

History

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A popular Indian saying goes that the state of Rajasthan alone has more history than the rest of the country put together. Given that its name literally translates as 'the land of kings', perhaps the theory is true. Strewn with fascinating palaces, forts and ruins, with a colourful and diverse culture to boot, Rajasthan is an exotic land that intrigues as much as it enthralls. Throw in the neighbouring medieval capitals of Delhi and Agra, and you've got a heady cocktail laced with a thousand royal legends, potent enough to work its charm on even the most prosaic of imaginations.

But all good things come at a price. And Rajasthan, along with its neighbouring areas, has had to pay heavily in the past in order to inherit the rich heritage it calls its own today. Over the centuries, the province has had to cope with waves of ruthless invasions lashing in from the geographically vulnerable northwest, and later the south. These raids, undertaken by everyone from treasure hunters to religious crusaders, have brought along their own share of carnage, vandalism and desecration. Uncertainty and political turmoil have been a way of life here. Delhi, for instance, has been razed and rebuilt by different dynasties at least nine times throughout the ages. And the crisis has often been compounded by severe infighting among princely states in the area. Ironically, it is this very streak of collective unrest that has contributed immensely towards shaping the character of the terrain and its people, leaving behind a legacy unparalleled by any other part of the nation.

BACK WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Archaeologists have inferred that the desert and scrub areas of Rajasthan have been home to humans for several thousand years. Excavations in Kalibangan, near Ganganagar in northern Rajasthan, have unearthed terracotta pottery and jewellery that date back to around 3000 BC, conclusively dating the earliest spread of settlements in the state to that time. Some of these urban centres were presumably absorbed into the Harappan segment of the Indus Valley civilisation, where they flourished until the settlement was mysteriously abandoned 3700 years ago. The mass exodus, possibly triggered by flooding or a severe climatic change, rendered Rajasthan devoid of human settlement for some time, until indigenous tribes such as the Bhils and the Minas moved in to set up their own squabbling small kingdoms, thereby commencing the long history of argumentative neighbours in the region.

But even as the tribes tore away at each other, another civilisation was sprouting in the fertile plains to the east of Rajasthan, between the rivers Yamuna and Ganga (Ganges). Though their exact origins are difficult to determine, the settlers in this fledgling colony are widely assumed to

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The oldest natural relics in Rajasthan are fossilised remains of a 180-million-year-old forest, located at the Akal Wood Fossil Park (p337) in the Thar Desert near Jaisalmer.

TIMELINE

c 2600–1700 BC

The heyday of the Indus Valley civilisation. Spanning parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat and the Sindh province in Pakistan, the settlement takes shape around metropolises such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.

c 1500 BC

The Indo-Aryan civilisation takes root in the fertile plains of the Indo-Gangetic basin. The settlers here speak an early form of Sanskrit, from which several Indian languages, including Hindi, later evolve.

c 1000 BC

Indraprastha, Delhi's first incarnation, comes into being. Archaeological excavations at the site where the Purana Qila now stands continue even today, as more facts regarding this ancient capital keep coming to light.

The website www.harappa.com provides an illustrated yet scholarly coverage of everything you need to know about the ancient Indus Valley civilisation, including the significance of recent archaeological finds.

The concepts of zero and infinity are widely believed to have been devised by eminent Indian mathematicians such as Aryabhata and Varahamihira during the reign of the Guptas.

Rajput armies primarily consisted of cavalries. They were known to breed pedigree horses such as the Marwari and Kathiawari, which were inducted into their forces.

belong to a seminomadic race of Indo-European origin, who were known as Aryans or 'noblemen'. It was in this civilisation that Hinduism first evolved as a religious tradition and a way of life, along with a complex patriarchal social structure and the tiered caste system that the greater Indian society adheres to even today. By 1000 BC, the province had seen the establishment of at least two prominent kingdoms: the Matsya territory of Viratnagar encompassing Alwar, Bharatpur, Dholpur and Karauli; and Indraprastha, the earliest-known incarnation of Delhi, which was successively built on by several dynasties to come.

Little is known of Rajasthan's development at this time. However, it was an era that saw few incursions, as the mighty empires which were then strengthening their hold on the subcontinent, surprisingly, chose to pass on the state for one reason or another. Alexander the Great, who came to Asia on his epic conquest, was forced to return when his troops, homesick and weary after the campaign, convinced him to retreat. The Mauryan empire (323–185 BC) had minimal impact too, largely due to its most renowned emperor, Ashoka, taking to nonviolent ways after he converted to Buddhism. In stark contrast to the atrocities he had inflicted on the eastern Indian kingdom of Kalinga, the only evidence Ashoka left of his reign in Rajasthan were Buddhist caves and stupas (Buddhist shrines; p235) near Jhalawar, rock-cut edicts at Bairat, an ancient Buddhist site near Sariska (p198), and a 13m-high pillar he inscribed in Delhi (p99).

MARAUDING HUNS & THE ADVENT OF KINGS

The insulation that Rajasthan enjoyed through its early years came to an abrupt end during the 5th century AD, when armies of fierce Hun warriors rode in from Central Asia to carry out a series of pillaging raids across north India. These raids were to alter the course of the region's history in two major ways. To begin with, they resulted in the disintegration of the Gupta dynasty, which had taken over from the Mauryas as a central power and had reigned over the country 320–550. But more importantly, they triggered a parallel invasion, as the Rajputs finally came to make Rajasthan their home and, in the absence of an overarching monarchy, grew from strength to strength to usher in the golden age of Rajasthan.

Historical evidence suggests that the Rajputs (their name meaning 'children of kings') fled their homelands in Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh to settle in Rajasthan, primarily to escape the wrath of the White Huns (and later the Arabs) who had begun to storm in from Pakistan and Afghanistan. Once they had arrived in Rajasthan, the Rajputs trampled over the Bhils and Minas, and set up their own small fiefdoms in the face of mounting local chaos. Though they largely belonged to the lower rungs of Hindu society, volatile circumstances demanded that the Rajputs don the role of warriors, if only to fend off further advances by foreign invaders. So in

spite of rigid social norms, which didn't allow for any kind of self-promotion, early Rajput clans such as the Gurjara Pratiharas crossed the caste barriers to proclaim themselves Kshatriyas, members of the warrior class, who came second only to the Brahmins (priests) in the caste hierarchy.

To facilitate their smooth transition through social ranks, and to avoid stinging criticism from the Brahmins, these early Rajput clans chose to jettison their worldly ancestry and took to trumpeting a mythological genealogy that supposedly evolved from celestial origins. From the 6th century onward, some of the clans began calling themselves Suryavanshis (Descendants of the Sun), while others chose to be known as Chandravanshis (Descendants of the Moon). A third dynasty, on the other hand, traced their roots to the sacrificial fire that was lit on Mt Abu during the Mauryan era, thereby naming themselves Agnivanshis (Fire-Born).

As the Rajputs slowly consolidated their grip over Rajasthan, they earned a reputation for their chivalry, noble traditions and strict code of conduct. Their sense of honour matched perhaps only by Arthurian knights or the Japanese samurai, the Rajputs gave rise to several well-known dynasties, who in turn established some of the most renowned princely states of Rajasthan. The largest of these kingdoms, and the third largest in India after Kashmir and Hyderabad, was Marwar. Founded by the Suryavanshi Rathores who rode in from Uttar Pradesh, it was initially ruled from Mandore, before the seat of power was relocated to the Mehrangarh Fort (p304) in nearby Jodhpur. The Sisodias migrated from Gujarat to assemble in the folds of the Aravalli Hills to the south, where they formed the state of Mewar (see boxed text, p32) encompassing Chittorgarh and Udaipur. The Kachhwahas, from Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh, settled in Jaipur in eastern Rajasthan, their capital nestled in the twin fort complex of Amber (p178) and Jaigarh (p179). Meanwhile, a fourth kingdom, called Jaisalmer, was established in the Thar Desert by the Bhattis, who belonged to the lunar dynasty. Obscured by the dunes, the Bhattis remained more or less entrenched in their kingdom until Jaisalmer was integrated into the state of Rajasthan after Independence.

Over the years, Rajasthan saw the mushrooming of many other smaller dynasties, each of which staked claim to its own patch of territory in the region and ruled with complete autonomy, often refusing to submit to the whims of the bigger kingdoms. A few temporary alliances forged through cosmetic treaties or marriages didn't help much, as their fierce sense of pride and independence kept these states from growing and functioning as a unified force. Besides, the clans were so content with their tiny fiefdoms that they rarely thought of looking beyond their borders to explore and conquer newer territories.

One dynasty, however, proved to be an exception. The Chauhans, who belonged to the Agnivanshi race, moved in from Gujarat around the 8th century to settle in the city of Ajmer, from where they gradually extended their

Upon losing Delhi to the Afghans, Prithviraj Chauhan was captured and taken back to Mohammed of Ghori's court in Ghazni, where he was later blinded and killed.

c 540 BC

The writing of the *Mahabharata* begins. The longest epic in the world, it takes nearly 250 years to complete, and mentions settlements such as Indraprastha, Pushkar and Chittorgarh.

326 BC

Alexander the Great invades India. He defeats Porus in Punjab to enter the subcontinent, but a rebellion within his army keeps him from advancing beyond the Beas River in Himachal Pradesh.

323–185 BC

India comes under the rule of the Maurya kings. Founded by Chandragupta Maurya, this Pan-Indian empire is ruled from Pataliputra (Patna), and briefly adopts Buddhism during the reign of Ashoka.

AD 320–550

The period of the Gupta dynasty, the second of India's great monarchies after the Mauryas. This era is marked by a creative surge in literature and the arts.

AD 500–600

The emergence of the Rajputs in Rajasthan. Stemming from three principal races supposedly of celestial origin, they form 36 separate clans who spread out to claim their own kingdoms across the region.

1024

Mahmud of Ghazni raids India for the last time, ransacking on this occasion the Somnath Temple in Gujarat, where he purportedly smashes the idol with his own hands.

empire across the neighbouring states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Within Rajasthan, the Hada offshoot of the Chauhans crossed over to the Hadoti region and captured the cities of Bundi and Kota, while the Deora branch took over the nearby Sirohi area, making way for successive generations to zero in on the provinces of Ranthambore, Kishangarh and Shekhawati. The most illustrious of the Chauhan kings, Prithviraj III, went a notch further by leading his troops to invade Delhi, which had been reduced to insignificance after the fall of Indraprastha and was being governed by local chieftains. Keen to set up a new capital here, Prithviraj Chauhan commissioned the building of a settlement called Qila Rai Pithora, the ramparts of which can still be seen near the Qutb Minar (p126) in Mehrauli. One of the few Hindu kings to hold fort in Delhi, Prithviraj Chauhan administered his empire from the twin capitals of Qila Rai Pithora and Ajmer, before his reign was put to an end by Islamic warriors, who galloped in by the thousands to change the face of the region forever.

THE SWORD OF ISLAM

Some 400 years after Prophet Mohammed had introduced Islam into Arabia, northern India saw the arrival of Muslim crusaders. It was to be expected. With the banner of Islam fluttering high, the crusaders had taken over the province of Sindh (in Pakistan) long ago, and, once they had managed to occupy Ghazni in neighbouring Afghanistan, it was obvious that India would figure next on their agenda. So at the beginning of the 11th century, zealous Turk warriors led by the fearsome Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni descended upon India, razing hundreds of Hindu temples and plundering the region to take away vast amounts of wealth to fill their coffers back home. The Turks made their raids into India almost an annual affair, ransacking the northern part of the country 17 times in as many years. Jolted out of their internal bickering, the Rajput princes organised some hasty defence, but their army was torn to shreds even before they could retaliate. Rajasthan had been lost to Islam.

Delhi, located further east, was initially spared the wrath of the crusaders, as the Sultan largely confined his raids to Rajasthan and parts of Gujarat. Trouble, however, came by the name of Mohammed of Ghori, governor of Ghazni, who invaded India in the late 12th century, taking up where his predecessor had left off. He was thwarted on his first campaign by Prithviraj Chauhan, but the resolute Ghori returned a year later to defeat the Rajput king in the Second Battle of Tarain. Having convincingly stamped his victory over the region, Ghori trotted back to Ghazni, leaving Delhi under the governorship of Qutb-ud-din Aibak, a former Turk slave who had risen to command forces in India. When news of Ghori's death arrived in Delhi a decade and a half later, Qutb-ud-din shrugged off competition from rivals to stake claim to the Indian part of Ghori's empire. He declared himself Sultan

of the region, and founded the Mamluk or Slave dynasty, giving Delhi the first of its many Islamic monarchies.

AN AGE OF TREACHERY & EXPLOITS

The enthronement of Qutb-ud-din Aibak flagged off the Sultanate era of Delhi, which lasted for about 350 years. Throughout this period, Delhi was ruled by six different Islamic dynasties, with a break between 1526 and 1540, when Delhi was captured by the Mughals. The six dynasties produced a line of 38 rulers, who gradually pushed the boundaries of their kingdoms to conquer new land. The whole of the Gangetic basin soon came under the Sultanates' control, as did Rajasthan and Gujarat – the princely states there had little option but to bow down to their might.

Apart from expanding their empire, the Sultanate kings also significantly urbanised Delhi. The Mamluks created the city of Mehrauli, whose most famous monument is the Qutb Minar. The Khiljis, on their part, seated their capital at Siri (p89). The Tughlaqs constructed the forts of Tughlaqabad (p126) and Firoz Shah Kotla (p99), while Sher Shah Suri, the most renowned of the Sur kings, chose to rule from Shergarh, built on the site of the Purana Qila (p104) which he had won from the Mughal emperor Humayun.

Despite the glorious developments, however, the Sultanate era was marked by prolonged phases of political turmoil and administrative tension. Having become the jewel of foreign eyes, Delhi was persistently being attacked from the northwest by Mongol, Persian, Turk and Afghan raiders, who all wanted to set up their own outposts in the city. Within the empire, stability had given way to turncoat politics, conspiracy and internal strife, as deceitful kings contrived bloody assassinations and coups to either remove or upstage their predecessors. Things got murkier with time, until two noblemen who were disgraced by Emperor Ibrahim Lodi decided to get even with the Sultan by inviting Babur, prince of Kabul, to invade Delhi. Ironically, in plotting their revenge, the two men unknowingly paved the way for the most celebrated Islamic dynasty to roll into India.

ENTER THE MUGHALS

Babur, whose Turkic-Mongol lineage included great warriors such as Genghis Khan and Timur the Lame, marched into India through Punjab, defeating Ibrahim Lodi in the First Battle of Panipat (1526) to establish the Mughal dynasty in the country. Once he had seized Delhi, Babur focused his attention on Rajasthan, where many princely states, anticipating his moves, had already banded together to form a united front under the Sisodia king Rana Sanga. Taking advantage of the chaos in Delhi, the Rajputs had meanwhile clawed back in the power race, and states such as Mewar had become formidable enough to pose a considerable threat to the rulers of Delhi. Babur, however, squared everything by defeating the Rajput alliance in a blood-spattered battle

Razia Sultana, who headed the Mamluks from 1236 to 1240, was the only woman ever to reign in Delhi. She was dislodged from the throne by her brother, Bahram Shah.

While the construction of the Qutb Minar in Delhi was started by Qutb-ud-din Aibak in 1193, it was completed during the reign of Firoz Shah, more than 150 years later.

The eccentric Tughlaq emperor Mohammed Tughlaq reduced Delhi to a ghost town for two years by moving the entire population to a new capital called Daulatabad, more than 1100km away in the Deccan.

To improve connectivity within his kingdom, Sher Shah Suri built the Grand Trunk Road, the oldest and longest road in the subcontinent, which runs from Bengal to Peshawar in Pakistan.

1192

Prithviraj Chauhan loses Delhi to Mohammed of Ghori. The defeat effectively ends Hindu supremacy in the region, exposing Rajasthan and the subcontinent to subsequent Muslim invaders trooping in from the northwest.

1206

Ghori is murdered during a prayer session while returning to Ghazni from a campaign in Lahore. In the absence of an heir, his kingdom is usurped by his generals. The Delhi Sultanate is born.

1303

Ala-ud-din Khilji sacks Chittorgarh with the intention of carrying away the beautiful Sisodia queen Padmini. The queen immolates herself to escape humiliation – the first recorded instance of *sati* in Rajasthan.

1398

Timur the Lame invades Delhi, on the pretext that the Sultans of Delhi are too tolerant with their Hindu subjects. He executes more than 100,000 Hindu captives before the battle for Delhi.

1498

Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese voyager, discovers the sea route from Europe to India. He arrives in Kerala and engages in trade with the local kings.

1504

Agra is founded on the banks of the Yamuna by Sikandar Lodi. Its glory days begin when Akbar makes it his capital, and the city is briefly called Akbarabad during his reign.

THE INDOMITABLE SISODIAS

In a region where invasions and political upheavals were historical norms, the Sisodias of Mewar stood out as an exception, using everything from diplomacy to sheer valour to retain an iron grip over their land. Pillage and blood baths notwithstanding, the dynasty administered its kingdom in southern Rajasthan without a hiatus for some 1400 years. Lorded over by 76 monarchs throughout the ages, the Sisodias also enjoy the rare distinction of having had one of the longest-serving dynasties in the world.

While they claim to be Suryavanshis, the lineage of the Sisodia kings can be traced back to a prince named Guhil, born to a Rajput queen sometime in the 6th century AD. Orphaned soon after birth and his kingdom ransacked by Huns, Guhil grew up among native Bhils in the forests of the Aravalli Hills. When he was 11, he forged an alliance with a Bhil chieftain to establish a dynasty called the Guhilots. The chieftain also granted Guhil a tract of forested land in the mountains, which was to later expand and flourish as the state of Mewar.

The Guhilots shifted base from the hills in the 12th century to a place called Ahar. It was here that the family split, resulting in a breakaway faction that relocated to the town of Sissoda and rechristened themselves Sisodias. The separatists soon took over Chittorgarh, an ancient garrison which remained under their control (despite being attacked by Ala-ud-din Khilji) until it was sacked by Mughal emperor Akbar in 1568. Though it came as a major military setback, the Sisodias lost no time in retreating into the Aravalli Hills, where they put together a new capital called Udaipur (p240). A serenely beautiful city, Udaipur was never lost to the enemy, and remained the capital of Mewar until the kingdom was absorbed into the state of Rajasthan following India's Independence.

Known for their resilience and courage, the Sisodias have been credited with producing some of the most flamboyant kings ever to have reigned in Rajasthan. The family boasts names such as Rana Sanga, who died a valiant death in 1527 while fending off Mughal troops under Babur, and Maharana Pratap (1540–97), who made several daring though unsuccessful attempts to win Chittorgarh back from Akbar during his time in power. Being prolific builders, the Sisodias also gave Mewar some of its finest structures, including the Victory Tower (p238) at Chittorgarh, the grand City Palace (p244) in Udaipur, the elegant Monsoon Palace (p248) atop Sajjangarh Hill and the spectacular Lake Palace (p243), which stands on an island amid the placid waters of Lake Pichola, also in Udaipur. A part of the City Palace now houses a museum, open to the public, which contains countless artefacts showcasing and documenting the glorious heritage of Mewar.

where several Rajput chiefs, including Rana Sanga, fell to the enemy's wrath. The defeat, which shook the foundations of the Rajput states, also left the Sisodias as the undisputed rulers of northern India.

Mughal supremacy was briefly cut back in the mid-16th century by Sher Shah Suri, who defeated Babur's successor Humayun to give Delhi its sixth and final Sultanate. Humayun reclaimed Delhi 14 years later, and was succeeded upon his accidental death by his 13-year-old son Akbar. Known as the greatest of the Mughal emperors, Akbar ruled for a period of 49 years,

When Timur sacked Delhi, he spared all the builders so that they could build him a city, much like the one he had plundered, back in Samarkand.

and, being a master diplomat, used both tact and military force to expand and consolidate the Mughal empire in India. Realising that the Rajputs could not be conquered on the battlefield alone, Akbar arranged a marriage alliance with a princess of the important Kachhwaha clan which held Amber (and later Jaipur), and even chose Rajput warriors to head his armies. Honoured by these gestures, the Kachhwahas, unlike other Rajputs, aligned themselves with the powerful Mughals, as Akbar indirectly succeeded in winning over one of the biggest Rajput states.

Of course, when diplomacy didn't work, Akbar resorted to war; he conquered Ajmer, and later proceeded to take the mighty forts of Chittorgarh and Ranthambhore. Gradually, all the important Rajput states except Mewar had acknowledged Mughal sovereignty to become vassal states. But even as he was well on his way to becoming the supreme ruler of India, Akbar became more tolerant in many ways. He married a Hindu Rajput princess and encouraged good relations between Hindus and Muslims, giving Rajputs special privileges so that they were embraced within his empire. A monarch with great social insight, he discouraged child marriage, banned *sati* (ritual suicide of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre) and arranged special market days for women. Akbar's reign also saw an unprecedented economic boom in the country, apart from great development in art and architecture.

THE LAST OF THE MUGHAL GREATS

Jehangir, Akbar's son, was the next Mughal emperor (1605–27), and he ruled alongside his adored Persian wife, Nur Jahan, who wielded considerable power and brought Persian influences to the court. Nur Jahan also commissioned the beautiful Itimad-ud-Daulah (p136), the first Mughal structure to be built in marble, in Agra for her parents. The Rajputs maintained cordial relationships with the Mughals through Jehangir's rule, a notable development being that Udai Singh, king of Udaipur, ended Mewar's reservations about the Muslims by befriending Jehangir.

