



The many shades of Shekhawati

A WALK THROUGH THE COLOURFUL STREETS OF CHURU, A TOWN LOCATED IN THE INDIAN STATE OF RAJASTHAN, IS TRULY A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

The town of Churu is just over three hours away from Jaipur, but, for all its isolation, when my car arrives on the main road, it could be a million miles away. Churu is just waking up to a lazy Sunday morning, shop shutters resolutely down everywhere. The blaring horn from a motorbike or auto-rickshaw occasionally rents the air, but there is no other traffic. A couple dozen goats and cows are ambling about aimlessly on the narrow lanes, competing for space with the local children playing boisterous games. As soon as they spot my vehicle, both the animals and the kids abandon their pursuits, and begin to show avid interest in the newcomer.

Churu is part of the Shekhawati region, a collection of towns and villages in one corner of Rajasthan, that conceals a wealth of exquisitely painted *havelis* (mansions). These imposing mansions were built mostly in the 19th century to serve as homes for the elite and conservative business and trading community, the Marwaris. With their graceful archways, ornate windows and spacious courtyards, these mansions were more like miniature palaces than everyday residences.

However, what really sets the *havelis* of Shekhawati apart are the fresco paintings that once covered each available inch of space – the outer and inner walls, pillars and ceilings. It seemed like, the larger the *haveli*, and the more elaborate the frescoes, the higher the prestige and status of the owner. This fresco work of the Shekhawati area is fascinating and colourful, some of it even bizarre. And I am here to check out some of it over a long weekend detour from Jaipur.

When their dwindling fortunes forced the community to migrate to larger cities like Mumbai and Kolkata, many of these *havelis* were abandoned. And they lay neglected

INTRICATE DESIGNS: The entrance of a typical *haveli* in Shekhawati

TRAVEL

for the next few decades, till recently there has been a revival in travellers' interest in the region. Accordingly, some of these mansions have been repurposed into heritage hotels, while others are open just for visits.

My base for this exploration is not one of the more popular towns (relatively speaking) like Nawalgarh or Mandawa, but Churu with its population of just over 100,000 residents, which is almost completely off the tourist radar. As of now, there is only one such *haveli* in Churu, dating back from the 1920s, and converted into a heritage hotel a few years ago by the Balans, a local family whose roots lie firmly in this soil.

Malji ka Kamra was built by Seth Malji Kothari, a prosperous merchant, as a guesthouse to host visiting dignitaries like Maharaja Ganga Singhji of Bikaner. As my hired cab turns into the gate at the end of another deserted lane, the mansion painted in a striking teal colour, makes its distinct presence felt. Despite the opulent façade, this boutique *haveli* hotel of only 15 rooms turns out to be cosy and welcoming.

Although Malji ka Kamra does not boast of the region's fresco paintings, it more than makes up with an eclectic mix of architectural styles that combine modern (for the time it was built) and European with ethnic Rajasthani. Therefore, in place of traditional murals, there are elaborate Italian stucco work and statues of the more fashionable Seths in Indo-European wear (think crisp white dhotis topped with formal jackets and dressy turbans), and their wives in rich silk saris and trendy blouses, plump pearl strands adorning their necks.

In a nod to where the political power really lay in those times, there are a few Britishers in the mix, solar *topis* firmly on top of their heads. And of course, there are statues of few gods and goddesses, along with angels sprouting wings thrown in for good luck. All in all, the effect is startling and holds promise of more interesting sights within Churu.

After a quick lunch at Malji ka Kamra, I head out for a Churu heritage walk with Lal Singh Shekhawat, who is going to my guide for the next two days. Along with the hotel's owners, Shekhawat has put together an easy trail within the town, connecting the dots of its history as marked by the *havelis*. Many of them are hidden deep inside the dusty lanes and still in a dilapidated state – the spotlight not yet fallen on Churu the way it has on some other towns in Shekhawati – but both the art and the architecture that is still standing is a veritable treat for the senses. A few mansions still have residents, usually the surviving family of the landlords, now doubling up as caretakers.

Lal Singh says that most of Churu's *havelis* were built in the second half of the 19th century, when the town was an important stop in the trading route across India. The frescoes are typical of the region, where the artists seem to have been allowed to give free rein to their imagination. They were, in fact, actively encouraged by their Marwari benefactors, who travelled to Europe for work, and brought back with them images of everything they had seen and absorbed.

Wherever I turn my head, or crane my neck, there is a flash of colour – reds, yellows, greens and blues, all of them made with natural dyes like indigo and vermillion – calling out for attention from the walls of even the most derelict buildings. Parakh Haveli, Baid Haveli, Surana Mahal – the names soon become a blur in my mind, but I press on eagerly, since the scenes depicted in each mansion differ greatly, depending on the interest and experience of the original owners.

So, there are paintings of kings and warriors, gods and cherubs, animals and birds, flowers and geometric designs. As if to record the most significant socio-cultural trends of the times, there are several frescoes of motor cars as well as steam engines, both of which had just chugged their way slowly into this part of the world. There are tributes to Bikaner's royalty, especially Maharaja Ganga Singhji, who was a benevolent patron of this area. There are also portraits of superstars from folktales, like the ill-

fated lovers Dhola and Maru on camelback (the Rajasthan version of Romeo and Juliet).

There is also another fact that leaves me mystified, that the hue seems relatively bright and fresh, even in those mansions which are otherwise in complete ruin. That is when I learn that the frescoes were painted on a smooth and shiny surface created using a unique plaster mixture of limestone and sea shells. This ensured that the vegetable dyes coated on them also remained without fading much, able to withstand the extreme desert temperatures of Shekhawati for over a hundred years.

Closer to the main market, we pause for a cup of chai, while Lal Singh points out the gphantaghar (clock tower) which has been telling the time since the early 1900s. The entire afternoon has gone by, and we have only just started my discovery of Shekhawati with this walking tour of Churu. Later that night, I fall asleep in my room at Malji ka Kamra, thinking of moustachioed warriors and passionate lovers, and of Rolls Royce cars that have suddenly grown wings and taken to the skies. **W**

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A WALK THROUGH CHURU: 1. Malji Ka Kamra, dating back to 1920, is the only heritage *haveli* hotel in Churu; **2.** Frescos on the walls and ceilings of the various *havelis* inside Churu, many of them in a state of disrepair; **3.** One of the magnificent *havelis* that is still standing inside Churu; **4.** Scenes from a typical afternoon in Churu market