

BUSY BLUR: Cars and bicycles in motion on the street in Jaipur

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Jewel of India

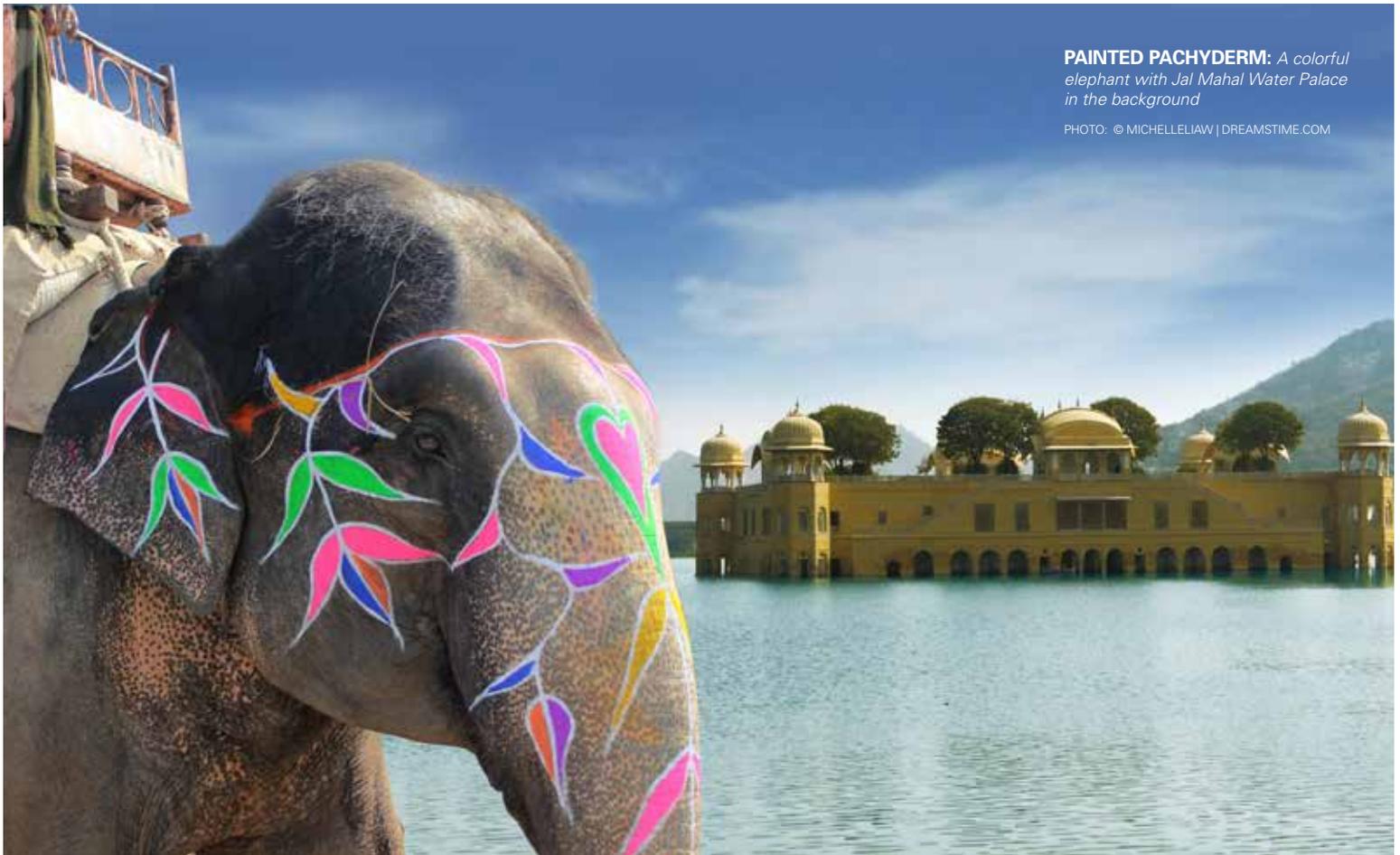
Jaipur awakens the senses with flamboyant beauty, colors, aromas and sounds. BY BECCA HENSLEY

In Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, India's most radiant state, I try to cross the street. And though it's an ample boulevard (Jaipur was the first city in India to be drawn up by meticulous city planners back in 1727), today the road overflows with traffic. Facing the salmon-hued walls that give Jaipur its nickname — the Pink City — I step off the curb toward the ornate City Palace and into an unbridled current of cars, tuk tuks, trucks, motorcycles, buses,

bicycles, pedestrians, carts and camels. Oh, yes, even a painted elephant and a few lumbering, sacred cows.

