



# Ram ram Rajasthan

**India is an extraordinary mix of everything you can imagine from the depths of Slumdog Millionaire to the evocatively romantic images of A Passage to India and the Raj – plus many a surprise in between**

**C**LOUDS of dust billowing in our wake, lurching along Chitty Chitty Bang Bang style in an old green 1930s open-top Chevvy, nine of us – plus the driver and his mate, who rode shotgun – bounced and swayed like a bunch of overgrown schoolkids along spine-shattering potholed roads in a landscape studded with acacia, neem and Twiglet-like flame trees.

Out here in the vast open Rajasthan countryside, where boundaries are marked by bushes of killer dried thorns, dry stone walls or vertical planks of rough hewn granite, our journey threaded its way through dusty hamlets with basic rush-roofed mud-hut dwellings. We chicaned past many a free-ranging dog, cow, camel cart or oxen, while hooting madly every time the Chevvy swung out wildly out to overtake yet another desperately unroadworthy, smoke-belching bus or gear grinding lorry.

Every few minutes or so we exchanged many a happy wave and shouted “ram ram” greetings to passers-by, who regarded us either with equally animated

(or completely contained and reserved) amusement.

Passing red-turbaned, dhotie-wearing shepherds, we then lurched across a vast and completely dried up river bed (and it’s hard to believe they are ever going to get rain here, it was desperately drought-ridden in mid-April) on the approach to another village and passed a knot of vibrantly colourfully-dressed, bejewelled and chattering smiling women walking homewards. Those,

who instantly veiled their faces and wore bracelets almost from wrist to armpit, were the married ones while all gave a flashing impression of thoroughly exotic birds in their fabulously bright vermillion, magenta, peacock and orange sari and veil plumages. The women are stunningly beautiful.

Then it was pointed out that they were carrying small empty water containers which indicated they’d just been on a mass visit to the loo together in the bush – and not just for a wee. In these remote rural parts of Rajasthan, life is lived out on an almost biblical timescale. For the masses here – as in much of India – there’s simply no such thing as domestic running

water – so no bathrooms, of course – so going about your business here is both a shared open-air and moreover something of a social event. Can you imagine?

Drinking water comes from pumps and wells (but town or country water is definitely not suited to western stomachs, so it has to be avoided totally by visitors) and has to be collected regularly from central village pumps in either stainless steel or heavy pottery containers (just try and pick an empty one up). Then all has to be transported home – as most things are –

balanced on the women’s heads which gives them almost perfect posture.

So not only do most of them look like Vogue models – even when they’re labouring in the fields or part of a road-building gang – but they glide like swans as they walk, even with pickaxes and boulders balanced on their heads.

Blessed with having Sameer Rathore as our tour leader on this 19-day safari around Rajasthan, we were learning much, and fast, about this amazing region, its people, religions, history and way of life. A 6ft 1in, lean and attractive, 32-year-old public school-educated local, Sam had turned out to be not only the very best sort of comprehensive walking talking guide book but also as a great companion, joker, organiser, raconteur and generous sharer of ‘Sam’s positive energy’. Simply put, he loves his homeland and shares



“Scratching a living”  
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every aspects of it – from his grandmother’s stomach and throat remedies to colourful tales of wily eunuchs, who still exist!

So whilst we ticked off all the Golden Triangle must-see forts and staggering palaces, we also went to mad tout-ridden city bazaars, temples of all persuasions, inhabited hovels in the outback and slept variously in hotels, a train and even a tent in the desert.

India is a mad jumble of extraordinary contradictions and it’s a privilege to go off piste into remoter, less visited areas and find out a little more about what makes this often chaotic place tick.

In doing that, we’d stayed in a few outlying places, visited tiny tribal farming communities and even been welcomed by one family into their one-roomed dirt-floored home, which was built of mud, animal ‘patties’ (okay then, poo), sticks and rushes. Here several generations of the same family live, cooking over wood (and dried animal poo) fires; they own a bare handful of basic possessions. All of a sudden the expression ‘scratching a living’ takes on real meaning. Then there was the total anomaly of hearing a loud cowboys and Indians Western blasting out of another mud hut which had a satellite dish protruding from its thatch!

Once we stopped our bus to watch a two-oxen driven Persian waterwheel, real straight out of the bible type stuff, raising deep well water via Heath Robinson scoops, which then discharged into channels, which in turn ran off to irrigate a field of fresh lush green coriander. It was magic stuff. Another photo stop saw a pair of lumbering yoked humped oxen being lead round threshing corn.

Camels pulled carts, women virtually disappeared under bundles of sticks being brought home for the fire, children ran naked.

At Chandelao, we were invited into a village school (where ‘time is many’ instead of ‘money’ was chalked on the blackboard!) and visited a women’s co-operative, where they make and sell clothing to earn the money to send their children to school.

There was also a close encounter and a few ‘ram rams’ exchanged with a raggedly-dressed village lady of 105. Bent double with age, she surprised us when she effortlessly squatted on her haunches to pose for the cameras and then sprung straight up again – only to assume her 90 degree position. And who could ever forget the ‘snake charmer’. Dressed in threadbare clothes, he welcomed us in too. He’s a bit of a local witchdoctoring star because he cures people, who are brought from miles around after they’ve been bitten by a snake or scorpion. Testament to his successes were hundreds of string knots which danced in the branches of a tree in the centre of his open-air temple home.

