

# Western Rajasthan



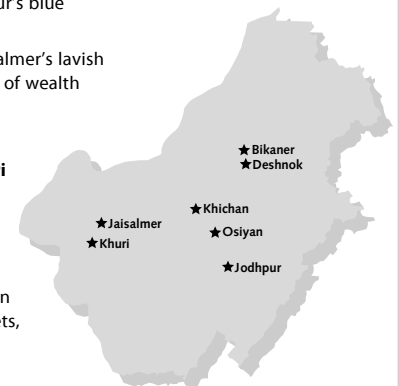
Rama, hero of the Ramayana, fuming with rage at the sea god who policed the straits between India and Lanka (Sri Lanka), resolved to fire a destructive arrow into the sea. However, in the nick of time, the sea god appeased the irate god, and Rama switched his aim. He fired the arrow into the northwest, creating the parched arid lands of western Rajasthan, represented today by the Thar Desert, which embraces the romantic citadels of Jodhpur and Jaisalmer.

The vast desert, extending into Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat, and into Pakistan, is not all barren and sandy. In fact it's the world's most populous arid zone. Desert culture, from the down-to-earth villages to the majestic forts, is vibrant and resilient, and such a vital ingredient of Rajasthan's allure. The towns of this region are powerfully evocative. Jodhpur, the Blue City, spreads out like an inland sea from beneath the glare of mighty Mehrangarh – a fort of impressive proportions. Jaisalmer, the Golden City, arises from the drifting sands of the Thar like an enormous sand castle. Bikaner, with no allotted colour, has narrow medieval bazaars, and its fort, Junagarh, has some of Rajasthan's most opulent interiors. Barmer, in the far southwest, is the colourful centre of handicraft production with treasures galore for adventurous shoppers.

The west is where you can ride a camel over a sand dune and into the sunset, camp under a desert sky and meet villagers in radiant robes. It's as if the romance of the great caravans has been preserved in the desert air.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Listen to a city's secrets from the soaring ramparts of magnificent **Mehrangarh** (p304), above Jodhpur's blue building blocks
- Marvel at the overworked stone carving of Jaisalmer's lavish **Havelis** (p326) – delicate yet powerful symbols of wealth
- Explore the ancient **Jaisalmer Fort** (p324) – the world's biggest sand castle
- Jump on a camel and embark on a **camel safari** from Jaisalmer (p330), Khuri (p336), Bikaner (p343) and Osian (p317) – the best way to experience the desert, and you get to sleep under the stars
- Spot a white rat at **Karni Mata Temple** (p348) in Deshnok where rodents run riot, gnawing sweets, slurping milk and scampering over your feet
- Watch the skies over Khichan for the graceful **demoiselle cranes** (p318) flying in for a free feed





## History

The district of Jodhpur was for a long time the ancient kingdom of Marwar, the largest kingdom in Rajputana and the third largest in India, after Kashmir and Hyderabad.

The region's history is hazy until the 3rd century BC. The indigenous inhabitants were subjugated by the Aryans during their invasion of northern India between 1500 and 200 BC. In 231 BC Chandragupta Maurya's empire came to power, spreading across northern India from its capital at present-day Patna, in Bihar. Subsequent centuries saw a bit of pass the parcel until the Rathore Rajputs, who hailed from Kannauj in present-day Uttar Pradesh, came out on top. This is when the state of Marwar

emerged. The Rathores originally settled at Pali, southeast of present-day Jodhpur, shifting to Mandore in 1381. In 1459 Rao Jodha, the Rathore leader, moved the capital about 9km to the south and founded the city of Jodhpur.

Jaisalmer was founded in the 12th century, after the Bhati Rajput capital at Lodharva had been destroyed by Mohammed of Ghori. After experiencing great unrest in the medieval period, Jaisalmer enjoyed a heyday from the 16th century to the 18th century, when it was a stop on an international trade route.

Meanwhile, the Muslims were entrenched at Nagaur. Mohammed Bahlim, the governor of Sind, erected a fort there in 1122, having subdued the local Hindu chief, Ajayaraja.

The rule of Nagaur fell variously to Ajayaraja (again), the sultanate of Delhi, the Rathores, an independent local dynasty led by Shams Khan Dandani, the Lodi sultans of Delhi and the Mughals under Akbar. In 1572 Akbar granted it to Raisimha, the chief of Bikaner. In the early 18th century Nagaur was acquired by the maharaja of Jodhpur.

The desert city of Bikaner was founded by one of the sons of Rao Jodha, founder of Jodhpur, following a schism in the ruling Rathore family.

After Independence, the desert kingdoms retained their autonomy for some time. The territory was strategic, owing to its proximity to Pakistan, and the various rulers were enticed to join India. The forces stationed along the border underscore the area's longstanding embattled character.

## JODHPUR

☎ 0291 / pop 846,400

Jodhpur is dominated by the huge fort of Mehrangarh, which glowers from its perch on a rocky ridge. The fort is Rajasthan's finest – an awesome stone structure with a delicate palace peering over the top of its dizzying walls. Beneath the fort sprawls Jodhpur – a mass of blue building-block houses. The city is blue, really blue, and it is at its bluest in the old city which is surrounded by a 10km-long, 16th-century wall. Inside is a tangle of winding, glittering streets, scented by incense, roses and sewers, with shops selling everything from trumpets and temple decorations to snuff and saris. Traditionally, blue signified the home of a Brahmin, but non-Brahmins have got in on the act, too. As well as glowing with a mysterious light, the blue tint is thought to repel insects.

## FESTIVALS IN WESTERN RAJASTHAN

Western Rajasthan's colourful festivals, usually featuring camels, splash colour against the desert. (For details of statewide and nationwide festivals, see p358.)

**Bikaner Camel Festival** (Jan-Feb; Bikaner, p338) Organised by the Department of Tourism, this festival sees decorated camels and best-breed competitions, camel dances and tugs-of-war, processions, and races.

**Jaisalmer Desert Festival** (Jan-Feb; Jaisalmer, p320) Light-hearted and tourist-focused festival featuring camel races and dances, folk music, traditional ballads, puppeteers, turban-tying contests and the famous Mr Desert competition. Many events take place on the Sam sand dunes, which provide a spectacular backdrop for the festivities.

**Nagaur Fair** (Jan-Feb; Nagaur, p316) A week-long cattle and camel fair – more about trading and more authentic than most. The fair attracts thousands of people from far and wide – and, this being Rajasthan, it does have its share of song, dance, camel fashion and trinket traders.

**Jambheshwar Fair** (Feb-Mar; Mukam, Bikaner, p338) This honours the founder of the Bishnoi sect (p315) and draws pilgrims from across India. At Guru Jambhoji's temple in Mukam, people offer grain which is used to feed birds around the temple.

**Barmer Thar Festival** (Mar; Barmer, p337) Cultural shows, dancing and puppetry.

**Mallinath Fair** (Mar-Apr; Tilwara, near Barmer, p337) One of Rajasthan's biggest cattle fairs, this 14-day event revolves around animal trading, bullock, camel and horse races, and masses of local colour. Traders come from Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. It's believed that local hero Mallinath (you can see his statue at Mandore gardens; p313) used to trade here, the origin of the fair. People make offerings to his shrine and, when their wish is answered, offer miniature horse figures, which can be bought at the fair.

**Karni Mata Fair** (Apr-May & Sep-Oct; Deshnoke, p349) Devotees throng to the Karni Mata Temple, where rats are worshipped as the reincarnations of local people. The bigger fair is the one held in spring.

**Ramdevra Fair** (Aug-Sep; Ramdevra, p319) Ramdev Temple is the focus of this festival, which is celebrated by both Hindus and Muslims to commemorate Ramdev, a saint who helped the downtrodden. Female performers with 13 small cymbals attached to their costumes dance the *terahtal* (a traditional dance) while balancing pitchers of water on their heads.

**Marwar Festival** (Oct-Nov; Jodhpur, above) Celebrates the rich cultural legacy of Marwar (Jodhpur) and honours the region's heroes. The festival features lots of regional folk artists, the great art of turban tying and a moustache competition. It's held over two days, one of which coincides with the full moon.

**Kolayat Fair** (Nov; Bikaner, p338) This is a kind of mini-Pushkar, with sadhus instead of camels (the holy men are a lot less well groomed) and very few tourists. As in Pushkar, devotees take a dip in the holy lake at the full moon.

## JODHPUR'S JODHPURS

Jodhpurs are baggy-tight aristocratic riding breeches – a fashion staple, worn by self-respecting horse people all around the world. Usually a pale cream colour, they're loose above the knee and tapered from knee to ankle. It's said that Sir Pratap Singh, a virtuoso horseman, designed the breeches for hunting and polo, and also brought them to a wider public by wearing them on trips abroad.

Jodhpur is overcrowded, cluttered with traffic, over polluted and a very hectic place. It feels less developed than the cities of the east. Be prepared for some hassle, particularly around the clock tower and up to the fort. You can escape this by diving into the heart of the old city (west of the clock tower), with its tangle of medieval bazaars. Jodhpur hosts the colourful Marwar Festival (p301) which celebrates, primarily through folk music, the erstwhile kingdom's rich heritage.

## History

Driven from their homeland of Kannauj by Afghans serving Mohammed of Ghor, the Rathores fled west to the region around Pali, a short distance to the south of Jodhpur. An expedient marriage between the Rathore Siahaji and the sister of a local prince enabled the Rathores to take root in the region. They prospered to such a degree that they managed to oust the Pratihars of Mandore, 9km to the north of present-day Jodhpur.

By 1459 it became evident that more secure headquarters were required. The rocky ridge 9km to the south of Mandore was an obvious choice for the new city of Jodhpur. The natural fortifications afforded by its steep flanks were greatly enhanced by a fortress of staggering proportions (see p304).

Founded by Rao Jodha, from whom it takes its name, the city lay on the vital trade route between Delhi and Gujarat. It grew out of the profits of opium, sandalwood, dates and copper, and controlled a large area. The Rathore kingdom was once cheerily known as Marwar (the Land of Death) due to its harsh topography and climate.

A war for independence and struggles for succession dominated the 17th and 18th centuries. However, the 19th century saw

the commencement of competent rule by Sir Pratap Singh (of riding pants fame; see left), followed by Maharaja Umaid Singh. Thus Jodhpur – Rajasthan's largest kingdom – was reasonably stable when it came to Independence in 1947.

## Orientation

The Tourist Reception Centre, train stations and bus stand are all outside the old city. High Court Rd runs from Raika Bagh train station, past the Umaid gardens, and round beside the city wall towards the main (Jodhpur) train station and the main post office. Trains from the east stop at the Raika Bagh station before heading on to the main station, which is handy if you're staying at a hotel on the eastern side of town.

Watch out in Jodhpur for similarly named places – some businesses take on remarkably unoriginal names, closely resembling a thriving local business, in order to confuse travellers (this doesn't only happen in the hotel business – check out the number of clone-named spice and omelette shops around the clock tower).

## Information

There are ATMs all over the city, including a UTI ATM near Sojati Gate, SBBJ near the Tourist Reception Centre, and ICICI and IDBI ATMs on Airport Rd.

**Bank of Baroda** (Map p303; Sojati Gate) Issues cash advances against Visa and MasterCard.

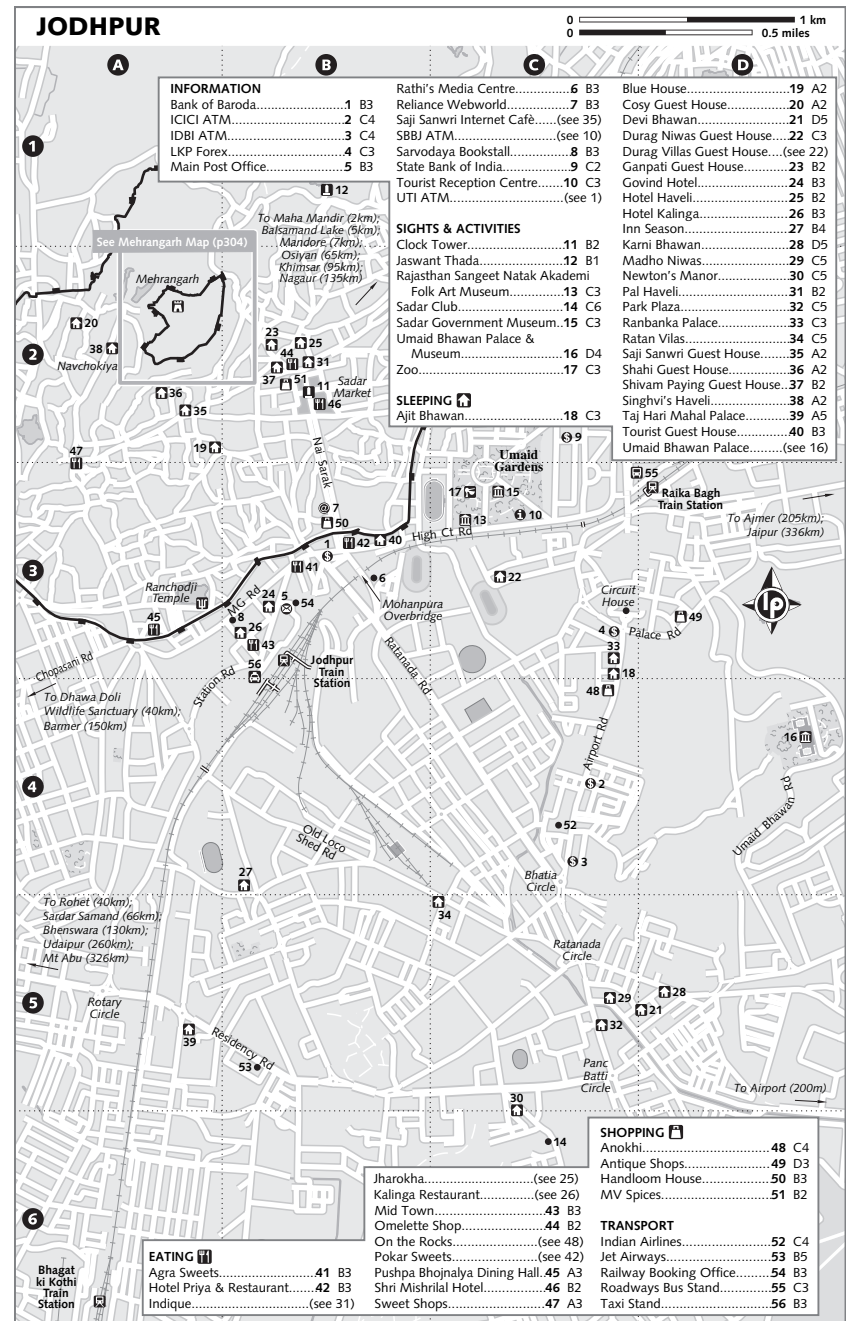
**International Tourist Bureau** (☎ 2439052; ☎ 5am-11.30pm Mon-Sat) At the main train station, the bureau provides help for foreign passengers. It's a handy place to hang around while waiting for a train. There are comfortable armchairs and a shower and toilet here. Unattended luggage must be deposited in the train station cloakroom (Rs 10 per piece for 24 hours).

**LKP Forex** (Map p303; ☎ 2512066; shop No 1, Maharaja Palace) Changes cash and travellers cheques. Opposite Circuit House.

**Main post office** (Map p303; Station Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Less than 500m north of the main train station.

**Rathi's Media Centre** (Map p303; Mohanpura Overbridge; ☎ 7am-9pm) Stocks a reasonable range of magazines and books in English, including novels and recent releases.

**Reliance Webworld** (Map p303; Nai Sarak; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 10.30am-11pm) One of many cheap internet places.



**Saji Sanwri Internet Cafe** (Map p303; Ghandi St; per hr Rs 40; ☎ 9am-11pm) Modern, cool and fast internet café encompassing all digital services.

**Sarvodaya Bookstall** (Map p303; ☎ 8.30am-10.30pm) Off Station Rd, opposite Ranchoji Temple. Sarvodaya has English-language newspapers and magazines, a good range of books and maps on Rajasthan, and a few Western novels.

**State Bank of India** (Map p303; ☎ 2543649;

☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Changes currency and travellers cheques. Located about 1km north of the Tourist Reception Centre.

**Tourist Reception Centre** (Map p303; ☎ 2545083;

☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) In the RTDC Hotel Ghoomar compound. Offers a free map and can arrange city tours and Bishnoi village excursions.

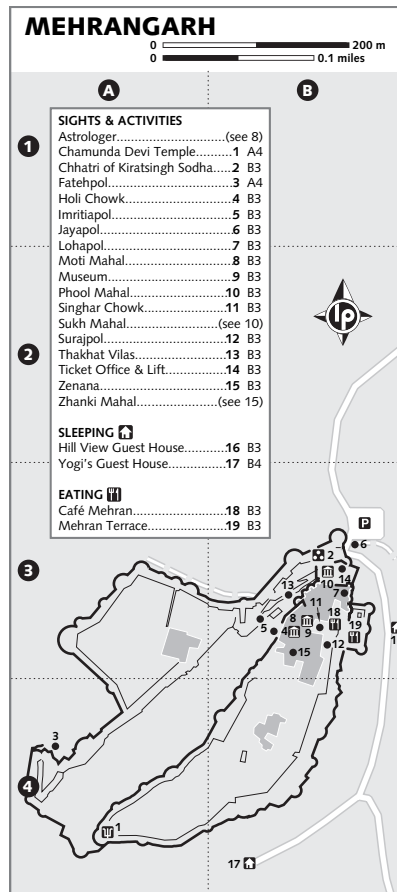
## Sights

### MEHRANGARH

Still run by the maharaja of Jodhpur, **Mehrangarh** (Map p304; www.Mehrangarh.org; Indian/foreigner admission Rs 20/250, incl camera & audio guide; ticket sales ☎ 9am-5pm) is an enchanting place to visit. Following the lines of a 125m hill, the fort's height becomes apparent as you approach. It's a mesmerising, formidable feat of construction. The battlements are 6m to 36m high. As the building materials were chiselled from the rock on which the fort stands, the structure merges with its base. The fort was added to over the centuries by Jodhpur's maharajas. A winding road leads up to the entrance from the city, 5km below.

Cast off your audio-tour prejudices, as this tour (in multiple languages requiring a deposit of credit card/passport/Rs 2000) is terrific. The mix of history, information and royal reminiscing make it entertaining and engaging. It's a real treat to wander around at your leisure, taking a fix of information when you feel like it. However, if you prefer a real person, guides are available for Rs 150.

The fort's seven *pols* (gates) include the **Jayapol**, built by Maharaja Man Singh in 1806 following his victory over the rulers of Jaipur and Bikaner. This is the main entrance to the fort. Beyond it is the ticket office, where there's a lift (Rs 15) that will whisk disabled or weary travellers to the top of the fort. The walls at the entrance are still scarred by cannonball hits, showing that this was a fort that earned its keep. To the left, just beyond the ticket office, is the **Chhatri of Kiratsingh Sodha**. This cenotaph was built over the site where a soldier fell defending Jodhpur against Jaipurians in 1806.



Built in the 16th-century, **Imritiapol** is arranged at the top of a slope, after a sharp turn, in order to stop onslaughts by an enemy's elephants. The **Fatehpol** (Victory Gate), at the southwestern side of the fort, was erected by Maharaja Ajit Singh to commemorate his defeat of the Mughals.

The next gate is the **Lohapol** (Iron Gate), again built at the top of the slope, just beyond a bend. Its iron spikes were a further elephant deterrent. Beside the gate are 15 tiny handprints, the *sati* (self-immolation) marks of Maharaja Man Singh's widows, who threw themselves on his funeral pyre in 1843 – the last *sati* widows of the Jodhpur dynasty. The handprints still attract devotional attention, and are usually covered in red powder and paper-thin silver.

Inside the fort is a stone-latticed network of courtyards and palaces, all beautiful examples of Rajput architecture. **Surajpol** leads to the museum. Through the gate you'll find **Singhar Chowk**, where coronations take place. The small marble seat has been used for coronations from the 17th century.

The **museum** holds a splendid collection of Indian royal trappings, showing the wealth and power of the Marwars, including Rajasthan's best collection of elephant howdahs (seats for carrying people on an elephant's back – essential for glittering processions). Some feature the most exquisite repoussé (raised relief) silverwork. There are also maharajas' palanquins, including covered palanquins for the women in purdah (seclusion). Apparently one of these sent the British media into a frenzy when the maharajas visited – the press were all desperate to get a picture of the hidden queen. One photographer caught a picture of her foot, but there was such an outcry when it was published that all the newspapers in which it was printed had to be recalled. Perhaps the finest palanquin is that presented to Jaswant Singh I by the Emperor Shah Jahan; it's exquisitely worked in silver and gold, and has a natty little parasol to beat the heat. The museum also has some splendid miniatures and, as you might expect, the armoury is impressive – each weapon is a work of art. Also on display is some wonderful ephemera, such as 19th-century ivory-inlaid ladies' dumbbells and camel-bone carpet weights.

Within the complex are numerous small palaces with evocative names, such as the **Sukh Mahal** (Pleasure Palace). Upstairs is the **Phool Mahal** (Flower Palace), in which traditional dances were performed. It was also used as a durbar hall (see p246) by former maharajas. The fine paintings adorning the walls of this palace were executed by a single artist, who took 10 years to create them using a curious concoction of gold leaf, glue and cow's urine. The artist passed away before the work was finished, which is evident in the bare patch to the left of the hallway. The gold ceiling is embellished with over 80kg of gold plate, and around it the various maharajas of Jodhpur are depicted. Stained glass further adds to the room's opulence.

Also on view is **Thakhat Vilas**, the private chamber of Maharaja Thakhat Singh (r 1843-73), who had no less than 30 maharanis and numerous concubines. The beautiful ceiling

is distractingly adorned with lac painting and hung with Christmas baubles.

Nearby, in the zenana (women's apartments), the **Zhanki Mahal** has cradles of infant princes, including that of the current maharaja – a motorised version. From the zenana the women would peep at palatial goings-on through the latticed windows, the screens of which are said to feature over 250 different designs.

Next is an impressive marble-floored courtyard called **Holi Chowk**; this is where the maharaja and friends would celebrate Holi. On its right is the early 17th-century **Moti Mahal** (Pearl Palace), where royal women would hold meetings. The walls are coated with crushed seashell *chunam* (lime paste). The five alcoves along the western wall and the other tiny alcoves were for oil lamps. The gold-painted ceiling is embellished with glass tiles.

At the southern end of the fort, cannons look out from the ramparts over the sheer drop to the old town beneath. There are magical, stupendous views, and you can clearly hear the voices and city sounds swept up by the air currents. Aldous Huxley noted this in *Jesting Pilate – An Intellectual Holiday* (George H Doran Co, 1926):

From the bastions of the Jodhpur Fort one hears as the Gods must hear from Olympus – the Gods to whom each separate word uttered in the innumerable peopled world below, comes up distinct and individual to be recorded in the books of omniscience.

The peaceful **Chamunda Devi Temple**, dedicated to the goddess Durga (the Inaccessible, a form of Devi) in her wrathful aspect, stands at the southwest end of the fort. This is a lovely place to sit in the window alcoves overlooking the city below.

Just near Surajpol is **Café Mehran** (Map p304; meals Rs 70-180; ☎ 9am-5pm), offering snacks and some simple meals. A restaurant, **Mehran Terrace** (p310), which is spectacularly situated on the fort ramparts, is only open in the evenings.

### JASWANT THADA

This flamboyant milk-white marble **memorial** (Map p303; admission Rs 20, camera Rs 25; ☎ 9am-5pm) to Maharaja Jaswant Singh II is about 1km from the fort. It's a peaceful spot away from the hubbub of the city, and the view across to

the fort is superb. The cenotaph, built in 1899, was followed by the royal crematorium and the three other cenotaphs that stand nearby. There are carved wooden doors and marble jali (lattice) work over the windows. Brought 240km from Makrana, the marble used to build the monuments is now translucent in places. Look out for the memorial to a peacock that flew into a funeral pyre.

### CLOCK TOWER & MARKETS

The **clock tower** (Map p303) is an old city landmark, surrounded by the chaotic and vibrant Sadar Market. The market's lines of shops are an impressive example of 19th-century town planning and a wonderful place to ramble. Narrow alleys bustle with commerce and tiny hole-in-the-wall outlets. Heading westwards from here, you go deep into the old city's commercial heart, with crowded alleys and bazaars selling vegetables, spices, sweets, silver and handicrafts.

### RAJASTHAN SANGEET NATAK AKADEMI FOLK ART MUSEUM

This national academy, established in 1938, has the task of preserving the traditional folk art, dance, drama and music of Rajasthan. You might need to rustle someone up to open the little **museum** (Map p303; ☎ 2544090; www.sangeetnatakakademi.org; Town Hall, High Court Rd; admission Rs 5; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), but it's well worth the effort. There are beautiful puppets, an amazing array of traditional instruments and other exhibits on the performing arts. Unfortunately, there's not much information in English. The academy also organises regular performances of music, dance and theatre.