Good times, however, came to an end soon after Jehangir's period in office, as his descendants' greater emphasis on Islam began to rock the relative peace in the region. Upon Jehangir's death, the prince Khurram took over, assuming the title Shah Jahan, which meant 'monarch of the world'. His reign was the pinnacle of Mughal power. Like his predecessors, Shah Jahan was a patron of the arts, and some of the finest examples of Mughal art and architecture were produced during his reign, including the Taj Mahal (p133), an extravagant work of extreme refinement and beauty. Shah Jahan also commenced work on Delhi's seventh incarnation, Shahjahanabad, constructing the Red Fort (p96) and the Jama Masjid (p98).

Unfortunately, the emperor harboured high military ambitions, and often bled the country's financial resources to meet his whims. His exhaustion of the state treasury didn't go down well with the Rajputs, and towards the end

Driven by nostalgia, Babur ordered his architects to design a series of gardens across Delhi in a way that they would remind him of his former capital Kabul.

Though Fatehpur Sikri had every making of a great capital, it had an acute shortage of water which became so severe with time that Akbar was forced to move his seat of power to Agra.

Known for his religious tolerance, Akbar propounded a cult called Din-I-Ilahi, which incorporated the best elements of the two principal religions of his empire, Hinduism and Islam.

1526

Babur conquers Delhi and stuns Rajasthan by routing its confederate force, gaining a technological edge on the battlefield due to the early introduction of matchlock muskets in his army.

1540

The Sur dynasty briefly captures Delhi from the Mughals, after Sher Shah Suri's victory over Humayun in the Battle of Kanauj. The loss forces the Mughals to temporarily seek help from the Rajputs.

1568

Akbar leads his army to Chittorgarh and wrests it from the Sisodias. Udai Singh, then king of Mewar, survives the onslaught and transfers his capital to the new city of Udaipur.

1608

Granted trading rights by way of a royal charter, the first ships of the British East India Company sail up the Arabian Sea to drop anchor at Surat in Gujarat.

1631

Construction of the Taj Mahal begins after Shah Jahan, overcome with grief following the death of his wife Mumtaz Mahal, vows to build the most beautiful mausoleum in the world in her memory.

1674

Shivaji establishes the Maratha kingdom, spanning western India and parts of the Deccan and north India. He assumes the supercilious title of Chhatrapati, which means 'Lord of the Universe'.

of Shah Jahan's rule, the Rajputs and the Mughals had resigned to accept each other as unsatisfactory bedfellows. Things worsened when Aurangzeb became the last great Mughal emperor in 1658, deposing his father who died in imprisonment at the Musamman Burj (p136) in Agra eight years later. An Islamic hardliner, Aurangzeb quickly made enemies in the region. His zeal saw him devoting all his resources to extending the Mughal empire's boundaries. His government's emphasis on Islam alienated his Hindu subjects. Aurangzeb imposed punitive taxes, banned the building of new temples, even destroying some, and forbade music and ceremonies at court. Challenges to his power mounted steadily as people reacted against his dour reign. And when he claimed his rights over Jodhpur in 1678, his relations with the Rajputs turned into full-scale war. Before long, there was insurgency on all sides, which only increased as Aurangzeb died in 1707 to leave the empire in the hands of a line of inefficient successors given to Bohemian excesses, who had little or no interest in running the state. The Mughal empire was on a one-way journey towards doom.

MARATHAS & PERSIANS RUN RIOT

The death of Aurangzeb marked the beginning of Delhi's Twilight Years, a period through which the degenerating Mughal empire was laid to waste by the Marathas and the Persians. The Marathas had risen to prominence between 1646 and 1680 led by the heroic Shivaji, under whom their empire was administered by the *peishwas*, or chief ministers, who later went on to become hereditary rulers. At a time when the Mughals were struggling to hold their empire together, the Marathas trooped in from the south and gained a stranglehold on Delhi, primarily by supplying regiments to the Mughal army who soon went out of control and began to take possession of the land. Contemporary Mughal kings, who were both ineffective and cowardly, failed to curb their unruly behaviour. The resulting confusion was capitalised on by the Persian invader Nadir Shah, who sacked Delhi in 1739 and robbed the city of much of its wealth. When the Marathas were unable to put up any resistance on behalf of the Mughals, they joined the Persians in pillaging the capital. They soon sucked Delhi dry of all its treasures, and when there was nothing left to rob, the Marathas turned their eyes on Rajasthan. Raids and skirmishes with the Rajputs followed; cities were sacked, lives were lost, and the Marathas began to win large tracts of Rajput land in the state. The absence of a central Indian authority only contributed to the mayhem, so much so that India had to wait till the early 19th century for another invasion to bring the country under a single umbrella once again.

THE BRITISH DROP ANCHOR

The British invaders came by the sea, following the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, who had first discovered the sea route from Europe to

India around Africa in 1498. The British East India Company, a London trading firm that wanted a slice of the Indian spice trade (having seen how well the Portuguese were doing), landed in India in the early 1600s. Granted trading rights by Jehangir, the company set up its first trading outpost in Surat in Gujarat, and gradually went about extending its influence across the country, harbouring interests that went beyond mere trade. Extraordinarily enough, this commercial firm ended up nominally ruling India for 250 years.

Sooner or later, all leading European maritime nations came and pitched tent in India. Yet none managed to spread out across the country as efficiently as the British. The early English agents became well assimilated in India, learning Persian and intermarrying with local people, which gave them an edge over other European hopefuls. When the Mughal empire collapsed, they made a calculated political move, filling the power vacuum and taking over the reins of administration through a series of battles and alliances with local rulers. By the early 19th century, India was effectively under British control, and the British government in London had begun to take a more direct role in supervising affairs in India, while leaving the East India Company to deal with day-to-day administrative duties.

Outside British territory, the country was in a shambles. Bandits were on the prowl in the rural areas, and towns and cities had fallen into decay. The Marathas' 32 raids in Rajasthan continued, and though the British at first ignored the feuding parties, they soon spotted an opportunity for expansion and stepped into the fray. They negotiated treaties with the leaders of the main Rajput states, offering them protection from the Marathas in return for political and military support. The trick worked. Weakened by habitual wrangling and ongoing conflicts, the kings forfeited their independence in exchange for protection, and British residents were installed in the princely states. The British ultimately eliminated the Maratha threat, but, in the process, the Rajputs were effectively reduced to puppets. Delhi's prominence as a national capital dwindled too, as the British chose to rule the country from Calcutta (now Kolkata).

The later British authorities had an elitist notion of their own superiority that was to have a lasting impact on India. The colonisers felt that it was their duty to civilise the nation, unlike the first agents of the East India Company who had seen and recognised the value in India's native culture. During the first half of the 19th century, the British brought about radical social reforms. They introduced education in the English language, which replaced Persian as the language of politics and governance. New roads and canal systems were installed, followed by the foundation of schools and universities modelled on the British system of education. In the later stages, they brought in the postal system, the telegraph and the railways, introductions that remain vital to the Indian administrative system today.

The booty carried back by Nadir Shah from India was so rich that, upon reaching Iran, he relieved his subjects from paying taxes for a period of three years.

Captain James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (published 1829-32) is a historical masterpiece, with the captain's fascinating observations on a region previously undocumented by Europeans.

William Dalrymple's *City of Djinns* is a wonderful book that draws upon his personal experiences in Delhi, and chronicles the fascinating history of the city in its many incarnations.

The Doctrine of Lapse, a policy formulated by Lord Dalhousie, enabled the East India Company to annex any princely state if its ruler was either found incompetent or died without a direct heir.

1707

Death of Aurangzeb, the last of the Mughal greats. His demise triggers the gradual collapse of the Mughal empire, as anarchy and rebellion break out across the country.

1739

Nadir Shah plunders Delhi, and carries away with him the Peacock Throne as well as the Kohinoor, a magnificent diamond which changes many hands to eventually become property of the British royalty.

1756

The rise of the notorious Jat dynasty of Bharatpur in Rajasthan. Under the leadership of Suraj Mahi and his son Jawahar Singh, the Jats soon join the Marathas and Persians in looting Delhi and Agra.

1757

Breaking out of its business mould, the East India Company registers its first military victory on Indian soil. Siraj-ud-Daulah, nawab of Bengal, is defeated by Robert Clive in the Battle of Plassey.

1857

The short-lived First War of Independence breaks out across India. In the absence of a national leader, the rebels coerce the last Mughal king Bahadur Shah Zafar to proclaim himself emperor of India.

1885

The Indian National Congress, India's first home-grown political organisation, is set up. It brings educated Indians together and plays a key role in India's freedom struggle.

But at the same time, British bureaucracy came with controversial policies. Severe taxes were imposed on landowners and, as raw materials from India were used in British industry, cheap British-produced goods began to flood Indian markets and destroy local livelihoods. Mass anger in the country began to rise, and found expression in the First War of Independence in 1857. Soldiers and peasants took over Delhi for four months and besieged the British Residency in Lucknow for five months before they were finally suppressed by the East India Company's forces. Rajasthan also saw uprisings among the poor and middle classes, but there was little effect in the royal circles as Rajput kings continued to support the British, and were rewarded for their loyalty after the British government assumed direct control of the country the following year.

INDEPENDENCE, PARTITION & AFTER

Following a lengthy freedom movement, India finally freed itself of British domination in 1947. The road to Independence was an extraordinary one, influenced by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, later known as the Mahatma (Great Soul), who galvanised the peasants and villagers into a nonviolent resistance that was to spearhead the nationalist movement. A lawyer by qualification, he caused chaos by urging people to refuse to pay taxes and boycott British institutions and products. He campaigned for the Dalits (the lower classes of Hindu society, who he called Harijans or the 'Children of God'), and the rural poor, capturing public imagination through his approach, example and rhetoric. The freedom struggle gained such momentum under him that the British Labour Party, which came to power in 1945, saw Indian independence as inevitable. The process of the handover of power was initiated, but Hindu-Muslim differences took their toll at this crucial moment, and saw the country being divided on religious lines, with Pakistan being formed to appease the Muslim League which sought to distance itself from a Hindu-dominated country.

Prior to the change of guard, the British had shifted their capital out of Calcutta (now Kolkata) and built the imperial city of New Delhi through the early 1900s, work on which was overseen by architect Edwin Lutyens. Meant to be an expression of British permanence, the city was speckled with grand structures such as the Rashtrapati Bhavan (p104), the Central Vista and hundreds of residential buildings that came to be known as Lutyens Bungalows. After Independence, many of these Colonial buildings were used to house the brand-new Indian government, as Delhi was reinstated to its former status as the administrative and political capital of the country.

Agra, sadly, did not get as much recognition as its counterpart. Being predominantly a satellite capital, where power occasionally spilt over from Delhi, the city had lost most of its political importance after the Mughals had departed. In the modern context, it made little sense to invest it with any kind of government machinery, so much so that it lost out to Lucknow when it came to selecting a state capital for Uttar Pradesh. Nonetheless, Agra

continues to be high up on the tourism map of India, as travellers throng the city to visit its many historic sites and monuments.

The long history of insurgency and unrest in India did not end with Independence. In 1962, India had a brief war with China over disputed border territories, and went on to engage in three battles with Pakistan over similar issues. Political assassinations didn't recede into history either. Mahatma Gandhi was slain soon after Independence by a Hindu extremist who hated his inclusive philosophy. Indira Gandhi, India's first woman prime minister, was gunned down by her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation to her ordering the storming of the Golden Temple, the holiest of Sikh shrines, in 1984. Her son, Rajiv, who succeeded her to the post of prime minister was also assassinated by Tamil terrorists protesting India's stance on Sri Lankan policies. Rajiv's Italian-born widow, Sonia, was the next of the Gandhis to take up the dynastic mantle of power. In 2004, she was chosen as president of the Congress Party, which has fed on the reputation and charisma of the Gandhis since its formative years and is currently a principal political alliance in one of the world's largest democracies.

RAJASTHAN IS BORN

Ever since they swore allegiance to the British, the Rajput kingdoms subjugated themselves to absolute British rule. Being reduced to redundancy, they also chose to trade in their real power for pomp and extravagance. Consumption took over from chivalry and, by the early 20th century, many of the kings were spending their time travelling the world with scores of retainers, playing polo and occupying entire floors of expensive Western hotels. Many maintained huge fleets of expensive cars, a fine collection of which can be seen in the automobile museum in Udaipur (p240). While it suited the British to indulge them, the maharajas' profligacy was economically and socially detrimental to their subjects, with the exception of a few capable rulers such as Ganga Singh of Bikaner. Remnants of the Raj (the British government in India before 1947) can be spotted all over the region today, from the Mayo College in Ajmer to the colonial villas in Mt Abu, and black-and-white photographs, documenting chummy Anglo-Rajput hunting expeditions, which deck the walls of any self-respecting heritage hotel in the state.

After Independence, from a security point of view, it became crucial for the new Indian union to ensure that the princely states of Rajasthan were integrated into the new nation. Most of these states were located near the vulnerable India-Pakistan border, and it made sense for the government to push for a merger that would minimise possibilities of rebellion in the region. Thus, when the boundaries of the new nation were being chalked out, the ruling Congress Party made a deal with the nominally independent Rajput states to cede power to the republic. To sweeten the deal, the rulers were offered lucrative monetary returns and government stipends, apart from being allowed to retain their titles and property holdings. Having fallen on hard times, the kings couldn't but agree

The 2005 film *The Rising* retells the story of the 1857 rebellion through the life and death of its most celebrated hero, the soldier Mangal Pandey, played by Aamir Khan.

Mahatma Gandhi argued that the leader of the Muslim League, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, should lead a united India if that would prevent the partition of the country.

The 24-spoke wheel, an emblem designed by Ashoka, has been adopted as the central motif on the national flag of India, where it is rendered in blue against a white background.

India got its first president from the Dalit community when KR Narayanan was sworn in to office in 1997. The current president, Pratibha Patil, is the first woman to hold the top post.

The Sariska and Ranthambhore tiger reserves, Rajasthan's best-known national parks, were originally used as private hunting grounds by the maharajas of Alwar and Ranthambore respectively.

1911

Architect Edwin Lutyens begins work on New Delhi, the newest manifestation of Delhi, subsequently considered in architectural circles as one of the finest garden cities ever to have been built.

1947

India gains independence on 15 August. Pakistan is formed a day earlier. Partition is followed by cross-border exodus, as thousands of Hindus and Muslims brave communal riots to migrate to their respective nations.

1948

Mahatma Gandhi is assassinated during a public walk in New Delhi by Nathuram Godse on 30 January. Godse and his co-conspirator Narayan Apte are later tried, convicted and executed.

1948-56

Rajasthan takes shape, as the princely states form a beeline to sign the Instrument of Accession, giving up their territories which are incorporated into the newly formed Republic of India.

1952

The first elections are held in Rajasthan, and the state gets its first taste of democracy after centuries of monarchical rule. The Congress is the first party to be elected into office.

1992

Hindu-Muslim rivalry rears its ugly head once again as the Babri Masjid, presumably built by Babur on a Hindu shrine in Ayodhya, is demolished by Hindu activists.

with the government, and their inclination to yield to the Indian dominion gradually brought about the formation of the state of Rajasthan.

To begin with, the state comprised only the southern and southeastern states of Rajasthan. Mewar was one of the first kingdoms to join the union. Udaipur was initially the state capital, with the maharaja of Udaipur becoming *rajpramukh* (head of state). The Instrument of Accession was signed in 1949, and Jaipur, Bikaner, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer were then merged, with Jaipur as the state's new capital. Later that year, the United State of Matsya was incorporated into Rajasthan. The state finally burgeoned to its current dimensions in November 1956, with the additions of Ajmer-Merwara, Abu Rd and a tract of Dilwara, originally part of the princely state of Sirohi that had been divided between Gujarat and Rajasthan. Rajasthan is now India's largest state.

The fate of the royal families of Rajasthan since Independence has been mixed. A handful of the region's maharajas have continued their wasteful ways, squandering away their fortunes and reducing themselves to abject poverty. A few zealous ones, who hated to see their positions of power go, have switched to politics and become members of leading political parties in India. Some have skipped politics to climb the rungs of power in other well-known national institutions, such as sports administration bodies or charitable and nonprofit organisations in the country. Only a few have chosen to lead civilian lives, earning a name for themselves as fashion designers, cricketers or entertainers.

The majority of kings, however, have refused to let bygones be bygones, and have cashed in on their heritage by opening ticketed museums for tourists and converting their palaces to lavish hotels. With passing time, the luxury hospitality business has begun to find more and more takers from around the world. The boom in this industry can be traced back to 1971, when Indira Gandhi, then India's Prime Minister, abolished the privileges granted to the Rajasthan princes at the time of accession. Coming as a massive shock to those at the top of the pile, the snipping of the cash cord forced many kings to inadvertently join the long list of heritage hotel owners.

In spite of the abolition, many kings choose to continue using their royal titles for social purposes till this day. While these titles mean little more than status symbols in the modern context, they still help in garnering enormous respect from the common public. On the other hand, nothing these days quite evokes the essence of Rajput grandeur as much as a stay in palatial splendour surrounded by vestiges of the regal age, in places such as the Rambagh Palace (p158) in Jaipur and the Umaid Bhawan Palace (p306) in Jodhpur. Not all the royal palaces of Rajasthan are on the tourist circuit, though. Many of them continue to serve as residences for erstwhile royal families, and some of the mansions that were left out of the tourism pie are crumbling away, ignored and neglected, their decaying interiors empty and full of bats.

Discover the bygone days of Rajasthan's royalty in *A Princess Remembers*, the memoirs of Gayatri Devi, maharani of Jaipur. Cowritten by Santha Rama Rau, it's an enthralling read.

1998

India declares itself a nuclear power after conducting underground tests near the town of Pokaran in Rajasthan. Pakistan follows suit, and the twin tests subject the subcontinental neighbours to global condemnation.

2004

A deadly tsunami strikes the eastern shores of India on 26 December, killing more than 15,000 people.

2007

India and the US release the draft of the 123 Agreement for mutual exchange of nuclear power and logistics. The draft is widely criticised by Indian opposition parties.

The Culture

Anirban Mahapatra

RAJASTHANI IDENTITY

It's not the turbaned maharajas, or the self-obsessed white-collars, or even the stereotypical beggars, for that matter. The first people you run into upon your arrival in Rajasthan or Delhi are a jostling bunch of overly attentive locals, who ambush you the moment you step out of the airport or the railway station to drown you in a sea of unsolicited offers. Great hotels, taxi rides at half price, above-the-rate currency exchange... the list drags on, interspersed with beaming smiles you would only expect from long-lost friends. Famed Indian hospitality at work? This is no reception party; the men are touts out on their daily rounds, trying to wheedle a few bucks off unsuspecting travellers, and most of them can lie through their teeth. There's no way you can escape them, though a polite but firm 'no thank you' often stands you in good stead under such circumstances. It's a welcome each and every newcomer is accorded in India.

It's hard not to get put off by the surprise mobbing. But brush it off anyway, and don't let the incident make you jump to the hasty conclusion that every local, given half a chance, is out to hound the daylights out of you. Walk out of the terminal and into the real India, and things suddenly come across as strikingly different. With little stake in your activities, the people you now meet are genuinely warm (even if overtly curious), hospitable and sometimes helpful beyond what you'd call mere courtesy. For example, someone might volunteer to show you around a monument expecting absolutely nothing in return. And while it's advisable to always keep your wits about you (see the boxed text, p44), going with the flow often helps you understand the north-Indian psyche better, apart from making your trip to the region all the more memorable.

Broadly speaking, people in North India are easy to get along with. Punjabi-dominated Delhi has an inherent back-slapping culture where friendship is quickly forged over a stiff whisky. Rajasthan, on the other hand, is surprisingly cosmopolitan. Most rickshaw pullers in Jaipur or Udaipur have picked up a European language or three to attract more tourist dollars. And in spite of adhering to a rigid social code among themselves, Rajasthanis are willing to make concessions for tourists in more ways than one. Remember, it's the dollars brought in by travellers that makes much of the region's economy tick, and there's no way the locals are going to upset the apple cart.

The spin-off, however, is that Rajasthanis often tend to overdo things to play up their fabled identity built on chivalry and fortitude, if only to preserve an image that the world is willing to pay to see. From growing ornamental moustaches to weaving tall tales about their glorious ancestry, the people here leave no stone unturned in showcasing their regal past. But then, maybe it's just as well, for what would Rajasthan be without its history anyway?

DAILY LIFE

Contemporary Culture

Urbanity and exposure to the outside world notwithstanding, North Indian society remains conservative at heart. Cities such as Delhi and Jaipur may have acquired a liberal sheen on the outside, thanks to globalisation, but within the walls of a typical home, little has changed through time. The man of the house still calls the shots; conversations relating to sex don't make it to dinner table; and moving in with a partner is considered immoral, if not a sign of blatant promiscuity. Western influences are apparent in the

The common gesture used to greet strangers in India is that of joining palms at chest-level in a *namaste*. Women generally don't shake hands, unlike some men.

Moustachioed personnel in some troops of the Indian Army, such as the Rajput regiment, are paid a monthly allowance of Rs 100 to maintain their whiskers.

