

Southern Rajasthan



Southern Rajasthan holds arguably Rajasthan's most enchanting city, Udaipur, a milk-white confection meandering around several lakes. The city is the ultimate in Rajput fantasy with its cream-coloured *havelis* (traditional mansions) and palaces, one of which, floating in Pichola Lake, is among the world's most famous hotels, the Lake Palace.

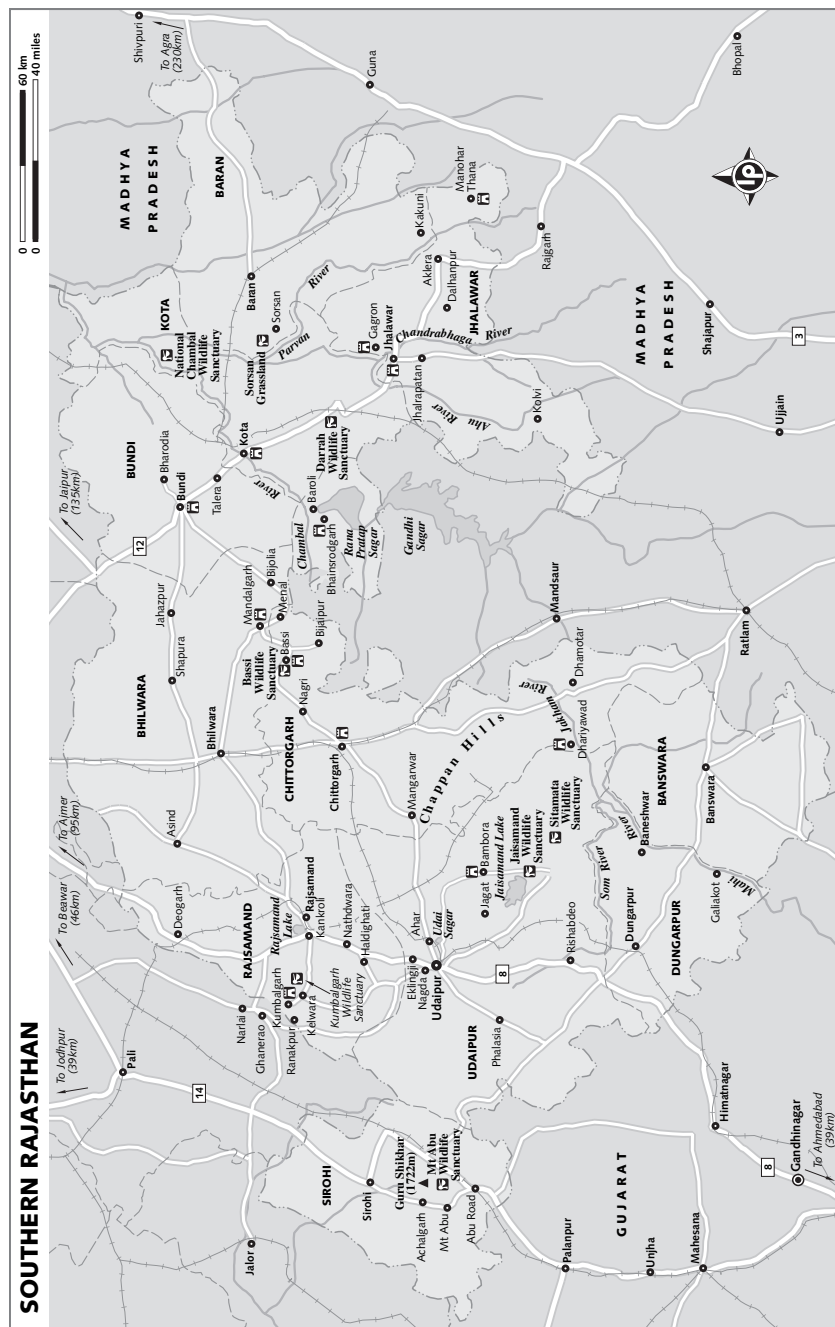
In the south of the region are Rajasthan's two finest forts, Chittorgarh (Chittor), sprawling over an enormous hilltop plateau, and remote Kumbalgarh, perched at 1100m, with breathtaking views over the dense Aravalli Hills fading into a pale blue horizon. Here, too, are two Jain temple complexes where artistic virtuosity reached dizzy peaks. Ranakpur, deep in an Aravalli valley, has a hall of 1444 pillars, each one different; Dilwara, on a hilltop near Mt Abu, sports marble carving so delicate that it's almost transparent. Mt Abu is Rajasthan's only hill station; a cool holiday destination for locals, it's still largely undiscovered by foreign tourists.

If you're keen to get off the well-beaten track, Bundi, though definitely discovered, is an enchanting town, painted Brahmin blue and overlooked by a palace; nearby Kota holds another fine palace. Jhalawar, meanwhile, is really off the trail, with its mighty, forgotten fort and nearby city of temples. Serene Jaisamand, a vast blue-reflecting hill-ringed expanse, is Asia's biggest artificial lake. The region offers some exhilarating activities too. You can trek or ride the beautiful countryside near Udaipur, Mt Abu or Kumbalgarh, cycle about Bundi, or take a boat trip down the crocodile habitats of the Chambal River.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the vast forts of busy **Chittorgarh** (p236) and remote **Kumbalgarh** (p259), whose architectural magnificence reflect nobler times
- Mess about on the river at **Kota** (p228), by taking a leisurely Chambal River boat cruise
- Indulge in **Udaipur** (p240), an ice-cream cake of a city, with dreamy lakes overlooked by shadowy hills
- Examine the exquisite, mind-blowing carving in the Jain temples at **Mt Abu** (p265) and **Ranakpur** (p261)
- Kick back in endearing **Bundi** (p223), a blue-painted small town, overlooked by a ramshackle fort and a magical palace





History

The kingdom of Mewar (the area encompassing Chittorgarh and Udaipur) has dominated the history of the south, which is splattered with bloodshed and vast doses of valour.

Chittorgarh, Mewar's former capital, was sacked three times between 1303 and 1568, each defeat ending in immense carnage, with the impossibly noble Rajputs (a Hindu warrior caste that formerly ruled western India) reliably choosing death before dishonour. While the men died in battle, the women committed *jauhar* (collective self-sacrifice), throwing themselves into the flames of huge pyres. After the third attack, Mewar's ruler, Maharaja Udai Singh II, wisely decided to give up Chittorgarh as a bad job and establish his new capital in Udaipur.

Udaipur, shielded by thick forests and the Aravalli Hills, was far less vulnerable than exposed Chittorgarh. But this didn't stop invaders from trying their luck, and Udaipur also had its share of battles. These power struggles ended in the early 19th century when the British signed an alliance pledging to protect the Mewar rulers.

The rulers of the Mewar region, the illustrious Sisodia Rajput clan, claim descent from the sun, and you'll see the symbol of the sun repeated in their palaces and forts. Their dynasty is believed to be one of the oldest in the world, reigning in unbroken succession for over 1400 years. Staunchly defying foreign domination of any kind, they were the only Hindu princes who refused to intermarry with the once-influential Mughal emperors. For them, honour, heritage and independence were paramount, even if that meant deprivation and suffering.

Other princely states in southern Rajasthan, such as Kota and Bundi, were formed long after the Mewar region, with the remote royal state of Jhalawar created as recently as 1838.

BUNDI

☎ 0747 / pop 100,000

A captivating small town with narrow lanes of Brahmin-blue houses, lakes, hills, bazaars and a temple at every turn, Bundi is dominated by a fantastical palace – faded-parchment cupolas and loggias rising from a mighty fortress mounted on a crag. Though it's becoming increasingly popular with travellers, the town remains the perfect place to relax and write that novel (as Rudyard Kipling did, in a

fragile lakeside icing-sugar house) before the crowds really descend in earnest. A visit in August or September might reward you with a glimpse of the cheerful festival of Kajli Tej (p224), celebrating the arrival of the monsoon, while October to November sees Bundi Utsav (p224), a cultural festival complete with music and fireworks, blaze through Bundi's quiet streets

Bundi's crumbling storybook palace houses the famous Bundi murals (see the boxed text, p232), along with legions of bats; dusk heralds the extraordinary sight of streaming clouds of them exiting the palace and taking to the skies as this still-sleepy town closes down for an early night.

History

The Hadoti Chauhans, who claim descent from the sacred fires of Mt Abu, conquered this area in the 12th century, wresting it from the Mina and Bhil tribes and claiming it as capital of their new kingdom, after being pushed south from their stronghold at Ajmer by Mohammed of Ghori.

In 1624 Kota, the land grant of the ruler's eldest son, was made into a separate state at the instigation of the Mughal emperor Jehangir. Bundi's importance dwindled with the rise of Kota during Mughal times, but it maintained its independence until it was incorporated into the state of Rajasthan after Independence in 1947.

Orientation

Bundi is small and easily navigable, and it's easy to find your way to the palace on foot through the bazaar. Once you pass through the city gates, there are only two main roads through town, and the palace is visible from many points. The bus stand is at the Kota (southeast) end of town, and the train station is about 2km south of town, across National Hwy 12.

Information

Along with the Ayurvedic Hospital, there's a conventional government hospital in the south of town, near the bus stand. Mukesh Mehta, at the Haveli Braj Bhushanjee (p228), is a terrific source of tourist information; his brother's website, www.kiplingsbundi.com, is also useful.

Ayurvedic Hospital (☎ 2443708; 🕒 9am-1pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) Opposite the Haveli Braj

FESTIVALS IN SOUTHERN RAJASTHAN

There's a flurry of colourful festivals in the south, while statewide and nationwide festivals (see p358) are also celebrated with aplomb.

Baneshwar Fair (Baneshwar, p264; Jan-Feb) This large tribal event, honouring both Lord Shiva and Vishnu (worshipped as Mavji) is celebrated by thousands of Bhil people, the fair site lying at the confluence of the Mahi, Som and Jakham Rivers. Festivities include acrobatic and cultural programmes, and a silver image of Mavji is paraded through the village on horseback and doused in the river. The river is thought holiest at this time, so many people bathe along with the idol.

Holi (Udaipur; Feb-Mar) Udaipur is the place to be for this joyful festival, which marks the end of winter and the beginning of spring. The Udaipur royal family hosts an elaborate function at the City Palace to celebrate Holi, with an evening horse procession, a band, local nobility in traditional attire and, of course, the royal family. After performing an ancient religious ceremony, the royal family lights a huge sacred fire, Holika Dahan, signifying the triumph of good over evil. Afterwards, you'll get the chance to rub shoulders with nobility at a cocktail and dinner reception held in the Zenana Mahal (Royal Ladies' Palace) at the City Palace. Tickets, costing Rs 4000 per person, can be obtained at the Shiv Niwas Palace Hotel (p253).

Gangaur (Mt Abu; Mar-Apr) Gangaur, celebrated across Rajasthan, has some interesting adaptations in this region. Essentially a festival for women, it's dedicated to the goddess Gauri (Parvati). Wives pray for their spouses, and unmarried women pray for good husbands. The Garasia tribes of the Mt Abu region celebrate Gangaur for an entire month, with an image of Gauri carried aloft from village to village, accompanied by singing and dancing. In Bundi, Kota and Jhalawar, unmarried girls collect poppies from the fields during Gangaur and make them into wreaths for the goddess; in Nathdwara the Gangaur procession lasts for seven days, the goddess dressed differently each day.

Mewar Festival (Udaipur; Mar-Apr) Udaipur's colourful take on Gangaur, this festival also welcomes the onset of spring. People dressed in traditional costumes sing and dance in a lively procession that goes through the town to Gangaur Ghat on Pichola Lake. Idols of Gauri and Shiva, representing the 'perfect couple', are carried in procession and set afloat on the lake in boats. There are also free cultural programmes.

Summer Festival (Mt Abu; Apr-May) Mt Abu registers the coolest temperatures in the state at this scorching time of the year; the festival includes classical and traditional folk-music programmes, as well as boat races on Nakki Lake and fireworks.

Kajli Teej (Bundi; Aug-Sep) The traditional Rajasthani festival of Teej, marking the onset of the monsoon, is celebrated somewhat differently in Bundi. Here it's observed on the 3rd day of the month of Bhadra. A palanquin (a covered litter) bearing the goddess Teej is carried through the streets from Nawal Sagar lake to Azad Park. The celebrations are a good chance to see local artists perform, and are merged with the festival of Janmastami, Krishna's birthday.

Bundi Utsav (Bundi; Oct-Nov) This cultural festival showcases the colourful traditions of the region with a procession, classical raga (free composition) performances, magic and fireworks.

Dussehra (Kota; Oct-Nov) Kota is the place to be at the end of this festival, when enormous effigies, some around 20m high, are filled with crackers and set alight. The festival – an India-wide celebration – celebrates the story of Rama's victory over Ravana (see p48).

Ghans Bheru Festival (Bharodia; Oct-Nov) Held on the day after Diwali (see p360) in the village of Bharodia, about 10km northeast of Bundi, the festival honours the Hindu god Ghans Bheru. While almost unknown to most tourists, this colourful festival attracts thousands of villagers from the district, who converge on the village to celebrate a prosperous harvest.

Chandrabhaga Fair (Jhalrapatan, p234; Nov-Dec) This huge cattle fair takes place on the last day of the Hindu month of Kartika on the banks of the holy Chandrabhaga River near Jhalrapatan. Attracting villagers from across Rajasthan, it includes livestock trading and colourful stalls, while pilgrims bathe in a sacred part of the river known as Chandrawati.

Bhushanjee, this charitable hospital prescribes natural plant-based remedies. There are medicines for all sorts of ailments, from upset tummies to arthritis, and many of them are free.

Cyber Dream (per hr Rs 60; ☎ 9am-9pm) One of the increasing number of places to check your email.

Pandey Forex (☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) A good place to change money, about 300m south of the palace.

SBBJ ATM (outside Chogan Gate) This frequently out-of-service ATM machine accepts international cards.

Shri Balaji.com (Nahar ka Chuhata; per hr Rs 60; ☎ 9am-9pm) An alternative to Cyber Dream.

Tourist office (☎ 2443697; Lanka Gate Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) Near Raniji-ki-Baori. You can get a free map here.

Sights

BUNDI PALACE

An extraordinary, decaying edifice, the **palace** (Indians/foreigners Rs 10/50, camera/video Rs 50/100; ☎ 7am-5pm) is actually a series of smaller *mahals* (palaces) which have fabulous, fading turquoise-and-gold murals. It's reached from the bazaar's northwestern end. Previously shut up and left to the bats, the entirety is now open to the public, and knowledgeable guides hang around the ticket office to illuminate your tour of a place so fairy tale-esque that Kipling called it 'the work of goblins rather than of men'.

Entering through the huge Elephant Gate (built in 1607), visit the Chhatra Mahal (palace), built in 1644, which houses some of Bundi's finest murals: one room features well-preserved paintings of Krishna – one for each month of the year. The Phool Mahal was built in 1607 and murals here include an immense royal procession. Dating from the same time, the Badal Mahal (Cloud Palace) houses Bundi's very best murals, including a wonderful Chinese-inspired ceiling, divided into petal shapes and decorated with peacocks and Krishnas.

To get to yet more murals at the **Chitrasala** (Umed Mahal; admission free; ☎ 7am-6pm), a small palace built by Rao Umed Singh in the 18th century, exit through the Elephant Gate and walk uphill to the entrance. Above the garden courtyard are several rooms covered in beautiful paintings. There are some great Krishna images, including a detail of him sitting up a tree playing the flute after stealing the clothes of the *gopis* (milkmaids). The back room to the right is the Sheesh Mahal, badly damaged but still featuring some beautiful inlaid glass, while back in the main courtyard there's an image of 18th-century Bundi itself.

TARAGARH

Built in 1354, the ramshackle, vine-strewn **Taragarh** (Star Fort; admission free) is a rewarding place to ramble around. With its overgrown vegetation and resident monkeys (pick up a stick on the walk up to the fort, to ward them off), the fort is so far beguilingly uncommercialised.

The views from the top are magical, especially at sunset. Inside the ramparts are huge reservoirs carved out of solid rock and the

Bhim Burj, the largest of the great bastions, upon which is mounted a famous cannon; a trench alongside it provided shelter for the artillery.

Taragarh is reached by a steep road leading up the hillside to its enormous gateway. Take the path up behind the Chitrasala, then head east along the inside of the ramparts and left up the steep stone ramp just before the Dudha Mahal, a small disused building 200m from the palace. It's also possible to take an autorickshaw to the top.

There are splendid views of the palace and Taragarh from the south side of Nawal Sagar lake.

BAORIS & WATER TANKS

Bundi has around 60 beautiful *baoris* (step-wells; see the boxed text on p260), some right in the town centre. The most impressive, **Raniji-ki-Baori** (Queen's Step-Well), is 46m deep and decorated with sinuous carvings, including the avatars of Lord Vishnu. Built in 1699 by Rani Nathavatji, wife of Rao Raja Singh, it's one of the largest of its kind anywhere. The **Nagar Sagar Kund** is a pair of matching step-wells just outside the Chogan Gate to the old city.

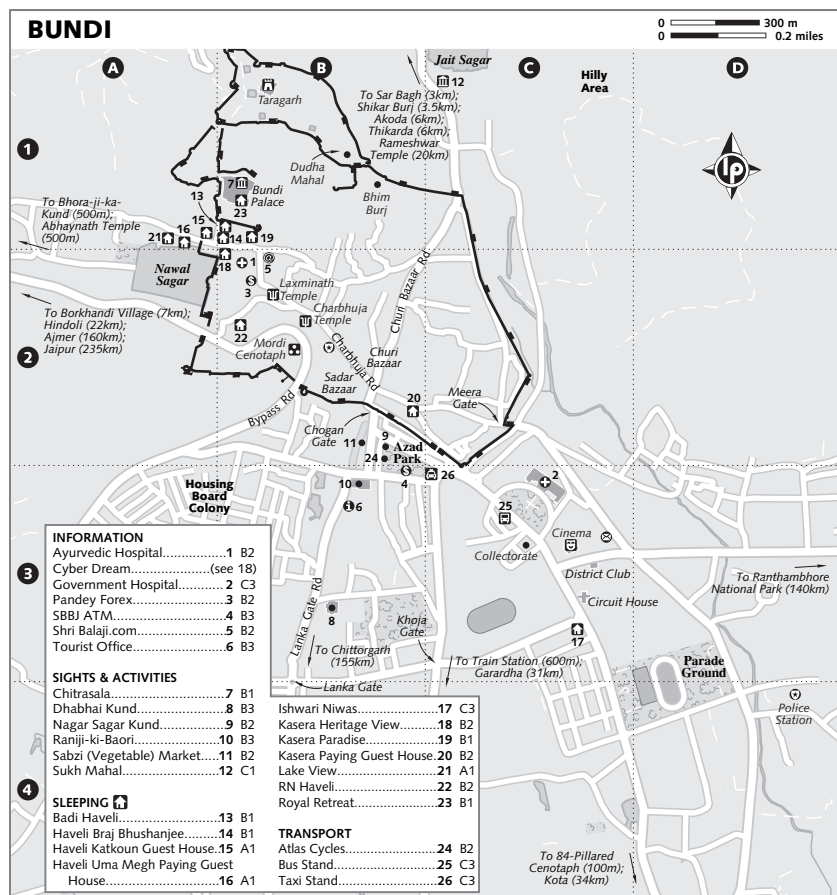
Visible from the fort is the square artificial lake of **Nawal Sagar**, which tends to dry up if the monsoon is poor. At its centre is a temple to Varuna, the Vedic god often associated with rain.

Opposite the **Abhaynath Temple**, one of Bundi's oldest Shiva temples, is the 16th-century tank **Bhora-ji-ka-Kund**, which attracts a variety of bird life after a good monsoon, including kingfishers and hummingbirds. The **Dhabhai Kund**, south of the Raniji-ki-Baori, is another imposing tank.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

It's great to amble around the bazaars of the old city. Just outside the walls, the **sabzi (vegetable) market**, between Raniji-ki-Baori and Nagar Sagar Kund, is particularly vibrant. There are more than 200 temples here, and you can pick up a self-guided map at Haveli Braj Bhushanjee (p228).

Bundi's other attractions are out of town and best visited by bike (bikes are available for rent at many guesthouses throughout town) or autorickshaw. **Jait Sagar**, to the north, is a picturesque lake flanked by hills and strewn with pretty lotus flowers during the monsoon and winter months. On the lake's southern



shore, the stately **Sukh Mahal** (☎ 10am-5pm) is a small summer palace surrounded by terraced gardens where Rudyard Kipling once stayed and wrote part of *Kim*. On the opposite side of the lake, the neglected **Sar Bagh** contains 66 rarely visited royal cenotaphs, some with terrific, intricate carvings – the most spectacular is that of Chhattar Sal Singh. If the gate is locked, knock on the caretaker's hut near the gateway, and tip him for the trouble of opening up. **Shikar Burj** is a small former royal hunting lodge (once there were tigers, deer and boars here). Next to a water tank, on the road that runs along the north side of the Jait Sagar, it is a good place for a picnic.

South of town is the **84-Pillared Cenotaph**, which is set in gardens. Particularly stunning

when lit up at night, it was built to honour the son of the maharaja's ayah (nurse) about 600 years ago.

There are some lovely bike excursions from Bundi. Cycle 6km north of Bundi to reach **Akoda**, a merchant's village, and **Thikarda**, which has various potteries. If you're in Bundi around Diwali time (October to November), head 10km northeast to the small village of Bharodia to witness the spectacular Ghans Bheru festival (p224), held on the day after Diwali itself. About 20km north are a Shiva cave temple and a waterfall at **Rameshwar**. Around 7km west of Bundi is rural **Borkhandi Village**. Twenty-two kilometres towards Jaipur is **Hindoli**, home to a huge lake and a ruined hilltop fort.

About 33km south of Bundi, at the village of **Garardha**, you can see some ancient rock paintings, believed to be about 15,000 years old, flanking the river. There's a curious depiction of a man riding a huge bird, as well as some hunting scenes. It's best to come here with a local guide; contact Haveli Braj Bhushanjee (p228) for more information. A half-day trip in a jeep costs around Rs 600 return.

Activities

The **Ayurvedic Hospital** (☎ 2443708; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), opposite the Haveli Braj Bhushanjee, prescribes natural plant-based remedies and offers various Ayurvedic treatments. Many remedies are for free, and you can usually drop in without an appointment.

Sleeping & Eating

Bundi's guesthouses are largely charming and family run, and make the best places to eat in town. Many will provide a free pick-up service from the train or bus station if you call and book in advance. Accommodation in town is mainly budget, with some midrange options and currently no top-end choices.

BUDGET

Lake View (☎ 2442326; lakeviewbundi@yahoo.com; r Rs 250, without bathroom Rs 150) This guesthouse, set in the modest, slightly scruffy 200-year-old Meghwahanji Haveli, is overseen by a kindly old man and his assorted younger relations. It occupies a lovely lakeside spot, with some of its seven rooms sporting lake views and stained-glass windows. Most travellers, though, plump for the cheaper rooms downstairs next to a small garden. Good home-cooked meals (dishes around Rs 30) are available.

RN Haveli (☎ 2443278; r Rs 250, without bathroom Rs 150-200; ☎) Behind Laxminath Temple, this is consistently voted one of the best budget options in town, and is an atmospheric, antique-adorned choice despite being a little bit run down. It's staffed by an energetic mother-daughter combination, who cook up fabulous vegetarian home-cooked cuisine (though beers aren't available) and can arrange upbeat jaunts across town.

Royal Retreat (☎ 2444426; royalretreatbundi@yahoo.com; s Rs 150-350, d Rs 300-500) In the palace compound, and once the palace's dyeing and printing works, Royal Retreat has four attractive rooms with air-coolers and tiled floors arranged around a hushed, open-air

courtyard. The restaurant serves good food and beer. However, it's lackadaisically staffed and can feel rather disconnected from the Bundi vibe, particularly if you happen to be the only guests.

Haveli Uma Megh Paying Guest House (☎ 2442191; r Rs 200-500) A good option with low prices, this peaceful guesthouse is run by friendly brothers, and has a range of rooms with wall paintings and alcoves and some with lake views. It has an excellent lakeside garden restaurant (dishes Rs 35 to 70) that's just right for candlelight dinners.

Kasera Paying Guest House (☎ 2446630; Charbhujia Rd; d Rs 300, without bathroom Rs 250) The same family from Kasera Heritage View watches over this small-scale guesthouse near Chogan Gate in the main bazaar. It offers small budget rooms, set in a delightful small *haveli*, and a good little rooftop restaurant (dishes Rs 30 to 35).

Ishwari Niwas (☎ 2442414; in_heritage@indiatimes.com; 1 Civil Lines; r Rs 250-800) Family-run Ishwari Niwas has royal associations. The graceful old colonial building has variable rooms with murals – some rooms have high ceilings – all arranged around a large, peaceful courtyard. The location, however, is not the best as it's away from the old city, past the bus stand. Sightseeing excursions can be arranged.

