

NORTH WESTERN RAJASTHAN

Hidden Palaces and Forts of Rural Rajasthan



ITINERARY:

Start and end in Delhi; 15 days/14 nights

Day 1

Land in New Delhi. Transfer to the wonderful Imperial Hotel (1 night) in Heritage Rooms.

PM After lunch we take you for some 'gentle' sightseeing in New Delhi.
Dinner at The Imperial.

Day 2

AM Transfer to Delhi Airport for a domestic flight to Jaisalmer, a UNESCO WHS fortified desert city.

PM Once we land we check-in at our lovely family-run boutique hotel (2 nights). Later this afternoon we visit the fortress of Jaisalmer, with its imposing rounded bastions, narrow alleys and intricately carved golden sandstone Havelis built by the Paliwat Brahmin trading community.

Day 3

AM We spend the morning exploring the surprisingly lush and history-rich surroundings. During the C12th & C13th, when the route through the Pamirs became difficult, the Silk Route's main traffic diverted south through this region bringing great, if temporary, wealth. Abandoned cities, ancient water collection engineering, hidden oasis-like water bodies, tribal people, our morning has it all! Back to the hotel for lunch and a free afternoon.

Day 4

AM This morning we leave by road in a NE direction to Gajner. The total drive takes 5h but we break it with stops in Pokaran, and in the vicinity of Keechen village, where thousands of Demoiselle Cranes gather to winter. For

centuries local people have fed the birds as they consider them harbingers of good luck. We stop for lunch on the way at a local restaurant for a delicious 'home cooked' meal.

PM Continue to the lakeside Gajner Palace where we arrive in late afternoon (2 nights).

Day 5

AM This morning is spent walking in the extensive grounds surrounding Gajner Palace. Built of local red sandstone on the banks of a man made water body it was both a pleasure palace and hunting lodge for the Bikaner Royal family. It is surrounded by a large private wildlife reserve, which we shall explore on foot spotting for water birds, black buck, wild boar and many other species.

PM Later in the afternoon we drive to nearby Kolayat, Rajasthan's 2nd most sacred Hindu site after Pushkar. This collection of temples spread along the banks of an extensive lotus-strewn lake is a major pilgrimage destination, but is also surprisingly peaceful away from festivals.

Day 6

AM This morning a 1h drive takes us to the desert city of Bikaner, where we visit the sprawling Junagarh Fort. Unusually for Rajasthan it was not built on a hill but instead immersed in the city, it nevertheless houses one of the best art collections in the State. We then check-in for 2 nights at Narendra Bhawan, a new heritage-style hotel set in a quiet residential neighbourhood of the city.

PM We head out of town to the renowned Camel National Research Centre, Asia's largest camel-breeding farm. Here different varieties of Dromedary (One humped) are bred to improve the stock. The best are sold to the cavalry units of the Border Security Force for mounted patrols in the Thar Desert along the Pakistan frontier. One can even sample camel milk ice cream at the farm's dairy!



Day 7

AM We spend the whole morning exploring Bikaner's wonderfully unchanged labyrinthine Old City: stroll through the colourful fruit & veg and textiles Bazaars, watch the Muslim tie & dye community at work, view intricately carved sandstone Havelis, visit the frescoed Jain temple in the city fortress, there is much to see and photograph!

Day 8

AM We depart Bikaner and after 30 mins stop at the village of Deshnok to visit the world-renowned Karni Mata Temple. Dedicated to the Mother Goddess this marble temple with massive silver doors is unique as a place where devotees come to feed the multitude of resident rats. The rodents are thought to be reincarnated souls saved from the God of Death's wrath (Obviously the squeamish among you do not have to enter). Catching a glimpse of one of the few albino rats is considered highly auspicious!

We then continue (2.5h) to Nagaur and Ranvas, a lovely Heritage Hotel and the result of the recent conversion of the 'Palace of the Queens' wing of the huge Ahichatragarh, 'Fort of the Cobra's Hood' (**2 nights**). The fort, which is privately owned by the Jodhpur Maharaja, has ramparts 1.8 Km long enclosing an area of 36 acres, thus making it one of the largest private properties in the State. The Getty Foundation and the Courtauld Institute, among many, have been involved in the preservation and restoration of its many frescoed pavilions.

PM Sunset walk along the fort ramparts for an amazing bird's eye view of the surrounding city.

Day 9

AM This morning, led by the local Palace Guide, we explore the fort's frescoed palaces, and extensive courtyards and pavilions.

PM Early afternoon at leisure, with time to enjoy our hotel's lovely pool or read a book ensconced in some quiet corner. Later optional stroll in the Old City's bustling bazaars.

Day 10

AM A whole morning's drive takes to Jaipur, Rajasthan's foremost city. Here we stay at Royal Heritage Haveli, an elegant family-run boutique hotel set in a quiet neighbourhood (**2 nights**). We arrive for lunch.

PM Visit of the Albert Memorial, a museum built during the Raj to showcase India's best examples of arts & crafts; a bit like Jaipur's equivalent of the V&A.

Day 11

AM This morning we visit the extensive complex of Jaipur's City Palace and the Observatory. Back to the hotel for lunch and a free afternoon.

Day 12

AM Depart Jaipur and after a 30 minutes drive we visit Amber Fort, the C11th seat of the Kachchwaha Clan until the founding of Jaipur in 1728. Perched on a narrow rocky ridge, with extensive ramparts and fortifications, this is one of the best known of the Rajasthani forts.

Drive a further 30 minutes to Ramgarh Lodge, a lovely 13 suites Heritage Property operated by the Taj Hotel Group and located in hilly country outside Jaipur (2 nights). With excellent cuisine, bucolic location, stepped lawns and a lovely swimming pool, this once hunting lodge of the Jaipur Maharajas was built on a dam overlooking a large lake, rich farmland and close to a wildlife reserve. The reservoir, having hosted the water sports events of the 1982 Asian Games, has unfortunately been dry for many years, but the location and views are still stunning.

PM Late afternoon stroll through farmland in the vicinity of our lodge, visiting a local hamlet where inhabitants specialise in working with wicker, and the organic vegetable farms that supply our food.

Day 13

AM Morning walk in the nature reserve, along a green valley where once large numbers of crocodiles swam in the waters released from the dam. Surrounded by steep, rocky ridges the valley is an excellent place to spot for birds and other wildlife. We also visit a rock cut temple popular with local tribals.

PM Free afternoon to swim or enjoy the hotel's spa,

Day 14

AM A final morning drive takes us back to Delhi and to The Imperial Hotel (**1 night**). Lunch & dinner at The Imperial.

PM At leisure. Time to shop for souvenirs, visit a museum or a site, or to stroll to the nearby Connaught Circus.

Day 15

Transfer to Indira Gandhi International Airport for flights home.