The number of mobile phone connections in India is currently upward of 75 million, and is expected to grow to about 600 million by 2012.

public domain. Satellite TV rules the airwaves, mobile phones are nothing short of a necessity, and coffee shops are jam-packed on the weekends. But ask a young man in front of his parents what his girlfriend does, and you needn't look beyond several pairs of flushed cheeks to realise you've made a faux pas. Urban India prefers to wallow in a state of conscious denial. Some things are best left unsaid.

In the region's backyard, the scene is rather stark. Rural Rajasthan remains one of the poorest areas in the country. Being in close proximity to the Thar Desert, the climate here is harsh, and people dwelling in the region's villages are locked in a day-to-day battle for survival, as they have been for ages. Unemployment is rife, and has resulted in mass frustration, which in turn has led to problems such as debt, drug abuse (with synthetic drugs rapidly replacing age-old indulgences like opium and marijuana), alcoholism and prostitution. Indigenous tribes have been the worst affected, and it isn't uncommon to see members from their communities begging or performing tricks at Delhi's traffic signals in return for loose change.

Rajasthan also lags behind on the education front, its literacy rate being about 4% behind the national average of 65.4%. In 2001, the government implemented a nationwide 'education-for-all' programme, which aims to impart elementary education to all Indian children by 2010. The project focuses on the education of girls, who have historically been deprived of quality schooling. Rajasthan is expected to benefit immensely from the programme, and the authorities are optimistic that the forthcoming 2011 census will throw up positive results and set the record straight.

Status of Women

Traditionally objectified to the extent of being seen as child-bearing machines, women in rural Rajasthan are yet to rub shoulders with their menfolk in many ways. Being socially disadvantaged, their freedom has been seriously clipped, and, as keepers of a family's honour, they have been forbidden from mingling freely with strangers. Try approaching a village belle on the street, and you'll see her beat a quick retreat into the privacy of her home, her face hidden behind her sari. A Rajasthani woman's beauty, after all, is only for her family to appreciate.

Screened from the outside world, most women in rural Rajasthan are sentenced to a lifetime of strenuous household chores. If they are allowed to work at all, they are paid less than their male counterparts. Besides all this, the radically patriarchal society still doesn't recognise them as inheritors of family property, which almost always goes to male heirs. The birth of a girl child is often seen as unlucky, since it not only means an extra mouth to feed but a generous dowry that needs to be given away at the time of her marriage. Embryonic sex determination, despite being illegal, is practised on the sly, and local newspapers occasionally blow the lid off surgical rackets where conniving surgeons charge huge amounts of money to carry out female-foeticide operations.

Progress has been made, however, in the form of development programmes run by the central and state governments, as well as nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and voluntary outfits that have swung into action. Organisations such as the Barefoot College, Urmul Trust and Seva Mandir all run grass-roots programmes in Rajasthan, devoted to awareness, education, health issues and female empowerment, and volunteering opportunities are never lacking (see p369).

In the cities, the scene is much better. Urban women in Delhi and Jaipur have worked their way to social and professional recognition, and feminists are no longer dismissed as fringe lunatics. Even so, some of India's first-

Opium was traditionally served to guests at social functions by several indigenous communities of Rajasthan. Though the sale of opium is now illegal, it continues behind law-enforcers' backs.

Mala Sen's *Death by Fire: Sati, Dowry Death & Female Infanticide in Modern India* is a disturbing and impassioned account, written from the perspective of three different women.

DOS & DON'TS

India has retained many time-honoured traditions and reservations regarding public behaviour. While you won't be expected to get everything right, common sense and courtesy will take you a long way. If in doubt about how you should behave, watch what the locals do, or simply ask.

Dressing conservatively (for both women and men) wins a warmer response from locals. Short skirts and spaghetti straps invite unwanted attention, especially in crowded places. Kissing and cuddling in public aren't condoned by society, so open displays of affection are best avoided.

Religious Etiquette

Visits to sacred sites require you to dress and behave respectfully – no shorts or sleeveless tops (this rule applies to both men and women). Head cover (not baseball caps!) is necessary at some places of worship. Jain temples request the removal of leather items and may ask women not to enter if menstruating. In some places, men may have to sit apart from women. Loud and intrusive behaviour isn't appreciated, nor is smoking. There are some sites that don't admit women and some that deny entry to nonadherents of their faith.

Before entering a holy place, remove your shoes and check if photography is allowed. Religious etiquette advises against touching locals on the head, or directing the soles of your feet at a person, religious shrine or deity. It's also offensive to touch someone with your feet or to touch a carving of a deity.

Eating & Visiting Etiquette

If you're invited to someone's home, it's considered good manners to remove your shoes before entering the house and wash your hands before a meal. Wait to be served or until you are invited to help yourself; if you're unsure about protocol, wait for your host to direct you. Indians eat with their hands, and cutlery is found only in urban households. You can always ask for a fork, but if the family can't provide you with one, simply proceed with your right hand. The left hand is only used for unsavoury actions, such as toilet duties. While drinking water from a shared container, hold it slightly above your mouth, so as to avoid contact with your lips – no swigging.

Photography Etiquette

Always ask before taking photographs. Incidents of people posing for photos only to ask for money afterward are common, and some women find it offensive to be photographed. Taking photos of shrines, funeral proceedings, religious ceremonies or of people bathing publicly can be considered impolite, and requesting permission in advance helps clear up any confusion. Flash photography may be prohibited in certain shrines or heritage monuments.

generation female executives recall a time not very long ago when employers would go into a tizz every time a woman put in a request for maternity leave, as motherhood had been precluded as an occasion that merited time off from work.

Treatment of Gays & Lesbians

Homosexuality is not endorsed by Indian culture per se. The Indian Penal Code still defines sodomy as a punishable offence for being 'against the order of nature'. Lesbianism, in contrast, has been left unaddressed by the law of the land. But if that leads you to believe that homosexual relations are unheard of in Indian society, the fact remains that India has more than 70 million gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people. Unfortunately, the absence of legal cover, along with fears of being rejected by society, keeps most people confined to the closet.

On a brighter note, the intelligentsia in cities such as Delhi have of late begun to mobilise public opinion against obsolete legal sanctions, besides actively rallying for gay rights. In recent years, several books have been

The government-run website www.explorerruralindia.org has a great deal of information about travel options in the backyards of several states across the country, including Rajasthan.

written and films made on same-sex relations, with the objective of dispelling social reservations regarding alternative sexuality.

Apart from the GLBT community, India has a sizable but marginalised population of transvestites and eunuchs, who dress in women's clothing and are collectively called *hijras*. A handful of them are born hermaphrodite; the others are either gay or are kidnapped and castrated at a young age by other *hijras* so as to add to their dwindling community. Disliked for their queer ways and brash behaviour, *hijras* earn a living by working as uninvited entertainers at weddings and celebrations of the birth of children. When their luck runs out, they have no option but to resort to prostitution.

Attitude towards HIV/AIDS

After South Africa, India has the world's highest number of HIV-positive people, with 5.2 million reported cases as of 2006. But even as the virus spreads rampantly through unprotected sex, prostitution and intravenous drug use, a large number of Indians continue to shy away from tackling the problem head on. Despite a flurry of awareness programmes, myths regarding the ailment abound, and HIV-positive people are often made to bear the brunt of social ostracism. Condom usage hasn't picked up either; many in suburban and rural India are still iffy about purchasing prophylactics across the counter in full public view.

Marriage & Divorce

Indian marriages were always meant to unite families, not individuals. In rural Rajasthan, the case remains much the same today. Unlike in cities, where people now find love through online dating sites, weddings in villages and small towns are still arranged by parents. Those actually getting married (read perfect strangers) have little say in the proceedings, and cross-caste marriages are still a no-no. Few move out of their parents' homes after tying the knot; setting up an independent establishment post marriage is often considered an insult to the elderly.

By and large, marriages in rural areas are initiated by professional matchmakers who strike a suitable match based on family status, caste and compatible horoscopes. Once a marriage is finalised, the bride's family arranges for a dowry to be paid to the groom's parents, as an appreciation of their graciously accepting the bride as a member of their family. Sometimes running into hundreds of thousands of rupees, dowries can range from hard cash to items such as TVs, motorcycles, household furniture, utensils and even toiletries. Despite the exact amount of dowry being finalised at the time of betrothal, there have been sporadic cases reported where the groom's family later insists that the girl's parents cough up more, failing which the bride might be subjected to abuse and domestic violence. Stories of newly married girls dying in kitchen 'accidents' are not uncommon either. In most cases, they leave the grooms free to remarry and claim another dowry.

Not giving two hoots about Indian law, which sets the marriageable age of men and women at 21 and 18 respectively, child marriages continue to be practised in rural Rajasthan. It is estimated that one in every two girls in the state's villages are married off before they turn 15. Divorce, on the other hand, remains forbidden, thereby complicating things in case marriages don't work out. Even if a divorce is obtained, it is difficult for a woman to find another husband; as a divorcée, she is considered less chaste than a spinster. Given the stigma associated with divorce, few people have the courage to walk out on each other, instead preferring to silently live through botched marriage.

Manvendra Singh Gohil, a Gujarati prince, is the only person among Indian royalty to have come out as gay. Now an activist, he plans to open a hospice for HIV-positive people.

According to Hindu astrologers, people born under the influence of the planet Mars supposedly make bad wedding matches. Called *mangliks*, they are believed to bring bad luck to their in-laws' families.

Death

Hindus cremate their dead. Deaths are mourned by Rajasthanis for a period of 12 or 13 days, after which a feast known as *mosar*, *barwa*, *kariyawa* or *terwa* is held, which formally ends the mourning. As a symbolic gesture, the aggrieved family has to entertain a group of community leaders and Brahmins by treating them to an elaborate meal, regardless of their financial standing. If the deceased happens to be a family patriarch, the 12th day also features a turban-tying ceremony where a successor to the male head is recognised by the family and society.

In the past, male deaths in Rajasthan warranted that widows end their lives by immolating themselves on their husband's funeral pyres. Known as *sati*, the act was traditionally seen as an event that relieved women of the ignominies of widowhood, and was widely practised in Rajasthan until the princely state of Jaipur outlawed it in 1846. Mewar initially resisted the ban, compelling Queen Victoria to issue a proclamation forbidding *sati* in 1861. After Independence, Indian legislation stuck with the proclamation, though intermittent cases of *sati* were still reported in the state, the last case coming to light as late as 1987.

ECONOMY

Rajasthan trails the nation's per capita income figures by many notches. Agriculture has traditionally been the region's mainstay, and almost 70% of rural households are engaged in working the fields. Yet, the occupation is far from profitable, and has lately become even less viable, as periodic droughts followed by freak flash floods have repeatedly wreaked havoc on the regional harvest. Big-city dreams have started taking their toll too. Thousands of Rajasthani youths now leave home and hearth behind to migrate to urban centres, only to land menial jobs ranging from daily wage labourers to waiters at roadside eateries, with monthly salaries ranging from a meagre Rs 2000 to Rs 5000 (US\$50 to US\$120).

The recent surge in the tourism industry, however, has provided many locals with alternative career options. A large number of young Rajasthanis now earn a living from the circuit by working in guest houses, manning counters at souvenir shops or sprucing up their knowledge of history to become tourist guides.

On the other end of the economic rainbow are the well-heeled tech geeks and corporate honchos of Delhi, who bring money into the capital by tapping out strings of high-end computer codes or riding the real-estate boom. The business process outsourcing (BPO) industry has emerged as a lucrative industry in the past five years or so. Scores of outsourcing firms (commonly referred to as call centres) now dot the skylines of Delhi's suburbs, providing employment to hordes of urban graduates, who take home anything from Rs 15,000 to Rs 75,000 (US\$350 to US\$1765) per month for their services. Easy money has predictably bumped up living standards, bringing previously unaffordable luxuries within arm's reach of urban India's generation next.

POPULATION

Rajasthan's population has nearly doubled since 1951. There are several issues that have contributed to the phenomenon, such as improved infrastructure and better medical facilities, which have led to a considerable drop in the mortality rate. Ironically, the local mindset has still not registered these new-age boons, which is why procreation still follows the norm of having 'an heir and a spare', just in case one offspring falls

Moral policing is a favourite pastime for some Indians, especially those associated with headline politico-religious outfits. Violent demonstrations over trivial or absurd issues aren't uncommon either.

TRAVELLING TIPS

Navigation

Asking for directions in India can be a harrowing affair. Few locals are good at giving directions, and some would rather lead you the wrong way than admit their ignorance. It's worth noting that the commonly used sideways wobble of the head doesn't necessarily mean 'no'. It can translate to: 'yes', 'maybe' or 'I have no idea'. So never pose questions in a leading manner, like pointing and saying 'Is this the way to the museum?' since you're almost certain to get 'yes' for an answer. 'Which way to the museum?' is better. Even if you're given directions, crosscheck with other people along the way.

Tipping

If done with discretion, tipping can work wonders in India. There's no rule of thumb regarding how much you should tip, but, if you want an idea, here goes. Roadside eateries expect no more than Rs 20; errand boys are happy with Rs 10. In budget or midrange hotels, tip the room service guys about Rs 20 to Rs 50 when you check in; this ensures they don't ignore you through your stay. Then pass off another Rs 50 while checking out. Indians don't tip for public services such as rickshaw rides, haircuts or portorage. Delhi's cabbies would expect you to round off the fare, though.

Diplomacy

Indians are naturally curious, especially about foreigners. People are likely to strike up a conversation on a train journey, and some questions can be rather nosy – marital status, income, food habits – so expect anything. While it's advisable not to snub them, you can always laugh off awkward questions. In cases where they persist, be a sport – answer politely, then ask them back. It's an effective way to check the volley of queries.

Following the Crowd

If the bus you're on breaks down in the middle of nowhere, don't fret. Keep your wits about you, and go with the public. The locals know best how to tackle an emergency. And being in the company of people means you're never left to handle a crisis all by yourself.

prey to untimely death. The reluctance to practise contraception is yet another reason behind the sharp rise in the head count; government-sponsored family-planning programmes are valiantly fighting a losing battle on this front.

Demographically speaking, most of the region's population still lives in its villages. The desert areas are scantily inhabited; western Rajasthan has the lowest population density in the region. The metropolises, alternatively, have attracted people from all walks of life to come and reside within their city limits, and thus boast a high-density, multiethnic population. Religious ghettos can be found in places such as Ajmer and Jaipur, where a fair number of Christian families currently live; the Ganganagar district, which is home to a large number of Sikhs; and parts of Alwar and Bharatpur, where the populace is chiefly Muslim. Though most Muslims in Rajasthan belong to the Sunni sect, the state also has a small but affluent community of Shi'ias, called the Bohras, living to the southeast.

Tribes & Indigenous Communities

Rajasthan has a large indigenous population, comprising communities that are native to the region and have lived there for centuries. Called Adivasis (ancient dwellers), most of these ethnic groups have been listed as Scheduled Tribes by the government. The majority of the Adivasis are pagan, though some have either taken to Hindu ways or converted to Christianity over time.

BHILS

The largest of Rajasthan's tribes, the Bhils live to the southeast, spilling over into Madhya Pradesh. They speak their own distinct native language and have a natural talent for archery and warfare. Witchcraft, magic and superstition are deeply rooted in their culture. Polygamy is still practised by those who can afford it, and love marriages are the norm.

Originally a hunter-gatherer community, the Bhils have survived years of exploitation by higher castes to finally take up small-scale agriculture. Some have left their villages to head for the cities. Literacy is still below average and not too many Bhil families have many assets to speak of, but these trends are slowly being reversed. The Baneshwar Fair (see boxed text, p224) is a huge Bhil festival, where you can sample the essence of their culture first hand.

MINAS

The Minas are the second-largest tribal group in Rajasthan and live around Shekhawati and eastern Rajasthan. The name Mina comes from *meen* (fish), and the tribe claims it evolved from the fish incarnation of Vishnu. Minas once ruled supreme in the Amber region, but their miseries began once they were routed by the Rajputs. To make matters worse, they were outlawed during the British Raj, after their guerrilla tactics earned them the 'criminal-tribe' label. Following Independence, the criminal status was lifted, and the Minas subsequently took to agriculture.

Festivities, music and dance form a vital part of Mina culture, and they excel in performances such as swordplay and acrobatics. Minas view marriage as a noble institution, and their weddings are accompanied by enthusiastic celebrations. They are also known to be friendly with other tribes, and don't mind sharing space with other communities.

BISHNOIS

The Bishnois are the most progressive of Rajasthan's indigenous communities, and even have their presence on the internet (www.bishnoi.org). However, they can't be strictly classified as a tribe. The Bishnois owe their origin to a visionary named Jambho Ji, who in 1485 shunned the Hindu social order to form a casteless faith that took inspiration from nature. Credited as the oldest environmentalist community in India, the Bishnois are animal-lovers and take an active interest in preserving forests and wildlife. Felling of trees and hunting within Bishnoi territory is strictly prohibited.

RELIGION

Hindus comprise nearly 90% of Rajasthan's population. Much of the remaining 10% are Muslims, followed by decreasing numbers of Sikhs, Jains, Christians and Buddhists respectively. In spite of this religious diversity, tolerance levels are high, and incidents of communal violence are rare, at least in comparison to the volatile nature of things in the neighbouring state of Gujarat. Most people here mind their own business, without nosing around in others' affairs.

Hinduism & the Caste System

Hinduism is among the world's oldest religious traditions, with its roots going back at least 3000 years. Theoretically, Hinduism is not a religion; it is a way of life, an elaborate convention that has evolved through the centuries, in contrast to many other religions which can trace their origins to a single founder. Despite being founded on a solid religious base, Hinduism doesn't

For comprehensive information on India's native and tribal communities, check out the website www.tribal.nic.in, maintained by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs under the Government of India.

Bombay Calling, a 2006 documentary produced by National Geographic, provided an in-depth look into India's BPO industry by profiling the work environment and employees of a call centre in Mumbai.

Look up the BBC website www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions for a concise rundown of the world's major religions. The site also lists some interesting links you can access for further details.

HINDU GODS & GODDESSES

According to Hindu scriptures, there are around 330 million deities in the Hindu pantheon. All of them are regarded as a manifestation of Brahman (the supreme spirit), which otherwise has three main representations, known as the Trimurti – the trio of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

Brahma

The only active role that Brahma ever played was during the creation of the universe. Since then, he has been immersed in eternal meditation and is therefore regarded as aloof. His vehicle is a swan and he is sometimes shown sitting on a lotus (see also boxed text, p210).

Vishnu & Krishna

Being the preserver and sustainer of the universe, Vishnu is associated with 'right action'. He is usually depicted with four arms, each holding a lotus, a conch shell, a discus and a mace respectively. His consort is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, and his vehicle is Garuda, a creature that's half bird, half beast. Vishnu has 10 incarnations, including Rama, Krishna and Buddha. He is also referred to as Narayan.

Krishna, the hugely popular incarnation of Vishnu, was sent to earth to fight for good and combat evil, and his exploits are documented in the Mahabharata. A shrewd politician, his flirtatious alliances with *gopis* (milkmaids) and his love for Radha, his paramour, have inspired countless paintings and songs.

Shiva & Parvati

Although he plays the role of the destroyer, Shiva's creative role is symbolised by his representation as the frequently worshipped lingam (phallus). A hippie of sorts, he lives in the Himalayas, smokes marijuana, smears his body with ash, and has a third eye on his forehead that symbolises wisdom. With snakes draped around his neck, he is sometimes shown holding a trident while riding Nandi the bull. With 1008 names, Shiva takes many forms, including Pashupati, champion of the animals, and Nataraja, performer of the *tandava* (cosmic dance of fury). He is also the lord of yoga.

Shiva's consort is the beautiful goddess Parvati, who in her dark side appears as Kali, the fiercest of the gods who demands sacrifices and wears a garland of skulls. Alternatively, she appears as the fair Durga, the demon slayer, who wields supreme power, holds weapons in her 10 hands and rides a tiger or a lion.

Ganesh

The jolly, pot-bellied, elephant-headed Ganesh is held in great affection by Indians. He is the god of good fortune, prosperity and the patron of scribes, being credited with writing sections of the Mahabharata. Ganesh is good at removing obstacles, and he's frequently spotted above doorways and entrances of Indian homes.

Hanuman

Hanuman is the hero of the Ramayana and is Rajasthan's most popular god. He is the loyal ally of lord Rama, and the images of Rama and his wife Sita are emblazoned upon his heart. He is king of the monkeys, and thus assures them refuge in temple complexes across the country.

have a specific theology, or even a central religious institution. It also has no provision for conversion; one is always born a Hindu.

Being an extremely diverse religion, Hinduism can't be summed up by a universal definition. Yet, there are a few principal tenets that most Hindu sects tend to go by. Hindus believe that all life originates from a supreme spirit called Brahman, a formless, timeless phenomenon manifested by Brahma, the Hindu lord of creation. Upon being born, all living beings are required to engage in dharma (worldly duties) and samsara

RAJASTHAN'S FOLK GODS & GODDESSES

Folk deities and deified local heroes abound in Rajasthan. Apart from public gods, families are often known to pay homage to a *kuladevi* (family idol).

