

# Rajasthan



From the cackle of its colour-charged cities to the luminous splendour of its sun-kissed desert, Rajasthan is romantic India wrapped in gaudy royal robes. Here the fearsome Rajput warrior clans ruled with gilt-edged swords, plundered wealth and blood-thick chivalrous codes.

A vast and wonder-laced state with treasures more sublime than those of fable, the Land of the Kings paints a bold image. Compiling a must-see list in Rajasthan can cripple the fussy traveller: Meherangarh looming over bright blue Jodhpur, the giant gold sandcastle at Jaisalmer, the palaces and pageantry of Udaipur, Pushkar's reverent yet carnival charm, the storybook whimsy of Bundi and the *havelis* (traditional, ornately decorated residences) sprinkled through Shekhawati – see them all, and you'll see a month fly by faster than the express bound for Pakistan. Like a microcosm of Mother India, there's also abundant wildlife and warm people, glitz and camels, soulful music, glittering saris, tottering turbans and a surprisingly rich cuisine.

Yet Rajasthan's largely rural population has grown tired of its own backward-looking image. Jaipur, the dusty pink capital, has rapidly become a fast-paced, modern Indian city, and literacy has made a rapid rise in the region. While the land is invariably harsh and droughts are a constant menace, imaginations are now fixed firmly on the future.

The state is diagonally divided into the hilly southeastern region and the barren north-western Great Thar Desert, which extends across the border into Pakistan – now accessible via train. The highest point is reached at the pleasant hill station of Mt Abu.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Get gobsmacked at **Meherangarh** (p234), the majestic fort of Jodhpur, the blue-tinged city
- Marvel at beautiful **Udaipur** (p217), then wander beyond into the Aravalli hills
- Go west and get lost in golden **Jaisalmer Fort** (p245)
- Kick back in **Bundi** (p199), a picture-book town by a storybook palace
- Relax in **Pushkar** (p192), a mystical small town around a holy lake, with one of India's fabulous fairs
- Shuffle around **Shekhawati** (p185) and track down its frescoes *havelis* (traditional, ornately decorated residences)
- Think pink: sightsee till you can't see and shop till you drop in captivating, chaotic **Jaipur** (p165)





## History

This diverse state is home to the Rajputs, warrior clans who claim to originate from the sun, moon and fire, and who have controlled this part of India for more than 1000 years. While they forged marriages of convenience and temporary alliances, pride and independence were always paramount, with the result that much of their energy was spent squabbling among themselves. The resultant weakness eventually led to the Rajputs becoming vassals of the Mughal empire.

Nevertheless, the Rajputs' bravery and sense of honour were unparalleled. Rajput warriors would fight against all odds and, when no hope was left, chivalry demanded *jauhar* (ritual mass suicide by immolation).

It's unsurprising that Akbar persuaded Rajputs to lead his army, nor that subsequent Mughal emperors had such difficulty controlling this part of their empire.

With the Mughal empire declining, the Rajputs gradually clawed back independence –

### FAST FACTS

- Population: 56.5 million
- Area: 342,239 sq km
- Capital: Jaipur
- Main languages: Hindi and Rajasthani
- When to go: mid-October to mid-March

at least until the British arrived. As the British Raj inexorably expanded, most Rajput states allied with the British, which allowed them to continue as independent states, subject to certain political and economic constraints.

These alliances proved to be the beginning of the end for the Rajput rulers. Consumption took over from chivalry, so that by the early 20th century many of the maharajas spent much of their time travelling the world with scores of retainers, playing polo and occupying entire floors of expensive Western hotels. While it suited the British to indulge them in this respect, the maharajas' profligacy was economically and socially detrimental. When India gained its independence, Rajasthan had one of the subcontinent's lowest rates of life expectancy and literacy.

At Independence, India's ruling Congress Party was forced to make a deal with the nominally independent Rajput states to secure their agreement to join the new India. The rulers were allowed to keep their titles and their property holdings, and they were paid an annual stipend commensurate with their status. It couldn't last forever though, and in the early 1970s Indira Gandhi abolished the titles and the stipends, and severely sequestered rulers' property rights.

In their absence Rajasthan has made headway, but the state remains very poor. The strength of tradition here means that women have a particularly tough time in rural areas, where they're often condemned to a life of drudgery and subject to elaborate strictures. However, literacy stood at 61% in 2001, a massive rise from 8.02% in 1951 and 38.55% in 1991 (although the gender gap remains India's widest, and the literacy rate is still below the national average of 65.38%). In 2006, the Rajasthan Directorate of Literacy and Continuing Education was awarded a Unesco gong for its commitment to improving literacy rates.

## Information

Accommodation in Rajasthan is among the best in India for range and value. Here you can snuggle down in exquisite palaces and heritage hotels, or opt for cheap guesthouses and friendly homestays. Taxes are not included in prices in this chapter.

The website [www.hotelsinrajasthan.com](http://www.hotelsinrajasthan.com) is a good place to nose out accommodation. While options are plentiful, it's best to book ahead from October till March.

# EASTERN RAJASTHAN

## JAIPUR

0141 / pop 2.63 million

Jaipur, the City of Victory, is chaotic and congested, though it still has a habit of ticking travellers pink. Stunning hilltop forts and glorious palaces fit like footprints from a rich royal past, candyfloss-bright turbans blaze a trail through brilliant bargain-filled bazaars, and fluttering saris catch the eye like butterflies.

As the gateway to the desert state of Rajasthan, however, it's also a city permanently under siege. Package tourists are captivated by (and offloaded on) the bustling bazaars, world-class hotels and clammy sophistication, while camel carts and cows waddle through diesel-soaked streets, rampaging rickshaw drivers hustle and burn past businessmen and tourists, and scores of street children beg outside huge jewellery shops and palatial hotels.

Jaipur beams boldest at dusk – when it's well worth walking to Amber – and, much like its founder, Jai Singh II, the Pink City is both proud and resilient.

There's the **Elephant Festival** in March, **Gan-gaur** is celebrated in March/April and **Teej** celebrations occur in August; see p166 for details.

## History

The city owes its name, founding and planning to the great warrior-astronomer Maharaja

### RAJASTHANI TRIBES

Groups of Adivasis (tribal people) were the first inhabitants of this region, and today they form 12% of the population – the national average is 8%. The main tribes are the Bhils and the Minas. The Bhils inhabited the southwestern part of the state, and were regarded as splendid warriors, helping the Rajputs combat the Marathas and Mughals. The Minas live in eastern Rajasthan. Originally a ruling tribe, their downfall began with the rise of the Rajputs, and in 1924 the British declared the Minas to be criminals, a label only removed after Independence. Smaller tribes include the Sahariyas, Damariyas, and the Rajput Garasias and Gaduliya Lohars.

Jai Singh II (1693–1743). In 1727, with Mughal power on the wane, Jai Singh decided the time was right to move from his cramped hillside fort at nearby Amber. He laid out the city, with its surrounding walls and rectangular blocks, according to principles set down in the *Shilpa-Shastra*, an ancient Hindu architectural treatise. In 1728 he built Jantar Mantar, Jaipur's remarkable observatory.

In 1876, Maharaja Ram Singh had the entire old city painted pink, a colour associated with hospitality, to welcome the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII), and the tradition has been maintained – the current maharaja is a great polo chum of Britain's Prince Charles.

## Orientation

Once the initial shock has subsided, travellers find Jaipur surprisingly easy to negotiate. The bazaar-lined old city is in the northeast of

Jaipur, the new parts spread to the south, and the more subdued Bani Park is to the west.

There are three main interconnecting roads in the new part of town: Mirza Ismail (MI) Rd – where the majority of restaurants are found – Station Rd and Sansar Chandra Marg. Many tourist facilities are along or just off these roads.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Books Corner** (MI Rd; ☎ 10am–8pm) A wide range of English-language books and magazines; sells the informative *Jaipur Vision* (Rs 30).

**Corner Bookstore** (Bhagwandas Marg; ☎ 10am–10.30pm) Sells some English books; it's housed with a small branch of Barista coffee bar.

**Ganpati Books** (Shop 67, ground fl, Ganpati Plaza, MI Rd; ☎ 11am–8.30pm Mon–Sat) A good selection of Indian fiction and local-interest books.

## FESTIVALS IN RAJASTHAN

**Camel Festival** (Jan; Bikaner, p252) All conceivable types of camel fun.

**Nagaur Camel Fair** (Jan/Feb; Nagaur, p242) Serious yet colourful camel and livestock trading fair that attracts thousands of rural people.

**Desert Festival** (Feb; Jaisalmer, p243) A chance for moustache-twirlers to compete in the 'Mr Desert' contest, and a host of other desert delights.

**Elephant Festival** (Mar; Jaipur, p165) Parades, polo and human-versus-elephant tugs-of-war.

**Thar Festival** (Mar; Barmer, p252) Just after the Jaisalmer Desert Festival, this features cultural shows, dancing and puppetry.

**Gangaur** (Mar/Apr; Jaipur, p165) A statewide festival honouring Shiva and Parvati's love; it's celebrated with particular fervour in Jaipur.

**Cattle Fair** (Mar/Apr; Barmer, p252) One of Rajasthan's biggest cattle fairs.

**Mewar Festival** (Apr; Udaipur, p217) Udaipur's version of Gangaur, with free cultural events and a colourful procession down to the lake. Local women step out in their finest.

**Summer Festival** (May; Mt Abu, p229) If, like a mad dog, you are travelling through Rajasthan in summer, check out the Summer Festival, dedicated to Rajasthani music.

**Tej** (Aug; Jaipur, p165 & Bundi, p199) Honours the arrival of the monsoon, and Shiva and Parvati's marriage.

**Dussehra Mela** (Oct; Kota, p203) Commemorates Rama's victory over Ravana (the demon king of Lanka). It's a spectacular time to visit Kota – the huge fair features 22.5m-tall firecracker-stuffed effigies.

**Marwar Festival** (Oct; Jodhpur, p234 & Osian, p242) Celebrates Rajasthan heroes through music and dance; one day is in Jodhpur and one in Osian.

**Bundi Ustav** (Oct/Nov; Bundi, p199) Cultural programmes, fireworks and processions.

**Kashvrai Patan** (Oct/Nov; Bundi, p199 & Kota, p203) Held between Bundi and Kota, this festival sees thousands of pilgrims descend for the month of Kartika.

**Pushkar Mela** (Nov; Pushkar, p195) The Pushkar Camel Fair is the most famous festival in the state; it's a massive congregation of camels, cattle, livestock traders, pilgrims, tourists and Japanese film crews.

**Kolayat Mela** (Nov; Kolayat, p257) Held at the same time as Pushkar Mela, but with plenty of sadhus (spiritual men) rather than camels.

**Chandrabhaga Mela** (Nov; Jhalrapatan, p214) A cattle fair and a chance for thousands of pilgrims to bathe in the holy Chandrabhaga River.

**Winter Festival** (Dec; Mt Abu, p229) Focuses on music and folk dance.

## INTERNET ACCESS

High-speed internet access is available throughout the city. It costs between Rs 20 and 60 per hour.

**Mewar Cyber Cafe & Communication** (Station Rd; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 24hr) Near the main bus station.

## MEDICAL SERVICES

Some good hospitals and clinics:

**Galandia Clinic** (☎ 2361040; MI Rd; ☎ 24hr) Dr Chandra Sen is the doctor here.

**Santokha Durlabhji Hospital** (☎ 2566251; Bhawan Singh Marg; ☎ 24hr)

**Sawai Mansingh Hospital** (☎ 2560291; Sawai Ram Singh Rd; ☎ 24hr)

## MONEY

There are loads of 24-hour ATMs around Jaipur. When cashing travellers cheques, make sure you're carrying multiple copies of your passport, as banks and hotels are now required to hold a copy when making transactions.

**Bank of Rajasthan** (☎ 2381416; Rambagh Palace Hotel; ☎ 7am-8pm)

**HDFC** (Ashoka Marg) Has an ATM.

**ICICI** (ground fl, Ganpati Plaza, MI Rd) Has an ATM.

**Standard Chartered** (Bhagwat Bhavan, MI Rd) Has an ATM.

**Tata Finance Amex** (fax 2364026; Saraf House, MI Rd; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-2.30pm Sat) Represents American Express (Amex).

**Thomas Cook** (☎ 2360940; Jaipur Towers, MI Rd; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

## PHOTOGRAPHY

The majority of photo shops will happily save your digital photos onto CD for around Rs 100. Memory sticks and compact flash cards are also widely available.

**Goyal Colour Lab** (☎ 2360147; MI Rd; ☎ 10.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun)

**Sentosa Colour Lab** (☎ 2388748; ground fl, Ganpati Plaza, MI Rd; ☎ 10am-8.30pm Mon-Sat)

## POST

**DHL Worldwide Express** (☎ 2362826; G8 Geeta Enclave, Vinobha Marg) A reliable international courier. Ensure you ask to pay customs charges for the destination country upfront.

**Main post office** (☎ 2368740; MI Rd; ☎ 8am-7.45pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5.45pm Sat) Efficient and has a parcel stitcher who works between 10am and 4pm Monday to Saturday.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

There's a tourism helpline on ☎ 1363. The Tourism Assistance Force (tourist police) is stationed at major tourist traps. The monthly *Jaipur City Guide* (Rs 30) has a handy listing of restaurants and boutique shops, while *Pink City Map & Guide* is a useful companion for shopping trips. Both are available from most hotels and bookshops.

**Government of India tourist office** (☎ 2372200; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Next to Hotel Khasa Kothi, provides brochures (and little else) on places all over India.

**Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation**

**Central Reservations Office** (RTDC; ☎ 2202586; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) Behind RTDC Hotel Swagatam Campus. Expect some false leads.

**Tourist office** airport (☎ 2722647; ☎ for flight arrivals); main bus station (☎ 5064102; Platform 3, main bus station; ☎ 10am-5pm); RTDC Tourist Hotel (☎ 2375466; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat); train station (☎ 2315714; Platform 1, Jaipur train station; ☎ 24hr) Helpful.

## Sights

### OLD CITY (PINK CITY)

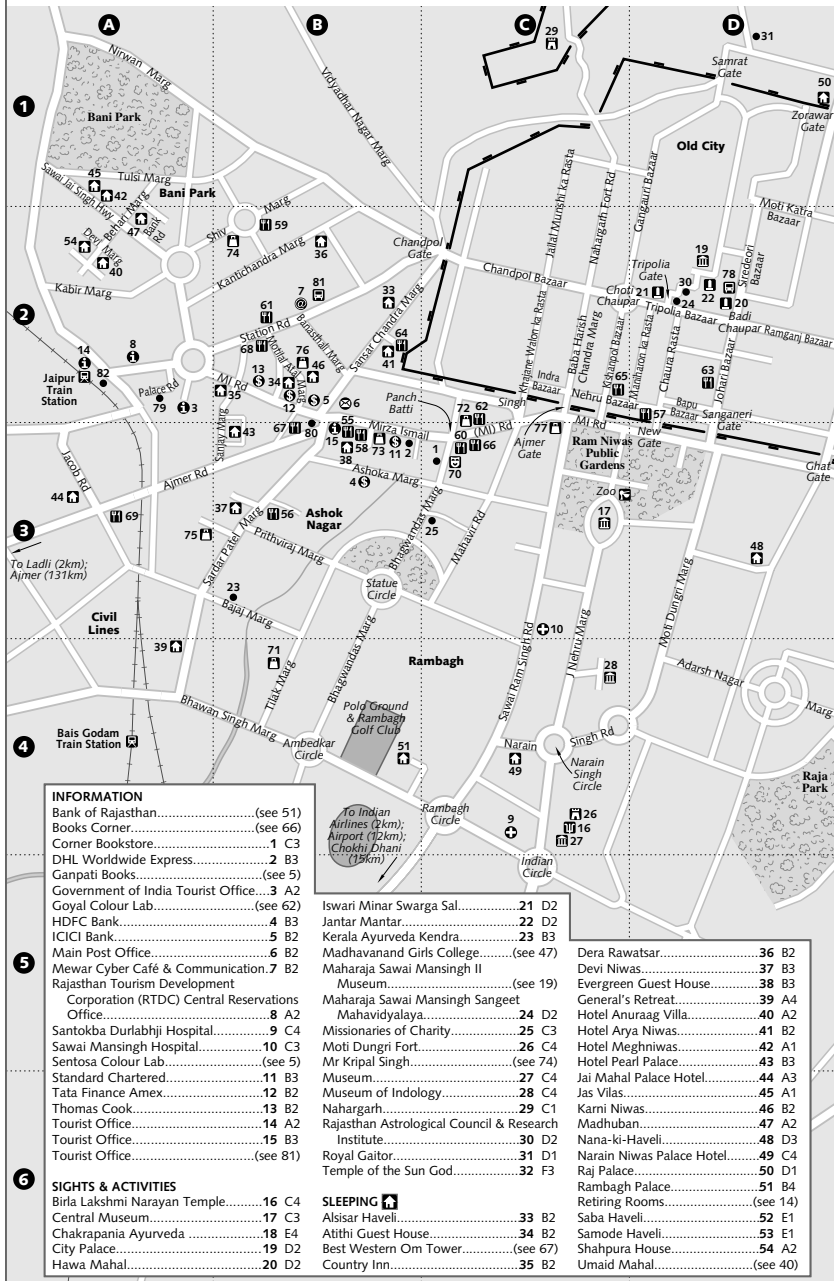
The old city is partially encircled by a crenellated, battle-scarred wall, and the major gates of Chandpol, Ajmer and Sanganeri have been carefully restored. The entire city is a feat of town planning; avenues divide the Pink City into neat rectangles, each one specialising in different crafts (see p176). The main **bazaars** include Johari, Tripolia, Bapu and Chandpol Bazaars. At sunset, the buildings bask in a magical pink and gold glow.

A handy reference point among the chaos is **Iswari Minar Swarga Sal** (Heaven Piercing Minaret; admission Rs 5, camera/video Rs 10/20; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) near Tripolia Gate. The minaret was erected by Jai Singh's son, Iswari, who later killed himself rather than face the advancing Maratha army. As the ultimate act of Rajput loyalty, 21 wives and concubines committed *jauhar* on his funeral pyre. You can climb to the top of the minaret for excellent views over the old city. The entrance is around the back – follow the alley that's 50m west of the minaret along Chandpol Bazaar.

### Hawa Mahal

Jaipur's most distinctive landmark, **Hawa Mahal** (Palace of the Winds; admission Rs 5, Indian/foreigner camera Rs 10/30, video Rs 20/70; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Sat-Thu) is a remarkable, delicately honeycombed, pink sandstone structure. The five-storey building

## JAIPUR



**Approximate Scale**  
0 800 m  
0 0.5 miles

**E** To Cenotaphs of the Maharanis of Jaipur (6km); Amber (11km); Jaigarh (11km); Sahara Anita Organic Farm Resort (25km); Delhi (259km)

**F** To Ramgarh (35km)

**1**

Amber Rd  
52  
53  
Ganga  
Char Darwaja Gate  
Chrori Nikas Rd  
Rangaraj Chaurpar  
Surajpol Bazaar  
Pillar Court  
Suraj Gate  
Rasta Balaji ki Kothi  
Agra Rd  
Delhi Bypass Rd  
32

**2**

**3**

**4**

**5**

**6**

**EATING**

Chic Chocolate.....	(see 12)
Copper Chimney.....	55 B3
Four Seasons.....	56 B3
Ganesh Restaurant.....	57 D2
Gayatri's.....	(see 47)
Handi Restaurant.....	58 B3
Jai Shankar Pavitr	
Bhojnalaya.....	(see 81)
Jaipur Inn.....	59 B2
Jai Mahal.....	60 C3
Kanji.....	61 B2
Lassiwalla.....	62 C2
LMB.....	63 D2
Mediterraneo.....	64 B2
Mohan.....	65 C2
Natraj Restaurant.....	(see 60)
Niro's.....	(see 19)
OM.....	67 B3
Palace Cafe.....	(see 19)
Rawat Kachori.....	68 B2
Spice Court.....	69 A3

**DRINKING**

B2B.....	(see 35)
Polo Bar.....	(see 51)
Steam.....	(see 51)

**ENTERTAINMENT**

Raj Mandir Cinema.....	70 C3
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**SHOPPING**

Anokhi.....	71 B4
Himalaya.....	72 C2
Juneja Art Gallery.....	73 B3
Kripal Kumbh.....	74 B2
Mojari.....	75 A3
New Jodhpur Tailors.....	76 B2
Rajasthali.....	77 C3
Samanwai Art.....	(see 5)

**TRANSPORT**

Air India.....	(see 5)
Buses to Amber.....	78 D2
Crown Tours.....	79 A2
Jet Airways.....	80 B3
Main Bus Station.....	81 B2
Railway Reservation Office.....	82 A2
Rajasthan Travel Service.....	(see 5)

**Adarsh Nagar**

**Raja Park**

**To Galta (Road Access, 2km); Dharmimathali Vipassana Meditation Centre (2km)**

**Sisodia Rani Palace & Gardens**

**Vidyadharji ka Bagh**

**To Raj Vilas (3.5km); Abhaneri (95km); Balaji (102km); Bharatpur (150km); Agra (232km)**

was constructed in 1799 by Maharaja Sawaj Pratap Singh to enable ladies of the royal household to watch the life and processions of the city. It's an amazing example of Rajput artistry, and remains a great place for people-watching from behind the small broken shutters. The top offers stunning views over the Jantar Mantar and the City Palace in one direction, and over Siredeori Bazaar in the other.

Entrance to the Hawa Mahal is from the back. To get there, return to the intersection on your left as you face the Hawa Mahal, turn right and then take the first right again through an archway.

### City Palace

This **palace** (☎ 2608055; www.royalfamilyjaipur.com; Indian/foreigner adult Rs 35/180, 5-12yr Rs 20/100, camera Rs 50/free, video Rs 100/200; 🕒 9.30am-5pm) is impressive – a vast complex of courtyards, gardens and buildings. The outer wall was built by Jai Singh, but other additions are much more recent, some dating from the early 20th century. Today the palace is a blend of Rajasthani and Mughal architecture. Beyond the main courtyard is the seven-storey Chandra Mahal, the maharaja's residence (off limits to visitors).

There are two entrances: the main entrance, approached through Virendra Pol, and an entrance through Udai Pol near Jaleb Chowk.

Entering through Virendra Pol, you'll see the **Mubarak Mahal** (Welcome Palace), a reception centre for visiting dignitaries. Built in the late 19th century by Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh II, it's a heady combination of Islamic, Rajput and European architecture. It now forms part of the **Maharaja Sawai Mansingh II Museum**, which contains a collection of royal costumes and superb shawls, including Kashmiri *pashmina* (wool shawls). One remarkable exhibit is Sawai Madho Singh I's clothing. He was a cuddly 1.2m wide, weighed 250kg and, appropriately for such an excessive figure, had 108 wives.

The **armoury** is housed in the former apartments of the maharanis (wives of the maharajas). As visitors enter, fearsome daggers spell out their welcome. Many of the ceremonial weapons are beautifully engraved and inlaid, as are lethal weapons such as the two-bladed daggers that, at the flick of a catch, become scissors inside their victims. If you're not into bloody weaponry, the mirrored and gold-inlaid ceilings are well worth a gaze.

Contained in the **Diwan-i-Am** (Hall of Public Audience) is an array of exhibits, including a

touching collection of illustrated manuscripts showing everything from scenes from everyday life to the tales of the gods. The miniature copies of Hindu scriptures were small enough to hide in case Aurangzeb, the Mughal ruler, attempted to destroy them. Between the armoury and the art gallery is the **Diwan-i-Khas** (Hall of Private Audience), with a marble-paved gallery in which you can see enormous silver vessels 1.6m tall (reputedly the largest silver objects in the world); Maharaja Madho Singh II, as a devout Hindu, used these vessels to take holy Ganges water to England.

Don't miss the gates of the courtyard **Pitam Niwas Chowk**, representing spring, summer, autumn and winter – and above all the gorgeous bas reliefs of the peacock gate. Beyond this is the private palace, the Chandra Mahal.

Admission to the palace also gets you in to Jaigarh Fort (p180); it's valid for two days.

### Jantar Mantar

Near the City Palace is **Jantar Mantar** (admission Rs 10, free Mon, Indian/foreigner camera Rs 20/50, video Rs 50/100; ☎ 9am-4.30pm), an observatory begun by Jai Singh in 1728, which at first glance looks like a collection of mammoth, bizarre sculptures. If sensing you've stepped into *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is not enough, the Rs 150 guided tour (30 minutes to one hour) is worthwhile. Guides provide fascinating explanations of how each of the instruments work, and how through watching, recording and meticulous calculation, Jai Singh measured time by the place the sun's shadow fell on the huge sundials and charted the annual progress through the zodiac. Each construction has a specific purpose, such as calculating eclipses. The most striking instrument is the sundial, with its 27m-high gnomon; the shadow this casts moves up to 4m per hour.

Before constructing the observatory, Jai Singh sent scholars abroad to study foreign constructs. He built five in total, and this is the largest and best preserved (it was restored in 1901). Others are in Delhi (p135), Varanasi (p431) and Ujjain (p697). The fifth, the Muttra observatory, is gone.

### CENTRAL MUSEUM

This dusty but memorable **collection** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/30, free Mon; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu) is housed in the spectacularly florid Albert Hall, south of the old city, and displays a fine, if carelessly exhibited, array of tribalware, dec-

orative arts, costumes, drawings and musical instruments. Photography is prohibited.

### NAHARGARH

Built in 1734 and extended in 1868, sturdy **Nahargarh** (Tiger Fort; ☎ 5148044; Indian/foreigner Rs 15/20, camera/video Rs 20/70; ☎ 10am-5pm) overlooks the city from a sheer ridge to the north. An 8km road runs up to the fort through the hills from Jaipur, or it can be reached along a zigzagging 2km footpath. There are some interesting furnished rooms in the fort and glorious views – it's a popular picnic spot on weekends, and the perfect place to catch the sunset.

### ROYAL GAITOR

The site of the royal **cenotaphs** (admission free, Indian/foreigner camera Rs 5/10, video Rs 10/20; ☎ 9am-4.30pm), just outside the city walls, is an appropriately restful place to visit, and still feels remarkably undiscovered. Surrounded by a straggling village, the monuments bear much beautiful, intricate carving. The marble cenotaph of Maharaja Jai Singh II is particularly impressive.

The **cenotaphs of the maharanis of Jaipur** (Amber Rd; admission free) are midway between Jaipur and Amber.

### GALTA

The seductive **Temple of the Sun God** at Galta – also known as the Monkey Temple (monkeys converge here at dusk) – is 2.5km to the east of Jaipur, just beyond Surajpol Bazaar. On arrival, it's a steady 200m climb through a rocky, barren gorge, but there are spectacular views over the surrounding plains, and it's often packed with bathing pilgrims. Donations are sometimes insisted upon, and women travellers have reported feeling uncomfortable walking up here alone, particularly in the evening.

The beautiful Dhammathali Vipassana Meditation Centre (see p172) is about 3km from Jaipur city centre on the Sisodiarani Baug-Galtaji road. A rickshaw will cost around Rs 80 return.

### OTHER SIGHTS

The ramshackle, dusty treasure-trove of the **Museum of Indology** (Indian/foreigner incl guide Rs 20/40; ☎ 8am-6pm) is an extraordinary private collection of folk-art objects – there's everything from a manuscript written by Aurangzeb to a glass bed (for a short queen). The museum



is signposted off J Nehru Marg, south of the Central Museum.

Further south is the small fort of **Moti Dungri** (J Nehru Marg), which is closed to the public. At its foot is the modern **Birla Lakshmi Narayan Temple** (J Nehru Marg; ☞ dawn-dusk), with splendid marble carving. Free guides explain aspects of the temple. Next to the temple there's a small **museum** (admission free; ☞ 8am-noon & 4-8pm), which houses everyday objects from the industrially renowned Birla family.

## Activities

### AYURVEDIC MASSAGE

A sure-fire cure for the big-city blues can be found at swanky **Kerala Ayurveda Kendra** (☎ 5106743; www.keralaayurvedakendra; Bajaj Marg; ☞ 8am-8.30pm), where an hour's massage costs Rs 500. Or try **Chakrapania Ayurveda** (☎ 2624003; www.chakrapaniaayurveda.com; Adarsh Nagar Marg; ☞ 9am-2pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), where a body-type analysis costs Rs 200, and a massage Rs 650.

### ASTROLOGY

Dr Vinod Shastri is the medal-laden general secretary of the **Rajasthan Astrological Council & Research Institute** (☎ 2663338; Chandani Chowk, Tripolia Gate; ☞ consultations 9am-8pm). He will prepare a computerised horoscope if you have your exact time and place of birth, or will read your palm. Though he should know when you're arriving, it's best to make an appointment.

## Walking Tour

Start at Panch Batti, beneath the statue of Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh.

Head north along MI Rd, then turn left at Gopinath Marg and enter the walled city. Once inside, walk straight towards **Khajane Walon ka Rasta** (1), where you'll see fine marble craftsmanship. Turn right at Chandpol Bazaar and continue until you reach the **inter-section of Choti Chaupar and Kishanpol Bazaar** (2), where textile artisans design their *bandhani* (tie-dye) and *loharla* (literally 'waves'; tie-die technique creating a striped or zigzagged effect) pieces.

After crossing Choti Chaupar, you'll reach **Tripolia Bazaar** (3), home to an array of iron trinkets and kitchen utensils. Tucked away to the right is **Maniharon ka Rasta** (4), the domain of the lac (resin) bangle makers. To the north of the bazaar is the soaring **Iswari Minar Swarga Sal** (5; p167).

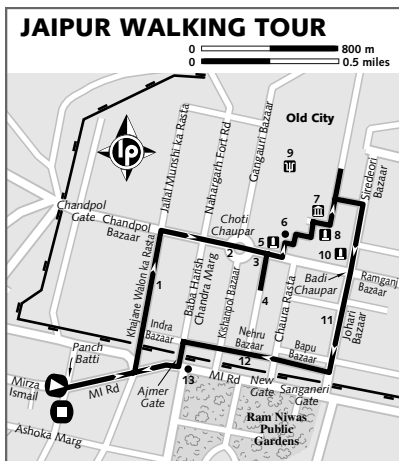
## WALK FACTS

**Start** Panch Batti

**Finish** Panch Batti

**Distance** 3km

**Duration** one hour



About 50m from the minaret is **Tripolia Gate** (6), the three-arched main entrance to the City Palace, though only the maharaja's family is permitted to enter via its portals. The public entrance is to the left, via Atishpol, or Stable Gate. From here, you can visit the **City Palace** (7; p169), the **Jantar Mantar** (8; opposite) and, to the north of the City Palace, the impressive **Govind Devji Temple** (9), surrounded by gardens.

Come out of the complex through the Jalebhi Chowk (you may need to ask). To your right is the **Hawa Mahal** (10; p167), and bustling Siredeori Bazaar. A few yards away is the large square, Badi Chaupar, and further south is **Johari Bazaar** (11), known for its gold and silversmiths. Many of the grand *havelis* shading the street belong to wealthy cotton merchants. Of particular interest here are the enamel workers, the *meenakari*. This highly glazed and intricate work in shades of ruby, bottle green and royal blue is a speciality of Jaipur.

If you turn right before Sangarani Gate, you'll reach Bapu Bazaar, then further west is **Nehru Bazaar** (12), which extends between Chaura Rasta and Kishanpol Bazaar on the inside of the southern wall. Brightly coloured fabrics, camelskin shoes and perfumes make

this area hugely popular with local women. At the end of Nehru Bazaar, to your left, is Ajmer Gate. Come out of the gate and the road you see is **MI Rd (13)** – great for restaurants and for general Jaipur hubbub. Time it for sunset when the buildings turn pink. Turn right from here, and walk straight and you will come back to Panch Batti crossing.

## Courses

### Dharmathali Vipassana Meditation Centre

(☎ 2680220; Galta) This beautifully located centre runs 10-day meditation courses for a donation.

**Madhavanand Girls College** (☎ 2200317; C19 Behari Marg, Bani Park) There are free hatha yoga classes here from 6am to 7am.

### Maharaja Sawai Mansingh Sangeet Mahavidyalaya

(☎ 2611397; 🎵) music lessons 8am–11am, dance 4–8pm Mon–Sat) This is an excellent music school located behind Tripolia Gate. The sign is in Hindi – ask locals to point you in the right direction. Tuition (per month from Rs 500) is given in dance and in Indian instruments such as tabla (pair of drums), sitar (stringed instrument) and flute.

**Mr Kripal Singh** (☎ 2201127; Kripal Kumbh, B18A Shiv Marg, Bani Park) This renowned artist offers lessons in Indian painting and ceramics. Lessons are free, but you must supply materials. Advance booking is essential.

## Tours

The RTDC (p167) offers half-/full-day tours of Jaipur and around for Rs 100/150; book at the Central Reservations Office. The full-day tours (9am to 6pm) take in all the major sites (including Amber Fort), with a lunch break at Nahargarh. The lunch break can be as late as 3pm, so have a big breakfast. AC bus tours (10am to 5pm) cost Rs 135/180; they don't include Nahargarh. Rushed half-day tours are confined to the city limits (8am to 1pm, 11.30am to 4.30pm and 1.30pm to 6.30pm) – some travellers recommend these, as you avoid the long lunch break. Fees don't include admission charges. Tours depart from the train station (depending on demand), and pick up from the RTDC Hotel Teej, Hotel Gangaur and RTDC Tourist Hotel. You're not immune to prolonged stops at emporiums along the way, so be prepared. Book at the **RTDC Tourist Hotel Swagam Campus** (🕒 7am–8pm) in front of the RTDC Central Reservations Office.

## Sleeping

Authorickshaw drivers besiege travellers who arrive by train or bus. If you take their sug-

gestions, chances are you'll pay a huge commission to the hotel owner. To avoid such shenanigans, go straight to the prepaid autorickshaw stands at the bus and train stations. Alternatively, most hotels will pick you up (usually free of charge) if you ring ahead.

From May to September, most midrange and top-end places will offer bargain rates, dropping prices by 25% to 50%.

## BUDGET

**Retiring rooms** (s/d Rs 150/300, r with AC Rs 500; 🛏️) At the train station, these rooms are handy if you're catching an early-morning train. Make reservations on the railway enquiries number (☎ 131).

**Devi Niwas** (☎ 2363727; singh\_kd@hotmail.com; Dhuleswar Bagh, Sadar Patel Marg, C-Scheme; s/d Rs 200/350) A cruisy little place to stay, with honest Indian hospitality. The rooms downstairs are the pick, so book ahead. Food is home cooked and tasty, and there's a small garden.

**Evergreen Guest House** (☎ 2363446; evergreen34@hotmail.com; Chameliwala Market; s/d Rs 225/300; 🛏️ 🍷 🚶) Backpacker world meets student-union mess hall at this place with 100 stuffy dormlike rooms. The restaurant is a good place to meet other travellers though. Non-guests can use the pool for Rs 100.

**Hotel Pearl Palace** (☎ 2373700; www.hotelpearlpalace.com; s Rs 250–600, d Rs 350–750; 🛏️ 🍷 🚶) A deservedly popular choice in a quiet location off Ajmer Rd. Mr Singh puts much effort into maintaining his rooms, which are great value, clean and tasteful. Overlooking Hathroi Fort, the rooftop restaurant has wrought-iron sculptured chairs, an extraordinary peacock canopy and tasty thalis (South Indian and Gujarati all-you-can-eat meals; Rs 50). Guests receive a complimentary copy of *Jaipur for Aliens*. Book ahead.

**Karni Niwas** (2365433; karniniwas@hotmail.com; C5 Motilal Atal Marg; s Rs 400–750, d Rs 550–950; 🛏️ 🍷 🚶) Tucked behind Hotel Neelam, this has many spacious, richly decorated rooms – most with balconies – and relaxing plant-filled terraces. The showers have genuine force.

**Atithi Guest House** (☎ 2378679; atithijaipur@hotmail.com; 1 Park House Scheme Rd; r Rs 450–850; 🛏️ 🍷 🚶) This guesthouse, between MI and Station Rds, offers clean, simple rooms around a calm courtyard. It's centrally located (though quiet) and service is incredibly friendly. The rooftop restaurant also does room service, and showers are regularly hot.

**Krishna Palace** (☎ 2201395; www.krishnapalace.com; E26 Durga Marg; s/d Rs 450/500, with AC Rs 750/850; 🏠) Krishna Palace is a modern building gone heritage with a clever paint job. Rooms are spotless, well maintained and comfortable – if a touch bland – and the service is excellent.

**Saharia Amla Organic Farm Resort** (☎ 5103025; binod57@yahoo.com; Maheshpura, Jaipur-Sikar Rd; Rs 500; 🏠) This member of the International Organic Volunteer Organisation has nine dirt-cheap organic mud huts where not even the furniture has been touched by chemicals! There's a relaxing swimming pool, super-healthy Rajasthani meals and well-informed village tours. The 18-hectare property is in the village of Maheshpura, 25km from Jaipur on Jaipur-Sikar Rd. There's a small dairy on site, various seasonal crops (including 10,000 amla trees) and a bevy of beehives. Volunteer teachers are welcome at the nearby primary school.

**Hotel Arya Niwas** (☎ 2372456; www.aryaniwas.com; s/d Rs 700/800, with AC Rs 800/930; 🏠 📺) Just off Sansar Chandra Marg, this reliable Jaipur institution is well run (though impersonal), and attracts a broad spectrum of short- and long-term clientele. There's a long soothing terrace facing a peaceful grassy patch, and it has a good self-service veg restaurant. Rooms are clean, although those on the ground floor are a bit claustrophobic (check out a few). The autorickshaw squad at the end of the road is easily avoided.

## MIDRANGE

### Bani Park

The Bani Park area is relatively green and leafy. It's a 1.5km rickshaw ride from the old city.

**Hotel Anuraag Villa** (☎ 2201679; www.anuraagvilla.com; D249 Devi Marg; r Rs 500-1200; 🏠 📺) This ice-cream-cone-coloured rectangular building is surprisingly serene, with an extensive front lawn and simple, well-appointed rooms. The meals are plentiful and management is sharp.

**General's Retreat** (☎ 2377539; www.generalsretreat.com; 9 Sardar Patel Marg; s/d Rs 990/1200) A good-value option set around the sprawling greenery of Chomu estate, with 10 smart, if slightly poky, rooms; one room has its own kitchenette.

**Umair Mahal** (☎ 2201952; reservation@umairmahal.com; C20B/2, Behari Marg; s/d Rs 1300/1600) Wing Commander Bhim Singh Rathore ably runs this lofty heritage 'castle' in a quiet backstreet. It's all polished faux-marble floors, colourful cur-

tains and blinding tiled interiors (especially in the foyer). Rooms are spotless, and most have balconies.

**Madhuban** (☎ 2200033; www.madhuban.net; D237 Behari Marg; s Rs 1300-1800, d Rs 1400-1900, ste Rs 2400-2700; 🏠 📺 📺) Madhuban is the premier mid-range hotel in Jaipur, run by the indefatigable Dicky, whose family once ruled Patan. It's surrounded by head-high plants and decorated with bright frescoes. The rooms are fully decked out, the restaurant is smart and versatile, and there's a small walled-in pool. It's completely hassle free.

**Hotel Meghniwas** (☎ 2202034; www.meghniwas.com; C9 Sawai Jai Singh Hwy; s/d/ste Rs 1300/1500/2200; 🏠 📺) In a 1950s building constructed by Brig Singh and run by his friendly descendants, this place has modern rooms with traditional carved-wood furniture and leafy outlooks. Nos 201 and 209 are like miniapartments – good for long-termers. The pool is in a pleasant lawn area.

**Dera Rawatsar** (☎ 2200770; www.derarawatsar.com; D194, Vijay Path; s/d/ste Rs 1400/1800/4500; 🏠 📺) Situated off the main drag, this quiet hotel is managed by a gracious Bikaner noble family. It has nicely decorated rooms, sunny courtyards, fantastic home-style Indian meals and a story-telling matriarch.

**Jas Vilas** (☎ 2204638; www.jasvilas.com; C9 Sawai Jai Singh Hwy; s/d Rs 2000/2300; 🏠 📺 📺) Built by a military man in 1950, this excellent choice is run by a charming family, and offers welcoming, eager-to-please service and a sparkling pool in a romantic courtyard. There are nine classy rooms, and it has a lovely sheltered, quiet feel. A superb breakfast costs Rs 150.

**Shahpura House** (☎ 2203069; www.shahpurahouse.com; D257 Devi Marg; s/d/ste Rs 2000/2300/3500; 🏠 📺) Owned by the Shekhawat Rajput clan, this is a good option, though it lacks a family-run feel. It's built in elaborate traditional style, and offers immaculate rooms, some with balconies, and even a durbar (royal court) hall with a huge chandelier. The swimming pool is magnificent.

## Elsewhere

**Nana-ki-Haveli** (☎ 2615502; www.dbr.nu/nana-ki-haveli; Fateh Tiba; r Rs 1200-1800) This tranquil, tucked-away place with attractive rooms decorated in traditional style is run by a lovely family for whom nothing is too much trouble. It's off Moti Dungri Rd.

**Alsisar Haveli** (☎ 2368290; www.alsisarhaveli.com; Sansar Chandra Marg; s/d/ste Rs 2400/3000/3650; 🏠 📺)

This gracious 19th-century mansion is set in beautiful, green gardens, with quaintly furnished, elegant rooms with lots of arches. It would take first prize, but nearby construction work appears never-ending.

**Narain Niwas Palace Hotel** (☎ 2561291; Narain Singh Rd; s/d/ste Rs 2595/3650/4950; 🏠 📺 📺) This doozy has an old-fashioned veranda and dusty, though charm-filled, rooms – pay a few more bucks for a suite. There's a secluded pool and lush garden. Make your own way there to avoid a monstrous commission.

**Best Western Om Tower** (☎ 2366683; omml.jaipur@yahoo.com; Church Rd; s/d/ste Rs 3850/4400/7700; 🏠 📺 📺) This worrying precursor to future Jaipur rises high above the city like a chunky space rocket that tragically crash-landed. Rooms are average at best, and the glitz-and-beige design may not be everyone's bag. Come for the spectacular revolving restaurant (see opposite), and the rooftop pool in the adjacent building.

**Country Inn** (☎ 510330; reservation.jaipur@cisindia.com; Khasa Kothi Circle, MI Rd; s/d Rs 4500/5000) A crisp hotel from the Carlson Group featuring 100 streamlined, ultramodern rooms, an impressive spa and health club, and an excellent 24-hour restaurant.

## TOP END

**Saba Haveli** (☎ 2630521; 477 Gangapol; d/ste Rs 4645/5830; 🏠) This 200-year-old *haveli* near Zorawar Gate is the latest of these ornate residences to be fully converted. Suites are suitably decadent, and the double rooms are good value for the bracket, though service is a bit sloppy.

**Samode Haveli** (☎ 2632370; www.samode.com; s/d US\$185/220, ste US\$252-315; 🏠 📺 📺) This classic in the northeast corner of the old city was once the town house of the rawal of Samode, the prime minister of Jaipur. The suites get high romance points, with big carved beds, private terraces and twinkling, intricate mirrorwork, though the ordinary rooms are ordinary value. The gorgeous pool has huge canopied double beds at one end. Prices halve from May to September.

**Jai Mahal Palace Hotel** (☎ 2223636; www.tajhotels.com; Jacob Rd; s/d US\$220/230; 🏠 📺 📺) Run by the Taj Group, this grand hotel is set in 18 acres of land with beautifully manicured Mughal gardens, which most of the swish, comfortable rooms overlook. There's a gorgeous circular pool. The 18th-century building was once the residence of Jaipur's prime minister.

**Raj Palace** (☎ 2634077; www.rajpalace.com; s/ste US\$275/475; Zorawar Gate, Amber Rd; 🏠 📺 📺) This stunning palace is almost over-the-top-end, with an antique-crockery museum, an enormous crystal chandelier, decadent paintings and a stellar list of royal guests, but the service is reassuringly intimate. The standard rooms are properly palatial, and the suites (especially Khaas Mahal and Durbar) are heavenly.

