

# Eastern Rajasthan



Eastern Rajasthan includes the environs of Jaipur, the former fiefdoms of Alwar, Bharatpur and Deeg, the holy towns of Pushkar and Ajmer, and Rajasthan's most renowned wildlife sanctuaries. All the sights are easily accessible from Jaipur and the other corners of the 'Golden Triangle', Agra and Delhi.

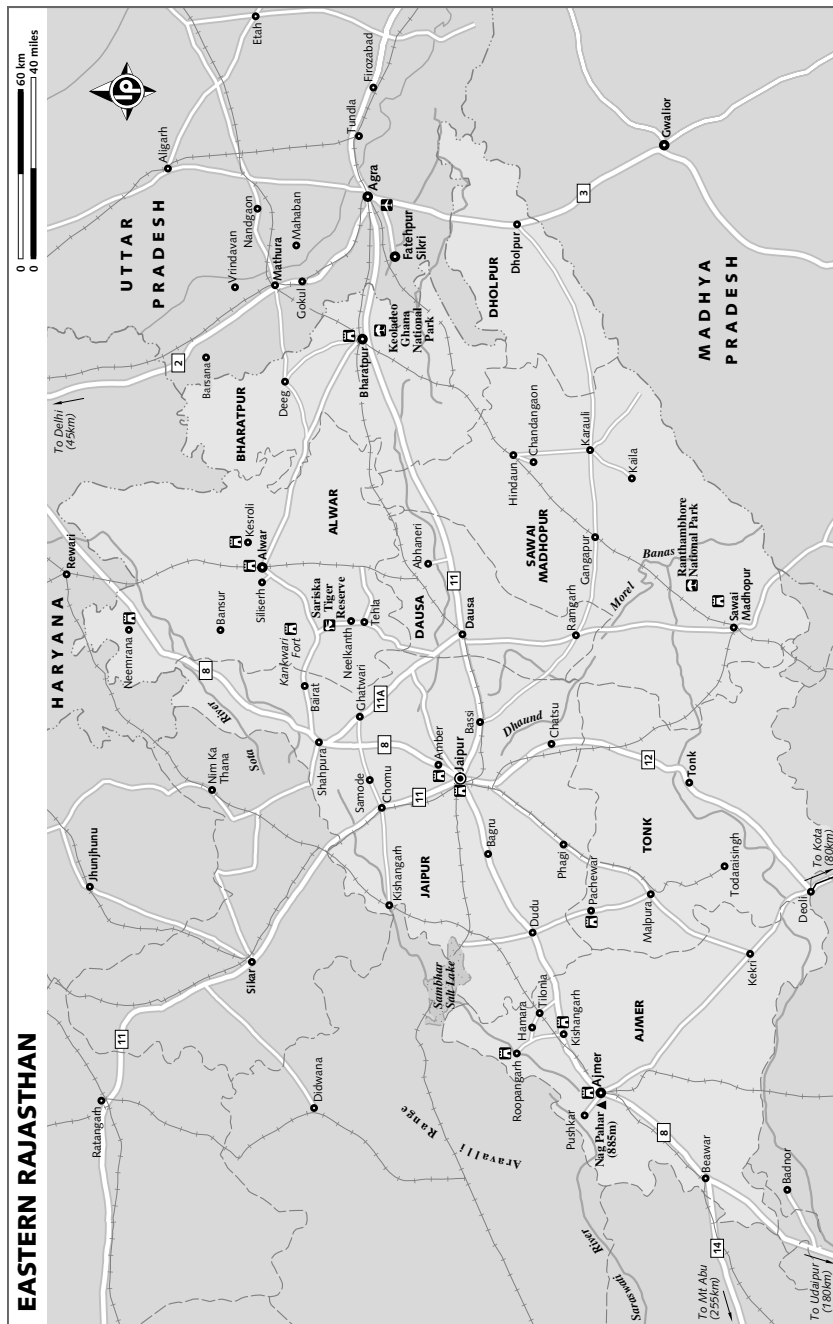
Separating Eastern Rajasthan from the desert scapes of the west is the Aravalli Ranges. In the shadows of these hills lie Rajasthan's finest nature reserves – Ranthambhore, Sariska and Keoladeo Ghana – sadly much diminished from recent misfortune. Keoladeo's wetland lost its water supply in 2003, but hopes are held high for a wildlife-saving pipeline to lure back the exotic avian migrants every winter. Sariska Tiger Reserve has controversially, and hopefully only temporarily, lost its tigers to poaching. A plan to relocate villages and reintroduce tigers is underway; meanwhile, other wildlife – deer, antelope, monkeys and more appear to have proliferated in the absence of Shere Khan. South of Keoladeo is the knotted scarp hiding Ranthambhore National Park; an epic landscape with a cliff-hugging jungle fortress and abundant wildlife including elusive tigers.

Travellers of all description are pulled towards Pushkar, a pale blue pilgrimage town that hosts an extravagant annual camel fair. While Pushkar is a magnet for those who seek Hindu mysticism or a halt in their travels to rest, chill, and shop, in nearby Ajmer the extraordinary dargah of Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti is India's most important Muslim pilgrimage site.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Kick back in the pastel-hued pilgrimage town of **Pushkar** (p206), centred on its sacred ghats and enchanting lake
- Mingle with camels, converse with camel-ers and catch the circus at the amazing **Pushkar Camel Fair** (p209)
- Spot a striped feline in the lush jungle and explore a magical cliff-top fortress at **Ranthambhore National Park** (p215)
- Observe abundant wildlife and explore temples, forts and a ghost city – in and around **Sariska Tiger Reserve** (p198)
- Merge with masses of pilgrims at India's most revered Muslim shrine – the **dargah** (p201) in Ajmer
- Cycle in peace while twitching for birds in the World Heritage-listed **Keoladeo Ghana National Park** (p188)





## FESTIVALS IN EASTERN RAJASTHAN

For festivals celebrated statewide and nationwide, see p358.

**Brij Festival** (2-4 Feb; Bharatpur, p186) The Brij takes place over several days prior to Holi (so expect a bit of premature colour to be splashed around). It's known for the *rasalila* dance, which acts out the story of the love between Krishna and Radha, and is a good chance for everyone to get dressed up in colourful finery.

**Alwar Utsav** (Feb-Mar; Alwar, p194) A tourist carnival showcasing cultural activities with a procession, traditional music and dance, a flower show and craft displays.

**Kaila Devi** (Mar-Apr; Kaila, p219) One of eastern Rajasthan's bigger festivals, this huge event is held at the village of Kaila, 24km southwest of Karauli, in the month of Chaitra. The temple of Kaila Devi (also known as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth) is 2km northwest of Kaila village, and thousands of pilgrims make their way here at this time of year bringing offerings. The devout will cover the distance to the temple wriggling prostrate along the ground, and the very devout won't eat or rest on the journey either. Masses of traders descend to make the most of the festival, selling crafts and souvenirs, and Mina tribespeople perform songs and dance.

**Shri Mahavirji Fair** (Mar-Apr; Chandangaon, p215) This huge Jain fair is held in honour of Mahavir, the 24th and last of the Jain *tirthankars* (great teachers), at the village of Chandangaon in Sawai Madhopur district. The Mahavirji temple contains an idol believed to have been dug out from a nearby hillside. Thousands of Jains congregate on the banks of the Gambhir River, to which an image of Mahavir is carried on a golden palanquin (litter) drawn by bullocks.

**The Urs** (Aug; Ajmer, p200) This is the anniversary of Sufi saint Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti's death, and signals a huge Muslim pilgrimage to Ajmer.

**Ganesha Chaturthi** (Aug-Sep; Ranthambhore, p215) Celebrated nationwide, Ganesha's birthday is particularly huge at Ranthambhore, which holds one of Rajasthan's most important Ganesha temples. Thousands of devotees make the pilgrimage here.

**Pushkar Camel Fair** (Oct-Nov; Pushkar, p206) Eastern Rajasthan hosts one of India's greatest festivals: a surreal, huge gathering of tribespeople, camels, livestock, horses, tourists, camera crews and touts.

## History

Alwar is perhaps Rajasthan's most ancient kingdom, part of the Matsya kingdom since 1500 BC. It has been much coveted and fought over, due to its position on the strategic southwestern frontier of Delhi. The city of Alwar is believed to have been founded by a member of the Kachhwaha family from Amber, but control was wrested from the Kachhwahas by the Nikumbhas. They in turn lost the city to the Bada Gurjara Rajputs of Machari. It then passed to the Khanzadas, under Bahadura Nahara of Mewat, who converted from Hinduism to Islam to win the favour of Emperor Tughlaq of Delhi. At this time Alwar and Tijara were part of the kingdom of Mewat.

In 1427 descendants of Bahadura Nahara of Mewat bravely defended the fort at Alwar against the Muslims. Although the Mewati leader professed the Muslim faith, he chose to ally himself with the Rajputs as opposed to the Muslims of Mughal Delhi. The Mughals weren't at all happy about this and mounted military forays into the region, conquering it after great difficulty. Alwar was later granted to Sawai Jai Singh of Jaipur by Aurangzeb, but the emperor took back his generous gift

when he visited the city and saw the strategic virtues of its forts.

The Jats of Bharatpur threw their hat in and briefly overran the region, installing themselves in the Alwar fort. They were evicted by the Lalawat Narukas (the descendants of Naru, the Kachhwaha prince of Amber) between 1775 and 1782 under the leadership of the Naruka *thakur* (nobleman) Pratap Singh. His descendants were great patrons of the arts, commissioning the transcription of numerous sacred and scholarly texts, and encouraging painters and artisans to visit the Alwar court.

In 1803 the British invested the Alwar *thakur* with the title of maharaja as thanks for support in a battle against the Marathas. This friendly alliance was short-lived, however, since the maharaja of Alwar strongly resented British interference when a British Resident was installed in the city.

After Independence in 1947 Alwar was merged with the other princely states of Bharatpur, Karauli and Dholpur, forming the United State of Matsya, a name that reflected the fact that these states all comprised the ancient Matsya kingdom. In 1949 Matsya was merged with the state of Rajasthan.

Bharatpur is another ancient city, traditionally home of the Jats, who settled in this region before the emergence of the Rajputs. The relationship between the Jats, tillers of the soil, and the warrior Rajputs was, at best, uneasy. Marital alliances helped to reduce the friction, but they continually tussled over territory. The differences were only overcome when both groups turned to face the mutual threat posed by the Mughals.

It was Jat leader Suraj Mahl who built Deeg's beautiful palace and gardens, and commenced work on the Bharatpur Fort, which was completed in the late 18th century after nearly 60 years of toil. This was time well spent, as the British unsuccessfully besieged the fort for around six months, finally conceding defeat after substantial losses. The rulers of Bharatpur were the first to enter into an agreement with the East India Company.

The huge fort at Ranthambhore, founded in the 10th century by the Chauhan Rajputs, predates that at Bharatpur by many centuries. It's believed to be one of Rajasthan's oldest. Ranthambhore was held in reverence by the Jains, and several temples here were very important spiritually. Over the centuries Ranthambhore was subjected to numerous assaults by the Muslims.

The Mughal Emperor Akbar negotiated a treaty with Surjana Hada, a Bundi ruler who bought the fort of Ranthambhore from Jhunjhar Khan, and the fort passed to Jagannatha, under whose leadership the Jain religion flourished. Later, Aurangzeb took the fort, and it remained with the Mughals until the 18th century, when it was granted to the maharaja of Jaipur.

Ajmer was also founded by the Chauhans, three centuries earlier than Ranthambhore. In the late 12th century it was taken by Mohammed of Ghori, and remained a possession of the sultanate of Delhi until the 14th century. Another strategic jewel, it was fought over by various neighbouring states through subsequent centuries, but was mostly under Mughal rule. It was one of the few places in Rajasthan to be directly controlled by the British, from 1818.

## BHARATPUR

☎ 05644 / pop 204,456

Bharatpur is famous for its Unesco World Heritage-listed Keoladeo Ghana National

Park (p188), a wetland and significant bird sanctuary. Apart from the park, Bharatpur has a few historical vestiges, though it would not be worth making the journey for these alone. The town is dusty, noisy and not particularly visitor friendly. Bharatpur hosts the boisterous and colourful Brij festival (p185) just prior to Holi celebrations.

## Orientation & Information

The fort is on an island in the centre of the old city, which was once surrounded by an 11km wall (now demolished). Keoladeo Ghana National Park lies 3km to the south of Bharatpur's centre. For tourist and other information, see p189.

## Sights

### LOHAGARH

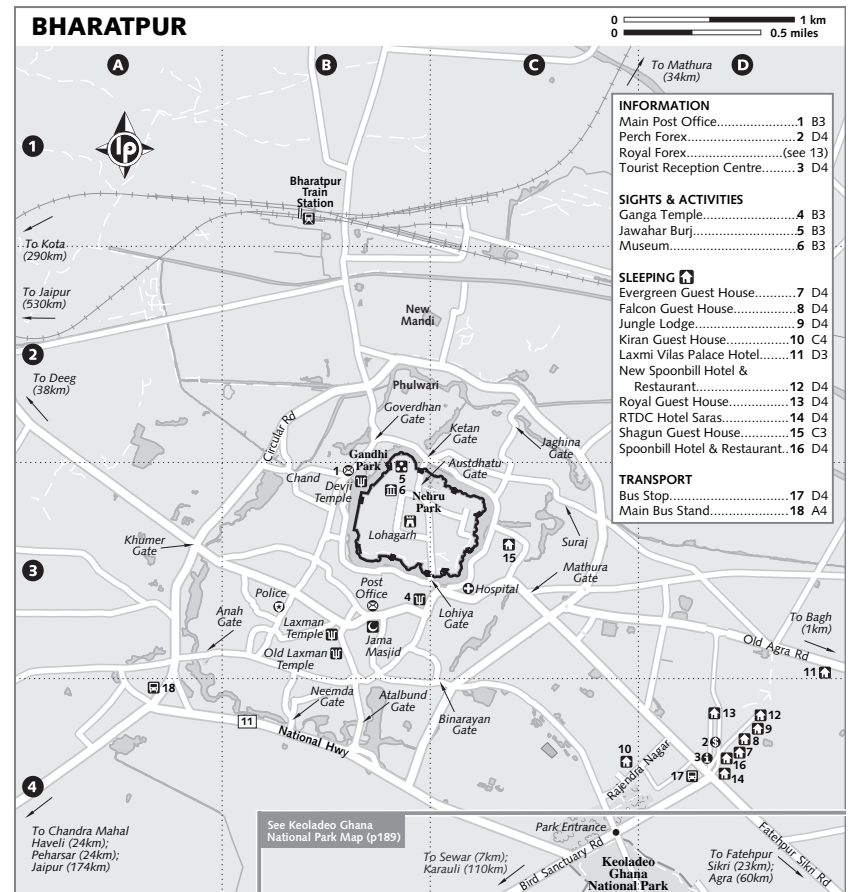
Lohagarh, the early-18th-century Iron Fort, was so named because of its sturdy defences. Today still impressive, though also forlorn and derelict, it occupies the entire small artificial island in the town centre. The main entrance is the **Austdhatu (Eight-Metal) Gate** – apparently the spikes on the gate are made of eight different metals.

Maharaja Suraj Mahl, constructor of the fort and founder of Bharatpur, built two towers, the Jawahar Burj and the Fateh Burj, within the ramparts to commemorate his victories over the Mughals and the British. The fort also contains three much-decayed palaces within its precincts.

One of the palaces, centred on a tranquil courtyard, houses a seemingly forgotten **museum** (admission Rs 3, free Mon, camera/video Rs 10/20, no photography inside museum; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu). Downstairs is a Jain sculpture gallery that includes some beautiful 7th- to 10th-century sculpture, and most spectacularly, the palace's original hammam (bathhouse), which retains some fine carvings and frescoes. Upstairs, dusty cabinets contain royal toys, weapons – such as miniature cannons, some creepy animal trophies, and portraits and old photographs of the maharajas of Bharatpur. It's worth clambering up onto the roof for views across the city and other bird-inhabited palaces.

### Jawahar Burj

This viewing point is a short walk to the northeast of the museum along a steep path that starts opposite the large water tank. It was



from here that the maharajas surveyed their city and it still has views. It's a peaceful, evocative place capturing the cool breezes in a series of pavilions, though unfortunately damaged and scarred with graffiti. The ceiling of one of the pavilions features badly deteriorating frescoes with hundreds of tiny scenes of daily life, elephants and chariots.

### GANGA TEMPLE

Not far from the Lohiya Gate is this exquisite red-sandstone two-storey temple dedicated to the goddess Ganga, with elaborately carved stone terraces. Construction started in 1845 during the rule of Maharaja Balwant Singh, but it was not finished until 1937, five generations later, during the reign of Maharaja

Brijendra Sawai. Inside is a black-and-white chequered floor. There's a real sense of peace. However, you could shatter it if you go too close to the edges of the terrace on which the temple stands, overlooking the busy streets below – they're not stable.

## Sleeping

**Shagun Guest House** (Map p187; ☎ 232455; rajeev.shagun@hotmail.com; s/d Rs 90/100, without bathroom Rs 75/80) It doesn't get much more basic than this – the only reasonable choice in Bharatpur city. Right in town, down a lane inside Mathura Gate, you will find yourself well off the tourist trail with a little tree-shaded courtyard and friendly locals keen for a chat. Though basic and a bit grubby, the beds do have

mosquito nets, there is hot water, home-cooked meals are available, and the affable owner is knowledgeable about the park and conducts village tours.