### UMAID GARDENS & SADAR GOVERNMENT MUSEUM

The pleasant **Umaid gardens** contain the **Sadar Government Museum** (Map p303; admission Rs 5; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu), which feels charmingly frozen somewhere in the 19th century. The ill-labelled exhibits in dusty cabinets include weapons and 6th- to 10th-century sculptures, as well as the obligatory moth-eaten stuffed animals.

There's also a desultory **zoo** (Map p303; Indian/foreigner Rs 7/50; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Mon) in the grounds.

### UMAID BHAWAN PALACE & MUSEUM

Take a rickshaw or taxi to this hill-top **palace** (Map p303), sometimes called the Chittar

Palace because local Chittar sandstone was used to build it. Building began in 1929 and the 365-room edifice was designed by the British Royal Institute of Architects president for Maharaja Umaid Singh, and took over 3000 workers 15 years to complete, at a cost of around Rs 11 million. The building is mortarless, and incorporates 100 wagon loads of Makrana marble and Burmese teak in the interior. The impressive central dome sits 30m above the sky-blue inner dome. It was built surprisingly close to Independence, after which the maharajas and their grand extravaganzas were a thing of the past. Apparently the construction of this over-the-top palace was motivated as a royal job-creation programme during a time of severe drought – very philanthropic.

Umaid Singh died in 1947, four years after the palace was completed; the current maharaja, Maharaja Gaj Singh II (known as Bapji), still lives in part of the building. The rest has been turned into a suitably grand hotel (see p310).

Most interesting in the **museum** (admission Rs 50; ☎ 9am-5pm) are the photos showing the elegant Art Deco design of the palace interior. The museum also has beautifully crafted weapons; an array of stuffed leopards; an enormous banner presented by Queen Victoria to Maharaja Jaswant Singh Bahadur in 1877; and a fantastic clock collection, including specimens shaped like windmills and lighthouses. Attendants will ensure that you don't stray into the hotel, but you can peer at the soaring domed central hall. Alternatively, you can visit the hotel to eat at one of its restaurants (see p311). Look out for some of the maharaja's highly polished classic cars displayed on the lawn in front of the museum.

### Activities

#### ASTROLOGER

**Astrologer Mr Sharma** (Map p304; ☎ 9414130200; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) has been studying astrology for over 30 years. Don't wear nail polish if you intend to get a reading, as the nails are used to ascertain your state of health. Mr Sharma charges around Rs 300 for a basic consultation at his office in the Moti Mahal section of the fort. He can also offer a private consultation, for which you'll need a booking.

### GOLF

There's a golf course at **Sadar Club** (p303; ☎ 1-11pm), south of Jodhpur in Ratanada. The

brown grounds offer some challenging shots for golfers. Expect to pay around Rs 200 for 18 holes, including equipment hire. Popular with the British during the Raj, the club is about 100 years old, but has been revamped over the last few years. However, it still has a sense of history: you can see the damage inflicted on part of the building when it was bombed during the first war between India and Pakistan.

### Tours

The Tourist Reception Centre runs **city tours** (Rs 100, min 4 persons, admission fees extra; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm), taking in the Umaid Bhawan Palace, Mehrangarh, Jaswant Thada and Mandore gardens (see p313). There's no guide, just a driver and vehicle.

Jodhpur is known for its interesting village safaris, which visit the nearby villages of the Bishnoi, a people whose belief in the sanctity of the environment and the need to protect trees and animals dates from the 15th century. See p314 for more information.

It's a well-worn trail, visiting potters and *dhurrie* (rug) weavers, so it can feel touristy – it depends how good your guide is. However, you have the chance to meet the local people as they go about their daily lives, have a traditional lunch at one of the villages and stop at a few crafts outlets. Visitors are sometimes invited to share *amal* (an opium preparation), which is traditionally offered to guests. Just about every hotel can organise these excursions; all charge around Rs 400 to Rs 500 per person (minimum of two people) for a half-day tour, including lunch. Recommended hotel-run tours include **Singhvi's Haveli** (Map p303; ☎ 2624293), **Durag Niwas Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 2512385), **Durag Villas Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 2512298) and **Govind Hotel** (Map p303; ☎ 2622758). **Deepak Dhanraj** (☎ 9314721655; www.bishnoivillagesafari.com) is also a good option.

**Shivam Paying Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 2610688) arranges recommended trips to villages around Osian (see p317), 65km north of Jodhpur, where you can take a camel or jeep safari and stay overnight in a village.

**Cosy Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 2612066) and the **Govind Hotel** (Map p303; ☎ 2622758) can also arrange trips out to Osian.

### Sleeping

As usual, if a rickshaw driver is clamouring to take you somewhere, it's because he is going

to receive a commission (up to 50% for the budget hotels). For anywhere near the clock tower, you can avoid this by getting dropped at the tower and walking the rest. Some rickshaw drivers ask 'which clock tower?' to confuse you. There's only one.

Staying around the clock tower is convenient for the fort and shopping district, and there's a cluster of mainly budget guesthouses here, but it's also where you'll encounter the most hassle. The places around Navchokiya in the old city are quieter.

Prices everywhere fluctuate according to how many tourists are around. If it's busy, prices will often go up, while at quiet times you can get big discounts.

Like most tourist centres in Rajasthan, there are far more budget choices than midrange options. However, the quality of accommodation in all categories is good, with an excellent range of atmospheric options.

A number of families are registered with the Paying Guest House Scheme in Jodhpur. Costs per double room per night range from Rs 200 to Rs 1500. Inquire at the Tourist Reception Centre (see p302).

### BUDGET

**Cosy Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 2612066; www.cosyguesthouse.com; Navchokiya; rooftop Rs 60, tents Rs 150, d Rs 300-650, s/d without bathroom Rs 200/250; ☎ ☎) This is a great, unpretentious choice in a quiet corner of the old city. It's a 500-year-old blue house, with several levels of rooms and rooftops and a genial owner, Mr Joshi. Options include rooms with bathroom, a single room without bathroom but with a fantastic view from the doorway and its own flight of steps, and tents on the roof. The rooftop restaurant has great views and vegetarian food. Ask the rickshaw-wallah for Navchokiya Rd, from where the guesthouse is signposted or give the hotel a call and you will be met.

**Govind Hotel** (Map p303; ☎ 2622758; www.govindhotel.com; Station Rd; dm Rs 70, s 150, r Rs 350-900; ☎) This is a friendly, central place, well set up for travellers and with helpful management. Opposite the main post office, it's a five-minute walk from the train station, which is great if you've got an early-morning departure. The rooms vary; those at the back are the quietest, though some have no external window. Otherwise, rooms range from basic to smart, and there's a rooftop restaurant with espresso coffee and

fort views (if you ignore the billboard). The owners don't pay commissions.

**Hill View Guest House** (Map p304; ☎ 2441763; s Rs 150, d 200-250) A family house perched high up on the way to, and in the shadow of, the fort, this option is very enthusiastically run (you'll be made to feel part of the family). Rooms are basic, clean and simple, all with bathrooms, and the terrace has a great view over the city. Simple, tasty vegetarian food is on offer.

**Blue House** (Map p303; ☎ 2621396; bluehouse36@hotmail.com; Moti Chowk; s Rs 150, d Rs 250-1500; 🏠) Certainly blue, this haphazard old house has a variety of individually decorated rooms and some very steep stairs. Run by a friendly Jain family, some rooms are incongruously opulent for this part of town: top of the range has a bed and a bathtub of carved sandstone! Beware of competitors with similarly named hotels.

**Tourist Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 2541235; udaibedi@hotmail.com; Rallarang Bldg, High Court Rd; s/d from Rs 200/250 to 500/600) This is a friendly choice outside the old city and thus outside the tourist scene. Don't be put off by the battered exterior and hectic High Court Rd, as this is a really nice place to stay. Run by a lovely family who won't pay rickshaw commissions, it has simple, basic clean rooms and offers tasty home-cooked inexpensive vegetarian fare.

**Durag Niwas Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 2512385; www.durag-niwas.com; 1 Old Public Park; s/d from Rs 200/250, r Rs 650; 🏠) This is a cool blue house run by a friendly family who are well-informed and helpful. Good home-cooked veg dishes are available, and there's a cushion-floored, saricurtained area on the roof for hanging out. The basic rooms vary and some are in need of maintenance. The more expensive rooms come with air-con.

**Yogi's Guest House** (Map p304; ☎ 2643436; r Rs 350-1200, s/d without bathroom Rs 200/250; 🏠) At the base of the fort walls is Yogi's, a popular travellers' hangout that's moving upmarket with many refurbished rooms, though there are still plenty of budget options. Set in the 500-year-old Rajpurohitji-ki-Haveli, the rooms are smart, spacious and clean. However, the service can be erratic and the ticket-booking service is best avoided. There's a lovely rooftop restaurant with a fort view and good food. The guesthouse is well signposted off the lanes leading to the fort.

**our pick Saji Sanwri Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 2440305; www.sajisanwri.com; Kapara Bazaar; s without bathroom Rs 200, d Rs 350-1300; 🏠 🏠) An energetic mother-and-son team run this rambling 32-room, character-filled guesthouse in the heart of the old city. A high degree of care and thought for their guests is very apparent, and the varied rooms are all spotless and comfortable. There's a modern internet café on site (opening onto Gandhi St) and all travel ticketing services are available. There's an early checkout of 9am but you can make use of the sitting room and store luggage until your departure.

**Singhvi's Haveli** (Map p303; ☎ 2624293; Navchokiya, Ramdevji ka Chowk; r Rs 200-1800) This 500-plus-year-old, red-sandstone *haveli* is in a peaceful corner of the oldest part of the city. Run by a friendly Jain family, it's a wonderful and welcoming place to stay. Rooms are atmospheric, ranging from basic, good-value options to the multimirrored Sheesh Mahal or the magnificent Maharani Suite with 10 windows and a fort view. The romantic rooftop restaurant serves home-cooked meals (and there are eggs for non-Jain guests). You can even visit the fort via the Fatepol entrance and experience a whole other (and uncrowded) side of the fort.

**Shivam Paying Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 2610688; shivamgh@hotmail.com; Makrana Mohalla; d from Rs 250-600, r without bathroom Rs 150) Near the clock tower is this cosy option where you'll get no hassles. Run by a helpful family, it has comfortable rooms on several floors, reached by steep staircases. Bathrooms have been shoe-horned into this old building, and there's a lovely rooftop restaurant, where the home-cooking is excellent.

**Ganpati Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 2631686; Makrana Mohalla; s Rs 250, d Rs 300-900; 🏠) This fully renovated guesthouse is run by the family at the nearby Shivam Paying Guest House and has been designed to avoid the nuisances that the old buildings present. Clean, bright, airy rooms have modern bathrooms and there is a pleasant all-veg rooftop restaurant.

**Durag Villas Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 2512298; www.duragvillas.com; 1 Old Public Park; r Rs 250-950; 🏠) As this guesthouse is next door to Durag Niwas, the competition here seems fierce. However, it is also a friendly place with simple, good-value rooms accessed via very steep stairs and set around a small, tranquil, leafy courtyard.

**Shahi Guest House** (Map p303; ☎ 9828583883; www.shahiguesthouse.com; Ghandi St; r Rs 400-1200; 🏠) This

architecturally intriguing 350-year-old *haveli* has six very distinct and individual rooms surrounding a peaceful inner courtyard. It's in a very central position in the old city yet the solid walls keep it quiet and cool. It's very atmospheric and relaxing and upstairs there's a pleasant rooftop restaurant with fort views.

**Hotel Haveli** (Map p303; ☎ 2614615; www.hotelhaveli.net; Makrana Mohalla; r Rs 400-1500; 🏠 🏠) This 250-year-old building inside the walled city is a popular, efficient and friendly place, previously known as Haveli Guest House. Rooms vary greatly and many have semi-balconies and fort views. Interiors have been brightly renovated in traditional Rajasthani style, and the management have rented a building across the road (with equally pleasant rooms) to take the overflow from the original. The rooftop veg restaurant, Jharokha (see p310), has excellent food and views.

#### MIDRANGE

**Madho Niwas** (Map p303; ☎ 2512486; Airport Rd, Ratanada; s/d Rs 800/1000, deluxe Rs 1100/1350; 🏠 🏠) This stately, rambling house built in the 1940s, is run by Dalvir Singh and is a relaxed place to stay, with a quiet lawn area. More rooms and a larger swimming pool were under construction when we visited. It's around 3km from the centre of town, but is good value, with comfortable rooms and tasty food. The hotel can also arrange a stay at Ravla Bhenswara (p315), outside Jodhpur.

**Devi Bhawan** (Map p303; ☎ 2511067; www.devibhawan.com; 1 Ratanada Area; r Rs 950-1500; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Devi Bhawan is a delightful green oasis, with appealing rooms and a cottage. Though it's a bit out of the way, it's great value and you'll have no hassles here whatsoever. There's a noon checkout, a good restaurant (veg thali Rs 120) and bar and shady grounds with a pool.

**Newtons Manor** (Map p303; ☎ 2430686; www.newtonsmenor.com; 86 Jawahar Colony, Ratanada; r Rs 995-1195; 🏠 🏠) Newtons Manor, 3km southeast of the town centre, is a lovely, colonial-style family home chock-full of Victoriana. It has elegant rooms crammed with antique furniture, and TV and fridge. There's a lovely billiard room and pleasant outdoor area. Scrumptious home-cooked meals are available and a free pick-up service is offered.

**Ratan Vilas** (Map p303; ☎ 2614418; www.ratanvilas.com; Old Loco Shed Rd, Ratanada; r Rs 995-1950; 🏠) This attractive, quiet, colonial villa is fronted by a clipped lawn, and the homey sitting room

gives the place a relaxed bygone-days atmosphere. Rooms are spotless, wonderful home-cooked meals are available, including breakfast in the sunny courtyard, and management say they are planning to build a swimming pool. If you're interested in getting authentic jodhpur trousers made, ask here – allow at least a week for your jodhpurs to be stitched.

**Inn Season** (Map p303; ☎ /fax 2616400; www.innseasonjodhpur.com; r with/without AC Rs 1500/1000, ste Rs 3500; 🏠 🏠) Near the taxi stand, this is an Art Deco bungalow with spacious, tidy rooms and a lovely suite. All rooms have wireless internet access but for old-fashioned fun there's an old radiogram and a German record player with an eclectic collection of classic records. The restaurant serves excellent Indian and Continental food.

**Hotel Kalinga** (Map p303; ☎ 2627338; www.kalingahotel.com; s/d Rs 1600/2100; 🏠) This hotel is convenient, as it's close to the main train station, however management are more in tune with travelling salesmen than tourists. It's a dull, almost seedy, business hotel, with musty, overpriced but well appointed rooms with TV and fridge.

**Karni Bhawan** (Map p303; ☎ 2512101; www.karnihotels.com; Palace Rd, Ratanada; s/d from Rs 1850/2300; 🏠 🏠 🏠) This place is a remodelled 1940s bungalow with a pleasant garden-restaurant with campfire, and an inviting pool. Its rooms are spacious and clean with solid colonial furnishings, and some are mildly themed (such as one based on Holi). The kitchen prides itself on its succulent regional cuisine which can be enjoyed in the restaurant, by the pool or under a thatched roof in the re-created *dhani* (traditional village).

**Pal Haveli** (Map p303; ☎ 2439615; www.palhaveli.com; Gulab Sagar; r Rs 2500-4000; 🏠 🏠) This stunning *haveli* was built by the Thakur of Pal in 1847. There are 20 charming, spacious rooms, elaborately decorated in traditional heritage-style surrounding a cool central courtyard. Be aware that at the time of writing management was planning to upgrade all rooms to the more expensive category. The family still lives here and can show you their small museum. There are two restaurants serving excellent food and the rooftop Indique (p311) boasts unbeatable views.

#### TOP END

**Ajit Bhawan** (Map p303; ☎ 2511410; www.ajitbhawan.com; Airport Rd; tent Rs 4000, r Rs 5500-9000, luxury tent &

ste Rs 10,000-15,000; 🏠 📞) This is a superb place to stay, and it's deservedly popular with travellers. Despite its location on a dusty main road, the hotel is a city oasis; the gracious heritage building is set well back from the road, amid verdant gardens and attention to detail is obvious. Behind the main building are private thatch-roofed cottages with traditional furnishings. There's a whimsical swimming pool (Rs 500 for nonguests) with a waterfall and you can swim beneath the restaurant.

**Park Plaza** (Map p303; 🏠 5105000; www.sarovarhotels.com; 5 Airport Rd; s/d from Rs 5000/5500, ste Rs 9,000; 🏠 📞 📞) A modern, functional business hotel with an incongruous British-style wood-panelled bar and restaurant, Geoffrey's. The standard rooms are well-appointed and comfortable without any heritage trappings. Room rate includes breakfast and airport transfer.

**Ranbanka Palace** (Map p303; 🏠 2512801; www.ranbankahotels.com; Airport Rd; r Rs 5000-6500, ste Rs 8500-12,500) In a beautiful sandstone building, built for Maharajadhiraj Ajit Singh (younger brother of Maharaja Umaid Singh), this is right next to higher profile and related Ajit Bhawan. Rooms have soaring ceilings and old colonial furniture and those facing the pool and garden are the best. Rooms are airy but devoid of charisma.

**Taj Hari Mahal Palace** (Map p303; 🏠 2439700; www.tajhotels.com; 5 Residency Rd; r from Rs 11,000, ste Rs 17,500; 🏠 📞 📞) Run by the Taj Group, this is a luxurious modern hotel built with traditional Rajasthani flourishes. It is centred on a courtyard with a big, inviting swimming pool. Cheaper rooms look out on the garden, while the pricier ones have a pool view. Prices drop by up to two-thirds in the low season.

**Umaid Bhawan Palace** (Map p303; 🏠 2510101; www.tajhotels.com; r Rs 28,000-42,000, ste Rs 87,000-144,000; 🏠 📞 📞) This massive 20th-century Art Deco palace, also home to a museum (see p306), is constructed from honey sandstone and white marble and is a Jodhpur landmark. It's so immense it feels rather like a parliament building or a university – that is, it's not all that cosy. The hotel is managed by the professional Taj Group. It has luxurious rooms of course and numerous sporting facilities, including a magnificent indoor swimming pool. There are lush lawns and several restaurants (see right) for grazing.

## Eating

While you're in Jodhpur, try a glass of *makhania* lassi, a thick and filling saffron-flavoured edition of that most refreshing of drinks.

## RESTAURANTS

**Pushpa Bhojnalya Dining Hall** (Map p303; Jalori Gate; mains Rs 15-45; 📞 10am-10.30pm) A small local eatery in a busy section of town, this is indeed a good restaurant with tasty Rajasthani regional cuisine. Try the hearty *dal bhatti* (baked balls of wholemeal flour served with dhal) or the Kashmiri *paneer* with apple, cashew and banana.

**Mid Town** (Map p303; 🏠 2637001; Station Rd; mains Rs 18-70; 📞 7am-11pm) Mid Town has downstairs and rooftop eating areas, though the rooftop was under renovation at the time we visited. This clean restaurant with good veg food, including some Rajasthani specialities, has some particular to Jodhpur, such as *chakkika-sagh* and *roti* (wheat dumpling cooked in rich gravy), *bajara-ki-roti pachkuta* (*bajara* wheat roti with local dry vegetables) and *kabuli* (vegetables with rice, milk, bread and fruit).

**Jodhpur Coffee House** (Map p303; High Court Rd; mains Rs 20-40; 📞 9am-10.30pm) This stuck-in-time place has been going since 1954, and feels like it might not have changed much since then. A calm contrast after the busy street, the pale-blue restaurant is a bit street soiled with a utility-furniture feel, and offers inexpensive thalis and South Indian food.

**Hotel Priya & Restaurant** (Map p303; 🏠 2547463; 181-182 Nai Sarak; mains Rs 25-40; 📞 6am-midnight) Partially open to the hubbub of Nai Sarak, this popular, friendly eatery has a cheerful sense of chaos. It's usually packed with locals, has good service, and serves reliable North and South Indian cuisine. The thalis are tasty, and there are sweets, too.

**Kalinga Restaurant** (Map p303; Station Rd; dishes Rs 25-100; 📞 8am-10.30pm) This restaurant, at the hotel of the same name (see p309), is smart and popular, with a dimly lit ambience typical of an Indian bar. Offering tasty veg and non-veg Indian, Chinese and Continental food, it's a good place to kill time while waiting for a train.

**Jharokha** (Map p303; 🏠 2614615; Makrana Mohalla; mains Rs 60-90; 📞 7am-10.30pm) On the rooftop of Hotel Haveli (see p309), this pleasant restaurant offers tasty Indian and Continental food with excellent city and fort views. The

vegetarian dishes extend from pizza and pasta to dosas and thalis.

**On the Rocks** (Map p303; 🏠 5102701; Airport Rd; mains Rs 85-285; 📞 lunch 12.30-3pm, dinner 7-11pm, bar 12.30-11pm, happy hour 4-6pm) This leafy place next to the Ajit Bhawan hotel (same owner) is very popular with locals and tour groups. The garden restaurant has plenty of shade trees, a small playground and is candlelit in the evening. It serves Chinese and tasty Indian cuisine, with lots of barbecue options and very rich and creamy curries. There's also a partly open-air bar and an excellent bakery.

**Indique** (Map p303; 🏠 2439615; www.palhaveni.com; Gulab Sagar; mains Rs 90-160; 📞 7am-11pm) On the rooftop of Pal Haveli (see p309), this wonderful restaurant offers tasty Indian dishes, including the outstanding silver thali (veg/nonveg Rs 250/300). It also has excellent views over the old city, the clock tower, Gulab Sagar and Mehrangarh Fort

**Mehran Terrace** (Map p304; 🏠 2548790; Mehrangarh; veg/nonveg thalis Rs 540/600; 📞 7.30-10pm) Dining with cannons under the stairs on one of the fort's terraces is unsurpassably romantic. The open-air restaurant is overlooked by floodlit palace buildings resembling a stage, complete with live music and traditional dancing. Perched 140m above the city, when you look over the ramparts, the sparkling metropolis is spread out below – an amazing sight. Sit at one of the well-spaced, candlelit tables and enjoy the rich (and constantly re-filled) Rajasthani thalis. You will need to book ahead.

**Umaid Bhawan Palace** (🏠 2510101) Located at the hotel of the same name (see opposite), this place has a selection of elegant eateries including the very grand Marwar Hall, which is used for functions but worth a look. **Risala** (mains Rs 650-1750; 📞 lunch 1-3pm, dinner 7.30-11pm), celebrating the famous Jodhpur Lancers (Risala means cavalry), is a casual fine-dining experience with Indian and international dishes including New Zealand lamb and local Rajasthani specialities. Behind Risala on the colonnaded western verandah is the **Pillars** (mains Rs 650-1750; 📞 6.30am-11pm), a breezy coffee shop and informal à la carte eatery sharing the menu from Risala. There are sublime views across the lawn towards Mehrangarh. For liquid refreshments you could pull up an elephant-foot stool at the **Trophy Bar** (📞 11am-3pm & 6-11pm) and discuss the finer points of pig sticking.

## QUICK EATS

**Omelette Shop** (Map p303; Sadar Market; mains Rs 10-15) Just through the entrance gate into Sadar Market on the northern side of the square, this shop claims to go through 15,000 eggs a day – the egg man has been doing his thing for over 30 years. Three tasty, spicy boiled eggs cost Rs 10, and a two-egg omelette with chilli, coriander and four pieces of bread is Rs 15.

**Shri Mishrial Hotel** (Map p303; clock tower) This place is on your right as you enter Sadar Market. It's nothing fancy, but whips up the best lassis in town. A delicious glass of impossibly thick, creamy *makhania* lassi costs Rs 15 and will do you for lunch.

**Agra Sweets** (Map p303; MG Rd, opposite Sojati Gate) There are good lassis (Rs 12) here, as well as delectable Jodhpur specialities, such as *mawa laddoo* (a milk sweet made with sugar, cardamom and pistachios wrapped in silver leaf; Rs 6) and the baklava-like *mawa kachori* (Rs 12).

**Pokar Sweets** (Map p303; cnr Nai Sarak & High Court Rd) This place has a huge selection of sweet treats. You can pick out a box of six for around Rs 30.

There's an inviting cluster of **sweet shops** (Map p303) in the old city, on the way to Cosy Guest House. The cool, quiet refreshment room on the 1st floor of the train station has a strangely timeless ambience and has surprisingly palatable thalis.

## Shopping

Take care while shopping in Jodhpur. If a rickshaw driver, friendly man on the street, or hotel recommends a shop to you, it's almost certain that they're getting a commission.

