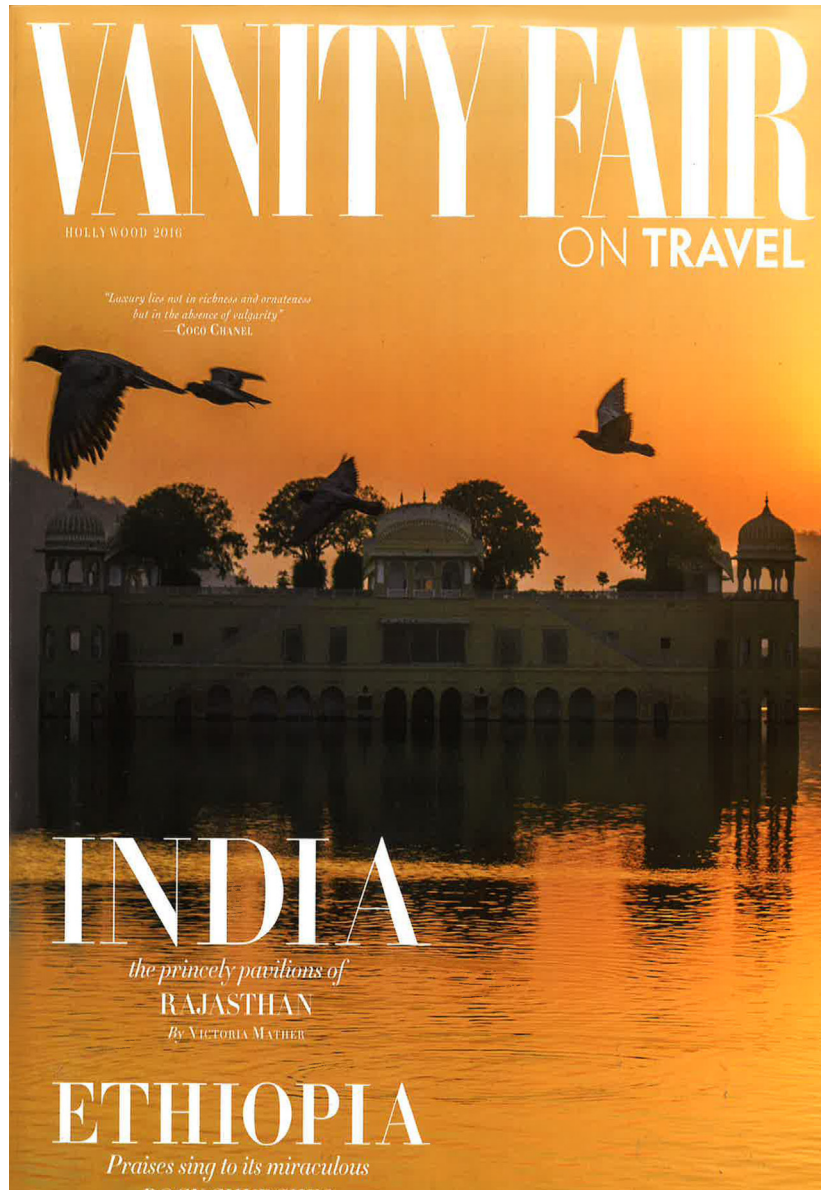


VANITY FAIR ON TRAVEL

2016

“The Singhs Serai tented camp is a wonder” Victoria Mather



On to Bujera Fort, outside Udaipur. It's ironic that Dev Shree, owned by an Indian, is a touch Fawty Towers, while Bujera, owned by an Englishman, could be the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel. Richard Hanlon, a designer with houses in Oxfordshire and the South of France, read Deborah Moggach's book *These Foolish Things*, which inspired the film. He'd been to Calcutta, where his father had a company, in 1974. "We stayed at The Oberoi Grand, had the worst food poisoning, and I just loved it. Next we travelled the Golden Triangle and Goa, where Mummy had a cockroach the size of a cat on her pillow. I just kept on coming back. Trish [McPherson, his friend, also a designer and his partner in Bujera] came 15 years ago." He bought a two-and-a-half-acre field with one wonky telegraph pole and has built a fort that is an English country house in India: vintage handprinted Jean Monro fabrics, Bennison ("Ma had it in her cottage in the Lake District"), family dinner services, a vegetable garden with umbrellas of bougainvillea based on David Hicks's design, a Lutyens cottage with stained glass. The bottoms of the beds are beaten silver; the pianos silver, too ("Ebay, darling"); and the suites have two excellent bathrooms ("the saviour of many a marriage, and marble is cheaper than plywood here"). The swimming pool glitters in the central courtyard. Richard has triumphed over dengue fever, whirlwinds that nearly whisked Irish away, monkeys ("The damage four monkeys can do to a garden in 20 minutes is unbelievable"), the pool fracturing, and bureaucratic hell. He has good friends. Lord Bamford's Indian JCB team helped out; the Maharana of Udaipur gave support and strong G&Ts. Bujera is now the complete fantasy. Gorgeous drawing rooms with log fires, books and more books, a spa to come. This is a place to rest awhile, with buzzy Udaipur alluring in the distance.

