

hump DAYS

In a remote corner of Rajasthan, **Shaun Busuttill** explores the Thar Desert from high atop a camel.

Photography by **Philip Charlie Malmqvist**

The figure making his way towards us gradually comes into view, and our guides announce ‘the butcher’ has arrived. He’s wearing a blue kurta with white ali babas (light cotton pants). Then I notice something black attached to the back of his camel and it appears to be moving. Instantly the knot in my belly tightens.

“I can’t believe they’re actually going to do this,” I whisper to my friend Charlie as we watch the butcher sharpen his knife with the precision of a surgeon. His focus is intense; his technique almost hypnotic. There’s no doubt he’s done this before.

I had no intention of having goat on my plate on Christmas Eve, certainly not out here in the remote dunes on the outer edges of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan. Our guides, however, had promised us something special for this magical night under the stars, and it seems rude to plea for the poor creature’s life. After all, we’re guests and this is how our hosts show their hospitality.

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“Come on,” urges Charlie, presumably noticing the look of apprehension on my face. “It’s Christmas Eve. Let’s celebrate in style!” Then he smirks: “Where’s your Christmas spirit?”

Back in the mind of my 10-year-old self who tried to stay awake to catch Santa in the act, I want to say. But I don’t. Truth be told, I admire his enthusiasm. We’ve already spent two days riding camels through the desert, and we could use a little excitement – and some meat. Turns out goat makes an excellent turkey substitute, especially when surrounded by good company and the glow of a campfire under a starry sky.

Notorious for crowded trains and chaotic roads, India may not be the first place you’d think to explore by camel. But the 200,000-square-kilometre Thar Desert

provides ample opportunity to do just that.

I’d arrived in Jaisalmer with three friends to embark on an epic five-day camel safari through the Great Indian Desert. Home to 80,000 inhabitants and located 575 kilometres west of Jaipur, the state capital of Rajasthan, Jaisalmer is a desert city protected by an impressive World Heritage-listed fort built on a sandstone ridge that dominates the surrounding desert. Looking very much like a sandcastle rising majestically above the flat sandy expanse, this desert citadel, guarding an impressive palace complex containing several ornate rooms, buildings and Jain temples, harks

back to the days of the Rajput warrior clans.

Inside the fort’s sandstone walls, there’s a labyrinth of lively small streets populated by smiling merchants peddling spices, wooden idols, books and all sorts of exotic handicrafts. Flanking these lanes are magnificent *havelis* (private mansions) decorated with intricate latticework and floral designs, carved from wood and stone and dating back at least 500 years.

Walking through the narrow winding lanes up to the palace complex, I stumble upon handprints etched into the sandstone. They tell the story of the fort’s rather macabre past as the site of countless *jauhar* (mass suicides) throughout the Islamic invasion of India in the Middle Ages. The women and children self-



A camel trader from Bikaner visits our campsite.

immolated within these walls in accordance with this ancient Rajput tradition in a bid to avoid capture, enslavement and dishonour.

Entering a small chai shop, I'm greeted by a cheerful shopkeeper who gives me a brief lesson on the strategic importance of the city in centuries past. As a stopping point for camel caravans along a traditional overland trade route that linked India with Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia, Jaisalmer grew in wealth and was fiercely protected by clans of Rajput warriors who wielded gilt-edged swords and claimed descent from Hindu deities.

Upon waking the next day, I have the faintest recollection of a dream. I remember walking through sand dunes and stumbling upon an old man charming his cobra. He was wearing a red turban and, with his wrinkled, sun-baked skin, looked about a hundred years old. As he played his flute, the charcoal-coloured snake gently swayed from side to side. I tried to speak to the man, but he was in a trance. I edged closer, trying to get him to notice me. Suddenly the cobra turned around and latched onto my arm – and that's where the dream ended. Lying in bed in the early morning light, I see my friends already stuffing their backpacks. I can't help but feel a little anxious.

We've been told temperatures will fall below zero come nightfall out in the land of shifting sand dunes, broken rocks and scrub. We were also warned that there would be no chance of a shower, no electricity and minimal food and water over the course of the five days.

This matters very little – at least to me. What a way to spend Christmas, I tell myself over and over again as we leave our guesthouse early in the back of an old Mahindra jeep, driven by a burly Brahmin who, with a big white beard, is reminiscent of Mr Claus. Just like those wise men 2000 years ago who were led by a luminous, twinkling star in the deserts of the Middle East, we are being led by the promise of adventure, hardship and a once in a lifetime experience. It's been a long time since I was this excited about the festive season.

