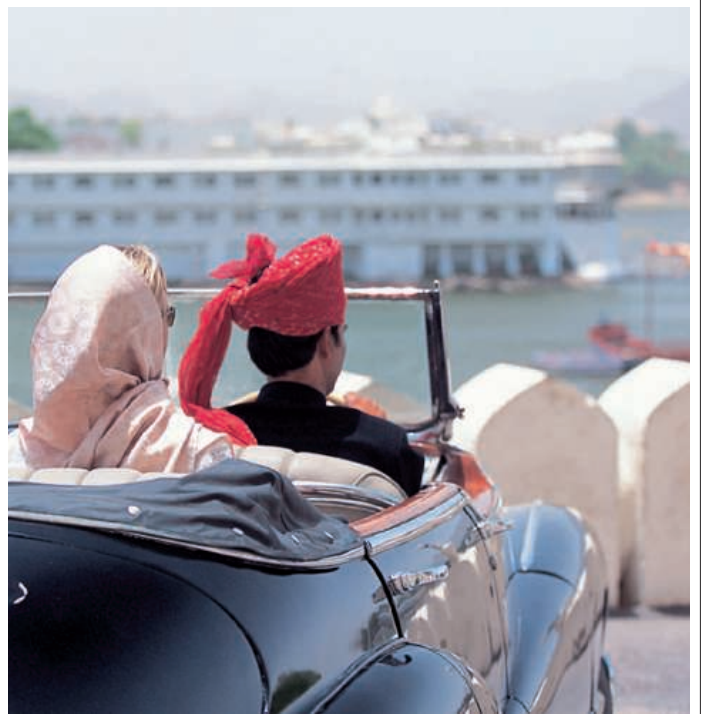


# ROYAL RAJASTHAN





Guests will be treated like royalty in Rajasthan's palatial hotels.  
*By James Durston*



If India is a land of extremes then Rajasthan, its biggest state, is a land of contrasts. Nothing better illustrates this than the moment I arrive at the final stop in my eight-day tour of the top heritage hotels of the region.

We have been driving for three hours across rocky desert and through dusty towns. Finally we enter the village that is wrapped around the hotel and wind our way through its middle, where people, cattle and rickshaws fight for the right of way along the sides of the narrow lane.

Then, when we enter the hotel grounds, the cacophony of village life is suddenly muffled. A suited man opens my door with a smile and passes me a glass of sweet lime juice. I step out into a shower of rose petals and a brightly dressed girl smears a bindi on to my forehead. Marble arches and towering columns reach skywards, and trickling fountains and a shimmering swimming pool sparkle sunlight on to every surface.

This is a place fiercely proud of its history, and nowhere is this more apparent than in its heritage hotels, past homes of the Maharajas who ruled the region for centuries before India's independence.

Take the Laxmi Niwas Palace in Bikaner. It is a red sandstone colossus, intricately carved, meticulously maintained and

filled with memorabilia from its heyday. The family still lives in the palace complex, although they are rarely seen. As I stroll down empty corridors, footsteps echoing off the marble stone, it feels more like a museum or a gargantuan shrine than a luxurious palace hotel.

Many cities contain several old palaces, and while all the state's hotels put on local activities, such as camel safaris, dancing girls and temple visits, it is these heritage hotels that offer an experience you won't find anywhere else.

Each has a very distinctive character. In stark contrast to the regal aloofness of Laxmi Niwas is the warmly intimate Deogarh Mahal in Deogarh, with its narrow, snaking corridors, well-preserved wall paintings and tiles and palatial furniture and furnishings. Plus, the entire palace roof can be accessed to watch the sunrise on one side and the sunset on the other. Many will come here looking for a pitstop between Jodhpur and Udaipur and will leave with the best memories of their trip.

