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The Royal Treatment in Rajasthan: Rajmahal Palace in Jaipur

The Royal Treatment at Rajmahal Palace

The Pink City has plenty of sumptuous palace hotels. But few feel as sumptuous and regal as the Suján Rajmahal Palace, which is still owned by the well-liked royal family. Conceived more than 250 years ago as a pleasure garden just outside Jaipur for a favorite queen, the pink palace became the British Residency during the Raj and then the private home of His Highness Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II of Jaipur. Along with the City Palace and some of the family’s private forts, it’s the only place in town where the royal standard still flies—and certainly the only hotel.

But rather than going guests the sense that they’re exploring a faded museum—even though dozens of Man Singh’s polo trophies, original family portraits and photographs of guests like Queen Elizabeth and Jackie Kennedy are on display, as is his 1950s Ford Thunderbird—the Rajmahal Palace transports them to a fantasy life of being royalty themselves. That’s helped along by the quality of service, which is overseen by Rajasthan luxury tourism leader Sujan (known for its outstanding tents camps), and one of the reasons the hotel was quickly accepted into Relais & Châteaux.

I certainly felt like queen for a day when I was shown into my room, the Maharani Apartment. (I stayed as a guest of the hotel following an enthusiastic recommendation by savvy travel designer Megan Black of Absolute.) Easily the largest hotel room I’ve stayed in, the massive bedroom is outfitted with plush mohair velvet couches and bedcovers, crystal glasses and a dazzling chandelier. The bed is so thick and so high that steps need to be climbed into it. There’s also an enormous bathroom, private dining area and enclosed veranda with a plunge pool.

Wallpaper is usually something that most of us can take or leave. More often these days, we love it—there’s a reason clean white walls have become a standard in luxury hotels. But in this Indian fantasy, the exotic, dramatic wallpaper was one of the first things that won me over. Candy-colored pussies all over the walls in the Maharani Apartment? Polo players in full regalia in the colonnade? Stylized flowers in the “rhinoceros” hallway? Yes, please.

“My nine-year-old self would have loved this place,” said my friend as we looked in the screening magnesia wallpaper and ceiling of the breakfast room, inspired by an iconic 1952 Vogue cover and known as 15 Shades of Pink. But our considerably older selves were seduced by it too. My friend was disappointed to learn that the custom wallpaper is not for sale.

Then again, it’s meant to be special. Society designer Adil Ahmed (a friend of the royal family), who oversaw the recent, meticulous refurbishment, created a distinct pattern for the 14 rooms and public spaces, all of which tell stories about Jaipur. Its rulers, their legacies and the collective legacy of the Kingshole and Awan.

The Suján Rajmahal Palace
Ahmad, who has said that the building was de发觉 enough for him to tear it as a blank canvas when he got involved, says in a design statement, “It is both a classical and a contemporary home within the walls of a royal palace. For me, Rashmahal Palace epitomizes the power and sensibility of a ruling family that actively contributed and participated in the layered history of India. It is an extraordinary ‘home’ set in an extraordinary city that is a living museum without boundaries, embracing one and all, a celebration of a vibrant diversity.” The palace embodies Jaipur’s ‘glittering past’ and ‘glided future.”

Ahmad said in another interview, “You cannot re-create the past. It just feels like pastiche. But to re-create this style of living—that’s where the past comes in.”

Back in the pleasure palace days, the property was on the outskirts of Jaipur. Now the city has grown and encircled it, but Rashmahal Palace still feels like an oasis amid the chaos that is India. Aside from the sounds from regularly passing trains, the hotel gardens are impressively quiet. Inside, everything smells of roses.

Although the hotel organizes custom excursions, I left all my logistics to Black and her colleagues at Absolute Travel—she’s lived in India and completed a big research trip last year. Absolute connected me with a smart guide, skilled driver, shopping recommendations and seamless itinerary through secret reaches of the Amber Fort and City Palace, plus lesser known attractions just outside of town like the Golbati temple, where monkeys roam freely over the prayer halls, and the Deogarh elephant sanctuary, a project of a nature-loving member of the royal family who jokes that he could have bought a plane but chose conservation instead. Oh, and a camel polo match just happened to be going on during our visit.

Absolute gave me a restaurant guide too, and we made plans a few times to go back out for dinner. But whenever we got back to our refuge after days of exploring, we were all too happy to stay put and let ourselves be dotted on by the staff. They mixed perfect martinis in the Polo Bar and served candlelit dinners on the lawn. I like a good adventure. But sometimes there’s a lot to be said for simply feeling like a queen.