The usual Rajasthani handicrafts are available, with shops selling textiles and other wares clustered around the clock tower (you'll need to bargain hard). However, Jodhpur is famous for antiques. The greatest concentration of showrooms is along Palace Rd, near Umaid Bhawan Palace. These shops are well known to Western antique dealers, so you'll be hard-pressed to find any bargains. Also remember that the trade in antique architectural fixtures may be contributing to the desecration of India's cultural heritage. However, most of these warehouse-sized showrooms deal in antique reproductions, catering for a growing number of overseas export houses, and can make you a piece of antique-style furniture. The showrooms are fascinating places

to wander around, and they're definitely the spot to head if you want a life-size wooden giraffe or two.

Make sure you find out how much customs charges will be in your home country. Restrictions also apply to the export of Indian items over 100 years old; see p365.

Around the clock tower are various spice shops targeting tourists, with prices to match, and there have been complaints about quality. However, **MV Spices** (Map p303; ☎ 5109347; www.mvspices.com; 209B Vegetable Market; ☎ 10am-9pm) still gets good reports from travellers for its genuine spices and excellent service. If you would like to buy spices at local prices, head westwards from the clock tower towards Navchokiya. You'll pass a square overlooked by a temple; beyond are some small spice shops. Heading this way into the old city you'll come across little cubbyhole shops selling such things as hand-carved wooden printing blocks, miniature gods, musical instruments and *bandhani* (tie-dye) saris.

**Handloom House** (Map p303; Nai Sarak) On the main drag is this busy department store, thronged with locals. Alongside many questionable clothes are mountains of good-quality fixed-price *bandhani*, silk saris and woollen shawls.

**Anokhi** (Map p303; Airport Rd) The local branch of this culturally and environmentally aware textile company sells high-quality block-printed and other fabrics. Contemporary and traditional designs feature colourful embroidery and beadwork.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Several domestic airlines have flights from Jodhpur. **Kingfisher** (☎ 1800 2333131; www.flykingfisher.com) flies daily to Agra (US\$80) via Jaipur (US\$50) and Jaisalmer (US\$45) and Udaipur (US\$40). **Jet Airways** (Map p303; ☎ 5102222; www.jetairways.com; Residency Rd) has an office in Jodhpur and flies daily to Delhi (US\$60) and Mumbai (US\$85). **Indian Airlines** (Map p303; ☎ 2510757; Airport Rd) also has an office in Jodhpur and daily flights to Delhi and Mumbai.

Jodhpur **airport** (☎ 2512617) is just 5km from the city centre.

### BUS

There are numerous (at least daily) Rajasthan State Road Transport Corporation (RSRTC)

Silver Line buses to Ajmer (Rs 133, 4½ hours), Bikaner (Rs 123, 5½ hours), Delhi (Rs 345, 14 hours), Jaipur (Rs 188, 7½ hours), Jaisalmer (Rs 168, 5½ hours), Pushkar (Rs 96 5 hours), Mt Abu (Rs 178, 5½ hours), and Udaipur (Rs 173, 5½ hours). RSRTC buses leave from the Roadways bus stand and ideally you should book tickets a day ahead.

Private buses have a union with fixed prices including Jaisalmer (Rs 120, 5½ hours, half-hourly), Udaipur (Rs 130, 5½ hours, seven daily), Jaipur (sitting/sleeping Rs 140/200, 7½ hours, half-hourly), Ajmer (Rs 100, 4½ hours, half-hourly), Bikaner (sitting/sleeper Rs 120/160, 5½ hours), Mt Abu (sitting/sleeper Rs 150/200, 5½ hours), Delhi (sitting/sleeper Rs 200/320, 12½ to 14 hours, five daily) and Ahmedabad (sitting/sleeper Rs 200/240, 10 to 12 hours, six daily). Private buses have ticket offices opposite the main train station and in the street leading to the Ranchodji Temple. Private buses leave from various locations in Sardapura, 1km southwest of the main train station.

The main highway between Jodhpur and Jaisalmer goes via Agolai, Dechu and Pokaran, but it's more interesting to go on the less frequently travelled route via Osian and Phalodi (for Khichan), which meets the main route at Pokaran.

### TAXI

There's a taxi stand outside as you exit the main train station. The usual rules apply – a good price to aim for is Rs 5 per kilometre (for a non-AC car), with a minimum of 250km per day. The driver will charge you at least Rs 100 for overnight stops and will charge for his return journey.

### TRAIN

The computerised **booking office** (Map p303; Station Rd; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1.45pm Sun) is between the main train station and Sojati Gate. Demand for tickets is heavy, so come here soon after you arrive. There are tourist quotas on trains from here. Reserve your tickets at window 788. At the main train station there's an International Tourist Bureau (see p302).

To Jaisalmer, the *Delhi-Jaisalmer-Barmer Express* (4059/60) departs at 6.10am arriving in Jaisalmer (sleeper/3AC Rs 157/411) at 1pm. The *Jodhpur-Jaisalmer Express* (4809/10) departs every night at 11.25pm, arriving in Jaisalmer at 5.30am. The latter

originates in Jodhpur so the departure time is more reliable.

To Delhi, the *Mandore Express* (2461/2) leaves Jodhpur at 7.30pm, stops at Jaipur (sleeper/3AC Rs 180/450) at 1am, arriving in Delhi (sleeper/3AC Rs 276/720) at 6.30am. The *Ranthambhore Express* (2466) departs at 5.55am and arrives at Jaipur (sleeper/3AC Rs 180/450) at 10.35am, and Sawai Madhopur (sleeper/3AC Rs 220/561) at 1.15pm. There are several daily trains to Bikaner, including the *Ranakpur Express* departing at 10.05am and arriving in Bikaner (sleeper/3AC Rs 148/386) at 4pm.

The weekly *Thar Express* (aka *JU MBF Link Express*, 4889, see p376) runs between Jodhpur and Karachi. In Jodhpur it leaves from Bhagat ki Kothi station every Saturday at 1.00am and reaches Munabao on the border at 7.00am. From Munabao you change to a Pakistan train (assuming you have a Pakistan visa).

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The journey to/from the airport costs about Rs 70/180 in an autorickshaw/taxi.

### AUTORICKSHAW

Most autorickshaw journeys in town should cost no more than Rs 45. A day's sightseeing costs around Rs 250.

### TAXI

There's a taxi stand near the main train station. To hire a taxi for sightseeing in Jodhpur, expect to be quoted around Rs 600/900 per half/full day. To Mandore, a taxi costs about Rs 250, including a one-hour wait. To Osian the fare is Rs 800 return, including a three-hour stay there.

## AROUND JODHPUR

### Maha Mandir & Balsamand Lake

About 2km northeast of the city is the **Maha Mandir** (Great Temple), which is quite an adventure to seek out. This edifice is supported by 84 pillars and protected by defensive bastions. There's a splendid altar in the centre of the temple, covered by a golden canopy. On the walls are pastel paintings of fantastic yoga contortions. The temple also houses a local school.

The picturesque **Balsamand Lake** is 3km further north. A refreshing escape from Jodhpur,

this artificial lake is the oldest in Rajasthan – it was built in 1159 – and has a picturesque summer palace on its banks.

Striking **Balsamand Palace** (☎ 2572321; s/d/stc Rs 5400/6050/14850; ☎ ☎), a deep-red sandstone building with elaborately carved balconies, sits at the edge of the lake. It offers comfort in a lush and serene setting not too far from Jodhpur. The attractive rooms are in the former stables. All have a private terrace with exposed stone walls and serene views.

## Mandore

Situated 9km north of the centre of Jodhpur, Mandore was the capital of Marwar prior to the founding of Jodhpur. It was founded in the 6th century, and passed to the Rathore Rajputs in 1381. Few traces of the ancient seat of power remain, but the lush gardens and domed *chhatris* (cenotaphs, literally 'umbrellas') make the place an appealing and relaxing excursion from Jodhpur (it's thronged with local tourists at weekends).

Its **gardens**, stepped with rock terraces, contain a variety of dark-red cenotaphs of Jodhpur's rulers. These include the soaring **Chhatri of Maharaja Dhiraj Ajit Singh** (1793), which combines Buddhist and Jain elements in its architecture. It's an enormous edifice with carved elephants, a pillared forechamber, fine sculpture and *amalaka* (disk-shaped flourishes with fluted edges). You can climb to the third storey up a peculiar set of staircases. The memorial also marks the spot where 64 queens and concubines committed *sati* on Ajit Singh's death in 1724.

Opposite is the 1720 **Chhatri of Maharaja Dhiraj Jaswant Singh I**, an enormous octagonal pavilion with a vast dome. It achieves a remarkable symmetry, with a gallery supported by huge pillars, and sculptures of Krishna and the *gopis* (milkmaids). The rest of the cenotaphs all date to the 17th century.

At the rear of the complex is the small **government museum** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 10am-4pm Sat-Thu), which is housed in the Abhay Singh Palace and shows relics of Mandore, including sculpture and inscriptions.

To the left is the 18th-century **Hall of Heroes**. This is a fantastically bright array of 15 solemn Hindu deities and local Rajput heroes carved out of a rock wall, coated with fine plaster and luridly painted. The **Shrine of 33 Crore Gods** is painted with figures of deities and spirits (one crore equals 10 million).



**SLEEPING**

**Mandore Guest House** (☎ 0291-2545210, 2571620; www.mandore.com; s/d Rs 500/850, with AC Rs 700/900; ♿) Delightful rounded mud-walled cottages are set in a leafy garden here, and there's good home-cooked food. The guesthouse is also connected with a local NGO working to address problems faced by disadvantaged people of Rajasthan and provide medical services. The NGO has short-term volunteer programmes (see p370).

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

There are many buses throughout the day between Jodhpur and Mandore (Rs 8), which is on the main road between Jodhpur and Nagaur. Catch one on High Court Rd.

Mandore is also included on the Tourist Reception Centre's city tours (p307).

You could get a rickshaw to take you there and back for around Rs 200.

**Bishnoi Villages**

A number of Bishnoi and other traditional villages are strung along and off the Pali road, located to the southeast of Jodhpur. Various operators, including the RTDC in Jodhpur, conduct jeep safaris to the villages – see p307 for details. A tour is essential to visit this region. Some of these villages are tiny, and they're reached along tracks that can barely be made out in the sand (and that you'll be hard-pressed to find on any maps). Unfortunately, the increase in tourism is starting to cause tension in some villages. Remember that you are visiting a private community, and make sure you ask before taking photographs.

Many villagers live in handmade thatched huts, in the traditions of their ancestors. Tours usually include a meal cooked over the fire in one of the villages.

Many visitors are surprised by the density, and fearlessness, of the wildlife around the Bishnoi villages. The relationship between the villagers and the animals has been nurtured for hundreds of years. The 1730 sacrifice of 363 villagers to protect the khejri trees (opposite) is commemorated in September at **Khejadali** village, where there is a memorial to the victims fronted by a small grove of khejri trees.

At **Guda Bishnoi**, the locals are traditionally engaged in animal husbandry. There's a small artificial lake where migratory birds,

such as demoiselle cranes and mammals, such as blackbucks and chinkaras, can be seen, particularly at dusk when they come to drink. The lake is full only after a good monsoon (July and August).

The village of **Salawas** is a centre for weaving *dhurries*, though many villages also practise this craft. Today a cooperative of 48 weavers runs the efficient **Roopraj Dhurry Udyog** (☎ 0291-2896658; rooprajdhurry@sify.com) in Salawas, through which all profits go to the artisan. A beautiful 1.3ft x 5ft *dhurrie* can take about one month to complete, depending on the intricacy of the design (there are more than 100 traditional designs) and the number of colours used, and costs about Rs 3000. The coordinator, Roopraj, will happily answer any questions you may have about this craft.

These days, chemical rather than natural dyes are used. *Dhurries* are usually of cotton, but sometimes camel or goat hair, or silk, is used. After the weaving is completed, the *dhurries* are sometimes stonewashed to give an antique effect. The *dhurrie* weavers can arrange post by sea or air (shipping costs around Rs 1200 for one piece).

Also in Salawas, several families, mostly of the Muslim community, are engaged in block printing. The hand-woven, block-printed cloth is known as *jetia*. A single bed sheet costs around Rs 400, and a double sheet is about Rs 500, depending on the design.

At the villages of **Zhalamand**, **Salawas** and **Kakani**, potters can be seen at work, using hand-turned wheels.

**Sardar Samand Lake**

The route to this charming and remote wildlife refuge, located about 66km southeast of Jodhpur, passes through a number of colourful little villages. Blackbucks, chinkaras and birdlife, including flamingos, pelicans, ducks, cranes, egrets and kingfishers, may be spotted.

Built in 1933 as the maharaja of Jodhpur's summer palace and hunting lodge, **Sardar Samand Palace** (☎ 02960-245003; www.jodhpurheritage.com; s/d Rs 3600/5000; ♿) is a grey-stone building with a single domed turret. Rooms are comfortable and have great views. There is a restaurant and a lakeside swimming pool, and it's a world away from the clamour of Jodhpur. Village safaris are available.

The only way to get here is by taxi (around Rs 700 round trip).

**THE TWENTY NINE**

*Sar santey rookh rahe to bhi sasto jaan.* (A chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree.)

*Bishnoi saying*

The Bishnoi are among the world's most dedicated conservationists. They hold all animal life sacred, in particular the endangered blackbuck (Indian antelope). The Bishnoi sometimes bury dead blackbuck and mark their graves with stones, and the women are said to suckle blackbuck fawns that have been orphaned. They believe that they will be reincarnated as antelope. They also have a long history of protecting the sacred khejri tree – sometimes with their lives. The men are recognisable by their large white turbans, while women usually wear red (or purple for mourning) and a large nose ring, a skirt with a white dot and a red dupatta (long scarf for women) with a green border.

The sect was founded in the 15th century, when a severe drought was crippling the desert regions near Jodhpur. A villager named Jambeshwar had a vision that the drought had been caused by humans meddling with the natural order. He laid down 29 tenets for conserving nature, including not killing animals, not felling trees and not using wood for funeral pyres (they bury their dead unlike the majority of Hindus). Other commandments include taking early morning baths, not taking opium or cannabis or drinking alcohol, not indulging in unnecessary discussions, and not wearing blue (it's thought this was to save the indigo plant). Jambeshwar became known as Guru Jambhoji, and his followers became known as the Bishnoi (meaning '29') after the principles they followed.

In 1730 the most famous Bishnoi act of self-sacrifice occurred. The maharaja of Jodhpur sent woodcutters into Bishnoi villages to cut down khejri trees for his lime kilns. A woman named Amritdevi clung to one of the trees and refused to be removed, crying 'A chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree'. The axeman cut her head off. One by one, other Bishnoi villagers followed Amritdevi's lead, and each in turn was killed by the axemen until 363 people lay dead. The maharaja, hearing of the carnage, declared a conservation zone around the Bishnoi villages, prohibiting tree felling or poaching in the area.

Today the site at Khejadali is a quiet grove of khejri trees, and a temple commemorates the sacrifice. The Bishnoi continue to live by their strict code and to defend native wildlife. In 1996 a Bishnoi villager named Nihal Chand Bishnoi was shot and killed by poachers near Bikaner as he tried to save the lives of some chinkaras (Indian gazelles). In October 1998 Bollywood superstar Salman Khan was arrested for killing two blackbucks near a Bishnoi village. The authorities were allegedly alerted to the crime by the villagers, who chased Khan from the scene and presented the dead blackbucks as evidence. Khan eventually faced court and has spent short terms in jail, in 2006 and 2007, between appeals and bail hearings, before the case was buried into the black hole of bureaucracy in late 2007. Reports from the Bishnoi suggest that the high profile of the case has resulted in a reduction in poaching activity. Today around 90% of the blackbucks in Rajasthan live under Bishnoi protection.

A festival near Bikaner celebrates Jambeshwar, the sect's founder, in around January or February (see p301).

**Rohet**

In this small village, 40km south of Jodhpur, the former local ruler has converted his 350-year-old manor into a heritage hotel. **Rohet Garh** (☎ 02936-268231; www.rohetgarh.com; s/d from Rs 3450/4500, ste Rs 4950; ♿) is a heritage hotel with lots of character and relaxing gardens. Bruce Chatwin wrote *The Songlines* here, and William Dalrymple began *City of Djinns* in the same room (No 15). It's surprising that they were so diligent, as there's a gorgeous

colonnaded pool and the rooms are lovely. The hotel has a stable of Marwari horses and can organise horse rides from one-day to six-day treks.

From Jodhpur, there are local daily buses to Rohet (Rs 18), or you can get a taxi for around Rs 800.

**Bhenswara**

Bhenswara, which translates as 'the place where buffaloes were kept', is about 130km

south of Jodhpur, on the banks of the Jawai river.

**Ravla Bhenswara** (☎ 02978-222080; s/d from Rs 1995/2595, ste Rs 3000; 🚻 🚿), an unpretentious rural manor, is perfect if you want a respite from travelling. This place is run by a nice young couple, Shiv Pratap Singh and Uma Kumari, who give the hotel a cosy appeal. The quaint rooms are decorated with lots of personality. Jeep village safaris and village bullock cart rides can be organised (there's a minimum of two people). The hotel owners can arrange a visit to the nearby **Jalor Fort**. The climb up to the fort takes about 45 minutes (carry water, as the ascent can be a hot one).

The closest bus route goes to Jalor (Rs 80 from Jodhpur), where you should catch a taxi to Bhenswara.

### Dhawa Doli Wildlife Sanctuary

This sanctuary is about 40km southwest of Jodhpur, on the road to Barmer, and has populations of blackbucks, partridges, desert foxes and nilgais. There's no accommodation here, but it's possible to take a half-day tour from Jodhpur (make enquiries at the RTDC Tourist Reception Centre) for Rs 800, or if you have your own transport you could stop en route to Barmer. The forest office is in a small group of village huts – you'll have to ask on the way – and the family there will help you look for wildlife. It's best to visit before about 11am or a few hours before sunset.

### Khejarla

This 400-year-old **fort** (☎ 02930-258311; s/d Rs 2200/2700, ste 4500; 🚻 🚿) is 85km east of Jodhpur en route to Ajmer. Its extraordinary carved window frames, made of deep-red sandstone, are bunched on the front of its stern fortifications. Rooms are whitewashed and rustic rather than swish.

Village safaris can be arranged, as well as a visit to an old step-well (ask Dalip Singh about the ghost).

### Khimsar

About 95km northeast of Jodhpur, **Khimsar Fort** (☎ 01585-262345; www.welcomeheritagehotels.com; s/d Rs 5400/6000, ste Rs 6000; 🚻 🚿) dates back to 1523. The zenana was added in the 18th century, and a new wing built in the 1940s. The palatial building has been converted into an upmarket hotel, with lush, well-appointed rooms. The hotel also boasts a sauna, yoga centre, pool

(with nearby hammock to laze away the day), a good restaurant and pleasant gardens. It's possible to arrange a jeep safari, or a horse or camel ride. Ayurvedic massage costs around Rs 825 for one hour.

A local bus from Jodhpur costs Rs 50, while a taxi costs about Rs 800.

### NAGOUR

☎ 01582 / pop 88,313

Lying 135km northeast of Jodhpur, Nagaur is home to the massive 12th-century ruins of **Ahhichatragarh** (Fort of the Hooded Cobra; Indian/foreigner Rs 15/50, camera/video Rs 25/100, parking Rs 15, guide Rs 100; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm), which are being restored (the project partly financed by the Getty Foundation). The 1 sq km fort complex is protected by vast double walls that encompass a Rajput-Mughal palace and an ingenious water recycling system. The frescoes appear not as elaborate as elsewhere in Rajasthan and, though there is much restoration activity going on, this vast complex is a carcass stripped bare. Years of army occupation ensured many frescoes were whitewashed over and anything that could be shifted was carted away. Just outside the fort but within the walls of the old city are several **mosques**, including one commissioned by Akbar for a disciple of the Sufi saint Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti (see p204). The minarets of **Akbari Masjid** can be seen from the fort's ramparts.

Nagaur also hosts a colourful fair, which is a smaller and even more camel-focused version of Pushkar Camel Fair – see p301. During this time a tourist information office is set up at the festival grounds.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Bhaskar** (☎ 240100; Station Rd; s/d from Rs 200/300; mains Rs 25-70) This friendly, central place has worn out and grim rooms, but it's conveniently near the train station and a veg curry won't ruin the budget.

**Hotel Sujan** (☎ 240283; Nakash Gate; s/d Rs 200/350, r with AC Rs 600; mains Rs 25-45; 🚻 🚿) Just beyond Nakash Gate, in the old city walls, the Hotel Sujan has gloomy hallways, and rather grimy rooms. The basic restaurant does veg curries.

**Hotel Mahaveer International** (☎ 243158; Vijai Vallabh Chowk; r Rs 350-550, with AC Rs 950-1500; mains Rs 85-175; 🚻 🚿) About 1km from the fort, this hotel has uninspiring but comfortable rooms aimed at business travellers. Inspect rooms in the old and new wing before deciding. There's a

relatively clean (for Nagaur) and cool vegetarian restaurant and a bar.

Fabulous, 4 sq metre royal tents are available in the fort grounds from November to March. Tents with private bathroom cost from Rs 11,500 during fair time. Bookings are essential; contact **Balsamand Palace** (☎ 0291-2571991).

During Nagaur's fair, the **RTDC** (s/d Rs 6500/7500) also has accommodation. For details, contact the general manager at **Central Reservations** (☎ 0141-2202586; www.rajasthan-tourism.gov.in; RTDC Hotel Swagatam Campus, Jaipur, 302006).

### Getting There & Away

Nagaur is connected by express bus to Jodhpur (Rs 70, three hours) and Bikaner (Rs 69, 2½ hours).

### JODHPUR TO JAISALMER

The most direct route by road to Jaisalmer is the southern route via Agolai, Dechu and Pokaran. But, if you have time, it's more rewarding to take the lesser-travelled northern route, which goes via Osiyani and Phalodi and meets up with the main route at Pokaran. The exquisite temples at Osiyani, the spectacular demoiselle cranes at Khichan and the important pilgrimage site of Ramdevra, all lie on or just off this northern route, which numerous buses ply every day.

### Osiyan

This ancient Thar Desert town, 65km north of Jodhpur, was an important trading centre between the 8th and 12th centuries. Known as Upkeshpur, it was dominated by the Jains, whose wealth left a legacy of exquisitely sculptured, well-preserved temples. Today it receives lots of pilgrims at certain times, but not that many tourists, and it's a good place for a taste of the desert if you can't make it to Jaisalmer. The village of Osiyani is inhabited mostly by Brahmins – most of the houses here are painted blue (traditionally a Brahmin practice), as in Jodhpur.

### SIGHTS

The finely carved ancient temples of Osiyani rival the Hoysala temples of Karnataka and the Sun Temple of Konark in Orissa.

About 200m north of the bus stand is the hilltop **Sachiya Mata Temple** (☎ 6am-7.15pm) – Sachiya Mata (Mother of Truth) is the ninth and last incarnation of the goddess Durga. This temple receives crowds of pilgrims,

both Hindu and Jain. People usually come here after the marriage of their children, but crowds come for Navratri (nine nights of worship in March or April and October or November). A long flight of steps, under fancifully decorated arches, takes you to the forechamber. Before the **mandapa** (pavilion in front of a temple), and beyond the impressive **torana** (gateway), are sandstone statues of various incarnations of Durga that were excavated by archaeologists and installed here. The main temple is flanked by nine smaller temples, each dedicated to an incarnation of the goddess. Abutting the sides of the main temple is a series of ancient temples contemporary with this one.

Five minutes' walk from Sachiya Mata Temple, directly opposite the entrance, is **Mahavira Temple** (admission Rs 5, camera/video Rs 40/100; ☎ 6am-8.30pm), which was dedicated to the last of the Jain **tirthankars** (great teachers). This is a more spacious temple than Sachiya Mata, featuring an open-air pavilion-style **mandapa** supported by carved pillars. As at the Sachiya Mata Temple, the drum of the dome features sculptures of **apsaras** (heavenly nymphs). There is also a beautiful **torana** before the temple, decorated with very intricate sculptural work.

The image of Mahavira is glistening with piercing eyes. According to legend it's over 2000 years old, was found buried underground, and is made of sand and milk and coated in gold. In the right-hand corner there's an ancient frieze, which retains fragments of colour. Interestingly, there is much restoration and replacement of stone carvings, however, the friezes are not being painted with the traditional vegetable-dye paints apparently because tourists prefer unpainted carvings.

Among the other temples in Osiyani are those dedicated to Surya, Shiva and Harihara. The temples are ruined, but they have some beautiful carving. The damaged 9th-century Katan **baori** (step-well) has more fine, worn sculptural work.

