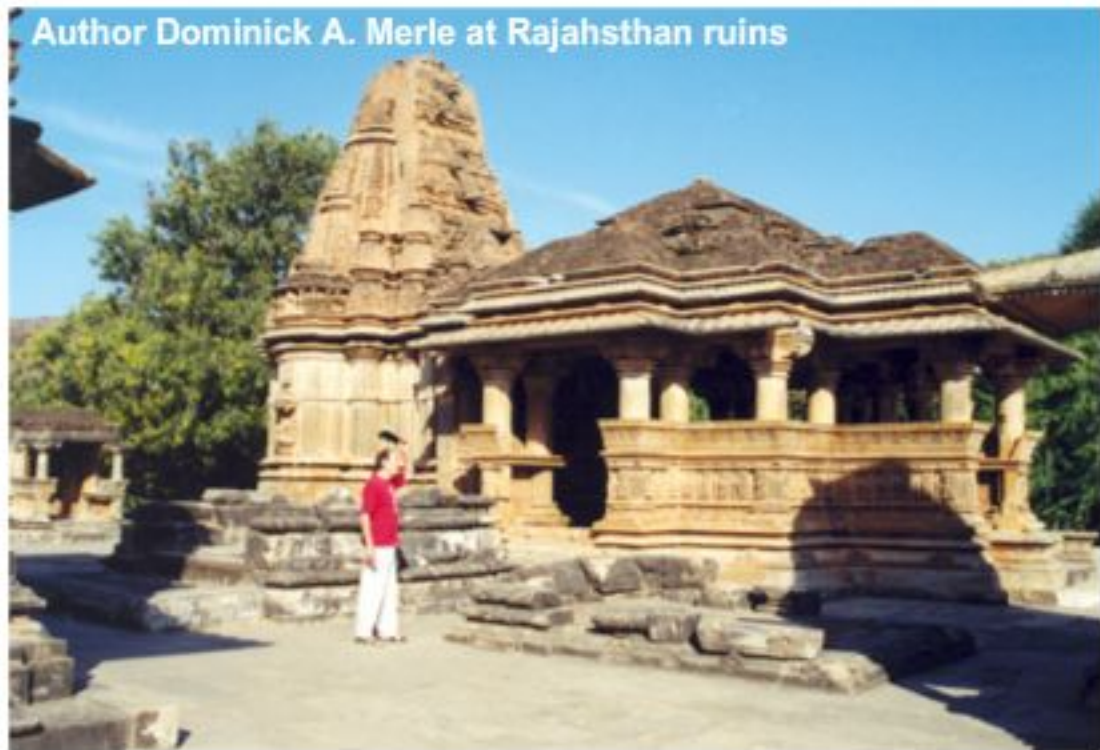


Rajasthan, India

By: Dominick Merle

RAJASTHAN, India - Writing a travel article about India can be a bit frustrating. Just when you think you've found your "lead" or main topic, another one comes along and tops it. And then another. You are bombarded constantly by sights and sounds and events that can take even the wildest imagination to a new level.

Author Dominick A. Merle at Rajahsthan ruins



Author and wife on Jaipur elephant



Each visit convinces me that India is at the very top of a select list of countries that are so immense in scope, in contrast and in spectacular surprises that they almost defy description. A recent tour of the northeast state of Rajasthan near the Pakistan border bolstered that opinion. More than half of Rajasthan is desert separated from the Indian peninsula by mountain ranges. Some historians place the first settlers here at around 2500 B.C., which would probably make Rajasthan the cradle of the universe and quite a story in itself. Whatever the exact time frame, Rajasthan has evolved over the centuries to become the most colorful state in this fascinating subcontinent.

Here, in the world's most populated desert, you will find magnificent palaces shimmering on lakes, temples and forts of stunning artistry carved from colorful stone, huge cities that are painted pink and blue. And then there are the people of Rajasthan, perhaps the brightest stars in the whirling kaleidoscope.

The men are descendants of heroic warriors who challenged the Mughal empire in the 16th Century with 10,000 swords

flashing in the desert sun. Today they wear colorful turbans, luxuriant moustaches that they carry with aplomb and rings for their ears. The women, whose beauty is renowned throughout India, wear jewelry that begins from the toes and anklets and mounts upward to the waist, face and forehead. Colorful bangles, sometimes as many as 50, cover their arms. How the inhabitants wear their turbans and jewelry tells what part of the desert state they are from.

Free bus riders





Our first stop in Rajasthan was the capital of Jaipur, known as the "pink city." In 1883, the ruling maharajah recommended that the houses be painted pink, the traditional color of welcome, in honor of a visit by British royalty. While the color has been retained, Jaipur has grown so much over the years that the pink is now only in the central core.

