

FINANCIAL TIMES

# how to spend it

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**THE LAST SWAN**  
THE SUBLIME TASTE  
OF MARELLA AGNELLI





THE SMOOTH GUIDE | THE LONG LUXURIOUS WEEKEND

# jodhpur

In the shadow of its legendary fort, the ancient desert city of Jodhpur intrigues with heritage hotels, garrulous merchants and cultural initiatives, says Maria Shollenbarger

**A**zure or golden – take your pick. Jodhpur's best-known sobriquet is the Blue City, and Mehrangarh, the storied fort that towers above it, is called the Citadel of the Sun; and this ancestral stronghold of the Rajput tribe, whose Rathor clan founded the maharaja dynasty that lives here to this day, still cleaves to both descriptions. Periwinkle-washed houses in the old town are clustered in swaths of coolness at its base, as it basks rosy-orange for most of the year in molten light pouring from clear, hot skies.

Jodhpur's history is a palimpsest of Rajput dominion and Mughal invasion, merchant traders and bejewelled polo-playing princes. Its population may have passed one million several years ago, making it Rajasthan's second-largest city, but the jumble of lanes in the old walled town still buzz with the chaos of commerce, their unassuming shop fronts belying the treasure troves of handmade goods inside. And while its royal family may no longer reign, the maharaja still resides in his palace, Umaid Bhawan – reborn as the elegant Umaid Bhawan Palace hotel in 2005.

It is a unique fillip that the maharaja's own home, with its innumerable-seeming

corridors and 347 rooms clad in pinkish marble and stone (of which 64 are given over to the hotel), is a place at which visitors of sufficient discernment – and means – can reside, too, if only for a few days. The lavish art-deco interiors, 26 acres of private gardens, and rooftop restaurant with staggering views of Jodhpur glowing at night, all enhance the fantasy.

Arguably, however, the most appealing hotel is in the heart of the walled city, in the former compound of a *thakur* (Rajasthani nobleman), a stone's throw from the famous clock tower and Sardar market (a must, even if briefly, for the first-timer, no matter how jaded and globetrotting; with as many as 7,000 stalls, this is quite a place). Thirty-nine-room Raas recasts traditional Rajput architecture through a contemporary lens, with very stylish results (note the elegant concertina window shutters, carved in the *jaali* style from single slabs of the local rose sandstone – no small feat of artisanship, that). Whitewashed walls, sandstone headboards, rich black terrazzo floors inlaid with brass, and panels of creamy



marble define the rooms, which surround an interior garden graced with a pool, shaded lawns and Baradari, a restaurant serving Indian, European and southeast Asian cuisines. (Serious Old Delhi and local delicacies are the themes at a second, rooftop eatery, Darikhana, with reach-out-and-touch-it views of Mehrangarh. Both places are excellent – and open to the public.)

A stroll outside Raas's gates takes you into the very thick of historic Jodhpur (although alternatively, you could also hitch a ride in the hotel's

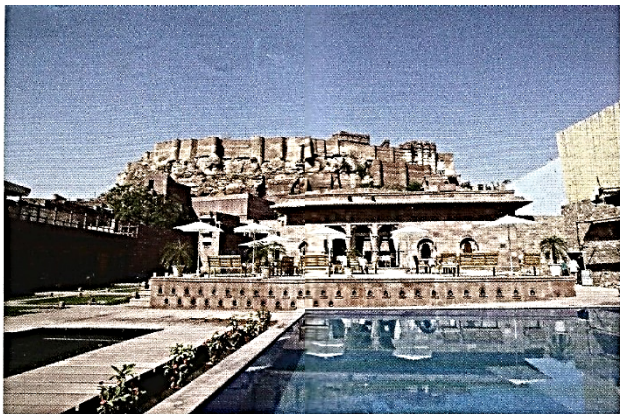
Above: Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. Left: the Maharaja suite at Umaid Bhawan Palace

fabulously cool powder-blue tuk-tuk). A dizzying bounty of goods is on offer – often quite vocally – with various streets dedicated to specific merchandise: cloth, silver or flowers. Start with textiles. Not for nothing is Maharani Textiles & Handicrafts the city's most famous emporium: owner Mukesh Jain is a smooth

character with a politician's grin, but he knows his trade, as any number of fashion insiders could tell you. So head upstairs immediately to where the real business happens. Piles of one-off silk prints might induce a sybarite's Stendhal syndrome in some; for others, the dizziness will set in when Jain brings out his double-faced cashmere wraps and pashminas, some of them made for top fashion houses in France and Italy, but available here at competitive prices.