Kasera Heritage View (☎ 2444679; r Rs 300-1000) Popular and operated by a charming young couple, the Kasera has a rooftop restaurant that's perfectly placed for gazing at the palace, and 11 nice rooms in an old *haveli* (if you can, take the room with the palace-view balcony or another overlooking the mosque).

Haveli Katkoun Guest House (☎ 2444311; raghu.nandansingh@yahoo.com; r Rs 350-850) Run by retired Major Singh and his gentle family, this hassle-free place has six comfortable, spotless rooms off a calm, leafy garden. The rooms upstairs open onto a communal balcony with views. The popular garden restaurant provides tasty home-cooked food (and beer), making it one of the livelier eating options in town, and free pick-up from the bus and train stations is on offer.

MIDRANGE

Kasera Paradise (☎ 2444679; www.kasera-paradise.com; r Rs 500-1800; ☎) The amiable couple at Kasera Heritage View opened this second, smarter hotel in a 16th-century *haveli* that had lain empty for 80 years. The spacious rooms

have smartly tiled bathrooms and the décor features coloured glass, murals, pretty bedspreads and sparkling chandeliers. There's a fabulous rooftop with city and palace views.

Haveli Braj Bhushanjee (☎ 2442322; www.kiplingsbundi.com; r Rs 800-2650; 🚗) This rambling 250-year-old *haveli* has a warren of 24 appealing, characterful rooms, directed by the helpful Braj Bhushanjee family (descendants of Bundi's former prime ministers). It's an enchanting place with splendid rooftop views. There's an unrivalled range of accommodation: rooms have views and are old and atmospheric or modern, beautifully muralled and decorated with antique furniture and miniatures. The vegetarian meals and snacks, though relatively expensive (mains from around Rs 200), are delicious, and the place has recently tried to make itself eco-aware, with rainwater conservation and solar hot-water heating. Free pick-up from the bus stand and train station is available. Staff will arrange cycle and walking tours, and even camel safaris. Its attached Badi Haveli hotel round the back has slightly lower rates but offers the same basic experience.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Bus journeys to and from Bundi are bone-rattlers, although the road to Udaipur seems to be very slowly improving. Express buses run to Ajmer (Rs 80, four hours, hourly), Kota (Rs 22, one hour, half hourly), Chittorgarh (Rs 95, four hours, four daily), Udaipur (Rs 155, eight hours, two daily), Jodhpur (Rs 160, 10 hours, three daily), Bikaner (Rs 190, 10 hours, three daily), Jaipur (Rs 90, five hours, hourly) and Pushkar (Rs 90, five hours, three daily). A private sleeper bus also runs to Udaipur from Bundi; enquire at the bus stand at the southern end of town.

There are also buses to Bijolia (Rs 24, 1½ hours, 10 daily), Keshraipatan (Rs 16, 1½ hours, 10 daily), Menal (Rs 24, two hours, four daily), and Shivpuri (Rs 125, eight hours, two daily).

TRAIN

The train station is about 2km south of the old city. At the time of research, no useful services were running, making it more practical to travel by bus.

Getting Around

Taxis can be hired at the stand near Ranijiki-Baori. A rickshaw to the train station costs

Rs 40; a half-day city/outside city tour should cost around Rs 90/150; and a trip out to Akoda and Rameshwar costs around Rs 250 return. For local sightseeing, expect to pay around Rs 50 per hour for an autorickshaw.

Bicycles are an ideal way to get around this area. They are available at many guesthouses and at **Atlas Cycles** (Azad Park; per hr/day Rs 5/25). You can also hire motorbikes locally – ask around at the guesthouses.

KOTA

☎ 0744 / pop 695,899

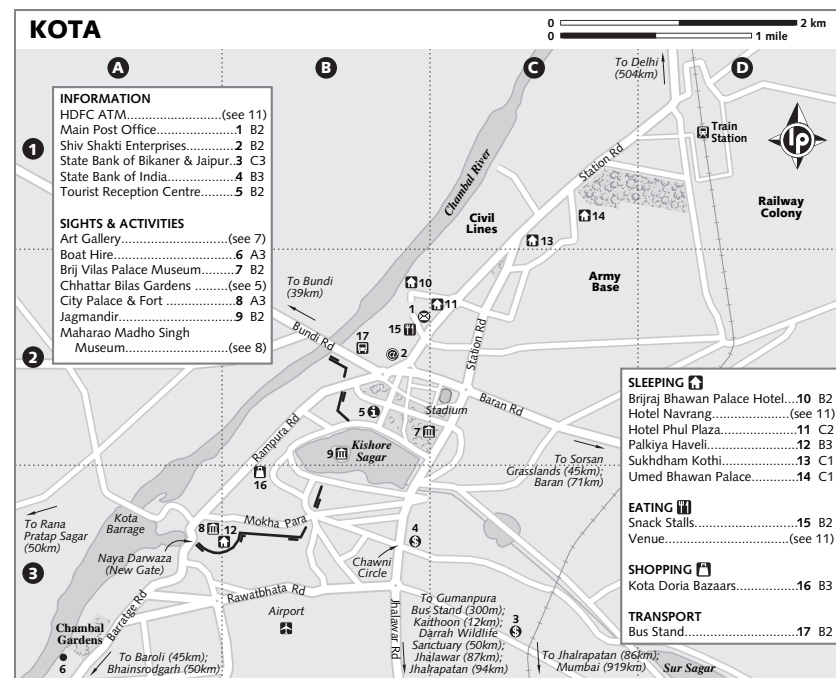
Busy, clamorous Kota lacks the charm of many Rajasthan towns, and so has remained untouristy: foreign tourists still attract curious stares – both from locals and from each other – on the street. However, it has a spectacular palace with an excellent museum and lovely murals, and the Chambal River runs through the town, offering opportunities for scenic boat trips.

Kota serves as an army headquarters and has the dubious distinction of being Rajasthan's industrial centre (mainly producing chemicals) and home to one of Asia's largest fertiliser plants. The nearby nuclear plant made headlines in 1992 when it was revealed that levels of radioactivity were way above safe levels. Growing industrialisation, moreover, has led to increased pollution, with black smoke belching from two huge chimneys on the opposite side of the river. Fortunately, leafy parks and an artificial lake provide much-needed breaths of fresh air.

Kota is well known for its beautiful saris, which are woven in the nearby village of Kaithoon. Known as *kota doria* saris, they are made of cotton or silk in an assortment of colours, many with delicate golden-thread designs. In case you're in the mood to shop for one, head to any of the town's bazaars, where you'll find a wide selection for sale. The miniature paintings of Kota are also famous – check them out in the marvellous City Palace. If you happen to hit Kota in October or November, check whether you're in town during the Dussehra festival, during which massive effigies are built then spectacularly set aflame (p224).

History

Building of the city began in 1264 following the Hadoti Chauhan defeat and beheading of Koteya, a Bhil chieftain who gave the city his name. The foundation stone of the fort was



laid, rather gruesomely, on the very spot he lost his head.

Kota didn't reach its present size until well into the 17th century, when Rao Madho Singh, a son of the ruler of Bundi, was made ruler of Kota by the Mughal emperor Jehangir. Kota remained a separate state until it was integrated into Rajasthan after Independence. Subsequent rulers have all added to the fort and palaces, each contributing to making Kota a flourishing centre of art and culture.

Orientation

Kota is strung out along the east bank of the Chambal River. The train station lies to the north; the RTDC Hotel Chambal, a number of other hotels and the bus stand are in the middle; and Chambal Gardens, the fort and the Kota Barrage are to the south.

Information

There are numerous ATMs, including HDFC ATMs next to Hotel Phul Plaza, and on platform 1 of the railway station.

Main post office (☎) 10.30am-1.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) Centrally located.

Shiv Shakti Enterprises (per hr Rs 50; ☎) 10am-10pm) Offers internet access.

State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur (Industrial Estate) Changes travellers cheques and currency.

State Bank of India (Chawni Circle) Changes travellers cheques (Amex only) and currency.

Tourist reception centre (☎ 2327695; ☎) 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat of month) In the grounds of the RTDC Hotel Chambal.

Sights & Activities

CITY PALACE & FORT

Beside the Kota Barrage, overlooking the river, the **City Palace and Fort** (☎) 9am-5pm) make up one of the largest such complexes in Rajasthan. The palace itself was the former residence and centre of power; the treasury, courts, arsenal, soldiers and various state offices were all located here. Some of its buildings are now used as schools. Entry is from the south side through the **Naya Darwaza** (New Gate).

There are several palaces within the fort, including Madho Singh Mahal, Raj Mahal, Bada Mahal, Chhatra Mahal and the ruined Jhala Haveli. Inside, too, is the excellent **Maharao Madho Singh Museum** (☎ 2385040; Indian/

foreigner Rs 10/100, camera/video Rs 50/100; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu). It's on the right-hand side of the complex's huge central courtyard and is entered through a gateway topped by rampant elephants. You'll find all the stuff necessary for a respectable Raj existence – silver furniture, an old-fashioned ice-cream maker and ingenious, beautiful weapons. The oldest part of the palace dates from 1624. Downstairs is an elegant durbar (royal court) hall with beautiful mirrorwork, while upstairs some of Rajasthan's best-preserved miniatures decorate the elegant, small-scale apartments. The upstairs rooms dance with exquisite paintings, particularly the hunting scenes for which Kota is renowned.

The curator may offer to take you around, but try to look around on your own so that you can wander at leisure.

After visiting the museum it's worth exploring the rest of the complex to appreciate how magnificent it must have been in its heyday. The fort ramparts are some of the highest in Rajasthan, with three-level fortifications, six double gates and 25 towers. Unfortunately, a lot of it is falling into disrepair, and the gardens are no more, but there are some excellent views over the old city and the Chambal and less-inspiring views of the monstrous industrial complex across the river, pollution from which is believed to be contributing to the deterioration of the fort, including the fading away of exterior murals.

JAGMANDIR

Between the City Palace and the tourist reception centre is the picturesque artificial lake **Kishore Sagar**, constructed in 1346. In the middle of the lake, on a small island amid palm trees, is the enchanting little tangerine palace of Jagmandir. Built in 1740 by one of the maharanis of Kota, it's a sight that seems to mock the frantic streets on either side of the lake. The palace, sadly, is closed to the public.

BRIJ VILAS PALACE MUSEUM

Near Kishore Sagar, this small **government museum** (admission Rs 3; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Thu) is also housed in a palace. It has a collection of miniature paintings, and some interesting 9th- to 12th-century stone idols and other sculptural fragments (mainly from Baroli and Jhalawar), such as Vishnu reclining on a serpent with Lakshmi (Vishnu's consort) at his feet.

Next door is a small, modern **art gallery** (admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) exhibiting works by local artists.

BOAT TRIPS

A lovely hiatus from the city is a Chambal River **boat trip**. Once you escape the industry near the town, it's beautiful, with lush vegetation and craggy cliffs on either side, and lots of opportunities to spot birds and crocodiles – so be sure you don't fall in. It costs Rs 25 for a 1½ hour trip and Rs 50 for a 3½-hour trip. Boats start from Chambal Gardens.

GARDENS

There are several well-maintained, peaceful gardens in Kota that provide a splash of greenery amid the industry. The **Chambal Gardens** are on the riverbank south of the fort, with a murky pond stocked with gavials (thin-snouted, fish-eating crocodiles) as a centrepiece, which you can walk over on a wobbly suspension bridge. Once common all along the river, by the mid-20th century these crocodiles had been virtually exterminated through hunting.

Next to the tourist reception centre are the **Chhattar Bilas Gardens**, a collection of overgrown but impressive royal cenotaphs interspersed with carved elephants.

Sleeping & Eating

Budget accommodation in Kota is lacklustre, but the city's reasonably well served for top-end hotels (where it's always worth asking for a discount). Understandably, however, most travellers prefer to base themselves in the more atmospheric town of Bundi. Mosquitoes can be a problem at some hotels in Kota, so come armed with repellent.

A few hotels have good restaurants, or you can graze on offerings from the early-evening snack stalls on the footpath outside the main post office.

BUDGET

Hotel Phul Plaza (☎ 2329351; s/d from Rs 375/475, with AC Rs 600/800; 📶) Next door to Hotel Navrang, this option is a clean, no-nonsense business hotel with ordinary rooms and overpriced suites. Rooms at the front are a bit noisy. There's a good vegetarian restaurant, serving a wide range of dishes.

Hotel Navrang (☎ 2323294; s/d from Rs 500/600, with AC Rs 800/1000; 📶) Better than the exterior

suggests, the Navrang's rooms are worn but comfortable and arranged around a modern internal courtyard. Some have more character than others, so try to look at a few first. There's also a good veg restaurant, Venue (dishes Rs 35 to 60), open from 11am to 11pm.

Sukhdham Kothi (☎ 2320081; s Rs 600-920, d Rs 680-1200) Sukhdham Kothi is atmospheric, comfortable and over 100 years old and was once the home of the British Resident's surgeon. It's set in pretty gardens and is a friendly, family-run place. The inviting rooms have antique furniture, and some open onto terraces.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Palkiya Haveli (☎ 2387497; Mokha Para; s/d Rs 900/1100; 📶) This is an exquisite *haveli* that has been in the same family for 200 years. It's a plant-filled oasis with impressive murals and six appealing rooms. The family is charming and helpful, and the food is excellent. The *haveli* is very close to the City Palace.

Brijraj Bhawan Palace Hotel (☎ 2450529; s/d from Rs 1700/2350) On an elevated site high above the Chambal River, this charismatic hotel is named after the current maharaja of Kota, Brijraj Singh, who lives with his family in part of the palace. Built in 1830 by the British East India Company, this was once the British Residency, and has attractive rooms opening onto riverside terraces. Some rooms, such as 4, are huge, with dizzyingly high ceilings. Queen Mary chose this for a snooze in 1911. There are well-maintained gardens, a croquet lawn and an intimate dining room (for guests only), which, unlike most palaces, is homy rather than grand.

Umed Bhawan Palace (☎ 2325262; s/d deluxe from Rs 2400/2900) Surrounded by sprawling gardens off Station Rd, this gracious palace is stuffily Edwardian and lacks the sparkle and intimacy of Sukhdham Kothi or the

Brijraj Bhawan Palace. Still, it's fancy and comfortable, and sports a restaurant, bar and billiard room.

Shopping

The Kota Doria Bazaars around Rampura Rd sell a wide range of *kota doria* (gold-woven saris), or you can hunt them down at their source in nearby Kaithoon (12km south of Kota, Rs 4 by bus, Rs 100 return in a rickshaw), where you'll find the widest selection and best quality. **Hamid Bihari** (Kota Saree Wala, Kaithoon; ☎ 10am-7pm), in Kaithoon near the police station, opposite Tailey Mandir which, sells exquisite pieces, which you can see being woven upstairs. Prices range from Rs 600 to 2600.

Getting There & Away

BUS

There are plenty of express bus connections (see the table, above).

There are also buses for Delhi (Rs 280, 11 hours) and Mt Abu (Rs 290, 12 hours). Buses leave for Jhalawar (Rs 45, two hours) every half-hour.

TRAIN

Kota is on the main Mumbai–Delhi line so there are plenty of trains to choose from. There's a daily train to Agra which leaves at 7.45am, arriving in Agra at 1.35pm (Rs 115), and four daily trains to Delhi (Rs 630/883/1547 in 3AC/2AC/1AC, 6¼ to 10 hours). To Mumbai, there are two daily Rajdani services, which depart Kota at 9.05pm and 9.55pm (Rs 981/1390/2443 in 3AC/2AC/1AC, 12¼ hours). Seven daily trains run to Jaipur (Rs 408/562/965 in 3AC/2AC/1AC, four to five hours) and the daily *Mewar Express*, 2963, departs at 1.10am for Udaipur (Rs 473/656/1145 in 3AC/2AC/1AC, six hours).

BUSSES FROM KOTA

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Ajmer	105	6	half-hourly
Bikaner	290	12	3 daily
Bundi	22	¾	half-hourly
Chittorgarh	95	6	5 daily
Jaipur	130	6	half-hourly
Jodhpur	195	11	3 daily
Udaipur	170	6	6 daily

THE MINI-MASTERPIECES OF KOTA & BUNDI

Some of Rajasthan's finest miniature work was produced around Bundi and Kota, the ruling Hada Rajputs being keen artistic patrons, and their influence and finances have left an exquisite legacy. The style combined the dominant features of folk painting – intense colour and bold forms – with the Mughals' concern with naturalism. See p61 for more on the development of miniature painting.

All the regions of Rajasthan produce paintings of individual character, but here they are even more distinctive. The schools were initially similar, but developed markedly different styles, though both usually have a background of thick foliage, cloudy skies and scenes lit by the setting sun. When architecture appears it is depicted in loving detail. The willowy women sport round faces, large petal-shaped eyes and small noses – forerunners of Bollywood pin-ups. Themes are often passionate, as well as being courtly or religious.

The paintings of the Bundi school are notable for their blue hues, with a palette of turquoise and azure unlike anything seen elsewhere. Bundi Palace in particular hosts some wonderful examples.

In Kota you'll notice the painters' penchant for hunting scenes, and for depicting the local foliage and fauna. Their dense woodland-packed paintings are unique, providing a vivid and detailed portrayal of hunting expeditions in Kota's once thickly wooded surrounds. Kota City Palace has some of the best-preserved wall paintings in the state.

Getting Around

Minibuses link the train station and bus stand (Rs 4). An autorickshaw should cost Rs 30 for this journey; there's a prepay place at the station. Cycle-rickshaws are, as always, a cheaper option (around Rs 20).

AROUND KOTA Wildlife Sanctuaries

The thickly forested, wildly beautiful 250-sq-km **Darrah Wildlife Sanctuary** (Indian/foreigner Rs 20/100; ☎ 10am-5pm) is about 50km from Kota. Once a royal hunting ground, there are spotted deer, wild boars, bears, sambars, leopards and antelopes. The sanctuary is sometimes closed during the monsoon (usually from early July to mid-September). You need to get permission to visit from the local forest ranger, or contact the **District Forest Office** (☎ 0744-2321263) in Kota. If all else fails, ask at the Kota **tourist reception centre** (☎ 0744-2327695), where they should be able to provide you with information and costs for a trained accompanying guide.

About 45km east of Kota, flanking the main canal of the Chambal and Parvan Rivers, are the **Sorsan grasslands**. Covering 35 sq km, these grasslands are rich with insects during the monsoon and attract a good variety of resident and migratory birds, including the great Indian bustard – a reluctant flier more commonly seen stalking through the grasslands on its sturdy legs. Other, often fantastically named, birds of Sorsan include

mynahs, orioles, quails, partridges, bulbuls, chats, drongos, shrikes, robins and weavers. Flocks of migrants, such as warblers, flycatchers, larks, starlings and rosy pastors, winter at Sorsan between October and March. The nearby canal and lakes attract waterfowl, such as bar-headed and greylag geese, common pochards, common teals and pintails.

You can hire a jeep with a driver to reach these parks from Kota for around Rs 5 per km. Ask at the tourist reception centre for details.

Baroli

One of Rajasthan's oldest temple complexes is at Baroli, 45km southwest of Kota on the way to Rana Pratap Sagar, the second dam on the Chambal River. Set in a peaceful rural area, many of these 9th-century temples were vandalised by Muslim armies, but much remains. The main edifice is the **Ghateshvara Temple**, which features impressive columns and a finely carved *sikhara* (temple spire). It's one of the best-preserved temples here, with figures including a dancing Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. Inside it are five Shiva lingams – one of which looks like an upturned pot (*ghata*), hence the temple name. **Trimurti**, a ruined temple to the southeast, contains a three-headed Shiva.

Many of the sculptures from the temples are displayed in the Brij Vilas Palace Museum in Kota.

There are buses from Kota (Rs 25, 1½ hours, hourly) – tell the driver you want to be dropped off at Baroli. The buses leave from the Gumanpura bus stand, near the petrol pump.

Bhainsrodgarh

Near Baroli is picturesque Bhainsrodgarh, a 14th-century fort that was never besieged by enemies. Perched on a ridge overlooking the Chambal River, it's still occupied by descendants of a feudal family. Although you can't go inside, the views from outside at the top are superb. You need permission to visit – enquire at Kota's **tourist reception centre** (☎ 0744-2327695). You can reach Bhainsrodgarh by autorickshaw from Baroli (about Rs 150 return).

JHALAWAR

☎ 07432 / pop 48,049

Jhalawar is a quiet, sprawling town that sees few visitors but has some charming sights in the surrounding area, part of their appeal being that they are so seldom visited. Seven kilometres to the south is Jhalrapatan, the ancient walled City of Temple Bells, which has some beautiful temples, and 10km northeast is Gagron, a forgotten fort towering over the confluence of two rivers.

Jhalawar was once the capital of a small princely state created in 1838 by Zalim Singh, the charismatic regent of Kota. Singh signed a treaty with the British on behalf of the young Kota prince, and in return received Jhalawar to rule in his own right.

Situated 87km south of Kota, it stands at the centre of an opium-producing region, evidence of which you'll see during winter, when fields are carpeted with picturesque pink and white poppies.

Information

Though no banks in Jhalawar will currently change money, there's an SBBJ ATM in the Jhalawar Fort building.

Tourist office (☎ 230081; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) At the RTDC Hotel Chandrawati.

Sights & Activities

In the town centre is **Jhalawar Fort** (admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), built by Maharaja Madan Singh in 1838. A run-down and sprawling cream-and-terracotta building, today it houses government offices and dusty rooms filled with piles of ledgers. Try, nevertheless,

to get a look in at the Zenana Khas room, which still has fine murals and mirrors, and at the Aina Mahal room, where indications of past glory compete with whirring institutional fans. Nearby there's also the small **government museum** (admission Rs 3; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), which has a curious collection comprising 8th-century sculptures, gold coins, weapons, old paintings, a handwritten copy of the Quran and a leopard-skin coat. The 1920s **Bhawan Natyashala**, inside the fort, was used for Parsi theatre, with a unique design including special underground constructions that allowed horses and carriages onto the stage.

Also interesting to visit is the **Government College Library** (☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm), round the corner from the Hotel Dwarika. Topped by a *chhatra* (cenotaph, literally 'umbrella'), the great old building houses 70,000 books; edifying mottoes, including 'Books are the lighthouses erected in the great sea of time', adorn the walls.

Sleeping & Eating

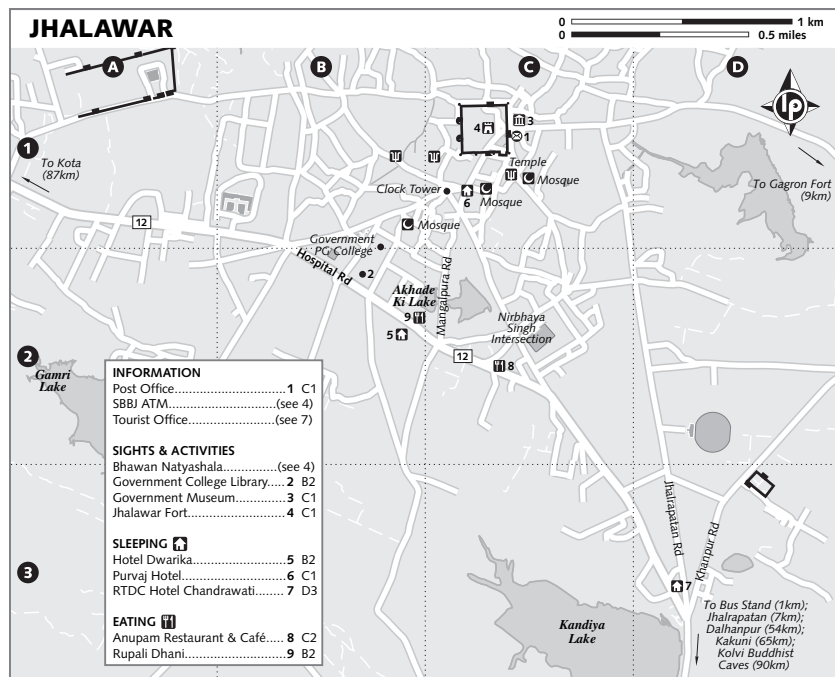
Attracting only a smattering of tourists, Jhalawar has limited and uninspiring accommodation.

Purvaj Hotel (☎ 231355; r Rs 150-450) Near the clock tower is this simple, extremely run-down, 200-year-old *haveli*. Rooms are basic but cheap, and the building has more character than the other hotels in Jhalawar, with good views from the roof. Solo female travellers might prefer to stay elsewhere since the area can feel a bit deserted at night and in the early morning.

RTDC Hotel Chandrawati (☎ 512080; Jhalrapatan Rd; s/d Rs 300/350, with AC Rs 600/700) Also housing the tourist office, this is a pleasant compound with bare rooms around a leafy courtyard. 'Deluxe' rooms are overpriced, but there's a passable restaurant (dishes Rs 15 to 40).