Our closest encounter, however, was being charged by a village bull (terrifying beasts, they wander at will round every town and city) which was very scary until a little girl, aged about five and armed with a just stick, promptly sorted him out. And we were regularly besieged by children – and adults – desperate for a digi camera snap so they could see themselves on a camera screen.

Oh, and then there was the camel ride in the Thar desert to an overnight stop in a tented camp in the middle of nowhere. That was a bumpy, dusty and ultimately very sore bottom experience for me on a camel called Karotta. She (and I) had a tendency to spook and her driver, who was virtually welded to my back for nearly three hours, actually made far more animal noises, including much spitting, hawking and farting, than dear lumbering Karotta ever did. My camel driver also slightly managed to ruin the full Lawrence of Arabia experience mid-desert by suddenly holding a very loud 30 minute conversation with several people all at once on his mobile phone.

That night, near Osian, we all danced under the stars with members of a shepherd tribe who arrived in a jeep out of the dunes complete with wand-thin exotic bendy swirling dancers and musicians. One girl twirled head-spinningly in the lamplight like a whirling Dervish before calmly bending in half backwards to pluck a ring off the sand only using her eyelids. Don’t try this one at home!

However based today in a fabulous heritage hotel in Jojawar, which is somewhere off the beaten track between the lake cities of Udaipur and Pushkar, we were now travelling by Chevrolet rather than our air-conditioned bus. With huge grins plastered on our faces and hanging onto each other, and our hats, for dear life, today team Imaginative Traveller were travelling vintage style to catch a train to go up into the Aravali hills.

It was day 12 of our 19 day odyssey. When we’d first met as complete strangers in the chaotic and frankly filthy, horribly polluted and heaving city of Delhi nearly two weeks before we were a random group of four singleton women from Britain, a mother and daughter from Adelaide (go, Aussies, go!) and a slightly older America couple from Seattle – plus Sameer our guide. We were joined in Jodphur by Mr Jagdish, our driver; and VJ, his assistant (and puncture-mending mate).

That first night I’d suffered total culture shock after walking through a market where a beggar, thrusting a baby in my face, gripped me so hard she bruised my arm and a small boy jumped up and pinched my boob!

Now we were one happy chilled out gang – we’d travelled together on an overnight sleeper train, camel and travelled hundreds of miles in

our own air-conditioned coach. There had also been a few interesting ‘experiences’ on various hairy tuk tuk rides. These ubiquitous vehicles (having to haggle hard over prices every time notwithstanding), take you literally any and everywhere for a matter of pence. The ride is akin to travelling in a cross between a Scrapheap Challenge bumper car and a scooter equivalent of a stock car and you just have to suspend belief as driving in India is a mix of ‘dare’ and ‘chicken’. It’s like being thrust into a crazy live computer game with different levels of terror. Obstacles are constantly thrown in your path including cattle, camels, dogs, people, vast trucks, tractors, cycle rickshaws, massed scooters and even elephants.

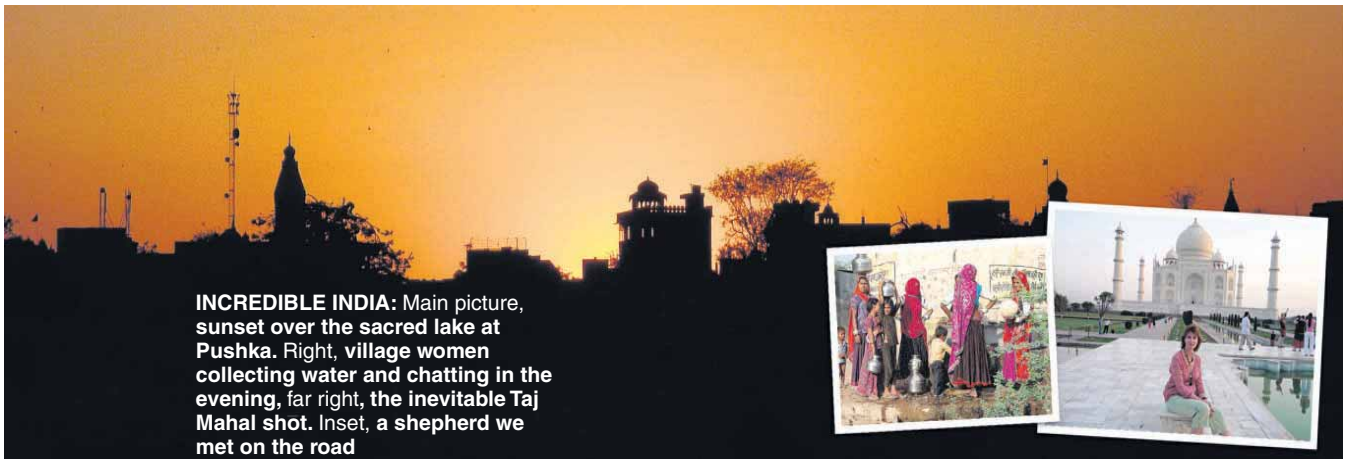
We’d already got Jaisalmer, Bhenswara, the desert region, Ranakpur and Udaipur under our belts – the joys of calmer Pushkar, the deserted ancient Moghul capital of Fatehpur

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**MEET THE GANG!** In front of our coach – Victoria, third left, with roomie Glenys on her left and driver, Mr Jagdish, and VJ to her right; Sam, our Rajasthan expert and guide, is crouching



**INCREDIBLE INDIA:** Main picture, sunset over the sacred lake at Pushka. Right, village women collecting water and chatting in the evening, far right, the inevitable Taj Mahal shot. Inset, a shepherd we met on the road

