

Touring Rajasthan: Desert Realm of the Rajputs

By Andra Leo



Jaisalmer Fort, photo by Gisella Harrold

Rajasthan – the very name conjures up images of fairytale palaces, tall, handsome men sporting brightly coloured turbans and luxuriant moustaches and beautiful women, gorgeously attired in kaleidoscopically coloured skirts and blouses. These lands were the stuff of dreams – so much wealth, pomp and opulence in such an inhospitable landscape. Who were the Rajputs, men whose very name claimed them to be the sons of kings, how did they build their stupendous palaces and magnificent forts in deserts? Where did the fabulous wealth needed for all this come from? Such questions were answered during an FOM study tour in November 2012 – a delightful voyage of discovery meticulously organised and ably led by Harman Deol and Gisella Harrold. The group of 16 travelled from New Delhi to golden-hued Jaisalmer, then to Jodhpur – the blue city, to Pushkar with its remarkable camel, horse and cattle fair, Ajmer where a highly-revered Sufi saint lies entombed and finally to the pink city of Jaipur with its beautiful palaces and the imposing Amber Fort.

Jaisalmer, the first of the extraordinary desert cities we visited, is known for its splendid fort, a city within a city, throbbing with life, the narrow streets filled with every possible type of vendor. In its centre are five exquisite Jain temples, each more extravagantly decorated than the



Mehrangarh Fort's palace from below

other, with statuary and intricately wrought decorative elements on ceilings and columns. They are testament to the religious tolerance practised by the Rajputs. Built in 1156 by King Rawal Jaisal, the fort dominates the countryside and flourished on the east-west caravan route connecting India and Central Asia to the Middle East and North Africa. This was the source of the enormous riches the Rajput kings accumulated; they built their cities along extremely profitable trade routes. In the town below the fort, hugely wealthy merchants built *havelis*, large courtyard houses, to show off their prosperity and house their extended families. These architectural marvels were constructed from yellow sandstone, just as the fort was. This stone, which is easily worked, became the palette upon which incredibly talented stonemasons performed their magic: latticework so delicate it looks like lace, decorative elements so imaginative that each one vies for attention – these are the hallmarks of the *havelis*. The Nathmalji-ki-Haveli is one remarkable example. Designed and built by two brothers, no other building in Jaisalmer surpasses this one in the quality of the workmanship.

From Jaisalmer to Jodhpur, where the imposing Mehrangarh Fort towers over the old town and houses yet another beautiful palace – now a museum holding numerous artworks, including rare 18th and 19th century Marwar paintings that have toured the world and artefacts



The intricate stonework on a balcony at the Nathmalji-ki-Haveli



The Hawa Mahal, Jaipur's Palace of the Winds

from a bygone era, including solid silver *howdahs* (seats on elephants) and elegant palanquins, one looking somewhat like Cinderella's magic coach, exquisitely made from delicate gilded wood, glass panes and cut iron fretwork. In the city below is a labyrinth of tiny shops, unbelievably crowded alleys and passages that led us to a treasure trove of fine cashmere shawls and other lovely textiles. An elegant dinner in the stunning Raas Hotel completed an eventful day.

Pushkar was our next destination, then on to Ajmer and finally Jaipur, where two groups of venturesome ladies took off on a balloon flight – a breathtaking experience of floating high above the waking world below as the sun made its appearance over the horizon. Jaipur is home not only to the Amber Fort and the gorgeous City Palace, but also to an amazing park, the Jantar Mantar, that houses gigantic stone astronomical instruments. The park is on one side of the City Palace with the Hawa Mahal, Palace of the Winds, on another. This delicate building is little more than a façade, originally built so the palace women could watch processions and everyday life outside their 'prison' walls. The women were of course, in *purdah*, the practice of secluding them from the sight of men or strangers and practised in Rajasthan well into the 20th century. Jaipur was the last of the wondrous



Group photo at the Raas Hotel, Jodhpur, courtesy of Gisella Harrold

cities on our itinerary and ended with Harman's parents hosting a sumptuous barbecue for us – in the grounds of a stud, surrounded by stalls holding haughty racehorses with refined pedigrees. Back in Singapore, our shared photos made it "easy to continue for a little bit more to travel in our dreams in colourful, beautiful, stunning Rajasthan" as one of the participants wrote.

Andra Leo enjoys travelling with her FOM friends for their companionship, erudition, spirit of adventure and for the sheer fun of exploring new places.

Unless otherwise noted, all photos by the author



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