



# Pleasure Palaces

Reviews by Tom Vater  
Pictures by Aroon Thaewchatturat

India is back on the tourism map. With a 25 percent increase of foreign arrivals in 2004, the subcontinent is once again deemed a safe, attractive and affordable travel destination. What's more, the country is finally shaking its long held reputation for unreliable transport and crummy accommodation. Budget airlines now whisk visitors from state to state, and the last decade has seen a profusion of newly opened heritage hotels suiting all budgets.

In 1947, when India gained independence from the British, the maharajas had mostly gone to seed, following 100 years of indulgence by their foreign masters. Their land and privileges gone, unable to find a new role in India's burgeoning democracy, the former kings soon ran out of cash to maintain their vast properties and extravagant lifestyles. The rich heritage of India's Rajput rulers was threatened by bankruptcy and ruin.

But in the late 1950s, the Maharaja Mahan Singh of Jaipur, the Rajasthani state capital, and the Maharana Bhagwat Singh of Udaipur, took an audacious and life-saving decision, and opened their royal properties as luxury hotels.

lifestyle + travel journeyed across Rajasthan and selected 10 of the region's top boutique properties. Nine are royal palaces or colonial households turned heritage hotels which offer an experience decidedly unique, incredibly reasonably priced, sometimes eccentric and always fascinating. The 10th is a reconstructed Mughal palace-cum-Rajasthani fort marketed towards the top-income bracket.

Tourists could now go beyond the museum experience and partake in the lifestyle of the richest kings in the world. Impoverished monarchs could hang on to their palaces and vices and undertake much needed renovations of these architectural treasures. Forty years later, Rajasthan boasts more than 150 heritage properties.

While some of these properties are managed and owned by large hotel chains, many former palaces are still run by the royal families who have owned the buildings for generations. As Maharaj Arjun Singh, brother of the late Maharana of Udaipur puts it, "We Rajputs aren't much good at anything these days, but we are good at running hotels."

This exclusive selection of heritage properties, from old stalwarts to flashy newcomers, budget palaces to luxury forts, urban *havelis* (grand townhouses), to opulent former British residences reflect the splendour of a bygone age, infused with the business savvy, history and eccentricities of India's former rulers. A map of the properties can be found in the tear-out section on page 148.

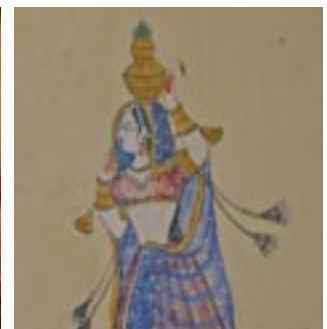
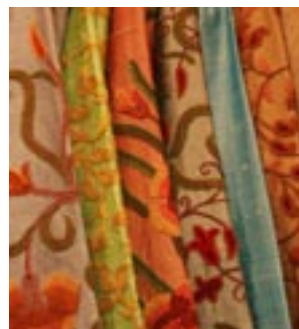
*Continued on page 120.*

**"We want to offer guests the kind of life a Maharaja would lead in the 21st century."**

*Previous page: Mounting a small hillock in the centre of a medieval village of narrow alleys, Roopangarh Fort attracts both human and camel visitors.*

*This page, left: The Tijoli Boutique at the Oberoi Raj Vilas offers pricey jewellery and fine Rajasthani textiles.*

*This page, right: Decorative details at Ishwari Nivas.*





## The Raj Palace, Jaipur, Rajasthan

**T**he Raj Palace was the first *haveli* to be constructed in Jaipur. Built in 1727, it has been a heritage hotel since 1996. Although located in the heart of the Pink City, within the hotel's courtyards, a quiet, seriously subdued ambience prevails - accentuated by silently bubbling fountains and a placid pool surrounded by a large lawn.