For additional accommodation options near the park, see p191.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

There are regular buses to various places, including Agra (local/express Rs 38/55, 1½ hours), Fatehpur Sikri in Uttar Pradesh (Rs 25, one hour), Jaipur (Rs 99, 4½ hours), Deeg (Rs 25, one hour) and Alwar (Rs 50, four hours). Buses leave from the main bus stand, but also drop off and pick up passengers at the bus stop at the crossroads by the tourist office.

### TRAIN

The *Janata Express* (9023/4) departs from Delhi (2nd class/sleeper Rs 67/121) at 1.45pm and arrives in Bharatpur at 5.40pm. It leaves Bharatpur at 8.05am, arriving in the capital at 12.40pm. There are several trains that run to Sawai Madhopur (sleeper/3 air-con Rs 141/326), including the *Golden Temple Mail* (2904) which departing at 10.45am and arriving at 1.05pm, which travels on to Kota and Mumbai. To Agra (2nd class/ AC chair car Rs 49/197), the *Jaipur Gwalior Express* (2987) departs at 9.05am arriving at Agra Fort at 10.15am.

## Getting Around

An auto- or cycle-rickshaw from the bus stand to the tourist office and most of the hotels should cost around Rs 25 (Rs 35 from the train station). An excellent way to zip around is by hiring a bicycle, which can be done at many of the hotels or at the park entrance – see p190 for further details.

## KEOLADEO GHANA NATIONAL PARK

This famous bird **sanctuary** (Indian/foreigner Rs 25/200, video Rs 200; ☎ 6am-6pm Apr-Sep, 6.30am-5pm Oct-Mar) was initially recognised as one of the world's most important bird-breeding and feeding grounds. In a good monsoon season over one-third of the park was submerged, and it hosted a staggering 364 species within its 29 sq km. You could spot hundreds of different species within a few days. The marshland patchwork was a wintering area for aquatic birds, including visi-

tors from Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, China and Siberia.

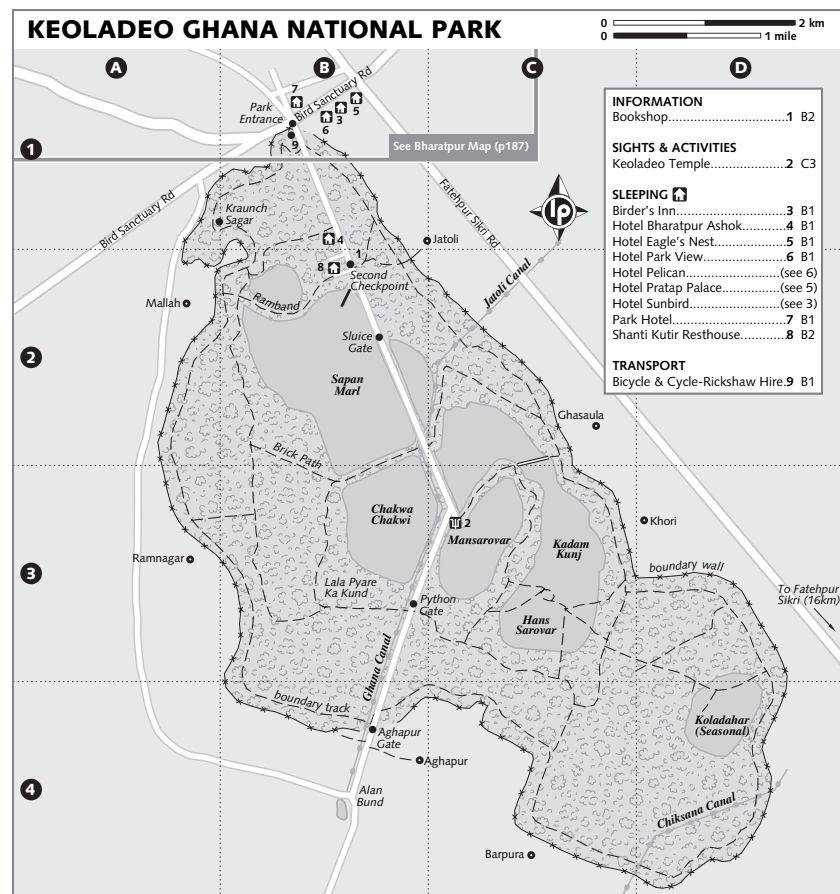
In recent years, however, Keoladeo has suffered greatly from poor management and poor monsoons, and less water has meant fewer birds. In 2003 the Panchana Dam located on the Gambhir River became operational and the park ceased to receive its usual monsoon water. In 2004 the park lodged an appeal for a higher allocation of water from the dam (it barely receives enough to cover evaporation in a few small dams), but came up against fierce opposition from land holders. In 2007 the park was a dismal echo of its former glory: it was mostly dry and invaded by thousands of cattle (from neighbouring farms) that were grazing the grasslands that occupied the former wetlands. In early 2008 it was announced that the flood waters from the Yamuna River via the Govardhan drain will be piped to the park. This *may* solve the problem. However, it could take several years to happen and the piped water may not supply the fish and the algae that are needed to support the extensive migratory bird populations.

## History

Keoladeo originated as a royal hunting reserve in the 1850s. Before then Maharaja Suraj Mahl, the founder of Bharatpur, built the Ajun Bund on the Gambhir River converting a low-lying swamp into a reservoir. During the late 1800s further earthworks increased the water capacity and a network of canals and sluice gates diverted monsoon run-off into a series of impoundments. In so doing a wetland ecosystem was created which, albeit artificial, was the perfect habitat for an astonishing variety of birds (as well as turtles, pythons and fish). It is named Keoladeo (one of Shiva's many incarnations) after the small temple that is located in the park.

Keoladeo continued to supply the maharajas' tables with fresh game until as late as 1965. A large tablet near the small temple in the park records that 12 November 1938 was a particularly bad day to be a duck – 4273 were shot by the then viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow, and his party.

A fence was built around the forests of the wetlands in the latter part of the 19th century to stop feral cattle from roaming through. Between 1944 and 1964 forestation poli-



cies were pursued by means of the planting of acacias.

The post-Independence period was one of great turmoil. Poor local communities were keen to divert the canals, which feed the swamplands, for irrigation and to convert the wetlands into crop lands. Although this tension still exists, the conservationists won the day, and in 1956 the region was made a sanctuary, although hunting was not prohibited until 1972. In 1982 Keoladeo was declared a national park and it was listed as a World Heritage site in 1985.

## Orientation & Information

Keoladeo Ghana National Park is 3km south of Bharatpur's centre and easily accessed by cycle-rickshaw.

A lot of places offer internet access for around Rs 40 per hour.

**Bookshop** (Map p189; ☎ 6am-5pm) At the second checkpoint, 1.5km from the main gate inside the park. This tiny place has a selection of titles on Indian animal and birdlife, and also sells postcards.

**Main post office** (Map p187; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) Near Gandhi Park.

**Perch Forex** (Map p187; ☎ 2224195; New Civil Lines; ☎ 5am-11pm) Cash travellers cheques, get credit-card advances or change money here.

**Royal Forex** (Map p187; New Civil Lines; ☎ 6am-10pm) Moneychanger that has expanded into the hotel and internet café business.

**Tourist Reception Centre** (Map p187; ☎ 222542; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd Sat of month) About 700m from the park entrance; has a map of Bharatpur (Rs 10).

## THE BIRDS OF KEOLADEO

During the monsoon period (July to August), and for a month or so following the monsoon, the park should be home to vast colonies of birds that have come here to breed and feed on the fertile wetland. However, since it lost most of its water supply in 2003 fewer and fewer migratory birds have returned to Keoladeo. With the promise of water being delivered by pipe, it is hoped that the park will return to its days of glory when it was a frenzy of feathered activity.

The wintering migratory birds would arrive in October and usually stay until around the end of February; these intervening months are the best time to visit. Some of the species that would nest at this time included storks, moorhens, herons, egrets and cormorants. In October and November the park would become full of ducks and geese. Pelicans would arrive later, when the fish are bigger and make for a more substantial meal. The most famous winter visitor was once the rare Siberian crane, though these haven't been seen since 2002, and that was only one pair. Saras cranes are the tallest birds in the park, and were seen in 2008. They have a fascinating breeding ritual whereby the male and female dance in front of each other and make trumpeting calls.

The migratory flocks have mostly left by the end of March. At the beginning of April, when the waters begin to recede, there is still a substantial population of birds of prey, some kingfishers and smaller birds, such as robins, wagtails and mynahs. Many of these birds feed at the few pools teeming with fish that remain in the park during the dry summer months. During the height of summer, when the waters have all but disappeared, the sanctuary is carpeted in dry grasslands that afford habitat to a variety of fauna, such as deer (spotted, sambar, bluebull), jackals, jungle cats, blackbucks, hares and mongoose.

Pythons are most commonly seen in the winter, when they emerge from underground for a sun bath.

The best times for bird-spotting are the early morning and evening.

## Visiting the Park

If the park receives sufficient water and if these flows mimic natural seasonal patterns, and if the migratory flocks return, then the best time to visit is from October to February.

Admission entitles you to one entrance per day; if you want to spend the day inside the park, get your hotel to provide a packed lunch. Carry drinking water, as bird-watching is thirsty work. There is a bookshop and a snack bar near the Keoladeo Temple. You can also get a bite to eat at the Hotel Bharatpur Ashok (see p192) in the park.

One narrow road (no motorised vehicles are permitted) runs through the park, and countless embankments thread their way between the shallow dam. Walking or cycling along them affords unique opportunities to observe the rich birdlife at close quarters.

## GUIDES & CYCLE-RICKSHAWS

Hiring an experienced ornithologist guide will cost Rs 70 per hour for up to five people and Rs 120 per hour for more than six people. Guides can be hired at the park entrance. Many hotels are run by qualified guides or will arrange guides for you, who charge the same rate. All registered guides provide a good service, but you may find

a guide who speaks better English by arranging one through your hotel. If you want a guide who speaks another European language, it's also best to enquire at your hotel.

Government-authorized cycle-rickshaws (recognisable by the yellow plate bolted onto the front) only are allowed inside. You don't pay an admission fee for the drivers, but they charge Rs 50 per hour. Some are very knowledgeable. However, these cycle-rickshaws can only travel along the park's larger tracks.

## BICYCLES

It's a good idea to take a rickshaw or guide on your first visit, then strike off on your own later. You get a scrappy but adequate map free with your ticket. An excellent way to see the park is by hiring a bike (Rs 25 per day), at the park entrance. You must leave your passport or a Rs 1000 deposit. At the time of writing you were no longer allowed to bring in a bike that you had hired outside of the park. This rule may change and most of the hotels are holding onto their hire bikes in the hope that it does. Having a bike is a wonderfully quiet way to travel, and allows you to avoid bottlenecks, which occur at the nesting sites of the larger birds.

The southern reaches of the park are virtually devoid of *humanus touristicus*, and so are better than the northern part for serious bird-watching.

## Sleeping & Eating

Don't be pressured by touts at Bharatpur train or bus stations. The following places are all within easy walking distance (within 1km) of the bird sanctuary. All can arrange park guides and offer binocular (around Rs 50 per day) and bike hire. Room tariffs fluctuate according to the season. All of the rooms listed in this chapter have private bathrooms, unless otherwise noted. Guests usually eat in the hotel they are staying at and most places offer a thali for between Rs 60 and Rs 90. One thing to note is the quality of Bharatpur's water during these dry times – it's very salty. If you want a decent cup of tea or coffee get the kitchen to boil bottled water.

## BUDGET

The cluster of guesthouses from the Spoonbill to the New Spoonbill are all run by different branches of the same family.

**Hotel Pelican** (Map p189; ☎ 224221; Bird Sanctuary Rd; r Rs 75-300) This funky little hotel with old car windscreens for windows has an overgrown garden and very relaxed management. There is quite a variety of rooms: from a pokey little cheapie to a couple of good-value doubles. The rooms upstairs are brighter.

**Royal Guest House** (Map p187; ☎ 230283; rinkesh btp@yahoo.com; s/d from Rs 150/200; 📺) One of the park's newest hotels though the ultrakeen management have run a moneychanging business here for years. There are just five rooms, all clean and fresh, and a rooftop restaurant was on the plans when we visited. Guests are welcome to use the kitchen for self catering, and the attached internet café (guests/nonguests Rs 20/40) is the fastest in town.

**Hotel Park View** (Map p189; ☎ 9887493558; Bird Sanctuary Rd; s/d Rs 150/250) One of the closest hotels to the park, its basic rooms are small and cell-like. You will need to bring your own mosquito protection for the room and the small garden restaurant.

**Evergreen Guest House** (Map p187; ☎ 225917; s Rs 150-200, d Rs 200-250) This is a more basic, less outstanding option, with just two rooms. Nevertheless it is a good cheapie that satisfies customers, with the option of rooftop or gar-

den dining and delicious home cooking. The owner also offers classes in Indian cooking.

**Kiran Guest House** (Map p187; ☎ 223845; www.kiranguesthouse.com; 364 Rajendra Nagar; d Rs 150-600, s without bathroom Rs 60; 📺) Managed by eager-to-please brothers, this guesthouse delivers great value with seven simple, spacious, clean rooms and a pleasant rooftop where you can eat tasty home cooking. It's on a quiet road not far from the park. Nature guiding and free pickup from the Bharatpur train and bus stations are offered.

**Spoonbill Hotel & Restaurant** (Map p187; ☎ 223571; www.hotelspoonbill.com; s/d from Rs 150/200 to Rs 600/700; mains Rs 30-150; 📺) The original Spoonbill has a variety of different rooms – all good-value and clean, if a bit shabby. The best room is superspacious and has a balcony. The place is run by a businesslike retired major and his son who also conducts birdwatching tours. The hotel has excellent food, with curd from the family cow and Rajasthani delicacies such as *churma* (sugar, cheese and dried fruit fried in butter), the royal dish of Rajasthan. There's often a campfire in winter.

**Falcon Guest House** (Map p187; ☎ 223815; falcon.guesthouse@hotmail.com; s/d downstairs Rs 150/200 upstairs Rs 300/400, r with AC Rs 600-1200; veg thali Rs 60; 📺) In the same area as the Spoonbill etc, the Falcon may well be the pick of this bunch. It is a well-kept, snug place to stay, run by the affable Mrs Rajni Singh. Her husband, Tej, is an ornithologist and he's happy to answer any bird-related questions. There are a range of comfortable, good-sized rooms, though more money gets you a softer mattress and private balcony. Flavoursome home-cooked food is served in the garden restaurant.

**Jungle Lodge** (Map p187; ☎ 225622; r Rs 200-400, r with AC summer only Rs 600; 📺) Surrounded by an overgrown garden, the simple rooms, which could do with more ventilation, face onto a shady veranda. The owner is a naturalist, and the family is welcoming. Tasty home-cooked meals are available.

**New Spoonbill Hotel & Restaurant** (Map p187; ☎ 223571; www.hotelspoonbill.com; s/d from Rs 250/350 to Rs 650/750; mains Rs 30-150; 📺 📺) Run by the major's son, this newer place has simple but smart rooms, each with a small terrace. The larger rooms are great, with lots of windows. The dining room looks onto the garden.

**Shanti Kutir Resthouse** (Map p189; ☎ 200753; s/d Rs 415/600; breakfast Rs 25, lunch & dinner Rs 50) This erstwhile hunting lodge inside the park has a

few rooms available at the behest of the park director. No forward booking is available but you can ring the director and take a punt on there being a vacancy. Simple meals are also available.

### MIDRANGE

**Hotel Pratap Palace** (Map p189; ☎ 225093; www.hotelpratappalace.net; Bird Sanctuary Rd; ordinary s/d Rs 300/400, deluxe Rs 850/1050, with AC Rs 1300/1450; 🏠 📺 🚿) This grand-looking hotel offers spacious but slightly faded rooms. The budget rooms aren't bad value though the standard at all levels is variable, so look at a few. The refreshing pool is available for nonguests for Rs 100 per person.

**RTDC Hotel Saras** (Map p187; ☎ 223700; cnr Fatehpur Sikri & Bird Sanctuary Rds; s/d Rs 550/650, with AC from Rs 800/900; 🏠 📺) In typical RTDC fashion this hotel offers spacious, bleak rooms running off an echoing hallway. Its best features include its acceptable cleanliness and central location at the crossroads just by the tourist office and the bus stop.

**Hotel Eagle's Nest** (Map p189; ☎ 225144; Bird Sanctuary Rd; s/d Rs 600/800, with AC Rs 800/1000; 🏠 📺) This smart option has 12 spacious and comfortable rooms (only two with air-con) with private balconies and a large multicuisine restaurant. Guided tours by a naturalist can be arranged and there are binoculars for hire.

**Hotel Sunbird** (Map p189; ☎ 225701; www.hotel-sunbird.com; Bird Sanctuary Rd; s/d Rs 1000/1250, deluxe Rs 1400/1800; mains Rs 40-260; 🏠 📺) Another well-run and popular place next door to Birder's Inn. Rooms are clean and comfortable and upstairs there's an appealing restaurant with a good range of dishes including tasty veg (Rs 150) and nonveg (Rs 200) thalis and cold beer. Packed lunches and guided tours are available.

**Birder's Inn** (Map p189; ☎ 227346; www.thebirder-sinn.com; Bird Sanctuary Rd; s/d Rs 1100/1400; mains Rs 50-250; 🏠 📺) The Birder's Inn is rightly a popular base for exploring the park. The atmospheric thatched restaurant is great place for a meal though there are plans for it to become the reception area and for a new restaurant to be constructed. The older front rooms are airy, spacious, and nicely decorated with good bathrooms, while the new rooms, under construction at the time of writing, were expected to boast bath tubs and LCD TVs. The in-house naturalist welcomes

guests and conducts tours (half day/full day Rs 400/700). The hotel can even arrange pick-up from Delhi airport.