Pabuji is one of many local heroes to have attained divine status. His is a particularly violent and chivalrous tale: Pabuji entered a transaction with a woman called Devalde, in which, in return for a mare, he vowed to protect her cows from all harm. The time to fulfil this obligation came, inconveniently, during Pabuji's own marriage. However, Pabuji immediately went to the aid of the threatened livestock. During the ensuing battle, he, along with all the male members of his family, perished at the hands of a villain called Jind Raj Khinchi. To preserve the family line, Pabuji's sister-in-law cut open her own belly and produced Pabuji's nephew, Nandio, before committing *sati* (a widow's act of self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre).

A community of professional storytellers called Bhopas have traditionally paid homage to the hero by performing *Pabuji-ka-phad*, in which they recite poetry in praise of Pabuji while unfurling *phad* (cloth-scroll) paintings that chronicle the life of the hero. You can attend these performances at places such as Chokhi Dhani (see p172) or Jaisalmer, if they happen at a time when you're around.

Gogaji was a warrior who lived in the 11th century and could cure snakebite; today, victims are brought to his shrines by both Hindu and Muslim devotees. Also believed to cure snakebite is Tejaji who, according to tradition, was blessed by a snake which decreed that anyone honouring Tejaji by wearing a thread in his name would be cured of snakebite.

Goddesses revered by Rajasthanis include incarnations of Devi (the Mother Goddess), such as the fierce Chamunda Mata, an incarnation of Durga; Sheetal Mata, the goddess of smallpox who is invoked by parents who want their children to be spared from the affliction; and Karni Mata, worshipped at Deshnok (see the Temple of Rats, p348) near Bikaner. Women who have committed *sati* on their husband's funeral pyres are also frequently worshipped as goddesses, such as Rani Sati, who has an elaborate temple in her honour in Jhunjhunu (p286), in Shekhawati. Barren women pay homage to the god Bhairon, an incarnation of Shiva, at his shrines, which are usually found under khejri trees. In order to be blessed with a child, the woman is required to leave a garment hanging from the branches of the tree. The deified folk hero Ramdev also has an important temple at Ramdevra (p319), near Pokaran in western Rajasthan.

(the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth). It is said that the road to salvation lies through righteous karma (actions which evoke subsequent reactions), which leads to moksha (emancipation), when the soul eventually returns to unite with the supreme spirit.

If that's not complex enough, things are convoluted further by the caste system, which broadly divides Hindus into four distinct classes based on their mythical origins and their occupations. On top of the caste hierarchy are the Brahmins, priests who supposedly originated from Brahma's mouth. Next come the Kshatriyas, the warriors who evolved from the deity's arms – this is the caste that the Rajputs fit into. Vaishyas, tradespeople born from the thighs, are third in the pecking order, below which stand the Shudras. Alternatively called Dalits or Scheduled Castes, the Shudras comprise menial workers such as peasants, janitors or cobblers and are known to stem from Brahma's feet. Caste, by the way, is not changeable.

Islam

Islam was founded in Arabia by the Prophet Mohammed in the 7th century AD. The Arabic term 'Islam' means 'surrender', and believers undertake to surrender to the will of Allah (God), which is revealed in the Quran, the holy book of Islam. A devout Muslim is required to pray five times a day, keep daylong fasts through the month of Ramadan, and make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, if possible.

In Hinduism, the syllable 'Om' is believed to be a primordial sound from which the entire universe takes shape. It is also a sacred symbol, represented by an icon shaped like the number three.

Darshan and *puja* are fundamental concepts of Hindu worship, which require people to visit a temple and make a ritual offering of flowers and fruits in return for divine blessings.

HINDU SACRED TEXTS & EPICS

Hindu sacred texts fall under two categories: those believed to be the word of God (*shruti*, meaning 'hearing') and those produced by people (*smriti*, meaning 'memory').

The Vedas

Introduced in the subcontinent by the Aryans, the *Vedas* are regarded as *shruti* knowledge and are considered to be the authoritative basis for Hinduism. The oldest works of Sanskrit literature, the Vedas contain mantras that are recited at prayers and religious ceremonies. The Vedas are divided into four Samhitas (compilations); the Rig-Veda, the oldest of the Samhitas, is believed to be written more than 3000 years ago. Other Vedic works include the *Brahmanas*, touching on rituals; the Aranyakas whose name means the 'wilderness texts', meant for ascetics who have renounced the material world; and the Upanishads, which discuss meditation, philosophy, mysticism and the fate of the soul.

Puranas, Sutras & Shastras

The Puranas comprise a post-Vedic genre that chronicles the history of the universe, royal lineages, philosophy and cosmology. The Sutras, on the other hand, are essentially manuals, and contain useful information on different human activities. Some well known Sutras are Griha Sutra, dealing with the nuances of domestic life; Nyaya Sutra, detailing the faculty of justice and debate; and Kamasutra, a compendium of love and sexual behaviour. The Shastras are also instructive in nature, but are more technical as they provide information pertaining to specific areas of practice. Vaastu Shastra, for example, is an architect's handbook that elaborates on the art of civic planning, while Artha Shastra focuses heavily on governance, economics and military policies of the state.

The Mahabharata

This 2500-year-old rip-roaring epic centres on the conflict between two fraternal dynasties, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, overseen by Krishna. Locked in a struggle to inherit the throne of Hastinapura, the Kauravas win the first round of the feud, beating the Pandavas in a game of dice and banishing them from the kingdom. The Pandavas, however, return after 13 years and challenge the Kauravas to an epic battle, from which they emerge victorious.

Being the longest epic in the world, unabridged versions of the Mahabharata incorporate the Bhagavad Gita, the holy book of the Hindus, which contains the worldly advice given by Krishna to Pandava prince Arjuna before the start of the battle.

The Ramayana

Composed around the 2nd or 3rd century BC, the Ramayana tells of Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, who assumed human form to facilitate the triumph of good over evil. Much like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana revolves around a great war, waged by Rama, his brother Lakshmana and an army of apes led by Hanuman against Ravana, the demon king who had kidnapped Rama's wife Sita and had held her hostage in his kingdom of Lanka (Sri Lanka). After slaying Ravana, Rama returned to his kingdom of Ayodhya, his homecoming forming the basis for the important Hindu festival of Dussehra (see boxed text, p224).

Islam is monotheistic. God is held as unique, unlimited, self-sufficient and the supreme creator of all things. God never speaks to humans directly; his word is instead conveyed through messengers called prophets, who are never themselves divine. The religion has two prominent sects, the minority Shi'ias (originating from Mohammed's descendants) and the majority Sunnis, who split soon after the death of Mohammed owing to political differences, and have since gone on to establish their own interpretations and rituals. The most important pilgrimage site for Muslims in Rajasthan is the extraordinary dargah (burial place) of the saint Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti (p201) at Ajmer.

Sikhism

Now among the world's largest religions, Sikhism was founded on the sermons of 10 Sikh gurus, beginning with Guru Nanak Dev (1469–1539). The core values and ideology of Sikhism are embodied in the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs which is also considered the eternal guru of Sikhism. The Sikhs evolved as an organised community over time, and devoted themselves to the creation of a standing militia called the *khalsa*, which carried out religious, political and martial duties and protected the Sikhs from foreign threats. The religion, on its part, grew around the central concept of Vaheguru, the universal lord, an eventual union with whom is believed to result in salvation. The Sikhs believe that salvation is achieved through rigorous discipline and meditation, which help them overcome the five evils – ego, greed, attachment, anger and lust.

Jainism

The Jain religion was founded around 500 BC by Mahavira, the 24th and last of the Jain *tirthankars* (path finders). Jainism originally evolved as a reformist movement against the dominance of priests in Hindu society. It steered clear of complicated rituals, rejected the caste system, and believed in reincarnation and eventual moksha by following the example of the *tirthankars*.

Jains are strict vegetarians and revere all forms of life. The religion has two main sects. The Svetambaras (White Clad) wear unstitched white garments; the monks cover their mouths so as not to inhale insects and brush their path before they walk to avoid crushing small creatures. The monks belonging to the Digambaras (Sky Clad), in comparison, go naked. Jainism preaches nonviolence, and its followers are markedly successful in banking and business, which they consider nonviolent professions.

SPORT

Cricket is a national obsession in India. Nearly everybody claims to understand the game down to its finer points, and can comment on it with endless vigour. Shops down shutters and streets take on a deserted look every time India happens to be playing a test match or a crucial one-day game. The arrival of the Twenty20 format and new domestic leagues such as the Indian Premier League (IPL) has only taken the game's popularity a notch further.

While other mainstream sports pale in comparison to cricket, a few traditional pastimes continue to be patronised by niche spectators in Delhi and Rajasthan. In Old Delhi, people still take active interest in *kabutarbaazi* (pigeon flying). Despite lobbying by animal-rights activists, cock-fighting events are held now and then, and garner plenty of attention. The Nats, a roaming Rajasthani community, have long excelled in acrobatics, which they now perform as a means of revenue generation. The acts (tightrope walking, bamboo-pole balancing) can be seen at Chokhi Dhani (see p172) near Jaipur.

Interestingly, many people belonging to Rajasthan's elite classes retain a soft spot for polo, a game which was popularised in the state by the Rajput kings. Cities such as Jodhpur and Udaipur still foster a culture for the sport, and the royal houses maintain stables of thoroughbreds for use in the game.

ARTS

If the Rajputs knew how to fight, they also knew how to create art. Rajasthan's culture is a celebration of beauty, manifested through its architecture, music, dance, painting and poetry. The state also has a rich legacy of handicrafts

Among all the deities in the Hindu pantheon, the gods Vishnu and Shiva have the largest number of devotees. Their followers are called Vashnavites and Shaivites respectively.

Sufism is a mystic tradition derived from Islam, which originated in medieval times. Being largely secular, it has attracted followers from other religions and is widely practised in North India.

MUMAL & MAHENDRA

It was love at first sight for Mahendra of Umarkot. Every night he raced to the beautiful princess Mumal's chamber, borne by a swift camel named Chekal. As Mahendra had to travel at night to visit Mumal in the distant village of Lodhruva, near Jaisalmer, he had little energy left to perform his husbandly duties to the satisfaction of his eight wives. One day, the aggrieved wives – suspecting his nocturnal visits to the princess – beat up Chekal, leaving Mahendra at the mercy of a less-competent camel, which subsequently lost its way.

Meanwhile, Mumal's sister Sumal decided to pay her a visit. Sumal was in the habit of wearing men's clothes, and fell asleep next to Mumal. When Mahendra finally reached Mumal's apartment, he was confronted by the sight of her lying next to another man. He fled from the chamber, vowing never to lay eyes on her again, and bitterly cursing the inconstancy of women. Mumal waited every night for him, finally pining away with grief. When Mahendra heard of her death, and realised his misunderstanding, he was driven insane with grief.

which are prized the world over, both for their intricate craftsmanship and ornamental appeal (see Rajasthan Arts & Crafts, p53).

Literature

For a long time, Rajasthan's storytelling tradition was solely oral. Among the earliest known Rajasthani written works available today are paeanic such as *Khuman Raso* (Songs of Khuman), the tale of a Sisodia king written by Dalapat Vijaya in the 9th century, and the epic *Prithviraj Raso* (Songs of Prithviraj), written by Prithviraj Chauhan's court poet Chand Bardai in the late 12th century.

In subsequent years, Rajasthan produced several talented writers who wrote either in the Marwari dialect or Dingal – a literary form of Rajasthani which evolved in the 15th century. Common literary genres included folk tales, songs and ballads based on heroic accounts, religious legends and tragic love stories such as those of Dholu Maru (see boxed text, p292) and the princess Mumal (see boxed text, above). Apart from chronicling society, these works also helped purvey the image of the brave Rajput warrior, by glorifying traits such as heroism, chivalry, virtue and sacrifice.

Contemporary literature, in contrast, is heavily English-oriented, though many people still continue to write in vernacular languages. A few great titles which look into the social, psychological and historical aspects of the region include *Raj*, by Gita Mehta, a moving story of a young Rajput princess contracted in marriage to an arrogant prince; *Delhi: a Novel* by Khushwant Singh, a funny and irreverent take on Delhi's history through the experiences of several generations of inhabitants; and the novels *City of Djinns*, *The White Mughals* and *The Last Mughal* by William Dalrymple, the British author who calls Delhi his second home.

With Delhi-based writers Arundhati Roy, Rajkamal Jha and Pankaj Mishra bagging six-digit dollar advances for their novels in recent times, the city has lately become a literary capital, with scores of authors routinely churning out quality fiction and nonfiction. The trend has rubbed off on Jaipur, which is now home to an annual international literary festival, held there every year since 2006.

Cinema & Television

Television provides stock recreation for most Indian families. The opening up of the airwaves in the early 1990s brought satellite TV into the country, and the industry hasn't looked back since. Today, Indian viewers can choose from sports channels (ESPN, Star Sports), entertainment channels (MTV,

VH1, HBO), nature and travel networks (National Geographic, Discovery) and a host of newscasters, many of which compete with each other 24/7 by slapping the 'breaking-news' tag on trivial stories.

Out of home, it's cinema that rules. India has the world's biggest film industry. Films come in all languages, the majority pumped out by the Hindi tinsel town of Bollywood in Mumbai, and Mollywood, its Tamil counterpart, in Chennai. Most productions, however, are formulaic flicks that seize mass attention with hackneyed motifs – unrequited love, action that verges on caricature, slapstick humour, wet saris and plenty of sexual innuendo. Nonetheless, the past 10 years have seen upscale productions aimed at a burgeoning multiplex audience. Check out the cricket extravaganza *Lagaan*, the patriotic *Rang De Basanti*, or Shakespearean adaptations such as *Maqbool* (Macbeth) and *Omkaara* (Othello). Some of these films have done the rounds at the Oscars, and shouldn't leave you disappointed.

Despite being far from popular, India also has a critically acclaimed, rock-steady art-house movement. Pioneered by the likes of Satyajit Ray, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Ritwik Ghatak and Shyam Benegal, the tradition now boasts directors such as Mira Nair (*Salaam Bombay*, *Monsoon Wedding*, *The Namesake*) and Deepa Mehta (*Earth*, *Water*, *Fire*).

Music

Like elsewhere in India, Hindi pop songs and film soundtracks crackle joyfully out of speakers all over Rajasthan. But at the same time, folk music remains a vital, living part of traditional Rajasthani culture. Commonly, folk music comprises ballads that, like the region's literature, relate heroic deeds or love stories, and religious or devotional songs known as *bhajans* and *banis*. Various communities in the state, such as the Dhadhis and the Dholis, specialise in professional singing, and good places to hear some of it are the Jaisalmer Fort (p324), Shilpgram (p247) in Udaipur, and Chokhi Dhani (p172) outside Jaipur. Sufi hymns are a widely popular form as well, and there's always some of it happening either at the dargah in Ajmer (p201), or the shrine of Nizam-ud-din in Delhi (p106).

In an attempt to popularise traditional music among the urban populace, a few contemporary musicians such as Ila Arun and Delhi fusion band Indian Ocean have dabbled in experimentation, thereby either reinventing folk music or fusing it with modern arrangements to create a unique sound which has clicked instantly with the city-bred (see boxed text, p52). Genres such as Indian and Western classical, rock 'n' roll and jazz have always had their own niche audiences, mostly in the cities. Blues is currently on an upswing; the Haze Bar (p117) in Delhi has live gigs on a regular basis, where bands from Kolkata, Mumbai and northeast India play out spirited 12-bar jams to a packed house.

Architecture

The magnificence of Delhi, Agra and Rajasthan's architectural heritage is astounding, and the province is home to some of India's best-known buildings. From temples and mosques to mansions and mausoleums, the region has it all. Most spectacular, however, are the fairy-tale forts and palaces, built by Rajputs and Mughals, which bear testimony to the celebrated history of North India.

TEMPLES

Rajasthan's earliest surviving temples date from the Gupta period. Built between the 4th and 6th century, these temples are small and their architecture restrained – the Sheetaleshvara Temple (p234) at Jhalrapatan is a notable

Watching a Bollywood blockbuster in a neighbourhood cinema with the local audience is a terrific experience. Try Jaipur's Raj Mandir Cinema and Delite or Golcha in Old Delhi.

The sitar, a musical instrument with sympathetic strings, seven of which are playable, is used widely by Indian classical musicians. It was popularised in the West by Beatle George Harrison.

The state-sponsored Sahitya Akademi in Delhi is devoted to the promotion of vernacular Indian literature. It grants annual awards of Rs 50,000 each in 22 language categories.

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

- The albums *Banjaran*, *Vote for Ghaghra* and *Khichri* by folk singer Ila Arun. Noted for her husky voice, Arun's music oozes the essence of the desert and the spirit of wandering gypsies. Some of her songs are rather tongue-in-cheek with catchy tunes; others have a dash of blues or traditional courtly music thrown in.
- *Kandisa* and *Jhini* by Indian Ocean, a fusion band from Delhi known for its signature sound and its inspiring compositions which are founded on Indian folk and classical music. *Desert Rain*, its live album recorded in 1997, hit number two on the iTunes world music charts in 2006.
- The concert performances of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, a Pakistani musician who redefined Qawwali, the devotional music of the Sufis. As a musician ahead of his time, Khan, who died in 1997, was so devoted to spreading the message of Sufism that he collaborated heavily with Western artists such as Eddie Vedder and Peter Gabriel, and often sang into personal tape recorders of fans, without caring about piracy.
- *Kailasa*, by Kailash Kher, a Delhi singer trained in classical music who happens to be one of India's most celebrated New Age singers. Kher's music also takes root in Sufism, but is open to experimentation and fusion.
- The classical performances of Shubha Mudgal, the lady with a mesmerising voice who has often brought about a union of classical music with contemporary Indian pop. Look out for her cult mainstream release, *Ab Ke Sawan*.

example. Temple architecture (both Hindu and Jain) developed through the 8th and 9th centuries, and began to incorporate stunning sculptural work, which can be seen on temples at Osayan (p317) and Chittorgarh (p238). Structurally, the temples usually tapered into a single *sikhara* (spire) and had a *mandapa* (pillared pavilion before the inner sanctuary). The Dilwara complex (p265) at Mt Abu epitomises the architecture of this era. Built in the 11th century, it has marble carvings that reach unsurpassed heights of virtuosity.

Delhi, traditionally an Islamic stronghold, has few ancient temples to boast of. Nevertheless, the city is known for two spectacular modern structures. The Lotus Temple (p107), built in 1986 as a place of worship for the Bahai community, is a magnificent modern building shaped like a nine-sided lotus with marble-clad petals. It has won several architectural awards for its design. In 2005, Delhi got its second grand temple, Swaminarayan Akshardham, which holds a Guinness record for being the world's largest comprehensive Hindu temple. Made entirely out of stone, it features permanent exhibitions, boat rides, an IMAX theatre and musical fountains within its complex.

FORTS & PALACES

The fabulous citadels of Rajasthan owe their origins to reasons ranging from mandatory fortification to the realisation of royal whims. Rajput kings often spent lavishly on these structures, to flaunt their status to the world, if nothing else. Sometimes, the beauty was heightened by having the palace reflected in an artificial pool or reservoir, such as in Deeg (p193) and Alwar (p194).

Most of Rajasthan's forts and palaces were built between the 15th and 18th centuries, which coincided with the Mughal reign in Delhi and saw the Rajputs borrowing a few architectural motifs from the Mughals. The concept of the *sheesh mahal* (hall of mirrors) was adopted from Muslim architecture, as was the use of pillared arches. Another ornamentation that was widely used across Rajasthan was the spired Bengal roof, shaped like an inverted

(Continued on page 61)

(Continued from page 52)

boat. Magnificent examples of Rajput architecture across the state include the Amber Fort (p178) and the Hawa Mahal (p157) in Jaipur, and the City Palace (p244) in Udaipur.

The forts and palaces of Delhi and Agra, conversely, adhere to the Islamic style, with intricate marblwork, ornate *pietre dura* (stone inlay) panels, arched entrances and symmetrical, four-square gardens. Mausoleums and mosques, such as the Taj Mahal (p1330) and the Jama Masjid (p98), are capped by onion-shaped domes and flanked by minarets. Almost every dynasty that ruled in Delhi built its own fort and monuments in the city. Though they all follow Islamic architectural style, subtle differences exist among these structures due to their having come up centuries apart from each other.

Towards the end of the British era, a novel architectural style called the Indo-Saracenic school emerged in India, which blended Victorian and Islamic elements into a highly wrought, frilly whole. Some striking buildings were produced in this style, including Albert Hall (p158) and Jai Mahal (now a hotel, p169) in Jaipur, Lallgarh Palace (p342) in Bikaner and Mayo College (p201) in Ajmer.

HAVELIS

Rajasthani merchants built ornately decorated residences called *havelis*, and commissioned masons and artists to ensure they were constructed and decorated in a manner befitting the owners' importance and prosperity. The Shekhawati district of northern Rajasthan is riddled with such mansions that are covered with extraordinarily vibrant murals (see boxed text, p283). There are other beautiful *havelis* in Jaisalmer, constructed of sandstone, featuring the fine work of renowned local *silavats* (stone carvers).

WELLS, TANKS & CHHATRIS

Given the importance of water in Rajasthan, it's unsurprising that the architecture of wells and reservoirs rival other structures in the region. The most impressive regional *baoris* (step-wells) are Raniji-ki-Baori (p225) in Bundi and the extraordinary Chand Baori (p181) near Jaipur (see boxed text, p260).

