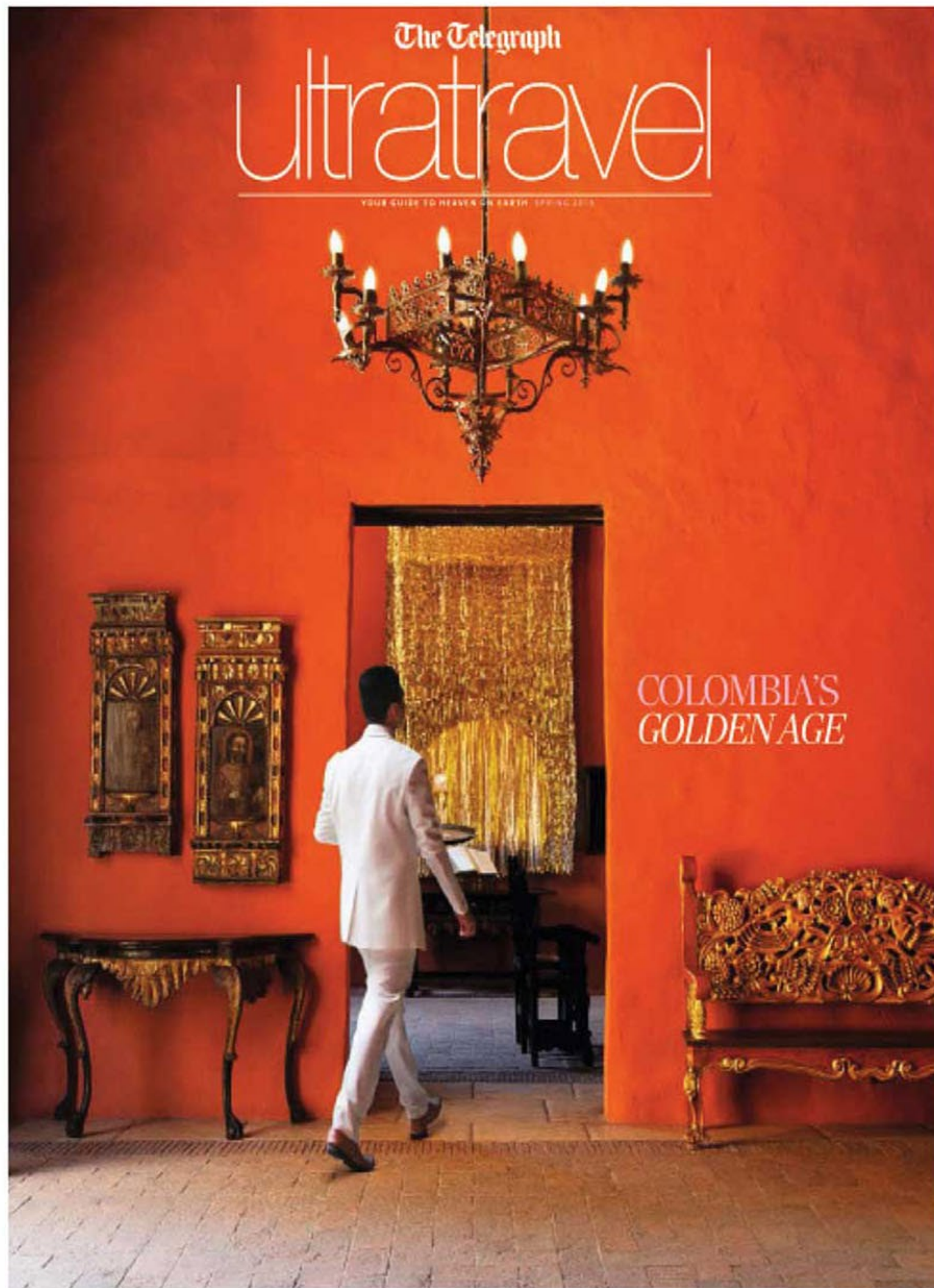


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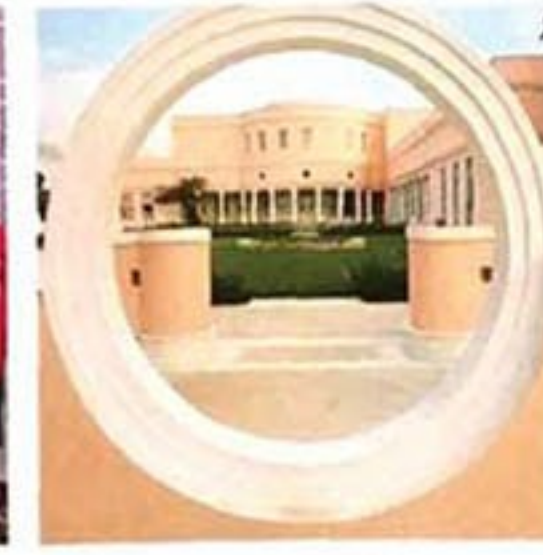
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edited by LISY GRAINGER



INDIAN RIKS
The sumptuous Rajmahal Palace, above, is the former home of the Maharaja of Jaipur. Now a boutique hotel, its interiors left, are a celebration of vivid Rajasthani colours.

A LITTLE PLACE I KNOW
RAJMAHAL PALACE Jaipur

There aren't many hotels in the world in which the Queen, Jackie Onassis, Lord Mountbatten and generations of Indian royalty have slept. But the Rajmahal Palace, the oldest in Jaipur, was once the private home of the Maharajah, and it was there, after a tour of his principality, that presidents and queens would rest, with a view of peacocks parading in the seven acres of Persian-inspired gardens, horse-drawn carriages sweeping through the imperial gates, and fountains gurgling amid beds of white roses.

Almost three centuries after it was built, the palace has been given an extensive make-over by Princess Diya Kumari, the Maharaja's daughter, and Asif Ahmad, the Indian designer who created the successful interiors firm Good Earth. Together, they have created an Indian boutique hotel unlike any other. It's not just the design that's bold, but the colours. Inside the double-storey art deco building the decor is as vivid as the saris that adorn the women beyond its rose-coloured walls. Kit Kemp meets Technicolor Raj. Walls have been decorated with 46 different styles of hand-blocked paper, some featuring polo horses, others the royal insignia. Chairs have been upholstered in hand-painted and shocking midnight blues. The Maharajah's and Maharani's Suites have original art-deco furniture and a rich, clashing colour scheme (an acquired taste). In every room chandeliers illuminate woven carpets and 10ft-high paintings of exotic birds and maharajahs.