### TOURS

**Gemar Singh** (☎ 0291-272313; www.hacra.org) lives in a village outside Osiyani and arranges homestays, camping, desert walks and horse or camel safaris from Jodhpur to Osiyani and surrounding Rajput and Bishnoi villages. Gemar Singh's safari's get rave reviews from readers. It costs around Rs 800 per person per day, with a minimum of two people.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

Few travellers overnight in Osijan, which accounts for the lack of accommodation.

**Guest House** (☎ 02922-274331, 9414440479; s/d Rs 250/300) Prakash Bhanu Sharma, a personable Brahmin priest, has basic accommodation that is geared for pilgrims, located directly opposite the Mahavira Temple. Expect simple rooms with shared bathroom and bucket hot water, though Prakash is planning to build a bigger and better guesthouse. Prakash can arrange jeep excursions and camel safaris, and is also a knowledgeable guide to the temples. You can usually find him sitting at the gateway to the temple, or ask any of the village children, who will happily track him down for you.

**Camel Camp** (in Jodhpur ☎ /fax 0291-2437023; www.camelcampasian.com; tents Rs 8500) This place offers upmarket but rather overpriced accommodation in tents that are located on a secluded sand dune that overlooks Osijan. The tariff includes all meals, as well as entertainment and a camel ride at sunset. Additional camel safaris can be arranged. Bookings are essential.

Four kilometres beyond Osijan, heading to Phalodi, is **Osian Desert Café** (mains Rs 110-225), a highway stop that has been built for tour groups and takes some beating for tasty food and cold drinks, including beer, in clean comfortable surroundings.

**THE DEMOISELLE CRANES OF KHICHAN**

From late August or early September to the end of March you can witness the extraordinary sight of over 7000 demoiselle cranes (*Anthropoides virgo*) wintering near Khichan. Morning and afternoon, the birds circle overhead, then make a dramatic descent for the grain Khichan's villagers spread for them. Brought to France from the Russian steppes, the cranes were tagged 'demoiselle' by Marie Antoinette because of their grace. Here they're known as kurjas.

Brown-grey birds with a black chest and throat, demoiselle cranes stand about 76cm high, and have a long neck and a short beak. In traditional Marwari songs, women beseech the cranes to bring back messages from their loved ones when they return from distant lands. The flock consumes a phenomenal 600kg of grain each day, which is distributed at the Birds Feeding Home. All the grain is funded by (very welcome) donations.

The feeding of the cranes dates back some 150 years. The grain is spread at night, ready for the birds to feed at sunrise (about 7am), and again around 4pm, in time for the birds' return in the afternoon. The sight of these wonderful birds in such large numbers descending on the feeding ground is truly awe-inspiring – the noise of the assembly is amazing. It shouldn't be missed if you're in the area. Please keep a distance from the birds and refrain from making a noise, so as not to scare them.

The demoiselle cranes also winter in Pakistan and Africa. To migrate they must cross the Himalayas from their breeding range, which extends over a wide belt spanning eastern Europe, Central Asia and eastern China.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

There are regular buses from Jodhpur (Rs 30, 1½ hours, half-hourly), and buses also serve Phalodi (Rs 35, two hours) for Khichan.

There's also train 4059 from Jodhpur which departs Jodhpur at 6.20am and arrives at Osijan (sleeper/3AC Rs 121/213) at 7.37am and then departs for Jaisalmer (sleeper/3AC Rs 135/350). On the return journey train 4060 departs Jaisalmer at 4pm, stops in Osijan at 9pm and arrives Jodhpur at 10pm.

A return taxi from Jodhpur costs Rs 800.

**Khichan & Phalodi**

Morning and afternoons in the winter months, the tiny village of Khichan hosts a fabulous feast for huge flocks of graceful demoiselle cranes (below). Khichan is about 10km east of Phalodi, a town about 135km from Jodhpur and 165km from Jaisalmer.

Phalodi surrounds an old desert citadel, a crumbling 15th century fort, that gradually rose to prominence during the 18th century when Jain business families trading in salt built impressive *havelis*. As well as the beautiful *havelis* (some over 250 years old), they built colourful and gaudy Jain temples, including the domed **Shri Parashnath temple** (admission free, camera Rs 20), glistening with gold and Belgian glass. The most prominent *haveli*, **Dadha Haveli**, is now the Lal Niwas hotel and houses a small

**museum** (admission Rs 40; ☎ 9am-4pm) containing coins, documents and arms.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

Note that all options are in Phalodi.

**Hotel Sunrise** (☎ /fax 02925-222257; s/d Rs 200/250, without bathroom Rs 100/150) Directly opposite the Roadways bus stand, this place has basic, barely acceptable rooms and a restaurant.

**Hotel Chetnya Palace** (☎ 02925-223945; Station Rd; s Rs 150-700, d Rs 200-750; ☎) Opposite the local bus stand, this place has very worn and grim rooms and only the AC rooms have running hot water. The restaurant is equally challenging.

**Lal Niwas** (☎ 02925-223813; www.welcomeheritagehotels.com; Dadha St; s/d Rs 2400/2650, ste 2750/3100; ☎) This is a splendid, carved, deep-terracotta *haveli* in the old part of town, with balconies, courtyards and a tangle of passages. All the rooms are different, decorated in the traditional style with heavy wooden furniture. The family suite is fantastic, especially if you have kids, as it has a number of rooms divided by carved arches. A multicuisine restaurant and a bar are on site, and the management act as the defacto information office for the region and can organise tours to Kichan.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

There are regular buses to/from Jodhpur (Rs 86, 3½ hours), Jaisalmer (Rs 72, 3½ hours) and Bikaner (Rs 84, 3½ hours).

Phalodi is on the Jodhpur–Jaisalmer line and has daily rail connections with Jodhpur (sleeper/3AC Rs 121/251, 2½ hours) and Jaisalmer (sleeper/3AC Rs 121/276, four hours).

**GETTING AROUND**

There are daily buses between Phalodi and Khichan (Rs 5, 15 minutes). A return auto-rickshaw to Khichan will cost Rs 70.

**Ramdevra**

This desolate and windswept desert village lies 10km north of Pokaran. While it has an important temple dedicated to deified local hero Ramdev, who lived in the Middle Ages, it's not the most salubrious place to visit or stay and there's little English spoken.

**SIGHTS****Ramdev Mandir**

Ramdev was born in Tanwar village to a Rajput family and was opposed to all forms

of untouchability, believing that all human beings are equal. He took samadhi (an ecstatic state involving conscious exit from the body) in 1458. The 1931 **temple** built in his honour has a brightly coloured façade, but isn't especially thrilling architecturally. However, the devotional activities of the hundreds of pilgrims who pay homage here are enthralling (Ramdev is worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims). The temple's at its busiest during the festival devoted to the saint in August or September (p301). The streets outside are lined with *dharamsalas* (pilgrims guesthouse), tea shops and souvenir-wallahs. Devotees place model horses in the temple in honour of the holy man's trusty steed, who carried him around when he was doing his good works.

You'll probably be assailed by people with receipt books demanding donations, both as you enter the temple complex and within the temple itself, even by men who 'guard' your shoes.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**Hotel Sohan Palace** (☎ 02996-237025; s/d Rs 200/500) Near the temple and the bus stand, Hotel Sohan is not much of a palace. It has basic pilgrim rooms and no meals are available.

**Hotel Ramdev & Dining Hall** (☎ 02996-235069; r Rs 500-800; ☎) A better option is this modern place, with clean comfortable rooms and good food, on the road to Pokaran about 1km from the temple.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Most buses between Phalodi and Pokaran pass through Ramdevra – the trip from Phalodi to Ramdevra costs Rs 30. Jeep taxis leave when full and travel along the main street to Pokaran (Rs 5, 20 minutes).

**Pokaran**

☎ 02994

At the junction of the Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Bikaner roads, 110km from Jaisalmer, is this desert town, site of another fort – a grand edifice the colour of dark plums. If you wander through the town look for the famous red-clay pottery products including animals, lamps, statues and more.

Pokaran became notorious in 1998 as the site of India's controversial nuclear tests (p320).

The bus stand is on the Jodhpur road at the southern edge of town. The fort is 1.5km to the

## NUCLEAR SABRE-RATTLING

In May 1998 India detonated five nuclear devices in the Pokaran area. These included miniature devices to be used for missile warheads and a 43-kiloton device that was almost three times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. India also conducted its first nuclear test here, in 1974.

The 1998 tests led to heightened tension between India and neighbouring Pakistan. Hundreds of thousands of Hindu loyalists celebrated the controversial decision to hold the tests with parties in the street. The US was less impressed, immediately imposing sanctions, suspending aid and recommending the freezing of international development loans. Japan withdrew its ambassador. Pakistan also swiftly responded to India by detonating its own nuclear devices, igniting global concern about a nuclear arms race in south Asia. The rupee plummeted and visitors were scared away – Jaisalmer was rendered a virtual ghost town.

In late September 2001 the US lifted the sanctions against India. Analysts saw this as a reward for India's support in the 'war against terror' after the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

Worth seeking out is director Anand Patwardhan's award-winning 2002 documentary *War & Peace*. This fascinating, dark and funny film examines the nuclear standoff, the patriotism that followed and the human cost. It was banned in India for two years.

Less controversial missiles continue to be tested at the site.

northeast of the bus stand. There is a State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur ATM in the bazaar.

## SIGHTS

### Pokaran Fort & Museum

The red-sandstone **Pokaran Fort** (admission Rs 50, camera or video Rs 30; ☎ 7am-7pm) is an evocative place overlooking a tangle of narrow streets lined by balconied houses. Built from the 14th to the 17th century, it once had charge of 108 villages. Part of it is now a heritage hotel. There's a small museum with an assortment of weaponry, some brocaded clothes, old wooden printing blocks and various games belonging to former rulers of Pokaran, including dice and dominoes. There are also 15 'living' temples or shrines; that is, the villagers still attend them, scattered around the fort, including a small shrine to Durga.

A stop at Pokaran breaks the long journey between Jodhpur and Jaisalmer. There's not a huge amount to see, but it's a great place to relax and escape the touts. Many travellers stop here for lunch, too.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**RTDC Motel Godawan** (☎ 222275; s/d Rs 500/600, with AC Rs 700/800) About 3km west of the bus stand, this place offers rooms and huts. A lot better than many other RTDC hotels, it also has a restaurant.

**Fort Pokaran** (☎ 222274; www.fortpokaran.com; r/room Rs 3000, ste Rs 7000; breakfast/lunch/dinner Rs 250/450/450; 🍷 🍷) The impressive sandstone fort offers 19 individual, atmospheric rooms that have

been expertly restored yet unchanged as much as possible – many rooms boast their original floors, antique furniture, and teak and mirror ceilings. Of course there are modern amenities for nontraditional comforts, and there's a superb swimming pool. The restaurant specialises in regional cuisine which you can enjoy in the grand dining room or beside the pool. It's a wonderfully peaceful place to stay, and jeep safaris can be arranged from here.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are regular RSRTC buses to Jaisalmer (Rs 37, two hours). There are also buses to Bikaner (Rs 98, five hours) and to Jodhpur (Rs 65, three hours).

Pokaran is on the Jodhpur–Jaisalmer line and has daily rail connections with Jodhpur (sleeper/3AC Rs 121/306, four hours) and Jaisalmer (sleeper/3AC Rs 121/238, three hours).

## JAISALMER

☎ 02992 / pop 58,286

Jaisalmer is a breathtaking sight. A magical, multiturreted sand castle on the 80m-high Trikuta (Three-Peaked) Hill rises mirage-like from the horizontal desert plain. Known as the Golden City, it seems to have sprung from a chivalrous tale or an overly imaginative miniature illustration. No place better evokes ancient desert splendour and exotic trade routes. Jaisalmer celebrates its desert culture with an action-packed festival in winter (see p301).

Ninety-nine huge bastions encircle the narrow streets of the fort, which is still inhabited. Elaborate houses, splendid temples, magnificent gateways and a beautiful palace are all carved out of the same warm-yellow sandstone. Once the inhabitants worked for the maharajas, but today they mainly run guesthouses, or shops and stalls swaddled in the kaleidoscopic mirrors and embroideries of Rajasthani cloth. Despite the commercialism of the Italian restaurants, internet cafés and camel-safari culture, it's impossible not to be enchanted.

There's still a sense of community within the straitened streets, with families pouring out of the close-knit web of houses, and cows blocking the narrowest corners. Spreading from the fort is the old city, containing lavish sandstone *havelis*, and all around lie the scrub, dunes, wind turbines and villages of the Thar Desert.

## History

Since the city was founded in 1156, Jaisalmer history has been derived from the tales and songs of the bards. The succession of maharajas of Jaisalmer trace their lineage back to a ruler of the Bhatti Rajput clan, Jaitasimha. The Bhatti Rajputs trace *their* lineage back to Krishna.

The 13th and 14th centuries were a tempestuous time, as rulers relied on looting for want of other income, and Jaisalmer was repeatedly attacked as those looted sought revenge. In the 14th century the emperor of Delhi, Ala-uddin Khilji, mounted an expedition to Jaisalmer to retrieve treasure that the Bhattis had taken from a caravan train en route to the imperial capital. He laid siege to Jaisalmer Fort for nine years. When defeat was imminent, *jauhar* (ritual mass suicide) was declared: the women of Jaisalmer committed themselves to the flames, while the men donned saffron robes and rode out to certain death. Jaitasimha's son Duda, a hero of the Bhattis, perished in the battle.

Duda's descendants continued to rule over the desert kingdom. In 1541 Lunakarna of Jaisalmer fought against Humayun when he passed through Jaisalmer en route to Ajmer. The relationship between the Jaisalmer rulers and the Mughal empire was not always hostile, and various marriages were contracted between the two parties to cement their alliance. Later Jaisalmer notables include Sabala Simha, who won the patronage of the Muslim Emperor Shah Jahan (r 1627-58) when he fought with distinction in a campaign at Peshawar. Although not the legitimate heir to the *gaddi* (throne), Shah Jahan invested Sabala Simha with the power to rule Jaisalmer, and he

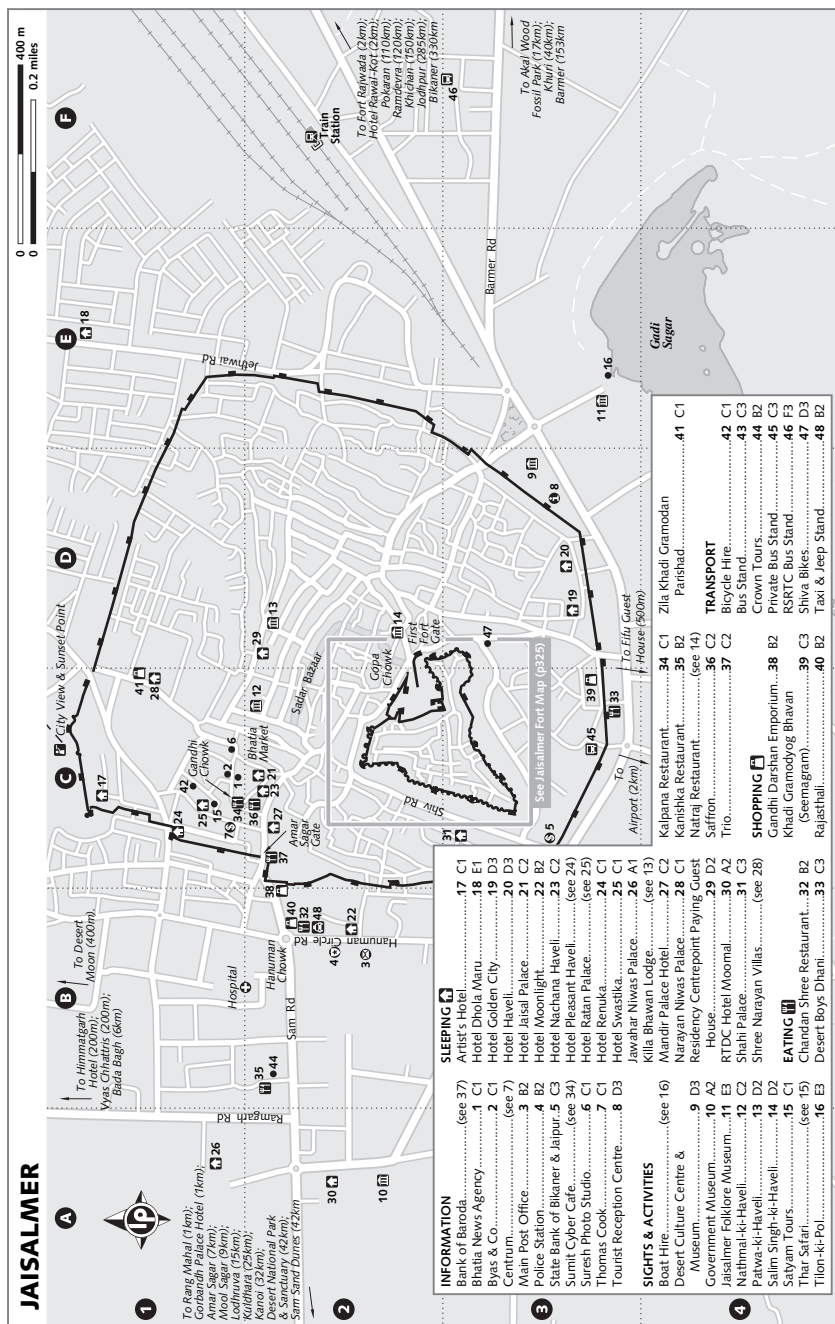
## ARRIVAL IN JAISALMER

If you're arriving in Jaisalmer by bus, you'll notice that the number of passengers suddenly swells about an hour before arrival. Your new companions are touts, not wanting to miss the chance of a captive audience. All foreigners will be asked to pay a tourist tax of Rs 20.

In the past few years, local authorities have introduced policies designed to keep the touts at bay. Most carriages on the overnight train carry at least a couple of soldiers to try to ensure you get a good night's sleep, and soldiers also patrol the train station platforms in Jodhpur with varying degrees of vigilance. Perhaps the most surreal experience is stumbling out of the train in the predawn light to find a small army of hotel owners kept behind a barricade about 20m from the station exit, holding up their signs and champing at the bit. Once you cross that line, you're on your own.

Don't believe anyone who offers to take you 'anywhere you like' for just a few rupees. Take with a fistful of salt claims that the hotel you want to stay in is 'full', 'closed' or 'no good any more', or has suffered some other inglorious fate. Don't listen to people outside your chosen hotel telling you 'their' hotel is full. They have probably followed your rickshaw on a motorbike and are pretending to be associated with the hotel. Go inside to the reception where you may well find a vacancy.

Also watch out for hotel representatives who offer you amazingly cheap rooms. They often just want you to join their camel safari and will throw you out if you don't fancy it – some even become aggressive. If the hotel of your choice has a representative waiting for you, by all means accept the free ride. Alternatively, take a rickshaw and hope you get an honest driver (they do exist) – pay no more than Rs 30.



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annexed areas that now fall into the administrative districts of Bikaner and Jodhpur.

The Jaisalmer rulers continued to line their coffers with illicit gains won through cattle rustling as well as through more orthodox methods, such as imposing levies on the caravans that passed through the kingdom on their way to Delhi. They were renowned for their valour in battle and for their treachery, as they fought to enlarge and secure their territories.

Religion and the fine arts flourished under the rulers of Jaisalmer. Although professing Hinduism, they were tolerant of Jainism, encouraging the construction of the beautiful temples that now grace the old city within the fort walls. Sculptural depictions of both Hindu and Jain deities and holy men stand side by side on the walls of these fine buildings. The visionary rulers commissioned scholars to copy precious sacred manuscripts and books of ancient learning that may otherwise have been lost during Muslim raids.

From the 16th to the 18th century Jaisalmer's strategic position on the camel-train routes between India and Central Asia brought it great wealth. The merchants and townspeople built magnificent houses and mansions, all carved from wood and golden-yellow sandstone. These merchant *havelis* can be found elsewhere in Rajasthan (notably in Shekhawati), but nowhere are they quite as exquisite as in Jaisalmer. Even the humblest of shops and houses display something of the Rajput love of the decorative arts in its most whimsical form.

The rise of shipping trade and the port of Mumbai saw the city decline. At Independence, Partition and the cutting of trade routes through to Pakistan seemingly sealed the city's fate, and water shortages could have pronounced the death sentence. However, the 1965 and 1971 wars between India and Pakistan revealed Jaisalmer's strategic importance, and the Indira Gandhi Canal to the north brings revitalizing water to the desert.

Today tourism rivals the military base as the pillar of the city's economy. And wind farms have proliferated around the city. The presence of the Border Security Force means that the regular sound of war planes disturbs the tranquillity of this desert gem. Being so reliant on the tourist dollar, Jaisalmer is in a vulnerable position. When tensions run high along the border, the city suffers.

## Orientation

This old city was once completely surrounded by an extensive wall, much of which has, sadly, been torn down for building material. Some of it remains, however, including the city gates and, inside them, the massive fort that rises above the city and is the essence of Jaisalmer. The fort is entered via the First Fort Gate. Within its walls is a warren of narrow, paved streets complete with Jain temples and the old palace of the former ruler – it's small enough that you'll never get lost for long.

The main market, Bhatia Market, and most of the city's attractions and important offices surround the fort to the north.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Bhatia News Agency** (Map p322; Bhatia Market; ☎ 9am-9pm) This well-stocked place has an excellent selection of new books (especially novels), as well as some secondhand books (in several languages), which can be bought or swapped. Day-old newspapers are also available.

### INTERNET ACCESS

There are internet cafés inside and outside the fort. The cost is around Rs 40 per hour.

**Sumit Cyber Cafe** (Map p322; Gandhi Chowk; ☎ 9am-10pm) Has a minimum charge of Rs 20.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Dr Dube** (☎ 9414149500; consultation Rs 500) A recommended doctor who will visit your hotel.

### MONEY

**Bank of Baroda** (Map p322; ☎ 252402; Gandhi Chowk; ☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Fri) Next to Trio restaurant, this bank changes Amex travellers cheques, issues cash advances on Visa and MasterCard and has an ATM.

**Centrum** (Map p322; ☎ 251878; Gandhi Chowk) Similar services to Thomas Cook.

**State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur** (Map p322; ☎ 252430) Near the bus stand. Changes travellers cheques and major currencies.

**Thomas Cook** (Map p322; ☎ 253679; Gandhi Chowk; ☎ 9.30am-9.30pm) A reliable moneychanger, changing travellers cheques and cash, and providing credit-card advances.

### PHOTOGRAPHY

**Byas & Co** (Map p322; Court Rd, Bhatia Market; ☎ 9am-9pm) Sells photographic supplies and batteries and develops pictures.

**Suresh Photo Studio** (Map p322; Kuchery Rd; ☎ 9am-8.30pm) About 50m to the east of Byas, Suresh offers

## GOLDEN CITY BLUES

Jaisalmer's fort is one of the most endangered monuments in the world. About 120L of water per head per day pumps through the city's aged plumbing system – 12 times the original capacity – and all this water is causing the fort to slowly self-destruct. Since 1993, three of the 12th-century bastions have collapsed. As the group 'Jaisalmer in Jeopardy' puts it: what happens when you tip a bucket of water over a sand castle?

Another mortal enemy is thoughtless building work. Ironically, the fort's inhabitants may be destroying their own livelihood by not taking conservation measures seriously.

For information on saving Jaisalmer, contact **Jaisalmer in Jeopardy** (☎/fax 020-73524336; www.jaisalmer-in-jeopardy.org; 3 Brickbarn Close, London SW10 0TP), a British charity established in 1996 to preserve the city's heritage. It's part of the **Jaisalmer Conservation Initiative** (☎ 011-24631818; www.intach.org; 71 Lodi Estate, Delhi 110 003), a wider initiative by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (Intach) to conserve and restore Jaisalmer's heritage. Donations are put to good use on a number of projects.

Travellers can do their bit for sustainable tourism by staying outside the fort. Tourists and tourist-related industries are substantial water users. You can also help by showing an interest in conserving Jaisalmer's heritage and encouraging locals to take pride in it. Many people are simply unaware of how important this is for the city's future.

similar services. In a small shop opposite it also sells an excellent range of B&W prints of Jaisalmer from the early 20th century (Rs 85-350).

## POST

**Main post office** (Map p322; Hanuman Circle Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) West of the fort.

**Post office** (Map p325; ☎ 10am-3pm Mon-Sat) Inside the fort, this post office only sells stamps.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist Reception Centre** (Map p322; ☎ 252406; Gadi Sagar Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm) Provides various brochures, including a map of Jaisalmer (Rs 10). It is 1km southeast of the First Fort Gate.

## Sights

### JAISALMER FORT

Built in 1156 by the Rajput ruler Jaisala and reinforced by subsequent rulers, **Jaisalmer Fort** (Map p325) was the focus of a number of battles between the Bhattis, the Mughals of Delhi and the Rathores of Jodhpur. The lower of the fort's three layers of wall is composed of solid stone blocks, which reinforce the loose rubble of Trikuta Hill. The second wall snakes around the fort, and between this and the third, or inner wall, the warrior Rajputs hurled boiling oil and water, and massive round missiles on their unwitting enemies below.