Cruising out of town, we pass crumbling buildings, groups of locals and the occasional cow. Some 40 kilometres shy of the India–Pakistan border the jeep begins to slow then veers off to the side of the road onto loose gravel. "There are your camels," says the driver, pointing to a colourful caravan on the horizon.

We disembark, collect our bags and stare into the distance, waiting for our rides to arrive. The Indian sun blazes above us in the clear blue sky, yet it's quite cold – about 10°C or so.

Waiting for our adventure to begin, I take a moment to breathe and absorb my alien surrounds. The epic panorama of this arid, dusty landscape envelops us. There is yellow and rust-red sand, rocks large and small, and khaki-coloured foliage strewn across the land as far as the eye

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A Rajasthani woman in a traditional sari provides colour in the desert.

can see. At the horizon these colours merge with soft, light blues, gradually morphing into deeper hues the higher into the sky you stare.

In the distance windmills dot the expanse, and there's a lonely settlement of cream-coloured, single-storey buildings. People carrying on a traditional desert life populate these local villages.

Our camels arrive and, after a quick introduction and a delicious lunch of roti and vegetable curry cooked on an open fire, we're ready to begin. Slow off the mark, I'm relegated to the group's most senior camel – a droopy-eyed old-timer with a fat lip and foam dribbling from its mouth. "This one, he got in a fight," Salim tells me, noticing my dubious expression. Salim is 28 and the older of our two guides. "But, he's okay now," he continues. "It's a good camel, strong camel. Good for you." I'm not so sure, but before I have a moment to hesitate, Salim instructs me to straddle the beast and I'm up. I glance over at my friends – each is wearing a smile as wide as the surrounding desert.

A mere 15 minutes into the safari, we yearn for independence and convince the guides to let us go it alone. They hand us the reins and teach us basic camel talk: *je-je* will get the camel to sit down; a tongue click makes it stand back up; *hut-un* means to speed up.

Three painful hours later – most of that time spent trying desperately to distract myself from the searing pain radiating from my upper thighs and groin – the mood lightens as we pull into our first camp. It's a level area with a wooden hut and makeshift fire pit, flanked on all sides by golden dunes. With a *je-je* I disembark and the circulation begins to return to my battered and bruised thighs.

With almost the same spirit of delight found in children having finally arrived at the playground after an arduous journey, we run up the shifting dunes and spend the next half-hour sipping hot chai in the warm sand. We poke fun at each other's turbans before returning to our own little worlds as we watch the burning red sun slowly sink below the horizon. There really isn't too much to say out in the desert.

After a brief meditation, we return to camp and spend the next hour collecting firewood. Around the flames after dinner, discussion somehow turns to the subject of dreams and I recount my ominous vision of a cobra encounter. "You are a very lucky boy," Salim tells me. In Indian mythology a bite from a snake foretells a gain in fortune. I don't know what to think. With our stomachs full and bodies tired, we hit the hay under two thick blankets and a twinkling sky.

During the next four days the many moods of India's Great Desert are revealed. We explore isolated local desert villages full of enterprising kids keen on making a handful of rupees in exchange for photo rights, and young women swathed in intricately patterned saris adorned with sequins



A gypsy selling jewellery inside Jaisalmer Fort.



INDIA

A villager leads his camel to a waterhole.



