

Telegraph magazine

A young orang-utan with reddish-brown fur is hanging from a tree branch in a lush green forest. The orang-utan is looking towards the camera with a thoughtful expression, resting its chin on its hand. The background is filled with vibrant green leaves and branches, creating a dense jungle atmosphere.

8 February 2016

TRAVEL ISSUE

Wild & wonderful

Tea with a maharaja
in Rajasthan

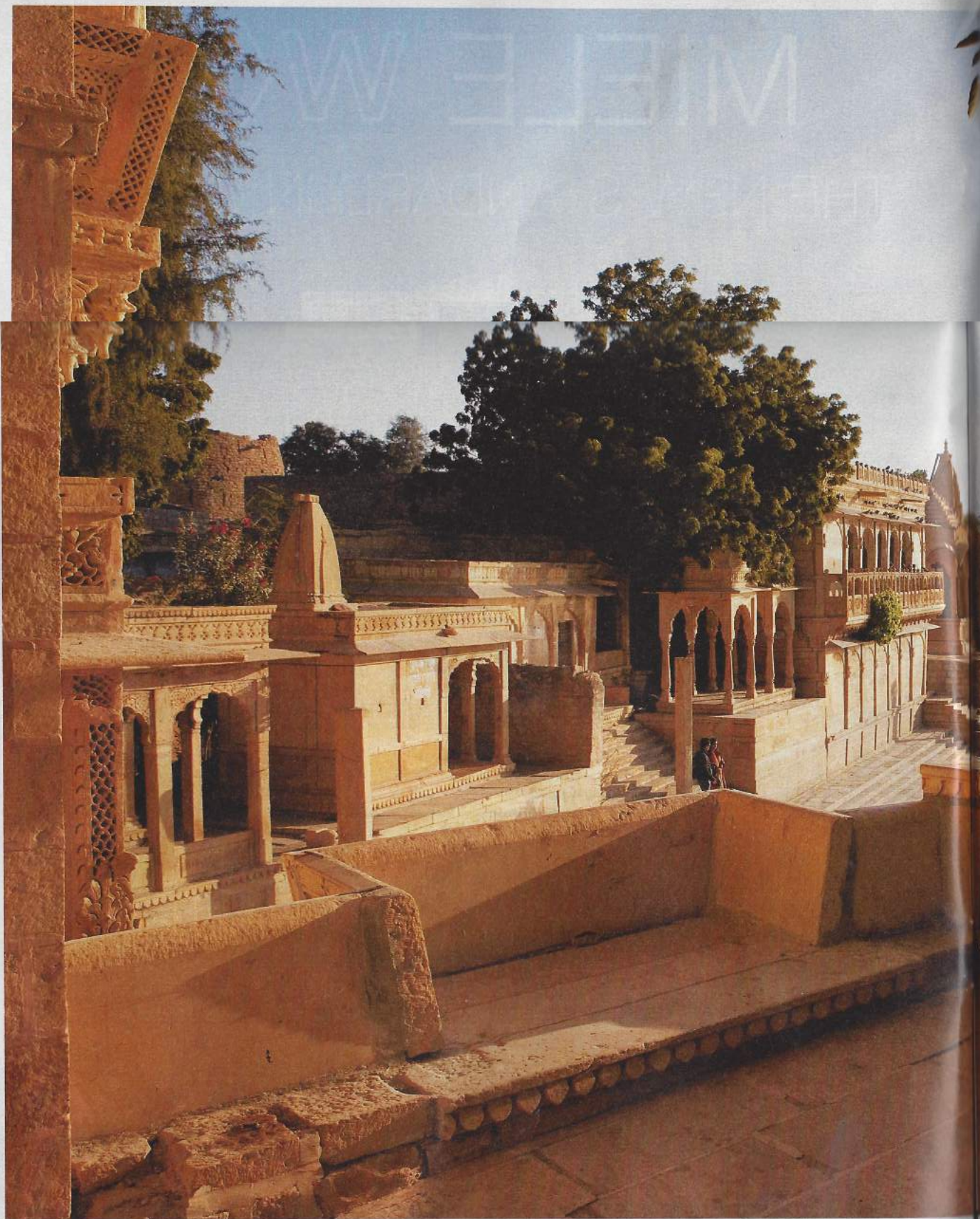
An edible golf course
in the Caribbean

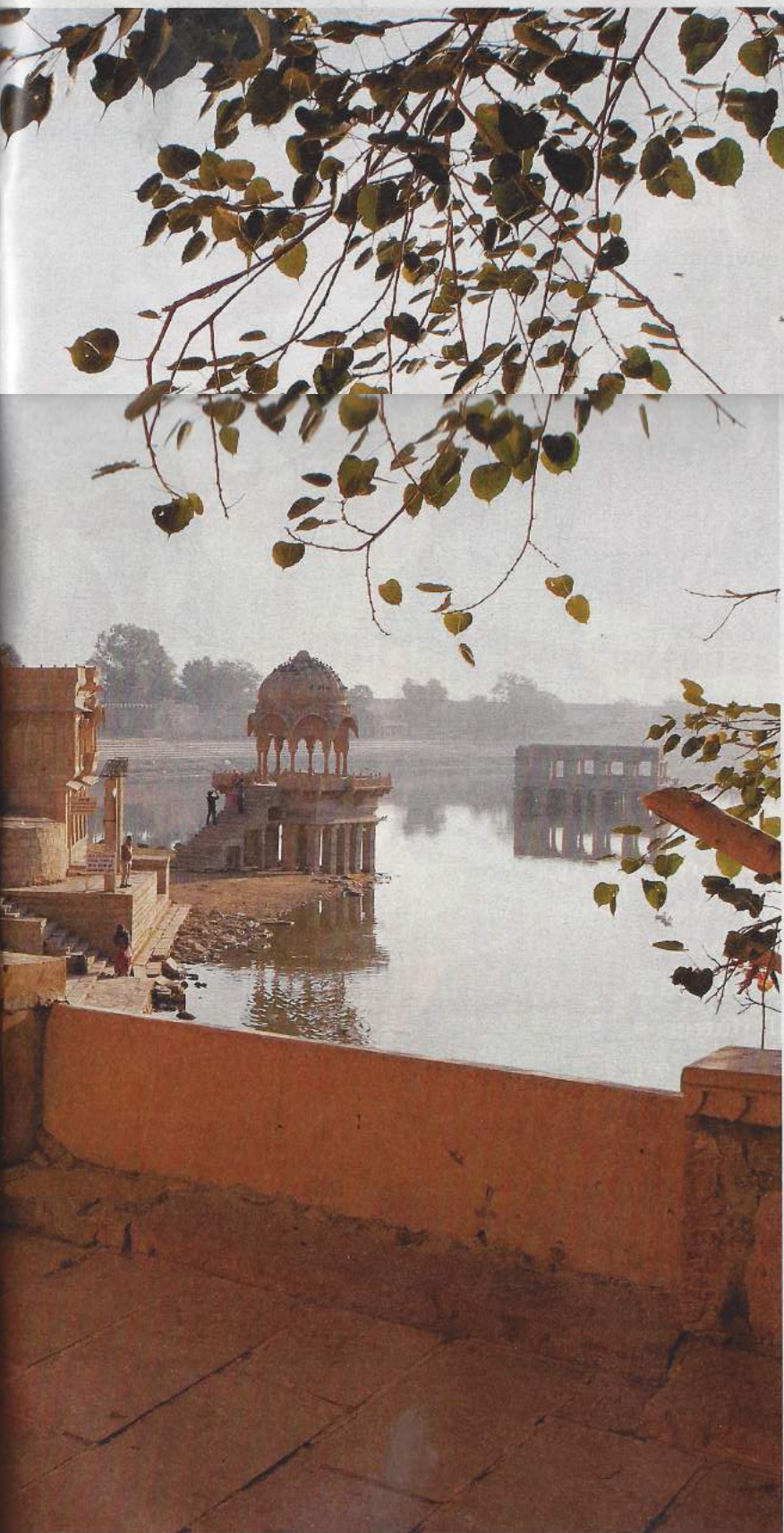
Exploring Jersey's
dark secrets

Snake-hunting
in rural Italy

'We gazed at
one another like
old friends'

