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DISCOVER

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ADAM RUCK EXPLORES THE CIVILISED CHARMS OF KEA **P05** **STACEY DOOLEY** DWELLS ON TOKYO'S OFTEN SURREAL APPEAL **P13**



ALAMY



Battle ready: Rajasthan's magnificent forts dot the landscape, top; Marwari horses, above, were bred for royalty

RAJASTHAN RIDES

Following in the hoof prints of the Rajput warriors, **Nicky Holford** gallops through the magnificent Thar Desert atop her trusty Marwari steed

The sun is beating down and dust gets in my eyes as I swerve to avoid a startled camel that lopes across my path. But my horse is unfaltering, a true warrior weaving through rows of millet, unfazed by the numerous obstacles in his path.

I'm inches from the horse in front, whose thundering hooves transport me to the days of the Rajput warriors galloping into battle, far from the chaos of Rajasthan's busy cities.

We are in the Shekhawati region, north of Jaipur, on the edge of the Thar Desert, 400 kilometres from the Pakistan border. We have abandoned the golden triangle of Rajasthan and replaced the trappings of tourism with tumbling forts and deteriorating merchant havelis.

Now off the beaten track, this region was once an important caravan route across the Thar Desert between Delhi and Sindh (which is now part of Pakistan) and the Gujarati coast. Its history comprises battle and religion: today both Muslim and Rajput influences are part of its character, and its history of Rajput warriors is rich. One of its attractions is the havelis left to deteriorate by the Marwari merchants, many of which are accessible to the public. A combination of tax-free advantages and profits from trade led merchant families to build imposing havelis embellished with hand-painted murals telling stories of battles and love, decorated with big glass chandeliers and the latest fittings of the time from Europe.

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WELCOME TO DISCOVER

It's amazing how reputations – and perceptions – can change, says Fiona Duncan, who until recently thought Biarritz to be a 'genteel bastion of faded elegance'. That was until she ran into the surfers at the French resort. But as she says on P6/7 there really is something for everyone there. Going farther afield, our front-page story finds Nicky Holford transported back to the days of Rajput warriors as she tells of her adventures in Rajasthan. And thank you for your responses to our Your Say competition (P8/9), which drew an array of entries on Trips of a Lifetime, with tips ranging from India to the Crimea and even Iona.

ONLINE *Looking for a summer escape? Browse more than 100 guides to the world's leading destinations. Each guide is written by an expert, who offers in-depth reviews of the finest hotels, a selection of the best restaurants and bars, advice on what to see and do – and avoid – as well as the pick of operators to take you there* **telegraph.co.uk/destinations**

The horses' tack is polished, their saddlecloths of red and saffron

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Before climbing aboard Chandrarekha (which means "ray of moonlight"), my Marwari steed, we are taken through the dusty streets of Mahansar by Rajesh. He dips into a dark entrance filled with bags of flour and maize and emerges with a key, for which we are asked to donate 100 rupees (£1). The key opens the door of the Golden House. Inside, every wall and ceiling is painted, much of it with gold leaf, and he tells us the elaborate stories of the murals. Large dust-coated mirrors from Belgium and France line the walls. It is as unexpected as walking into a vault of gold bullion. Another key is secured from a man who shows up on a bicycle (another 100 rupees), and we walk into the Dancing House, which is equally dazzling.

When we get back, the horses are ready to go. Their tack is polished and their martingales and saddlecloths are great sashes of red, denoting religion, and saffron, the colour of courage and sacrifice in battle.

Our guide and leader, Kunwar Raghuvendra Singh, a descendant of the Rajput ruler Kesari Singh and better known as Bonnie, is dressed in the full uniform of the Indian cavalry. With his maroon beret, good looks and manicured moustache, he looks as if he's straight from a film set.

His determination to see the Marwari horses from extinction and to keep the 1750 family fort at Dundlod going began with the filming of *The Far Pavilions*. Bonnie was location scout for the miniseries. But when it came to certain scenes, without the thoroughbred Marwari horse with its distinctive lyre-shaped ears, it lacked authenticity. Bonnie was sent to find these former warrior horses and, when filming finished, he ended up buying them. Now tucked away off a dusty track in the family seat of Dundlod is the Royal Equestrian and Polo Centre, one of the largest breeding centres of Marwari horses in India.

Every year, during the cooler months from October to March, Bonnie leads riding holidays to fairs such as Pushkar and Nagaur, camping in tents or staying in former forts or palaces. The longer trips are not for the faint-hearted. Marwari horses are spirited beasts, able to gallop for long periods of time and travel for miles in the heat and dust of their desert homeland.

The day we set off for Alsisar Mahal, 45 kilometres away, is the first ride of the season, and the horses are well up for adventure. As we leave through the imposing iron gates of Mahansar castle, built to keep out charging elephants, the streets are suddenly filled with children and villagers waving and smiling. I wave back, feeling very regal indeed. We ride through the village avoiding roaming cows and women laden with large piles of wood until we leave all signs of habitation behind.







