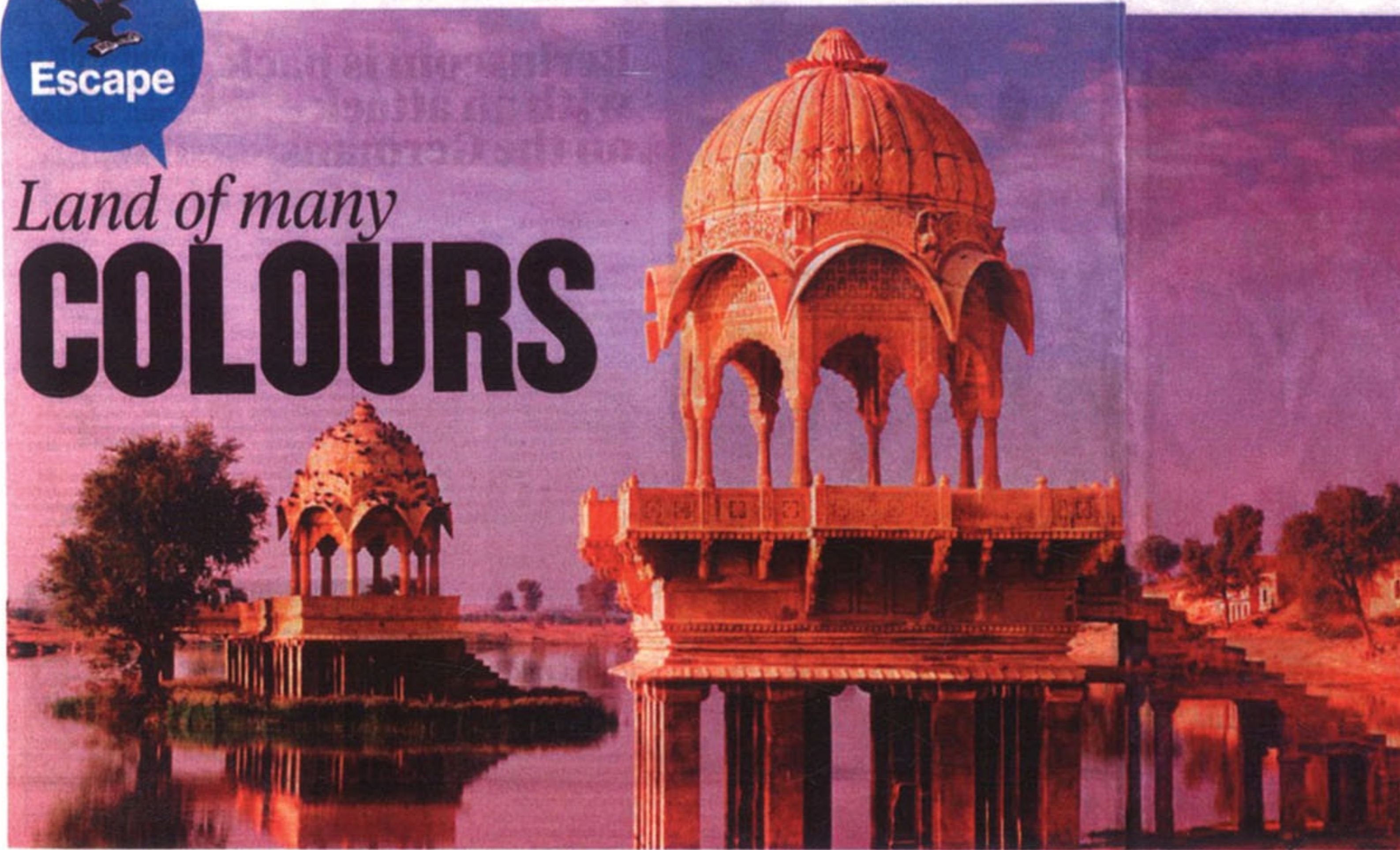


“There’s nowhere quite like Rajasthan...get ready for cities of pink white and blue, for dazzling Indian festivals, and for deserts, palaces and luxury trains.”



Escape

Land of many COLOURS



THE INDEPENDENT
WEDNESDAY 26 SEPTEMBER 2012

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Escape /45

Into the blue

Move west to one of Rajasthan's mightiest sights. Dubbed the “blue city” because of the colour of its houses, Jodhpur is set at the edge of the Thar Desert and is dominated by Mehrangarh Fort, a majestic edifice that appears to have evolved from the sandstone crags on which it was built in the 1500s. Jodhpur is a highlight of the Boutique Rajasthan package offered by Ampersand (020-7289 6100; ampersandtravel.com). The 10-night trip costs from £2,360 per person including flights from Heathrow.