**Park Hotel** (Map p189; ☎ 233192; thepark@yahoo.com; Bird Sanctuary Rd; d Rs 1500) Modern and clean, the Park offers spacious motel-style rooms with gleaming tiled floors and windows that overlook the surrounding manicured lawns. There is also a bright and airy restaurant offering the usual Chinese, Continental and Indian dishes.

**Chandra Mahal Haveli** (Off Map p187; ☎ 05643-264336; www.chandramahalhaveli.com; Peharsar; s/d Rs 1650/2050, r with terrace Rs 2600, s/d ste Rs 2100/2400; 🏠 📺) This is an old converted Muslim *haveli*, in Peharsar village 23km from Bharatpur on the way to Jaipur, about 1.5km off the Jaipur-Agra Hwy. The grand building, dating from 1850, has charming, simple rooms set around an inner courtyard. Ask for a room with a balcony view over the surrounding countryside. It's a good option if you are travelling by car. It's very peaceful and you can visit carpet weavers in the surrounding village.

**Hotel Bharatpur Ashok** (Map p189; ☎ 222722; www.bharatpurashok.com; s/d Rs 2500/2700; 🏠 📺) This lodge, run by the Indian Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC), is 1km inside the park and 8km from the Bharatpur train station. It's looking a little faded, and service is typically lax. However, the comfortable, quiet rooms have balconies with swing seats and there's a bar downstairs. The multicuisine restaurant's handy if you want something to eat while within the park (nonguests are welcome).

### TOP END

**Laxmi Vilas Palace Hotel** (Map p187; ☎ 223523; www.laxmivilas.com; Kakaji-ki-Kothi, Old Agra Rd; s/d/ste Rs 3300/3600/4600; 🏠 📺 🚿) This is a heritage hotel, about equidistant between the national park and the town centre, owned by the younger son of Maharaja Jaswant Singh. Arched ceilings and heavy old furniture make for exquisite, atmospheric rooms, set around a courtyard. A new 'palace' with another 20 rooms was being constructed next door at the time we visited. It's also a busy lunch stop for tour groups travelling between Jaipur and Agra.

**Bagh** (Off Map p187; ☎ 225415; www.thebagh.com; Old Agra Rd; s/d US\$130/150, ste US\$150/170; 🏠 📺 🚿) A picturesque hotel 2km from town, and Bagh has 23 elegant rooms spread out in

separate pavilions nestled in a former royal orchard. The standard rooms are not much smaller than the suites and boast cool marble floors, antique furnishings and wonderful bathrooms. Décor is traditional but the cool clean lines have a contemporary feel. The 4-hectare garden is over 200 years old and has masses of birds if you're feeling too lazy to go to the park.

### Getting There & Around

For travel details, see p188.

### DEEG

☎ 0564 / pop 40,826

Deeg is a small, rarely visited, dusty tumult of a town. At its centre stands an incongruously glorious palace edged by stately formal gardens, famous for their coloured-water fountains (switched on for festivals). Nearby are mighty fortifications. It's about 36km north of Bharatpur, and is an easy day trip (there's nowhere good to stay) from Bharatpur, or from Agra or Mathura, both in the adjacent state of Uttar Pradesh.

Built by Suraj Mahl in the mid-18th century, Deeg was formerly the second capital of Bharatpur state and was the site of a famous battle in which the maharaja's forces withstood a combined Mughal and Maratha army of 80,000 men. Eight years later the maharaja even had the temerity to attack the Red Fort in Delhi, carrying off masses of booty, including an entire marble building, which can still be seen in the palace grounds.

### Sights

#### SURAJ MAHL'S PALACE

One of India's most beautiful and carefully proportioned buildings, the **palace** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm) is splendidly preserved. Photography is not permitted in some of the bhavans (buildings).

Built in a mixture of Rajput and Mughal architectural styles, the 18th-century, mostly two-storey **Gopal Bhavan** is three and four storeys high in places. Downstairs is a lower storey that becomes submerged during the monsoon as the water level of the adjacent tank, **Gopal Sagar**, rises – but this hasn't happened for many years. The eastern façade is fronted by imposing arches to take full advantage of the early-morning light. It was used by the maharajas until the early 1950s, and contains many original furnishings, includ-

ing faded, spilling sofas, huge punkas that are over 200 years old, chaise longues, a stuffed tiger, elephant-foot stands, and fine porcelain from China and France. In an upstairs room at the rear of the palace is an Indian-style marble dining table – a stretched oval-shaped affair raised just 20cm off the ground. Guests sat around the edge, and the centre was the serving area. In the maharaja's bedroom is an enormous, 3.6m by 2.4m wooden bed with silver legs. On either end of Gopal Bhavan are two low stone tables used for washing and dressing dead bodies. One is made from a single piece of black granite, and was brought from the Red Fort in Delhi. The other one is white marble and found inside a small Hanuman temple.

Two large tanks lie alongside the palace, the aforementioned Gopal Sagar to the east and **Rup Sagar** to the west. The well-maintained gardens and flowerbeds, watered by the tanks, continue the extravagant theme with over 2000 fountains. Many of these fountains are in working order and coloured waters pour forth during the monsoon festival in August.

The Keshav Bhavan (Summer or Monsoon Pavilion) is a single-storey edifice with five arches along each side. Tiny jets spray water from the archways and metal balls rumbled around in a water channel imitating monsoon thunder. An arcade runs around the interior of the pavilion over a canal with hundreds of fountains, many of which are functional and are turned on for local festivals. The fountains are powered by water pressure when plugs are pulled from a rooftop reservoir. Deeg's massive walls (which are up to 28m high) and 12 vast bastions, some with their cannons still in place, are also worth exploring. You can walk up to the top of the walls from the palace.

Other bhavans (in various states of renovation) include the marble **Suraj Bhavan**, probably stolen from Delhi and reassembled here, the **Kishan Bhavan** and, along the north side of the palace grounds, the **Nand Bhavan**.

#### LAXMI MANDIR

This ancient **temple** is presided over by a *mataji* (a female priest). There are alcoves on three sides enshrining images of Durga, Hanuman and Gada, and a small shrine to Shiva to one side. The temple is on Batchu Rd, 20 minutes' walk from the palace.



## Sleeping

As not many tourists stop here, Alwar's hotels are mostly aimed at budget business travellers, and are mediocre and not particularly good value. Finding a budget place is not a problem, but anything better is scarce. Contact the Tourist Reception Centre (p194) for details about the houses involved in the Paying Guest House Scheme (Rs 400 to Rs 1500).

## BUDGET

Several hotels owned by brothers ring a central courtyard about 500m east of the bus stand, set back from Manu Rd. All have a range of rooms with private bathrooms and numerous tariffs, so it's worth looking at a few. The cheaper rooms have basic beds where you will require a hostel sheet. Single women may feel uncomfortable here.

**Imperial Hotel** (☎ 2701730; 1 Manu Rd; s/d from Rs 100/300, deluxe d Rs 400-800; 🏠) This place is at the start of the laneway that leads to the other budget hotels. It too is owned by one of the brothers. It has musty but large rooms that are pretty clean, and somewhat better deluxe options.

**Hotel Aravali** (☎ 2332883; www.hotelaravali.co.in; Nehru Rd; dm Rs 100, s/d from Rs 450/500, with AC from Rs 850/950; 🏠 📺 🍷) This is one of the town's better choices, but nevertheless is a bit like *Fawlty Towers* without the humour. Its room options stretch to midrange, though rowdy guests can be a problem. If the hotel isn't full request a quiet room. There's a summer-only pool and the restaurant's not all that great. Turn left out of the train station and it's about 100m down the road.

**RTDC Hotel Meenal** (☎ 2347352; Topsingh Circle; s/d Rs 500/600, with AC Rs 700/800; 🏠) This is a respectable option with bland and tidy rooms typical of the chain. It is located about 1km south of town, so it's quiet and leafy, though it's a long way from the action.

## MIDRANGE

**Alwar Hotel** (☎ 2700012; www.hotelalwar.com; 26 Manu Rd; s/d from Rs 900/1150, ste Rs 1750; 🏠) Set back from the road in a neatly manicured garden, this well-run hotel has spacious, renovated and comfortable rooms. This is easily the best option in town, and staff can be helpful with general information and sightseeing advice. The Alwar also boasts one of the town's better multicuisine restaurants, (right).

## Eating

Alwar has a reasonable selection of restaurants, and is famous for its *palang torh* (milk cake) – not for those watching their weight.

**Prem Pavitra Bhojnalaya** (Old Bus Stand; mains Rs 20-40; 🕒 11am-10.30pm) Alwar's renowned restaurant has been going since 1957. It is in the heart of the old town (there's another branch near Moti Dugri) and serves fresh, tasty pure veg food – try the delicious *aloo parathas* (bread stuffed with spicy potato), *palak paneer* (unfermented cheese cubes in spinach purée) and *gaajar ka halva* (dessert made with carrots, cardamom and pistachios, topped by curd). The servings are big and half-serves are available.

**Thali House – New South Indian Café** (mains Rs 20-45; 🕒 9am-10pm) This dimly lit place, opposite the Gopal Cinema, has a shuffling, half-hearted atmosphere, but it's popular with families and offers cheap, excellent South Indian dishes, such as delicious masala dosa and good value thalis.

**Inderlok Restaurant** (Company Bagh Rd; mains Rs 25-90; 🕒 noon-3pm & 7-11pm) This main road restaurant has lots of palatable veg and unusual *paneer* choices. There's a typically hushed and gloomy ambience in the air-con room, which is plain and functional. It's popular for business-lunch deals and with courting couples.

**Narula's** (mains Rs 50-120; 🕒 11am-3pm & 5.30-10.30pm) Tucked away in a basement, Narula's whips up Indian, Chinese and Continental food. A long-established restaurant, it offers a good choice of veg and nonveg dishes.

**Dawat** (Alwar Hotel, Manu Rd; mains Rs 50-100; 🕒 Tue-Sun) Dawat serves first-rate Indian, Continental and Chinese food; the South Indian selection is particularly good. It's slightly gloomy in the restaurant but you can eat in the pleasant garden.

**Tija** (Nangli Circle) This small café is a town favourite and teenager meeting point. A great place to grab a coffee (hot/cold Rs 15/20) or one of its excellent lassis (yogurt and iced water drinks, Rs 15).

## Getting There & Away BUS

From Alwar there are numerous buses to Sariska (Rs 18, 1½ hours, half-hourly 5.15am to 8.30pm), which go on to Jaipur (Rs 78, four hours), via Bairat (Rs 27). There are also frequent (bumpy) services to Bharatpur (Rs 50, four hours) for Keoladeo

Ghana National Park, and Deeg (Rs 34, 2½ hours). Buses to Delhi take two different routes (Rs 88, via Tijara/Ramgarh four/five hours, half-hourly).

The following are cookie-cutter similar and cheek by jowl around a quiet courtyard. **Ankur** (☎ 2333025; s/d from Rs 300/500; 🏠) occupies two hotels and has passable rooms. **Atlantic** (☎ 2343181; s/d from Rs 300/500, with AC Rs 700/850) has plain, possibly cleaner rooms. **New Alankar** (☎ 3202966; s/d from Rs 300/400, with AC Rs 500/750) offers the newest, freshest rooms at the time of writing. **Ashoka** (☎ 2346780; s/d from Rs 300/500) offers passable rooms, though the cheaper rooms are far less appealing than the pricier ones.

## CAR

A return taxi to Sariska Tiger Reserve (including a stop at Siliserh) will cost you around Rs 900.

## TRAIN

The *Shatabdi Express* (2015/6) passes through Alwar. It departs for Ajmer (AC chair class/1st class Rs 435/830, four hours) at 8.39am and stops at Jaipur (Rs 320/605) at 10.45am. For Delhi, it departs at 7.30pm (Rs 335/640, 2½ hours). The *Mandore Express* (2461) departs Alwar at 9.45pm, arriving in Jodhpur (2 AC/3 AC Rs 793/578, 465km) at 8am.

## Getting Around

There are cycle-rickshaws and autorickshaws. A cycle-rickshaw from the train station to the town centre should cost about Rs 20. You can hire bicycles near the train station (Rs 40 per day).

## AROUND ALWAR Siliserh

For a breath of fresh air, this former royal retreat, 20km southwest of Alwar (off the road to Sariska Tiger Reserve), is one of the state's lesser known secrets. Uninhabited forested hills encircle a tranquil 10.5 sq km lake and perched above the lake is the erstwhile hunting lodge – a cream-coloured confection with cupolas, balconies and courtyards. It was built by the Alwar Maharaja Vinay Singh in 1845, and is now a government-run hotel. Apart from the **Lake Palace** (admission Rs 30) there's not much else here except for some touristy waterborne activities and cheap restaurants. You can get a water view by hiring a decidedly unseaworthy

**paddleboat** (per 30min Rs 80), or putt-putting around on a **motorboat** (per 15min Rs 400).

The **RTDC Hotel Lake Palace** (☎ 0144-2886322; s/d Rs 1075/1525, with AC Rs 2000/2600, ste Rs 3100/3700; 🏠), in the palace, has wonderful lake views and a relaxed atmosphere. You will have to overlook the erratic cleanliness and service and very ordinary food typical of a government hotel. The admission charge can be offset by buying a meal at the restaurant.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

A tempo from Alwar will cost you about Rs 15, or you can hire a taxi for around Rs 400.

## Kesroli

☎ 01468

This pleasant small town, 12km from Alwar, has a rambling 14th-century fort (with seven turrets) – now a hotel – still keeping a watch over bucolic agricultural scenery. The fort ramparts offer views across the fields, where the working villagers make splashes of colour.

The fairy-tale **Hill Fort Kesroli** (☎ 01468-289352; www.neemranahotels.com; Rs 2000-5500; breakfast/lunch/dinner Rs 200/300/400) is an authentic stone fortress perching on a rocky knoll that would set any kid's imagination flying. True to form it is a bit haphazard, with mysterious passageways, changing floor levels and 22 very different, character-loaded rooms. It's an isolated, self-sufficient place set in tranquil countryside, with bike rides and car excursions available to break any self-imposed siege.

Many guests will be from small tour groups, but plenty of independent travellers rest their weary feet here for a couple of stress-free days. From Alwar you can take a taxi or an autorickshaw to the fort. It is run by the folks at the Neemrana Fort Palace (below).

## Neemrana

☎ 01494

This small village lies about 75km north of Alwar on the main Delhi–Jaipur Hwy, a short distance to the south of the Haryana border. The reason to visit is the magnificent fortress palace, 2km away from Neemrana village. Dating from 1464, it was from here that the Rajput Maharaja Prithviraj Chauhan III reigned, and it's now one of Rajasthan's oldest luxury hotels.

The magnificent **Neemrana Fort Palace** (☎ 01494-246007; www.neemranahotels.com; s/d/ste



from Rs 1500/2500/3500; 🏠 🚶) surmounts a fortified rugged plateau. The fort rises an amazing 10 levels, set in 25 acres among the folded Aravalli Hills. Rooms are decorated in a mixture of Rajput and colonial styles, and are massively varied – you should try to get one with a balcony or terrace. The fort layout is fascinatingly complex, with hidden courtyards and terraces, and corridors that resemble mazes.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses on the main Delhi to Jaipur route generally stop at Behror, 14km from Neemrana (from where it's a further 2km to the hotel). A taxi from Behror to the hotel will cost about Rs 300.

### SARISKA TIGER RESERVE

📞 0144

Enclosed within the dramatic, shadowy folds of the Aravallis, the **Sariska Tiger Reserve** (Indian/foreigner Rs 25/200, car/jeep Rs 125, video Rs 200; 🎫 ticket sales 7am–3.30pm Oct–Mar, 6am–4pm Apr–Sep, park closes at sunset) is a tangle of remnant semideciduous jungle and craggy canyons sheltering streams and lush greenery. It covers 866 sq km (including a core area of 498 sq km), and is home to peacocks, monkeys, majestic sambars, nilgai, chital, wild boars and jackals.

Although Project Tiger has been in charge of the sanctuary since 1979, there has been a dramatic failure in tiger protection. In 2004 there were an estimated 18 tigers in the park; however, reports in 2005 called this into question, after an investigation by the World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF). That report prompted the federal government to investigate what has happened to the tigers of Sariska. See opposite for more details.

Tigers or no tigers, Sariska is in any case a fascinating sanctuary to visit – and with visitor numbers at an all time low and deer numbers at a high, the wildlife-viewing experience is exceptional. Unlike most national parks, it opens year-round, although the best time to spot wildlife is November to March, and you'll see most wildlife in the evening. During July and August your chance of spotting wildlife is minimal, as the animals move on to higher ground, and the park is 'open' primarily for temple pilgrimage rather than wildlife viewing.

In early 2008 it was proposed to stop private car access into the park and to end

the free access to Indians between 8am and 3pm Tuesday and Saturday (during summer) for visiting the Hanuman temple. As we go to print these proposals hadn't been acted on.

#### Sights

Besides wildlife, Sariska has some fantastic sights within the park or around its peripheries, which are well worth seeking out. If you take a longer tour, you can ask to visit one or more of these. A couple of them are also accessible by public bus.