A few minutes drive from Jaipur is the imposing fort of Amber, once the capital of the original

inhabitants of this area. On my first visit here 16 years ago, we rode an elephant up a winding path to the pavilions and palaces above, including the palace of mirrors, where the walls are inlaid with exquisite mirrored motifs that dance to the flame of even a single candle. Ours was the only elephant on the path at that time. On this visit, there were more than 100 elephants in a trunk-to-tail caravan carting tourists up and down the path. The palace of mirrors, however, was just as dazzling as before.

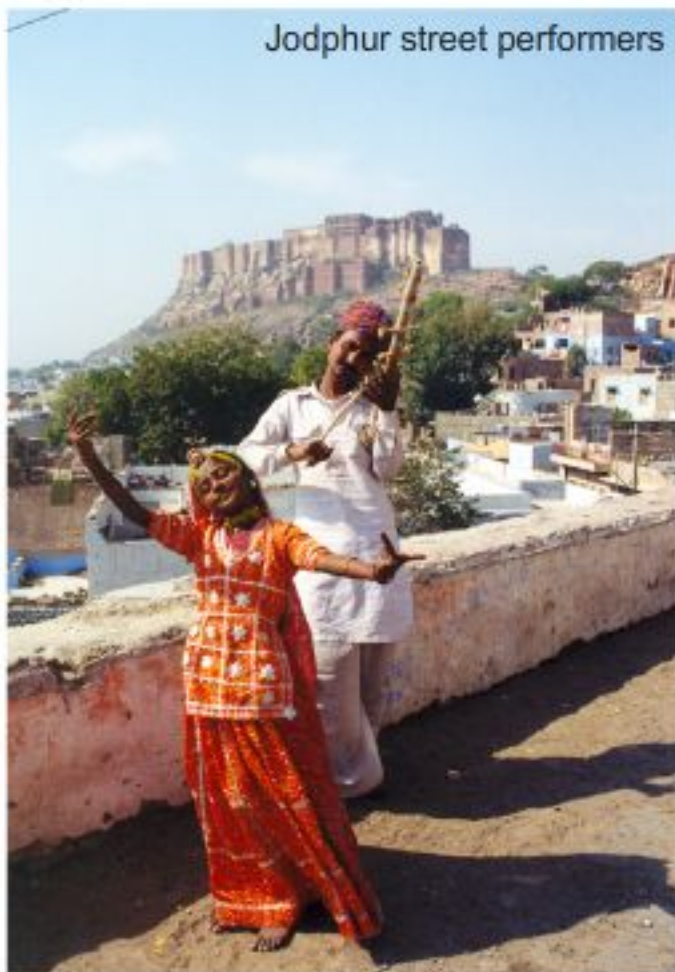
It was in Jaipur also that we "re-experienced" a slice of India that never makes the guidebooks--the ceremony of the Indian carpet salesman. Wherever you are in India, the ritual is the same. As you enter the showroom, three or four young boys are usually asleep on the carpets in a darkened room.

They spring into action, turn on the lights and fans and usher you to a small seated area. Someone appears almost magically with complimentary tea, coffee or cold drinks. Then the salesman, more like a master of ceremonies, appears, and after giving you a brief history of carpet making, the show begins. The young boys begin unrolling the carpets directly at you, carpets of all sizes, colors and shapes. There is no stopping them; they seem almost in a