Hotel Dwarika (☎ 232626; Hospital Rd; s/d Rs 300/350, deluxe Rs 400/450, with AC Rs 750/850) The best of the bunch, this hotel has rooms that are all almost exactly the same, except that the deluxe and air-con rooms have the luxury of hot water.

Rupali Dhani (Hospital Rd; dishes Rs 15-40; ☎ 9am-11pm) Set opposite Hotel Dwarika, this is a friendly garden restaurant dishing up tasty Chinese, South Indian and veg dishes. The sign outside is in Hindi, but 'garden restaurant' is written in English.



Anupam Restaurant & Café (Patan Rd; dishes Rs 35-65; ☎ 9am-11pm) Another decent choice, this offers tasty veg and nonveg food in a small indoor restaurant.

Getting There & Away

There are regular buses between Jhalawar and Kota (Rs 43, two hours). The bus stand is 1km south of town.

Getting Around

If you plan to visit the historic sites outside of town, it's best to hire a jeep or taxi. Many of the roads are in a state of bumpy disrepair. Expect to pay Rs 5 per kilometre. The tourist office should be able to arrange jeep or taxi hire for you; otherwise, ask at your hotel. To travel anywhere in town by autorickshaw should cost Rs 20.

AROUND JHALAWAR

Jhalrapatan

Seven kilometres south of Jhalawar on the Kota road is Jhalrapatan (City of Temple Bells), on the banks of the holy Chandrabhaga River. This walled town once had more than

100 temples, although far fewer remain. The best known is the huge 10th-century **Surya Temple** (☎ 7am-noon & 5-10pm) at the centre, a spacious, high-ceilinged building that contains magnificent sculptures and one of the best-preserved idols of Surya (the sun god) in India. It has a glorious, high stupa with very intricate, almost organic carving. There's also the 12th-century **Shantinath Jain Temple** – colourful, brightly painted and restored with intricately carved statues, an inlaid black-and-white marble floor, and two huge stone elephants – and **Sheetaleshwara Temple**, a fine example of Gupta architecture. If you are visiting during November or December, you should look out for the huge Chandrabhaga Fair (p224), a lively cattle fair that consumes the town.

About 3km outside Jhalrapatan, the enchanting, peaceful 7th-century **Chandrabhaga Temple** is set in beautiful, lush, well-kept gardens on the banks of the Chandrabhaga River. Ghats (steps) along the riverbank neighbour some hidden-away erotic carvings.

There are regular daily buses from Jhalawar to Jhalrapatan (Rs 7, 15 minutes). An auto-

rickshaw from Jhalawar will cost around Rs 100 return.

Gagron Fort

Don't miss a trip to the spectacular **Gagron Fort** (admission free; ☎ sunrise-sunset), 10km from Jhalawar, while you're in the area. It's set high above the confluence of the Kalisindh and Ahu Rivers and has big, big views, as the rivers surround the building on three sides, while on the fourth is a deep moat. Though not as famous as the forts at Chittorgarh, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer, the huge fort occupies a prominent place in the annals of Rajput chivalry and has been fought over for centuries. It was established in the 8th century, changed hands many times, and was the site of a huge *jauhar* in 1443. Later, it was conquered by the Mughal emperor Akbar.

For the best view of the fort itself, head to Changari, the little village on the outcrop opposite.

Near the fort walls there's the small village of **Gagron** and the **shrine of the Sufi saint Mittheshah**, constructed in 1423. The gate to the shrine was built by Akbar in 1580 and many pilgrims still come here during Ramadan.

An autorickshaw here should cost around Rs 150 return, but beware – the road is in a sorry state.

Other Attractions

The Jhalawar environs' other attractions are further out of town and difficult to reach without your own transport (a jeep is best as the roads are rough). About 54km (1½ hours) southeast of Jhalawar, at **Dalhanpur**, temple ruins near the Chhapi River include some carved pillars with erotic figures. Take care not to damage the fragments of pillars and statues that have fallen over. About 30km from Dalhanpur, at **Kakuni**, are the ruins of an old township on the Parvan River. Ruined 9th- to 12th-century temples are scattered around the area, one of which includes a huge idol of Ganesh. Beyond Kakuni is the large **Fort of Manohar Thana**, once of great strategic importance. There are several small temples within its walls, and a reforestation programme has filled the compound with vegetation and bird life.

There are ancient **Buddhist caves** and **stupas** atop a desolate hill near the town of **Kolvi**, about 90km south of Jhalawar. It's only a short climb to the top, where you'll find sev-

eral enormous figures of Buddha. A narrow path winds past large stupas and numerous bat-filled meditation chambers. These 35 remarkable caves are believed to date back to the 5th century, and some contain weathered sculptures of Buddha, now sadly neglected and deteriorating.

BUNDI TO CHITTORGARH (CHITTOR)

If you're travelling by taxi from Bundi to Chittorgarh, there are various attractions worth stopping off at along the way.

Bijolia, a large town 16km northeast of Menal, was once a famous pilgrimage centre with 100 temples. Most of these were destroyed by Mughal invaders, and today only three are left standing. One of them, **Hajaresvara Mahadeva**, is devoted to Shiva, with delicate carving and a high lingam (phallic symbol) surrounded by lots of small lingams.

Menal, 48km from Bundi, is a complex of crumbling Shiva temples built in the Gupta period, with some striking statuary and a domed pavilion that affords superb views. Menal was once the retreat of Prithviraj Chauhan of Delhi, and there are a few ruined palaces. To the northwest of Menal, **Mandalgarh** is the third fort of Mewar to be built by Rana Kumbha (the others are the great fort of Chittorgarh and the fort at Kumbalgarh). The vast, sprawling ruins afford good views.

Bassi

The town of Bassi, about 30km northeast of Chittorgarh and well off the tourist trail, is famous for its woodcarvers, who create brilliantly coloured religious pieces (see Kavads, p236). There's also the **Bassi Wildlife Sanctuary** to explore, with its leopards, antelopes, wild boars and many birds; hotels here can arrange jeep safaris to the sanctuary with a day or so's notice.

Twenty kilometres southwest of Bassi, on the Chittorgarh road, is **Nagri**, one of Rajasthan's oldest towns. Hindu and Buddhist remains from the Mauryan to the Gupta periods have been found here, along with many old copper coins and sculptures, now gracing museum collections in Chittorgarh and Udaipur.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are a couple of top-end accommodation choices around Bassi, which are far better bets than the dingy Chittorgarh options.

KAVADS

The artisans of Bassi are famous for their brightly painted woodcarvings, and in particular the amazing folding boxes known as kavads. Carved from mango wood, these portable temples – usually painted in traffic-stopping reds or yellows – are made of a number of hinged doors that open outwards, each one covered in colourful pictures that illustrate the great Indian epics. They were the tools of professional bards, known as Kavadia Bhattas, who traditionally travelled from village to village chanting the tales of the Mahabharata (a Vedic epic poem of the Bharata dynasty), a skill that was handed down through the generations. As the stories unfolded, so did the boxes. At the climax of the tale, the last door opened to reveal the supreme deities – usually Rama, Lakshmana and Sita or Krishna. Somewhere near the bottom of the kavad there was always a slot where the audience could show their appreciation by depositing coins. Today, you can buy these magical boxes at the source in Bassi, or in shops in Udaipur.

Castle Bijaipur (www.castlebijaipur.com; s/d Rs 1550/1850; ☎ ☎) The adorable Castle Bijaipur is a fantastically set 16th-century palace, apparently plucked from the whimsy of Udaipur and dropped into the rural village of Bijaipur, 18km south of Bassi. It's a great place to settle down with a good book, compose a fairy-tale fantasy or just laze around. Rooms are romantic and luxurious, there're a pleasant garden courtyard, and an airy restaurant serving Rajasthani food. Reservations should be made through Chittorgarh's Hotel Pratap Palace. The friendly owners can arrange horse or jeep safaris to places of interest around Bijaipur, such as the nearby Bhil tribal village, or a visit to their cool jungle property, Thanderiberi.

Bassi Fort Palace (☎ 01472-225321; www.bassifortpalace.com; s/d Rs 1700/1900, ste Rs 2000/2100, deluxe tents Rs 1300) This glorious meringue of a place is in the town's 450-year-old fort (which was never defeated) and set amid verdant hills. In case you need a spot of luck, ask for directions for the tree known as *kalp vraksha*, which is set in the grounds and is said to grant wishes. It's a peaceful spot with 16 lovely rooms arranged around a garden, or you can opt for the swish tented camp beside a lake in the wildlife sanctuary.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Frequent buses travel daily from Chittorgarh to Bassi (Rs 15, 30 minutes), passing through Nagri on the way. A jeep taxi to Bassi costs around Rs 350. There are also buses from Chittorgarh to Bijaipur (Rs 20, 1½ hours), or you can get a return taxi for around Rs 350.

CHITTORGARH (CHITTOR)

☎ 01472 / pop 96,028

Chittorgarh holds a special place in the hearts of many Rajputs. Its fort is the greatest in

Rajasthan and has a history that epitomises Rajput romanticism, chivalry and tragedy. Three times Chittor was under attack from a more powerful enemy; each time, soldiers realised the odds were impossible and chose death before dishonour, performing *jauhar*. The men donned the saffron martyrs' robes and rode out from the fort to certain death, while the women and children immolated themselves on a huge funeral pyre.

The only real reason to come to Chittor is to see the fort – the town itself is quite grotty and not of much interest. An increasing number of industries are based in and around Chittorgarh, scarring the landscape around the fort and making the fort best visited on a day trip, or as a stop between Bundi and Udaipur.

History

Chittor is first mentioned in the Mahabharata, which tells that Bhim, one of the Pandava heroes, struck the ground here so hard that water gushed out to form a large reservoir. Its fort, founded by Bappa Rawal of Sisodia, dates back to the 8th century. The fort's first defeat came in 1303, when Ala-ud-din Khilji, the Pathan king of Delhi, besieged it, apparently in order to capture the beautiful Padmini, an adventure culminating in disaster and *jauhar* (see Death Before Dishonour, p240).

In 1535 Bahadur Shah, the sultan of Gujarat, besieged the fort again with the age-old aim of laying claim to some new territory. Once again, the medieval dictates of chivalry determined the outcome; this time it's thought that some 13,000 Rajput women and 32,000 Rajput warriors died following the declaration of *jauhar*.

The final sacking of Chittor came just 33 years later, in 1568, when the Mughal emperor Akbar took the town. Once again, the odds were overwhelming. The women performed *jauhar*, and 8000 orange-robed warriors rode out to die. On this occasion, Maharaja Udai Singh II fled to Udaipur, where he re-established his capital. In 1616 Jehangir returned Chittor to the Rajputs; no attempts were made to resettle, though the fort was restored in 1905.

Orientation

The fort is roughly fish-shaped, and stands on a 28-sq-km site on top of a 180m-high hill that rises abruptly from the surrounding plain. Until 1568 the town of Chittor was

contained within the fort walls, but today's modern town, known as Lower Town, clatters and sprawls to the west of the hill. A river separates it from the bus stand and the railway line.

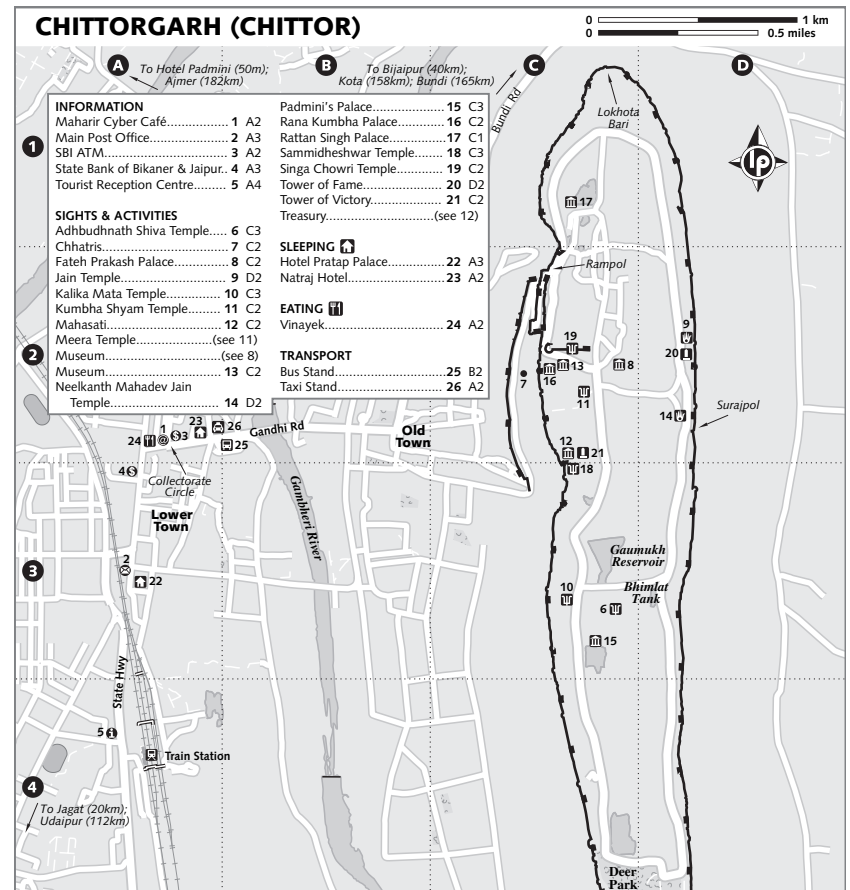
Information

You can change money at the State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur, a short distance north of the post office. There is also an SBI ATM in town.

Maharir Cyber Café (Collectorate Circle; per hr Rs 25; ☎ 9am-10pm) Internet access.

Main post office (☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) Less than 1km south of the bus stand.

Tourist reception centre (☎ 241089; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) Near the train station.



Sights

FORT

All Chittor's attractions are within the **fort** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☞ sunrise-sunset). A zigzag ascent of more than 1km leads through seven gateways to the main gate on the western side, the **Rampol** (*pol* means 'gate'; the former back entrance).

On the climb you pass two **chhatris**, memorials between the second and third gates. These mark the spots where Jaimal and Kalla, heroes of the 1568 siege, fell during the struggle against Akbar. Jaimal had already been fatally wounded but was carried out by Kalla to fight on to the death. The main gate on the eastern side of the fort is known as the **Surajpol**, and offers fantastic views across the empty plains. There are also good views over the town and countryside (and, unfortunately, a huge cement factory) from the western side of the fort.

Today, the fort of Chittor is virtually a deserted ruin, but impressive reminders of its grandeur still stand. Within it, a circular road runs around the deserted ruins of palaces and around 130 temples, and there's a deer park at the southern end. The main sites can all be seen in half a day (assuming you're not walking – see opposite) and guides are available for either walking or autorickshaw tours, usually at Rana Kumbha Palace, charging around Rs 200 for a few hours. Make sure you get a government guide (they carry a guide licence).

Rana Kumbha Palace

After entering the fort, turn right and you'll arrive almost immediately at the ruins of this 15th-century **palace**, which includes elephant and horse stables and a Shiva temple. Padmini's *sati* is said to have taken place in a now-blocked cellar. Across from the palace is the museum and archaeological office, and the treasury building (Nau Lakha Bhandar). The **Singa Chowri Temple**, built in 1448 and adorned with attractive intricate carving, is nearby.

Fateh Prakash Palace

Located just beyond Rana Kumbha Palace, this **palace** is more modern (Maharaja Fateh Singh died in 1930). Closed to the public, except for a small, poorly labelled **museum** (admission Rs 3, free admission Mon; ☞ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu), it houses a school for local children

(around 4000 villagers still live within the fort's walls).

Tower of Victory

The glorious **Tower of Victory** (Jaya Stambha), symbol of Chittor, was erected by Rana Kumbha between 1458 and 1468 to commemorate his victory over Mahmud Khilji of Malwa in 1440. It rises 37m in nine exquisitely carved storeys, and you can climb the 157 narrow stairs (the interior is also carved) to the 8th floor, from which there's a good view of the area. Hindu sculptures adorn the outside; its dome was damaged by lightning and repaired during the 19th century.

Close to the tower is the **Mahasati** area where there are many *sati* (suicide by immolation) stones here – 13,000 women committed *jauhar* close by in 1535. The intensely carved **Sammidheshwar Temple**, built in the 6th century and restored in 1427, is nearby.

Gaumukh Reservoir

Walk down beyond the temple and at the edge of the cliff is a deep **tank** where you can feed the fish. The reservoir takes its name from a spring that feeds the tank from a *gaumukh* (cow's mouth) carved into the cliffside.

Padmini's Palace

Continuing south, you reach **Padmini's Palace**, beside a large lotus pool with a central pavilion. Legend relates that, as Padmini sat in this pavilion, Ala-ud-din saw her reflection in the lake. This glimpse convinced him to destroy Chittor in order to possess her. The bronze gates to this pavilion were carried off by Akbar and can now be seen in Agra Fort. Near Padmini's Palace is a small prison where captured invaders were kept; former prisoners include sultans of Malwa and of Gujarat.

Not far away are the former military training grounds for Rajput soldiers, though today the grounds are used as a helipad for visiting dignitaries. Continuing around the ring road, you pass the deer park, Bhimlat Tank, Adhbudhnath Shiva Temple, the Surajpol and the Neelkanth Mahadev Jain Temple before reaching the Tower of Fame.

Tower of Fame

The 22m-high **Tower of Fame** (Kirti Stambha) is older (probably dating from the 12th century) and smaller than the Tower of Victory. Built by a Jain merchant, the tower is dedicated to

Adinath, the first Jain *tirthankar* (one of the 24 revered Jain teachers) and is decorated with naked figures of various other *tirthankars*. A narrow stairway leads through the seven storeys to the top; though the staircase is usually locked, the gatekeeper may open the door for some baksheesh.

Rattan Singh Palace

While Padmini's Palace was the summer abode of the Chittor royals, the **winter palace** takes the name of her husband, Rattan Singh. It overlooks a small lake and, although run down, is an interesting place to explore.

Other Buildings

Close to the Fateh Prakash Palace is the **Meera Temple**, built during the reign of Rana Kumbha in the ornate Indo-Aryan style and associated with mystic-poetess Meerabai. She consumed poison sent by an enemy, but survived due to the blessings of Krishna. The larger temple in this same compound is the **Kumbha Shyam Temple** (Temple of Varah).

Across from Padmini's Palace is the **Kalika Mata Temple**, an 8th-century sun temple damaged during the first sack of Chittor and then converted to a temple for the goddess Kali in the 14th century. At the fort's northern tip is another gate, the **Lokhota Bari**, while at the southern end is a small opening once used for hurling criminals into the abyss.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel standards in Chittor are generally disappointing; cleanliness and service are usually below average and many of the cheaper places have miserable bathrooms. If your budget stretches to top end, you're far better off staying in Bassi and visiting Chittor on a day trip.

Hotel Pratap Palace (☎ 243563; hpratap@hotmail.com; s/d Rs 1150-1500, deluxe r Rs 1250-1600, superdeluxe Rs 1800-2100; ☞) Deservedly one of the most popular places to stay, the cheaper rooms are reasonable value, though nothing special, and the more expensive rooms have window seats and leafy outlooks. Next to a pleasant garden area there's a restaurant with good food. Village safaris and visits to the owners' castle in Bijapur (p235) can be arranged.

Hotel Padmini (☎ 241718; hotel_padmini@rediffmail.com; s/d Rs 800/1000, with AC Rs 1250/1500; ☞) Out of town near the Bearch River, Padmini has a garden with horses and kids' play equipment. The hotel is owned by a marble mag-

nate, and thus is lined with his favourite stone. Some rooms have balconies looking out to the distant fort, though this is about their biggest asset.

Natraj Hotel (☎ 241009; Gandhi Rd; s without bathroom Rs 60-125, d Rs 90-250) Near the bus stand, this place has cheery reception staff who'll usher you through to small, dark rooms – still, it's an adequate option if you're counting the rupees while waiting for your bus or train.

Vinayek (Collectorate Circle; dishes Rs 15-60; ☞ 7am-11pm) Vinayek serves up North Indian veg dishes as well as Chinese and South Indian food. It's in a gloomy basement, but enlivened by its popularity and sweets counter.

Retiring rooms can be found at the train station. Doubles are Rs 100 or Rs 200 with AC. A simple but tasty vegetarian thali is available for a bargain Rs 20.

Getting There & Away

If you're coming from Bundi, it's possible to catch the early morning train to Chittor, spend three or four hours seeing the fort and then catch a bus on to Udaipur, or vice versa.

BUS

Express buses serve Delhi (Rs 350, 14 hours, two daily), and regularly go to Ajmer (Rs 125, five hours), Jaipur (Rs 175, eight hours), Udaipur (Rs 50/70 local/express, three/2½ hours) and Bundi (Rs 95, five hours), among other places.

TRAIN

The No 2966 *Udaipur-Jaipur Super Express* leaves Chittor at 9.40pm and arrives in Jaipur (sleeper Rs 357) at 7am.

For Udaipur (Rs 38 in 2nd class), the No 2965 *Chetak Express* leaves at 5.40am, arriving at 9am. Check at the station for details of other services to Ajmer, Bundi and Delhi: at the time of research, services were being scaled back.

Getting Around

It's about 6km from the train station to the fort (less from the bus stand) and 7km around the fort itself, not including the long southern loop out to the deer park. Autorickshaws charge around Rs 200 from the bus or train station to go around the fort, and back (including waiting time). You'll have to haggle, and make sure it's clear that you're going to visit the sights and have time to look around. A rickshaw between the bus and train stations should cost Rs 30.

DEATH BEFORE DISHONOUR

History has been kept alive by bards and folk songs in Rajasthan, and thus historical fact often merges with myth; this is the story told of the first sack of Chittor.

By the turn of the 14th century, much of North India had been conquered by the Mughals who ruled from Delhi. However, the *rana* (king) of Chittor, Rattan Singh, like many Rajput rulers, had managed to resist the invaders.

The jewel of the kingdom was Padmini, Rattan Singh's wife. Although she never left the zenana (women's quarters) uncovered, word had spread of her beauty, and Padmini was admired far beyond the sturdy walls of the fortress, even as far away as Delhi. The rumours aroused the curiosity of the Pathan king of Delhi, Ala-ud-din Khilji, and he decided to confirm them for himself.

In 1303 Ala-ud-din amassed his armies around Chittorgarh and sent word to Rattan Singh that he wanted to meet Padmini. Knowing his forces were no match for the sultan's armies, the *rana* reluctantly agreed, but set a number of conditions. The sultan was required to enter the fort unarmed; once inside, Ala-ud-din was not permitted to meet Padmini in person, but was only able to gaze upon her reflection in a mirror, while she sat well out of his reach inside a pavilion built (just to be sure) in the middle of a lotus pool.

But this glimpse was enough. Ala-ud-din was mesmerised and resolved to possess her at any cost. As Rattan Singh escorted him to the gate, Ala-ud-din gave an order to his forces lying in wait. The *rana* of Chittor was taken hostage and the ransom demanded for his return was Padmini herself.

The court was thrown into panic, until Padmini came up with a plan. She sent word that she agreed to Ala-ud-din's terms and soon a long train of 150 beautiful curtained palanquins, befitting great ladies of the court in purdah (the custom of keeping women in seclusion), trundled slowly out of the fort. The palanquins were Chittor's Trojan Horse – as soon as they had made their way into the sultan's camp, four armed Rajput warriors leaped out of each palanquin and rescued their leader.

The sultan was furious and laid siege to the fort, patiently waiting as the Rajputs slowly starved. It was clear the sultan could not be defeated, but the Rajputs couldn't consider the dishonour of surrender. Instead, a funeral pyre was lit in an underground tunnel. Padmini and all the ladies of the court put on their wedding saris and threw themselves into the fire as their husbands watched. The men then donned saffron robes, smeared sacred ashes on their foreheads and rode out of the fort to certain death.

Although it's clear that Ala-ud-din Khilji did lay siege to Chittor in 1303, and that the Rajput women indeed committed the horrific act of *jauhar*, it's also rumoured that the beautiful Padmini may have been invented by a 16th-century bard.

UDAIPUR

☎ 0294 / pop 389,137

The most romantic spot on the continent of India

Colonel James Tod, Annals & Antiquities of Rajasthan

A cupola-crowned city of cream, rose and honeysuckle hues, Udaipur – considered by many as the most romantic city in India – sits prettily on Pichola Lake, at the centre of which lies the Lake Palace, the creamiest, most wedding cake-like building of them all. A few years ago, when the monsoon rains were poor, there were fears that this magnificent, shimmering body of water might dry up altogether. Now the rains have finally returned and when

the lake is full, the palace once again seems to float, a grandiose piece of architectural frippery, as insubstantial as icing sugar.