#### KANKWARI FORT

Deep inside the sanctuary, this imposing small jungle fort, 22km away from Sariska, offers amazing views over the plains of the national park, dotted with red mud-brick villages. This is the inaccessible place that Aurangzeb chose to imprison his brother, Dara Shikoh, Shah Jahan's chosen heir to the Mughal throne, for several years before he was beheaded.

#### HANUMAN TEMPLE

You can visit a small Hanuman temple, deep in the park surrounded by an unsightly cement building painted pink. Its recumbent idol, adapted from a rock, is painted orange with a couple of eyes and is shaded by silver parasols. People give offerings of incense and receive tiny parcels of holy ash. From the temple there is a pleasant walk, for over a kilometre to **Pandu pol**, a gaping natural arch. The rough trail follows an ephemeral stream beneath sheer ravine walls which merge at the 'gateway'. There is a deep green pool below the arch and the track becomes a steep slippery climb best left alone.

#### NEELKANTHESHWAR TEMPLE

Around 35km from Sariska is an ancient temple complex, up a dramatically winding road that allows fantastic views. This 8th-century complex sits on a small plateau ringed by low hills where the old defensive wall is still visible. It's said that the temples remained preserved because bees chased Aurangzeb away when he tried to attack them. The main temple is dedicated to Shiva (photography prohibited). The small podlike shrines outside the temple are priests' graves. A little bit further away,

#### THE CASE OF THE MISSING TIGERS

News splashed across the press in spring 2005 that the tigers were gone, presumed poached. The distressing news from Sariska followed a report from the WWF, who had searched areas previously frequented by tigers and found that there was no evidence to indicate any recent tiger activity. They found that no tigers had been sighted in these areas since August 2004. The WWF concluded that something had happened to the last tigers between then and December 2004. Furthermore, it was suggested that previous estimations of numbers of tigers in the park were exaggerated.

Though notorious interstate poachers and poor local villagers have since been brought before courts and poachers have been jailed, the prime minister's inquiry into the crisis suggested fundamental management changes before tigers could be reintroduced to the reserve. Several recommendations and extra funding was proposed covering relocation of villages within the park, restricting access and increasing the protection force. While poaching is the most likely cause of the ultimate extinction of the last of Sariska's tigers, the WWF report highlighted the issues of widespread woodcutting and grazing within park boundaries and the low morale among park staff. And it's not only tigers at risk here – sambars have also been targeted for their antlers. The underlying problem – the inevitable interplay between India's poorest tribal and village populace with rare and phenomenally valuable wildlife on their doorstep – remains largely unresolved. Of the 11 villages within the core area of the park, four have been earmarked for urgent relocation. By early 2008 only one of these four villages, Bhagani, had been relocated.

As things stand, Sariska Tiger Reserve is a sad indictment of tiger conservation in India, from the top government officials down to the underpaid forest guard. Tragically it seems it will inevitably be repeated in future interactions between the soaring populations of *Homo sapiens* and the dwindling numbers of *Panthera tigris* and their diminishing habitat.

through a tangle of vegetation (ask locals to point out the right path), is a Jain temple built from orange-red sandstone, with a huge stone statue of the 23rd *tirthankar*, known locally as Nogaza.

#### BHANGARH

Around 55km from Sariska, beyond the inner park sanctuary and out in open countryside, is this deserted, well-preserved, notoriously haunted city. It was founded in 1631 by Madho Singh, and had 10,000 dwellings, but was suddenly deserted about 300 years ago for reasons that remain mysterious. However, the favoured explanation is that a magician who loved the queen found his love unrequited and cursed the city. The buildings today, in their wonderful setting of unspoiled countryside, are largely restored, which gives a remarkable sense of the city and its town planning. Temples and *chhatris* (cenotaphs, literally 'umbrellas') dot the surrounding area.

After you enter the main gate, there is a *haveli*, once a grand house, to the right. Beyond it, you can walk through the market area's well-defined and ordered bazaars up to the ruined, evocative palace for striking views. Within the complex are two well-preserved,

ornate Shiva temples. One has its lingam (phallic image of Shiva) still intact, and lies alongside a green-shaded tank.

Bhangarh can be reached by a bus that runs twice daily through the sanctuary (Rs 29) to nearby Golaka village. Check what time the bus returns, otherwise you risk getting stranded.

#### Tours

While it was possible to take private cars into the park when we visited, there was a proposal to stop this before any introduction of tigers. In any case private cars are limited to sealed roads. The best way to visit the park is by jeep, which can explore off the main tracks. For diesel/petrol jeeps you'll be quoted Rs 700/800 for three hours, or Rs 2000/2500 for a full day. They can take up to five people. It's worth paying the extra for a petrol jeep, as the diesel vehicles are noisier and can scare away the animals. On the days when admission is free for Indians (Tuesday and Saturday in summer) the park gets very crowded; however, it is also proposed that free entry will be discontinued in the future. Guides are available (Rs 100 for three hours; maximum five people). It's also possible to arrange guided treks.

Bookings can be made at the **Forest Reception Office** (☎ 2841333; Jaipur Rd), directly opposite the Hotel Sariska Palace, which is where buses will drop you.

### Sleeping & Eating

**RTDC Hotel Tiger Den** (☎ 2841342; dm Rs 50, s/d Rs 1075/1525, with AC Rs 1775/2350; 🏠) Hotel Tiger Den is a quasi-Soviet block, backed by a rambling garden that's also used as a rubbish tip. Rooms are drab and a bit run-down, but they have balconies and occupy a pleasant setting. Bring a mosquito net or repellent. Various tours of the reserve can be organised at reception here.

**Sariska Tiger Heaven** (☎ 224816; r Rs 2500, with AC Rs 3200; 🏠 🚗) This is an isolated place about 3km west of the bus stop at Thanagazi village; free pick-up is on offer. Rooms are set in stone-and-tile cottages and the cement tree stumps in the neatly clipped lawn complete the picture. Rooms have big beds and windowed alcoves, and are set in 5 acres. It's a tranquil, if overpriced and overstaffed, place to stay. Staff can arrange jeeps and guides to the park.

**Alwar Bagh** (☎ 2885231; www.alwarbagh.com; r & tent Rs 2800, ste Rs 3500; breakfast/lunch/dinner Rs 150/300/300; 🏠 🚗) This is a very peaceful option located in the village of Dhawala, between Alwar (14km) and Sariska (19km). It can arrange pick-up and drop-off from Alwar and can also arrange tours of Sariska. The bright new hotel boasts traditional styling, spotless rooms and romantic tents, an organic orchard, a garden restaurant and a sparkling swimming pool.

**Hotel Sariska Palace** (☎ 6451322; r Rs 6600, ste from Rs 17,400; mains Rs 330-400, set breakfast/lunch/dinner Rs 350/650/900; 🏠 🚗) Near the park entrance is this imposing former hunting lodge of the maharajas of Alwar. There's a pot-holed driveway leading from opposite the Forest Reception Office. Rooms have LCD TVs, soaring ceilings and soft mattresses. Those in the annexe by the swimming pool have newer interiors and good views. The Fusion Restaurant here serves expensive Indian and Continental dishes and guests can help themselves to the buffet. It's set in 20 hectares, and it's possible to take short horse and camel rides around the grounds.

**Amanbagh** (☎ 065-68873337; www.amanresorts.com; r from US\$650; 🏠 🚗 🚗) Set some way away, isolated among the folds of the Aravalli range, is this vastly opulent hotel. It's a lush walled

compound that was once a site for the hunting camps of the maharaja of Alwar. Amanbagh means 'peaceful garden'. The splendid rooms have domed ceilings and huge baths – it's like walking into a movie set – and the most expensive have a private pool. The resort is just 10km from Bhangarh.

### Getting There & Away

Sariska is 35km from Alwar, a convenient town from which to approach the sanctuary. There are frequent buses from Alwar (Rs 18, one to 1½ hours, at least hourly) and on to Jaipur (Rs 67). Buses stop in front of the Forest Reception Office.

### AJMER

☎ 0145 / pop 485,197

Ajmer is a bustling chaotic city around 130km southwest of Jaipur. Situated beside the tranquil lake of Ana Sagar, and surrounded by barren Aravalli hills, Ajmer is Rajasthan's most important place in terms of Islamic history and heritage. It contains one of India's most important Muslim pilgrimage centres – the shrine of Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti, a venerated Sufi saint who founded the Chishtiya order, the prime Sufi order in India today. As well as some superb examples of early Muslim architecture, Ajmer is also a significant centre for the Jain religion, possessing an amazing golden Jain temple. However, most travellers just use Ajmer as a stepping stone to nearby Pushkar, a supremely sacred town to Hindus and former hippy hang-out. With Ajmer's combination of high-voltage crowds, commerce and traffic, most travellers choose to stay in laid-back Pushkar, and visit on a day trip.

Ajmer gets very busy during Ramadan, and the anniversary of the saint's death – the Urs (see p185).

### History

Ajmer has always had great strategic importance. Located on the major trade route between Delhi and the ports of Gujarat, it was fought over for centuries. Its significance was such that its rulers, from the time of the Turks until the East India Company, tried to keep Ajmer under direct control.

The city was founded in the 7th century by Ajaipal Chauhan, who constructed a hill fort and named the place Ajaimeru (Invincible Hill). Ajmer was ruled by the Chauhans until

the late 12th century, when Prithviraj Chauhan lost it to Mohammed of Ghor. It became part of the sultanate in Delhi and remained so until 1326. Ajmer then entered a tumultuous period when it was continually fought over by surrounding states, including the sultans of Delhi and Gujarat, and the rulers of Mewar (Udaipur) and Marwar (Jaipur).

Later in its history, Ajmer became a favourite residence of the great Mughals. One of the first contacts between the Mughals and the British occurred in Ajmer when Sir Thomas Roe met Emperor Jehangir (who lived here for three years) in 1616.

In 1659 Aurangzeb battled and won here against his brother Dara Shikoh, changing the course of succession and signalling the end of the Mughal empire.

The city was subsequently taken by the Scindias and, in 1818, was handed over to the British, becoming one of the few places in Rajasthan controlled directly by the British rather than being part of a princely state. The British set up Mayo College here in 1875, a prestigious school in an overexcited building, exclusively for the Indian nobility. Today it's open to all boys (whose parents can afford the fees). Other monuments that stand as reminders of Ajmer's colonial past are the Edward Memorial Hall, Ajmer Club and Jubilee Clock Tower.

### Orientation

The main bus stand is close to the RTDC Hotel Khadim on the east side of town. Most of the hotels are west of the train station. Northwest of the main post office is Naya Bazaar (known for its silver jewellery and tied-dyed fabrics) and Agra Gate. Further north is the large artificial Lake Ana Sagar.

### Information

Ajmer has several ATMs, including an IDBI ATM on Jaipur Rd.

**Bank of Baroda** (Prithviraj Marg; ☎ 10am-3pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) Changes travellers cheques and does credit-card advances and has an ATM.

**JLN Hospital** (☎ 2625500; Daulat Bagh)

**Main post office** (Prithviraj Marg; ☎ 10am-1pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat) Less than 500m from the train station.

**Satguru's Internet** (60-61 Kutcheri Rd; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 8am-10pm)

**State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur ATM** (Kutcheri Rd)

**State Bank of India** (☎ 2627048; ☎ 10am-2pm & 2.30-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Opposite the Collector-

ate, changes travellers cheques and currency and has an ATM.

**Surya Tours & Travels** (☎ 2631731; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) In the forecourt of the RTDC Hotel Khadim, this helpful travel agent can arrange transport and tickets.

**Tourist office** RTDC Hotel Khadim (☎ 2627426; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Sat); train station (☎ 10am-2pm & 2.30-5pm Mon-Sat)

### Sights

#### ANA SAGAR

This large lake, created in the 12th century by damming the River Luni, is set against a blue-grey hilly spine that merges into its surface. On its bank is a park, the **Subash Bagh & Dault Bagh**, containing a series of marble pavilions erected in 1637 by Shah Jahan. There are good views towards Ajmer from the hill beside the Dault Bagh, particularly at sunset. It's a popular place for an evening stroll, though you may get quite a lot of attention. Pedalos and motorboats can be hired from the Fun N Joy Boat Club.

#### DARGAH OF KHWAJA MUIN-UD-DIN CHISHTI

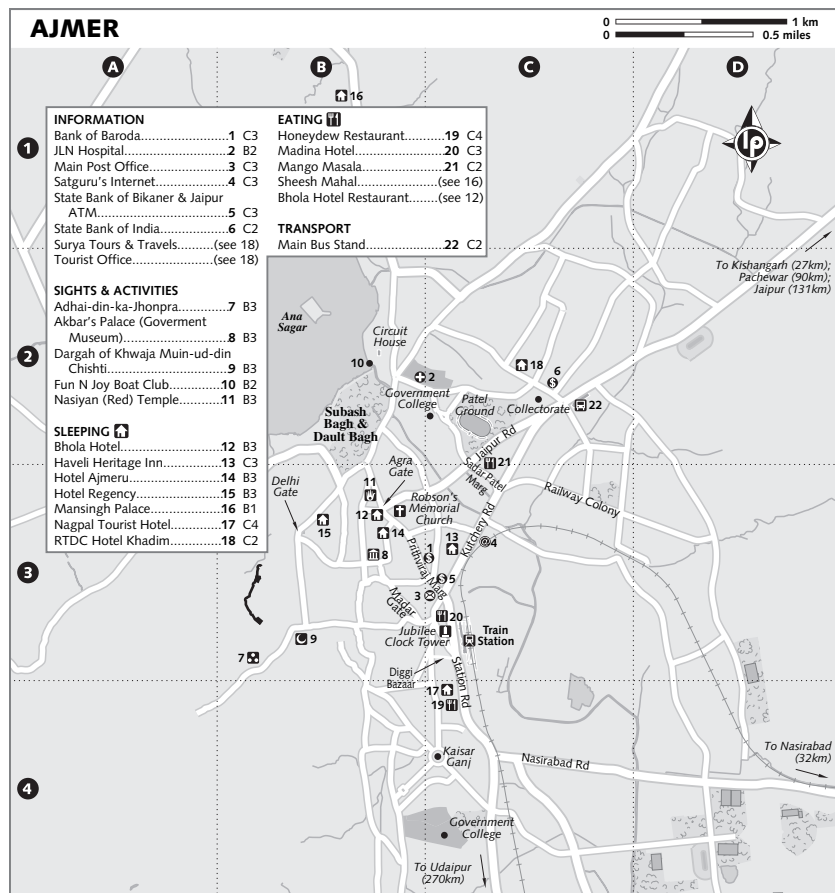
The dargah was packed. Tens of thousands of devotees from all over India and beyond were milling around. Ecstasies and madmen were shrieking to themselves, beating their foreheads against the stone railings on the tomb. Blind beggars stumbled around with their alms bowls. Women discreetly suckled young babies under the folds of their saris.

*William Dalrymple, City of Djinns*

Situated at the foot of a hill and in the old part of town is the **dargah of Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti** (www.dargahajmer.com; ☎ 5am-9pm winter, 4am-9pm summer), India's most important Muslim pilgrimage site.

This is the tomb of a Sufi saint Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti, who came to Ajmer from Persia in 1192 and died here in 1236. The tomb gained its significance during the time of the Mughals – many emperors added to the buildings here. Construction of the shrine was completed by Humayun, and the gate was added by the nizam (ruler of Hyderabad). Akbar used to make the pilgrimage to the dargah from Agra every year.

You have to cover your head in certain parts of the shrine, so remember to take a



scarf or cap, although there are plenty for sale at the colourful bazaar leading to the dargah, along with floral offerings and delicious Muslim toffees.

Following a fatal bomb blast in October 2007, security is extremely tight adding to the usual bottleneck of pilgrims at the entrance. The first gate is the Nizam Gate, built in 1915 up some steps to protect it from the rains. The green and white mosque, **Akbari Masjid**, on the right was constructed by Akbar in 1571 and is now Moinuia Usmania Darul-Uloom, an Arabic and Persian School for religious education. The second gate was built by Shah Jahan, and is often called the Nakkarkhana because it has two large *nakkharas* (drums) fixed above it.

In an inner court there is another mosque, built by Shah Jahan. Of white marble, it has 11 arches and a Persian inscription running the full length of the building.

The third gate, Buland Darwaza, dates from the 16th century. It's tall – about 28m high – and whitewashed, and leads into the dargah courtyard.

Flanking the entrance of the courtyard are the *degs*, large iron cauldrons (one donated by Akbar in 1567, the other by Jehangir in 1631) for offerings for the poor. Sometimes someone will sponsor a cauldron and they will be filled with porridge to be distributed to the needy (one *deg* feeds around 70 people). In the past this gave rise to a specialist profession, known as 'looting the *degs*' – people wearing protec-

tive clothes would dive into the cauldrons to distribute the food. Today it's more boringly distributed using large ladders.

The saint's tomb has a marble dome, and the tomb inside is surrounded by a silver platform. Pilgrims believe that the saint's spirit will intercede on their behalf in matters of illness, business or personal problems, so the notes and holy string attached to the railings around are thanks or requests.

At the entrance, *khadims* (Muslim holy servants or mosque attendants) wielding donation books will ask you for cash (there are 4000 *khadims* in Ajmer!). It's likely you'll be asked for still more money inside, where you might be blessed with the edge of the tomb blanket. If you don't want to give, just be firm about it or give a small amount.

Despite the hustle, it's a fascinating shrine with a sense of profound significance. It's good to visit in the evening, when it's decorated in twinkling lights and there are Qawwali singers, who sing verses in praise of the Prophet and saints. These verses can have a powerful effect – it's said that Khwaja Sahib once heard a verse devoted to the Prophet and was so ecstatic that he fainted and was unconscious for seven nights and days.