LARRY ATHE SADDLE





Rajasthan route: clockwise from main picture, Bonnie, in full uniform, leads the way; Udaipur is a clash of colours; and Golden House is lined with murals

In this parched and sometimes inhospitable scrub, winter farming has recently been introduced. Stretches of desert have been turned into fields of millet bordered by posts and wire, and Bonnie has to forge a new route as the crops haven't been harvested yet after the monsoons.

We gallop in between the crops, startling chickens, and have to avoid the odd makeshift dwelling. Once we have to swerve at the last minute to miss a man napping on a bed. In the middle of nowhere we come across small settlements where there is always a water trough for the horses and a school where children scream with delight and rush to see us, waving with great enthusiasm.

Bonnie's horse, Mumtaz, can fly like the wind, and we cover a lot of ground. When the sun is full in the sky and I have finally succeeded in making myself look like Lawrence of Arabia to avoid burning, we arrive at a village to find a whole support team. There are grooms for the horses, who are untacked and taken to rest in the shade, and an elaborate picnic for us. Tables are laden with a variety of dishes: curries, paneer, dal, a selection of breads and chutneys.

When we mount up again, the intensity of the sun has waned, the horses are keen and we find the wide open space of desert. A few hours later, on the horizon we can see the turrets of Alsisar, our destination. As we approach, it looks even more imposing, raised high above the town. The road to the fort is cobbled, and I feel swept back in history as we pass the main gates and clatter up a steep ramp into the courtyard.

The fort is luxurious, with large rooms and modern bathrooms. But we don't have time to explore, as Abimanya, son of the current Thakur of Alsisar, insists on taking us in his Second World War jeep to his favourite sunset spot.

We arrive back in Jaipur as dusk coats the city in a pink and golden haze. In the distance we can see children flying kites from the rooftops. Away from the sounds of the city we wait for the midnight train to Jaisalmer in the serene surroundings of the Diggi Palace. Unfortunately, there is a slight hiccup with our train tickets and we don't make it. But instead, thanks to the haveli owners Jyotika and Sandhya Kumari Diggi, I have a rare chance to ride their polo ponies. Father and son both play at the Rajasthan Polo Club. The clubhouse is a veritable hall of fame. There are photos of heads of state and royalty from all over the world, from John F Kennedy and Jackie Onassis to Diana, Princess of Wales.

The following night we step over sleeping bodies in the train station to find our platform. Fortunately, a girl who works for the Santander call centre tells us exactly where to stand. Sure enough, the train arrives on time and we are outside our compartment. A whistle blows and the train chugs into the night, taking us again to the Thar Desert and the honey-coloured stone fort at Jaisalmer, built in the 1150s.

Our final days are spent in Udaipur, where I get to ride another Marwari horse in much greener countryside and stay in the Lake Palace hotel, which rises majestically out of Lake Pichola. It has been 20 years since my last visit, and both India and the hotel have changed beyond all recognition.

By chance our last night coincides with Ashwa Poojan, a ceremony to worship and give thanks to the Marwari horse, held at the City Palace on the ninth day of the Hindu Navratri festival. It is Indian pomp and ceremony at its colourful best, with a procession of pipers and soldiers followed by the Maharana arriving in a carriage drawn by six horses. Later, to celebrate the end of Navratri, festivities carry on until late in the night. But we take the boat, which glides through the black night towards the lights of the Lake Palace dancing on the water.

Saddle support: supplies go on ahead, leaving tour participants to enjoy the ride, top; guests stay overnight in former forts, palaces or tents in the Thar Desert, above

YOUR SAY
Have you been on a riding or ranching holiday? Send your comments to yoursay@telegraph.couk for the chance to win a Thames river cruise.

Essentials

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways (0808 101 1199; jetairways.com) flies from London Heathrow to Delhi daily. Return fares start at £555. Flights are also available from Manchester and Birmingham via Brussels. Fares from Delhi to Udaipur start at £42.20 one way. Prices include all taxes. Jet Airways, celebrating 20 years of service, has the largest domestic network, connecting 52 destinations across India.

PACKAGES

Greaves Travel (020 7487 9111; greavesindia.co.uk) offers tailor-made tours to India. A 10-night tour to Rajasthan including one night at the Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra, and two nights at the Serai, Jaisalmer, costs from £2,750 per person. Price includes return flight, internal flights, b&b accommodation and private sightseeing, including a visit to the Taj Mahal.

In the Saddle (01299 272997; inthesaddle.com) has a Fairs and Festivals ride from October 24 to November 4 2013. Ride through the ancient kingdoms of Shekhawati, staying in palaces and tented camps. The 11-night trip (seven days' riding) costs from £1,748 per person sharing, flights not included. There are other itineraries to coincide with the Pushkar Fair in November, the Nagaur Fair in January/February and a ride each year running over Christmas and New Year.