The city sits in a valley surrounded by the ochre- and purple-shaded Aravalli Hills, dominated by the huge lakeside City Palace and overlooked by Sajjan Garh (Monsoon Palace), perched high on a peak as if plucked from a miniature painting. Udaipur is at its best if you step from the tourist epicentre into the jumbled streets of the old city, wander around the lake or find a rooftop to while away a dreamy afternoon. It's also surrounded by some dramatic countryside – folded peaks dotted with tiny villages – so it's rewarding to venture outside the city on foot or horseback, or by motorbike.

Udaipur is also a centre for arts, crafts and dance, and has a renowned school of miniature painting. West of the city is Shilpgram (p247), a village specially constructed to showcase the best of the region's arts. Here, you can see puppet shows and whirling dance displays, serenaded by some of the state's best musicians. The city is also a great place to shop, with miniature paintings, jewellery, brightly woven textiles, woodcarvings, handmade paper and puppets galore. If you're in Udaipur between February and March, moreover, you might be lucky enough to experience the festival of Holi, Udaipur-style, when the town comes alive in a riot of colour (p224). March to April, meanwhile, brings the procession-heavy Mewar Festival (p224) – Udaipur's own version of the springtime Gangaur festival – to town.

Although Colonel Tod's description (in *Annals & Antiquities of Rajasthan*) can still be trotted out, the old city around Lal Ghat is nowadays rife with rampant commercialism – every building is a hotel, shop, restaurant, travel agent or (most commonly) all four rolled into one. The city suffers, too, from mountains of plastic waste, ever-taller hotels competing for the best view and endless mediocre restaurants serving up a standard menu. And, like most Indian cities, Udaipur has more than its fair share of urban and industrial sprawl, along with the inevitable accompanying pollution, a discouraging first impression when you arrive at the city's train or bus station. Ignore it, though, and hurry on to the old city, where an utterly different world – despite the tourist trappings – still awaits.

History

Udaipur was founded in 1568 by Maharaja Udai Singh II following the final sacking of Chittorgarh by the Mughal emperor Akbar. According to legend, Udai Singh II found the site of his new capital some years before the last assault on Chittor, after coming across a holy man meditating on a hill near Pichola Lake, who advised the maharaja to establish his capital on that very spot. Since the site is surrounded by forests, lakes and the protective Aravalli Hills, the old man's advice was sound: the new capital of Mewar had a much less vulnerable location than Chittor.

Maharaja Udai Singh II died in 1572 and was succeeded by his son, Pratap, who bravely

defended Udaipur from subsequent Mughal attacks and gallantly fought at the Battle of Haldighati in 1576. The Mewar rulers were fiercely independent; unlike many other rulers in Rajasthan, they refused to be controlled by foreign invaders, even though they were constantly under attack. After struggling against the Mughals, Udaipur then had to deal with the Marathas (central Indian people who controlled much of India at various times and fought the Mughals and Rajputs).

An end to all the bloody battles and instability came with British intervention in the early 19th century, when a treaty was signed that pledged to protect Udaipur from invaders – protection that lasted right up until 1947. At Independence, along with all the other princely states, Udaipur surrendered its sovereignty and became part of a united India.

Orientation

The old city, bounded by the meagre remains of a city wall, is on the east side of Pichola Lake. The train station and bus stand are both just outside the city wall to the south-east. Udaipur's aesthetically challenging urban sprawl ranges out beyond.

Information

A good website, with tourist and cultural information, can be found at www.udaipurplus.com.

BOOKSHOPS

Numerous places clustered around Lal Ghat purvey and exchange books. It's a good place to buy nonfiction and fiction about India, though books here can be more expensive than elsewhere in India. Novels, guidebooks and books about Rajasthan are widely available.

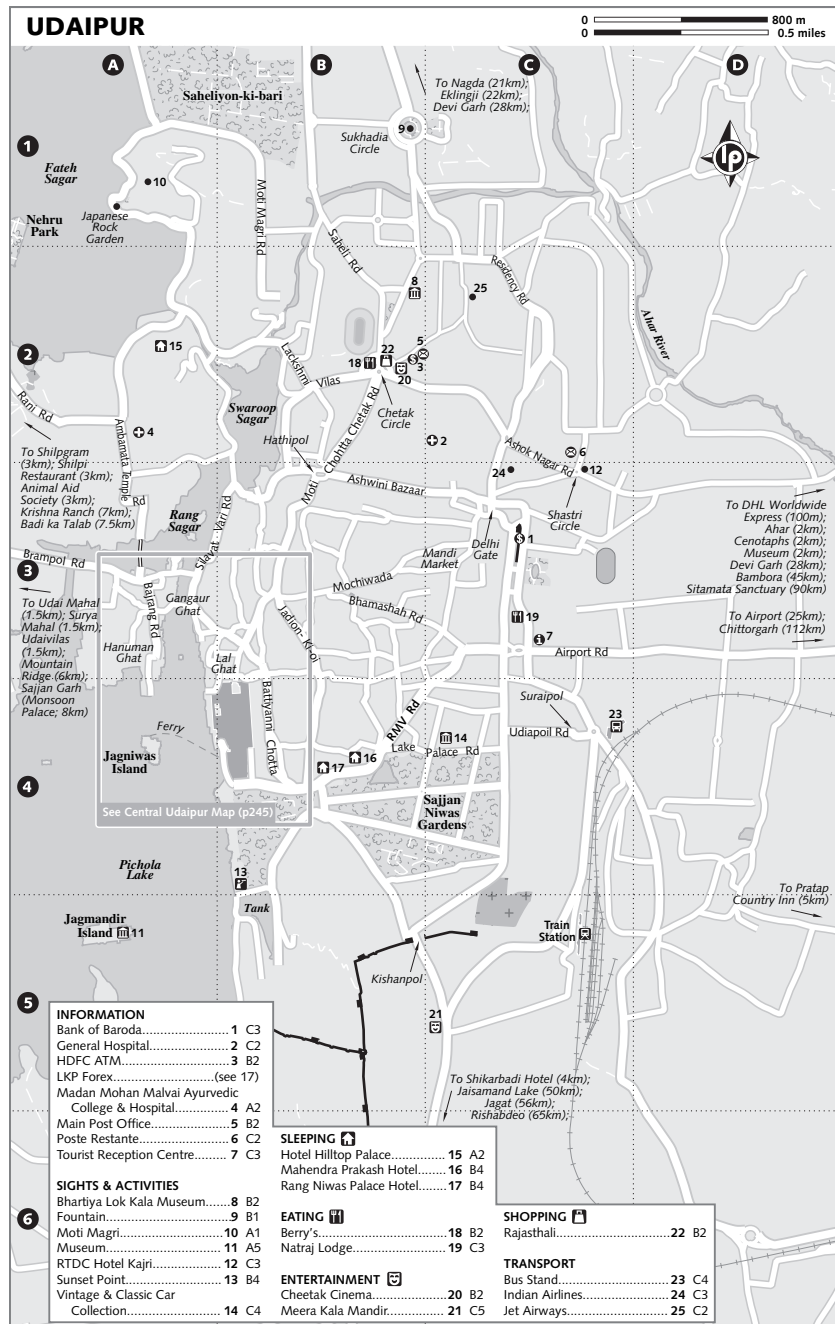
INTERNET ACCESS

You can surf the internet at plenty of places, particularly around Lal Ghat, though connections can sometimes be unbearably slow. Most places charge between Rs 30 and Rs 50 per hour. There are several reasonably swift internet options:

BA Photo N Book Store (Map p245; 69 Durga Sadan; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9.15am-11pm)

iWay (Map p245; Jagdish Temple Rd; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 8am-11pm)

Mewar International (Map p245; 35 Lal Ghat; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9am-11pm)

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

General hospital (Map p242; ☎ 2528811; Chetak Circle) For medical emergencies.

Madan Mohan Malvai Ayurvedic College & Hospital (Map p242; ☎ 2431900; Ambamata Temple Rd; ☞ 10am-5pm) Prescribes natural medicines and conducts free courses in Ayurveda. This government-run hospital was opened in 1944 and specialises in joint pain, paralysis and neurological disorders.

MONEY

There are lots of ATMs around, including an HDFC ATM (Map p245) near the main post office and a UTI ATM (Map p242) near Jagdish Temple. Three of the many places to change money are:

Bank of Baroda (Map p242; ☎ 2420671; ☞ 10am-2.30pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) About 200m southeast of Delhi Gate. Changes cash and gives credit-card advances.

LKP Forex (Map p242; ☎ 2423358; Lake Palace Rd; ☞ 9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) Next to the Rang Niwas Palace Hotel. Changes numerous currencies.

Thomas Cook (Map p245; ☎ 2419746; City Palace Complex; ☞ 10am-1.30pm & 2-5pm) Changes travellers cheques and foreign currency.

POST

DHL Worldwide Express office (Off Map p242; ☎ / fax 2412979; 380 Ashok Nagar Rd; ☞ 9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) Situated east of town. Has a free collection service within Udaipur and can arrange air freight around the world.

Main post office (Map p242; Chetak Circle; ☞ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) North of the old city (but note that the poste restante office is at Shastri Circle).

Post office (Map p245; ☞ 10.30am-1pm & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Sat) Outside the City Palace Museum.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Apart from the tourist reception centre listed below, smaller tourist information counters operate at both the train station and the airport. The bimonthly *Out and About in Udaipur* magazine (Rs 10) contains lots of useful listings, and can be found at most Udaipur bookshops.

Tourist reception centre (Map p242; ☎ 2411535; Fateh Memorial Bldg; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat of month) Situated in not the most convenient position, near Surajpol and less than 1km from the bus stand, this place dishes out a limited amount of brochures and information. It can also arrange official guides for tours of the city; a four- to eight-hour tour should cost between around Rs 250 and 500.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Udaipur has scores of small travel agencies (concentrated in the tourist-laden old city), all promising the best deals in town. It's definitely worth shopping around for the best price, as most will try to match or better the prices quoted to you by other agencies.

Dangers & Annoyances

If you have trouble with hotels, taxi or auto-rickshaw drivers (in the latter two cases, note down their vehicle registration number), contact the **police** (☎ 2412693) or report it to the **tourist reception centre** (☎ 2411535).

Sights**PICHOLA LAKE**

Limpid and large, Pichola Lake (Map p242) reflects the cool grey blue mountains on its rippling mirrorlike surface. It was enlarged by Maharaja Udai Singh II, following his foundation of the city, by flooding Picholi Village, which gave the lake its name. The lake is now 4km long and 3km wide, but remains shallow and dries up in severe droughts, when you can walk to Jagniwas and Jagmandir, its two major islands, and camels and buffalo graze around the exposed foundations of the seemingly shipwrecked Lake Palace.

The lake is allegedly home to a handful of crocodiles, believed to reside near uninhabited sections of the shore (making it an unappealing option for swimming and wading); occasionally, the waters get choked up with water hyacinths.

The City Palace extends for a long stretch along the lake's east bank. South of the palace, a pleasant garden runs down to the shore. To the palace's north, you can wander along the waterfront to some interesting bathing and dhobi (laundry) ghats, where the slip-slap noises of the dhobi-wallahs (washerpeople) echo across the quiet waters.

Boat rides (Map p245; adult/child per 30min Rs 130/70, per 1hr Rs 250/130; ☞ 9.30am-5pm) leave half-hourly from the City Palace jetty (aka Bansi Ghat), when the lake water is high enough. The half-hour ride involves a quick trip around the lake, while the longer trip includes a 20-minute visit to Jagmandir Island. Note that nonguests have to pay Rs 25 to enter this area. If you're part of a group, you can also hire a whole boat for around Rs 2000 for the hour's trip

THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

In Udaipur a royal servant named Panna Dhai has been immortalised for the most extraordinary loyalty to the royal family that you could possibly imagine.

In 1535 Prince Udai Singh II was just a baby when his father, Vikramaditya, maharaja of Mewar, was assassinated by a character named Banbir. Banbir wanted control of the kingdom, and he was determined to eliminate anyone that stood in his way, including the young heir to the throne – Udai Singh himself. One night, Banbir managed to break into the prince's bedroom, planning to kill the baby boy.

Udai Singh's devoted *dhai* (wet nurse), Panna Dhai, was, however, one step ahead of him. At the time, Panna was also breastfeeding her own infant son, Chandan. Having already suspected Banbir's wicked intentions, she had placed, as a precaution, her Chandan in the prince's own cradle. When Banbir demanded to know which child was the prince, Panna Dhai pointed to the prince's cradle where her own son slept. Banbir whipped out his sword and slaughtered the child.

Soon after the murder, Panna Dhai hid the prince in a basket and fled to the fort at Kumbalgarh. She told the nobles and people of Mewar what had happened, and the prince was promptly crowned, ensuring the unbroken lineage of the Mewar dynasty.

The current maharaja of Udaipur has ensured the memory of Panna Dhai lives on with a special award at the annual Maharaja Mewar Foundation Awards ceremony. The Panna Dhai Award is given to an individual who 'ventures beyond the call of duty and sets an example in society of permanent value through sacrifice'.

Jagniwas Island

The world-famous Lake Palace Hotel island of Jagniwas (Map p245) is about 1.5 hectares in size, almost entirely covered by the opulent palace built by Maharaja Jagat Singh II in 1754. Once the royal summer palace, it was converted into the **Lake Palace Hotel** in the 1960s by Maharaja Bhagwat Singh and was, during the conversion, greatly extended. It remains the ultimate in the world's luxury hotels, with gleaming courtyards, fountains, restaurants and a swimming pool, and has been largely responsible for putting Udaipur on the international tourist map. You may also remember it from that classic Bond movie, *Octopussy*, along with the Shiv Niwas Palace and the Monsoon Palace. It is a magical place. Casual visitors, however, are discouraged; nonguests can only come over to experience its atmosphere over lunch or dinner (see p255). Hotel launches cross to the island from the City Palace jetty – note that nonguests have to pay Rs 25 to enter this area.

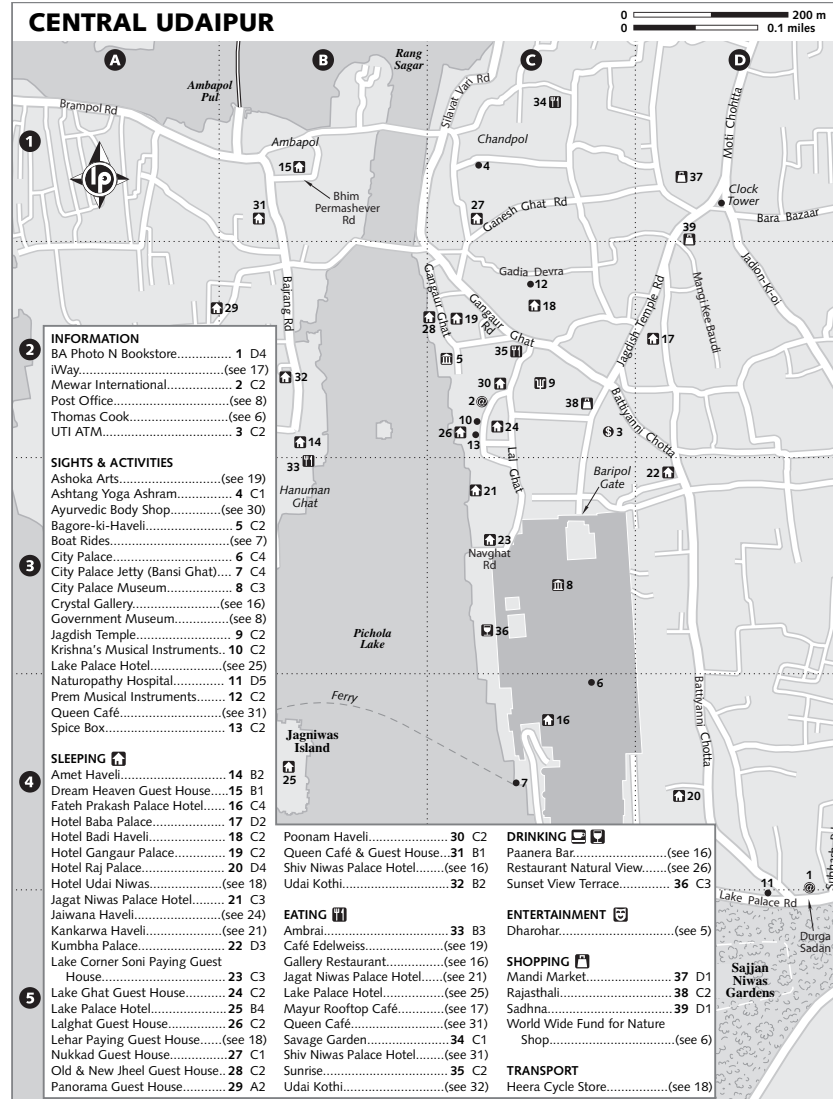
Jagmandir Island

The palace on Jagmandir Island (Map p242) was built by Maharaja Karan Singh in 1620, added to by Maharaja Jagat Singh during his reign between 1628 and 1652, and has changed very little in the four centuries since. It's said that the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan

(then Prince Kharrim) derived some of his inspiration for the Taj Mahal from this palace after staying here in 1623 and 1624 while leading a revolt against his father, Jehangir. European women and children were later sheltered here by Maharaja Sarup Singh during the 1857 Indian Uprising. Flanked by a row of enormous stone elephants, the island has an impressive *chhatra* carved from grey bluestone, and fantastic views across the lake to the city and its golden palace. There's a small **museum** here in the main building, detailing the history of the island; apart from this, there are gardens to wander, filled with fragrant frangipani trees, flowers and neat courtyards, all tended by the island's only residents, three gardeners still in royal employ.

CITY PALACE & MUSEUMS

Surmounted by balconies, towers and cupolas towering over the lake, the imposing **City Palace** (Map p245) is Rajasthan's largest palace, with a façade 244m long and 30.4m high. Construction was begun by Maharaja Udai Singh II, the city's founder, and it later became a conglomeration of structures (including 11 separate smaller palaces) built and extended by various maharajas, though it still manages to retain a surprising uniformity of design. There are fine views over the lake and the city from the palace's upper terraces.



Entering the palace from the north, you'll come through the Baripol (Great Gate; 1600) and the three-arched Tripolia Gate (1725). To the left, seven arches commemorate the seven times maharajas were weighed here and their weight in gold or silver distributed to the lucky locals. The ticket office is here too, where guides can

be hired for Rs 100 to Rs 150 (maximum of five people).

In the large rectangular courtyard set outside the museum, there are a number of pricey handicraft shops, a **World Wide Fund for Nature** (WWF; Map p245; ☎: 9.30am-5.30pm) shop, a Thomas Cook office, a post office and banks.

DURBAR GLITZ

Many palaces in India have a durbar hall (royal court). Usually the grandest room in the place, with a respectable amount of chandeliers and gilt overlay, the durbar hall was dressed to impress, used by India's rulers for official occasions, such as state banquets, and to hold meetings.

The restored Durbar Hall at the Fateh Prakash Palace Hotel in the City Palace complex is undoubtedly one of India's most impressive, vast and lavish, with some of the country's hugest chandeliers. The walls display royal weapons and striking portraits of former maharajas of Mewar (a most distinguished-looking lot). The illustrious Mewar rulers come from what is believed to be the oldest ruling dynasty in the world, spanning 76 generations.

The foundation stone was laid in 1909 by Lord Minto, the viceroy of India, during the reign of Maharaja Fateh Singh. As a mark of honour to Lord Minto, it was originally named Minto Hall. The top floor of this high-ceilinged hall is surrounded by viewing galleries, where ladies of the palace could watch in veiled seclusion what was happening below. Nowadays, it's the Crystal Gallery (below).

The hall still has the capacity to hold hundreds of people and can even be hired for conferences or social gatherings. If you find yourself in need of just such an imposing and expansive venue, contact the **Fateh Prakash Palace Hotel** (☎ 2528019; www.hrindia.com).

City Palace Museum

The main part of the palace is now preserved as the **City Palace Museum** (Map p245; adult/child Rs 50/30, camera/video Rs 200; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm), housing a large, varied collection of artefacts. Downstairs from the entrance is an armoury section sporting old weapons, including a lethal two-pronged sword.

The entrance to the museum leads up to the **Rajya Angan** (Royal Courtyard), the very spot where Uday Singh met the sage who told him to found his city here. Here, the rooms of the museum are extravagantly decorated with mirrors, tiles and paintings. In the **Manak Mahal** (Ruby Palace) there is exquisite glass- and mirrorwork, while **Krishna Vilas** has a remarkable collection of miniatures (no photography is permitted here). The **Moti Mahal** also has beautiful mirrorwork, and the **Chini Mahal** is covered in ornamental tiles. The **Surya Chopar** has a huge, ornamental sun – the symbol of the sun-descended Mewar dynasty. **Mor Chowk** (Peacock Sq) holds mosaics of peacocks, the favourite Rajasthani bird, while **Bhim Vilas** has a striking striped floor. In the **Bari Mahal** there's a fine central garden with good views over the old city.

More beautiful paintings can be seen in the **Zenana Mahal**, which opens onto **Laxmi Chowk**; there's a beautiful white pavilion in the centre of this square. Take note of the large tiger-catching cage, which worked rather like an oversized mousetrap, near the Zenana Mahal entrance.

Palace ladies once used the gallery to observe the grand **Durbar Hall** (above).

Inside the separate palace enclosure, entered from the south of Badi Chowk, are the Shiv Niwas and Fateh Prakash Palace Hotels (p253), the Sunset View Terrace (p256), the Gallery Restaurant (p255), the Crystal Gallery (below), and the boat wharves for trips out to Jagmandir Island and the Lake Palace. Note that it costs Rs 25 for nonguests to enter this area.

Government Museum

Inside the city palace complex, there's also a **government museum** (Map p245; admission Rs 3; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu). There are inscriptions dating from the 2nd to the 17th centuries, and some wonderful sculpture dating from the 5th century onwards, including pieces from Jagat and Kumbalgarh. It also has a splendid collection of jewel-like miniature paintings of the Mewar school. Stranger exhibits include a stuffed monkey holding a lamp. There are also regal maharaja portraits in profile, documenting the palace's rulers along with the changing fashions of the moustache.

Crystal Gallery

In the Fateh Prakash Palace Hotel, the **Crystal Gallery** (Map p245; adult/child Rs 325/165; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-8pm) houses rare crystal that Maharaja Sajjan Singh ordered from F&C Osler & Co in England in 1877. The maharaja died before it arrived, and all the items stayed forgotten and packed up in boxes for 110 years. The extraordinary, extravagant collection includes crystal chairs, sofas, tables and even beds. There's an

exquisite antique jewel-studded carpet that has to be seen to be believed. The rather hefty admission fee includes a soft drink, tea or coffee in the Gallery Restaurant (see p255), where a nice high tea is served daily. Admission also includes entry to the grand Durbar Hall (opposite). No photography is permitted.

JAGDISH TEMPLE

Only 150m north of the City Palace entrance, this busy, fantastically carved Indo-Aryan **temple** (Map p245; ☎ 5am-2pm & 4-10.30pm) was built by Maharaja Jagat Singh in 1651. It enshrines a black stone image of Krishna as Jagannath, Lord of the Universe; there's a brass image of the Garuda (man-bird vehicle of Vishnu) in a shrine in front of the temple, and the temple's steps are flanked by elephants. You can donate money, which is used to feed the hungry, between 11am and noon.

BAGORE-KI-HAVELI

This gracious 18th-century **haveli** (Map p245; admission Rs 25; ☎ 10am-5.30pm), set on the water's edge in the Gangaur Ghat area, was built by a former prime minister and has been carefully restored. There are 138 rooms set around courtyards, some arranged to evoke the period during which the house was inhabited, and others housing cultural displays, including – intriguingly enough – the world's biggest turban. The **haveli** also houses an interesting art gallery, featuring contemporary and folk art, and an eclectic selection of world-famous monuments lovingly carved out of polystyrene. The upper courtyard makes an atmospheric setting for the fabulous Rajasthani dance performances at 7pm (see p256).

FATEH SAGAR

North of Pichola Lake, this lake (Map p242) – which dries up if the monsoon has been poor – is ringed by hills and is a popular hangout for lovestruck locals. Overlooked by a number of hills, it was originally built in 1678 by Maharaja Jai Singh but reconstructed by Maharaja Fateh Singh after heavy rains destroyed the dam. A pleasant drive winds along the east bank. In the middle of the lake is **Nehru Park**, a garden island. An autorickshaw from the old city costs Rs 30 (one way).

MOTI MAGRI

Overlooking Fateh Sagar, atop Moti Magri (Pear Hill; Map p242), is a statue of the

Rajput hero Maharaja Pratap, who frequently defied the Mughals while riding his beloved horse, Chetak (see Haldighati, p258 for more about this noble quadruped). The path to the top passes a pleasant **Japanese Rock Garden** (Map p242; adult/child Rs 20/10; ☎ 7.30am-7pm). Car/rickshaw/motorcycle/bicycle entry costs Rs 20/10/5/1.

