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RAJASTHAN SPECIAL

Your ultimate insider guide

JAIPUR • UDAIPUR
JODHPUR • JAISALMER
BIKANER & BEYOND

JODHPUR

THE BLUE CITY

SEE & DO ♦ EAT & DRINK ♦ SHOP ♦ STAY ♦ GET AWAY

PLUS INSIDER SECRETS

HIS HIGHNESS MAHARAJA GAJ SINGH II OF MARWAR-JODHPUR ♦
CHIRAG NAINANI ♦ RAGHAVENDRA RATHORE



THE BLUE CITY

A first trip to Jodhpur is a bit like a visit to the Taj Mahal. Most visitors have been armchair travellers before and it is with trepidation that they approach the city, wondering if it will meet their expectations. Like the Taj Mahal, the Blue City does not disappoint; it is love at first sight.

Jodhpur rises like an indigo-dyed mirage from the ochre countryside and surrounding desert landscape. At its crest, the majestic Mehrangarh Fort stands sentinel over the old gates and clock tower. The walled city and its busy by-lanes are lined with old houses and havelis that keep a deferential eye on the Umaid Bhawan Palace nearby. Hidden stepwells and old bazaars add to its medieval charm; to travel to Jodhpur is to journey back in time.

The Rathore clan that once reigned over Marwar, has a long and tumultuous history of victory and defeat. In 1459, Rao Jodha moved the capital from Mandore to Jodhpur, which he named after himself. Jodhpur grew wealthy from trade—even the Mughals coveted it—but the impregnable fort was impossible to conquer. Eventually, they forged an alliance with the Rathores when Akbar married Udai Singh's sister. The last Maharaja before Independence was Umaid Singh, after whom the palace is named. When the royal Privy Purse was abolished in 1971, his descendant Maharaja Gaj Singh paved the way for heritage tourism by opening up his ancestral fort and palace to tourists. Given the wealth of heritage properties in this state marked by feudal kingdoms, he set a precedent, thereby giving a boost to tourism in Rajasthan. The family continues to occupy a part of this beautiful palace known for its memorabilia and several acres of gardens that house a museum, library and zoo. Tread softly, for this is also one of the world's grandest luxury hotels today, and a destination in itself.

Mehrangarh Fort is sprawled atop a hillock. Within the fort complex lie the finest examples of Rajput design and architecture. It is encircled by the Old City whose narrow, crooked lanes lead you through rows of houses bathed in blue, deeper than the cerulean sky above, and in contrast with the heaps of scarlet chillies left to dry in their courtyards. The colour blue was once the mark of distinction of the city's Shaivite Brahmins, but has since been adopted by others, including a local mosque. Close to the fort complex lies the serene, white Jaswant Thada, a cluster of marble cenotaphs commemorating Maharaja Jaswant Singh II, and the

Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park. The latter is an oasis in the arid countryside, with beautiful walking trails that showcase the flora of the region.

The city bazaars and gates like Jalori Gate and Sojati Gate are alive with the buzz of daily life. True to Rajasthani tradition, shops sell everything from antiques, camel bone and leather items, to hand block-printed textiles, bright leheriya and bandhani fabrics, and, of course, the well-known jodhpurs—the classic breeches that derive their name from the city. The famous Sadar Bazaar is teeming with local temptations like silver jewellery, lacquerware, puppets and carpets. One can even buy excellent spices like the pungent, bright red Mathania chillies that lend their flavour to the local cuisine.

Jodhpur has made significant contributions to India's culinary landscape, especially in terms of snacks and savouries. Specialities like makhaniya lassi, mawa kachori, pyaaz ki kachori and mirchi vada, have their origins here. The city also has a sweet tooth, with a weakness for mawa sweets and doodh phirni, which, according to tradition, are to be had before a meal. Among the many experiences that the city has to offer, the combination of its culinary delights with the view from its rooftop restaurants and bars, is one of the finest.

The Blue City is a sensorial extravaganza, with its colours, smells, sounds and tastes. Festivals like Jodhpur Rajasthan International Folk Festival or RIFF (of which Mick Jagger is an international patron), Marwar Festival, Nagaur Fair and Desert Kite Festival, enhance the experience, but with its vibrant culture and the hospitality of its cheerful, brightly attired residents, Jodhpur exudes a festive feel all year round.