An authentic feeling of old-world Rajput decadence is absent in the standard rooms here, but the more expensive rooms exude real period flair, with carefully selected antique furniture, wall hangings and weapons, complimented by luxuriously designed bathrooms. The highlight must be the Durbar Suite, an absurdly ostentatious self-contained complex of two master bedrooms and a throne hall that bristles with enough priceless gems to rival the crown jewels. It might take a king or a strong aspirant to enjoy this amount of splendour.

Jevendra Kumari, the present heiress to the 'palace,' has been involved in the restoration of the Raj for nine years. Her husband explains the vision behind the property: "We want

to offer guests the kind of life a Maharaja would lead in the 21st century. Our furniture is either antique or bought from outlets that supply only palaces. We go back to the original building techniques, using lime plaster and vegetable colours and employ a small army of artisans to figure out what the palace used to look like and how we can make it look like that again."

The food here, although not cheap, is excellent and the service is superb - especially for those who like courtly formality and nightly puppet shows.

The Raj Palace  
Chomu Haveli, Amer Road  
Jaipur, Rajasthan  
Tel: + 91 141 263 4077  
gkvhotel@sancharnet.in,  
rajpalac@sancharnet.in

Rooms: USD 225 - 275  
Suites: USD 375 - 475  
Durbar Suite: USD 2,100



## The Diggi Palace, Jaipur, Rajasthan

Located just outside the city gates of Jaipur, **The Diggi Palace** is a delightful budget hotel which offers backpackers and mid-range travellers stylish accommodation in a sprawling royal compound. The property, a maze of courtyards and well-restored two-storey buildings set in a lush garden area, is still run by the Thakur family (Rajasthan nobility) who built this *haveli* in 1860. Inside the garden compound, the hustle and bustle of Jaipur fades into a quiet murmur.

Owner Shakti Singh is a mine of information on Jaipur and beyond: “We pride ourselves on being an unprofessional hotel. We don’t aim to provide accommodation for package groups, but we do offer authentic charm and a break from the hectic city.”

*Previous page:* The Raj Palace in Jaipur was the first haveli to be constructed in Jaipur.

*Above:* Just outside the city gates of Jaipur, the Diggi Palace is a delightful budget hotel set in a sprawling royal compound.

Ostentatious drawing rooms contribute to the decadent, roaring-twenties flavour. There’s a gleaming white 1927 Buick convertible with a horn shaped like a snake parked in the foyer. – *(Bhanwan Niwas, page 126)*

The larger rooms here are beautifully restored and contain period furniture. The owners keep polo horses on the property and biogas is used as cooking fuel, generated with cow dung. A rooftop restaurant offers a wide selection of Indian, Chinese and continental cuisine, and the vegetables are grown in the hotel’s own organic garden. The ice cream is especially recommended.

The Diggi Palace  
Shivaji Marg, SMS Hospital  
Road, Jaipur, Rajasthan  
Tel: + 91 141 237 3091  
diggihtl@datainfosys.net,  
www.hoteldiggiipalace.com

Air-cooled: USD 10 -15  
A/C: USD 16 - 21/  
USD 19 - 23 (twin)  
A/C Suite: USD 33/35

3 • Roopangarh Fort,  
Roopangarh, Rajasthan



*Previous page: Roopangarh Fort invokes the romance of Rajasthan like few other properties.*

*Right: The Ishwari Nivas Heritage Resort in Bundi was built around 100 years ago to accommodate the local Prime Minister.*

Lime plaster covers the exterior of the main hotel fort building and numerous pools around the property are inlaid with exquisite blue pottery tiles in vibrant shades of turquoise, lapis and ultramarine. - (*Oberoï Rajvilas, page 127*)



## Ishwari Niwas, Bundi, Rajasthan

**I** 20 km south of the state capital Jaipur, **Roopangarh Fort** rises out of a great dusty plain overlooking the district of Kishangarh, India's marble capital. Invoking the romance of Rajasthan like few other properties, Roopangarh is remote, barely restored, and soaked in a long history of warfare and political intrigue. Thick ramparts that look like they have repelled centuries of marauders envelop a bright ochre 17th century palace. The walls are re-enforced by several circular watchtowers, topped with rusty cannons facing the plains. Peacocks and several obstinate camels populate the outer courtyard. The main building, crowned by delicate turrets, houses a high-ceilinged ballroom, now serving as the restaurant. The Fort's terrace, beyond the ballroom, affords stunning views of the medieval village of narrow alleys and small ancient-looking blue-washed houses below. It also doubles as a tennis court.

