

RAJASTHAN REFRESHED

Amar Grover goes under the radar in Rajasthan to find great new hotels in less-touristy areas

When Maharaja Balwant Singh died mysteriously in 1845, some claimed it was murder. Son of a relatively low-born singer-dancer and her liaison with the Maharaja of Alwar, he had his own small kingdom centred on Tijara in eastern Rajasthan, reluctantly carved from Alwar's. For a decade, his star shone firm and bright, yet his grandest project, a hilltop palace, was never completed.

For 158 years, Tijara Fort-Palace lay ignored and almost forgotten until the Rajasthan state government initiated the first PPP (Public-Private Partnership) tourism project for its restoration. Neemrana Hotels, which has a considerable track record in reviving so-called "heritage properties" in India, stepped forward to spend a decade restoring what remained and completing what lay unfinished. There were countless bureaucratic delays; "perpetual policy paralysis" quipped some insiders. But early last year, Tijara Fort-Palace finally opened its doors.

Rajasthan's ancient forts and medieval palaces have long anchored tourism in one of India's most-visited states. New, interesting hotels, plus curiously under-the-radar properties, mean there are more and quirkier options than ever. Even moderately bolder travellers no longer need to be city-bound.

Bumping along the winding track to Tijara Fort's entrance, my first thought is that they forgot to finish the road. It is a clumsy introduction to what turns out to be a charming property with expansive views across rural Rajasthan's fields. Funnelled through an imposing gateway, you reach the Hawa Mahal (Palace of Winds) with a reception area below and high-ceilinged dining room above. ►

Tijara Fort-Palace, which lay unrestored for more than 150 years, has now been reopened as a hotel
Neemrana Hotels



Rajasthan

◀ The Hawa Mahal is one of three 19th-century buildings Neemrana had to adapt and complete. The rocky hilltop between them was sculpted and levelled, creating a swimming pool and seven terraced lawns and gardens – somewhat excessively branded the “hanging gardens” – which are beautifully maintained by a retinue of gardeners. Their lowest level edges a colonnaded terrace overlooking a long bund, which during more bountiful monsoons once created a vast seasonal lake.

Accommodation is in the Mardana and Rani Mahals, and it is here, as manager Vijay Shukla explains to me, that most of the “magic” happened. “As older buildings across Rajasthan are gradually demolished, and most people prefer newly built homes, there’s quite a bit of architectural salvage. We were constantly on the lookout for this material, things such as pillars and latticed stone screens, or jalli.” Old window frames, door jambs and archways were also used.

Before-and-after pictures displayed around the hotel helpfully illustrate the extent of this work, but not the detail. A large porch using partly cut unfinished pillars was added to the Mardana, with rooms arranged around a garden courtyard. Two floors were added to the sumptuous Rani Mahal, with suites neatly evolved from what were originally open hallways. Indian designers and artists were tasked with each room’s decor (what you might call “heritage-chic”), so no two are the same, and most have unique configurations.

About 100 kilometres southwest and barely an hour’s drive from Jaipur, Alila Hotels’ newly opened Fort Bishangarh is one of Rajasthan’s most eagerly anticipated new properties. Like Tijara, it stands atop a hill, overlooking a village – but hereafter, any similarity ends. Bishangarh was a relatively modest garrison fort that, but for its resident bats

and foraging monkeys, had long fallen into disuse.

Nine years ago, Rao Rajendra Singh and co-investors decided to develop his ancestral property. It proved a formidable challenge: Bishangarh was not really large enough to be a significant high-end hotel and there was no proper access track, never mind a motorable road. Its walls were three feet thick, none were at 90 degrees and the organic layout was puzzling.

Ritu Khandelwal of Jaipur-based Sthapatya Architects explains: “We, as a team, had immense respect for the past, and decided to create a fort truly authentic to its original nature.” Their vision was bold, almost minimalistic, and deliberately eschewed an ornate “palace” aesthetic. Several dramatic floors and wings were sympathetically added to the surviving structure; look carefully from the outside and you can still discern the profile of its original upper crenellations.

Today, its 59 suites are modern in feel, but embellished with traditional elements from jharokha windows (resembling small projecting balconies) to brass-embossed panels that nestle within elegantly tapering walls and towers that lend Bishangarh such an arresting profile. Traditional finishes have been used throughout; even the external plaster was refined so that the cracked and weathered look of the original was replicated on the modern walls. Its organic integrity has also been preserved: here and there in its corridors, granite boulders once exposed to sun and sky now jut through walls and floors.