Pilgrims and Sufis come from all over the world on the anniversary of the saint's death, the Urs (when William Dalrymple visited). The anniversary is celebrated in the seventh month of the lunar calendar, Jyaistha (the dates are variable, so check with the tourist office). The saint retired to his cloister for a long meditation, and when it was opened six days later he was dead, hence the festival lasts six days. It's an interesting time, but the crowds can be suffocating – praying people line the streets all the way down from the dargah. Many pilgrims also come here in the month of Ramadan.

#### ADHAI-DIN-KA-JHONPRA & TARAGARH

Beyond the dargah, on the town outskirts, are the extraordinary ruins of the **Adhai-din-ka-Jhonpra** (Two-and-a-Half-Day Building) mosque. According to legend, construction in 1153 took 2½ days. Others say it was named after a festival lasting 2½ days. It was built as a Sanskrit college, but in 1198 Mohammed of Ghori seized Ajmer and converted the building into a mosque by adding a seven-arched wall covered with Islamic calligraphy in front of the pillared hall.

Although in need of restoration, it's an exquisite piece of architecture, with soaring domes, pillars and a beautiful arched screen, largely built from pieces of Jain and Hindu temples.

About 3km and a steep 1½-hour climb beyond the mosque, the ancient **Taragarh** (Star Fort) commands a superb view over the city (accessible by car). Built by Ajaipal Chauhan, the town's founder, it saw lots of military action during Mughal times and was later used as a British sanatorium.

#### NASIYAN (RED) TEMPLE

This marvellous Jain temple (Prithviraj Marg; admission Rs 5, camera Rs 15; ☎ 8am-4.30pm) was built in 1865. It's also known as the Golden Temple, due to its amazing display – its double-storey temple hall is filled with a huge golden diorama depicting the Jain concept of the ancient world, with 13 continents and oceans, the intricate golden city of Ayodhya, flying peacock and elephant gondolas, and gilded elephants with many tusks. The hall is decorated with gold, silver and precious stones. It's unlike any other temple in Rajasthan and is worth a visit. Children will like it, too.

#### AKBAR'S PALACE

Not far from the main post office, Akbar built this imposing building in 1570 – partly as a pleasure retreat, but mainly to keep an eye on pesky local chiefs. This is just part of the impressive fortifications originally built by Akbar. It saw life as an arms magazine during the British rule, and is still known locally as the 'Magazine'. It houses the **government museum** (admission Rs 3; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu), with a small collection of old weapons, miniature paintings, ancient rock inscriptions and stone sculptures that date back to the 8th century.

#### Sleeping

Commission rackets are ingrained in Ajmer: you'll be accosted by cycle-rickshaws and autorickshaw drivers the minute you step off the bus or train. On top of this, the hotels here offer poor service and soulless atmosphere – it's a far better idea to stay in nearby Pushkar.

A good alternative to hotels is to stay in one of the homes participating in Ajmer's Paying Guest House Scheme, which gives you the opportunity to stay with an Indian family. Rates range from around Rs 200 to Rs 800

### THE INCLUSIVE SAINT

Born in eastern Persia sometime in 1138 or 1139, Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti was orphaned in his early teens and lived on the proceeds of his ancestral orchards. According to legend, a holy man passed his garden and when Khwaja rushed out to greet him, the holy man gave him some food that enlightened him. Khwaja then renounced all worldly goods, became a fakir (Muslim holy man) and began to wander in search of knowledge. He visited Samarkand and Bukhara, great centres of Islamic learning, and absorbed all he could from great Central Asian Sufis – theirs was an Islam with an emphasis on devotion, mysticism and miracles. He then settled in Baghdad, and later made a pilgrimage to Medina for the haj, where he heard a divine voice telling him to go to Hindustan. Now in his 50s, he wandered to India, arriving in Ajmer in around 1190, where he settled on a hill by Ana Sagar. His beliefs and life of meditation and fasting – it's said he only ate one chapati every eight days – had brought him great renown, and people flocked to him to hear his teachings. Even Mohammed of Ghori took time off raiding temples to pay his respects to the holy man.

His preachings were notably generous and inclusive. He spoke to Hindus as much as to Muslims, emphasising that theirs were different approaches along the same path. Hindus could relate to many aspects of Sufism (for example, holy men renouncing everything except faith bears considerable resemblance to Hindu practice). He preached against discrimination and differentiation between believers of different faiths.

In 1236 he died, aged 97, and was buried in his simple brick cell, now covered by its elaborate shrine. In tribute to his teachings and beliefs, it is regarded as a holy place by people of many different faiths.

per night depending on the facilities provided. The tourist office (p201) has details about these guesthouses.

### BUDGET

**RTDC Hotel Khadim** (☎ 2627490; dm Rs 100, s/d from Rs 350/450, with AC Rs 990/1200; 🚻) This unexciting option is near the bus stand and has reasonable, though dreary budget rooms that aren't bad value.

**Nagpal Tourist Hotel** (☎ 2429503; Station Rd; s Rs 225-400, d Rs 500, s/d with AC Rs 900/950; 🚻) Nagpal is friendly though a typical low-budget business hotel with uninspiring rooms. The non-air-con rooms are not all that clean but the air-con rooms are much better and almost worth the increased expense. It's in a good location next to the recommended Honeydew restaurant (opposite) and near the train station.

**Bhola Hotel** (☎ 2432844; Agra Gate, Prithviraj Marg; s/d Rs 250/350) Opposite the church, southeast of Agra Gate, this hotel is friendly and one of the better budget options, though being near the road it is a bit noisy. There are five nondescript but tolerably clean rooms. It has a vegetarian restaurant (opposite) serving a decent thali.

**Hotel Ajmeru** (☎ 2431103; Khailand Market; s/d from Rs 450/550, with AC Rs 800/1100; 🚻) This welcoming hotel with a veg restaurant can be

found just past the narrow Kotwali Gate off Prithviraj Marg. It was undergoing extensive renovation when we visited; expect bland, comfortable, freshly painted rooms with TVs and phones.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Haveli Heritage Inn** (☎ 2621607; Kutchery Rd; r Rs 500-1600) Set in an old and modest *haveli*, this is a welcoming city-centre oasis and arguably Ajmer's best choice. The high-ceilinged rooms are quite large and clean though a bit worn and run-down. There's a pleasant, grassy courtyard and the hotel is infused with a family atmosphere, complete with home-cooked meals.

**Hotel Regency** (☎ 2620296; s/d from Rs 550/600, with AC from Rs 825/875) Although a typically insipid business hotel with overpriced rooms, the Regency is close to the dargah, and a good base for exploring the alleys of old Ajmer. Rooms are serviceable but dreary.

**Mansingh Palace** (☎ 2425956; Circular Rd; s/d from Rs 4000/4500; 🚻 🍷) This modern place, overlooking Ana Sagar, is Ajmer's only top-end hotel. It's rather out of the way, but has attractive and comfortable, though overpriced, rooms, some with views and balconies. The hotel has a shady garden, a bar and an acceptable restaurant, the Sheesh Mahal (opposite).

### Eating

Ajmer has a few good options, and there is also a flourishing trade in ice creams and cakes.

**Bhola Hotel Restaurant** (☎ 2432844; Agra Gate, Prithviraj Marg; mains Rs 15-50; 🍷 11am-10pm) This place (see opposite) has a gloomy but surprisingly appealing and good-value veg restaurant at the top of a seedy staircase. Tasty thalis cost Rs 50.

**Mango Masala** (☎ 2422100; Sadar Patel Marg; mains Rs 35-90; 🍷 11am-11pm) With dim, barlike lighting and nursery school décor, this no-alcohol veg restaurant is where Ajmer's teens hang out. There's an imaginative menu of pizzas, Chinese, and North and South Indian vegetarian food – tasty and freshly cooked. There are also cakes, ice cream, hotel-cream sodas and mocktails.

**Madina Hotel** (Station Rd; mains Rs 40-55; 🍷 9am-11pm) Handy if you're waiting for a train (it's opposite the station), this simple, open-to-the-street eatery cooks up cheap veg and nonveg fare, with specialities such as chicken Mughlai and *rumali roti* (huge paper-thin chapati).

**Honeydew Restaurant** (☎ 2622498; Station Rd; mains Rs 40-110; 🍷 9am-11pm). The Honeydew offers a great selection of veg and nonveg Indian, Chinese and Continental food in a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere. It has long been Ajmer's best, and is the restaurant of choice for Mayo College students' midterm treat. It's just near the Nagpal Tourist Hotel.

**Sheesh Mahal** (mains Rs 80-160; 🍷 noon-3pm & 7-10.30pm) This upmarket restaurant, located in the Mansingh Palace, offers Indian, Continental and Chinese dishes as well as a buffet when the tour groups pass through. The service is slick and the food is palatable and it boasts a bar.

### Getting There & Away

#### BUS

There are frequent buses going from Ajmer to Pushkar (local/express/starline Rs 6/7/8, 30 minutes), which leave from the main bus stand. Regular RSRTC buses go to and from the places listed in the table and beyond. The inquiry number is ☎ 2429398.

In addition, there are private buses to these destinations – many companies have offices on Kutchery Rd. If you book your ticket to one of these destinations through an agency in Pushkar, they should provide a free transfer to Ajmer to start your journey.

#### TRAIN

There are no tourist quotas for many Ajmer trains, so book early; go to booth 5 at the

### BUSES FROM AJMER

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)
Bikaner	131	8
Bundi	91	5
Chittor	110	5
Delhi	205	9
Jaipur	69/AC	
	114	2½
Jodhpur	109	6
Kota	106	6
Udaipur	150	8

train station's **reservations office** (📞 8am-2pm & 2.15-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun). **Surya Tours & Travels** (☎ 2631731; 🍷 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) in the forecourt of the RTDC Hotel Khadim can arrange tickets.

Ajmer is a busy station on the Delhi–Jaipur–Ahmedabad–Mumbai line. The *Shatabdi Express* (2016/5, Thursday to Tuesday) runs between Ajmer and Delhi (AC chair/1st class, Rs 645/1200, four hours) via Jaipur (Rs 300/575). It leaves Delhi at 6.10am and arrives in Ajmer at 1pm. Going the other way, the train leaves Ajmer at 3.50pm, arriving in Jaipur at 5.35pm and in Delhi at 10.40pm. There's also the 2957 *Rajdhani Express* to Delhi (3 AC/2 AC/1 AC, Rs 660/895/1530, seven hours), which leaves Ajmer at 12.35am.

The *Delhi-Ahmedabad Mail* (9105/6) departs from Ajmer at 8.28pm and arrives in Delhi (sleeper/3 AC/2 AC Rs 200/531/740) at 6.30am. Heading for Gujarat, the train leaves Ajmer at 7.40am and arrives in Ahmedabad (sleeper/3 AC/2 AC Rs 215/574/800) at 5.35pm.

The *Ajmer Udaipur City Express* (2992) leaves at 6.15am, arriving in Udaipur (2nd class/AC chair Rs 103/346) at 11.40am via Chittorgarh (Rs 80/266; 9.20am).

### Getting Around

There are plenty of autorickshaws (anywhere in town should cost around Rs 25), as well as cheaper cycle-rickshaws and tongas.

### AROUND AJMER

#### Kishangarh

☎ 01463 / pop 116,000

Kishangarh is 27km northeast of Ajmer and was founded in the early 17th century by Kishan Singh, a Rathore prince. Since the 18th century the town of Kishangarh has

been associated with one of India's most famous schools of miniature painting. Among its renowned works is the *Bani Thani* painting by Kishangarh master Nihal Chand – a sensual, graceful portrayal of Krishna's consort, Radha, depicted with exaggeratedly slanting, almond-shaped eyes – you'll see this reprinted all over Rajasthan. Today local artists are trying to revive this magnificent school of painting by making copies of the originals on surfaces such as wood, stone and cloth (the originals were done on paper). Kishangarh is also famous for painted wooden furniture.

Kishangarh town is divided into the charming old city and the less-charming new part, which is mainly commercial. Pollution is steadily increasing, along with the growing number of dusty marble factories and textile mills.

### SLEEPING

**Phool Mahal Palace** (☎ /fax 01463-247405; www.royalkishangarh.com; s/d Rs 2400/2800; ♿ ♿) This romantic heritage building on the shores of Gundalao Lake was built in 1870 as a 'monsoon palace'. The lake fills after the monsoon rains and the palace, with its looming backdrop of Kishangarh Fort, is very picturesque. Nevertheless the waters have taken their toll and the rambling hotel is rather musty and insect prone. Fresh frescoes brighten the otherwise drab and overpriced rooms.

**Roopangarh Fort** (☎ /fax 01497-220444; www.royalkishangarh.com; s/d Rs 2750/3300, ste Rs 4900; ♿ ♿) About 25km out of town, Roopangarh Fort has been converted into an evocative hotel. Roopangarh was the capital of this province for about 100 years and was never conquered, despite being repeatedly attacked by its neighbouring states. The fort was founded in 1653 by Maharaja Roop Singh, the fifth ruler of Kishangarh, who was inspired to make this site his capital after watching a mother sheep gallantly protect her lambs from a pack of hungry wolves. Rooms are large, and decorated with lots of traditional furniture. The road to the fort passes through a timeless village, where it seems life has been the same for centuries. The hotel can arrange village tours, bird-watching, and camel, horse or jeep safaris, and if you stay here you can view the maharaja's private collection of miniatures. The fort itself is well endowed with fine paintings.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Frequent daily buses go between Ajmer and Kishangarh (Rs 18).

### Tilonia

☎ 01463

In Tilonia village, located about 25km north-east of Kishangarh and 7km off the Ajmer to Jaipur road, is the inspiring **Barefoot College** (☎ 01463-288204; www.barefootcollege.org); see opposite. This NGO is run by and for villagers, and uses their skills for development work in the area to address problems of water supply, housing, education, health and employment. Part of the complex is devoted to an impressive showroom where goods made by villagers are on sale – it's a fantastic place to pick up high-quality, reasonably priced souvenirs, including everything from textiles to furniture and leather goods. Other great gifts include bell *totas* (colourful strings of stuffed birds), painted ceramic bowls and wooden toys. All proceeds go towards maintaining and developing rural projects.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

The easiest way to get to Tilonia is to hire a taxi, which should cost around Rs 600 return from Ajmer or Pushkar. From Ajmer you can take a Harmara bus (Rs 23) and ask to be dropped off at Tilonia. There are also buses from Kishangarh (Rs 10). The Barefoot College centre is about 1km from the bus stop.

### Pachewar

☎ 01437

This little village, about 90km east of Ajmer, has a lake that attracts migratory birds in winter. It has an imposing fort, once ruled by the Khangarot Rajputs. Thakur Anoop Singh Khangarot captured the fort of Ranthambhore from the Marathas and annexed it to his family allies in Jaipur. To reward him, Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh I of Jaipur granted him the Pachewar territory in 1758.

**Pachewar Garh** (☎ 01437-28756, in Jaipur 0141-2601007; s/d Rs 1800/2200, with AC Rs 2100/2500; ♿ ♿) is the impressive 300-year-old fort. The spacious rooms are furnished with antiques, and some are splendidly decorated with frescoes. The hotel can also arrange village safaris.

### PUSHKAR

☎ 0145 / pop 14,789

Pushkar has a magnetism all of its own, and is quite unlike anywhere else in Rajasthan. It's a prominent Hindu pilgrimage town and devout Hindus should visit at least once in their lifetime. The town curls around a holy lake,

### BAREFOOT COLLEGE

Barefoot College is an NGO mixing radical change with respect for traditional knowledge. The college emphasises that it values people without qualifications, degrees, certificates or the usual signals of expertise. It values people who are dispossessed and deprived, and invests in their training in order to benefit the community in which they live. It teaches people new respect for themselves and for their capabilities, as well as humility and openness to new knowledge.

The entire complex is solar powered, and Barefoot has been instrumental in bringing solar power to many communities. It's even pulled women out of purdah to teach them how to become solar-power engineers. Other major projects are the installation of hand pumps and the implementation of rainwater harvesting projects. Local people, including significant numbers of women, have been trained to maintain the systems.

Barefoot makes great use of puppet shows in poor rural areas, and has trained puppeteers to communicate with semiliterate communities, with shows on health, education and human rights. Use of a medium such as puppetry is typical of its work, as it is appropriate to the environment, based on the long Rajasthani tradition of storytelling and education through puppet theatre. Barefoot communicators also include screen-printers, photographers and filmmakers, who help get similar messages across with more modern means.

Officially known as the Social Work & Research Centre, Barefoot College was set up in 1972 and since then has pioneered many creative ideas like this to promote self-reliance in poor communities. Other programmes include night schools that give working adults and children access to education, and a variety of schemes that promote the work of low-caste artisans on fair-trade principles.

The organisation is largely supported by the government and international donors. However, the handicrafts section employs around 300 women – often homebound and unable to pursue other work because of the tradition of purdah – who are able to support their families through their skills. You can support the college's efforts and check out the project by visiting the craft showroom at Tilonia.

said to have appeared when Brahma dropped a lotus flower. It also has one of the world's few Brahma temples (p210). With 52 sky-blue bathing ghats and 400 milky temples, the town literally hums with regular *pujas* (prayers) generating an episodic soundtrack of chanting, drums and gongs, and devotional songs.

Besides pilgrims, travellers have long discovered Pushkar's charms, and small, white-washed budget guesthouses almost outnumber the temples and *dharamsalas* (pilgrims guesthouses). Many visitors reach here and grind to a satisfied halt, experimenting variously with spirituality, bhong (marijuana) and facial hair. Time can slip by very easily in Pushkar.