Some properties feel more like hotels than palaces and if that's what you are after you won't do much better than to visit the Taj Lake Palace in Udaipur. The emphasis is on luxurious comforts and romantic indulgence, and being situated in the middle of a lake surrounded by mountains, makes this one of the world's

most idyllic resorts. A sculpted garden, superb restaurants and wonderful views mean you could easily spend two days here without leaving the island.

The Grand Laxmi Vilas Palace, meanwhile, is more of a new hotel than a heritage palace and is better suited to those who want contemporary luxuries rather than a historical experience.

In contrast, Devi Garh resort, just 19 miles outside Udaipur, shows what can be achieved with the right location. Just a shell when the owner bought the palace, it has been turned into a glorious rural retreat, nestling at the foot of the Aravalli hills and in the middle of a working Rajasthanian village. While the rose-petal welcome may be a little over the top, it is a perfect way to avoid the hustle of Udaipur and gives a clear illustration of the difference between the rural life endured by the majority of Rajasthanis and that of the lucky few who ruled over them from their forts.

After a week touring these magnificent resorts, you could be forgiven for feeling like a blue-blood yourself. The service is friendly and attentive, the food, both Indian and continental, is rarely disappointing, and the sense of history is outstanding.

Seldom can regressing to a period of bloody wars and noble sacrifice, and of extravagant decadence and fanciful pampering, be so enchanting.

# Devi Garh Resort, Udaipur

**Brief description:** Devi Garh resort, a fort built 250 years ago, is an awkward and ambitious construction, at odds with the meek village life over which it towers. The rooms are sleek, clutter-free and equipped with all the mod-cons. The restaurants and separate dining areas, which are dotted around in various cavities through the palace and can be reserved for private meals, are fresh and intimate. And it must be one of the only hotels in the world to offer a room, the Devi Garh suite, with its own private swimming pool. A fantastic spa (go for the Marma massage; 90 minutes of pure heaven) and gym complete everything you need for a memorably indulgent stay.

**Like:** The sounds of village life as you eat breakfast.

**Dislike:** The pool is closed by mid-evening.

**Rating out of five:** 4.5

**Contact:** deviresorts.com; +91 295 328 9211



## Rajasthan information

**Where:** Northwest India, bordering Pakistan.

**Capital:** Jaipur.

**Time difference:** GMT+5.5 hours.

**Visa for India:** A six-month tourist visa can be obtained in person from the Indian High Commission in London or at the Indian Consulate Generals in Birmingham or Edinburgh. Go to [hclondon.net/visa](http://hclondon.net/visa) for forms and details.

**Climate:** Generally hot and dry, with monsoon season during July and August. During the hottest months of May and June temperatures can hit 50C.

**Contact:** [rajasthantourism.gov.in](http://rajasthantourism.gov.in); UK tel: 020 7437 3677.

**Get there:** Airlines flying direct from London to Delhi include British Airways, Jet Airways, Air India and Virgin Atlantic. The 190 miles from Delhi to Jaipur can be driven, flown or done by rail.

**Sample package:** Kuoni Travel offers the 10-night India in Style on a bed-and-breakfast basis, staying two nights in Delhi, two nights in Agra, three nights in Jaipur, one night in Devi Garh and two nights in Udaipur, including flights from Heathrow with Jet Airways, transfers and domestic flights in resort, from £2,563 per person for August 2008, based on two sharing.



## Ajit Bhawan, Jodhpur

**Brief description:** Ajit Bhawan, located opposite the imposing Umaid Bhawan Palace, has been turned into a pleasant resort-style hotel away from the chaos of the old town, with various types of rooms including garden-facing huts and luxurious suites. A glorious terrace-top pool with an original water wheel is a fantastic addition. As well as being more affordable than Umaid Bhawan, which is now run by Taj Hotels, Ajit Bhawan is also still home to

Maharaj Ajit Singh's descendents. However, little appears to have been done to retain any of the character of a working palace, so if a true heritage experience is what you want, you may leave disappointed.