**Rambagh Palace** (☎ 2211919; www.tajhotels.com; Bhawani Singh Marg; d US\$565, ste US\$1225-1845; 🏠 📺 📺) This Taj Group special once belonged to the maharaja of Jaipur. The 47 acres sport superb views across immaculate lawns; rooms are, hmm, expensive. The Polo Bar is great for a sundowner (p176).

**Raj Vilas** (☎ 2680101; www.oberoihotels.com; Goner Rd; r US\$600, luxury tents US\$700-1500, villas US\$2000-3300; 🏠 📺 📺) About 8km from the centre, Raj Vilas is Jaipur's most sophisticated hotel. Run by Oberoi, it has 71 rooms, yet retains a boutique feel. Its terracotta domes are set in more than 32 shady orchard- and fountain-filled hectares. Rooms have sunken baths and are subtly and gorgeously decorated, and each villa has its own pool. You ride from place to place in golf buggies.

## Eating

### RESTAURANTS

Places tend to get lively at around 9pm.

## MI Road

**Natraj Restaurant** (MI Rd; mains Rs 50-180) This classy, two-level vegetarian restaurant has an extensive menu featuring North Indian, Continental and Chinese cuisine. The stuffed-tomato dish is divine, and the bomb curry will blow you away. Otherwise there's a good selection of thalis (Rs 100 to 160), but the South Indian food is oily and bland.

**Handi Restaurant** (MI Rd; dishes Rs 60-200; 🍷 noon-3.30pm & 6.30-11.30pm) This old stalwart is opposite the main post office, behind Maya Mansions, and offers scrumptious barbecue dishes, and tandoori and Mughlai cuisine. In the evenings it sets up a cheap kebab stall at the entrance to the restaurant.

**Copper Chimney** (Maya Mansions; dishes Rs 65-200; 🍷 noon-3.30pm & 6.30-11.30pm) Near Handi Restaurant, Copper Chimney is a smart, classy place with a gruff waiter army and a rollicking horse mural. It offers top-to-bottom Indian and Chinese food in a cool, pleasant setting, with a window over the mayhem of MI Rd.

**Niro's** (☎ 2374493; restaurant@nirosindia.com; MI Rd; mains Rs 80-290) Niro's has been on duty for more than 50 years, and still pumps out classic Indian fare and piped muzak. Under a mirrored roof, masses tuck into veg and nonveg dishes. The *murg malai* (chicken and cheese) kebabs and *began bharta* (aubergine) still head the list.

**OM** (☎ 2366683; ommjjaipur@yahoo.com; Church Rd; dishes Rs 90-290; ☎ noon-3.30pm & 7-11pm) The rocket-shaped icon of Jaipur houses a revolving restaurant that leaves you dining 56m up among the smog-sheltered stars. The surrounds are glitzy, and the hard-core veg – and booze-free – menu is superb. A revolution takes 45 minutes, but service is invariably quicker. Keep your hands off the buffet – it doesn't match the à la carte. It's off MI Rd.

### Around MI Road

**Jai Shankar Pavitra Bhojnalaya** (☎ 25102541; 12 Sindhi Camp Bus Stand, Station Rd; dishes Rs 10-50) Close to the main bus station, this popular veg place does especially good Indian breakfasts. Limited English, but it's fast, fresh and delicious.

**Ice Spice** (☎ 2370586; Ashok Marg; mains Rs 45-65) A short stroll south of Evergreen Guesthouse, this locals' place does a roaring trade in Rajasthani thalis (Rs 65), and a good side business in South Indian dishes.

**Four Seasons** (D43A Subhas Marg; mains Rs 45-170; ☎ noon-3.30pm & 6.30-11pm) This smart, vastly popular place – expect to wait on weekends – is on two levels, with a glass wall to the kitchens. It's a bit out of the way but has hearty vegetarian food and a great range of Rajasthani dishes. Try the *mutter paneer* (peas and unfermented cheese) or a thali (Rs 85 to 100).

**Gayatri's** (AC4 Gayatri Sadan, Sawai Jai Singh Hwy, Bani Park; mains Rs 60-90) Close to Madhuban hotel, this pleasant, clean multicuisine restaurant whips up superb curries in healthy portions. The *Kashmiri dam aloo* (a traditional Kashmiri dish made with potatoes and spices) is a winner.

**Mediterraneo** (9 Khandela House; dishes Rs 65-195) This Italian restaurant offers wood-fired pizzas and pasta dishes – even Italians recommend it. It's on the candlelit rooftop, and offers a rare chance to eat outside in Jaipur. It's behind Amber Tower.

**Jaipur Inn** (B17 Shiv Marg, Bani Park; buffet Rs 150; ☎ 7-11pm) This guesthouse has a rooftop restaurant with stupendous views over Jaipur.

The scrumptious Indian veg buffet dinner is sociable and superb (nonguests book in advance).

**Spice Court** (☎ 2220202; Hari Bhawan, Achrol House, Jacob Rd, Civil Lines; mains Rs 90-200) This relaxed clubhouse restaurant, with a blue tiled roof and a splendid evening courtyard, is an excellent place to escape the hum of the city (but not the hum of Hindi pop). The food is fresh, the kitchen spotless, and the kebab platter is serious business.

### Old City

**Mohan** (144-5 Nehru Bazaar; dishes Rs 8-55) This popular chow pit is grubby on the outside, but prepares freshly cooked food on the inside. The name is in Hindi and it's on the corner of the street, a few steps down from the pavement.

**Ganesh Restaurant** (Nehru Bazaar; dishes Rs 10-100) This pocket-sized outdoor restaurant is in a fantastic location on the old city wall. There's no English menu and not much English spoken, but if you're looking for a local eatery with fresh tasty food you'll love it. It's near New Gate, between two tailors.

**LMB** (Lakshmi Mishthan Bandar; Johari Bazaar; mains Rs 55-210; ☎ 11.30am-3.30pm & 7-11pm) LMB is heart-warming stuff – an Art Deco-meets-disco *satvik* (pure vegetarian) restaurant going strong since 1954. The menu includes a warning from Krishna about people who like putrid and polluted food (*tamasic*). All meals are made with pure ghee (clarified butter), and *puri* (flat dough that puffs up when fried) snacks such as *kachori* (*puris* pepped up with corn or dhal) and *gol gappas* (Indian-style breakfast of *puris* and vegetables) are the best in town. Aside from the thali, *paneer tikka* (unfermented cheese cooked in spices and dry roasted) stuffed with fennel is a scrummy choice.

**Palace Café** (☎ 2616449; City Palace; mains Rs 80-250) A welcome respite from the tourist shuffle, Palace Café has classy Indian food, measured service, and a no-nonsense team of chefs who won't be hurried. It's better at night, when it's cool enough for alfresco dining.

### QUICK EATS

**Mr Beans** (E141A Sardar Patel Rd) India's premier coffee chain still has the best cuppa in this town; you'll find the Jaipur branch opposite the Raj Mahal Hotel.

**Lassiwala** (MI Rd; lassis Rs 10-20) This milky institution is a simple little place that whips up

fabulous, creamy lassis (yoghurt and iced-water drink). Will the real Lassiwala please stand up? It's the one that says 'Since 1944', directly next to the alleyway; imitators (some pretty good) spread to the right as you face it.

**Jai Mahal** (MI Rd; ice creams Rs 12-110) This packed little takeaway ice-cream parlour has some inventive concoctions, from the earthquake to the after ate.

**Chic Chocolate** (MI Rd) Around the corner from Atithi Guest House, this pastry shop serves excellent cheese toast (with onion and peppers, Rs 25). It also bakes its own bread and cakes.

For great Indian sweets – including Jaipur's own sticky *ghevar* (a honeycomb-shaped cake made from flour and dhal and covered in ghee and milk) topped with flaked almonds – head to the mobbed **Rawat Kachori** (Station Rd; sweets Rs 5-10, lassis Rs 22); a delicious milk crown should fill you up for the afternoon. Across the road is **Kanji** (Station Rd; sweets per kg Rs 110-300), with a similarly fabulous array.

## Drinking

Jaipur isn't traditionally a late-night party town; MI Rd has sprouted a few drinking dens, while the top-end hotels all have slick bars, none of which get particularly wild.

**B2B** (Country Inn, Kasa Kothi Circle; ☎ 7pm-1am) This hit-and-miss nightclub, in the Country Inn basement, is an ideal place to witness Jaipur's new upward mobility in mid-swing. It has the requisite 'couples-only' dance floor, and an impressive range of cocktails.

**Polo Bar** (Rambagh Palace Hotel, Bhawani Singh Marg; ☎ 11am-midnight) The pick of the gin joints, with arched, scalloped windows overlooking perfect lawns. A bottled beer costs Rs 360.

**Steam** (☎ 7pm-late) In the same complex as Polo Bar, Steam is perhaps the only genuine late-night venue in town, and definitely the only one built inside a steam engine.

## Entertainment

**Raj Mandir Cinema** (☎ 2379372; Rs 25-100; ☎ sessions 12.30pm, 3.30pm, 6.30pm, 9.30pm) The number-one Hindi cinema in India, world-famous Raj Mandir is an icon of Jaipur. Opened in 1976, the meringue-shaped auditorium is so ugly it's almost beautiful, while the cream-puff exterior looks ready to orbit outer space or get gobbled up by a passing sweet-toothed ogre. It's usually full, despite its immense size, but bookings can be made one hour to

seven days in advance (open 10am to 6pm) at Windows 7 and 8. Alternatively, sharpen your elbows and join the queue when the current booking office opens 45 minutes before the curtain goes up.

**Chokhi Dhani** (☎ 2225001; adult/3-9yr incl meal Rs 190/100) Located 15km from Jaipur, this reconstructed village provides a fantastical, magical evening. It's pretend ethnicity, but don't let that put you off. Stroll through gardens lit by glimmering lamps and dine on traditional Rajasthani thalis. Then take in some offbeat entertainment, ranging from the bizarre to the more bizarre: traditional tribal dancers setting fire to their hats, small children balancing on poles, and dancers dressed in lion costumes lurking in a wood. It's hugely popular with middle-class Indian families, and you can stay here in luxurious mud huts (huts Rs 4449, suites Rs 6449).

## Shopping

Jaipur is shopping heaven, and Rajasthani crafts adorn its pearly gates. Bargain your pants off though, or you might go home without them. Tourist traps around the City Palace and Hawa Mahal tend to be pricier. At some shops, such as the government emporium and some fancy stores, prices are fixed, but often on the high side. For useful tips on bargaining, see p1148.

Most of the larger shops can pack and send your parcels home for you – although it'll be cheaper if you do it yourself (see p167 for postal services).

Jaipur is famous for precious and semi-precious stones. Many shops offer bargain prices, but you do need to be able to recognise both your gems and your charlatans. The main gem-dealing area is around the Muslim area of Pahar Ganj. Here you can see stones being cut and polished in workshops tucked off narrow backstreets. Johari and Siredeori Bazaars are where many jewellery shops are concentrated, selling gold, silver and fine, highly glazed enamelwork known as *meenakari*.

The old city is still loosely divided into traditional artisans' quarters. Bapu Bazaar is lined with saris and fabrics, and is a good spot to buy trinkets. For fabrics, you might find better deals along Johari Bazaar, where many merchants specialise in cotton. Kishanpol Bazaar is famous for textiles, particularly *bandhani*. Nehru Bazaar sells fabric, as well as jootis (traditional pointy-toed shoes), trinkets and perfume. MI

Rd is another good place to buy jootis. The best place for bangles is Maniharon ka Rasta.

Factories and showrooms are strung along the length of Amber Rd between Zorawar Gate and the Holiday Inn to catch the tourist traffic. Here you'll find block prints, blue pottery, carpets and antiques, but the emporia are used to busloads swinging in to blow their cash, so you'll need to wear your bargaining hat.

Rickshaw-wallahs, hotels and travel agents will be getting a hefty cut from any shop they take you to. Steer clear of friendly young men on the street trying to take you to their uncle's/brother's/cousin's shop – commission is the name of their game too.

**Rajsthali** (MI Rd; ☎ 11am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) The state-government emporium, opposite Ajmer Gate, is packed with good-quality Rajasthani artefacts and crafts, but has an air of torpor that doesn't make shopping much fun. The best reason to visit is to scout out prices before launching into the bazaars.

**Anokhi** (2 Tilak Marg; ☎ 10am-7pm) This classy, upmarket boutique is well worth visiting, with high-quality textiles such as block-printed fabrics, tablecloths and clothes. The pieces are produced just outside Jaipur at an unusually ethical factory built on the grounds of an organic farm.

**Pratap Sons** (☎ 2575421; Saraogi Mansion) This professional setup is perfect for tailor-made Western suits that somehow appear before your eyes, and pricey but glamorous *salwar kameez* (long dresslike tunic worn over baggy pants).

**Kripal Kumbh** (☎ 2201127; B18A Shiv Marg, Bani Park; ☎ 9am-5pm) This is a showroom in a private home – it's a great place to buy the famous blue pottery produced by the renowned,

multi-award-winning potter Mr Kripal Singh. Now in his eighties, he is an accomplished artist and has some stunningly beautiful artworks for sale. Ceramics go for anything from Rs 10 (for a paperweight) to Rs 10,000 (for a large vase). You can also learn how to paint or make blue pottery here (see p172). Touts might take you elsewhere and claim that someone else is K Singh, or even tell you that he is dead, so make sure you are taken to the right place (near the Jaipur Inn).

**Mojari** (Bhawani Villa, Gulab Path, Chomu House; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon-Sat) This place sells fabulous footwear for between Rs 400 and 800. Named after the traditional decorated shoes of Rajasthan, Mojari is a UN-supported project that helps 3500 rural leatherworkers' households. It's fit for shoe fetishists, but not for large feet. Find it off Sadar Patel Marg.

**Juneja Art Gallery** (6-7 Laksmi Complex, MI Rd; ☎ 10am-8pm) This gallery has some striking pieces of contemporary art by Rajasthani artists (prices from Rs 100 to 50,000).

**Samanvai Art** (☎ 5114400; www.samanvaiart.com; No 351, 3rd fl, Ganpati Plaza, MI Rd) This place also has edgy paintings.

**Ratan Textiles** (☎ 2222526; www.ratantextiles.com; Jain Paprimal Cottage, Ajmer Rd) Popular with Indian shoppers, this is a 25-year-old design studio that specialises in interior decorations, with some very creative staff. It has a huge selection of blankets and linen.

**Himalaya** (MI Rd; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) For Ayurvedic preparations, try this place near Panch Batti, which has been selling herbal remedies and beauty products for 70 years. They can help you with a wide variety of ailments, including poor memory and hangovers. There

## WARNING – GEM SCAMS

A disturbingly large number of travellers continue to get bedazzled by gem deals. These too-good-to-be-true con tricks might involve buying gems for resale at a supposedly huge profit, or getting paid by wealthy dealers to cart gems then suddenly coming up against 'customs problems' that mean you have to shell out huge amounts, or some other cunning ploy.

The con artists are invariably charming, often taking travellers to their homes and insisting on paying for meals. Mistaking a smooth operator for someone showing genuine Indian hospitality, the unsuspecting traveller begins to trust his or her new-found friend. The proposed moneymaking scheme a few days later seems too good to be true – and it is. If you buy gems for resale, they are usually worth a fraction of the price paid (or, if you agreed to have them sent, they never arrive, even if you see them posted in front of you). Hard-luck stories about an inability to obtain an export licence or having to pay huge taxes are not your problem. Testimonials from other happy gem-dealing punters are easy to fake. Don't let the promise of easy money cloud your judgment.

are even treatments for your pet. The moisturisers are good buys.

**New Jodhpur Tailors** (9 Ksheer Sagar Hotel, Motilal Atal Marg; ☎ 9am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) This small tailor shop can make you a pair of jodhpurs (Rs 500) in preparation for a visit to the Blue City. Or you could just go for a made-to-measure suit (Rs 1800) or shirt (Rs 100).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Jet Airways** (☎ 2360450; Umaid Nagar House, MI Rd) flies to Delhi (US\$90, daily), Mumbai (US\$190, daily), Udaipur (US\$125, daily) and Ahmedabad (US\$302, Monday and Saturday). If you're under 30 you get a 30% discount. **Indian Airlines** (☎ 2743500; Tonk Rd), whose office is out of town, runs similar fares.

You can book domestic flights at **Rajasthan Travel Service** (☎ 2365408; Ganpati Plaza, MI Rd) or **Crown Tours** (☎ 2363310; Palace Rd). For international flights, **Air India** (☎ 2368047; Shop 101, Ganpati Plaza, MI Rd) is in the city centre.

### BUS

Rajasthan State Transport Corporation (RSTC) buses all leave from the **main bus station** (Station Rd), also picking up passengers at Narain Singh Circle. There is a left-luggage office here (Rs 10 per bag for 24 hours), as well as a prepaid autorickshaw stand. Deluxe buses all leave from Platform 3, tucked away in the right-hand corner of the bus station, and they may be booked in advance from the **reservation office** (☎ 2205790) at the bus station.

There are regular buses to many destinations, including the following:

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Agra	174	5½	12 daily
Ajmer	140	2½	7 daily
Bharatpur	95	4½	4 daily
Bikaner	125	8	hourly
Bundi	105	5	5 daily
Chittor	156	7	2 daily
Delhi	270	5½	at least hourly
Jaisalmer	286	15	daily
Jhunjhunu	84	5	half-hourly
Jodhpur	240	7	3 daily
Kota	143	5	3 daily
Mt Abu	312	13	daily
Nawalgarh	71	4	half-hourly
Sawai Madhopur	85	6	3 daily
Udaipur	202	10	5 daily

Prices are for non-AC buses. For long journeys, private buses can be more comfortable, though the RSTC Silverline luxury services are pretty good. Private buses also often provide sleeper buses (at extra cost) over long distances, where you can lie down – ensuring far better sleep than on a chair service.

### CAR

The RTDC charges Rs 5.5 per kilometre in an Ambassador (non-AC), with a daily minimum of 250km; the overnight charge starts at Rs 100. Private taxis charge from Rs 4.5 per kilometre for a non-AC car, with the same minimum. Remember you'll have to pay for the driver's return journey.

### TRAIN

The efficient **railway reservation office** (☎ 135; ☎ 8am-2pm & 2.15-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) is to your right as you exit the main train station. It's open for advance reservations only. Join the queue for 'Freedom Fighters and Foreign Tourists' (Counter 769). For same-day travel, buy your ticket at the train station. For enquiries call ☎ 131. See opposite for details of routes and fares. The Jaipur-Udaipur line should have reopened at the time of publication.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

There are no bus services from the airport. An autorickshaw/taxi costs at least Rs 150/250 for the 15km journey into the centre.

### AUTORICKSHAW

There are prepaid autorickshaw stands at the bus and train stations. If you want to hire an autorickshaw for local sightseeing, it should cost around Rs 200/300 for a half-/full day (including a visit to Amber but not Nahargarh); be prepared to bargain.

### CYCLE-RICKSHAW

You can do your bit for the environment by flagging down a lean-limbed cycle-rickshaw rider. A short trip costs about Rs 20.

## AROUND JAIPUR

### Amber

Pronounced 'amer' and meaning 'high', this wraithlike fort-palace beautifully illustrates Rajput artistry in faded shades of reddish pink. Situated on rugged hills 11km north



## MAJOR TRAINS FROM JAIPUR

Destination	Train No & Name	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departure
Agra	2308 <i>Howrah Jodhpur Exp</i>	157/385*/570	6½	2am
Ahmedabad	2958 <i>Ahmedabad SJ Radhani Exp</i>	890/1220	9¼	12.45am (Wed-Mon)
	2916 <i>Ahmedabad Ashram Exp</i>	281/735*/1115	11	8.55pm
Ajmer	2016 <i>Shatabdi</i>	310/545	2	10.45pm (Thu-Tue)
Bikaner	4737 <i>Bikaner Exp</i>	119/853	9¼	10.10pm
	2468 <i>Intercity Exp</i>	121/351	6¾	3.25pm
Delhi	2016 <i>Shatabdi</i>	535/1015	4¼	5.45pm
	2957 <i>Rajdhani</i>	530/725	5½	2.30am
	2414 <i>Jaipur-Delhi Exp</i>	80/277	5½	4.25pm
Jaisalmer	4059 <i>Jaisalmer Dehli Exp</i>	256/690*	12¾	12.05am
Jodhpur	2465 <i>Intercity Exp</i>	107/359	5½	5.10pm
	2461 <i>Mandore Exp</i>	180/450*/679	5½	2.35am
Sikar	9734 <i>Shekhawati Exp</i>	37/135	2¾	6.05pm
Udaipur	9615 <i>Chetak Exp</i>	167/748	12¼	8.40pm

(due to reopen by  
time of publication)

*Rajdhani* fares are 3AC/2AC; *Shatabdi* fares are chair/executive; express fares are 2nd class/chair or sleeper for day trains, sleeper/AC sleeper for overnight trains (\* = 3AC). To calculate 1st class and other fares see p1180.

of town, Amber was once the ancient capital of Jaipur state.

Construction of the **fort** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50, camera/video Rs 75/150; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) was begun in 1592 by Maharaja Man Singh, the Rajput commander of Akbar's army. It was later extended by the Jai Singhs before the move to Jaipur.

You can climb up to the fort from the road in about 10 minutes (cold drinks are available at the top). A seat in a jeep up to the fort costs Rs 150 return. Riding by elephant is popular at Rs 500 return (each can carry up to four people), but it's just as easy to walk, and treatment of the animals is suspect. Help in Suffering (see p1159) is lobbying the government to speed up plans to build better facilities for the elephants. If you want to help, you can send a letter of support.

Hiring a guide (Rs 150 to 200 for 1½ hours, maximum four people) at the entrance is an asset here, as there are few signs.

Otherwise, after leaving the ticket office, stick to the right of the main stairs, and ascend the narrower stairs; the silver door of the small **Kali Temple** (☎ 6am-noon & 4-8pm) lies at the top. From the 16th century to 1980 (when it was banned), a goat was sacrificed here daily. Photography is not permitted.

To the left of the temple, the main stairway leads to the **Diwan-i-Am** (Hall of Public Audi-

ence), with a double row of columns and latticed galleries above.

The maharaja's apartments are on the higher terrace; you enter through a gateway decorated with mosaics and sculptures. The **Jai Mandir** (Hall of Victory) is noted for its inlaid panels and mirrored ceiling. Carved marble relief panels around the hall are fascinatingly delicate and quirky, with cartoonlike insects and sinuous flowers.

Opposite the Jai Mandir is the **Sukh Niwas** (Hall of Pleasure), with an ivory-inlaid sandalwood door, and a channel that once carried cooling water right through the room. From the Jai Mandir you can take in the fine views from the palace ramparts over the lake below. The **zenana** (areas where women were secluded) surround the fourth courtyard, linked by a common passageway for the maharaja's discreet nocturnal visits.

Continuing past Amber Fort you'll find the newly opened **Anokhi Museum of Handprinting** (Anokhi Haveli, Kheri Gate, Amber; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Tue-Sat, 11am-4.30pm Sun), which superbly documents the recent resurgence in hand-block printing, and runs hands-on demonstrations. The *haveli*, reached up cobblestone pathways, is itself worth the visit, and the exhibitions are regularly updated. A café serves excellent coffee and there's also a gift shop.

There are frequent buses to Amber from near the Hawa Mahal in Jaipur (Rs 8, 25 minutes).

## Jaigarh

A scrubby green hill tumbles down above Amber, topped by imposing **Jaigarh** (Indian/foreigner Rs 15/20, camera/video Rs 20/100, car Rs 50; ☎ 9am–5pm), built in 1726 by Jai Singh. The stern fort, punctuated by whimsical-hatted lookout towers, was never captured and has survived intact through the centuries. It's an uphill walk (about 1km) from Amber and offers great views from the Diwa Burj watchtower. The fort has reservoirs, residential areas, a puppet theatre and the world's largest wheeled cannon, *Jaya Vana*. Admission is free with a ticket to the City Palace (p169).

## Abhaneri

About 95km from Jaipur on the Agra road, this remote village, surrounded by rolling wheat fields, is the unlikely location for one of Rajasthan's most awe-inspiring *baoris* (stepwells). An incredible geometric sight, **Chand Baori** (admission free; ☎ dawn–dusk) has around 11 visible levels of zigzagging steps and is 20m deep. Both the crumbled palace and the warm orange sandstone Harshat Mata Temple were built by King Chand, ruler of Abhaneri and a Rajput from the Chahamanas dynasty.

From Jaipur, catch a bus to Sikandra (Rs 20, 1½ hours), from where you can hire a jeep for the 10km trip to Abhaneri (Rs 250 return, including a 30-minute stop). Alternatively, take a bus to Gular, from where it's a 5km walk to Abhaneri. If you have your own transport, this is a worthwhile stop between Jaipur and Bharatpur or Agra.

## Balaji

The extraordinary Hindu exorcism temple of **Balaji** (☎ dawn–dusk) is about 3km off the Jaipur–Agra road. People bring their possessed loved ones here to have bad spirits exorcised through prayer and rituals. Most exorcisms take place on Tuesdays and Saturdays. At these times the street outside feels like it's hosting a Hindu rave, and the only people who can get inside the temple are the holy men and the victims – services are relayed to the crowds outside on crackly video screens. The possessed scream, shout, dance and shake their heads.

If you wait until the service has finished, you will be able to look inside the temple. You may want to cover your head with a scarf as a

mark of respect. No photography is permitted. The often disturbing scenes at this temple may upset some.

From Jaipur there are numerous buses to Balaji (local/express Rs 32/50, 2½/two hours).

## BHARATPUR

05644 / pop 205,104

Bharatpur is home to the World Heritage-listed Keoladeo Ghana National Park (p182), one of the world's prime bird-breeding and feeding grounds. This peaceful sanctuary is hard-core twitcher (bird-watcher) territory, and boasts a whopping 364 species within its 29-sq-km marshlands, including many threatened aquatic birds on migratory routes from Central Asia.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Bharatpur was an important stronghold of the Jats, who retained their autonomy through their prowess in battle and marriage alliances with Rajput nobility. They successfully opposed the Mughals on several occasions, and their 18th-century fort here withstood an attack by the British in 1805 and a long siege in 1825. This siege led to the signing of the first treaty of friendship between the northwest Indian states and the East India Company. The Jat influence and the town's position next to the border with Uttar Pradesh means that it resembles the towns in the neighbouring state rather than those in Rajasthan.

The fort's sturdy defences remain, but Bharatpur itself has lost its charm.

Bring mosquito repellent.

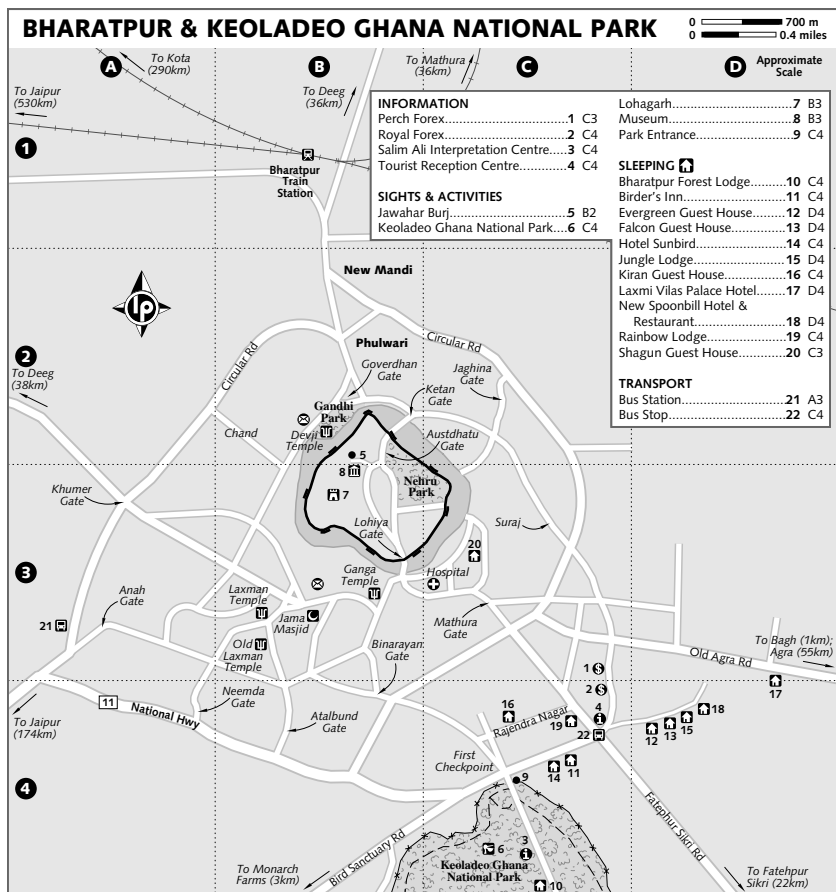
## Sights

**Lohagarh**, the early 18th-century 'Iron Fort', occupies the entire small artificial island in the town centre. Maharaja Suraj Mahal built two towers within the ramparts – the *Jawahar Burj* and *Fateh Burj* – to commemorate his victories over the Mughals and the British. The austere structure contains three decaying palaces. One of them, centred on a tranquil courtyard, houses a little-visited **museum** (admission Rs 3, free Mon, camera/video Rs 10/20; ☎ 10am–4.30pm Sat–Thu) with Jain sculptures, paintings, weapons and dusty animal trophies. Most spectacular is the palace's original *hammam* (Turkish bath).

## Sleeping

For more accommodation options, see p182.

**Shagun Guest House** (☎ 232455; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 80/90) Down a lane inside Mathura



gate, this place is the only reasonable choice in the dusty town. Rooms are basic, cell-like and dusty, but it's cheap and fronted by a little tree-shaded courtyard with primitive grass huts. The friendly owner, Rajeev, is knowledgeable about the park, and offers village tours.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

There are regular buses heading to destinations including Agra (local/express Rs 40/55, 1½/two hours), Fatehpur Sikri in Uttar Pradesh (Rs 12, one hour), Jaipur (Rs 90, five hours), Deeg (Rs 15, one hour) and Alwar (Rs 43, four hours). Buses depart from the bus station but they'll also stop at the

crossroads beside the Tourist Reception Centre.

### TRAIN

The *Janata Express* (Nos 9023/4) leaves New Delhi at 1.45pm and arrives in Bharatpur at 6.20pm. It leaves Bharatpur at 8.05am, arriving in the capital at 12.50pm (2nd class/sleeper Rs 68/121). There are about six trains daily to Sawai Madhopur (2nd class Rs 78, four hours, 182km), which continue to Kota (2nd class/sleeper Rs 43/121, six hours, 258km).

### Getting Around

Auto- or cycle-rickshaws from the bus station to the tourist office and most hotels should be about Rs 25; from the train station, Rs 30.

## KEOLADEO GHANA NATIONAL PARK

By far the best time to visit this park (Indian/foreigner Rs 25/200, video Rs 200; ☎ 6am-6pm Apr-Sep, 6.30am-5pm Oct-Mar) is October to February, when you'll see many migratory birds. At other times, it can be dry and relatively bird-free.

The best times for bird-spotting are either early morning or evening. Expect to see Saras cranes (and its spectacular courtship dance), herons, egrets, geese, owls, cormorants and kingfishers. Pythons are most commonly seen in the winter, when they come out from underground to sunbathe. The southern reaches are a web of deserted, tangled paths, and are officially closed, as a tigress is rumoured to roam the area.

The sanctuary was once a vast semiarid region, filling with water during the monsoon season but drying up afterwards. To prevent this, the maharaja of Bharatpur diverted water from a nearby irrigation canal and soon birds began to settle in vast numbers.

Yet in a 2006 report, Unesco urged that a permanent backup source of water for the park be established, as drought (along with unchecked cattle grazing) had caused serious damage. The previous year, a government attempt to divert water from the nearby Panchana dam came up against strong opposition from local villagers.

Admission entitles you to one entrance per day; if you want to spend the day inside, get your hotel to provide a packed lunch. Carry drinking water, as bird-watching is thirsty work.

One narrow road (no motorised vehicles permitted) runs through the park, with countless embankments leading off into the greenery. Only the government-authorised cycle-rickshaws (recognisable by the yellow plate bolted onto the front) are allowed inside. You don't pay admission for the drivers, but they charge Rs 100 per hour. A guide costs Rs 150 per hour.

An excellent way to see the park is to hire a bike (around Rs 40 per day), either at the entrance or from your hotel.

## Orientation & Information

Keoladeo Ghana National Park is 3km south of Bharatpur's centre.

The **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 05644-222542; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd Sat of month), 700m from the park entrance, has a map of Bharatpur (Rs 10).

About 2km inside the park, you'll find the recently built Salim Ali Interpretation Centre & Programme, where an interactive display highlights the park's unique ecosystem. There's a bookshop with birdlife books, and a snack bar near the Keoladeo Temple, about 1.5km from the park entrance.

You can cash travellers cheques, get credit-card advances, change money and surf the internet at **Royal Forex** (New Civil Lines; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 6am-10pm). You can also try **Perch Forex** (☎ 05644-233477; B6 New Civil Lines; ☎ 5am-11pm).

## Sleeping & Eating

The following places are all within easy walking distance of the bird sanctuary. All hire binoculars (around Rs 50 per day) and bikes (around Rs 40 per day), and will arrange park guides. Prices fluctuate according to the season, and AC costs an additional Rs 50 to 100. Most guesthouses will provide a tasty thali for somewhere between Rs 40 and 70.

**Kiran Guest House** (☎ 05644-223845; 364 Rajendra Nagar; s with shared bathroom Rs 80, d with private bathroom Rs 150-300) This is a friendly place with simple rooms and a pleasant rooftop run by eager-to-please brothers. It's a short walk from the park.

**Rainbow Lodge** (☎ 05644-220253; dm/r Rs 100/300) Near Rajasthan Gramin Bank, this spotless hotel has an appealing dormitory and cheap, well-presented rooms. At the time of research, guests had to eat in their laps.

**Jungle Lodge** (☎ 05644-225622; Gori Shankar; r Rs 150-300) This place has clean, plain, comfortable rooms, set by a lovely jungly garden.

**Evergreen Guest House** (☎ 05644-225917; s/d Rs 200) This is a basic, relaxed option, but it boasts many satisfied customers. Its garden restaurant serves delicious home cooking, and motorbike hire costs Rs 450 per day.

**Falcon Guest House** (☎ 05644-223815; falconguesthouse@hotmail.com; r Rs 200-500) The Falcon is well kept, with a charming owner and sizable rooms, some with private balcony. Ask for a soft mattress. A tasty veg thali costs Rs 60.

**Hotel Pratap Palace** (☎ 05644-225093; www.hotelpratappalace.net; Bird Sanctuary Rd; s/d Rs 300/400, deluxe Rs 700/850, with AC Rs 1100/1250; ☎ ☎) This grand-seeming hotel, built in traditional style, offers faded but spacious, comfortable rooms; the standard is variable so look at a few.

**Monarch Farms** (☎ 9414215139; divayog30@yahoo.com.in; Rampura; r Rs 500) Three kilometres from Bharatpur, this place provides an unusual

opportunity to stay as a guest in a family house. The charming upper-middle-class family speak excellent English and live in a huge bungalow surrounded by large grounds, in which they run a separate restaurant, Car-doman Court.

**New Spoonbill Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 05644-223571; hotelspoonbill@rediffmail.com; r Rs 500-700) This place has smart, simple rooms, each with a small terrace. The bigger rooms have lots of windows. The dining room looks onto the garden.

**Hotel Sunbird** (☎ 05644-225701; www.hotelsunbird.com; Bird Sanctuary Rd; s/d Rs 800/900, deluxe Rs 1050/1250; ☺ ☑) The highly fancied Sunbird is a superbly run place with a leafy seating area and a reasonable restaurant. Rooms are clean and attractive, similar to those at the Birder's Inn but less spacious.

**Birder's Inn** (☎ 05644-227346; brdinn@yahoo.com; Bird Sanctuary Rd; s/d Rs 825/1045; ☺ ☑) This place is set back from the road, with a little garden at the front. The nicely decorated rooms are appealing, airy and spacious, and have good bathrooms.

**Bharatpur Forest Lodge** (☎ 05644-222760; s/d Rs 2500/2799) This lodge, run by the Indian Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC), is 1km inside the park. Comfortable, quiet rooms have balconies with swing seats and are surrounded by greenery.

**Laxmi Vilas Palace Hotel** (☎ 05644-223523; www.laxmivilas.com; Kakaji-ki-Kothi, Old Agra Rd; s/d/ste Rs 3000/3250/4200; ☺ ☑) Once owned by the younger son of Maharaja Jaswant Singh, Laxmi Vilas is deluxe. Arched ceilings and heavy furniture make for atmospheric rooms, which are set around a courtyard. The pool is a saviour.

**Bagh** (☎ 05644-225415; Agra-Achmera Rd; www.thebagh.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$90/110; ☺ ☑ ☑) This beautiful hotel is in the former royal orchard, 2km from town. It has 14 elegant rooms with antique furnishings but a contemporary feel, and the 200-year-old 10-acre garden has masses of birds if you're feeling too lazy to go to the park.

## Getting There & Around

For transport information, see p181.

## DEEG

☎ 0564

Built by Suraj Mahl in the mid-18th century as a summer resort for the Bharatpur rulers, Deeg was also the second capital of Bharatpur

state. The town held a famous battle in which the maharaja's forces withstood a combined Mughal and Maratha army of 80,000 men.

Deeg is now famous for the **Suraj Mahl's Palace** (Gopal Bhavan; admission Rs 100; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Thu), one of India's most beautiful and delicately proportioned buildings. It is splendidly preserved and feels like a time capsule – it was used by the maharajas until the early 1970s, and rooms contain their original furnishings, from faded, spilling sofas to huge swing fans. Built in a combination of Rajput and Mughal architectural styles, the 18th-century palace fronts a large tank (reservoir), the Gopal Sagar, and is flanked by two exquisite pavilions. Outside, the gardens continue the extravagant theme, with monsoon pavilions engineered to mimic the sound of thunder when it rains. The Keshav Bhavan (Summer Pavilion) has hundreds of fountains, which are turned on for local festivals, when paint is used to colour the water. The fountains are worked by hand – plugs are pulled from a rooftop reservoir, creating the water pressure that powers the fountains.

Deeg's massive **walls** (up to 28m high) and 12 vast bastions, some with their cannons still in place, are also worth exploring – you can walk up to the top of the walls from the palace.

Frequent buses run to/from Alwar (Rs 30, 2½ hours) and Bharatpur (Rs 15, one hour, half-hourly). There is one direct bus to Agra (Rs 50).

## ALWAR

☎ 0144 / pop 260,245

Dusty Alwar has a fine palace and some colourful bazaars. It was once an important Rajput state, emerging in the 18th century under Pratap Singh, who pushed back the rulers of Jaipur to the south and the Jats of Bharatpur to the east, and who successfully resisted the Marathas. It was one of the first Rajput states to ally itself with the fledgling British empire, although British interference in Alwar's internal affairs meant that this partnership was not always amicable.

It's the nearest town to Sariska Reserve.

## Sights & Activities

### BALA QUILA

This imposing fort, with its 5km of ramparts, stands 300m above the city, its walls clinging to the steep incline. Predating the time of

Pratap Singh, it's one of the few forts in Rajasthan built before the rise of the Mughals. Unfortunately, the fort now houses a radio transmitter station and can only be visited with permission from the superintendent of police (SP). However, this is easy to get – just ask at the SP office in the City Palace complex.

### CITY PALACE COMPLEX

Below the fort sprawls the delicately coloured, complicated City Palace complex, its massive gates and tank lined by a beautifully symmetrical chain of ghats (steps or landings on a river) and pavilions. There's an interesting **government museum** (admission Rs 3, free Mon; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Thu) hidden away in the former City Palace. The museum's exhibits evoke the extravagance of the maharajas' lifestyle, with stunning weapons, royal ivory slippers, miniatures and old musical instruments.

### Sleeping & Eating

Several hotels, owned by brothers, ring a central courtyard set back from Manu Marg, about 500m east of the bus stand.

**Ashoka** (☎ 2346780; off Manu Marg; s/d from Rs 250/300) Offers good rooms, some of which have been freshly painted. The cheaper rooms are less appealing; the priciest have groovy geometric murals and freshly tiled bathrooms.

**Alwar Hotel** (☎ 2700012; 26 Manu Marg; s/d Rs 400/700, with AC Rs 800/1000; 🍷) Helpful staff run this place, with spacious, snazzy rooms set in leafy grounds. There's a good restaurant, and you can eat in the garden.

**Neemrana Fort Palace** (☎ 246007; www.neemrana hotels.com; s/d Rs 1100/2200; 🍷 🚗) If you have your own transport, treat yourself and stay 75km north of Alwar in this magnificent parchment-coloured fort-palace mounted on a fortified plateau. The fort rises an amazing 10 levels and is in a setting of 25 acres, among the Aravalli hills.

**Prem Pavitra Bhojalaya** (Old Bus Stand; dishes Rs 20-80) Alwar's best restaurant is in the heart of the old town (though there's also another branch) and serves up fresh, tasty pure-veg food.

### Getting There & Away

From Alwar there are buses to Sariska (local/express Rs 12/14, 1½/one hours, half-hourly from 5.15am to 8.30pm), which go on to Jaipur (Rs 68/73, four/five hours). There are also frequent (bumpy) services to Bharatpur

(Rs 43, four hours), and Deeg (Rs 27, 2½ hours). Buses to Delhi (Rs 81, half hourly) travel via either Tijara (four hours to Delhi) or Ramgarh (five hours to Delhi).

For train travel, the *Shatabdi* (Nos 2015/6) passes through Alwar. It departs for Ajmer (chair Rs 440, four hours) at 8.35am and stops at Jaipur (chair Rs 315, two hours) at 10.40am. For Delhi it departs at 7.28pm (chair/1st class Rs 350/670, 2½ hours).

The *Mandore Express* leaves at 11.43pm, arriving in Jodhpur (sleeper/3AC Rs 226/578, 465km) at 8am. The *Jaisalmer Express*, leaving at 8.50pm, goes all the way to Jaisalmer (sleeper/3AC Rs 251/705, 16 hours, 759km).

A return taxi to Sariska Reserve & National Park (with a stop at Siliserh) will cost you around Rs 750.

## SARISKA RESERVE & NATIONAL PARK

☎ 0144

Lying in a wooded valley, a tangle of greenery against red clay, **Sariska Reserve & National Park** (Indian/foreigner Rs 25/200, jeep Rs 125, video Rs 200; ☎ 7am-4pm Oct-Mar, 6am-4.30pm Apr-Sep) has been at the centre of controversy since 2005 when the WWF produced a damning report that suggested that the tigers had been poached – a sad indictment of Project Tiger (who've been in charge here since 1979) and the sanctuary.

The sanctuary is still worth visiting though – the 800 sq km (including a core area of 498 sq km) is home to sambars (deer), chitals (spotted deer), wild boars and lots of birdlife. It also has some fascinating, beautiful sights within and around its boundaries, including the spectacular hilltop **Kankwari Fort** (22km from the Forest Reception Office), and **Bhangarh**, a deserted, well-preserved 17th-century city that's famously haunted. If you take a longer tour then you can ask to visit one of these sights, or Bhangarh can be reached by a bus that runs through the sanctuary to nearby Golaka village (Rs 25).

However, without the big draw of the tigers, safaris here are overpriced, and the park's popularity with tourists is suffering.

Unlike most national parks, Sariska opens year-round, although the best time to spot wildlife is November to March. You'll see most wildlife in the evening.

It's possible to go by private car into the park, but these are only allowed on sealed roads. The best way is to visit by jeep. Diesel/petrol jeeps cost Rs 800/1000 for three hours, or Rs 1700/2000 for a full day, and take a maximum

## TIGER TROUBLE

It's unofficially official – there are no tigers left in Sariska reserve.

In one of India's worst-kept environmental secrets, the tiger population at one of the country's leading wildlife reserves has been eliminated due to organised poaching and apparent mismanagement. Project Tiger, the body in charge of tiger protection in India since 1979, has come under serious criticism in the media, though it maintains that the government did not adequately compensate local farmers for their loss of land.