The city's central location—it is flanked by Jaipur and Jaisalmer—means it's a blend of both eastern and western Rajasthan. At a short distance are attractions like Sardar Samand Lake, Rohetgarh and the beautiful temples of Osian, ideal for a getaway. In the surrounding villages, you can observe the daily life of the nature-worshipping Bishnoi tribe and watch potters and weavers at work. Jodhpur lies on the fringe of the Thar Desert, allowing for camel safaris, desert camps and luxury stays in sandstone forts. And yet, for those who wish to experience the city fully, it may be enough to wander aimlessly through its maze of gullies, soaking in the sights and sounds under a vast sky so blue that it seems to reflect the hues of the city below.

JANHAVIACHAREKAR



WHAT TO SEE & DO: JODHPUR

Visit Mehrangarh Fort Rising 410ft above the city like something out of a fairy tale,

Mehrangarh Fort—the majority of which was built in the 17th century by Maharaja Jaswant Singh—is at once colossal and delicate, imposing and organic. This is a monument whose dominance of the skyline feels well-earned. There's an excellent audio-guide to **Mehrangarh Museum**, which houses one of the best-kept collections of regal paraphernalia in the land (the palanquins are a particular highlight). While you're there make it a point to see the **Sheesh Mahal**, **Phool Mahal** and **Moti Mahal**—each is

distinct and breathtaking. (www.mehrangarh.org)

Go zip lining Mehrangarh Fort offers the opportunity for adventure seekers to try their hand at six different zip lines of varying lengths (the longest is 300m). **Flying Fox's** lines allow you to glide over gardens and battlements, giving you a unique vantage point from which to see the city. (www.flyingfox.asia)

Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park

This unique park was created to restore the ecosystem next to Mehrangarh Fort. Opened in 2006, the park has over 80 species of plants that can grow

in the rocky terrain here. The flourishing greenery offers a great opportunity to learn about succulents (plants that store water in their tissue) and other plants. (www.raojodhapark.com)

Take a tour of Umaid Bhawan Palace Museum

Touching down in Jodhpur affords a bird's-eye view of **Umaid Bhawan Palace**, the Beaux-Arts marvel constructed by Maharaja Umaid Singh in the 1930s and '40s, when the royal family finally decamped from Mehrangarh to live here. Now partly a hotel and partly a museum, it's a palace so surreally futuristic and so massive, you get the impression

that it could probably be seen from space.

Explore the area around the stepwell Toorji ka Jhalra

the stepwell on the edge of Mehrangarh, has been restored, and the water cleaned to revitalise the area. Now, cafés, shops and more are being set up around the ancient structure, giving tourists a chance to spend the day exploring this historic part of town. It's not all development, though: local daredevils continue to dive into the water, putting on a show for anyone who's watching, just as they've been doing for generations. (*Makrana Mohalla*)

Manganiyars perform in front of the Mehrangarh Fort



WHERE TO EAT & DRINK: JODHPUR

Baradari This partly al-fresco restaurant at RAAS Jodhpur, serving up a range of cuisines including Thai, Mediterranean and regional fare, sits in the shadow of the towering Mehrangarh Fort. But foodies heading here know the hero's not the view but what's on the plate, which is prepared using organic produce from the chef's own kitchen garden. (www.raasjodhpur.com)

Chokelao Mahal What's better than a meal served with a view of Mehrangarh Fort? Eating a meal sitting at Mehrangarh Fort with a bird's-eye view of the city to boot! This restaurant is situated within the fort's walls and is accessed by a special jeep that ferries you from the gate. And when in a precinct so royal, why not eat like a maharaja? Order the Silver Thali meal that comes in, well, as the name suggests, silverware. (0291 254 8790)

Nai Sarak In a city steeped in history, where so little has changed over time, Nai Sarak or New Street, transports you to the Jodhpur of yore. Shops like **Shri Arora Namkeen and Sweets** (098290 27042) and **Pokar Sweets** (098290 22200) are local landmarks where visitors and residents alike stop for their fill of piping hot samosas, pyaaz ki kachoris, saffron jalebis, kalakand, rabdi, and gulab jamun. Similarly, hole-in-the-wall establishments like **Surya Namkeen** (098296 30121), **Choudhary Namkeen** (094149 12798), **Chaturbhuj Rameshchandra** (094141 31765) and **Mohanji Mithaiwala** (093147 10760) are all on the city's A-list when it comes to

INSIDER Rahul Soni

WRITER/EDITOR/TRANSLATOR

"For me, as for perhaps most of its denizens, the best things about Jodhpur are the fort and the food—especially the mithai and the namkeen which are—and I do not make this claim lightly—possibly the best in the country.