Close encounters with
orang-utans





**In the 1970s
Martin Fletcher
enjoyed a magical
year in Rajasthan,
teaching at
'the Eton of India'.
Forty years later
he returned to
the region to see
whether it could live
up to his romantic
memories – or
whether the past is,
indeed, a foreign
country**

Lord Mayo, a 19th-century viceroy of India, still gazes towards the ruined fort on Taragarh mountain. Behind his statue, a crown tops the clock tower of the magnificent main building of the school that bears his name – all arches, domes and ornate balustrades, in unpolished white marble. Mayo College continues to flourish 140 years after he founded it in Ajmer – to educate Rajasthan's young princes and produce 'hearty supporters of British authority and power'. Rudyard Kipling's father designed Mayo's coat of arms, and its first student, Maharaja Mangal Singh of Alwar, arrived on an elephant with 200 retainers and assorted horses, camels and tigers.

My own arrival in 1978 was less grand. I came in the second-class compartment of an overnight train from Delhi. I had just graduated, and my father's first cousin, Jack Gibson, had suggested I teach English for a year at the school from which he had recently retired as the last British principal.

I was young, carefree and had a terrific time. I caught the dying embers of empire – Gibson, who had come out to India to teach just before the Second World War, was the last Englishman still living in Rajasthan, and older Indians remembered the Raj, most quite fondly. The age of mass tourism had yet to begin, which meant sharing the delights

FLORIAN STERN/GALLERY STOCK

**At weekends I visited my
students' crumbling, bat-infested
forts, where we slept on the
battlements**

Among the beautiful sights in Rajasthan is the 14th-century Gadi Sagar water reservoir in Jaisalmer, replete with small shrines and temples

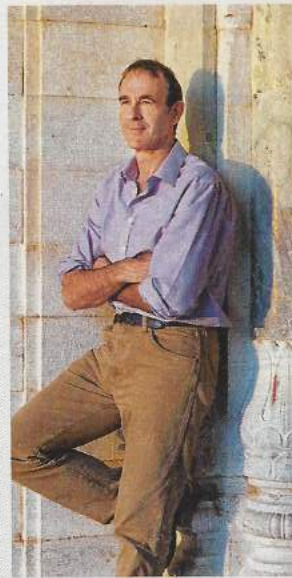
of Rajasthan with few other foreigners except the occasional trail-blazing backpacker or hippy.

There was no television. Airmail letters were the only means of communication with the outside world. I rode around on an old bicycle, once emerging from a lesson to find a cobra coiled around its wheel. I learnt some essential Hindi phrases - *chup raho* (shut up), *bahut mirchi* (too much chilli) and *ubla pani lao - joldhi, joldhi* (bring boiled water - quickly, quickly). I played endless sport, and still possess a faded cutting from the *Times of India* headlined 'Borg Wins in Monte Carlo, Connors Wins in New York, Fletcher and Ellis win in Ajmer'.

At weekends I visited my students' crumbling, bat-infested forts. Ancient family retainers served our meals, and we slept on the battlements as the scent of cow-dung fires rose from the medieval villages below. Rajasthan's nobles were struggling in those days. Indira Gandhi had abolished their titles, privileges and privy purses seven years earlier. Most could no longer afford to maintain their palaces, and would happily have sold them for £2,000.

In the 38 years since then, India has changed spectacularly. Its population has doubled to 1.3 billion. Its economy - socialist and totally protectionist in 1978 - has taken off. Last month I returned to see whether the romantic India of my memory had survived.

My first day in Delhi was a shock. The capital was covered in a pall of smog. It was clogged by every conceivable sort of wheeled transport except the once-ubiquitous bicycle, which appeared to have been forced from the roads. From my eighth-floor room in the grand Lodhi hotel I was supposed to have a view of Humayun's tomb, half a



At Mayo College I taught French as well as English, until the French ambassador visited and my pathetic command of his language was humiliatingly exposed

mile away, but it was scarcely visible. The air smelt acrid. The pollution made my eyes smart. Brown dust coated everything: trees, lawns, the Red Fort.

I visited the once-wonderful Chandni Chowk market in Old Delhi and found it hawking Chinese tat. Connaught Place, New Delhi's shopping hub, was little better. It was full of Western designer stores, with one charming exception: the colonial-era New Delhi Stationery Mart had somehow survived, and was still selling fountain pens.

