. Neighbouring Rajput states and the Marathas usurped large areas of territory. It was in 1876 that Maharaja Ram Singh earned Jaipur its sobriquet. He painted the entire old city pink, a colour associated with royalty. Maharaja Ram Singh also built Ramgarh lake to supply water to the needs of the city. During the 19th and 20th centuries the city’s population spread beyond its walls.

After Independence, Jaipur merged with Jodhpur, Jaipur became the capital of Rajasthan.

Geography

The old city is to the north-east of Jaipur. Additions have been made to this section in the south and the west. Tourist attractions are in and around this part. Since Jaipur is a planned city, roads and bylanes are laid out in a grid pattern, making it easy to find your way around. The new part of the town isn’t difficult to negotiate either. There are three interconnected roads – Mirza Ismail Road (MI Road), Station Road and Sunsar Chandra Marg where most of the hotels are located. Anyone can tell you where to find them.
Parting shot

Sweet tidings: A band announces the arrival of the baraat in the Walled City

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