The result of this magnetism is a muddle of religious and tourist scenes. The main street is one long bazaar, selling anything to tickle a traveller's fancy, from hippy-chic tie-dye to didgeridoos. Despite the commercialism and banana pancakes, the town remains enchantingly small and authentically mystic. You can help preserve the spiritual balance by respecting tradition and dressing appropriately and abiding by local restrictions (no

alcohol, meat or eggs, and no public displays of affection).

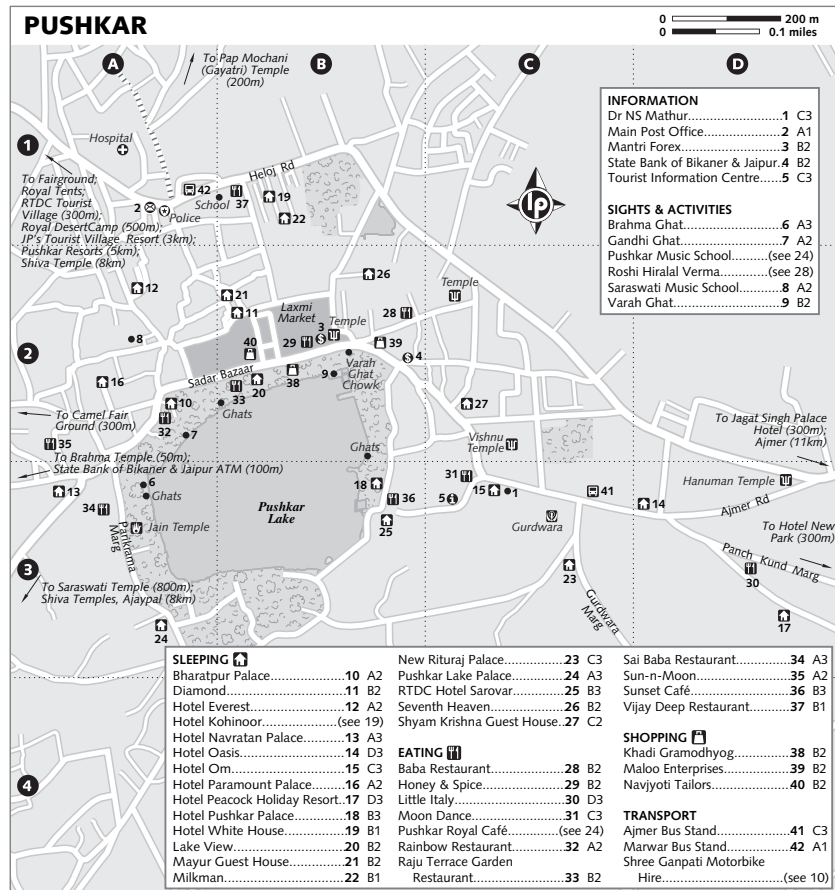
Pushkar is world famous for its spectacular camel fair (p185), which takes place here in the Hindu lunar month of Kartika (October/November). If you're anywhere nearby at the time, you'd be crazy to miss it.

During this period the town is jam-packed with tribal people from all over Rajasthan, pilgrims from all over India, and filmmakers and tourists from all over the world. And there are plenty of camels and other livestock (it's best to arrive a few days before the official start to see serious trading).

Pushkar is only 11km from Ajmer but separated from it by Nag Pahar, the Snake Mountain.

### Orientation

The pastel town surrounds the deep green Pushkar Lake, with its many bathing ghats and fabulous temples. Pushkar town remains small despite the constant stream of visitors, and it's a twisting maze of narrow streets filled with interesting little shops, food stalls, hotels



and temples. Fortunately, there is very little motorised traffic in the main bazaar, making it a pleasurable place to explore at leisure – though watch out for idiots on motorbikes. The town is very tourist-friendly and most people speak some English, so you should have no problem finding your way around.

## Information

Cash and travellers cheques may be changed at places along Sadar Bazaar Rd, but check the commission first. There's an ATM near the Brahma temple. Many places also offer (slow) internet services for Rs 20 per hour.

**Hospital** (☎ 2772029) North of the post office.

**Main post office** (☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Just south of the hospital.

**Mantri Forex** (Sadar Bazaar; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques and provides internet.

**State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur** (☎ 2772006;

☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) Changes travellers cheques and currency.

**Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 2772040; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) Sells a town map (Rs 10).

## Dangers & Annoyances

Priests – some genuine, some not – will approach you near the ghats and offer to do a *puja* (prayer) for which you'll receive a 'Pushkar passport' (a red ribbon around your wrist). Others proffer flowers (to avoid trouble, avoid taking any flowers that you are offered). In either case you'll be asked to add up your family members whose happiness

is surely worth multiple Rs 100. You could always try denying your family, or massively exaggerating their number to get a reduction on bulk purchase. However, you can choose to avoid encouraging these pushy, unprincipled 'priests' altogether – they can become unpleasantly aggressive. At least don't be bullied and agree on a price beforehand. The priests will suggest anything from Rs 101 to Rs 1001 (they add the 1 for luck), and beyond! An offering of Rs 11 or Rs 21 is enough, though you'll probably have trouble getting one of these priests to accept this. Be prepared for an earful of abuse if you don't give the priest as much as they want, and try not to let this spoil your visit to the lake.

You can try reporting people to the tourist office if they get you down. If enough people make a fuss, the tourism authorities may address the problem.

On the other hand, flowers are offered at the Brahma Temple, where there are simply donation boxes. Here you can offer flowers and sacred sweets for the happiness of your friends, family and everyone you've ever known – and still have change for a *masala* chai.

During the camel fair, Pushkar is besieged by pickpockets working the crowded bazaars.

You can avoid the razor gang by not using thin-walled daypacks and by carrying your daypack in front of you.

## Sights

### TEMPLES

Pushkar boasts hundreds of temples, though few are particularly ancient, as they were mostly desecrated by Aurangzeb and subsequently rebuilt. Most famous is the **Brahma Temple**, said to be one of the few such temples in the world as a result of a curse by Brahma's consort, Saraswati (see p210). The temple is marked by a red spire, and over the entrance gateway is the *hans* (goose symbol) of Brahma. Inside, the floor and walls are engraved with dedications to the dead.

The one-hour trek up to the hilltop **Saraswati Temple** overlooking the lake is best made before dawn, though the views are fantastic at any time of day. The sunrise views over town from the closer **Pap Mochani (Gayatri) Temple**, reached by a track behind the Marwar bus stand, are also well worth the 30-minute climb.

About 8km southwest of the town (past the turn-off to Savitri) is a collection of **Shiva temples** near Ajaypal, which make a great trip by motorbike (or bike if you're fit and start

## PUSHKAR CAMEL FAIR

Come the month of Kartik, the eighth lunar month of the Hindu calendar and one of the holiest, Thar camel drivers spruce up their ships of the desert and start the long walk to Pushkar in time for Kartik Purnima (full moon). Each year around 200,000 people converge here, bringing with them some 50,000 camels, horses and cattle. The place becomes an extraordinary swirl of colour, sound and movement, thronged with musicians, mystics, tourists, traders, animals, devotees and camera crews.

Trading begins a week before the official fair (a good time to arrive to see the serious business), but by the time the RTDC mela starts, business takes a back seat and the bizarre sidelines (snake charmers, children balancing on poles) jostle onto centre stage. Even the tourist board's cultural programme is bizarre: moustache contests, turban tying contests, or seeing how many people can balance on a camel.

It's hard to believe, but this seething mass is all just a sideshow. Kartik Purnima is when Hindu pilgrims come to bathe in Pushkar's sacred waters. The religious event builds in tandem with the camel fair in a wild, magical crescendo of incense, chanting and processions to dousing day, the last night of the fair, when thousands of devotees wash away their sins and set candles afloat on the holy lake.

Although fantastical, mystical and a one-off, it must be said that it's also crowded, touristy, noisy (light sleepers should bring earplugs) and tacky. Those affected by dust and/or animal hair should bring appropriate medication. However, it's a grand epic, and not to be missed if you're anywhere within camel-spitting distance.

It usually takes place in October or November:

2008	2009	2010	2011
5-13 Nov	25 Oct-2 Nov	13-21 Nov	2-10 Nov

### DREAMER OF THE UNIVERSE

According to one Indian saying, GOD stands for Generation, Operation, Destruction, and the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are respectively responsible for these three tasks. Of the three, Brahma, the Creator, is the most mysterious. Unlike Vishnu and Shiva, he is rarely worshipped, although reality itself is Brahma's dream. Each of his lifetimes spans 311,040,000,000,000 human years and corresponds to a great cycle of the universe, at the end of which it is destroyed by Shiva. Then Brahma is reborn to dream it all again.

Brahma is usually depicted with four bearded faces facing the four directions, and four hands, each holding one of the four books of the Vedas (Books of Knowledge). His vehicle is the swan and his consort is Saraswati, the Goddess of Education.

According to legend, the sacred lake of Pushkar sprang up at the spot where Brahma dropped a lotus flower from the sky. Pushkar takes its name from this incident – *push* means 'flower' and *kar* means 'hand'. Brahma wanted to perform a *yagna* (self-mortification) at the lake on a full-moon night, a ceremony that required the presence of his consort. But Saraswati was late. Irritated, Brahma quickly married a convenient milkmaid named Gayatri, and when Saraswati arrived she discovered Gayatri seated in her own honoured place beside Brahma. Saraswati was understandably furious and vowed that Brahma would be forgotten by the people of the earth. It was a profound curse and the gods pleaded with her to reconsider. Finally she relented, decreeing that he could be worshipped, but only in Pushkar. Since then, the Brahma temple at Pushkar has remained one of the only temples in the world dedicated to Brahma and allegedly the only one in India. Meanwhile, Saraswati and Gayatri receive their *pujas* at separate temples, at opposite ends of the town.

early in the day), through barren hills and quiet villages. Be warned: the track is hilly and rocky. Another Shiva temple is about 8km north, tucked down inside a cave, which would make for a good excursion.

### GHATS

Fifty-two bathing ghats surround the lake, where pilgrims bathe in the sacred waters. If you wish to join them, do it with respect; remember, this is a holy place. Remove your shoes and don't smoke, kid around or take photographs.

Some ghats have particular importance: Vishnu appeared at **Varah Ghat** in the form of a boar, Brahma bathed at **Brahma Ghat** and Gandhi's ashes were sprinkled at **Gandhi Ghat** (formerly Gau Ghat).

### Activities

#### REFLEXOLOGY

**Dr NS Mathur** (☎ 9828103031; Shri Raghu Nathji Temple; 🕒 10.30am-6.30pm) provides back, hand and foot reflexology (from Rs 200), which will most certainly take your mind off any pains you might have had. The doctor also teaches reiki.

### Courses MUSIC

The **Saraswati Music School** (☎ 2773124; Mainon Ka Chowk) teaches classical tabla (drums), flute,

singing and *kathak* (classical dance). Birju, who's been playing for around 20 years, charges from Rs 350 for two hours, and, for an intensive bout, you can live in for Rs 500 a night. He often conducts evening performances (8pm to 9.30pm), and also sells instruments.

**Pushkar Music School** (☎ 5121277; Pushkar Lake Palace, Parakrama Marg) teaches classical sitar, tabla, harmonium, dancing and more, for Rs 150 per hour in a peaceful lakeside location. It is affiliated to the Hidden Light Foundation ([www.hidden-light.org](http://www.hidden-light.org)).

### YOGA & HEALING

For reiki, yoga and shiatsu, Reiki Master Roshi Hiralal Verma is based at Baba Restaurant (p213). Costs depend on the duration and nature of your session.

Dr NS Mathur (see left) is also a teacher of reiki (I/II Rs 1500/2500), and his daughter teaches yoga and provides beauty treatments.

### Tours

#### HORSE & CAMEL SAFARIS

Lots of people in Pushkar offer horse or camel safaris, which are a good way to see the lovely landscape – a mixture of desert and the rocky hills – around town. They're far removed from the camel-crazy hype of Jaisalmer. A safari here is entirely different from one over in

the west of the state – don't expect iconic sweeping dunes; it's more of a chance to have a rural ramble and visit some little-known spots. It's best to ask your hotel, a travel agent or other travellers to recommend somebody who organises good trips.

For camels, the prices per hour/three hours are quoted at about Rs 100/300, or Rs 500 per day for two or more days. Horses per hour/day can be similarly hired for around Rs 200/500.

Most organisers are happy to tailor-make a safari and they have good suggestions about places of interest in and around Pushkar. If you want to get off the beaten track, you can arrange a safari all the way to Jaisalmer, a journey of about four weeks. Camel safaris are a splendid way to experience the rugged beauty of the countryside.

### Sleeping

Owing to Pushkar's status among backpackers, there are far more budget options than midrange though many have a selection of midrange-priced rooms. The explosion in visitor numbers over recent years has seen an explosion in budget hotels – most are basic, clean, whitewashed and well run, though few are legally registered businesses. They can be small and windowless, so to avoid a cell, ask to see a few rooms. There are a couple of choice upmarket options here, too.

At the time of the camel fair, prices multiply five to 10 times; it's best to book several weeks, even months, ahead.

### BUDGET

**Hotel Om** (☎ 2772672; [www.hotelompushkar.com](http://www.hotelompushkar.com); r Rs 70-500; 📍 📍) Near the Vishnu temple, Om has a peaceful garden with an unappealing, undercover pool, and views over surrounding hills and the gurdwara (Sikh temple). Rooms are basic, air-cooled and a bit overpriced.

**Milkman** (☎ 2773452; [vinodmilkman@hotmail.com](mailto:vinodmilkman@hotmail.com); Mali Mohalla; r Rs 300-600, without bathroom Rs 80-100; 📍 📍) Milkman is a cosy guesthouse in a backstreet location with a relaxing rooftop retreat. The varying rooms are all brightly decorated with paintings and though some rooms are small and doorways are low, the bright colours, cleanliness and friendly family keep this place cheerful.

**RTDC Hotel Sarovar** (☎ 2772040; dm Rs 100, s/d Rs 400/500, with lake view Rs 600/700, with AC Rs 990/1200; 📍 📍) This hotel is set in spacious grounds

and has a great position along the eastern shore of the lake. It has more character than most RTDC places, with colonnades, arches and domes, but the rooms are generally bland and the service apathetic.

**Hotel Paramount Palace** (☎ 2772428; d Rs 150-300, without bathroom Rs 100-120, with balcony Rs 450-700) Perched on the highest point in town overlooking an old temple, this welcoming hotel has fine views. The most expensive rooms (106, 108, 109) have lovely balconies, stained glass and are good value; smaller rooms can be dingy. There's a dizzyingly magical rooftop terrace.

**Mayur Guest House** (☎ 2772302; [mayurguesthouse@hotmail.com](mailto:mayurguesthouse@hotmail.com); Holin Ka Chowk; r Rs 200-700, s without bathroom Rs 100) A pleasant blue-washed place, with neat, unspectacular rooms around a tiny leafy courtyard. Upstairs rooms have balconies and there's a cheerful welcome and more views from the rooftop.

**Hotel Kohinoor** (☎ 9414484249; Mali Mohala; r Rs 150-300) This is a simple guesthouse, more or less operating as the cheap alternative to the nearby, and related, Hotel White House at mela time. There are 11 small but spotless rooms with attached bathrooms. They vary in size so check a few.

**Hotel Everest** (☎ 2773417; r Rs 150-500; 📍) This welcoming budget hotel is secreted in the quiet laneways north of Sadar Bazaar and is convenient to the bazaar and the mela ground. It is run by a friendly father-and-son team who can't do too much for their appreciative guests. The rooms are simple, variable in size and spotless and the beds are comfortable. The roof is a pleasant retreat for meals or just relaxing with a book.

**Lake View** (☎ 2772106; Sadar Bazaar; r Rs 300-400, without bathroom Rs 200) Lake View is a long-standing place, wonderfully located above the ghats, with superb views over the lake from the restaurant. Rooms are simple and run-down, but some doubles (usually those with shared bathroom) have balconies facing the water.

**Hotel Oasis** (☎ 2772100; [www.hoteloasispushkar.net](http://www.hoteloasispushkar.net); Ajmer Rd; r from Rs 200, with AC from Rs 750; 📍 📍) Right near the Ajmer bus stand is this big hotel, which is very popular with Israeli tourists. It has large, bare rooms, which open onto long walkways overlooking the central pool. The best rooms are upstairs. Occasional loud techno might put some off.

**Bharatpur Palace** (☎ 2772320; r Rs 200-800; 📍) This rambling old building occupies one of

the best spots in Pushkar, on the upper levels of the western ghats. Room No 1 is the most romantic place to wake up: it's one room surrounded on three sides by the lake. It's possible to lie in bed with the doors open and have the lake and ghats laid out before you. Even without an attached bathroom, it's a bargain at Rs 600 (Rs 3000 during the camel fair). Room No 9 is also good, with three doors opening onto the lake. There's a variety of rooms with or without bathrooms, hot water and air-con.

**Hotel Navaratan Palace** (☎ 2772145; www.pushkarnavaratanpalace.com; s/d from Rs 250/300, with AC from Rs 500/600; 🏠 🚿) Located close to the Brahma Temple, this hotel has a lovely enclosed garden with a fabulous pool (Rs 50 for nonguests), when it is clean and operational, and children's playground. The rooms are clean, small and crammed with carved wooden furniture.