The 19 stately rooms here are huge - probably the largest in the state - and sparsely furnished with period pieces. Some guests have complained that it's too far to walk from the bed to the bathroom. The Queen's Suite, the most ostentatious room, has a narrow balcony that circumnavigates the room on three sides. It offers complete privacy with its own courtyard and rooftop terrace.

Service is prompt here, and manager Jasvir Singh is a charismatic, knowledgeable host. He tells a good story on rock star Sting's recent stay at the palace: "He was such a simple man. He had holes in his shirt. No one in the village had ever heard of him."

**I**shwari Nivas Heritage Resort was built around 100 years ago to accommodate the local *devan*, or Prime Minister (and the entrance and driveway here are aptly prime-ministerial). It was subsequently used as a British residence before passing into the possession of the Maharaja's brother just prior to independence. Bundi is one of the barely discovered gems of Rajasthan - an imposing fort and palace rise on a steep slope above the picturesque city.

This simple hotel has some 22 rooms, arranged around a central courtyard, and retains much of the musty ambience of Raj-era officialdom. Guests with a penchant for kitsch will enjoy the two fountains, which have recently been constructed in the courtyard - lit with fairy lights at night. The four suites here contain an odd assortment of 19th and early 20th century furniture and artwork. Even the bathroom walls are covered in pastoral themes.

For lovers of the Raj, the family's private quarters are a royal flashback in time. The lounge is covered wall to wall in rare, 350-year-old miniatures interspersed with a collection of early 20th century images of members of both the Maharaja's family and former British rulers.

Roopangarh Fort  
Roopangarh, District Ajmer,  
Rajasthan  
Tel: + 91 1497 20217  
tis@vsnl.com

Non A/C: USD 35  
A/C: USD 53  
Queen's Suite: USD 70

Ishwari Niwas Heritage Resort  
1 Civil Lines, Bundi, Rajasthan  
Tel: + 91 747 244 214  
in\_heritage@indiatimes.com,  
www.angelfire.com/amiga/  
inheritage

Standard room: USD 23/28  
Suites: USD 35



## Sukhdam Kothi, Kota, Rajasthan 5

*Above: The Sukhdam Kothi, located in a four-acre, well-maintained garden, is a delight for fans of colonial nostalgia. Following page, top: The Bassi Fort's Bhupendra Singh and family. Bottom: The Rangniwas Palace Hotel lies right in the heart of the old city of Udaipur.*

**B**uilt by the British around 1870, the Sukhdam Kothi, located in a four-acre, well-maintained garden, is a delight for fans of colonial nostalgia. Initially the British army surgeon's residence in Kota, a tiny kingdom in the south east of Rajasthan, the present owner's grandfather received the property from the local Maharaja for his valiant services in the British army in 1928.

A beautiful gothic building with barely a hint of princely ostentation, shady courtyards, arcades and balconies of dressed sandstone surround 16 bright, high-ceilinged, well-maintained rooms.

Current owners Jaiwardhan and Harshvardhan Singh go out of their way to make their guests feel at home. The two brothers are tireless promoters of Kota's sites and a drive in their 1970's Pal - a tiny white car graced with tailfins - is an experience not easily forgotten. Boat trips on the crocodile-infested Chambal River can also be booked through the hotel. The elusive reptiles can only be observed in winter, but there are vultures and giant bats year round. The hotel's restaurant serves excellent Indian food and the lounge, as neat as the rest of the property, exudes Raj-era charm.

