

The arrival lounge at Jodhpur airport has two young, good looking women welcoming people who walk from the plane since the airport is a small one. For a moment I am amazed at the famed Rajasthani hospitality till I realise that the welcome is for the guests coming for a mega Marwari wedding of two NRI tycoons which is going to be held in true, Ham Aapke Hain Kaun style at the Umaidh Bhawan Palace hotel!

The drive from the airport to the hotel is a short one and one doesn't really get to see the city. But the wide, divided roads are certainly noticeable- a feature that is evident in all of Jodhpur except the old city. The city is a fairly large one, being the gateway to Marwar as also to the Thar desert. We take an auto to the Umaidh Bhawan Palace.

The Umaidh Bhawan Palace (and hotel) is the largest private residence in the world. It was built during the 1930s, partly as a royal NREGA scheme during the famine by Maharaja Umaidh Singh. Built on a hill, it has an imposing view of the whole city of Jodhpur. The palace has been divided into three parts- the main part is a super-luxury hotel which regularly features in the Best Hotels of the world list. Then one part has been retained by the present Maharaja as his private residence and small part onto a side has been converted into a museum.

The museum is basically a collection of some of the stuff used by the royal family over the years- dinner sets, weapons, furniture and other royal paraphernalia. Of course there is lots of information about the palace itself, including some original drawings made by the famous architect Henry Lanchester. The palace is made of sandstone and doesn't use any cement or mortar! In fact, as I overheard the guide tell one of the honeymooning couples, apart from the stone, large amounts of ice had to be transported to the construction site. This was because some pieces were just too big and so had to be moved into place on ice blocks and once the ice melted, would settle in place!

The museum tour over, we ask the autodrivers to take us to a handicrafts shop and sure enough he takes us to one with whom he has, what is colloquially called a "setting"- a place where he gets a commission for bringing in custom. The shop, like all other handicraft shops around the country has a large billboard with a huge sign saying Rajasthan Tourism or Handicrafts Board which is usually prefixed in small print by "Approved by"!!! This is for unsuspecting tourists to believe that they are going into a government showroom and hence feel satisfied with the prices that they are paying, not expecting to bargain in a government run shop. The shop also has, another standard fixture of such shops- a collage of

pictures of the owner with famous film personalities- the idea being that if Hema Malini can shop here, so can you! A downmarket celebrity endorsement!

The next day we drive down to Jaisalmer. Sumer Singh, our driver, fills us in to the local politics and caste equations. Jodhpur has seen a lot of development recently since it is the Chief Minister's constituency. This is evident in the wide boulevards and the general appearance of a well maintained (and well funded) city, at least in the areas that we passed through.

The city is not large and soon we are on the highway to Jaisalmer and beyond. It is amazing how 10 kilometres outside of Jodhpur, the landscape changes so dramatically- from green fields to stark yellow and brown, with an occasional baabool tree providing a patch of green.

The road is in excellent condition- the strategic importance of Jaisalmer and Barmer districts ensures that the army keeps the road in good condition. Plus the lack of rainfall means almost no maintenance is needed. There is very little traffic and the road seems to be going on and on in this stark and inhospitable terrain- passing an occasional village called Dani in the local dialect. The villages don't look very prosperous, given the aridity of the land and it seems that the major source of income is animal husbandry- goats, sheep, cows and buffalos. We are still not into the real camel territory it seems.

Even for the animals, the environment must be tough as there is very little grass. We stop on the roadside where a large number of women are gathered. A pond is being dug to capture the water flowing down from a hillock. The work is being done under the much acclaimed National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) which ensures a 100 days of work to every adult in the villages.

There are about 50 women already working on the site- of all ages and wearing colourful clothes. They are dumping the mud which has been dug up onto an earthen dam to stop the water from flowing. I talk to an old man sitting there smoking a bidi. He tells me that there has been very scanty rain for the last 3 years and hence there is enormous hardship being faced by the villagers. This pond will at least provide water for the animals.

I ask him about almost total lack of males at the worksite. Apparently, the males do come and work but only for the relatively hard work of digging the ground. The women are all from neighbouring villages and we see them coming with their children on their hips and a taslaa (a kind of flat bucket used to move soil)

with their stainless steel multi-tiered lunch boxes on their heads. The government guarantees a minimum wage of Rs. 100/- for a day's work but the old man tells me that they are lucky to get Rs 30-40 since there is a lot of corruption in the scheme. All through this conversation, the driver Suran Singh is listening but he finally asks about the caste composition of the villages. It turns out that the villages are mostly inhabited by dalit castes and this is enough to turn Suran Singh off. He goes back to the car while I chat for some time with the kids who are hanging around.

