

ODE TO GOLD

Jaisalmer, the city that goes by the moniker Golden City courtesy its desert setting and yellow sandstone buildings, is a potpourri of culture, art, craft and tradition in the midst of the Thar.

Text | **BINDU GOPAL RAO**

A view of the city from Jaisalmer Fort.



“Go to Jaisalmer if you want to experience Rajasthan,” said a friend to me many years ago when I mentioned that I wanted to visit the desert state. And when I landed here on a recent trip, I realised almost instantly that he was absolutely right. In so many ways, this city embodies every quality we associate Rajasthan with. Additionally, the city boasts excellent roads maintained by the Border Roads Organisation since it is located so close to the India-Pakistan border. What’s not to love!

HISTORY BECKONS

The best way to explore the city is to head to the towering, majestic Jaisalmer Fort, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2013. After all, even after 800 years, this living fort still houses one-fourth of the old city’s population.

A drive through sepia-toned landscapes and old havelis brought me face-to-face with the majestic

yellow sandstone facade of the fort. The massive structure is called Sonar Qila or Golden Fort, named after the warm hues of the stone. The five-km-long fortification wall incorporates 99 bastions and the main fort has two walls running parallel to each other with a gap of 2-4 metres in between. This gap was earlier used for periodic patrols by security guards.

While walking into the ramparts from the Ganesh Pol, an entrance located in the southern end of the courtyard, there is a sense of vastness that envelopes you immediately. Inside the fort,

there are several vendors who sell colourful handicrafts. The architecture here is stunning with intricate jali work, detailed carvings and arches around doors and windows that will have your camera out perpetually.

At the centre is the Dussehra Chowk, the 11-storey palace that was home to past rulers. In this beautiful structure is the Rang Mahal, a painted and mirrored room that is so bright and colourful that it will make you gape in admiration.

Make time for a stop at the group of intricately carved Jain temples dedicated to Jain *tirthankaras*

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

A view of the Jaisalmer fort from within.

A Rajasthani local in traditional attire and jewellery.

The side panel on the Ganesh Pol presents some intricately detailed carvings.



TOP: A couple of paddle boats rest up before a long day at the Gadisar Lake.

ABOVE: Situated inside the majestic Jaisalmer Fort, these stone carvings are the highlight of the museum.

Rikhabdevji and Shambhavdevji that were built between the 12th and 15th centuries AD. However, it was the havelis that had me mesmerised.

The Patwon ki Haveli, a cluster of five havelis that belonged to a rich trader and his five sons is now run as a museum. The 19th century Nathmal Ji Ki Haveli is a beautiful symmetrical construction and its miniature-style paintings are worth a closer look.

MUSEUM CALLING

Jaisalmer is teeming with museums for every visitor. Whether you fancy yourself a geologist, an anthropologist or more of a military buff, the city has something for everyone. The Thar Heritage Museum, privately owned and operated by historian L N Khatri, is a great place to take a trip down memory lane and understand the

culture of the region. The museum features a display of fossils, manuscripts, weapons and kitchen equipment. An important geological site, Jaisalmer is home to the Wood Fossil Park or Aakal, where you can trace geological changes from 180 million years ago. The Jaisalmer Government Museum is run by the Department of Archaeology and Museums and features exhibits from the 7th and 9th centuries AD. These include traditional household items, jewellery, rock-cut crockery and statues reflecting the rich cultural heritage of the region. The trophy of Rajasthan's state bird *godawan* or the Great Indian Bustard is an attraction here.

Finally, there is the Jaisalmer War Museum, a tribute by the Indian Army to the soldiers who lost their lives in the 1965 India-Pakistan War and the 1971 Longewala Battle.



TOP:
A man leads his loaded camels through the Thar Desert.

ABOVE:
The cenotaphs of Jaisalmer glow in the setting sun.

NATURE BECKONS

The Gadisar Lake, also known as the Gadi Sagar, is an artificial reservoir that was the only source of water in the area until 1965. What makes this place interesting is the combination of calming waters, ghats, and small temples and shrines that dot the slopes. There is also an array of colourful boats that will carry you onto the lake to catch the sunrise. You can also feed the catfish and spot the migratory birds that flock here in the winter.

The Bada Bagh garden complex houses royal cenotaphs of Jai

Singh II as well as other royals of Jaisalmer. If wildlife is your calling, a visit to the Desert National Park that showcases the wildlife of the Thar desert's ecosystem like the black buck and Great Indian Bustard among others should be on your itinerary list.

DUNE THRILLS

Since you are in the midst of the Thar Desert, you can't go back without trying your luck on the sands. The Sam Sand Dunes are the perfect way to spend an evening. I started my experience on

a four-wheel-drive jeep that started quite simply before we reached the dunes and then it was a topsy-turvy drive that was quite an adrenaline rush. Soon, I found myself atop a camel for a sunset safari. Let me also warn you that the camel ride is quite bumpy, but if you do make it, you will be treated to some brilliant sunset views across the desert sands. Do remember to tip the camel owner who will feed the animal on your behalf. If you opt for a safari package you will also be able to head to a camp to spend some time listening to Rajasthani

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

A local musician plays an instrument called a *ravanhatha* inside the Jaisalmer Fort.

A folk dancer's costume makes for a sharp contrast against the pale sandstone of the fort.

The *dal bhaati churma* is a typical Rajasthani treat.

folk music and watching traditional dance forms while you nibble on snacks.

Dinner is a typical Rajasthani meal that comprises favourites like *dal bhaati churma*, sweet *kadhi*, masala *khichdi* and *moong dal halwa*. A typical Rajasthani preparation, a round hard bread, known as *bhaati*, is baked and greased with ghee before being served with *dal* and *churma*, a dry chutney. Non-vegetarians can opt for a succulent dish of *Murgh-e-Subz*, a balanced plate of chicken and vegetables in a thick gravy. Round off your meal with *moong dal halwa*: sweet, rich, loaded with ghee and topped off with delicate slivers of dried fruits.

After my trip I made sure to call my friend to let him know that what he told me about Jaisalmer was right; the call of the desert is not to be left unanswered. 📍



DID YOU KNOW?

- The *Vyas chhatri* at the edge of the city is dedicated to the author of the *Mahabharata*. *Vyasa*, and features many interesting cenotaphs.
- The abandoned village of *Kuldhara* is located along the *Barmer Road* about 35 km away from the city.