Jawai Leopard Camp, beyond Ranakpur, with its marvellous Jain temples, is another Jaisal and Anjali Singh masterpiece, in some of the most spectacular countryside I have seen anywhere in the world: rocks billions of years old, worn by heat and cold, wind and rain, now leopard caves and pathways. Leopards are sacred here, meandering through local temples; the land is rich and fertile with wheat, mustard, sesame and castor, yielding seven crops a year, the lake flooding with precious water. Punctuating the wild grandeur is the flash of the rich red turbans of the tribesmen with their flocks and their camels. You're in the middle of nowhere—except... did I just hear, far away, that woo-woo again?

Jawai's tents, based on the contemporary African model, are edgy black and white, with stunning leopard photographs taken by Anjali. There is an exquisite desk on the deck, and a leather chest is a cold box filled with anything you wish. The main lodge is open-plan; there are white linen sofas by a slate-black pool, an open kitchen and food both Indian and Italian (it's a new gastro-marriage, and one that's made in heaven). The Singhs stay back-of-house (immaculate, like the perfect stitching on the back of a good tapestry) with their four-year-old twins, who sat politely on my lap while I read *How the Leopard Got His Spots*. There are Monopoly and Scrabble, in chic black leather boxes, in the drawing room; it all says Stay. Chill. And Have India's Best Foot Massage (by Ramesh: an hour per foot).

The slow road through Rajasthan is joyous because of these new small properties, their awareness of crisp comfort (no more musty-dusty), their care and kindness for the individual traveller, their Rajput families, their connection to the land. This time, it's personal. □

VANITY FAIR | Travels to...

INDIA

WAY TO GO

India specialists Greaves Travel (greavesindia.com) know all these properties and their owners, and the personal knowledge is invaluable. The Greaves service is comprehensive: advice on which bedroom to have, the forwarding of dietary requirements and other mad contemporary quirks, meet and greet at the airport and a safe, kind driver with an air-conditioned, comfortable car laden with bottled water. There are also Greaves representatives along the way for path-smoothing.

NEED TO KNOW

- DO take light, loose cotton clothing, shawls for evening, flat shoes and an empty fold-up bag for the shopping. If your pashminas are past it, doyenne Jenny Housego has a shop at Rajmahal.
- DON'T panic about food. Everything at these properties is home-cooked and it's some of the best food in Rajasthan.
- DO trust Indian wines—the Sula sauvignon blanc and pink sparkling fizz are very good. There's no better country for soft drinks: nimbu pani (sweet or salt) is refreshing fresh lime.
- DON'T fuss about taking adaptor plugs. A new joy in these modern heritage properties is a bank of sockets that fit all. If not, they have adaptors.
- DO note that Lakshman Sagar's cottages are on rough, rocky terrain—not for the physically challenged.
- DON'T worry about laundry. It will be done and no Suján property charges for this service. An incentive to pack less and shop more.

STAYING ON

If you yearn to see tigers, then Ranthambhore is a three-hour-plus drive from Jaipur. The park, the ancient fort, the lakes, the little mahals are heartbreakingly beautiful. The tiger population has stabilized and there are constant surprises, like a python swallowing a sambar, with a peacock next day for pud. Stay at Sher Bagh, Jaisal Singh's first rustic camp, now Relais & Châteaux, retaining a deceptive simple-luxury charm but with swimming pools, a spa, seductive air-conditioned library and wildly smart safari vehicles. It is blissfully near Dastkar, the women's co-operative where a tailor can run you up a kaftan in time for dinner. Dastkar is now celebrating 25 years and, as a result, 300 women have bank accounts, skills have been learnt and 600 families supported. Bujera Fort and Jawai Leopard Camp are in hitting distance of Jodhpur (stay at Umaid Bhawan Palace or Raas Jodhpur) and also Jaaisalmer, where the Singhs' Serai tented camp is a wonder. Perfectly between Udaipur and Jodhpur is Rawla Narlai, a lodge built in the 17th century by the Maharaja of Jodhpur. Charming, decorative heaven, yummy food, blissful gardens.

PS

If you do feel frail, only eat bananas and yoghurt.