First the namkeen. **Surya Namkeen** at Jalori Gate is most famous for its shahi samosa, which is quite superb, but its pyaaz ki kachori is the real star. For mirchi vadas, **Choudhary Namkeen** is quite rightly 'world famous in Jodhpur' and cartons of the stuff, I'm told, are regularly spirited away to foreign lands by Jodhpuris who can't live without it.

When it comes to sweets, **Chaturbhuj Rameshchandra** (Pungal Pada Road, Sarafa Bazar), is the place to go for its special gulab jamuns and kitti ki chakki, while **Mohanji Mithaiwala** at Ada Bazaar makes the best laddoos of all kinds, but especially its signature kind made with boondi, which is the stuff of legend.

For a while, there used to be lamp-lit, unplugged performances by Langa and Manganiyar folk musicians at the Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park on full moon nights, in the shadow of the fort and surrounded by nature. I'm told there are plans to revive these 'Chandni Concerts'. Until then, though, an **early morning tour of the Desert Rock Park** will have to suffice."

snacking on the go. Some, like Pokar, will even seal and pack goodies so you can carry what you love back home with you.

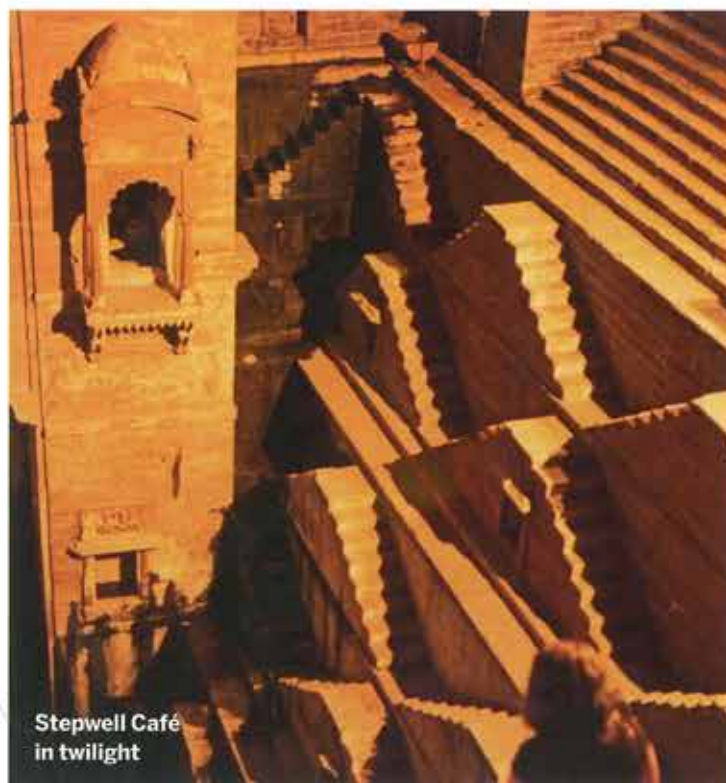
On The Rocks Near Ajit Bhawan, On The Rocks serves Indian fare. But the main reason to visit is the cosy bar, which has a decent wine list and good cocktails. The whisky sour comes specially recommended. (www.facebook.com/pages/On-The-Rocks-Jodhpur)

Risala Enjoy recipes that are handed down from royal bawarchis in a palace that still houses the descendants of Jodhpur's former rulers. From the Umaid Bhawan Palace, look out on to the fair lawns, or Mehrangarh in the distance, as turbaned durbans address you as 'hukum' and serve you decadent continental and Indian fare. (www.tajhotels.com)