**Hotel White House** (☎ 2772147; hotelwhitehouse@hotmail.com; r without balcony Rs 350-450, with balcony Rs 550-650) This place is indeed white with spotless and airy rooms. There is also good traveller fare and fine views from the plant-filled rooftop restaurant. It is efficiently run by a tenacious businesslike mother-and-son team who plan to add rooms that have air-con. Checkout is 10am and the front door is closed at 10pm.

**Hotel Peacock Holiday Resort** (☎ 2772093; r from Rs 350-550, with air-con Rs 800-900; 🏠 🚿) Located around 500m southeast of Sadar Bazaar, Hotel Peacock has a congenial host and a cooling pool (Rs 75 for nonguests) that is set in a leafy courtyard. The cheapest rooms are rather shabby and overall the place has a well worn feel and is due for a makeover.

Some other good cheap options that are recommended:

**New Rituraj Palace** (☎ 2772875; Bamdev Marg; tents Rs 100, r Rs 150-400) This place, tucked away behind an untidy garden, has very basic rooms. At camel fair time tents are erected directly outside rooms and the place gets very crammed.

**Shyam Krishna Guest House** (☎ 2772461; r Rs 200-400, s/d without bathroom Rs 125/200) Serene, lovely old building run by Brahmins with simple, bare rooms and pleasant lawn.

**Diamond** (☎ 9828462343; Holi ka Chowk; r Rs 250-350, s without bathroom Rs 150) In a quiet part of town, Diamond has tiny rooms around a small tranquil courtyard.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

Several of these have a few budget-priced rooms and some are located a few kilometres out of town.

**JP's Tourist Village Resort** (☎ 2772067; s Rs 300-1000, d Rs 500-1500; 🏠 🚿) About 3km out of town, JP's has whimsical small, reed-roofed cottages with elaborate wooden furniture. In the shady, rambling gardens are a tree house (for the brave), a pint-sized pool and a restaurant. It's popular with families, with lots of exploring potential and kids' play equipment.

**our pick** **Seventh Heaven** (☎ 5105455; www.inn-seventh-heaven.com; Chhotti Basti; r Rs 400-1275; 🏠 🚿) You enter this lovingly converted *haveli* through heavy wooden doors into an incense-perfumed courtyard, centred with a marble fountain and featuring a fair-trade shop. There are just 12 individually decorated rooms on three levels, with traditionally crafted furniture and comfortable beds. All the rooms have their own character and vary in size from the downstairs budget rooms to the spacious 'Asana' suite. On the roof you'll find the excellent restaurant as well as sofas and swing chairs for relaxing with a book. This popular place is professionally run by the laid-back Anoop, and early booking (two-night minimum, no credit cards) is recommended.

**Hotel New Park** (☎ 2772464; www.newparkpushkar.com; Panch Kund Marg; r from Rs 500, with AC Rs 750-1200; 🏠 🚿) This is an excellent, modern hotel, located among fields of red roses in a quiet locale on the outskirts of town. Smart, modern rooms with balconies overlook the fields against a backdrop of hills and there's a pleasant rooftop restaurant sharing the view.

**Pushkar Lake Palace** (☎ 51210771; Parikrama Marg; r with/without AC Rs 1000/600; 🏠 🚿) This is a quiet, modern hotel, located close to the lake with a smashing little restaurant, the Pushkar Royal Cafe (opposite). The nonair-con rooms are nothing special but are clean and adequate. It is when you add the friendly service, the location and the good food that this hotel excels. Another bonus is the on-site Pushkar Music School (p210).

**Jagat Palace Hotel** (☎ 2772953; www.hotelpushkarpalace.com; Ajmer Rd; s/d Rs 2662/3267; 🏠 🚿) This is a lovely heritage hotel in new but traditional-designed buildings resembling a palace. It offers romantic bedrooms with carved wooden furniture and lovely bathrooms. Balconies overlook large, lush gardens and a gorgeous, secluded-feeling pool (Rs 300 for nonguests)

with mountain views. There are tempting packages and low-season discounts.

**Pushkar Resorts** (☎ 2772944; www.pushkarresorts.com; Motisar Marg; s/d from Rs 3495/3945; 🏠 🚿) This sprawling resort, about 5km out of town, is set in an orchard and has a pool shaded by palms. There are four clusters of 10 modern and comfortable cottages, and some have been renovated beautifully. However, those awaiting renovation are showing their age. One aspect of its popularity is that it is outside the city limits and so has meat and alcohol on the menu.

**Hotel Pushkar Palace** (☎ 2773001; www.hotelpushkarpalace.com; s/d from Rs 6050/7260) Once belonging to the maharaja of Kishangarh, and in a romantic lakeside setting, this place is let down by frosty reception and unhelpful staff. Rooms have carved wooden furniture and beds, but aren't as appealing as those at its sister hotel, the Jagat Singh. There's a pleasant outdoor eating area overlooking the lake. Only the suites look directly onto the lake; other rooms open onto a lakeside walkway. If you want to stay here, ask for a discount.

### Tourist Village

During the camel fair, the RTDC and many private operators set up a sea of tents near the fairground. It can get rather cold at night, so bring something warm. A torch (flashlight) may also be useful. You're advised to book ahead. These all have private bathroom.

**RTDC Tourist Village** (☎ 2772074; s/d huts from Rs 700/800, tents s/d from Rs 6000/6500) This option has various permanent huts and semipermanent tents that are usually booked out by tour groups well in advance. Full payment must be received two months in advance. Rates include all meals.

**Royal Desert Camp** (☎ 2772957; www.hotelpushkarpalace.com; tents s/d Rs 2420/2662) Further away from the fairground than Royal Tents, but another good option. You can book at Hotel Pushkar Palace (above).

**Royal Tents** (www.jodhpurheritage.com; tents US\$250) Owned by the maharaja of Jodhpur, these are the most luxurious tents. The rates include meals. Reservations for the Royal Tents should be made in advance through Jodhpur's Balsamand Palace (☎ 0291-2571991).

### Eating

Pushkar has plenty of atmospheric eateries with lake views and menus reflecting the back-

packer presence. Strict vegetarianism, forbidding even eggs, limits the range of ingredients, but the cooks (sometimes) make up for this with imagination.

**Little Italy** (☎ 2772366; mains Rs 20-60; 🕒 10am-11pm) This superb garden restaurant has excellent thin-crust, wood-fired pizzas and imported pasta with tasty sauces. As well as homemade pesto and gnocchi, there are some Indian and Israeli dishes.

**Pushkar Royal Cafe** (Pushkar Lake Palace; ☎ 51210771; Parakrama Marg; mains Rs 20-100; 🕒 8am-10pm) This rooftop restaurant has a wonderful view across the lake to the northern ghats and the lights of Sadar Bazaar. The jovial cook is keen and traveller fare includes imported pasta and tasty pizzas and there's a filling and tasty thali. Deserts include a wonderful apple crumble and icecream.

**Sai Baba Restaurant** (mains Rs 20-110; 🕒 7am-10pm) In a relaxing garden, this restaurant offers lots of Indian, Chinese and Italian dishes. There are regular mesmerising dance displays in the evenings with whirling nomadic dancers (but not during the camel fair).

**Honey & Spice** (Laxmi Market; mains Rs 25-70; 🕒 8am-10pm) Run by a friendly couple who learned their skills in Europe, this tiny restaurant has delicious South Indian coffee, homemade banana cakes, soups and vegetable stew.

**Baba Restaurant** (☎ 2772858; mains Rs 25-70; 🕒 8am-10pm) Tucked away, east of Sadar Bazaar, and open to the street, Baba has good pizzas and Israeli food and a chilled atmosphere.

**Sun-n-Moon** (☎ 2772823; dishes Rs 25-90; 🕒 8am-10pm) Popular with neo-hippies, the Sun-n-Moon has a lovely, quiet courtyard surrounding a bodhi tree and a shrine, and populated with contented tortoises. There are pizzas, pasta and apple pie, and breakfast for the homesick includes hash browns and hot chocolate, while for others there are sustaining lassis and masala chai.

**Vijay Deep Restaurant** (mains Rs 30-60; 🕒 10am-10pm) A cosy local joint with a dirt floor near the Marwar bus stand, it has a simple menu of spicy Indian dishes, and is a good choice if you want to get away from the tourist scene.

**Raju Terrace Garden Restaurant** (Sadar Bazaar; mains Rs 35-80; 🕒 10am-10pm) This relaxed rooftop restaurant serves lots of dishes for the homesick (for example, shepherd's pie, pizza and baked potatoes) and oddly bland Indian food. It's on a pleasant terrace that's filled with pot



plants and fairy lights and has great views of the lake.

**Moon Dance** (☎ 2772606; mains Rs 35-100; 🕒 8am-10.30pm) This has tables in an inviting garden, and an area with low tables and floor cushions to lounge around on. It feels a bit like it's been made from a backpacker-restaurant kit, and the food, including Indian, Mexican and many Italian dishes, is reasonable.

**Rainbow Restaurant** (☎ 51210771; mains Rs 45-100; 🕒 11am-11pm) On a small rooftop with an attractive view over the lake, the Rainbow is a bit cramped with slow and surly waiters, but stick it out and you can eat great curries, pasta, pizza and other traveller fare. The falafel and hummus with fresh pita bread is delicious. Desserts include apple pie and ice cream and you can get a decent cup of tea.

**Sunset Café** (mains Rs 50-110; 🕒 7.30am-midnight) Right on the eastern ghats, this café has sublime lake views. It offers the usual traveller menu plus there's a German bakery serving OK cakes. The lakeshore setting is perfect at sunset and gathers a crowd.

## Shopping

Pushkar's Sadar Bazaar is lined with enchanting little shops and is a good place for picking up gifts. Many of the textiles come from the Barmer district south of Jaisalmer. There's plenty of silver and beaded jewellery catering to foreign tastes, and some old tribal pieces, too. Coloured glass lamps are another appealing buy (you can ponder over trying to get them home intact), as are embroidered and mirrored wall hangings. The range of Indian-music CDs makes this an excellent place for buying some local tunes.

Bookshops in the main bazaar sell a tremendous range of secondhand novels, and they'll usually buy them back for around 50% of the price you paid.

Pushkar is also good for getting clothes made. One reliable place with reasonable prices is **Navjyoti Tailors** (Sadar Bazaar). Also recommended is **Maloo Enterprises** (Varah Ghat Chowk), opposite the post office. **Khadi Gramodhyog** (Sadar Bazaar) sells traditional hand-weaves – mainly men's shirts, scarves and shawls.

As Pushkar is touristy, you'll have to haggle. Ignore 'last-price' quotes that aren't negotiable – take your time and visit a few shops.

## Getting There & Away

There are two bus stations in Pushkar. Ajmer Bus Station on Ajmer Rd is where most gov-

ernment buses to/from Ajmer stop. There are frequent buses to/from Ajmer (local/express/Star Line Rs 6/7/8) and the last bus leaves Ajmer bus station around 9pm. The other bus station, Marwar, to the north of town, has government and private buses to Ajmer and major destinations in Rajasthan. It operates 24 hours. Local travel agencies sell tickets for private buses – shop around for the best price. Buses generally stop for an hour or more in Ajmer. Be warned that some buses (particularly those travelling via Jodhpur) may involve a change of bus *and* an extra fare. Destinations include Agra (ordinary/sleeper, Rs 150/210, nine hours), Bundi (Rs 98, four hours), Delhi (ordinary/sleeper, Rs 160/220, 10½ hours), Jaipur (Rs 100, four hours), Jaisalmer (ordinary/sleeper, Rs 240/340, 10½ hours), Jodhpur (Rs 120, five hours) and Udaipur (Rs 180, eight hours). Government bus fares are slightly cheaper (and the buses less comfortable).

For around Rs 50, some agencies will book train tickets for services ex-Ajmer (including free transfer to Ajmer).

For cars, the road toll to Ajmer is Rs 25 which is raised to Rs 35 during the camel fair.

## Getting Around

There are no autorickshaws, but it's a breeze to get around on foot. Another good option is to hire a bicycle (Rs 30 per day) or a motorbike (Rs 150 to Rs 250 per day). Try **Shree Ganpati Motorbike Hire** (☎ 2772830; Brahma Rd) whose bikes have an all-Rajasthan tourist permit. A wallah can carry your luggage on a hand-drawn cart to/from the bus stand for around Rs 10.

## TONK

This town, 95km south of Jaipur, on the way to Ranthambhore National Park, was built in the mid-17th century. The colourful bazaar and the beautifully painted mosque are worth a look, though the town is regularly the focus of Hindu-Muslim tension and is very much off the tourist trail.

The town of Tonk was originally ruled by a tribe of Afghani Pathans, and their prosperous Muslim descendants have left a legacy of fine mansions, a testament to the wealth they accumulated when they ruled as nawabs from this region. Tonk also served as an important administrative centre during the era of the Raj, and the British have left behind some well-preserved colonial buildings.

Worth seeking out is the early-19th-century **Sunehri Kothi** (Najar Bagh Rd), which is decorated with exquisite coloured Belgium glass, inlay work and gilding. However it is all much in decay with amateurish renovation attempts. You must sign in at the small office opposite the entrance and the guide will expect a tip. A contrasting but equally beautiful sight is the imposing **Jama Masjid**, Rajasthan's finest mosque. Delicately frescoed inside and out with interlocking patterns, ferns and flowers, and sinuous gold decoration, it's hung with dusty glass chandeliers and busy with elderly men praying. This important place of worship was begun in 1246 by the first nawab of Tonk, Nawab Amir Khan, and completed by his son in 1298.

At the **Arabic & Persian Research Institute** (🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) a rare collection of old Arabic and Persian manuscripts and books is housed, dating from the 12th to the 17th century.

About 22km out of town, by Ranthambhore Rd, is a huge elephant carved out of a single block of stone. This is **Hathi Bhata**, carved in 1200 – the date is given in script on the elephant's right ear. Beside the elephant are 64 plate-sized depressions in the rock. This is where worshippers sit and eat at festival times. The flickering firelight from the open kitchen must make the hathi an impressive sight.

## Getting There & Away

Many local buses from Jaipur's main bus stand pass through Tonk (Rs 49, 2½ hours) en route to Kota. There are also numerous buses between Tonk and Sawai Madhopur for Ranthambhore National Park (Rs 67, two hours).

## RANTHAMBHORE NATIONAL PARK

☎ 07462

Near the railway town of Sawai Madhopur, this **park** (🕒 Oct-Jun) has tremendously dramatic scenery – wild jungle hemmed in by steep crags, crossed by a system of lakes and rivers, and scattered with crumbling temples, pavilions and *chhatris*. The 10th-century Ranthambhore Fort stands on a rocky outcrop looking like a set from an adventure epic. The park was a hunting ground for maharajas till 1970 – 15 years after it had become a sanctuary. You can still see numerous hides where the Jaipur maharajas mounted their elaborate big-game shoots (shikars) inviting royalty and bigwigs from all over the world.

In 1955 this game park was declared a wild-life sanctuary, and in 1973 became one of nine sanctuaries selected as part of the Project Tiger programme. In 1980 the central area was designated a national park, and the Project Tiger reserve was expanded over subsequent years. The reserve and park now covers 1334 sq km.

Ranthambhore is where you are most likely to spot a tiger on safari in India. Traffic into the park is restricted, and the tigers are so used to being observed that they are not scared away by jeeps and canters (large, open-topped trucks seating 20).

The park is one of Project Tiger's greatest conservation successes, though here the project's difficulties have also become apparent, such as when government officials were implicated in tiger poaching and when tiger numbers have been questioned.

Just as in Sariska Tiger Reserve (p198), which lost its tigers to poaching in 2004, Ranthambhore also witnesses the struggle between local villagers and authorities over livestock. Villagers compete for land in both the national park and its buffer zones. They need land for cultivation, grazing and wood-felling. There are 332 villages in and around Ranthambhore, with around 150,000 cows. Most of the villages are directly dependent on the park for fodder. Although it is illegal to graze stock within the core national park area, some villagers have been compelled to break the law as overgrazing has left them with no grazing grounds at all. Despite efforts of education within the local villages, the relationship between the villagers and park authorities remains strained.

According to a recent census, the park has around 26 to 30 tigers, a drop from 2004 figures (39 to 41 individuals), thought to be the result of poaching. Seeing one is a matter of luck; you should plan on two or three safaris to improve your chances. There are also more than 300 species of birds in the park. Other animals inhabiting Ranthambhore include the endangered caracal, also a member of the cat family, the leopard and the jungle cat; several members of the dog family, such as hyenas, foxes and jackals; the sloth bear; and varieties of deer, including the chital (spotted deer) and the sambar, India's largest deer. There are also two species of antelope: the chinkara (Indian gazelle) and the nilgai. However, the park is also worth visiting for its scenery, particularly if you walk up to the fort.

Ranthambhore is very popular on the tourist trail, which has led to pressure on resources around the park, and there can be difficulties getting a place in a jeep or canter. A large and colourful Jain festival, the Shri Mahavirji Fair (p185), is celebrated in the village of Chandangaon, within the Sawai Madhopur district.

## Orientation

It's 10km from Sawai Madhopur to the first gate, and another 3km to the main gate and Ranthambhore Fort. Accommodation is stretched out along the road from the town to the park.

## Information

The post office is on the street that runs parallel to, and north of, the main bazaar in Sawai Madhopur.

**Bank of Baroda ATM** (Bazariya Market) Situated 200m northwest of the train station.

**Project Tiger office** (☎ 223402; Ranthambhore Rd) The office is 500m from the train station. Don't expect much in the way of information.

**Ranthambhore Art Gallery** (☎ 221137; Ranthambhore Rd) Sells a small range of wildlife books.

**State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur ATM** (Train Station) East of the entrance in the train station building.