Thankfully, many of the 14 suites have been decorated in softer, powdery hues that are cooling and calming in the dry desert heat.

The prettiest, such as the baby-blue Mountbatten, have private living spaces overlooking the gardens, high-tech music and television systems, and white-marble bathrooms stocked with products in crystal decanters, cotton-wool and tissues in elegant stone jars, and a hardiyer and torch in leather pouches.

But then, management of the hotel is in the hands of Sajin, the boutique organisation owned by Jaisal and Anjali Singh, so nothing is too much trouble. Meals, which can be taken in-suite, range from fruit platters at breakfast and salads at lunch to rich Indian feasts at night, served by staff who are polished from the tops of their turbans to the royal enignias on their brass buttons. And almost any trip can be arranged: excursions by horse-drawn carriage, visits to private palaces and, of course, shopping trips to more exclusive artisans' workshops.

To complement the outdoor swimming pool, a spa suite opens this month offering Ayurvedic treatments. There are also two shops, in which to buy local treasures, a Palace Collection boutique, selling items created by Ahmad, from wallpaper to glassware, and Kashmiri Loom, makers of fine embroidered cashmere shawls.

Sajin Rajmahal Palace, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India (0091) 74517 2700; sajinluxury.com costs from £170 a night. Groves India (020 7487 9101; grovesindia.co.uk) offers a week's tour to India from £2,085 per person including four nights at Sajin Rajmahal Palace and three nights in Delhi, flights with British Airways, transfers, guides and sightseeing.