Chhatris (cenotaphs) are a statewide architectural curiosity, built to commemorate maharajas and, as is the case in the Shekhawati district, wealthy merchants. In rare instances, *chhatris* also commemorate women, such as the Chhatri of Moosi Rani (p195) at Alwar. Literally translating to 'umbrella', a *chhatri* comprises a central dome, supported by a series of pillars on a raised platform, with a sequence of small pavilions on the corners and sides.

Painting & Sculpture

MINIATURES

Rajasthan is famed for its miniatures – small-scale paintings that are executed on small surfaces, but cram in a surprising amount of detail by way of delicate brushwork. Originating in the 16th and 17th centuries, they led to the emergence of eminent schools such as Marwar, Mewar, Bundi-Kota, Amber and Kishangarh, among others. Each school had its own stylistic identity; while paintings from the Mewar school depicted court life, festivals, ceremonies, elephant fights and hunts, those from the Marwar school featured vivid colours and heroic, whiskered men accompanied by dainty maidens. Miniatures gained immense value as souvenirs with the coming of the tourism boom.

Rajasthani painters derived their colours mostly from natural sources; vegetables dyes were commonly used, as were pigments from minerals and

The Archaeological Survey of India, a government body, currently protects and maintains heritage monuments of national importance, and conducts excavations at ancient sites.

The courtyard of Delhi's Jama Masjid can hold up to 25,000 devotees during *namaz*. The mosque houses several relics, including a copy of the *Quran* written on deer skin.

The Kumbalgarh Fort, a former Mewar stronghold in the Rajsamand district of Rajasthan, has the second-longest fortification in the world after the Great Wall of China.

Fascinating and detailed, *The Royal Palaces of India* by writer George Michell and photographer Antonio Martinielli is a comprehensive guide including maps to the grand residences of the Indian royalty.

crushed semiprecious stones. In ancient times, the vibrant gold and silver colouring used in many palaces was obtained from finely pounded pure gold and silver leaf. Miniatures can be spotted all over Rajasthan, on surfaces ranging from handmade paper to ivory, marble, wood, cloth and leather.

PHAD & FRESCO

Apart from miniatures, Rajasthan is also renowned for a kind of scroll painting called *phad*, which is done on cloth and portrays deities, mythology and legends of Rajput kings. Bhilwara, near Udaipur, is one of the better-known centres for *phad* scrolls. See also the Arts & Crafts colour section p61.

Fresco painting, originally developed in Italy, arrived in Rajasthan with the Mughals, and its finest examples can be seen in the exquisitely muralled *havelis* of Shekhawati. Other kinds of painted houses can be seen in certain tribal areas, where earthen walls are decorated with *pithoras* – naïve, appealing designs rendered in white – which were believed to bring luck and keep away evil spirits.

PORTRAITURE

Borrowed from the Mughals, the concept of royal portraiture was encouraged in Rajput courts from the 17th century onward. They took off on a stylised note, and depicted maharajas engaged in typical activities including hunting, fighting, wooing women and attending the *darbar* (royal court). Unlike the Mughals, who used muted colours to give their portraits a sense of shadow and depth, the Rajputs went overboard with bold primaries. The 19th century heralded a decline in portraiture in Rajasthan, perhaps reflecting the fading power of the maharajas, and the practice was diluted further with the arrival of photography soon after.

SCULPTURE & STONEMWORK

The abundance of natural marble and sandstone deposits has helped breed generations of stonemasons and sculptors in Rajasthan. The most famous marble quarries were located in Makrana, from where the marble used in the Taj Mahal and the Dilwara Temples was sourced. The quarries of Dungarpur yielded a soft stone that was used for carving images of deities, which turned a rich, lustrous black when oiled. Most of Rajasthan, Delhi and Agra's forts were built out of red sandstone, which was mined from deposits in the Aravalli Hills. The exceptional Jaisalmer Fort (p324) and the Agra Fort (p135) were among the other group of sandstone structures, sculpted out of yellow sandstone.

Dance

Folk dance forms in Rajasthan are generally associated with indigenous tribes and communities of nomadic gypsies. Each region has its own dance specialities. The *ghoomer* (pirouette) is performed by Bhil women at festivals or weddings, and its form varies from one village to another. The Bheels are also known for *gair*, a men-only dance, that's performed at springtime festivities. Combine the two, and you get *gair-ghoomer*, where women, in a small inner circle, are encompassed by men in a larger circle, who determine the rhythm by beating sticks and striking drums.

Among other popular forms, the *kachhi ghori* dance of eastern Rajasthan resembles a battle performance, where dancers ride cloth or paper horses and spar away with swords and shields. To the south, the *neja* is danced by the Minas of Kherwara and Dungarpur just after Holi. A coconut is placed on a large pole, which the men try to dislodge, while the women strike the men with sticks and whips to foil their attempts. A nomadic

Nathdwara, 48km from Udaipur, is the centre for *pichwai* (religious paintings on home-spun cloth) which are hung behind images of Krishna (locally worshipped as Sri Nathji).

Ghungroos are anklets made of metallic bells strung together, worn by Indian classical dancers to accentuate their complex footwork during performances.

community called the Kalbelias, traditionally associated with snake charming, performs swirling dances such as the *shankaria*, while the Siddha Jats of Bikaner are renowned for their spectacular fire dance, performed on a bed of hot coals, which supposedly leaves no burns. You could catch up on some of the action at tourist hubs such as Udaipur (see p256) and Chokhi Dhani (see p172).

Puppetry

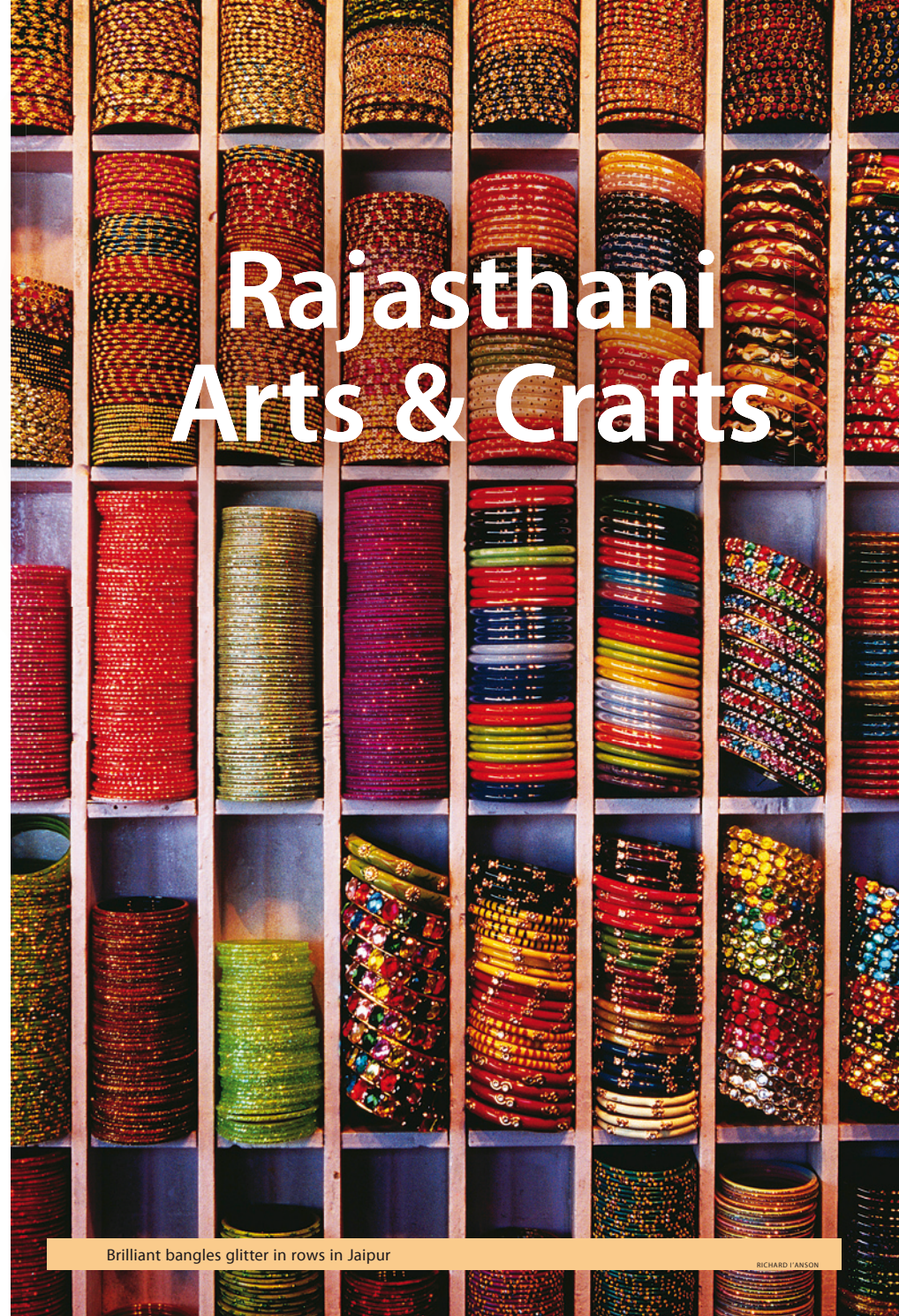
Puppetry is one of Rajasthan's most acclaimed, yet endangered, performing arts. Puppeteers first emerged in the 19th century, and would travel from village to village like wandering minstrels, relaying stories through narration, music and an animated performance that featured wooden puppets on strings called *kathputlis*. Puppetry is now a dying art; waning patronage and lack of paying audiences has forced many puppeteers to give up the art form and switch to agriculture or menial labour. The puppets, however, have retained their value as souvenirs. Organisations such as the Barefoot College (see p207) now make use of puppetry as a medium to spread useful information on health, education and human rights.

Theatre

Modern theatre is firmly rooted in Delhi's thriving culture circuit. The city has a host of quality theatre institutions, including the prestigious National School of Drama, the Shri Ram Centre and Janam, founded in 1973 by late thespian-activist Safdar Hashmi. In recent years, the construction of state-of-the-art auditoriums and availability of corporate sponsorship has helped Delhi's theatre flourish in a significant way.

The website www.artindia.net keeps enthusiasts in tune with the best of classical music and dance happening around India, and has an excellent repository of articles on performing arts.

Rajasthani Arts & Crafts



Brilliant bangles glitter in rows in Jaipur



Rajasthani dancers from a Bhil tribe create swirls of colour at Jaipur's Elephant Festival (p148)

PAUL BEINSEN

The most vivid impression that visitors to Rajasthan take away with them is that of colour: searingly bright tribal dress, luminescent lorries and camels dressed to impress in a rainbow hotchpotch of bobbing baubles.

The local people have a passion for decoration, having historically taken advantage of their position on trade routes to learn new artistic skills. Their adoration of adornment is evident in the gorgeous painted houses of Shekhawati in northern Rajasthan, in the manifold variations of Rajasthani turbans (which are said to change in style every 10km) and in the state's women, from their block-printed *odhnis* (headscarves) right down to their brilliantly embroidered *jootis* (traditional Rajasthani leather shoes).

In a state whose natural environment is characterised by the stark, two-tone combination of sand and sky, the people of Rajasthan have created enduring, enchanting beauty to adorn a bleak and arid land.

RESPONSIBLE SHOPPING

Aside from not maxing out your credit card or buying too much to fit in your backpack, there are several ways to ensure that you're shopping responsibly in Rajasthan.

- Consider shopping at cooperatives, which have been set up to protect the income of day labourers and promote handicraft producers at a grass-roots level.
- Don't buy the assorted pieces of antique house fixtures you'll see up for sale, which may be slowly stripping the land of its traditional architecture.
- Ask to visit the place where a shop's items are manufactured. It's at least one way of seeing for yourself the conditions under which workers are producing goods.
- Check out the listings in Smart Shopping (p57), which includes shops and organisations dedicated to promoting Rajasthan's artisans.

PAINTING

Rajasthan's miniature painting flourished under princely patronage from the 11th century AD and beyond, with seven different 'schools', corresponding to seven Rajput principalities, each displaying its own individual conventions. Tackling religious and mythological subjects as well as plenty of courtly love, these tiny, delicate paintings were picked out in clear, bright colours and painted onto cotton, paper or silk; modern copies are widely available today.

The ancient art of *phad* (scroll) painting also survives in Rajasthan, whereby a long rectangular cloth is meticulously painted to depict the exploits of folk legend. Modern art, too, has its place in larger cities: try the splendid Juneja Art Gallery (p173) for a glimpse of contemporary Rajasthani art.

Finally, mural painting, especially in the Shekhawati region, has always played an important part in Rajasthan's artistic life. The region's painted *havelis* (traditional ornately decorated residences) form a sort of open-air art gallery, with work in a kaleidoscope of colour and styles (see p283). If the *havelis* inspire you, you can try mural painting yourself in Jhunjhunu (p287).

PAPER MAKING

Paper making is centred in Sanganeer, near Jaipur, whose paper has traditionally been the most celebrated in India. The process makes environmentally friendly use of discarded fabric rags, which are soaked, pulped, strained, beaten and then spread out to dry on frames. Though some of the town's factories nowadays use machines, there are plenty of places that still perform the entire process by hand – view the racks of paper spread out to dry along Sanganeer's river, or pop in for a visit at one of the town's 10 or so paper-making factories (p180).

Ornate frescoes cover the façade of the Haveli Nadine Le Prince (p292) in Fatehpur



JOHN SONES

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JEWELLERY, GEMS & ENAMELWORK

The patronage of Rajput princes historically helped Rajasthan's jewellery industry thrive. But jewellery in Rajasthan has never been entirely the domain of the rich. Even in the state's poorest villages, women can be seen bedecked in large and elaborate silver folk jewellery, along with armfuls of colourful bangles made of lac (resin), gold leaf and mirrorwork. The quality of the jewellery indicates the relative economic status of the wearer, along with their caste, ethnic group and social position, and consequently you may see women lugging around ornaments weighing as much as 5kg.

Two jewellery-making styles particularly prevalent in Rajasthan are *kundan* and *meenakari* work. *Kundan* involves setting gemstones into silver or gold pieces; one symbolic variation is known as *navratan*, in which

nine different gems are set into an item of jewellery, corresponding to the nine planets of Indian astrology. This way, it's an eternally lucky item to have about your person, since you will always be wearing, at any given time, the symbol of the ruling planetary body. *Meenakari*, meanwhile, is a gorgeous type of enamelwork, that is usually applied to a base of silver or gold. Jaipur's pieces of *meenakari* are valued for their vibrant tones – especially the highly prized rich ruby-red. A fantastic selection can be found on sale at the city's Johari Bazaar (p173).



SMART SHOPPING

- Asha Handicrafts Association (www.ashahandicrafts.org) supports Rajasthani artisans, including producers of blue pottery, leather goods and block-printed textiles.
- Barefoot College (www.barefootcollege.org; p207), based in Tilonia, runs artisan-development initiatives. Its craft output can be bought online at www.store.tilonia.com.
- Seva Mandir (www.sevamandir.org; see also p370) is an Udaipur-based initiative that is dedicated to improving the lives of rural Rajasthani people. In Udaipur, you can buy their products at Sadhna (p256).
- The Urmul Trust (see also p371) is a local NGO that sells artisans' diverse products at the Abhivyakti shop in Bikaner (p346).
- Anokhi (p174) is a Jaipur clothing and textile manufacturer that produces high-quality items and provides good working conditions.
- At Ranthambhore National Park, the Dastkar Craft Centre (p219) promotes handicrafts produced by low-caste women in local villages.
- Sanganer's paper products (p180) are almost all made from recycled fabric, with not a felled tree in sight.

LEATHERWORK

Leatherworking has a long history in Rajasthan. Leather shoes known as *jootis* are produced in Jodhpur and Jaipur, often featuring ornate embroidery (*kashida*). Strange to Western eyes and feet, there is no 'right' or 'left': both shoes are identical but after a few wears they begin to conform to the wearer's feet. Jaipur is the best place to buy *jootis*, with prices ranging from Rs 50 to Rs 700 per pair – don't miss the marvellous UN-supported Mojari (p174) shoe shop.

The town of Alwar is known for its beautiful leather book-bindings, a craft that flourished under Maharaja Banni Singh in the early 19th century. Bikaner, meanwhile, is famous for its *usta* (gold-painted camel leather) products. Some fine examples can be seen in Bikaner's Ganga Government Museum (p342); leather goods are sold, appropriately enough, on Usta St (p346).



TEXTILES

Rajasthan is renowned for its blazing textiles. Riotously woven, dyed, block or resist printed and embroidered, they are on sale almost everywhere you look throughout the state. You

can also seek out specialist favourites, such as the *kota doria* (gold-woven) fabric from the village of Kaithoon near Kota (p228), woven in silk, cotton and pure-gold thread for exquisite, delicate saris. Intricate *bandhani* (tie-dye), whereby sections of fabric are tied and knotted before dyeing, often carries symbolic meanings when used to make *odhnis* (headscarves). A yellow background indicates that the wearer has recently given birth, while red circles on that background means she's had a son. You can buy tie-dyed cloth all over Rajasthan, and in Nawalgarh in Shekhawati you can even learn to do it yourself (see p280).

Traditionally, all Rajasthan's textile colours were derived from natural sources such as vegetables, minerals and even insects. Yellow, for instance, came from turmeric and buttermilk; green from banana leaves; orange from saffron and jasmine; black from iron rust; blue from the indigo

plant; red from sugar cane and sunflowers; and purple from the kermes insect. Today, however, the vast majority are synthetically dyed; while they may not possess the subtlety of the traditional tones, they will, at least, stand a better chance in a 40°C machine wash.

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A kaleidoscopic pattern of stunning mirrored embroidery



CHRISTER FREDRIKSSON

EMBROIDERY

During the Mughal period, embroidery workshops known as *kaarkhanas* were established to train artisans so that the royal families were ensured an abundant supply of richly embroidered cloth. Finely stitched tapestries, inspired by miniature paintings, were also executed for the royal courts.

Today, Bikaner specialises in embroidery with double stitching, which results in the pattern appearing on both sides of the cloth. In Shekhawati, the Jat people embroider motifs of animals and birds on their *odhnis* and *ghaghara* (long cotton skirts), while tiny mirrors are stitched into garments in Jaisalmer. Beautifully embroidered cloth is also produced for domestic livestock, and ornately bedecked camels are a wonderfully common sight, especially at the Pushkar camel fair (p209).

CARPETS & WEAVING

Carpet weaving took off in the 16th century under the patronage of the great Mughal emperor Akbar, who commissioned the establishment of various carpet-weaving factories, including one in Jaipur. In the 19th century Maharaja Ram Singh II of Jaipur established a carpet factory at the Jaipur jail, and soon other jails introduced carpet-making units. Some of the most beautiful *dhurries* (flat-woven rugs) were produced by prisoners, and Bikaner jail is still well known for the excellence of its *dhurries*. Recent government training initiatives have seen the revival of this craft, and fine-quality carpets are once again being produced across Rajasthan.

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POTTERY

Of all the arts of Rajasthan, pottery has the longest lineage, with fragments recovered in Kalibangan dating from the Harappan era (around 3000 BC). Before the beginning of the 1st millennium, potters in the environs of present-day Bikaner were already decorating red pottery with black designs.

Today, different regions of Rajasthan produce different types of pottery, and most villages in Rajasthan have their own resident potter. He not only produces domestic vessels, but also clay images of the deities for ceremonial purposes. The most famous of Rajasthan's pottery is the blue pottery of Jaipur. The blue-glazed work was first evident on Mughal palace and cenotaph tiling, and later applied to pottery. Though, over the centuries, the tradition declined, it was revived in Jaipur in the mid-19th century, and an especially wide range of blue pottery is still available here (p173).

WOODWORK

Despite the paucity of wood in most parts of Rajasthan, the tradition of woodcarving dates back many centuries. Unfortunately, few medieval pieces have survived – if Rajasthan's arid climate didn't get them, the termites or the antique touts generally did.

Shekhawati was an important centre for woodcarving, and here you can still see the woodcarvers' talents in fantastically wrought doors, door and window frames, and in *pidas* – low folding chairs featuring decorative carving. On a smaller scale, Bassi (p235) is known for the production of wooden puppets and toys, and bright *kavads* – wonderful little portable shrines used by storytellers to relate tales of the gods. You can buy these from around Rs 100, as well as brilliantly painted tiny Hindu gods, for about Rs 20 apiece, which make great pocket-sized presents.

Food & Drink

Wherever you go in this region of India, you'll never be more than a step or two away from something tempting and delicious. From the sweet, decadent deep-fry of a Jaipur street-food stall, to the bliss of a hot cardamom-scented chai (tea) on a freezing Delhi January morning, to the opulence of a centuries-old Mughal or Rajput regal recipe, food is all around you, making it almost impossible to ever go hungry. Moreover, food is never just food here. It's intrinsically caught up in identity, ritual and tradition. Food marks celebrations and festivals, honours guests, and accompanies births, marriages and deaths.

Rajasthan's cuisine has developed in response to its harsh climate. Fresh fruit and vegetables are rare commodities in desert zones, but these parts of the state overcome the land's shortcomings by serving up an amazing and creative variety of regional dishes, utilising cereals, pulses, spices, milk products and unusual desert fruits in myriad ways. In these arid regions, water was traditionally so scarce and precious that milk was used as an alternative in cooking. In more fertile eastern areas, by contrast, food has always been prepared in a more conventional manner. Local cuisines have also been influenced by the area's martial history, with dishes having been developed that could last several days, be eaten on the move, and didn't require heating up before serving them.

