

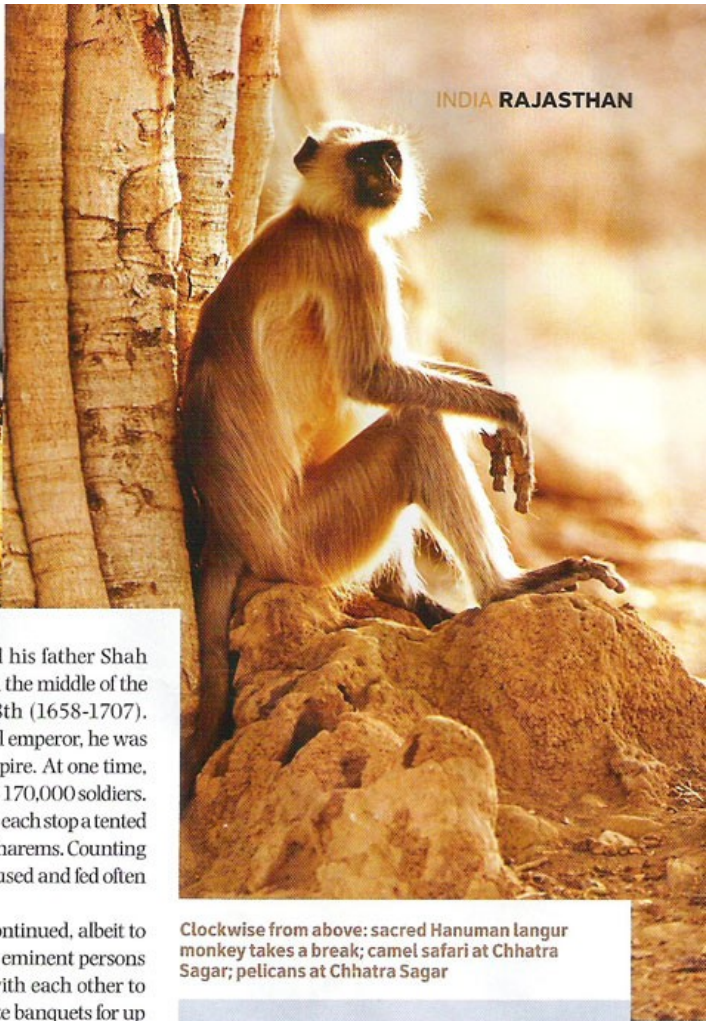
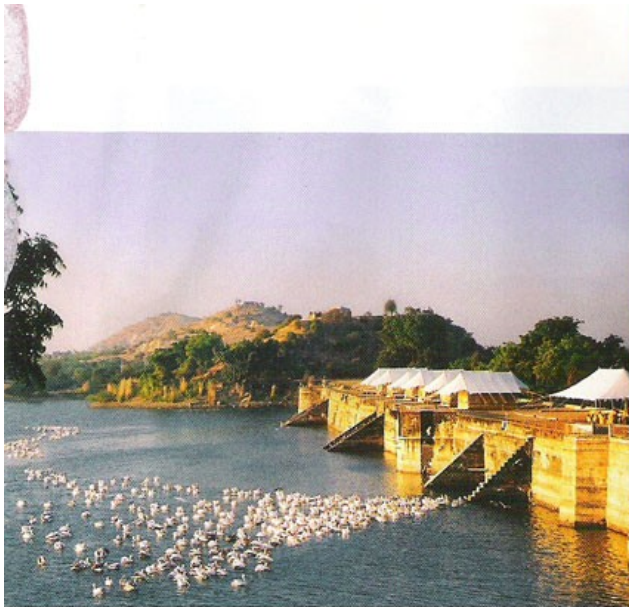
RAJASTHAN INDIA

# LUXURY UNDER CANVAS

Redolent of colonial splendour, the unique tented bivouacs  
of Rajasthan could make anyone a camp follower.

