

Mughals, Rajputs & Villages: An Introduction

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This tour explores three princely capitals in the heartland of the Mughal Empire, Delhi, Agra and Fatehpur Sikri, and a number of great Rajput fortress cities of Rajasthan. You will visit magnificent Mughal monuments such as Agra's Red Fort and Taj Mahal, as well as a group of matchless Rajput palaces, including some which are seldom visited by tourists. A special feature of the tour is accommodation in a number of heritage hotels, among them old palaces. The program also explores the folk culture of Rajasthan, manifest in fine music, dance, puppetry and textiles.

Rajasthan exemplifies an extremely interesting quality of Indian culture and identity. Here, 'history' has, until very recently, been conceived in a different way to its portrayal in the west. Whereas westerners have for centuries considered 'history' something that happened in a compartmentalised 'past', separated from the present, Indians until recently (before the British wrote their 'history') saw the past as being on a continuum with the present. Whereas western city dwellers could be said to be 'stranded in the present', in many aspects Rajasthani society, religion, architecture, art, music and dance evince a seamless harmony of past and present. Even though, since 1949, the Rajputs have ceased to rule their old feudal states, memories of their fourteenth-century hegemony remain vivid, as you will see in the old cities they once ruled.

The Rajputs princes who dominated this large region evolved in the sixth century AD. Their origins are obscure. Some scholars have even argued that they descend from the Huns, who ravaged Central Asia and North India before one branch invaded Europe under Attila. Others believe that they may have emerged from the ancient tribes of the region, which are even mentioned in India's ancient epics, the

Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Although some great Rajput families rose to princely status, the word 'Rajput' ('son of a king') in fact describes a warrior caste, not a princely class. Many Rajputs are not princes. Those families that did grow to dominate princely states from their citadels at Chittor/Udaipur, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, developed a chivalric code not unlike that of the European medieval aristocracy. The Rajputs were fearless in battle, valuing honour more highly than life. Nowhere is this more vividly expressed than in the great deserted Rajput city of Chittor, whose women committed mass ritual suicide whilst their doomed husbands rode out to meet the besieging Mughal army – and certain death. Fiercely territorial, the Rajputs defended their states until forced to compromise with the Mughals (the maharana of Udaipur refused) and then with the British. Rajasthan was continuously invaded by Indian dynasties because of its strategic location between India's heartlands and the great Silk Routes of Central Asia on the one hand, and the monsoon maritime trade routes of the Arabian Gulf on the other. It was a corridor both for trade and conquest.

The main geographic feature of Rajasthan is the Aravalli Range, which runs through the state from southwest to northeast. This mountain chain blocks the monsoon, so that the northern part of the state, the Thar Desert, is arid and thinly populated. Fortresses like Jaisalmer and Bikaner rise from this desert. Surrounding the Thar is a land dominated by scrub forest. The Godwar, Marwar, and Shekhawati regions lie in the thorn scrub forest zone, along with the city of Jodhpur. The Luni River and its tributaries are the major river system of Godwar and Marwar regions, draining the western slopes of the Aravallis. The Ghaggar River, which originates in Haryana, is an intermittent stream that disappears into the sands of the Thar Desert in the northern corner of the state. The Aravalli Range and the lands to its east and southeast are generally more fertile and better watered. Here the Kathiarbar-Gir dry deciduous forests include teak and Acacia. The hilly, well-watered Vagad region lies in southernmost Rajasthan, on the border with Gujarat. Its major cities are Udaipur and Chittaurgarh. The Hadoti region lies to the southeast, on the border with Madhya Pradesh. North of Hadoti and Mewar is the Dhundhar region, home to the state capital, Jaipur. We shall experience all these different regional ecosystems on the tour, and also see much of Rajasthan's diverse wildlife.

Rajasthan's culture is as diverse as its environment. Although there are few Buddhist monuments here, the region boasts some of the most beautiful Jain temples in India. Many of these were built by Jain merchants, who also constructed Havelis, intricately decorated houses that are miniature versions of Rajasthan's vast Rajput palaces. We shall visit a number of the most important Havelis and Jain temples, and also some of India's most magnificent Hindu shrines.

The Rajput palaces we shall both visit and stay in, are unique in the world. These richly decorated residences, which combine traditional Indic and Mughal stylistic features, served a number of purposes. Surrounded by daunting fortifications, they were centres of defence of princely states, as well as their administrative headquarters. They were important residences, in which courtly manners, seen in famous Rajsthani miniatures depicting court life, distinguished Rajput princes from their inferiors. They were, of course, residences, which divided into two parts, one for the court women and the other for the men. Often the women's quarters are larger than those of the men who were invariably absent, on military campaigns or at the Mughal court. The great bulk of these fortified palaces, which dominate the surrounding countryside, also signified status. They were symbols of princely power.

The tour will not only explore great Hindu and Jain temples, courtly Rajput palaces and merchant havelis, but also encounter the vernacular architecture of Rajasthan, including its famous stepped wells, and villages whose shape has remained the same for millennia. You will, in fact, sample most of the sensual delights of this great region - in sight, sound, smell and taste - and return home with a new understanding of how non-western societies live in continuity with the past.