**State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur** (🕒 10am-2pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat) The place to change cash or travellers cheques, also with an ATM. It's in the old city (a local bus runs there for Rs 4, or a return rickshaw costs Rs 60).

**Tiger Track** (☎ 222790; Ranthambhore Rd; per hr Rs 60; 🕒 7am-10.30pm) Near Ankur Resort. Offers internet access and a good range of books.

**Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 220808; Train Station; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) This friendly office has a good, although not to scale, map of Sawai Madhopur and the park.

## Sights

### RANTHAMBHORE FORT

In the heart of the national park, this ancient fort (admission free; 🕒 6am-6pm) is believed to have been built by the Chauhan Rajputs in the 10th century, only a few years before the invasion of India by Mohammed of Ghori. According to tradition, the fort was erected over the site at which two princes were engaged in a boar hunt. The boar eluded the princes and dived into a lake. Not to be thwarted, the princes prayed to Shiva to bring back the boar. This Shiva deigned to do, on condition that the princes build a fort in his honour at the spot.

However, it is ever-popular Ganesh who rules the roost at the fort, and a temple to him overlooks its southern ramparts – often busy with pilgrims. The temple hosts the annual Ganesh Chaturthi festival (see p185). Traditionally, when a marriage is to take place, invitations are forwarded to Ganesh before any other guests. The temple at the fort receives hundreds of letters each week addressed to the elephant god, some of which include money to enable him to cover his fare. There are two other Hindu temples inside the fort: the others are dedicated to Shiva and Ramlalaji. All three date from the 12th and 13th centuries and are constructed with impressive blocks of red Karauli stone. Built from the same stone are a number of cenotaphs that can be seen in the precincts of the fort.

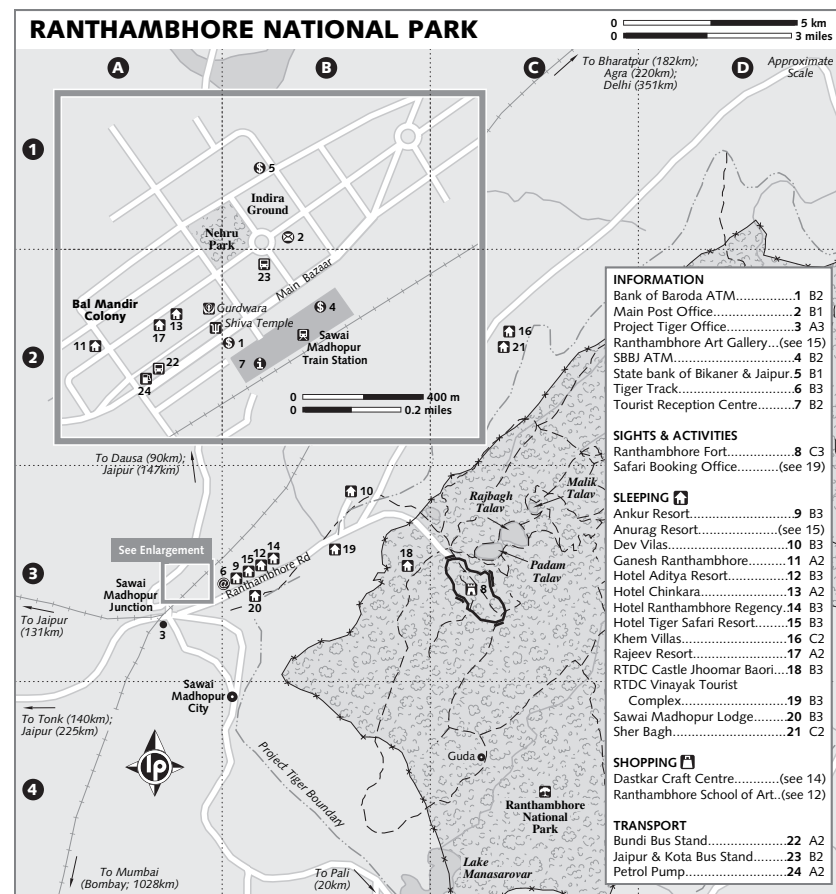
The fort is believed to be the site of the first *jauhar* (ritual mass suicide by immolation) in Rajput history. In the early 14th century the ruler of the fort, Hammir Deva, was engaged in a protracted battle with the Muslim forces. Although Hammir repulsed the Muslim invaders, the women who were installed in the fort for their safety heard that he had succumbed on the battlefield. In Rajput style, preferring death to dishonour, they committed mass suicide. When confronted with the grisly news, the victorious Hammir beheaded himself before the image of Shiva in the temple at the fort.

From a distance, the fort is almost indiscernible on its hilltop perch – as you get closer, it seems almost as if it is growing out of the rock. It covers an area of 4.5 sq km, and affords peerless views from the disintegrating walls of the Badal Mahal (Palace of the Clouds), on its northern side. The ramparts stretch for over 7km, and seven enormous gateways are still intact.

## Tours

The best time to visit is between October and April; the park closes during the monsoon (July–September). Safaris take place in the early morning and late afternoon. The mornings can be very chilly in the open vehicles, so bring some warm clothes.

The only way to travel into the core of the park is by jeep or canter safari. A good network of seven gravel tracks crisscrosses the park and on each safari, vehicles divide among the trails. The canters and jeeps are



open-topped. If you've ever been on safari in Africa you might be thinking this is risky, but the tigers appear unconcerned by garrulous tourists toting cameras only metres away from where they're lying. No-one has been mauled or eaten – yet!

You have as much chance of seeing a tiger from a jeep or canter, though sometimes canter passengers can be rowdy, which obviously isn't a great advantage when spotting wildlife. Alternatively, the higher canter provides a better view and you have 20 sets of eyes scouring the country for those hidden stripes.

Demand outstrips supply because the number of motorised vehicles is restricted – only 20 jeeps and 20 canters are allowed inside

per session. An extra 10 canters are allowed at Diwali and Christmas. Under the current system, seats in canters and two jeeps are allocated on a first-come-first-served basis. Seats on the 18 other jeeps can be booked in advance at [www.rajasthantourism.gov.in](http://www.rajasthantourism.gov.in).

A guide is compulsory and is included in the canter ticket price, but will cost an extra Rs 150 if you go by jeep.

Safaris take 3½ hours. The price for a canter is Rs 285/460 for Indians/foreigners; and a jeep is Rs 391/566. A camera is free, while video is Rs 200.

From October to February, both canters and jeeps leave at 7am and 2.30pm. From March to June, they leave at 6.30am and 3.30pm. Bookings can be made at the

**RTDC Vinayak Tourist Complex** (☎ 221333; Ranthambhore Rd; ☎ 5-7am & noon-2pm). Although you could queue for tickets yourself it is far better to utilise the services of your hotel walah who will engage an agent who will slip effortlessly through the bureaucracy and get you a seat while you are relaxing. The cost of this service varies from Rs 90 for a canter to Rs 1000 for a jeep, depending on demand and the category of hotel you are staying in. You should be able to get a seat on a canter by booking the day before with the possible exception of Indian holiday times.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

Budget travellers will find the cheapest lodgings in Sawai Madhopur itself, but it isn't a particularly inspiring place to stay.

**Hotel Chinkara** (☎ 220340; 13 Indira Colony, Civil Lines; s/d from Rs 200/300) This place is quiet, with large, dusty, quaint, good-value rooms. It's run by a cheery family and home-cooked meals are available with notice.

**Rajeev Resort** (☎ 221413; 16 Indira Colony, Civil Lines; s/d Rs 200/300; ☎) Rajeev Resort has decent rooms of a slightly better standard than nearby Chinkara's, but the staff are less welcoming. Cheap, simple set meals are available.

**Hotel Aditya Resort** (☎ 9351244510; Ranthambhore Rd; s/d from Rs 250/300, with AC Rs 500/600; ☎) This friendly place is way ahead of anything in town. The keen young staff will organise safaris and allow use of the big air-con room without air-con for a hefty discount. Nothing it seems is too much trouble.

**Ganesh Ranthambhore** (☎ 220230; 58 Bal Mandir Colony, Civil Lines; d from Rs 400; ☎) On the western side of the overpass, this is the most appealing of the options in the town centre. Rooms are adequately clean and more airy and light than most of the pokey options in Sawai Madhopur. Rooms have passable bathrooms, and tasty meals are available in the restaurant.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

All of the following places offer fixed-price meals, and some also offer an à la carte selection. All of these places can help with safari bookings – though some are better than others – and some will close when the park is closed.

**RTDC Vinayak Tourist Complex** (☎ 221333; Ranthambhore Rd; s/d Rs 700/800, with AC Rs 990/1200; ☎) You're well placed for tour reservations here –

the complex also houses the booking office and a tourist reception centre. The rooms vary but are generally better than typical RTDC rooms. They are spacious with appealing sitting areas in alcove windows. There's a peaceful lawn area, and a campfire is lit in winter.

**Hotel Tiger Safari Resort** (☎ 221137; www.tiger-safariresort.com; Ranthambhore Rd; d from Rs 800, cottages Rs 1300; ☎ ☎) About 4km from the train station is one of the best-value options. It's a relaxed place where the management are particularly helpful with organising safaris and dealing with clueless would-be tiger-spotters. They pick-up and drop-off from the train station and can organise sightseeing trips to the fort. The spacious doubles and 'cottages' (which aren't really cottages) are centred on a well-kept garden with small pool. The rooftop restaurant is airy and cool, with good views and good food (mains Rs 35 to Rs 125).

**Anurag Resort** (☎ 220451; www.anuragresort.com; Ranthambhore Rd; s/d from Rs 1200/1500; ☎ ☎) Anurag is also around 3km from the train station. It's an attractive terracotta building built in neo-Rajasthani style with scalloping details, set amid lawns. Rooms are tiny, plain and overpriced yet clean and comfortable. Even the top-end rooms have smallish bathrooms.

**Hotel Ankur Resort** (☎ 220792; ankurswm@sancharnet.in; Ranthambhore Rd; s/d from Rs 1200/1800, with AC Rs 1600/2200, new wing Rs 2000/2600; ☎ ☎) Ankur Resort, 3km from the train station, is a popular choice, and discounts are worth asking for. It is another hotel that is good at organising safaris, wake-up calls and early breakfasts for tiger spotters. Rooms are clean, bright and attractive, and the surrounding gardens boast an inviting pool.

**RTDC Castle Jhoomar Baori** (☎ 220495; Ranthambhore Rd; standard s/d Rs 1775/2375, ste Rs 3400/4025; ☎) This is a stunningly set hilltop former royal hunting lodge, about 7km from the train station (you can spot it from the train). The multi-chamber rooms are loaded with character, although they're a bit shabby in true RTDC style. Open-rooftop areas add appeal. The tariff includes breakfast.

**Hotel Ranthambhore Regency** (☎ 221176; www.ranthambhore.com; Ranthambhore Rd; room only Rs 3000; s/d incl meals from US\$120/150; ☎ ☎) This is a professionally run place which caters to tour groups. It has immaculate, well-appointed rooms which would rate as suites in most hotels. The central garden is a virtual oasis and the impressive pool is inviting.

**our pick Khem Villas** (☎ 252099; www.khemvillas.com; Ranthambhore Rd; s/d homestead Rs 6000/7000, tents Rs 9000/11,500, cottage Rs 12,000/14,000 incl all meals & taxes; ☎) This splendid option has been created by the Singh Rathore family – the patriarch Fateh Singh Rathore is lauded as the driving force behind the conservation of the tiger at Ranthambhore. His son Goverdhan, and his daughter-in-law Usha, run this impressive eco-lodge. The accommodation ranges from rooms in the colonial-style bungalow to luxury tents to sumptuous stone cottages. Privacy is guaranteed – you can even bathe under the stars; and socialising is relaxed – join the tiger talk at sunset drinks while the jungle sounds switch from the day shift to the night shift.

**Sher Bagh** (☎ 252120; www.sherbagh.com; Ranthambhore Rd; s/d Rs 12,000/13,325 incl all meals & taxes; ☎ Oct-Apr) A tented camp: here luxurious tents – based on the design for the maharaja of Jodhpur last century – are set on manicured lawns in an isolated woodland near the park. Each of the 12 tents has a veranda and gorgeous ensuite bathrooms with sunken marble showers.

**Sawai Madhopur Lodge** (☎ 220541; Ranthambhore Rd; r from Rs 13,500; ☎ ☎) This Taj Group lodge, 3km from the train station, once belonged to the maharaja of Jaipur. It's luxurious, with a pool (Rs 400 for non-guests), a tennis court and more than 4.5 hectares of lovely, well-kept gardens. The bar boasts half a tiger and a billiard table. The rooms are in bungalows with spiffing colonnaded verandas and are surrounded by serene lawns. The faded but restful rooms feature new marble bathrooms.

**Dev Vilas** (☎ 252168; www.devvilas.com; Ranthambhore Rd; s/d incl all meals r or tent US\$200/225; ☎ ☎) This well-appointed hotel is modelled on a grand Indo-Saracen hunting lodge, albeit one with wheelchair accessibility in mind. It is set on out-of-the-way acres and has a luxurious pool in its neat garden. The tents are lavish and private, while the marble-floored lodge rooms are truly elegant.

## Shopping

**Dastkar Craft Centre** (☎ 252051; Ranthambhore Rd; ☎ 10am-8pm) About 3km from the train station, this place is worth a visit. The organisation helps to empower low-caste village women, who gain regular income through selling their textile and embroidery work. Many attractive handicrafts are on sale, including saris, scarves, bags and bedspreads. You can

visit the workshops located beyond the park entrance, near Sher Bagh Hotel.

**Ranthambhore School of Art** (☎ 222892; Ranthambhore Rd) This place aims to promote conservation through art, and sells signature photo-realistic wildlife watercolours and prints with 20% of the proceeds going towards conservation.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Buses to Jaipur (Rs 91, six hours, four daily) via Tonk, and to Kota (Rs 80, five hours) via Bundi (Rs 56, 3½ hours) leave from the Bundi bus stand near the petrol station close to the overpass. Travelling to Bharatpur by bus invariably involves a change in Dausa (on the Jaipur-Bharatpur road). Buses to Dausa (Rs 55, five hours), leave from the roundabout near the main post office. The train is preferable for all routes. The inquiries number is ☎ 2451020.

### TRAIN

The train station has a **computerised reservation office** (☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) for bookings.

The *Golden Temple Mail* (2903/4) leaves Sawai Madhopur at 12.40pm, stopping at Bharatpur (sleeper/3 AC Rs 141/316) at 3.08pm, arriving in Delhi (Rs 192/484) at 7pm. From Delhi, it leaves at 7.50am, stopping at Bharatpur at 10.40am and arriving at 1.05pm. To Kota, there are about seven trains daily, the most convenient of which is the *Avadh Express* (9037/8). It leaves Sawai Madhopur at 9.15am and arrives in Kota (sleeper/3 AC Rs 121/238) at 11am. Going the other way, it leaves Sawai Madhopur at 4.25pm, arriving in Agra (Rs 130/335) at 9.50pm.

## Getting Around

Bicycle hire is available in the main bazaar (around Rs 25 per day). Autorickshaws are available at the train station; the journey to Ranthambhore Rd will cost around Rs 25.

## KARauli

☎ 07464 / pop 66,200

Karauli was founded in 1348 and is the home of Shri Madan Mohanji, the deity of Lord Krishna, and has some important Krishna temples which attract many pilgrims. Around 23km from Karauli is the massively popular

temple of Kaila Devi – during the Navratri celebrations in March/April and September/October, thousands of devotees flood the town en route to the temple (see p185).

Completely off the tourist trail, the area is also famous for its red-sandstone quarries and for its lac (resin) bangles. Nearby is the rugged **Kaila Devi Game Sanctuary** (25km away), home to chinkaras, wild boars, antelope, jackals and leopards.

The mainly 17th-century **old city palace** (Indian/foreigner Rs 50/100; ☀ sunrise-sunset) was constructed over different periods; the oldest part has existed for 600 years. The Durbar Hall has some particularly fine paintings. Occupied by the Karauli royal family until around the 1950s, the palace is run-down and worn, but very atmospheric with great views from the roof. It's worth getting the guard to guide you around for a tip. There's a **Krishna temple** (☀ 5-11.30am & 4-8pm) in the compound.

Around 40km from town, along a pot-holed road, is a tragically ruined fort, **Timangarh**. Built around 1100 and reconstructed in 1244, this once mighty fort overlooks a lake filled with water lilies. It was deserted 300 years ago,

but was destroyed by looters over the last 50 years. You'll need to hire a taxi to get here, and one that can manage the track – the return journey will cost you around Rs 500.

**Bhanwar Vilas Palace** (☎ 07464-20024, 2290763; www.karauli.com; s/d from Rs 1750/2000; 🏠 🚗), owned by Maharaja Krishna Chandra Pal (whose family hail back to Krishna), is closer to a large country manor than a palace. A back-in-time place, it features a billiard room, shady verandas, rambling grounds and classic cars in the garages. Rooms are comfortable here and at the neighbouring Bhumendra Vilas. Excursions to nearby points of interest, including the old city palace, can be organised.

The town is 182km southeast of Jaipur, situated between Bharatpur (110km) and Sawai Madhopur (104km). There are buses running between Jaipur and Karauli (Rs 65, five hours).

The nearest train stations are Gangapur City (31km) and Hindaun (30km), both on the main Delhi-Mumbai (Bombay) Line, where almost all the trains running between Mumbai and Delhi stop.