**Like:** The collection of classic cars available to hire.

**Dislike:** The palatial essence has been lost.

**Rating out of five:** 3.5

**Contact:** [ajitbhawan.com](http://ajitbhawan.com); +91 291 251 3333

## Taj Lake Palace, Udaipur

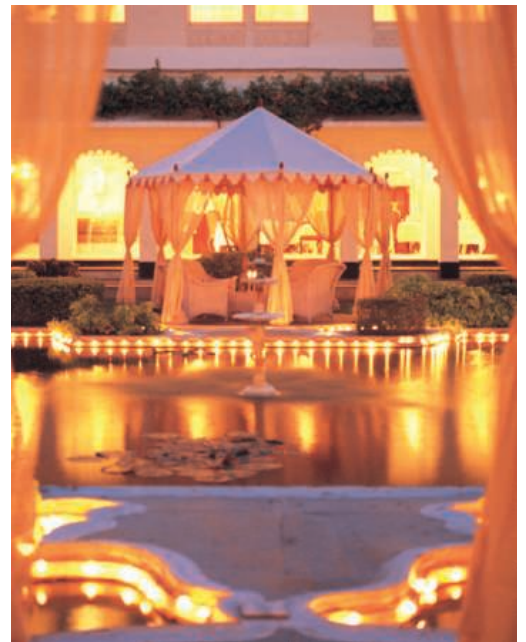
**Brief description:** Surrounded by water and with the Aravalli Hills creating a dramatic backdrop, The Taj is a great choice for a romantic getaway. The white marble makes the 250-year-old 'pleasure palace' of former Maharana Jagat Singh appear to glow on the lake's surface. Inside, the 83 rooms, each with a personal 24-hour butler, are individually themed. The large suites retain all the grandeur of a royal home, and although the smaller rooms feel more like you're on a luxury yacht, there is a wonderful sense of escapism.

**Like:** If you book a basic room in low season but suites are available, you will often get a free upgrade.

**Dislike:** A bit pricey, with rooms from £300 to £5,000 per night.

**Rating out of five:** 5

**Contacts:** [tajhotels.com](http://tajhotels.com); +91 294 242 8800



## Deogarh Mahal, Deogarh

**Brief description:** Most people ignore Deogarh on their way to either Udaipur or Jodhpur. Big mistake. The Deogarh Mahal, built in 1670, offers one of the most authentic heritage breaks in India. Original and untouched paintings, tiles, windows and mirrorwork can be found scattered throughout this labyrinthine fort. The hands-on touch from owner Veerbhadra Singh Chundawat (but call him VB) ensures you really feel like a guest rather than a customer. A pool, a spa centre, a small gym and an excellent restaurant add some modern comforts to the heritage experience. And if you need to get away you can also stay at two out-of-town resorts nearby, also owned by the family. Fort Seengh Sagar is a wonderfully restored lake-side castle with just four rooms, and Deogarh Khayyam is a collection of 16 luxury tents for outdoor types.

**Like:** The charming owner and original features make you feel like a personal guest of a Rajasthani noble.

**Dislike:** The electricity and hot water supplies can be a bit erratic.

**Rating out of five:** 4.5

**Contacts:** deogarhmahal.com; +91 2904 52777



Deogarh Mahal

## Laxmi Niwas Palace, Bikaner

**Brief description:** Laxmi Niwas is possibly the most architecturally impressive palace hotel in Rajasthan. Intricate filigree is carved into nearly every inch of the colossal red sandstone façade, and inside cavernous rooms and winding hallways give a real sense of royal spaciousness. There are several acres of grounds and you may even spot a few wild peacock, while in the evening you can watch the sunset from one of

the many roof-top terraces.

**Like:** Fantastic service and the sense of history is palpable, with old pictures lining every wall and historical references in every room.

**Dislike:** The dozens of tiger, lion and leopard skins pinned to the walls of the bar and billiards room will not be to everyone's taste.

**Rating out of five:** 4

**Contacts:** laxminiwaspalace.com; +91 151 220 2777

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