



# Cinda Hunter

Rajasthan, India, 2012



Rajasthan is one of my favourite places in the world and this year I was able to share it with my niece who joined me on my annual buying trip and gave me a wonderful excuse to visit some new destinations. It was so wonderful to introduce her to so many of the things that I have come to love about India over the years: the "Goats in Coats" that frequent Jaipur in winter, the camels that pull carts all have fabulous patterns shorn into their coats, the elephants that are painted and adorned and even the ubiquitous Indian "Holy" cows with festive horn adornments, the bristly "warthoguesque" pigs that roam the street.



Then there are the colours of India: the saris worn by women, even those working in fields or carrying rocks on their heads to build the roads; the spices and vegetables laid out for sale, the fields of flowering mustard seed.



But it is also the slightly archaic form of much of the English language spoken in India that lends a different kind of colour and provides an endless source of amusement. A newspaper front page is better than any comedy and a discussion of cricket with a rickshaw driver is an endless source of amusement.

While I steadily worked, I sent my niece off visiting some of the must see sights, Amber Palace in Jaipur, the Taj Mahal in Agra and Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur. She also went to the wedding of one of the dealers I work with. It was set at the Umaid Bhawan Palace which is partly a hotel and partly the residence of the Maharajah of Jodhpur. Indian weddings are always spectacular events, extraordinary in terms of noise, over the top pageantry, glorious clothing and jaw dropping jewellery. No expense was spared for this one. As you can imagine she was rather overwhelmed. Unfortunately, because it was at night, the photos were not good!

I always stay at one of the many Havelis with lovely gardens that fill Jodhpur. Many of the streets of Jodhpur are lined with bougainvillea and it has retained a slightly rural small town feel, which is one of its great charms.

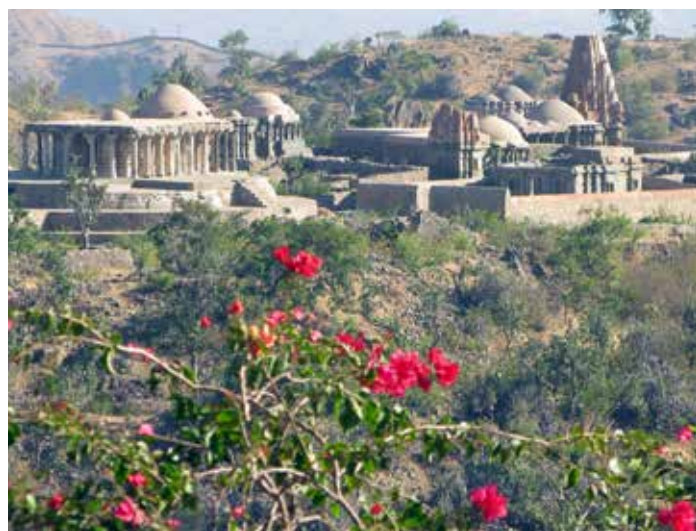
Our driver headed out of Jodhpur through the Thar Desert that extends North and West all the way to Pakistan. 3 hours later we came to the exquisitely beautiful and serene Jain temple of Ranakpur. Ranakpur is the site of the second largest Jain temple in India. "Jainism is an ancient Indian religion that teaches that the way to liberation and bliss is to live a life of harmlessness and renunciation." (Thanks Wikipedia). This includes a form of vegetarianism that excludes root vegetables - notably potatoes, garlic and onions (to preserve the lives of these plants) and it is likely that Hindus became vegetarian and avoid taking life, notably of cows, due to strong Jain influences. Jains run animal shelters and bird hospitals all over India. We experienced this non-violence to all living beings in Jodhpur where one of my suppliers, with a shop full of pashmina shawls and silk and wool bed throws, calmly ignored a small mouse that was running around and presumably nesting in his precious stock. My niece was terrified to point it out as she thought they might kill it and they were horrified she would think this of them! They told us they feed the mice and if there are too many they catch them and escort them out of town! Ranakpur was built between 1437 and 1485 and the extraordinary white marble buildings and carvings have a



similar aesthetic and feeling to some of the temples in the Angkor complex in Cambodia (also of Hindu origin but dating back to the 12th C). it is an extraordinary place filled with light, beauty and an incredible sense of peace (despite priests who want to pray for you in exchange for a donation for the temple – I would prefer to pay an entrance fee and do without the hassling....) We drove on from Ranakpur deeper into the amazing Aravalli hills. In the flatness of the desert, it is quite

extraordinary to come to this well-forested hill country. There is an occasional picturesque village with a few water buffalo but mostly it is quite wild countryside - there are wonderful trees, bush and a narrow single lane road switching back over ravines and up the steep hillsides. It was filled with troops of Langur monkeys sunning themselves along the roadside and frustratingly familiar but unidentifiable birds (I didn't bring a local bird book!)

