

September 19, 2014

Drama on the dunes



I arrive in time for dinner. On a camel with halitosis. The road is a dark braid of highway beneath a sky full of shooting stars. But the dunescape ahead of me is lit by lanterns, strewn with diwans and cushions and echoing with the haunting voices of the Manganiyars singing of love and longing.

The Preferred Boutique Hotel in Jaisalmer, Suryagarh's 'Dinner On The Dunes' is perhaps the most memorable of its dining experiences. The food, drawn from a nomadic hunt menu, is cooked on-site over open coal braziers and served on silver platters by bearers softly padding past on soft carpets.

The *sheekh kebab* arrives in a flurry of fire and spice, gently doused by a layer of cream, and tastes of the Frontier. Glasses of wine intrude sweetly between the courses. The roomali rotis fly from the hands of the chef onto an upturned pan, like UFOs in the desert, and emerge soft and chewy. The *gatte ki sabji* (gram flour dumplings in yoghurt-based gravy) and the *ker sangria* (made of desert berries and dried beans) arrive infused with charcoal smoke and the dry tang of desert sand.

But it's the *jungle maas*, with plenty of game meat thrown in, that is the cherry that evening. I'm unsure whether its rabbit or venison or even just familiar lamb meat, but whatever it is, it's succulent and frightfully spicy. I perspire despite the nippy evening, but don't pass up the offer for seconds. The gravy arrives again, cast in a deep red from the Mathania chillies grown only to flavour this staple of the warrior clans. Flavoured with curd, garlic, onions, cloves and ghee, with

a hint of mustard oil, it is cooked in a sealed vessel over a fire. And when the seal is broken and the lid opened on a cold desert night... it gives off more than just the aroma of an irresistible Rajput dish. It's also a throwback to gallantry and good times.