



SUFIS, RAJASTHAN & INCREDIBLE INDIA

When I heard about the Nagaur Sufi Festival in Rajasthan I decided to go - and also see the region's spectacular sights. The palaces of Jaipur, lakes of Udaipur, desert forts of Jodhpur, colorful clothing, adornments and customs make it the country's top tourist destination. With so many options in this largest state of India (along with bad roads and no connecting airports), it's key to have an expert plan your itinerary. Our Personal Guest, the ultimate India specialist and super agent on Travel + Leisure's A list, knows the very best places to stay and visit. Their expertise, taste level and VIP access guarantee a truly authentic luxury experience. With the guidance of OPG, I had a remarkable journey to many little known and fascinating locales.

Our Personal Guest:

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NEW DELHI:

I flew into Delhi, the capital, and stayed at opulent Leela Palace, a favorite of diplomats and royalty. This ultra luxurious hotel with lavish interiors features a gorgeous lobby, striking art objects, spacious rooms, rooftop pool, spa by Espa and superb cuisine at Megu, Le Cirque and acclaimed Jamavar Indian Restaurant where I relished the best lamb biryani ever. A tour of the majestic Red Fort, historic India Gate and the fashionable shopping spot Connaught Place was followed by a delicious lunch of tamarind ribs at trendy Indian Accent.

Leela Palace New Delhi
www.theleela.com

MAHARAJAS' EXPRESS:

An ideal way to journey through India with its rough terrain and difficult connections is by luxury train. Just minutes from the Leela Palace, I hopped aboard the Maharajas' Express and traveled with ease and style, sightseeing by day and sleeping at night while the train travels to the next destination. Features include cabins with beds, desk, private bathroom and shower, tv, dvd, ac, butler, wifi, dining car with Indian or Continental food and lounge cars with bars.

BY TRAVELIN' GAL MAXINE ALBERT

AGRA, JAIPUR, BIKANER:

I marveled at the wondrous Taj Mahal in Agra. Scouting for tigers on a game drive at Ranthambore National Park was followed by a visit to the Amber Fort in Jaipur, capital of Rajasthan. I strolled the streets of this pink city known for jewelry and textiles, passing bejeweled men and women alike clad in striking hues of yellow, purple, red, gold, blue and green. In the desert city of Bikaner, first a stop at grand Junagarh Fort, then a ride to sand dunes in a camel cart for a barbecue dinner with joyous music and dance by a local troupe.

Maharaja's Express
www.the-maharajas.com



JODHPUR:

This vibrant blue, old walled city enchants with its Rajasthani flavor. Meander to bustling Clock Tower Market filled with stalls selling all varieties of spices, sweets, bangles, sandals, rugs, shawls and fabrics as cows amble by. Women are clad in brightly colored saris and jewels, men with diamond earrings and turbans in Jodhpur pants and perfectly tailored jackets.

Opulent, art deco Umaid Bhawan Palace, essence of grandeur and glamour, is the residence of the Maharaja of Jodhpur, aka Bapji and the royal family. Hugely popular Bapji counts Mick Jagger and Sting among his friends. Many celebrities and glitterati guest at the Palace. Lavish interiors with gilt furniture, exotic murals, stunning art, Jiva spa, pool, lush gardens, exceptional Rajisthani cuisine like (lamb) laal maas and butler service deliver the ultimate luxury experience.

Umaid Bhawan Palace
www.tajhotels.com

Located within the walled city is chic luxury boutique hotel Raas. Guests enjoy a pool and stylish rooms with outdoor sitting areas with spectacular views of must see Mehrangarh Fort towering high above, gloriously illuminated at night.

Raas
www.raasjodhpur.com

Bal Samand Lake Palace exudes old warm charm. My lovely suite with veranda opened to flowered gardens and trees. Breakfast overlooking the lake was followed by a massage in a spa tent, then a ride in a horse drawn Victorian carriage glimpsing peacocks. An al fresco candle lit dinner of chicken tandoori and sitar accompaniment was pitch perfect.