Cacophonous, the sounds of the street meld laughter, horns, clamorous engines, hawkers selling their wares and birds tweeting. All around me, a Technicolor blur includes gem-colored saris, lucent turbans and the golden rays of sun hitting the street. The humid breeze brings the perfume of coriander, cumin and rose petals from the spice market just out of sight, as well as the acrid scent of decay from garbage left to rot. This city is the best and worst of everything I've seen in my life — an exotic treasure trove of mystery, surprise and delight.

Thankfully, at my side I have Hem Singh, guide extraordinaire for Micato Safaris, resident of Jaipur and descendant of a local royal family. He knows how to navigate the streets. Under his tutelage I pass safely through the bedlam to discover the many reservoirs of tranquility and elegance that evoke Jaipur's regal past. Here the royal family still inhabits the City Palace amid a



PAINTED PACHYDERM: *A colorful elephant with Jal Mahal Water Palace in the background*

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JUST THE FACTS

Time zone: GMT +5.5

Phone code: Country code: 91

City code: 141

Currency: Indian rupee

Official language: Hindi

Entry/Exit Requirements: All foreign nationals are required to have a valid passport and a visa for entry. A new online process makes this easier than in the past. Malaria medicine may be suggested during certain seasons in certain provinces of the nation.

Key Industries: Textiles, gemstones, tourism

INFO TO GO

Jaipur International Airport lies approximately 10 miles from town. If you booked with a legitimate outfitter such as Micato, you will be greeted and whisked through the airport and on to your hotel. Otherwise, hop into a taxi, which costs around \$20. Major airlines fly into Jaipur from Delhi, Mumbai or Udaipur.

splendorous fusion of Mughal and Hindu architecture. Not far away, the glamorous polo field awaits, where watching a match becomes a quintessential Jaipur moment. Popularized by the late maharaja of Jaipur, Indian polo continues to draw swanky crowds stunningly clad in silk, chiffons, rubies, emeralds and pearls. To join them and to be sure I dress the part, I partake of another Jaipur essential: shopping. A thriving commercial center, with tourism and the arts as its chief industries, the city boasts a merchant history dating back to the era of the Silk Road, when the kingdom was an important stop along the route. Today the city draws business travelers in the textile, gem and jewelry industries — not to mention leisure shoppers who take advantage of Jaipur’s reputation as the best place to shop in India.

Less immense than Delhi or Mumbai, much more historic, vibrant Jaipur has always been wealthy and thriving due to its large merchant and royal class. Today its major exports are ready-made garments, gems and jewelry, handicrafts, wooden furniture, leather goods, and marble and granite mined from the quarries just outside of town in the arid Aravali Hills.

According to local city official Naresh Joshi, the city’s real estate values are up and economic activ-

ity, especially in the arts and tourism, is soaring. Jet Airways, Air India, Indigo and Spice Jet all fly into Jaipur from various cities, with more flights added all the time. Joshi also notes that while traditional businesses using time-honored techniques, such as enamel and brass ateliers, stay true to the ways of the past, Jaipur continues to adopt modern and progressive business models.

“Startups are booming here,” he says. Stores such as The Gem Palace, established in the mid-19th century and India’s oldest jewelry house, provide commercial gravitas, catering to celebrities, film stars, politicians and royalty. At the same time, newer boutiques, such as Trunks, established by two brothers who offer bespoke leather trunks, re-invent the concept of craft creations to the beat of a new century and its luxury-loving denizens.

Beyond those in search of a sapphire necklace, Jaipur welcomes throngs of tourists and bibliophiles at the Jaipur Literature Festival, occurring in January each year. Touted as the “greatest literary show on Earth,” the festival, popularly referred to as “Lit Fest,” pulls in prominent authors such as Margaret Atwood and J.K. Rowling as well as book aficionados from around the globe to its seminars, presentations and

CHECKING IN WITH HEM SINGH

Tour guide, Micato

Jaipur seems both ancient and modern. How does it reflect India today?

The old part of Jaipur is like an elegant museum and has a rich heritage. Yes, Jaipur also has a growing contemporary part that reflects the modern development in the city. It is the essence of India today.