The Jaisalmer standard, which features a *chhatra* against a red-and-yellow background, flies above the structure.

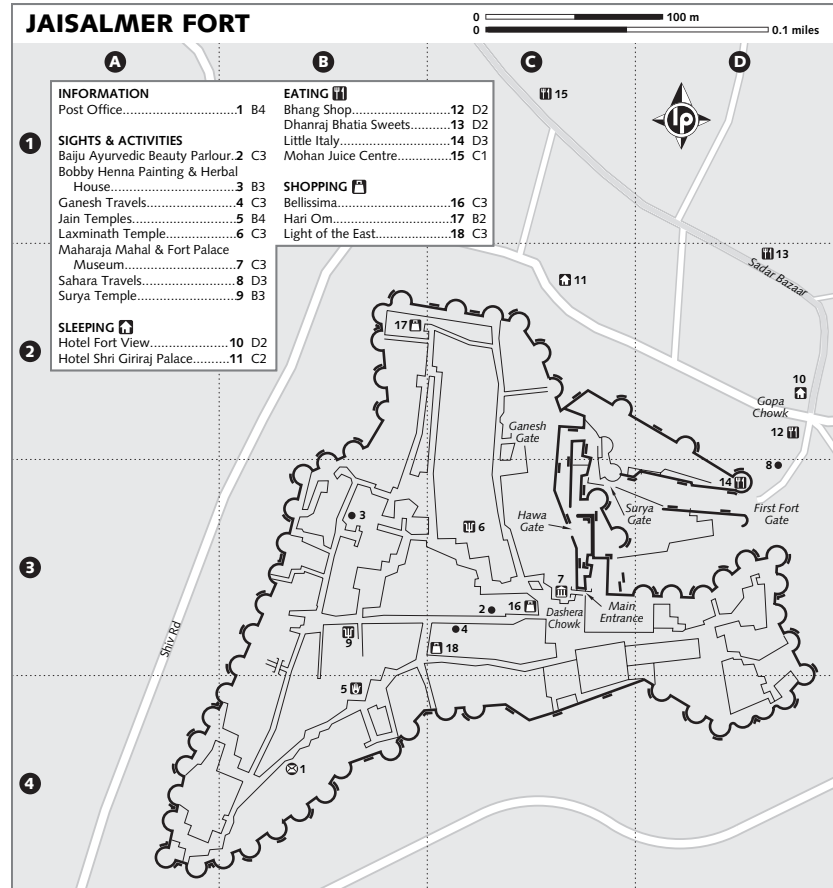
You enter the fort through a forbidding series of massive gates leading to a large courtyard, and it's inside the walls that Jaisalmer's unique quality becomes clear: it is a living fort – about 25% of the city's population resides within its walls. It's an extraordinary, resonant experience to wander around the lanes inside this animated museum. It's packed with houses, temples, handicraft shops and beauty parlours, and honeycombed with narrow, winding lanes, all of them paved in stone. It's also quiet – vehicles cannot drive beyond the main courtyard. The fort walls provide superb views over the old city and surrounding desert – it's fantastic to stroll around the outer fort ramparts at sunset. The fort looks especially magical when it's lit up at night under a clear sky full of stars.

Sadly, the tourist trade is threatening the fort. Tourist numbers and government indifference have placed it on the World Monuments Watch list of 100 endangered sites worldwide (see above).

### Maharaja Mahal

Towering over the fort's main courtyard is the former maharaja's elegant seven-storey palace, now the **Fort Palace Museum** (Map p325; admission inc audio guide & camera Rs 250; video Rs 150; ☎ 8am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9am-6pm Nov-Mar). The square was formerly used to review troops, hear petitions and present extravagant entertainment for important visitors.

## JAISALMER FORT



Part of the palace is open to the public – floor upon floor of small rooms, giving you a fascinating sense of how such buildings were designed to spy on the outside world. Highlights are the mirrored and painted Rang Mahal, a small gallery of finely wrought 15th-century sculptures, and the spectacular 360-degree views from the rooftop.

On the eastern wall of the palace is a sculpted pavilion-style balcony. Here drummers raised the alarm when the fort was under siege. The doorways connecting the rooms of the palace are quite low. This isn't a reflection on the stature of the Rajputs, but was deliberately done to force those walking through to adopt a humble, stooped position, in case the room they were entering contained the maharaja.

In the **Diwan-i-Khas** (Hall of Private Audience), on the east side of the palace, there's a display of stamps from the former Rajput states. The room affords fine views out over the entrance ramp to the fort and the town spread beneath it. From here you can clearly see the numerous round rocks piled on top of the battlements, ready to be rolled onto advancing enemies. There's a small **Diwan-i-Am** (Hall of Public Audience), with lower walls lined with porcelain tiles.

The adjacent room is lined with blue and white tiles. Upstairs, close to the maharaja's private chamber on the east side of the palace, is a room with some exquisite stone-panel friezes that on first glance appear to have been carved from wood.

## Jain Temples

Within the fort walls is a maze-like, interconnecting treasure trove of seven beautiful yellow-sandstone **Jain temples** (Map p325; admission Rs 20, camera/video Rs 50/100), dating from the 12th to the 16th century. Opening times have a habit of changing, so check with the caretakers. The intricate carving rivals that of the marble Jain temples in Ranakpur (p261) or Mt Abu (p265), and has an extraordinary quality because of the soft, warm stone.

Shoes and all leather items must be removed before entering the temples.

**Chandraprabhu** (☞ 7am-noon) is the first temple you come across as you enter. Dedicated to the eighth *tirthankar*, whose symbol is the moon, it was built in 1509 and features fine sculpture in the *mandapa*. Around the inside of the drum are 12 statues of Ganesh, and around the hall that encompasses the inner sanctum are numerous statues of *tirthankars*. The *mandapa* is supported by intensely sculpted pillars that form a series of *toranas*. No mortar was used in the construction of this temple; blocks of masonry are held together by iron staples. Around the upper gallery are 108 marble images of Parasnath, the 23rd *tirthankar*. In the inner sanctum are four images of Chandraprabhu. In Jain temples the statues are usually unclothed – a contrast to Hindu temples, where statues are elaborately dressed. The voluptuous women are tributes to female beauty and to the importance of carnal desire in human existence.

To the right of this temple is **Rikhabdev** (☞ 7am-noon). There are some fine sculptures around the walls, protected by glass cabinets, and the pillars are beautifully sculpted with *apsaras* and gods. This temple has a lovely, tranquil atmosphere. On the south side of the inner sanctum, a carving depicts a mother with a child who is reaching up for the fruit she is holding just out of reach. Behind the sanctum is a depiction of the Hindu goddess Kali, flanked by a Jain sculpture of an unclothed woman – a chance to compare the elaborately garbed Hindu statue with its less prim Jain equivalent.

Behind Chandraprabhu temple is **Parasnath** (☞ 11am-noon), which you enter through a beautifully carved *torana* culminating in an image of the Jain *tirthankar* at its apex. There is a voluptuous carving of an *apsara* balancing sets of balls on her raised forearm.

The temple interior has a beautiful, brightly painted ceiling.

A door to the south leads to small **Shitalnath** (☞ 11am-noon), dedicated to the 10th *tirthankar*. The depiction of Shitalnath enshrined here is composed of eight precious metals. A door in the north wall leads to the enchanting, dim chamber of **Sambhavanth** (☞ 11am-noon) – in the front courtyard, Jain priests grind sandalwood in mortars for devotional use. Steps lead down to the **Gyan Bhandar** (☞ 10-11am), a fascinating, tiny library founded in 1500 by Acharya Maharaj Jin Bhadra Suri. This small underground vault houses priceless ancient illustrated manuscripts, some dating from the 11th century. Other exhibits include astrological charts and the Jain version of the Shroud of Turin: the Shroud of Gindhauri, a Jain hermit and holy man who died in Ajmer. When his body was placed on the funeral pyre, the shroud remained miraculously unscathed. In a small locked cabinet are images of Parasnath that are made of ivory and various precious stones, including emerald and crystal. The remaining two temples are **Shantinath**, and **Kunthunath** (☞ 11am-noon), below the library, both built in 1536. They each have plenty of sensual carving. The enclosed gallery around Shantinath is flanked by hundreds of images of saints, some made of marble and some of Jaisalmer sandstone.

Guides are available outside the temples for around Rs 50.

## Laxminath & Surya Temple

This **Hindu temple** (Map p325), in the centre of the fort, is simpler than the Jain temples and has a brightly decorated dome. Devotees offer grain, which is distributed before the temple. There're a repoussé silver architrave around the entrance to the inner sanctum, and a heavily garlanded image enshrined within.

There's also a small Hindu temple devoted to Surya, the sun god, inside the fort.

## HAVELIS

Outside the fort walls, Jaisalmer has some incredibly fine sculpted sandstone buildings built by wealthy merchants in the 19th and 20th centuries; some are in excellent condition. An admission fee is charged at some of the *havelis*, but most of them reserve their most stunning decoration for the outside – showing that building was much about status for these merchants.

## Patwa-ki-Haveli

The biggest fish in the *haveli* pond is **Patwa-ki-Haveli** (Map p322; admission Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50; ☞ 8am-7.30pm), which towers over a narrow lane, its intricate stonework like honey-coloured lace. It is divided into five sections and was built between 1800 and 1860 by five Jain brothers who made their fortunes in brocade and jewellery. It's at its most impressive from the outside, though one of the sections has been restored internally into a **museum** (Map p322; admission Indian/foreigner Rs 30/50, camera/video Rs 20/40; ☞ 8am-7.30pm). There are displays of turbans, household items and postcards, and there are remnants of original painting and fine mirrorwork. There's a superb view of the fort from the roof.

## Salim Singh-ki-Haveli

This 300-year-old private *haveli* (Map p322; admission Rs 15, camera/video incl guide Rs 15/50; ☞ 8am-7pm May-Sep, 8am-6pm Oct-Apr) has a distinctive shape. It's narrow for the first floors, and then the top storey spreads out into a mass of carving, with graceful arched balconies surmounted by pale blue cupolas. The beautifully arched roof has superb carved brackets in the form of peacocks. There is one remaining stone elephant before the *haveli*. Elephants are a traditional sign of welcome commonly found in front of all respectable palaces and grand mansions. Amazingly, the building is constructed with no mortar or cement – the stones are connected with visible iron joints.

Salim Singh was a notorious prime minister of Jaisalmer. His father had been prime minister before him, and was murdered. When Salim Singh was old enough, he took revenge on the perpetrators of his father's death by murdering them in turn. His was a stern, unpleasant rule, and his ill treatment of the local Paliwal community led them to abandon their 84 villages in the Jaisalmer region and move elsewhere. You can visit Kuldhara, one of the deserted villages – see p335. Salim Singh was eventually murdered on the orders of the maharaja.

The admission fee to Salim Singh-ki-Haveli includes a free guided tour.

## Nathmal-ki-Haveli

This late-19th-century *haveli* (Map p322; admission Rs 20; ☞ 8am-7pm) also used to be a prime minister's house and is still an inhabited private house. It has an extraordinary exterior drip-

ping with carving. The entrance fee allows you to venture to the 1st floor where the beautiful paintings used 1.5kg of gold. A doorway is surrounded by 19th-century British postcards, and there's a picture of Queen Victoria. The left and right wings were the work of two brothers, whose competitive spirit apparently produced this virtuosos work – the two sides are similar, but not identical. Sandstone elephants keep guard out the front.

## GADI SAGAR

This soupy green reservoir, south of the city walls, was once the water supply of the city and, befitting its importance in providing precious water to the inhabitants of this arid place, it is surrounded by many small temples and shrines. The tank was built in 1367 by Maharaja Gadsji Singh, taking advantage of a natural declivity that already retained some water. It's a waterfowl favourite in winter. Between 8am and 9pm you can paddle around for 30 minutes in a paddleboat for Rs 50 or in a 2-seater Kashmiri *shikara* (gondola-like boat) for Rs 100.

The attractive **Tilon-ki-Pol** (Map p322) gateway that straddles the road down to the tank is said to have been built by a famous prostitute. When she offered to pay to have it constructed, the maharaja refused permission on the grounds that he would have to pass under it to go down to the tank, and he felt that this would be beneath his dignity. While he was away, she built the gate anyway, adding a Krishna temple on top so the king could not tear it down.

## VYAS CHHATRIS

The **Vyas Chhatris** (Off Map p322; admission Indian/foreigner Rs 10/20, camera/video Rs 20/30) is an atmospheric assemblage of golden sandstone *chhatris* forming a peaceful and picturesque sunset point from which to view the fort. Enter from Ramgarh Rd opposite Himmatgarh Palace hotel.

## MUSEUMS

Next to the Tourist Reception Centre is the **Desert Culture Centre & Museum** (Map p322; ☎ 252188; admission Rs 20; ☞ 10am-5pm), which has interesting information on Rajasthani culture, as well as textiles, old coins, fossils, traditional Rajasthani musical instruments and a *karal* (opium-mixing box), among other things. Its aim is to preserve cultural heritage and

conduct research on local history. There're nightly, one-hour, English commentary **puppet shows** (admission Rs 30, camera/video Rs 20/50; ☎ 6.30pm, 7.30pm).

Related to the Desert Culture Centre is the small **Jaisalmer Folklore Museum** (Map p322; admission Rs 20, camera/video Rs 20/50; ☎ 8am-6pm), which has an eclectic and dusty collection of camel ornaments, printing blocks and camel-hide opium bottles. Both museums were founded by NK Sharma, a local historian and folklorist, who has written several booklets including the informative *Jaisalmer, the Golden City*, available for Rs 100 at the museums. The hill nearby is a tremendous place to soak up the sunset.

Close to the RTDC Hotel Moomal is the small **government museum** (Map p322; admission Rs 3, free Mon, photography prohibited; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu), which houses a limited but well-captioned collection of fossils, some dating back to the Jurassic era (160 to 180 million years ago). Other exhibits include examples of ancient script, coins, religious sculptures (some from the 11th century), puppets and textiles. There's even a stuffed great Indian bustard, the state bird of Rajasthan, which thrives in the Thar Desert but is declining in numbers elsewhere.

## Activities

### MASSAGE

After a long camel trek you can soothe your jangled body with a spot of Ayurvedic massage and herbal healing. Many places also offer henna painting.

**Bobby Henna Painting & Herbal House** (Map p325; ☎ 254468; ☎ 10am-8pm) Seving women only, Bobby is an energetic lady who also runs an outlet for rural women's handicrafts (see p333). Bobby will decorate your hands with henna (Rs 50 to 100) and provide a herbal massage (full body Rs 250, Ayurvedic Rs 300).

**Baiju Ayurvedic Beauty Parlour** (Map p325; ☎ 255730; ☎ 10am-8pm), located near Maharaja Mahal (king's palace) in the fort, offers facials (Rs 200) and Ayurvedic massage (Rs 400), as well as manicures, pedicures and waxing. It's female run, so women will feel comfortable here.

## Tours

Few travellers visit Jaisalmer without venturing into the desert on a camel. For details, see p330.

The Tourist Reception Centre runs sunset tours to the Sam sand dunes (Rs 150 per person, minimum four people) at 3pm, returning after sunset. On request, the tours to Sam may stop at Kano, 5km before the dunes, from where it's possible to get a camel to the dunes in time for sunset (around Rs 200).

Another tour visits Amar Sagar (p335), Lodhrava (p335) and Bada Bagh (p335). It departs at 8am and costs Rs 550 per car.

## Sleeping

Staying within the fort is romantic, but authorities are urging tourists to make an ethical choice and stay outside the walls, as pressure on the fort infrastructure is contributing to subsidence (see p324). Lonely Planet has taken the decision not to recommend *any* hotels within the fort. We have a commitment to sustainable and responsible travel, and we want to make sure we communicate this commitment to travellers and operators. When we become aware that travel is having an impact on cultures, peoples and the environment (rural or built), we do have a responsibility to live up to the commitment we have made. Our aim is to provide information and encourage travellers to make an ethical decision when visiting Jaisalmer.

The World Monuments Fund has listed the fort as an endangered site. We appreciate that local business owners take considerable care to repair and maintain their buildings. However we still can't encourage readers to stay there if we know that despite the best efforts of locals the actions of travellers are seriously harming the fort.

Rates fluctuate a lot. If there's a festival on, rooms are expensive and scarce, but at slow times most places offer big discounts. You'll get massive discounts between April and August, but you'd also be crazy to come during this time, as Jaisalmer becomes hellishly hot. Often guesthouses here are rented by the management, so they can alter in quality from one year to the next according to who's in charge.

Like many Rajasthan tourist centres, there are a lot more budget choices than midrange options, but some of the budget choices are of a very decent standard. (Unfortunately, a few budget hotels are really into the high-pressure selling of camel safaris; see p321.) This being such an important stop on the tourist route, there's a large choice of top-end hotels.

Be aware that many hotels in Jaisalmer have a 9am checkout time.

## BUDGET

Most of the rock-bottom places are pretty similar in standard – clean and reasonable, but watch out for the safari hard-sell. Check the midrange options for dormitories and cheap single rooms. The Paying Guest House Scheme has only a handful of participants in Jaisalmer. Contact the **Tourist Reception Centre** (Map p322; ☎ 252406; Gadi Sagar Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm) for details.

**Hotel Shri Giriraj Palace** (Map p325; ☎ 252268; r Rs 125-150, without bathroom from Rs 80) Just off Bhatia Market, this hotel has cheap rooms with tiny attached bathrooms in an old building. The upstairs restaurant has fort views and check-out is at 9am.

**Hotel Golden City** (Map p322; ☎ /fax 251664; www.hotelgoldencity.com; s/d Rs 125/175, d with AC Rs 450-650; ☎ ☎) This hotel is in the southern section of the walled city, off Gadi Sagar Rd, and has a range of clean, basic rooms from smaller budget options to larger ones with a balcony. All have satellite TV. Nonguests can use the pool for Rs 100.

**Hotel Fort View** (Map p325; ☎ 252214; Gopa Chowk; r Rs 150-400) Close to the fort entrance is this friendly option. The cheapest rooms have a separate bathroom and some of these rooms are tiny. The better rooms have attached showers with hot water and rooms 26 and 31 have fort views. There's a popular top-floor fort-facing restaurant, but the 9am checkout is not so popular.

**Hotel Haveli** (Map p322; ☎ 252552; jaisalmer\_haveli@yahoo.co.in; s Rs 150, d Rs 200-750; ☎ ☎) Located opposite a State Bank of India branch, this modest hotel has clean, inexpensive and unexciting rooms with TVs. The better rooms are found on the top floor.

**Hotel Renuka** (Map p322; ☎ 252757; hotelrenuka@rediffmail.com; s Rs 250-300, without bathroom Rs 150, d without AC Rs 300-400, d with AC Rs 600; ☎ ☎) Renuka has bright, clean rooms – the best have balconies and bathrooms. The hotel has a roof terrace with great fort views and a restaurant.

**Hotel Swastika** (Map p322; ☎ 252483; swastikahotel@yahoo.com; Chainpura St, Gandhi Chowk; s/d from Rs 150/300, d with AC Rs 600; ☎ ☎) This place is well run, efficient and clean, and you'll receive no hassles. Rooms are simple and unfussy with no frills; some have balconies. Management offer free pick-up from the bus and train stations.

**Artist's Hotel** (Map p322; ☎ 252082; artisthotel@yahoo.com; Artist Colony, Suly Dungri; s Rs 180, d Rs 300-600) This Austrian-managed operation help support local musicians with school fees and emergency money. The surrounding 'musicians' colony has a village atmosphere, and there are great fort views from the roof (where there are regular concerts). Rooms vary, as do the bathrooms, but are clean and comfortable.

**Hotel Ratan Palace** (Map p322; ☎ 252757; s/d Rs 300/400) The same friendly family that runs the Hotel Renuka (left) operate Ratan Palace. All rooms here have bathrooms. It is a newer building than Renuka, with spacious, bright rooms.

**Residency Centrepoint Paying Guest House** (Map p322; ☎ /fax 252883; s/d Rs 400/450) Near the Patwaki-Haveli, this friendly, family-run guesthouse has five clean, spacious doubles in a lovely 250-year-old building. Rooms vary in size – budget by price but midrange in quality – and No 101 has a wonderful antique balcony. The rooftop restaurant has superb fort views and offers home-cooked food.

## MIDRANGE

**RTDC Hotel Moomal** (Map p322; ☎ 252392; dm Rs 100, s/d Rs 600/700, with AC Rs 1300/1500; ☎ ☎) West of the walled city, the exterior here is more impressive than the interior. There are ordinary (and musty) rooms in the main complex and air-cooled thatched huts in the grounds. There is also a bar and a restaurant.

**Hotel Pleasant Haveli** (Map p322; ☎ 253253; pleasanthaveli@yahoo.com; Gandhi Chowk; dm Rs 200; d without/with AC Rs 1500/2500; ☎ ☎) This place is new, with just four doubles when we visited but more are on the way. The spacious rooms in raw sandstone with colour-themed soft furnishings look fabulous. Room rates include breakfast.

**ourpick Shahi Palace** (Map p322; ☎ 255920; www.shahipalacehotel.com; r Rs 350-1750; ☎ ☎) Shahi Palace is a brilliant, peaceful place to stay, offering stunning value and free pick-up from the transport stations. It has lovely rooms with window seats, raw sandstone walls, colourful embroidery, and carved stone or wooden beds. The elegant rooftop restaurant is also fantastic, with veg and nonveg dishes, cold beer and a superb sunset fort view. The hotel is just off Shiv Rd. This popular hotel has expanded into two new buildings nearby. At the time of writing the **Star Haveli** and **Oasis Hotel** with a similar range of rooms and tariffs, were to be contacted through the Shahi Palace phone number.



## JAISALMER CAMEL SAFARIS

Steering your own camel through the deserts around Jaisalmer is the most evocative and enjoyable way to experience Rajasthan. The best time to go is from October to February.

### Before You Go

Competition between safari organisers is cut-throat, and standards vary. None of the hotels have their own camels – these are independently owned – so the hoteliers and the travel agencies are just go-betweeners. Furthermore, there is a union of camel drivers and the rates they charge the hotels and agents is fixed.

If you're offered a cut-price safari you can be sure corners are going to be cut somewhere – probably with food and time in the desert. Beware of operators who claim (and charge for) three-day safaris when you return directly after breakfast on the third day.

The realistic minimum price for a safari is about Rs 600 per person per day including overnight. For this you can expect breakfasts of porridge, tea and toast, and lunches and dinners of rice, dhal and chapatis. Blankets are also supplied. Usually you must bring your own mineral water. Of course, you can pay for greater levels of comfort, such as tents, stretcher beds, better food and beer, but take care: some travellers have paid extra for promised upgrades, only to find out afterwards that their safari was much the same as for people who paid less.

However much you decide to spend, ensure you know where you'll be taken and check that what has been promised is in place before leaving Jaisalmer. Attempting to get a refund for services not provided is a waste of time. Take care of your possessions, particularly on the return journey. It's wise to look after your own bag rather than have drivers keep an eye on it. Any complaints you do have should be reported, either to the **Superintendent of Police** (☎ 252233) or the **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 252406).

If you're on your own, it's worth getting a group together. Organisers will make up groups, but four days – or even two – are a lot to spend with a stranger you don't get on with. Usually each person is assigned their own camel, but check this, as some agencies might try to save cash by hiring fewer camels. This means you'll find yourself sharing your camel with a camel driver – definitely not an advisable option for female travellers, and not much fun for men either.

### What to Take

A wide-brimmed hat (or I-am-Lawrence-of-Arabia turban), long trousers, toilet paper, sunscreen and a water bottle (with a strap) are recommended. Women should also consider wearing a sports bra, as a trotting camel is a bumpy ride. It can get cold at night, so if you have a sleeping bag, bring it along even if you're told that lots of blankets will be supplied. During summer rain is not unheard of – so come prepared.

**our pick Desert Moon** (Off Map p322; ☎ 250116, 9414149350; www.desertmoonguesthouse.com; Achalvansi Colony; s Rs 500-700, d Rs 650-1000; 🏠) Near the Vyasa Chhatris sunset point, Desert Moon is a new guesthouse in a peaceful location, about a 10-minute walk from Gandhi Chowk. The guesthouse is run by a friendly Indian-Kiwi couple who can help organise good-value camel safaris and who offer free pick-up from the train and bus stations. The rooms are cool, clean and comfortable with polished stone floors and sparkling bathrooms. At the time of writing there were just five rooms, and though another five are on the way, booking is recommended. The rooftop restaurant has fort and *chhatri* views and offers simple vegetarian fare.

