

Words and photography **EDWINA HART**

*The spectacular pink
facade of Jaipur's Hawa
Mahal – the Palace of
the Winds – as seen from
a rooftop café.*



Pretty in pink

WITH RAJASTHAN KNOWN AS THE LAND OF THE KINGS, IT IS FITTING THAT ITS CAPITAL CITY IS THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN OF THE COUNTRY – GRAND PALACES, GLAMOROUS HOTELS, BLUSH-PINK ARCHITECTURE AND ALL.



CLOCKWISE FORM TOP LEFT: Breakfast is served in the bright and playful dining room 51 Shades of Pink at SUJÁN Rajmahal Palace; A bejewelled Rajasthani man; The grand staircase at SUJÁN Rajmahal Palace. **OPPOSITE:** Your ride awaits at the SUJÁN Rajmahal Palace.

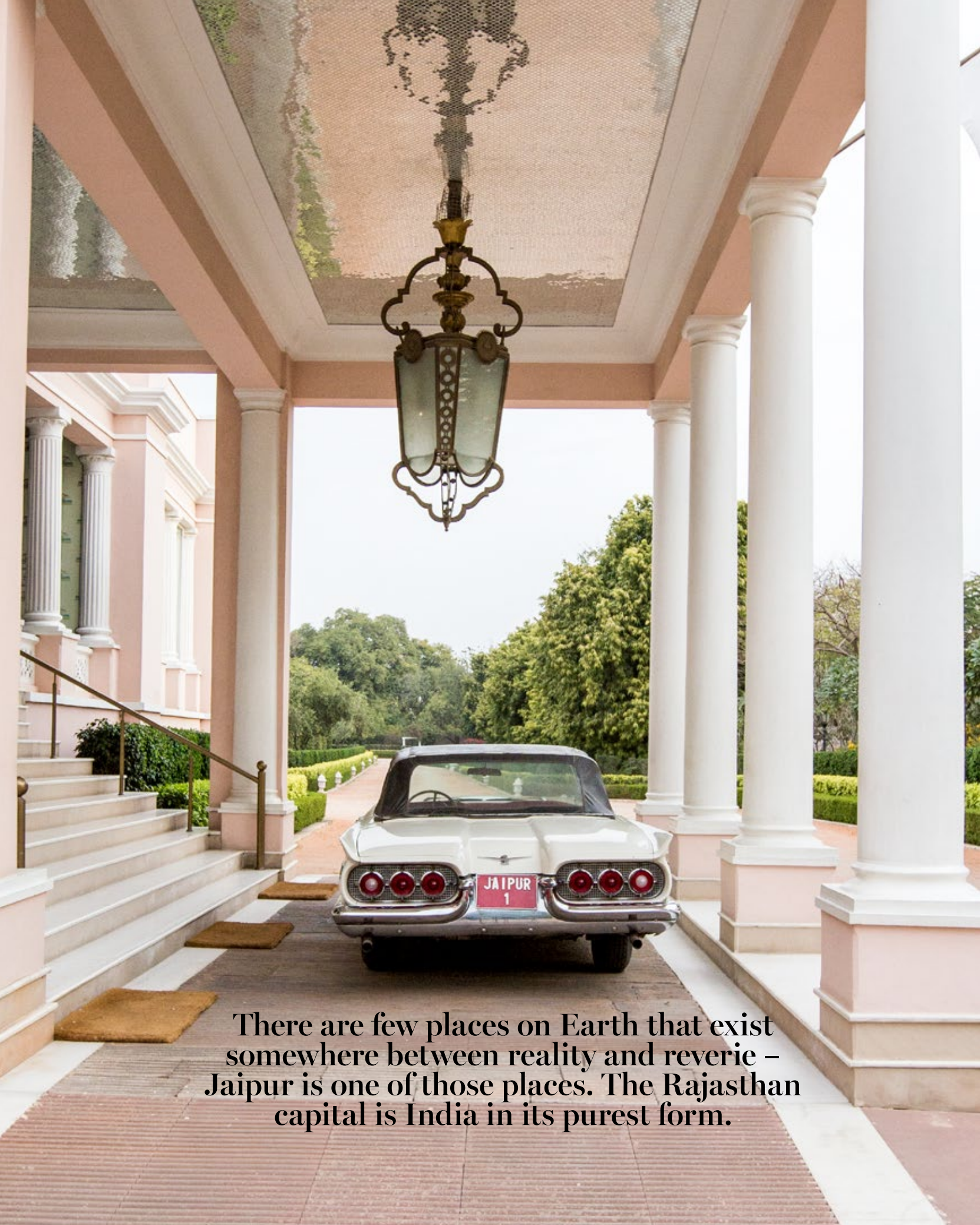
A garland of bright orange marigolds is flung around my neck as a hand reaches through a sea of gem-coloured saris; a priest presses his thumb against my forehead with a dot of sandalwood paste. Devotees of Krishna, one of the most widely revered Hindu deities, have gathered for prayer inside the 18th-century Govind Dev Ji Temple and I am now one of them. Hundreds of worshippers spill out from the marble archways of the red stone pavilion to join us.