What insider places do you show people on bespoke tours of Jaipur?

We can show travelers Jaipur like no one else. I like to take them into the old city — so ethnic and typical of India. Every street has a different specialty: textiles, jewelry, handicrafts. But amidst what you expect to see there are hidden gems the usual visitor won't see. I also enjoy showing tourists a typical traditional *haveli* (an old-time merchant mansion) with architecture, art and old mirror work that makes it unique and interesting. To look deeper, I like to show visitors the real Jaipur — to meet the local people, hear about the Rajput culture and heritage.

Haggling in the market is a common sight in India. What are your tips for getting the best deal?

When a store owner tells you this is his best price, smile and

bargain some more until you get the “real” best price. The friendly banter will not only get you a better price, but you will also make a friend. Every traveler should bring home a Jaipur quilt (light and easy to carry), jewelry and textiles as a memory of their trip.

Describe your perfect day in Jaipur.

A leisurely breakfast followed by walking my guests through the old city. Then a visit to my favorite site, Amber Fort. Apart from the beauty of the structure — which in my opinion beats the Taj Mahal — the views from the terrace are amazing. My perfect day ends with a game of golf, ending on the 19th hole (the bar!).

What are Jaipur's most iconic shops?

The most iconic include Gem Palace from Siddharth Kasliwal, Silver & Art Palace, Amrapali, Anokhi (Textiles), Royal Gems & Art, Handicraft Haveli, Indigo and Jewels Emporium.

Where else in India should a business traveler to Jaipur visit?

My top three suggestions are Udaipur, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer.

It is easier than ever to visit India's Golden Triangle, a beloved tourist route connecting Jaipur with the national capital Delhi and the Taj Mahal's home, Agra.

KALEIDOSCOPE: Brilliant textiles and jewelry are popular items sold at Jaipur markets.

PHOTO: © MARINA PISSAROVA | DREAMSTIME.COM





workshops. Also favored, Pushkar Camel Fair, located about three hours away in the ancient Lilliputian town of Pushkar, has become one of Jaipur's most anticipated annual social affairs. Each November thousands of people rove the banks of Pushkar Lake to buy and sell livestock, from camels to goats. Camel races and beauty contests amuse, and craftspeople vend bracelets, fabrics and textiles.

Awakening all the senses, Jaipur hums with a characterful intensity. Like a flower in the khaki-colored, weather-scorched landscape, the city exudes grace and beauty. Perhaps Jaipur's metaphor is the way its residents dress. As the flamboyant antithesis to the lackluster hues of the desert, they don towering turbans in bright colors and rainbow-hued clothing. Jodhpurs, boots and startling mustaches on men lend a further dramatic effect. So it only makes sense I visit a seamstress, buy a bolt of emerald-hued silk and have her make me a sari. I wear it to the City Palace with Hem Singh to meet his friend, the current maharaja, for dinner. Quixotic, the evening, like Jaipur itself, resembles a storybook tale or hazy dream.

DIVERSIONS

Visit the Amber Fort on the crest of a craggy hilltop overlooking Lake Moata, just outside of town. Built from white and red sandstone, it features rough, fortress-like exteriors; lavish interiors influenced by both Hindu and Muslim ornamentation; and daunting, mural-covered walls and frescoes that depict ancient scenes from daily life. For an uplifting perspective, hover above the fort — and the rest of the city — inside the basket of a hot air balloon. To delve further into local culture, visit the Birla Temple, known for its centuries-old fire rituals and prayer ceremonies.

STRENGTH AND BEAUTY: Jaipur's Amber Fort

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1135 AD
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Amber Fort
amberfort.org

Amrapali Jewels
amrapalijewels.com

Anokhi Cafe
anokhicafe.com

Anokhi Textiles
anokhi.com

Birla Temple
birlatemple.com

The Gem Palace
gempalacejaipur.com

Handicraft Haveli
handicrafthaveli.in

Incredible India
incredibleindia.org

Indian Visa Online
indianvisaonline.gov.in

Indigo Jewellery
indigojewellery.com

Jaipur Literature Festival
jaipurliteraturefestival.org

Micato Safaris
micato.com/india

The Oberoi Rajvillas
oberoihotels.com

Pushkar Camel Fair
pushkarcamelfair.com

Raj Mahal
oberoihotels.com

Rampaugh Palace
taj.tajhotels.com

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