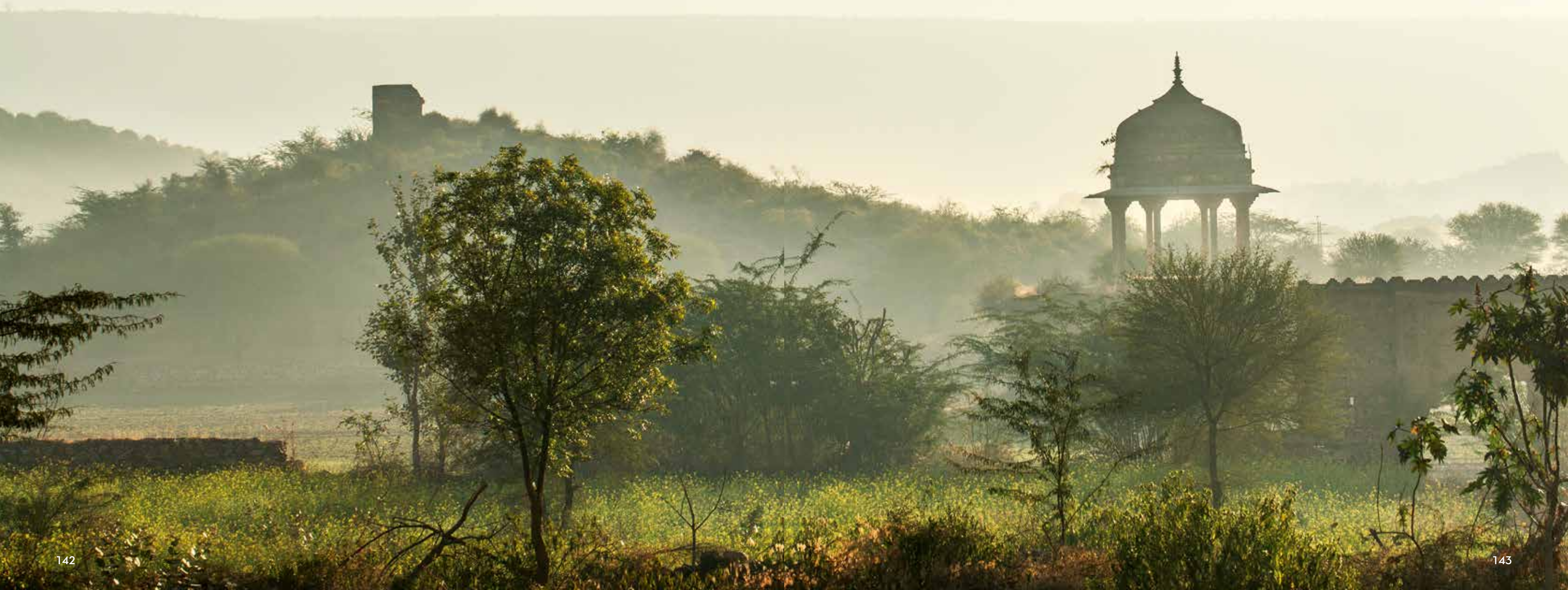


THE UNDERSTATED

Instagram-worthy fields, a tiger reserve and haunted forts: **Ruchir Joshi** finds, in this

MAGIC OF ALWAR

underrated part of Rajasthan, the perfect long weekend. Photographs by **Athul Prasad**



If, on a sharply sunny winter morning, you look out from the ramparts of Hill Fort-Kesroli across the patchwork quilt of yellow and green fields, you realise that you don't always have to escape to Provence or Tuscany for this sort of visual feast. You have, not four hours away from New Delhi, the district of Rajasthan's Alwar. Within an hour and a half of driving out of the capital, you will be breathing clean air, your eyes refreshed by the bright cadmium yellow of mustard flowers. True, the hinterland and the industrial clusters along the highway are ugly. But even here, you will begin to see odd bits of old architecture, hear the sweet sound of bird call when you stop for tea at a dhaba, feel the weight of the city sloughing off. This trip is the sort you take just to get yourself out of that urban sprawl and give yourself a breather. Awaiting you are the quaint treats of Alwar, the famous striped residents of Sariska and magnificent monuments, such as the multi-tiered Chand Baori stepwell, south of the tiger reserve, which has nearly 3,500 steps.