In September 2006, in an effort to ease pressure on existing wildlife, steps were taken to relocate (and compensate) 15 entire villages situated within Sariska's boundaries. A month earlier, in a belated bid to monitor traffic inside the park, the state government banned entry to pilgrims wishing to visit the ancient temple of Neelkantheshwar.

Sadly though, it seems the fate of the big cats lay in the black market. Tiger parts are highly valued for their use in Chinese medicine – tiger claws are used to treat insomnia and tiger fat to combat rheumatism – and a dead tiger can fetch up to US\$40,000. Even the gruesome prospect of tiger farming has been suggested as a way to combat this highly profitable illicit trade.

The recent arrest of notorious smuggler Sansar Chand and murmurs of an increased military presence within India's nature reserves has critics holding their breath. So too does a proposed breeding program in conjunction with Rajasthan's last tiger stomping ground, Ranthambore National Park. But as Ranthambore itself is struggling to properly maintain tiger numbers, and similar political rhetoric has in the past failed to address the problem, any assurances that the animal will return in force to this state are met with reluctant scepticism.

of five people. Bookings can be made at the **Forest Reception Office** (☎ 2841333). Note that you'll also have to pay an admission charge for the jeep. The park is free for Indians visiting the Hanuman temple on Tuesdays and Saturdays (8am to 3pm), but this policy is under review. Chances are it will still be busy on these days.

**RTDC Hotel Tiger Den** (☎ 2841342; dm Rs 50, s/d from Rs 600/700; 🍷) is in a quasi-Soviet block, but is backed by a green, rambling garden. Rooms are drab, but have balconies. Bring a mosquito net or repellent.

**Sariska Tiger Heaven** (☎ 224815; r with/without Rs 1800/1500; 🍷) is an isolated place about 5km west of the bus stop; it offers free pick-up. Rooms have big beds and windowed alcoves, and are set in five acres of peaceful grounds. It's a tranquil, if overpriced place, to stay. It arranges jeeps and guides to the park.

There are frequent buses from Alwar (local/express Rs 12/14, 1½/one hour, at least hourly); these head on to Jaipur (local/express Rs 55/65). Buses stop in front of the Forest Reception Office.

## SHEKHAWATI

☎ 01592

Shekhawati is a semiarid dreamscape of dazzling fields, fluttering fabrics and open-air picture galleries. A short skip from Jaipur, the region is crisscrossed by narrow near-country

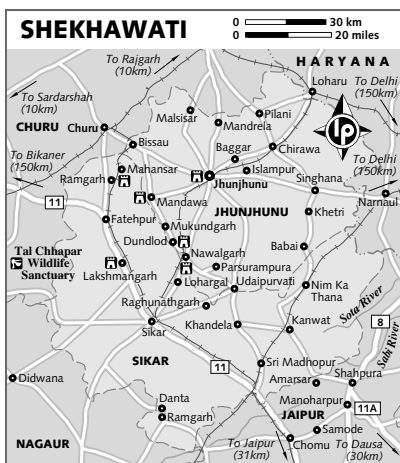
roads that lead to half-forgotten villages and wholly hidden *havelis*. Each stop on the hop-along highways offers secret treasures (some slowly sinking in the sand) lacquered in rich and varied hues.

Shekhawati was formerly a wealthy but lawless land on the trade route between the ports of the Arabian Sea and the fertile Ganges Valley. The Shekhawat *thakurs* (noblemen), who once were noted for their indulgence in quarrelling among themselves, began to flourish in the mid-18th-century British East India Company when merchants imposed some semblance of order. A century later the British used the skills of local merchants or Marwaris (they'd long since left Marwar, today's Jodhpur) to improve trade. While the Marwaris settled in the new coastal cities, they built *havelis* for their families back home.

Until 1947 these mansions were symbols of their success and homes in which their families could live the good life; these days they remain one of Rajasthan's better-kept secrets.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Access to Shekhawati is easiest from Jaipur or Bikaner. Sikar (gateway to the region, but with no notable *havelis*) and Fatehpur are on the main Jaipur–Bikaner road. The last bus from Mandawa to Bikaner (3½ hours, eight daily) leaves at 4.15pm.



Churu is on the main Delhi–Bikaner railway line, while Sikar, Nawalgarh and Jhunjhunu have passenger-train links with Jaipur and Delhi.

### GETTING AROUND

The Shekhawati region is crisscrossed by narrow bitumen roads, and towns are well served by government or private buses. However, north–south roads are usually far smoother than those running east–west.

The local services to the smaller towns can get crowded and riding ‘upper class’ (on the roof!) is acceptable – and often necessary.

A great option is to hire a taxi (or even an autorickshaw) to tour the area. Prices start from about Rs 900 per day.

### Ramgarh

The town of Ramgarh was founded in 1791 by the powerful Poddar merchant family, who had left the village of Churu following a disagreement with the *thakur*. Ramgarh boomed in the mid-19th century and was one of the richest towns of the area.

**Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri**, near the bus stand, has brilliantly coloured paintings inside its dome. The **Poddar Havelis**, near Churu Gate, are also densely frescoed, with subjects ranging from soldiers to fish.

### Fatehpur

Established in 1451 as a capital for Muslim nawabs (ruling princes), Fatehpur was taken over by the Shekhawati Rajputs in the 18th century.

It’s a busy little town, with masses of *havelis*, many of which are in a sad state of disrepair.

**Haveli Nadine Prince** (☎ 01571-231479; www.cultural-centre.com; adult/child Rs 100/50; 🕒 9am–6pm) has been brightly restored to its former glory. The 1802 building is owned by French artist Nadine Le Prince, who has turned it into a gallery and cultural centre and has done much to publicise the plight of Shekhawati. Long-term artist residences are available. The **Art Café** (dishes Rs 25–80) has appealing snacks.

Some other Fatehpur highlights are **Mahavir Prasad Goenka Haveli** (often locked, but with superb paintings); **Geori Shankar Haveli**, with mirrored mosaics on the antechamber ceiling; **Nand Lal Devra Haveli**, with red and blue paintings; **Harikrishnan Das Sarogi Haveli**, with a colourful façade and iron lacework; and **Vishnunath Keria Haveli**, which depicts Radha and Krishna in flying gondolas.

Fatehpur makes a convenient base for visits to nearby Ramgarh and Mahansar, but accommodation here is woeful. **RTDC Hotel Haveli** (☎ 01571-230293; dm Rs 60, s/d from Rs 250/350, with AC Rs 650/750; 🕒) is the best of a bad bunch. Rooms are nothing special but it’s friendly, and has the requisite gloomy dining hall and reasonable food (dishes Rs 10 to 75). It’s about 500m south of the bus stand.

### Mandawa

Mandawa is the preferred base for travellers to Shekhawati. Settled in the 18th century and fortified by the dominant merchant families, it remains a lovely, subdued little market town, though the infrastructure is starting to stretch, and touts are starting to hover.

**Binsidhar Newatia Haveli** (now the State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur premises) has curious paintings on its outer eastern wall – a boy using a telephone, a European woman in a chauffeur-driven car, and the Wright brothers attempting flight. The **Gulab Rai Ladia Haveli**, southwest of the fort, has some defaced erotic images. The unused half of **Castle Mandawa** has some interesting frescoes. There are also some fine **baoris** scattered around town.

**Hotel Shekhawati** (☎ 223036; hotelshekwati@sify.com; near Mukundgarh Rd; r Rs 300–700; 🕒) is a budget option run by a retired bank manager and his hard-working son (who’s also a registered tourist guide). Bright murals give the pleasant, clean rooms a welcome splash of colour, and tasty meals are served on the peaceful rooftop. Confirm your exact check-out time.



## AN OUTDOOR GALLERY

Most *havelis* (traditional, ornately decorated residences) are entered through an archway into an outer courtyard where there is often a meeting room, complete with punkahs (cloth fans swung by pulling a cord), where the men may do business; opposite is a stable and coach house. Another arch leads via a dogleg passage (to ensure privacy) to one or more inner courtyards – the private domain of the family and run by the women. Galleries around the upper floors provide access to the often small individual rooms, and there is usually a roof terrace. This is a common arrangement far outside Shekhawati, where it serves male-dominated families and sets a premium on female privacy. Together with the thick walls, it provides deep shade to cool the inner rooms, a necessity in this sun-scorched land.

But the unique feature of the Shekhawatis *havelis* is their painted decorations. The artists belonged to the caste of *kumhars* (potters), and were both the builders and painters, and they used the fresco technique (applying natural pigment to the wet top layer of plaster) to remarkable effect. (After about 1900 the artists began to paint on to dry plaster instead, allowing greater intricacy but losing the original urgency of the work.) The outside walls, particularly around the entrance, the outer and inner courtyards and sometimes some of the rooms are painted from the ground to the eaves. Typically the paintings mix depictions of the gods and their mythical lives with everyday scenes, often featuring modern inventions such as telephones, trains and aeroplanes, which were painted by artists who had never seen them. The two worlds often merge, so Krishna and Radha are seen in flying motorcars.

Some *havelis* are officially open, but most are inhabited by the remnants of the families who built them, or caretakers. Take your chance: stand close by and look hopeful. You will often be invited in, either freely or for a small tip. Photography is generally allowed.

One detrimental aspect of the tourist trade is the desire for antiques. A few towns have antique shops chock-a-block with items ripped from the *havelis*, particularly doors and window frames. Investing in these antiques perpetuates this desecration.

**Hotel Rath Mandawa** (☎ 223892; hotelrath@rediffmail.com; Dhigal Rd; r Rs 1200-1800; 🏠), a red-washed building on the outskirts of Mandawa, has beautifully decorated rooms at much cheaper prices than in town. The swimming pool, still under construction at the time of research, looks promising, and the orange orchard and adjoining gardens are most inviting. Management is keen to please.

Near the main bus stand is **Hotel Heritage Mandawa** (☎ 223742; www.hotelheritagemandawa.com; r Rs 1200-1750, ste Rs 3200), an attractive old *haveli* with a mixture of rooms, some gloomy and jarringly decorated, others more stylish. The courtyard is a godsend.

Opposite the main bus stand, **Singhasan Haveli** (☎ 223137; www.singhasanhaveli.com; Goenka Chowk; r without AC Rs 1200, with AC Rs 2300, ste Rs 4000; 🏠) is a very smart, meticulously run hotel with bright, slightly gaudy rooms, and a touristy, though memorable, sand-dunes dinner. The memorial hall is kaleidoscopic.

Close to Sonathia Gate, **Hotel Mandawa Haveli** (☎ 223088; r Rs 2200-3250) is in a glorious 19th-century restored *haveli* where rooms surround a painted courtyard. It's worth splashing out

on a romantic suite filled with arches, window seats and countless small windows.

**Hotel Castle Mandawa** (☎ 223124; www.castlemandawa.com; s/d Rs 2550/3250) is Mandawa's big hotel. Located in a converted castle, the hotel's building is fantastic (and easy to get lost in), but the rooms are overrated and staff can be difficult to rouse. The same group also runs **Hotel Mandawa Desert Resort** (☎ 223123; r Rs 2800-5500, ste Rs 8000-13000; 🏠 🏠 🏠), built atop a magnificent sand dune with a striking vista of the desert. The service again is a bit shabby and some rooms need rewiring, but it's still ideal for those hot velvet nights.

**Bungli Restaurant** (☎ 200084; Goenka Chowk; dishes Rs 50-150) is a popular travellers' eatery near the main bus stand that serves fantastic, piping-hot tandoori and very cold beer. Service can be a little slow though, and bugs here tend to bite.

**Restaurant Pawaana** (☎ 223223; Main Market; mains Rs 60-200) is a timely new venture hidden behind high walls and set around a spotlight courtyard. The traditional Rajasthani food is excellent, and the bustling street noise makes a welcome soundtrack.

## Nawalgarh

This is another great base, with quietly humming streets leading out from the banyan-shaded centre. The town has been disfigured somewhat by modern additions, but it still retains a genuine charm, especially in and around the 250-year-old fort. *Havelis* of interest include the **Aath Haveli**, **Hem Raj Kulwal Haveli**, **Bhagton-ki-Haveli** and **Khedwal Bhavan**.

The **Dr Ramnath A Podar Haveli Museum** (admission Rs 75; ☎ 8am-6pm), built in the 1920s on the eastern side of town, has been colourfully restored, and has vibrant murals and displays on Rajasthani culture.

All hotels can arrange bike hire, treks, tours and lessons in Hindi and music.

Near Maur Hospital, **Ramesh Jangid's Tourist Pension** (☎ 01594-224060; s/d Rs 350/450), now run by genial Rajesh, Ramesh's son, offers homy, clean accommodation in spacious rooms with big beds. It's a real family atmosphere, and scrumptious meals made with organic ingredients are available (vegetable thalis Rs 70).

Four kilometres east of the bus stand is **Shekhawati Guest House** (☎ 2224658; s/d Rs 400/600; ♿), a splendid choice run by a friendly Rajput couple, Kalpana and Gajendra Singh. They have six beautifully decorated bargain rooms with private bathrooms and hot showers. A fantastic organic garden keeps up the town's ecotrend.

**Apani Dhani** (☎ 01594-222239; www.apanidhani.com; s/d Rs 700/950) is a ground-breaking, award-winning ecological resort, as well as a wonderfully relaxing place to stay. Rooms are in traditional, cosy mud huts with comfortable beds, set around a bougainvillea-shaded courtyard. The adjoining organic farm supplies delicious ingredients for meals, and alternative energy is used wherever possible. It's near the TV tower on the west side of the Jaipur road. Multilingual Ramesh Jangid runs the show, and is also president of Les Amis du Shekhawati, an organisation aiming to preserve the *havelis*.

About 1km north of the fort is **Roop Niwas Palace** (☎ 01594-222008; s/d Rs 1700/1900; ♿), a converted palace with a back-to-the-Raj feel, lovely grand grounds and old-fashioned rooms.

## Lohargal

Situated 30km southwest of Nawalgarh, the sacred hillside town of Lohargal is a dramatic and worthwhile detour. When the Pandawas

won the battle of Mahabharata, they took a dip in the holy waters, only to see their weapons disintegrated, though they remained unharmed (Lohargal literally means 'That Which Melts Iron'). It doesn't seem to stop the pilgrims from diving in – a supposedly perennial holy stream trickles from the Aravalli hills and into the town's lake, **Suraj Kund**. Lohargal is raucous on weekends, but tourists are rare. Lohargal is also famous for *chachar* pickle, the wincingly sour Indian condiment.

There are six beautiful temples within hiking distance of Lohargal, including **Malket**, **Barkhandi** and **Gyan Bawari**. The nearest bus station to Lohargal is at Golyana (5km); from there you'll need a driver, or a map, or both.

## Parsurapura

This little village, 20km southeast of Nawalgarh, has some of the best-preserved and oldest paintings in Shekhawati. The detailed paintings inside the **Chhatri of Thakur Sardul Singh** dome date from the mid-18th century. There is also the **Shamji Sharaf Haveli**, decorated with a mixture of Hindu gods and Europeans, and the small **Gopinathji Mandir**, a finely painted temple constructed in 1742 by Sardul Singh.

## Jhunjhunu

Shekhawati's district headquarters, Jhunjhunu is bigger and busier than other places in the region. Founded by the Kaimkhani nawabs in the mid-15th century, it was taken over by the Rajput ruler Sardul Singh in 1730.

It was in Jhunjhunu that the British based their Shekhawati Brigade, a troop formed in the 1830s to try to halt the activities of the dacoits (bandits), who were largely local petty rulers who were also adept at thieving.

The **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 232909; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) is just out of the town centre, at the Churu bypass, but staff are out of the loop.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The **Khetri Mahal** is a minor palace dating from around 1770. Although run-down, it's one of Shekhawati's most sophisticated buildings, with sensational views. The **Bihariji Temple** is from a similar period and contains some fine, though worn, murals.

Jhunjhunu is famous for the huge, wealthy, multilayered **Rani Sati Temple** – it's dedicated to the patron goddess of the merchant class,

a woman who committed *sati* (ritual suicide of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre) in 1595.

The frescoed **Modi Havelis** and the **Kaniram Narsinghdas Tibrewala Haveli** are both in the main bazaar.

## COURSES

Laxmi Kant Jangid at the Hotel Jamuna Resort (below) arranges courses in cookery and traditional fresco painting.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Hotel Shekhawati Heritage** (☎ 237134; Station Rd; shekhawati\_heritage@yahoo.com; s/d Rs 400/500) Near Hotel Sangam, this place with kindly management is a quiet achiever. The bright rooms are well decorated and have leafy outlooks.

**Hotel Shiv Shekhawati** (☎ 01592-232651; www.shivshekhawati.com; d Rs 400-800; 🍴) This hotel, east of the centre, is a modern place around a central inner courtyard. It has squeaky-clean, plain rooms.

**Hotel Fresco Palace** (☎ 395233; Station Rd; fresco\_palace@yahoo.com; r Rs 500/800) This smart choice next door to Hotel Shekhawati Heritage represents great value, with a range of spotless, colourful rooms and a delightful manager.

**Hotel Jamuna Resort** (☎ 232871; s/d Rs 600/700, with AC from Rs 1000/1200; 🍴 🚿) This charming, welcoming place, perched on a hilltop overlooking the eastern edge of town, is popular with Delhi residents. Run by Laxmi Kant Jangid (who also runs Shiv Shekhawati), it has rooms decorated with paintings, a sizable pool and serene garden. You can stay here for free if you study painting and help with the decorative upkeep. It also runs cookery packages that include field visits (around €1000 for two weeks).

## Mahansar

This quaint, slow-moving, untouristy village contains the mid-19th-century, *haveli*-like **Raghnath Temple**, the gold paintings of **Sonaki-Dukan Haveli** (admission Rs 100) and the **Sahaj Ram Poddar Chhatra**. Mahansar is also famous for a homemade liquor that resembles Greek ouzo.

**Narayan Niwas Castle** (☎ 01595-264322; r Rs 600-900), in the old fort, dates from 1768 and feels evocatively uncommercial. Rooms are dusty but atmospheric, some with paintings covering the walls. The food gets excellent reports and the hotel offers local guides.

**Hotel Surajgarh Fort** (☎ 25889516; www.surajgarh.com; s/d from Rs 2000) is a good-value midrange

place 20km southeast of Pilani, an interesting university town and home of the industrial giants Birla.

## AJMER

☎ 0145 / pop 485,197

Jagged, pale blue hills hide the calm waters of Ana Sagar and the bustling, friendly Muslim pilgrimage city of Ajmer. Due largely to the pull of Pushkar, the fascinating shrine of Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti is, sadly, overlooked by most foreign visitors to Rajasthan.

Sacked by Mohammed of Ghori on one of his periodic forays from Afghanistan, and later favoured by the mighty Mughals, Ajmer once had considerable strategic importance. One of the first contacts between the Mughals and the British occurred in Ajmer, when Sir Thomas Roe met Jehangir here in 1616. Later the Scindias took the city, and in 1818 it was handed over to the British, becoming one of the few places in Rajasthan that they directly controlled.

The British set up Mayo College here in 1875, a prestigious school on sprawling grounds, exclusively for the Indian nobility. Today it's open to all boys (whose parents can afford the fees).

## Orientation & Information

The main bus stand is to the northeast, and the train station and many hotels are to the east.

**Bank of Baroda** (Prithviraj Marg; 🕒 10am-3pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) Changes travellers cheques and does credit-card advances.

**Satguru's Internet** (60-61 Kutchery Rd; per hr Rs 20; 🕒 9am-10pm) Has good connections.

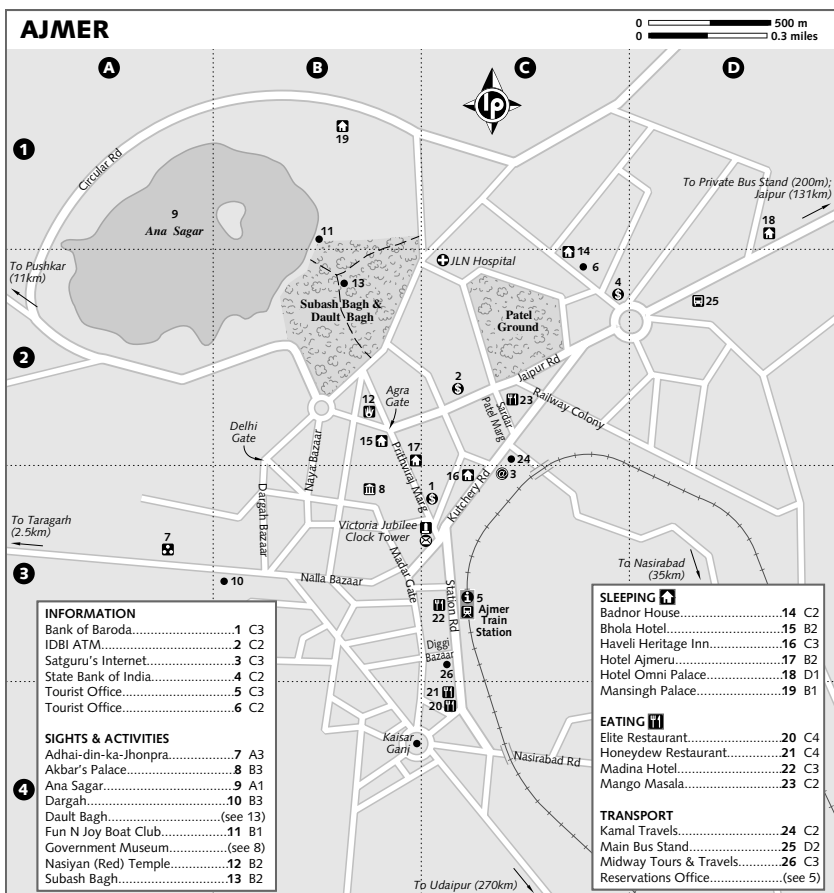
**State Bank of India** (☎ 2627048; 🕒 10am-2pm & 2.30-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Changes travellers cheques and currency.

**Tourist office** RTDC Hotel Khadim compound (☎ 2627426; 🕒 8am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Sat); train station (🕒 10am-2pm & 2.30-5pm Mon-Sat)

## Sights & Activities

### ANA SAGAR

This large lake, created in the 12th century by damming the River Luni, is set against a blue grey hilly spine that merges into its surface. On its bank are two delightful parks, **Dault Bagh** and **Subash Bagh**, containing a series of marble pavilions erected in 1637 by Shah Jahan. There are good views back towards Ajmer from the



hill beside the Dault Bagh, particularly just before sunset. Pedalos and motorboats can be hired from the Fun N Joy Boat Club at the edge of the lake.

## DARGAH

Located in the old part of town, this is one of India's most important Muslim pilgrimage sites. The **dargah** (☞) 5am-9pm Jul-Mar, 4am-9pm Apr-Jun, closed for services 3-4pm & 2.30-3.30pm Thu) is the tomb of a Sufi saint, Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti, who came to Ajmer from Persia in 1192 and lived here until 1233. Construction of the shrine was completed by Humayun and the gate was added by the nizam (ruler of Hyderabad). Akbar used to make the pilgrimage to the dargah from Agra every year.

You must cover your head in certain areas, so don't forget a scarf or cap – you can buy one in the bazaar leading to the shrine.

The first gate is the Nizam Gate, up some steps to protect it from the rains; it was built in 1915. The green and white mosque, Akbari Masjid, on the right was constructed by Akbar in 1571.

In the second courtyard is a mosque built by Shah Jahan. Beyond this, in the inner courtyard, the large iron cauldrons (one donated by Akbar in 1567, the other by Jehangir in 1631) are for offerings for the poor, and are called the *degs*.

The saint's tomb is in the inner courtyard. It has a marble dome and the tomb inside is surrounded by a silver platform. Pilgrims

believe that the saint's spirit will intercede in matters on their behalf, so the notes and holy string attached to the railings are often personal requests.

At the entrance khadims (servants of god) wielding donation books will ask you for cash (there are 4000 khadims in Ajmer!). It's likely you'll be asked for still more money inside, where you might be blessed with the edge of the tomb blanket. It's good to visit in the evening, when there are Qawwali (rhymed Urdu devotional singing with musical accompaniment) singers and it's decorated in twinkling lights.

Pilgrims and Sufis come from all over the world on the anniversary of the saint's death, the Urs, in the seventh month of the lunar calendar. The saint retired to his cloister for a long meditation, and when it was opened six days later he was dead (hence the festival lasts six days). It's an interesting time but the crowds can be suffocating. Many pilgrims also come here in the month of Ramadan.

#### ADHAI-DIN-KA-JHONPRA & TARAGARH

Beyond the Dargah, on the town's outskirts, are the extraordinary ruins of the Adhai-din-ka-Jhonpra (Two-and-a-Half Days) mosque. According to legend, its construction in 1153 took 2½ days. Others say it was named after a festival lasting 2½ days. It was built as a Sanskrit college, but in 1198 Mohammed of Ghori seized Ajmer and converted the building into a mosque by adding a seven-arched wall in front of the pillared hall.

It's a grand piece of architecture with soaring domes, pillars and arched screens, largely built from pieces of Jain and Hindu temples.

About 3km from the town and a steep 1½-hour climb beyond the mosque, the ancient **Taragarh** (Star Fort; admission free; ☞ dawn-dusk) commands a superb view over the city; it's also accessible by car. It was built by Ajaipal Chauhan, the town's founder, and saw lots of military action during Mughal times. It was later used as a British sanatorium.

#### AKBAR'S PALACE

Akbar built this imposing palace in 1570 – partly as a pleasure retreat, but mainly to keep an eye on pesky local chiefs. It houses the **government museum** (admission Rs 3, free Mon, camera/video Indian Rs 5/10, foreigner Rs 10/20; ☞ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu), which has a small collection

of stone sculptures, weapons and miniature paintings.

#### NASIYAN (RED) TEMPLE

The **Jain Red Temple** (Prithviraj Marg; admission Rs 3; ☞ 8.30am-5.30pm, to 5pm winter) is amazing. Its double-storey hall is filled with golden models depicting the Jain concept of the ancient world, with 13 continents and oceans, the golden city of Ajodhya and flying-swan and flying-elephant gondolas.

#### Sleeping

**Bhola Hotel** (☞ 2432844; Prithviraj Marg; d Rs 250) Southeast of Agra Gate, this friendly hotel has five nondescript but clean and comfortable rooms. Tasty thalis cost Rs 50.

**Haveli Heritage Inn** (☞ 2621607; Kutchery Rd; r Rs 400-1000) Set in a 100-year-old *haveli*, this is a good choice in the city centre. Though the high-ceilinged rooms are large, they're a bit run-down and the bathrooms look tired. Still, there's a pleasant, grassy courtyard and a warm, family atmosphere, complete with yummy home-cooked meals.

**Hotel Ajmeru** (☞ 2431103; www.ajmeru.com; Khailand Market; s/d from Rs 450/550, with AC Rs 800/1100; ☞) Five-hundred metres from the train station, this colourful, renovated hotel has brightly furnished rooms.

**Hotel Omni Palace** (☞ 2428503; Jaipur Rd; r Rs 800-1500) This modern place is professionally run, and offers the usual three-star spin (though the beds are more like four star!). The suite rooms are spacious, and the standard rooms represent good value.

**Badnor House** (☞ 2627579; Civil Lines; d incl breakfast Rs 1800) This provides a welcome opportunity to stay with a delightful Indian family. The erudite hosts are well informed about Ajmer and beyond (Sonny is a travel writer) and their down-to-earth hospitality includes self-contained living quarters with luxurious a double bed and a private courtyard.

**Mansingh Palace** (☞ 2425956; Circular Rd; s/d Rs 3000/4000) Overlooking Ana Sagar, Mansingh Palace is Ajmer's only top-end hotel. It's a modern place, rather out of the way, but has attractive, comfortable rooms, some with views and balconies. There's a pleasant garden, bar and restaurant.

#### Eating

**Mango Masala** (Sadar Patel Marg; dishes Rs 25-100; ☞ 11am-11pm) With dim, barlike lighting and

crêche-style décor, this is where Ajmer's hip crowd hangs out. There's an imaginative menu of pizzas, Chinese, and North and South Indian vegetarian food, and an attached sweet shop with cakes, ice cream and floats.

**Madina Hotel** (dishes around Rs 40) Opposite the train station, this simple, open-to-the-street eatery cooks up cheap veg and nonveg fare.

**Elite Restaurant** (Station Rd; thalis Rs 45) Next door to Honeydew, Elite has the town's top thali – and don't the locals know it!

**Honeydew Restaurant** (Station Rd; dishes Rs 40-180) This soothingly staid place has long been Ajmer's best, and it's still the restaurant of choice for Mayo College students' midterm treat. There's a good selection of veg and non-veg Indian, Chinese and Continental food.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

The main bus stand has regular **RSTC buses** (☎ 2429398) to/from the following places:

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)
Agra	168	10
Ahmedabad	245	13
Alwar	133	6
Bharatpur	159	8
Bikaner	140	8
Bundi	96	5
Chittor	100	5
Delhi	205	9
Indore	240	12
Jaipur	87	2½
Jaisalmer	205	10
Jodhpur	103	6
Kota	15	6
Pushkar	12	½
Udaipur	140	8

Private buses serve many destinations; most companies have offices on Kutchery Rd, including **Kamal Travels** (☎ 2620926).

### TRAIN

There are no tourist quotas for many Ajmer trains, so book early; go to Booth 5 at the **reservations office** (☎ 8am-2pm & 2.15-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun). **Midway Tours & Travels** (☎ 2628744; Station Rd; ☎ 8am-8pm) will prebook sleeper/upper-class berths for you for Rs 17/28.

Most trains stop here, as Ajmer is on the Delhi-Jaipur-Ahmedabad-Mumbai line. The *Shatabdi* (Nos 2016/5, Thursday to

Tuesday) runs between Ajmer and Delhi (chair/executive class Rs 660/1250) via Jaipur (chair/executive class Rs 270/545). It leaves Delhi at 6.10am and arrives in Ajmer at 12.45pm. The other way, it leaves Ajmer at 3.50pm, arriving in Jaipur at 5.45pm and Delhi at 10.20pm. There's also the 2957 *Rajdhani Express* to Delhi, leaving Ajmer at 12.35am (1st/2nd class with AC Rs 910/1570, seven hours).

The *Delhi-Ahmedabad Mail* (Nos 9105/6), departs Ajmer at 8.28pm and arrives in Delhi at 5.20am (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 200/531/753, 442km). Heading for Gujarat, the train leaves Ajmer at 7.40am and arrives in Ahmedabad at 5.30pm (2nd class Rs 215, 492km).

## Getting Around

There are plenty of autorickshaws (anywhere in town should cost around Rs 25) as well as cycle-rickshaws and tongas (two-wheeled horse carriages).

## PUSHKAR

☎ 0145 / pop 14,789

Brahma dropped a lotus flower on the earth – so say the epics – and Pushkar floated to the surface. This pond-sized Hindu pilgrimage town is a magical desert-edged place, with one of the world's few Brahma temples. Rows of sacred ghats front a mystically magnetic lake, where hundreds of milky-coloured temples and weather-touched domes sit beneath a shifting, pale grey sky.

Smooth operators abound though, as dodgy priests try to outwit pious pilgrims who are intoxicated by God or *bhang* (marijuana) but are either way enchanted by this much feted low-rent paradise. Try to play the part in Pushkar – no booze, meat, eggs or kissing – or risk offending what you came here to admire.

Pushkar is 11km from Ajmer, but is separated from it by the winding Nag Pahar (Snake Mountain).

## Orientation & Information

The town clusters around Pushkar Lake, with a maze of streets spreading out from Sadar Bazaar Rd. It's small and tourist-friendly, and easy to find your way around. Cash and travellers cheques can be easily changed, and internet (around Rs 40 per hour) cafés are everywhere.

**Ganesh Enterprises** (Sadar Bazaar Rd) Quality film processing; charges Rs 5 per photo.

## PUSHKAR PASSPORTS & PUSHY PRIESTS

Priests, some genuine, some not, will approach you near the ghats and offer to do a *puja* (prayer) for which you'll receive a 'Pushkar passport' (a red ribbon around the wrist). Others proffer flowers. In either case you'll be asked to tot up your family members – alive and dead – whose happiness is *surely* worth multiple Rs 100s. You could always try denying your family, or massively exaggerating their number to get a reduction on bulk purchase. However, you may choose to avoid encouraging these pushy, unprincipled 'priests' altogether – they can become unpleasantly aggressive. At least don't be bullied and agree on a price beforehand.

On the other hand, you can head to the Brahma Temple, where there are simply donation boxes. Here you can offer flowers and sacred sweets for the happiness of friends, family, everyone you've ever known – and still have change for a masala chai (spiced tea).

**Post office** (Sadar Bazaar Rd; ☎ 9.30am-5pm)

**State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur** (Sadar Bazaar Rd; ☎ 2772006; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat)  
Changes travellers cheques and currency, but is slow.

**Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 2772040; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat of month) In the grounds of Hotel Sarovar; gives out a free map.

## Sights

### TEMPLES

Pushkar has hundreds of temples, though few are particularly ancient, as they were mostly desecrated by Aurangzeb and rebuilt. Most famous is the **Brahma Temple** (Sadar Marg; ☎ dawn-dusk), said to be one of the few such temples in the world. Apparently Brahma wanted to perform a *yagna* (self-mortification) at the lake, and when his wife Savitri didn't attend, he married another woman on a whim. Savitri, understandably annoyed, vowed that Brahma would not be worshipped anywhere else. It's marked by a red spire, and over the entrance gateway is the *hans* (goose symbol) of Brahma.

The one-hour trek up to the hilltop **Savitri Temple** (☎ dawn-dusk) overlooking the lake is best made before dawn, though the views are fantastic at any time of day. The views from the closer **Pap Mochani Temple** (☎ dawn-dusk), known as Gayatri Temple to locals, reached by a track behind the Marwar bus stand, are also worth the climb.

Approximately 8km southwest of the town (past the turn-off to Savitri Temple) are a collection of Shiva temples. They make for a great trip by motorbike (or bike if you're fit and start early in the day) through the peaceful hills and quiet villages. Be warned – the track is hilly and rocky. Another Shiva temple is about 8km north, tucked down inside a cave.

## GHATS

The lake is surrounded by 52 bathing ghats, where pilgrims bathe in the sacred waters. Some have particular importance: Vishnu appeared at **Varah Ghat** in the form of a boar, Brahma bathed at **Brahma Ghat**, and Gandhi's ashes were sprinkled at **Gandhi Ghat** (formerly Gau Ghat). If you wish to join the pilgrims, do it with respect; remember, this is a holy place. Remove your shoes and don't smoke, kid around or take photographs.

## Activities

### CAMEL TREKS

For longer camel treks, Pushkar makes for a convenient starting point. Trips start at around Rs 500 per day, and head out to Jodhpur (six to seven days) and Jaisalmer (10 to 12 days). See p248 for general details about camel treks. Numerous operators line Panchkund Rd.

### REFLEXOLOGY

**Dr NS Mathur** (☎ 2641185; Shri Raghu Nathji Temple; ☎ 10.30am-6.30pm) provides a toe-challenging reflexology session (Rs 150), which will certainly take your mind off the rest of your body. He also teaches reiki (courses I/II Rs 1000/2000).

## Courses

### MUSIC

The excellent **Saraswati Music School** (☎ 2773124; Mainon ka Chowk; ☎ 10am-10pm) teaches classical tabla, flute, singing and Kathak (dance). Birju, who's been playing for over 15 years, charges Rs 200 for two hours and, for an intensive bout, you can live in for Rs 100 to 250 a night. He often conducts evening performances (8pm or 9.30pm), and also sells instruments.

**COOKING**

The multitalented Deepa runs cooking and henna classes from behind her Ayurvedic shop, Bahar. She is also connected to the **Saraswati Music School** (☎ 2773124; Mainon Ka Chowk; ☎ 10am-10pm).

**YOGA & HEALING**

For a fix of reiki, yoga and shiatsu, Reiki Master Roshi Hiralal Verma is based at **Baba Restaurant** (☎ 2772858). Prices are charged according to the duration and the nature of your session.

Similarly, Dr Kamel Pandey offers recommended yoga classes and naturopathic consultations. He's based at the Old Rangji Temple, and on Panchkund Rd.

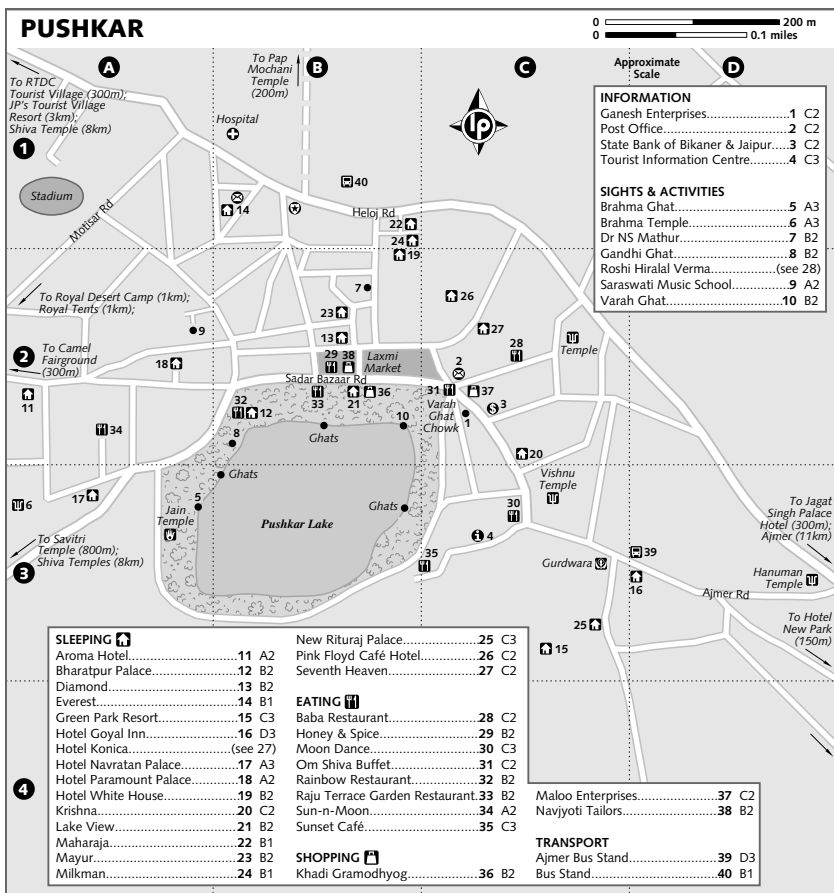
**Sleeping**

Most Pushkar hotels are basic, clean and whitewashed, with lovely rooftops; there are a lot more budget options than midrange here. At the time of the Camel Fair, prices multiply five to 10 times; it's best to book ahead at this time.

**BUDGET**

**Diamond** (☎ 2305022; Holi ka Chowk; s with shared bathroom Rs 100, r with private bathroom Rs 150) With a friendly European owner, this pick of the cheapies has a little, tranquil courtyard lined by small but spotless rooms.

**Lake View** (☎ 2772106; Sadar Bazaar Rd; www.lakeviewpushkar.com; r with shared bathroom Rs 100-150, with private bathroom Rs 250-350) This faded master-





## PUSHKAR CAMEL FAIR

Come the month of Kartika, the eighth lunar month of the Hindu calendar and one of the holiest, Thar camel drivers spruce up their ships of the desert and start the long walk to Pushkar in time for Kartik Purnima (full moon). Each year around 200,000 people converge here, bringing with them some 50,000 camels and cattle. The place becomes an extraordinary swirl of colour, sound and movement, thronged with musicians, mystics, tourists, traders, animals and devotees. It's camel-grooming nirvana, with an incredible array of corn rows, anklets, embroidery and pompoms.

Trading begins a week before the official fair (a good time to see the serious business), but by the time the fair starts, business takes a back seat and the bizarre aspects of the fair jostle into life (musicians, snake charmers, children balancing on poles etc). Even the tourist board's cultural programme is bizarre: to what, how many people can you balance on a camel? Or dancing on hot coals...

It's hard to believe, but this seething mass is all just a sideshow; Kartik Purnima is when Hindu pilgrims come to bathe in Pushkar's sacred waters. The religious event builds in tandem with the Camel Fair in a wild, magical crescendo of incense, chanting and processions to dousing day, the last night of the fair, when thousands of devotees wash away their sins and set candles afloat on the holy lake.

It's crowded, touristy, noisy (light sleepers bring earplugs) and tacky. Those affected by dust and/or animal hair should bring appropriate medication. However, it's a grand epic, and not to be missed if you're anywhere within camel-spitting distance. It usually takes place in November; check with the RTDC for this year's dates.

piece feels about as old as Brahma himself, but the rooftop views are still unsurpassed and the blue-and-white walls keep it feeling fresh. Interiors might be running down fast, but the proximity to the lake still makes it great value.

**Pink Floyd Café & Hotel** (☎ 2772317; Choti Basti; r Rs 100-350) Though its lyrical motto, Whatever You Need We Have, may be a tad presumptuous, this offbeat venue has basic but cheap rooms, all named after Pink Floyd albums, with a hip hard-core fan who runs the show. The rooftop 'bar' is one of the most congenial in Pushkar, filled with factory-line 1980s memorabilia. Movies are shown nightly at 8pm.

**Aroma Hotel** (☎ 2772729; www.aroma-hotel.com; Badi Basti; Kapaleshwar Rd; r Rs 100-500) Aroma is ideal for yogic shenanigans and other wholesome pursuits, with blindingly white and sparsely furnished rooms, a sunset-sucking rooftop, and a charismatically 'centred' owner.

**Hotel Paramount Palace** (☎ 2772428; d Rs 200-650) This place has fine views and a formidable reputation for value and service. At the time of research, not even major renovations could keep it quiet.

**Hotel White House** (☎ 2772147; hotelwhitehouse@hotmail.com; r Rs 250-650) This is a spotless place, with airy, somewhat cramped, rooms and fine views from the plant-filled rooftop restaurant.

It's efficiently run by a tenaciously businesslike mother-and-son team. Book ahead or be shunted elsewhere.

**Hotel Navratan Palace** (☎ 2772981; s/d Rs 350/400; ☎) This businesslike hotel has a world-class pool (nonguests Rs 100), but stagnant service and uninspiring rooms. Did we mention the pool?

**Bharatpur Palace** (☎ 2772320; Sadar Bazaar Rd; s/d from Rs 300/600) On the upper levels of the western ghats, this hotel is a good 'un, though management is oddly unaware. Room 1 is the best place to wake up – it's surrounded on three sides by the lake. Room 9 is also good, with three doors opening onto the lake.

Other good cheapies:

**New Rituraj Palace** (☎ 2772875; r Rs 80-100)

Pleasant garden and good home-cooked food.

**Mayur** (☎ 2772302; mayurguesthouse@hotmail.com; s/d Rs 100/120) Courtyard, simple rooms and a cheerful welcome.

**Milkman** (☎ 2773452; vinodmilkman@hotmail.com; Mali Mohalta; s/d Rs 100/250) Backstreet, family house, peaceful rooftop.

**Krishna** (☎ 2772461; Sadar Bazaar Rd; r Rs 100-300) Elaborate building with simple rooms.

**Maharaja** (☎ 2773527; Mali Mohalta; r Rs 120) Popular, tucked-away spot with a restful rooftop.

**Everest** (☎ 2773417; behind Head Post Office; r Rs 150-300) Clean and cheap.

## CAMEL FAIR TOURIST VILLAGE

During the Camel Fair, the RTDC and many private operators set up a sea of tents near the fairground. It gets cold at night, so bring something warm. A torch (flashlight) may also be useful. You're advised to book ahead. Apart from the dorm tents, all the listed accommodation have private bathrooms.

**RTDC Tourist Village** (☎ 2772074; tents dm Rs 200-350, s Rs 2900-5800, d Rs 3200-6350, huts s Rs 3200-6350, d Rs 3450-6350) This option has stinky dorm and standard tents, and upmarket Swiss tents and deluxe huts. Meals are included in the price for all accommodation options except the dorm tents. Full payment must be received two months in advance.

**Royal Desert Camp** (☎ 2772957; tents US\$125) This camp is further away from the fairground than Royal Tents, but is a good option. You can also book at Hotel Pushkar Palace (☎ 2772001).