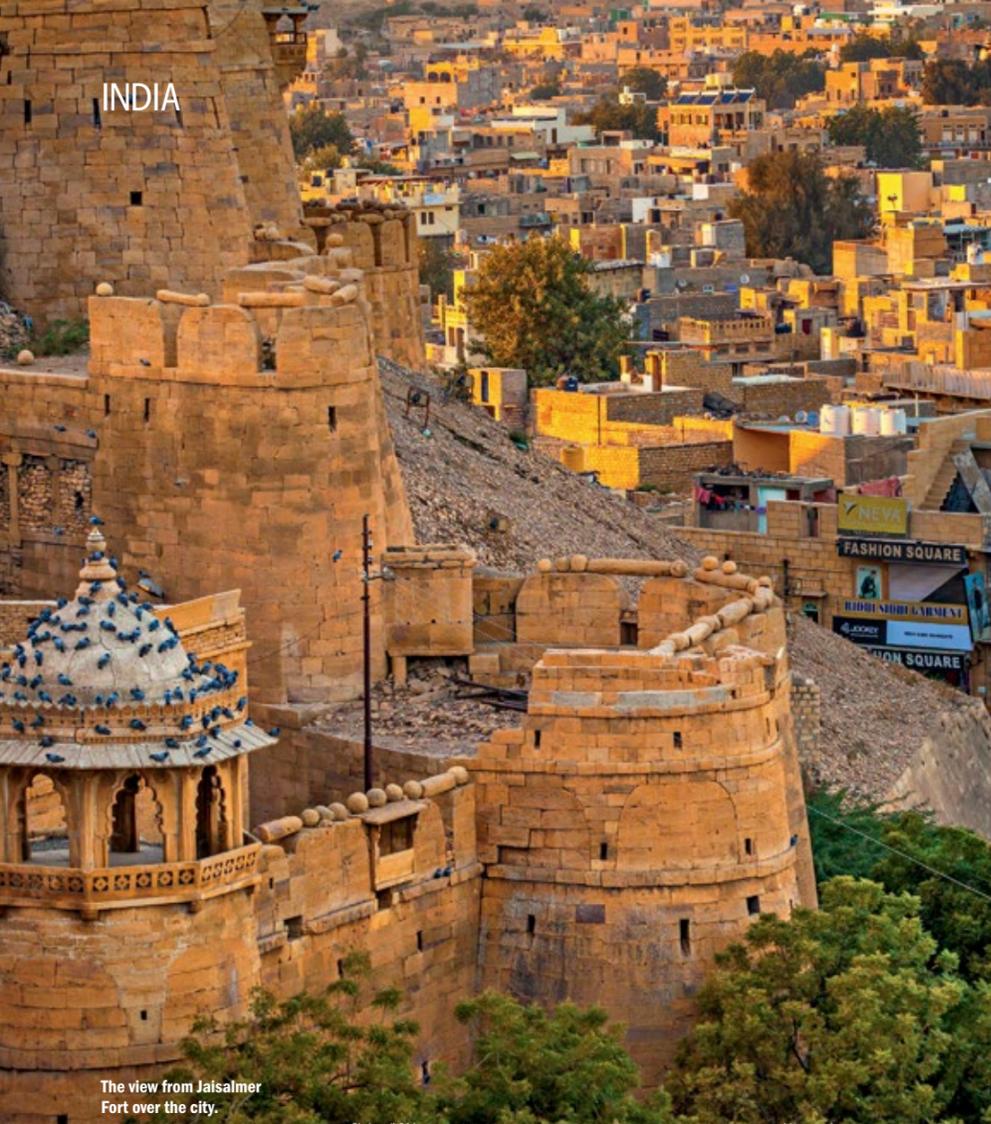
A Rajasthani man meets the camera lens.



A chai break at the popular Bhatia Bazaar in Jaisalmer.



Gathering on the dunes for a golden sunset in the Thar Desert.



The view from Jaisalmer Fort over the city.

and beads. Their eyes sparkle just like their jewellery in the midday sun.

Each day bleeds into the next. As we traverse the barren plains, we make occasional stops to water the camels and feast on delectable curry while our guides belt out soulful Rajasthani folk songs. Our legs enjoy each short respite, and we're often left smiling by a gaggle of local villagers before slowly riding into the desert to face the elements once more.

“As we traverse the barren plains, we make occasional stops to water the camels and feast on delectable curry while our guides belt out soulful Rajasthani folk songs.”

I awake on the final day to the sound of fighter jets passing overhead, a reminder of the nearby Indian Air Force base and the fact that civilisation is close again. We pack our things, fix our turbans and straddle our camels for one final day.

The rising sun burns off the morning mist as we make our way back to the main road. I'm happy riding at the back of the group, enjoying the view of my friends and

their camels in front of me and the passing scenery of rippling sand dunes.

Suddenly there is commotion up ahead. Perhaps growing impatient at his foreign subjugation, Charlie's camel revolts and, in a frantic display, bucks him to the ground, launching dust and sand in the air. Almost like a superhero, Salim leaps from his camel several feet away and grabs the reins, subduing Charlie's rebellious mount in a matter of seconds. It's like a scene

from a Bollywood action movie. As the dust clears, Charlie gets up, giddy and confused.

It's scary yet exhilarating knowing your life and limb are at the mercy of an unpredictable animal that, no matter how much you try to convince yourself otherwise, you really can't control. Charlie was lucky to have survived unscathed. I wonder whether he too dreamed of a biting cobra. ☹️

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Singapore Airlines flies to Delhi with return fares from Sydney starting at about AU\$1200.

singaporeair.com

From Delhi book an overnight train to Jaisalmer with Indian Railways (about AU\$120 return in first class) or take a domestic flight with Air India to Jodhpur (from about AU\$115 return) and book a car and driver to Jaisalmer through Clear Car Rental, from about AU\$100 each way.

indianrail.gov.in

airindia.com

clearcarrental.com



STAY THERE

Gorbandh Palace is a hotel two kilometres from the centre of Jaisalmer. Double rooms cost about AU\$135 a night, including breakfast.

hrhotels.com

Closer to town, Nachana Haveli has a rooftop restaurant serving traditional Rajasthani meals with panoramic views of Jaisalmer Fort. Double rooms start at AU\$66 a night, including breakfast.