Rajasthan, Delhi and Agra's regal feasts, meanwhile, are the stuff of legend. Delhi's princely Mughlai cuisine is traditionally rich and heavy, with plenty of butter, almonds, raisins and other expensive treats, often still cooked up the traditional way on brass pots over smoky wood fires. Rajasthan's ruling warrior class cooked up similar dishes, also heavy on the meat and cream. Modern Delhi, while not quite living up to these regal standards, ranks as one of the best restaurant destinations in the country. It has scores of establishments serving up everything from buttery kebabs to opulent international fusion cuisine, with enough choice to keep you eating at a different hotspot – cheap and cheerful or chic and complex – every day for several years.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Bread

A meal is not complete in India unless it comes with a bountiful supply of roti, little round circles of unleavened bread (also known as chapati), made with fine wholemeal flour and cooked on a *tawa* (hotplate). In Rajasthan you'll also find *sogra*, a thick, heavy chapati made from millet; *makki ki roti*, a fat cornmeal chapati; and *dhokla*, yummy balls of steamed maize flour cooked with coriander, spinach and mint, and eaten with chutney. Yet another kind of roti is a pastry-like *purat* roti, made by repeatedly coating the dough in oil, then folding it to produce a light and fluffy result, from which you pull delicious bready strips to dip in sauce. *Cheelre*, meanwhile, is a chapati made with gram (legume) powder paste, while *bhakri* is a thick roti made from barley, millet or corn, eaten with pounded garlic, red chilli and raw onions by working-class Rajasthanis, and said to prevent sunstroke. It's probably best not to put too much trust in this theory, or to munch on a pungent stack of *bhakri* without your loved-one joining in.

Alongside the world of roti come *puris*, *parathas* and naans. A *puri* is a delicious North Indian snack of deep-fried wholemeal dough that puffs up like a soft, crispy balloon, and should be eaten finger-scaldingly fresh from the fryer. *Kachori* is a similar thing, but here the dough is pepped up with

corn or dhal. Flaky *paratha* is a soft, circular bread, deliciously substantial and mildly elastic, which makes for a scrumptious early morning snack, and is often jazzed up with a small bowl of pickle and a stuffing of *paneer* (unfermented cheese), *aloo* (potato), or grated vegetables. Naan bread, made with white flour, is distinguished from roti by being much larger, thicker and doughier, cooked along the walls of a tandoor (oven) rather than on a *tawa*. Laced with garlic and lashings of butter, and filled with *paneer*, *aloo*, or coconut and raisins, naan is difficult to resist.

Rice

Rice is just as important in this region of India as in any other, and makes a nice change when you've had your fill of a dozen different kinds of roti. Aside from the plain long-grain white variety, you'll find *pilau* (also known as *pilaf*), a tasty, buttery rice dish, whose Rajasthani incarnations frequently include cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, and a handful or two of almonds and pistachios. Of all the varieties of rice you'll encounter, though, simple steamed basmati rice – slender and delicate – is generally considered the cream of India's crop, its name stemming from the Hindi phrase for 'queen of fragrance'.

Dhal & Cereals

India unites in its love for dhal (lentils or pulses), with around 60 different pulses slipping daily onto plates across the nation. In Rajasthan, the dhal of choice is *urad*, lentils boiled in water then cooked with *garam* (hot) *masala* (mixed spices), red chillies, cumin seeds, salt, oil and fresh coriander to make a spicy, fragrant broth.

The state's most popular and remarkable dhal-based dish is *dhal-bati-choorma*, which mixes dhal with *bati*, buttery hard-baked balls of wholemeal flour, and *choorma*, sweet fried wholemeal-flour balls mixed with sugar and nuts.

Frequently, instead of wheat flour, *besan*, or gram flour (made from ground chickpeas), and sometimes lentil flour, is used as a Rajasthani staple. Gram-flour dumplings known as *gatta* are a delicious dish usually cooked in a yogurt or masala sauce, while you might come across *mangodi*, lentil-flour dumplings, served in an onion or potato gravy. A speciality of Jodhpur is *kabuli Jodhpuri*, a dish made with meat, vegetables such as cauliflower, cabbage and peas, and yet more fried gram-flour balls. *Govind gatta* offers a sweet alternative: lentil paste with dried fruit and nuts all rolled into a sausage shape, then sliced and deep-fried. Pakora (fritters), *sev* (savoury nibbles) and other salted snacks generally known as *farsan* are all equally derived from chickpea gram, as is *gate ki sabzi* (or *besan gate*), spiced *besan* dough rolled into snakes, steamed and cooked in spicy gravy to create a delicious, if rather weighty, result.

Meat

While Rajasthan's Brahmins and traders traditionally stuck firmly to a vegetarian diet, the Rajputs have a far more carnivorous history. Goat (known as 'mutton' since the days of the British Raj), lamb and chicken are the mainstays; religious taboos make beef forbidden to Hindus, and pork to Muslims.

In the deserts of Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Bikaner, meats are cooked without the addition of precious water, instead using milk, curd, buttermilk and plenty of ghee. Cooked this way, dishes keep for days without refrigeration, a practical advantage considering the searing heat of the desert. *Murg ko*

There's really no such thing, in India, as a 'curry'. The term is thought to be an anglicisation of the Tamil word *kari* (black pepper), coined by bewildered Brits for any dish that included spices.

For easy Rajasthani recipes - along with Mughlai, Gujarati and gorgeous breakfast recipes - search the extensive archive at www.indianfoodforever.com

khaato (chicken cooked in a curd gravy), *achar murg* (pickled chicken), *kacher maas* (dry lamb cooked in spices), *lal maas* (a rich red dish, usually made from mutton) and *soor santh ro sohito* (pork with millet dumplings) are all classic Rajasthanian-desert dishes.

Maas ka sule, a Rajput favourite, is a dry dish that can be made from partridge, wild boar, chicken, mutton or fish. Chunks of meat are marinated in a paste of turmeric powder, coriander powder, ginger and garlic paste, salt, red-chilli powder, mustard oil and yogurt. The chunks are cooked on skewers in a *tandoor*, then glazed with melted butter and a tangy masala spice mix. Mughlai meat dishes, meanwhile, include rich *korma* and *rogan josh*, the former mild, the latter cooked with tomatoes and saffron, and both generously spiked with thick, creamy curd, equally popular today in their vegetarian incarnations.

Fruit & Vegetables

Rajasthan's delicious vegetable (*sabji*) dishes have to be admired for their inventiveness under frequently hostile growing conditions. Dishes you might come across include *papad ki sabzi*, a simple pappadam made with vegetables and *masala* (a mixture of spices), and *aloo mangori*, ground lentil paste dried in the sun then added with potato to a curry. Once rolled by hand, the paste is now often forced through a machine in a similar way to making macaroni. A common vegetarian snack whilst on the move is *aloo samosa*, triangular pastry cones stuffed with spicy potato, while another scrumptious local snack is *mirch bada*, a large chilli coated in a thick layer of deep-fried potato and wheatgerm, a Jodhpur speciality.

There are a few vegetables specific to the deserts of Rajasthan. These include *mogri*, a type of desert bean, which is made into *mogri mangori*, (similar to the *aloo mangori* described above) or into a sweeter version called *methi mangori* - *methi* being the leaf of a green desert vegetable. Another use for these *methi* leaves is in *dana methi*, where they are boiled with *dana* (small pea-shaped vegetables) and mixed with sugar, *masala* and dried fruit.

With developments in infrastructure, more vegetable dishes are now available in Rajasthan than during its barren, warrior-filled past. Heads of cauliflower are usually cooked dry on their own, with potatoes to make *aloo gobi*, or with other vegetables such as carrots and beans. Fresh green peas turn up stir-fried with other vegetables in *pilaus* and biryanis, in *samosas* along with potato, and in one of North India's signature dishes, *mattar paneer* (peas and fresh, firm white cheese). Brinjal (eggplant or aubergine), *bhindi* (okra or ladies' finger) and *saag* (a generic term for leafy greens) are all popular choices.

The desert bears a handful of fruits, too. *Kair* is a small, round variety, which grows on a prickly shrub and is a favourite of camels as well as local people, to whom it is usually served with mango pickle; *kachri* is a type of desert fruit frequently made into chutney. If you order something that arrives looking like a plate of dry sticks, these are *sangri* (dried wild desert beans). The seeds and beans are soaked overnight in water, boiled, and then fried in oil with *masala*, dried dates, red chillies, turmeric powder, shredded dried mango, salt, coriander and cumin seeds – and despite their dry-stick appearance are amazingly tender.

Fresh fruit is sold in mountains on street stalls at every turn: you'll find oranges (which are yellow-green), tangerines, custard apples, grapes, pink and white grapefruits, kumquats and sweet limes. Bananas are piled high, too, with many distinct varieties, rich in individual flavour and usually far tastier and juicier than the kind you'll get back home. You'll also find fruit –

Gorge yourself by reading about the extravagant royal recipes of Rajasthan in *Royal Indian Cookery* by Manju Shrivastava Singh, the niece of the late Maharaja Bhawani Singh of Jaipur.

For a taste of the desert, try out a few dishes from the recipe collection, *Classic Cooking of Rajasthan* by Kaira Jiggs and Raminder Malhotra.

EATING INDIAN-STYLE

Most Indians eat with their right hand, using the tips of the fingers. *Never* eat with your left hand, which is reserved for unsavoury actions, such as toilet duties. The three-point plan to eating like a local goes as follows:

- First, before a meal in any home, wash your hands thoroughly.
- Next, mix your food with your fingers until it's thick and sticky. If you're having dhal and *sabzi*, mix only the dhal into your rice and take the *sabzi* in small scoops with each mouthful. If you're eating fish or meat curry, mix only the gravy into your rice and take the flesh off the bones from the side of your plate.
- Finally, scoop up lumps of the mix and, with your knuckles facing the dish, use your thumb to shovel the food into your mouth. If you get messy in the process, discreetly wipe your hand on your bread, then consume the evidence.

especially lemons, limes and mangos – fashioned into a chutney or pickle, flavouring kulfi (ice cream) or other sweet treats.

Pickles, Chutneys & Relishes

You're in a pickle without a pickle, or *achar*: no Indian meal is complete without one, and, if possible, a couple of *chatnis* (chutneys) and relishes on the side. A relish can be anything from a roughly chopped onion to a delicately crafted fusion of fruit, nuts and spices. The best known is *raita* (mildly spiced yogurt or curd often containing cucumber, tomato or pineapple – served chilled as a side dish), which makes a delicious and refreshing counter to spicy meals. In Rajasthan it may be *bathua raita*, made with a handful of *bathua* (a spinach-like winter vegetable, also known as Pigweed) leaves, which are boiled, rinsed and then mixed with the yogurt.

Other regional variations include *goonde achar*, *goonde* being a green fruit that is then boiled and mixed with mustard oil and *masala*. *Kair achar* is a pickle with desert fruit as its base, while *lahsun achar* is an onion pickle. *Lal mirch* is a garlic-stuffed red chilli and *kamrak ka achar* a pickle made from *kamrak*, a type of desert vegetable with a pungent, sour taste. The best known, and most widely served, however, are made of raw mango, mixed with spices and mustard oil, with lime, shredded ginger, or with tiny whole shallots, jazzing up even the dullest dhal or rice dish.

Dairy

Milk and milk products make a staggering contribution to Indian cuisine (hence the sanctity of the cow), and in Rajasthan they're even more important: *dahi* (curd) is served with most meals and is handy for countering heat in terms of both temperature and spiciness of dishes; firm, unmeltable *paneer* cheese is a godsend for the vegetarian majority and is used in apparently endless permutations; popular *lassi* (yogurt and iced-water drink) is just one in a host of nourishing sweet or savoury drinks, often with fruit such as banana or mango added for an extra zing; *ghee* (clarified butter) is the traditional and pure cooking medium (although not used nearly as much in India as in Indian restaurants abroad); and the best sweets are all made with plenty of condensed, sweetened milk or cream.

Sweets & Desserts

Indians have a heady range of tooth-jarringly sweet *mithai* (sweets), made from manifold concoctions of sugar, milk, ghee, nuts, and yet more sugar. Rajasthanian varieties include *badam ki barfi*, a type of fudge made from sugar,

'unmeltable paneer is a godsend for the vegetarian majority'

powdered milk, almonds and ghee, and *chakki*, a *barfi* (milk-based fudge) made from gram flour, sugar and milk. Gram flour, sugar, cardamom, ghee and dried fruits combined make *churma*, while *ladoo* comes in ball-form, made from gram or wheat flour with dried fruit and sugar added.

Ghewar, another Rajasthani favourite for which Jaipur is famous, is a paste based on *urad* (a mung-bean type pulse) that's crushed, deep-fried, and dipped in sugar syrup flavoured with cardamom, cinnamon and cloves. It's served hot, topped with a thick layer of unsweetened cream and garnished with rose petals.

Kheer is perhaps India's favourite dessert. It's a delectable, fragrant rice pudding with a light, delicate flavour of cardamom, saffron, pistachios, flaked almonds, cashews or dried fruit. *Gulab jamun* comes next: spongy deep-fried balls of milk dough soaked in rose-flavoured syrup, satisfyingly treacle pudding-like and wonderful when served with chopped nuts or a rich kulfi ice cream. Kulfi is addictive once experienced; delicious, substantially firm-textured, made with reduced milk and flavoured with nuts, fruits and berries, and especially tasty in its pale-green pistachio incarnation.

Alongside these more sophisticated offerings are the sweets of the region's food stalls, which are weighed down with delights such as *jalebis* (orange-coloured whirls of fried batter dipped in syrup) which, served hot, melt in the mouth and hang heavy on the conscience. Taste these at your peril, since anyone with the slightest sweet tooth will inevitably find themselves drawn back for more.

Thalis

Thalis are the traditional cheap and filling meals made up of a combination of vegetable (or sometimes nonveg) curried dishes, served with relishes, pappadams, yogurt, *puris* and rice. The term 'thali' also covers the characteristic school-dinner type metal tray-plate on which the meal is frequently served. If you're strapped for cash, thalis are a saviour, especially at small, local hole-in-the-wall restaurants and at railway-station dining halls, since they're far heavier on the stomach than the wallet. In southern Rajasthan, many restaurants serve more sophisticated, sweet and lightly spiced Gujarati thalis, brought over from the adjoining state of Gujarat – one of the most famous and most delicious ways to sample a taste of Gujarati cuisine.

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic Drinks

TEA & COFFEE

India runs on chai (tea). It's a unique and addictive brew, more milk than water, stewed for a long time and frequently sugary enough to give you a much-needed energy boost. It's usually *masala* chai (mixed tea), with a few spices added, such as ginger and cardamom pods, to give it a delicious, exotic twist. A glass of steaming sweet, milky, frothy chai is the perfect antidote to the heat and stress of Indian travel; the disembodied voice droning 'chai, chai *garam*' (hot tea) at any dusty, sticky station will fast become one of the most familiar and welcome sounds of your trip.

If you never quite get the hang of chai but still crave a simple cuppa, many cafés and restaurants will serve you up 'tray tea' or 'English tea', where the teabag, milk, hot water and sugar are each served separately.

Whilst coffee used to be fairly unusual in the region, nowadays Delhi, along with parts of Rajasthan, has caught up with the double-mocha-latte ways of the West, and good – or complicated – coffee can generally be had at hotels, bars, traveller-orientated cafés, and at international coffee chains such as Costa and Barista. Coffee shops have increasingly become a popular

hang-out for travellers and wealthier locals alike, though part of their appeal (beyond the paninis and carrot cake) might be the soothing jazz, chilly air-conditioning and clean toilets, as much as the quality of the ground beans.

At bus and train stations, though, coffee is still pretty much indistinguishable from chai: it's the same combination of water, boiled milk and sugar, but with just a dash of instant-coffee powder to allow connoisseurs to note the difference. That said, it offers the same restorative powers as chai, for just a fraction of the price tag of a frothy bucket-sized coffee-chain creation.

OTHER DRINKS

Aside from the usual gamut of Pepsis and 7Ups, India has a few of its own sugary bottled concoctions: the vaguely lemonish Limca and vivid-orange Mirinda. *Masala soda* is the quintessential Indian soft drink, though may be an acquired taste to the newcomer. Available at many drinks stalls, it's a freshly opened bottle of soda pepped-up with lime, spices, salt and sugar. Simple, freshly squeezed orange juice is also widely available – as are numerous sugar-enhanced carton versions – though the most popular street juices are made from sweet lemon and sugar cane, pressed in front of you by a mechanised wheel complete with jingling bells.

Less widespread but also popular, *Jal jeera* is one of the most therapeutic and refreshing indigenous drinks. It's made with lime juice, cumin, mint and rock salt and is sold in large earthenware pots by street vendors as well as in restaurants. *Falooda* is another nice option, a sweet rose-flavoured Muslim speciality made with milk, cream, nuts and strands of vermicelli.

By far the most popular of all Indian cold drinks, however, is a refreshing sweet or salty lassi (yogurt drink). Jodhpur is famous for its sweet *makhania* lassis, delicious thick, creamy lassis flavoured with saffron that are hearty enough to stand in for a meal. *Chach* and *kairi chach* are other Rajasthani specialities – the former is a thin, salted lassi and the latter is unripe mango juice with water and salt added, widely available in summer and allegedly a good remedy for sunstroke. There are also the infamous bhanga lassis, to be attempted with caution: a mixture of yogurt and bhanga, a heady marijuana derivative.

For information on water, see Drinking Water, p391.

Alcoholic Drinks

There's a plethora of local and national brands of beer, but little to tell them apart as most are straightforward pilsners containing around 5% alcohol. Most travellers champion Kingfisher; Royal Challenge, Dansberg, Golden Eagle, London Pilsner and Sandpiper, imbibed ice-cold, are all equally refreshing. Local whiskies Peter Scott, Antiquity and Solan No 1 are all palatable if drunk with sufficient mixers.

Though the Indian wine industry is still in its infancy, there are signs that Indian wines are slowly being accepted into local and international markets. Currently, one of the best-known Indian wine producers is Sula Wines, which creates a whole slew of different tastes – from Zinfandel and Sauvignon Blanc, to a Chenin-Blanc dessert wine – with grapes grown in northern Maharashtra state. Meanwhile, Grover Vineyards, established in 1988 near Bangalore, also has a solid international reputation, with a smaller range of wines than Sula, including a nice Sauvignon Blanc and a tasty pink Shiraz. Both are worth seeking out whilst in India, rather than opting for a glass of something imported and inevitably overpriced.

At the other end of the scale, arak is what the poor drink to get blotto, poignantly called *asha* (hope) in the north of India. It's clear, distilled rice liquor, the effects of which creep up on you quickly and without warning.

'A glass of steaming sweet, milky, frothy chai is the perfect antidote to the heat'

'Masala soda is the quintessential Indian soft drink'

Only ever drink this from a bottle produced in a government-controlled distillery. *Never, ever* drink it otherwise – hundreds of people die or are blinded every year in India as a result of drinking arak produced in illicit stills. Mahansar in Shekhawati (p289) produces a kind of ‘wine’ known as *daru* that tastes rather like Greek ouzo – it’s homemade so, as with arak, proceed with caution.

CELEBRATIONS

Although statewide and national festivals are religiously resonant, they are also occasions for a huge nosh-up, each festival proffering its own special dishes. Sweets are considered the most luxurious of foods: *karanjis*, crescent-shaped flour parcels stuffed with sweet *khoya* (milk solids) and nuts, are synonymous with Holi, the most boisterous Hindu festival, which wouldn’t be the same without its fair share of *malpuas* (wheat pancakes dipped in syrup), *barfi* fudges and *pedas* (multicoloured pieces of *khoya* and sugar). Diwali, the festival of lights, is the most widely celebrated national festival, each area producing specific Diwali sweets which are offered not only to revellers, but also to the gods themselves.

Ramadan is the Muslim month of fasting, when Muslims abstain from eating, smoking or drinking even water during daylight, replenishing themselves only before daybreak and at night. Each day’s fast is broken by a huge *iftar* (sunset fast-breaking) meal and, during the Eid al-Fitr festival, a feast of heavy curries, nonvegetarian biryanis and squidgy, sumptuous sweets.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Eating

Throughout Rajasthan, Delhi and Agra are multitudes of small, cheap and locally aimed restaurants, frequently known as ‘hotels’. Most midrange restaurants serve one of two basic genres; South Indian (which means the sweeter, lighter vegetarian cuisine of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) and North Indian (which comprises heavier, more meat-orientated Punjabi/Mughlai food). Rajasthan is a favourite holiday destination for affluent Gujaratis – from the famously foodie neighbouring state – which means places often specialise in Gujarati thalis. These include a selection of purely vegetarian, subtly flavoured dishes to delight the palate.

Dhabas (snack bars) are oases to the millions of truck drivers, bus passengers and anyone else who frequents India’s crowded roadways. The rough-and-ready but extremely tasty food served in these hospitable shacks has become a genre on its own, known as ‘*dhaba* food’. In Rajasthan *dhabas* are known as *bhojanalyas*, from *bhojan* (food or meal) and *alya* (place). These simple eateries are great for travellers on a tight budget, but make sure your food comes freshly cooked, and not just reheated: you’ll usually be able to judge quality in a *dhaba* by how busy its scattering of tables are or, in tableless versions, the length of the queue outside.

