

# PASSAGE THROUGH INDIA

Nowhere else in the world possesses such natural beauty and culture. Now the people of India are energetically embracing the contemporary and the eco-aware. In a three-part travelogue, our writers stay with princely families on the plains, catch their breath in the Himalaya, and have spine-tingling encounters with tigers

## CHAPTER ONE

### RAJASTHAN

*Towering forts and tented camps, luxury comfort-zones and rural pleasures, iridescent lakes, and shops that shimmer with treasures: VICTORIA MATHER falls in love with a land fit for maharajas*

It is an India moment. I am standing in the marbled bar of the Fort Rajwada Hotel in Jaisalmer discussing the merits of Indian white wine. "I would love a glass of white wine, please," then the barman produces a suspect, curvy bottle. "No, I don't like that, I like Sula." Sula is the very acceptable Indian Pinot Grigio. There's a lot of thoughtful head-nodding. "Sahiba, tragically we don't have Sula tonight." Oh dear, I say, and smile and wait. For the marvellousness of India is how we get out of these little problems with all our dignity intact. The excellent barman and I both look curiously at the curvy bottle. Suddenly, dawn lightens: "Sahiba, Sula is better, but this wine is equally better."

I adore India. I am bewitched by the colour, culture, drama, shopping and the elegant sway of a Rajasthani red sari-ed lady plucking beans in a field. I love the India moment arriving at Deogarh Mahal when the drums beat and I am showered with rose petals from a 17th-century balcony by Bhavna's children, and I run up the stairs and am hugged by their grandfather, the Rawat Nahar Singh II, and I say, "I am so happy to be home". I love sleeping in a mirror-tiled room at Deogarh, where a previous ancestral occupant was 7ft high and 5ft wide. If I stay in Rajasthan any length of time, with its delicious food, the girth is

a self-fulfilling prophecy. Meanwhile, I am delighted that this was where the Rawat's mother used to keep her garlic, on the shaded balcony. There is a photograph of the Rawat—looking very cross—when small and forced into satin knickerbockers, on my way to the shower. It is all perfect and, blissfully, my arched doorway opens into the bar where, every time I poke my head out, they say "Gin'ntonic, madam?" regardless of time of day. I have also stayed in the Mirror Room, which is dead grand, suspended in a tower high above the village, so you hear rural India awakening. The sound of dogs barking, the muezzin call, the swoosh-swoosh—the endless pointless sweeping, as much as the honk-honk of cars, the low chatter of women cooking breakfast over open fires. Just after sunrise, I climb to the top of the tower to do yoga. The yoga teacher is also the IT expert.

Just after sunset, I love the moon rising over Fort Seeng Sagar, built in 1739 as a hunting lodge on an iridescent lake full of pied kingfishers, lapwings, and great white egrets. There are also goats decorated with pink spots, but this is post-Diwali, the festival of light, not post-modern. The fort is a new outpost of Deogarh Mahal, a perfect retreat for friends travelling together, with four bedrooms, a shaded central courtyard, and magic dining terrace above the lake in which women in little boats, wearing rose-pink saris, are harvesting water chestnuts.

I also love Deogarh's new tented camp on another lake—grand family, many lakes—the Rajastani tents are like living inside a fairytale. A dream, with horses, a place to which we travel in this busy world to be hushed, to hear silence.

I love pottering in the village street in Deogarh, my favourite in the world other than Fifth Avenue. Tailors throb away on treadle sewing machines, the shops glisten with silver jewellery and gold-threaded sari material, the linen is in crisp piles of colour. I once bought six tablecloths and the word spread like wildfire: as I left Deogarh every tablecloth seller in the village sprang out in front of the car waving their wares. Cloths in red, aquamarine, Hermès orange and deep blue decorated with elephants, camels, and peacocks.

To stay at Deogarh is one way of travelling in India; the heritage hotels, like Samode Palace outside Jaipur and its townhouse Samode Haveli, and Chhatra Sagar, to which we'll come in a minute, have a warm individuality. Owned by the old princely families, they are rich in extraordinary durbar halls

(Samode), elephant stables (Deogarh—Bhavna, daughter-in-law of the house, has just converted them into a delicious shop), intricate purdah screens and interior courtyards tinkling with fountains—all leitmotifs of feudal India. Many of the staff may be old family retainers; there has never been a time at Deogarh when I haven't stood in my shower with the Rawat's major domo as we've both contemplated its mysterious refusal to produce any water. It is an India moment. I love a plumbing crisis since it requires a cast of thousands and much excitable chatter to fix. They happen in the best-regulated establishments; at the Maharaja of Jodhpur's Umaid Bhawan Palace there was never a suggestion of hot water in the Maharani Suite. It didn't worry me but the next guests were the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, who might have been more fussy.