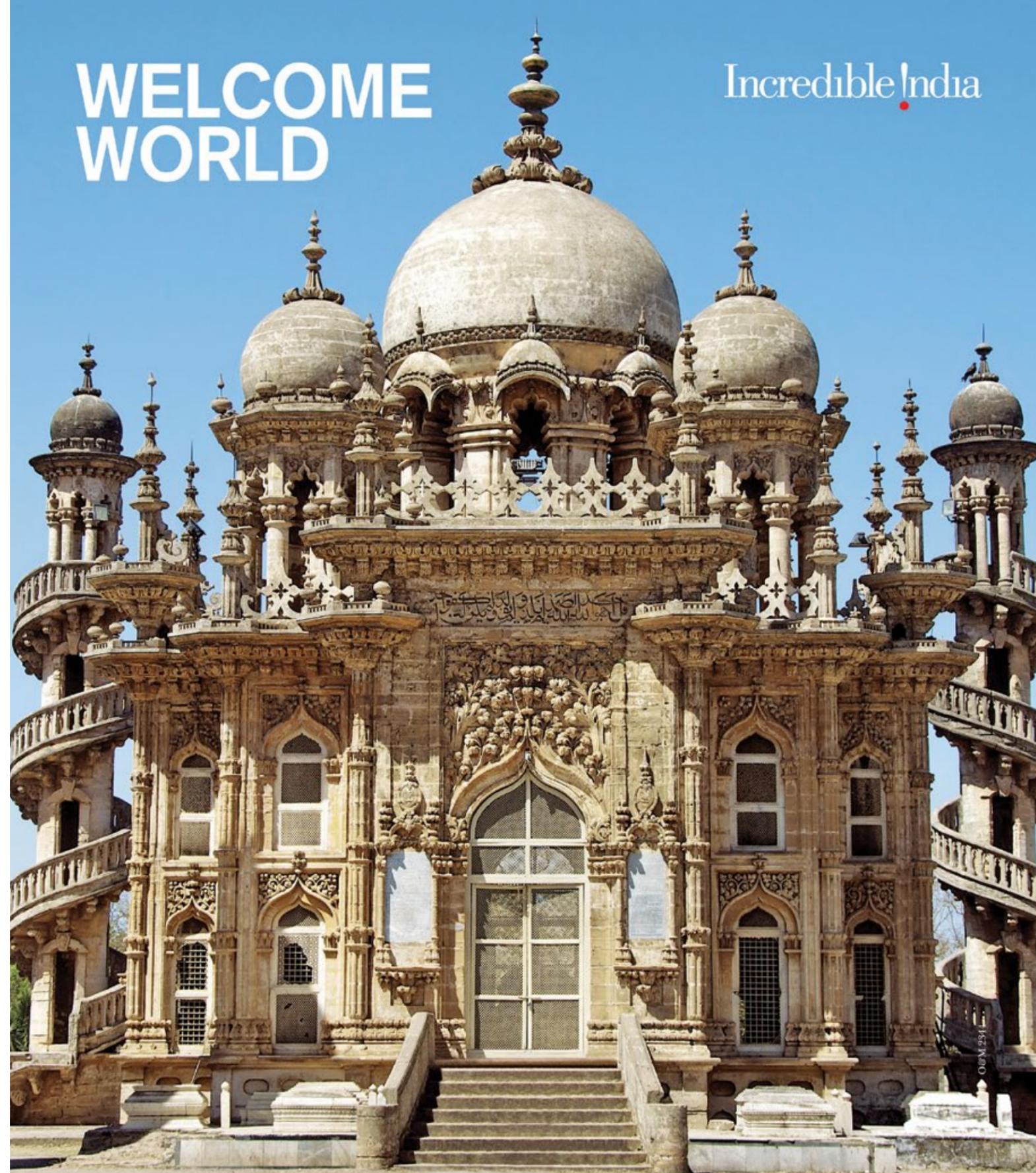
nachanahaveli.com



TOUR THERE

The best time to visit Jaisalmer is in winter, between November and February. Thar Desert Tours runs a number of camel safaris, from a half-day ride to multiple-night adventures. An all-inclusive six-day package costs AU\$180.

tharcamelsafarijaisalmer.com



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