Before dawn the next day I gratefully boarded an express train to Jaipur - travelling first class this time because travel writing and age have their advantages. An hour passed before we left Delhi behind; two before the haze lifted.

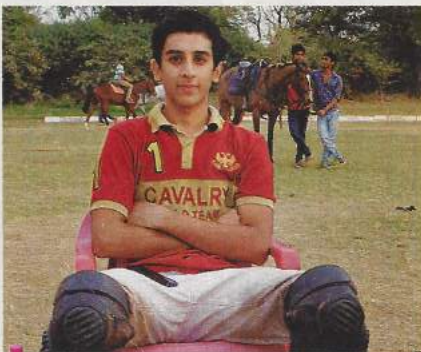
Jaipur was little better. I remembered the 'Pink City' as a small town. Today it is a teeming metropolis of six million, with a metro and international airport, flyovers and shopping malls. I found the exquisite 18th-century Hawa Mahal - the Palace of Winds from which purdah-ed royal women once watched public events from behind latticed stone windows - packed not only with foreign tourists but with a new phenomenon: troops of visitors drawn from India's rapidly expanding middle classes.

I gave the Amer Fort a miss after learning that it had attracted 15,000 visitors in a single day at New Year, preferring the tranquillity of the Rajasthan

Clockwise from top Mayo College; Martin Fletcher outside the school, and during his teaching days there; the 17-year-old Maharaja of Jaipur

Polo Club. I was in luck. Kumar Padmanabh Singh, the 17-year-old Maharaja of Jaipur and an ex-Mayo boy now studying at Millfield in Somerset, was playing. He wore the number 1, naturally, and scored a goal, but the Jaipur Warriors still lost to a team of army officers. He rather regally avoided the trophy presentation afterwards.

That night I discovered the means by which many of Rajasthan's nobles had survived the crisis of the



1970s. I stayed in Samode Haveli, once the city residence of the Rawats of Samode, a princely state north of Jaipur. It is now a luxurious hotel filled with relics of past glories. Raghvendra Singh, the present Rawat and another old Mayo-ite, recalled how he and his brother sold the family jewels in the 1980s to convert their 16th-century palace into a hotel. It was a gamble, but Jacqueline Onassis was an early guest, MM Kaye's *The Far Pavilions* was filmed there, and the brothers now have four flourishing hotels. Thus, Rajasthan's former rulers have become hoteliers.

A six-line highway lined by billboards took me to Ajmer. There, I greeted old friends and toured Mayo's green and shady 187-acre campus. Peacocks strut among the splurges of bougainvillea and elegant boarding houses built by each princely state. But Mayo has also changed dramatically. It has added a girls' school, golf course, shooting range, open-air theatre, polo field and stables for 58 thoroughbreds. Happily, it now employs a professional French teacher: I taught French as well as English until the French ambassador visited and my pathetic command of his language was humiliatingly exposed.

What moved me, however, was the school's continuing reverence for Jack Gibson 22 years after his death. A quintessential Englishman from Norfolk, he turned Mayo into one of India's leading public schools, and pioneered skiing and mountaineering in the Himalayas. He won both an OBE and a Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian honours. In his old age, the chiefs of India's army, navy and air force - all former pupils - flew down from Delhi in separate helicopters one day to visit him.

Mayo has named buildings and prizes after 'Gibby'. Its museum exhibits his wooden skis, primitive climbing equipment, fencing medals, suit, stamp collection, gramophone, pipes, tobacco and much else besides. A photo shows him high in the snowy Himalayas with Tenzing Norgay, who later helped Edmund Hillary conquer Everest. A letter records his wish to be cremated, 'but not using precious wood'. Over lunch on his lawn, Mayo's present principal, Lieut Gen Surendra Kulkarni, said his mission was 'to restore Jack Gibson's ethos'.

Gibson, a bachelor, retired to a farmhouse on the edge of Ajmer, where he played quoits in the courtyard each evening and grew sweet peas and roses in his English garden. I would go there on Sunday mornings for 'undarumble-tumble' (scrambled eggs) cooked by his faithful servant Tanzuk, who had learnt to say words like 'ghastly' in an upper-crust English accent. From his terrace, Gibson enjoyed a bucolic view across small, hand-tilled fields to the Aravalli hills - but today it is all built on.