In north-western Rajasthan, Bikaner’s new Narendra Bhawan is an extraordinary design hotel born from what was the modest home of Narendra Singh, the late Maharaja of Bikaner. For 20 years until his death in 2003, he lived here, largely detached from the



trappings of “royal” life, with his beloved cows, dogs and horses – some might say it was an eccentric existence.

Bikaner state was founded in 1465 and perhaps not leaving any male heir compounded the poignancy of his passing. Nonetheless, his royal legacy has inspired the conversion of his former home into a unique hotel.

What was an unexceptional two-storey building with a roof terrace now boasts five floors fronted in Dulmeria sandstone. Externally, it resembles a faintly modern take on a traditional haveli, the handsome, town house-like mansions of India’s prosperous urban elite.

‘As older buildings across Rajasthan are gradually demolished, and most people prefer newly built homes, there’s quite a bit of architectural salvage’

Yet the real excitement is on the inside. Once through the porch and a threshold of Portuguese floor tiles, you are in an art-deco cocoon, the effect thoroughly enhanced by smooth jazz cooing softly in the background.

I felt as if I had stepped into another country. Furniture, flooring, lighting and smoked mirrors – it has all been meticulously curated and sourced by designer Ayush Kasliwal and a team of consultants. But, you may ask, why art deco, especially when there seems little connection between it and the well-travelled but modestly-living late maharaja?

“That look,” Kasliwal explains, “was inspired by the times of Narendra Singh. And many of Bikaner’s old havelis have art-deco influences.” The furniture and fittings are a mix of vintage and contemporary. “The challenge,” Kasliwal continues, “was making the two blend seamlessly.” They seemed to have pulled that off, and its polished staff rise to the occasion whether serving drinks and nibbles by the porch-veranda or in the excellent restaurant.

This hotel’s atmosphere is almost about an imagined or reinterpreted life, a memorial to the late maharaja. Many of his ordinary possessions, from watches and medals to, oddly, combs and mirrors, are displayed in cases along with old photographs. Just about the only nod to a conventional heritage look is the snooker table and a stuffed leopard shot by his great-grandfather. ▶

Far left, Kotwara Mahal at Tijara Fort-Palace; left, the central courtyard at Narendra Bhawan Bikaner
Neemrana Hotels; Narendra Bhawan Bikaner



Left, the newly opened Alila Fort Bishangarh is one of Rajasthan’s most eagerly anticipated new properties, created from a former garrison fort that had fallen into disuse; below, the hotel’s royal heritage suite Alila Hotels & Resorts



Rajasthan

◀ There is nothing remotely imagined at Chanoud Garh, an ancestral home in the small unassuming village of Chanoud, roughly midway between Jodhpur and Udaipur. “Ours was a thakur family – landowning nobles under the Maharaja of Jodhpur,” Jairaj Singh explains. “My grandfather had expensive tastes, particularly horse racing, and although our revenue [from land] declined and the Privy Purse was abolished [in 1971], he still maintained that lifestyle.” By the 1980s, heirlooms were being sold off as and when funds were required. Nothing was maintained, the grandfather lived in one wing and bumbling servants unwittingly added to the home’s terminal malaise. In a life-changing move, Singh left the glamorous Mumbai advertising world to return, quickly followed by his younger brother and sister. “A boutique hotel or homestay; that was the answer. Work began in 2009, and we learnt a lot along the way, mistakes and all.”

Three years later the first guests arrived. Now with 10 unique rooms, it is a gem. Arranged around a garden courtyard, the mansion’s wings present an array of peaceful nooks and crannies. Personal touches, from scrumptious homestyle cuisine to informal escorted excursions, makes Chanoud feels more than a hotel, yet “homestay” doesn’t quite do justice to the experience either. Above all, staying here lends a fascinating window on rural Rajasthani life. Jairaj’s brother Mahiraj takes me into the countryside, punctuated with abrupt hills, to meet semi-nomadic Rabari shepherds and prosperous though unassuming farmers. We visit low-key temples with wonderfully strange back-stories and enjoy sundowners beside shallow lakes thick with migratory cranes. The family have also embraced their village, with a fine-tuned social conscience, and have clearly earned considerable local respect. Their clout



Clockwise from left, a suite at Chanoud Garh; and on a Jeep safari run by the hotel, which is an ancestral home in the small unassuming village of Chanoud; Fort Begu, which was built in 1430 and opened five suites in 2010; the courtyard at Chanoud Garh Chanoud Garh; Fort Begu



essentials

The flights
Etihad (etihad.com) and Emirates (emirates.com) fly direct from the UAE to Delhi from about Dh950 return including taxes.