Rangniwas Palace Hotel lies right in the heart of the old city of Udaipur, famous for its lake palaces and rich Mewar heritage. Built in the 1880s as a royal concert venue, Rangniwas was transformed into a small palace for visiting nobles some 20 years later. The late Maharana Bhagwat Singh of Udaipur gifted the property to his brother Arjun Singh in 1955 who turned it into a heritage hotel in 1975. A second wing was added in 1990.

Rooms here are located in a beautifully maintained garden-cum-courtyard, with a small swimming pool, shaded by several enormous old palm trees. Four well-kept suites are furnished with period pieces - note the grand iron bathtubs. Most rooms have private balconies facing the garden. The smaller rooms in the new wing are box-like and may make guests feel more like serfs than guests.

A high-ceilinged lounge filled with family curios, an extensive library, stuffed tiger heads and vintage photographs recalls the life of the Maharajas, and as the oldest family run hotel in Udaipur, Rangniwas retains a distinct royal ambience - thanks also to the very distinguished-looking Arjun Singh who continues to run the property with flair.

Sukhdam Kothi  
Civil Lines, Kota, Rajasthan  
Tel: + 91 744 232 0081  
sukhdam@datainfosys.net,  
www.sukhdamkothi.com

USD 38/44 (twin)

Rangniwas Palace Hotel  
Udaipur, Rajasthan  
Tel: + 91 294 252 3890  
rangniwas75@hotmail.com,  
rangniwaspalace.com

Rooms USD 15 - 23  
Deluxe Rooms USD 23 - 28  
Suites USD 42 - 70

## The Bassi Fort Palace, Bassi, Rajasthan

**T**he Bassi Fort Palace, which looks far more like a palace than a fort, is a newcomer to the heritage hotel scene in Rajasthan, opening in 2001. In the heart of a picturesque village, above the shores of a small lake, the building was constructed in the 16th century and remains in the possession of the founding family of Bassi. A real fort, of which only the outer walls remain, graces a small hill behind the hotel.

From the village, visitors enter through a large gate into an inner courtyard, part of which is now a well-kept garden. Twenty clean and spacious suites are reached via a long gallery, and some of their furniture is part of the family heritage. All rooms are decorated with miniature style wall paintings, traditional dolls and other traditional curios, a delight for all those who enjoy gaudy finery.

Enthusiastic owner and manager Bhupendra Singh is keen to preserve an informal atmosphere, hence the family welcomes all guests personally, and uncles, aunts, parents and wife are happy to tell visitors of the area's history and the proud chivalry and stupendous self-sacrifice of the Rajputs nobles in their struggle for independence and wealth - a unique experience.

The hotel organises daytrips to surrounding sights: a lake and the family's hunting lodge, a wildlife sanctuary and several tribal opium-growing villages. Visit in January for the harvest.



The Bassi Fort Palace  
Chittorgarh, Rajasthan  
Tel: + 91 1472 225 321  
resv@bassifortpalace.com,  
www.bassifortpalace.com

USD 30 - 53



7

Rangniwas Palace  
Hotel, Udaipur,  
Rajasthan

## Deogarh Mahal, Deogarh, Rajasthan

Chivalry, romance, desert rogues and veiled beauties – the spirit of Rajasthan comes alive nowhere more so than at **Deogarh Mahal**, an imposing 17th century fort palace, transformed in 1994 into a luxury hotel. It is hard to fault this property. The rooms are spotless and guests may choose between authentic Rajput ambience – suites with period furniture and ancient cracked walls covered in priceless miniature paintings – and recently renovated ultra-modern suites for travellers who wish to stay in a heritage hotel but require 21st century aesthetics. The 21 suites have expansive verandas, a couple even feature Jacuzzis. The four Royal Suites are breathtaking examples of Rajput opulence with a mini bar stocked with French wines.

