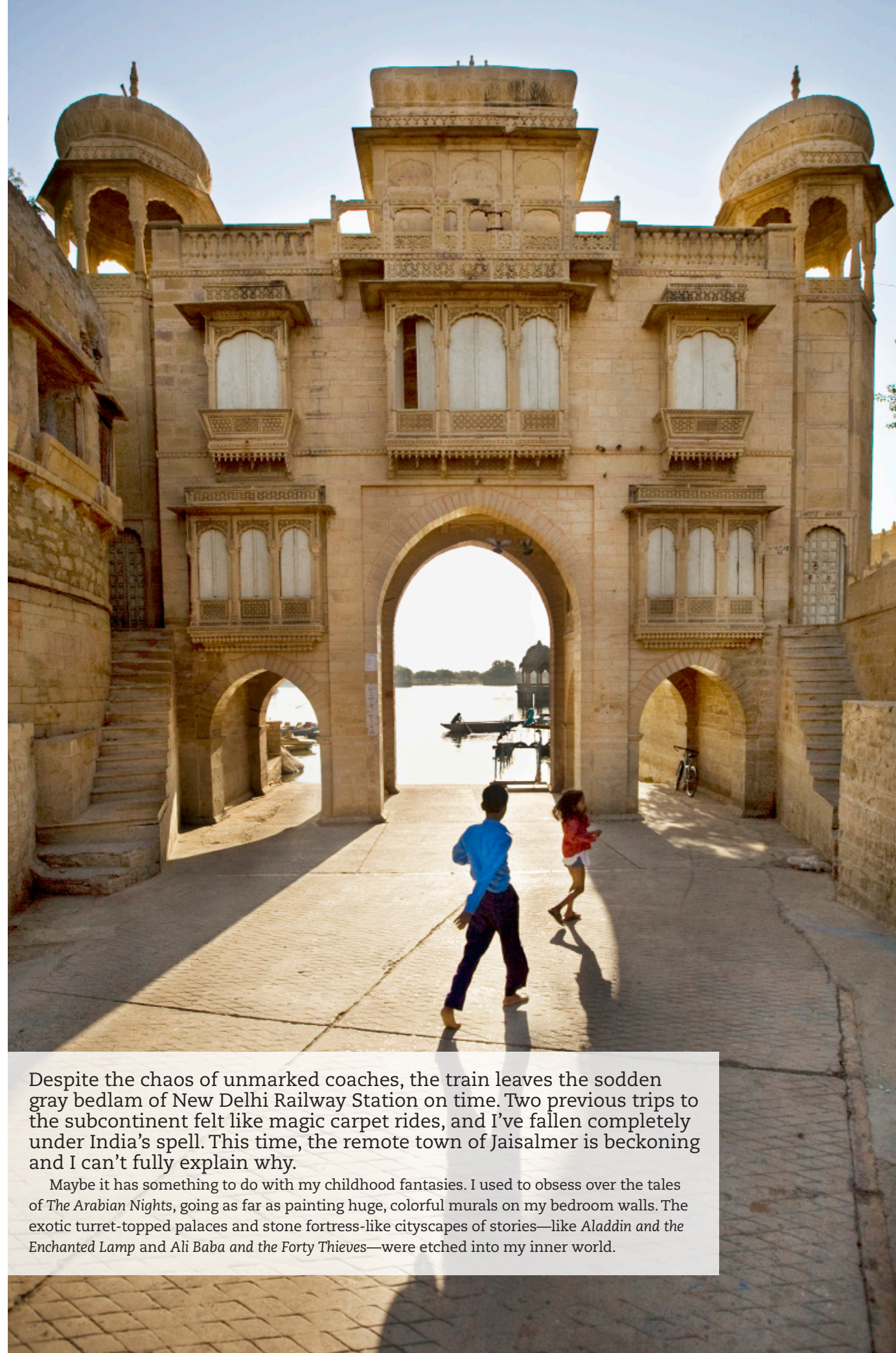


BY MARIELLEN WARD

GOLDEN MIBACE

DEEP IN THE HEART OF INDIA'S THAR DESERT EXISTS JAISALMER, A PLACE OF FAIRY TALES
WHERE IMAGINATION MIXES WITH PAST AND PRESENT FOR A POWERFUL ELIXIR



Despite the chaos of unmarked coaches, the train leaves the sodden gray bedlam of New Delhi Railway Station on time. Two previous trips to the subcontinent felt like magic carpet rides, and I've fallen completely under India's spell. This time, the remote town of Jaisalmer is beckoning and I can't fully explain why.

Maybe it has something to do with my childhood fantasies. I used to obsess over the tales of *The Arabian Nights*, going as far as painting huge, colorful murals on my bedroom walls. The exotic turret-topped palaces and stone fortress-like cityscapes of stories—like *Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*—were etched into my inner world.



GETTING TO KNOW THE GOLDEN CITY

Getting to Jaisalmer is not difficult, just time-consuming.

The **closest civilian airport is 177 miles away** in Jodhpur.

Local buses between Jodhpur and Jaisalmer run often, and the road is one of the best in India.

Rajasthan's capital city, Jaipur, is about **12 hours** away by road or train.

Hotel Fifu is a comfortable, mid-range accommodation option. It's built in the traditional haveli style, with an unbeatable location near the fort.

Cost: US\$45
www.hotelfifu.com

Hotel Killa Bhawan is a good option within the fort. Built right into the fort walls and decorated by a French fashion designer, it's fantasy in stone.

Cost: US\$80 to \$200
www.killabhawan.com

Jaisalmer rises from the baked earth of the Thar Desert—scores of intricately carved buildings culminating in an impossibly romantic mountaintop fort

The town is on the far western side of Rajasthan, India's largest state, and is said to have an atmosphere that evokes the former kingdom's fabled past. But after 21 hours stuck in a cramped train compartment with nothing to look at but flat desert terrain, I'm wondering if Jaisalmer will be worth the effort.

