


Gateway to India:

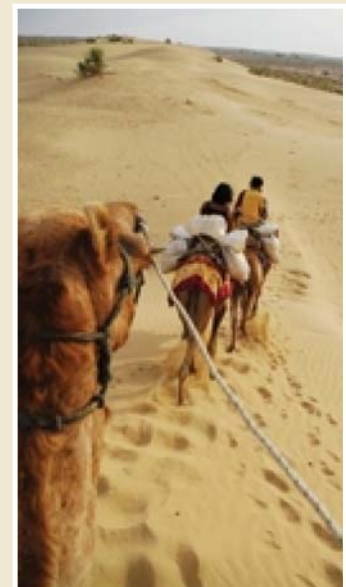
Jaisalmer

**Ghazala Irshad gets
swept off her feet in
the Land of Kings**

I wake to find myself glued by sweat to my blue plastic seat, blinking dust out of my eyes, and feeling with my tongue the gritty taste of sand in my teeth. I look over at my cousin Nurus Sabah sleeping under a blanket of fine sand in the bunk across from me in our berth and realise that we both look like we've just rolled down a sand dune. It's evident that the sandman of the Thar Desert has paid us a nocturnal visit to ensure we're well-rested and alert this morning, although it isn't clear why—until we look out of the barred windows of our train: he didn't want us to miss a thing.



Prince Kesari riding to his palace 



The journey to Jaisalmer, near the Pakistan border in the northwestern state of Rajasthan, a backdrop for numerous Bollywood blockbusters like *Sarfarosh* and *Border*, is an intriguing and alluring lead-in through the Thar Desert. A vast ochre plain of desolate, parched terrain stretches beyond the horizon, peppered with camels and goats feeding on thorny scrubs. Bone dry carcasses lay nearby as vultures circle overhead. The sight of thatched-roof mud huts in this water-scarce, sparsely vegetated landscape begs the questions: Who could actually live here? And how?

The answers proudly emerge from their huts in colourful turbans and sparkling saris, like exotic flowers in full bloom. Their vivid hues shine boldly in stark contrast to their surroundings, as if to challenge me for daring to question their being. They walk barefoot along the burning earth—the women’s silver payals tinkling and the men’s heads held high in defiance of the scorching sun—to let me know that, in a land where survival of the fittest determines their existence, they hadn’t just survived—they ruled.

The Rajputs of Jaisalmer have a long and storied history of demonstrating their fighting spirit in valiantly guarding their land, culture, and values

Duly noted, I tell myself as I brush myself off after stepping out of the dusty train, only to step into an even dustier Jeep sent by our guesthouse. It's no surprise that even these nomads carry themselves like royalty—it's in their blood, after all. Rajasthan means "land of kings," and its people, the Rajputs, the "sons of kings."

The Rajputs of Jaisalmer have a long and storied history of demonstrating their fighting spirit in valiantly guarding their land, culture, and values against several Mughal conquests over the centuries. So fierce is this warrior caste's pride that they are renowned for choosing death before dishonour at the hands of the enemy. On multiple occasions throughout history, when faced with imminent defeat, the women committed jauhar, or mass suicide in the flames of a collective pyre during the night, while the men performed saka, riding out to the battlefield the next morning to fight until their last breath.



▲ The valiant Rajput



▲ The city of Jaisalmer

The Jaisalmer Rajputs' bravery in battle is as legendary as the grand prize which they fought to protect—the golden city's crowning glory: the formidable fortress of yellow sandstone atop the 80-metre high Trikuta hill, resembling a tawny lioness guarding her territory below. On the horizon, the ancient citadel rises like a misty mirage from an amber sea of sand, but as we draw closer, the vision deepens into an imposing stronghold that's been doing its job for nearly 900 years, rendering Sabah and I mere mortals in its presence.

If all this sounds like a filmi fantasy, then you're partially right—world-famous Bengali Indian filmmaker and writer Satyajit Ray's mystery novel

and film of the same name, *Sonar Kella* (Golden Fortress), is based around this jewel of Jaisalmer—but for us, it's reality.

After its founding in 1156, Jaisalmer's location at the crossroads of the central Asian overland trade route allowed the desert outpost to thrive on trade with passing camel caravans laden with silk and spices. Palatial havelis, intricately carved from yellow sandstone, sprung up all over the city, and for centuries, its residents virtually bathed in a river of riches. Unfortunately, Jaisalmer's wealth dried up with the rise of commercial shipping and the seaport of Bombay, and its increasingly agriculturally dependent economy was worsened by



“Ayye, humara sangeet sunye—sirf ek gaana!” (Come, listen to our music—just one song!)

nomadic musical storytellers who have travelled throughout the Thar, depicting daily life through traditional folk songs and dances. These gypsy performers have rhythmically woven their heritage into the rich cultural fabric of Jaisalmer. Most eke out livings performing for tourists’ tips, and some have even gone on world tours or served as entertainers for maharajas. It’s quite audible, though, that all have an intense connection with the music. This soundtrack plays as we arrive at the hilltop just in time to catch the already radiant citadel stealing the last glints of the disappearing sun to glisten even more brilliantly.