Bangles are another of Jodhpur's venerated craft traditions (and





profoundly part of its culture: ask a local woman to parse the fascinating protocol surrounding the mixing of colours and styles to augur for happy marriage and familial harmony). As Jain is to *haute couture*, so Abdul Sattar is to these glass bracelets. His shop, Bibaji Churi Wale, is full of overflowing with bevelled and smooth cuts in jewel-clear or opaque tones, from deepest aubergine to crimson to milky blue-white. There are the simplest styles and outrageously gilded and pearl-encrusted iterations as well. (Bibaji will happily dispatch a vendor with a huge supply, should you prefer to ooh and ahh in the privacy of your hotel.)

In among these retail delights are architectural monuments to Jodhpur's powerful history. Some of the most beautiful are so familiar that they can be overlooked (and, sadly, have been neglected of late by the state): the city's stepwells, communal open-air rainwater cisterns that evolved from pre-medieval necessity to become, by the 11th century, splendid structures replete with ornate arches, bas-relief carving and sculptural detailing. Small, crumbling Tunwarji ka Jhalra, just around the corner from Raas, is a prime example. Another is adjacent to Gulab Sagar: a man-made lake at the edge of the city; its steps, furred in moss and wildflowers, disappearing into a pool of rainwater as still as an emerald mirror. These are slightly forlorn but picturesque places – ideal for a spot of contemplative peace, when the street traffic becomes too acute. If, afterwards, you're hungry for a reliably good biryani and a far less melancholy scene, a table in the garden

### Inside Mehrangarh is a museum where stories come alive



at On the Rocks, at the Ajit Bhawan Palace out on the Circuit House Road, will provide both. Stay into the evening, when the DJ might make an appearance.

Then there is Mehrangarh, Kipling's "work of giants" – a monument as packed with legend as any in India, towering 120ft and arresting one's attention from almost any vantage point (a local saying holds that a Jodhpuri doesn't feel complete if he doesn't catch sight of the fort at least once a day). After its foundation in 1459 by Rao Jodha, the 14th Rathore ruler, the fort was enhanced with various temples, palaces and administrative buildings from the 16th century onwards; it's a glorious accretion of ornamentation and architectural shows of might. But it is inside its museum that the stories come alive. Chief curator and director Karni



Clockwise from top left: Raas Jodhpur. Maharani Textiles & Handicrafts. The opening concert at Jodhpur RIFF, 2011. Bottom: a Bishnoi potter

Singh Jasol – erudite and enthusiastic in equal measure – has brought 21st-century goals to its development (its patrons, interestingly, are 75-80 per cent Indian). Partnerships

with contemporary exhibitors, such as photography gallery Tasveer Arts, and programmes to engage local artisans and traders in exhibitions recounting their historic place in the human fabric of the fort, are paying dividends. Mehrangarh's two internationally known music festivals – the World Sufi Spirit Festival and Jodhpur RIFF (Rajasthan International Folk Festival) – were joined last year by a third, which brought the art of flamenco into an original new subcontinental context.

Look down from the northern ramparts and you'll see a network of trails amid the brush and gullies; this is the Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park, started in 2006 to restore the desert bush eco-system that surrounded the fort centuries ago, and absolutely worth an early-morning walk before a museum

visit. At day's end, the fort's verdant terrace restaurant, Chokhelao, is a lovely place for a candlelit dinner.

Further afield are a handful of addresses worth exploring. Jaipur has more or less cornered the market for palace jewellery in Rajasthan with The Gem Palace, but one Jodhpur seller is worth the taxi ride out to the base of the hill on which Umaid Bhawan stands. Gems & Jewels Palace, like its similarly named Jaipuri peer, produces the traditional confections of soft yellow gold, diamonds, rubies, emeralds and pearls. But there is beautiful contemporary work as well; on my visit, one pair of just-completed earrings – silver filaments lined with tiny black diamonds, formed into large delicate teardrops – was utterly of the moment (and, at about £500, shockingly well priced).