Delhi, these days, is a different culinary case from much of the rest of the country. Packed with expensive restaurants and cafés, it’s a perfect place to splurge, if you’re so-inclined, on stellar Mughlai food, or indeed on pretty much any world cuisine. But wherever you are in the region, don’t be afraid to experiment in the ‘I’ll have what she’s having’ vein. Eating in Rajasthan is as much an adventure as the journey itself, and if you play it safe you may miss out on rich and memorable culinary experiences.

Drinking

You’ll find no end of places to swig on a Kingfisher or sip on an expertly poured Manhattan in Delhi, particularly around Connaught Place and in the

Learn more about Sula Wines and their environmentally-friendly sustainable agriculture programmes at their website, www.sulawines.com.

Even deities have their favourite dishes. Krishna likes milk products, and Ganesh is rarely seen without a bowl of *modak* (sweet rice-flour dumplings).

wealthy suburbs, where some very stylish bars cater to the city’s well-heeled after-work crowds. In Rajasthan, too, you won’t find it too difficult to locate a cool glass of beer, except in Pushkar, which is officially a ‘dry’ town. ‘Dry’ days, too, may prevent you from quenching that thirst: Rajasthan has three per year (Republic Day, January 26; Independence Day, August 15; Gandhi Jayanti, October 2), while Delhi officially has 21.

Due to the expense of obtaining a liquor licence, many restaurants in Rajasthan don’t list alcohol on the menu. Some won’t mind if you bring your own; others may pop out to buy one for you (at an inflated price) whilst there are also those who will serve it to you despite their lack of licence – but surreptitiously, and in a teapot.

Quick Eats

STREET & PLATFORM FOOD

Whatever the time of day, people on the street are boiling, frying, roasting, peeling, juicing, simmering, mixing or baking some sort of food or beverage to tempt passers-by. Small operations usually have one special dish which they serve up all day, while other, slightly more sophisticated vendors offer different dishes for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The fare varies as you venture between neighbourhoods, towns and regions; it can be as simple as puffed rice or peanuts roasted in hot sand, as incongruous as a fried-egg sandwich with ketchup, or as complex as the riot of different flavours known as *chaat* (any snack foods seasoned with *chaat masala*).

Deep-fried treats are really where it’s at on stations and streets, and you’ll find samosas (deep-fried pyramid-shaped pastries filled with spiced vegetables and sometimes meat), *aloo tikka* (mashed potato patties) and *bhaji* (vegetable fritter fried in besan batter) in varying degrees of spiciness, along with *puris*, *kachoris*, and a whole host of other hot and battered delights. In most Muslim areas, you’ll also find kebabs, doused in smooth curds and wrapped in warm bread, both filling and warming in equal measure.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

India produces some of the best vegetarian food you’ll find anywhere on the planet, and vegetarians will have absolutely no problem maintaining a varied and exciting diet no matter how long their stay.

Vegetarian food is sometimes divided up in India into ‘veg’ and ‘pure veg’, a frequently blurred and confusing distinction. As a general rule of thumb, ‘veg’ usually means the same as it does in the West: without meat, fowl or seafood, but possibly containing butter (in India’s case, ghee), dairy products, eggs or honey. ‘Pure veg’ often refers to what the West knows as vegan food: dishes containing no dairy products, eggs or honey. Sometimes, as in the case of Jain or Hare Krishna–run eating establishments, ‘pure veg’ might also mean no onions, garlic or mushrooms (which some Hare Krishna believe can have a negative effect on one’s state of consciousness) or even no root vegetables or tubers (since many Jains, according to the principles of ahimsa, are loathe to damage plants).

Though it’s extremely easy to be vegetarian in India, finding vegan food – outside ‘pure veg’ restaurants – can be a bit trickier. Many basic dishes, including dhal, include a small amount of ghee, so ask whether a dish is ‘pure veg’, even in a vegetarian restaurant, before ordering.

EATING WITH KIDS

In such a family-centred society, children are welcomed everywhere and foreign children especially fêted. You’ll never feel out of place, even in the swankiest of New Delhi restaurants, even if basics such as highchairs and

For the full foodie experience whilst in Delhi, pick up the Times of India’s *Times Food Guide* (Rs 100) which lists 2500 of Delhi’s top eating destinations.

STREET FOOD DOS & DON'TS

There are obvious risks involved in eating on India's streets, but with a little common sense you're bound to discover culinary treasures: remember that fortune favours the brave.

- Stick to street stalls that seem well-frequented, particularly by local families with children.
- Check how and where utensils are cleaned, and whether food is covered when not on the flame. If the stall is very grimy or there are too many buzzing flies, beat a hasty retreat.
- Avoid, in general, eating meat from street stalls, since food-poisoning risks are increased.
- Choose sweet lemon, orange and sugar-cane drinks that are pressed in front of you, rather than dispensed from a jug.
- Don't be tempted by pre-sliced fruit, which keeps its luscious veneer with a regular dousing of local tap water.

child-sized portions are a little lacking. For little ones with tamer palates, the cook at a simple eatery will usually be pleased to whip up a simple, spice-free dhal, roti and rice combination. At more sophisticated dining joints, there will generally be a choice of child-friendly dishes, both Indian and Western in orientation.

For vegetarian children, lassis and *paneer* in all its forms, are a great way to make sure they are getting an adequate dose of calcium. Fruit, bought from street stalls and peeled and washed in bottled water, is great for keeping everyone's vitamin C levels high, and bananas are particularly good for troubled tummies. Every small kiosk sells snacks (try Parle G biscuits for their chai-dunkable, malted-milk consistency) for on-the-go treats, while adventurous children will enjoy sampling the sweets and deep-fried delicacies of street stalls.

Breakfasts are a good time to stock up for the day ahead, where pancakes filled with sliced banana and honey or Nutella will soon become a firm favourite on every travelling-child's breakfast agenda. More adventurous children, meanwhile, will love the messy, hands-on experience of dipping *idlis* and *parathas* in *sambar* (dhal with vegetables) and curd, along with the vast, floppy *dosas* of the Indian breakfast table.

For more on travelling with children, see p354.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Three main meals daily is the norm in India, with as many tiffin (snacks) as can be consumed without sabotaging the appetite. Breakfast is a light meal, usually of *paratha* and chai – though for the modern Delhi commuter masses, it might just as likely be a croissant and cappuccino-to-go. Lunch is substantial, often a local version of a thali, or a slew of rice and curry dishes shared with friends or family, from the local eating joint.

Few are able to wait until dinner before eating again, so a substantial tiffin is tucked into at around 5pm. Indians eat their evening meal relatively late, so restaurants are often deserted before 9pm. Dinner will usually have fewer dishes than a thali lunch, but bigger portions. Whatever the meal time, dishes are rarely served in courses; rather they're served hot and all-together. In Delhi you'll see the masses tucking into cakes, ice creams or street-stall sweets until late in the evening, long after dinner is done and digested.

Food & Religion

Regardless of caste or creed, Indians share the belief that food is just as important for fine-tuning the spirit as it is for sustaining the body, though

To find out more about veganism in India, take a look at www.indianvegan.com. For recipe ideas, pick up a copy of *Spicy Vegan* by Sudha Raina.

the country's Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists adhere to more culinary rules than its Sikhs, Christians and Parsis.

Most Hindus avoid foods that are thought to inhibit physical and spiritual development. The taboo on eating beef is the most rigid restriction, yet some – especially middle-class Hindus – eat it in restaurants and in non-Hindu homes. Some foods, such as dairy products, are considered innately pure and are eaten to cleanse the body, mind and spirit. Ayurveda, the ancient science of life, health and longevity, also heavily influences food customs.

Muslims have had a great influence on Indian food, and are responsible for most Indian meat dishes. Pork and alcohol are forbidden, and stimulants such as coffee and tea are avoided by the most devout. Halal is the term for all permitted foods, and haram for those prohibited.

Buddhists subscribe to the concept of ahimsa (the philosophy of non-violence), and most Indian Buddhists are largely vegetarian, though some eat fish and others abstain only from beef. Jainism's central tenet is ultra-vegetarianism, and rigid restrictions are in place to avoid even potential injury to any living creature – many Jains abstain from eating vegetables that grow underground; some, because of the potential to harm insects during cultivation, whilst others prefer to avoid harm to the plant itself.

COOKING COURSES

In Udaipur several places run cookery lessons (see p249), and you can also learn in Mt Abu at the Shri Ganesh Hotel (see p268). In Jhunjhunu in Shekhawati, Hotel Jamuna Resort (see p287) runs various courses, where lessons are coupled with field visits to different foodie families and establishments.

EAT YOUR WORDS**Useful Phrases****Do you accept credit cards?**

kyaa aap kredit kaard lete/letee haing? (m/f)

What would you recommend?

aap ke kyaal meng kyaa achchaa hogaa?

I'm (a) vegetarian.

maing hoong shaakaahaaree

I'd like the ... , please.

muje ... chaahiye

Please bring a/the

... *laaiye*

bill	<i>bil</i>
fork	<i>kaangtaa</i>
glass	<i>glaas</i>
glass of wine	<i>sharaab kee kaa glaas</i>
knife	<i>chaakoo</i>
menu	<i>menyoo</i>
mineral water	<i>minral vaatar</i>
plate	<i>plet</i>
spoon	<i>chammach</i>

I don't eat ...

maing ... naheeng kaataa/kaatee (m/f)

Could you prepare a meal without...?

kyaa aap ... ke binaa kaanaa taiyaar kar sakte/saktee haing? (m/f)

beef	<i>gaay ke gosht</i>
fish	<i>machlee</i>

meat stock	<i>gosht ke staak</i>
pork	<i>suar ke gosht</i>
poultry	<i>murgee</i>
red meat (goat)	<i>bakree</i>
I'm allergic to ...	
<i>muje ... kee elarjee hai</i>	
nuts	<i>meve</i>
seafood	<i>machlee</i>
shellfish	<i>shellfish</i>

Food Glossary

achar – pickles and chutneys
aloo – potatoes
aloo tikka – mashed-potato patty, often filled with vegetables or meat
appam – South Indian rice pancake
arak – liquor distilled from coconut milk, potatoes or rice
baigan – eggplant; also known as *brinjal*
barfi – milk-based fudgelike sweet
besan – ground chickpea flour
betel – nut of the betel tree; chewed as a stimulant and digestive in *paan*; also called areca nut
bhajia – vegetable fritter fried in besan batter, often eaten as street food
bhang lassi – potent blend of lassi and bhang (a derivative of marijuana)
bhulpuri – thin fried rounds of dough with rice, lentils, lemon juice, onions, herbs and chutney
bhindi – okra (ladies' fingers)
biryani – rich, fragrant rice dish with meat or vegetables
bonda – mashed-potato patty
brinjal – eggplant/aubergine
butter chicken – a Delhi favourite: tandoori chicken in a rich butter and tomato sauce
chaat – any small, savoury snack
chai – sweet, spiced tea
chana – chickpeas
chapati – unleavened Indian bread, also known as roti
chatni – chutney
cheiku – small brown fruit that looks like a potato, but is sweet
dahi – curd or yogurt
dhal – curried lentil dish; a staple food throughout India
dhal makhani – black lentils and red kidney beans with cream and butter
dhansak – Parsi dish; meat, usually chicken, with curried lentils and rice
dosa – South Indian breakfast dish: a paper-thin lentil-flour pancake
falooda – rose-flavoured drink made with milk, cream, nuts and vermicelli
faluda – long chickpea-flour noodles
farsan – savoury nibbles
ghee – clarified butter
gram – legumes
gulab jamun – deep-fried balls of dough soaked in rose-flavoured syrup
halwa – soft sweetmeat made with vegetables, cereals, lentils, nuts and fruit
idli – South Indian spongy, round savoury rice cake, served for breakfast
jaggery – hard, brown unrefined sugarlike sweetener made from palm sap
jalebi – deep-fried coils of sweet batter dipped in sugar syrup
keema – minced meat
kheer – rice pudding
khichdi – heavy rice dish sometimes made with lentils, potatoes and peanuts
kofta – minced balls of meat or vegetables in a curry sauce
korma – rich, mild meat or vegetable dish, cooked with curd
kulcha – charcoal-baked bread

kulfi – flavoured (often with pistachio) ice-cream confection
ladoo – sweet ball made with gram flour and semolina; also spelt as *ladu*
lassi – refreshing yogurt and iced-water drink, served either sweet or salted
masala – a wide-ranging term referring either to a mixture of spices or a spicy dish
masala dosa – South Indian dish; large lentil-flour crepe (*dosa*) often stuffed with potatoes and vegetables, and served with *sambar* and coconut chutney
mattar paneer – peas and unfermented cheese in gravy
milk badam – invigorating morning drink made with saffron and almonds
mithai – Indian sweets
momo – Tibetan fried or steamed dumpling stuffed with vegetables or meat
murg – chicken
naan – flat bread cooked in a tandoor oven
paan – digestif made of betel nut (also called areca nut), lime paste and spices, with or without tobacco
pakora – bite-sized piece of vegetable dipped in gram-flour batter and deep-fried
palak paneer – unfermented cheese in spinach gravy
paneer – unfermented cheese
pani – water
paratha – bread made with ghee and cooked on a hotplate
pilau – rice cooked in stock and flavoured with spices; also spelt as 'pilaf' or 'pulao'
puri – flat dough that puffs up when deep-fried; also spelt as 'poori'
raita – mildly spiced yogurt or curd, often containing shredded or diced cucumber, carrot, tomato or pineapple; served chilled as a side dish
rasam – South Indian dish; thin tamarind-flavoured vegetable broth
rasgulla – sweet little balls of cream cheese flavoured with rose-water
rogan josh – spicy red curry, traditionally made with meat, cooked with saffron
roti – wheat-flour bread cooked on the *tawa* (hotplate)
sabji – any vegetable curry, also known as *sabzi*
saag – leafy greens, usually spinach or fenugreek
sambar – South Indian dish; thin, soupy dhal with cubed vegetables often served with *dosas* or *idlis*
samosa – deep-fried pastry triangles filled with spiced vegetables and/or meat
sonf – aniseed seeds; used as a digestive – usually comes with the bill after a meal and also known as *paan*
thali – 'all-in-one' meal served on a stainless-steel or silver plate
thukpa – thick Tibetan noodle soup
tiffin – snack; also refers to the stacked meal container, often made of stainless steel
tikka – spiced, marinated, chargrilled chunks of chicken, *paneer*, lamb or fish

Environment

THE LAND

The rugged Aravalli Range splits Rajasthan like a bony spine, running from the northeast to the southwest. These irregular mountains – at times lush and forested, at others bare and muscular – form a boundary between the Thar Desert to the west and the relatively lush vegetation to the east. With an average height of 600m, in places the range soars to over 1050m; the highest point, Guru Shikhar (1722m), is near Mt Abu. It's thought to be the oldest mountain range in the world. A second hilly spur, the Vindhya Range, splays around the southernmost regions of Rajasthan.

The state's sole perennial river is the wide, life-giving swell of the Chambal. Rising in Madhya Pradesh from the northern slopes of the Vindhyas, the river enters Rajasthan at Chaurasigarh and forms part of Rajasthan's eastern border with Madhya Pradesh.

The south is drained by the Mahi and Sabarmati Rivers; the Luni, which rises about 7km north of Ajmer in the Aravalli, is the only river in western Rajasthan. Seasonal and comparatively shallow, the Luni sometimes billows out to over 2km wide.

The arid region in the west of the state is known as Marusthali or Marwar (the Land of Death), which gives some idea of the terrain. Sprawling from the Aravallis in the east to the Sulaiman Kirthar Range in the west is the Thar Desert, which covers almost three-quarters of the state. It's a barren, dry, inhospitable expanse – the eastern extension of the great Saharo-Tharian Desert – forming 61% of the area covered by desert in India.

Low, rugged, barren slopes occasionally punctuate the parched plains. About 60% of the region is also made up of sand dunes, which are formed by the erosion of these low hills and from sand blown from Gujarat's vast desert, the Great Rann of Kutch.

It's hard to believe, but this desolate region was once covered by massive forests and populated by huge animals. In 1996 two amateur palaeontologists working in the Thar Desert discovered animal fossils, some 300 million years old, that included dinosaur fossils. At the Akal Wood Fossil Park (p337), near Jaisalmer, you can visit the incredible remains of fossilised trees that are around 180 million years old. Plant fossils from 45 million years ago show that Rajasthan's metamorphosis into desert is relatively recent – and ongoing.

It's hard to make out where the desert ends and becomes semiarid. The semiarid zone nestles between the Aravallis and the Thar Desert, extending west from the Aravallis and encompassing the Ghaggar River Plain, parts of Shekhawati and the Luni River Basin.

Delhi lies on the vast flatlands of the Indo-Gangetic Plain, though the northernmost pimples of the Aravallis amount to the Ridge, which lies west of the city centre. The Yamuna River flows southwards along the eastern edge of the city. To the south, Agra lies on the banks of the Yamuna, in the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh.

WILDLIFE

For a place apparently so inhospitable, Rajasthan hosts an incredible array of animals and birds; the stars are the elusive tigers of Ranthambhore National Park (p215) and the birds of Keoladeo Ghana National Park (p188), although the status of the latter has dramatically declined owing to lack of water.

Animals

Arid-zone mammals have adapted to the lack of water in various resourceful ways. For example, some top up their fluids with insects that are composed of between 65% and 80% water, and water-bearing plants, while others retain water for longer periods. Faced with the incredible heat, many creatures burrow in the sand or venture out only at night – tricks that travellers in the hot season may feel like emulating.

ANTELOPES & GAZELLES

Blackbuck antelopes, with their long spiralling horns, are most common around Jodhpur, where they are protected by local Bishnoi tribes (see p315). Bishnoi conservation has also helped the chinkaras (Indian gazelles). These delicate little creatures (around 1m tall) are very fast and agile and found in small herds.

Also notable and relatively common in the national parks is the extraordinary nilgai, which is the largest of the antelope family – only the males attain the blue colour. It's a large, muscular animal whose front legs are longer than its rear legs, giving it an ungainly stance.

BIG CATS

Tigers were once found along the length of the Aravallis. However, royal hunting parties, poachers and habitat destruction have decimated the population, and tigers are now only found in Ranthambhore National Park. In 2008 there were plans to relocate the last four villages remaining in Sariska Tiger Reserve, and to then reintroduce tigers from Ranthambhore. The last of Sariska's original tigers were killed by poachers in 2004–05; (see p199).

The mainly nocturnal and rarely seen leopard, or panther, inhabits rocky declivities in the Aravallis, and parts of the Jaipur and Jodhpur districts. Anecdotal reports suggest an increase in numbers of leopards at Sariska Tiger Reserve following the demise of the tiger.

DOGS

Jackals are renowned for their unearthly howling, which enables them to find each other and form packs. Once common throughout Rajasthan, they would lurk around villages, where they scavenged and preyed on livestock. Habitat encroachment and hunting (for their skins) have reduced their numbers, though they are still a very common sight in Keoladeo Ghana, Ranthambhore and Sariska parks.

The wolf once roamed in large numbers in the desert, but farmers hunted it almost to the point of extinction. Wolves have begun to reappear over recent decades, due to concerted conservation efforts. The sanctuary at Kumbalgarh (p259) is known for its wolves.

The sandy-coloured desert fox is a subspecies of the red fox and was once prolific in the Thar Desert. As with wolves, the fox population has shrunk due to human endeavours, but it's still quite common to spot a single animal flitting across a desert road. Keep your eyes open for them scavenging roadkill on the highway near Jaisalmer.

RODENTS

Desert gerbils are small, but they're big trouble: they descend on crops in vast numbers, causing untold damage. In the arid zone an incredible 12,000 to 15,000 burrows per hectare have been identified. Each burrow opening shifts 1kg of soil, which is carried by the high-velocity winds, contributing to soil erosion and dust storms.

Elephas maximus – A Portrait of the Indian Elephant by Stephen Alter, reveals the princely pachyderm in all its wild grandeur as well as describing its influence in art, warfare and ceremony.

The US-based Fund for the Tiger, www.fundforthetiger.com, and Save the Tiger Fund, www.savethetigerfund.org are non-profit fundraisers who finance initiatives to assist tiger conservation in India and elsewhere.

Did you know? Around 180 million years ago the deserts of Rajasthan were lush forests home to dinosaurs.

MONKEYS

Monkeys seem to be everywhere in Rajasthan. There are two common types: the red-faced and red-rumped rhesus macaque and the shaggy grey, black-faced langur, with prominent eyebrows. Both types are keen on hanging around human settlements, where they can get easy pickings. Both will steal food from your grasp at temples, but the macaque is probably the more aggressive and the one to be particularly wary of.

BEARS

In forested regions you might be greeted by a sloth bear – a large creature covered in long black hair with a prominent white V on its chest and peculiar muzzle with an overhanging upper lip. That lip helps it feed on ants and termites. Sloth bears feed mostly on vegetation and insects but aren't averse to a bit of carrion. The bears are reasonably common around Mt Abu and elsewhere on the western slopes of the Aravalli Range.