After about 160km on the road, you reach the outskirts of Alwar town and, bypassing its eastern edge, you come to the fields that surround the village of Kesroli. The village's 14th-century fort sits perched on a lone hillock in the middle of a flat spread of farmland. When master hotelier Aman Nath came across the old structure, it was a dilapidated place, "home for bats and owls"; as Wing Commander Mangal Singh ji, whose family inherited the fort, puts it. Kesroli became Nath's second folly, his second stroke of genius. Prior to this, in the early 1990s, he had taken a mad leap into the dark by acquiring and completely redoing the palace at Neemrana Fort. →

Clockwise from top left: **architectural details at City Palace, Alwar; a local in Ajabgarh; carvings at Neelkanth Temple; a view of Kesroli Village; handicraft in Alwar; kalakand or milk cake at the market.** Previous pages: **a view from Ajabgarh Fort**





“IF THE FORT, WITH ITS MIX OF ROUGH AND SMOOTH TEXTURES OFFERS ONE KIND OF LUXURY, AMANBAGH OFFERS A VASTLY DIFFERENT ONE”

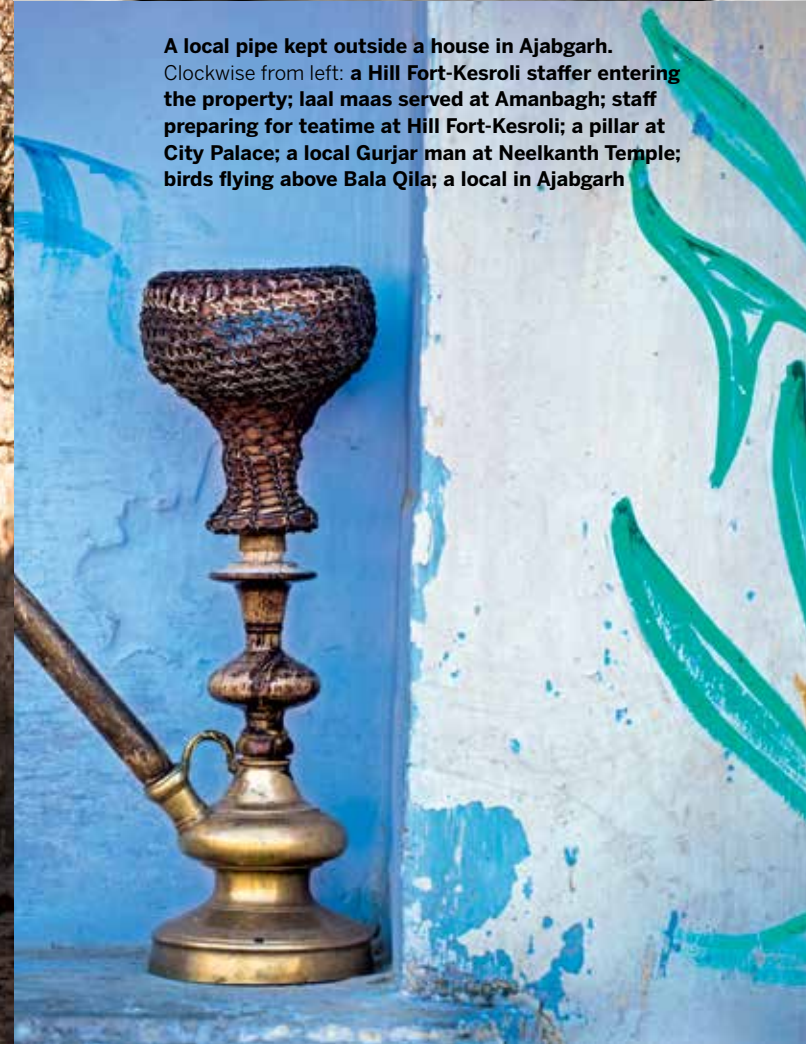
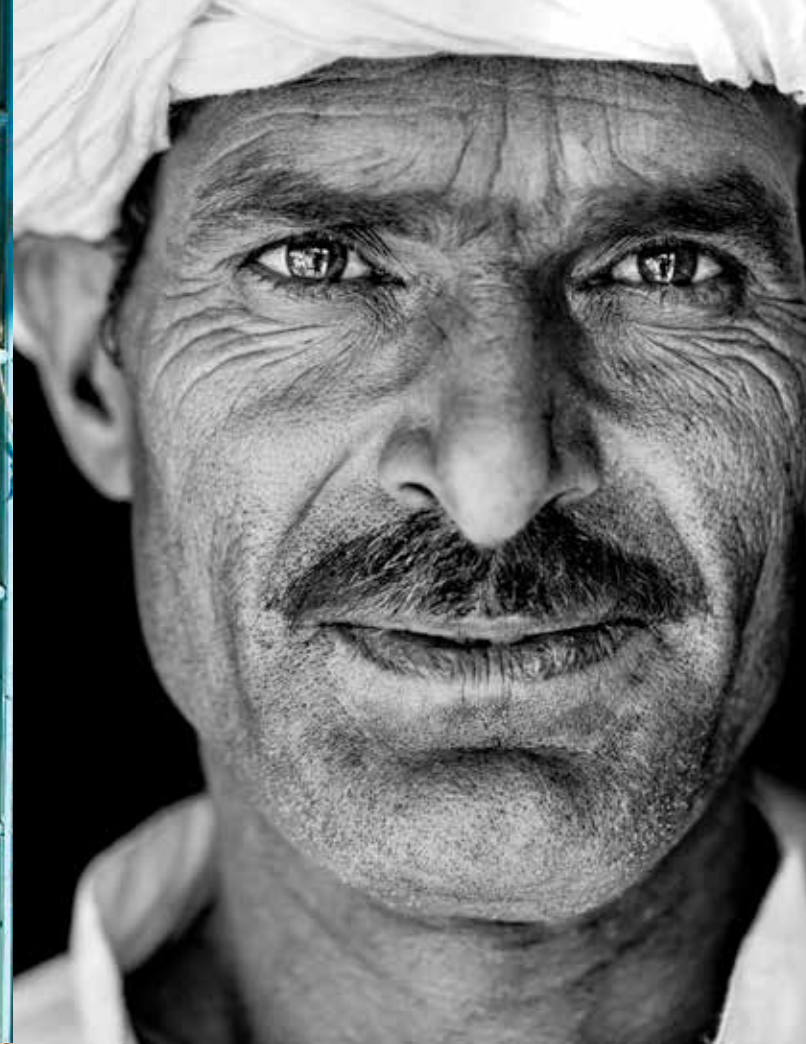
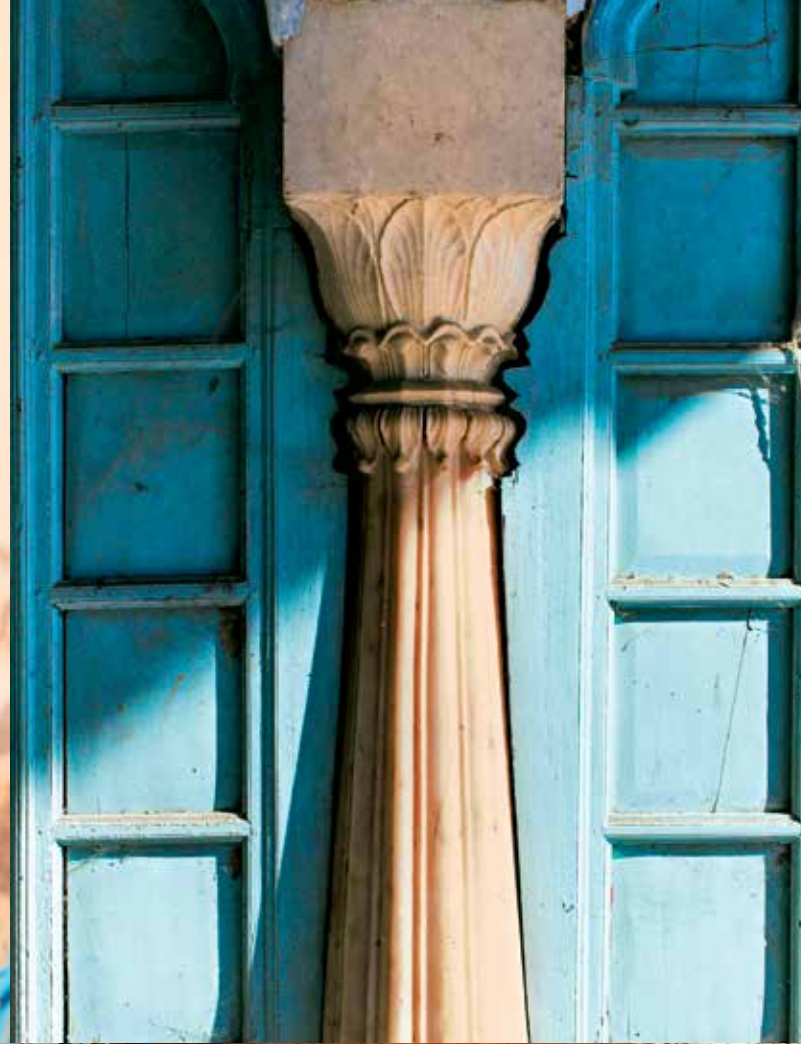
The idea of reinventing Neemrana and Kesroli, and later, Tijara Fort-Palace, as tastefully decorated hotels that retained the beautiful roughness of the old princely dwellings, with the precise injection of necessary mod-cons, (hot water, showers, air-conditioning, great food, warm service that isn't overly deferential) was radical at the time. And it would turn the tourism industry on its head, first in Rajasthan and then all across India. Now, when you return to one of the originals, you can sense the difference between a process and attitude that has been honed over decades and something that has been copied without enough thought.