Desert beauty

Desert towns don't come more spectacular than Jaisalmer, in the remote west. With bastions rising out of the desert scrub, the 12th-century fort here looks as if it has swept in from a sensational fairy tale. To this, add bazaars and striking havelis with intricate latticework. Peregrine Adventures (0845 863 9667; peregrineadventures.com) presents Jaisalmer as a highlight of its “Land of the Kings” 20-day tour. The holiday costs from £1,570 per person, excluding international flights.



Full spectrum: (clockwise from main) temples in Jaisalmer; the River Ganges; Palace On Wheels luxury train; the Lake Palace, Udaipur; Jodhpur PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICKY HARRIS



This week:
Should I gamble on getting cheaper flights from Gatwick to Las Vegas?

Q I have just been given a price of £516 for a Virgin Atlantic return flight to Las Vegas in February 2013. Should I book now or is this likely to go down?
John Knight

A It's the Hamlet dilemma, familiar to anyone booking a trip a fair way in advance - to buy, or not to buy, a flight at a particular moment? In a perfect world, from the airlines' point of view, fares would only ever increase: early bookers would be rewarded for committing cash upfront. Fares would increase steadily, on the principle that the closer to departure you book, the more you pay - with very late bookers handing over a fortune.

But given the fickle nature of the travelling public, and the behaviour of rival carriers, it is quite possible for fares to fall. Airlines use “revenue management” systems that are intended to fill as many seats as possible on each flight while extracting the maximum cash that each passenger is prepared to pay. Fares fluctuate frequently; prices are nudged up or down to keep bookings on trend. In the case of a flight from Gatwick to Las Vegas, the airline will expect that by 1 October perhaps 30 per cent of seats on the departure on 1 February to have been filled. If bookings are heavier than predicted, fares will rise; if lower, then prices may be cut.

To add an extra layer of complexity, airlines often seek to boost the number of seats filled across the board by staging short-term “seat sales”; for example, British Airways has just finished a post-Olympics sales push that expired last night.

The competitive landscape to Las Vegas is also changing. At present, Virgin flies from Gatwick (and Manchester), while BA flies from Heathrow. However, next month, BA is launching flights from Gatwick to the Nevada city, in competition with Virgin.

Despite the new competition, you should seize the £516 deal on offer. Even under the latest BA sale, the lowest fare was £563 return. A future sale could conceivably see fares cut to, say, £499 return. If this happened, it would apply only to lightly booked flights, so you might not get the departures you want. So book now.

What's the attraction?

Glorious palaces, spectacular forts, dramatic desert - the mix is compelling. And right now, cooler weather makes this an optimum period to visit. Rajasthan exudes flamboyant character: until becoming part of the Republic of India in 1949, the region was known as Rajputana, “Land of Princes”, and was an affiliation of small kingdoms. The Rajput clans were legendary for their sense of honour, while many of their leaders claimed descent from sun, moon and fire. Although the maharajahs no longer hold political power, they have huge paternalistic influence and are greatly revered - accounting to a large degree for Rajasthan's particularly colourful customs.

In the pink for starters

It's with good reason that first-timers to India often start with the “Golden Triangle”, a road trip taking in Delhi, Agra and the Taj Mahal, and the Rajasthan capital, Jaipur. Known as the pink city because of its rosy-coloured buildings, Jaipur glories in exuberant architecture. Sights include the City Palace, the remarkable facade of the Palace of the Winds, the astronomical park of Jantar Mantar, and, just out of town, superb Amber Fort. Voyage Jules Verne (0845 166 7038; vjv.com) offers a good-value Golden Triangle nine-night group trip from £2,349 per person (based on two sharing, as are all other prices shown). The price includes flights from Heathrow.

There's nowhere quite like Rajasthan, says **Harriet O'Brien**, and now is the perfect time to visit. So get ready for cities of pink, white and blue, for dazzling Indian festivals, palaces and luxury trains

Visions of white

Head south to enjoy the fabled romance of Udaipur. Shining with whitewashed havelis (mansions) and domed palaces, the city fringes the shimmering waters of Lake Pichola. Take in the maze of the old town, the brilliantly decorated City Palace and enjoy a drink at the dreamy Lake Palace Hotel (00 91 294 2428800; tajhotels.com), which appears to float in the middle of the lake. Udaipur features on the Classic India itinerary of Bales Worldwide (0845 057 0600; balesworldwide.com). The 13-day group holiday also visits Delhi and Varanasi and costs from £2,345 per person including flights from Heathrow.