**Hotel Jaisal Palace** (Map p322; ☎ 252717; www.hoteljaisalpalace.com; s/d from Rs 600/750; 🏠) This is a well-run, good-value hotel though some rooms are smallish and characterless and checkout is at 9am. Those on the south side have fort-facing balconies. The chair-swing on the roof terrace is a great place to soak up the view.

**Fifu Guest House** (Off Map p322; ☎ 254317; www.fifutavel.com; Bera Rd; r Rs 750-1500; 🏠) Set 250m south of town, a little bit away from the hub-bub, Fifu has comfortable, bright sandstone rooms with colourful furnishings, though there are lots of stairs to negotiate. There's a wonderful rooftop with a stunning fort view, and secluded terraces that act as common areas where you can have a drink and soak

## Which Safari?

Several independent camel safari agencies have been recommended. **Ganesh Travels** (Map p325; ☎ 250138; ganeshtravel45@hotmail.com), inside the fort, is owned by camel drivers and is a well-thought-out operation that gets good reports. **Sahara Travels** (Map p325; ☎ 252609; www.mrdesertjaisalmer.com), by the First Fort Gate, also gets good reviews. It's run by Mr Bissa, Mr Desert, who graces lots of Rajasthan Tourism posters. **Satyam Tours** (Map p322; ☎ 250773; ummedsatyam@yahoo.com; Gandhi Chowk) and **Thar Safari** (Map p322; ☎/fax 250227; tharsafari@yahoo.com; Gandhi Chowk) offer variations on the usual circuit.

Remember that no place is perfect – recommendations here should not be a substitute for doing your own research. The best way to go about this is to ask other travellers who've recently been desert-bound. Many hotels run good safaris, such as the Desert Moon (opposite), and again it's advisable to ask around about these, too.

Whoever you go for, insist that all rubbish is carried back to Jaisalmer.

## In the Desert

Don't expect dune seas: the Thar Desert is mostly barren scrub, sprinkled with villages and ruins. You often see tiny fields of millet, and children herding flocks of sheep or goats, whose neckbells ring in the desert silence. It's a nice change from the sound of belching camels.

Camping out at night, huddling around a tiny fire beneath the stars and listening to the camel drivers' songs, is magically romantic.

The reins are fastened to the camel's nose peg, so the animals are easily steered. Stirrups make the journey a lot more comfortable. At resting points, the camels are unsaddled and hobbled. They limp away to browse on nearby shrubs while the camel drivers brew chai or prepare food. The whole crew rests in the shade of thorn trees.

Most safaris last three to four days; if you want to get to the most interesting places, this is a bare minimum unless a significant jeep component is included.

The traditional circuit takes in Amar Sagar (p335); Lodhruva (p335); Mool Sagar (p335); Bada Bagh (p335); and the Sam sand dunes (p336), as well as various abandoned villages along the way.

However, more and more travellers are opting for 'nontouristic' safaris on offer by agencies and hotels. You are driven in a jeep for around 30km or so, and then head off on your steed, avoiding the major sights and other groups.

If you're really pressed for time, you could opt for a half-day camel safari (which involves jeep transfers).

The camel drivers will expect a tip or gift at the end of the trip; this tops up their meagre wage, so don't neglect to give them one (unless you're heartily dissatisfied, of course).

For a more off-the-beaten-track safari option, see p343

up the atmosphere. The tariff includes all taxes, and management also run a guesthouse in Khuri.

**Shree Narayan Villas** (Map p322; ☎ 254444; shreenarayanvillas@rediff.com; Malka Prol Rd; s/d from Rs 1400/1500, with AC Rs 1900/2000; 🏠) This hotel is not to be confused with its neighbour, the Narayan Niwas Palace. It has rather overpriced rooms, comfortable but neglected. A discount should be forthcoming unless some serious renovations have occurred.

**Hotel Moonlight** (Map p322; ☎ 252717; www.moonlighthotelresort.com; Hanuman Circle Rd; s/d from Rs 1450/2150; 🏠) This is a new hotel developed by the people from Hotel Jaisal Palace. The Moonlight boasts extravagantly-carved

sandstone interiors and the rooms are decorated with a certain confidence. Some rooms have their own fridge while all have TV and telephone. Checkout is at noon.

**Killa Bhawan Lodge** (Map p322; ☎ 253833; www.killabhawan.com; r without/with AC Rs 1600/2200; 🏠) Situated behind Patwa-ki-Haveli, this B&B operation is managed by the same group that run a luxury operation within the fort. There are six big and beautifully decorated rooms and there is a pleasant rooftop restaurant. As well as breakfast, all taxes are included in the tariff and there is complimentary tea and coffee available all day.

**Hotel Nachana Haveli** (Map p322; ☎ 251910; nachana\_haveli@yahoo.com; Gandhi Chowk; d Rs 1950-2300, ste Rs

3300; 🏠) Housed in a charming 280-year-old sandstone *haveli*, this hotel has interesting architecture, and a caravanserai ambience. The comfortable rooms, some with grand Rajput furnishings, are located around a courtyard.

**Narayan Niwas Palace** (Map p322; 📞 252408; www.narayanniwas.com; Malka Prol Rd; s/d from Rs 2050/3550; 🏠 🚿) North of the fort, this grand 19th-century building counts among its former guests Britain's Princess Anne. Rooms are big and tidy, and there's an odd indoor swimming pool with pillars and shadows and a neat little bar. The rooftop has a superb view of the fort and the old city. However, the hotel is a tad impersonal and geared towards groups.

**Hotel Dhola Maru** (Map p322; 📞 252863; www.hotel.dholamaru.com; Jethwai Rd; s/d Rs 2500/3000; 🏠 🚿) This option, to the northeast of the walled city, is a couple of kilometres from the fort entrance and along with the inconvenient location it lacks a fort view. Rooms are clean and comfortable but rather bland. There's an extraordinary little bar, which has incorporated tree roots and saddle-shaped bar stools into its décor, and a clover-shaped pool.

**Mandir Palace Hotel** (Map p322; 📞 252788; www.wel.com/heritagehotels.com; Gandhi Chowk; r Rs 2800/3200; 🏠 🚿) Just inside the town walls is this royal palace – the erstwhile royal family still lives here. It's so named because it contains many mandirs (temples). The intricate stone latticework is exquisite. Some rooms are atmospheric, with antique furnishings, but the newer ones have less character and the service can be tardy.

**Rang Mahal** (Off Map p322; 📞 250907; www.hotel.rangmahal.com; s/d from Rs 3000/3500, ste Rs 9000; 🏠 🚿) About 2km west of Hanuman Chowk is this dramatic, traditional-style building with big bastions and impressive rooms. The bland unwelcoming lobby suggests this place usually caters for big groups. The fort view rooms and suites are divine, and there's a spectacular pool (Rs 165 for nonguests).

**Jawahar Niwas Palace** (Map p322; 📞 252208; jawahar.niwas@yahooco.in; Bada Bagh Rd; s/d Rs 3000/3900; 🏠 🚿) Located about 1km west of the fort, this stunning sandstone palace stands rather incongruously in its own sandy grounds. Rooms are elegant and spacious with soaring ceilings and the generous bathrooms have a relaxing bath tub. Those rooms upstairs at the front have the best fort views. There are sumptuous common areas to curl up with a book, a grand dining room, and a fabulously large pool.

**Himmatgarh Palace** (Off Map p322; 📞 252002; himmatgarh@sancharnet.in; Ramgarh Rd; s/d from Rs 3050/3550; 🏠 🚿) This group-oriented hotel is about 1.5km northwest of Hanuman Chowk opposite the entrance to the Vyas Chhatris. The rooms are clean, functional and bland though all have a fort view. There is a vast lawn and terrace for watching the sun set on the fort with a drink in your hand. Or you could plunge into the star-shaped pool (Rs 200 for nonguests).

#### TOP END

**Fort Rajwada** (Off Map p322; 📞 253233; www.fortrajwada.com; Jodhpur-Barmer Link Rd; s/d from Rs 4400/5900; 🏠 🚿) About 3.5km east of the old city, this modern place was built according to the ancient Indian design principles of *vaastu*, which is similar to feng shui. All materials in the hotel are natural. An opera designer created the traditional interior, so it's suitably dramatic. Carved sandstone balconies, taken from royal *havelis* in Jaisalmer, have been installed in the foyer.

**Hotel Rawal-Kot** (Off Map p322; 📞 252638; www.tajhotels.com; Jodhpur-Barmer Link Rd; r Rs 5500, 2-night package s/d Rs 8500/10,500; 🏠 🚿) Next to Fort Rajwada is another plush top-end choice. The hotel is a grand, impressively carved sandstone faux fort surrounding a courtyard embellished with manicured gardens. The spacious rooms are decorated in traditional style with very untraditional but well stocked minibars and other luxuries. Check out the good-value two-night package which includes breakfast, taxes and a half-day tour.

**Gorbandh Palace Hotel** (Off Map p322; 📞 253801; www.hrindia.com; Sam Rd; r/ste Rs 6000/7000; 🏠 🚿) Adjacent to Rang Mahal is another grand modern hotel with traditional design elements and aimed at tour groups. Constructed of local sandstone, the friezes around the hotel were sculpted by local artisans. You won't be writing home about the rooms, but they are comfortable, and there's a superb pool (Rs 200 for nonguests).

#### Eating

With so many tourists visiting Jaisalmer, there are plenty of choices where you can kick back and enjoy a good meal, often with a view. Nonetheless, you may find standards and service at some restaurants sloppy.

**Chandan Shree Restaurant** (Map p322; Hanuman Circle Rd; mains Rs 20-100, thalis Rs 40-100; 🕒 7am-11pm)

Always busy, this is a popular dining hall, usually packed with locals, churning out tasty, spicy, all-you-can-eat South Indian, Gujarati, Rajasthani, Punjabi and Bengali thalis. We wouldn't recommend the Chinese and pizza, however.

**Kalpna** (Map p322; 📞 252469; Gandhi Chowk; mains Rs 35-130; 🕒 8pm-10.30pm) Perched above an old gateway overlooking hectic Gandhi Chowk, this is an inexpensive place for a snack or simple meal of veg and no-veg curries and OK pizzas.

**Natraj Restaurant** (Map p322; 📞 252667; mains Rs 40-225; 🕒 8am-11pm) This is an excellent place to eat, and the rooftop has a satisfying view of the upper part of the Salim Singh-ki-Haveli next door, and across the south of town. The veg and nonveg food, including tandoori and curries, as well as Chinese and Continental dishes, is consistently excellent, as is the service. And we must mention the scrumptious desserts such as fried ice cream, apple pie and banana split.

**Desert Boys Dhani** (Map p322; 📞 254336; Seemagram Campus; mains Rs 50-90; 🕒 9am-11pm) This is a walled-garden restaurant with tables scattered across its dusty lawns, as well as traditional cushion seating under cover. It's a pleasant place to eat excellent, good-value Indian veg dishes.

**Kanishka** (Map p322; 📞 254500; Sam Rd; mains Rs 50-130; 🕒 8am-11pm) This restaurant is tucked away off the road and features a pleasant garden and terrace where you can enjoy the inexpensive vegetarian offerings. Less pleasant is the windowless AC dining room – though no doubt it is at its best in summer. The Rs 130 thali is excellent and there are snacks and curries for lighter meals.

**Trio** (Map p322; 📞 252733; Gandhi Chowk; mains Rs 65-180; 🕒 7.30am-10.30pm) With a romantic setting under a tented roof, this popular, long-running Indian, Chinese and Continental restaurant offers reliably good veg and non-veg dishes. The thalis and tandoori items are excellent, and the restaurant has a lot more atmosphere than most places in town. Traditional musicians play in the evening, and there's a great fort view.

**Saffron** (Map p322; 📞 251910; Gandhi Chowk; mains Rs 70-155; 🕒 6.30am-10.30pm) Operated by the heritage Hotel Nachana Haveli, the veg and non-veg food here gets excellent reports. Choose from Italian, Chinese, Indian and more. The restaurant has a great setting on a sandstone terrace overlooking the comings and go-

ings on Gandhi Chowk. Evening dinners are especially atmospheric.

**Ourpick Little Italy** (Map p325; 📞 253397; mains Rs 80-120; 🕒 9am-11pm) Set right next to the First Fort Gate, Little Italy is an atmospheric Italian restaurant, atop a lower section of the old fort wall. The interior is decorated with floor cushions, mirrorwork, terracotta lamps and a satin-tented ceiling, or you can sit outside on the rooftop, and look up to the floodlit fort ramparts – looking for all the world like a giant's sandcastle. It's romantic, and the bruschetta, pizza and pasta are excellent. And the beer is pretty good, too.

#### QUICK EATS

**Dhanraj Bhatia Sweets** (Map p325; Sadar Bazaar; sweets Rs 13/100g, samosas Rs 7) This place in Bhatia Market has been churning out traditional sweet treats for 10 generations. It's renowned in Jaisalmer and beyond for its local specialities, such as *ghotua ladoos* (sweetmeat balls made with gram flour) and *panchadhari ladoos* (made with wheat flour). Even if you don't grab a handful of sticky sweets or spicy samosas, this little shop is worth visiting just to watch the sweetmakers ply their trade. You will recognise it by the throng of locals waiting to buy sweets.

**Mohan Juice Centre** (Off Map p325; Bhatia Market; lassis Rs 7-16) Near the fort, this has a little sitting area – almost in the style of an ice-cream parlour – at the back. It sells assorted interesting lassis, such as honey and *makhania* (saffron-flavoured).

**Bhang Shop** (Map p325; Gopa Chowk; medium/strong lassi Rs 40/50, cookies Rs 50/70) Outside the First Fort Gate, below Little Italy (same owners), this 'shop' (not the most attractive establishment in town) offers lassis of different strengths as well as bhang cookies, cakes and chocolate (including special camel-safari packs). Note that bhang doesn't agree with everyone (see p360).

#### Shopping

Jaisalmer has a particularly stunning array of mirrorwork wall hangings – some of the best in Rajasthan – and is also famous for embroidery, rugs, blankets, bedspreads, oil lamps, old stonework and antiques. Watch out when buying silver items; the metal is sometimes adulterated with bronze.

**Bellissima** (Map p325; 📞 254468; 🕒 10am-9pm) This small shop near the Maharaja Mahal sells beautiful patchworks, embroidery, handmade

paintings, bags, rugs, cushion covers and all types of Rajasthani art. It is the brainchild of Bobby (p328), of henna painting fame, and the proceeds assist women, in particular widows who unfortunately continue to endure social discrimination.

**Hari Om** (Map p325; ☎ 255122; ☎ 10am-9pm) This family of silversmiths makes beautiful, delicate silver rings and bracelets featuring places and Hindu gods. Visitors have commissioned personalised wedding rings here and been delighted with the results.

**Light of the East** (Map p325; ☎ 8am-9pm) On the laneway leading up to the Jain temples within the fort, this is an enthralling little shop selling crystals and rare mineral specimens, including zeolite, which fetches up to Rs 5000 depending on the quality. Ask the owner to show you the amazing apophyllite piece – unfortunately, it's not for sale.

There are several good *khadi* (homespun cloth) shops located around town that sell fixed-price carpets, shawls and woven garments. These include **Zila Khadi Gramodan Parishad** (Map p322), **Khadi Gramodyog Bhavan (Seemagram)** (Map p322; Dhibba; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) and **Gandhi Darshan Emporium** (Map p322; Gandhi Chowk; ☎ 11am-7pm Fri-Wed). You can also pop into **Rajasthali** (Map p322; Gandhi Chowk; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) to check out prices – this is the government handicraft emporium, which sells all sorts of products ranging from cushion covers to wooden ornaments.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The airport, 2.5km south of town, has been intermittently closed and open for the last few years due to border tensions with Pakistan. It reopened in late 2007, when **Indian Airlines** (www.indianairlines.nic.in) and **Kingfisher Airlines** (www.flykingfisher.com) started services to Delhi (Rs 8000 one way) and Jodhpur. However these services stopped in early 2008. When/if services recommence it is quite likely other airlines will join or replace these two carriers. The Indian Airlines agent is **Crown Tours** (Map p322; ☎ /fax 251912), about 350m west of Amar Sagar Gate.

### BUS

The main **RSRTC (Roadways) bus stand** (Map p322; ☎ 251541) is near the train station. Fortunately, all buses start at a more convenient bus stand southwest of the fort.

There are buses to Jodhpur (express/deluxe Rs 122/155, 5½ hours, hourly) and express buses to Bikaner (Rs 160, seven hours, four daily), Jaipur (deluxe Rs 341, 12 hours, one daily) and Barmer (express/deluxe Rs 66/77, three hours, hourly).

You can book private buses through most travel agencies and hotels. Private buses congregate near Hanuman Chowk and near Desert Boys Dhani south of the fort. Numerous buses go to Bikaner, Jaipur, Jodhpur (express/deluxe/sleeper Rs 70/90/110), Mt Abu (Rs 202), Ahmedabad (Rs 270) and elsewhere. Most private buses (except those going to Bikaner) require a change at Jodhpur. Buses also run to Ajmer (Rs 270, 12 hours) and Udaipur (Rs 250, 10 hours). Some travellers have found themselves in Jodhpur with a useless onward ticket, so make sure you clarify what you're getting.

### TRAIN

There's a **reservation office** (☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) at the train station.

There are numerous trains going to/from Jodhpur, including the *Jodhpur Express* (No 4809), which leaves Jaisalmer at 11.15pm, arriving in Jodhpur (sleeper/3AC Rs 157/411) at 5.35am. The *Jaisalmer Express* (4810) leaves Jodhpur at 11.15pm and arrives in Jaisalmer at 5.30am. The *Barmer-Jaisalmer-Delhi Express* (4060) leaves at 4pm, calls at Jodhpur (sleeper/3AC Rs 157/411) at 10pm, at Jaipur (sleeper/3AC Rs 256/690) at 5am and at Delhi (sleeper/3AC Rs 326/889) at 11.10am. Going the other way, the express (4059) leaves Delhi at 5.45pm and arrives in Jaisalmer at 1pm the following day.

From Jodhpur you can get train connections to other destinations (see p312).

## Getting Around

### AUTORICKSHAW

Bargain hard. An autorickshaw ride to Gadi Sagar costs about Rs 25 one way from the fort entrance. Autorickshaws from the train station into the city should be no more than Rs 30.

### BICYCLE

A good way to get around is by bicycle. There are a number of places where you can hire, including one unsigned operator near Gandhi Chowk charging Rs 5 per hour or Rs 30 per day.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

It's possible to hire jeeps from the **stand** (Map p322) near Hanuman Chowk. To Khuri or the Sam sand dunes expect to pay Rs 500 return with a one-hour wait. For Lodhruva, you'll pay Rs 700 return with a one-hour stop. A full day of sightseeing around Jaisalmer will cost around Rs 1000. To cut the cost, find other people to share with you.

**Shiva Bikes** (☎ 250531; scooter/motorbike per day Rs 300/400) is a licensed hirer with adequate motorbikes and scooters for exploring town and nearby sights.

## AROUND JAISALMER

There are several fascinating places to visit in the desolate, wind-swept landscape around Jaisalmer. Beyond the major sights, the barren sand-dune desert stretches across the lonely border into Pakistan.

Due to the alleged arms smuggling across that border, most of Rajasthan west of National Hwy No 15 is a restricted area. Special permission is required from the **district magistrate** (☎ 02992-252201) in Jaisalmer to go there, and is usually only issued in exceptional circumstances. Places exempted are Amar Sagar, Bada Bagh, Lodhruva, Kuldhara, Akal, Sam, Ramkund, Khuri and Mool Sagar.

### Bada Bagh

Located about 6km north of Jaisalmer, Bada Bagh is a fertile oasis with a huge old dam. It was built by Maharaja Jai Singh II in the 16th century and completed after his death by his son.

Above the gardens (closed to visitors) are picturesque royal **chhatris** (admission Rs 50, camera Rs 20; ☎ 6am-7pm), with beautifully carved ceilings and equestrian statues of former rulers. On the memorial of Maharaja Jeth Singh it is inscribed that on his death his queen and 10 concubines committed *sati*. Bada Bagh is now surrounded by wind turbines.

### Amar Sagar

This once pleasant formal garden, 7km northwest of Jaisalmer, has fallen into ruin. The lake usually dries up several months into the dry season. According to locals, the step-wells here were built by prostitutes.

Nearby is a beautifully restored and finely carved 19th-century **Jain temple** (admission Rs 10, camera/video Rs 50/100; ☎ sunrise-sunset) that's well worth a look.

## Lodhruva

About 15km northwest of Jaisalmer are the deserted ruins of Lodhruva, the ancient capital before the move to Jaisalmer. It was probably founded by the Lodra Rajputs, and passed to the ruler of Devagarh, Bhatti Devaraja, in the 10th century. In 1025 Mahmud of Ghazni laid siege to the town, and it was sacked various times over subsequent decades, prompting Jaisalmer to shift the capital to a new location – Jaisalmer.

The **Jain temples**, rebuilt in the late 1970s, are the sole reminders of the city's former magnificence. The **main temple** (admission Rs 20, camera/video Rs 50/100; ☎ sunrise-sunset) enshrines a finely wrought silver image of Parasnath, the 23rd *tirthankar*, surrounded by fine sculptures.

The ornate rosette in the centre of the drum of the dome over the *mandapa* was carved from a single piece of stone, and before the temple is a beautiful *torana*. The small sculptures around the lower course of the inner sanctum are badly damaged, and still bear the scars of Muslim raids. Behind the inner sanctum is a 200-year-old carved Jaisalmer stone slab that bears carvings of the *tirthankars*' feet in miniature. The small temple to the right is dedicated to Adinath, the first *tirthankar*.

There is nowhere to stay in Lodhruva – the *dharamsala* beside the temple is for Jains only.

There are buses from Jaisalmer to Lodhruva (Rs 8, 20 minutes, four daily), though hiring a taxi (Rs 500-700 depending on time and other sites visited) is a far more comfortable option.

## Mool Sagar

Situated 9km west of Jaisalmer, this is another pleasant, but rather neglected, small **garden and tank** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 8am-7pm). It belongs to the royal family of Jaisalmer and was originally built as a cool summer retreat. In the lemon grove there's a small Shiva temple carved from two pieces of sandstone.

Inside is the **Royal Camp Mool Sagar** (☎ 253801; www.jodhpurheritage.com; d Rs 6000), a luxury tented camp which mostly hosts tour groups with accommodation, excursion and entertainment packages.

## Kuldhara

This small **village** (admission Rs 10, vehicle Rs 50; ☎ sunrise-sunset) is 25km west of Jaisalmer. Around 400 years ago, all the inhabitants of the 84 villages

in the area left after a dispute with the prime minister, Salim Singh, whose *haveli* you can visit in Jaisalmer (see p327). The prime minister had taxed the Paliwals heavily, they had been looted and a daughter of one family had been kidnapped, but there was no response to their complaints, so the entire community upped and left. According to legend, they couldn't carry all their gold and silver, so they buried it. Several years ago some Westerners armed with metal detectors arrived at Kuldhara on motorcycles and found some valuable silver coins. Local villagers became suspicious and called the police, and the treasure hunters were apprehended and divested of their booty.

Some of the houses appear in remarkable condition, as they have been heavily restored for use as film sets – this is a popular Bollywood location. Kuldhara is also included on some of the extended camel treks.

### Desert National Park & Sanctuary

This **national park** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/10, guide Rs 200, vehicle Rs 100), 42km southwest of Jaisalmer, was established in 1980 to preserve the Thar Desert ecosystem, including the critically endangered Indian bustard (*Choriotis nirogceps*), known locally as *godawan*. It encompasses an area of 3162 sq km, an arid zone of sand dunes, thorn forest, scrub and sandy wastelands between Jaisalmer and Barmer, including the areas around Sam and Khuri. It is of interest to visitors with a curiosity in desert ecosystems, however there are no attractions for the layperson.

The park should be avoided during summer months, when temperatures soar to over 50°C. You need to bring a good supply of drinking water at any time. For more information, contact the Desert National Park's **deputy director** (☎ 02992-2522201) in Jaisalmer, from whom you need to obtain permission to visit the park.

### Sam Sand Dunes

The silky **Sam sand dunes** (admission vehicle/camel Rs 50/80) lie on the edge of the Desert National Park, and are one of the most popular excursions from Jaisalmer. The dunes are 42km from the city, along a very good sealed road (which is maintained by the Indian army).

This is Jaisalmer's nearest real Sahara-like desert. It's best to be here at sunrise or sunset, and many camel safaris spend a night at the dunes. Just before sunset jeeploads of day-trippers arrive from Jaisalmer to be chased

across the sands by tenacious camel owners offering short rides, dressed-up dancing children and young boys selling soft drinks. Yes, this place has become a massive tourist attraction, so don't set your heart on a solitary desert sunset experience. The hordes of people here at sunset lend the place something of a carnival atmosphere. If you want a slightly less touristy sand-dunes experience, try Khuri as an alternative (below).

