

# DESERT SYMPHONY



**TOWERING SIGHT** The city, as seen from Sonar Quila (below) PHOTO BY AUTHOR

## Sand in my shoes

**KALPANA SUNDER** visits sun-kissed Jaisalmer in Rajasthan and revels in the colour and vibrancy that permeates every home, street and fort located in this city.

A monochrome landscape of camel carts, flocks of shaggy sheep, resilient kaer and babul trees is offset by the mounds of fiery red chillies and the brilliant turbans of farmers offering a welcome burst of colour in this brown-on-brown palette. In the distance is a continuous line of windmills (60 percent of Jaisalmer is powered by these windmills). Slowly, the rolling tawny hills and the vast empty sky give way to shimmering sand dunes and far away, like a mirage, rises the silhouette of a golden fortress. It reminds me of the sandcastles built in my childhood with inverted pails — this is a place as remote as it can get. It was here in 1156, that Rawal Jaisal, the king belonging to the Bhatti clan of Rajputs, established a fortress.

Each Rajasthani town has a dominant colour: Jaipur is the pink town, Jodhpur the blue town and Jaisalmer is the golden city, hewn in the famous yellow sandstone of the region. Muslim craftsmen wielded their magic on the town's *havelis* and even today there's a sizeable Muslim population here. My guide Kanhaiya Lal is a historian, guide, even an actor (he proudly points out to a movie hoarding in German) and describes his visit to Vienna, "*Badi sundar nagar hai, aur bilkool saaf.*" Jaisalmer has one of the worst civic environments in Rajasthan — plastic covers and blocked sewers litter the streets and cows roam freely within the ancient medieval walls.

### Quaint setting

I walk through four gargantuan gates into the chaotic streets of the squat Sonar Quila or golden fortress, which is a unique 'living fort' where more than 4,000 people still live within its crenulated walls. It is today listed as one of the most endangered sites, with many bastions and walls crumbling, and it's said that the leaks from the sewage system are slowly eroding the fort's foundations. Inside the fortress is a pageant of colour and sounds that awaken my senses.

“INHABITANTS LIVE IN SANDSTONE 'HAVELIS' WITH DELICATE 'JALI' SCREENS WHICH HONEYCOMB THE STREETS, JUST LIKE THEIR ANCESTORS DID CENTURIES AGO. LAUNDRY DRIES ON CENTURIES-OLD BALUSTRADES AND WOMEN WITH ARMLoads OF BANGLES AND GAUZY VEILS WASH FLOORS AND VESSELS...”

There are guesthouses with signboards that have quaint misspellings and gimmicky advertising seems to reign supreme. I spot on a bed sheet — 'works better than Viagra' and 'bed sheet size — one wife'. Bright mirror work and patchwork quilts, metal gods and goddesses, chunky silver jewellery, sequined skirts, hot pink turbans and antique doors dot the narrow streets alongside tourist tack and buckets of spicy pickles. Inhabitants live in sandstone *havelis* with delicate *jali* screens which honeycomb the streets, just like their ancestors did centuries ago. Laundry dries on centuries-old balustrades and women with armloads of bangles and gauzy veils wash floors and vessels, impish boys drive cycles at breakneck speeds, lumbering cows squeeze their behinds into narrow nooks and crannies, internet cafes do lazy business and soporific men read newspapers in the shade of a tree. Outside many homes, I see wedding cards with bright Ganeshas painted on the wall, a custom which harks back to ancient times when every person knew the other and spread word about the wedding! Kanhaiya Lal takes me to the *Lonely Planet*-recommended Hari Om jewellers, who have painted scenes on human hair and grains of rice. I gaze entranced through a magnifying glass at three bands on a delicate silver ring which portray scenes from a royal era and monuments.

The most beautiful parts of the fortress are the cluster of sandstone Jain temples with soaring spires, built in the 15th and 16th centuries with scalloped arches, cornices and minute filigree. Inside the *mandap* of the Parsvanath Temple dedicated to the 22nd Tirthankara is a ceiling with the sculpture of a demon-like head with four bodies arranged in a circle. As I walk around, the head seems to connect to each of the bodies. In the Sambhavnath Temple, I descend into a tiny basement called the Gyan Bhandar — a 16th century library with ancient palm leaf manuscripts and paintings. Kanhaiya Lal shows me the motif of a giraffe on one of the ancient documents — proof of the ancient trade links that Jaisalmer had as an important outpost on the Spice Route to Central Asia, Egypt, Africa and the West.

Jaisalmer is famous for its ornate mansions or *havelis* (derived from *hawa wali* or airy) built by wealthy merchants in the 18th and 19th centuries, out of the yellow sandstone, with a riot of stylised flowers and geometric motifs weaving a lace — like delicacy into stone. The Patwon ki Haweli is a set of five houses next to each other, looming over a narrow street, which was built by five Jain brothers who were in the trade of gold and silver brocade. Inside, the *havelis* are large airy courtyards and lavishly chiselled wooden ceilings with mirrors and 60 balconies, each in a different style. Bats hang from ceilings and pigeons roost in the windows of these atmospheric mansions.

Outside the *haveli*, I meet Dhanna Ram who has the dubious distinction of the longest moustache in town. Rajasthani men seem to have this fetish for moustaches and beards and Dhanna is following his father's footsteps (who was a Guinness Book record holder for his long moustache)! The perfect antidote to the colour and clutter of the city is my hotel — the colonial luxury tented camp called the Serai, a half hour drive from the city. That night in the billowing white tent, I dream of the view from the fort with the city laid out under my feet like a fantasy from the Arabian nights, turning a burnished bronze in the rays of the setting sun.