At Hill Fort-Kesroli (www.neemranahotels.com; doubles from ₹3,500), you can savour your outing on different levels. The first is simply enjoying the space itself: its courtyards, winding stone pathways and turrets, the quiet of the well-appointed rooms, having a long breakfast or lunch by the swimming pool, gazing languorously at the standing crop waving at you from the breezy fields below.

Then you can venture towards the town for its low-key attractions, which include a pretty Raj-era garden and Bala Qila. If you happen to be partial to sweetened, solidified milk, you should wander around the city market and sample the kalakand. Locals claim this ubiquitous north Indian milk cake was invented here. Not far from the market, is the City Palace, once home to Kachhwaha Rajput rulers and now a museum. Alongside the swords and miniatures, the huge dining table made in silver, commissioned by Maharaja Jai Singh Prabhakar, is a rare gem. And if you think the table's OTT, then consider this oft-quoted bit of trivia — the Maharaja, in the 1920s, after being refused a test drive by a Rolls-Royce salesperson in London, bought a fleet of them for his staff to use as garbage dumpers. You will go to bed still thinking what a badass the maharaja must have been.

The next morning, leaving Kesroli early allows you to make a brief stop at the scenic Siliserh Lake, which offers lovely birding and boating, before you take the road that circles Sariska National Park towards the little-known hamlet of Ajabgarh. If the fort, with its mix of rough and smooth textures is one kind of luxury experience, Amanbagh (www.aman.com; doubles from ₹54,500) at Ajabgarh is another, vastly different one. In contrast to Kesroli's hawk-nest that gazes over →

Textured walls are a common feature in Alwar. Opposite page: **the pool at Amanbagh in the Aravalis**



A local pipe kept outside a house in Ajabgarh.
Clockwise from left: a Hill Fort-Kesroli staffer entering the property; laal maas served at Amanbagh; staff preparing for teatime at Hill Fort-Kesroli; a pillar at City Palace; a local Gurjar man at Neelkanth Temple; birds flying above Bala Qila; a local in Ajabgarh



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the surrounding landscape, this Aman Hotels property sprawls over sumptuously maintained grounds in the Aravali range. As you drive in, past the date palms and banana trees that were brought in and planted from elsewhere, the oldest fold mountain range in the world looks down upon you in all its craggy beauty, a stark contrast to the billiards-table lawns below.