If you want a sanitised experience, then Biki Oberoi has provided a ring of confidence round Rajasthan. Amarvilas, in Agra, is the only way to see the Taj Mahal; Rajvilas in Jaipur is built in the style of a Rajasthani fort and is an oasis just outside the city; Vanyavilas is an immaculate tented camp at Ranthambore; Udaivilas in Udaipur is a modern palace on the lake's edge, the city shimmering across the water. Beautifully designed and run, this is India for those frightened of going to India. Also, sometimes one wants a respite from the noise and the people, and the Vilas properties provide awesome comfort-zones. Brilliantly, what Mr Oberoi has done is raise the bar, so that the Taj group, which had been resting on its laurels for too

## It's easy to miss secret, rural India in the demented rush to clock up as many palaces, temples, tigers and forts as possible.

long, has had to invest seriously in its properties. The Rambagh Palace in Jaipur is now glittering with the magnificence that once made it such a glamorous backdrop for Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II (Jai) and his wife, Ayesha, acclaimed as the most beautiful woman in the world. Now in her eighties, she still lives there at Rambagh in her house, Lilypool, and worries about cruelty to elephants. Their feet get burnt walking the hot tarmac road to the Amber Fort, up to which they heave fat tourists. At Rambagh I sat on my balcony, with its fountain, having breakfast and watching some very happy elephants feeding in the garden, attended by a poo-wallah with a bucket.

At Umaid Bhawan Palace, Taj has achieved a near-impossible restoration of the Art Deco property. Bats used to wing through the throne room; the cavernous hall was like a railway station (if not watched like a hawk, a lot of India deteriorates into seething-mass chaos), now it is breathtaking. To walk through the hall, past a ballroom of romance, beyond the hunting trophies (long-dead, entire leopards are suspended—in a good way—on the soaring stone walls), to the monumental pillars on the terrace, to have lunch overlooking the gardens, the Mehrangarh Fort on a hill far beyond, is an India moment. The India of cloud-capp'd towers, gorgeous palaces and solemn temples. Yet in the demented rush to clock up as many palaces, temples, tigers and forts as possible, it's easy to miss secret, rural India. I love being at Chhatra Sagar, where Harsh Vardhan's family have lived since the 15th century; it was part of the kingdom of Jodhpur and his grandfather, Thakur Umaid Singh, first had a sporting camp here in the 1920s. Harsh, a rakish figure in an Indiana Jones

hat, has built a tented camp at Nimaj, Chhatra Sagar, along the top of a dam that is a five-star pitstop for migratory birds. Here, by the camp fire, one eats the best food in Rajasthan, cooked by his wife, Shrinidhi. The tables are beautifully laid above the dam, the food is fresh, organic—vegetables picked from their own fields, their own herbs, everything cooked in Shrinidhi's spotless steel kitchen—you can taste real, earthy deliciousness. There's a completely magical dish of puréed, creamy tomatoes. And I hate tomatoes. At breakfast, every egg is lovingly poached, no horrid buffet. There are 11 tents, decorated on the inside like Mogul art, the bathrooms large and brilliantly ergonomic: plenty of space to put everything, and power showers. Each season the women of the village paint the ochre mud paths outside with intricate white patterns. Soon there will be two private tents with their own pool up on the hill

During the morning one might go to the village where the school has improving sayings inscribed on the wall: FRIENDS DO NOT COME IN MARCH AND END IN MAY; FRIENDS MEAN YESTERDAY, TOMORROW AND TODAY. At assembly the uniformed children recite interesting bits from *The Times of India* and a thought for the day (PLAY THE GAME IN THE SPIRIT OF THE GAME) is written on the blackboard. Down the street the silversmith, Chandra Prakesh, is silversmithing, the potter, Mema, potting and the rug maker, Narayanji, spinning goat's wool when he can get his goats to stop eating his wares.

This village of Kehda Deogarh is a community project, as is Harsh's farm, and one supports the endeavour by staying at Nimaj. It is travelling to make a difference and it's no hardship as, after the tomatoey lunch and wine from chilled glasses, one sinks into a siesta before going birding or riding.

I love going to the schools around Deogarh with the Rawat and his wife, the Rani Bhooratna Prabha Kumari. Here, too, one can contribute: it costs but £7 to support a child through primary education for a year; the Government pays the fees but the children still need clothes, books, pens, pencils, school bags; some schools have no drinking water—a tanker of water per week costs £4. Since the Deogarh family began the hotel 11 years ago some 2,200 children have been given clothing and scholarships for the 26 schools in the area. Desks are handy; most of the children have to sit on the floor. Razzed up by the improving proverb scenario, I asked one teacher to translate the message on the blackboard. It said, "Crash has won the Oscar for best film." Another India moment.

A new luxury player in Rajasthan is Aman, with their superb tented camp Aman-i-Khas, at Ranthambore and Amanbagh, near Alwar, which is the perfect place to go between Agra (very aggravating) and Jaipur. Amanbagh, meaning peaceful garden, is in a part of rural Rajasthan one would never otherwise see: temples, hidden valleys, Ajabgarh, the fort said to have been used by the Moghul Emperor Akbar, or the deserted royal city of Bhangarh (deserted overnight having been cursed by the evil court magician, Selu Sewra), which is a national heritage site. Once a picnic spot for royal hunts, surrounded by palm and eucalyptus trees, Amanbagh is now a contemporary sanctuary. I'd like to spend the rest of my life in a suite on the river, with a private pool, having eternal Indian head massages in the spa. Yet also to go on the cow-dust hour trips in the evening, just before sunset, through the tribal Meena villages when the villagers are taking the livestock home, the old men are hanging out drinking chai and the children chase the Land

**DOWN TO A FINE ART**

Local women decorate the paths of Chhatra Sagar. Formerly a sporting camp in the 1920s, it now consists of a cluster of tents with bathrooms and power showers. In the evenings, guests sit around the camp fire to dine on the best food in Rajasthan, with organic vegetables picked from the surrounding fields.

