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“SUJÁN is bringing Rajasthan’s epic environment to the fore”

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Sher Bagh leads conservation-first safaris in a Rajasthan tiger sanctuary owned by founder Jaisal Singh

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Suján Luxury, India

Twenty years after debuting India's first luxury tented safari, upscale innovator Suján is bringing Rajasthan's epic environment to the fore – a personal odyssey for founder and CEO Jaisal Singh

Story by **Bill Prince**

Back in 2000, Jaisal Singh was deliberating how best to avoid going up to university – he was then playing high-goal polo with the Jodhpur team and enjoying the sweet life that comes with finishing school – when an idea popped into his head. Starting at eight weeks old, he'd been a regular visitor to the family farm

his parents had bought on the perimeter of Ranthambore, a tenth-century Mughal fort-turned-tiger sanctuary occupying 150 square miles of eastern Rajasthan. His plan: to harness the region's general lack of tourism while making good on his family's first-hand feel for conservancy.

"We lived in New Delhi, but my father and uncle spent 50 per cent of their time

in Ranthambore, where they were very heavily involved in conservation," recalls Singh, now 40. "I'd seen tented camps in Africa and I thought it was something I could do, so I started writing a business plan and presented it to my parents on my mother's birthday that April."

His father, Tejbir, a distinguished documentary filmmaker, might have wished his son >>

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Sher Bagh constitutes 12 luxury canvas tents that spin an air of new luxury from colonial-era aesthetics; (below right) its sustainability credentials include a garden that supplies much of the items on the menu

>> would defer university by only a term, but things didn't turn out that way. Less than six months later Sher Bagh was fully operational and 20 years on Singh Jr sits at the helm of Suján, a four-strong Indian hospitality portfolio (there's also a joint venture with a conservancy in the Masai Mara) that speaks volumes for his intrepid, entrepreneurial spirit.

As well as offering expertly guided private game drives (catch a break and you could even spot one of its 70 or so tigers lounging atop a Mughal ruin), Sher Bagh delivers an industry first for India: an eco-resort that offers luxe residential touches with a colonial-era aesthetic. Its 12 white canvas tents are each specced with campaign furniture and dining is farm-to-fork and then some: Sher Bagh's own garden provides much of the produce and its chickens even lay low-cholesterol eggs.

Having helped Adrian Zecha set up the first Aman resort in India, in 2008 Singh developed a larger camp in the arid desert landscape of western Rajasthan at Jaisalmer, where The Serai offers camel safaris alongside tours of its historic sites. In 2013 it was joined by Jawai, a wilderness safari that's reputedly home to the highest density per square kilometre of leopards in the world. Here, Singh and his wife, Anjali, have doubled down on their commitment to sustainable tourism, imposing a £20 conservancy tax on all their guests that they in turn have vowed



Catch a break and you could spot one of its 70 or so tigers lounging atop a Mughal ruin

to match. "There was no point us building another tented camp unless it was going to have even more impact than Sher Bagh on its inhabitants," reasons Singh. "So we were the first in India to charge a conservation contribution – 100 per cent of which goes to the community and to conservancy. In the first few years we ended up putting in a lot more, because we bought and rented land to put it back into wildlife."

In addition to rewilding, community initiatives undertaken at Jawai include upgrading local schools with more classrooms and teacher training and the delivery of free healthcare to more than 8,000 villagers and counting. "India is not the easiest place to work, especially in the wildlife and conservation-tourism space," says Singh. "You can't have the scale of land that you

can for a conservancy in Africa because of landlords, who create havoc. And the government will never let private land of that magnitude go to that. But Jawai has proved you can benefit wildlife positively with a commercial enterprise."

Suján's most recent opening is Rajmahal Palace, a strikingly imaginative boutique property in Rajasthan's pink-stoned hub, Jaipur. Dazzlingly restored with interiors by Indian designer Adil Ahmad that mix Rajput style with art deco glamour, "Raj Mahal is a complete hoot," says Singh, "but it works." No wonder: originally built as a pleasure palace for Rajasthan's ruling family, it retains a suite for the personal use of the current maharaja, whose recent return from studies abroad is reigniting his native city's social whirl.

Abetting this "Rajasthan renaissance" is Singh's mother, Malvika, a former politician-turned-cultural attaché for the state, to whom her son has turned to curate a selection of "interesting, money-can't-buy stuff". Given the influx of young talent into Jaipur, expect off-hours private tours of its proliferating art scene as well as exclusive access to some of the country's greatest architectural treasures. "A lot of people are spending time with us right through their trip and the feedback we get is that the experiences at all four properties are all so different you don't feel like you're staying in a chain. So we want to do things you really can't do anywhere else."

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The Royal Suite,
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