★EDITOR'S PICK★

Stepwell Café Part of the JDH Project which aims to restore the old, walled city of Jodhpur, the new Stepwell Café is the perfect place from which you can contemplate the city's beauty and history while sipping on a cappuccino. The walls are covered with old photographs of Rajasthan's royalty, and the Indo-European menu features comfort food. A happy combination of old and new, this is exactly the kind of spot Jodhpur has been lacking. (www.raasjodhpur.com)

Tashli A local favourite, Tashli serves excellent Rajasthani food. The laal maas, predictably, is one of the most ordered dishes. (www.karnihotels.com)



Stepwell Café in twilight



INSIDER

HH Maharaja Gaj Singh II of Marwar-Jodhpur

CHAIRMAN, MARUDHAR HOTELS

"As twilight descends on the historic Mehrangarh Fort, the rugged impregnable walls and the delicate palaces come alive with a **walk with the museum curator**. Let him take you on a tour of the collection and share his expertise and insights. Listen to the tales of sacrifice, of extraordinary events of adventure. Indulge in the easy joy of discussing a painting or discussing the incredible architecture. You won't regret the experience."

WHERE TO SHOP: JODHPUR

BAZAARS

Mochi Bazaar Called Mochi or shoemaker's bazaar, we can almost guarantee that you will leave here with not just footwear, but a whole new wardrobe. Start with the colourful, bejewelled mojris that are essential to any Rajasthani outfit. For every day use, choose the less-ornamented, simpler kind. Don't forget to stop for traditional lacquer bangles. For men, there are traditional Rajasthani achkans, sherwanis and other garments, so you are sure to find something here that catches your eye. Remember, don't be afraid of colour. (*Korna House Road, Bhistiyan ka Bas*)

Sadar Bazaar In the shadow of the clock tower, shop for local handicrafts that range from leheriyas to juttis and all kinds of spices. Haggling with the vendors is expected; consider it part of the experience. (*Clock Tower Road*)

SHOPS

★**EDITOR'S PICK**★
Anandaram Bhojaria Industries The dhurries (rugs) and wooden furniture here are the stuff of legends. Don't miss the intricately embroidered tents, either. (099289 81105)

Bibaji Churi Wale Abdul Sattar's family has been selling glass bangles for more than 100 years now. Don't be fooled by his humble-looking store; he has been decorating the wrists of generations of Rajasthani royalty. He stocks everything from decorative, wedding bangles to minimalist lacquer ones for daily wear. (098282 92232)

INSIDER Raghavendra Rathore

LIFESTYLE DESIGNER



"**Sadar Bazaar** near the Clock Tower gives immense shopping pleasure to locals as well as visitors. The colourful but hectic bazaar consists of many narrow lanes lined with tiny shops. Look for tie-and-dye textiles, embroidered leather shoes, lacquerware, antiques, carpets and puppets. Gastronomic delights are aplenty—for the rustic traveller who understands and cherishes a spicy mix of food. **On The Rocks** is a good start. Surprisingly though, the food is light on the tummy. As you walk back to the new city, you cannot miss **Nai Sarak**. The small strip has myriad food stalls selling an incredible variety of fast food."

Gem and Jewel Palace A local institution, Gem and Jewel Palace is popular with local families looking for traditional Rajasthani jewellery, especially bridal wear. That doesn't preclude you from stepping in and seeing its other offerings, ranging from statement necklaces to delicate earrings and more. (0291 251 6666)

Jodhpur Jutti Samir, the owner of the store, stocks everything from simple to blinged-out numbers, this is your one-stop shop for classic Rajasthani footwear. (077929 12050)

Lalji Handicrafts Interested in some quality, traditional Rajasthani furniture and artifacts? Look no further. A lot of the interesting items on display here are of reclaimed vintage stock and you will want to buy everything in the store. If, somehow, you manage to resist the urge to shop, you'll still be in for an interesting afternoon of exploring. (0291 251 0887)

★EDITOR'S PICK★

Maharani Textiles and Handicrafts While this store has some smoother-than-silk stoles and feather-light pashminas, part of the reason people keep coming here is to be entertained by owner Mukesh Jain. His stories about Hollywood celebrity customers are as colourful as his brocade cushions. (093514 97944)