A swimming pool, a gym, a pool table, an Ayurvedic massage centre and, from the imposing ramparts, some great desert views complete the picture. Dinner is served in the central courtyard, accompanied by traditional dance performances, but an international restaurant has just opened within the property, offering Indian, Continental and Thai dishes. All this in the middle of nowhere.

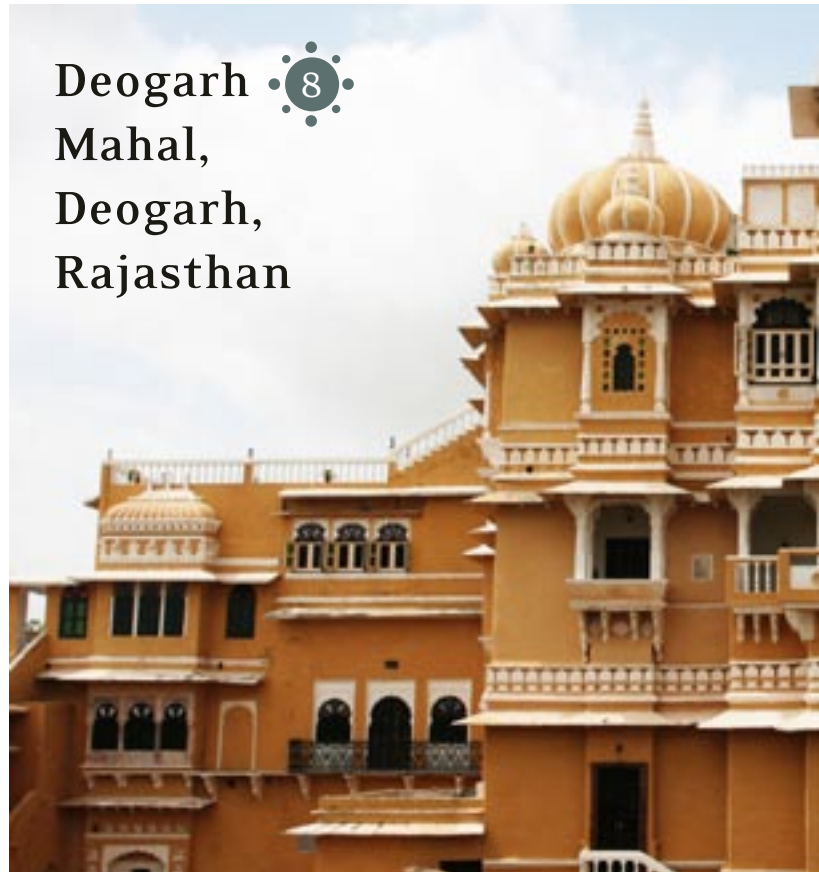
Veerbhadra Singh, a man with fading movie star looks and an unearthly light in his eyes runs the hotel to indulge in the royal lifestyle he feels he has a birthright to – and his sense of exuberance and decadence is happily shared with the guests. Formality, so often associated with hotels of this class, is entirely absent.

Deogarh Mahal  
Deogarh Madaria, District  
Rajsamand, Rajasthan  
Tel: + 91 2904 252 777  
info@deogarhmahal.com,  
www.deogarh.com

Rooms: USD 100/122 (twin)  
Suites: USD 159  
Deluxe Suites: USD 274

Right in the crowded heart of the ancient city of Bikaner, on the edge of the Thar Desert, **Bhanwar Niwas Hotel** is an enormous sandstone *haveli* – a townhouse built in the 1920s by the Rampuria family, owners of a textile empire. As such, the architectural style and interior decorations are an exuberant, possibly overwhelming fairytale mix of Rajput and European influences.

