

## India-ana Jaunts

More Indiana Jones than India, a trip to Rajasthan involves tiger hunts, hot air ballooning and high speed zip wiring

You're flying through the turrets of Neemrana Fort at 50km/hr, not a magic carpet in sight. The barely-there zip wire above you sings to the wind whistling through your hair, as the ancient walls of the 600-year-old fortress flash by. From bastion to battlement to rampart to wall, you finally glide to a halt.

Stepping free of your harness, you accept the proffered glass of Champagne and turn to survey the rugged realm of Rajasthan stretching the horizon as far as the eye can see. James Bond would certainly approve. In fact, the ultimate Double-O probably had his best time yet in this breathtakingly beautiful Indian state. It's any man's guess as to just why he hasn't returned since his Octopussy encounter in Udaipur's decadent Lake Palace.

As fierce as the tigers which inhabit its wilds, and as cultured as a Maharajah, Rajasthan offers manly pursuits in sultan-esque style.

The state itself is the largest in India—about the size of Germany—and is blessed with exceptional natural beauty and a fascinating history. The dry northwestern part of the state, where Jodhpur and Jaisalmer are found, is dominated by the Thar Desert, and separated from the more fertile southeastern regions by the 850km long Aravalli Mountain range.

One of the oldest mountain ranges in the world, it reaches from the southwest to the northeast corner of the state, and provides



Women labourers carrying concrete for building construction: Poor or rich, Rajasthanis wear the most colourful saris in India





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opportunities galore for outdoorsmen and nature enthusiasts. It is also a range filled with the ruins of temples and palaces which speak eloquently of Rajasthan's glorious and bloody past, populated with more heroes and villains than a Marvel comic book.

Literally the 'Land of Kings', Rajasthan only became part of India in 1949. Before that, it was a collection of 23 warring princedom ruled by Rajputs—fierce warrior families, rich in elephants, camels, jewels, land and beautiful women. The Rajputs had risen to prominence during the 6th century, been subjugated (with difficulty) by Babur and Akbar, the Great Mughal invaders, in the 14th century, tolerated the dominance of the British Raj in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and survived—with pride intact. The Maharajahs of the royal Rajput families were paid compensatory 'privy purses' when they gave up their titles and joined the Indian union in 1949, until Indira Gandhi abolished the purses in 1971. Hence the fact that many of Rajasthan's most exclusive hotels such as the exquisite Rambagh Palace, Samode Haveli and Jai Mahal in Jaipur, the state's capital, and the magical Lake Palace in Udaipur were once the homes and leisure palaces of Rajasthan's royal warlords.

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These heritage hotels are busy. Tourism has flourished in Rajasthan in recent years, with travellers flocking to the cities to capture, on their SLRs, the exotic colours of elegant sari-clad women, the nonchalance of cows causing traffic jams, the concentration of roadside barbers, and the magnificent architectural relics of days gone by—from Jaipur's Hawa Mahal 'Palace of Winds' to Jaisalmer's golden fort. Rajasthani cities have that quintessentially Indian photogenic appeal, but, by their very nature, they're crowded—even without the tourists.

It's therefore in the countryside, around the cities that the savvy man spends his time, as this is where the mavericks of the state's burgeoning adventure tourism industry can be found. Gemma Hyde of Banyan Tours, India's foremost authority on independent luxury travel in the subcontinent, says: "A tailored off-the-beaten-track, the Rajasthani experience can deliver as much adrenalin as the client



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- 2 The magnificent Taj Lake Palace, built in the mid-1700s in the middle of Lake Pichola, in Udaipur

- 3 A typical Hindu holyman, you may see similar religious people all over India

- 4 Relic of a royal era: Colourfully dressed up, elephants get ready for their polo competition

desires, with a good dose of relaxation and luxury thrown in. It also lacks many of the hassles for which India is famed."

Even Black Tomato, the well-known British adventure travel company is getting in on the action. Watch this space for Enfield motorcycle tours into the Himalayas...

A typical tour of Rajasthan will start in Jaipur, founded by Jai Singh in the 18th century and also known as "The Pink City" due to its proliferation of pink stuccoed buildings. A typical tour will see you wowed by the gigantic instruments of Jai Singh's 300-year-old outdoor observatory, the Jantar Mantar, impressed by the City Palace's massive 900 gallon silver water urns, and agape at the spectacular views from the noble Amber Fort.

You might even browse in the colourful local markets and bring yourself good karma by joining locals at a bird-feeding station near the Albert Hall Museum.

Just a few kilometres from Jaipur lies Dera Amer, the brainchild of Udaijit Singh. To prevent a pristine piece of wilderness on his family's land being requisitioned by

the government because of lack of use, he set up a business that would have the least environmental impact possible on the area. Now a dirt track winds through villages and rural lands up into the foothills of the Aravalli Range, where a single-storey colonial-style building with wide verandahs overlooks a polo pitch with a difference.