Not far away is a jewel box of a different sort. Lalji Handicrafts is a furniture maker with a showroom attached; or rather, rooms, and lots of them – a maze of the twice-loved and fantastically esoteric. It's easy to imagine Wes Anderson's set designers going a bit mad here, amid 1930s watercolour-tinted wedding photos, burnished tiffin boxes and painted sparkler containers; shelves crowded with brass candlesticks and stained-glass light fixtures; avatars of deities; and boxes of crystal door handles. One room is crammed full of *dhurries* and *suzani*, another with vintage film stills and posters. It's a paradise for the connoisseur of the unique and delightful.

These terms apply equally to Bal Samand Lake Palace, another of Jodhpur's best hotels. A 15-minute drive outside the city, in the former summer-palace redoubt of the maharajas, Bal Samand is a dose of throwback, cinematic India – peacocks sound their haunting calls in the rambling gardens and lime orchards, and fruit bats emerge at twilight to circle the carved-sandstone *caitya* pavilions under which guests sip champagne while the sun sets behind the man-made lake. The 10 suites are charmingly old-school, with mullioned windows in jewel-toned stained glass, massive carved beds, gilded taps and curtains in embroidered silks and cotton block prints adorning the many archways. At breakfast on the restaurant's terrace, the molten light pours down onto the rosy-orange sandstone, and your sense of place is complete. ♦

## THE HIT LIST

### HOTELS

Prices are for a double room with breakfast. **Bal Samand Lake Palace**, Mandore Road, 342026 (+91291-257 2321), from Rs25,000 (about £251). **Raas Jodhpur**, Tunwarji ka Jhalara, Makrana Mohalla, 342001 (+91291-263 6455), from about £183. **Umaid Bhawan Palace**, Near Circuit House Road, 342006 (+91291-251 0101), from about £477.

### RESTAURANTS

Jodhpur has few standalone restaurants; most are inside hotels.

Prices are for three courses or closest approximation and half a bottle of wine. **Baradari** and **Darikhana** at Raas, +91291-263 6455, from £35. **Chokhelao Mahal Terrace Restaurant**, Mehrangarh Fort (+91291-251 0101), £40. **On the Rocks**, Circuit House Road, 342006 (+91291-510 2701), £20.

### SHOPS

**Bibaji Churi Wale**, Manak Chowk, 352001 (+91291-261 2504). **Gems & Jewels Palace**, Ajit Bhawan, Circuit House Road, 342001 (+91983-344 5934). **Lalji Handicrafts**, Umaid Bhawan Palace Road, 342006 (+91291-251

0887). **Maharani Textiles & Handicrafts**, Circuit House Road, 342006 (+91291-265 3152).

### SITES

**Clock Tower/Sardar Market**, daily from early morning. **Mehrangarh Fort and Museum**, +91291-254 8790, from £4. **Stepwells**, hotels or guides will provide directions.

### LESS THAN AN HOUR AWAY

The name "Bishnois" – a Hindu sect in the Thar desert – comes from *bis* (20) and *noi* (nine), the 29 precepts given by Guru Jambheshwar Bhagvan to protect nature. **Bishnoi Village Safari** (+91982-912 6398) lets you

meet *dhurrie* weavers and potters, and observe blackbucks, blue bulls and chinkara, from £7.

### WHEN TO GO

December is high social season, packed with polo – including British



Polo Day – and festivities. The rainy season stretches from June to September; late April and May will, to most, be oppressively hot.

### HOW TO GET THERE

Maria Shollenbarger travelled as a guest of **Greaves** (020-7487 9111), which offers customised Jodhpur itineraries from £1,750, including return flights to Delhi with British Airways, overnight accommodation in Delhi, internal flights, three nights in Jodhpur staying at Raas, private guides and transfers. **Air India** (011-2462 4074) flies twice daily to Jodhpur from London Heathrow, from £754.