Each spotless and sparkling room – all arranged around a central courtyard, richly adorned with intricate carvings – has been meticulously restored to its former glory. Beautifully papered walls, early 20th century furniture, paintings of Rajput rulers, china mosaic floors and gold figurines give an air of overpowering urbanite luxury. Ostentatious drawing



## Bhanwar Niwas Hotel, Bikaner, Rajasthan



rooms contribute to the decadent, roaring-twenties flavour. There's a gleaming white 1927 Buick convertible with a horn shaped like a snake parked in the foyer. It does about a mile to the gallon. For period ambience, this property is unbeatable.

Bhanwar Niwas  
Rampuria Street, Bikaner,  
Rajasthan  
Tel: + 91 151 252 9323  
bhanwarniwas@rediffmail.com,  
www.bhanwarniwas.com

USD 56 - 77 (In the low season, May to July, all rooms are offered at a 30% discount.)

*This page, top: The spirit of Rajasthan comes alive nowhere more so than at the Deogarh Mahal. Bottom: The architectural style and interior decorations of Bhanwar Niwas are an exuberant fairy-tale mix of Rajput and European influences. Following page: Oberoi Rajvilas offers five-star services in Rajasthan's dusty state capital, Jaipur.*



## Oberoi Rajvilas, Jaipur, Rajasthan



This is both the perfect resort to take a luxurious break from the challenges of luxury travel on the Indian subcontinent (only those who travel luxuriously will be able to afford a room here), and to indulge in an expensive imitation of the lifestyle of the legendary Maharajas of Rajasthan, supported by state-of-the-art contemporary amenities.

A 32-acre oasis, inspired by 17th-century Mughal landscape features designed by Bangkok-based Bensley Design Studio, **Rajvilas**, which opened its doors in 1997, rises out of the fringes of Jaipur's urban squalor, and offers deluxe rooms, villas with private pools, luxury tents, a royal tent and a royal villa - once occupied by former US President Bill Clinton during his visit to India in 2000.

The standard rooms are unremarkable in comparison to those in other five-star properties in the region, and at more than USD 500, rather overpriced. But the luxury tents convey much more flair and position the guest firmly in India. The white marble bathrooms are designed to allow for maximum natural light and have the ambience of large, well-kept tanks for large well-kept reptiles.

The rooms are built in small clusters around a 250-year old Hindu temple, utilising traditional Rajasthani building techniques - lime plaster covers the exterior of the main hotel fort building and numerous pools around the property are inlaid with exquisite blue pottery tiles in vibrant shades of turquoise, lapis and ultramarine; all executed in a monumental effort of painstaking craftsmanship and patience, guests are assured.

The main building, constructed in the style and shape of a Rajasthani fort, contains the Surya Mahal Restaurant, which serves a wide selection of expensive Indian, European and South East Asian dishes. The Indian food is excellent. In winter, guests may take their meals in an open courtyard with a marble amphitheatre set in a shallow pool, which serves as a stage for dance and music performances.

The Rajwada Bar, with its faux-colonial flair faintly reminiscent of a 19th century Raj gentleman's club, contains an extensive if obscure library of coffee table books and leather-bound tomes on 19th century colonial politics. A large log fire warms guests on chilly desert nights.

Stone elephants guard the pool, and a large gym, two tennis courts and a five-hole putting green compete for guests' active times. Daily yoga classes are complimentary. Should the journey from room or pool to restaurant appear too strenuous, there's always an electric golf buggy around to whisk you to your next destination.

Service is perfect but informal. The hotel is structured to allow for maximum privacy and minimum interaction amongst guests. And, for those who want to avoid looking at thousands of struggling urban poor on the way from the airport to their room, there's even a helipad.

Oberoi Rajvilas  
Jaipur  
Tel: + 91 141 268 0101  
reservations@oberoi-rajvilas.  
com, www.oberoihotels.com

Deluxe Room: USD 530  
Luxury Tent: USD 630  
Villa: USD 1,800  
Royal Villa: USD 3,000