**Royal Tents** (tents incl full board US\$250) Owned by the maharaja of Jodhpur, these are the most luxurious (and most expensive) tents in the tourist village. Reservations should be made in advance at Jodhpur's Balsamand Palace (☎ 0291-2571991).

## MIDRANGE

Several of these are a bit out of town.

**Seventh Heaven** (☎ 5105455; www.inn-seventh-heaven.com; Chotti Basti; r Rs 300-700, ste Rs 900-1500) This lovingly converted *haveli* is the perfect place to chill out, with traditionally crafted furniture (including swing chairs on the main court), galleries and a rooftop restaurant. The cool tiled rooms have gorgeously pretty individual touches, and blissfully comfy beds. Asana (Rs 1500) is one step closer to heaven, and Bagheera (Rs 900) isn't far behind. The rooftop restaurant has wonderful views and scrummy food. If full, the tiny Hotel Konica (rooms Rs 150 to 250) is in the same building.

**Hotel New Park** (☎ 2772464; Panch Kund Rd; s/d Rs 450/550, with AC Rs 650/750; ☺ ☑) This quiet, modern place is ageing fast, but it still has country-fresh rooms with balconies overlooking an inviting pool, plus chrysanthemum gardens and a backdrop of hills.

**Hotel Goyal Inn** (☎ 2773991; Near Gurudwara, Ajmer Rd; s/d Rs 500/600, with AC Rs 1100/1500; ☺ ☑) On the way out of town, this slick hotel has all the mod cons, plus motivated staff, and a welcome noon check out.

**JP's Tourist Village Resort** (☎ 2772067; d Rs 750-1200; ☑) About 3km out of town, JP's has atmospheric reed-roofed cottages with elaborate wooden furniture. In the shady gardens is a tree house (for the brave), a pint-sized pool and a restaurant.

**Green Park Resort** (☎ 2773532; www.greenparkresort.com Vaam Dev Rd; s/d Rs 1450/1600; ☺) This midrange place has 10 spiffy rooms with marble floors, solar heating and cable TV, and a rooftop restaurant. It's a 10-minute stroll to town through the Tuscanesque meadows of Rose Valley.

**Jagat Singh Palace Hotel** (☎ 2772953; d low/high season Rs 2420/2970; ☺ ☑) This heritage hotel is Pushkar's finest top-end option (although competition is scant). A new but traditional building, it has meekly romantic rooms, with carved wooden furniture, balconies and nice bathrooms, overlooking lush gardens and a gorgeous pool (Rs 250 for nonguests) with mountain views. Service can be rigid.

## Eating

Pushkar has plenty of atmospheric restaurants, though hygiene standards are sometimes lacking. Strict vegetarianism, forbidding even eggs, limits ingredients; some cooks make up for this with imagination. Western-style dishes are hit and miss.

**Sunset Café** (dishes Rs 10-110; ☺ 7.30am-midnight) Right on the eastern ghats, this café has sublime lake views, but uninspiring food. The lakeshore setting is perfect at sunset.

**Honey & Spice** (Laxmi Market; dishes Rs 20-75) This has delicious homemade banana cakes (Rs 20), sandwiches (Rs 35), tofu salad (Rs 45) and tofu steak (Rs 75), and is run by a friendly couple who learned their skills in Europe. Oh, and the South Indian coffee (Rs 25) is the real deal.

**Sun-n-Moon** (dishes Rs 25-180) This neohippy haunt attracts all kinds for its exquisite Italian menu – preorder homemade gnocchi the morning before your dinner – and friendly management. The lovely courtyard surrounds a bodhi tree, a shrine and happy tortoises. Breakfast for the homesick includes hash browns and hot chocolate, while for others there are sustaining lassis and masala chai (spiced tea).

**Raju Terrace Garden Restaurant** (Sadar Bazaar Rd; dishes Rs 25-90) This long-standing rooftoper has fairy lights, potted plants and tremendous views, plus reasonable 'homesick food' such as baked potatoes and pizza. The Indian fare is middling though, and service is beyond relaxed.

**Moon Dance** (dishes Rs 25-140) Trust the energy in this twinkly garden restaurant. The Indian, Mexican and Italian food is ace.

**Baba Restaurant** (☎ 2772858; dishes Rs 30-70) Baba bakes a mean pizza, and this chilled streetside restaurant is pretty good value too.

**Rainbow Restaurant** (Sadar Bazaar Rd; mains Rs 35-110) Set on a small rooftop with a lovely view over the lake, and decorated with coloured light bulbs, the Rainbow hums with satisfied customers. The pasta is excellent, and the ice-cream sundaes overflow with sugary goodness. The hummus with fresh pita is pretty darn authentic.

**Om Shiva Buffet** (☎ 2772647; buffets Rs 50) The best of the all-you-can-eat merchants; it's relatively fresh and regularly busy.

## Shopping

Pushkar's narrow trance-banging Sadar Bazaar is lined with absorbing little shops. Good buys include silver and costume jewellery, glass lamps, embroidery and wall hangings, CDs and Indo-Western clothes.

Much of the stock comes from the Barmer district south of Jaisalmer, and other tribal areas of Rajasthan. As Pushkar is a touristy place, you'll have to haggle. Bookshops in the main bazaar sell a tremendous range of secondhand novels, and they'll usually buy them back for around 50% of what you pay.

Pushkar is also a good place to get clothes made. One reliable place, with reasonable prices, is **Navjyoti Tailors** (Sadar Bazaar Rd). Also recommended is **Maloo Enterprises** (Varah Ghat Chowk), opposite the post office.

**Khadi Gramodhyog** (Sadar Bazaar Rd) is almost hidden on the main street. It's a fixed-price shop selling traditional hand-woven stuff – mainly men's shirts, plus scarves and shawls.

## Getting There & Away

Buses for Ajmer leave from the road heading eastwards out of town; other buses leave from the station to the north. There are frequent buses to/from Ajmer (Rs 10/8). The difference is the road toll to Ajmer; for cars the toll is Rs 25.

Local travel agencies sell tickets for private buses – shop around. These buses generally leave from Ajmer, but the agencies should provide you with free connecting transport. Those that leave from Pushkar usually stop for an hour or more in Ajmer anyway. Be warned that some buses (particularly those via Jodhpur) don't go all the way; in spite of promises, they'll involve a change of bus *and* an extra fare. Destinations and fares include the following:

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)
Agra	non-AC/AC 165/265	9
Delhi	non-AC/AC 200/270	10½
Jaipur	100	4
Jaisalmer	280	10½
Jodhpur	107	5
Udaipur	150	8

For around Rs 50 some agencies will book train tickets for services out of Ajmer (including free transfer to Ajmer). See p192 for details of trains from Ajmer.

## Getting Around

There are no autorickshaws, but it's a breeze to get around on foot. Another good option is to hire a bicycle (Rs 10/30 per hour/day) or a scooter/motorbike (Rs 200/350 per day). A wallah can carry your luggage on a hand-drawn cart to/from the bus stand for around Rs 15.

## RANTHAMBORE NATIONAL PARK

☎ 07462

Infamous, spectacular **Ranthambore National Park** (Indian/foreigner Rs 25/200; ☒ Oct-Jun) is 1334 sq km of wild jungle scrub hemmed in by rocky ridges. At its centre is the 10th-century Ranthambore Fort, and scattered nearby are ancient temples and mosques, crocodile-filled lakes, *chhatris* (cenotaphs) and hides. The park was a maharajas' hunting ground till 1970 – a curious 15 years after it had become a sanctuary.

Ranthambore is the only place to spot wild tigers in Rajasthan, but each year the odds are reduced by mismanagement and poaching. Project Tiger has been in charge of the animals' welfare since 1979, but the project's difficulties were thrown into sharp relief when government officials were again implicated in poaching in 2005. Getting an accurate figure on the number of tigers comes down to who you believe – an April 2006 report in the Indian journal *Frontline* estimated the figure to be as low as 15.

Aside from the enormous Ganesh mela (fair) every August, traffic into the park is highly restricted. Still, the remaining tigers are so used to being observed that they're not scared away by jeeps and canters (large, open-topped trucks seating 20); being sociable animals, they are even intrigued by visitors.

Seeing a tiger is just a matter of luck, but the park is also worth visiting for the scenery alone, particularly if you walk up to the fort. There are also more than 300 species of birds in the park.

### Orientation

It's 10km from Sawai Madhopur to the first gate, where you pay admission, and another 3km to the main gate and Ranthambore Fort. Accommodation is stretched out along the road from the town to the park. The train station is in the heart of Sawai Madhopur, just south of the main bazaar. Sawai Madhopur old city, a residential area, lies about 2km southeast of the train station.

### Information

**Project Tiger office** (☎ 223402; Ranthambore Rd)  
Located 500m from the train station.

**State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur** (🕒 10am-2pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat) The only place to change cash or travellers cheques. It's in the old city; to get here, a local bus/return rickshaw from near the train station in Sawai Madhopur costs Rs 5/70.

**Tiger Track** (Ranthambore Rd; per hr Rs 50; 🕒 7am-10.30pm) Internet access.

**Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 2220808; Sawai Madhopur train station; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat)

### Activities

The best time to take a **wildlife safari** in the national park is between October and April. Safaris take place in the early morning and late afternoon. If you are taking photos, it's worth bringing some ISO 400 or ISO 800 film, as the undergrowth is surprisingly dark in places. The mornings can be cold, so bring warm clothes.

The best way to travel is by jeep, which takes five people. You still have a good chance of seeing a tiger from a canter, though sometimes passengers can be rowdy, and the engine tends to roar. Guides will lead you down one of eight allocated routes – negotiating an alternative route with your driver takes clever diplomacy.

Seats in both jeeps and canters are allocated on a first-come-first-served basis. De-

mand outstrips supply because the number of motorised vehicles is restricted – only 15 jeeps and 15 canters are allowed inside per session.

A guide is compulsory and is included in the canter ticket price, but will cost an extra Rs 200 if you go by jeep. Tips are heavily encouraged.

Safaris take three hours. From October to February, canters (per person Rs 150) and jeeps (Rs 1050) both leave at 7am and 2.30pm. From March to June they leave at 6.30am and 3.30pm. Bookings for safaris are made at the **RTDC Vinayak Tourist Complex** (Ranthambore Rd; safari Indian/foreigner Rs 25/200, vehicle Rs 125, video Rs 200; 🕒 5am-7am & noon-2pm).

### Sleeping & Eating

Ranthambore Rd is lined with excellent accommodation options. Budget travellers will find the cheapest (grimiest and noisiest) lodgings in uninspiring Sawai Madhopur.

### RANTHAMBORE ROAD

**Hotel Ranthambore Resort** (☎ 221645; d Rs 400-700) About 5km from the station, this place offers simple but scrubby rooms – the more expensive ones are larger and better kept. The food isn't fit for a tiger.

**RTDC Vinayak Tourist Complex** (☎ 221333; s/d Rs 500/650, with AC Rs 800/900; 🕒) Further along the road from Castle Jhoomar Baori, this RTDC complex has newly decorated bright rooms with appealing little sitting areas. There's a nice lawn area and a campfire is lit in the winter.

**RTDC Castle Jhoomar Baori** (☎ 220495; s/d Rs 600/700, with AC Rs 900/1000; 🕒) The government got it right when they positioned this stunningly set hilltop former royal hunting lodge, located about 7km from the station. Rooms are characterful rather than luxurious.

**Hotel Tiger Safari Resort** (☎ 221137; www.tigersafariresort.com; d Rs 740, cottages from Rs 1300; 🕒) Some 4km from the train station, this is one of the nicest options and is under new management. The spacious spick-and-span doubles have wall paintings, and are centred on a well-kept garden. The cottages (with baths) are the best option. The rooftop restaurant (dishes Rs 35 to 150) is airy and cool, with pleasant views.

**Hotel Anurag Resort** (☎ 220751; www.anuragresort.com; s/d Rs 700/1320, cottages Rs 1760/1870; 🕒) An old pink chestnut that offers affordable midrange rooms, with '70s décor and a '60s dining room

(and cuisine). The gardens are ruler-edge perfect and the staff attentive.

**Ankur Resort** (☎ 220792; s/d Rs 1600/2000, cottages Rs 2000/2400, superdeluxe Rs 2400/2800; 🍷 🍷) Located 3km from the station, this is a popular choice. Rooms are clean, bright and attractive, and surrounded by greenery. There are 18 cottages in the grounds. Superdeluxe rooms have been revamped, but you pay for it. There's an inviting pool.

**Hotel Ranthambore Regency** (☎ 221176; s/d incl full board US\$70/90; 🍷 🍷) This is an efficient place near Ankur Resort. It has attractive, well-appointed rooms and a small pool.

**Nahargarh Ranthambore** (☎ 252146; Village Khilchipur, Ranthambore Rd; s/d/ste Rs 4000/5000/6500; 🍷) This Alisar hotel is a palace fit for a very large, eccentric king, with impressively drawn rooms, long gold-inlaid dining area, and a monstrous courtyard that feels like an abandoned film set. Even management appears awestruck. It's opposite the park entrance, 1km back from Ranthambore Rd.

**Sawai Madhopur Lodge** (☎ 220541; r US\$260, ste US\$300; 🍷 🍷) This Taj Group lodge, 3km from the station, once belonged to the maharaja of Jaipur. It's more unassuming than many in the brand, but is still luxurious, with a pool (nonguests Rs 400) and 12 acres of lovely gardens. The simple, restful rooms overlook serene lawns.

**Vanyavilas** (☎ 223999; www.oberoihotels.com; tents US\$580) Oberoi works its usual magic here: each teak-floored tent is 790 sq ft, with jungle décor and a freestanding bath, and is set in a private compound amid beautifully landscaped grounds.

## SAWAI MADHOPUR

Sawai Madhopur has grotty but money-belt-friendly options.

**Hotel Chinkara** (☎ 220340; 13 Indira Colony, Civil Lines; s/d Rs 100/200) This place is quiet, with large, dusty, good-value rooms. It's run by a cheery, welcoming family.

**Hotel Pink Palace** (☎ 220722; plot A1, Bal Mandir Colony; r with shared bathroom Rs 150, with private bathroom Rs 200-400, with AC Rs 450-700; 🍷) This is the friendliest option and has basic but clean, good-value rooms – more expensive ones open onto a terrace, others have TVs. The shady dining hall has a very small menu.

**Sharma Hotel** (Station Bazaar; dishes Rs 16-60; 🍷 6am-midnight) A basic, open-fronted, pure-veg place, this has oily but tasty dishes.

## Shopping

**Dastkar Craft Centre** (☎ 252049; Ranthambore Rd; 🍷 10am-8pm) This place, 3km from the station, is worth a visit. The organisation empowers low-caste village women, who produce the attractive handicrafts on sale, including saris, scarves, bags and bedspreads.

## Getting There & Away BUS

Buses include services to Jaipur (Rs 70, six hours, three daily) and Kota (Rs 50, four hours, four daily). Buses to these destinations via Tonk leave from the small bus stand near the petrol station close to the overpass. To go via Dausa (on the Jaipur-Bharatpur road), buses leave from the roundabout near the main post office. The enquiries number is ☎ 2451020. The train is preferable for most routes.

## TRAIN

At the station there's a computerised **reservation office** (🍷 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun).

For Delhi, the *Golden Temple Mail* (No 2903) leaves Sawai Madhopur at 12.40pm, arriving in the capital at 7pm (2nd class Rs 115, 361km). It goes via Bharatpur (Rs 78, 182km), arriving at 3.20pm. From Delhi it leaves at 7.55am, stopping at Bharatpur at 10.51am and arriving at 1.08pm. To Kota there are about seven trains daily, the most convenient of which is the *Avadh Express* (No 9038), leaving Sawai Madhopur at 9.30am and arriving at 11am (Rs 43, 109km). The other way, it leaves Sawai Madhopur at 4.50pm, arriving in Agra at 9.40pm.

## Getting Around

Bicycle hire is available in the main bazaar (around Rs 30 per day). Autorickshaws are available at the train station; the journey to Ranthambore Rd will cost around Rs 30.

# SOUTHERN RAJASTHAN

## BUNDI

☎ 0747 / pop 88,312

With narrow Brahmin-blue lanes, assorted temples, classic *havelis*, and a picturesque hillside lake, Bundi is the kind of effortlessly charming Indian town you wish you dreamed of – or at least stumbled upon – first. There's an air of the wonderful here – as Kipling found when he moved here to write – which

is most readily felt around the fairy-tale palace looming large and cupola-clad.

Bundi is also a great place to hire a bike for day trips into the nearby countryside. Get home fast though, as the night sky fills with bats, and this discreetly spiritual town closes up shop soon after sundown.

Bundi was the capital of a major princely state during the Rajputs' heyday. Although its importance dwindled with the rise of Kota during Mughal times, it remained independent until incorporation into Rajasthan in 1947.

From January to March, delicate pink poppies fill surrounding fields, while in October/November the festivals of **Bundi Ustav** and **Kashavrai Patan** inject some evening energy into an otherwise daydreamy town. In August, the town hosts celebrations for **Teej**. See p166 for details of the festivals.

## Information

The small **tourist office** (☎ 2442697; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Fri), near Ranji-ki-Baori, offers free maps. Mukesh Mehta, at the Haveli Braj Bhushanjee (p202) is a terrific source of information; his brother's website ([www.kiplingsbundi.com](http://www.kiplingsbundi.com)) is also useful.

The small moneychanger south of the palace changes various currencies, and travellers cheques, depending on his mood. The only ATM in town is an unreliable SBBJ branch that accepts international cards. There are increasing numbers of places to check your emails, including **Cyber Dream** (per hr Rs 40; 🕒 9am-9pm) and **Shri Balaji.com** (Nahar ka Chuhata; per hr Rs 40; 🕒 9am-9pm).

## Sights & Activities

### TARAGARH

The vine-strewn, magnificent **Taragarh** (Star Fort; admission free) was built in 1354, and is great to ramble around – but take a stick to scare away the monkeys! Take the path up behind the Chitrasala, east along the inside of the ramparts, then left up the steep stone ramp just before the **Dudha Mahal**, a small disused building 200m from the palace. Inside the ramparts are huge rock-carved reservoirs, fleet-footed reptiles and the **Bhim Burj**, the largest of the battlements, which supports a famous cannon. Views over the town and surrounding countryside are magical, especially at sunset.

### BUNDI PALACE

The **palace** (admission Rs 50, camera/video Rs 50/75; 🕒 8am-5pm) is an extraordinary decaying edi-

fice with fabulous fading turquoise-and-gold murals. It's reached from the bazaar's north-western end. Previously shut up and left to the bats, the maharaja leased it to a private company to clean it up and it's now open to the public. Knowledgeable guides hang around the ticket office.

You enter through the huge elephant gate, built in 1607. From here you can visit the Chhatra Mahal, built in 1644, which has some of Bundi's finest murals; one room features well-preserved paintings of Krishna – one for each month. The Phool Mahal was built in 1607 and shows a huge royal procession. Of the same date, the Badal Mahal has a wonderful Chinese-inspired ceiling, divided into petal shapes and decorated with peacocks and Krishna (note his Chinese eyes).

To get to the **Chitrasala** (Umed Mahal; admission free; 🕒 7am-6pm), built by Rao Umed Singh in the 18th century, you exit the elephant gate and walk further uphill to the entrance. Above the garden courtyard are several rooms covered in beautiful paintings. The back room on the right is the Sheesh Mahal; it's badly damaged, but with has beautiful inlaid glass.

There are splendid palace and Taragarh views from the south side of Nawal Sagar.

### BAORIS & WATER TANKS

There are many impressive *baoris* in Bundi. **Ranij-ki-Baori** (Queen's Baori) is 46m deep and is decorated with funkily sinuous carvings. Built in 1699 by Rani Nathavatji, it is one of the largest of its kind. The **Nagar Sagar Kund** is a pair of matching step-wells just outside Chogan Gate.

Visible from the fort is the square artificial lake of **Nawal Sagar**, which tends to dry up if the monsoon is poor. In the centre is a temple to Varuna, the Aryan god of water. Other tanks also worth a look are the 16th-century **Bhorrji-ka-Kund** and imposing **Dhabhai Kund**.

### OTHER SIGHTS

It's great to amble around the bazaars of the old city. Just outside the walls, the **sabzi market** (vegetable market), between Raniji-ki-Baori and Nagar Sagar Kund, is particularly vibrant. There are more than 200 temples here and more than 100 step-wells. Self-guided heritage-walk maps are available at Haveli Braj Bhushanjee (p202).

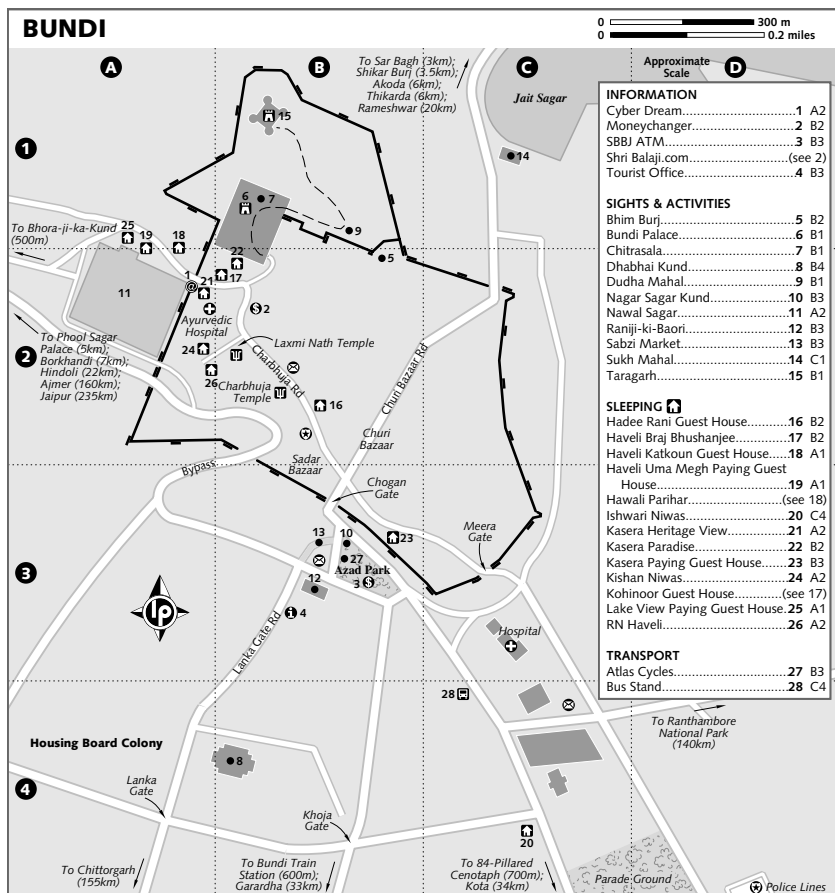
Bundi's other attractions are out of town, and are best visited by bike or rickshaw. The

modern palace, known as the **Phool Sagar Palace**, has a beautiful artificial tank, good for spotting kingfishers, and gardens, several kilometres out of town on the Ajmer road. The stately **Sukh Mahal** (☞ 10am-5pm) is a smaller palace, where Rudyard Kipling once stayed and wrote part of *Kim*. It's closer to town, on the edge of the beautiful Jait Sagar, and is now the Irrigation Rest House. The nearby, neglected **Sar Bagh** has a number of royal cenotaphs, some with terrific, intricate carvings. **Shikar Burj** is a small former royal hunting lodge, next to a water tank, on the road that runs along the north side of the Jait Sagar, and a good place for a picnic. South of town is the **84-Pillared Cenotaph**, set in gardens, particularly stunning when lit up at night. It was built to

honour the son of the maharaja's ayah about 600 years ago.

There are some lovely cycle excursions from Bundi, through pristine countryside. North of Bundi you can visit **Akoda**, a merchant's village, and **Thikarda**, with various potteries, around 6km from Bundi. About 20km north is a Shiva cave temple and a waterfall at **Rameshwar**. West of Bundi is rural **Borkhandi** village, around 7km distant. Twenty-two kilometres towards Jaipur is **Hindoli**, with a huge lake and a ruined hilltop fort.

About 33km from Bundi at the village of Garardha you can see some ancient **rock paintings** flanking the river, believed to be about 15,000 years old. There's a curious depiction of a man riding a huge bird, as well as some



hunting scenes. It's best to come here with a local guide – ask at your hotel. A half-day trip in a jeep would cost around Rs 600 return.

## Sleeping & Eating

Bundi's guesthouses are excellent, and most double as restaurants. Most guesthouses will also pick you up free of charge from the train station or bus stand if you call ahead – a good way to avoid commission tactics.

Bundi was once a dry town, so it's not a place for evening revelry; most guesthouses close their doors at 11pm.

**RN Haveli** (☎ 2443278; Rawle ka Chowk; r with shared bathroom Rs 100-150, r with private bathroom Rs 200) The dynamic mother-and-two-daughters team who run this little doozy often drag guests kicking and laughing on all kinds of cross-town excursions. If that's not your thing, then clean, comfortable doubles and delectable home-cooked meals are reason enough to stay.

**Lake View Paying Guest House** (☎ 2442326; lakeview bundi@yahoo.com; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 125/200) This guesthouse, overseen by a kindly old man and his assorted younger relations, has a lovely lakeside spot. Some rooms have lake views and stained-glass windows – most people prefer the rooms downstairs, next to a small garden. Home-cooked meals (dishes around Rs 30) are available.

**Kasera Paying Guest House** (☎ 2446630; d with shared/private bathroom Rs 200/250) Run by the same family as Kasera Heritage View, this small-scale guesthouse, near Chogan Gate in the main bazaar, has small budget rooms set in a delightful, small, old *haveli*, and a good little rooftop restaurant (dishes Rs 30 to 35).

**Haveli Uma Megh Paying Guest House** (☎ 2442191; r Rs 200-550) A bona fide bargain cheapie run by friendly brothers, this has a mixed bag of rooms, with wall paintings, alcoves and some lake views – the pricier rooms are really spacious. It's peaceful and has an excellent lakeside garden restaurant for candlelit dinners (dishes Rs 30 to 55).

**Hadee Rani Guesthouse** (☎ 2442903; hadeeranip.g@yahoo.com; Boari Khera House, Sadar Bazaar; r Rs 200-600) This is a delightful new place with a superb rooftop restaurant and an energetic family in charge – the irrepressible Chintu will happily guide guests around town. Rooms are colourful, clean and airy.

**Kasera Heritage View** (☎ 2444679; r Rs 200-900) This popular establishment offers a range of rooms in an old *haveli* (nab the one with a palace-view

balcony or the one overlooking the mosque). The rooftop restaurant sits precariously atop crippled foundations, but is nevertheless well placed for gazing at the palace.

**Ishwari Niwas** (☎ 2442414; in\_heritage@indiatimes.com; 1 Civil Lines; r Rs 250-600) This is a family-run hotel with royal associations. The graceful old colonial building set around a courtyard has variable rooms with murals, but the location is not the best: it's away from the old city, past the bus stand.

**Haveli Katkoun Guest House** (☎ 2444311; raghun andansingh@yahoo.com; r Rs 250-850) Just outside the town's west gate, this is the pick of the town's accommodation, with comfortable, spotless rooms off a calm, leafy garden. The rooms upstairs open onto a communal balcony with views, and the restaurant provides good home-cooked food (and beer). Major Singh and his gracious family are friendly but unobtrusive hosts.

**Kasera Paradise** (☎ 2444679; r Rs 400-1500; ☞) The lovely couple at Heritage View also run this smarter hotel that has a fantastic rooftop with city and palace views. For Kasera Paradise they renovated a *haveli* that had lain empty for 80 years. Rooms are spacious, with lots of alcove action, and have smartly tiled bathrooms. Décor features coloured glass and dangly chandeliers.

**Haveli Braj Bhushanjee** (☎ 2442322; www.kiplings bundi.com; r Rs 750-2450; ☞) This 250-year-old *haveli* is run by the helpful Braj Bhushanjee family (descendants of the former prime ministers of Bundi). It's an enchanting place with splendid rooftop views. It has an unrivalled range of accommodation – if a touch overpriced – ranging from old and atmospheric to modern with views. Rooms are decorated with beautiful murals on white paint, antique furniture and miniatures, and the freshly tiled bathrooms have solar-powered hot water. Meals are relatively expensive.

More and more families are opening their homes as guesthouses, including **Kishan Niwas** (☎ 2446110; jain\_jp@hotmail.com; Mahar ka Chohatta; s Rs 80-100, d Rs 150-200), **Hawali Parihar** (☎ 2446675; r Rs 100-200) and **Kohinoor Guesthouse** (d with kitchen Rs 150).

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Bus journeys in and out of Bundi are bone rattlers, though the main road to Udaipur has been improved. See opposite for some destinations and fares.



**BUSES FROM BUNDI**

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Ajmer	80	4	half-hourly
Bikaner	190	10	3 daily
Indore	150	12	4 daily
Jaipur	90	5	half-hourly
Jodhpur	160	10	7 daily
Kota	16	1	every 15min
Pushkar	90	5	daily (8.30am)
Sawai	45	4½	5 daily
Madhopur			
Udaipur	135	8½	4 daily

A private sleeper bus runs to Udaipur from Bundi – inquire near the bus stand.

**TRAIN**

The station has some useful passenger trains, which make for a smoother, if slower, journey. The No 282 at 7.23am goes to Chittor (Rs 29, 3¼ hours), having arrived from Agra (sleeper Rs 143), from where it departs at 7pm. Services should be going directly on to Udaipur by the time of publication.

**Getting Around**

A rickshaw to the train station costs Rs 40, a half-day city/outside city tour Rs 80/140 and out to Akoda and Rameshwar around Rs 250 return. Bike hire is available at **Atlas Cycles** (Azad Park) for Rs 5/25 per hour/day. You can also hire motorbikes locally – ask around at the guesthouses.

**KOTA**

☎ 0744 / pop 695,899

Once a city of huge strategic importance, Kota has found its stride in modern Rajasthan as a major industrial and chemical centre, and so remains refreshingly free from tourist hustle. Still, it has a spectacular palace with an excellent museum and lovely murals. The revitalising Chambal River, filled with small crocodiles and plied by boats of all sizes, is the state's only permanent river, and sustains a wealth of mostly unexplored terrain. Kota is also famous for *kota doria*, exquisite saris woven with golden thread in the nearby village of Kaithoon.

Following Rajput conquest of this area in the 12th century AD, Bundi became its capital, with Kota going to the ruler's eldest son. In

1624, Kota became a separate state, remaining so until it was integrated into Rajasthan after Independence.

Building of the city began in 1264 following the defeat of the Bhils, but Kota didn't reach its present size until the 17th century, when Rao Madho Singh, a son of the Bundi ruler, was handed Kota by the Mughal emperor Jehangir.

Today Kota also serves as an army headquarters and its wide, leafy streets add a touch of welcome airs and graces.

In October, the town hosts **Dussehra Mela**, and thousands of pilgrims descend in the month of Kartika (October/November) for **Kashavrai Patan**. See p166 for details of the festivals.

**Orientation**

Kota is strung out along the Chambal River's east bank. The train station is well to the north; a number of hotels and the bus stand are in the centre.

**Information**

There are numerous ATMs, including HDFC Bank ATMs next to Hotel Phul Plaza and on Platform 1 of the train station.

**Shiv Shakti Enterprises** (Rampura Rd; per hr Rs 50; ☎ 10am–10pm) Provides internet access.

**State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur** (Industrial Estate) Changes travellers cheques and currency.

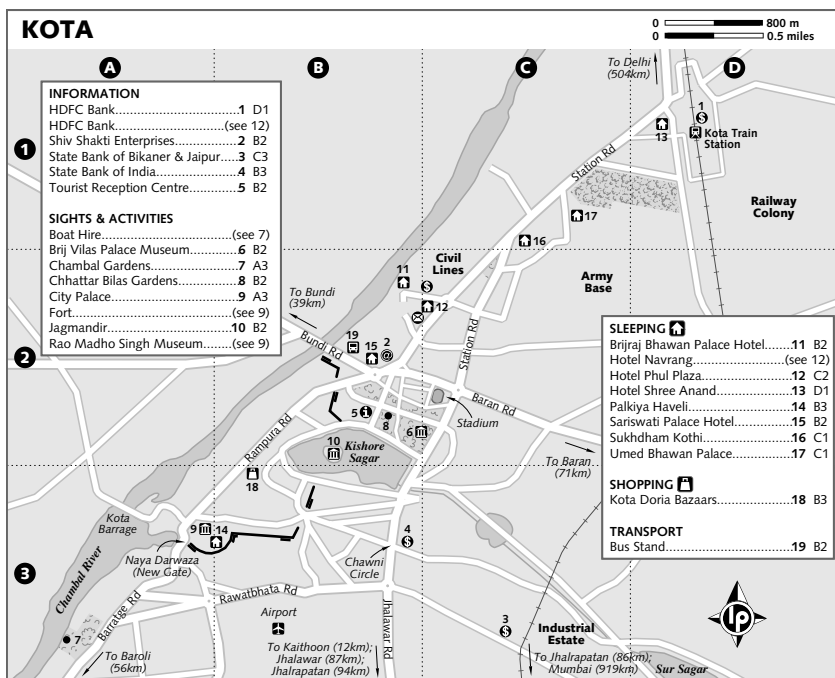
**State Bank of India** (Chawni Circle) Changes currency and Amex travellers cheques.

**Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 2327695; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat of month) In the grounds of the RTDC Hotel Chambal.

**Sights & Activities****CITY PALACE & FORT**

Beside the Kota Barrage, overlooking the river, is the complex holding the **City Palace** (☎ 9am–5pm) and the **fort**; it's one of Rajasthan's largest. Entry is from the south side through the **Naya Darwaza** (New Gate).

The palace houses the excellent **Rao Madho Singh Museum** (☎ 2385040; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50, camera/video Rs 50/100; ☎ 10am–4.30pm Sat–Thu). You'll find all the stuff necessary for a respectable Raj existence – silver furniture, an old-time ice-cream maker, and ingenious, beautiful weapons. The oldest part of the palace dates from 1624. Amazing mirrorwork and some of Rajasthan's best-preserved miniatures decorate the small-scale apartments – the upstairs rooms dance with exquisite paintings.



The curator may offer to take you around but, if you can, look around on your own, so that you can wander at leisure.

### JAGMANDIR

Between the City Palace and the Tourist Reception Centre is the picturesque artificial lake of **Kishore Sagar**, constructed in 1346. In the middle of the lake, on a small island amid palm trees, is the enchanting little tangerine palace of **Jagmandir**, built in 1740 by one of the maharanis of Kota. It's a sight that seems to mock the frantic streets either side of the lake. The palace is closed to the public.

### BRIJ VILAS PALACE MUSEUM

Near the Kishore Sagar, this small **government museum** (admission Rs 3; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu) is also housed in a palace. It has a collection of some interesting 9th- to 12th-century stone idols and other sculptural fragments, and some miniature paintings.

### BOAT TRIPS

A lovely hiatus from the city is a Chambal River boat trip. Once you escape the indus-

try near the town, it's beautiful, with lush vegetation and craggy cliffs either side, and opportunities to spot birds, gharials (fish-eating crocodiles) and crocodiles (don't fall in). It costs Rs 50/25 for 3½-/1½-hour trips. Trips start from Chambal Gardens.

### GARDENS

**Chambal Gardens** are on the riverbank south of the fort, with a murky pond stocked with crocodiles as a centerpiece. Once common all along the river, crocodiles had almost disappeared through hunting by the mid-20th century. There are also some rare gharials.

Next to the Tourist Reception Centre are the **Chhattar Bilas Gardens**, a collection of overgrown but impressive royal cenotaphs interspersed with carved elephants.

### Sleeping & Eating

Budget accommodation in Kota is lacklustre, but the city has decent upper-end hotels. A few hotels have good restaurants (meals Rs 30 to 100), or try the early-evening snack

(Continued on page 213)

(Continued from page 204)

stalls on the footpath outside the main post office.

**Hotel Shree Anand** (☎ 2462473; s/d from Rs 150/200) This place, in a pink building along the street opposite the train station, is useful if you're catching an early-morning train. The rooms are tiny and dingy, but pretty clean. Veg meals are available.

**Hotel Phul Plaza** (☎ 2329350; Civil Lines; s/d from Rs 325/425, with AC Rs 550/750; 🍷) Next door to Hotel Navrang, this option is a clean, no-nonsense business hotel. Rooms at the front are a bit noisy. There's a good veg restaurant with a wide range of dishes.

**Hotel Navrang** (☎ 2323294; Civil Lines; s/d from Rs 450/550, with AC Rs 750/950; 🍷) Navrang is unimpressive from the outside and in need of a makeover in the middle, but it has a modern internal courtyard and unobtrusive staff. Its excellent veg restaurant, Venue (dishes Rs 40 to 70), is a subdued business-lunch haunt where zigzag decorations add a dash of disco.

**Sariswati Palace Hotel** (☎ 2321861; Civil Lines; s/d Rs 600/900; 🍷) This modern hotel is efficiently run and justifiably recommended. Located close to the bus stand, Sariswati's rooms come equipped with TVs, bar fridges and a sense of impending room service.

**Brijraj Bhawan Palace Hotel** (☎ 2450529; s/d/ste Rs 1700/2350/2900) High above the Chambal River, this charismatic hotel has drawn exclusive guests since 1830, when the East India Company was plying its trade. It's named after the current maharaja of Kota, Brijraj Singh (who still lives here), and the enormous, classically presented rooms open onto quaint riverside terraces. If booking ahead, go for No 1 or No 4. It's off Station Rd.

**Sukhdham Kothi** (☎ 2320081; Station Rd; s/d Rs 1925/2200) This 100-year-old building set amongst leafy grounds is filled with foliated arches and cool arcades. The inviting rooms come with antique furniture; some open onto terraces.

**Umed Bhawan Palace** (☎ 2325262; off Station Rd; deluxe s/d/ste Rs 2400/2900/3600) Surrounded by sprawling gardens, this gracious palace is stuffily Edwardian. It's grander than the Brijraj Bhawan, with voluminous rooms, but they are darker and the overall feel is impersonal. The Presidential Suite (Rs 5500) is good, clean fun.

**Palkiya Haveli** (☎ 2327375; Mokha Para; s/d/ste Rs 2400/3000/3650; 🍷) This traditional Rajput *haveli* has been owned by the same Rathore family for 200 years, and is certifiably lovely. The hotel is a plant-filled oasis, and has impressive murals and appealing rooms. The family is charming and helpful, and the food is excellent.

## Shopping

The bazaars around Rampura Rd sell a wide range of *kota doria*, or you can hunt them at their source in nearby Kaithoon, 12km from Kota; it's Rs 4 by bus or Rs 100 return in a rickshaw.

## Getting There & Away BUS

There are plenty of express bus connections, see below.

## TRAIN

Kota is on the main Mumbai–Delhi train route via Sawai Madhopur, so there are plenty of trains to choose from, including services to Sawai Madhopur (sleeper/2AC Rs 271/605, two hours, 108km, six daily), to Agra (sleeper Rs 316, six hours, 333km), to Delhi (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 376/878/1107, 6¼ to 10 hours, 469km) and to Mumbai (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 488/1207/1579, 16 hours, 919km). The 2952 *Rajdhani* to Mumbai leaves at 8.50pm (3AC/2AC Rs 1490/1920, 12¼ hours).

## Getting Around

Minibuses link the train station and bus stand (Rs 4). An autorickshaw should cost Rs 30 for this journey; there's a prepay place at the station. Cycle-rickshaws cost around Rs 20.

### BUSES FROM KOTA

Destination	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Ajmer	105	6	half-hourly
Bikaner	290	12	3 daily
Bundi	22	¾	half-hourly
Chittor	95	6	5 daily
Jaipur	130	6	half-hourly
Jodhpur	195	11	3 daily
Udaipur	150	6	6 daily

## AROUND KOTA

### Baroli

Baroli is a 9th-century temple complex, 56km southwest of Kota. Much was vandalised by Muslim armies, but some fantastic carving remains. Kota's Brij Vilas Palace Museum (p204) displays some statuary from here.

There are buses from Kota (Rs 24, 1½ hours, hourly); tell the driver you want to be dropped off at Baroli.

### Jhalawar

Jhalawar, a small, appealing town 87km south of Kota, has some amazing, seldom-visited sights in the area surround it. Seven kilometres south is **Jhalrapatan** (the City of Temple Bells), which has a huge 10th-century Surya temple with impressive sculptures and one of India's best-preserved idols of Surya (the sun god). The 12th-century **Shantinath Jain Temple** is also worth visiting. Jhalrapatan hosts the **Chandrabhaga Mela** (p166) in November. Around 3km from Jhalrapatan is the lovely **Chandrabaga Temple**, set by a river. **Gagron Fort**, 10 km from Jhalawar, is also spectacular: a well-preserved, middle-of-nowhere fortress set high above the point where two rivers meet. Jhalawar has several reasonable hotels.

There are regular buses between Jhalawar and Kota (Rs 52, two hours).

## CHITTORGARH

☎ 01472 / pop 96,028

The fort at Chittorgarh (known as Chittor) is the greatest in Rajasthan, and is well worth reshuffling an itinerary to explore. The town itself is unspectacular, but the 700-acre complex standing on a rocky mountain plateau feels like the ultimate spot for a History Channel re-enactment. But there are no fallen actors here, just a series of stunning palaces, gates, temples and the startling **Jaya Stambha**.

History paints Chittor as strangely vulnerable – three times when it was under prolonged attack, its soldiers chose death before dishonour. The Rajput romantics actually left the compound to charge the enemy, donning saffron robes and leaving their families to the funeral pyre. Whether staying put behind the fort's rolling stone walls would have changed Chittor's fate is today a matter for academics (and TV producers) to debate.

Chittor makes a splendid day trip from Udaipur or Bundi.

## History

Chittor is mentioned in the Mahabharata – Bhim, one of the Pandava heroes, struck the ground here so hard that water gushed out to form a large reservoir. But the fort dates from the 8th century, founded by Bappa Rawal of Sisodia. Chittor's first defeat occurred in 1303 when Ala-ud-din Khilji, the Pathan king of Delhi, besieged the fort, apparently to capture the beautiful Padmini, wife of the rana's (king's) uncle, Bhim Singh. When defeat was inevitable, the men rode out to die and the Rajput noblewomen, including Padmini, committed *jauhar*.

In 1535 it was Bahadur Shah, the sultan of Gujarat, who besieged the fort and, once again, the medieval dictates of chivalry determined the outcome. It's thought that 13,000 Rajput women and 32,000 Rajput warriors died following the declaration of *jauhar*.

The final sacking of Chittor came just 33 years later, in 1568, when the Mughal emperor Akbar took the town. Once again, the odds were overwhelming, and the women performed *jauhar* and 8000 orange-robed warriors rode out to die. On this occasion, Maharaja Udai Singh II fled to Udaipur, where he re-established his capital. In 1616, Jehangir returned Chittor to the Rajputs. There was no attempt at resettlement, though it was restored in 1905.

## Orientation & Information

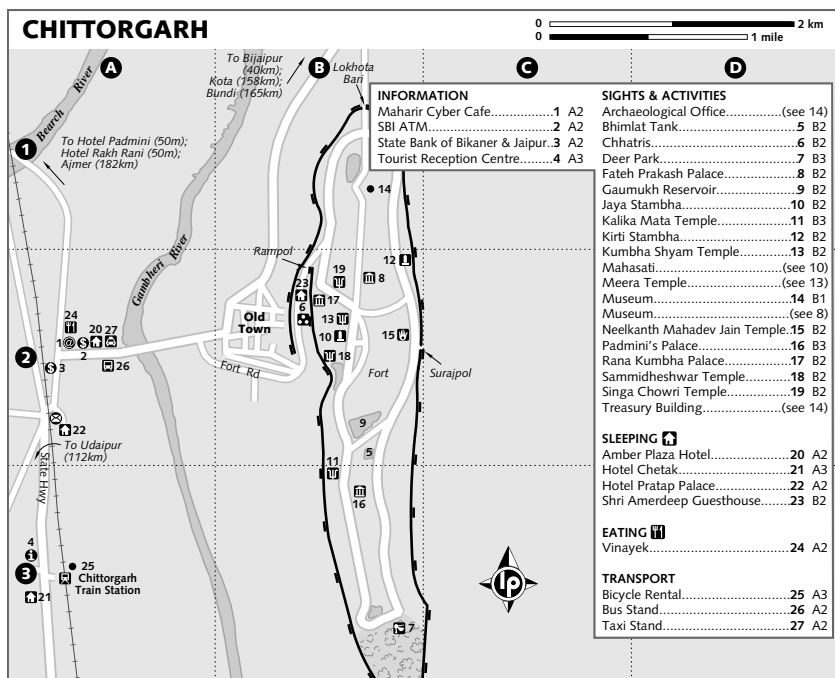
The fort is roughly fish shaped, and stands on a 28-sq-km site on top of a 180m-high hill that rises abruptly from the surrounding plain. Until 1568 the town of Chittor was within the fort walls, but today's modern town, known as Lower Town, clatters to the west of the hill. A river separates it from the bus stand, railway line and the rest of the town.