On our way to dinner, a voice calls out in the darkness from above. We look up to see a turbaned man with a handlebar moustache smiling down at us from a rooftop. “Ayye, humara sangeet sunye—sirf ek gaana!” (Come, listen to our music—just one song!) Our stomachs grumble in protest, but to miss an opportunity to hear the pulsing beat of Rajasthan live from its heart in Jaisalmer would be a crime. Just one song, Sabah and I tell both the man and our tummies as we follow a hypnotic melody upstairs.

We seat ourselves on the small carpeted terrace in front of four tunic-clad men. One of them leads on the harmonium and another beats a dholak; the other two provide backup vocals. Their backdrop: the glittering fortress. Before singing they explain the song’s origin; it’s a traditional love ballad sung in the local Marwari dialect “about the beauty of the desert, for the beauties of the desert,” the harmonium player says flirtatiously.

drought and famine at the turn of the 20th century. After the partition of 1947, particularly during the India-Pakistan wars, Jaisalmer’s strategic position near the border once again brought about its revival as a major army base.

Despite the rapidly changing world around it, to this day, like the bastion that has often been attacked but taken only once, Jaisalmer’s look and way of life have remained virtually untouched by the hands of time. It would be a lie to say its residents haven’t capitalised on it, but they certainly haven’t exploited it. Surely, its authenticity is a major appeal to visitors looking to be transported back in time, but there’s something more to this magic kingdom. I discover

that it’s not just a destination—it’s an experience.

Sabah and I take a big whiff of the clean air as we walk past peddlers wheeling carts heaped with market-fresh fruit and flowers and barrel-bellied cows sleeping serenely in the sandy street. Coming off the hectic Rajasthan tourist circuit, full of noisy, filthy crowds, the simplicity and genuine quaintness all around us is a refreshing change of pace and a welcome relief.

At the behest of our guesthouse, Sabah and I make a quick pit stop to view the sun set from atop a hill in an area known as the “artists’ colony” before dinner. The bohemian neighbourhood is home to generations of historically



Camels transporting goods amongst the sand dunes of Jaisalmer ▲

From the very first note he belts out from his soul into the night, Sabah and I are so mesmerised that we forget all about our one-song limit. From classical Urdu ghazals and qawwalis (Sufi devotional songs) to Hindi filmi gaane, the musicians string us along with their deep poetic passion. It's an experience so surreal that I have to step outside of myself to visualise it: on a rooftop under a full moon, Sabah and I, with all the zeal of whirling dervishes, are clapping and dancing deliriously while being serenaded by mystical desert gypsies. The notes still waft and linger temptingly in the air behind us when we're pulled away by our hunger, by this time a force more powerful than music.

For our first dinner in Jaisalmer, the musicians say ladies like us shouldn't settle on "anything less than a feast fit for a queen," and point us across the chowk toward the honey-hued Nachana Haveli, with an entrance guarded by two yellow sandstone lions. Since the end of the overland trade era, many former merchants have been forced to turn private haveli residences like this one into heritage hotels or museums to survive. Nachana is actually a haveli owned by the noble family that has been turned into a heritage hotel with a terrace restaurant, Saffron, overlooking the fortress and the adjoining royal palace.

We drool over the authentic Rajasthani fare featured on the menu. Because of the scarcity of water and fresh vegetables in this arid region, liberal amounts of native or more available ingredients like milk and ghee (clarified butter), chilli, beans, lentils, millet, and gram flour are used to compensate. Like the people of this desert belt, the cuisine is characterised by equally generous portions of spice in the savoury dishes and sugar in the sweets, from laal maans (meat cooked in red chilli curry) to churma. According to our menus, one of the princes of Jaisalmer himself taught the Saffron staff how to prepare the royal family's favourite centuries-old delicacies now offered at the restaurant.

After stuffing ourselves silly, Sabah and I get snap happy on the terrace with my camera. Our surroundings are too gorgeous for me to maintain any kind of decorum, even if we are at a haveli owned by nobility. We pause for a moment to look at a dimly lit square, wondering aloud what it might be.

"That's the royal stable," says a voice behind us, causing me to nearly fall off the edge. I turn around to see a tall, well-built man in his late 20s brushing a thick lock of his wavy mane from his dark, deep-set eyes. His manner is as casual as his jeans and T-shirt. "I train and exercise the horses myself every day before sunrise. Would you girls like to join me tomorrow morning so I can teach you horseback riding?"

