

MORE THAN JUST DESERT

History, culture and colour come alive in the former trading city of **Jaisalmer** in Rajasthan, India

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

Almost everything in Jaisalmer is the colour of the earth: the dusty tracks that lead into the city from the small airport, the hues of the shops and houses that line the market lanes and, most importantly, the massive Jaisalmer Fort that rises up on top of a hillock in the centre of town, stretching its arms wide and strong, as if to mark the territory it is perched upon.

But then, Jaisalmer is not just the muddy and muted colour of earth. It is also the golden glow of the desert sunlight falling on the fortress early in the morning. It is the bright reds, greens and yellows of the veils covering the faces of local women. It is also the burnished copper of the squat sand dunes just outside the confines of the town.

Right on the fringes of the great Indian Thar desert, in the western state of Rajasthan, Jaisalmer may now be a drab and dusty town, a



quick pitstop in the traveller’s itinerary that aims to cover as much as possible. However, its history is as rich and varied as that of any other princely state in this region. Jaisalmer gets its name from its Rajput founder, Rawal Jaisal, who built the city in 1156.

Even though the town remained geographically isolated, it served as a significant outpost in the ancient trading path across Asia, known as the Silk Route, that connected Afghanistan to China and Central Asia. Driving through these crowded lanes now, it is difficult to imagine that this was once a kingdom that prospered on the taxes collected from passing traders. It is even tougher to believe that it once revelled in the heady scent of spices, and in the timeless grandeur of soft silks and pure gold that the merchants carried with them in their caravans.

My base for this Jaisalmer exploration was Suryagarh, the boutique hotel on the outskirts of town, built to resemble a typical Rajasthani fort-palace. After a royal welcome – think traditional drumbeats, folk music and a shower of rose petals – I checked into my luxury suite on the second floor of this hotel that has tastefully recreated classic architectural elements of the region, such as latticed windows, open courtyards and pillared corridors.

After that, I immediately headed to the Jaisalmer Fort, one of the six hill forts in Rajasthan that has been inscribed with the UNESCO world heritage status a few years ago. It has gained acclaim as the *sonar quila* (golden fort) for the way the yellow sandstone gleams in the desert sun. That was when I realised that Suryagarh’s special sheen could also be attributed to this stone too.

The massive fort, with its double fortified walls and four grand gates, was visible from a great distance as we drove towards it. We followed the winding path around the base of the hillock upon which the fortress stands. As soon as I stepped inside, it was obvious why this labyrinth of a fortress, with its multiple lanes and squares, was the beating heart of this small town. This was a living monument, one with over 70,000 residents – most there for several generations. There were dozens of tourists out and about, mingling freely with locals who either lived or worked inside the fortress, or were visiting just like the rest of us.

Souvenir shops selling patchwork bedsheets and fake pashmina shawls jostled for space with the makeshift stalls of women hawking oxidised silver jewellery. From aerated cold drinks to thin crust pizzas, there was something to fill everyone’s stomach. Motorbikes emerged suddenly from hidden lanes, narrowly avoiding collisions with cows staring indulgently into space. Shopkeepers were uniformly generous with their invitations to “just come in and look” and “no charge for looking, madam.” From its crumbling mansions to exquisite temples, the fortress was a marvel of architecture, and a beehive of activity.

On the way back, I stopped at the Patwon Ki Haveli, a cluster of five mansions (haveli) built by a rich businessman for his five sons back in 1805. With their arched windows of intricate latticework and balconies overlooking the narrow lane, each of these looked like a mini palace in itself. Not surprisingly, these mansions took over 50 years to be completed. The interiors were no less magnificent, with walls of intricate mirrorwork and ceilings covered with frescoes, and provided an insightful glimpse into the lives of the rich and famous of those days.

Back at the hotel, tired and hungry, I tucked into a Suryagarh thali, representing the subtle flavours of the cuisine from this arid area. Juicy kababs and succulent curries, rice seasoned mildly with whole spices and rotis made from corn flour and bajra millets, and the ubiquitous Rajasthani trio of dal bati and churma – one course followed the other, as I ate and dreamed of sleeping away the afternoon. I did one better though, by indulging in a signature sand massage at their Rait Spa (named after the sand of the desert).

The next day, I set out on a curated Silk Route exploration trail with the general manager of Suryagarh, Nakul Hada, in an attempt to imagine life here as it must have been a few centuries ago. As we drove along on the mud tracks leading away from the town



HISTORIC CITY: 1. A view of the town from the top of the Jaisalmer Fort; 2. The Khaba fort; 3. Local women inside the fort; 4. Visitors to Jaisalmer’s Fort take a break; 5. A musical welcome at Suryagarh; 6. The Patwon Ki Haveli; 7. One of the stalls inside the fortress

towards the desert, the brown landscape turned more and more barren, arid, bleak. But, to my surprise, in the midst of all the desolation, there were patches of green oases, which Hada explained as catchment areas created by the ingenious Paliwal Brahmin community who once lived in the region and prospered during the times of the Silk Route.

Our journey started from the deserted Khaba Fort, where only a handful of peacocks and a few broken statues greeted us. This frontier fort, believed to be over 700 years old, was a tax collection point in the Silk Route, where traders had to pay for the privilege of being allowed to go ahead. The fort now overlooks an old, deserted Paliwal settlement, which is now considered cursed and haunted, after the community abandoned it overnight two centuries ago (leading to many spooky campfire stories). We walked around the village, stopping briefly at its lone temple, before driving further towards the inexplicably sweet water wells of Mundhari, where curious local children surrounded us and demanded to have their photos taken.

I found stone statues called Govardhan scattered all over, erstwhile directional aids as well as water markers, indicating to weary travellers the way to rest and refreshment halts known as caravanserai. In the fading evening light, it was easy to imagine the sights and sounds of distant caravans settling in for the night after long days of travel.

My idea of the desert has always been somewhat stereotypical, gleaned together from books and movies, photos of intrepid travellers on the Sahara and long-forgotten visits in my childhood. On this trip to Jaisalmer, I discovered those images come to life in the form of sand dunes and parched earth. But along with it, I also discovered the history and heritage of Jaisalmer, the colours and tastes of the Marwar region, and the local folk who smiled, despite all the tough and trying seasons. **W**

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