There's a **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 241089; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) near the train station. You can change money at the State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur. Surf the internet at **Maharir Cyber Cafe** (Collectorate Circle; per hr Rs 25; ☎ 9am-10pm).

## Sights

All of Chittor's attractions are in the **fort** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ dawn-dusk). A zigzag ascent of more than 1km leads through seven gateways to the main gate on the western side, the **Rampol** (the former back entrance).

On the climb you pass two **chhatris**, memorials marking spots where Jaimal and Kalla



fell during the struggle against Akbar – Jaimal was already fatally wounded but was carried out to fight by Kalla. The main gate on the eastern side of the fort is known as the **Suraj-pool**, and has fantastic views across the empty plains. Within the fort, a circular road runs around the ruins and there's a **deer park** at the southern end.

Today the fort is a deserted collection of ruined palaces and around 130 temples. The main sites can all be seen in half a day (if you're not walking; see p203 for transport info), but it's worth spending longer as this is a mellow place. Guides are available, usually at the Rana Kumbha Palace; they charge around Rs 150.

### RANA KUMBHA PALACE

After entering the fort and turning right, you come to the ruins of this palace, which includes elephant and horse stables and a Shiva temple. Padmini's *jauhar* is said to have taken place in a now blocked cellar. Across from the palace is the museum and archaeological office, and the **treasury building** (Nau Lakha Bhandar). The **Singa Chowri Temple** is nearby.

### FATEH PRAKASH PALACE

Just beyond Rana Kumbha Palace, this **palace** is more modern and houses a small, poorly labelled **museum** (admission Rs 3, free Mon; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu) and a school for local children (around 4000 villagers live within the fort).

### JAYA STAMBHA

Heading south, you come to the glorious Jaya Stambha (Tower of Victory) – the symbol of Chittor and a particularly masculine expression of triumph. Erected by Rana Kumbha between 1458 and 1468, it rises 37m in nine exquisitely carved storeys; you can climb the narrow stairs (the interior is also carved) to the 8th floor, from where there's a good view. The dome was damaged by lightning and repaired during the 19th century.

Close to the tower is the **Mahasati**, an area where the ranas were cremated during Chittor's period as the capital of Mewar, the area encompassing Chittor and Udaipur. There are many *sati* stones here – 13,000 women committed *jauhar* close by in 1535. The intensely carved **Sammidheshwar Temple**, built in the 6th century and restored in 1427, is nearby.

## GAUMUKH RESERVOIR

Walk down beyond the temple and, at the edge of the cliff, you'll see this deep tank. A spring feeds the tank from a carved cow's mouth in the cliff.

## PADMINI'S PALACE

Continuing south, you reach **Padmini's Palace**, set beside a large pool with a central pavilion. Legend relates that, as Padmini sat in this pavilion, Ala-ud-din saw her reflection in the lake. This glimpse convinced him to destroy Chittor in order to possess her. The bronze gates to this pavilion were carried off by Akbar and can be seen in the fort at Agra.

Continuing around the circular road, you pass the deer park, the **Bhimlat Tank**, the Surajpol and the **Neelkanth Mahadev Jain temple**, before reaching the Kirti Stambha.

## KIRTI STAMBHA

The 22m-high Kirti Stambha (Tower of Fame) is older (probably 12th century) and smaller than the Tower of Victory. Built by a Jain merchant, it is dedicated to Adinath, the first Jain *tirthankar* (revered Jain teacher), and is decorated with naked figures of the various *tirthankars*, indicating that it is a Digambara monument. (There are two orders of Jains: Svetambara and Digambara. Monks belonging to the first order wear thin white robes, while Digambara monks reject any form of clothing whatsoever and live naked, or 'sky-clad'.) A narrow stairway leads through the seven storeys to the top. The staircase is usually locked.

## OTHER SIGHTS

Close to Kirti Stambha is the **Meera Temple**. Built during the reign of Rana Kumbha, it's in the ornate Indo-Aryan style and is associated with the mystic poet Meerabai – she consumed poison sent by an enemy but survived due to the blessings of Krishna. The larger temple in this same compound is the **Kumbha Shyam Temple** (Temple of Varah).

Across from Padmini's Palace is the **Kalika Mata Temple**, an 8th-century sun temple. It was damaged during the first sack of Chittor, then converted to a temple to the goddess Kali in the 14th century. At the fort's northern tip is another gate, the **Lokhota Bari**, while at the southern end is a small opening used for hurling criminals into the abyss.

## Sleeping & Eating

Hotels are mainly dreadful and noisy in Chittor. Those near the train and bus stations are places where lone women may feel uncomfortable.

**Shri Amerdeep Guesthouse** (☎ 248610; r Rs 400) Near Rampol gate on the fort hill, this well-camouflaged guesthouse has poky but pleasant rooms set above a line of shops. There are tremendous fort views from the concrete rooftop, and the owners plan to build a restaurant.

**Hotel Rakh Rani** (☎ 249558; Bilara Rd, r Rs 300-800) This is a brash-looking new hotel near the Bearch River bridge, incongruously set in an overgrown field. Rooms are colourful, though clummy, and staff are eager to please.

**Amber Plaza Hotel** (☎ 249799; s/d Rs 500/700; ☺) A smart option tucked away behind Natraj Hotel, Amber is a professional setup with small, spotless rooms and appealing showers. The restaurant downstairs rents out private booths (Rs 200, including meal) for those looking for in-your-face intimacy.

**Hotel Chetak** (☎ 241679; s/d Rs 550/650, with AC & TV Rs 700/800; ☺) The pick of the train-station lodgings, Chetak has spotless, spacious rooms with hot water.

**Hotel Padmini** (☎ 241718; hotel\_padmini@rediffmail.com; s/d Rs 800/1000, with AC Rs 1250/1500; ☺) This option, out of town near the Bearch River, has a garden and horses, and a shiny, bustling reception. Some rooms have balconies with views of the distant fort, but rooms are overpriced and run-down.

**Hotel Pratap Palace** (☎ 243563; hpratap@hotmail.com; s Rs 1150-1440, d Rs 1250-1560, superdeluxe s/d Rs 1800/2040; ☺) This is Chittor's go-to joint, with a wide range of rooms, convenient location and travel-savvy staff. The more expensive rooms have window seats and leafy outlooks, while top prices also get you a big mural (Room 208). There's a gardenside restaurant with good food – drop in for lunch, and they'll let you stash your luggage for the afternoon. Village safaris and visits to the hotel's castle in Bijaipur (see opposite) can be arranged.

**Vinayek** (Collectorate Circle; dishes Rs 15-60) This restaurant serves up North Indian veg dishes as well as Chinese and South Indian food. It's in a gloomy basement that enlivened by the restaurant's popularity and a sweet counter.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Express buses serve Delhi (Rs 310, 14 hours, two daily), and travel regularly to Ajmer (Rs

95, five hours), Jaipur (Rs 155, eight hours), Udaipur (local/express Rs 46/56, three/2½ hours) and Bundi (Rs 78, five hours), among other places.

### TRAIN

The *Udaipur–Jaipur Super Express* (No 2966) leaves Chittor at 9.40pm, arriving in Jaipur (sleeper Rs 357, 324km) at 7am. For Udaipur, the No 2965 leaves at 5.40am, arriving at 7.45am (sleeper Rs 291, 115km).

### Getting Around

Autorickshaws charge around Rs 150 to take you from the bus or train station, around the fort, and back (including waiting time). A rickshaw between the bus and train stations should cost Rs 20.

Bicycles can be rented near the train station (Rs 30 per day), but you may have to walk up the steep hill to the fort. Still, they're great for seeing the fort and coming back downhill.

## AROUND CHITTORGARH

### Bijaipur

Forty kilometres from Chittor, **Castle Bijaipur** ([www.castlebijaipur.com](http://www.castlebijaipur.com); s/d Rs 1550/1850; ☎ ☎) is a fantastically set 16th-century palace, seemingly plucked from Udaipur and plumped in the countryside. Rooms are romantic and luxurious. Reservations should be made through Chittor's **Hotel Pratap Palace** (☎ 243563; hpratap@hotmail.com). The friendly owners organise horse and jeep safaris. There are frequent buses from Chittor to Bijaipur (Rs 10, 1½ hours). A return taxi will cost around Rs 300.

### UDAIPUR

☎ 0294 / pop 389,317

Watermarked by whimsy and splendour, the Venice of the East holds stage as one of India's truly seductive cities. Udaipur is an international destination unto itself, with splendid Lake Pichola lapping against shimmering white buildings, and the Aravalli hills closing in to savour the view.

The centrepiece of the city is the floating Lake Palace – brash enough for a Bond film (parts of *Octopussy* were filmed here), yet refined enough for his majesty's pleasure. Packed with princeliness and passion, Udaipur is raw Rajput dreaming, with palaces, *havelis* and temples at every turn.

Formerly known as Mewar, Udaipur was founded in 1559 when Maharaja Udai Singh

II took flight from the final sacking of Chittor by the Mughal emperor Akbar. As Udai Singh and his contemporaries resisted Muslim might, the city grew a reputation for patriotic fervour and an aching love of independence.

In 2006 a record rainfall returned the lake to its natural splendour and restored the heart to Rajasthan's most romantic city. When the monsoon is poor though, the lake feels more like an abandoned quarry, and the swarming tourist trade of the old city goes into damage control. Don't despair though, fair traveller; the surrounding countryside is an untapped Rajasthan highlight.

Udaipur celebrates the **Mewar Festival** (p166) in April.

### Orientation

The old city, bounded by the remains of a city wall, is on the east side of Lake Pichola. The train station and bus stand are both just outside the city wall to the southeast. Like most Indian cities, Udaipur has an urban sprawl that goes beyond the city's original boundaries.

### Information

#### BOOKSHOPS

Udaipur has numerous places around Lal Ghat selling and exchanging books in various languages. It's a good place to buy books about India, though books can be more expensive here than elsewhere in Rajasthan.

#### EMERGENCY

**Police** (☎ 2412693; Surajpol)

#### INTERNET ACCESS

You can surf the internet at loads of places, particularly around Lal Ghat. The following places are reasonably quick:

**BA Photo N Book Store** (69 Durga Sadan; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9.15am–11pm)

**I-way** (Jagdish Chowk; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 8am–11pm)

**Mewar International** (35 Lal Ghat; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9am–11pm)

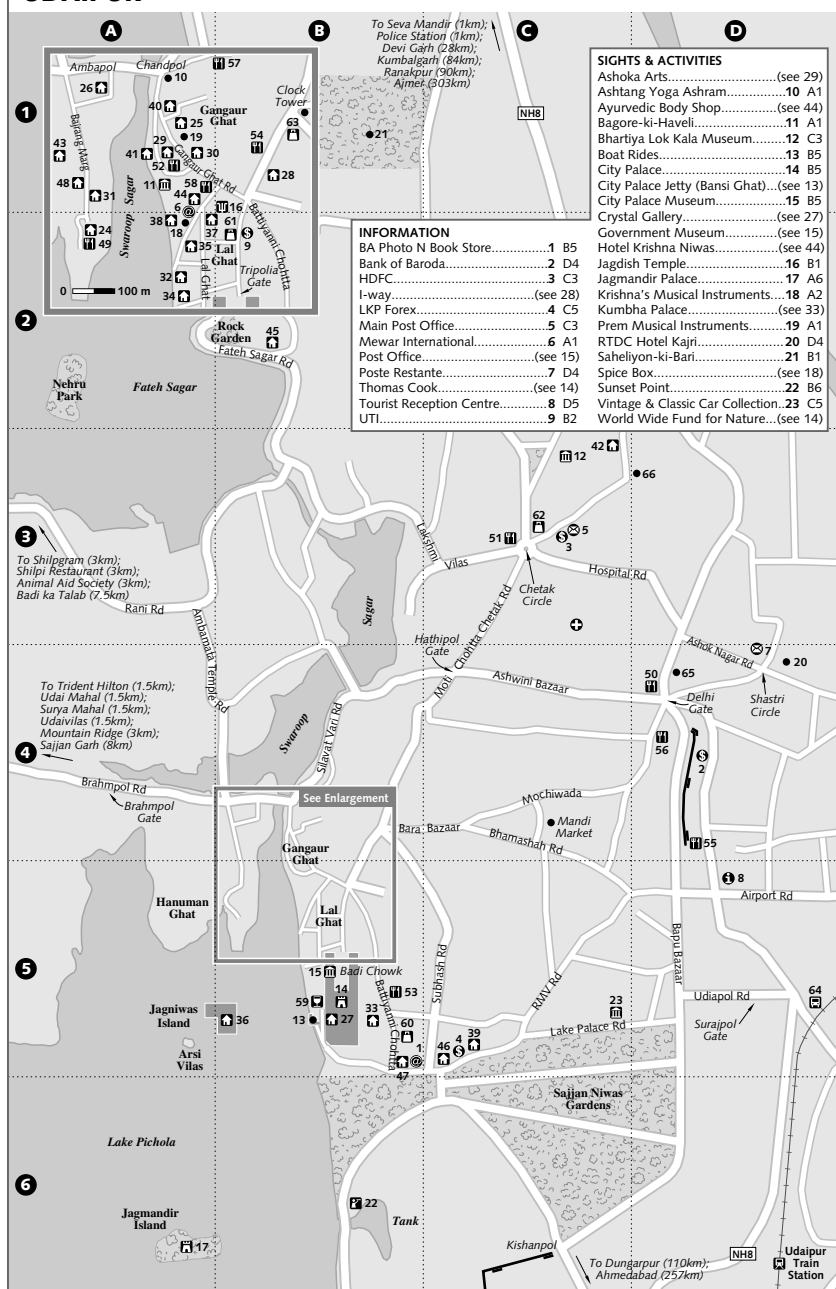
#### MEDIA

*Udaipur Calling* (Rs 300) is a new publication that has the ins and outs of the city covered, although it does run a bit like an advertorial. It's available at most bookshops.

#### MONEY

There are lots of ATMs around, including an HDFC ATM near the main post office and

## UDAIPUR





SLEEPING	
Amet Haveli.....	24 A2
Anjani Hotel.....	25 A1
Dream Heaven Guest House.....	26 A1
Fateh Prakash Palace Hotel.....	27 B5
Garden Hotel.....	(see 23)
Hotel Baba Palace.....	28 B1
Hotel Gangaur Palace.....	29 A1
Hotel Krishna Niwas.....	(see 44)
Hotel Lake Star.....	(see 10)
Hotel Uda Niwas.....	30 A1
Hotel Wonderview.....	31 A1
Jagat Niwas Palace Hotel.....	32 A2
Jaiwana Haveli.....	(see 35)
Kankarwa Haveli.....	(see 32)
Kumbha Palace.....	33 B5
Lake Corner Soni Paying Guest House.....	34 A2
Lake Ghat Guest House.....	35 A2
Lake Palace Hotel.....	36 B5
Lake View Guest House.....	37 A2
Lalghat Guest House.....	38 A2
Lehar Paying Guest House.....	(see 30)
Mahendra Prakash Hotel.....	39 C5
Mandiram Palace Guest House.....	(see 48)
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New Jheel Guest House.....	(see 41)
Nukkad Guest House.....	40 A1
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Pahuna Haveli.....	42 C3
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Ram Pratap Palace Hotel.....	45 B2
Rang Niwas Palace Hotel.....	46 C5
Ratan Palace.....	(see 16)
Shambhu Vilas.....	47 B5
Shiv Niwas Palace Hotel.....	(see 27)
Udaï Kothi.....	48 A1
EATING	
Ambrai.....	49 A2
Barwachi Restaurant.....	50 D4
Berry's.....	51 C3
Café Edelweiss.....	52 A1
Jagat Niwas Palace Hotel.....	(see 32)
Lotus Café.....	53 B5
Maxim's Café.....	54 B1
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Parkview Restaurant.....	56 D4
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Paanera Bar.....	(see 27)
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ENTERTAINMENT	
Dharohar.....	(see 11)
SHOPPING	
Gallery Pristine.....	60 B5
Rajasthali.....	61 B2
Rajasthali.....	62 C3
Sadhna.....	63 B1
TRANSPORT	
Bus Stand.....	64 D5
Heera Cycle Store.....	(see 30)
Indian Airlines.....	65 D4
Jet Airways.....	66 D3

To DHL Worldwide Express (500m); Anar (2km);

To Airport (25km); Chittorgarh (112km);

To Pratap Country Inn (5km); Princess Trails (5km); Jaisamand Lake (48km)

a UTI ATM near Jagdish Temple. You can change money and get credit-card advances at many places.

**Bank of Baroda** (☎ 2420671; 🕒 10am-2.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) About 200m southeast of Delhi Gate; changes cash and does credit-card advances.

**LKP Forex** (☎ 2423358; Lake Palace Rd; 🕒 9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) Next to the Rang Niwas Palace Hotel; changes numerous currencies.

**Thomas Cook** (☎ 2419746; City Palace Complex; 🕒 10am-1.30pm & 2-5pm) Changes travellers cheques and foreign currencies.

## POST

**DHL Worldwide Express** (☎ /fax 2412979; 380 Ashok Nagar Rd; 🕒 9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) Has a free collection service within Udaipur.

**Main post office** (Chetak Circle; 🕒 10am-1pm & 1.30-7pm) North of the old city.

**Post office** (City Palace Complex; 🕒 10.30am-1pm & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Sat) Outside the City Palace Museum.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 2411535; Fateh Memorial Bldg; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat of month) Near Surajpol Gate.

## Sights

### LAKE PICHOLA

Placid Lake Pichola was enlarged by Maharaja Udaï Singh II after the city was founded – he flooded nearby Pichola village by building a masonry dam, known as the Badipol. The lake is now 4km long and 3km wide, but it remains shallow and dries up in severe droughts. The City Palace decorates the east bank of the lake. North of the palace you can wander along the lakeshore, where there are some interesting bathing and dhobi (clothes-washing) ghats.

The lake has two islands: Jagniwas and Jagmandir. **Boat rides** (adult/child 30min trip Rs 100/50, 1hr trip Rs 175/100; 🕒 9.30am-5pm) leave half-hourly from the City Palace jetty (aka Bansî Ghat) when the lake is high enough. The longer trip includes a visit to Jagmandir Island.

### Jagniwas Island

Jagniwas, the Lake Palace Hotel island, is about 1.5 hectares in size, completely covered by the palace built by Maharaja Jagat Singh II in 1754. Formerly the royal summer palace, today it is the ultimate in luxury hotels (p225), with shady courtyards, lotus ponds and a pool shaded by a mango tree. Nonguests can only come over for lunch or dinner (p226); hotel

launches cross to the island from the City Palace jetty.

The Lake Palace, along with the Shiv Niwas Palace and Monsoon Palace, was used in the James Bond movie *Octopussy*.

Behind Jagniwas is a much smaller island called **Arsi Vilas**, used as a helipad.

### Jagmandir Island

The **palace** on Jagmandir Island was built by Maharaja Karan Singh in 1620, and added to by Maharaja Jagat Singh (1628–52). It is said that the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan derived some of his inspiration for the Taj Mahal from this palace after staying here in 1623–24 while leading a revolt against his father, Jehangir. Europeans were sheltered here by Maharaja Swarup Singh during the uprising of 1857.

Flanked by a row of enormous stone elephants, the island has an impressive *chhatra* carved from grey-blue stone, and fantastic views across the lake to the city and its golden palace.

### CITY PALACE & MUSEUMS

The imposing **City Palace** (admission Rs 25; ☎ 7am–8pm), surmounted by balconies, towers and cupolas, and towering over the lake, is Rajasthan's largest palace, with a façade 244m long and 30.4m high. A conglomeration of buildings created by various maharajas, it still manages to retain a surprising uniformity of design. Construction was started by Maharaja Udai Singh II, the city's founder. There are fine views over the lake and the city from the upper terraces.

The palace is entered from the northern end through the Baripol (built in 1600) and the three-arched Tripolia Gate (1725). To the left, seven arches commemorate the seven times maharajas were weighed here and their weight in gold or silver distributed to the lucky locals.

The **City Palace museum** (adult/child Rs 50/30, camera/video Rs 200/200; ☎ 9.30am–4.30pm) includes the **Mor Chowk**, with its lavish mosaics of peacocks, the favourite Rajasthan bird. The **Manak (Ruby) Mahal** has glass and mirrorwork, while **Krishna Vilas** has a remarkable collection of miniatures (no photography allowed). In the **Bari Mahal** there is a pleasant central garden. The **Moti Mahal** has beautiful mirrorwork and the **Chini Mahal** is covered in ornamental tiles. More wall paintings can be seen in the **Zenana Mahal**. There's a large tiger-catching cage near the Zenana Mahal entrance.

Enter the museum from the north side (up the hill from the Jagdish Temple), otherwise there's an extra Rs 25 visitor fee. A guide (Rs 100 for up to five people) is worthwhile.

There's also a **government museum** (admission Rs 3, free Mon; ☎ 10am–5pm Sat–Thu) within the complex. Exhibits include a freaky monkey holding a lamp, as well as more serious stuff, such as sculptures, and maharaja portraits with a spectacular array of moustaches.

In the large courtyard outside the City Palace museum are pricey handicraft shops, a **World Wide Fund for Nature** (☎ 9.30am–5.30pm) shop, Thomas Cook, a post office and banks.

The rest of the palace fronts the lake and has been partly converted into two luxury hotels: Shiv Niwas Palace (p225) and the Fateh Prakash Palace (p225). There's a stunning **crystal gallery** (adult/child incl soft drink Rs 325/165; ☎ 10am–1pm & 3–8pm) at the Fateh Prakash Palace Hotel, though the admission charge is becoming rather exclusive. Maharaja Sajjan Singh ordered this rare crystal from F&C Osler & Co in England in 1877; he died before it arrived, and all the items stayed packed up in boxes for 110 years. The extravagant, unused collection includes crystal chairs, sofas, tables and even beds. Photography is prohibited.

Palace ladies once used the crystal gallery to observe the grandiose **darbar hall**, which was used for official occasions such as state banquets and meetings. This darbar hall, built in 1909, is undoubtedly one of India's most impressive, with outrageously huge chandeliers. The illustrious Mewar rulers who deck the walls come from supposedly the oldest ruling dynasty in the world, spanning 76 generations. The darbar hall holds hundreds and can be hired for special functions.

### JAGDISH TEMPLE

Only 150m north of the City Palace entrance, this fantastically carved Indo-Aryan **temple** (☎ 5am–2pm & 4–10.30pm) was built by Maharaja Jagat Singh in 1651. It enshrines a black stone image of Vishnu as Jagannath, Lord of the Universe. A brass image of Garuda is in a shrine in front of the temple.

### BAGORE-KI-HAVELI

This gracious 18th-century **haveli** (admission Rs 25; ☎ 10am–7pm), on the water's edge in the Ganguar Ghat area, was built by a former prime minister and has been carefully restored. There

## CLOTHES THAT SPEAK

The colours of everyday Rajasthani life dazzle against the desert – top-heavy turbans (*safas*, *paags* or *pagris*); fluttering scarlet, sunflower yellow and saffron saris; glittering traditional Rajasthani skirts (*lehngas* or *ghagharas*); and headscarves (*odnis* or *dupattas*).

These are not just decorative, but speak a language of their own, tied up with the strictures of society.

Turban colour may signify caste, religion and occasion. Rajputs traditionally wear saffron, signifying chivalry. Brahmins wear pink, Dalits brown and nomads black. Jubilantly multicoloured turbans are for festivals. White, grey, black or blue turbans are worn by Hindus to signify sadness, but these colours are also worn by Muslims. The way a turban is tied further indicates the wearer's social class and origin.

As Hindus believe some shades of blue, green and white to be mournful colours, they tend to be worn by widows, while wives and single women wear more cheery pinks, reds and yellows. These embody more signs: one red-and-yellow combination may only be worn by women who've borne a son. Hindu married women are carefully marked off limits by *chudas* (arm bangles), *bichiyas* (toe rings) and a dash of vermilion in their hair parting.

are 138 rooms set around courtyards. Some have been arranged to evoke when the house was inhabited, others have cultural displays, including the world's (rather saggy) biggest turban! The *haveli* also houses an interesting art gallery, with contemporary and folk art, and world-famous monuments lovingly carved out of polystyrene. The upper courtyard makes an atmospheric setting for fabulous Rajasthani dance performances at 7pm (see p227).

## FATEH SAGAR

North of Lake Pichola, this lake – which dries up if the monsoon has been poor – is ringed by hills and is a hang-out for love-struck locals. It was originally built in 1678 by Maharaja Jai Singh but, after heavy rains destroyed the dam, it was reconstructed by Maharaja Fateh Singh. At its centre is **Nehru Park**, a garden island. An autorickshaw from the old city costs Rs 30 (one way).

## BHARTIYA LOK KALA MUSEUM

This small, private **museum** (☎ 2529296; Indian/foreigner Rs 15/25, camera/video Rs 20/50; ⌚ 9am–5.30pm) shows dolls, masks, tribal jewellery, musical instruments, paintings and puppets.

## SAHELIYON-KI-BARI

In the north of the city is the **Saheliyon-ki-Bari** (Garden of the Maids of Honour; admission Rs 5; ⌚ 8am–7pm) is. This small, quaint ornamental garden was laid out for 48 women attendants who came as part of a princess's dowry, and has fountains (water shortages permitting), kiosks, marble elephants and a delightful lotus pool.

## SHILPGRAM

**Shilpgram** (Indian/foreigner Rs 15/25, camera/video Rs 10/50; ⌚ 11am–7pm) is a crafts village 3km west of town that hosts the fantastic Shilpgram festival each December – check with the Tourist Reception Centre (p219) or at Bagore-ki-Haveli (opposite) for details. The rest of the year sees excellent demonstrations by traditional performers and artisans from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Goa and Maharashtra, but it can feel somewhat staged.

Shilpi Restaurant is next door (p226); it has a **swimming pool** (admission Rs 100; ⌚ 11am–8pm).

A return autorickshaw trip (including a 30-minute stop) between the old city and Shilpgram costs Rs 100.

## AHAR

About 2km east of Udaipur are over 250 restored **cenotaphs** of the maharajas of Mewar; it's a spectacular city of snowy domes built over a period of 350 years. Nearby you can visit the patchy remains of the Sisodias' ancient capital, and a **museum** (admission Rs 3; ⌚ 10am–5pm) housing accompanying artefacts, some over 5000 years old.

## SAJJAN GARH (MONSOON PALACE)

Perched on the top of a distant mountain range like a fairy-tale castle, this neglected late-19th-century palace was constructed by Maharaja Sajjan Singh. Originally an astronomical centre, it later became a monsoon palace and hunting lodge. Now government-owned, it's open to the public after lengthy closure, but there is not much to see inside. Come for the breathtaking sunset views.

You pay Rs 80/20 per person/rickshaw at the foot of the hill to enter the Sajjan Garh Wildlife Sanctuary. Autorickshaw return costs Rs 150 (including waiting).

## OTHER SIGHTS

The maharajas' **Vintage & Classic Car Collection** (☎ 2420979; Garden Hotel; admission Rs 100; 🕒 9-11am & 2-6pm) is fascinating, with 22 splendid vehicles including a 1938 Cadillac complete with a system for purdah (custom among some Muslims and Hindus of keeping women secluded) to the beautiful 1934 Rolls-Royce Phantom used in *Octopussy*. The maharaja's 'sun-smart' car is also housed here.

**Sunset Point** (admission Rs 5) is a lovely sunset spot. There's a musical fountain here (drought permitting), which plays each evening.

Almost 5km beyond Shilpgram is **Badi ka Talab** (Tiger Lake), a mammoth artificial lake flanked by hills. It's usually full, and makes a pleasant picnic spot. Crocodiles lurk in parts of the lake, so swimmers beware!

## Activities

### HORSE RIDING

**Princess Trails** (☎ 242012; www.princesstrails.com; Familie Shaktawat, Jaisamand Rd, Titardi) is an Indian-German company offering extended horse safaris and half-day nature rides on the famed Marwari horses. **Kumbha Palace** (☎ 2422702; Battiyaani Chohtta) arranges riding excursions around Udaipur. A 2½-hour ride (including mineral water) costs Rs 500, a half-/full day (including water and lunch) Rs 700/1200. You can also stay overnight in the hotel's **rural cottages** (d Rs 1000-1200) or arrange much longer trips.

### MASSAGE

The **Ayurvedic Body Shop** (☎ 5120802; 39 Lal Ghat; 🕒 10.30am-9pm) offers Ayurvedic massage, including a head massage for Rs 100, a back massage for Rs 200 and a 45-minute full-body massage for Rs 500. It also has good products for sale.

### TREKKING

Exploring the surrounding countryside and villages on foot is a fantastic way to see rural and tribal life while taking in some beautiful scenery; Piers at **Mountain Ridge** (☎ 3291478; www.mountainridge.in; Sisarma) can arrange all kinds of hikes, or will put you in touch with an excellent local guide.

## Courses

**Ashoka Arts** (Hotel Gangaur Palace, Gangaur Ghat Rd) Runs painting lessons (Rs 150 for two to three hours, including materials).

**Ashtang Yoga Ashram** (☎ 2524872; Raiba House)

The teacher at this friendly hatha yoga centre has 20 years' experience; payment is by donation (proceeds go to the local animal hospital).

**Hotel Krishna Niwas** (☎ 2420163; jairaj34@yahoo.com; 35 Lal Ghat) Sushma runs tremendous cookery classes (Rs 500 for two hours, including meal), while Jairaj is an internationally renowned artist who teaches miniature and classical painting.

**Krishna's Musical Instruments** (37 Lal Ghat) Krishna provides sitar, tabla and flute lessons.

**Noble Indian Cooking Class** (☎ 3953825 nicc\_indya@yahoo.co.in; Nani Gali, Jagdsh Chowk) Ruchi is a highly accomplished cooking teacher (Rs 300 per prepared meal).

**Prem Musical Instruments** (☎ 2430599; 28 Gadia Devra) Bablu gives sitar, tabla and flute lessons (Rs 100 per hour).

**Spice Box** (☎ 5100742; spicebox2001@yahoo.co.in; 38 Lal Ghat) Offers recommended cookery lessons (Rs 400 to 500 for four hours).

## Tours

Five-hour city tours (five people minimum; per person excluding admission charges Rs 78) leave at 8am from the RTDC Hotel Kajri. There are also excursions to Ranakpur and Kumbalgarh (per person excluding admission charges Rs 276); the price includes a veg lunch.

## Sleeping

Many Udaipur guesthouse owners are slowly realising the value of sound environmental practice. Aside from the obvious issue of water conservation in a city desperate to maintain a full lake, across the skyline you'll see solar-heating panels popping up faster than satellite dishes. Even the maharaja recently got in on the act by investing in a state-of-the-art solar-powered rickshaw as an example of the city's commitment to positive tourism.

One of the catalysts for this ecoawakening is an organisation called **Shikshantar** (☎ 2451303; www.swaraj.org/shikshantar; 21 Fatehpura), an Udaipur-based community action group that is working towards a 'zero-waste Udaipur'. To this end, it has created 'green-leaf' hotel rating system to help guests and tour operators make more informed decisions about where to stay. The rating is based on 14 criteria, including

waste management, energy usage and food preparation. Results are currently on display at Bagore-ki-Haveli and on the website.

Staying close to the lakeshore is most romantic. You can either head west of the Jagdish Temple, or to the quieter and less touristy Hanuman Ghat on the other side of the lake. Ask for a lake-facing room (usually more expensive). Most places offer off-season discounts.

To bypass rapacious rickshaw drivers working on commission, use the prepaid autorickshaw stands outside the train and bus stations. If you do have any complaints (about rickshaw drivers – note the registration number – or hotels), contact the **police** (☎ 2412693; Surajpol) or the **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 2411535; Fateh Memorial Bldg; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat of month).

## BUDGET

### Lal Ghat Area

**Lalghat Guest House** (☎ 2525301; lalghat@hotmail.com; 33 Lal Ghat; dm/s with shared bathroom Rs 100/125, d with shared bathroom Rs 100–150, s/d with private bathroom Rs 200/250; 📍) This was one of the first guest-houses in Udaipur, and it's still going strong. Accommodation ranges from spruce, end-to-end dorm beds to the inspired lake-view room (Rs 1200). There's a small kitchen for self-caterers.

**Hotel Lake Star** (☎ 2430102; azad\_udr@yahoo.com; 80 Naganagri, Chandpol; r Rs 100–300) Another family-run joint with great lake views. The kitchen whips up real palate pleasers, and the double rooms are blissfully quiet, if a touch stark.

**Hotel Gangaur Palace** (☎ 2422303; Gangaur Ghat Rd; r Rs 100–400) This classic cheapie has faded *haveli* charm and is set around a courtyard. Pay the extra rupees for a window seat, and bathroom. The rooftop restaurant has an island calm.

**Lake Corner Soni Paying Guest House** (☎ 2525712; 27 Navghat; s/d with shared bathroom from Rs 100/120, with private bathroom Rs 125/150) This modest place – nothing ritzy here – has a sweet, family atmosphere, though slightly shabby rooms. The home cooking is excellent, the rooftop views unexpectedly pretty and just around the block is your own private dock.

**Lehar Paying Guest House** (☎ 2417651; 86 Gangaur Ghat Rd; s/d from Rs 150/200) Run by a redoubtable matriarch, this homestay stalwart has top-value, clean (though slightly faded) rooms with wall paintings and coloured glass. A new

double upstairs (Rs 700) is poky but lush, and has its own private courtyard.

**Nukkad Guest House** (☎ 2411403; 56 Ganesh Ghat Rd; s/d Rs 150/300) Friendly Raju has opened up his traditionally decorated family house – recently extended to accommodate more guests – and he loves a late-night chat! There's a fab rooftop restaurant too.

**Old Jheel Guest House** (☎ 2421352; 56 Gangaur Ghat Rd; d Rs 200–350) Old Jheel Guest House is in an old *haveli*. Accommodation ranges from basic back rooms to a room with a small balcony and three lake-facing windows.

**Lake View Guest House** (☎ 2420527; Sahib ki Haveli; r Rs 200–400) Thorough renovations have made Lake View a leading budget option. Rooms are reasonably well maintained and spacious, some with reach-out-and-touch-it temple views, and the restaurant does cracking breakfasts.

**Ratan Palace** (☎ 2561570; 1, Lal Ghat; r Rs 200–400) The Soni family manages this welcoming place with excellent views, clean rooms with stained glass, and a busy little restaurant. The affable owner plays (and teaches) a mean sitar. It's behind Jagdish Temple.

**Anjani Hotel** (☎ 2421770; www.anjanihotel.com; 77 Gangaur Ghat Rd; r Rs 300–800; 📍 📍 📍) This well-run hotel has 21 rooms with black-and-white checked floors, lots of stained-glass windows and elaborate wall paintings – the top-floor rooms have fantastic city views. The pool is well maintained, and the restaurant is excellent (though service can be slow). There's an art shop in the lobby.

**Hotel Udai Niwas** (☎ 5120789; www.hoteludainiwas.com; Gangaur Ghat Rd; r Rs 300–1000; 📍 📍) This has excellent, spotless rooms, painted white and decorated by puppets and wall hangings – the cheapest rooms are a real bargain.

### Hanuman Ghat

**Dream Heaven Guest House** (☎ 2431038; 22 Bhim Permashever Marg; r Rs 120–450) This place is deservedly popular. All rooms are fitted with wall hangings and paintings – nab a room with a balcony. The food at the rooftop restaurant overlooking the lake and Udaipur is fresh and tasty.

**Panorama Guest House** (☎ 2431027; krishna 2311@rediffmail.com; Hanuman Ghat; r Rs 150–300) Smart and well kept by the attentive Krishna, this is a lovely choice overlooking a small local square. The rooms are clean and kitschy, and the relaxing rooftop restaurant is a proud patron of great coffee and pancakes.

**Elsewhere**

**Kumbha Palace** (☎ 2422702; Battianni Chohhta; r Rs 70-350) Just inside the City Palace retainers' quarters, this delightful place backs on to a lovely lush lawn. Rooms are comfortable enough, and the Dutch-Indian management team run recommended horse-riding excursions (see p222).

**Shambhu Vilas** (☎ 2421921; Lake Palace Rd; r Rs 250-450) This highly recommended spot is fantastic value, with neat double rooms and a slick rooftop restaurant that encourages guests to get their hands dirty in the kitchen.

**Pratap Country Inn** (☎ 2583138; s/d Rs 400/500) This serene (though shabby) secluded country retreat at Titardi village, about 7km outside Udaipur, can arrange horse safaris.

**MIDRANGE****Lal Ghat Area**

**Poonam Haveli** (☎ 2410303; poonamhaveli@hotmail.com; 39 Lal Ghat; r Rs 400-1050; ☺) Poonam has spacious rooms with big beds – the best have lake views. The 007 room has arches elegant as a raised eyebrow. The master room is great value (Rs 1000).

**Lake Ghat Guest House** (☎ 2521636; 4/13 Lal Ghat; d Rs 500-700) This travellers' hot spot has smart, spacious rooms, some with views, some with balconies, all with stained glass. There are splendid views from the rooftop, and a good restaurant (veg dishes around Rs 60).

**Hotel Krishna Niwas** (☎ 2420163; jairaj34@yahoo.com; 35 Lal Ghat; r Rs 500-1000) Formerly Art Loft Guest House, this place has a gone up a star or two to offer a range of quality, hand-painted rooms, and tremendous cooking and art classes. Jairaj and Sushma are gentle, accommodating hosts.

**New Jheel Guest House** (☎ 2421352; 56 Gangaur Ghat; d Rs 600-800) Down the road from Old Jheel, this place is the business – breezy rooms, a great position over the lake, and accommodating, hands-off staff. Room 201 is the best, with windows on three sides.

**Jaiwana Haveli** (☎ /fax 2521252; 14 Lal Ghat; r Rs 600-1850; ☺) Young and bubbly staff oversee this smart midrange option where rooms are decorated with block-printed fabrics and some have views through slightly tinted windows. Book a corner room (Nos 21 and 31). At the restaurant, try the lamb curry.

**Hotel Baba Palace** (☎ 2427126; www.hotelbabapalace.com; r Rs 600-1985) This slick hotel has clean, fresh rooms and an unusual location eye-to-eye with

Jagdish Temple – rooms have great views. There's also a first-rate dormitory (Rs 200), and an incongruous 'family room' (Rs 1800).

**Mewar Haveli** (☎ 2521140; 34-35 Lal Ghat; r Rs 990-1500; ☺ ☺) Mewar is a great midranger with excellent staff who oversee clean, sun-filled rooms, some containing French windows that open onto the street. Upstairs rooms are divine. The owners also run Jagat Niwas Palace Hotel.

**Jagat Niwas Palace Hotel** (☎ 2420133; mail@jagatniwaspalace.com; 23-25 Lal Ghat; r/deluxe/ste Rs 1250/1895/4000; ☺) This leading hotel has rested on its laurels in recent years, but still takes the location cake. Set in two converted *havelis*, deluxe rooms are charming, with carved wooden furniture and cushioned window seats. Sleeping in lake-view rooms can feel like you're sailing. There's a peaceful restaurant (p226).

**Kankarwa Haveli** (☎ 2411457; fax 2521403; 26 Lal Ghat; r Rs 1450-2200) This option, in an old *haveli*, has a lovely simplicity, with whitewashed rooms, although service isn't always good. Pricier rooms overlook Lake Pichola. The suite (Rs 2200) is amazing value – spacious with wonderful alcoves and day beds.

**Ram Pratap Palace Hotel** (Fateh Sagar Lake; s/d/ste Rs 2445/2885/3500) More old-world, rickety charm than modern maharaja, this hotel appeals for its quiet location and friendly service. It has a terrific view of Fateh Sagar, rooms have large windows and fancy bathrooms, and it's within walking distance of the old city.

**Around Lake Palace Rd**

**Mahendra Prakash Hotel** (☎ 2419811; r Rs 700-2500; ☺ ☺) This pleasantly priced place has spacious gardens, well-furnished rooms, a cheery atmosphere and friendly staff. The restaurant overlooks a step-well, and there's a fabulous pool (nonguests Rs 150).

**Rang Niwas Palace Hotel** (☎ 2523890; www.rangniwaspalace.com; Lake Palace Rd; s Rs 770-1800, d Rs 900-2100, ste s/d Rs 2500/3000; ☺) This is a converted 19th-century palace set in lovely gardens with a small pool (nonguests Rs 150). The rooms in the older section are far more appealing; the suites – full of carved wooden furniture, and balconies with swing seats – are divine.

**Garden Hotel** (☎ 2418881; s/d/ste Rs 2500/3000/4000) This HRH hotel, opposite the Sajjan Niwas Gardens, is more relaxed than many in this category. Rooms are a touch same-same, but the family suite, with two levels and two bathrooms, is amazing value. There are two

restaurants (go for the modest Gujarati thali joint in the bungalow), and the car museum (p222) is spectacular at night.

### Hanuman Ghat

**Mandiram Palace Guest House** (☎ 2434279; mandiram.palace@gmail.com; Panchdevri Ramdwara Chowk, Chandpol; r Rs 600-800) The friendly management at this breezy place encourage you to 'feel a divine presence'. The restaurant is relaxed and serves good rice dishes; rooms are streamlined and tidy, though a touch overpriced.

**Hotel Wonderview** (☎ 2432494; www.wonderview.palace.com; 6 Panch Dewari Marg; r Rs 800-3000) Thoughtful renovations have done wonders to this hotel, offering even more fine views, through scalloped windows arrayed with cushioned seats. The top floor is completely new – and suitably spectacular. The three-bedder (Rs 3000) is worth finding a friend for.

**Amet Haveli** (☎ 2431085; regiudr@datainfosys.net; s/d/ste Rs 2100/2500/3000; 🏠) In a 350-year-old heritage building on the lakeshore, this quiet place has beautiful rooms with cushioned window seats, small windows with stained glass and little shutters. Splurge on one with a balcony or giant bathtub. Five splendid new rooms have just been added, and one of Udaipur's most scenic restaurants, Ambrai (p226), is just next door. Breakfast costs Rs 175.

**Udai Kothi** (☎ 2432810; www.udaikothi.com; r/deluxe/ste Rs 3300/3800/4000; 🏠 🏠) The highlight here is the wonderful rooftop terrace, where you can dine well (p226) or swim in Udaipur's only rooftop pool (nonguest Rs 200); there's even a Jacuzzi with a view. Rooms are decorated with summery, pretty prints, though it can feel a bit like sleeping in a doll's house. Service continues to receive mixed reports.

### Elsewhere

**Mountain Ridge** (☎ 3291478; www.mountainridge.in; Sisarma; d incl half-board Rs 1900; 🏠) This fantastic new homestay makes a wonderful base for trips into rural Udaipur. Perched high above Sisarma village – and just 10 minutes' drive from Lake Pichola – this originally designed home has three stylish yet casual double rooms. There's a fabulous pool and deck. Charming, English-speaking owner Bharat is an expert on the surrounding countryside.

**Pahuna Haveli** (☎ 2526617; www.pahunahaveli.com; 211 Sardarpura; d/ste Rs 2000/2500) A fantastic homestay in the Udaipur suburbs, presided over by the charming Hanwant Singh and Hemant

Kumari. There are five beautifully presented Mewari-style rooms, lovely gardens and delicious meals (lunch or dinner Rs 250) taken in a sociable setting.