Our next stop is Pokharan, a small town about 200 kilometres from Jodhpur. Pokharan of course became famous globally after the nuclear tests which took place in the desert, some 30 kilometres away. The town has a small fort which, like most old structures in Rajasthan has been converted into a heritage hotel and a museum. We go to the museum which is a pathetic affair with old pots and pans, some furniture and an occasional sword- all very poorly displayed behind dirty glass. Interestingly, in every display there is a small slot through which people have pushed in coins and notes- a measure of the kind of respect which royalty still commands with the local population.

On one side of the museum is an open gallery which has very interesting wooden statues and a large number of wooden horses. This is a shrine for Baba Ramdevji, a local deity who seems to have a huge following in these parts- every other shop is named after him! Considered a reincarnation of Krishna, this 14th century saint is credited with many miracles including flying off as a child on a wooden horse- thus the wooden horse, elaborately decorated being the primary offering to his shrines.

A hundred kilometres driving down an excellent road passing through barren landscape brings us to Jaisalmer. The hotel is on the outskirts and as with everything else in the city, is made of jaisalmer stone- the yellow colored sandstone found in abundance in the vicinity.

Jaisalmer was founded in the 12th century by Rawal Jaiswal, a local chieftain who constructed the fort and the city on a hillock. Located on major trade routes from India to the Sind and onwards, the economic mainstay of the city was trade levies on caravans. After independence, smuggling to and from Pakistan became a major activity which got curtailed after the 1965 border war with Pakistan.

The 1965 war with Pakistan also highlighted the strategic significance of the region for the country's defence. As a result, there is a massive presence of the army and air force in the region- Jodhpur being a Core Headquarters now.

The Jaisalmer fort is the only living fort in the world and though not as massive as others in Rajasthan (Ranthambore or Jodhpur), is very imposing. The city is not a very large one, with a population of under a lakh and seems to be dependent heavily on tourism. This makes it tough in times like this when the foreign tourist arrivals are recession impacted. In any case, since tourism only thrives for about 5 months of the year, it is intriguing what drives the city for the rest of the year.

The entrance to the fort is crowded with shops- handicrafts and restaurants. Like most other places who cater to a largely foreign tourist population, the restaurants have their signs in many different languages- German, French and Japanese. Jaisal Italy, Little Tibet, Joe's German Bakery etc, all advertising genuine food and great prices and of course, most of them also advertise that they are recommended by that bible for the tourist- the Lonely Planet.

After passing through the entrance with the customary assortment of street performers and musicians, one reaches the Dusshera Chowk or the square where the Dusshera celebrations were held. The chowk has the main palace on one side and the queen's palace on the other. The main palace houses a museum and has magnificent chattris while the queen's palace has intricately carved jaalis for purdah. The chowk has the mandatory handicraft shop and a teastall where all the guides hang out.

The Jain temple complex inside the fort is possibly the most impressive part. The original capital of the kingdom was a small village called Lodhurva some 15 kilometers from the city. There still exist some opulent Jain temples there, attesting to the fact that the Jains must have been fairly prosperous traders. The temples inside the fort have some of the idols from the original temples. The stone work on the walls of the temple complex is as exquisite as that in Dilwara or Ranakpur. The only difference being that these are made in sandstone (Jaisalmer) and not in marble.

Many of the houses inside the fort have been converted into hotels or shops- as our guide said, anyone with more than 2 rooms, converted one room into a shop and anyone with more than 5 rooms made a hotel out of it! The view from the top of the houses is truly spectacular- the city of Jaisalmer, shining yellow in col-

or and then brown/yellow flat landscape for miles. The only things breaking the monotony of the landscape are the massive wind turbines which seem to be present everywhere. These monstrous structures seem as if some aliens have transplanted them into the desert landscape.

The fort over, we walk around the town which is a veritable maze of narrow lanes flanked by 3-4 storeyed houses on either side. The lanes are really narrow and each house has a platform outside it which makes the lanes even narrower. The idea behind this architecture is to make it weather friendly- the place gets excruciatingly hot during the summer months and the high buildings on either side of the lane provide ample shade and keep the temperature down.

We pass through several lanes to come to a haveli which is called patuwon ki haveli. Outside this massive structure is an empty space which seems very incongruous since otherwise the whole city has absolutely no empty spaces. I ask the guide and he recounts how the house in front of the haveli was demolished literally overnight in the early seventies.