BHARTIYA LOK KALA MUSEUM

The interesting collection exhibited by this small **museum** (Map p242; ☎ 2529296; Indian/foreigner Rs 20/35, camera/video Rs 10/50; ☎ 9am-6pm) and foundation for the preservation and promotion of local folk arts includes a dusty collection of dresses, turbans, dolls, masks, musical instruments, paintings and – its high point – puppets. Diverting **puppet shows** (Indian/foreigner Rs 30/50), a good reason to visit if you're travelling with children, are staged at intervals throughout the day (depending on demand), with a one-hour performance at 6pm.

SAHELİYON-KI-BARI

In the north of the city, the **Saheliyon-ki-Bari** (Garden of the Maids of Honour; Map p242; admission Rs 5; ☎ 9am-7pm) was built by Sangram Singh II in 1710. This small, quaint ornamental garden was laid out for the enjoyment of 48 women attendants who came as part of a princess's dowry and has beautiful, well-maintained fountains (water shortages permitting; you may have to pay to see them turned on), kiosks, marble elephants and a delightful lotus pool.

SHILPGRAM

A crafts village 3km west of Fateh Sagar lake, **Shilpgram** (Off Map p242; admission Rs 25, camera/video Rs 10/50; ☎ 11am-7pm), was inaugurated by Rajiv Gandhi in 1989. Set in dusty, rolling countryside, it's contrived but remains interesting. There are displays of traditional mud huts with glittering mirrored interiors from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Goa and Maharashtra. Best, though, are the excellent demonstrations by traditional performers and artisans (crafts are on sale, though they might not be of the highest quality). There are always splendid groups ready to perform as you approach (you'll be expected to proffer a tip if you stay to watch), though it can feel deserted of visitors on a weekday and even more so out of season. The best reason to visit is if you're in town for the festival here

in December: it's a fantastic spectacle, often with hundreds upon hundreds of artisans in attendance. Check with the tourist reception centre (p243) for details.

Shilpi Restaurant (Off Map p242; dishes Rs 50-112; ☎ 11.30am-10.30pm), next to the crafts village site, is a pleasant open-air restaurant serving good veg and nonveg Indian, Continental and Chinese food. It also has a **swimming pool** (admission Rs 100; ☎ 11am-8pm).

Some people walk or cycle out to Shilpgram; a return autorickshaw trip (including a 30-minute stop) between the old city and Shilpgram costs Rs 100.

AHAR

About 2km east of Udaipur, at Ahar (Off Map p242), are more than 250 restored **cenotaphs** (Off Map p242) of the maharajas of Mewar, forming a spectacular city of snowy domes built over 350 years. Around 19 former maharajas were cremated here, and the most striking cenotaph is that of Maharaja Amar Singh, who ruled from 1597 to 1620. Nearby you can visit the remains of an ancient city – the Sisodias' capital – and a **museum** (Off Map p242; admission Rs 5; ☎ 10am-5pm) housing some accompanying artefacts, including a collection of earthen pottery, sculptures and other archaeological finds. Some pieces date back to 1700 BC, and there's a beautiful 10th-century metal figure of Buddha. Photography is not permitted. Not many tourists make it out here, but the sites, despite being rather unkempt these days, make it worth the trip. A return trip by autorickshaw should cost around Rs 80, including waiting time.

SAJJAN GARH (MONSOON PALACE)

Perched on top of a distant mountain range like a fairy-tale castle, this melancholy, neglected late-19th-century palace (Off Map p242) was constructed by Maharaja Sajjan Singh. Originally an astronomical centre, it became a monsoon palace and hunting lodge. Now government owned, it's open to the public after lengthy closure, but there's not much to see but neglect. You pay Rs 80/20 per person/rickshaw at the foot of the hill to enter the Sajjan Garh Wildlife Sanctuary. The main reason to visit is for the breathtaking views, particularly at sunset. Autorickshaw return trips cost Rs 150 (including waiting time).

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

The maharajas' **Vintage & Classic Car Collection** (Map p242; ☎ 2420979; Lake Palace Rd; admission Rs 100; ☎ 9-11am & 2-6pm) makes a fascinating diversion. Housed in the former state garage are 22 splendid vehicles, including a 1938 Cadillac complete with purdah system, the beautiful 1934 Phantom Rolls Royce used in *Octopussy*, a homely little Morris Minor Traveller from 1959, and the Cadillac convertible that whisked Queen Elizabeth II to the airport in 1961.

Sunset Point (Map p242; admission Rs 5) is a lovely, easy-to-reach sunset spot, with dazzling views over Pichola Lake, Jagmandir Island and off toward the Monsoon Palace. There's a musical fountain here (drought permitting), which plays each evening.

The huge **fountain** (Map p242) in the middle of Sukhadia Circle, north of the city, is illuminated at night. **Sajjan Niwas Gardens** (Map p242), near the Vintage & Classic Car Collection, has a rose garden, pleasant lawn, and a zoo.

Almost 5km beyond Shilpgram, 7.5km west from town, is the mammoth artificial lake **Badi ka Talab** (Tiger Lake). Flanked by hills, it's a great place to head for some relaxation and a picnic. Crocodiles apparently lurk in parts of the lake, so swimmers beware. Near the lake there's a small **Shiva and Hanuman temple**. An autorickshaw to the lake should cost Rs 100/200 one-way/return (with a one-hour wait).

Activities

See p243 for information about boat rides.

AYURVEDA

Madan Mohan Malvai Ayurvedic College & Hospital (Map p242; ☎ 2431900; Ambamata Temple Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm) prescribes natural medicines and conducts free courses in Ayurveda.

HORSE RIDING

Kumbha Palace (p252) arranges highly recommended riding excursions, for both beginners and experienced riders, around Udaipur. A half-/full-day excursion costs Rs 700/1300 (including lunch and water) and takes you wandering on four legs through hills and local villages.

Pratap Country Inn (p252) also runs horse safaris, as does tour operator **Princess Trails** (☎ 09829042012; www.princesstrails.com), which is a German-and-Indian-owned company that

THE ULTIMATE SLICE OF WEDDING CAKE

Getting married? If you want to play the ultimate game of prince and princess, you couldn't do much better than Udaipur, with its palaces already dressed in white for the day. The city has become a favourite wedding venue for foreigners – many have travelled thousands of miles to take the plunge in this dreamy destination.

Plump in the middle of Pichola Lake, the gorgeous Lake Palace Hotel, itself resembling a huge, elaborate wedding cake, was once the exclusive summer residence of Udaipur's maharajas, but today is accessible to anyone who can afford the rather hefty prices. There are several sumptuous venues to choose from within the palace: if you're a bit of a Bond fiend, then the Lily Pond, which starred in *Octopussy*, may appeal to you. For those wanting to get hitched on the waters of the lake itself, there's the Gangaur Boat, a graceful old royal barge belonging to the maharaja of Udaipur.

Arrangements for these, and several other sorts of weddings, can be made by staff at the Lake Palace Hotel itself. Most kinds of wedding ceremonies are possible: if you intend to be married by a Christian priest, you must send a Certificate of No Impediment (issued by a church in your country of residence) to the hotel at least a month prior to your wedding date. If you opt for a Hindu ceremony, the hotel can advise you on where to find traditional Rajasthani wedding clothes and on the conventions and etiquette surrounding such an event.

Whatever your wedding preferences, you're advised to make reservations for the big day at least six months ahead: bear in mind that the best and most pleasant time to get married is during the cooler months between November and March. For prices and further information, contact the food and beverages manager at the **Lake Palace Hotel** (☎ 2528800; lakepalace.udaipur@tajhotels.com; Post Box 5, Udaipur 313001, Rajasthan).

The Lake Palace isn't the only location offering weddings to intrepid travellers. It's also possible to arrange your event at the beautiful, opulent Shiv Niwas Palace Hotel (see p253), where venues include the poolside, the lawns and the top terrace. For a big bash, there's the Fateh Prakash Palace Hotel's grand Durbar Hall (see Durbar Glitz, p246), while its Sunset View Terrace is perfect for more intimate gatherings. Otherwise, you could go for evocative Jagmandir Island, with its fantastic colonnaded terrace overlooking the lake – here there are venues that can accommodate from 30 to 500 people. There are also various courtyards within the City Palace itself. For these venues, you must contact the sales and marketing manager, HRH Group of Hotels at the **City Palace** (☎ 1600-332933; www.hrindia.com; Udaipur 313001, Rajasthan). Check out more details on the website. If at all possible, it's worth visiting all the venues you're considering before making a choice.

offers mostly multiday excursions on thoroughbred Marwari steeds.

MASSAGE

The **Ayurvedic Body Shop** (Map p245; ☎ 5120802; 39 Lal Ghat; head/full-body massage Rs 100/500, 15min back massage Rs 200; ☎ 10.30am-9pm) offers Ayurvedic massages and has some good products on sale, such as oils, moisturisers, shampoos and soaps.

You can also indulge in a massage at the **Naturopathy Hospital** (Map p245; ☎ 2422700; cnr Battiyaani Chotta & Lake Palace Rd; 30min massage Rs 50; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Sat, 8-11am Sun), though 'indulge' may be the wrong word. You'll be rubbed down vigorously by one or two masseurs in a room of uncertain cleanliness. It may not be relaxing, but it's certainly an invigorating experience – and it's cheap too.

TREKKING

Exploring the surrounding countryside and villages on foot is a fantastic way to see rural and tribal life while taking in some beautiful scenery. Piers at **Mountain Ridge** (☎ 3291478; www.mountainridge.in; Sisarma) can organise a knowledgeable guide for you; others are loosely attached to guesthouses, so enquire at your hotel or seek out recommendations from fellow travellers.

Courses

See opposite for information on courses in Ayurveda.

COOKING

Spice Box (Map p245; ☎ 5100742; spicebox2001@yahoo.co.in; 38 Lal Ghat) offers recommended hands-on

cooking lessons (Rs 400 to 500 for four hours), in which you learn to cook a selection of dishes and then eat the results.

Queen Café (Map p245; ☎ 2430875; 14 Bajrang Rd) A four-hour introductory cooking lesson – encompassing a grand 14 dishes – costs Rs 900 and is a fantastic, fragrant way to chop and sizzle away the afternoon.

MUSIC

Bablu at **Prem Musical Instruments** (Map p245; ☎ 2430599; 28 Gadia Devra) gives sitar, tabla and flute lessons (Rs 100 per hour). He also sells and repairs those instruments and can arrange performances. Krishna at **Krishna's Musical Instruments** (Map p245; 37 Lal Ghat) also offers recommended lessons.

PAINTING

Ashoka Arts (Map p245; Hotel Gangaur Palace) runs painting lessons (Rs 150 for two to three hours, including materials).

YOGA

Ashtang Yoga Ashram (Map p245; ☎ 2524872; Raiba House), inside Chandpol, is a friendly hatha yoga centre with yoga classes every morning at around 8am. The teacher has 20 years' experience, and payment is by donation (proceeds go to the local Animal Aid hospital).

Tours

Five-hour **city tours** (per person excl admission charges Rs 90, minimum 5 people) leave at 8am from the RTDC Hotel Kajri (Map p242) and take in the main sights. There are also **excursions** (per person excl admission charges incl veg lunch Rs 330) to Ranakpur and Kumbalgarh. Contact the tourist reception centre (p243) for more information.

Sleeping

Staying close to the lakeshore is undoubtedly the most romantic Udaipur option. West of Jagdish Temple and close to the shores of the lake, the Lal Ghat area is crowded with places offering masses of choice. Otherwise, opt for the quieter and less-tourist-filled Hanuman Ghat on the other side of the lake, which often has even better views. Always make sure to ask for a lake-facing room, though, not surprisingly, these will be more expensive. In the low season, prices plummet – so it's well worth bargaining.

The hotel room commission racket operates in Udaipur with a vengeance, so if you're

unlucky enough to get an autorickshaw driver who insists that the hotel of your choice has burnt down or suddenly closed, firmly decline his kind alternative offer. To attempt to bypass rapacious rickshaw drivers altogether, try to use the police-supervised prepaid autorickshaw stands outside the train and bus stations. Some unscrupulous drivers will still try to take you to the hotel of their choice, but remember: they don't get reimbursed until you hand over the receipt at the end of your journey.

If you're heading for Lal Ghat to begin an accommodation search, ask to be deposited at Jagdish Temple, a good place to start looking. An autorickshaw from the bus stand to Jagdish should cost about Rs 30. See Dangers & Annoyances (p243) for info on what to do if you have trouble with hotels or rickshaw drivers.

BUDGET

Udaipur pioneered the Paying Guest House Scheme in Rajasthan. Expect to pay Rs 100 to Rs 300 per night. The tourist reception centre has a list detailing all the places and services offered.

Lal Ghat Area

Lalghat Guest House (Map p245; ☎ 2525301; lalghat@hotmail.com; 33 Lal Ghat; dm Rs 75, s/d Rs 250-350, s without bathroom Rs 125, d without bathroom Rs 150-200; ☎) This mellow guesthouse by the lake was one of the first to open in Udaipur, and, though looking a little worn around the edges, it's still a sound choice. The rooftop areas have superb lake views and are a serene place to sunbathe, and there's a back terrace overlooking the ghats. Accommodation ranges from spruce, end-to-end dorm beds (with curtained-off beds) to their top range room, which sports arched windows and thick walls (Rs 350). Rooms in the older part of the building generally have a lot more character. All the rooms have fans and mosquito nets, and there's a small kitchen for self-caterers.

Hotel Gangaur Palace (Map p245; ☎ 2422303; Gangaur Ghat Rd; r Rs 100-400) This whitewashed, elaborate, faded *haveli* is set around a courtyard. The pricier rooms are atmospheric though basic, with wall paintings, window seats and private bathrooms; the cheaper rooms are simple and share a bathroom, but are fine. Rooms with a lake view are the most expensive. The hot water is a bit iffy. In case you need help with where to go from here,

KEEPING UDAIPUR GREEN

Slowly, Udaipur guesthouse proprietors are realising that it pays to be green, not only for the future of their city but also to attract eco-conscious travellers. You'll probably notice solar panels on lots of hotel rooftops, and the maharaja himself has been investing in high-tech solar-powered autorickshaws to do his bit towards a cleaner future for the environmentally hard-pressed city.

Much of the new green movement has been instigated by **Shikshantar** (☎ 2451303; www.swaraj.org/shikshantar) a community group advocating a 'no waste' Udaipur, which has created a 'green leaf' rating for hotels, based on 14 different criteria, including energy usage and waste management. Check out their website for current ratings.

In order to do your bit towards keeping Udaipur the treasure it is today, consider cutting to a minimum the amount of plastic you consume. Some hotels, for example, offer filtered water to refill mineral water bottles; also try to carry a bag with you for your shopping, rather than picking up numerous plastic bags en route. Look out for recycling points for plastics you do use; consider walking instead of taking autorickshaws when and where you can; and even the old 'don't change your bath towels every day' mantra of top-end hotels is sure to help a little bit.

there's a palm reader working here from 2pm to 5pm, who charges Rs 50 to 100.

Lake Corner Soni Paying Guest House (Map p245; ☎ 2525712; 27 Navghat Rd; s/d from Rs 140/180, without bathroom from Rs 100/140) Tucked away close to the City Palace is this simple courtyard-centred guesthouse. It's run by a lovely elderly couple and is imbued with a family atmosphere, though the rooms themselves are a little shabby. Mr Soni offers Hindi lessons, the home cooking is excellent, and there's a great view from the rooftop.

Nukkad Guest House (Map p245; 56 Ganesh Ghat Rd; r from Rs 150-250) Staying at the Nukkad means renting one of 10 simple rooms – some with attached bathroom – in an extremely friendly family house. There's terrific home-cooked food on offer and a nice rooftop. Follow the signs for the guesthouse from Jagdish Temple.

Lehar Paying Guest House (Map p245; ☎ 2417651; 86 Gangaur Ghat Rd; d Rs 150-700) Run by a redoubtable matriarch, this place has five squeaky-clean rooms in an old building, some of which (usually the costlier ones) are decorated with wall paintings and coloured glass. The very best room has its own little courtyard and is considerably more comfy than the others.

Hotel Udai Niwas (Map p245; ☎ 5120789; www.hoteludainiwas.com; Gangaur Ghat Rd; r Rs 200-1000; ☎ ☎) A bright new hotel occupying a narrow space off Gangaur Ghat, Udai Niwas has excellent, spotless rooms that feel much more luxurious than their price range would suggest. They're painted white and decorated with puppets and wall hangings – the cheapest rooms are a real bargain. Staff are nice and helpful, and there's

a good travel agency and internet café. The hotel claims the highest rooftop in Udaipur – we're unsure if building so high should be encouraged, but for views alone this is a very good choice.

Old & New Jheel Guest House (Map p245; ☎ 2421352; 56 Gangaur Ghat; d Rs 250-800) Both Old and New Jheel are right down by the ghat. Old Jheel Guest House is in an old *haveli*, and accommodation ranges from basic back rooms to one with a small balcony and three lake-facing windows. Nearby New Jheel has breezy rooms and a brilliant position over the lake. Room 201 is the best, with windows on three sides. Both the Jheels get good reviews from readers.

Hotel Badi Haveli (Map p245; ☎ 2412588; Gangaur Ghat Rd; r Rs 300-550) In an old whitewashed building around a leafy courtyard, the Badi Haveli offers clean, basic rooms; the costlier ones are furnished with wall paintings, coloured glass and alcoves, and some have views. See a variety of rooms on offer before you take your pick.

Poonam Haveli (Map p245; ☎ 2410303; poonam.haveli@hotmail.com; 39 Lal Ghat; r Rs 400-1050; ☎) A fairly modern place decked out in traditional style, Poonam has 16 rooms, all of which get positive reports from readers. Boasting big beds, the rooms are plain, fresh and large, some decorated with mirrorwork and some with lake views. The '007' room has arches as elegant as a raised eyebrow.

Lake Ghat Guest House (Map p245; ☎ 2521636; 4/13 Lal Ghat; d Rs 600-800) Some of the smart, bigish rooms have views, others have balconies, and all are decorated with stained glass. The rooms

are set around a small atrium filled with hanging plants; there are splendid views from up on the roof, and a good restaurant (veg dishes around Rs 60).

Hanuman Ghat Area

Directly across the water from Lal Ghat, Hanuman Ghat, with its local vibe and handful of excellent choices, is a more peaceful place to stay.

Panorama Guest House (Map p245; ☎ 2431027; krishna2311@rediffmail.com; Hanuman Ghat; r Rs 80-150) Another good choice that's smart, well kept and quietly set, overlooking a small local square. The spotless rooms have wall paintings and either a private bathroom or a view, and there's a relaxing rooftop.

Queen Café & Guest House (Map p245; ☎ 2430875; 14 Bajrang Rd; r without bathroom Rs 170-220) Run by a Jain family, Queen has just two comfortable, quiet and unadorned rooms in a homy and atmospheric family house. The home cooking (veg dishes Rs 15 to 35) is excellent, and fantastic cooking lessons are offered here (see p249).

Dream Heaven Guest House (Map p245; ☎ 2431038; 22 Bhim Permashever Rd; r Rs 180-520) An excellent choice and deservedly popular. With a handful of spick-and-span rooms featuring wall hangings and paintings, this is a popular place to come to a halt. Some rooms have views and some have a splendid balcony. The food at the rooftop restaurant (veg and nonveg dishes Rs 20 to 50), which overlooks the lake and shows Udaipur at its best, is fresh, tasty and highly recommended – the perfect place to chill out on a pile of cushions.

Other Areas

Kumbha Palace (Map p245; ☎ 2422702; Battiyanni Chotta; r Rs 100-400, ranch cottages d Rs 1000-1200) This excellent place is run by a Dutch-Indian couple. Quietly tucked away, not far from Jagdish Temple, Kumbha Palace has nine simple rooms (some with bathroom, some without), backed by a lush lawn, and a very good restaurant. The owners run highly recommended horse-riding excursions (p248). Free pick-ups from the bus or train stations are on offer. You can also stay overnight in the hotel's rural cottages at Krishna Ranch, set in beautiful countryside 7km from Udaipur, or arrange much longer trips. A 24-hour safari including accommodation at the ranch costs Rs 2200.

Pratap Country Inn (Off Map p242; ☎ 2583138; s/d Rs 500/600) about 7km southeast of Udaipur,

this is a serene, though shabby, secluded country retreat at Titaradi Village. Its best selling point is not so much its quiet location or its very standard rooms, but the good-value horse-riding safaris that can be arranged from here. The hotel offers free transport from the train or bus station, with prior arrangement.

MIDRANGE

Lal Ghat Area

Jaiwana Haveli (Map p245; ☎/fax 2521252; 14 Lal Ghat; r Rs 700-2000; 🍷) This modern, spacious, but rather impersonal place has unfussy, well-kept rooms decorated with block-printed fabrics. Views from the rooms (especially the corner ones) are made a little bit frustrating due to the slightly tinted windows, but there are vast views from the rooftop.

Hotel Baba Palace (Map p245; ☎ 2427126; www.hotelbabapalace.com; s Rs 750, d Rs 1200-1400, deluxe r with AC Rs 1400-2600; 🍷) This newish hotel has sparkling if not especially exciting rooms (though they do have great views) and an unusual location eye-to-eye with Jagdish Temple.

Jagat Niwas Palace Hotel (Map p245; ☎ 2420133; mail@jagatniwaspalace.com; 23-25 Lal Ghat; r with AC Rs 1350, deluxe r Rs 1895, ste Rs 4999; 🍷) On the lakeshore, this wonderful hotel consistently receives good reports. In two converted *havelis*, rooms are charming and evocative, with carved wooden furniture and cushioned window seats; splash out on one with a lake view. The hotel also has a highly recommended rooftop restaurant (p254).

Kankarwa Haveli (Map p245; ☎ 2411457; 26 Lal Ghat; r Rs 1450-2200) This option, in an old *haveli*, is set right next to Jagat Niwas Palace Hotel. Whitewashed rooms give a sublime simplicity, but the service isn't always spot on. The pricier rooms overlook Pichola Lake, and there are home-cooked meals on request.

Lake Palace Road Area

Mahendra Prakash Hotel (Map p242; ☎ 2419811; r Rs 700-2500; 🍷) Spacious gardens, well-furnished rooms, a cheery atmosphere and friendly staff are the name of the game at Mahendra Prakash. The restaurant overlooks a step-well, and there's a great pool (Rs 150 for nonguests).

Rang Niwas Palace Hotel (Map p242; ☎ 2523890; www.rangniwaspalace.com; Lake Palace Rd; s Rs 770-1800, d Rs 1000-2300, s/d ste Rs 2700/3300; 🍷) A converted 19th-century palace in scenic gardens, Rang

Niwas boasts a tiny pool (Rs 125 for nonguests). Rooms (some are small) have carved wooden furniture, and some feature balconies with swing seats for relaxing on. The garden is soothing and the staff are usually very friendly.

Hotel Raj Palace (Map p245; ☎ 2410364; rajpalaceudr@yahoo.com; 103 Battiyanni Chotta; d Rs 950-1150, ste from Rs 1250) The Raj Palace is housed in a 300-year-old *haveli* that feels a mite more tired than old. There are comfortable doubles; the more expensive they are, the more cushioned alcoves and pillars you get. There's a leafy courtyard restaurant, which is a great place to chill out with a beer, and the staff are friendly and efficient.

Hanuman Ghat

Amet Haveli (Map p245; ☎ 2431085; regiudr@datainfosys.net; s/d/ste 2200/2700/3300) This 350-year-old heritage building on the lakeshore is a romantic choice. The beautiful rooms have window seats and small stained-glass, shuttered windows. One of Udaipur's most scenic restaurants, Ambrai (p254), is next door. Breakfast costs an additional Rs 200.

Other Areas

Mountain Ridge (Off Map p242; ☎ 3291478; www.mountainridge.in; Sisarma; d incl half-board from Rs 1900; 🍷) Out in the Udaipur countryside, perched high above Sisarma Village, this place offers rest and respite, with three double rooms and a nice pool with a view. Treks around the region can be organised from here, there's yummy food available, and, in winter, a fire roars away merrily in the fireplace.

Shikarbadi Hotel (Off Map p242; ☎ 2583201; www.hrindia.com; d/ste from Rs 2800/3500; 🍷) This option is 4km south of town on the Ahmedabad road. Once a royal hunting lodge, it's set in wilderness in the Aravalli foothills, amid relaxing gardens with pristine lawns. Some rooms have exposed stone walls, others are whitewashed, but all have refreshing rural outlooks, and some have balconies. A stud farm on the premises offers short horse rides (Rs 250 for 40 minutes). In case you need them, there's also a private airstrip and a polo field. Sip tea while you watch the wild boars gorge at 4pm each day (not far from the pool area).

TOP END

Central Udaipur

Udai Kothi (Map p245; ☎ 2432810; www.udaikothi.com; s/d/ste Rs 4600/5200/6000; 🍷) This hotel is in a

new building, but designed with lots of traditional froth (cupolas, icing-sugar stucco etc). It has a wonderful rooftop terrace, where you can dine well (p254) or swim in Udaipur's *only* rooftop pool (Rs 200 for nonguests), and there's a Jacuzzi with a view. Book a table for dinner beside the pool for highly romantic eating (a full meal costs around Rs 400 per person). Rooms are beautifully appointed and decorated with summery, pretty prints, and the hotel is full of thoughtful touches, such as bowls of floating flowers.