One memorable excursion I made from Mayo in 1978 was to Pushkar, a village 10 miles away where Hindu pilgrims bathed in a lake created by Lord Brahma, and a huge camel fair was held in the surrounding desert each November. I slept amid the camels - one of a mere handful of foreigners amid hordes of pilgrims and turbaned peasants with fantastic cracked-leather faces. These days, the pilgrims are swamped by tourists, and the lovely ghats and temples surrounding the lake are ringed by hotels and souvenir stalls. Tour operators offer 'glamping' during the camel fair. Thus, tourism taints the wonders that it feeds off.

And so to Jodhpur. In 1956 Gibson wrote how a

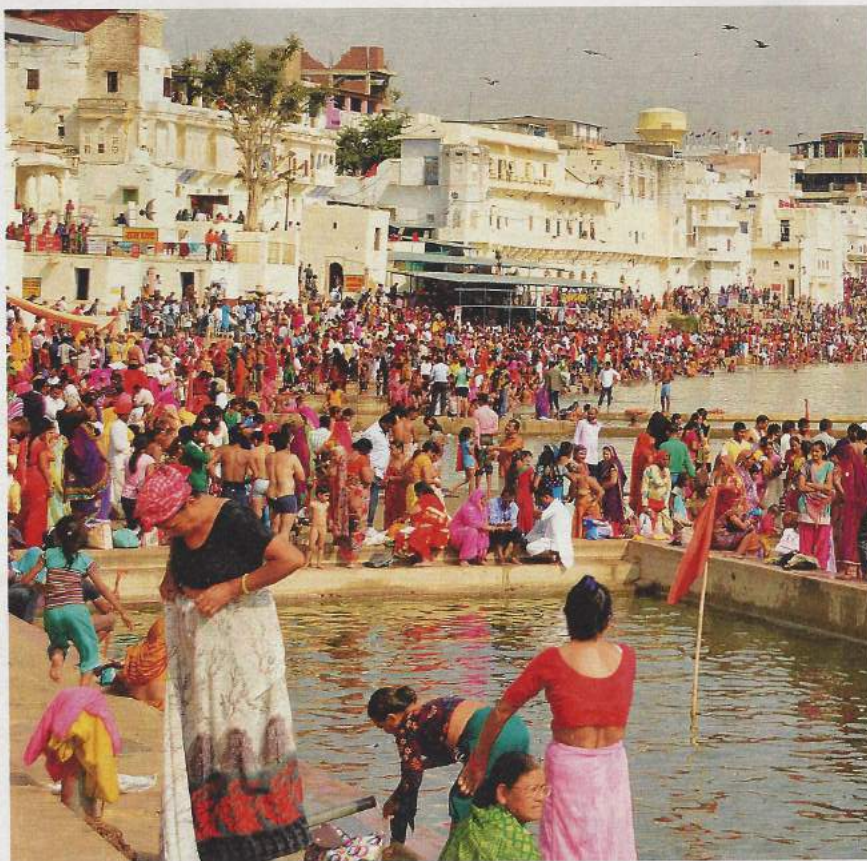
Rural Rajasthan is still a visual feast. Fields of vivid green wheat set off the arid brown hills. Colourful flags fly over whitewashed temples. Women walk elegantly balancing firewood on their heads

four-year-old boy had inherited India's last great palace - the 347-room Umaid Bhawan, which was built as a famine-relief measure before the Second World War. It was, he said, 'a white - or rather pink, for it is of the local red sandstone - elephant'.

That boy was Gaj Singh, the present Maharaja of Jodhpur and a Mayo governor, whose father died in a plane crash in 1952. After returning from Eton and Oxford in 1970, he lived alone with his mother in that vast hilltop edifice. Today he has a private apartment there, but the rest is a sumptuous hotel, where, somewhat to my embarrassment, I found myself staying.