Bal Samand
www.balsamandlakepalace.jodhanaheritage.com

SUFI FESTIVAL, NAGAU

The Nagaur Sufi Music Festival under the auspices of the Maharaja of Jodhpur features Sufi singers, musicians, artists and dancers from around the globe and attracts an international fashionable set. For three full days and nights I took a sacred journey experiencing the ecstatic music of the Sufi saints at the magical Ahhichatragarh Fort, gorgeously candle lit at night. Daily pleasantries with Bapji and the royal family were exchanged either during cocktail hour or after an entrancing performance by the Turkish Whirling Dervishes, Bhanwari Devi bhajan singers, Raza Khan Quawwalli group or Afghanistan's Seiar Hashemi on tablas – to name a few. With delicious Indian meals, lodging in the fort hotel or comfy tents, beautiful venues for the performances, pool, wifi and sublime music, it was spectacular.

Sufi Festival
www.nagaursufifestival.org

INDIA SAFARI CLUB

Just 2 hours drive from Jodhpur in the ancient village of Osian, I took a camel safari, visited with tribal people and saw an opium ceremony (legal here). This is all part of Reggie Singh's Camel Camp replete with entertainers and a candle lit dinner. After the meal, outgoing owner/host Reggie, cousin to The Maharaja of Jodhpur, joins guests in the plush lounge adorned with photos of royal relatives to kick back and listen to jazz. Reggie also owns exclusive Mounbatten Lodge, Ranakpur adjacent to The Kumbalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary. This luxury lodge with huge stylish suites, plunge pools, outdoor Jacuzzi and excellent Indian cuisine offers trips to the famous Ranakpur Jain Temples, leopard safaris and elephant treks with champagne sunsets.

India Safari Club
www.indiasafariclub.com

MIHIR GARH

Forty-five minutes from Jodhpur, this gorgeous 9 suite fort hotel in the Thar desert is utterly romantic. Rajasthani antiques, carved wood, and embroidered and mirrored fabrics from Jodhpur create a stunningly chic ambiance. This luxurious oasis features private plunge pools, Jacuzzis, terraces, courtyards with splashing fountains, outstanding local cuisine, royal picnics and riding safaris with Marwari horses.

Mihir Garh
www.mihirgarh.com

UDAIPUR

Aptly called Venice of the East and city of lakes, picturesque Udaipur is set amid the verdant Aravalli hills and three lakes. A water taxi took me to the luxurious Leela Palace on the banks of Lake Pichola. With breathtaking lake and palace views and sumptuous interiors, this opulent hotel delivers true regal indulgence. Tours of the grand City Palace, magnificent Crystal Gallery, vintage car museum, then a tuk tuk for shopping at Jagdish Temple and fabulous Ganesh Emporium were provided by the hotel. A dip in the pool, spa treatment at Espa, sunset boat cruise and romantic moonlit dinner on the hotel's veranda with delectable chicken tikka marsala left me feeling like a Queen.

Leela Palace Udaipur
www.theleela.com

DEVI GARH

Forty five minutes from Udaipur, this majestic fort palace hotel with pool, overlooking the rustic village of Delwara, is a real gem. Each stunning room is a masterpiece, decorated differently, with dazzling objets d' art and exquisite attention to detail. I savored superlative lamb saag at a lovely dinner in a gorgeously chic mirrored venue.

Devi Garh
www.lebua.com

MUMBAI'S CULINARY DELIGHTS

No visit to Mumbai is complete without a stop at the Taj Mahal Palace where I treated myself to superb Sichuan cuisine at their Golden Dragon Restaurant. I found the best Italian food at the posh Grand Hyatt's Celini, where chef Alessandro worked culinary magic with seafood antipasto and home made pasta. My stay at the swank Oberoi, whose luxurious rooms have views of the Arabian Sea, included a haute Indian dinner at renowned restaurant Ziya helmed by Michelin-starred Chef Vineet Bhatia. After dinner, a massage at their twenty four hour spa prepared me for my 3 am flight.

Taj Mahal Palace
www.tajhotels.com
The Oberoi
www.oberoihotels.com
Grand Hyatt
www.mumbai.grand.hyatt.com

HOW TO GO

Etihad Airways provided great service, stellar entertainment system and top amenities on my direct flights from JFK to New Delhi and from Mumbai to JFK. Spacious seats turned into comfortable lie flat beds with soft pillows and blankets in business class and on board chefs delivered superlative in flight cuisine.

Etihad
www.etihad.com