

Jodhpur: A City That Vibrates with Color

Having spent more than two weeks exploring a string of Rajasthani cities by air, road and train, I am set to declare Jodhpur as my most vividly-remembered stay. With a mere 1.2 million inhabitants, the state's second largest city is not as logistically disorienting as many others in India, and the profile and proximity of its markets and attractions make it feel like a city for walking and bicycle rickshaws if accommodation is strategically chosen. Better known in western travel circles for the riding breeches that bear its name than as an historical and cultural crossroads in the geographical center of Rajasthan, it is a place to take a deep breath of clear desert air and prepare to be surprised by its treasures.



Driving into the heart of the old city, my small group of travelers disembarks at what proves to be my most historically-memorable accommodation of the trip. Still run by the original family, Haveli Inn Pal (haveliinnpal.com), is a heritage mansion with an interior courtyard that makes visitors just want to stop and stare at the visible history of this illustrious Rajput clan. Each of the 12 guest rooms and the inn's public areas are furnished with intriguing antiques while sacrificing none of the modern amenities one would expect in a home of noble lineage.

If this is not sufficient motivation to linger a few days in Jodhpur, the Inn's terrace roof garden restaurant will surely be the clincher, serving traditional Rajasthani meals against a billion-dollar backdrop, while visitors drink in 360-degree views. Just for starters, these include the Mehrangarh Fort described by author Rudyard Kipling as "the creation of angels, fairies and giants" and the 347-room Umaid Bhawan Palace, one of the world's largest private residences commissioned over 15 years by a wealthy maharajah in the early 20th century as a famine and drought relief project for his people. Today, 64 rooms and suites of the palace are under management of the exclusive Taj hotel

chain (tajhotels.com) while the remainder of this vast edifice still serves as the Jodhpur royal family's personal residence and a private museum open to the public.

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Shimmering in the clear Thar Desert air, the vibrant indigo blue of many buildings seems to dance across the architectural landscape of the old city in ever-changing shades from dawn to sunset. How could Jodhpur ever deny the nickname, the Blue City? And yet, the reason for its blue hue remains elusive. Some historians think that the Brahmin (priestly) upper class first painted their homes blue to set them apart from the rest of the population, leading eventually to a copycat color boom regardless of caste. Many residents claim that blue keeps the interiors cool and fends off mosquitoes ... surely the tropical world would long ago have rushed to adopt the color if that were so! But there it is, a visual remembrance of Jodhpur for any traveler to hold dear long after a trip is over.

Our cultural-immersion tour leader and owner of Incredible Indian Tours (incredibleindiantours.com), Debbie Kindness, has visited Jodhpur 18 times and her eyeglasses see the city as "anything but blue. The reason it is my favorite city in Rajasthan," she explains, "is its multitude of colours and textures as well as the extraordinary fortresses and palaces and some of the friendliest people anywhere in India."

The Mehrangarh Fort, Citadel of the Sun, is the crown jewel of Jodhpur, the finest intact example of a Hindu fortress. It is managed very creatively by the reigning Maharaja of Jodhpur's Mehrangarh Museum Trust (mehrangarh.org) established in 1974. Towering 400 feet/122 meters above the city, visitors will want to wander for several hours through this unique museum that houses the royal family's collection of palanquins, elephant howdahs, baby cradles, miniature paintings, weapons and much more that make up the heritage of Marwar-Jodhpur. An informative self-guided audio tour is available in 11 languages and historical demonstrations are staged daily.



It hardly comes as a surprise that never once in its 553-year history has this mighty fortress been taken in a siege, but it has been infiltrated in modern times by film production teams of a number of Bollywood and Hollywood movies, including the just-released Batman film.

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