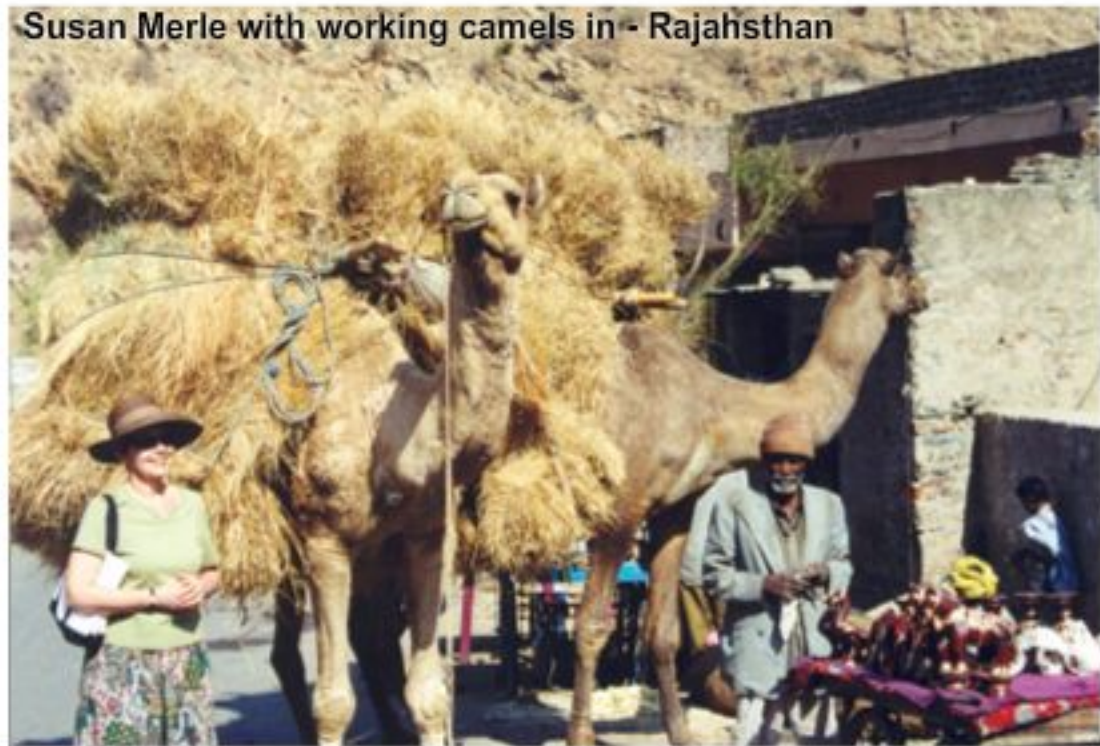
trance. They are programmed to unroll every last one of them. The age-old psychology is that since they have now turned their shop into a shambles for you, surely you will buy at least one carpet. Most Indian salesman, or salesladies in some cases, use this technique.

The man at the carpet shop, who

Jodhpur street performers



Susan Merle with working camels in - Rajasthan



said he was Hindu, told me at one point in trying to seal the sale, "You only live once." Strange, I thought as I left empty-handed, since Hindus believe in reincarnation.

From Jaipur we travelled to the "blue city" of Jodphur in the heart of the desert. How this city got that color is a horse of a different color. In the early 1970s when an invasion by neighboring Pakistan was feared, it was decided to paint the houses blue so that to warplanes, Jodphur

wouldn't look like Jodphur at all. It would look like a lake. Obviously this decoy no longer works with today's smart bombs, but Jodphur's central core remains blue.

We stayed at a small boutique-style hotel that was once a maharajah's guest house, the Karni Bhawan. It was so laid-back that there were no menus. You simply told the waiter, who doubled as cook and restaurant manager, what you wanted and he whipped it up. Each night,

there was an outdoor buffet. The city of Jodhpur is an interesting and bizarre area to walk through, particularly the central market near the clock tower. Here you will intermingle with cows, monkeys, pigs, sheep, oxen, elephants, motorized contraptions of every size and shape, a mass of humanity...and yes, even camels. Remember, you are in the heart of one of the world's great deserts. In fact, on our first day there, we were subjected to

a brief but bothersome sandstorm. The fort of Jodhpur sits on a mighty rock 400 feet tall. The palaces within have been carved from sandstone. We drove to the tiny desert village of Salawas the next day and met a 35-year-old man named Roopraj who along with his wife are continuing a 100-year-old tradition of rug weaving on a loom, using cotton or silk yarn, or goat or camel hair. There, on the desert floor, Roopraj displayed his wares,

Typical terracotta marketplace display



Jodphur street performers



much like the M.C. back at the big carpet shop in Jaipur. This time I didn't come away empty handed. Our final stop in Rajasthan was Udaipur, rimmed by marble-filled mountains and sprinkled with lakes, which had receded while we were there because of the lack of rainfall. This was the smallest of the cities we visited, and consequently the cleanest and the most tranquil. Udaipur is the old man of the desert, tracing its history to 728 A.D. whereas

Jaipur and Jodphur lag behind by 200 and 483 years respectively. Udaipur has a profusion of palaces, lakes and temples. The city palace is a labyrinth of courtyards richly decorated with inlaid mirror-work. An island on one lake houses the elegant Jag Nivas, built in 1746 as the summer residence of the rulers and now the Lake Palace Hotel, where reservations are often made a year or two in advance. A few minutes drive from Udaipur, we visited the ruins of the ancient city of Nagda where we viewed exquisitely carved Hindu temples.

Early the next morning, our tour over, we headed back to Delhi for our final day, specifically Delhi's old quarter. But that's another story. The Indian kaleidoscope never ends.

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