★EDITOR'S PICK★

Malani Impex Babulalji is the biggest exporter of handicrafts and fabrics in Jodhpur. Make a stop here for everything from scarves to rugs and everything in between—you'll find something for everyone. (088548 11111)

★EDITOR'S PICK★

Mohammed Tayeb Khan If you are in the market for beautiful, colourful Rajasthani fabric or saris, chances are you have already heard this name—several times. Tayeb, and his father Hassan before him, have popularised the leheriya

fabric. This is a result of a particular dyeing technique that results in characteristic wave-like patterns. The family has made a name for itself, making colourful turbans for Rajasthans' royals. (098295 48786)

Pukhraj Durry Udhog

This weaver's co-operative is synonymous with colourful, brightly patterned dhurries. The village is located 20km outside Jodhpur, where residents use materials such as cotton, silk, goat and camel hair, jute and wool to weave these gorgeous dhurries on a loom. See how beautiful dhurries are made and experience rural Rajasthan first-hand. (094147 20724)

★EDITOR'S PICK★

The Step Well Square All-new stores from our favourite Made in India brands are popping up quickly in this restored area of the old city, including **Via Jodhpur**, **Rajesh Pratap Singh**, **Forest Essentials**, **PortsideCafé**, **Play Clan**, and more. **Nicobar**, the hip lifestyle brand will be joining the gang, as will other indie stores, in this recently restored part of town. (www.raasjodhpur.com)

VJ Home If you'd like to decorate your home with some of the beautifully understated furniture you have been admiring at your hotel, you must stop by this place. Chances are the exquisite wardrobe in your hotel room or that stone lampshade in the lobby wherever you are staying came from here. Using wood, iron and stone, the material palette reflects the earthy surroundings. (0291 272 1789)



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAMY

Sadar Bazaar in the shadow of the clock tower

GET AWAY

not compromising on comfort. The result—**Mihir Garh** (www.mihirgarh.com, doubles from ₹35,236), about 60km from Jodhpur, which houses nine suites, 1,700sq ft each, with plunge pools and fireplaces. Its interiors blend the royal with the rustic to delightful effect, such as luxurious bathtubs surrounded by mud walls and a beautiful pool that overlooks the rugged landscape. Go horseback-riding or birdwatching, explore the nearby village and attend in-house culinary workshops, lakeside picnics and bonfire-side barbecues, which recreate some of the magic of bygone hunts.

Osian Sand Dunes Resort and Camp

This 15-tent property lies within fortress-like brick walls. Once inside the ramparts, though, the camp opens up and features a restaurant and comfortable accommodation. Ask the property to set up a cultural evening in the rolling sands nearby, or take a jeep safari to look at the animals and birds that call the area around **Osian Sand Dunes Resort and Camp** (www.osianresortcamps.com; doubles from ₹6,000) home. The nearby village of Osian, that gives the area its name, is also worth visiting and exploring.

Ranvas Nagaur An 18th-century fort that's been converted into a hotel, **Ranvas Nagaur** (www.ranvasnagaur.com; doubles from ₹22,000) is housed in the palace that used to be home to Maharaja Bakhi Singh's many queens. With a pool and two restaurants for guests, you can choose to dine on Indian food or international favourites. A spa, hammam and library are in the works, while gardens and water features await, as you explore the palace. The 33 spacious rooms, though, ensure that you

INSIDER Nikhilendra Singh

MANAGING DIRECTOR, RAAS JODHPUR



"I love **zip lining at Mehrangarh Fort**. It offers a jaw-dropping, breath-taking view of the walled city and the Rao Jodha Desert Park at impossible angles and high speed. Another favourite is slipping through the secret passage from RAAS and diving into the cool waters of the freshly rejuvenated 1740s **Toorji Ka**