BIRDS

The Aravalli forests harbour orioles, hornbills, kingfishers, swallows, parakeets, warblers, mynahs, robins, flycatchers, quails, doves, peacocks, barbets, bee-eaters, woodpeckers and drongos, among others. Birds of prey include numerous species of owls (great horned, dusky, brown fishing and collared scops, and spotted owlets), eagles (spotted and tawny), white-eyed buzzards, black-winged kites and shikras.

The wetlands of eastern Rajasthan include the internationally renowned Keoladeo Ghana National Park. Although in recent years the lack of water has prevented the famous migratory flocks from returning, it is hoped that a new water supply will soon reinvigorate this wetland (p188). Migratory species include spoonbills, herons, cormorants, storks, open bills, ibis and egrets. Wintering waterfowl include the common, marbled, falcated and Baikal teal; pintail, gadwall, shoveler, coot, wigeon, bar-headed and greylag geese; and common and brahminy pochards. Waders include snipe, sandpipers and plovers. Terrestrial species include the monogamous sarus, which inhabits the park year-round, and the beautiful demoiselle crane. Other species resident throughout the year include moorhens, egrets, herons, storks and cormorants. Birds of prey include many types of eagles (greater spotted, steppe, imperial, Spanish imperial and fishing), vultures (white-backed and scavenger), owls (spotted, dusky horned and mottled wood), marsh harriers, sparrowhawks, kestrels and goshawks.

Common birds of the grasslands include various species of lark, including the short-toed, crested, sky and crowned finch-lark. Quails, including grey, rain, common and bush, can also be seen, as can several types of shrike (grey, rufous-backed and bay-backed), mynahs, drongos and partridges. Migratory birds include the lesser florican, seen during the monsoon, and the Houbara bustard, which winters at the grasslands. Birds of prey include falcons, eagles, hawks, kites, kestrels and harriers.

The Thar Desert also has a prolific variety of birdlife. At the small village of Khichan, about 135km from Jodhpur, you can see vast flocks of demoiselle cranes descending on fields in the morning and evening from the end of August to the end of March. Other winter visitors to the desert include Houbara bustards and common cranes. As water is scarce, water holes attract large flocks of imperial, spotted, pintail and Indian sandgrouse in the early mornings. Other desert dwellers include drongos, common and bush quail, blue-tailed and little green bee-eaters, and grey partridges. Desert birds of prey include eagles (steppe and tawny), buzzards (honey and long-legged), goshawks, peregrine falcons and kestrels. The most notable of the desert and

Did you know? When the desert gerbil senses danger, it thumps the earth with its hind feet; the entire colony then flees to the burrows.

dry grassland dwellers is the impressive great Indian bustard, which stands some 40cm high and can weigh up to 14kg.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Some of Rajasthan's wildlife is disappearing due to encroachment on its habitat, but poaching is also a serious problem.

It's estimated that during the 1990s more than 20 tigers were slaughtered at Ranthambhore National Park and the last of the tigers of Sariska Tiger Reserve were killed in 2005. After the skin is removed, the bones inevitably find their way to China, where they form the basis of 'tiger wine', believed to have healing properties. The penis is coveted for its alleged aphrodisiac powers. For details on the recent tragedy see *The Case of the Missing Tigers*, p199.

National parks and sanctuaries are proving to be lucrative hunting grounds for poachers. Frequently, only main roads in parks are patrolled by (often poorly paid) guards, so poachers can trespass without fear of detection. From numbers in excess of 40,000 in the early 20th century, wild tigers in India have crashed to fewer than 1500 estimated in 2008. And many of these are in small, isolated and unsustainable populations.

Numbers of the great Indian bustard have also dwindled alarmingly due to hunting and because the bird's eggs are trampled by livestock. However, in Rajasthan, where the bird is the emblem of the state, there is no programme for conservation and this has led to calls for a national programme similar to Project Tiger to protect this majestic bird.

Three types of vulture have become endangered over the past few years. Once common, they joined the endangered ranks after the population in south Asia fell by 95%. The cause was exposure to a veterinary drug, which

The Tiger's Destiny, by Valmik Thapar, with photographs by Fateh Singh Rathore, is all about the besieged tigers of Ranthambhore National Park.

The most prominent organisation battling tiger poaching in India is the Wildlife Protection Society of India, www.wpsi-india.org.

ANIMAL AID SOCIETY

Praveen and Poonam met Americans Erika and Jim in 2000. Talking about their distress at seeing so many street animals in pain, together they began to realise a dream – to take action and address the problems of destitute animals. In March 2003 they completed a small hospital in Chota Hawala village, 3km northwest of Udaipur, which now treats around 200 animals per month.

The society's work includes emergency treatment of stray animals and projects such as spaying street dogs (20 to 40 per week). There are an estimated 10,000 ownerless dogs in the Udaipur district, so this helps keep numbers under control. They also travel to village communities to provide animals with treatments such as deworming.

If you've noticed donkeys weighed down with mammoth loads, you'll understand the Animal Aid Society's particular concern for these diminutive, overworked, long-suffering creatures. The hospital cares for retired donkeys and runs education programmes to prevent ill-treatment.

Another project is the Plastic Bag Education Campaign. Cows let loose on the street to graze often end up chowing down on indigestible plastic. The plastic sits in the cow's stomach, causing the animal to feel full. This means it will end up starving to death. Street cows who've been operated on have been found to have as much as 36kg of plastic in their gut. The society aims to educate people about the dangers of this kind of waste and so prevent cows from dying a slow and agonising death.

Visitors are welcome at the **hospital** (☎ 10am-5pm), in Chota Hawala village, near Udaipur. The Animal Aid Society relies on donations and volunteer help, so if you can give either money or time you'll be supporting excellent work. You could give a straightforward gift or sponsor a donkey. The society's website gives details of the projects your money could help with. Ideally, a volunteer should commit to at least two weeks, working four or more hours a day, but if you have less time the society is happy to make other arrangements. Volunteers don't have to be skilled – you can help by just giving animals the care and attention that can speed recovery. For more details, call ☎ 0294-2513359 or check the website at www.animalaidunlimited.com.

the vultures absorbed while feeding from livestock carcasses. The reduction in vulture numbers has had knock-on ecological and health effects, as the birds once disposed of many carcasses, thus reducing risks of disease.

Plants

Vegetation in the desert zone is, not surprisingly, sparse and hardy. Only a limited range of grasses and slow-growing thorny trees and shrubs can grow here. The most common tree species are the ubiquitous khejri (*Prosopis cineraria*) and varieties of acacia. Rajasthan also has some dry teak forest, dry mixed deciduous forest, bamboo brakes and subtropical hill forests. Forest stocks are dwindling, however, as inhabitants scour the landscape for fuel and fodder.

The hardy khejri, which is held sacred by the Bishnoi tribes of Jodhpur district (see p315), is drought resistant on account of its very deep roots (up to 30m below the surface). No part of the plant goes to waste: the thorny twigs are used to build barriers to keep sheep and goats away from crops, the leaves are dried and used for fodder, and the bean-shaped fruit can be eaten ripe or unripe. The latter, when cooked, is known as *sangri*. The wood is used to make furniture and the branches are burnt for fuel. The khejri twigs are used in the sacred fire that's lit during marriage ceremonies.

Another arid-zone tree is rohira (*Tecoma undulata*). Its pods form medicines that relieve abscesses, and its wood is used to make furniture. The Central Arid Zone Research Institute (p85) has had some success with the introduction of faster-growing exotic species to the desert, including various acacias.

NATIONAL PARKS & WILDLIFE SANCTUARIES

Among its numerous reserves, Rajasthan has some world-renowned wildlife sanctuaries and national parks (see the table opposite). Some of these, such as Ranthambhore, Keoladeo and Sariska, were originally the hunting reserves of the maharajas. Others, such as the Desert National Park in western Rajasthan, have been established to protect and preserve the unique plants and animals found in the arid zone.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Oont chhode Akaro, Bakri chhode Kangro

The camel consumes everything other than *ak* (a thorny shrub) but the goat devours even that, leaving only the pebbles

Marwari proverb

Rajasthan's challenging climate and human needs are responsible for its major environmental problems of drought, desertification and overgrazing, while Delhi and Agra's big burdens are air and water pollution.

Drought

Droughts are a recurrent spectre in Rajasthan, due to the unreliability of the monsoon. The propensity of drought conditions highlights the need for water-conservation strategies in the state, and many villages have been making impressive gains by reviving traditional water-harvesting techniques. However, the state still faces a huge water crisis. In western Rajasthan, even in good years, lack of water means cultivation barely meets subsistence requirements. Groundwater levels in cities such as Jaipur are lowering alarmingly.

Water scarcity has led to clashes between local people and conservationists. When it was suggested that water be re-diverted from Panchana Dam to

MAJOR NATIONAL PARKS & WILDLIFE SANCTUARIES

National park/ wildlife sanctuary	Location	Features	Best time to visit
Darrah WS	southern Rajasthan, p232	leopards, chinkaras, spotted deer, wild boar, wolves, sloth bears	Feb-May
Desert NP	western Rajasthan, p336	great Indian bustards, blackbuck, nilgai, wolves, desert foxes, crested porcupines	Sep-Mar
Dhawa Doli WS	western Rajasthan, p316	blackbuck, nilgai, partridges, desert foxes	Oct-Feb
Gajner WS	western Rajasthan, p347	desert cats, desert foxes, chinkaras	Oct-Mar
Jaisamand WS	southern Rajasthan, p262	crocodiles, leopards, chinkaras, beautiful <i>chhatris</i> (cenotaphs)	Nov-Jun
Keoladeo Ghana NP	eastern Rajasthan, p188	400 bird species, including migratory birds & waterbirds (wetlands)	Oct-Mar, Jul-Aug
Kumbalgarh WS	southern Rajasthan, p259	wolves in packs of up to 40, chow-singhas, four-horned antelopes, leopards, horse riding	Oct-Jun
Mt Abu WS	southern Rajasthan, p271	deciduous & subtropical forest, sloth bears, wild boar, sambars, leopards	Mar-Jun
National Chambal WS	southern Rajasthan,	gharial crocodiles, wolves, chinkaras, blackbuck, wild boar, caracals	Oct-Mar
Ranthambhore NP	eastern Rajasthan, p215	tigers, chitals, leopards, nilgai, chinkaras, bird life, ancient fort	Oct-Apr
Sariska Tiger Reserve	eastern Rajasthan, p198	leopards, chitals, chinkaras, birdlife, fort, deserted city & temples	Nov-Jun
Sitamata WS	southern Rajasthan, p263	ancient teak trees, deer, sambars, leopards, flying squirrels, wild boar	Mar-Jul
Tal Chhapar WS	northern Rajasthan, p298	blackbuck, chinkaras, desert foxes, antelopes, harriers, eagles, sparrowhawks	Sep-Mar

revive Keoladeo Ghana National Park, local farmers threatened to commit suicide. In Alwar district, villages have adopted traditional techniques to combat water shortages. The construction of *johars* (semi-circular earthen dams) slows the flow of monsoon run-off and thereby increases soil infiltration and the level of groundwater.

Desertification

Desertification is partly a natural progression, as geological factors have given rise to warmer, drier climates, but it has been exacerbated by more and more humans and their domestic animals exploiting fewer and fewer resources. The Thar Desert is the most densely populated desert in the world, with an average of over 60 people per square kilometre.

An acute shortage of water, plus the problems of salinity, erosion, periodic droughts, overgrazing, overcultivation and overconsumption of scanty vegetation for fuel and timber, all either contribute to or are a consequence

A Guide to the Wildlife Parks of Rajasthan, by Dr Suraj Ziddi, with photographs by Subhash Bhargava, is a comprehensive guide to Rajasthan's reserves.

India's premier wildlife magazine, *Sanctuary*, has a website, www.sanctuaryasia.com, highlighting the latest conservation issues and with numerous related links.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

You may feel that as an individual you are helpless to prevent environmental destruction, but there's a lot you can do, with little effort.

Rubbish Retaliation

Tourism contributes to the massive rubbish problem in Indian cities. In Udaipur the large number of hotels around Lake Pichola has contributed to widespread pollution within and around the lake. Travellers can help by encouraging hotel management to dispose of rubbish in an environmentally friendly manner. You can put similar pressure on the camel-safari operators who dump rubbish in the desert during their tours.

Plastic Peril

Many once-pristine regions are now vanishing under a sea of abandoned plastic mineral-water bottles. Travellers can make a significant difference by only buying products that use environmentally friendly packaging.

Discarded plastic bags are a very serious problem (see Animal Aid Society, p84). Avoid buying anything in plastic bags and bottles, and, if you must buy plastic, reuse it. Other ways of reducing Rajasthan's plastic peril include buying tea in terracotta cups at train stations (or in your own cup) rather than plastic, bringing your own canteen and purifying water rather than buying it in plastic bottles (see p391), and buying soft drinks in (recyclable) glass bottles.

Waste Not, Want Not

Traditionally, Rajasthanis have used ingenious methods of conserving every drop of water. In Jaisalmer the same water was used to bathe, wash clothes, wash the floor and water the garden. Today, however, Rajasthan has a water crisis. Across the state many people face a lack of drinking water, while in Jaisalmer increased water usage is causing the fort to crumble. There are various reasons for this, but the growing number of tourist facilities, particularly bathrooms, designed in line with Western standards, is definitely one of them.

of the continuing desertification of Rajasthan. As inhabitants scour the landscape for wood fuel, some species of vegetation face a severe threat. The roots of the phog plant (*Calligonum polygonoides*), which is one of the few species found on sand dunes, are removed and used for fuel. Once common in Jodhpur district, phog has now completely disappeared. The rohira tree has all but disappeared from the arid zone. Rohira wood, known locally as Marwar teak, is highly prized for furniture construction, and was traditionally used in the carved architraves and window frames of *havelis* (traditional, ornately decorated residences).

Pollution

Deforestation and pollution are damaging many parts of Rajasthan, especially the southern region. Industrial waste has caused air, water and noise pollution; this is particularly noticeable around the industrial town of Kota. Marble mining has been especially harmful. Some areas of southern Rajasthan, including the region from Kota to Jhalawar, seem to be covered in a thin layer of marble dust, and around Rambagh, near Jaipur, the landscape is scarred by the (now closed) mines.

To address water pollution, the government has introduced policies that restrict building and development around lakes and rivers.

In Delhi, a shocking number of people die of air-pollution-related diseases every year. Road traffic is the chief cause of the problem, though recent measures, including the development of the metro and the conversion of all rickshaw engines to use compressed natural gas (CNG), have had an

'concerns that air pollution was affecting the Taj Mahal led to the designation of a 4km traffic-free zone around the building'

You can make a difference by cutting down on the amount of waste water that you produce. Washing with a bucket uses around one-third of the water that's required for a shower. Similarly, using Indian rather than Western toilets reduces the amount of water that is flushed down the drain.

Animal Welfare

India's ancient reverence for the natural world manifests itself in myths, beliefs and cults that are an intrinsic part of the cultural fabric. But in a country where millions live below the poverty line, survival often comes before sentiment.

The World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) works to raise awareness of cases of cruelty and exploitation. One campaign focuses on dancing bears. Cubs of endangered sloth bears are captured in the wild, and then their muzzles are pierced so rope can be threaded through the hole, and their teeth are pulled out. The bears' nomadic handlers ply tourist traps in Agra and Jaipur. According to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), around 70,000 snakes (including the endangered king cobra) perish annually due to the dreadful living conditions they experience in captivity, particularly with snake charmers.

If you are concerned about the welfare of animals, don't take an interest in snake charming, bear dancing, photographic monkeys and other sideshow acts that exploit animals – don't take their photographs or give money. For information on elephant welfare, see The Amber Elephants, p179.

Monumental Mission

A number of monuments in Rajasthan are suffering irreparable damage from tourism and government indifference. One of the most threatened is Jaisalmer Fort, which has been listed in the New York-based World Monuments Watch list of 100 endangered sites worldwide. See Golden City Blues, p324, for information on how you can help save the fort. Other monuments in dire need of protection include the painted *havelis* (traditional, ornately decorated residences) of Shekhawati. You can help to reverse the damage by volunteering in conservation and restoration efforts – see p369.

impact. The Yamuna River is also horrendously polluted. In Agra, concerns that air pollution was affecting the Taj Mahal led to the designation of a 4km traffic-free zone around the building in 1994. In 1999 polluting factories in the area were closed, and illegal buildings within 500m were torn down (unfortunately, no provision was made for those affected by these rulings).

Plastic Waste

Almost everywhere in Rajasthan, Delhi and Agra, plastic bags and bottles clog drains, litter the city streets and deserts, and even stunt the growth of grass in parks. Of growing concern are the number of cows, elephants and other creatures that consume this plastic waste (see Animal Aid Society, p84). The antiplastic lobby estimates that about 70% of the plastics used in India is discarded within a week and only about 15% is recycled.

Deforestation

There are regular problems between villagers and the authorities running Rajasthan's sanctuaries as they battle over resources. The dense forests that covered the Aravalli Range prior to Independence are thinning rapidly. Before Independence, villagers were forbidden to encroach on these forests, which were the hunting preserves of the nobility. However, following Independence, huge numbers of trees were felled to meet increasing timber, fuel and fodder requirements, and in line with population growth this trend is continuing.

The alarming disappearance of the Aravalli forests has provoked government intervention, and some areas are now closed periodically to enable

'The alarming disappearance of the Aravalli forests has provoked government intervention'

JUST ADD WATER

Irrigating India's vast arid lands has long been the dream of rulers and politicians. The Indira Gandhi Canal was initiated in 1957 and, though it is still incomplete, it includes an amazing 9709km of canals, with the main canal stretching 649km. Critics suggest that the massive project, connected with Bhakra Dam in Punjab, was concerned with short-term economics and politics to the detriment of the long-term ecology of the region.

The canal has opened up large tracts of the arid western region for cash crops, but these tracts are managed by wealthy landowners rather than the rural poor. Environmentalists say that soil has been destroyed through over-irrigation, and indigenous plants have suffered, adding to the degeneration of the arid zone. Furthermore, sections of the Indira Gandhi Canal are built on traditional grazing grounds, to which graziers are now denied access. The canal has also been blamed for breeding malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

In 2008, the waters from India's largest westward flowing river, the Narmada, which were dammed in highly controversial circumstances, trickled into Rajasthan's drought-ravaged regions of Jalore and Barmer. The miraculous appearance of the water brought untold joy to the long-suffering villagers. However, the entire Narmada River project has been heavily criticised both on environmental grounds and for displacing a large number of tribal people in the Narmada Valley.

the forest to regenerate. However, the closed regions are poorly policed, and locals are also entitled to take dry wood from the areas. There is simply not enough wood for everyone, so villagers ringbark healthy trees, returning later to remove the dead timber. Residents of the villages that surround Ranthambhore and Sariska regularly clash with the authorities, as these villagers illegally remove wood from the protected areas.

Conservation

The best way to combat desertification is afforestation. Trees provide food, fodder, fuel and timber, and they also stabilise the earth and act as windbreaks, lessening the damage caused by sandstorms.

The first official recognition of the advancement of the Thar Desert and the alarming ramifications of this for the inhabitants of the arid zone occurred in 1951. As a result, in 1952 the Desert Afforestation Research Station was established in Jodhpur to conduct research into the problems of desertification (the research station became the Central Arid Zone Research Institute in 1959). This is the most important institute of its type in south Asia.

The institute's endeavours include stabilising the shifting sand dunes, establishing silvipastoral (where trees are grown alongside shrubs that can be used for livestock feed) and fuel-wood plantations, planting windbreaks to reduce wind speed and subsequent erosion, rehabilitating degraded forests, and starting afforestation of barren hill slopes.

Some of the institute's work has been criticised by conservationists, who claim that massive attempts to irrigate and afforest the arid zone alter its fragile composition. An afforestation project along the Indira Gandhi Canal has come under attack, as the indigenous phog plant is being uprooted and replaced with fast-growing non-native species such as a hybrid *Eucalyptus* and *Acacia tortilis*. Such species upset the desert ecosystem, are of little nutritional or practical use to villagers, and reduce traditional grazing grounds (animal husbandry is the economic staple and traditional livelihood for most of the inhabitants of Rajasthan's 11 desert districts). Environmentalists argue that development should promote the generation and conservation of desert species that are attuned and adapted to the local environment, and provide food, fodder and fuel.

Several organisations work to regenerate the ecosystem and promote environmentally sustainable development. **Tarun Bharat Sangh** (Young India Organisation; ☎ 01465-225043; www.tarunbharatsangh.org; Tarun Ashram, Bhikampura, Via Thangazi, District Alwar 301022) is an acclaimed nongovernmental organisation (NGO) involved in water-harvesting projects. It constructs small dams to collect rainwater using traditional technology and local labour. Since 1974 it has set up more than 4000 structures.

The **Central Arid Zone Research Institute** (CAZRI; ☎ 029-2740584, www.cazri.res.in; Light Industrial Area, Jodhpur 342003) focuses on the problems of desertification. It has a small pictorial museum with a photographic exhibition illustrating the institute's work.

Ubeshwar Vikas Mandal (chand67@bpl.net.in; 125 Priyadarshini Nagar Bedla Rd, Udaipur) is a small NGO studying and promoting sustainable agriculture, and focusing on methods such as rainwater harvesting.

In Shekhawati, Ramesh Jangid has pioneered inspirational ecological measures at his resort, Apani Dhani, a unique project in Rajasthan. See p277 for more information.

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