WORDS LEO SCHOFIELD



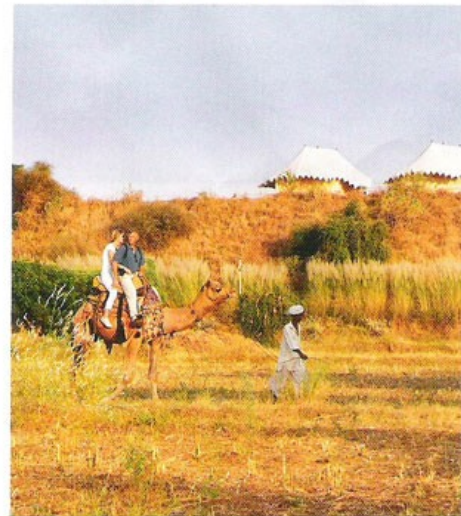


**E**MPEROR AURANGZEB, who succeeded his father Shah Jahan, ruled India for nearly 50 years from the middle of the 17th century to the beginning of the 18th (1658-1707). Generally regarded as the last great Mughal emperor, he was constantly at war in some corner of his empire. At one time, his fighting force in the Deccan plateau alone numbered 170,000 soldiers. Wherever his army went, so did the imperial court, and at each stop a tented city was set up, complete with bazaars, cantonments and harems. Counting noncombatants, the number of people needing to be housed and fed often nudged half a million.

Under British rule, the tradition of the tented camp continued, albeit to somewhat less bellicose purpose. Whenever royalty or eminent persons visited the subcontinent, the local princes would vie with each other to provide extravagant entertainment and, apart from state banquets for up to 150 people, the favourite form of diversion for the visitor was the *shikar*, a hunting party on a vast scale with the majestic Bengal tiger as the preferred target. Once again, small suburbs of tents were set up for occupancy by guests and servants, arranged in hierarchial order according to military plan. When a satisfactory number of animals had been despatched, the guests of honour and their entourages departed and the bearers and beaters took down the dozens of tents, folded them neatly and stored them until the next important visitors arrived.

Small wonder, then, that the Indians, with a few centuries of experience behind them, are experts at erecting and dismantling tents, a skill that stands them in good stead today in the many tented camps that attract adventurous tourists fancying something a little more down to earth than the sumptuous accommodation offered by the luxury hotels set up in some maharaja's converted palace. Tented camps are now proliferating throughout India—from the traditional set-up to the more African-style camps such as the one in Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan, the last major refuge of the tiger, where visitors stand a good chance of spotting one of the majestic cats in the wild. Rajasthan has several superb tented camps. ➤

Clockwise from above: sacred Hanuman langur monkey takes a break; camel safari at Chhatra Sagar; pelicans at Chhatra Sagar



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Tents at Chhatra Sagar sit by a reservoir, home to much birdlife (above); lavish interior of a Chhatra Sagar tent (below)



## Chhatra Sagar

It is amazing to see how swiftly a camp can be set up. In early September, Chhatra Sagar is virtually empty, a flat site on the edge of a huge reservoir with a lake below that is home to myriad birds, including swans and waterfowl, and a source of refreshment for water buffalo, deer and other wildlife. Then, within a week, a row of tents has sprung up along the edge of the reservoir. Spacious affairs of thick khaki canvas, they have a slightly regimented look to them – only to be expected given their history – but the interior decoration is chic and playful. Each tent is lined in pale Rajasthani cotton block-printed with panels of colourful meandering flowers and framed spaces for window blinds that roll up to reveal the striking landscape. Behind is a bathroom, each element made of local wood or stone, with hot and cold running water

and, in front, a sitting-out area where, shaded by a canopy, you can enjoy a late afternoon *chota peg* (small drink). That is unless you decide to walk up the nearby hill to take in the fiery sunset over the lake, with the Aravalli ranges as a backdrop, and sip a gin and tonic mixed by a turbaned waiter who has earlier carried up the makings and set up a temporary bar for thirsty climbers.

Another, much larger, open-sided tent sits at the end of Reservoir Row and it's here that guests take their meals: delicious Indian and traditional Rajasthani dishes prepared in the family kitchen using spanking fresh, locally grown ingredients. And at least one meal each day is vegetarian.

Owned and operated by the ruling Rajput family of the nearby city of Nimaj, whose forebears once hunted here, Chhatra Sagar is a nature lover's paradise. The Pali district in which it is located is one of the most sparsely populated parts of India and abounds in wildlife. A jeep safari through the fiercely beautiful terrain is mandatory, as is birdwatching. You may spot a flock of Siberian cranes, a rare and endangered species, passing overhead in the night sky, winging south on their perilous 6000km annual migration.

Situated just off the main highway that connects Jaipur and Jodhpur, Chhatra Sagar is a perfect spot to stop over for a night or two on the 330km journey between two of the most popular destinations in Rajasthan. [Acis Manava](#) >

**CHHATRA SAGAR** Nimaj, Pali. 9414 123 118/2939 230 118. [www.chhatrasagar.com](http://www.chhatrasagar.com). Open: October 1-March 31, 2009. Single/double from INR14,950/INR17,250 (\$407/\$470) including meals, bottled water, non-alcoholic beverages, village or birdwatching tour.