Despite the tourist hype, it's still a magical place – and it's possible to frame pictures of solitary camels against lonely, wind-rippled dunes. A fascinating sight on a smaller scale is the desert dung beetle. Study a dune close up to spot these industrious little creatures rolling lumps of dung twice their size.

One tragic consequence of dune-hungry hordes is the debris and rubbish they leave behind. Visitors are now charged a fee to visit the dunes, money which could be put to good use to clean them up, but is more likely lining the pocket of some local official. If you feel strongly about the rubbish here, a letter to the **Chief Tourism Officer** (RTDC Tourism, Swagatam Campus, near train station, Jaipur 302006, Rajasthan) might have some effect. For further information, contact the Desert National Park's **deputy director** (☎ 02992-252201) in Jaisalmer.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Most travellers prefer to visit the dunes on a day trip from Jaisalmer or as part of a camel safari. However, there are several places to stay – mostly upmarket tented camps catering to organised tours. There's also a straggling line of restaurants and tea shops at the dunes.

**RTDC Hotel Sam Dhani** (s/d Rs 875/1225) This hotel has good, though by no means luxurious, huts and tents and is in an appealing spot overlooking the dunes. It's a good idea to book ahead, through **RTDC Hotel Moomal** (☎ 02992-252392) in Jaisalmer, as the manager isn't always around.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are three daily buses to Sam (Rs 22, 1½ hours) from Jaisalmer.

### Khuri

☎ 03014

Khuri is a small village 40km southeast of Jaisalmer, surrounded by desert sand dunes and wind turbines. Khuri is a relatively

peaceful place with houses of mud and straw decorated with intricate patterns. And once the excitement of sunset is over, you have desert solitude under the brilliant star-studded sky. There are plenty of camps of mud huts and camel drivers eager to take you on the dunes, as well as throngs of holidaymakers. Be aware that the commission system is entrenched in the larger accommodation options here.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Places to stay in Khuri are mostly basic, fanless thatched mud huts with wall paintings, set around a campfire area, though some have improved their facilities in recent years. All places listed here provide meals and can arrange camel safaris.

**Badal House** (☎ 274120; huts or r without bathroom incl meals Rs 125) Here you can stay in a family compound with a few charming small spotlessly clean huts and freshly painted rooms. Former camel driver Badal Singh is a lovely, gentle man who charges Rs 300 for a camel safari with a night on the dunes. Don't let touts warn you away. The phone number given here belongs to his brother Amal Singh, who can pass on a message. If you arrive by car ask your driver not to demand a commission as this is not included in the prices quoted here.

**Khuri Guest House** (☎ 274044; r Rs 150-2000; ☎) This place has expanded into something of a complex, though it's still a friendly place, with cheap, basic rooms and huts with shared bathrooms, and more expensive AC rooms with private bathroom, as well as tents among the dunes. Room vacancy for independent travellers is dependent on group bookings from Delhi. Packages including a camel ride, cultural dance, dinner and accommodation, start at Rs 2000 per person per night.

**Mama's Guest House** (☎ 274042; gajendra\_sodha 2003@yahoo.com; huts without bathroom incl dinner & breakfast per person Rs 500) This is a long-running place, with a circle of cosy whitewashed huts. A basic/luxurious overnight camel safari costs Rs 350/600.

**Gangaur Guest House** (☎ 274056; hameersingh@yahoo.com; huts Rs 750, without bathroom Rs 500) This is a small place with yet another circle of snug huts. It offers packages, including one with a camel ride, dinner with traditional dance entertainment and breakfast, for Rs 750. It's closest to the dunes.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are at least four daily buses to Khuri from Jaisalmer (Rs 20, one hour).

### Akal Wood Fossil Park

About 1km off the road to Barmer, 17km from Jaisalmer, are the amazing fossilised remnants of a 180-million-year-old **forest** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/20, car Rs 10, bike Rs 2; ☎ 8am-5pm Apr-Oct, 8am-6pm Nov-Mar). They're a collection of fallen, broken logs protected by little corrugated-iron shelters. The largest fossil is 13.4m long and 0.4m wide. The climate here was once hot and humid – a stark contrast with today's dry desert. The fossil park is apparently 108 hectares, of which only 18 have been excavated. Near the entrance is a small display, where you get the chance to stroke an ancient red wood tree-trunk fossil.

A return taxi will cost around Rs 400.

### BARMER

☎ 02982 / pop 83,517

Barmer is famed for its woodcarving, carpets, embroidery, block printing and other handicrafts, and it is also a great place to hunt for bargains. The small shops in the colourful Sadar Bazaar are a good place to start – exploring the narrow backstreets, you'll find artisans at work. Otherwise this desert town, 153km south of Jaisalmer, isn't very interesting, and few travellers make the trek out here. For details of Barmer's cultural festivals, see p301. The best part is the journey that takes you through peaceful, small villages, their mud-walled houses decorated with geometric designs. There is a particularly interesting village located south of Barmer (see p338).

### Sleeping & Eating

Barmer's accommodation options are strictly at the budget end of the scale.

**RTDC Hotel Khartal** (☎ 222956; s/d Rs 300/400) Out of the town centre, this hotel is a very basic option. Rooms are adequate for weary travellers and basic meals are available.

**Hotel Krishna** (☎ 230826; r without/with AC Rs 300/700; ☎) This is Barmer's best option. It is on the main street leading from the train station and staff are friendly and helpful. Rooms vary but all are acceptably clean.

**Kailash Sarover Hotel** (☎ 230030; Station Rd; s/d with AC Rs 770/870; ☎) Further away from the station and on the opposite side of Station Rd (with

a spillover building nearby), this hotel offers OK but overpriced rooms.

**Raj Restaurant** (Station Rd; mains Rs 25-60; ☎ 7.30am-10.30pm) Between the train station and Hotel Krishna, Raj Restaurant is a jolly, typically grubby, little place that opens onto the street. It offers a range of veg dishes at reasonable prices.

### Getting There & Away

From Barmer there are frequent buses to/from Jaisalmer (express/deluxe Rs 66/77, three hours) and Jodhpur (Rs 95, four hours). Buses leave from the main bus stand, which is about 1km north of the train station.

Trains to/from Barmer include the *Delhi-Jaisalmer-Barmer Express* (4059) which bifurcates and departs Jodhpur at 6.10am to arrive at Barmer (sleeper/3AC Rs 125/321) four hours later. The return train (4060A) departs Barmer at 6.30pm and arrives at Jodhpur at 10pm, where it joins up with 4060 from Jaisalmer and continues to Delhi. The rail link between Munabao in Barmer district, and Khokhraparkar in Pakistan, closed since 1965, reopened in 2006. The weekly *Thar Express* (see p376) runs from Jodhpur to Karachi via this line.

### AROUND BARMER

About 35km from Barmer, the 10th- to 11th-century **Kiradu Temples** feature some very fine sculpture. These five temples conform to a style of architecture known as Solanki, and the most impressive is **Someshvara Temple**, which has a multiturreted spire. However, it's located in the sensitive border region near Pakistan, so you'll first need to contact the **district magistrate** (☎ 02982-220003), who will obtain the necessary permission from the superintendent of police for you to visit. You'll need to fill out an application form and submit a photocopy of your passport – usually if you ask for permission in the morning it will be granted by the afternoon.

South of Barmer the road leads 67km to **Dhorimmana**, a small, dusty market town with no specific attractions, but which is a busy meeting point for villagers living in the area. It's a chance to see wonderful tribal dress. The colourful villages along the route are also very traditional, consisting of huddles of mud huts among the desert scrub. This is a fascinating off-the-beaten-path excursion for those with their own transport.

### BIKANER

☎ 0151 / pop 529,007

A dust-swirling desert city, Bikaner's finest sight is its fort, Junagarh, with its dazzlingly rich interiors. Close to the fort lies the old city, surrounded by a high crenellated wall. Within the walled city the streets feel medieval (despite the motorbike and rickshaw traffic) – narrow, dark and uneven, complete with open sewers, rubbish heaps, dark-red sandstone *havelis* and some exquisitely painted Jain temples.

Bikaner feels far less set up for tourism than other Rajasthan cities, though there are a lot of hotels here and a busy camel-safari scene. More and more visitors are opting to take desert camel safaris from Bikaner, thus avoiding the Jaisalmer hustle.

Many travellers come here to visit the notorious Karni Mata Temple, 30km south, where pilgrims worship thousands of holy rats. Less Brothers Grimm, but still fairy-tale, is the small temple town of Kolayat, with its holy lake and religious fair (p301), 54km to the south.

The city is also known for its traditional fire dances, performed by members of a Hindu religious sect called the Jas Naths. Today it's only possible to see this dance during the Bikaner Camel Festival (p301), in the village of Katriyasar, 40km from Bikaner on the Jaipur road.

### History

The city was founded in 1488 by Rao Bika, a descendant of Jodha, Jodhpur's founder, and was another important staging post on the great caravan trade routes. Being closer to Delhi, Bikaner spent more time fighting the Mughals than other Rajasthan cities, but its harsh desert surroundings helped to defeat many of its enemies. Post Mughals, the city declined, though its geography excused it the attacks from the Marathas that plagued many other cities. By the 19th century the province was markedly backward, but managed to turn its fortunes around by trading camels with the British during the Afghan War. In 1886 it was the first desert princely state to install electricity.

Maharaja Ganga Singh (r 1898-1944) was one of Rajasthan's most notable and accomplished rulers. His clever diplomacy and canny economic sense helped develop Bikaner. He promoted the Ganga Canal, built between

1925 and 1927, which continues to irrigate a large area of arid land. He later led the Indian delegation to the League of Nations.

### Orientation

The old city is encircled by a 7km-long wall with five entrance gates that was constructed in the 18th century. The fort and palace, built of similar reddish-pink sandstone as Jaipur's famous buildings, lie outside the city walls.

### Information

For an online guide to Bikaner, check out [www.realbikaner.com](http://www.realbikaner.com).

**Bank of Baroda** (☎ 2545453; ☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) Changes travellers cheques only.

**Corporation Bank ATM** Beside the fort, near the post office, accepts Cirrus cards.

**Main post office** (☎ 10am-1pm & 2-3pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Near Junagarh.

**New Horizons** (Biscuit Gali; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 9am-9pm) Off Station Rd, this is one of the few internet places in Bikaner (other than the increasing number of hotels with convenient internet access). Be warned the equipment is old and the shoes-off policy has led at least one traveller to leave shoeless!

**PBM Hospital** (☎ 2525312; Hospital Rd)

**State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur** Ambedkar Circle (☎ 2544361; ☎ noon-4pm Mon-Sat); public park, near Junagarh (☎ 2544034; ☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

**Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 2226701; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) Near Pooran Singh Circle, in the RTDC Hotel Dhola Maru compound, about 1km from the city centre. It has various brochures (including a free map of Bikaner and a toilet that can be used by tourists). There is also a **counter** (☎ 3-6pm Mon-Sat) within the fort.

### Sights

#### JUNAGARH

This most impressive **fort** (Indian/foreigner Rs 20/100, camera/video Rs 30/100, guide Rs 150; ☎ 10am-4.30pm) was constructed between 1588 and 1593 by Raja Rai Singh, a general in the army of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. Palaces and luxurious suites were added by subsequent maharajas. Unlike many Rajasthan forts, Junagarh doesn't command a hilltop position. However, it's no less imposing for that and – a credit to its planners and architects – it has never been conquered.

It's protected by a 986m-long wall with 37 bastions, and is surrounded by a (now dry) moat. The sandstone **Surajpol** (Sun Gate) is the main entrance and is where the guides

line up to hustle trade. The palaces within the fort are on the southern side, and make a picturesque ensemble of courtyards, balconies, *chhatris*, towers and windows, with superb stone carving.

The handprints that can be seen close to the **Daulatpol** commemorate the wives of Rajput soldiers lost in battles, who committed *sati* on their husbands' funeral pyres.

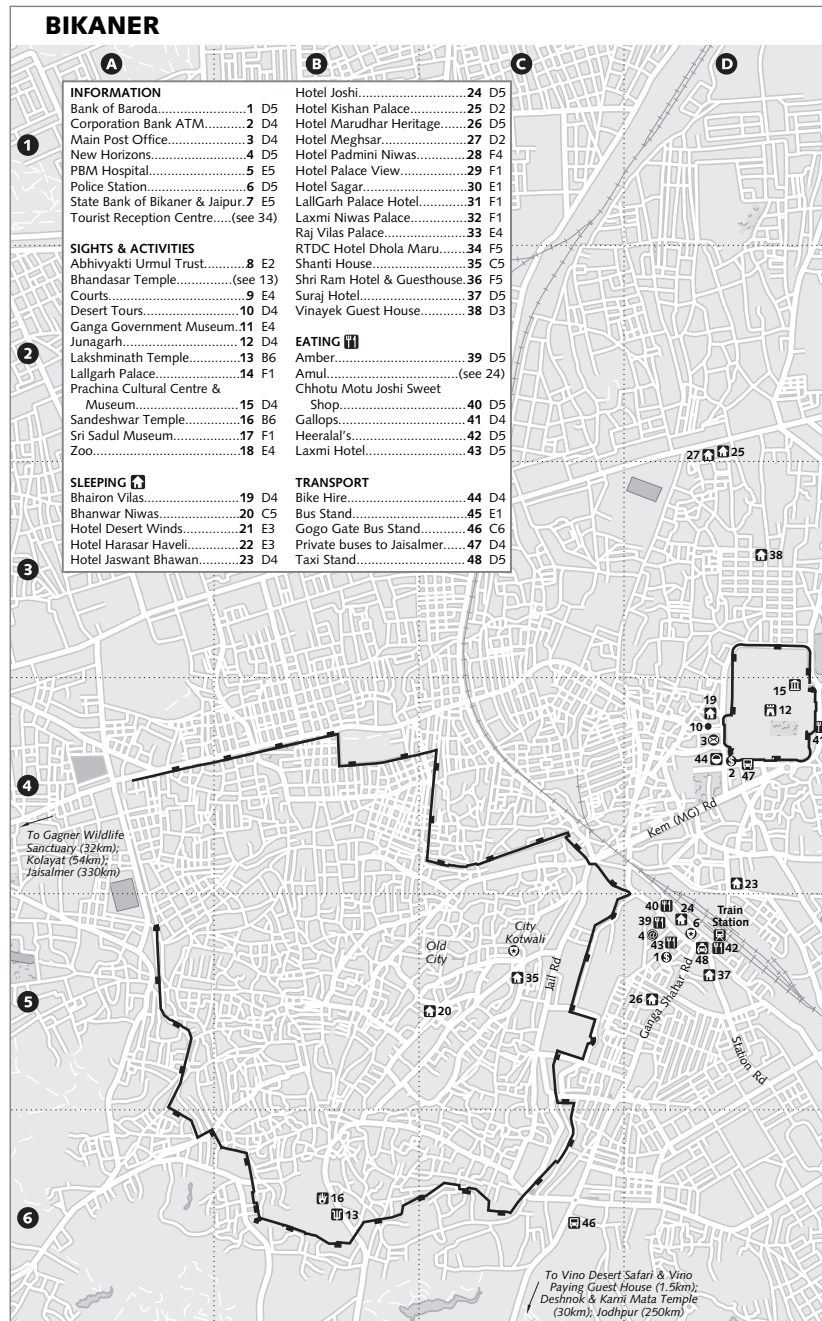
You may be besieged by 'guides' offering tours before you arrive at the ticket counter. Unless you want an individual tour, this is unnecessary, as the ticket price includes a group tour with an official guide. The one-hour tours leave every 15 to 20 minutes. To visit at a leisurely pace, ask for your own guide, as larger groups rush around.

The gold-painted ceiling of the beautiful **Diwan-i-Khas** (Hall of Private Audience) was executed in 1631, and the silver *gaddi* of the maharajas can still be seen here. There's a courtyard paved with Italian tiles; through the fine lattice screens surrounding it, the women of the zenana could watch the activities below. Beside the **Phool Mahal** (Flower Palace), built during the reign of Maharaja Gaj Singh, is a marble statue of Surya, the sun god. Around the upper edges of the walls are paintings depicting Hindu gods.

The beautiful **Anup Mahal** was commissioned by Maharaja Karan Singh (r 1631-69). According to local lore, the maharaja was camping at Golkonda, in southern India, in his capacity as a general in the Mughal army, when an artist showed him fine works in gold. The artist told the maharaja that he was originally from Jaisalmer, but had migrated to southern India when a famine swept over his homeland. The maharaja was inspired by the proficiency and great beauty of the work he had been shown, and so he invited the artist to return to Bikaner, where the artist was given royal patronage.

The work of this artist and of his students features in the **Karan Mahal** and the **Anup Mahal**. Three styles of work can be seen here: the *sonakin* style features white plaster decorated with delicate patterns and painted with gold leaf; the *jangali sunthari* style features plaster with a green backing that depicts floral motifs; and the *manovat* style features a pillar of clay that is embossed on plaster, the entire work painted with gold leaf.

In the **Badal Mahal** (Cloud Palace), the walls are painted with blue cloud motifs, and there's



a statue here of Vishnu and Lakshmi. The large pillars beside the Karan Mahal were installed with the aid of elephants nearly 400 years ago.

The **Gaj Mandir** formed the private chambers of Maharaja Gaj Singh. The maharani's chamber is decorated with mirror tiles and gold painting, and there's wooden lac (resin) painting on the ceiling. The maharaja's chamber has a beautiful painted wood ceiling featuring florets and geometric motifs, and carved ivory doors.

In the **Hawa Mahal** (Palace of the Winds – used in the summer), there's an ingenious device said to have alerted the maharaja to potential enemies. A mirror positioned over the bed enabled Maharaja Dunga Singh to see the reflections of people walking across the courtyard below (this is the purpose of the mirror according to the official fort guides, but other motives might be suspected). The ceiling features floral arabesques and scenes of Krishna dancing. The decorative blue tiles were imported from both Europe and China.

There's an interesting museum exhibition (included in the ticket price), housed in several of the newer rooms of the palace. In the armory are enormous bore guns that were used for shooting from the backs of camels, as well as the usual collection of sinister-looking pistols and swords.

In the **Diwan-i-Khas** of Ganga Singh are three massive, intricately carved arches and a throne of sandalwood. Here also can be seen a 56kg suit of armour, including chain mail, and sculptures of Krishna dancing and stealing the clothes of the *gopis*. Beautiful, if deadly, weapons, each an exquisite work of art – swords with carved ivory and crystal handles – can also be seen here. In a separate chamber are the royal vestments of Maharaja Ganga Singh, as well as items from his office. There's also an old biplane that was presented to Ganga Singh by the British government during WWI. This is one of only two models of this kind of plane in the world.

#### PRACHINA CULTURAL CENTRE & MUSEUM

The **museum** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50, camera Rs 10/25; ☎ 9am–6pm), across the main courtyard from Surajpol, is fascinating and well labelled. It focuses on the Western influence on the Bikaner royals before Independence, including crockery from England and France and menu cards from 1936, as well as some

exquisite Rajasthani costumes, jewellery and textiles, and intriguing everyday ephemera.

There is a small shop and café at the museum, and a reference library containing a limited collection of books on Rajasthan, which is open to the public.

### JAIN TEMPLES

Two Jain temples just inside the walled city are well worth seeking out. **Bhandasar Temple** (admission free; ☎ 6am-7pm) is particularly beautiful, with yellow-stone carving and dizzily vibrant paintings. It's dedicated to the fifth *tirthankar*, Sumtinath, and the building was commissioned in 1468 by a wealthy Jain merchant, Bhandasa Oswal. It was completed after his death in 1514.

The interior of the temple is stunning. The pillars bear floral arabesques and depictions of the lives of the 24 Jain *tirthankars*. It's said that 40,000kg of ghee was used instead of water in the mortar, which locals insist seeps through the floor on hot days.

On the 1st floor of the three-storey temple are beautiful miniatures of the sentries of the gods. There are fine views over the city from the 3rd floor, with the desert stretching behind it to the west. The priest will undoubtedly ask for a donation in excess of Rs 100, of which half will go surreptitiously to your guide. In fact, a trust pays for the upkeep of the temples and this is how the priest earns pocket money.

The second Jain temple here is **Sandeshwar Temple** (admission free, camera/video Rs 20/30; ☎ 6am-noon & 6-7pm). It's smaller than Bhandasar Temple, and has good carving around the door architraves and columns, and ornately carved, painted pillars. Inside the drum of the *sikhara* (spire) are almost ethereal paintings, and the sanctum itself has a marble image of Sandeshwar, flanked by smaller marble statues of other Jain *tirthankars*.

### LAKSHMINATH TEMPLE

Behind Bhandasar Temple, to the right, is the splendid Hindu **Lakshminath Temple** (admission free, photography prohibited). It was built during the reign of Rao Lunkaran between 1505 and 1526. Lakshminath was the patron god of the rulers of Bikaner, and during major religious festivals a royal procession led by the maharaja paid homage at the temple. The elaborate edifice was maintained with tributes received from five villages and several shops,

which were granted to the temple by Maharaja Ganga Singh (1880-1943). Around 9.30pm you may witness praying in Sanskrit.

### LALLGARH PALACE

About 3km north of the city centre, this pink-golden sandstone **palace** was built by Maharaja Ganga Singh (1880-1943) in memory of his father, Lal Singh. It's out-and-out grandeur, with overhanging balconies and delicate latticework. The 1st floor contains the **Sri Sadul Museum** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/20, camera/video Rs 20/50; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat). It has fascinating old B&W photographs celebrating the slaughter of wildlife and some evocative maharaja accessories reflecting the former royals' privileged lifestyles. Artefacts include (empty) wine and sherry bottles, menu cards, European crockery and a brass vessel known as a *tokna* (used to collect revenue that was transported by camel to the Bikaner state treasury). There's even a funky old film projector made in New York in 1921. Other more pedestrian exhibits include Maharaja Karni Singh's golf tees, roller skates, typewriters and pink-shaded sunglasses. There's also a disturbing pictorial display of tiger carnage, including a picture of the five tigers shot in three minutes by Maharaja Ganga Singh in 1937.

At the time of writing there were plans to move the museum to new rooms in the palace and possibly increase the admission cost.

In front of the palace is a carriage from the maharaja's royal train (you can stay in the train; see p345).

### GANGA GOVERNMENT MUSEUM

This **museum** (admission Rs 3, free Mon; ☎ 9.30am-5pm), on the Jaipur Rd, houses a well-displayed, interesting collection.

Exhibits include terracotta ware from the Gupta period, a range of Rajasthani traditional musical instruments, rich gold paintings by local Usta artisans, miniature wooden models of the Gajner and Lallgarh palaces, and a miniature of the Royal Bikaner train with the roof folded back to reveal its comfortable amenities. There's a separate exhibition hall with exquisite carpets and royal vestments.

Other interesting exhibits include decrees issued by the Mughals to the maharajas of Bikaner, including one advising Rai Singh to proceed to Delhi 'without any delay and with utmost expedition and speed, travelling over as great a distance as possible during the day

time as well as by night' as 'Emperor Akbar is dying'. It was issued by Crown Prince (who would shortly become Emperor) Jehangir.

There are also some fine oil paintings, including one entitled *Maharaja Padam Singhji avenging... the death of his brother, Maharaja Mohan Singhji by killing the Emperor's brother-in-law... He drew his sword, rushed upon his enemy and severed him in two with a blow which also left a mark upon the pillar*.

The sculptures include a beautiful, busty image of Devi, and a marble Jain sculpture of Saraswati dating from the 11th century.

Only still cameras (no videos) are permitted (no charge). The entrance to the museum is at the back of the building on the left-hand side.

### Tours

The Tourist Reception Centre (p339) can arrange English-speaking guides (Rs 300 per day, with a maximum of four people).

Bhairon Vilas (p345) offers various tours, including a range of camel safaris, village tours, a jeep tour to Deshnok via a couple of the desert villages, and a tour to Kolayat (p348) and Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary (p347).

Most of the tour options cost from Rs 650 to 1500 per day, including transport, a guide and (sometimes) food. The trip to Gajner includes jeep transport into the sanctuary for wildlife spotting.

### Sleeping

The **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 2544125) at the RTDC Hotel Dhola Maru has a list of families registered with Bikaner's Paying Guest House Scheme. Rates are Rs 200 to 600 per night.

### BUDGET

**Shri Ram Hotel & Guesthouse** (☎ 2522651; www.yha.india.org, www.hotelshriram.com; YHA dm Rs 60, s/d from Rs 200/300, s/d with AC from Rs 400/600; 📶 📺 📺) In a quiet area east of town, 3km from the train and bus stations, this is an accommodation multiplex comprising a YHA affiliated youth hostel, guesthouse and hotel. Despite its diversity, it retains a family atmosphere. Rooms vary in size and comfort and are adequately clean. Free pickup from the train and bus stations is offered, and note the 9am checkout.

