

VANITY FAIR ON TRAVEL

USA, 2016

INDIA *files*

Rajasthan, with its searing colours, dusty sunsets and gracious historic hotels, has long been India's star attraction. VICTORIA MATHER paid a visit—at a suitably stately pace—to the hotels and camps that keep it forever burning bright

INDIAN SUMMER

The Jawai river reservoir, southern Rajasthan, at sunset

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You take the high road, bouncing from Taj Mahal to tigers, Amber Fort to Pink City, Lake Palace to the Golden City of Jaisalmer. I'll take the low road through Rajasthan, staying awhile with Rajput families in their camps, castles, hunting lodges and *palazzetti*, with a dash of the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel.

Slow down, we move too fast. Try to make the experience last. Rajasthan is considered India for beginners, with the hectic sightseeing rush ticking off Jaipur, Udaipur, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer, all with demanding drives in between. Old India hands tut-tut and confide smugly about the joys of Darjeeling (agreed: stay at the enchanting Glenburn Tea Estate), the wonders of Calcutta (the beautiful heartbeat of the Raj, given a bad PR rap by Mother Teresa), and the ruins of Hampi, but secretly yearn for the colour of Rajasthan. That flash of a pink sari in the fields, the spangle of bangles as the women herd the flop-eared goats and water buffaloes home at cowdust hour, and the tumble of village streets with tailors flourishing peacock-embroidered tablecloths and metal workers hammering bright brass pots.

Let us start in Jaipur for the colour rush of Rajmahal. It was the private home of Maharaja Jai Singh and his wife Gayatri Devi, decreed one of the most beautiful women in the world by *Vogue*. They were star players in the cast of international society and everyone came to Rajmahal. Jacqueline Kennedy stayed three weeks. Now, Jai's daughter-in-law, Her Highness Rajmata Padmini Devi, his granddaughter Princess Diya Kumari and her daughter Princess Gauravi Kumari have turned the private palace into a boutique hotel designed by Adil Iqbal Ahmad, the creative director of Good Earth, and managed by Jaisal and Anjali Singh's transformative hotel group Suján, (see page 110). It is divine. Good Earth is dynamic—it's extraordinarily difficult to emerge from their lifestyle shops in Delhi and Mumbai without having bought a shipping container's worth of deliciousness (I bitterly regret not buying the dinner service with elephants charging round the plates)—and Adil has thrown this style into Rajmahal in spades: 37 different designs of wallpaper, chandeliers copied from the City Palace, a mirrored ceiling here, Art Deco there, ravishing fabrics. Imagine an Indian *Hôtel Costes*. And the service takes telepathic to a new level. Rabi, my butler, shimmered towards me with a steaming porcelain cup. "I noticed you had a sore throat; this is tea my mother used to make," he said. I'm a sucker for this. At breakfast he spotted that I only ate the pineapple on my fruit plate, so an only-pineapple plate was magicked without asking; every step of my way there was fresh lime soda. He packed my bags with acid-free tissue paper; I wanted him to pack himself while he was about it so I could take him home, as did Lady Tang, who inherited him from me. (We may have to have words.) Go shopping and an *aide de camp* accompanies you. Don't miss the

betel-nut and rose-leaf ice cream; and how can you resist a hotel where they say solemnly: "There is an Old Etonian gathering here at the weekend so, of course, the Maharaja's Apartment is available for His Highness of Jodhpur"? These are things as they should be.

