

# THE SUN CITY

*The city of Jodhpur, with its opulent palace and Brahman-blue houses, is the jewel in the crown of India's Thar Desert.*

Words & Photography by **Liani Solari**



**THE BLUE CITY**  
View of Jodhpur's old city from the ramparts of Mehrangarh Fort.

There is no graceful way to alight from a ship of the desert, but at least Lalu the Rajasthani camel ensures my soft landing. Coaxed by his driver, he almost seamlessly folds his gnarled legs like a concertina and drops relatively smoothly – for a camel, that is – to the powdery sand.

My thoughts briefly flash back to a childhood holiday in Central Australia, where Fluffy, a nonstarter in the Alice Springs Camel Cup, let the spit fly, snorting unrelentingly at anyone who dared to get too close to either business end, despite wearing a nose peg intended to calm the beast.

Here, however, on a two-hour sunset camel ride in India's Thar Desert, I needn't worry about Lalu. I'm in the capable hands of his nine-year-old driver. Besides, surely the warm hospitality of the locals, which our group has enjoyed for the past five days in Jodhpur and Jaipur in the north-western state of Rajasthan, extends to camel etiquette?

## PALATIAL GLAMOUR

Our introduction to the desert's frontier city, Jodhpur, is the glamorous Umaid Bhawan Palace. Though our media group might not be of the same ilk as past guests Charles and Camilla, Angelina and Brad, Madonna and Guy or Elizabeth Hurley and Arun Nayar, we are received at the palace with fanfare that would befit monarchy and celebrity royalty. We are greeted with a glass of champagne, the traditional tikka (mark on the forehead) and marigold garland before being shown to our luxurious suites. It's immediately evident that this Taj hotel gives every guest the royal treatment and second-guesses their every need.

Named after Maharaja Umaid Singh (1903–47), the grandfather of the present Maharaja of Jodhpur, Gaj Singh II, who lives in the palace with his family, this magnificent sandstone edifice dominates the landscape with a monumental sense of history and permanence, so much so that it is difficult to believe its construction was completed as recently as 1943. Its grand scale and Art Deco opulence belie the beneficent impulse that



**WHAT ROAD RULES?**  
The tuk-tuks in Jodhpur's old city are poised for action.

led to its creation, for Maharaja Umaid Singh commissioned the project to ensure employment for his starving population when the monsoon failed for the third successive year.

Those days of famine are long gone, and today's guests of the palace can enjoy Risala restaurant's à la carte menu or alfresco dining on the rear verandah, known as Pillars. Breakfast at Pillars is something of an event. Peacocks regally strut around the picture-perfect manicured grounds to the gently rousing music of the tabla and santoor. An opportunistic squirrel darts for cover when an immaculately pressed, white-gloved waiter appears at our table to spoil us for choice, offering a tray of eight shot glasses of fresh fruit juice so that we may sample a selection before ordering.

I'm soaking up the ambience when restaurant manager Kumar Saurabh Sushil offers to give me a tour of the palace's organic vegetable garden. It's a rare treat to be given a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the workings of this luxury hotel where the semblance of effortlessness is one of the hallmarks of hospitality. Kumar points out the companion planting and

continental parsley, while the staff in the garden briefly stops what they're doing with a warm "Namaste!"

Another rare treat is a palm reading at the palace with renowned local palmist S.L. Sharma, who also gives private readings at nearby Mehrangarh Fort (bookings can be made through the reception staff at the Palace).