Our eyes widen in recognition as the information registers in our brains: it's Prince Kesari. Fifth generation royal resident and part-owner of this haveli/hotel/restaurant which I'd just treated like a common tourist attraction. The prince, whom we just read about in our menu as the man who taught the staff how to cook the food we'd just scarfed down like animals. I almost die of mortification right then and there.

"So...would you like to?" he asks again, jolting us out of our stupor.

As if we would say no to a prince. We manage to regain composure and reply with a very nonchalant, "Oh, yeah sure, that sounds good."

"Great! Just ring my mobile around 4:30am," he says. My palms moisten as I enter the digits in my phone.

"I deduced by the smiles on your faces tonight that you've enjoyed your time in Jaisalmer so far. I hope I can help make the rest of your stay a memorable experience. Dhanyavaad." And with that, Prince Kesari leaves Sabah and I still standing for a moment, too stunned to speak.

We just want to run squealing all the way back to our guesthouse, but Prince Charming, ever the chivalrous gentleman, sends a staff member to escort us because of the late hour.

A few hours later, under the cloak of a starry night, the prince trots into the royal stable on a white stallion named Sultan (“king” in Arabic, ha!). We go to a plot of land adjacent to his family’s opulent “guest palace,” where Sabah and I take turns desperately trying not to make fools of ourselves on the back of the horse and when opening our mouths.

Horseback riding by moonlight with a prince in front of his palace is every bit as dreamy as it sounds. Our fantasy continues through sunrise, when he leads us through the palace to a poolside courtyard for some chitchat over chai. He may or may not have sensed our inhibitions, but during the next three hours, accompanied by a soundtrack of warbling birds (each of which he’s able to identify immediately), Kesari shows us that he’s anything but a typical nobleman to be reticent around.

After regaling us with tales of his hilarious misadventures in thrill-seeking (nearly being gored by a wild bull that he eventually domesticated, breaking several bones falling from a waterfall, and shooting off his car’s side view mirror while hunting) and seeing our jaws drop, Kesari admits, “I sound a bit mad, but what’s a life of unclaimed chances? I’d rather live *bindaas* (carefree) and die without any regrets.”

His disposition and thought-provoking words have an inspiring effect. But it turns out Kesari is mad and wants proof of our newly freed spirits, setting the tone for the rest of our time with him in Jaisalmer. Later, while watching the sun set over the sand dunes from a garden full of peacocks at yet another one of his palaces, he challenges me to climb one of the giant trees. I’m wearing flimsy sandals, but I refuse to lose a bet, even to a prince. Barefoot, I scale the tree to within an inch of my life (though I need his help getting down).

At twilight, we drive silently and aimlessly through the desert, growing more enchanted as the inky night is illuminated with each star that switches on. Here, the stars seem so big and close that I want to pluck them out of the sky as we drive by. We stop the car in what feels like the middle of nowhere and are humbled by the breathtaking infinity all around us; it’s as if time has stood still and we’re in a giant snow globe with stars and sand swirling about. Even Kesari, who has seen this many times before, is spellbound.



I point out a building looming in the distance and ask what it is. I should have known Kesari’s answer would be “let’s find out,” impulsive as he is. It’s an abandoned fort in ruins, and it’s hauntingly beautiful. After some resistance from Sabah, who has an unnatural fear of the supernatural, the three of us end up on the terrace, wordlessly basking in the glow of the moon. I reflect on the sights and feelings we’ve encountered in the 24 hours since we’ve met the prince. We’ve experienced Jaisalmer as a place we never knew from his fantastic point of view, as if he’s shown us (forgive me, but I couldn’t resist) a whole new world.

It’s unreservedly romantic, and Sabah and I are falling hard and fast (for Jaisalmer, of course). On the way back to town, Kesari abruptly stops the car and turns off the headlights, silencing our chatter as our eyes adjust to the sudden dark. Then, just as suddenly, he switches on the headlights: there in the middle of the road, perfectly framed in the glare, is a mother camel with her calf. Sabah and I are awestruck both at the sight and at how he conjured up such a vision for us, but there was no charm involved—only Kesari’s keen hunter’s eye spotting peripheral movement. Regardless, this finale to our Arabian night fairytale has completely swept us off our feet.

There are more magical moments in Jaisalmer over the next few days, both with and without Kesari—from losing ourselves in the labyrinth of lanes while browsing the bazaars inside the fortress to falling asleep to the sound of huffing camels in a “thousand-star hotel” on wind-caressed sand dunes during our safari. But one thing’s for sure: we’ve only had a taste of Jaisalmer’s mouth-watering desert (not a typo) and we will surely be back for more. [Ⓜ]