

March 15, 2013

Fit for a king



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Special Arrangement

The Reception



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Special Arrangement

The Jaisalmer suite.



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A view of Suryagarh



• Special Arrangement

Festivities inside Suryagarh

It's a quarter past four and a few minutes since I was sucked into a time machine... for my welcome, Suryagarh in Jaisalmer seems to have stepped back into princely India.

The wind from the dunes smells of the fragrance of a thousand roses. A sepia map on the table tells me exactly where I am. An old grandfather clock, inscribed with Tolkien's 'Not all those who wander are lost', strikes the hour.

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After a long drive from Jodhpur to Jaisalmer, with a brief stopover for lunch at the delightful Samsara resort, the car draws up to where three orange-turbaned men wait. After a respectful "khamaghani" (greeting), their jeep, with the Suryagarh standard fluttering, escorts me to the hotel's ramparts. We speed down roads maintained by the hotel before swinging into a grand cannon-flanked gateway. At the portico, a colourful, braided camel waits while a moustachioed man heralds my arrival on a huge nagada drum.

I feel the colour rise to my cheeks but it is too late to hide. Suryagarh's GM Karan Singh Vaid and guest relations manager Nakul Hada are at hand to greet me. So is most of the staff and Alex, Vaid's well-behaved retriever. Then, a Manganiyar sings a song of welcome, a priest marks my forehead with a tikka and, as if on cue, a thousand rose petals from the latticed balcony above shower over me.

A Preferred Boutique hotel, Suryagarh would have gone the way of other high-rises if it hadn't been for the dynamism of its young MD, Manvendra Singh Shekhawat. At his insistence, the hotel was designed to mirror the splendour of the forts and havelis of Rajputana as well as the turrets and arches of Windsor Castle.

Suryagarh, planned by architect Ravi Gupta and designers Aparna Kakrania and Raghavendra Rathore, has an aura of arrested time. The central courtyard is colonnaded and the soft, yellow sandstone casts a golden light on the peacocks that strut across. Neel (pool), Draksh (bar), Nosh (coffee shop), Legend of Marwar (restaurant), Akara (gym), Tash (billiards room) and Rait (spa) swing between the grandeur of the Orient and the elegance of a colonial club filled with stuffed tigers, unusual nutcrackers, Jurassic era finds, medieval swords and shields. The lounge wall has the phrase *Veer Bhogya Vasundhara* (The brave shall inherit the earth) painted across it in muted colours.

With 62 luxurious rooms, complete with bathtubs and shower heads that open like tropical thunderstorms, the top-end Jaisalmer Suites open out like the wings of a palace, with plunge pools overlooking the distant dunes.

The evening is spent listening to Rajasthani folk music at the baoli (step well). I cross my arms to keep out the cold desert air and as if by magic a shawl drapes itself around my shoulders. At Rait, I succumb to the pleasure and pressure of Nancy's Balinese massage, which she ends by softly ringing a silver anklet.

But it is at the dune-side dinner that the hotel outdoes itself. We set out for Kanoi on a road that's a ribbon of moonlight. As we trek through the lantern-lit sands, Shekhawat tells me how the idea of offering his guests this unique experience came about.

In these private dunes, canopied divans sit warmly by braziers with hot coals. Chef Bhawar and his team lay out dishes that echo a royal hunt — jungle maas and other meat selections that are truly daring. Champagne bottles open — we toast the musicians and dancers who dazzle our eyes, eyes that should've been jaded from a weekend of opulence.

And finally, long after the witching hour has passed, we raise a toast to the hotel that had me at the first 'khamagani'.

(The writer was at the hotel on invitation)