We finally arrived at our hotel in Kumbhalgarh at about 6pm. We were welcomed with an unusual syrupy pink goo dabbed on the middle of the forehead which dripped all over my white linen pants and stained both my pants and our foreheads for the next few days! We had been told that they light up the fort in Kumbhalgarh at 7.30 pm, so we headed there quickly with our driver and were told the light show at the fort was starting and we should hurry. After quite a strenuous walk/stumble along dark cobbled paths, we arrived at a temple which had chairs set up like an amphitheatre and was filled to capacity. Apparently this is one of the only forms of local entertainment. The locals and their children had come to watch a light and sound show reflecting against the walls of the fort which depicted a historical battle involving charging horses and many trumpeting elephants. It was cleverly done and the sounds and shaking earth quite alarming. Fortunately not only was this only light and sound rather than the real thing, but since it was being described in Hindi we were quite grateful to have arrived for the last 10 minutes! As the show ended, they lit up the fabulous fort on the hill behind it, which was a totally spectacular sight.



The next morning we went to explore the fort which offered extraordinary views over the surrounding countryside and must have been a singular stronghold. Kumbhalgarh is a wonderful old fort and palace surrounded by 35km of wall (wide enough for a span of EIGHT horses) which contained around 360 temples (Hindu, Jain, Buddhist). The wall followed the contours of this mountainous area, both up and down the hills and valleys. The surrounding area is a nature reserve (formerly a Maharajah's hunting area). As we drove on to Udaipur, we discovered a complete maze of (fairly low) loose stone walls extending over hundreds of kilometres in all directions. We could not find out much about them, but suspected that, since little of this area of land was being cultivated or grazed (possibly it was part of the nature reserve) it was not a way to clear the land of rocks but instead could have formed an extensive defense system to slow down invaders.

The drive onward to Udaipur took us through wonderful small villages filled with water buffalo, glorious fields of bright yellow mustard flowers and green wheat. They use the ancient system of water pumps which are operated by a pair of oxen turning a water wheel with buckets attached. This pulls water up from the canals they have created into



smaller canals above which then irrigate the fields. Incredibly picturesque.

We arrived at Udaipur (known as the 'Venice of India') where I had booked their best room overlooking the lake at the Kankarwa Haveli, an old heritage home. We were given a palatial roof penthouse! Since it was west facing, our room would have been hot in summer, but in the lovely cool weather we were having (freezing most nights) it was glorious. The view made your throat catch.



Truly this was one of the most memorable stays and was worth the expense! The food at our hotel was appalling as we unfortunately discovered on our first night. Fortunately we had one more night, and we visited the next door hotel, the Jagat Niwas Palace, which looked like

it would have lovely rooms as well (but was a lot more expensive). We had a sublime sunset view (literally over a wall from our hotel room) combined with incredible food and a wonderful brazier full of coals next to each table to warm us. Totally spectacular! Udaipur is something of a tourist trap and other than the traditional Moghul miniature paintings which are a speciality here, did not have much to offer in terms of buying. We visited the City Palace, but felt it did not compare well to Jodhpur's Mehrangarh. It is quite fascinating in that it was built around the top of a hill and the very top level courtyard has a tree growing in the centre, which is in fact on the hill!

From Udaipur we flew back to Delhi for me to complete more business and for my niece to do some fabulous shoe shopping. Khan market in Delhi is a shopper's paradise and she found lots to buy. For the last 7 years, I have always stayed at a little hotel in Paharganj (the very tacky backpacker mecca in Delhi). I had tried many other places in the preceding years without much success and had found this the most satisfactory and reasonably priced. Mainly it has proved very convenient as I tend to come back from work late and I can walk around, find a restaurant to eat and then return to my hotel safely and without any transport. The hotel had always been clean and very functional. This time we received a huge shock as it was under new management who couldn't have cared less about us: the room I had reserved had not being kept for us and we were given a room which was dirty, stank of cigarette smoke and just fitted 2 beds and when

there was no water in the shower, we were offered a bucket! I managed to move to a lovely bed and breakfast run by a retired colonel from the Indian army and his wife for my last night.



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