### TOP END

#### City Palace

**Shiv Niwas Palace Hotel** (☎ 2528016; crs@udaipur.hrindia.com; r US\$275, terrace ste US\$575, royal ste US\$750-1000; 🏠 🏠) This hotel, in the former guest quarters of the maharaja, has high-end furnishings but middle-class value. Fountains and silver aside, the cheapest rooms are more like ageing drag queens. Go for one with a terrace, or just go for a swim in the gorgeous marble pool (nonguests Rs 300).

**Fateh Prakash Palace Hotel** (☎ 2528008; sales@zudaipur.hrindia.com; r from US\$350; 🏠) An early-20th-century stomping ground for Maharaja Fateh Singh, this is palatial, but classy. The cheapest double rooms are not in the main palace wing.

**Lake Palace Hotel** (☎ 2528800; www.tajhotels.com; d US\$450, with lake view US\$500, ste US\$630-1330; 🏠 🏠) The icon of Udaipur, this romantic palace rising from the depths of the lake is extraordinary, with open-air courtyards, lotus ponds and a small, tree-shaded pool. Rooms are hung with silk and filled with carved wood furniture. The cheapest (US\$450) overlook the lily pond or terrace, rather than the lake.

### Elsewhere

**Devi Garh** (☎ 02953-289211; Delwara; www.devireorts.com; ste US\$400-1300; 🏠 🏠 🏠) This outstanding hotel, 28km northeast of Udaipur amid dramatic Aravalli hills, is a showcase of 21st-century Indian design. It's housed in a beautiful 18th-century palace, but has been decorated in a wonderfully contrasting contemporary style using traditional motifs, marble, metals and semiprecious stones. The best suites have private pools.

**Udaivilas** (☎ 2433300; www.oberoihotels.com; r US\$600-700, ste US\$2770; 🏠 🏠) Udaivilas' butter-sculpture domes are breathtaking. It's a luxury boutique hotel that doesn't spare the glitz and gold leaf – the Kohinoor Suite costs a whopping US\$3300. Suites have their own pools, and there are two excellent restaurants (p226), Surya Mahal and Udai Mahal.

### Eating

Udaipur has scores of sun-kissed rooftop cafés, many with mesmerising lake views, as

well as fine dining at the top-end hotels. Indian food is usually a better bet than Western-style dishes. If you like a drink, the local liquor *duru* – a heady mixture of saffron, cardamom and aniseed – may appeal to your brainbuds!

Many budget restaurants show contemporary movies or endless reruns of *Octopussy* nightly.

**Sunrise** (cnr Lal Ghat & Gangaur Ghat Rd; dishes Rs 10-80) Sunrise does a breakfast of champions, plus delicious home-cooked Indian dishes. The friendly family will happily join in a spot of people-watching.

**Café Edelweiss** (Gangaur Ghat Rd; snacks Rs 15-70; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm) The Savage Garden crowd have got the café set covered with this little piece of Europe that appeals to both homesick and discerning travellers. The cake tray turns over fast, and it's tough to get a seat. The coffee is superb.

**Maxim's Café** (Jagdish Temple Rd; dishes Rs 20-90) This has a small, two-level, sparkling clean terrace overlooking the street. The pure-vegetarian food freshly cooked.

**Berry's** (Chetak Circle; dishes Rs 35-240) An icy cool restaurant with an impressive brass front door, Berry's is a better bet in the evening, when the trade is busy and the white-tablecloth service comes to the fore. The cooking is classy veg and nonveg, with the usual Indian trade plus great burgers.

**Natraj Lodge** (Bapu Bazaar; thalis Rs 40; ☎ 10am-3pm & 6.30-11pm) Justifiably famous throughout town for its delicious all-you-can-eat Gujarati thalis, this place is permanently busy with locals.

**Bawarchi Restaurant** (6 Delhi Gate; thalis Rs 45) A jumping local thali joint where you can eat well and be merry for not a lot of money.

**Shilpi Restaurant** (dishes Rs 42-110) Next to Shilpgram (p221), 3km west of town, this is a pleasantly open restaurant serving the usual range of cuisines. It also has a pool (admission Rs 100; open 11am to 8pm).

**Ambrai** (dishes Rs 40-200; ☎ 12.30-3pm & 7.30-10.30pm) At water level, looking across to Lake Palace Hotel and Lal Ghat, Ambrai feels like a French park, with its wrought-iron chairs and dusty ground. The food at this scenic restaurant is nothing to rave about, but after a couple of sunset drinks, the *matar rajputana* will do the trick.

**Parkview Restaurant** (www.parkviewrestaurant.com; dishes Rs 50-190) A celebrated local restaurant with a surprisingly low tourist quota,

Parkview does a solid spread of Indian staples in a 90-seater elongated room with fuzzy red seats, and well-dressed waiters.

**Whistling Teal** (Bhattiyani Chohatta; dishes 50-180) A brilliant restaurant with superlative curries and exemplary service. Set in a putting-green-perfect garden, the Whistling Teal has walls covered with grainy photos, and you can drink cocktails in saddles at the bar. The jazz soundtrack is classy, and the coffee menu extensive (from Rs 40).

**Jagat Niwas Palace Hotel** (☎ 2420133; 23-25 Lal Ghat; dishes Rs 50-200; ☎ 7-11am, noon-3pm & 6.30-10.15pm) This is a delightful, peaceful restaurant with wonderful lake views, and particularly good fish dishes and biryani (steamed rice with meat or vegies). It's wise to book ahead in the evening. Breakfast is average.

**Lotus Café** (Bhattiyani Chohatta) This Anglo-Indian enterprise plucks out fabulous chicken dishes and is ideal for meeting-and-greeting other travellers. Loads of games are available, and there's plenty of funky background noise.

**Savage Garden** (22 Inside Chandpol; dishes Rs 85-140; ☎ 11am-10pm) This place, near Chandpol, is still doing it right. It's unusually atmospheric, with deep-blue walls, bowls of flowers, and tables in alcoves or in a pleasant courtyard. The starters are sublime – try the stuffed pappadam rolls. The bar is slick, and the service slicker.

**Udai Kothi** (dishes Rs 90-240) This glorious terrace restaurant has tables or cushioned alcoves around the edge of a pool. The tandoori fish is excellent, and the saffron chicken with cashews is a hit. The staff seem saturated by the evening romance though, fussing over everything bar the clientele. Musicians play in the evenings (October to April).

**Trident Hilton** (☎ 2432200; buffets Rs 500; ☎ guests 6am-11pm, nonguests 11am-11pm) The service and multicuisine buffet at this slick top-end hotel are worth the short trek out here.

**Surya Mahal** (Udaivilas; dishes around Rs 500; ☎ noon-3.30pm & 7-10.30pm) This is an expensive, though hip, '30s-style eatery, with delicious Continental and Asian cuisine in a high-ceilinged opulent interior.

**Udai Mahal** (Udaivilas; dishes around Rs 500; ☎ noon-3.30pm & 7-10.30pm) This restaurant specialises in the most refined Rajasthani and North Indian food.

**Lake Palace Hotel** (☎ 2528800; buffets Rs 2000; ☎ 7.30-10.30pm) This Udaipur institution will never live up to its hype, but where else can you eat in such surrounds? The price of the



sumptuous buffet dinner has been catapulted to Rs 2000, house wine to Rs 2500. Reservations are mandatory, and you've got to iron your shirt.

## Drinking

**Paanera Bar** (Shiv Niwas Palace Hotel; ☎ 11am-11pm) Plush poolside spot with soft sofas.

**Sunset View Terrace** (City Palace complex; ☎ 11am-11pm) On a terrace overlooking Lake Pichola, this is the place to be at sunset – it's perfect gin-and-tonic territory. But the food is overpriced and nothing special.

## Entertainment

**Dharohar** (Gangaur Ghat; adult/child Rs 60/30, camera/video Rs 10/50; ☎ show 7pm) Perhaps the best (and most convenient) chance to see world-class classical dancing in Rajasthan. At the beautiful Bagore-ki-Haveli, the brilliant performers wow big crowds with moves your mother can't make.

## Shopping

Udaipur has masses of little shops selling jumbles of things ranging from cloth lanterns to antique jewellery.

The town is known for its local crafts, particularly its miniature paintings in the Rajput-Mughal style; shops line Lake Palace Rd and around Jagdish Temple, but finding an authentic artist takes a collector's eye. Silver jewellery pitched at Western tastes, and leather-bound books and handmade paper (from Jaipur) are other popular buys in this area.

Textile shops also line Lake Palace Rd, and shops along here also sell beautiful, brightly painted, small wooden Hindu gods.

Interesting, less-tourist-focused bazaars spread out from the clock tower, east of Ganjaur Ghat, and buzz loudest in the evening. Bara Bazaar sells silver and gold, as well as saris and fabrics. Traditional shoes are sold on Mochiwada, more silver on Battiyaani Chohтта, and Mandi Market is the centre for spices.

Be prepared to bargain hard, as most places have ridiculously inflated prices for tourists.

**Rajasthali** Chetak Circle (☎ 10.30am-7pm Mon-Sat); near Jagdish Temple (☎ 10am-6.30pm) The government fixed-price emporium is worth dropping into to gauge handicraft prices.

**Sadhna** (☎ 2454655; www.sadhna.org; Mangi Kee Baudi, Kasaron Ki; ☎ 10am-7pm) This is the outlet for Seva Mandir, an NGO set up in 1969 to

help rural women. The small shop sells attractive fixed-price textiles; profits go to the artisans and towards community development work.

**Gallery Pristine** (☎ 2423916; gallerypristine@yahoo.com; 60 Bhattiyanni Chohтта) More showroom than gallery, this collection proves that Shahid Parvez and friends are the pick of Udaipur's rich crop of contemporary artists.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Indian Airlines** (☎ 2410999; Delhi Gate; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) fly to Delhi (US\$115) via Jodhpur (US\$75), Jaipur (US\$90) and Mumbai (US\$138). **Jet Airways** (☎ 2561105; Blue Circle Business Centre, Madhuban), near the main post office, has similar flights for similar prices.

### BUS

Destinations served by **RSTC buses** (☎ 2484191) include Agra (express/deluxe Rs 101/120, six hours), Jaipur (express/deluxe Rs 161/201, nine hours), Ajmer (express/deluxe Rs 111/145, eight hours), Jodhpur (express/deluxe Rs 113/125, eight hours), Chittor (local/express Rs 40/48, three/2½ hours) and Delhi (express/deluxe Rs 270/420, 14 hours, three daily).

Private bus companies operate to Mt Abu (Rs 100, five hours), Ahmedabad (ordinary/AC Rs 150/200, six hours), Jodhpur (ordinary/sleeper Rs 100/150, six hours), Delhi (ordinary/sleeper Rs 200/350, 14 hours) and Mumbai (ordinary/sleeper Rs 400/600, 16 hours).

### TAXI

Many drivers will show you a list of 'official' rates to places like Mt Abu, Chittor and Jodhpur. Shop around (Rs 4.5 per kilometre is a good starting point). Remember taxis charge return fares even if you're only going one way.

### TRAIN

Lines into Udaipur are slowly being converted to broad gauge, but until this is complete (supposedly by the time of publication), train services are limited. It's quicker in most cases to catch a bus. The enquiries number is ☎ 2527390.

The *Chetak Express* (No 9616) to Delhi departs at 6.15pm (sleeper/2AC Rs 268/1131, 19 hours, 727km) and goes via Chittor (2nd class Rs 38, 3¼ hours, 115km), Ajmer (2nd

class Rs 78, eight hours, 304km) and Jaipur (sleeper/2AC Rs 197/813, 11 hours, 439km).

The 2966 *Jaipur Super Express* (sleeper/3rd class AC Rs 252/655) leaves at 9.40pm and arrives in Jaipur at 7.15am.

The *Ahmedabad Express* (No 9943) departs at 7.45pm and arrives in Ahmedabad (sleeper/2AC Rs 154/567, 297km) at 4.25am.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is 25km from the city. A taxi will cost at least Rs 250; there's no airport bus.

### AUTORICKSHAW

These are unmetered, so you should agree on a fare before setting off – the standard fare anywhere in town is around Rs 20 to 25. There are prepaid autorickshaw stands at the bus and train stations. It costs Rs 250 to hire an autorickshaw for a day of local sightseeing.

The commission system is in place, so tentatively pursue your first choice of accommodation. Unless your rickshaw is prepaid, ask for the Jagdish Temple when arriving, as it's a good place to start looking for accommodation.

### BICYCLE & MOTORCYCLE

You can hire bicycles for around Rs 25 per day.

**Heera Cycle Store** (☎ 2523525; 🕒 7.30am–9pm), near Hotel Udai Niwas, hires out bicycles/mopeds/motorcycles for Rs 25/150/300 per day.

## AROUND UDAIPUR

### Kumbalgarh

An incredible stone fort compound, **Kumbalgarh** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; 🕒 8am–6pm) is situated 1100m skyward in the Aravalli hills. Built by Maharaja Kumba in the 15th century, the colossal structure practically touches the sky, summoning up the might of Rajput imagination.

It was the most important Mewar fort after Chittor, and rulers, sensibly, used to retreat here in times of danger. Unsurprisingly it was taken only once in its history, and even then it took the combined armies of Mughal emperor Akbar and of Amber and Marwar to breach its defences, and they only managed to hang on to it for two days.

The fort walls stretch some 36km and enclose around 360 temples, as well as palaces, gardens, *baoris* and 700 cannon bunkers.

If you stay in Kumbalgarh, you can trek from your hotel to the fort, a dramatic way

to approach and reinforce the sense of its impenetrability.

The big **wildlife sanctuary** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/100; 🕒 dawn–dusk) here is known for its wolves. Other wildlife includes chowsinghas (four-horned antelope), leopards and sloth bears. The period from March to June, when water is scarce, is the best time to see animals. You need permission from the forest department in nearby Kelwara to enter. All hotels can arrange three-hour horse or jeep safaris – **Shivika Lake Hotel** (☎ 02934-285078; shivikalake@rediffmail.com) in Ranakpur arranges jeep tours at a cost of Rs 600 per person, which covers all admission fees.

**Karni Palace Hotel** (☎ 02594-242033; Bus Stand Rd, Kelwara; s/d Rs 500/750, ste Rs 1500/2000) Backing onto lovely cornfields, this hotel has slopped on the paint, but it's squeaky clean and popular with groups.

**Kumbhal Castle** (☎ 02594-242171; www.kumbhalcastle.com; s/d Rs 1500/1800), 3km from the fort, has plain, good-value rooms with bright bedspreads, window seats, shared balconies and good views.

**Aodhi Hotel** (☎ 02594-242341; crs@udaipur.hrindia.com; s/d Rs 3000/3500; 🍷 🍷), about 5km from the fort, is an appealing, blissfully tranquil hotel, with an inviting pool and winter campfires.

There are several RSTC buses to/from Udaipur (Rs 35, 3½ hours). Some stop in Kelwara, 7km away, some at the Aodhi Hotel, from where it's a 2km walk to the fort. Hiring a taxi from Udaipur means you can visit both Ranakpur and Kumbalgarh in a day – many travellers ask around to fill the car and share the expense (Rs 1050).

### Ranakpur

Ninety kilometres north of Udaipur, **Ranakpur** (admission free, camera/video Rs 50/100; 🕒 Jains 6am–7pm, non-Jains noon–5pm) is another incredible feat of Jain devotion. Carved, as always, using milk white marble, the complicated series of 29 halls, supported by a forest of 1444 pillars (no two alike), is the finest in Rajasthan, and one the most important in India. The devotion of its builders is encapsulated in the loving carving, and the pale interior has an unparalleled sense of space and harmony.

The main temple is called the **Chaumukha Mandir** (Four-Faced Temple); it's dedicated to Adinath and was built in 1439. Within the complex are two other Jain temples to **Neminath** and **Parasnath**, and a **Sun Temple**. About

1km from the main complex is **Amba Mata Temple**.

Shoes, cigarettes and all leather articles must be left at the entrance.

With small, cosy cottages set amid leafy, pretty gardens, **Shivika Lake Hotel** (☎ 02934-285078; shivikalake@rediffmail.com; r Rs 400-1200; 🏠 🚶 🚗) is an undisturbed, rustic place to stay. The knowledgeable family arranges forest safaris and guides for short or longer treks. There's a restaurant (dishes Rs 40 to 100).

A classy new resort situated deep in mango country, **Ranakpur Hill Resort** (☎ 02934-286411; www.ranakpurhillresort.com; Ranakpur Rd, Post Sadri; s/d from Rs 1500/1800, tents Rs 1800; 🏠 🚶 🚗) has an inviting pool and enormous restaurant. Rooms are generously proportioned, with shiny bathrooms and bouncy beds.

Sixty-five kilometres northwest of Udaipur is **Aranyawas** (☎ 9829699413; www.aranyawas.com; Maga Village; r Rs 1800/2500), a secluded and stunning chalet buried deep among fruit trees and forests. Panthers and bears roam the nearby woods, and most rooms – with balconies and sleep-inducing beds – overlook a stream running through a valley. The restaurant serves cheap and tasty food.

The **Maharani Bagh Orchard Retreat** (☎ 02934-285105; balsamand@sify.com; s/d Rs 2400/3000; 🏠 🚶 🚗), 4km from Ranakpur and set within a lush mango orchard, offers accommodation in wood-furnished cottages with terraces, surrounded by green lawns.

Lots of buses run to from Udaipur to Ranakpur (Rs 35, three hours, hourly), but it's hard to visit both Ranakpur and Kumbalgarh by public transport in a day; a taxi taking in both from Udaipur costs around Rs 1050.

## Jaisamand Lake

Located 48km southeast of Udaipur, this startlingly huge artificial lake (88 sq km) is one of Asia's largest. Created by damming the Gomti River, it was built by Maharaja Jai Singh in the 17th century. There are beautiful marble *chhatris* around the 330m-long, 35m-high embankment, and Udaipur maharanis' summer palaces are dotted on surrounding hilltops.

**Jaisamand Island Resort** (☎ 0294-2431401; www.lakend.com; s/d from Rs 1800/2700; 🏠 🚶 🚗 Oct-Feb) is a modern but somewhat shabby hotel in a wonderful, secluded location 20 minutes by boat across the lake. The pool has a brilliant setting but isn't always full. Discounts are

often available. A return boat ride to the resort costs Rs 150, while a small/medium/large circuit of the lake costs Rs 30/50/80.

There are frequent buses from Udaipur (Rs 20, 1½ hours, hourly).

## Dungarpur

About 110km south of Udaipur, splendid Dungarpur, the City of Hills, was founded in the 13th century. You can visit the wonderful deserted old palace, **Juna Mahal** (admission Rs 100; 🏠 9am-5pm). It has lots of murals (including the Kamasutra hidden discreetly in a cupboard), and even willow-pattern plates embedded in the walls. The former royal hunting lodge, on a nearby hilltop, has sensational views. Buy tickets from Uda Bilas Palace (below).

The beautiful **Deo Somnath Temple**, about 25km out of town, dates from the 12th century.

**Hotel Pratibha Palace** (☎ 02964-230775; Shastri Colony; d Rs 100-150) has tiny, quite good rooms that are nothing flash but OK value for money.

**Uda Bilas Palace** (☎ 02964-230808; www.udaibilaspalace.com; s/d/ste Rs 2750/3500/4000; 🏠 🚶 🚗), set on sparkling Gaib Sagar, is a fantastic place to stay – a lakeside palace partly converted into a hotel. It's built around the extraordinary Ek Thambhia Mahal (One-Pillared Palace), and rooms retain their original Art Deco and 1940s furnishings; some have a lakeview balcony. The gorgeous pool is designed so that it seems to merge with the lake.

Frequent RSTC buses travel to and from Udaipur (Rs 50, three hours, hourly). There's also a snail's-pace train to and from Udaipur (2nd/1st class Rs 21/154, four to five hours, 114km).

## MT ABU

☎ 02974 / pop 22,045 / elev 1200m

Mt Abu rises high above southern Rajasthan, cool on the heels of the baking desert plains. It's a welcome hill station retreat, nestled along pedolo-filled Nakki Lake, which attracts hordes of weekenders from neighbouring Gujarat. The tremendous wooded valleys that line the winding drive to the summit lend some longed-for Alpine beauty to a Rajasthan excursion, and house wildlife including bears, wild boars, langoors (wild donkeys), Indian civets, hyenas and sambars. There are also plenty of botanical delights on offer, most notably a number of rare orchids, and excellent trekking opportunities for all levels of fitness.

Mt Abu is more widely known as a pilgrimage centre, particularly for Jains, and the clusters of once stately summer retreats – and damp brick hotels – are often filled with the seasonally devout. The extraordinary Jain Dilwara temples rival most in India though, and the humble presence of Brahma Kumaris followers gives Mt Abu its place in the eternal sun.

It's organised mayhem around **Diwali**, and best avoided; May sees the **Summer Festival** (p166), while December is the time of the **Winter Festival** (p166). Note that evening temperatures can catch you cold, so remember to pack something warm.

### Orientation & Information

Mt Abu is on a hilly plateau about 22km long by 6km wide, 27km from the nearest train station (Abu Rd). The main part of the town extends along the road from Abu Rd down to Nakki Lake.

There's a **Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 235151; ☹ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd Sat of month), opposite the bus stand, that has a free map. The **Bank of Baroda** (Rajendra Rd; ☹ 10am-3pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) changes travellers cheques and currency, and does credit-card advances. There's an SBBJ ATM near Hotel Samrat International. **Shree Krishna Telecommunications** (Main Market; per hr Rs 40; ☹ 8am-10pm) is a reliable internet café.

### Sights & Activities

#### NAKKI LAKE

Scenic Nakki Lake is a big attraction and the town's focus. It's so-named because, according to legend, it was scooped out by a god using his *nakh* (nails). It's a pleasant stroll around the perimeter – look for the strange **rock formations**. The best-known, **Toad Rock**, looks just like it's about to hop into the lake. The 14th-century **Raghnath Temple** (☹ dawn-dusk) stands beside the lake. You can hire a **pedalo** or a more romantic **shikara** (gondala-like boat) at the edge of the lake near the temple; a two-person **shikara** costs Rs 100 for 30 minutes, while a two-/four-person pedalo costs Rs 50/100.

#### VIEWPOINTS

**Sunset Point** is a popular and lovely place to watch the setting sun. Other viewpoints include **Honeymoon Point** and the **Crags**. You can follow the white arrows along a path to the summit of **Shanti Shikhar**, west of Adhar Devi Temple, where there are panoramic views.

The best view over the lake is from the terrace of the maharaja of Jaipur's former summer palace, now Jaipur House (see p233).

### DILWARA TEMPLES

These **temples** (☹ Jains dawn-dusk, non-Jains noon-6pm) rank among India's finest temple architecture. The artisans were paid according to the amount of dust they collected, encouraging them to carve ever more intricately. Whatever their inducement, there are two temples in which the work is dizzyingly intense, a collection of delicate milky kaleidoscopes, with carving so fine you want to break it off and eat it.

The older of the temples is the **Vimal Vasahi**, started in 1031 and dedicated to the first *tirthankar*, Adinath. It took 14 years to build and cost Rs 180.5 million. The central shrine has an image of Adinath, while around the courtyard are 52 identical cells, each enclosing a cross-legged open-eyed *tirthankar*. Forty-eight pillars form the courtyard entrance. In front of the temple stands the **House of Elephants**, with a procession of elephants marching to the temple entrance, some damaged by marauding Mughals.

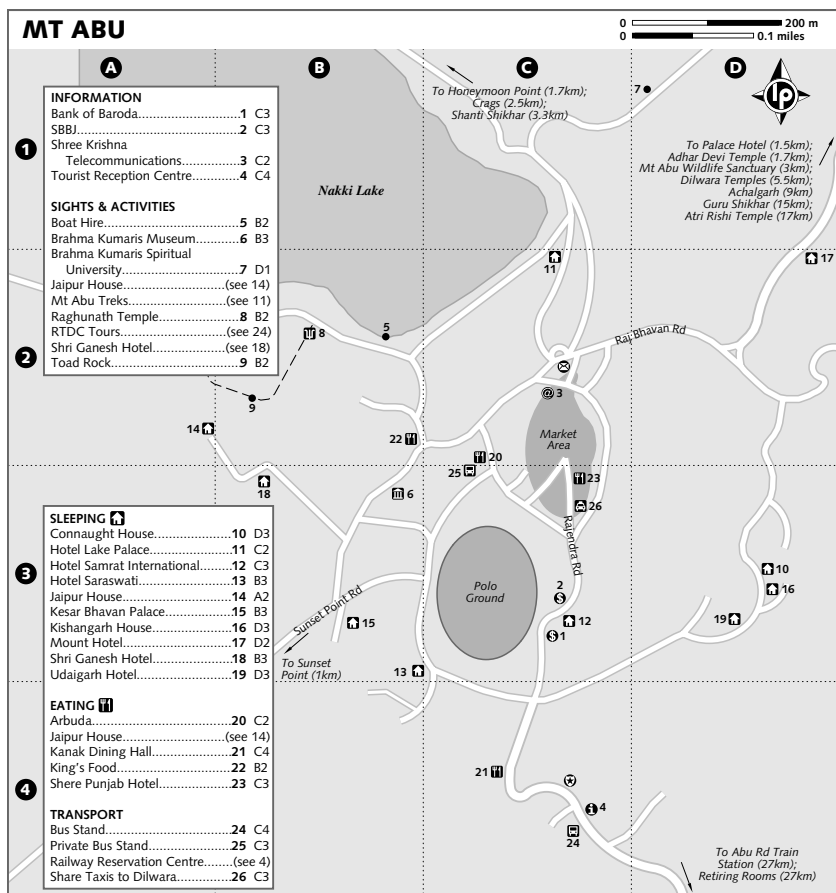
The later **Luna Vasahi** is dedicated to Neminath, the 22nd *tirthankar*, and was built in 1230 by the brothers Tejpal and Vastupal for a mere Rs 125.9 million. Like Vimal, they were government ministers. Here the marble carving took 2500 workers 15 years to create. The filigree is so fine that, in places, the marble becomes almost transparent. In particular, the many-layered lotus flower that dangles from the centre of the dome is an astonishing piece of work.

The temple is remarkably well preserved, employing several full-time stone carvers to maintain the work.

There are another three temples in the enclosure – **Bhimashah Pittalhar** (built 1315–1433), with a four-ton, five-metal statue, **Mahaveerswami** (1582), a small shrine flanked by painted elephants, and the three-storey **Khartar Vasahi** – but none compete with Luna and Vimal Vasahi.

Photography is not allowed (though photographs are sold). As at other Jain temples, leather articles (belts as well as shoes) have to be left at the entrance and menstruating women are warned away.

You can stroll out to Dilwara from the town in less than an hour, or take a shared taxi (see p233).



## BRAHMA KUMARIS SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY & MUSEUM

The number of white-clad people around town is not just a coincidence – they're studying at **Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University** ([www.bkwsu.com](http://www.bkwsu.com)) This organisation teaches that all religions lead to God and are equally valid, and that the principles of each should be studied. The university's aim is the establishment of universal peace through 'the impartation of spiritual knowledge and training of easy raja yoga meditation'. For many, the teachings are intensely powerful; there are over 4500 branches in 70 countries. For others, it gives off a spooky New Age-sect vibe. You can decide for yourself. An introductory course takes a minimum of three days. There's no

charge – the organisation is supported by donations.

There's a **Brahma Kumaris museum** (☎ 223260; admission free; ⌚ 8am-8pm) in the town, the entrance labelled Gateway to Paradise. It outlines the university's teachings, and attempts answers to teasers such as 'How can world peace be established?'.

If you walk past the museum you'll find **Adhar Devi Temple**, a cave temple reached via a steep staircase. Early morning services are powerful and popular, and well worth the climb.

## TREKKING

Charles from **Mt Abu Treks** (☎ 91-9414154854; Hotel Lake Palace) arranges superlative, tailor-made

treks ranging from gentle village visits to longer, wilder expeditions into Mt Abu Wildlife Reserve. He's passionate and extremely knowledgeable about the local flora and fauna. Prices vary from Rs 380 per person for a half-day trek or Rs 530 for a full day (including lunch) to Rs 1250 for an overnight village trek (including all meals).

The staff at **Shri Ganesh Hotel** (☎ 235062; lalit\_ganesh@yahoo.co.in) also organise treks into the hills – one in the morning and one to see the sunset. The routes vary and the level of difficulty depends on the fitness of the group.

It's common to spot bears as well as other wildlife. It's unsafe to wander unguided in the hills, as travellers have been mugged.

## Tours

The RTDC has five-hour tours of the main sites, leaving from the bus stand at 8.30am and 1.30pm (later in summer). Tours cost Rs 55 excluding admission and camera fees. The afternoon tour finishes at Sunset Point. Reserve at the **enquiries counter** (☎ 235434) at the bus stand.

## Sleeping

The town of Mt Abu mostly consists of hotels. The high season lasts from mid-April to June, during and after Diwali (October/November, when you need to book way ahead, prices become ridiculous, and you cannot move for crowds), and from Christmas to New Year. Many midrange and top-end places offer off-season discounts (30% to 50%).

Most hotels have an ungenerous 9am check-out time.

Usually there are touts working the bus and taxi stands. In the low season ignore them, but at peak times they can save you legwork, as they'll know where to find the last available room.

**Shri Ganesh Hotel** (☎ 235062; lalit\_ganesh@yahoo.co.in; dm Rs 50, with shower Rs 100, r with shared bathroom Rs 100-300, r with private bathroom Rs 250-450; 📶) This serene place has a peaceful rooftop, loads of helpful local information, a guest kitchen and good home cooking. There's yoga on the roof in the mornings, cookery lessons, and trekking every morning and evening.

**Retiring rooms** (Abu Rd train station; d Rs 150) Convenient if you're catching an early-morning train.

**Hotel Saraswati** (☎ 238887; r Rs 150-400) Popular and efficient, this is an appealing place in a

peaceful setting behind the polo ground with a good range of well-kept rooms. Prices can rise by Rs 200 at the weekend.

**Mount Hotel** (☎ 235150; Dilwara Rd; s/d Rs 400/800) This is a lovely, homy place with seven nicely renovated rooms, with wooden furnishings, that feel like they belong somewhere in Sweden. It's on the road to the Dilwara temples, in a tranquil location with a small lawn.

**Hotel Samrat International** (☎ 235173; Rajendra Rd; s with shared bathroom from Rs 170, s/d with private bathroom from Rs 450/750) This well-run hotel has a hotchpotch of rooms, from tight-fit doubles to attractive, spacious suites with sheltered balconies overlooking the polo ground (the Romance Suite is confronting). The street traffic below is hectic by Mt Abu standards.

**Hotel Lake Palace** (☎ 237154; r Rs 600-1200) This is a spacious, friendly place overlooking a small garden; it has unfussy, appealing rooms, some with semiprivate lake-view terrace areas. Avoid it during rainy season, when damp crawls in during the night.

**Kesar Bhavan Palace** (☎ 235219; Sunset Point Rd; r Rs 1600-1800, ste Rs 2850; 📶) This heritage property is perched high up among trees and has appealing leafy views, but feels a little stark. The well-thought-out, comfortable, marble-floored rooms all have balconies, and the suites are on two levels. Better value than most.

**Kishangarh House** (☎ 238092; www.royalkishangarh.com; Rajendra Marg; cottages/d Rs 1700/2700) This former summer residence of the maharaja of Kishangarh has been lovingly restored into a top-notch heritage hotel. It has impressive rooms – some with marble floors – extravagantly high ceilings and a delightful, sun-filled drawing room. The big gardens are lovingly tended.

**Palace Hotel** (☎ 238673; Bikaner House, Delwara Rd; s/d Rs 2500/3000, ste Rs 3500/4500) Near the Dilwara temples is this huge palace, built in 1893 by Sir Swinton Jacob, which resembles a Scottish stately manor, with tree-shaded gardens, a private lake, tennis courts and a restaurant. Rooms are tasteful and massive, with bathtubs the whole family can enjoy.

**Udai Garh** (☎ 237018; www.udaigarh.com; Rajendra Marg; r Rs 2050-2950; 📶) This addition to the upmarket-hotel scene has a wonderful location atop a steep incline. The rooms are flashy, but damp and a touch overpriced. The garden restaurant has the best setting in town.

**Connaught House** (☎ 238560; welcom@ndf.vsnl.net.in; s/d/cottages Rs 2800/3300/3500) Connaught House

is a lovely, stuck-in-time colonial bungalow that looks like an English cottage, with lots of sepia photographs, dark wood, angled ceilings and a gorgeous shady garden. Suite 28 is the best pick. Newer rooms in a separate block are attractive and have good views, though they have less character. It's owned by the maharaja of Jodhpur.

**Jaipur House** (☎ 235176; www.royalfamilyjaipur.com; junior ste s/d Rs 2500/3500, ste Rs 4500-4900) Perched on a hilltop overlooking the lake, this was built by the maharaja of Jaipur in 1897. Opulent suites overlook the town from a suitably lofty height. If you're not really a suite person, the junior suites in the former servants' quarters verge on the simple.

## Eating

Most holidaymakers here are Gujarati – tough customers when it comes to cuisine, hence the profusion of good-quality restaurants.

**Kanak Dining Hall** (Rajendra Rd; dishes Rs 25-55) The excellent all-you-can-eat Gujarati thalis (Rs 55) are contenders for Mt Abu's best; there's seating indoors in the busy dining hall or outside under a canopy.

**Arbuda** (Arbuda Circle; dishes Rs 25-75) A lovely big restaurant set on a sweeping curved open terrace that's filled with chrome chairs, this place specialises in Punjabi and South Indian food, and does a fine *paneer tikka*.

**King's Food** (dishes Rs 25-90) This busy, open-to-the-street fast-food joint has the usual have-a-go menu and offers Chinese, Punjabi and South Indian food, and good lassis. The breakfast menu is the same as the lunch menu.

**Shere Punjab Hotel** (dishes Rs 25-200) This place in the market has bargain Punjabi and Chinese food. There's fried brain for those in need of a protein boost.

**Jaipur House** (snacks Rs 60-150, dishes Rs 100-235; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-11pm) This place has divine views over the hills, lake and the town's twinkling lights from its lovely open terrace, with food that measures up. Also a brilliant place for a drink.

## Getting There & Away

As you enter Mt Abu there's a tollgate; bus and car passengers are charged Rs 10, plus Rs 10 for a car (keep change handy).

## BUS

From 6am to 9pm buses make the 27km climb from Abu Rd train station up to Mt

Abu (Rs 18, one hour, half-hourly). They leave from outside the bus stand, next to the ticket booth.

A direct bus from Mt Abu is usually faster and more convenient than a train from Abu Rd station. **RSTC buses** (☎ enquiries 235434) go to Jaipur (express/deluxe Rs 250/270, 12 hours, two daily), Udaipur (Rs 92, 4½ hours, six daily), Ahmedabad (Rs 115, 6½ hours), Jodhpur (Rs 140, seven hours, one daily), Ajmer (express/deluxe Rs 195/220, 10 hours, two daily), and Jaisalmer (Rs 227, 11 hours, one daily). Some RSTC buses go all the way to Mt Abu, while others terminate at Abu Rd train station.

Buses belonging to private bus companies leave from the private bus stand, north of the polo ground, and serve similar destinations and cost about the same.

## TAXI

A taxi for up to six people into town from Abu Rd train station costs about Rs 250. Some taxi drivers claim that this is only as far as the bus stand and ask an extra fee (as much as Rs 50) to take you to your hotel.

## TRAIN

Abu Rd, the railhead for Mt Abu, is on the broad-gauge line between Delhi and Mumbai via Ahmedabad. In Mt Abu, above the Tourist Reception Centre, there's a **railway reservation centre** (☎ 8am-2pm), which has quotas on most of the express trains.

The *Ahmedabad Mail* (No 9106) leaves at 1.10pm and reaches Ahmedabad at 5.35pm (2nd class Rs 54, 185km). The *Delhi Mail* (No 9105) leaves Abu Rd at 2.20pm, arriving in Jaipur (2nd class Rs 104, 440km) at 11.10pm and Delhi at 5.20am (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 439/1084/1414, 749km). The *Adi Jat* (No 9223) to Jodhpur leaves at 3.20pm (2nd class Rs 83, five hours, 269km). For Bhuj and the rest of the Kathiawar peninsula in Gujarat, change trains at Palanpur, 53km south of Abu Rd.

## Getting Around

Local buses go to various sites around Mt Abu, but it's easier to take the five-hour tour (see opposite). To hire a jeep for local sightseeing costs around Rs 450/900 per half-day/day (bargain hard and you may bring it down). For Dilwara you can take a shared taxi (jeep). These leave when full from near the market area (Rs 5 per person, or Rs 50 all to yourself).

There are no autorickshaws in Mt Abu, but it's easy to get around on foot. Unique to the town is the *baba-gari*, a porter-pulled handcart. They cart your luggage for Rs 15 or even one/two people for Rs 20/30.

## AROUND MT ABU

### Guru Shikhar

At the end of the plateau, 15km from Mt Abu, is Guru Shikhar, Rajasthan's highest point, at 1721m. A road goes almost all the way to the summit and the **Atri Rishi Temple**, complete with a priest and fantastic views. It's visited as part of the RDTTC tour, or a jeep will cost Rs 400 return.

### Achalgarh

A handful of hilltop Jain temples and an ancient Shiva temple 11km north, perched above a rural village, offer spectacular views of the countryside and are well worth a visit.

### Mt Abu Wildlife Sanctuary

This 290-sq-km **sanctuary** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50, jeep Rs 100; ☎ 8am-5pm), 5.5km northeast of Mt Abu, on a large plateau, is home to panthers, sambars, foxes, wild boars and bears. It's about a 3km walk from the Dilwara temples. Contact Mt Abu Treks (p231) to arrange an overnight stay.

## WESTERN RAJASTHAN

### JODHPUR

☎ 0291 / pop 846,408

Glorious Meherangarh fort mushrooms from beneath a huge rocky cliff to dominate the once indomitable Blue City. At dusk you feel a part of a real-life movie, as the camera-shy palace peeks over awesome stone walls, and citizens mill about in the hemmed-in chaos below. Jodhpur proper stretches beyond the 16th-century border, but it's the immediacy and grandeur of the old city, once a stop on a vital trade route, that has more and more travellers raving.

New Jodhpur is dirty and – bless those errant cows and those open sewers – smelly, but dive into the Brahmin-blue laneways of the old city to find boxes of snuff and boxed-cuff trousers (oh yes, the baggy-pants brigade started here!) bejewelled regalia and sensual spices – you name it, you can get it, half-price and giftwrapped. There's hassle here too though,

particularly around the clock tower, but it's nothing a shopping expedition down Palace Rd, a foray into the nearby craft villages, or an excursion to the Mandore gardens can't cure.

Jodhpur was founded in 1459 by Rao Jodha, a chief of the Rajput clan known as the Rathores, and the city grew out of the profits of opium, sandalwood, dates and copper. Rathore kingdom was once cheerily known as Marwar (the Land of Death), but today its moustached men are more about smiling for the camera.

In October, Jodhpur holds the **Marwar Festival** (p166).

### Orientation

The Tourist Reception Centre, train stations and bus stand are all outside the old city. High Court Rd runs from the Raika Bagh train station, past the Umaid gardens, and along the city wall towards the Jodhpur train station.

### Information

There's a UTI ATM opposite Sojati Gate; there are also ICICI and IDBI ATMs on Airport Rd. For internet access, there are loads of cheap places around town, usually charging Rs 20 per hour.

**Bank of Baroda** (Map p235; Sojati Gate) Issues cash advances against Visa and MasterCard.

**I-Way** (10 Pal Haveli; per hr Rs 20) This link in the reliable internet chain is in front of the clock tower.

**Krishna Book Depot** (Map p235; Pal Haveli) Near the exit to Sardar Market; stocks an impressive range of second-hand books. Bargain hard with the matriarchal owner.

**LKP Forex** (Map p235; ☎ 2512066; Shop 1, Mahareer Palace) Changes currencies and travellers cheques.

**Main post office** (Map p235; Station Rd)

**Mandarah Clinic** (☎ 2636659; Dr Gautam Bhandari; 1st B Rd, Sardarpura) Excellent clinic, with private rooms upstairs. Dr Bhandari is accomplished and friendly, and has plenty of experience with foreigners.

**Reliance Webworld** (Map p235; Nai Sarak; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 10.30am-11pm) Internet access; just inside the city wall.

**State Bank of India** (Map p235; ☎ 2543649; High Court Rd; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri & 10am-1pm Sat) Changes currencies and travellers cheques.

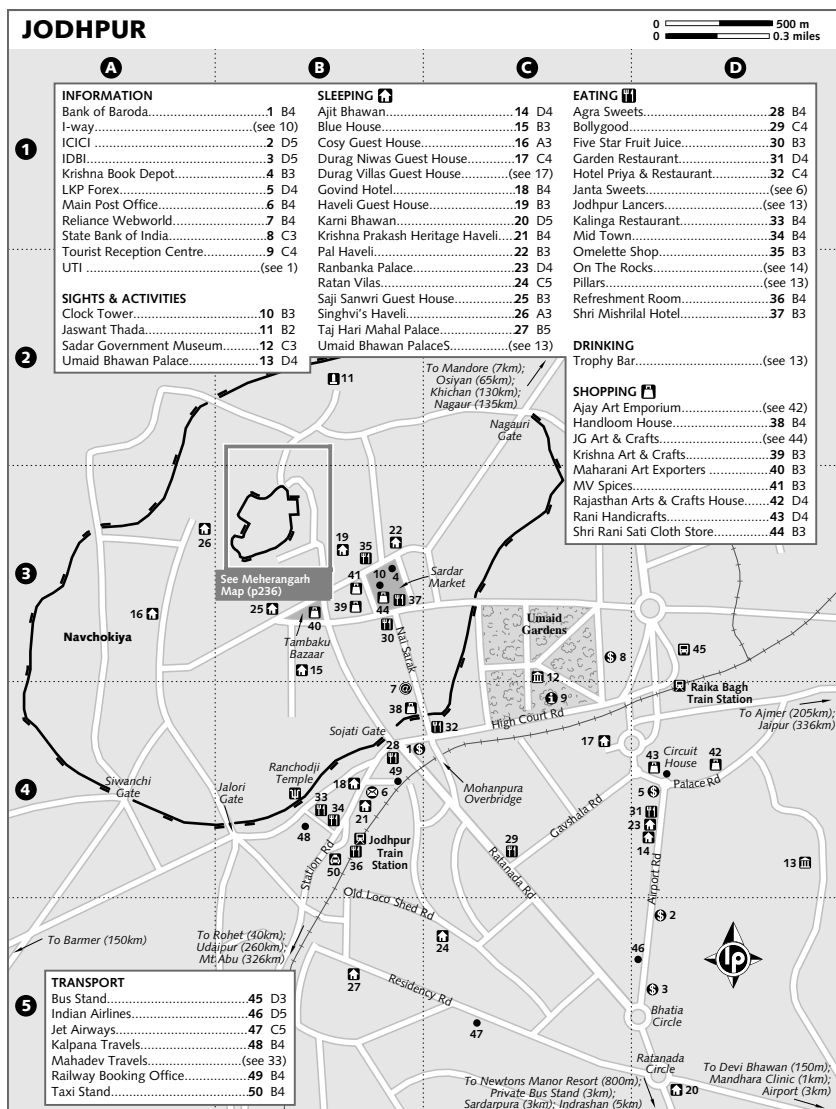
**Tourist Reception Centre** (Map p235; ☎ 2545083; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) In the RTDC Hotel Ghoomar compound; will give you a free map.