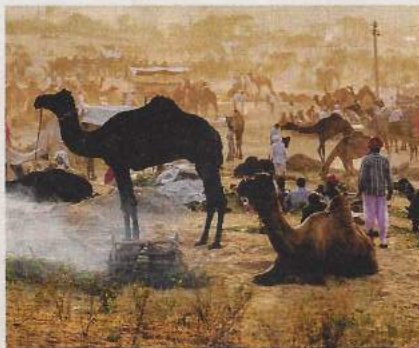
No viceroy was ever so pampered. A bugler and drummer greeted me. Servants bowed and scraped as I processed through the rotundas, halls and courtyards. I emerged from the pool to find my clothes all folded. I returned to my room to find my laptop cable coiled and strapped, a proper bookmark instead of the scrap of newspaper I had been using, and a rich chocolate gâteau. I also found an invitation to the Maharaja's 68th birthday celebrations the next day, an especially auspicious event this year because his first grandson was born in November.

Nobody would have guessed that the Maharaja was officially dethroned 45 years ago. Jodhpur rushed to greet the man they still call *Bapji* (father) as he drove through the city in his silver Mercedes that morning, uniformed guards clearing his way.



Above Pushkar lake during the *maha snan* (big bath), in honour of Lord Brahma, who supposedly created the lake. **Below** Pushkar camel fair

Later several hundred male relatives, lesser Rajput princes and other dignitaries - all dressed in their finest turbans, sherwanis and Jodhpuri coats - paid homage to him in a marquee on the Umaid Bhawan's expansive lawns, each offering a monetary token and touching his feet before enjoying a splendid lunch. That night Bapji hosted a dinner for 200, featuring singers and a birthday cake floating on a sea of dry ice. The women held separate celebrations.



'We all love him. He's like a God,' one minor prince said, as he explained how the Maharaja had used his immense stature to help the people of Jodhpur.

The next morning Bapji, a soft-spoken and self-effacing man, stroked a Jack Russell as we chatted in his stately apartment. His ancestors had ruled the state of Marwar for 800 years, he said. A sense of responsibility had been hammered into him since childhood. 'You inherit a residue of goodwill, but you can't fritter it away.'

I briefly visited Jodhpur's mighty 15th-century Mehrangarh Fort, which now attracts a million visitors a year, 800,000 of them Indian; then fled deep into rural Rajasthan, which is still a visual feast. Fields of vivid green wheat set off the arid brown hills. Colourful flags fly over small, whitewashed temples. Young boys tend herds of goats. Women walk elegantly along dusty tracks, balancing forage or firewood on their heads. Men pass on motorbikes bearing preposterous loads of tin pots and pans.

Late one afternoon I forsook Rakesh, my driver, and took a train up into the hills on a British-built line that still had manually operated points. It went so slowly that monkeys ran alongside, hoping for food. I was - inevitably - befriended by a large family going to a wedding and painting their hands with henna. I sat in the open doorway of the ancient carriage as the setting sun cast a golden glow over the pastoral scenery, marvelling at its timeless serenity, and for a while convinced myself that nothing had changed.

But it has. Mechanised agriculture has sucked life from the fields. Villagers no longer use cow

dung for fuel, or lay grain on the road to get rid of the chaff. The camel carts have gone. Only the old men (and tourists) still wear baggy cotton dhotis and lungis – the rest have adopted Western dress. The women have swapped their traditional bright red, yellow and orange saris for more muted colours. The villages have electricity, television, mobile phones, internet access, even ATMs. Kunds – those magnificent deep stone tanks shaped like inverted pyramids with steps leading down to the water – have been replaced by modern tube wells. Roadside stalls now sell chai in paper cups, not clay pots.

The most startling transformation has been that of the decaying forts into 'heritage hotels'. I feared they had become Disneyfied, but I was wrong: my old student Mahipal Singh has turned his half-ruined hilltop palace in Sardargarh into a delightful place to stay, and where once we bounced across the nighttime desert in his Jeep, searching for hares to shoot in the headlights, he now takes his guests out to spot leopards, panthers and wild boar.

Hotels like his have revitalised the villages – creating scores of jobs, providing customers for their handicrafts, and employing musicians, artists and masons whose skills might otherwise wither. 'The economic benefits are huge,' said Shatrunjai Singh, who recently opened a stylish new hotel called Dev Shree in his ancestral village, Deogarh.