The hotels
Double rooms at Tijara Fort-Palace (neemranahotels.com) cost from 6,670 rupees (Dh377), including breakfast. Doubles at Fort Bishangarh (alilahotels.com) cost from 29,030 rupees (Dh1,641), including breakfast. Doubles at Narendra Bhawan (narendrabhawan.com) cost from 15,360 rupees (Dh869). Doubles at Chanoud Garh (chanoudgarh.com) cost from 19,840 rupees (Dh1,122), full-board. Doubles at Fort Begu (fortbegu.com) cost from 10,000 rupees (Dh565), including breakfast.

The tours
Amar Grover travelled with Wild Frontiers (wildfrontierstravel.com). A tailor-made, nine-day itinerary via New Delhi, with one night in Tijara and two nights in each of the remaining properties, including car/driver, costs from £1,445 (Dh6,968) per person.

improved electricity and water supplies, schools and social services, and they helped raise funds for a new, much-needed primary health centre. “No matter how humble the deceased,” Jairaj says, “one of us always goes to pay condolences when there’s a death in the village.” For one of the region’s most authentic old-world hotel experiences, Fort Begu in southern Rajasthan is hard to match. Built in 1430 and augmented by numerous additions and partial renovations, Begu’s noble family opened five suites in the ancestral property in 2010. They have a traditional heritage feel; relatively simple yet comfortable and full of character. The 12-hectare complex still boasts an unusually wide (but now dry) moat. A muscular fortified wall with bastions and eight gateways effectively screen it from the town’s workaday bustle. Peacocks roam the lawns and former minister Rawat Sawai Hari Singh, an agronomist by training and the 23rd generation of the Begu line, is more than happy to regale guests with stories and good-natured chat from his favoured perch on a shaded veranda. His son Ajay elaborates on the trials of owning such a wondrous place steeped in lore and history. “There’s almost always some unexpected expense; monsoon rains cause havoc to older properties. Maintenance just never ends,” he says. While a few relatively modest quarters have been cleared because they were beyond economic repair, a section of perimeter wall was recently restored, and it is clear that paying guests are the only practical way of thwarting any further decay. “But,” Hari Singh says to me one morning after showing me his sword over breakfast, “we’ll never Disney-fy our home; it’s not a resort”. He points to the unoccupied Princes Palace alongside the main lawn. “One of our forebears was married there; the wedding lasted a

month. One whole month,” he exclaims. “And the dancing girls, they danced on the tusks of elephants. Imagine,” he beams, “the tusks.” Enthralled, I head off with the manager to survey its fascinating dilapidation. “We’re planning more suites here,” Ajay says, “but it needs a lot of work.” It is a real eye-opener: three-storeys high, with numerous rooms, chambers, terraces, balconies and squadrons of pigeons. Just enough decorative detail mainly paintings, coloured glass and inlaid mirrors remains to suggest what was, and, moreover, how it might yet be the beautiful annexe-in-waiting. In a rather quaint, almost paternalistic fashion, Fort Begu still operates with about 30 staff. Most are the descendants of former servants whose families still reside – though you would hardly know

it – in one corner of the fort near its defunct jail. One afternoon, I set off in a Jeep with a posse of attendants. About seven kilometres out of town stands Rajgarh, a dinky island-palace with its own temple linked by a little causeway to a long bund. This and the mango orchard behind remain with the family; the large tranquil lake belongs to the government. It is a lovely spot with huge trees, and guests usually come here for sundowners enjoyed on the upper pavilions. “My grandfather used to stay here for two months in summer,” Ajay explains. “That was the 1930s: 500 servants, Persian rugs, Belgian chandeliers and French furniture.” It all disappeared, stolen or vandalised at independence. Now just a shell remains. But it is a very pretty shell indeed. ■