Shiv Niwas Palace Hotel (Map p245; ☎ 2528016; www.hrindia.com; d/d with terrace/ste from US\$175/445/547; 🍷) Once the maharaja's guest quarters, Shiv Niwas has some incredibly lavish, over-the-top rooms, filled with fountains and silver furniture. The marble pool (Rs 500 for nonguests) is gorgeous. The cheapest (palace) rooms are unexciting and not really great value – for one notch higher, go for a terrace room – or, for an all-out splurge, there are some extravagant, technicolour suites; the mirrored, antique-heavy imperial suites even come complete with small fountains and, of course, the ubiquitous dreamy four-poster bed. The hotel has an atmospheric restaurant (above), a bar and an Ayurvedic massage centre.

Fateh Prakash Palace Hotel (Map p245; ☎ 2528019; www.hrindia.com; d from US\$298; 🍷) Built in the early 20th century when Maharaja Fateh Singh reigned, the hotel has palatial suites. The cheapest double rooms are not in the main palace wing, but all have a lake view. Far more ornate rooms furnished with traditional pieces are available (some with a lake view). The intimate Gallery Restaurant (p255) has wonderful views across the lake.

Lake Palace Hotel (Map p245; ☎ 2528800; www.tajhotels.com; d from US\$550, ste US\$3500-4700; 🍷) Overblown it might be. Overpopular? That, too. But this romantic palace, seemingly floating in the lake, remains extraordinary, with its open-air courtyards, lotus ponds and a small, mango tree-shaded pool. Rooms are hung about with breezy silks and filled with carved furniture. The cheapest rooms (still coming in at well over a sobering US\$500) overlook the lily pond or terrace; the most opulent suite will make you feel like a maharaja.

Other Areas

Our pick **Devi Garh** (Off Map p242; ☎ 02953289211; Delwara; www.deviresorts.com; d/ste from US\$275/740; 🍷) Think of every conceivable

21st-century luxury, all parcelled up within a gorgeous 18th-century palace, and you've pretty much got Devi Garh. The pool, the spa, the trekking, the kite flying (kites are available at reception): you name it, they've thought of it, and they do it impeccably. Rooms, as you might expect, are the ultimate Rajasthan fantasies, the food is outstanding (if inevitably pricey) and the gliding staff will cater to your every sybaritic whim.

Udaivilas (Off Map p242; ☎ 2433300; www.oberoihotels.com; d from US\$475, ste with pool from US\$2200; 🏠 🚗 🚶) Lying 1.5km west of Udaipur, Udaivilas' sea-of-butter sculptured domes are a recent addition to the Udaipur skyline. It's a luxury boutique hotel that doesn't spare the glitz or gold leaf, and suites even come equipped with private pools. The hotel houses two excellent restaurants (see opposite).

Eating

Udaipur has scores of sun-kissed rooftop cafés, many with mesmerising lake views, as well as the ultimate in fine dining at top-end hotels.

Many budget restaurants have nightly 7pm screenings of contemporary movies or *Octopussy* – in case you'd forgotten this was partly filmed in Udaipur.

LAL GHAT AREA

Café Edelweiss (Map p245; Gangaur Ghat Rd; snacks Rs 20-80; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm) There's a morning magnetism to Edelweiss, and something rather European that attracts travellers in droves to this bright, open-fronted cubbyhole bakery. You can sit in the comfortable chairs to drink real coffee and eat cakes (the apple pie, squidgy chocolate cake and sticky cinnamon rolls all deserve special mention) along with other savoury snacks. The same owners run Savage Garden (above).

Sunrise (Map p245; cnr Lal Ghat & Gangaur Ghat Rd; dishes Rs 30-90; ☎ 8am-10pm) Set up high on top of a family house, this is the place to come for tasty, filling breakfasts, or for nice Indian dishes at other times of the day. Run by a friendly family, it also makes a terrific location for a spot of people-watching over those perfectly turned scrambled eggs.

Mayur Roofed Café (Map p245; 155 Jagdish Temple Rd; dishes Rs 40-100; ☎ 8am-11pm) Open-air Mayur with *de rigueur* scalloped arches has a great view into Jagdish Temple. The Western and Chinese options on the menu aren't really anything special, but the café is worth visiting

for the location and its good-value vegetarian thalis (Rs 55). This is one of the places to head to if you're in need of a good dose of *Octopussy*.

Jagat Niwas Palace Hotel (Map p245; ☎ 2420133; 23-25 Lal Ghat; mains around Rs 120 ☎ 9am-10pm) With great views over the lake from its well-padded window seats, this rooftop restaurant is a good bet for a romantic evening dinner: the fish dishes are fresh, well cooked and come recommended by quite a few travellers. It's worthwhile booking in advance for a good table, from which to enjoy the live sitar music and indulgent desserts.

HANUMAN GHAT AREA

Queen Café (Map p245; ☎ 2430875; 14 Bajrang Rd; ☎ 8am-10pm) This guesthouse-café, which also offers great cooking lessons (p249), makes a fabulous lunch stop on a busy sightseeing day. With delicious vegetarian cuisine cooked up by its lovely owners, there are plenty of fragrant curries to choose from, including some delicious varieties incorporating pumpkin and coconut. The chocolate desserts, too, come highly recommended – and each of these dishes comes in at just below the Rs 50 mark.

Ambrai (Map p245; Hanuman Ghat; dishes Rs 90-170; ☎ 12.30-3pm & 7.30-10.30pm) This outdoor restaurant has a superb location, and is a great place for a long, languid lunch. Unusually for restaurants in Udaipur, it sits at water level, looking directly across at the Lake Palace, Lal Ghat and the City Palace. It feels like a French park, with its wrought-iron chairs and dusty ground. The ambience is brilliant, and the North Indian food – especially the tandoori dishes – extremely tasty.

Udai Kothi (Map p245; dishes Rs 100-270) The glorious terrace restaurant set high up in the hotel of the same name (p253) has tables and cushioned alcoves around the edge of the rooftop pool and is especially romantic in the evening. Highly recommended are any of the several tandoori dishes on offer. Musicians play every evening from around 8pm between October and April.

OTHER AREAS

Ourpick Natraj Lodge (Map p242; New Bapu Bazaar; thalis from Rs 50; ☎ 10am-3pm & 6.30-11pm) Famous throughout town for its delicious all-you-can-eat Gujarati thalis, this place has been filled to the brim for two decades with devout locals, who arrive to chow down on its huge portions

UDAIPUR'S TOP FIVE ROMANTIC EATS

If you're taking your beloved out for a candlelight treat or lavish lunch, Udaipur has a whole slew of places fit to pop the question or simply indulge in the food, views and, of course, each other's company. Here are five of the best.

Jagat Niwas Palace Hotel (p253) Rooftop views of the lake, live music and delicious food.

Ambrai (opposite) Water-level garden with wonderful views.

Udai Kothi (opposite) Glamorous rooftop terrace with poolside seating.

Savage Garden (below) Lashings of flair, deep-blue walls, alcoves and unusual Indo-Western fusion dishes.

Udai Mahal (below) *Haute cuisine* in surroundings of bygone opulence.

of cheap, fresh food. The veg thali, for example, includes a whopping selection of rice, dhal, roti, pickles and at least five different vegetable dishes, all for a decent Rs 50. The only drawback is that the place is rather hard to find, tucked away in a backstreet. Your best bet is to corner a local and ask for directions: it's definitely worth the hunt.

Berry's (Map p242; Chetak Circle; dishes Rs 50-270; ☎ 9am-11pm) A calm and fairly refined restaurant with an impressive brass door and lots of international options on the menu (including tasty burgers), Berry's is enhanced by white tablecloths and a burbling fish tank. It's a better place for dinner than for lunch, as tables are full then and the atmosphere is at its best; for dinner, the Indian menu is recommended over the Chinese and Italian dishes.

Savage Garden (Map p245; 22 Inside Chandpol; dishes Rs 100-170; ☎ 11am-10pm) Tucked away in the backstreets (but well signposted) near Chandpol, Savage Garden continues to receive rave reviews from backpackers, particularly for its winning line in soups, nice fresh salads, and unusual fusion pasta dishes, which feature spaghetti and penne topped with Indian-spiced sauces. It's unusually atmospheric, set as it is in a 250-year-old *haveli* with peacock-blue walls, and laid out with bowls of flowers and tables in alcoves or in a pleasant courtyard. Staff are quick and courteous, and there's a great bar for a cold beer after a day seeing Udaipur's fairy-tale sights.

Shiv Niwas Palace Hotel (Map p245; dishes around Rs 40; ☎ 6.30-10.30am, 12.30-2.30pm & 7.30-10.30pm) Most captivating in the evening, this formal restaurant in Shiv Niwas Palace Hotel (p253) has indoor seating, but it's best out in the pleasant open-air courtyard by the pool. Indian classical music is performed nightly. You can take your pick from an extensive buffet or the regular menu, though the romantic ambience, rather than the food, is the main reason to come here.

Surya Mahal (Off Map p242; dishes around Rs 600; ☎ noon-10pm) For a big romantic splash, it's worth heading to Udaivilas' Surya Mahal, (p253) a 1930s-style place serving delicious Thai, Continental and loosely fusion cuisine in high-ceilinged opulence. If you're in the mood for a picnic with a difference, the restaurant can also arrange a picnic basket lunch, to be eaten on a gondola in the middle of a lake.

Udai Mahal (Off Map p242; dishes around Rs 700; ☎ 7-10pm) Udai Mahal, also in Udaivilas, is a candlelight treat, specialising in refined Rajasthani and North Indian food. Like everything at Udaivilas, this is opulence at its best, both in location and cuisine.

Lake Palace Hotel (Map p245; ☎ 2528800; ☎ 7.30-10.30pm) In the hotel of the same name (p253), this is Udaipur's most famous dining experience, but one that has left a few too many travellers feeling that it's overpriced and overhyped. The sumptuous buffet lunch costs a weighty Rs 2000 (including boat crossing), while a three-course dinner comes in at Rs 3000. Reservations are essential – at least a day before you wish to dine (reservations can be taken at the desk on the City Jetty) – and dress is smart casual. For something especially unusual, enquire about the tiny floating pontoon on Pichola Lake, which holds lunch or dinner for US\$75 per person (maximum four people). If you don't want a waiter hanging around, you can request a cordless phone to be left in case you need anything. Be sure to wear something warm here, though, if you're dining at night in winter.

Gallery Restaurant (Map p245; high tea Rs 255; ☎ 2528019; ☎ high tea 3-6pm) In the palace enclosure (admission Rs 25), at the Fateh Prakash Palace Hotel (p253), this elegant little restaurant has beguiling views across Pichola Lake. You can eat within Durbar Hall itself or out on the terrace in the sunshine. Ignore the main meals: the reason to come here is for the best cream teas in town; they include sandwiches

and biscuits, as well as the all-important combination of scones, jam and cream.

Drinking

There are plenty of good places for a beer in Udaipur: most guesthouses have a roof terrace serving up cold Kingfishers, while the top-end places have predictably plush options, though not all allow nonguests during the evening.

Paanera Bar (Map p245; ☎ 11am-11pm) At the Shiv Niwas Palace Hotel (p253), this is a relaxingly plush poolside bar equipped with soft sofas and the inflated drinks tariffs you'd expect of a top-end joint.

Sunset View Terrace (Map p245; City Palace; admission Rs 25; ☎ 11am-11pm) On a terrace overlooking Pichola Lake, this is *the* place to be at sunset – it's perfect gin-and-tonic territory. The food is overpriced and nothing special, so stick closely to drinks, and get here just before 7.30pm to nab a table for the live music that's performed every night.

Entertainment

Dharohar (Map p245; Gangaur Ghat; adult/child Rs 60/30, camera/video Rs 10/50; ☎ 7pm) Don't miss out on this: against the wonderful backdrop of Bagore-ki-Haveli are staged mesmerising Rajasthani dances, including traditional Mewari, Bhil and western Rajasthani dances, by talented performers who can whirl better than most dervishes.

Meera Kala Mandir (Map p242; ☎ 2583176; Sector 11, Ahmedabad Rd; admission Rs 60) Rather touristy one-hour Rajasthani folk dance and music performances take place here at 7pm Monday to Saturday from August to April. An autorickshaw from Jagdish Temple costs Rs 30.

Cheetak Cinema (Map p242; Chetak Circle) This is one of a number of cinemas in Udaipur, if you feel like taking in the latest Bollywood hit. Tickets for performances cost about Rs 60. Check out screening times at the box office (open all day).

Shopping

Udaipur offers glorious shopping potential, with masses of little shops selling jumbles of things from cloth lanterns to exquisite antique jewellery.

The town is known for its local crafts, particularly miniature paintings in the Rajput-Mughal style: shops line Lake Palace Rd and cluster around Jagdish Temple. The miniatures are painted on cloth, marble,

wood, paper and even leaves, and Udaipur is known as one of the best places in the state to buy them. There are also many leather- and cloth-bound books of handmade paper (from Jaipur) for sale, in every design imaginable. Silver jewellery, carpets, block-printed fabrics, marble items, wooden figures and papier-mâché are other popular buys. Shops along Lake Palace Rd also sell small, beautiful, brightly painted wooden Hindu gods, perfect for portable presents. Be prepared, however, to bargain hard, as most places will probably quote you an initially ridiculous price: as a general rule, aim to pay around 50% of the opening asking price.

Interesting and less tourist-focused bazaars spread out from the clock tower (Map p245). Bara Bazaar sells silver and gold, as well as saris and fabrics. Traditional shoes are sold at Mochiwada, and more silver at Battiyaani. Colourful Mandi Market, a sprawling bazaar, is the centre for an aromatic assault of brightly coloured loose spices.

Sadhna (Map p245; www.sevamandir.org; Mangi Kee Baudi, Kasaron Ki; ☎ 10am-7pm) This is the outlet for Seva Mandir, an NGO set up in 1969 to help rural women. The small shop sells attractive and individual fixed-price textiles such as clothes, cushion covers and bags; profits go to the artisans and towards community development work.

Rajasthali (Chetak Circle (Map p242; ☎ 10.30am-7pm Mon-Sat); Jagdish Temple (Map p245; ☎ 10am-6.30pm) This fixed-price government emporium is worth dropping into to gauge handicraft prices.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are daily **Indian Airlines** (Map p242; ☎ 2410999; www.indian-airlines.org; Delhi Gate; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) flights to Delhi (US\$115). The airline also has direct flights that go to Jodhpur (US\$75; three times per week), Jaipur (US\$90; daily except Sunday) and Mumbai (US\$138; daily). **Jet Airways** (Map p242; ☎ 2561105; www.jetairways.com; Blue Circle Business Centre, Madhuban), which is located near the main post office, close to Chetak Circle, and **Kingfisher** (☎ toll free 18001800101; www.flykingfisher.com) have similar flights for similar prices. See p376 for more information on flying within Rajasthan.

It's strongly advisable to make flight bookings well in advance during the busy tourist season; it's usually cheapest to book online.

BUS

Frequent **Rajasthan State Road Transport Corporation** (RSRTC; ☎ 2484191; www.rsrtc.gov.in) buses travel from Udaipur to other regional centres, as well as to Delhi and Ahmedabad. If you use these buses, take an express as the ordinary buses take an incredibly long time, making innumerable detours to various towns off the main route, and can be very uncomfortable, rattling and overcrowded. For long-distance travel it's best to use deluxe or express buses, but you'll need to book ahead. Destinations served by express and deluxe buses are listed in the table below. Where only one price is given, there are only express, and no deluxe, buses.

Private buses operate to Ahmedabad (Rs 150/200/150 in ordinary/AC/sleeper, six hours), Mumbai (Rs 400/600 in ordinary/sleeper, 16 hours), Delhi (Rs 200/350 in ordinary/sleeper, 14 hours), Mt Abu (Rs 100 in ordinary, five hours) and Jodhpur (Rs 100/150 in ordinary/sleeper, six hours).

TAXI

Many drivers will show you a list of 'official' rates to places such as Mt Abu, Chittorgarh and Jodhpur, but shop around (Rs 5 per km is a good starting point) for the most competitive rate. Remember that taxis will charge you return fares even if you're only going one way. For useful tips on hiring a taxi and driver, see p380.

TRAIN

The daily No 2964 *Nizamuddin Mewar Express* (Rs 210/591/853/1509 sl/3AC/2AC/1AC/) departs Udaipur for Delhi at 6.35pm, arriving the next morning at Nizamuddin station at 6.10am. The daily No 2966 *Udaipur City*

Jaipur Express leaves Udaipur at 9.35pm and arrives at Jaipur (Rs 142/399/576 sl/3AC/2AC) at 7.10am, stopping at Kota at an inconvenient 2.15am along the way. More services may be running in the near future; to check, the train enquiries number is ☎ 2527390.

Getting Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is 25km east of town. A taxi will cost at least Rs 250; there's no airport bus.

AUTORICKSHAW

These are unmetered, so you should agree on a fare before setting off – the standard fare anywhere in town is around Rs 30 to 35. There are prepaid autorickshaw stands at the bus and train stations. It costs Rs 200 to hire an autorickshaw for a day of local sightseeing.

Udaipur's autorickshaw drivers are keen on the hotel commission malarkey, so be extra vigilant that you're being taken to where you really want to go.

BICYCLE & MOTORCYCLE

A cheap and environmentally friendly way to buzz around is by bike; many guesthouses can arrange bikes to rent, costing around Rs 30 per day. Motorbikes, meanwhile, are great for exploring the surrounding countryside. **Heera Cycle Store** (Map p245; ☎ 2523525; ☎ 7.30am-9pm), near Hotel Badi Haveli, hires out bicycles/mopeds/motorcycles for Rs 30/150/350 per day.

NORTH OF UDAIPUR Eklingji & Nagda

The interesting village of Eklingji – only 22km and a short bus ride north of Udaipur – has a fascinating ancient temple complex

BUSES FROM UDAIPUR

Destination	Fare (express/deluxe, Rs)	Approximate duration (hr)
Agra	121/170	6
Ahmedabad	150	6
Ajmer	131/180	8
Bundi	155	7
Chittorgarh	70/68	3/2½
Delhi	300/470	14
Jaipur	191/231	9
Jodhpur	135/150	8
Kota	170	8
Mt Abu	105	6

EXPLORING AROUND UDAIPUR

Around Udaipur lie huge, rugged hills – cut through by narrow roads snaking across an expansive landscape – that open up to impressive views across the countryside. It makes a fantastic excursion to ramble out into the rural areas, stopping along the way at small villages and little-visited temples. The best way to travel like this is by motorbike, since you can explore completely at your leisure. If you're not keen on motorbikes, try to find a willing and knowledgeable autorickshaw driver who'll be able to stop at all the right places.

Heading north, you could spend a day visiting **Madar Lakes**, around 15km from the city; head to Madar Village, from which there are two tracks, leading to **Little Madar Dam** or **Great Madar Dam**, each with splendid views across the expanse of water. Venturing west out of Udaipur, head towards the village of Sisarma (where the excellent Mountain Ridge guest house is based; see p253), then head onwards towards the tiny village of Dhar, from which the road leads to the **Ubeshwarji**, a revered Shiva shrine that attracts many pilgrims. Leaving Ubeshwarji, the road continues on through a remote hill pass; seek out local help along this road to get directions to **Kailashwarji**, a magnificent waterfall that plunges 50m, straight out of *The Jungle Book*. The small villages and temples you hit on the way may not be spectacular, but it's an adventure – and the journey, as they say, is the destination.

attracting lots of pilgrims but few tourists. The **Shiva temple** (admission free, ☎ 4-6.30am, 10.30am-1.30pm & 5-7.30pm), with its 108 small shrines, was originally built in AD 734, although its present form dates from the 15th-century rule of Maharaja Raimal. Constructed from sandstone and marble, the walled complex has an elaborately pillared hall under a large pyramidal roof and features a four-faced Shiva image of black marble. Note, though, that opening hours change quite regularly, so you might have to wait an hour or two if you arrive at the wrong time of day. Avoid the temple on Monday (an auspicious day for devotees), as it can get very crowded; the maharaja of Udaipur himself pays a private visit to the temple on Monday evening. Guides are available at the temple; bank on paying around Rs 50 to 100 to engage their services. Photography is not permitted.

Several kilometres further on from Eklingji, at Nagda, are some 10th-century temples. The 11th-century **Jain temple of Adbudji** remains very fine, despite damage at the hands of the Mughals, and contains a 15th-century black-marble idol of *tirthankar* Shanti Nath. About 500m away are a pair of **Saas-Bahu Temples** (the name meaning 'mother-in-law-daughter-in-law') dating from the 9th century and featuring some fine, intricate carvings, including a number of erotic figures. You can reach these temples by hiring a bicycle in Eklingji. There's a bike-hire shop in the village; a day's rental should cost around Rs 30. There are also some small temples submerged in the

nearby lake; after a poor monsoon they're completely exposed.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Local buses travel from Udaipur (Rs 10, 30 minutes) to Eklingji every hour from 5am to 10pm.

Haldighati

This **battlefield site** (Rs 30; ☎ 8am-8pm), 40km north of Udaipur, is where Maharaja Pratap defied the superior Mughal forces of Akbar in 1576. The site is marked by a small *chhatra* that commemorates the warrior's horse, Chetak. Although badly wounded and exhausted, this loyal steed carried Maharaja Pratap to safety before collapsing and dying. There's not a lot to see, but the historic site attracts many Indian visitors. Haldighati can be reached by bus from Nathdwara (Rs 12, 30 minutes); the site is 2km southeast of the town.

Nathdwara

☎ 02953

The 18th-century Krishna temple of **Sri Nathji** (admission free, ☎ 5-5.30am, 7.15-7.45am, 9.15-9.45am, 11.30am-noon, 3.30-4pm, 4.30-5pm & 6-6.30pm) stands at Nathdwara, 48km north of Udaipur. It's another place that draws many pilgrims but sees few tourists; photography is not permitted. The shrine has special significance for Vaishnavites (followers of Vishnu or of his incarnations). The black-stone Krishna image housed in the temple was brought here from Mathura in 1669 to protect it from the destructive impulses of the

Mughal ruler Aurangzeb. According to legend, the getaway vehicle, a wagon, sank into the ground up to the axles as it was passing through Nathdwara. The priests realised that this was a sign from Krishna that the image did not want to travel any further; accordingly, the Sri Nathji Temple was built on the spot.

Attendants treat the black-stone image like a delicate child, waking it up in the morning, washing it, dressing it, offering it specially prepared meals and putting it to sleep, all at precise times throughout the day. It's a very popular pilgrimage site, and the temple opens and closes around the image's daily routine. It gets very crowded from 3.30pm to 4pm when Krishna gets up after a siesta.

Nathdwara is also well known for its *pichwai* paintings, which were produced after the image of Krishna was brought to the town in the 17th century. These bright screen paintings, with their rather static images, were usually created on handspun fabric and intended to be hung behind the idol – they usually show Sri Nathji decked out in different outfits. As with many other schools of painting, numerous inferior reproductions of the *pichwai* paintings are created specifically for the lucrative tourist market.

SLEEPING & EATING

RTDC Hotel Gokul (☎ 230917; Lal Bagh; dm/s/d Rs 50/450/600, superdeluxe d Rs 800; ☎) Considering it's a Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation (RTDC) establishment, this small hotel is surprisingly good. It's set in quiet gardens, around 4km from the temple. A bar and a restaurant are on site.

RTDC Hotel Yatrika Mangla (☎ 231119; dm/s/d Rs 70/350/450) The Yatrika Mangla is only around 1km from the temple, so it's more convenient than Gokul, though plainer and less appealing.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are frequent daily buses from Udaipur to Nathdwara (Rs 28, one hour). If you're coming by car, it costs Rs 10 to park at the temple.

Kankroli & Rajsamand Lake

At Kankroli, 66km north of Udaipur, there's a beautiful **temple** devoted to Dwarkadhish (an incarnation of Krishna), which is similar to the temple at Nathdwara; the opening hours are similarly erratic.

Nearby is the large **Rajsamand Lake**, created by a dam constructed in 1660 by Maharaja Raj Singh (r 1652–80). There are numerous ornamental arches and beautifully carved *chhatris* set along the huge *bund* (embankment), which is 335m long and 13m high, along with several interesting old inscriptions.

There are frequent RSRTC buses from Udaipur (Rs 25, 2½ hours).

Kumbalgarh

☎ 02954

About 84km north of Udaipur, **Kumbalgarh** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 9am-6pm) is a fantastic, remote fort, fulfilling romantic expectations and vividly summoning up the chivalrous, warlike Rajput era. Built by Rana Kumbha in the 15th century, the isolated fort is perched at an amazing 1100m, from where endless views melt into blue distance. The journey to the fort, a trip along twisting roads through the Aravalli Hills, is a highlight in itself.