Apparently when Mrs. Gandhi came to the city for inspecting the Pokahran blast site, she wanted to see this grand haveli. However, given that the lanes are so narrow, there was no way the imposing 5 storeyed structure could be appreciated from outside without bending one's neck to a superhuman angle. Hence the proactive district administration gave alternative houses to the inhabitants in front of the haveli and demolished them so that the Prime Minister could see the intricate stone carvings on the haveli's façade!

The haveli was made by a jeweller family and are really 5 havelis out of which two are under the control of the State Archeological department and are open to the public. Outside in the square is the crowd of the usual wide eyed foreigners and the ubiquitous Bengali tourists and the Gujarati honeymooners. I notice a bearded man with a turban and dark glasses. The guide tells me that he has a four and a half feet long moustache and he charges Rs 20 to open it up and display it!

Back in the lanes, we are going towards a handicraft shop which, our guide very earnestly assures us, is the best and the most reasonable in town (this being guide speak for "I get a hefty commission for taking tourists there!") Along the way one notices that almost every house has a brightly painted ganesha outside the door with a date and some names. Apparently, whenever there is a wedding in the family, the ganesha is painted and the bride and the groom's names are

written. This is never painted over even when the house is whitewashed! When the next wedding in the family happens, the new names and date are added to this painting. And, as with all such public displays of artistic talent (the backs of trucks, autos etc), the artist also adds his flourish in terms of an appropriate or rather seemingly appropriate verse to the work of art.

The sign outside the handicraft showroom is an interesting one- on top of a patchwork bedspread is written- "No Viagra needed- magical bedsheet"! At least the owner, no matter how reasonable or not, has a sense of humour! Shopping done, we come back to the hotel for lunch and then go on to the sand dunes.

The sand dunes are all over, but the touristy ones are about 40 kilometres from Jaisalmer. We reach the camel "boarding area" where there are already a huge number of people. The caravan starts for the dunes which are about a kilometre away. Bengali tourists with their monkey caps (this is the north and it is December so it must be cold, never mind that the temperature outside is in excess of 25C!), NRIs giving their teenaged kids the "India" experience and a few foreigners. We reach the dunes which are not, as we had imagined, stretching for miles and miles to the horizon, but a few of them where the tourists are taken. The whole place feels like a mela, a feeling I got when I was at the Rohtang pass- street performers with little girls who will dance and sing for you, urchins selling water, cold drinks , chips and cigarettes are all there.

The sun sets and the caravan starts moving back but not to the original boarding point. Very close to the dunes, across the road are the resorts where the tourists are taken after the mandatory dune visit, for an evening of desert fun- local food, dance and music. We are not in a mood for this and so drive back to Jaisalmer.

The drive back to Jodhpur the next day is uneventful and we reach the hotel around lunch. There is still the famous Mehrangarh fort to be seen. The fort is visible from far since it is about 400 feet above the city. It is one of the largest forts in the country and is enclosed by thick walls. The meandering road leads to the parking lot and one is surprised by the well maintained demeanour of the public spaces in the place.

Not surprising since the fort is controlled by the Trust set up by the Maharaja of Jodhpur which runs a Museum inside the fort. The steep walk from the ticket counter is interesting since one sees that whole place is tuned to the well-healed inbound tourist. As soon as one enters, there is an Internet café serving pasta and

not pakoras! The museum is spread over several floors and has the usual assortment of royal arms, clothes, memorabilia and is not particularly exciting. There is an exhibition of durries which has been put up which seems far more interesting. The view from the fort is actually quite remarkable and one sees why Jodhpur is called the Blue city since many of the houses around the fort are colored indigo blue.

The exit is through a souvenir shop- another trap for the well-heeled NRI/foreigner- with exorbitantly priced items like Jodhpur Polo T-shirts (made in China!), exotic Indian perfumes etc. The way out also has a café, once again serving dishes like vegetable au-gratin! Unfortunately, there are very few foreigners this year because of the recession, so the waiter serves us tea, though with understandable condescension!

The flight from Jodhpur to Delhi is delayed and so we wait in the lounge and finally walk to the aircraft. The plane waits at the runway for another 30 minutes since this being an air force runway, the air force planes get priority and we see several Mig aircraft taking off- a very impressive sight with their roaring engines and high speed. Finally our own Airbus 319, a more staid and rickety plane is given clearance and we are off to Delhi.