

“The most luxurious and stylish tents I have seen created with masterful attention to details.”



EDITED BY MRIGULA GANDHI

HOTELS

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[CHECK OUT]

DESERT ROSE

Charty Dugdale spends two days of luck and luxury at The Serai in Jaisalmer

Once a year, in February, my father visits me in Delhi. He devotes most of his time to his grandchildren but for a few days he whisks me away to explore a corner of India together. The arrangement is simple: I plan, he pays. Last year Madhya Pradesh, this year Rajasthan, with a night of super luxury at The Serai. As we drove deeper into the Thar I worried about this 'desert camp and spa'—for the rupees my father was forking out, it had better be good. A sign for The Serai—letters cut out of a hunk of golden stone—directed us off NH-15 and we wove through the scrub

for a few kilometres before spying wisps of white—the roofs of the tents—in the distance. There it was. A magnificent desert camp looking like it had sprung out of the sand. But while the desert is meandering, The Serai, modelled on a photograph called the 'Grand Encampment of the Order of the Star of India at Calcutta, Jan 1, 1876', and constructed entirely out of Jaisalmer stone and canvas, is perfectly symmetrical in design. From the raised infinity pool you can look down the two long rows of tents (ten on each side) to the Royal Suite (with its own pool, spa, dining and lounge tents) at the end. Such is the scale that the scarlet-turbaned

waiter bearing a tray of iced drinks towards a distant tent seemed the size of a child's toy figure. Cassandra, the general manager, explained that "even when it's full it feels empty; it's that kind of place." Our tent was the most luxurious and stylish I have seen, created with masterful attention to detail. All crisp-white and tan, not a block-print in sight: très desert chic. A veranda where we ate our breakfast led to a comfortable sitting area where a leather-topped desk urged me to sit and scrawl old-fashioned letters on the camel-embossed writing paper. An enormous bed, wide and deep and dreamily comfortable. And at the back of the tent a spacious bathroom with



Clockwise from this picture: al fresco dining in the desert; an exterior view of The Serai; an inviting table; the luxurious interiors of a tent; and the bathroom



HOTELS

Cabanas with deck chairs for poolside lounging

a warm shower, two stone basins and thick, white fluffy towels. Instead of the usual plastic, a trio of elegant glass bottles containing lavender shampoo, conditioner and body moisturiser stood by the shower—one of the many delightful touches that set The Serai apart. As I lay on my bed, listening to the sounds of flapping canvas, babblers in the akara shrubs and water pouring over the side of the pool in the distance, I had an overwhelming desire to bury my phone. Nothing, no one, was going to impinge on this elemental peace, the noiselessness and space of the desert. Sensibly, I opted for burial in my suitcase and enjoyed a relaxed late afternoon by the pool and generous cups of tea with slices of banana and apricot cake. Later, in the darkness, haunting music beckoned us from our tent. The heavens were ablaze with stars and campfires glowed. Around one of them, musicians from the Manganiyar Seduction, just back from Australia, were weaving their melodies into the night air. Apparently, they often drop by during breaks from their jet-set schedule to seduce the guests (as if we needed more seducing). Stirred by the music and warmed by the fire, we lolled in our campaign-style canvas chairs, gazing up at the stars and sipping our drinks (a snappy margarita and a seductive mojito were spot on, and

the wine list strong). In a pinch-yourself moment I exchanged numbers with Chhuga Khan, who offered to come and play in my home when he's next in Delhi. Dinner in the restaurant was excellent. A thali, which included local Rajasthani dishes such as lal maas, was probably the best of all, but the tom kha soup was also delicious as was the spinach cannelloni. And the puddings—banana tart tatin, rum and raisin ice cream, lemon and basil sorbet—were heavenly. The menus were not extensive but they included a well-thought-out mix of Indian and Western food, and the lunch menu changed daily. Many of the ingredients are grown organically on site and it's a nice walk to see the beautifully tended vegetable garden. The following day's highlight was a 'Serai Massage' in one of the spa tents set in the four corners of a walled garden. The massage was perfect, but again it were the details that made it unforgettable. The gentle bathing of my feet in a sandstone basin of warm water, the bowl of marigolds set beneath the massage bed that I could gaze at as Sindhu gently worked my back with a blend of tulsi, saffron and honey in a sesame oil base. We didn't leave The Serai until we absolutely had to, at tea time on our second day ("there's no check-out time, stay as long as you like," we were told). Had we

been able to stay longer we could have enjoyed a guided visit to Jaisalmer 40km away, ridden camels or horses and sipped sundowners on the dunes. The outing that appealed most to me, though, was Cassandra's monthly visit to the local village with a vet (part of a wider commitment to the local people and environment). Hundreds and hundreds of camels come for treatment from miles around, she told me, and it is quite a spectacle. So, yes, The Serai was good! In fact, its extraordinary setting combined with an attention to detail and a level of personalised service that I have never come across before make it outstanding and "unique in the world," as its Relais & Châteaux signature declares. There's something quite visionary about it. I just wish I was richer!

THE INFORMATION

LOCATION Village Bherwa, Chandan, District Jaisalmer, Rajasthan; 290km (4hrs) by road from Jodhpur
ACCOMMODATION 21 suites: 14 tented suites; 6 luxury tented suites each with a private plunge pool set in a walled garden; 1 royal tented suite with its own pool, spa, dining and lounge tents
TARIFF ₹25,000 (tented), ₹35,000 (luxury tented), ₹50,000 (royal tented)
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