Kumbalgarh was the most important Mewar fort after Chittorgarh, and the rulers, sensibly, used to retreat here in times of danger. Here, a baby prince of Mewar was hidden from an assassin (see *The Ultimate Sacrifice*, p244). Not surprisingly, Kumbalgarh was only taken once in its entire history, and even then it took the combined armies of Amber, Marwar and Mughal emperor Akbar to breach its strong defence and they only managed to hang onto it for two days.

The fort's thick walls stretch some 36km; they're wide enough in some places for eight horses to ride abreast and they enclose around 360 temples, as well as palaces, gardens, *baoris* and 700 cannon bunkers. Renovated in the 19th century by Maharaja Fateh Singh, it's worth taking a leisurely walk in the large compound, which has some interesting ruins and is very peaceful.

If you stay in Kumbalgarh, you can trek from your hotel to the fort, a dramatic way to approach it. It's a steep climb up to the entrance, so don't forget to buy your ticket first, near the start of the road from the car park. It costs Rs 25 to park a car.

Nearby there's also the large, densely wooded **Kumbalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/100; ☎ sunrise-sunset), known for its leopards and wolves. The scarcity of water holes between March and June makes this the best time to see animals. Wildlife includes chowsingha (four-horned deer), leopards,

THE STEP-WELLS OF RAJASTHAN

Ten wells equal one *vapi*, 10 *vapis* equal one pond
Ten ponds equal one son and 10 sons equal one tree

Vedic verse

Step-wells, or *baoris* as they are also known, are widespread throughout Rajasthan, and you will find them located in the south, not only the more famous examples at Bundi – where there are several dozen – but also at smaller, more out-of-the-way locations such as within the atmospheric, remote fort remains at Kumbalgarh and in quiet, pastoral Narlai. The term *baori*, when used to describe a well of this kind, usually means it has some sort of connection to the religious community.

Building a step-well is lauded in the ancient Hindu scriptures as an act of great merit, the wealthy having built wells to gain kudos and good karma. Although the distinctions have become blurred, there are several other terms used to describe these wells, including *kund*, which generally refers to a structural lake/tank, and *vapi* (also known as a *vav* or *wav*), a water supply accessed via a series of steps.

In addition to their essential function as a water supply in arid areas, step-wells were frequently attached to temples and shrines, enabling devotees to bathe and purify themselves. Many formed part of a larger complex that included accommodation for weary travellers, constructed in far-reaching trails along caravan routes. The more elaborate *baoris* have intricate pillars; steps built in artistic configurations; and rooms, corridors, galleries and platforms cut into the various levels. The spiritual and life-giving properties of step-wells, and their pivotal role in daily life, meant that many were adorned with carvings and statues of gods and goddesses, with Ganesh, Hanuman, Durga and Mahishasura the most commonly represented deities. The presence of these wells served to transform the everyday necessity of collecting water into a social occasion, and women would dress to impress in their finest outfits just to go out for the day's supply – the equivalent of going grocery shopping today in your best evening wear.

sloth bears and various bird species. You need a permit from the forest department in nearby Kelwara to enter (ask at your hotel for advice). All hotels can arrange three-hour horse or jeep safaris. **Shivika Lake Hotel** (☎ 285078; www.shivikalakehotel.com) in Ranakpur arranges jeep tours at a cost of Rs 700 per person, which also covers admission fees.

SLEEPING

Thandiberi Forest Guest House (d Rs 350) This is a plain and basic guesthouse but it's situated within the sanctuary. Bookings should be made in advance through the deputy chief wildlife warden (☎ 0294-2453686) in Udaipur.

Kumbhal Castle (☎ 242171; s/d Rs 800/980, deluxe Rs 1400/2000) The modern Kumbhal Castle, 3km from the fort, has plain but pleasant modern white rooms featuring curly iron beds, bright bedspreads and window seats, shared balconies and good views.

Aodhi Hotel (☎ 242341; www.hrindia.com; s/d from Rs 3500/4000, ste from Rs 5000; 🍷 🍷 🍷) About 5km from the fort is this appealing, blissfully tranquil

hotel with an inviting pool and winter campfires. It's an ideal place to read a book or play a leisurely game of cards, though the rooms themselves are very much on the kitsch side (especially the tiger- and parrot-themed suites). A jeep safari from here costs Rs 1200, a three-hour visit to the sanctuary is Rs 4000 (maximum of five people), and trekking is around Rs 1000 per day for five people. Nonguests can dine in the restaurant, where good standard Indian fare is the pick of the options on offer, or have a drink in the cosy Chopal Bar.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Several RSRTC buses go to/from Udaipur (Rs 35, 3½ hours); some leave from the bus stand (Map p242) and others from Chetak Circle (Map p242). Some services stop in Kelwara, 7km away, and some at the Aodhi Hotel, from where it's a 5km walk; check with your bus driver before boarding in Udaipur. There's one direct bus from the RSRTC bus stand, which leaves at 12.45pm and takes four hours, dropping passengers off at the Aodhi Hotel.

Hiring a taxi from Udaipur means you can visit both Ranakpur and Kumbalgarh in a day. Many travellers ask around to make up a group and share the expense (taxis take four to five people and cost Rs 1200 for a round trip).

Ranakpur

☎ 02934

In a remote and plunging wooded valley, reached down a twisting road, **Ranakpur** (admission free, camera/video Rs 50/100; 🕒 Jains 6am-7pm, non-Jains noon-5pm) is one of India's biggest and most important Jain temples. The main temple called the **Chaumukha Mandir** (Four-Faced Temple), is dedicated to Adinath and was built in 1439. It's an incredible milk-white marble building, a complicated series of 29 halls supported by a forest of 1444 pillars, no two of which are alike. The interior is completely covered in knotted, lovingly wrought carving. The pale interior has a marvellously calming sense of space and harmony. Remember that shoes, cigarettes and all leather articles must be left at the entrance.

Within the complex are two other Jain temples, dedicated to **Neminath** (22nd *tirthankar*) and **Parasnath** (23rd *tirthankar*), and a nearby **Sun Temple**. About 1km from the main complex is **Amba Mata Temple**.

The complex is well worth a visit and makes a convenient stop between Jodhpur and Udaipur. It's 90km from Udaipur and is, for those with the time, a great place to kick back for a few days. You can visit Kumbalgarh and its nearby wildlife sanctuary from here, and trek into the hills. One four-hour trek leads to a Parshurama Shiva Temple in a cave. Guided trekking trips cost around Rs 500 for a day and can be arranged through Shivika Lake Hotel.

SLEEPING & EATING

If you don't mind the discomfort of an old mattress on a concrete floor, you can stay at the temple complex itself for a bargain Rs 10, along with the legions of Jain pilgrims. For an extra Rs 20, you'll get a simple vegetarian dinner, served daily at 5pm. Aside from this, however, accommodation in the area is all fairly pricey.

Shivika Lake Hotel (☎ 285078; www.shivikalakehotel.com; r Rs 600-1600; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Offering small, cosy cottages with pretty décor, and set amid leafy gardens, Shivika Lake is a welcoming, rustic place to stay. Five tents with private bathrooms are also available. The warm,

knowledgeable family arranges forest safaris (a three-day safari costs around Rs 1950 per person per night, all included) and guides for short or longer treks. The hotel has a good restaurant (dishes Rs 40 to 100) and a nice, refreshing pool.

Ranakpur Hill Resort (☎ 286411; www.ranakpurhillresort.com; Ranakpur Rd; s/d/tent Rs 1500/2000/1800; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This is a smart, traditional-style place, with plenty of frills and a pleasant pool in the garden, around which are ranged the simple but well-decorated tented rooms. The rooms are well adorned and have nice, new bathrooms, and the beds are extra comfy.

Fateh Bagh (in Udaipur ☎ 0294-2528008; www.hrindia.com; Ranakpur Rd; s/d Rs 3000/3500, ste from Rs 5000; 🍷 🍷 🍷) It might amaze you to know that this palatial building carved from peachy sandstone is at not its original site: the original palace, built by Rawla Koshilav near Jodhpur in 1802, was transferred here piece by piece and reconstructed – 65,000 pieces were moved in total. The result is an impressive and opulent small hotel, with rooms decorated comfortably in antique pieces and local crafts. The deluxe suites are particularly impressive: novel features include a swing bed in the honeymoon suite.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A good number of buses run to Ranakpur from Udaipur (Rs 45, three hours, hourly), and stop right outside the temple, but it's hard to visit both Ranakpur and Kumbalgarh by public transport in a day. A taxi taking in both from Udaipur costs around Rs 1200.

There are express buses to/from Mt Abu (Rs 90, five hours) and Jodhpur (Rs 95, five hours).

All the accommodation listed in Ranakpur is too far from the bus stop to be able to walk there. Jeeps can sometimes be hired at the bus stop (ask at the shop), or call your hotel and see if you can be picked up.

Narlai

☎ 02934

Quiet yet spectacular, Narlai makes a nice base for exploring the various attractions in the countryside around Udaipur. Opposite the Rawla Narlai hotel is a mammoth granite rock that's dotted with caves and temples; the village is also home to a good *baori* and several old temples and offers lots of opportunities for quiet walks.

Rawla Narlai (☎ 282425; in Delhi ☎ 011-26221419; www.ajitbhawan.com; r Rs 2400-2900, ste Rs 3000) was once the hunting lodge of the rulers of Narlai. This is the main reason to stay in Narlai: it's a beautifully maintained place, with 26 appealing, antique-furnished rooms. These are often decorated with frescoes, stained glass and hanging baubles and lead onto balconies and porches that face the huge granite outcrop opposite. Sumptuous Indian dinners can be eaten poolside, or, if you're in the mood, opt for the 'themed dinner' which involves a magic show, a countryside bullock-cart ride, and local traditional entertainment, all while you tuck into your thali.

There are buses from Udaipur (Rs 62, two hours) and Jodhpur (Rs 110, four hours).

Ghanerao

☎ 02934

About 12km from Narlai is little Ghanerao, dominated by a castle that has been converted into yet another charismatic hotel. **Mahavira Temple**, a 10th-century Jain temple devoted to the founder of Jainism, is also worth visiting. Splendidly set among woodland, it's flanked by two mighty elephants, and its walls are richly carved with warriors, horses and gods riding chariots.

Ghanerao Royal Castle (☎ 284035; www.ghaeraooyalcastle.com; s/d/ste Rs 2000/2500/3000) is the place to stay in town. Carved from red sandstone, this creaky old place has bags of atmosphere in its ambling corridors, courtyards, frescoes, and marble pavilion in a central courtyard where palace musicians used to perform. Though it can seem a little deserted in anything but the high, high season, this only adds to the abandoned-castle experience, especially in the evenings, when eerie shadows play in its courtyards. The whitewashed rooms are a little bare but comfortable, with arches, antiques, coloured glass and tall ceilings. Near the castle are cenotaphs of former rulers.

To get to Ghanerao, take an RSRTC bus from Udaipur to Sadri (Rs 75) or Desuri (Rs 75), then a jeep taxi (about Rs 80) from there.

SOUTH OF UDAIPUR Rishabdeo

☎ 02907

The village of Rishabdeo, about 65km south of Udaipur, is a significant pilgrimage centre with a magical atmosphere, making it

well worth a visit. The village is home to a 15th-century **Jain temple** (admission free; ☎ 7am-9.30pm) dedicated to Rishabdeo, a reincarnation of Mahavira, the 24th and last of the Jain *tirthankars*. Mahavira founded Jainism around 500 BC and is also worshipped as a reincarnation of Vishnu. The temple features a beautiful silver image of Rishabdeo and some lovely carvings, including 52 images of idols. Two large, glossy, black-stone elephants flank the temple's entrance, two more are beyond them, and another huge one is inside. The interior is multipillared and decorated with carvings in white marble. A short walk through a lane lined with small shops leads you there.

RTDC Hotel Gavri (☎ 230145; dm Rs 50, s/d from Rs 600/700, with AC Rs 900/1000; ♿) is about 500m from the temple. The rooms are functional, if thoroughly unspectacular, and there are pleasant lawns surrounding the building.

There are buses going to Rishabdeo from Udaipur (Rs 35, 1½ hours).

Bambora

☎ 0294

About 45km to the southeast of Udaipur, the sleepy village of Bambora has a dramatic 250-year-old fort that has been converted into another impressive hotel.

Karni Fort (☎ 2398220; s/d from Rs 2200/3000; ♿) is in the middle of nowhere, dramatically plumped on a hilltop. Inside the fort walls the main building rises up like a grand country house. All rooms are light, bright and colourfully decorated; the best come with stunning panoramic views. There's a good restaurant, an old underground 'secret' passageway, and an alluring marble swimming pool with four water-spurting marble elephants and a central pavilion, set in the hilly garden. Staff are extremely helpful, and a range of jeep and trekking options are on offer.

Jaisamand Lake

☎ 0294

A startlingly vast tract of water 48km south-east of Udaipur, Jaisamand Lake lies between wooded hills, surveyed by yje Udaipur maharanis' summer palaces. At 88 sq km, the artificial lake is one of Asia's largest, created by damming the Gomti River and built in the 17th century by Maharaja Jai Singh (who, on the day of its inauguration, went for a leisurely stroll distributing gold – his own

weight of it, in fact – to the locals) and is today around 14km long and 9km wide in places. There are beautiful marble *chhatris* around the 330m-long, 35m-high embankment, fronted by carved elephants, and today busy with a scattering of people waiting for boats and small boys selling food with which to feed the teeming fish. The small hilltop palace is Rothi Rani; the larger palace, near the dam, is Hawa Mahal.

The lake features a variety of bird life, and the small nearby **Jaisamand Wildlife Sanctuary** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/80, camera Rs 200; ☎ 10am-5pm) is home to leopards, deer, wild boars and crocodiles. The forests here used to be a favourite hunting ground of the former rulers of Mewar, and elaborate hunting expeditions would frequently take place. It costs Rs 65/3 to take a car/bicycle inside; it's not, however, well set up for visitors, with no information or guides available.

There are boats available for lake tours – a small/medium/large circuit of the lake costs Rs 30/50/100. This lake could be great for bird-watching, but if you take a boat out you'll find the engine noise a hindrance; see if you can negotiate a price for taking the boat out then sitting for an hour or two, engine cut, to watch the birds emerge.

SLEEPING

Forest Guest House (r Rs 450) Run by the wildlife sanctuary, this guesthouse has large double rooms and fantastic views over the lake. It has a dilapidated air, though, and the bathrooms are a little dirty, but the location is worth it. You must contact the deputy chief wildlife warden (☎ 0294-2453686) in Udaipur for reservations.

Jaisamand Island Resort (☎ 2431401; www.lakend.com; s/d/ste from Rs 2200/3300/4400; ♿) Modern and imposing but somewhat rough around the edges, this hotel is in a wonderful, secluded island location, 20 minutes by boat across the lake. Rooms are comfortable but they're run down, rather dark and hence overpriced. However, all have great views over the water. The swimming pool has a brilliant setting, right beside the water's edge. Discounts are often available. A return boat ride to the resort costs Rs 150 (nonguests are welcome to visit). The only dining option for guests is at the hotel restaurant, which serves up reasonable Indian, European and Chinese dishes; mains are between Rs 150 and Rs 450.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are frequent buses from Udaipur (Rs 25, 1½ hours, hourly).

Sitamata Wildlife Sanctuary

If you want to get away from it all, this is the place to visit. Lying 90km southeast of Udaipur, Sitamata Wildlife Sanctuary covers 423 sq km of mainly deciduous forest, which is known for its ancient teak trees. Wildlife includes deer, sambars, leopards, caracals, flying squirrels and wild boars. Few tourists make it out this way, which is part of its charm. If you're in search of picturesque countryside, peace and plenty of fresh air, this place is ideal.

Fort Dhariyawad (☎ 02950-220050; s/d Rs 1700/1950, deluxe r from Rs 2335) is in the Sitamata sanctuary area, 120km from Udaipur. It's housed in a 16th-century fort founded by Prince Sahasmal, second son of Maharaja Pratap, and offers great all-round creature comforts, though the beds aren't the comfiest. The restaurant here serves tasty Indian food, and meals can be taken in the enchantingly lit gardens. Jeep safaris can be arranged to places of interest in the area, and the owners can also arrange tented accommodation for the Baneshwar Fair (p264).

There are RSRTC buses from Udaipur to Dhariyawad (Rs 60, 3½ hours).

Dungarpur

☎ 02964

About 110km south of Udaipur, attractive Dungarpur, the City of Hills, was founded in the 13th century when Rawal Veer Singh Dev took over this area from the Bhils. It's set in the foothills of the Aravalli Hills, and the landscape is wild and stony, dotted with cacti and hardy trees.

The town's wonderful, deserted, crumbling old palace, **Juna Mahal** (admission Rs 100; ☎ 9am-5pm), was built in stages between the 13th and 18th centuries, on a 450m-high rocky peak, and is filled with old frescoes and paintings. The fascinating murals include the Kamasutra, hidden discreetly in a cupboard, and there are willow-pattern plates embedded in the walls. The Aam Khas (main living room) has impressive mirrorwork and glass inlays. The former royal hunting lodge, on a nearby hilltop, has sensational views over the town and its many temples. Get your ticket to Juna Mahal from Udaipur Bilas Palace.

Also of interest is the **Rajmata Devendra Kunwer State Museum** (admission Rs 5, free Mon; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Thu), near the hospital, which has a sculpture gallery featuring pieces from as far back as the 6th century, including a black-stone Shiva. There are also some interesting old photographs of the area.

The multilayered **Deo Somnath Temple**, about 25km north of town, dates back to the 12th century and is worth a visit for its beautiful, harmonious architecture. Note the amazing centuries-old banyan tree opposite the temple.

SLEEPING

Hotel Pratibha Palace (☎ 230775; Shastri Colony; d Rs 150-200) This is the best budget hotel in town. It has tiny rooms that are nothing flash but aren't bad value for money.

Udai Bilas Palace (☎ 230808; www.udaibilaspalace.com; s/d/ste Rs 3500/4450/5300; ☎ ☎) Set on the sparkling Gaib Sagar River, this fantastical 18th-century palace (with beautifully carved balconies built of *pareva*, Dungarpur's blue-stone) has been partly converted into a hotel by Maharaja Kumar Harshvardhan Singh. It's built around the astonishing Ek Thambia Mahal (One-Pillared Palace), and the rooms retain their original Art Deco and 1940s furnishings (some have balconies facing the lake). The previous maharaja's penchant for hunting is underlined by the stuffed beasts that watch your progress around the hotel, including in the long dining hall, where the exquisite ceiling is made from Burmese teak. The gorgeous outdoor pool is so designed that it seems to merge with the lake as you swim. Bicycle hire and bird-watching excursions can be organised for guests. Meals, which take the form of lavish buffets, can be eaten either indoors or poolside; breakfast comes in at Rs 300, lunch at Rs 500 and dinner costs Rs 575 per person.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Frequent RSRTC buses travel to and from Udaipur (Rs 60, three hours, hourly).

Galiakot

About 50km southeast of Dungarpur is the important Muslim pilgrimage centre of Galiakot. This small town is famous for the **tomb of the saint Fakruddin**, who spread the word of Mohammed in the 10th century. Each year, thousands of local and international Bohra

Muslim pilgrims flock here to pay homage to the saint at his white-marble shrine.

There are daily express buses from Udaipur (Rs 65, three hours).

Baneshwar

The town of Baneshwar lies at the confluence of three holy rivers: the Mahi, Som and Jakhm. In January/February the week-long **Baneshwar Fair** is held at the Baneshwar Temple, about 80km from Dungarpur. The fair honours Vishnu incarnated as Mavji – there's a nearby Vishnu temple believed to have been built where Mavji meditated – and the event attracts thousands of Bhil tribal people. Music, dance and fairground rides go on alongside the rituals of the festival.

There are regular buses from Dungarpur (Rs 10, one hour) to Baneshwar.

MT ABU

☎ 02974 / pop 22,045 / elev 1200m

According to one legend, Mt Abu is as old as the Himalaya range itself, named after Arbuda, a mighty serpent who saved Nandi, Shiva's revered bull, from plunging into an abyss. According to another, it was in Mt Abu that the four Rajput fire clans, the Chauhans, Solankis, Pramaras and Pratihars, were created by Brahmin priests from a seething pit of fire.

The town is certainly unlike anywhere else in Rajasthan, a green, serene and welcome retreat during summer from the scorching temperatures and arid beige terrain elsewhere. The state's only hill station, it lies close to the Gujarat border, reached by way of a winding road through massive wooded hills (a haven for bears, langurs, hyenas and the like), the rolling alpine slopes a revelation after so many baking desert plains. Gujarat and Rajasthan's favourite holiday getaway, Mt Abu is a particular hit with honeymooners and middle-class Gujarati families; unlike the hill stations of northern India, you won't find many Western travellers here. The beautiful landscape around the town, though – home to some rare plant life, including graceful exotic orchids – makes it well worth exploring, and there are several excellent short treks that start from here.

Mt Abu's cool climate is, inevitably, what draws most visitors to the town. Try to avoid arriving in Diwali (October to November) or the following two weeks, though, when

prices soar and the place is packed. Equally, like most hill stations, it's best to avoid Mt Abu in summer, when hordes of people come to escape the heat, though this might be exactly why you're also making your way into town. This is also when the Summer Festival hits town, with music, fireworks and boat races (p224). If you are visiting in the cooler months, you will find that everyone is wrapped up in shawls and hats to keep warm; remember to pack something woolly to avoid winter chills in poorly heated hotel rooms. If you visit here in spring, you may come across the local variation of the Gangaur festival (p224), that is celebrated by Garasia tribespeople.

Sadly, tourism has taken its toll on the surrounding natural environment, with large tracts of vegetation having been cleared to make way for the many hotels that continue to crop up. As with all Rajasthan's destinations, trying to minimise your consumption of plastics and other waste will help to safeguard the town, and its surroundings.

Orientation

Mt Abu sprawls along a 1220m-high plateau that's about 22km long by 6km wide, and 27km from the nearest train station (Abu Rd). The main part of town extends north from the station along Abu Rd and surrounds picturesque, central Nakki Lake.

Information

There's an SBBJ ATM near Hotel Samrat International, and a State Bank of India ATM right next to the tourist reception centre.

Bank of Baroda (☎ 10am-3pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) Changes travellers cheques and currency, and does credit-card advances.

Main post office (Raj Bhavan Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) At the northern end of town.

Shree Krishna Cyber Café (per hr Rs 40; ☎ 8am-10pm) Internet access; located in the main Market.

Tourist reception centre (☎ 235151; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd Sat of month) Opposite the main bus stand and below the railway ticket reservation office. Offers a free map of town, though the maps aren't especially accurate, useful or illuminating.

Sights

NAKKI LAKE

Scenic Nakki Lake, the town's focus, is one of its biggest attractions. It's so named because, according to legend, it was scooped out by a god

using his *nakh* (nails). Some Hindus thus believe it to be a holy lake, but you're more likely to see people pedalling in a pedalo than bathing in it. It's a pleasant stroll around the perimeter – the lake is surrounded by hills, parks and strange rock formations. The best known, **Toad Rock**, looks just like a toad about to hop into the lake. The 14th-century **Raghnath Temple** stands beside the lake.

Nakki Lake is the heart of all activity in Mt Abu. At the edge, by the town centre, there's a carnival of juice and food stalls, ice-cream parlours, balloon vendors and souvenir shops. You'll probably have to plough through the persistent photographers eager to take a happy snap of you by the water. The honeymoon market is catered for by aphrodisiac vendors, with potions that allegedly 'make big difference'.

To enter into the spirit of things, you can do as the honeymooners do and hire a **pedalo** (2-4-person boat per 30min Rs 50/100), or, for the especially romantically inclined, a gondola-like **shikara loveboat** (2-person boat per 30min Rs 100). Those travelling with small children will doubtless be pressured into purchasing a **pony ride** (per hr Rs 50) from the stand one road back from the lake, for a slow but scenic stroll along the water's edge.