**Vinayek Guest House** (☎ 2202634; vinayakguesthouse@gmail.com; r Rs 80-300) This place offers five very different rooms in a quiet family house

### BIKANER CAMEL SAFARIS

Bikaner is an excellent alternative to the Jaisalmer safari scene. The Bikaner version of the safari tends to involve more travel in a camel cart – less tiring but also less fun. There are also fewer sights than around Jaisalmer, but it's great if you want to ride in empty desert scrub (no wind turbines yet), sleep on dunes and see life in desert villages. There are fewer organisations running safaris here, so you're unlikely to encounter much hassle. In fact there are two main camel men and all the other operators contract camels and drivers from them. If your travel agent/hotel manager/rickshaw-wallah is talking down either of these gentlemen (a favourite sport in Bikaner), it is because they have tried to squeeze too much discount from one of the camel men and there has been a falling out. If you are quoted a discount price for an overnight trip you may well find yourself heading out to the camels in a rickshaw rather than a jeep.

The major (and recommended) operators include **Vino Desert Safari** (www.vinodesertsafari.com; see VINO Paying Guest House, p344), south of the city, opposite the Gopeshwar Temple, which has been operating since 1991. VINO offers two- to seven-day trips (Rs 500 to 1500 per day, depending on how much luxury you require and how much you use a jeep). The friendly, enthusiastic VINO speaks English, French and German.

Then there's Vijay Singh Rathore, the **Camel Man** (www.camelman.com; see Vijay's Guest House, p344), another friendly chap operating safaris since 1983, who runs basic half-day/full-day safaris for Rs 650/1000, and more upmarket excursions (beds with sheets are provided) for Rs 1300 to 1600 per day. Safaris range from half-day jaunts to 14-day trips all the way to Jaisalmer.

Also recommended is Kamal Saxena of **Desert Tours** (☎ 2521967; www.uniqueidea.org), a smaller operator who has a long experience organising safaris. He charges around Rs 800 per day and is located behind the main post office.

There are many different camel-trek routes, including trips to Khichan, home of the demoiselle cranes, and to the rat temple at Deshnok.

owned by the manager of the Urmul Trust. On offer is a free pick-up service, cooking lessons and camel safaris. There's no sign outside, but it's near Sher Singh's Flour Mill and Old Pugal House.

**Vino Paying Guest House** (☎ 2270445, 9414139245; www.vinodesertsafari.com; Ganga Shahar; s without bathroom Rs 100, d Rs 200-850) This guesthouse in a family home south of town is a cosy choice. Rooms vary widely and include standard hotel rooms as well as basic and cool adobe huts in the garden. All are excellent value, and the family is enthusiastic, helpful and welcoming and runs recommended safaris (see p343). Vino's family also gives free cooking lessons. It's opposite Gopeshwar Temple.

**RTDC Hotel Dhola Maru** (☎ 2529621, fax 2522109; dm Rs 100, s/d without AC Rs 500/600, with AC Rs 750/900; ☎) This large hotel has spacious and tolerably clean rooms in a typically bland RTDC hotel complex including a featureless restaurant and a helpful tourist reception centre.

**our pick Shanti House** (☎ 2543306, 9461159796; inoldcity@yahoo.com; near Kotwali, Old City; s/d Rs 150/250) Run by the affable Gouri who is a fountain of information, this friendly, tidy and snug guesthouse is secreted in the old city. Take advantage of the free pickup from the train and bus stations otherwise you'll never find this place in the maze of laneways. There are just four rooms which boast real mattresses on the beds but have bucket hot water and squat toilets in the attached bathrooms. There is also a two-night minimum stay. The old city is quiet and atmospheric and once you get your bearings you will enjoy wandering around.

**Vijay's Guest House** (☎ 2231244, 9829217331; www.camelman.com; Jaipur Rd; s/d from Rs 250/300-800) Camel safari organiser Vijay (see p343) runs this super-clean and friendly guesthouse. East of town, opposite Sophia School, it has a family atmosphere and vast rooms, some of which are air-cooled.

**Hotel Marudhar Heritage** (☎ 2522524; hmheritage2000@yahoo.co.in; Ganga Shahar Rd; s/d from Rs 250/350, with AC from Rs 550/650; ☎) This is a friendly, well-kept and well-run option in a quiet location. There are rooms to suit most budgets that are plain and comfortable with TV and phone. You may wish to avoid the carpeted rooms which are a bit musty. There are nice views from the roof.

**Hotel Joshi** (☎ 2527700; Station Rd; s Rs 250-800, d Rs 350-900) Hotel Joshi bills itself as a 'Landmark in Vegetarian Hotels' and its clean, though

unexciting, rooms are the best of the cheapies available on Station Rd – the others hotels are quite depressing. It's conveniently near the train station, does a decent veg thali, and has 24-hour checkout.

**Hotel Kishan Palace** (☎ 2527762; www.hotelkishanpalaceheritage.com; 8B Gajner Rd; r Rs 300-750; ☎) North of town, Kishan Palace is a reasonable option with spacious rooms that are showing their age and looking a little dusty. Meals are available, and there's free pick-up from the bus station.

**Hotel Meghsar Castle** (☎ 2527315; www.hotelmeghsarcastle.com; 9 Gajner Rd; r Rs 300-1050; ☎) Next door to Kishan Palace, this hotel has old-fashioned rooms, some echoing large, with cool, clean, tiled floors. It's a well-run, friendly place, with meals available in the garden. The front rooms can suffer a bit of traffic noise.

**Hotel Harasar Haveli** (☎ 2209891; www.harasar.com r Rs 300-2000) Most rickshaw-wallahs will want to bring you to this hotel next to Desert Winds – it's notorious for its commission-paying tactics. If you don't mind encouraging such behaviour, it's a great choice – big and efficient with clean, uncluttered rooms and even better deluxe rooms. Room prices can be bargained down if things are quiet or no commission is being paid. There's a pleasant rooftop restaurant with swing chairs. Camel safaris are available.

**Suraj Hotel** (☎ 2542740; surajhotel@yahoo.com; Rani Bazaar; s/d Rs 325/375, with AC Rs 625/675; ☎) A good choice, off Station Rd near the train station, with 24-hour checkout. Check your bathroom for working plumbing but the rest of the room should be OK and there's a recommended restaurant in the basement (see opposite).

**Hotel Palace View** (☎ 2203463; hotelpalaceview@gmail.com; Lallgarh Palace Campus; s Rs 400-650, d Rs 600-700, s/d with AC Rs 900/1200; ☎) This place is north of town, within the grounds of Lallgarh Palace, with – you've guessed it – palace views. The rooms are all different but all share the same care, cleanliness and attention to detail. The hotel is pleasant, small and efficient, in a very peaceful spot, with good-value, home-cooked meals.

**Hotel Desert Winds** (☎ 2542202; www.hotel-desertwinds.in; r Rs 400-1300; ☎) This lovely hotel with squeaky-clean rooms is northeast of the fort and only about 1km from the train station, opposite Karni Singh Stadium. It's owned by a retired deputy director of Rajasthan Tourism,

who can give you info about the city and organise camel safaris.

**Hotel Padmini Niwas** (☎ 2522794; padmi\_hotel@rediffmail.com; 148 Sadul Ganj; r without/with AC from Rs 450/750; ☎) Padmini Niwas has clean, carpeted rooms in a peaceful location. The owner is relaxed, and the small outdoor pool (Rs 100 for nonguests) is a bonus.

#### MIDRANGE

**Hotel Jaswant Bhawan** (☎ /fax 2548848; www.hoteljaswantbhawan.com; Alakh Sagar Rd; s/d Rs 600/800, with AC Rs 800/1000; ☎) This is a pleasant, quiet, welcoming place with a small garden, lounge bar and restaurant. The pricier rooms in this heritage house are spacious and airy. It's very handy for the train station without the noise of Station Rd, and you can use the excellent kitchen for self-catering.

**our pick Bhairon Vilas** (☎ /fax 2544751; www.hotelbhaironvilas.tripod.com; r Rs 800-1800; ☎) Bikaner's prime minister once lived here (he had three wives, hence the 120-year-old building's four sections). The deep-red heritage hotel is now run by the prime minister's great-grandson, Harsh Singh, who's made it Bikaner's funkiest place to stay. Rooms are huge and eclectically decorated with antiques, bearskins and old family photographs. There's a snug bar crammed with old furnishings, a garden restaurant where traditional musicians sometimes play, and an interesting, if pricey, shop here called Vichitra Arts (see p346). Free pick-up from the bus or train station is available and camel safaris and local tours (see p343) can be arranged.

**Hotel Sagar** (☎ 2520677; www.sagarhotelbikaner.com; Lallgarh Palace Campus; s/d from Rs 1000/1200; ☎) This hotel, north of town, is housed in a large pink building, the first place to the left of the driveway as you approach Lallgarh Palace. It offers a range of rooms, from thatched huts set in the garden to overfurnished grand rooms set in the main building, which surrounds a courtyard. All are a bit overpriced so don't forget to ask for a discount.

**Raj Vilas Palace** (☎ 2525901; www.rajvilaspalace.net; Public Park; s/d Rs 1950/3500; ☎) This newish cement palace boasts a brash and bright lobby, coffee shop, bar and restaurant. Unfortunately not as much money has been spent on the rather ordinary rooms and the swimming pool was already in a state of disrepair. Hopefully these are just teething problems for this business and wedding-oriented hotel.

#### TOP END

**Karni Bhawan Palace Hotel** (☎ 2524701; www.hrindia.com; Gandhi Colony; r from Rs 3000, ste Rs 5000) This hotel is about 500m east of the Lallgarh Palace Hotel and was briefly the residence of Maharaja Karni Singh. It's an ugly but grand red-and-white flourish of a building, cosy and well run. Huge suites are furnished in Art Deco style. A visit to stunning Gajner Palace Hotel outside Bikaner can be arranged (see p348).

**Bhanwar Niwas** (☎ 2529323; www.bhanwarniwas.com; Rampuri St, Old City; s/d from Rs 3500/4500; ☎) This place, in the beautiful and elaborate Rampuri Haveli, near the *kotwali* (police station) in the old city, has large, tastefully decorated rooms, featuring hand-painted wallpaper and antique furnishings. The atmospheric rooms are all very different, and are set around a peaceful, sun-dappled courtyard. The *haveli* was completed in 1927 for Seth Bhanwarlal Rampura, heir to a textile and real-estate fortune. In the entrance gate is a stunning blue 1927 Buick. Inside is pure uncluttered sumptuousness from the gilded sitting room to the grand dining hall. To get here turn left at the Kote Gate, and take the first right at Lady Elgin School. The hotel is close to a community of kitemakers, who can be seen practising their craft.

**Lallgarh Palace Hotel** (☎ 2540201; www.lallgarhpalace.com; s/d from Rs 4000/4600; ☎) Some 3km north of the city centre, this pink-and-gold sandstone hotel is part of the maharaja's palace, dating from 1902, and has well-appointed, old-fashioned rooms around a courtyard. The pricier ones are huge, with lofty ceilings. There is an indoor pool (Rs 250 per hour for nonguests), as well as a billiard room, croquet facilities, and a resident masseur and astrologer.

**Laxmi Niwas Palace** (☎ 2202777; www.laxminiwaspalace.com; s/d Rs 5500/5500; ☎) Beside Lallgarh Palace, north of town, this is a beautifully restored building with some lovely stone carving, opulent interiors and an oversupply of dead tiger photos. Rooms are enormous, elegant and evocative, with painted walls. The courtyard is overlooked by the old zenana, the bar is overlooked by stuffed heads, and there's a charming garden restaurant (see p346).

#### Eating

#### RESTAURANTS

**Laxmi Hotel** (Station Rd; mains Rs 30; ☎ 10am-10pm) This is one of four earthy veg joints which



crowd the entrance to a large *dharamsala* and tempt pilgrims with cheap tasty thalis.

**Suraj Restaurant** (☎ 2542740; Rani Bazaar; mains Rs 40-65; 🕒 6am-10.30pm) Situated beneath the Suraj Hotel (p344) off Station Rd, this is Bikaner's best-value thali joint. Choose between the 'mini', 'deluxe' and the highly recommended 'special' which can be shared between two people.

**Amber** (☎ 2220333; Station Rd; mains Rs 40-100; 🕒 6am-10pm) Amber is a cool, clean restaurant that is decorated in neutral tones with bench seating. It is well regarded and popular for veg fare, including Continental and South Indian dishes. On one side of the restaurant there's an Indian sweets counter, and on the other side is an ice-cream parlour and pizzeria.

**Heeralal's** (☎ 2204455; Station Rd; mains Rs 55-85; 🕒 downstairs 7am-midnight, upstairs 12.30-11.30pm) Opposite the train station, this bright restaurant is a great place to wait for the train. Downstairs there are shiny booths, pizzas, burgers and South Indian snacks. Upstairs they deliver veg and nonveg dishes including tandoori, curries and Chinese in swish surroundings, but unfortunately no beer.

**Galops** (☎ 3200833; mains Rs 90-175; 🕒 8am-10pm) This modern café/restaurant close to Surajpol is managed by the folks at Harisar Haveli, and the rickshaw-wallahs know it as 'Glops'. There are snacks such as pizzas, pakoras, and sandwiches, and a good range of Indian and Chinese veg and nonveg dishes. You can curl up on the outside leather lounge with a cold beer or a fuming hookah and be entertained by live music.

**Hotel Laxmi Niwas Palace Garden Restaurant** (☎ 2202777; mains Rs 80-150; 🕒 noon-3pm & 7.30-10.30pm) Beside Laxmi Niwas Palace (p345), this excellent garden restaurant is a lovely place to eat – at least until the nights become too chilly. If it is obvious you are a tourist you will first be offered the menu from the hotel's plush, indoor **Swarn Mahal** (mains Rs 125-250). However, if you are looking for food less pricey and more spicy, then ask for the Garden Restaurant menu. Note that the beer is cheaper and that there is far less choice on this menu – veg and nonveg curries and some Chinese dishes. If you are lucky there's music in the evenings.

**Bhanwar Niwas** (☎ 2529323; set lunch/dinner Rs 350/375) A splendid place to eat, this hotel (p345) welcomes nonguests to its veg dining

hall (notice is essential). You can have a drink before dinner in the courtyard.

### QUICK EATS

Bikaner is noted for the *bhujjiya*, which is a special kind of *namkin* (spicy nibbles), sold in the shops along Station Rd among other places.

**Chhotu Motu Joshi Sweet Shop** (Station Rd) This is Bikaner's best-loved sweet stop, with an assortment of Indian treats. Try milk-sweet *ras malai* (ricotta dessert with cardamom, nuts and sugar; Rs 16) and saffron *kesar cham cham* (Rs 6). The latter is a sausage-shaped sticky confection of milk, sugar and saffron; when bitten, it oozes a sweet sugar syrup. Fresh samosas (Rs 5) are available out the front in the mornings, and *bhujjiya* costs Rs 9 per plate, *jalebis* (circular, deep-fried sweet) Rs 15 per plate.

**Amul** (Station Rd; ice cream Rs 10-15) On the ground floor of Hotel Joshi, there's a small ice-cream parlour selling popular Amul ice cream.

### Shopping

**Abhivyakti** (Ganganagar Rd; 🕒 8.30am-6.30pm) Run by the Urmul Trust, a local NGO supported by Urmul Dairy (which has an outlet next door), Abhivyakti sells textiles produced by skilled artisans from local villages. The profits go directly to the producers, and to health and education projects in the surrounding villages, such as a girls' college. Take care, as rickshaw drivers and touts have taken visitors to other, commercial shops, claiming that they're run by the Urmul Trust.

The trust, founded in 1986, aims to provide primary health care and education to the people of the remote villages of Rajasthan, raise awareness of poor women's rights and promote the handicrafts of rural artisans, thus cutting out middlemen and commissions. You can pick up *pattus* (lovely handloom shawls), cushion covers, kurtas (shirts), *jootis* (traditional, pointy-toed Rajasthani shoes), puppets and more.

The Urmul Trust welcomes volunteers (see p371).

**Vichitra Arts** Based at Bhairon Vilas (see p345), this shop sells beautiful clothes including magnificent wedding skirts. It's pricey but interesting. There's an adjoining workshop with a resident artist painting miniatures.

Go to Usta St in the old city to see artisans making *usta* (gold-painted camel leather) products.

### CAMEL-ODOLOGY

The camels reared at Bikaner's National Research Centre on Camels are of three breeds. The long-haired camels with hairy ears are the local Bikaner variety; they are renowned for their strength. The light-coloured camels are from Jaisalmer, and are renowned for their speed. The dark-coloured camels are from Gujarat, and the females are renowned for the quantity of milk they produce. The milk tastes a little salty and is reputedly good for the liver. If you have a cup of chai in a small desert village, you're quite possibly drinking camel milk. The stout of heart might even like to try fresh, warm camel milk at the farm. The camels on the farm are crossbred so, in theory, they should be the strongest, fastest and best milk-producing camels you'll find anywhere. Breeding season is from around December to March, and at this time the male camels froth disconcertingly at the mouth.

This is also a stud farm; locals bring their female camels here to be serviced free of charge. Female camels give birth every one and a half years, depending on their age and health, following a long (13-month) gestation period. A male camel can inseminate up to five cows per day.

Adult camels consume about 16kg of fodder in summer, and drink around 30L of water per day; in winter, they drink about 20L per day. In winter a healthy camel can work up to one month without food or water, and in summer up to one week.

### Getting There & Away BUS

The bus stand is 3km north of the city centre, almost opposite the road leading to Lallgarh Palace. If your bus is coming from the south, ask the driver to let you out closer to the city centre. Private buses to Jaisalmer congregate near the southern wall of the fort. There are numerous RSRTC and private buses to Agra (express/sleeper Rs 205/274, 12 hours), Ajmer (Rs 133, seven hours), Delhi (express/sleeper Rs 216/237, 11 hours), Jaipur (express/sleeper Rs 125/150, seven hours), Jaisalmer (Rs 146, eight hours), Jhunjhunu (Rs 87, five hours), Jodhpur (Rs 139, 5½ hours), Mandawa (Rs 50, four hours), and Udaipur (Rs 265, 12 hours).

### TRAIN

To Jaipur, you can take the *Bikaner Howrah Superfast* (2308A), that leaves at 6.30pm (sleeper/3AC Rs 201/510, seven hours) or the *Jaipur-Bikaner Express* (4737/8), that departs at 9.20pm (sleeper/2AC Rs 178/654, 8½ hours). The *Ranakpur Express* (4707) leaves for Jodhpur at 9.45am (sleeper/3AC Rs 148/386, five hours). To Delhi, you can take the *Sampark Kranti Express* (2464A) that leaves at 5.20pm and arrives at Delhi Sarai Rohilla station at 5.40am (sleeper/3AC Rs 293/771).

### Getting Around

An autorickshaw from the train station to the palace should cost Rs 20, but you'll certainly

be asked for more. Bicycles can be hired near Bhairon Vilas for Rs 25 a day.

### AROUND BIKANER Devi Kund

The marble and red-sandstone royal **cenotaphs** of the Bika dynasty rulers, with some fine frescoes, are located 8km east of the centre of Bikaner. The white-marble *chhatris* of Maharaja Surat Singh is among the most imposing.

It costs Rs 150 return by rickshaw to get to this quiet spot.

### National Research Centre on Camels

The **National Research Centre on Camels** (☎ /fax 0151-2230183; admission Rs 10, camera Rs 20, rides Rs 30, guides Rs 100; 🕒 2-6pm), 8km from central Bikaner, is possibly worth a look if camels take your fancy – you can visit the baby camels, go for a short ride and look around the small museum. There are about 230 camels, and three different breeds, reared here. The British Army had a camel corps drawn from Bikaner during WWI.

The on-site Camel Milk Parlour doesn't look much but can whip up a lassi for Rs 5. The round trip, including a half-hour wait at the camel farm, is around Rs 150 for an autorickshaw or Rs 300 for a taxi.

### Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary

The lake and forested hills of this **reserve** (admission per jeep Rs 1000), 32km from Bikaner on the Jaisalmer road, are inhabited by wildfowl,

### THE TEMPLE OF RATS

The Karni Mata Temple located at Deshnok is one of India's more challenging temples for Westerners – its resident mass of holy rodents is not for the squeamish. Karni Mata lived in the 14th century and performed many miracles during her lifetime. When her youngest son, Lakhan, drowned, Karni Mata ordered Yama, the god of death, to bring him back to life. Yama replied that he was unable to do this, but that Karni Mata, as an incarnation of Durga, could restore Lakhan's life. This she did, decreeing that members of her family would no longer die but would be reincarnated as *kabas* (rats), and that these *kabas* would return as members of her family. Around 600 families in Deshnok claim descent from Karni Mata and that they will be reincarnated as *kabas*.

The temple is an important place of pilgrimage; pilgrims are disgorged from buses every few minutes. Once at the village, they buy *prasad* (holy food offerings) in the form of sugar balls to feed to the rats. Eating *prasad* covered in holy rat saliva is also claimed by believers to bring good fortune, although most travellers are willing to take their word for it.

The pilgrims are anointed with a tikka made with ash from a holy fire in the inner sanctum, while the objects of their devotion run over their toes (sorry, no shoes permitted). Before the temple is a beautiful marble façade with solid silver doors, donated by Maharaja Ganga Singh. Across the doorway to the inner sanctum are repoussé silver doors – one panel shows the goddess with her charges at her feet. An image of the goddess is also enshrined in the inner sanctum. There are special holes around the side of the temple courtyard to facilitate the rats' movements, and a wire grille has been placed over the courtyard to prevent birds of prey and other predators consuming the holy rodents.

It's considered highly auspicious to have a *kaba* run across your feet – you'll probably find you'll be inadvertently graced in this manner whether you want it or not. White *kabas* are quite rare, although there are one or two at the temple, and sighting one augurs well for your spiritual progress.

What may seem unusual to Western eyes is devoutly believed by pilgrims – remember that this isn't a sideshow but a place of worship. And don't conveniently forget to remove your shoes!

wild boar, desert foxes, blackbucks and nilgai. It was once a royal hunting ground – many British luminaries have killed wildlife here. The reserve is only accessible by vehicle from Gajner Palace Hotel (below), which may be hired by nonguests.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Gajner Palace Hotel** (☎ 01534-275061; [www.hrindia.com](http://www.hrindia.com); r from Rs 6000; 🍷) Right on the edge of a beautiful lake is the magnificent erstwhile royal winter palace and hunting lodge, in 2400 hectares. The sandstone palace is set in lush surroundings, and the rooms are lavishly furnished. Some of the rugs in the main palace were woven by prisoners of the Bikaner jail. There's a restaurant, and you can eat indoors or outdoors as you watch the birds bobbing on the lake.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are frequent daily buses (Rs 28) running to Gajner village, about 1km away from the hotel. A return taxi from Bikaner should

cost around Rs 600, including the two hours' waiting time.

### Kolayat

Set around a temple-ringed lake, Kolayat is a beautiful, untouristed town, around 54km to the south of Bikaner. Kolayat is a holy place, with 52 ghats surrounding its lake. Visiting here is a worthy pilgrimage, and spending one day here can equal up to 10 years at another sacred place. Like Pushkar, it has a (rare) Brahma temple.

There are a number of very basic *dharamsalas*, but most won't accept tourists. **Bhaheti Dharamsala** (r with shared bathroom Rs 35), on the main ghat by the lakeside, is a reasonable place. Otherwise Kolayat is a good day trip from Bikaner.

The **Kapil Muni Mela** (fair) is held here in October or November, around the same time as the Pushkar Camel Fair (minus the camels and cattle, but with plenty of sadhus). The main temple at Kolayat is **Kapil Muni Temple** (🕒 closed 3-5pm).

There are regular buses from Bikaner (Rs 30, 1½ hours), or there's a train at 8.30am (1½ hours), returning at 4pm.

### Deshnok

Most travellers coming to Bikaner make a beeline for the extraordinary **Karni Mata Temple** ([www.karnimata.com](http://www.karnimata.com); admission free, camera/video Rs 20/50; 🕒 4am-10pm) at this village 30km south of Bikaner (see opposite). The holy rodents of Karni Mata are considered to be incarnations of storytellers, and they run riot over the temple complex.

Two special festivals take place at the Karni Mata Temple around April/May and October/November. Ask at the **Tourist**

**Reception Centre** (☎ 0151-2544125) in Bikaner for the exact dates.

### SIGHTS

#### Shri Karni Centenary Auditorium

The pictorial display in this **auditorium** (admission Rs 2; 🕒 7am-7pm), across the square from the temple, is worth a look. It tells the story of Karni Mata's life, with descriptions in English and Hindi.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses from the main or Gogo Gate bus stands in Bikaner depart hourly for Deshnok (Rs 20, 30 minutes). A taxi (Rs 450 with a one-hour wait) is better and safer.

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