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The sands of time



The Hindu;THE HINDU

Camels at Jaisalmer. Photo: Subir Roy



Special Arrangement

A contestant at the Desert Prince competition.



The Hindu

The view from Jaisalmer fort. Photo: Deepa Alexander



The facade of Patwon ki haveli, Jaisalmer. Photo: Deepa Alexander



Colourful kathputlis at Jaisalmer. Photo: Deepa Alexander

A golden fort framed by hot pink turbans and racing camels. Deepa Alexander visits Jaisalmer during the Desert Festival

It's a moon-drenched night and I am a star-struck wanderer lost to medieval enchantment. I trail my fingers through the cool desert sand and watch a screaming, silver-tipped MIG on a sortie. Somewhere, a peacock plaintively calls out. The skyline is pinned in place by the sand dunes of Sam on one side and the ethereal silhouette of the Sonar Qila on the other. Between the two, they define the spirit of Jaisalmer, forged by the sword in a thousand bloody battles in the heat of the Thar.

I've travelled north by northwest almost all day to arrive at this frontier town of the Bhatti Rajputs. The road from Jodhpur runs straight into the sun's eye past scrubland and tawny-coloured hills, landscape that melds stone and sand, signboards warning of camels crossing and herds of chinkara. When I arrive with the changing light, I find a town well-girded for the three-day Desert Festival that opens on the morrow.

The next morning, I'm at the Shaheed Poonam Singh Stadium that stands framed against the fort. Accompanied by the intriguingly named Raju Guide, I weave my way through the crowds to the dais where the turban-tying competition for foreigners is in full flow. The festival has just been declared open and in what seems a scene the modern world has failed to spoil, men and women from places as far flung as Holland and Argentina wrap 20 mt of hot pink cloth around their excited heads.

Competitions galore

I saunter past poly-chromed camels of the BSF and stop by one with halitosis. Two children dressed in warrior robes sit astride it and pose for pictures. Others spin away on a giant Ferris wheel. Still others gawk at the contestants lined up for the titles of Desert Prince and Desert Princess. A turbaned desert prince in white robes, cross swords and a menacing moustache glowers at me. I look away and follow the derisive laughter of women watching the pot-carrying competition. Brass pots of diminishing sizes climb all the way to the sky and the trick is to run not walk to the finish line. Camel races and camel polo follow, and the sun is searing the grounds when the men get ready to display their long moustaches. Inch after luxuriant inch of hair unravels — fed on a diet of coconut and mustard oil and egg white — but I leave such hirsute pastimes to the men and visit the fort.

Unlike the other forts of Rajasthan that are built across linear hillsides, Jaisalmer's crowns the menacing Trikuta hill. Its soft yellow sandstone is carved to dovetail together into 99 bastions and four gateways — Akhaiya, Suraj, Ganesh and Hawa Pol — that stand at angles to one another to desist sieges. Built by Maharawal Jaisal in 1156 A.D., it has been captured by Allauddin Khilji and Humayun. One of the few living forts — the descendants of those who served the king continue to live here — its cobweb of narrow lanes is dotted with lovely havelis, sculptured Jain temples and interconnected palaces. Bikes whiz around this medieval township accessed through the Gopa chowk and Raju takes me past the *kot*, past the well of traitors, past a

gate with little hands that signify sati, and up the ramparts for a view to a thrill. The city glints gold.

I stuff myself with a panchdari ladoo from the legendary shop of Dhanraj Bhatia before following a wandering cow to Patwon ki Haveli. I'm undecided whether it is my hunger or the beauty of the haveli's façade that makes my eyes swim. Jaisalmer once stood on the famed Silk Route and its merchant princes built mansions that rivalled the beauty of Alhambra. Along with Salim Singh ki haveli and Nathmalji ki haveli, the five-storied Patwon built by Gumanlal Bafna for his sons in the late 1800s, showcases the skill of Muslim stonecarvers who lent it architectural beauty not seen elsewhere. Softly lit rooms lead to carved lintels and drooping eaves and a view of the world below through latticed balconies.

Late afternoon, I take a meditative walk around the Gadsisar lake, built by Rawal Gadsis Singh in 1367. Originally a rain-fed lake dotted with chatris and temples, its catfish filled waters are now fed by the Indira Gandhi Canal.

Forty-two km from the town, it is time for the rest of the festival. The Sam dunes are filled with hordes of travellers on a mission of self-discovery and some tourists who come merely to gape at the powdery sands, carve out hearts, make merry on the camels and return unmoved. All, however, applaud the gair and kalbeliya dancers who perform to the strains of the dholak and morchang and the enchanting voices of the Manganiyars. They sing of the unrequited love of Mahendra and Moomal, of rain and drought, of life in these hardy desert lands.

The city still sleeps as I leave and the landscape transforms as the sun slowly rises. At the head of the long winding road lies the fort, colouring from ochre to yellow to gold, appearing only for those who believe in the stuff of legend, in desert princes and tales of brave adventure.

(The writer was in Jaisalmer at the invitation of Suryagarh Hotel)