The social liberalisation of a deeply conservative state has been dramatic too. In 1978 I was having lunch in a courtyard with Shatrunjai's father, Nahar Singh, the late Rawat of Deogarh, who also taught at Mayo, when three young sisters in traditional Rajasthani dress came to ask his blessing – they



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were child brides. Nahar's widow, Prabha, tells me how, after marrying and moving to Deogarh from Uttar Pradesh, she had to live in purdah until 1966. She could not drive herself through the village until 1995. The last case of sati – a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre – in Rajasthan was as recent as 1987.

Any lingering regrets I had about the conversion of Rajasthan's forts into hotels were dispelled when I visited another old haunt – Badnore. I used to go there with my friend Raghuraj Singh, the Thakur of Badnore and a fellow Mayo teacher. His father had sold the family's imposing 16th-century fort to the government in 1961, and Raghu had moved into a nearby summer house overlooking a lake, but villagers still brought him rabbits and chickens as a sign of respect.

Today the fort is a ruin. The government briefly used it as a teacher-training college then abandoned it. The huge wooden entrance gates are disintegrating. The courtyards are disappearing beneath trees and bushes. Floors and ceilings have collapsed. The durbar halls with their fading murals are strewn with rubble. Hornet nests hang from eaves, and the walls are covered in graffiti. 'I feel very sad,' said Raghu, now 82, who grew up in the fort and remembers when its stables were full of horses and elephants. 'I don't think I will visit it again.'

From top the Maharaja of Jodhpur, Gaj Singh (third from left); his ancestral home, Umaid Bhawan Palace, is now a hotel, where he retains an apartment

I am writing all this in Udaipur's celebrated Lake Palace, a hotel of such extravagant opulence that I had a choice of nine different sorts of pillow. It is an apt place to end my journey, for I can see the great white flanks of the City Palace across the water, resplendent in the winter sun. I once dined there with the Maharani of Udaipur, an Englishwoman who I remember describing in my diary as 'remarkable, intelligent, young and beautiful'.

Her name was Annabella Parker, a colonel's daughter from Gloucestershire. She was travelling around India in the early 1960s, reached Mayo on Founders' Day and asked Gibson how she could get to Udaipur. 'He'll take you,' he said, pointing to the Maharana, India's pre-eminent noble thanks to his 1,500-year-old dynasty's illustrious history of resistance to both the Mughals and the British. The next thing Gibson knew Annabella had become the Maharana's second wife – to the intense chagrin of the first, a princess from Bikaner with whom Bhagwat Singh had already had three children.

Parker did her best to blend in, though she had skin as white as alabaster. She kept a low profile. She learnt Hindi and Indian dance, wore a sari and always

kept her head covered – even when sailing on the lake. She championed animal welfare, and I remember her earnestly discussing it while sitting in a chamber full of leopard skins and stuffed tigers.

But although Parker had the title 'Her Highness', she was never accepted by the Maharana's family, other Rajput nobles or the people of Udaipur. When her husband died in 1984, his family cast her out. Back in England, she eventually remarried, but died several years ago. She had no children.

None of this I could have learnt in Udaipur. I found no trace of the 'English Maharani' in the City Museum, no pictures hanging on royal walls, no mention in the family tree. Younger Udaipuris had never heard of her. The older ones declined to talk for fear of offending the first wife's sons, who have been locked in an ugly 30-year battle over their father's property and title. 'Annabella,' one source said, 'has been written out of history.'

My own love affair with Rajasthan persists, but less intensely. Like India, the state has made huge advances, but for me its primary colours have faded. The scope for adventure has shrunk. The magic of that youthful year cannot be recaptured. As the poet AE Houseman once wrote of nostalgia: 'That is the land of lost content/I see it shining plain/The happy highways where I went/And cannot come again.' *Ampersand Travel (020-7819 9770; ampersandtravel.com) offers a 12-night Rajasthan trip – with accommodation at the Lodhi, Delhi; Samode Haveli, Jaipur; Umaid Bhawan Palace, Jodhpur; Dev Shree, Deogarh; Sardargarh, Rajsamand; and Taj Lake Palace, Udaipur – from £3,840pp, including flights*