Finally, the train pulls into Jaisalmer station and I step onto the platform and into the light of a dazzling noonday sun. I'm struck by the colors of this far-flung Rajasthani town—splashes of neon pink and orange fabric against a backdrop of pale red earth, golden sandstone and iridescent blue sky. I'm immediately refreshed by the sunlight and spaciousness.

My home base is Hotel Fifu. The proprietors have arranged for a jeep to drive me the short distance to their peaceful location on the edge of town, where Jaisalmer meets the desert. Soon I'm settled into the Fifu's third-floor terrace restaurant overlooking what's known as the "Golden City"—and with good reason.

Jaisalmer rises from the baked earth of the Thar Desert—scores of intricately carved buildings culminating in an impossibly romantic mountaintop fort. The ancient castle, with its 99 beautiful bastions, is made almost entirely of yellow sandstone and seems to shine from within when bathing in the setting sun of dusk. The arduous trek is gone, the magic of Jaisalmer seeping in. Here in front of me are the bedroom walls of my childhood.

Jaisalmer is a small town with a population of around 57,000. To a Westerner, it feels like the middle of nowhere, yet the town has a glorious past. Jaisalmer was an important stop on the caravan trade routes between Egypt, Afghanistan and India for more than 800 years, a history told in its rich art and architecture. The town's prosperous rulers and traders commissioned the finest craftsmen to build sumptuous palaces, temples, cenotaphs and havelis (Rajasthani-style mansions).

With the rise of sea travel, the overland trade routes began to falter in the late 17th century. The expansion of the port of Bombay (now Mumbai) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries furthered their decline. The 1947 partitioning of India spelled the end of the routes, and towns along their paths fell into difficult times.

Considered inaccessible by most travelers only a few decades ago, tourism has recently begun to revive Jaisalmer's fortunes. However, while most visitors make it to Jaipur, one of the three stops on the "golden triangle tour" of culturally rich Indian cities (the other two being Agra and Delhi), only the hardy traveler ventures as far as Jaisalmer—which is part of its charm.



color and magic

Jaisalmer Fort, built in 1156, has been inhabited ever since. Today, 2000 people still live inside its sandstone walls, and thousands more live in the town that has built up around it.



WINTER 2010



Camel Trekking 101

Jaisalmer is the “birthplace and undisputed king of the Rajasthani camel safari,” according to *The Rough Guide to India*. Here are some things to consider before booking a trek.

A camel is a bumpy ride that even an experienced horseman will find takes some getting used to, so a desert trek is for the hardy among us.

Jaisalmer summers (April through August) are extremely hot. Daytime temperatures regularly reach north of 100°F, and nights are in the high 70s.

Many say the ideal time to visit is post-monsoon season (October through February) when daytime temps are more in line with Jaisalmer summer nights. Nights, though, are in the chilly 40s.

Your camel is your desert taxi, and it's customary to tip your “driver” generously. No, we're not kidding.

More info on desert treks: www.jaisalmertourism.com



I have fallen in love with the burnished beauty of the desert. I feel profoundly peaceful, and more alive than ever before

But it's not only the setting that's charming. When I arrive, tired and hungry, my hotel proprietor, known by the nickname Fifu, says, “Welcome to your home,” and he means it. Fifu and his partner in the hotel, Jitu (also a nickname), restore me with their warm Jaisalmer-style hospitality.

They also urge me to explore. First, a walk through the narrow lanes of the fort. I barter for beaded wall hangings, puppets and silver jewelry, drink chai in outdoor cafes and fend off constant, though gentle, sales pitches from the local merchants: “Madam, just look in my store!”

One day, Jitu takes me on a motorcycle ride through the winding streets of the town. Around every turn we encounter lanes lined with stunningly beautiful havelis and shops filled with local, handmade crafts, textiles and jewelry. The women of Rajasthan look like a vision of

Scheherazade, the fictional sultan's wife and narrator of *The Arabian Nights* tales, bedecked in the brightest colors and most elaborate jewelry in all of India. There are so many gorgeous items to choose from, I'm bedazzled.

Later we head out into the desert to a tiny Hindu temple dedicated to the elephant-headed deity *Ganesh*. In the shimmering heat, I'm suddenly and inexplicably overcome by a powerful feeling of tension-melting, life-altering bliss. It's as if my heart has just burst open; as if I'm seeing with my soul and not my eyes. I've suddenly fallen in love with the burnished beauty of the desert. I feel profoundly peaceful—and yet more alive than ever before.

I'm still reeling from the pure joy of that experience when I embark on my first-ever overnight desert safari. A handful of guests travel by jeep to Bada Bagh, the royal cenotaphs, and a delicate Jain temple complex at Amar Sagar on our way to the Sam sand dunes.

We ride camels into the dunes to a distant camp. After a delicious meal of rice, dal, vegetables, chutney and rotis cooked on an open fire, we roll out our sleeping mats and I squint into a stunning desert sunset, the dome of the sky turning indigo above us.

At first the desert looks like nothing. Then it looks like everything. The sand dunes ripple in a rhythmic dance, and soon the night sky is teeming with more stars than I've ever seen before. The only sound is the gurgles of camels and the whisper of a warm breeze that kisses my skin, reminding me this isn't a mirage.

I lie awake the entire night, communing with the thrumming stars, full of wonder and joy, and more attached to myth than time. Incredibly, I have found a place matching my childhood imagination. Infinity stretches in every direction, including within. Ⓐ



Delhi, Agra and Jaipur make up India's Golden Triangle