You later realise the manicured outdoors merely hint at what's indoors. Luxury veers to the point of being absurd. Not that that takes away from your enjoyment of the place, of course. In the pool pavilions, the bedroom opens out to a covered stone terrace with a private lawn and a heated pool. Should you, for any reason, want to tear yourself away from this opulent life, you can visit the two nearby forts, Bhangarh and Ajabgarh. The former bears the label of being one of India's most haunted sites. Myths associated with it blame the fort's abandonment on a curse that was, depending on whom you ask, invoked either by a godman offended by a king or by a tantric who was spurned by a princess.

An easy afternoon outing begins with a drive through the magnificent landscape to an old Shiva (Neelkanth) temple hidden in the hills above the resort. Most locals claim it was built in the time of the Pandavas, but according to Sitaramji, Amanbagh's knowledgeable guide, the antiquity of the temple varies according to the myth you refer to. A few hundred metres away, on a hilltop plateau, lie the ruins of a slightly younger Jain temple. As you walk around the Shiva temple, examining the relief sculptures, the delicately carved bodies of the gods, goddesses, apsaras copulating with donkeys, all roughed up by the winds of time, you might start to hear a strange, repetitive sound from a local who has come to worship at the shrine. The farmer's body, you notice, has gone completely stiff in a trance and his friends hold him as he sways back and forth. “He is possessed,” Sitaramji explains in a hushed voice. “It can happen when the deity enters you to cleanse you of your sins.” A few kilometres away, you enter a different kind of trance inside Sariska National →

A dancer performing at Hill Fort-Kesroli. Opposite page:
tourists at Chand Baori, a 9th-century stepwell



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and Tiger Reserve. Here, it’s the immersion in nature that’s hypnotic—the stillness in the air, the lengthening shadows, the latticework of bare tree branches extending around you. Suddenly, Sitaramji’s mobile phone breaks your reverie with a message: T7, one of the park’s young tigresses, has been spotted at the edge of her area. As we go haring towards the sighting, we cross deer—sambar and spotted cheetal—monkeys and a variety of birds. Every now and then, we stop and Sitaramji sends out different animal calls into the bush. A young male sambar starts to call out, loud warning honks that indicate it has spotted danger, probably a leopard, if not T7, lurking in the rocks above. Despite Sitaramji’s best efforts, the driver going forward and back repeatedly, we can’t see the cat. But its presence is palpable in the peacocks frozen in their foraging, in the provocative, rhythmic tap of the sambar’s hooves as it tries to incite the off-stage hunter to reveal himself. T7 is not to be seen, but for 15 tense minutes, this gripping theatre plays out.

You return to the resort tired but happy, accompanied by spectacular sunset clouds colouring the hills. That evening, your meal, in keeping with the bush theme of the day, is centred around batair (quail) captured from the local forests. The bird comes in three avatars, starting with a delicate shorba, followed by mousse-like kababs and ending with the bird in a rich gravy.

As the sun rises on the last day of your long weekend, you make your way to Chand Baori, an hour’s drive away. All of Gujarat and Rajasthan are dotted with stepwells of different kinds and Chand Baori is one of the largest. As you walk around the top level, the only level where visitors are allowed, you can look down at the rhythmically carved steps that lead further and further down into the shadows, all 10 storeys of them finally reaching the rectangle of precious water. It is an amazing and beautiful feat of architecture. Symmetry admired, pictures taken, you start your return journey to Delhi. As you mull over all that you’ve seen, you realise Alwar is a bit like the baori—deceptively understated on the surface, but deeply rewarding for those who wish to explore its many levels. 📍

Clockwise from top left: **birds at Sagar Lake in Alwar;**
dhol-playing to welcome guests at Tijara Fort-Palace;
a deer at Sariska; a room at Tijara Fort-Palace; an
outdoor seating area at Hill Fort-Kesroli; a Kesroli
local wearing a vibrantly patterned shawl

