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Why this Indian desert city is the antidote to stressful Rajasthan



The Golden City of Jaisalmer CREDIT: ISTOCK

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Listening to the steady slap of sandals behind me, I feel a twinge of nerves. We're on the trail of a fast-approaching sunset, best viewed, I'd been assured, at a rooftop cafe somewhere up ahead, and I'm leading the charge through Jaisalmer's deserted, dusty alleys. The hopes of the group weigh heavy on my shoulders.

As we round one last bend, the chiselled walls of the city's houses fall away to reveal a flat terrace bathed in the rich light of the dying sun, all of Jaisalmer rolling out from it in a carpet of turrets and temples. Behind me - the silence of success.

We - myself, my partner (Alex) and two friends (Jess and Jordan) - are at Cafe the Kaku, having come to India's 'Golden City' as part of a two week trip through Rajasthan's cities: Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, Jodhpur and Udaipur. While most stick to some combination of the above line-up, we'd carved out time for the trip into the desert.



Jaisalmer isn't on the standard Rajasthan itinerary CREDIT: ISTOCK

The ardor of the journey is in its length. Jaisalmer rises up out of the middle of the Thar desert to sit at the most westerly edge of Rajasthan, a scant 125 miles from the border with Pakistan.

Translated into time, it's an 18 hour, 45 minute train journey from Delhi. We choose to depart from the Pink City, a less demanding 12 hour trip that leaves at a quarter to midnight and pulls in just before 12pm the next day.

Our one sop to luxury is going by first class sleeper, which comes with air conditioning, locking doors and a lottery of two-bed cabins interspersed within the four bunks.

Alex and I luck out, getting assigned the former, while our travelling companions are led by a stoic conductor to one of the latter, the other occupant of which snores for the first half of the night, before rising at 4am for prayers. "It was a beautiful thing to see," Jess blearily tells us later, "but it was also 4am."

In the hour before we arrive, I loll in my sheet-covered berth, watching the shifting sienna scenery warp into a blur of golden shapes as the train picks up speed. The platform, when it slowly slides into view, is proof of how far we've come.

The nerve-jangling crowds of Jaipur station are supplanted by a loose handful of men wrapped in white robes and scarlet turbans, the sun-etched lines of their faces creasing as they chat to one another.

We step off the train into the heat of the desert, and the closest thing to quiet we've heard all trip. Even the touts are a calmer bunch, taking

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our 'no thanks' with easy grace and letting us move on without following (too closely).

We'd been warned copiously by those who'd been before to the largest state in India that we'd be likely to get city fatigue.

The echoes of those warnings hit in Delhi, where the cacophony of car horns did not let up, even throughout the night, and continued through the clouds of Agra's smog, and the markets of Jaipur, where, hemmed in on all sides by jostling crowds, we dodged motorbikes and shopkeepers trying to march us over to view their wares.

Traversing the land of the maharajas is no easy feat. Amid the opulence of the palaces is the everyday life of some of the most frenetic cities on earth. Every step runs a gauntlet of smell that ranges from the plumes of rose-tinged incense to the stench of animal waste.

A constant drone of city noise is punctuated with calls to prayer and processions preceding a steady stream of grooms on the way to meet their brides. To an outsider, it's a combination of heaven and hell as draining as it is compelling.

Set against it, 12th century Jaisalmer is an oasis of calm. In the Indian epic poem, the Mahabharata, the story of the city's birth can be found. A mystic tells King Rawal Jaisal of a desert hill that's location has been praised by Lord Krishna.

Build a fort there, he said, and it will be near invisible to your enemies. The sage was right. The structure Rawal Jaisal went on to create remains untouched by invading forces and by the frenzy of Rajasthan's other cities, its soothing lines appearing out of the desert floor as you approach.

The oldest inhabited citadel in the world - some 4,000 people live inside its walls - its warren-like interiors are the first streets we feel comfortable getting lost in, looping past the same old ladies lounging in doorways again and again as we get our bearings.

Even in parts lined with signs promising 'un-touristy tours' and stalls selling the country's ubiquitous 'I found myself in India' harem pants, the sense of a close-knit village community remains as shopkeepers laugh and joke with each other and children weave in and out.



The Jain temples cream-stone

We meet up with a local guide to go through Patwon-Ki-Haveli, one of the largest *haveli* (traditional townhouses) in Rajasthan. A series of five smaller buildings that took 55 years to build, to gaze out across the gold-dipped streets from its many *jharokhas* (balconies) is to step back in time.

From there it's an easy walk to the seven interconnecting Jain temples within the fort complex.

One of India's ancient religions, Jainism follows the 'three jewels' - right belief, right knowledge and right conduct - explains our guide as we sidestep the cows and goats wandering the streets.

Mirroring the maze like streets outside, every inch of these 15th and 16th century religious buildings is covered with intricate carvings of apsaras (celestial nymphs) and gods. Inside, Jain priests grind and burn sandalwood, sending the scent spilling out into the air.

Afterwards, our bellies lead us to a cluster of street food stalls, watching quick-fingered men roll out dough for *chole bhature* and toss the circles into hot oil to puff up, as our guide darts back and forth collecting steaming dishes to present to us.

Dal pakora, satisfyingly crunchy vegetarian bites that Jordan lovingly refers to as 'fried chicken' for the rest of the trip, follow as do cups of sticky sweet chai and *ghotua* from Dhanraj Ranmal Bhatia, a soft, marzipan-like dessert.

"It's specific to Jaisalmer, you can only get these here," our guide says, his eyes lighting up.

Outside the city, a drive through remote desert takes us to SUJÁN The Serai, a sprawling camp set on 100-acres of private scrubland. Camping in the desert is an essential part of the Jaisalmer experience, but roughing it has never been my style. The Serai, however, very much is.

As we walk the smooth stone steps up to the main tent, where a member of staff waits with cold towels and lemonade infused with basil grown on the estate farm, the last bit of tension from Rajasthan's cities melts away.

An unashamed tribute to luxury, the main tents feature a library and bar, and a raised platform comes with an infinity pool that turns from blue to shades of violet and rose as the sun sets. At dinner, the only sound is the crackle of the open fires surrounding our table and the songs of the khartal-wielding tribal band.

Even a camel ride the next day, a stalwart of any Jaisalmer trip, is given its own twist, taking place away from the famous Sam Sand Dunes on quieter, more private peaks.

At the end of a loping ride across the sands, we disembark to find chairs

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set up on a rug, pointing towards the sinking sun, and chilled glasses of champagne to toast it with.



SUJÁN The Serai is a unique way to experience the Thar desert CREDIT: SUJÁN THE SERAI

The train to Jodhpur, our next stop, leaves at lam. We meet our guide once again at the station.

Amid an onslaught of thanks, he shrugs, and waves us off with a simple, “come back to Jaisalmer sometime.” It’s a difficult offer to refuse.