WHERE TO STAY

The Diggi Palace, Jaipur £
A secluded heritage haveli minutes from the walls of the pink city with a lovely garden, large lawn, outdoor terraces and courtyards and pool. Owned by the Thakurs of Diggi since the 1860s, it is a labyrinth of corridors and courtyards with simple but brightly painted rooms all varying in size and décor from rooftop to garden rooms. The Jaipur Literature Festival is hosted here every January, and clients are more often buyers of textiles than tourists (0091 141 237 3091; hoteldiggipalace.com; doubles from £60 a night, including breakfast).

Taj Lake Palace hotel, Udaipur £££
On Lake Pichola and reached by a private motor launch, the Lake Palace hotel, which used to be the summer residence of Maharana Jagat Singh II, retains a royal feel. There are beautifully manicured courtyards and numerous terraces, and every whim is catered for. Don't miss an Udaipur martini or a Vesper, and order a DVD of *Octopussy*, which comes with popcorn, to watch the scenes filmed around Udaipur and the Lake Palace (294 242 8800; tajhotels.com; doubles from £342 a night, including breakfast).

The Serai camp, Jaisalmer £££
A sumptuous tented camp at the edge of the desert, modelled on an original army camp, with a lovely pool and spa. There's a profusion of wildlife, especially birds, in this isolated spot. Jeep trips to the desert, camel riding among the dunes and star-filled nights around the campfires give you a great feeling of space conducive to reflection. Morning coffee, afternoon tea in your tent and an impressive menu make for an extremely pampered experience (11 4606 7608; sujanluxury.com; doubles from £350, breakfast included).

The Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra ££££
This luxurious hotel is sheer indulgence away from the heat and dust of Agra, with spectacular views of the Taj Mahal. It has beautifully landscaped gardens with a pool and spa, a cocktail bar and terrace overlooking the Taj and exceptional service with details such as pillow menus, chilled facecloths and sunscreen at the pool as standard (11 2389 0606; oberoihotels.com; premier doubles from £455 a night).

DID YOU KNOW?
India has the highest number of post offices in the world



Monumental view: the Oberoi Amarvilas in Agra overlooks the Taj Mahal

WHERE TO EAT

Baradari Mahal, Diggi Palace, Jaipur £
Set around a large lawn, bordered by lush vegetation, sweeping trees and pillared terraces. Most of the food is organic and produced on the owner's farms, and all the spices, pulses and grains are locally grown. Try the roasted and mashed aubergines, jungle maans curry or chicken roasted in melon and poppy seeds. It has a good choice of curries and Western food, and is a lovely peaceful spot for lunch (141 237 3091; hoteldiggipalace.com; prices from £5-£15).

Darikhana, RAAS, Jodhpur ££
This stunningly designed haveli makes a great change from palaces and forts yet looks on to the majestic Mehrangarh Fort at Jodhpur. It's right in the walled city, minutes from the clock tower. A secluded oasis of red sandstone complemented by flowing muslin curtains decorate the pillared section of the restaurant. A rooftop bar has views to the fort and an extensive cocktail list. There are several Thai options, curries and Western food, all beautifully cooked and presented (291 263 6455; raasjodhpur.com; cocktails £9; dinner, £18 for two courses, £22 for three).

Chadni, Udaivilas, Udaipur £££
Arrive by boat at the hotel's jetty, where a golf cart will take you through the extensive rambling gardens with paths and fountains lit like a fairy castle. Eat at tables under canopies or al fresco. The service is impeccable, and it has mouth-watering starters and appetisers with subtle spices and new tastes. Even the many types of bread have a twist and are sublimely delicious (141 221 1276; oberoihotels.com; £35-£50 including a local wine).

THE INSIDE TRACK

- British passport holders need a visa, which costs £82. Apply online (in.vfsglobal.co.uk). For postal applications allow at least 14 days.
- For vaccinations and malaria information, contact your GP or the National Travel Health Network and Centre (nathnac.org).
- Royal Equestrian and Polo Centre at Dundlod (141 221 1276; dundlod.com) can arrange riding and overnight stays at the Risala tented camp.
- Shahi Palace (2992 255920; shahipalacehotel.com) can arrange overnight Jeep or camel desert trips outside Jaisalmer.
- Don't miss the experience of travelling by train. You can book online up to 60 days in advance. The most user-friendly way to do it is on cleartrip.com, which has a £1 surcharge.
- The Jaipur Literature Festival 2014 takes place at the Diggi Palace from January 17 to 21 (jaipurliteraturefestival.org).
- The country code for India is 91.

WHAT TO AVOID

- Dehydration, by always having bottled water or drinking fresh lime juice with salt. Sachets of electrolytes are easily available at local shops or pharmacies.
- Lugging bulky luggage. Ideal for this sort of trip is the hybrid rucksack/suitcase that's soft topped with sturdy wheels. Try the Sojourn from Osprey (ospreypacks.com), £160 for 60 litres, or the new Ozone 70 Convertible with a detachable rucksack, £180.
- When travelling by taxi or rickshaw always agree the price first.