

travel

my kind of place **Jodhpur, Rajasthan**

Royal turn in Blue City

Palaces and princes, souqs and spices, forts and food – Jodhpur does everything king-size, says **Malavika Bhattacharya**

Why Jodhpur?

Rajasthan's second city is one of epic proportions: its impregnable, 122-metre-high fort looms against the sky; and the hilltop palace, home to a modern-day maharaja, is one of the largest private residences in the world.

Jodhpur is often clubbed together with a wider tour of the desert state, but, more recently, it's shown up on the international party circuit thanks to the glamorous lifestyle of Maharaja Gaj Singh II. Celebrities from Sting to Naomi Campbell have attended chic soirées at Umaid Bhawan and extravagant weddings at Mehrangarh Fort.

The 500-year-old city has the flamboyance of Jaipur but is less touristed; it sits just close enough to the Thar Desert to afford sweeping dune-and-camel views à la Jaisalmer; and, best of all, it represents all of Rajasthan's royal trappings within an easily manageable size.

A comfortable bed

Splash out at the Umaid Bhawan Palace (www.tajhotels.com; 0091 291 251 0101), the current home of Jodhpur's royal family. Maharaja Umaid Singh built the 347-room, art-deco-style sandstone palace in the 1930s. Now, it's one part royal residence, one part museum, and one part Taj heritage hotel with 64 rooms. A whimsical collection of 20th-century heirlooms including vintage automobiles and model airplanes are on display at the museum, which is open to non-guests from 9am to 5pm. Doubles without breakfast are from 32,600 rupees, including taxes (Dh1,993).

At the heart of the frenetic old city is the Pal Haveli (www.palhaveli.com; 0091 291 329 3328). The 21-room haveli-turned-hotel is full of old-world charm with its stained-glass windows and intricate wooden doorways. The decor consists of weapons and black-and-white photos, reminiscent of Jodhpur's glory days. For those who like to be in the thick of things, the buzzy clock-tower market is just outside. With doubles from 4,297 rupees (Dh263), it's a steal.

Raas (www.raasjodhpur.com/hotel.html; 0091 291 263 6455) is a hip boutique property in the shadow of the Mehrangarh Fort, so close that you feel you could touch its walls. Stylishly restored haveli suites, a courtyard pool, fort views from almost every room, and a little spa – Raas is all about living like royalty. Doubles with breakfast from 9,900 rupees (Dh606).



The Jaswant Thada memorial in white marble and the blue-tinged cityscape around Jodhpur's historic Mehrangarh Fort. David Henderson / Corbis

Find your feet

Get your bearings at the oh-so-grand 15th-century Mehrangarh Fort (www.mehrangarh.org; 9am-5pm; tickets 400 rupees [Dh24]), among the best-preserved forts in the country. Grab an audio guide, and make the fort's ramparts your first port of call for superb views of the Blue City. An action-packed account of Rajput history will keep you entertained (and informed) as you explore the labyrinth of narrow hallways and airy period rooms. The over-the-top galleries – originally royal bedchambers – are all gold-plated columns and mirror-work walls. Reflective stained-glass windows and patterned surfaces in the Takhat Vilas lend an oddly eerie air to this otherwise regal chamber.

It's easy to spend half a day listening to swoony stories about Mehrangarh. If the weather allows it, head down to the Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park – a 170-acre area of volcanic rock formations and desert plants (www.raojodhapark.com).

Meet the locals

Spread out at the foot of the fort lies the atmospheric Brahmपुरi area, Jodhpur's oldest quarter. Low-roofed indigo buildings, blue doorways and navy motifs cram the higgledy-piggledy alleyways, hence the Blue City moniker. The sudden departure from the otherwise arid sandstone hues of the desert city is a pleasing change. Here, children play hopscotch on the streets while turbaned men with ferocious moustaches and women in bright bandhej prints go about their deliciously slow-paced lives. They're always willing to stop and chat about their ancestors, their city's history, and – the question on everybody's mind – why their houses are blue.

Book a table

Experiment with Rajasthan's fierce flavours; there's always stomach-soothing buttermilk to be had. Duck into Indique – Pal Haveli's terrace restaurant – for winning views of the Mehrangarh Fort and

the lit-up Gulab Sagar Lake. The largely Indian menu features North Indian staples such as vegetable curry, biryani and tandoori. A meal for two costs 2,000 rupees (Dh122).

For a lavish meal showcasing the lifestyle of the kings, head to On the Rocks (Ajit Bhawan, Circuit House; 0091 291 251 3333). This leafy garden restaurant is best for the fiery Rajasthani speciality, Laal Maas – falling-off-the-bone meat cooked in a curry of yogurt and chilli, for 360 rupees (Dh22).

Shopper's paradise

The best bargains are to be had around the old city's Clock Tower. A maze of alleyways, it is chock-a-block with open-fronted shops manned by persuasive vendors selling all that is typically Rajasthani: swathes of tie-dye, leather satchels, high-fashion Jodhpur pants and block-printed cottons. The air is heavy with the smell of leather and spices. Fans of Rajasthani cuisine can get their masala fix at MV Spices (Shop 209-B; www.mvspices.com),

where tandoori and meat masalas are on sale.

What to avoid

Midday sightseeing. The afternoon sun can be particularly punishing in the desert city. Save your outdoor walkabouts for the early mornings and evenings.

Don't miss

On Diwali, the Indian festival of lights, fireworks light up the night sky above Mehrangarh Fort, while the city is all lit up with diyas (earthen lamps) and candles. It's a lovely time to sit out on a haveli rooftop. Diwali falls on October 23 this year.