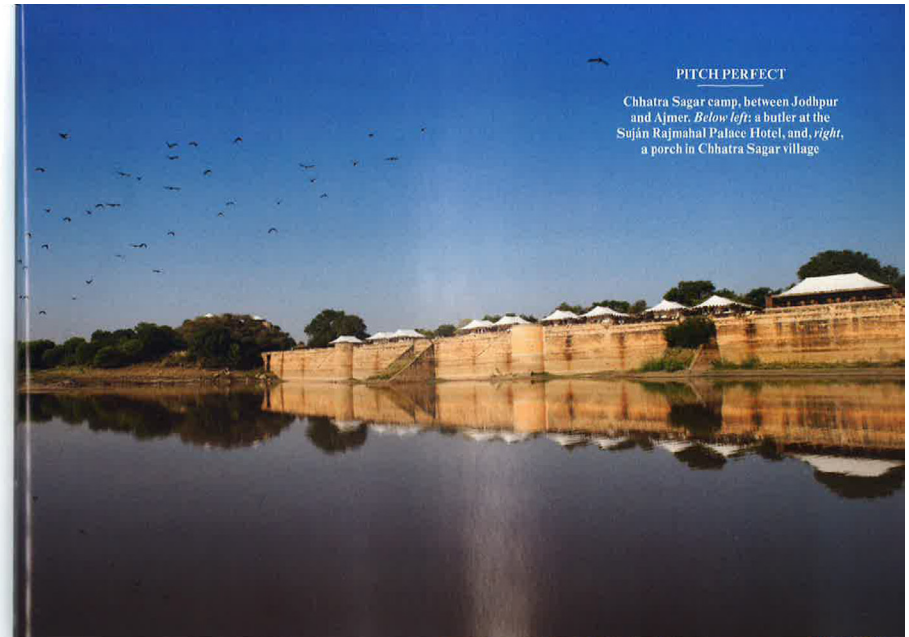
On to Chhatra Sagar, a dear favourite tented camp on a dam built in the 19th century by Thakur Chhatra Singh of Nimaj to harvest the monsoon water for agriculture and host "legendary shooting parties with high tea". All around is now green and pleasant land; wild boar and antelope are back; there are turtles in the lake; egrets, spoonbills and terns have found a watery heaven; and the Thakur's great-grandson, Harshwardhan Singh, nurtures this environment, his guests and the 35 families who are dependent on his endeavour. The two new hilltop suites will shortly have plunge pools and an airy drawing room has been built, overlooking the lake, with a wall of foliage and falling water that provides natural air conditioning. There are bird books, binoculars and a visitors' book brimming with Sainsburys, Palumbos and the Marquess of Zetland. I don't know Jane and Christopher Goring from West Sussex, but they've nailed Chhatra Sagar: "Here you experience the true meaning of luxury: it is time, peace, hot water bottles and tea cosies, the cauldron of hot coals [under the table] to warm your feet at dinner, the charm and discretion of knowledgeable people." I'd add that I love the maids putting rose petals down the loo to show it has been cleaned—beats those terrible sanitized strips that reassure Americans.

I arrived with hundreds of Demoiselle cranes having a stopover on their migration to the Thar Desert. My tent was hung with hand-blocked fabric, the shower and dressing room huge and I had to race the squirrels for the biscuits to go with my cup of tea. This is grounded stuff: tour the farm with Harsh or his cousins, Nandi and Raj, and you see an organic farming model. I went to the village and perceived the changing India. The only Muslim in the village has a house peaceably opposite the Hindu temple; the garbled silversmith, Omprakash, is still there, working with a primitive blowtorch powered by his own breath. But his granddaughter Vandana is studying economics and wants to join the police force. The artisan crafts will not survive: the potter moulding a beautiful cup on a wheel powered by his feet, the carpenter fashioning wood on a block sunk in a hole in the ground. "Now I have a blacksmith who will mend my chairs," says Harsh. "In 10 years I will have to send them to a factory." It takes two days for Omprakash to make a pair of silver anklets—a machine can make them in five hours. The village school is an inspiration to us all: the staff room noticeboard is inscribed with three mantras: "If wealth is lost, nothing is lost; if health is lost, something is lost; if character is lost, everything is lost". Spine-stiffening Kiplingese. And over the school gate it says that the five steps to success are discipline, foresight, determination, hard work and strong desire.

On to Lakshman Sagar, 40 minutes from Harsh and owned by



LIFE IS SUITE
An opulent bedroom at the Suján Rajmahal Palace Hotel

**PITCH PERFECT**

Chhatra Sagar camp, between Jodhpur and Ajmer. *Below left:* a butler at the Suján Rajmahal Palace Hotel, and, *right,* a porch in Chhatra Sagar village