### Sights & Activities

#### MEHERANGARH

Still run by the maharaja of Jodhpur, **Meherangarh** (Majestic Fort; Map p236; Indian/foreigner Rs 250, Indian camera/audio guide Rs 50/150; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a cap-

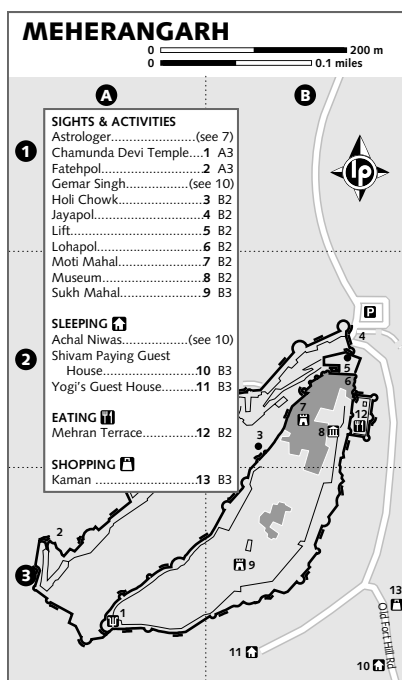




titating place to visit. It's sprawled across a 125m-high hill – as you approach, the height of the walls becomes apparent – a mesmerising, formidable feat of construction. Cast off your audio-tour prejudices, as this tour, covered by the foreign-visitor admission charge (which also includes camera fees), is terrific, with a mix of history, information and dra-

matically narrated anecdotes. It's a real treat to wander around at your leisure, taking a fix of information when you feel like it. Guides are available for around Rs 200.

The fort follows the lines of the hill. The fort's seven gates include the **Jayapol**, built by Maharaja Man Singh in 1806 following his victory over Jaipur and Bikaner, and the



**Fatehpol** (Victory Gate), erected by Maharaja Ajit Singh to commemorate his defeat of the Mughals. The second gate in the fort is still scarred by cannonball hits: this was a fort that earned its keep. The final gate is the **Lohapol** (Iron Gate), beside which are numerous tragic tiny hand prints, the *sati* marks of Maharaja Man Singh's widows, who threw themselves upon his funeral pyre in 1843. They still attract devotional attention and are usually covered in red powder.

Inside the fort there is a deep-terracotta-coloured, latticed network of courtyards and palaces, beautiful examples of the asymmetry and symmetry that marks Rajput buildings. They house a **museum**, with a splendid collection of the trappings of Indian royalty, including some amazing howdahs (seats for carrying people on an elephant's back – essential for glittering processions), miniatures, armory and ephemera – from 19th-century ivory-inlaid ladies' dumbbells to camel-bone carpet weights.

The palaces have evocative names, such as the **Moti Mahal** (Pearl Palace), **Sukh Mahal** (Pleasure Palace) and **Phool Mahal** (Flower Pal-

ace) – the latter is beautifully decorated, using a curious concoction of gold leaf, glue and cow's urine. The inner courtyard, **Holi Chowk**, was used for the Holi festival; the women were able to view the festival from above. The small marble seat here was used for coronations from the 17th century.

At the southern end of the fort, old cannons look out from the ramparts over the sheer drop to the old town beneath. There are magical views, and you can clearly hear voices and city sounds swept up by the air currents. The peaceful **Chamunda Devi Temple**, dedicated to Durga, stands at this end of the fort.

A lift will whisk up disabled or weary travellers for Rs 15. There's even a fort **astrologer** (☎ 2548790, ext 39; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-5pm); Mr Sharma charges Rs 150/300 for a 15-/30-minute (basic/detailed) consultation.

### JASWANT THADA

This milky white marble **memorial** (Map p235; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/20, camera Rs 25 🕒 9am-5pm) to Maharaja Jaswant Singh II is an array of whimsical domes – it's a welcome, peaceful spot after 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 three other cenotaphs that stand nearby. Look out for the memorial to a peacock that flew into the funeral pyre. There are some beautiful *jalis* (carved marble lattice screens), and it's the definitive tomb with a view.

### CLOCK TOWER & MARKETS

The clock tower (Map p235) is an old city landmark, surrounded by the vibrant Sardar Market. Heading westwards from here, you get deep into the old city's commercial heart, with alleys leading to bazaars selling vegetables, spices, sweets, silver and handicrafts.

### UMAID BHAWAN PALACE

Sometimes called the Chittar Palace (Map p235) because of the local Chittar sandstone used, this immense pink-and-white monster was begun in 1929. It was designed by the president of the British Royal Institute of Architects for Maharaja Umaid Singh, and took 3000 workers 15 years to complete. This was apparently a royal job-creation programme during a time of severe drought – very philanthropic.

Maharaja Umaid Singh died in 1947; his successor still lives in part of the building. The rest has been turned into a hotel (see p239).

## UMAID GARDENS & SADAR GOVERNMENT MUSEUM

The Umaid gardens contain the **Sadar Government Museum** (Map p235; admission Rs 3 ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu), which feels charmingly frozen in time. The ill-labelled exhibits include weapons and 6th- to 10th-century sculptures.

## Courses

**Parul's Kathak Dance Academy** (☎ 2759355; precious.parul@rediffmail.com) offers intensive one-on-one courses in classical Kathak, including an audio recording so you can keep in step after class. Prices vary depending on level and duration.

## Tours

The Tourist Reception Centre (p234) runs four-hour city tours (Rs 90, excluding admission fees) from 9am to 1pm, and 2pm to 6pm. The tours take in the Umaid Bhawan Palace, Meherangarh, Jaswant Thada and Mandore gardens.

Jodhpur is known for its village safaris – trips by jeep to local Bishnoi villages, potters and *dhurrie* (rug) weavers. The Bishnoi are a tribal sect whose belief in the sanctity of the environment, and the need to protect trees and animals dates from the 15th century. It's a well-worn trail, so it can feel touristy – your enjoyment depends on how good your guide is. Just about every hotel organises similar excursions; all are fairly similar, and charge around Rs 450 to 550 per person for a half-day trip, including lunch. **Marwar Eco Cultural Tours & Travels** (☎ 5123095; www.nativeplanet.org/tours/india) is a recommended private operator.

Alternatively, friendly **Chhota Ram Prajapat** (☎ 2696744; chhotaramprajapat@rediffmail.com) offers simple hut accommodation (per person including dinner Rs 500) for up to eight guests in nearby Salawas, the main artisan village.

**Gemar Singh** (☎ 2619688; gemar@rediffmail.com; Shivam Guest House) arranges homestays, camping, desert walks and camel safaris to Osayan and surrounding Rajput and Bishnoi villages. The cost is around Rs 700 per person per day (minimum two people).

## Sleeping

As usual, if a rickshaw driver is clamouring to take you somewhere, it's probably because he is going to receive a juicy commission. You can avoid this by getting dropped at the tower and walking the rest of the way (note: there's

only one clock tower). As many travellers arrive by train or bus late at night, it helps to arrange a pick-up service with your hotel.

The places around Navchokiya in the old city are quieter and infinitely more interesting.

## BUDGET

**Cosy Guest House** (Map p235; ☎ 2612066; cosyguesthouse@yahoo.com; Navchokiya; rooftop Rs 60, tents Rs 150, s/d with shared bathroom Rs 200/250, d with private bathroom Rs 350-650; ☎) Filled with young adventurers (or the young at heart), this is a happening place in the heart of the old city. It's a 500-year-old blue-coloured house with several levels of higgledy-piggledy rooftops and a mix of rooms, some monastic, others decked out with AC. If you've got heavy bags, don't attempt the steep climb. Ask the rickshaw for Navchokiya Rd, from where the guesthouse is signposted, or call genial Mr Joshi.

**Shivam Paying Guest House** (Map p236; ☎ 2610688; shivamgh@hotmail.com; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 125/150, s/d with private bathroom from Rs 175/200) Near the clock tower, this is a quiet, hassle-free option run by a gentle, helpful family, with cosy rooms and a lovely little rooftop restaurant.

**Durag Niwas Guest House** (Map p235; ☎ 2512385; www.durag-niwas.com; 1 Old Public Park; r Rs 150-650; ☎) This is a friendly, family-run place set away from the hustle of the old city. Good home-cooked veg dishes are available, and there's a cushion-floored, sari-curtained area on the roof for hanging out. There's also a fabulous deal for long-termers: a spacious double room costs Rs 4500 per month, including full board. The Maharaja Room (Rs 650) is not for the prudish – it sleeps eight people.

**Blue House** (Map p235; ☎ 2621396; bluehouse36@hotmail.com; Moti Chowk; r Rs 150-750) This popular place has been overhauled in recent times, with some death-defying extensions. The two rooms with a shared bathroom and small seating area facing the fort are still the pick, though most of the rest of the rooms are cramped and difficult to access.

**Achal Niwas** (Map p236; ☎ 2618004; r Rs 200-500) Around the corner from Shivam Paying Guesthouse, this mellow place is a smart budget option with a romantic, quiet rooftop, and some rooms with excellent fort views.

**Yogi's Guest House** (Map p236; ☎ 2643436; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 200/250, r with private bathroom Rs 650) Yogi's is a classic travellers' hang-out, situated at the base of the fort walls. Set in the

500-year-old Rajpurohitji-ki-Haveli, rooms are smart, spacious and, more often than not, full. The charming and chatty owner operates at a million miles an hour, so be prepared for an authentic Indian experience. There's a stunning rooftop restaurant with panoramic fort views and good food (try the egg curry). It's well signposted off the lanes leading to the fort.

**Krishna Prakash Heritage Haveli** (Map p235; ☎ 2633448; Nayabas, Killikhana; r Rs 200-1200) This heartily decorated heritage hotel is a good choice, with impressive suites, big bathrooms, a relaxing terrace, and pleasant, professional staff. The Marwar thali is amazing.

**Durag Villas Guest House** (Map p235; ☎ 2512298; 1 Old Public Park; r Rs 250-800; ☎) Next door to Durag Niwas, this has simple, good-value rooms – the more expensive rooms are worth the in-

vestment. It's a quiet, relaxed place set around a leafy courtyard.

**Haveli Guest House** (Map p235; ☎ 2614615; Makrana Mohalla; r Rs 250-850; ☎) This 250-year-old building inside the walled city is a popular place. Many rooms have semibalconies and fort views. The rooftop vegetarian restaurant (dishes Rs 30 to 60) is unimaginary, but has excellent views. Rickshaws sometimes take travellers to copycat places so check you're in the right place; this one faces a stagnant step-well.

#### MIDRANGE

**Saji Sanwri Guest House** (Map p235; ☎ 2440305; www.sajisanwri.com; d Rs 200-950; ☎) This is a gorgeous, busily decorated 350-year-old *haveli* run by the warm-hearted Indu. It has 10 delightful, flowery rooms with spotless private bath-

### MYSTICAL MUSIC

Rajasthan is a living study in ethno-musicology. Songs are often inspired by daily life – the drawing of precious water, or the preparation of a hearty meal – though Rajasthanis will at times turn to the haunting ballads of Moomal Mahendra, Dhola-Maru and other legendary lovers and heroes.

There are two traditional classes of musicians in Rajasthan: the *langas* of western Rajasthan, who are favoured mostly by Muslim audiences and have a distinct Sufi flavour, and the *manganiars*, whose breaks possess a more Hindustani bent.

Then there are the *sapera* snake charmers who blow into two-tubed *poongas*, and the *bhopas*, priestlike singers who play the village circuit in times of sickness or poor harvest. The *mirasis* and *jogis* of Mewar are famed for their gurgling voices – *jogis* sing without accompaniment – while the *maand* are highly sophisticated folk singers, once heard only in royal courts.

Where there is song, there is also dance, and Rajasthanis are never backward in shuffling forward. Aside from the Holi festival staple the *ghooma gait* – a series of gentle, graceful pirouettes – there is the *teerah taali* of the Kamad community in Pokaran, a boisterous dance in honour of the theft deity Baba Ramdeo. It's an unusual spectacle where men play a four-stringed instrument called a *chau-tara* while the women move with dozens of *manjeeras* (small cymbals) tied to their bodies. Similarly remarkable is the *chari* dance, popular in the Kisherigarh region, which is performed with an illuminated clay pot nursed on the dancer's head.

In Shekhawati, the *kacchi ghodi* is skilfully performed on horses. Holding naked swords aloft, the riders move to the beating of drums while a singer narrates the exploits of notorious bandits. In Bikaner, Jasnathis, revered for their Tantric powers, dance on flaming coals until the music peaks and the dancers fall into a trance, while the drum dance of Jalore sees five men with huge drums strapped around their necks accompany a sword-swallower who simultaneously juggles.

From rustic resonators to thunderous kettledrums, Rajasthanis instruments are equally unusual. Handcrafted by the musicians themselves, they include the *morchang*, a handheld trumpet that plays fast in-and-out sounds; the *sarangi*, a popular bowed instrument; and the *kamayacha*, a 16-stringed *langa* speciality that is played with a long wooden bow made of horse-tail hair. The *kharta* (a metal castanet) is a favourite with saints and seers, while the *algoza* of the Ajmer region is the equivalent of a South Asian bagpipe.

Concerts are held regularly for tourists in all major cities, usually in upmarket hotels. For the more adventurous, tour operators will arrange a visit to the villages themselves – particularly in the west – and an unforgettable backstage pass to rhythmic Rajasthan.

rooms and the corner room (Rs 750) is sun-filled. The family still lives here, and can show you their small sitting-room museum.

**Govind Hotel** (Map p235; ☎ 2622758; www.govindhotel.com; r Rs 350-900) This unfussy place is well set up for travellers, with helpful management (who refuse to pay commission) and a location just a five-minute walk from the Jodhpur train station. All rooms are tiled and fairly smart, with excellent bathrooms; there's also a rooftop restaurant with fort views (an oasis in this area).

**Singhvi's Haveli** (Map p235; ☎ 2624293; Ramdevji ka Chowk, Navchokiya; r Rs 200-1200) This family-run, beautiful red-sandstone *haveli* with exquisitely carved *jalis* is an understated gem. Rooms have been recently upgraded, and range from the simple to the magnificent Maharani Suite with 10 windows and a fort view (Rs 1200). The romantic restaurant on the rooftop has home-cooked dishes (Rs 20 to 100) and is decorated by sari curtains and floor cushions.

**Indrashan** (☎ 2440665; 593 High Court Colony; r Rs 900) Bhavna and Chandrashekar Singh run this wonderful homestay situated 10 minutes by rickshaw from the clock tower. They have five rooms – more are planned – and the food is highly recommended (lunch or dinner Rs 225). They can also organise homestays in other cities in Rajasthan.

**Devi Bhawan** (☎ 2511067; devibhawan@satyamonline.com; 1 Ratanada Area; s/d/ste Rs 850/1200/1500; ☎ ☎) This welcome green oasis is excellent value, though a bit out of the way. There's a good restaurant here (veg thali Rs 150) and a swimming pool here.

**Newtons Manor** (☎ 2430686; www.newtonsmantor.com; 86 Jawahar Colony, Ratanada; r Rs 1095-2195; ☎) Strictly Victorian in manner, Newtons Manor has 10 elegant rooms decorated with lots of antique furniture in a fussy, old-colonial style, and a good-sized billiard table. The management also has a 9-acre resort on the Madore Hwy that has offers safaris and has a swimming pool.

**Ratan Vilas** (Map p235; ☎ /fax 2614418; ratanvilas\_jod@rediffmail.com; Old Loco Shed Rd, Ratanada; s/d Rs 1400/1650; ☎) Built in 1920 by the great polo player Maharaj Ratan Singhji of Raoti, this beauty from a bygone era is the real deal. It's quintessential colonial India, with manicured lawns, spacious villas and exceptional staff who prepare wonderful home-cooked meals.

**Pal Haveli** (Map p235; ☎ 2439615; www.palhaveli.com; Gulab Sagar; r Rs 1550-2250) Set around a courtyard and built by the *thakur* of Pal in 1847, this is the only original *haveli* in the old city. There are 12 charming rooms, mostly large and decorated in traditional heritage style.

**Karni Bhawan** (Map p235; ☎ 2512101; Palace Rd; r Rs 1650-2300, ste Rs 2950; ☎ ☎) This place is a remodelled colonial bungalow that feels creepily modern, but is still ideal for families thanks to the peaceful lawns and fabulous new pool-side restaurant. Rooms are heavy with dark wooden, traditional furnishings, but are clean and spacious.

## TOP END

**Ranbanka Palace** (Map p235; ☎ 2512801; Airport Rd; r incl breakfast Rs 3500-4500; ☎ ☎ ☎) This slick setup next to Ajit Bhawan is much better value, but a lot less polished (although the vinyl shines bright). Still, rooms are well decked out, with Persian rugs and four-poster beds, and the restaurant is first rate.

**Ajit Bhawan** (Map p235; ☎ 2511410; www.ajitbhawan.com; Airport Rd; r Rs 4500-6000, tents Rs 7000, both incl breakfast; ☎ ☎) Ajit Bhawan is the pick of Jodhpur. It's set well back from dusty Airport Rd in splendidly kept gardens, and behind the gracious main heritage building there is a series of stone cottages with dark wood furnishings. There's a world-class restaurant, sensational swimming pool (nonguests Rs 250) and gift shop. Other services include a wonderful collection of vintage cars that you can rent, such as a 1939 Chevrolet convertible.

**Taj Hari Mahal Palace** (Map p235; ☎ 2439700; fax 2624451; 5 Residency Rd; r US\$185-325; ☎) This flashy Taj number uses hybrid Marwar-Moghul design to good effect. Centred on a courtyard with a big lush swimming pool, it's the most exclusive place in Jodhpur, but pretty good value for a cheeky weekend.

**Umaid Bhawan Palace** (Map p235; ☎ 2510101; r US\$375-600, ste US\$1000-3500; ☎ ☎) This monster 20th-century palace took 3000 artisans some 14 years to carve from red sandstone. It's like a grand parliament building with beds, and is well worth a visit, if not a night of decadence in a remote palace wing. It has a tennis court, indoor swimming pool, lush lawns and several restaurants (p240). Décor is somewhere between Art Deco and non-ironic 1970s gangster chic. Prices continue to soar, so it might be worth waiting for the off-season discount.

## Eating & Drinking

While you're in Jodhpur, try a glass of *makhania* lassi, a filling saffron-flavoured variety of that milky goodness.

### RESTAURANTS

**Hotel Priya & Restaurant** (Map p235; 181-2 Nai Sank, Sojati Gate; dishes Rs 15-60) If you can stomach the wasps and the petrol fumes, this street-facing place has a cheerful sense of hubbub, and serves up reliable North and South Indian cuisine. The thalis are good and there are sweets, too.

**Mid Town** (Map p235; Station Rd; dishes Rs 18-70) Mid Town is middle-class dining at its finest, with a choice of seating and good veg food. It serves some Rajasthani specialities, including some particular to Jodhpur, such as *chakki-ka-sagh* (wheat dumpling cooked in rich gravy) and *kabuli* (vegetables with rice, milk, bread and fruit).

**Kalinga Restaurant** (Map p235; Station Rd; dishes Rs 50-160) This AC-injected restaurant near the train station is smart and popular, with a dim ambience and yellow, segmented walls. There's a well-stocked bar, and tasty veg and nonveg Indian dishes – try the butter-soaked chicken – plus excellent pizza.

**On the Rocks** (Map p235; dishes Rs 50-260; ☎ 10am-2am, lunch noon-3pm, dinner 7.30-11pm) This is far and away the most jumping joint in Jodhpur. There's a garden restaurant (candlelit in the evening), frequented by families, that serves tasty Indian cuisine (try the *mutter rogan josh* Rs 130), including lots of barbecue options. There's also a small playground, an excellent bakery (pastries Rs 15), and a fabulous, partly open-air bar with a dance floor (and actual dancing!).

**Bollygood** (☎ 2514513; Ratananda; dishes Rs 60-300) Run by same owner as On the Rocks, this themed restaurant is brightly lit and over-staffed and – once the word spreads – will be a great place for a drink. Dishes are named after Indian movie stars, but the Bollygood veg platter (Rs 250) wins the gong.

**Garden Restaurant** (Map p235; Airport Rd; dishes Rs 85-170 ☎ noon-3pm & 7.30-10.30pm) Near Ajit Bhawan, this is a large, lovely garden restaurant, candlelit at night, with excellent Indian and Continental dishes.

**Mehran Terrace** (Map p236; ☎ 2549790; Mererangarh Fort; dishes Rs 80-180, thalis Rs 300-350; ☎ 7.30-10.30pm) Come for the location, stay for the...location. Dining on one of the fort's terraces is unsurpassably romantic, but the food and service

is wholly disappointing. It's still worth a visit though, as the candlelit tables, 140m above the city, will make the rich Rajasthani thali immeasurably more palatable. Enjoy the waiters' high jinks, and don't forget to book.

Umaid Bhawan Palace (Map p235) has **Pillars** (☎ 6pm-11pm), a breezy informal eatery with sublime lawn views, and more upmarket **Jodhpur Lancers** (☎ 9am-11pm). Main dish prices at these places range from Rs 200 to 600. Or you could just have a drink at the **Trophy Bar** (☎ 11am-11pm).

### QUICK EATS

Yummy street food is available on the streets adjoining the railway reservation office.

**Omelette Shop** (Map p235; eggs Rs 5-12) Just through the gate (by the inner arch – don't be fooled by imitations!) on the northern side of the square, the Omelette Shop claims to go through 1000 eggs a day – the egg man has been doing his thing for over 30 years. Two tasty, spicy boiled eggs cost Rs 10, and an oily two-egg omelette with chilli, coriander and four pieces of bread Rs 15, but it's not ideal for a queasy stomach.

**Agra Sweets** (Map p235; opposite Sojati Gate; sweets Rs 10, lassis Rs 12) This sweet shop sells good lassis, as well as delectable Jodhpur specialities such as *mawa laddoo* (milk sweet made with sugar, cardamom and pistachios, wrapped in silver leaf) and the baklavali-like *mawa kachori*.

**Janta Sweets** (3 Nai Sarak, Station Rd) The 'home of sweets' comes pretty close to the money, with superb *mawa laddoo* (Rs 5) and *mawa kachori* (Rs 5), and a high customer turnover.

**Shri Mishrilal Hotel** (Map p235; lassis Rs 15) At the clock tower, this place is nothing fancy, but whips up the best lassis in town. A delicious glass of creamy special *makhania* lassi costs Rs 15.

**Five Star Fruit Juice** (Map p235; 112 Nai Sadak; small/large fruit juice Rs 20/30) The pick of the fruit-juice bunch, this hole-in-the-wall juice shop serves superfresh combinations in a traveller-friendly atmosphere.

**Refreshment room** (Map p235; 1st fl, Jodhpur train station; veg/nonveg thali Rs 20/25) There's a strangely timeless ambience here, and surprisingly palatable food.

### Shopping

The usual Rajasthani handicrafts are available here, but Jodhpur is most famous for antiques. However, we recommend that you

do not buy genuine antiques as the trade in antique architectural fixtures is contributing to the desecration of India's cultural heritage (beautiful old *havelis* are often ripped apart for their doors and window frames). Most places can make you a piece of antique-style furniture and prices aren't bad. The greatest concentration of showrooms is along Palace Rd, near Umaid Bhawan Palace. Make sure you find out how much extra customs charges will cost in your home country.

The mission racket operates here, so use your head.

**Krishna Art & Crafts** (Map p235; ☎ 5103348; 1st fl, Tija Mata ka Mandir) Ex-London resident Ajit Singh is in charge of this classy fixed-priced store. A great place to gain knowledge of traditional garments, it also has an incredible range of carpets and shawls, and highly professional staff.

**Shri Rani Sati Cloth Store** (Map p235; ☎ 2625747; 117 Sardar Market) This small store to the left of the clock tower as you enter the market is the premier choice for block-printed fabrics. Very competitive prices, and trustworthy staff.

**Rani Handicrafts** (Map p235; Hanuwant Colony, Circuit House Rd) Another good choice for a range of handicrafts, this place is a little off the tourist beat, and prices are very generous.

**JG Art & Crafts** (☎ 2636580; Sardar Market) Abhay Kumar is the proprietor of this excellent store, which has a cheap and reliable international courier service, and all kinds of handicrafts and fabrics.

**Kaman** (Map p236; kaman\_contemporaryart@yahoo.in; Old Fort Rd, Killi Khana) This is a slick contemporary art gallery featuring the pick of the painters from western Rajasthan. Seventy percent of sales reach the artists' pockets, and the other 30% keeps the space alive.

**Handloom House** (Map p235; Nai Sarak; ☎ 10am-10pm) This is a huge department store thronged with locals. Alongside some questionable clothes are mountains of fixed-price *bandhani*, silk saris and woollen shawls.

Around the clock tower are various spice shops, but these are mainly for tourists, with prices to match, and there have been complaints about quality; however, the hugely successful **MV Spices** (Map p235; ☎ 5109347; www.mvspices.com; 209B Vegetable Market; ☎ 10am-9pm) does have genuine spices and excellent service. If you would like to buy spices at local prices, head westwards from the clock tower along Tambaku Bazaar towards Navchokiya in the

old city. You will pass a small square, past which you will find some small spice shops where chilli powder will cost around Rs 90 per kilogram and real saffron around Rs 50 to 60 per gram.

The best bets for quality fake antiques are **Ajay Art Emporium** (Map p235; ☎ 2510269; Umaid Bhawan Palace Rd), **Maharani Art Exporters** (Map p235; ☎ 2639226; Tambaku Bazaar) or **Rajasthan Arts & Crafts House** (Map p235; ☎ 2653926; Umaid Bhawan Palace Rd). International courier rates on containers are very competitive (eg US\$225 per cubic metre to Australia).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Indian Airlines** (Map p235; ☎ 2510757; Airport Rd; ☎ 10am-1.15pm & 2-4.30pm) is located south of the centre. Flights depart to Delhi (US\$120) via Jaipur (US\$90), and to Mumbai (US\$160) via Udaipur (US\$90). **Jet Airways** (☎ 5102222; Room 4, Osho Apartments, Residency Rd) also flies to Delhi (via Jaipur) and Mumbai (via Udaipur).

### BUS

There are RSTC buses to, among other places, Jaisalmer (Rs 60, 5½ hours, half-hourly), Udaipur (Rs 60, 5½ hours, seven daily), Jaipur (express/deluxe Rs 140/163, 7½ hours, half-hourly), Ajmer (Rs 99, 4½ hours, half-hourly), Bikaner (Rs 100, 5½ hours), Delhi (express/deluxe Rs 262/363, 12½/14 hours, five daily) and Ahmedabad (Rs 210/180, 10/12 hours, six daily). There's a **Roadways enquiry number** (☎ 2544686).

Private bus companies, including **Mahadev Travels** (Map p235; ☎ 2633926; Kalpataru Cinema Rd) and **Kalpana Travels** (☎ 2201519; Olympic Cinema Rd), have offices opposite the train station and in the street leading to the Ranchodji Temple, and both serve destinations such as Udaipur (nonsleeper/sleeper Rs 130/180), Bikaner (Rs 120/160), Jaipur (Rs 140/200) and Ajmer (Rs 100/160). Private buses leave next to Sardarpura cinema.

### TRAIN

The computerised **railway booking office** (Station Rd; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1.45pm Sun) is between the Jodhpur train station and Sojati Gate. There's a tourist quota (Window 788).

The *Jodhpur-Jaisalmer Express* (No 4810) leaves every night at 11.15pm, arriving in Jaisalmer around 5.15am (sleeper/3AC Rs 157/411, 294km); the 4809 from Jaisalmer

also leaves at 11.15pm, arriving in Jodhpur at 5.15am. The *Mandore Express* (No 2462) leaves Jodhpur at 7.30pm, arriving in Delhi at 6.30am (sleeper/2AC/3AC Rs 276/1009/720, 623km). To Jaipur, the *Intercity Express* (No 2466) leaves at 5.45am, arriving at 10.35am (chair/3AC Rs 359/450, 313km).

## Getting Around

The airport is only 5km from the centre. It costs about Rs 60 in an autorickshaw or Rs 150 in a taxi.

There's a taxi stand near the main train station. Most taxi journeys around town should cost around Rs 80 and autorickshaws no more than Rs 30.

## AROUND JODHPUR

### Mandore

Situated 9km north of Jodhpur, Mandore was the capital of Marwar prior to the foundation of Jodhpur. Today, its **gardens** with rock terraces make it a popular local attraction. The gardens also contain a mixture of dark-red stupas (domed edifice housing Buddhist or Jain relics) and domes – the cenotaphs of Jodhpur rulers, including the soaring memorial to Maharaja Dhiraj Ajit Singh.

The 18th-century **Hall of Heroes** contains 15 solemn Hindu deities and local heroes carved out of a rock wall, coated with fine plaster and luridly painted.

**Mandore Guest House** (☎ 0291-2545210, 2571620; www.mandore.com; s/d Rs 500/850, with AC Rs 700/900; ♿) has delightful rounded mud-walled cottages set in a leafy garden. There's good home-cooked food. It's also connected with a local NGO working to address drug addiction and provide medical services; there are short-term volunteer programmes.

Located in a former Raj hunting area, **Balsamand Lake Palace** (☎ 0291-2572321; www.jodhpurheritage.com; Mandore Rd; d/ste Rs 4600/11000; ♿) is set across 70 well-kept acres. The lakeside suites are divine, stables have been generously converted into well-appointed double rooms, and the restaurant is one of Jodhpur's finest. It has a real country feel, with a plush swimming pool, lovingly tended rose gardens and, until recently, a disgruntled resident yogi.

### Rohet

A heritage hotel in the small village of Rohet, 40km south of Jodhpur, **Rohet Garh** (☎ 02936-268231; s/d from Rs 1450/2000, ste Rs 3000; ♿ ♿) is

where Bruce Chatwin wrote *The Songlines* and William Dalrymple began *City of Djinnis*. Surprising they were so diligent, as there's a gorgeous colonnaded pool, and the rooms are lovely. The hotel can organise village safaris.

## Osiyan

This ancient Great Thar Desert town, 65km north of Jodhpur, was an important trading centre between the 8th and 12th centuries. It was dominated by the Jains, who left a legacy of exquisitely sculptured, well-preserved temples. **Sachiya Mata Temple** (☎ 6am-7.15pm) is an impressive walled complex. The **Mahavira Temple** (admission Rs 5, camera/video Rs 30/100; ☎ 6am-8.30pm) surrounds an image of the 24th *tirthankar*, said to be over 2000 years old and formed from sand and milk.

In October, Osiyan hosts the **Marwar Festival** (p166).

Prakash Bhanu Sharma, a personable Brahmin priest, has an echoing **guesthouse** (☎ 02922-274296; d Rs 300), geared towards pilgrims, near Mahavira Temple.

The **Camel Camp** (☎/fax 0291-2437023; tents Rs 2500-7000) offers tent accommodation perched on a secluded sand dune overlooking Osiyan. Camel safaris can be arranged. Advance bookings are essential.

There are regular buses from Jodhpur (Rs 30, 1½ hours, half-hourly). There's also a train (2nd class Rs 27, 1½ hours, 65km). A return taxi costs Rs 600.

## Nagaur

Nagaur, 135km northeast of Jodhpur, has the massive, 12th-century, beautifully restored ruins of **Ahhichatragarh** (Fort of the Hooded Cobra; Indian/foreigner Rs 15/50, camera/video Rs 25/100; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm), which has a unique water system – every drop is recycled. At the ruins' heart is a richly painted, Rajput-Mughal palace complex.

The town hosts the **Nagaur Camel Fair** (p166) in January/February.

**Hotel Bhaskar** (☎ 01582-240100; Station Rd; s/d from Rs 200/250) is friendly and has bright, but run-down, rooms.

**Hotel Sujan** (☎ 01582-240283; Nakash Gate; s/d Rs 200/300), near the fort, has gloomy hallways but the rooms are fine.

**Royal Tents** (tents US\$250) are available at fair time. These fabulous tents must be booked in advance through **Balsamand Lake Palace** (☎ 0291-2572321; www.jodhpurheritage.com; Mandore Rd. The **RTDC** (s/d Rs 2000/2500) also has tents.



There are hourly buses from Jodhpur (Rs 60, three hours).

### Khichan

This small village, 140km northwest of Jodhpur, is a twitcher's dream, and a regular stop on long-range camel safaris. From late August/early September to the end of March, you can witness masses of demoiselle cranes circling noisily and then descending on the surrounding fields at around 7am and 5pm to feed on grain (600kg per day!) spread around by the villagers. Ten kilometres further west is **Phalodi**, an old caravan centre with beautiful *havelis* and some reasonable places to stay, including the recommended **Lal Niwas** (☎ 02925-223813; Dadha's Mohalla, Phalodi; s/d Rs 2000/2200; ♿ ♿).

There are regular buses between Phalodi and both Jodhpur and Jaisalmer (Rs 65, 3½ hours), but getting to Khichan requires a car.

## JAISALMER

☎ 02992 / pop 58,286

Jaisalmer is a giant sandcastle with a town attached, an emblem of honour in a land of rough and tumble. The fort is a living monument to long-lost desert might, a Golden City of dreams that exceeds expectations of the most travel-sick tourist or hardened history buff. Rising high from Trikuta hill, 99 enormous bastions hide *havelis* of crumbling beauty, and former Raj retainers, who now raffishly run guesthouses or flog bedazzling mirrorwork and embroidery. Like a Hansel and Gretel wonderland, the enclosed palace is carved from the same near-edible golden sandstone.

But Jaisalmer is in trouble. Overcrowding and poor drainage – coupled with devastating monsoons – have seen the fort sinking into Trikuta hill. Add to that the high hassle factor for camel safaris and your precious rupees, and the atmosphere is a touch strained. Yet Jaisalmer is still the stuff of legend – as the night sky spreads thick across the scrubs and dunes of the Great Thar Desert, most travellers will find themselves happily trapped in this exotic trade route town.

The town hosts the **Desert Festival** (p166) in February.

### History

Founded in 1156, 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, exquisitely carved from wood and sandstone.

Jaisalmer experienced its share of sieges and sackings, with an inevitable Rajput *jauhar* in the 13th century after a siege that lasted eight years. However, it escaped too much harm from the Mughals. On good terms with Delhi, the 17th-century city saw another golden age, with more grand palaces and *havelis*.

The rise in the importance of shipping and the port of Mumbai (Bombay) resulted in Jaisalmer's decline. Partition and the cutting of the trade routes through to Pakistan seemingly sealed the city's fate, and water shortages could have pronounced its death sentence. However, the India–Pakistan Wars of 1965 and 1971 revealed Jaisalmer's great strategic importance.

Today it's an important stop on another lucrative trade route – tourism rivals the military base as the city's economic mainstay.

### Orientation

The massive fort that rises above the city is entered via the First Fort Gate. Within the fort 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

There are plenty of places to check email, both inside and outside the fort. Cost is around Rs 40 per hour, though speeds vary.

**Bhatia News Agency** (Map p244; Bhatia Market; ☎ 9am–9pm) Day-old newspapers and an excellent selection of new and secondhand books in various languages can be bought at this well-stocked shop.

**Byas & Co** (Map p244; Bhatia Market; ☎ 9am–9pm) Sells photographic supplies and develops pictures.

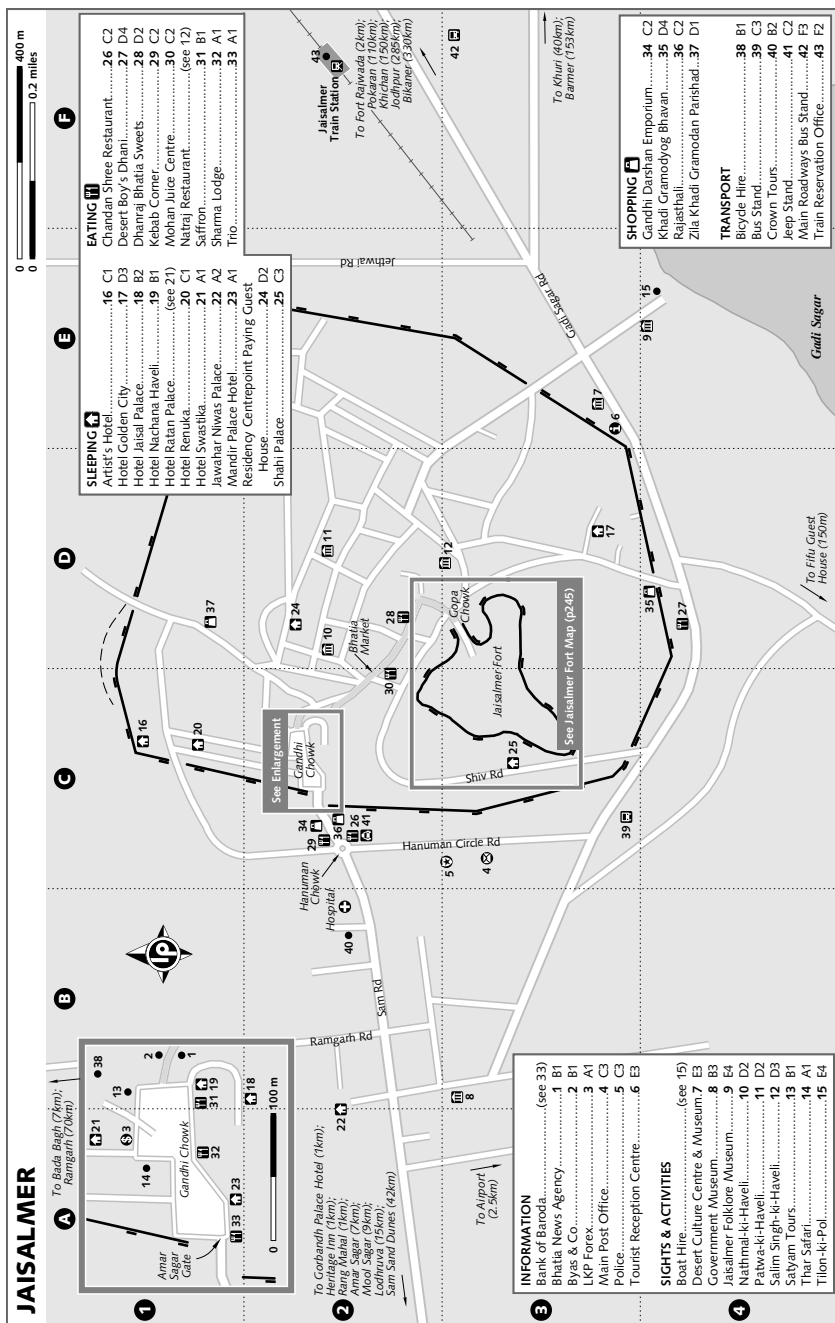
**LKP Forex** (Map p244; ☎ 253679; Gandhi Chowk; ☎ 9.30am–9.30pm) Changes 32 different currencies, travellers cheques and gives cash advances on credit cards.

**Main post office** (Map p244; Hanuman Circle Rd; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat) West of the fort.

**Police** (Map p244; ☎ 252233)

**Post office** (Map p245; ☎ 10am–3pm Mon–Sat) Inside the fort; only sells stamps.

**Tourist Reception Centre** (Map p244; ☎ 252406; Gadi Sagar Rd; ☎ 10am–5pm) One kilometre southeast of the First Fort Gate; sells maps for Rs 10.



## Sights & Activities

### JAISALMER FORT

The fort (Map p245) is a warren of narrow streets carved from sandstone, harbouring a palace, temples, and hundreds of deceptively simple-looking *havelis*. Built in 1156 by the Rajput ruler Jaisal, and reinforced by subsequent rulers, the fort crowns the 80m-high Trikuta hill. About 25% of the old city's population resides within the fort walls, which have 99 bastions around their circumference. It's an extraordinary, resonant experience to wander around the lanes inside this living museum. Sadly, the tourism trade is threatening the fort – suffering from pressure of numbers and government indifference, it is on the World Monuments Watch list of the 100 most endangered sites worldwide.

### Maharaja's Palace

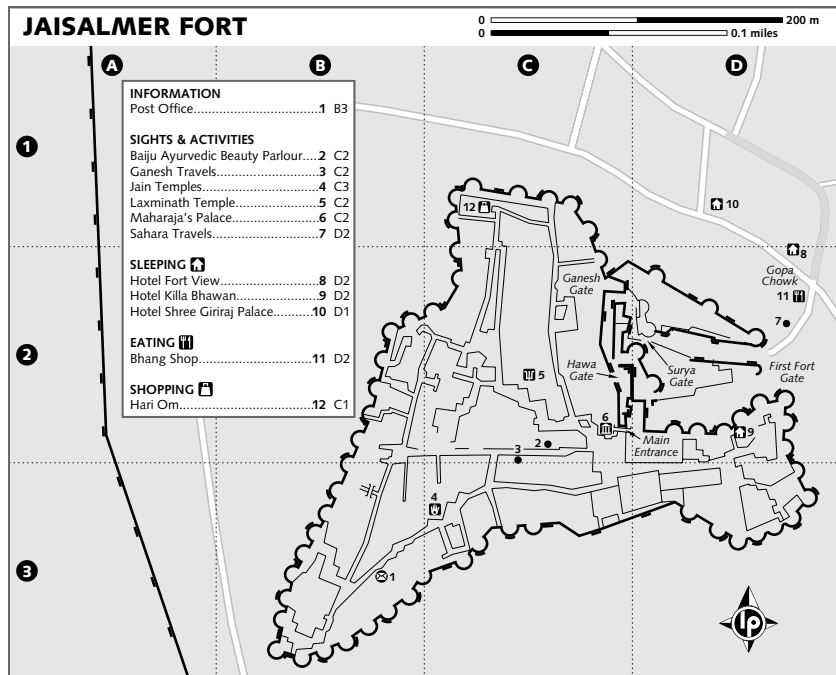
The fort is entered through a forbidding series of massive gates leading to a large courtyard, fronted by the elegant seven-storey **palace** (Map p245; Indian/foreigner Rs 20/70, camera/video Rs 50/150; ☞ 8am–6pm Mar–Jul, 9am–6pm Aug–Feb). The square was formerly used to review troops, hear peti-

tions and present extravagant entertainment for travelling dignitaries. Part of the palace is open to the public – floor upon floor of fascinating rooms that peep creepily on the outside world.

The 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 summit.

### Jain Temples

Within the fort walls is a mazelike, interconnecting complex of seven beautiful yellow sandstone **Jain temples** (Map p245; admission Rs 10, camera/video Rs 50/100), dating from the 12th to 16th centuries. Opening times have a habit of changing, so check with the caretakers. The intricate carving rivals that in Ranakpur or Mt Abu, and has an extraordinary quality because of the soft, warm stone. **Chandraprabhu** (☞ 7am–noon) is the first temple you come to, dedicated to the eighth *tirthankar*, whose symbol is the moon. Around the upper gallery are 108 marble images of Parasnath, the 22nd *tirthankar*. To the right of this temple is **Rikhabdev Temple** (☞ 7am–noon). Behind Chandraprabhu is **Parasnath Temple** (☞ 11am–



## GOLDEN CITY BLUES

One of the world's most endangered monuments, Jaisalmer Fort is slowly self-destructing due to the pressure on the city's drainage system. One-hundred-and-twenty litres of water per head pumps through the city's aged plumbing system – 12 times the original capacity. Since 1993, three of the 12th-century bastions have collapsed.

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 the **Jaisalmer Conservation Initiative** (☎ 011-24631818; www.intach.org; 71 Lodi Estate, New Delhi 110 003), run by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), or the British-registered charity **Jaisalmer in Jeopardy** (☎ /fax 020-73524336; www.jaisalmer-in-jeopardy.org; 3 Brickbarn Close, London SW10 0TP).

noon), which you enter through a beautifully carved *torana* (gateway); it has a lovely, brightly painted ceiling. A door to the south leads to the **Shitalnath Temple** (☎ 11am-noon), dedicated to the 10th *tirthankar*, with an eight-metal image. A door in the north wall leads to the beautiful **Sambhavanth Temple** (☎ 11am-noon) – in the front courtyard, Jain priests grind sandalwood for devotional use. Steps lead down to the **Gyan Bhandar** (☎ 10-11am), a fascinating, tiny library of ancient manuscripts, founded in 1500. The remaining two temples are **Shantinath** (☎ 11am-noon), and **Kunthunath** (☎ 11am-noon), below it, both built in 1536, and with plenty of sensual carving.

### Laxminath Temple

This Hindu temple (Map p245) is simpler than the Jain temples, with a brightly decorated dome. Devotees offer grain, which is distributed before the temple. There is a repoussé silver architrave around the entrance to the inner sanctum, and a heavily garlanded image enshrined within.