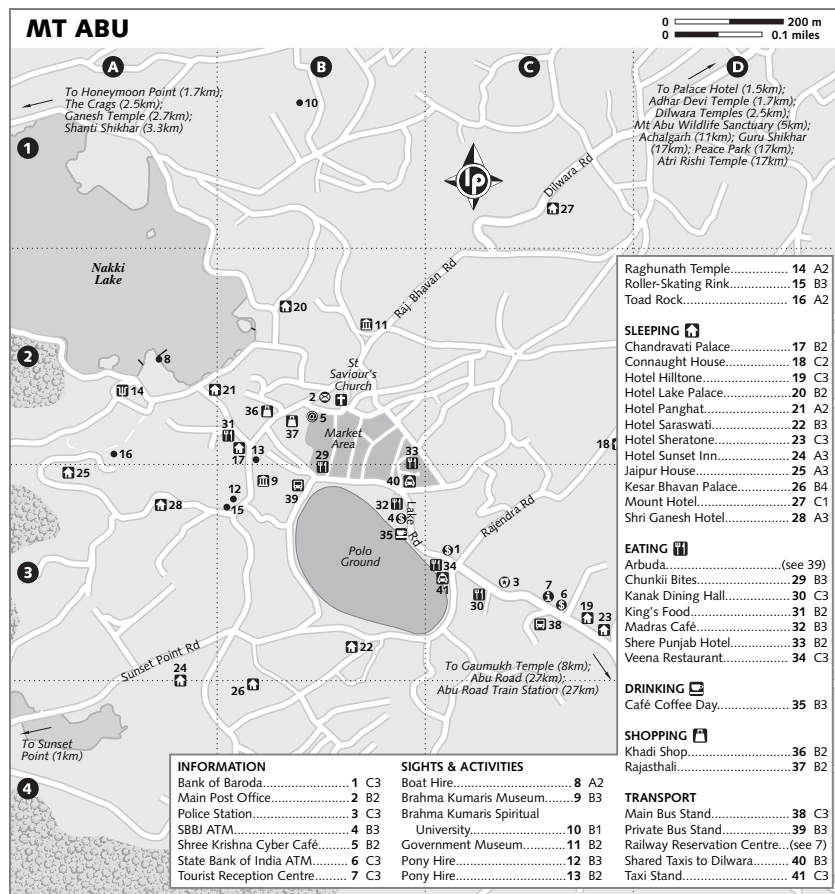
VIEWPOINTS

Sunset Point is a popular and lovely place from which to watch the brilliant setting sun, though distinctly unromantic unless you find that being thrust red roses, bags of peanuts, or Polaroid cameras gets you into a loving mood. Hordes stroll out here every evening to catch the end of the day, the food stalls and all the usual jolly hill-station entertainment. It's a 1km-walk from the road to the viewpoint. Other viewpoints include **Honeymoon Point** – another good sunset point – and **The Crags** (Ganesh Temple). You can follow the white arrows along a path to the summit of **Shanti Shikhar**, west of Adhar Devi Temple, where there are panoramic views.

The best view over the lake is from the terrace of the maharaja of Jaipur's former **summer palace**, which has been converted into Jaipur House (p268).

DILWARA TEMPLES

These remarkable **Jain temples** (admission free, donations encouraged; ☎ Jains sunrise-sunset, non-Jains noon-6pm) are Mt Abu's main attraction and feature



some of India's finest temple decoration. It's said that the artisans were paid according to the amount of dust they collected, encouraging them to carve ever more intricately. Whatever their inducement, there are two temples in which the marble work is dizzyingly intense, a collection of delicate milky kaleidoscopes, with icing-like carving so fine it looks like you could break it off and eat it. No photography is permitted.

The older of the temples is the **Vimal Vasahi**, on which work began in 1031 and which was financed by a Gujarati minister named Vimal. Dedicated to the first *tirthankar*, Adinath, it took 14 years and allegedly cost Rs 180.5 million to build. The central shrine has an image of Adinath himself, while around the

courtyard are 52 identical cells, each enclosing a cross-legged Buddha-*tirthankar* – the crucial difference between these statues and those of Buddha is that their eyes are always open. Forty-eight beautifully carved pillars form the courtyard entrance, in front of which stands the **House of Elephants**, featuring a procession of elephants marching to the temple entrance, some of which were damaged long ago by marauding Mughals.

The later **Luna Vasahi Temple** is dedicated to Neminath, the 22nd *tirthankar*, and was built in 1230 by the brothers Tejpal and Vastupal for a mere Rs 125.9 million. Like Vimal, the brothers were both Gujarati government ministers. The marble carving here took 2500 workers 15 years to create, and its most notable feature is

its intricacy and delicacy, which is so fine that, in places, the marble becomes almost transparent. In particular, the many-layered lotus flower that dangles from the centre of the dome is an astonishing piece of work. It's difficult to believe that this huge lacelike filigree started life as a solid block of marble. The temple remains incredibly well preserved, employing several full-time stone masons to maintain the work.

There are three other temples in the enclosure – **Bhimashah Pittalhar** (built between 1315 and 1433), sporting a 4-tonne five-metal statue of Adinath; **Mahaveerswami** (1582), a small shrine flanked by painted elephants; and the three-storey **Khartar Vasahi**. None, however, competes with the ethereal beauty of Luna Vasahi and Vimal Vasahi.

As at other Jain temples, leather articles (belts as well as shoes) have to be left at the entrance, and menstruating women are warned away.

You can stroll out to Dilwara from Mt Abu in less than an hour, or hop aboard a shared taxi.

BRAHMA KUMARIS SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY & MUSEUM

The white-clad people you'll see around town are students of the **Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University** (www.bkwsu.com). This organisation teaches that all religions lead to God and are equally valid, and that the principles of each should be studied. The university's aim is the establishment of universal peace through 'the impartation of spiritual knowledge and training of easy raja yoga meditation'. The headquarters are here in Mt Abu, and many followers come each year to attend courses at the university.

For many the teachings are intensely powerful; there are over 4500 branches in 70 countries. It even has consultative status on the Economic and Social Council of the UN. For others, it gives off a spooky New Age-sect vibe and non-believing locals of Mt Abu might try to warn you away. You can decide for yourself by paying a visit to the university's **Universal Peace Hall** (☎ 238268; ☎ 8am-6pm), where free tours are available, including an introduction to the philosophy of the Brahma Kumaris. If you want to find out more, you can attend a daily morning meditation class (held at the museum) or take an introductory course (seven lessons), including yoga tuition for a minimum of three days, though a course of seven days is recommended. If

you come out hooked, there's a further six-month advanced course to set you on target for spiritual enlightenment. There's no fee for any of these activities.

The organisation also runs the **Peace Park** (admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm), 17km north of town, and a **museum** (☎ 223260; admission free; ☎ 8am-8pm) in the town centre, the entrance of which is labelled 'Gateway to Paradise'. The museum outlines the university's teachings through the means of wonderfully kitsch light-up dioramas, and attempts answers to teasers such as 'How can world peace be established?' in a manner of which old Walt himself would have been proud.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

The small, seldom-visited **government museum** (Raj Bhavan Rd; admission Rs 3; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu) features a diorama illustrating local tribal life, some hill dwellers' artefacts, and a few miniature paintings. The highlight is the sculpture gallery, with works from the ancient town of Chandravati, 7km from Mt Abu, dating from the 6th to the 12th centuries. Note the sculpture of the snake goddess Vish Kanya breastfeeding a snake – something not to attempt at home.

About 3km north of town, 365 steps lead to the ancient **Adhar Devi Temple**, which is built in a natural cleft in the rock. You have to stoop to get through the low entrance to the temple, which holds atmospheric devotional services at dawn. There are splendid views over Mt Abu from up here.

Activities

The town has a **roller-skating rink** (per 15/30 min incl skate hire Rs 15/25; ☎ 9am-10pm). Beware the honey-mooners on wheels for the first time, whizzing uncontrollably at high speed towards you.

TREKKING

There are many good treks to be undertaken from Mt Abu; see p268 for details.

HORSE RIDING

You can hire ponies at the stand not far from the lake, and at various places dotted around the town. One-hour rides cost Rs 50.

Tours

The RTDC has five-hour tours of Mt Abu's main sites, leaving from the bus stand at 8.30am and 1.30pm (later in summer). Tours cost Rs 65, excluding admission and camera

TREKKING FROM MT ABU

Unused by most local holidayers who remain firmly enchanted with the pedalo-and-pony attractions of the town, Mt Abu's hiking trails are many and various, leading you in just a few minutes out into untouched wilderness. Here, you'll find tranquillity, solitude, wild flowers and birdlife in abundance – as well as the odd snake, leopard or bear. Though deforestation was, until recently, threatening to scar the landscape, stringent new laws on wood gathering seem to have worked wonders, and regrowth can already be seen.

Since many hiking and trekking routes are unmapped, it's best to employ the services of a guide. This is especially important these days if you're travelling alone, as the tourist police actively discourage – or even forbid – solo hiking after a group of tourists were seriously assaulted some years ago by bandits. A guide will also be able to point out the manifold medicinal plants you'll encounter along the way, used to make Ayurvedic remedies. You'll also doubtless see the troublesome human-introduced lantana plant, which has overrun many hillsides, threatening indigenous species that have been growing here for millennia.

There are a few good guides in Mt Abu; contact Mahendra Dan (aka Charles) at Mount Abu Treks (☎ 91-9414154854; www.mount-abu-treks.blogspot.com), who runs a whole range of tailor-made whole- and half-day treks, with overnight journeys also possible. Alternatively, join one of the treks organised by Lalit at the Shri Ganesh Hotel, who takes groups out for three- to four-hour jaunts each morning. Routes vary and the level of difficulty depends on the fitness of the group.

fees. The afternoon tour finishes at Sunset Point. Make reservations at the **enquiries counter** (☎ 235434) at the main bus stand.

Sleeping

Mt Abu town centre seems to largely consist of hotels, and new ones spring up each year. The high season lasts from mid-April to June, during and after Diwali (October to November, when you need to book way ahead, prices become ridiculous, and you can't move for crowds – not a good time to visit) and from Christmas to New Year.

During the low season, discounts of up to 70% are available, and midrange accommodation can be an absolute steal. Most places are definitely open to a bit of bargaining, and the rates become more appealing the longer you plan to stay.

Hot water can be erratic at the budget places, and service, at all but the choicest top-end places, can be a bit lacklustre when things are busy. The Paying Guest House Scheme, which gives you the opportunity to live with a local family and is a great way to circumvent uninspiring hotel choices, operates in Mt Abu, costing around Rs 100 to Rs 500 per person, per night. Contact the tourist reception centre for details.

BUDGET

our pick **Shri Ganesh Hotel** (☎ 237292; lalit_ganesh@yahoo.co.in; dm Rs 50, r Rs 150-250, without bathroom Rs

60-200; ☎) Up the hill towards the old summer palace of the maharaja of Jaipur, this serene place is the most popular spot to stay, and deservedly so. It has a peaceful rooftop, friendly management, loads of helpful local info, a guest kitchen and good home cooking. There's yoga on the roof in the mornings. Lalit Ganesh takes travellers trekking (above), and his Irish wife, Beverley, offers cooking lessons. If you stay in the dorm, you'll have to pay Rs 50 for a shower. Call ahead for pick-up from the bus or train station.

Hotel Saraswati (☎ 238887; r Rs 250-700) Popular and efficient, Saraswati is a reasonably appealing place in a peaceful setting behind the polo ground, and is one of the best, after Shri Ganesh, of the budget bunch. There's a range of rooms, which go from just passable to pretty decent; see a few of the 36 on offer before you decide (and plump, if you can, for one with a balcony). The rooms in the annex are mostly in better condition than the others. The restaurant serves fantastic Gujarati thalis. Note that prices frequently double at the weekend.

Chandravati Palace (☎ 238219; d Rs 300-800) Down a quiet side street, this is a pleasant small guesthouse with basic but extremely clean and bright modern rooms. The best ones have spacious balconies and hill views.

Hotel Panghat (☎ 238886; d Rs 350-600) Well situated and overlooking the lake, this hotel is in the heart of the action. The rooms are

plain and uninspiring, but are compensated by a great rooftop with a view, and unusually friendly and obliging staff.

MIDRANGE

Most places offer low-season discounts of 30% to 50%.

Mount Hotel (☎ 235150; Dilwara Rd; s/d Rs 500/1000) Once a British army officer's house, this is a lovely, homy place. The seven rooms are outfitted with wooden furnishings that give off a distinctly Swedish vibe. It's in a tranquil location, on the road to the Dilwara Temples, with a small lawn.

Hotel Sunset Inn (☎ 235194; Sunset Point Rd; s/d Rs 800/1000) On the western edge of Mt Abu, the popular, modern Sunset Inn is efficiently run and friendly, with a good vegetarian restaurant and good-sized, clean, but (like most hotels in Mt Abu) overpriced rooms. It's set in pleasing small gardens.

Hotel Sheratone (☎ 238366; d from Rs 1000) The spelling isn't quite right... a cunning attempt to cash in on a famous name. Rooms, though lacking in anything approaching character, have balconies and views across the trees. Marble staircases add to the general feel of attempted grandeur done on the cheap, but it's clean and the management is very keen to please.

Hotel Lake Palace (☎ 237154; www.savshantihotels.com; d/ste from Rs 1800/1980; ☎) In an excellent lakeside location, spacious, friendly Lake Palace overlooks a small garden. It's classier than most on the lake, with appropriately high prices. Rooms, though simple and unspacious, are clean, uncluttered, and some have semiprivate lakeview terrace areas. It's popular with Brahma Kumaris students; beware the rainy season, however, when rooms can get rather damp and gloomy.

Kesar Bhavan Palace (☎ 238647; Sunset Point Rd; r/ste from Rs 2000/2850; ☎) This heritage property, originally the 19th-century home of the Sirohi royal family, is perched high up among trees and has beautiful views of rolling hills, which extend to the windows of some of the suites' bathrooms. The well-thought-out, comfortable, marble-floored rooms all have balconies, most rooms are fitted out with dark wooden antique furniture, and the suites are split-level. The hotel also tries, honourably, to reduce its environmental impact: there's water recycling to water the gardens, solar hot-water heating, and a no-plastic-bag policy in place.

Hotel Hilltone (☎ 238391; www.hotelhilltone.com; s/d from Rs 2400/3000; ☎) Hotel Hilltone is a central, modern holiday complex, a second – and equally badly spelled – Mt Abu attempt at emulating a certain famous international chain. Rooms are tidy and comfortable, with two curious 'cave suites' incorporating carved rock walls. There's a small pool, a sauna, a children's playground, a good restaurant and a cocktail bar.

Palace Hotel (Bikaner House; ☎ 238673; www.palacehotelbikanerhouse.com; Delwara Rd; r deluxe from Rs 2500, ste from Rs 4000; ☎) Near the Dilwara Temples is this huge palace, built in 1893 by Sir Swinton Jacob. Once the summer residence of the maharaja of Bikaner, the sprawling building resembles a Scottish stately manor, with tree-shaded gardens, a private lake, two tennis courts and a restaurant. There are 35 well-decorated rooms; the ones in the old wing have the most character – some are huge and feel very much like you've stepped into a little piece of Britain, a theme firmly continued in the grand old dining room with its hearty full English breakfasts.

Connaught House (☎ 238560; Rajendra Rd; d Rs 3500-3800; ☎) Owned by the maharaja of Jodhpur and seemingly staffed by Raj retainers, Connaught House is delightful, a stuck-in-time colonial bungalow on the southeastern edge of town. It's more like an English cottage than a hotel, with lots of sepia photographs, dark wood, slanted ceilings, gorgeous shady gardens and marmalade for breakfast. Attractive newer rooms in a separate block have great views over the hills, though far less character. Delicious meals are available but should be ordered in advance.

TOP END

There are quite a few top-end choices in town, but the three listed here are the most atmospheric: all vestiges of old India or, in the case of Connaught House and the Palace Hotel, old England. Prices drop quite substantially in the low season and climb equally steeply during the busiest times of year.

Jaipur House (☎ 235176; www.royalfamilyjaipur.com; s/d junior ste Rs 2000/2800, other ste Rs 4500-6500; ☎) Perched on a hilltop overlooking the lake, this old summer palace was built by the maharaja of Jaipur in 1897. Opulent suites overlook the town from a suitably lofty height. If you're not really a suite person, there are rooms in the former servants' quarters that verge on

the simple (but aren't any cheaper). The restaurant and bar are open to nonguests; the restaurant's food is nothing to write home about, but the bar makes a terrific venue for imbibing the views while sipping a G&T.

Eating

Most holidaymakers here are Gujarati – tough customers when it comes to cuisine, hence the profusion of good-quality places to eat in the town.

our pick **Kanak Dining Hall** (dishes Rs 25-65; ☎ 8am-11pm) A popular option, the excellent all-you-can-eat Gujarati thalis (Rs 60) are without doubt some of Mt Abu's best. Sit indoors in the extremely popular, bustling dining hall or outside under a canopy.

Veena Restaurant (veg dishes Rs 25-70; ☎ 7am-11pm) Veena, near the taxi stand, also draws crowds for its excellent Gujarati thalis and traditional Indian fare; the freshly brewed coffee makes a good way to round off a button-popping meal. As at Kanak, you can eat outside, which you might want to do given the Bollywood soundtrack and garish lighting indoors.

King's Food (dishes Rs 25-90; ☎ 7.30am-11.30pm) This busy, open-to-the-street fast-food joint is good for a light bite. It has the usual have-a-go menu, including Chinese, Punjabi and South Indian food, and good lassis, as well as filling breakfasts and nice Indian dinner-sized curries.

Madras Café (Lake Rd; dishes Rs 30-80; ☎ 7am-11pm) The laid-back Madras Café has pleasant indoor, outdoor and rooftop seating. It's a pure-veg place serving an assortment of South Indian and Punjabi dishes, as well as pizzas. Try the delicious, substantial mixed-fruit lassi. You can watch bread being baked in the outside oven and round it all off with an ice-cream sundae.

Chunkii Bites (Shopping Complex, Lake Rd; dishes Rs 35-70; ☎ 7am-11.30pm) This place (whose catchphrase is a snazzy 'bite to live long') is a good spot to grab a cheap snack. Grubby but cheerful, it has loud music and regional delicacies such as *bhelpuri* (a popular Mumbai snack) and Delhi *chaat* (snacks such as samosas and potato patties seasoned with spices and served with chutney).

Arbuda (Arbuda Circle; dishes Rs 35-80; ☎ 6am-11pm) Across the road from Chunkii Bites and set on a sweeping, curved, open-air terrace that's filled with chrome chairs, Arbuda special-

ises in Punjabi and South Indian food – the dosas are divine – and serves up some mean vegetarian curries, though even their pizzas are pretty decent.

Shere Punjab Hotel (dishes Rs 35-200; ☎ 8am-midnight) Shere Punjab, in the market, has bargain Punjabi and Chinese food. For the devil-may-care carnivore, there's brain fry or brain masala, but there are also some more conventional options, such as chicken curry, and a long list of vegetarian options for those frightened off by the sight of all that brain.

Drinking

Most of the more upmarket hotels have bars serving local and imported drinks; the prices are predictably high, but the heritage hotels more than justify this with their quaint and antiquated atmosphere.

Café Coffee Day (Hotel Maharaja International; snacks Rs 30-80; ☎ 8.30am-11pm) Every now and then, it's not a crime to be gasping for an overpriced, oversized latte or a cup of unadulterated Darjeeling tea. This popular coffee-shop chain also serves satisfyingly squidgy cakes, to consume while guiltily ensconced in a nice, deep armchair.

Jaipur House (☎ 235176; www.royalfamilyjaipur.com) The outdoor terrace of this heritage hotel has superlative views across Mt Abu, Nakki Lake and the surrounding countryside, and is the perfect place for a sunset tippie, watching the town's twinkling lights flicker to life.

Shopping

Around Nakki Lake are lots of bright little shops and stalls flogging all sorts of kitsch curios. In the evening the town comes to life, and this is a fine time to do some leisurely browsing and people-watching.

There's an expensive branch of **Rajasthali** (Raj Bhavan Rd; ☎ 9.30am-9pm), the government crafts emporium, which has some very eager sales staff. Alternatively, you may like to try the fixed-price **khadi shop** (Raj Bhavan Rd; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3.30-9pm), which sells all things woven.

Getting There & Away

As you enter Mt Abu there's a toll gate – bus and car passengers are charged Rs 10, plus Rs 21 for a car (keep change handy).

BUS

From 6am to 9pm, buses make the exciting 27km mountain road climb from Abu Road

train station up to Mt Abu (Rs 24, one hour, half-hourly). Buses leave from outside the main bus stand, next to the ticket booth. Some RSRTC buses go all the way to Mt Abu, while others terminate at Abu Road.

The bus schedule from Mt Abu is extensive, and for many destinations you will find a direct bus faster and more convenient than going down to Abu Road and waiting for a train.

RSRTC buses (☎ 235434) go to Jaipur (Rs 230/250 in express/deluxe, 11 hours, one nightly), Ajmer (Rs 175/211 in express/deluxe, seven hours, one nightly), Udaipur (Rs 98 in express, five hours, four daily), Jodhpur (Rs 144 in express, six hours, one daily), and Ahmedabad (Rs 104 in express, 6½ hours, three daily). Buses that belong to private bus companies, offering similar services at similar prices, depart from the private bus stand.

There are lots of travel agencies around town offering bus tickets. Shop around for the best price.

TAXI

A taxi for up to six people into town from Abu Road costs about Rs 300. Some drivers claim that this is only as far as the bus stand and ask an extra fee (as much as Rs 50) to take you to your hotel; make the total price clear before you depart Abu Road. To hire a jeep for sightseeing costs about Rs 500/1000 per half-day/day (bargain hard and you may bring it down). Many hotels can arrange jeep hire, or you can hire your own in the town centre.

TRAIN

Abu Road, the railhead for Mt Abu, is on the line between Delhi and Mumbai via Ahmedabad. In Mt Abu, above the tourist office, there's a **railway reservation centre** (☎ 8am-2pm), which has quotas on most of the express trains.

Several trains per day run from Abu Road to Ahmedabad; the No 2916 *Ashram Express* departs Abu Road at an early-morning 3.50am but arrives conveniently swiftly at Ahmedabad at 7.40am (Rs 196/283/501 3AC/2AC/1AC). The daily No 9223 *Tawi Express* runs from Abu Road to Jodhpur (Rs 115/465 Sl/2AC), departing Abu Road at 3.17pm and arriving at 8.15pm. For other services, check up-to-date information at the reservation centre.

Getting Around

Buses from the main bus stand go to the various sites in Mt Abu, but it takes a little planning to get out and back without too much hanging around; check return times at the bus stand before you leave. For Dilwara you can take a shared taxi (jeeps, which leave when full from opposite the Madras Café and cost Rs 6 per person, or Rs 40 all to yourself). Alternatively, it makes a pleasant 4km walk to the temples.

There are no autorickshaws in Mt Abu, but it's easy to get around on foot. Unique to the town is the *baba-gari*, a porter-pulled handcart, which will cart your luggage for Rs 15 or even one/two people for Rs 30/40.

AROUND MT ABU Mt Abu Wildlife Sanctuary

This beautiful 290-sq-km **sanctuary** (Indian/foreigner/jeep Rs 10/40/100; ☎ 8am-5pm), on a large plateau 5.5km northeast of Mt Abu, is home to leopards, sambars, foxes, wild boars, bears, crocodiles and birdlife. It's about a 1km walk from the Dilwara Temples.

Achalgarh

The fascinating, atmospheric Shiva temple of **Achaleswar Mahandeva**, 11km north of Mt Abu in Achalgarh, boasts a number of diverting features, including what's said to be a toe of Shiva, as well as a brass Nandi bull (Shiva's vehicle). Where the Shiva lingam would normally be there's a deep hole, believed by devotees to extend all the way down to the underworld.

Just outside the temple, beside the car park, three stone buffaloes stand around a tank, while the figure of a king shoots at them with his bow and arrows. A legend tells that the tank was once filled with ghee, but demons, in the form of the buffaloes, arrived from the skies to pollute the holy ghee – until, that is, the king managed to shoot them. A path leads up the hillside to the hilltop group of colourful Jain temples, which have fantastic views out over the plains.

Guru Shikhar

At the end of the Mt Abu plateau, 15km north of the town itself, is 1722m-high **Guru Shikhar**, Rajasthan's highest point. A road goes almost all the way to the summit and the **Atri Rishi Temple**, complete with a priest and fantastic, huge views. A popular spot, it's visited as part

of the RDTC tour; if you decide to go it alone, a jeep will cost Rs 400 return.

Gaumukh Temple

Down on the Abu Road side of Mt Abu, 8km southeast of the town, a small stream flows from the mouth of a marble cow, giving the shrine its name (*gaumukh* means 'cow's mouth'). There's also a marble figure of the bull Nandi. The tank here, Agni Kund, is said to be the site of the sacrificial fire made by the sage Vasishta, from which four of the great Rajput clans were born. An image of Vasishta is flanked by figures of Rama and Krishna.

To reach the temple you must take a path consisting of 750 steps down into the valley – and then trudge those same 750 steps back up again.

ABU ROAD

This station, down on the plains 27km from Mt Abu, is the rail junction for Mt Abu. The train station and bus stand are conveniently located right next to each other on the edge of town.

Although there are RSRTC buses from Abu Road to cities such as Jodhpur, Jaipur, Udaipur and Ahmedabad, there's little point in catching them from here since services are all available from Mt Abu itself, along with alternative private bus company services to the same destinations. The **railway retiring rooms** (dRs 150) at the station have rock-bottom prices with suitably rock-hard mattresses, but are convenient if you're catching a very early train. Note that you may be asked to show an onward ticket to be able to bed down here for the night.

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