This is an elephant polo pitch, completely surrounded by wilderness, on which guests can play a few chukkas—8 foot long mallets in hand—atop Earth's biggest land mammals. Speedy it's not, but to be part of a game that involves eight elephants shaking the ground in pursuit of a ball, while being roundly urged on by their mahouts, is fun in the extreme—and pretty hilarious to watch with a couple of Gin and Tonics.

Afternoon matches finish with a decadent high tea. Then it's time for an elephant safari through the wilds to a sundowner drinks spot near a 400-year-old temple, lit with torches in the gathering dusk. Peacocks cry, as if mourning their splendour lost to the fading light, and as you head back to where an authentic Rajasthani feast awaits,





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there's a strong chance you might spot a jackal or shy gazelle.

For hardcore game viewing however, go to Rajasthan's Ranthambore National Park. The former hunting ground of the Maharajahs of Jaipur, this 392km<sup>2</sup> park is located 130km from Jaipur and is one of the best places to view tigers in their natural habitat, as well as leopards, sloth bears, hyenas and up to 350 species of birds, both resident and migratory.

Luxurious lodges, such as Aman-i-Khas, a tented paradise on the outskirts of the park, offer twice daily safaris, as well as every conceivable comfort. But while seeing these magnificent beasts from the back of a safari vehicle is thrilling, seeing one from the air would be an unforgettable experience.

Drifting across the sky in a hot air balloon offers a completely new perspective on the park. Your bird's eye view sees you gliding over lakes where marsh crocodiles eye chital deer grazing nearby, and looking down on the remnants of the 1,000-year-old Ranthambore Fort.

The sensation of effortless flight—soundless save for the odd burst of flame to keep the vast balloon aloft—is one of pure exhilaration. The professional 'Sky Waltz' ballooning team also offers flights over Delhi, Jaipur, and Pushkar, and will soon be soaring over Udaipur, 'The City of Dawn'.

A two-hour airplane flight south of Jaipur, Udaipur is a nest of quaint, pastel-coloured buildings, ancient temples and grand palaces, tucked away in the Aravalli Hills. Built by Udai Singh in 1568 on the shore of Lake Pichola, it is known as India's most romantic city—a reputation cemented over the centuries by generations of lusty Rajput men.

Those with power had extensive harems, and their "leisure" time with said harems (a euphemism used by every guide with glee) was so important to them, that they built leisure palaces dedicated to their own pleasure. The most famous of these is the Lake Palace, built by Jagat Singh in the mid-1700s when his father refused to let him host his moonlight parties at his own "leisure" facilities.

5 Pushkar Lake: With its holy lake and temples, Pushkar is one of the sacred Hindu towns in India

6 These doors and walls of an old building are just a casual side of the 'The Blue City' of Jodhpur, another famous destination in Rajasthan



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Today a sumptuous hotel, the Taj Lake Palace appears to float in the middle of Lake Pichola, like an intricately carved marble iceberg. The views from its restaurant, pool and seven original suites are stunning, particularly at night when the graceful City Palace across the water is floodlit, and mirrored in reflected glory. Udaivilas, on the other shore, is the Oberoi Group's masterpiece of a hotel, offering views of both palaces and consistently voted one of the five top hotels in the world since its launch in 2002. But these hotels are not just for honeymooners. They are also perfect for pampering saddle-weary bones after a five-day Aravalli horseback safari with the award-winning Ghanerao Tours.

Two hours from Udaipur lies the hamlet of Kotri where you start your horseback adventure, although routes can be tailor-made to time and ability constraints. Beyond Kotri lies freedom, in a land where often your only company, besides

a wheeling bird of prey, is a lonely rabari (shepherd) and his sheep.

With saddle time varying from three to five hours a day, you'll make your way over the rocky hills of Narlai, climb the rock of Narad and savour the peace of the Muthana Bird Lake. You'll picnic during the heat of the day, and explore the 15th century Ranakpur Jain Temples and the unconquered Kumbhalgarh Fort with its 36km of unbroken wall.

You can then ride, amid oblivious wildlife, in the Kumbhalgarh Sanctuary, your human presence masked by your four-legged mount. Each night you'll dine in style and sleep in absolute comfort in boutique heritage hotels, often centuries-old forts.

One such hotel is the 18th century Devi Garh palace, rising like a medieval castle from the village of Delwara. Offering 39 contemporary suites, superb restaurants, a spa and pool, it's hard to imagine that, just eight years ago, the palace was a veritable ruin.

Ghanerao also offers bespoke horseback tours outside 'The Blue City' of Jodhpur, where the more arid landscape serves panoramic vistas and fantastic game viewing. So too does Rohet Garh, a heritage hotel with one of the finest stables of famed Marwari horses in the country.

In the words of Richard McCallum, another of the region's adventure mavericks, who has spent enough time in Rajasthan recently to call it a second home: "There's only so much fun to be had on a morning's camel ride, and only so much time you can spend haggling over trinkets in the bazaar." ■

**Plan your trip:** **Banyan Tours & Travels** provides the highest standard in luxury travel arrangements in India. For superb guides, insider knowledge, bespoke experiences and hassle-free travel, look no further. Email [info@banyantours.com](mailto:info@banyantours.com), [www.banyantours.com](http://www.banyantours.com)

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