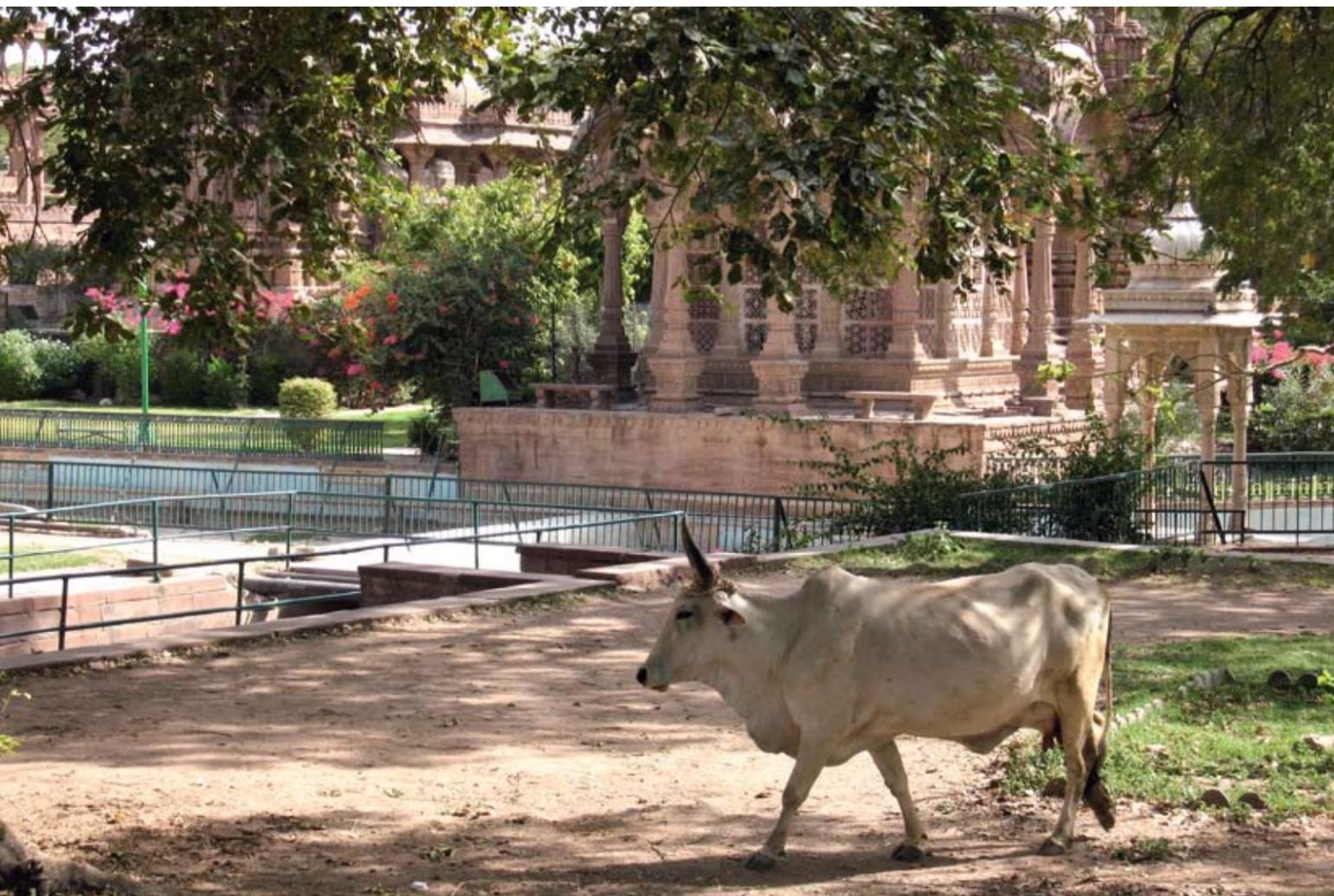
On our final evening at the Palace our charming and generous host is general manager Sanjay Umashankar, who arranges for our table to be set on the rear lawn. We're hoping that celebrity titbits might be on the menu. He doesn't disappoint, whetting our appetite with the Palace's inventory of stars who have imbibed the glamour of this mesmerising place. Angelina, Brad and their children rank among their most down-to-earth guests, he tells us, adding that Brad landed on this very lawn in a private helicopter – a down-to-earth experience of sorts.

## BRAHMAN BLUE

Leaving the serenity of the Palace, the tuk-tuk ride to Sardar Market near the clock tower in Jodhpur's old city is a



*The descendants of the 3000 labourers and artisans who constructed the palace can be found here selling all manner of wares, from aromatic spices and vegetables to silverware, handicrafts and textiles.*



reality check: constant beeping of horns, frenetic activity and slow-blinking sacred cows that are wont to park themselves in the middle of the fray, the tuk-tuks, buses, motorcycles, cars, bicycles and pedestrians missing them by a holy whisker. The descendants of the 3000 labourers and artisans who constructed the palace can be found here selling all manner of wares, from aromatic spices and vegetables to silverware, handicrafts and textiles, notably pashmina and silk.

The otherwise merciless desert sun only adds to the allure of these textiles, saturating them with colour and brilliance and making it easy to see why fashion designers Trelise Cooper, Collette Dinnigan, Megan Park, Akira Isogawa and Alex Perry have long drawn creative inspiration from India's vibrant, opulent fabrics, beaded textiles and renowned artistry.

Known as the Sun City, Jodhpur (formerly Marwar) is aptly described by Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces as "a place defiantly splashed with brilliant hues of colour and music to mock the monochromes of the desert". Most houses in the old city are painted in various shades of blue, a colour that was once reserved for the homes of the Brahmins, as they were considered the descendants of the blue-skinned god Vishnu. More recently, however, members of other castes have transformed Jodhpur into the Blue City, adopting this colour for their homes because of its cooling effect in summer.

Summoning our inner mountain goats, we scale the imposing centuries-old Citadel of the Sun, or Mehrangarh Fort, to be rewarded with panoramic, almost otherworldly views of the Blue City. An audio tour guides us through

the intricately decorated palaces and period rooms of the fort – "the work of angels and giants", said British poet Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) – which have been converted into a museum that houses an impressive collection of palanquins, elephant howdahs and Marwar court paintings.

History and divine inspiration can also be found in the gardens of the ancient capital, Mandore, 8km north of Jodhpur. We meander under shade trees, past the resident monkeys and the cenotaphs of rulers, to the Hall of Heroes and Divinities – a series of cult figures and heroes carved into a natural rock wall – only to discover that we have timed our visit perfectly to witness a local family's modest yet vibrant ceremony to honour the Hindu gods, complete with the ritualised circling of a fire. It might not be the Hollywood extravaganza hosted by Umaid Bhawan Palace in 2004 when Peter O'Toole and Omar Sharif filmed *One Night with the King* (2006) there, but it is authentic Rajasthan, steeped in the Thar Desert's traditions and colours. 

*Liani Solari writer travelled courtesy of India Tourism, Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces and Singapore Airlines. Visit [incredibleindia.org](http://incredibleindia.org)*

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**SUN CITY**

*Clockwise from top left:* The Hall of Heroes and Divinities in Mandore Garden; inside Umaid Bhawan Palace; a Thar Desert "workhorse"; diet staples at Sardar Market; hall of Heroes and Divinities; the extraordinary Umaid Bhawan Palace; musicians playing the tabla and santoor at Pillars; a sacred cow wanders through Mandore Gardens.