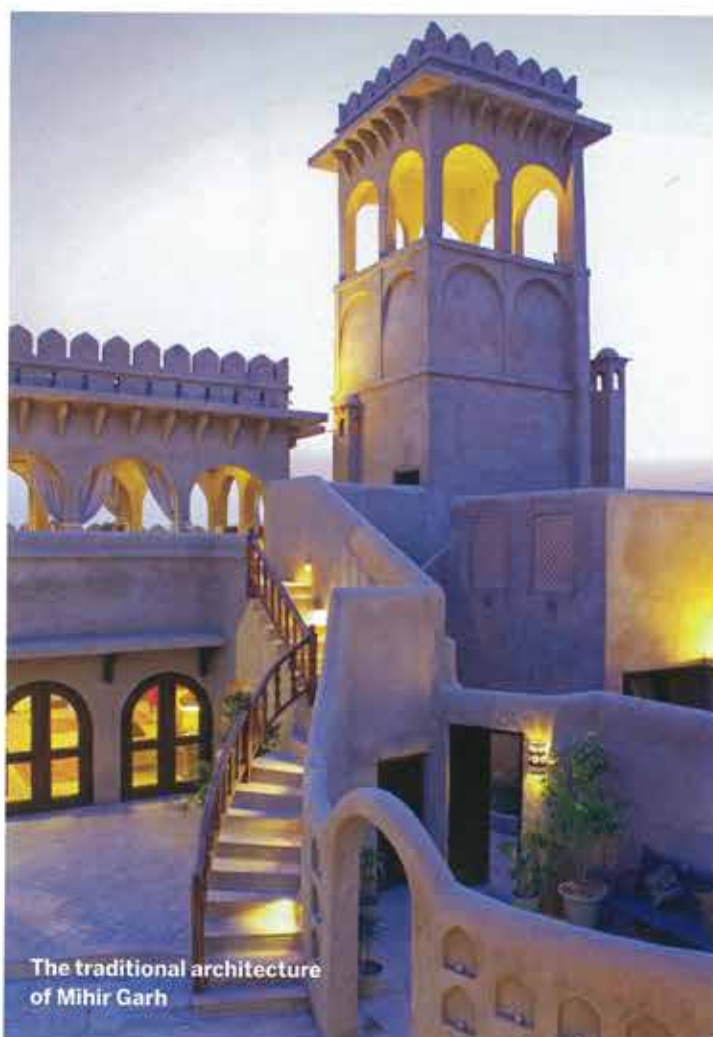
Jhalra Stepwell on a hot summer's day.

Step Well Café is a new favourite of mine. It offers rarest of rare views, eclectic furniture from Indian furniture brand, Krea; wonderful music; and an exciting mix of old and contemporary Jodhpur imagery and ambience. My best new shopping experience is in **Stepwell Square**, a red sand-stone's throw from RAAS. It's the best of India with a distinct Jodhpur twist—from Hot Pink to Royal Blue, from Rajesh Pratap Singh, CMYK and PortsideCafe to Play Clan and Forest Essentials and Good Earth and Nicobar to RaSA and Andraab. I recommend buying a bespoke pair of jodhpurs and a pre-tied safa (turban) of many hues at Royal Blue."

will want to spend most of your time living as the ranis once did. Each room has its own living room and private courtyard amidst the maze-like fort.

Rohet Garh In 1622, this stunning house was given to Thakur Dalpat Singh I as a reward for his courage in battle. The younger generations of the family, who still own it, have painstakingly restored it to make **Rohet Garh** (www.rohetgarh.com; doubles from ₹12,000) a luxury retreat without forsaking its heritage appeal. The 30 rooms including six suites, feature frescoes and bay windows, and peacocks dance on the property's manicured gardens. Guests can relish dinners by the pool while watching stunning performances by folk musicians, and can take part in workshops to master traditional local cuisine. A highlight is the equestrian programme, which allows guests to ride Marwari horses into the wilderness, for a chance to sight the area's famous blackbucks.

Sardar Samand Lake Palace A former hunting lodge of the royal family and built by Maharaja Umaid Singh, this Art Deco building is a visual treat. **Sardar Samand Lake Palace** (www.sardarsamand.jodhanaheritage.com; doubles from ₹7,500) consists of 18 sprawling rooms and two restaurants, but chances are you'll want to spend more time outdoors. On the property, there are tennis and squash courts and a swimming pool, while those looking to explore the countryside can take the hotel up on its offer to organise a village safari, bird watching excursion or a day on the lake. Keep an eye out for the chinkaras and blackbucks that roam the region.



The traditional architecture of Mihir Garh