## HAVELIS

### Patwa-ki-Haveli

Most magnificent of all the *havelis*, its stonework like honey-coloured craggy lace, **Patwa-ki-Haveli** (Map p244; admission Rs 20, camera/video Rs 20/20; ☎ 9am-6pm) towers over a narrow lane. It was built between 1800 and 1860 by five Jain brothers who were brocade and jewellery merchants. It's most impressive from the outside, but the fort view from the roof is superb, and the interior richly evokes 19th-century life.

### Salim Singh-ki-Haveli

This private *haveli* (Map p244; admission Rs 15, camera/video Rs 10/50; ☎ 8am-6pm Oct-Apr, 8am-7pm May-Sep) has an amazing, distinctive shape – it's nar-

row for the first floors, then the top storey spreads out into a mass of carving, with graceful arched balconies surmounted by pale blue cupolas. It was built about 300 years ago; part of it is still occupied. Salim Singh was a fearsome prime minister when Jaisalmer was the capital of a princely state.

### Nathmal-ki-Haveli

This late-19th-century *haveli* (Map p244; admission free; ☎ 8am-7pm) was also a prime minister's house and is still partly inhabited. It drips with carving, and the first floor has some beautiful paintings that used 1.5kg of gold. A doorway is surrounded by 19th-century British postcards from the prime minister's time, and there's also a picture of Queen Victoria. The left and right wings were the work of two brothers, whose competitive spirit apparently produced this virtuoso work – the two sides are similar, but not identical. Sandstone elephants keep guard.

## GADI SAGAR

This stately tank (Map p244), south of the city walls, was once the water supply of the city, and there are many small temples and shrines around it. Waterfowl flock here in winter. **Boat hire** (☎ 8am-9pm) costs Rs 10 to 100 for 30 minutes.

The attractive **Tilon-ki-Pol** (Map p244) that straddles across the road down to the tank is said to have been built by a famous prostitute. When she offered to pay to have this gateway 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.

## MUSEUMS

Next to the Tourist Reception Centre is the **Desert Culture Centre & Museum** (Map p244; ☎ 252188; admission Rs 10; 🕒 10am-5pm), which has interesting information on Rajasthani culture, as well as textiles and traditional instruments. There's a nightly one-hour **puppet show** (admission Rs 30, camera/video Rs 20/50) at 6.30pm. Admission to the Desert Culture Centre includes entry to the small **Jaisalmer Folklore Museum** (Map p244; camera/video Rs 20/50; 🕒 8am-6pm), which has everything from camel ornaments to opium bottles. The hill nearby is a tremendous place to soak up the sunset.

The small **government museum** (Map p244; admission Rs 3, free Mon; 🕒 10am-4.30pm Sat-Thu) has a limited but well-captioned collection of fossils, some which date back to the Jurassic era (160 to 180 million years ago!).

## MASSAGE

**Baiju Ayurvedic Beauty Parlour** (Map p245; ☎ 255 730; 🕒 10am-8pm) offers facials (Rs 300) and Ayurvedic massages (Rs 500), as well as manicures, pedicures and waxings. It's near the maharaja's palace.

## Tours

Few travellers visit Jaisalmer without venturing into the desert on a camel. For details see p248.

The Tourist Reception Centre (p243) runs sunset tours to the Sam sand dunes (Rs 130 per person) at 3pm, returning after sunset. On request, the tours to Sam may stop at Kanoi, 5km before the dunes, from where it's possible to get a camel to the dunes in time for sunset (around Rs 250).

## Sleeping

Staying within the fort is no longer a sustainable practice, as increased water consumption has left the fort infrastructure in danger of collapse. For this reason Lonely Planet has taken the decision not to list any hotels or restaurants within the fort. We encourage travellers to make an ethical decision when visiting Jaisalmer.

Motorised traffic is not permitted beyond the main square – anywhere further into the maze is a 10-minute walk at most. Most hotels in Jaisalmer have a stingy 9am check-out time.

Unfortunately, a few hotels are really into the high-pressure selling of camel safaris. Some offer good rooms at knockdown prices,

and then turn nasty if you don't take their safari. To avoid the drama, be clear from the outset if you are not interested.

Prices fluctuate a lot. If there's a festival on, rooms are expensive and scarce; in slow times most places offer big discounts. Often guesthouses here are rented, so can alter in quality from one year to the next according to who's in charge.

## BUDGET

You'll find a cluster of places north of Gandhi Chowk.

**Hotel Golden City** (Map p244; ☎/fax 251664; hotel.goldencity@hotmail.com; rooftop Rs 25, r Rs 145-525; 🕒 🍷 🍴) Off Gadi Sagar Rd, this busy hotel feels like a budget big spender, with modern rooms, balconies and satellite TV. The ice-cold pool (nonguests Rs 100) is surrounded by potted plants and has a prime party feel. Requests to take a camel safari can be quite persistent.

**Hotel Swastika** (Map p244; ☎ 252483; s/d from Rs 80/120) The yogic swastika spirals upwards towards subtle wisdom, and the kindly management here will slip in a few pearls with your complimentary morning tea. This place is well run and clean, and the only hassle you'll get is to relax. Rooms are simple and unfussy; some have balconies.

**Hotel Fort View** (Map p245; ☎ 252214; r Rs 100-300) This stalwart of the Jaisalmer budget scene can expect increased trade due to its namesake and its conscientious location outside the fort entrance. The best room has a fabulous fort view and balcony, and though the rest are tiny and show signs of their early-'80s construction, they still squeeze in bathrooms.

**Hotel Ratan Palace** (Map p244; ☎ 253615; s/d Rs 150/300) Run by the same family as Hotel Renuka (below) with the same friendly approach, this place is a better bet, with large, bright rooms.

**Hotel Renuka** (Map p244; ☎ 252757; hotelrenuka@rediffmail.com; r Rs 150-350) Spread over three floors, Renuka has 12 squeaky clean, slightly murky rooms with interesting photos on the walls – the best rooms have balconies and bathrooms. It's been open since 1988, so management knows its stuff, warmly accommodating guests without the camel-safari grief. The roof terrace has great fort views and a so-so restaurant.

**Hotel Shree Giriraj Palace** (Map p245; ☎ 252268; r Rs 200-350) This hotel has cheerful rooms in an old building, though it remains a little overpriced.

## JAISALMER CAMEL SAFARIS

Trekking around Jaisalmer by camel is the most evocative and fun way to sample desert life. The best time to go is from October to February.

### Before You Go

Competition between safari organisers is cut-throat and standards vary. Hotels don't have their own camels – they're independently owned – so hoteliers and travel agencies are just go-betweens.

Beware of operators who claim they run (and charge for) three-day safaris, when you actually return after breakfast on the third day – hardly value for money.

The realistic minimum price for a safari is about Rs 450 to 500 per person per day. For this you can expect breakfast of porridge, tea and toast, and lunch and dinner of rice, dhal (curry made from lentils or other pulses) and chapati (unleavened Indian bread). Blankets are also supplied. You must bring your own mineral water. Of course, you can pay for greater levels of comfort: tents, stretcher beds, better food, beer etc – but take care, because some travellers have paid extra for promised upgrades only to find out afterwards their safari was much the same as people who paid less.

Take care of your possessions, particularly on the return journey. Any complaints you do have should be reported, either to the **Superintendent of Police** (Map p244; ☎ 252233) or the **Tourist Reception Centre** (Map p244; ☎ 252406; Gadi Sagar Rd; 🕒 10am-5pm).

### What to Take

Women should consider wearing a sports bra, as a trotting camel is a bumpy ride. A wide-brimmed hat (or *Lawrence of Arabia* turban), long trousers, toilet paper, sunscreen and a water bottle (with a strap) are also recommended. 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. Snakes have been spotted, so it's worth wearing thick socks.

### Which Safari?

Several independent agencies have been recommended. **Ganesh Travels** (Map p245; ☎ 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 p245; ☎ 252609), by the First Fort Gate, gets good reviews, and is run by Mr Bissa, alias Mr Desert – he graces lots of Rajasthan Tourism posters.

**Hotel Green** (☎ 252502; Dhibba Para; hotelgreen@hotmail.com; r Rs 200-800; 🍷) Run by the same crowd as Golden City (guests here can use the Golden City swimming pool), this modern hotel has depressing corridors, but bargain rooms with swish toilets, attentive service, and bouncy beds.

**Artist's Hotel** (Map p244; ☎ 251498; artisthotel@yahoo.com; Artist Colony, Suly Dungri; r Rs 300) Get a feel-good night's rest at this Austrian-owned establishment, which helps local musicians with school fees and emergency money. The three-storey building above a bustling artists colony gives you a taste of village life, plus there are great views of the fort from the roof (where there are regular concerts). Rooms are comfortable, and staff are keen.

**Residency Centrepoint Paying Guest House** (Map p244; ☎ /fax 252883; s/d Rs 400/450) Near the Patwarki-Haveli, this friendly, family-run guesthouse

has clean, spacious doubles. Room 101 has a lovely antique balcony, and the rooftop has superb fort views.

### MIDRANGE

**Fifu Guest House** (☎ 252656; http://fifutravel.com; Bera Rd; d Rs 500-700) Spruced up to the nines in 2006, and loaded with high-powered AC and professional attitude, this thriving business (the owners also run a travel agency and another guesthouse in Khuri) gets mixed reports. The bright sandstone rooms afford a pleasant stay though, and the rooftop has tremendous fort views. Almost ideal if there were no such things as camel safaris, it's also a little out of town, so be careful walking home at night.

**Shahi Palace** (Map p244; ☎ 255920; www.shahipalacehotel.com; Shiv Rd; r Rs 500-1500; 🍷 🍷) Shahi Palace has lovely rooms with window seats, sand-

**Satyam Tours** (Map p244; ☎ 250773; ummedsatyam@yahoo.com; Gandhi Chowk) and **Thar Safari** (Map p244; ☎ /fax 252722; 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.

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 that is sprinkled with villages and ruins. You will often come across tiny fields of millet, and children herding flocks of sheep or goats, whose neckbells tinkle in the desert silence – a welcome change from the sound of farting camels.

Camping out at night, huddling around a tiny fire beneath the shed of 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 (tea) or prepare food. The whole crew rests in the shade of thorn trees.

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

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

The traditional circuit takes in **Amar Sagar** (admission Rs 10, camera/video Rs 50/100), where there's a garden, dried-up step-wells and a Jain Temple; the deserted ruins of **Lodhruva** (p251); **Mool Sagar** (admission Rs 5), a run-down oasis with a Shiva Temple; **Bada Bagh** (admission Rs 20, camera/video Rs 20/20), a fertile oasis with a huge old dam and startling sandstone-sculpted royal *chhatris* with beautifully carved ceilings; and the dunes of **Sam** (p251), as well as various abandoned villages along the way.

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; don't neglect to give them one.

stone walls, and carved stone or wooden beds, though management seems to have rested on past rave reviews. The elegant rooftop has a fantastic fort view and acceptable food.

**Hotel Jaisal Palace** (Map p244; ☎ 252717; hotel.jaisalpalace@yahoo.com; s/d from Rs 600/800; 🍽️ 🚿) Near the Nachana Haveli is this clean, well-run place with smallish rooms. Those on the south side have fort-facing balconies.

**Mandir Palace Hotel** (Map p244; ☎ 252788; mandirpalace@hotmail.com; Gandhi Chowk; r Rs 1500-2000; 🍽️) Just inside the town walls is this royal palace; the restored rooms are atmospheric and fabulous value. Avoid the new additions though, and service is very basic.

**Hotel Nachana Haveli** (Map p244; ☎ 252538; nachana\_haveli@yahoo.com; Gandhi Chowk; d Rs 1950-2700; 🍽️) This 280-year-old *haveli*-cum-hotel is a winner. Comfortable, sandstone rooms have curved ceilings, and some have bathtubs. The

fireless camp courtyard comes with all the Rajput trimmings, including swing chairs and bearskin rugs.

### TOP END

**Jawahar Niwas Palace** (Map p244; ☎ 252208; s/d Rs 2225/3300; 🍽️ 🚿) Like a ghostly mirage, this forlorn beauty stands 1km west of the fort in an abandoned quarry. Rooms are elegant and spacious though, with plenty of room to plan full-on fort assaults. Those upstairs at the front have the best (if distant) fort views. There's another fabulous pool.

**Rang Mahal** (☎ 250907; www.hotelrangmahal.com; s/d from Rs 3000/3500, ste Rs 5500-9000; 🍽️ 🚿) Heading west along Sam Rd, you'll find this impressive hotel with big bastions and divine suites. There's a spectacular pool (nonguests Rs 200) and an excellent restaurant. Rooms with a fort-facing veranda are the best.

**Hotel Killa Bhawan** (☎ 251204; www.killabhawan.com; 445 Kotri Para; r US\$62-140; 🏠) Built into the fort walls and presented like a *World of Interiors* documentary, this good-value place just passes the conscience test. It's beautifully decorated and romantic with wooden furniture, dazzling bright silks and wall hangings. The cheaper rooms don't have private bathrooms but are still luxurious. It's worth it just for the sunsets.

**Heritage Inn** (☎ 250901; hhjisl\_jp1@sancharnet.in; 4 Hotel Complex, Sam Rd; s/d/ste Rs 3500/4500/7000; 🏠) On the high-end hotel strip, this place is sparsely staffed but relaxing, with 40 garden-facing cottages. There's a first-rate Ayurvedic service and a sparkling pool.

**Fort Rajwada** (☎ 253233; r Rs 3900-5450, ste Rs 9500-12000; 🏠 🏠) This is a modern place built according to the ancient Indian design principles of Vaastu – something like feng shui. All materials in the hotel are natural. An opera designer created the traditional interior, so it's suitably dramatic.

**Gorbandh Palace Hotel** (☎ 253801; crs@udaipur.hrhindia.com; Sam Rd; d/ste Rs 5000/7000; 🏠 🏠) This grandiose modern hotel is great top-end value, blissfully quiet and particularly good for families. It's constructed from local sandstone, and the friezes around the hotel were sculpted by local artisans. There's a superb pool (non-guests Rs 200), and the excellent breakfast makes you want to go to bed early.

## Eating

### RESTAURANTS

**Chandan Shree Restaurant** (Map p244; Hanuman Chowk; dishes Rs 15-70, thalis Rs 40) Always busy – and rightfully so – this is a popular dining hall churning out tasty, spicy all-you-can-eat Gujarati, Rajasthani, Punjabi and Bengali thalis.

**Kebab Corner** (Map p244; Hanuman Chowk; dishes Rs 30-140) Specialising in tandoori dishes, this has some great veg and nonveg sizzling dishes. The location is a surprisingly peaceful tent by a busy junction. The personable chef has been getting it right for some time now.

**Sharma Lodge** (Map p244; Gandhi Chowk; thali Rs 35; ☎ 5.30am-10.30pm) This place is a simple eatery offering equally simple thalis.

**Desert Boy's Dhani** (Map p244; Seemagram Campus; dishes Rs 35-100; ☎ 11am-4pm & 6.30-11pm) This is a popular, garden restaurant in an enclosed setting, with a choice of floor seating or tables. It serves yummy, good-value veg dishes.

**Natraj Restaurant** (Map p244; dishes Rs 40-70) 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.

**Saffron** (Map p244; dishes Rs 40-140; ☎ 7am-3pm & 7-10.30pm) Run by the same family in charge of Nanchana Haveli, the veg and nonveg food here is superb, plus it has a great setting on a sandstone terrace overlooking Gandhi Chowk.

**Trio** (Map p244; ☎ 252733; Gandhi Chowk; dishes Rs 40-190; ☎ noon-3pm & 6.30-10.30pm) This upmarket Indian and Continental restaurant with a romantic setting under a tented roof is still the pick of Jaisalmer. There's reliably good veg and nonveg dishes, musicians play in the evening and there's a great fort view. Flies don't mind it either.

### QUICK EATS

**Dhanraj Bhatia Sweets** (Map p244; Sadar Bazaar; sweets Rs 5) This place in Bhatia Market has been churning out traditional sweet treats for 10 generations. It is renowned in Jaisalmer and beyond for its local specialities, such as *ghotua ladoos* (sweetmeat balls made with gram flour) and *panchadhari ladoos* (sweetmeat balls made with wheat flour) for Rs 5 each.

**Mohan Juice Centre** (Map p244; lassis Rs 7-20) At Bhatia Market, this has a little sitting area at the back and sells assorted interesting lassis, such as honey and *makhania*. It's a good place to hang out and meet other travellers.

**Bhang Shop** (Map p245; medium/strong lassis Rs 30/35) Bhang cookies, cakes and sweets are all sold here – some deceptively strong. Advance notice is not necessary, though it's appreciated, especially if you want tailor-made 'safari packs'. Bhang does not agree with everyone – see p1140.

## Shopping

Jaisalmer has a particularly stunning array of mirrorwork wall hangings, and it's 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.

There are several good *khadi* (homespun cloth) shops around town selling fixed-price carpets, shawls, and woven garments, including Zila Khadi Gramodan Parishad (Map p244), **Khadi Gramodyog Bhavan** (Seemagram; Map p244; Dhibbar; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) and **Gandhi Darshan Emporium** (Map p244; Gandhi Chowk; ☎ 11am-7pm Fri-Wed). You can also pop into **Rajasthali** (Map p244; Gandhi Chowk; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) to check out prices.



**Hari Om** (☎ 255122; 275 Taloti Vyaspara) is a silversmith who makes beautiful, delicate silver rings and bracelets featuring places and Hindu gods. Visitors have commissioned personalised wedding rings here. There's a shop inside the fort (Map p245), or you can visit the home address listed here.

## Getting There & Away

All foreign visitors to Jaisalmer must now pay a tourist tax of Rs 20. It can be threateningly enforced upon newcomers arriving by bus or train, so be sure you pay the right person.

### AIR

The airport has been closed for some years, due to border tensions with Pakistan. If it reopens, the agent for Indian Airlines is **Crown Tours** (Map p244; ☎/fax 251912), about 350m west of Amar Sagar Gate.

### BUS

The **main Roadways bus stand** (Map p244; ☎ 251541) is near the train station. Fortunately, all buses start at a more convenient bus stand (Map p244) southwest of the fort. Private buses leave from Airforce Circle.

There are buses to Jodhpur (express/deluxe Rs 60/135, 5½ hours, hourly), Bikaner (express Rs 142, seven hours, four daily), Jaipur (deluxe Rs 194, 12 hours, one daily) and Ajmer (Rs 180, 12 hours).

You can book private buses through most travel agencies – if you can't get a ticket, check with a few agencies, as sometimes people will tell you a bus is full when it's not. Destinations include Bikaner (local/deluxe Rs 110/130), Jaipur (Rs 180/190), Jodhpur (local/deluxe/sleeper Rs 70/90/110), Mt Abu (local/deluxe Rs 220/240) and Ahmedabad (deluxe/sleeper Rs 200/300). Be aware that most private buses (except those going to Bikaner) require a change at Jodhpur. 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 **train reservation office** (Map p244; ☎ 8am–8pm) at the station.

There are numerous trains to/from Jodhpur, including the *Jodhpur–Jaisalmer Express* (No 4809), which leaves Jaisalmer at 11.15pm, arriving in Jodhpur at 5.15am (sleeper/3AC Rs 157/411, 294km). The return trip (No 4810)

leaves Jodhpur at 11.15pm and arrives in Jaisalmer at 5.15am. The *Jaisalmer Delhi Express* (No 4060) leaves at 4.15pm, calls at Jodhpur at 10pm (2nd class/chair Rs 97/322), Jaipur at 5.15am (sleeper/3AC Rs 256/690, 313km) and Delhi at 10.43am (sleeper/3AC Rs 322/877, 623km). The other way, the train (No 4059) leaves Delhi at 6.15pm and arrives in Jaisalmer 19 hours later.

A new train service to Bikaner should have opened by the time of publication.

## Getting Around

### AUTORICKSHAW

An autorickshaw to Gadi Sagar costs about Rs 30 one way from the fort entrance.

### BICYCLE

A good way to get around is by bicycle. There are a number of hire places, including one near Gandhi Chowk (Rs 5/30 per hour/day).

### JEEP

It's possible to hire jeeps from the stand on Gandhi Chowk. To Khuri or the Sam sand dunes expect to pay Rs 550 return with a one-hour wait. For Lodhrva you'll pay Rs 300 return with a one-hour stop. To cut the cost, find other people to share with (maximum of five people per jeep).

## AROUND JAISALMER

### Lodhrva

About 15km northwest of Jaisalmer the deserted ruins of Lodhrva, the ancient capital before the move to Jaisalmer. The **Jain temples**, rebuilt in the late 1970s, are sole reminders of the city's former magnificence. The **main temple** (admission Rs 10, camera/video Rs 50/100; ☎ 6am–8pm) enshrines a finely wrought silver image of Parasnath, the 23rd *tirthankar*. Apparently a cobra lives in the complex. There are three buses daily from Jaisalmer to Lodhrva (Rs 5, 20 minutes).

### Sam Sand Dunes

A **desert national park** (admission Rs 3, jeep Rs 5) has been established in the Great Thar Desert near Sam village. One of the most popular excursions is to the sand dunes on the edge of the park, 42km from Jaisalmer along an excellent sealed road (maintained by the Indian army).

This is Jaisalmer's Sahara-like desert, with huge, silky, undulating folds of sand. It's best

to be here at sunrise or sunset, and many camel safaris spend a night at the **dunes**. This place has become a massive tourist attraction, so don't count on a solitary desert sunset experience. Nonetheless, it's still possible to frame pictures of solitary camels against lonely dunes.

One tragic consequence of dune-hungry hordes is the debris and rubbish lying around. Please don't contribute to this problem.

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

### Khuri

☎ 03014

Khuri is a small village 40km southwest of Jaisalmer – an hour and a world away from the fort's swarming trade. Khuri has its own desert sand dunes, and remains a peaceful place (apart from during holiday periods, as it's popular with Indian holidaymakers), with houses of mud and straw decorated like the patterns on Persian carpets. There are plenty of camps of mud huts, and camel drivers eager to take you on the dunes, but no shop-lined streets or pancake restaurants. Once the excitement of sunset is over, you have desert solitude and the brilliant star-studded sky at night to look forward to.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Places to stay in Khuri are basic, fanless thatched mud huts with wall paintings, set around a campfire area. All places listed here provide meals and arrange camel safaris.

**Badal House** (☎ 274120; per person huts/r with shared bathroom incl half board Rs 300/300) Here you can stay in a family compound with a few charming small huts and freshly painted rooms. Badal Singh is a lovely, gentle man who charges Rs 500 for a camel safari with a night on the dunes. Don't let touts warn you off.

**Mama's Guest House** (☎ 274042; gajendra\_sodha2003@yahoo.com; per person hut with shared bathroom incl half-board Rs 400) This is a long-running place with a circle of whitewashed, cosy huts. A basic/luxurious overnight camel safari costs Rs 650/900.

**Gangaur Guest House** (☎ 274056; hameersingh@yahoo.com; per person huts with shared/private bathroom Rs 300/400) This is a small place with yet another circle of snug huts; it's closest to the dunes. It offers packages including a camel ride, dinner with traditional dance entertainment, and breakfast for Rs 650.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are several buses to Khuri from Jaisalmer (Rs 25, one hour).

### Barmer

☎ 02982 / pop 83,517

One-hundred-and-fifty-three kilometres south of Jaisalmer, Barmer is famed for wood-carving, carpets, embroidery, block printing and other handicrafts. 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, stunned by dramatic floods in 2006, has little for the visitor.

In March, Barmer holds the **Thar Festival**; there's also a large **cattle fair** around the same time (see p166 for details).

**Hotel Krishna** (☎ 220785; s/d with shared bathroom from Rs 110/200, r with private bathroom Rs 200-500; ♿), on the main street leading from the train station, is friendly and has acceptably clean rooms.

From Barmer there are frequent buses to/from Jaisalmer (Rs 65, 2½ hours) and Jodhpur (Rs 86, four hours). The train station picks up the *Thar Express* (No 4889) from Jodhpur to Khokarpar (Pakistan border) at 3am on Sunday mornings.

### Pokaran

The colour of dusty berries and located at the junction of the Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Bikaner roads, 110km from Jaisalmer, **Pokaran Fort** (admission Rs 50, camera/video Rs 30/30; ♿ 7am-7pm) is an aura-inducing red-sandstone palace that shelters a tangle of narrow streets lined by balconied houses. It dates from the 14th to 17th centuries and once had charge of 108 villages; part of it is now a colourfully restored **heritage hotel** (☎ 02994-222274; www.fortpokaran.com; s/d from Rs 1700/2100). There's not much to see here, but a stop breaks the journey between Jodhpur and Jaisalmer.

It was in Pokaran in May 1998 that India detonated five nuclear devices, leaving a huge crater that's strictly off limits.

Buses run frequently to Jaisalmer (2½ hours, Rs 35) and also Jodhpur for a similar price.

### BIKANER

☎ 0151 / pop 529,007

Bikaner is a vibrant, dust-swirling desert town with a fabulous fort, a refreshing outpost feel and a burgeoning tourist trade. Close to the fort lies the rickety old walled

city, a medieval maze of narrow, dark and uneven streets decorated with rubbish heaps, medicine men, gambling dens, dark-red sandstone *havelis* and some exquisitely painted Jain temples.

Bikaner 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. When the British arrived centuries later, the state of Bikaner exchanged its finest camels for its freedom.

Camel safaris continue to grow in popularity here, as travellers chase the silken darkness of a desert dawn without the hassle of Jaisalmer. Many travellers also come to visit the notorious Karni Mata Temple in Deshnok, 30km south, where pilgrims worship thousands of holy rats, or Kolayat, 54km south, a temple town where sadhus (spiritual men) swim in rubber tyres.

There's a **camel festival** (p166) in January.

## Orientation & Information

The old city is encircled by a 7km-long, 18th-century city wall with five entrance gates. The fort is northeast, outside the walls.

There are several ATMs, including a Corporation Bank ATM opposite the fort.

Try [www.realbikaner.com](http://www.realbikaner.com) for information about the city.

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

**New Horizons** (Biscuit Gali; per hr Rs 20; 🕒 8am-9pm) Off Station Rd; internet access.

**Reliance Webworld** (Station Rd; per hr Rs 20; 🕒 10am-7pm) Internet access.

**State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur** Ambedkar Circle (☎ 2544361; 🕒 noon-4pm Mon-Sat); Public Park

(☎ 2544034; 🕒 10am-2pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat) You can change cash and travellers cheques here.

**Tourist Reception Centre** (☎ 2226701; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat)

**UCICI** (Station Rd) ATM.

## Sights & Activities

### JUNAGARH

Constructed between 1588 and 1593 by Raja Rai Singh – a general in the army of the Mughal emperor Akbar – this most impressive **fort** (adult/child Rs 100/50, camera/video Rs 30/100; 🕒 10am-4.30pm) has a 986m-long wall with 37 bastions, a moat and two entrances. The **Surajpol** (Sun Gate) is the main entrance to the fort. The palaces within the fort are on the southern side, and make a picturesque ensemble of courtyards, balconies, kiosks, towers and windows.

It's the interiors that make the fort stand out. Highlights include the **Diwan-i-Khas**, the **Phool Mahal** (Flower Palace), which is decorated with paintings and carved marble panels, the **Hawa Mahal**, the **Badal Mahal** and the **Anup Mahal**.

A compulsory guide is included in the admission price. To visit at a leisurely pace, ask for your own guide – larger groups rush around. The **fort museum** (admission Rs 25, camera Rs 20; 🕒 9am-6pm) is fascinating and well labelled, with over-the-top costumes, jewellery and a rare glimpse of everyday paraphernalia.

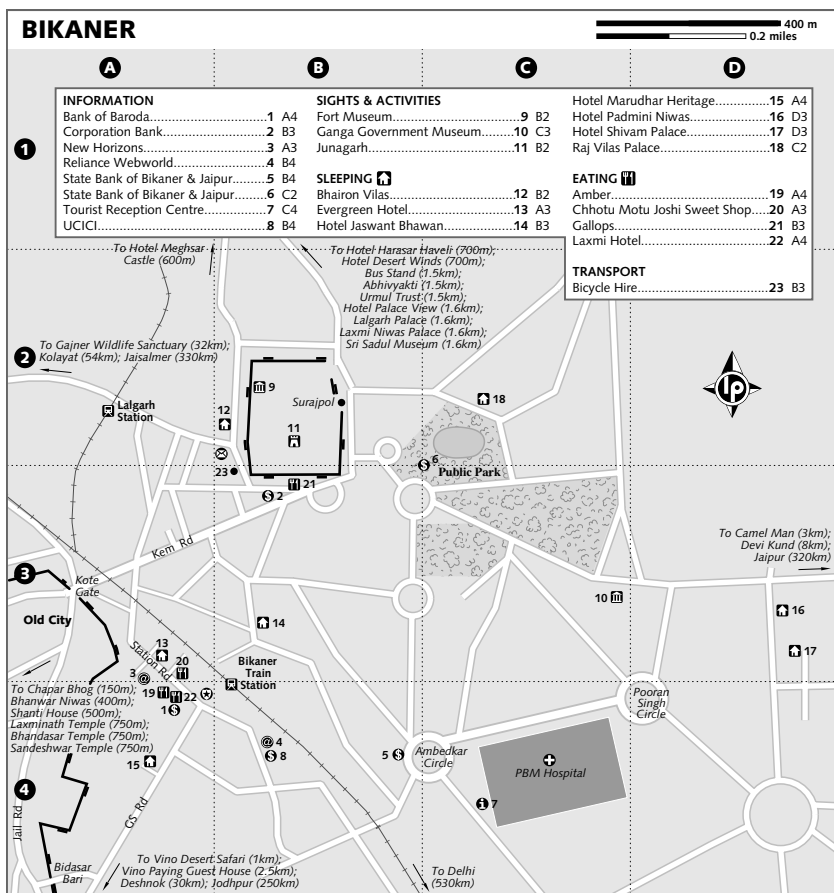
### LALGARH PALACE

Set about 3km north of the centre, the red-sandstone **Lalgargh Palace** (admission Rs 5, 🕒 10am-4.30pm, Wed closed) was built by Maharaja Ganga Singh (1881–1942) in memory of his father Maharaja Lal Singh. It's out-and-out grandeur, with overhanging balconies and delicate

## BIKANER CAMEL SAFARIS

Bikaner is an excellent, offbeat alternative to the Jaisalmer safari scene and is becoming increasingly popular with travellers. There are fewer organisations running safaris here, so the hassle factor is quite low. Here the safari tends to involve more travel in a camel cart – less tiring but also less fun. There are fewer sights than around Jaisalmer, but it's great if you want to ride in empty desert scrub, sleep on dunes and see life in desert villages. Longer safaris (to Jaisalmer or Jodhpur) are highly recommended.

Recommended operators are **Vino Desert Safari** (☎ 2270445; [vino\\_desertsafari@yahoo.com](mailto:vino_desertsafari@yahoo.com)), which offers half-day to 13-day trips (Rs 500 to 800 daily, depending on how much luxury you require and how much you use a jeep); and **Camel Man** (☎ 2231244; [www.camelman.com](http://www.camelman.com)), run by Vijay Singh Rathore, which operates safaris ranging from a half-day trip to 14 days (all the way to Jaisalmer), with basic safaris costing Rs 550 per day, and more upmarket excursions (beds with sheets are provided!) costing from Rs 800 to 1100 per day.



lattice-work. The 1st floor contains the **Sri Sadul Museum** (Indian/foreigner Rs 10/20, camera/video Rs 20/50; 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) with lots of fascinating old black-and-white photographs and some evocative maharaja accessories. In front of the palace is a carriage from the maharaja's royal train. You can stay in the palace (see opposite for details).

### OTHER SIGHTS

The narrow streets of the old city conceal a number of old *havelis* and a couple of notable **Jain temples**. The temples date from around the 15th century. **Bhandasar Temple** is particularly beautiful, with yellow-stone carving and dizzyingly vibrant paintings. It's said the foundations contain 40,000kg of ghee, and the floor

still gets greasy in summer. **Sandeshwar Temple** is smaller, but has some fine carving. Nearby, the unassuming **Laxminath Temple** comes alive at around 10.30pm each night.

The **Ganga Government Museum** (admission Rs 3, Mon free; 9.30am-5pm Sat-Thu) houses a well-displayed, interesting collection of sculptures, handicrafts, musical instruments and gold paintings by Usta artisans. Entrance is to the back left of the building.

Eight kilometres north at Jorbeer, you'll find the **Camel Research Institute** (admission free). Between 4.30pm and 5pm, you can watch a cavalcade of camels returning, in biblical fashion, to their enclosure after a day's grazing. A small shop sells the usual knick-knacks, including jootis of camel hide.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

The cheapest budget options are along horrendously noisy Station Rd. The better budget options are to the north or south of town.

**Vino Paying Guest House** (☎ 2270445; vino\_desert\_safari@yahoo.com; Gangasharhar Rd; s/d from Rs 100/200, huts Rs 300) Three kilometres south of town, this is a homy choice in a family house. Rooms are superb value, and the new garden huts are cool and comfy. Vinod runs excellent safaris, and is developing a farm stay with a swimming pool; he's also the go-to-guy for information on the surrounding villages.

**Evergreen Hotel** (☎ 2542061; Station Rd; r Rs 175-250) The green-tiled rooms are fine, but they can be noisy and some are musty. There's a restaurant downstairs.

**Shanti House** (☎ 2543306; ML Modi, New Well; r Rs 200) This is a cool little *haveli* inside the old city, behind the Jain school, with three bargain rooms on a narrow staircase, all brightly decorated, and the bustle of Bikaner at your doorstep. Owner Gouri is a trustworthy local guide.

**Hotel Marudhar Heritage** (☎ 2522524; hmheritage\_2000@yahoo.co.in; G5 Rd; s Rs 250-900, d Rs 350-999; 🚗 🚶) A short walk from the train station, this friendly choice is well kept and well run, with rooms to suit most budgets. Rooms are plain, comfortable and good value, and are popular with locals. There are nice views from the roof, but meals are served in your room.

**Hotel Harasar Haveli** (☎ 2209891; Sadul Ganj; r Rs 200-1500) Harasar is still the premier budget choice in Bikaner, and a great place to meet other travellers. The deluxe rooms are worth the added expense, and there's a beautiful rooftop restaurant. Be patient with pleas to take a camel safari, and don't worry about getting lost – it's a favourite with the rickshaw drivers.

### MIDRANGE

**Hotel Palace View** (☎ 2543625; opnain\_jp1@sancharnet.in; Lalgarh Palace Campus; s Rs 300-650, d Rs 450-800) This hotel near Lalgarh Palace is extraordinarily clean, and the hosts take great pride in satisfying their guests. The food is hit and miss, but this place still makes for a wise midrange choice.

**Hotel Meghsar Castle** (☎ 2527315; www.hotelmeghsarcastle.com; 9 Gajner Rd; r Rs 300-800; 🚗 🚶) North of town, this hotel has clean, old-fashioned rooms with subdued tiling, some echoingly

large. The front rooms can cop a bit of traffic noise. It's a well-run place, with meals available in the garden.

**Hotel Shivam Palace** (☎ 2203112; www.hotelshivampalace.com; 1-69 Sadul Ganj; r Rs 300-1500) With exceptional management, this hotel has a range of spotless rooms, as well as the best Western restaurant in town. Guests receive complimentary toiletries bags. It's popular with groups, so book ahead.

**Hotel Padmini Niwas** (☎ 2522794; 148 Sadul Ganj; s/d from Rs 450/750; 🚗 🚶) A fabulous place to unwind from the rush of the city, this hotel has clean, pleasant rooms, and a chilled-out, helpful owner. The lawn area is a revelation, with the town's only outdoor pool (nonguests Rs 100).

**Bhairon Vilas** (☎ /fax 2544751; hbhairon@rediffmail.com; r Rs 600-1200) This hotel is run by the former Bikaner prime minister's great-grandson Harsh Singh, and his grandfather's stately residence is a fine place to stay. Rooms are eclectically decorated with antique clothes, bearskins and old family photographs.

**Hotel Jaswant Bhawan** (☎ /fax 2548848; jash\_want@sanchar.web; r Rs 700-1200; 🚶) Quiet, with a small garden, this is an agreeable, welcoming place. The pricier rooms are spacious and airy, and the food is first rate.

**Hotel Desert Winds** (☎ 2542202; s/d Rs 900/1100) Next door to Harasar Haveli, this venture has clummy but spacious rooms, and a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. It's run by a retired director of Rajasthan Tourism.

### TOP END

**Raj Vilas Palace** (☎ 2525901; rajvilas@sancharnet.in; Public Park; s/d from Rs 2050/3700; 🚗 🚶) This former residence of the governor general is the latest luxury addition to Bikaner. It has friendly staff, and a real red-carpet feel. The rooms are centrally air-conditioned, though most are fairly businesslike. The rooftop restaurant has the best views in the city.

**Bhanwar Niwas** (☎ 2529323; www.bhanwarniwas.com; s/d Rs 3000/4000; 🚗 🚶) This superb hotel in the beautiful Rampuri Haveli, near the *kotwali* (police station) in the old city, has large, solemnly decorated rooms, with hand-painted wallpaper, arranged around an internal courtyard.

**Lalgarh Palace** (☎ 2540201; www.lalgarhpalace.com; s/d from Rs 3500/4000; 🚗 🚶) This hotel is part of the maharaja's palace (p253), dating from 1902, and has well-appointed, old-fashioned rooms

around a courtyard – pricier ones are huge, with high ceilings. There's an indoor pool (Rs 250 per hour for nonguests). You can even stay in the royal train carriage (Rs 2000).

**Laxmi Niwas Palace** (☎ 2202777; s/d/ste Rs 4500/5500/8000; 🍴) Beside Lalgarh Palace, this is a beautifully restored building with some exquisite carving. Rooms are enormous, elegant and evocative, and there's a charming restaurant (see below).

## Eating RESTAURANTS

**Amber** (Station Rd; dishes Rs 40-95; 🕒 10am-3pm & 6-10pm) With brown walls and mirrors, and a staid, no-nonsense look, Amber is well thought of and popular for veg fare.

**Laxmi Hotel** (Station Rd; dishes Rs 15-40) This is a simple place, open to the street, with tasty, fresh vegetarian dishes – you can see the roti (unleavened bread) being flipped in front of you. The two places on either side are pretty good too.

**Laxmi Niwas Palace** (Laxmi Niwas Palace; dishes Rs 15-40) A lovely place to eat, this is an excellent garden restaurant, with music in the evenings. It has different prices for Indians and foreigners.

**Chapan Bhog** (Rani Bazaar; dishes Rs 20-70) This spot dishes out top-notch vegetarian fare at very affordable prices. Squeaky clean, but some of the ambience got rubbed off by the sponge.

**Gallops** (☎ 3200833; dishes Rs 30-150) This is a spiffy air-conditioned café brewing all kinds of imported beans (short black Rs 30). It has a camel-leather-clad lounge area with big windows, and is popular for dinner, especially among the dating set.

## QUICK EATS

Bikaner is noted for the *namkin* (spicy nibbles) sold along Station Rd, among other places.

**Chhotu Motu Joshi Sweet Shop** (Station Rd; sweets Rs 3-50) This is Bikaner's most loved sweet stop, with an assortment of Indian treats. Try the milk sweet *ras malai* (cottage cheese dumplings; Rs 12) and saffron *kesar cham cham* (milk, sugar and saffron flavoured sweet; Rs 6 for two).

**Kwality** (Station Rd; ice creams Rs 10-15) Kwality has quality 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 help to fund a girls' college. Take care, as rickshaw drivers and touts have taken visitors to other, commercial shops, claiming them to be run by the Urmul Trust. The Urmul Trust welcomes volunteers (see p1159).

## Getting There & Away BUS

The bus stand is 3km north of the centre, almost opposite the road leading to Lalgarh Palace. If your bus is coming from the south, ask the driver to let you out closer to the centre. There are express buses to various places, including Udaipur (Rs 242, 12 hours, 6.30pm), Ajmer (Rs 127, seven hours, 15 daily), Jaipur (via Fatehpur and Sikar; Rs 135, seven hours, 15 daily), Jodhpur (Rs 119, 5½ hours, 15 daily) and Jaisalmer (Rs 130, eight hours, three daily), Agra (Rs 227, 12 hours, 5am). There are also buses to Delhi (ordinary/express Rs 190/207, 11/10 hours, six daily), some of which run via Jhunjhunu (Rs 77, five hours, three daily).

Private buses make their way to Jaipur (express/sleeper Rs 100/150), Jodhpur (express/sleeper Rs 100/120), Udaipur (express/sleeper Rs 210/250), Mt Abu (express/sleeper Rs 260/280), Delhi (express/sleeper Rs 170/200), Agra (express/sleeper Rs 200/250) and Ajmer (express Rs 150).

## TRAIN

For a train to Jaipur there's the *Bikaner Howrah Superfast*, leaving at 3.55pm (sleeper/3AC Rs 201/510, seven hours, 175km) or the *Jaipur-Bikaner Express* (Nos 4737/8), departing at 9.45pm (sleeper/2AC Rs 158/731, 10¼ hours). The *Ranakpur Express* (No 4707) leaves for Jodhpur at 9.45am (sleeper Rs 148, five hours, 569km). To Delhi, the *Bikaner Mail* (No 4792) leaves at 7.50pm and arrives in the capital at 6am (sleeper/2AC Rs 200/827, 449km).

A train line to Jaisalmer is scheduled to open by the time of publication.

## Getting Around

An autorickshaw from the train station to the palace should cost Rs 30, but you'll probably be asked for more. Bicycles can be hired near Bhairon Vilas for Rs 30 a day.

## AROUND BIKANER

### Devi Kund

The marble and red-sandstone royal cenotaphs of the Bika dynasty rulers, with some fine frescoes, are 8km east of Bikaner. This peaceful spot is Rs 120 return by rickshaw.

### Deshnok

The extraordinary **Karni Mata Temple** ([www.karnimata.com](http://www.karnimata.com); admission free, camera/video Rs 20/50; ☎ 4am-10pm) at Deshnok, 30km south of Bikaner, is one of India's weirder temples. According to legend, Karni Mata, a 14th-century incarnation of Durga, asked the god of death, Yama, to restore to life the son of a grieving storyteller. When Yama refused, Karni Mata reincarnated all dead storytellers as rats, depriving Yama of human souls.

The mass of *kabas* (holy rodents) is not for the squeamish. It's considered auspicious if the rats scamper over your feet. Keep your eyes peeled for a rare white rat – it's good luck if you spot one.

The temple is an important pilgrimage site, so remove your shoes and be respectful. There are at least two buses hourly from Bikaner to Deshnok (Rs 12, 40 minutes). A taxi return costs Rs 450.

### Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary

Thirty-two kilometres along the road to Jaisalmer is this former hunting resort of Maha-

raja Ganga Singhji, spread over 6000 acres with its own private wildlife sanctuary – filled with black bucks, blue bulls, desert foxes and wild fowl – and stunning views across Lake Gajner. Purportedly the largest hotel in the world (but who's counting?), **Gajner Palace Hotel** (☎ 2528008; Tehsil Kolayat; r from Rs 3800) is, well, large. Rooms are elegantly restored – and reasonably priced – although service is a bit stiff in the neck. Nonguests can purchase an entry ticket (Rs 150 including soft drink), and sit on a terrace overlooking the lake.

### Kolayat

Set around a temple-ringed lake, Kolayat is a beautiful, small, untouristed town. Adding to its sleepy air are stoned sadhus emerging from temples and shrines around the lakes as if rehearsing for Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' video clip. **Kolayat Mela** (p166) is held in November.

There are a number of *dharamsalas* (pilgrims' guesthouses), but most won't accept tourists. **Bhaheti Dharamsala** (r with shared bathroom Rs 30), on the main ghat by the lakeside, is a good place. It has simple rooms (you'll need to rent a bed for Rs 5). Otherwise the town is a good day trip from Bikaner.

There are regular buses from Bikaner (Rs 20, 1½ hours), or there's a train from Lalgahar Station at 8.30am (Rs 18, 1½ hours), returning at 4pm.