

A RAJASTHAN ROAD TRIP

From Jodhpur to Udaipur in a white Ambassador.

(The Sunday Telegraph, 2001)

For some people, the soul of India is to be found in its city life. They like to rhapsodise about the vibrancy of the teeming streets, the pungency of the smells, and the colourful anarchy of the bazaar, as if the universe must remain a closed book to anyone who has not been harried within an inch of his life by hawkers and beggars, besieged by shopkeepers who claim a close personal acquaintance with John Cleese or Jeremy Irons, and forced into the gutter by a maniac in a motor-rickshaw.

Personally, I can do without all of the above. If the soul of India is to be found in them, I reckon, then India must be sitting on hot coals being prodded by a large fork. Give me grey, gridlocked London any day.

And yet, discomfited as I was when I first visited India fifteen years ago, there was something – an elusive sense of tranquillity behind the chaos – which told me that one day I would have to go back. One moment in particular remained with me – standing on the ramparts of the fort at Jodhpur at dusk, watching thin strands of smoke rise from the pale blue houses of the Brahmin quarter on the plain far below; and when I finally returned to Rajasthan last autumn, determined to journey beyond the tourist trail, it was here that we began.

For our week-long tour we hired a car (a Colgate-white Ambassador) and a driver called Misri, who luckily proved more cheerful than his name suggested. If this sounds extravagant, it wasn't: wages in India are low, roads are rough, signposts in English are rare, and the highway code is considered contrary to the laws of nature. As a foreign driver, you are likely to be held responsible for any accident, even if you are doing 5 mph and the other party has been drinking for a week. Misri, with his

virtuoso use of brake and horn, was a brilliant investment, with an answer for everything except the bullocks which trudged unhurriedly along the middle of the Tarmac.

Jodhpur is not entirely off the beaten track, but the Meherangarh, or Majestic Fort, does have the advantage of being three miles from the city centre. It is an awesome construction, with monumental walls, delicate courtyards, and a museum containing some very beautiful things (a peacock palanquin) and some very ugly ones (a selection of double-handled daggers). The nearby Jaswant Thada is even more beguiling: an exquisite white-marble mausoleum with intricate pavilions, smooth lawns and a discreet lake.

From Jodhpur it is an hour's drive to Rohet, a village of broken streets and sleeping dogs, whose hotel is its main point of interest. Rohet Garh is a charming seventeenth-century building, once a fort, with dust-pink and yellow walls, a central garden where peacocks stalk, and a swimming pool with a pavilion at each corner and a colonnaded terrace. Bruce Chatwin, who spent two months here while writing *The Songlines*, delighted in the birds which gathered on the adjoining lake: 'Almost within arm's reach are ducks, spoonbills, egrets, storks, cranes, herons, bee-eaters, a dazzling kingfisher which sits in the nearest tree.'

Beside the lake is a small complex of tombs where the ancestors of Chatwin's friend Manvendra Singh are buried, and a shrine to Shiva inhabited by geckos. After visiting them in the late afternoon, we followed the shoreline round to the village, and found ourselves part of a procession of cattle, labourers and boy cricketers heading slowly home at what the Indians call, evocatively, 'the cow-dust hour'.

A good deal more cow-dust awaited us at Deogarh, where we arrived in time for the town's annual cattle fair. Along the main street, hundreds of prime beasts were tethered, many wearing decorative headbands,

others with painted horns. The cattle were also an excuse for a much larger fair, whose attractions included a Ferris wheel, a Mickey Mouse bouncy castle, and tented cinemas showing Bollywood blockbusters.

Here we found stalls selling everything from ceremonial swords and camel-harnesses to huge, shiny cooking pots. Most fascinating (and alarming) were the dentists, their instruments and range of false teeth laid out on a cloth in front of them, offering on-the-spot treatment.

The Deogarh Castle, rising above the town, is an enchanting place to stay: passing through an archway painted with an elephant in full regalia, you enter a wide courtyard to find a caramel and white façade stacked with balconies, balustrades and arches, towering above you like a Willie Wonka fantasy. From here we made expeditions to another serene lake, where cranes flapped and pied kingfishers hovered in the sunset, and a 2,000-year-old cave temple, the Anjaneshwar Mahader, where small bats and an ancient umbrella hung in the gloom.

The Chaumukha Temple at Ranakpur, our next stop, was of a more elegant variety: a magnificent Jain building with row upon row of such intricately carved white marble pillars – 1,444 in all, if you care to count them – that you can hardly believe there were stonemasons enough in India to create it. It was fascinating; and yet, the real thrill of our journey lay not in sights like this, but in the scenes from everyday life which we passed along the road: buffalos wallowing together in waterholes; children splashing in a trough; unexpected islands of rock rising out of the desert; a camel carrying a huge sheaf of maize; two cyclists pedalling in single file with a ladder stretched between them, like slapstick comedians in search of an accident. Above all, there were the women's saris, so bold in their colours – gorgeous pink, bright yellow, fluorescent green – and so elegantly worn that the oldest, most care-lined crone

looked more stylish than any Prada-clad fashionista patrolling the Kings Road.

The drive to our last stopping point, Kumbhalgarh, was the most beautiful of all. We climbed through high and narrow hills, past fields thick with maize and banana trees and sugar cane, and came at last to a fort presiding over a landscape which – but for a flypast of parakeets – could have been painted by Poussin or Claude. The scale of the ramparts was stupendous: running for 20 miles, they enclosed the entire hilltop, including fields, scores of temples, a village with sagging tiled roofs, and cattle grazing lugubriously among the ruins. In another place, ranks of tour buses might have lined the road like siege elephants – but at Kumbhalgarh we were almost alone. Only the monkeys, bounding along the walls and posing on dizzy outcrops like Hollywood starlets released for a photo-call, seemed to detect any virtue in being part of a madding crowd.