Go there

A return flight on Etihad (www.etihad.com) from Abu Dhabi to Mumbai costs from Dh995, including taxes. From Mumbai, flights to Jodhpur take 90 minutes; and a return ticket is from Dh444 on Air India (www.airindia.com).

in brief

Treat yourself at Mondrian London's Agua bathhouse

Guests booking into the Mondrian London at Sea Containers can now enjoy the newly opened Agua Bathhouse & Spa, which embraces Hollywood glamour and offers personalised offerings and a range of therapies and skincare products. The treatment menu has affordable treatments that have been designed for every age and gender, with massages starting from £20 (Dh120). The spa also offers guests a new concept – the Spa Playground, a social, multi-sensory experience that encourages both individual treatments and fun with friends, inspired by the spirit of Roman spa communities. For more information or to make a reservation, go to www.morganshotelgroup.com.

A family-friendly getaway in the Pyrenees

Located in the foothills of the Pyrenees and run by a British family with three young sons, Chateau de la Lanette is tailor-made for couples with children. Guests, armed with readily available information on where to go and what to see, can leave the children in the safe and happy environs of a well-equipped playroom, a 14-foot trampoline, sandpit, pool, climbing frames, swings and more. Guests will be provided a home-cooked, three-course dinner for the adults and a separate meal for the children. Comfy sofas, an open log fire and an extensive DVD collection are all available for adults in the evening. Doubles, including a cot, from £1,105 (Dh6,520) for seven nights, including daily continental breakfast, dinner for five nights, unlimited drinks from the fridge and a babysitting service for one night. Visit www.babyfriendlyboltholes.co.uk for more details.

Xian welcomes the Gran Meliá Hotel

Meliá Hotels International has opened the Gran Meliá Xian in China. Located in Xian's new district of Quijiang, near the ancient city wall and home to all the biggest shopping malls and a convention centre, the hotel caters to business and leisure travellers alike. Located a short distance from the tourist attractions and major highways, the Gran Meliá Xian has 389 rooms, including 54 suites. Guests have access to the hotel's many restaurants and lounges including La Cava Cigar Bar, Rong Palace Chinese restaurant and DUO Spanish Authentic Cuisine, the only Spanish restaurant in Xian. The hotel also includes a Red Level floor with Red Glove personalised services, butler service, a private gym and YHI Spa. Deluxe rooms for two start from 990 yuan (Dh595) per night, including breakfast and tax. Visit www.melia.com to make a reservation or for more information.

★ Ashley Lane

hotel insider **Le Royal Méridien, Abu Dhabi**

An Abu Dhabi classic receives an overhaul

The welcome

The valet's greeting lacks any kind of wow factor but, once inside, I find out why: it's very busy. Unlike many local hotels, guests arriving at Le Royal Méridien Abu Dhabi are not treated like rare gems but with a pleasant efficiency. In the lobby, all the staff are already with other guests so I'm left to find the reception desk by myself. I'm not made to feel special but check-in is smooth and I am in my suite on the 16th floor within 10 minutes.

The neighbourhood

This is downtown Abu Dhabi, old style, at the east end of the Corniche. Sofitel opened its doors just down the road but the more starry venues (Jumeirah Etihad Towers and the Saadiyat Island hotels) stretch off at some distance. Nonetheless, Le Royal Méridien is a smart choice thanks to a two-year-long refurbishment of many rooms, the lobby and dining areas. There is, however, little reason to leave the hotel and explore the immediate area, thanks to the well-considered range of restaurants within its walls, not to mention the spa, gym and pleasant pool.



The revamped revolving restaurant is on floor 31. Le Royal Méridien Abu Dhabi

The room

The design of my deluxe suite is the only note of genuine disappointment. It's comfortable and the strip of windows running its full length provides great views, but the crowded layout and mismatched furniture is a misstep. That said, the bed is comfy, air-con efficient, rainfall shower and televisions easy to operate and, thank goodness, given the

proliferation of light sources, only a few buttons need to be pressed before darkness descends.

The scene

The hotel appears to be doing a roaring trade in (mostly male) business clientele with a steady stream of Abu Dhabi residents patronising its restaurants.

The service

Nothing to write home about but

neither were there any disasters and that's good enough at this price point.

The food

Le Royal Méridien Abu Dhabi really steps up when it comes to food. The all-day dining, bistro restaurant within the awfully named lobby area, The Hub, is bright and airy, with a cafe and "artisan bakery" that are worth dropping into off the street. Then there's an Irish-themed bar, Italian restaurant, modern American kitchen and at the top end, the newly opened revolving restaurant, Stratos, that updates an Abu Dhabi landmark. I settle in at Market Kitchen, the casual "family kitchen" restaurant from the New York-based French chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten. The decor is almost (but not quite) New York loft-style with triple height ceilings and exposed brickwork. It's buzzing thanks to piped music, a counter bar and two large tables of diners. The food itself is excellent, but that's in keeping with the casual theme. Highlights are the beef short rib served with different sauce purees, a truffle and fontina cheese pizza and a naughty salted-caramel

sundae. The five-course tasting menu costs Dh245 per person.

Loved

As an Abu Dhabi resident, I loved the views of that part of the coastline and the almost furtive peeps of old, low-rise cityscape against the shinier new developments. And the restaurants are a revelation.

Hated

Call me churlish but I can live without a key card that "is a work of art" designed by a "global array of visionaries" according to not one but two specially dedicated leaflets.

The verdict

A great local hotel that more than makes up for its rather absurd sense of room design thanks to its dining scene.

The bottom line

A deluxe room costs from Dh540 per night, including tax and Wi-Fi. Le Royal Méridien Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Khalifa Street, Abu Dhabi (www.leroyalmeridien-abudhabi.com; 02 674 2020).

★ Clare Dight



The lobby bar at Gran Meliá Xian in China. Courtesy PRCO