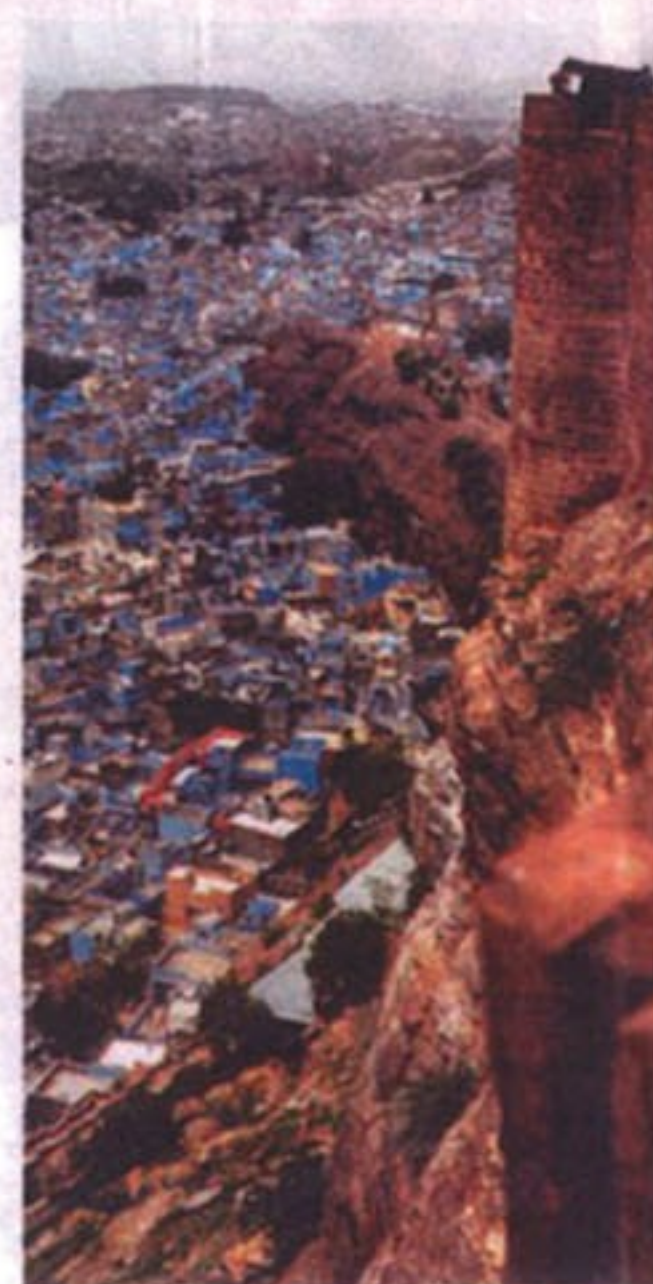
Who said that?

“Rajasthan was and always will be more Indian than anywhere else, if only because it never was anything else; this had never technically been British India at all.”

James Cameron, An Indian Summer

“The work of angels, fairies and giants... built by titans and coloured by the morning sun... he who walks through it loses sense of being among buildings. It is as though he walked through mountain gorges.”

Rudyard Kipling's description of Mehrangarh Fort



Tiger turmoil

In July, tiger tourism was banned in India. With a census indicating there may be less than 1,700 of the endangered animals left in the subcontinent, visitors are no longer allowed into “core tiger areas”, including Rajasthan's Ranthambore reserve. The ban, however, is an interim measure and the Supreme Court is due to review the situation this week. In the meantime, it is still possible to stay in resorts such as Sher Bagh (00 91 11 4606 7608; sherbagh.com) and Taj Savai Madhopur Lodge (00 91 7462 22 0541; vjvantahtaj.com) on the park's periphery and take walks in buffer areas to enjoy the vibrant bird life there (woodpeckers, hornbills, bee-eaters and more).

Insider information

“Udaipur's House of Mewar is the oldest unbroken dynasty in the world. Although the princely privileges of the maharajas of Rajasthan were removed in 1971, the spirit of custodianship is upheld even today by the House of Mewar. It is all encompassing - it comprises the passionate preservation of rich music traditions, art, and historical records. It involves unstinting support to infrastructure and tourism.” - *His Highness Shri Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur*



Sheer exuberance

There's nowhere quite like Rajasthan for vibrant festivals. Between 26 and 30 October this year you'll be dazzled by the activities in Jodhpur. Timed to coincide with the brightest full moon in north India, the Rajasthan International Folk Festival (jodhpurfestival.org) takes place at Mehrangarh Fort. India specialist Greaves Travel (020-7487 9111; greavesindia.co.uk) offers a seven-day trip costing from £1,599pp including flights from Heathrow. Or aim for the next full moon: the Pushkar Camel Fair (rajasthan tourism.gov.in) takes place from 20 to 28 November. Pushkar Resort (00 91 11 26-494531; sewara.com) has doubles from £2,954 (£90), room only.

On track

Capture a flavour of old-time splendour in the Palace on Wheels. Launched in 1982, this is a train kitted out to recreate the luxury of royal coaches. It toots its way slowly around Rajasthan, stopping for sightseeing excursions at Jaipur, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Udaipur and more. The train service was refurbished and relaunched in 2009 with a new decor, itinerary and cuisine. Great Rail Journeys (01904 521936; greatrail.com) presents a 15-day package from the UK with seven days in the Palace on Wheels and additional trips to Agra and Shimla. The price of £3,395 per person, includes flights from Heathrow.