I feel as if I'm floating among the crowds, swaying to the hypnotic rhythm of clapping and chanting. We are waiting for the unveiling of the idols Krishna and Radha; with the ringing of a bell, the priest reveals the statues from behind a curtain and the atmosphere turns from anticipation to elation.

There are few places on Earth that exist somewhere between reality and reverie – Jaipur is one of those places. The Rajasthan capital is India in its purest form, distilled to its very essence: a chaotic, colour-saturated state of sensory abandon. It's the 'India' that captures travellers' imaginations: of maharajas, resplendent royal residences, imposing hilltop forts, vibrant bazaars, saris billowing from the back of motorbikes and sacred cows bringing traffic to a standstill.

As I leave the early morning worship the city is bathed in a soft golden light that only seems to exist on the subcontinent. Sitting outside the temple, slipping my shoes back on after the prayer session, I am determined not to let any of the roaming red-faced monkeys steal my belongings. I've joined a small-group walking tour of Jaipur's old town to familiarise myself with the walled city and garner a glimpse of local life. Sujit Rathore is our well-spoken guide, whose Indian boarding school education has left a lasting impression on a young man whose accent and mannerisms are reminiscent of a Cambridge University history professor.

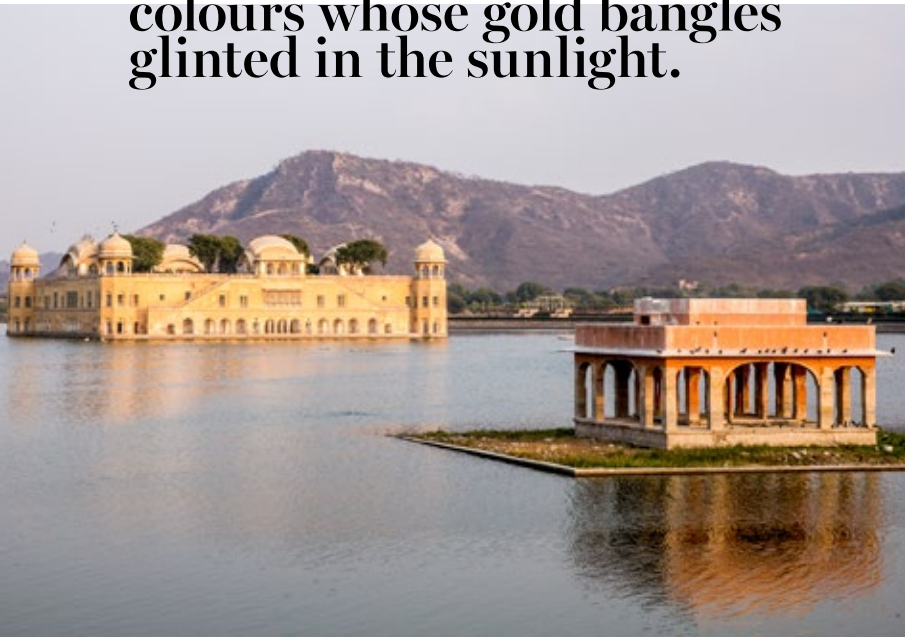
With his encouragement, our six-person group attempts to cross a busy road humming with bicycles, motorcycles, three-wheeled tuk-tuks >>



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and camel-drawn carts simultaneously swerving potholes, piles of rubbish and cows chewing on chapati (flatbread). Sujit, raising his voice over the din, eloquently explains the best way to avoid being hit by a vehicle: “Don’t run. In India our minds have been trained to calculate the trajectory of an object, so it’s best to be predictable with your pace.” Easier said than done.

The busy streets are in stark contrast to where we commenced the tour only an hour or so ago. Samode Haveli is a beautifully restored 300-year-old haveli (grand merchant mansion) turned guesthouse, a peaceful haven of jasmine-scented gardens and a courtyard replete with a gently trickling fountain.

The moment we stepped outside we were thrust into the madness of Jaipur, which, luckily for us, is only just waking up. A rooster crowed as we passed by milkmen selling vats of fresh milk straight from the farms. They dipped their hands into the cans to demonstrate the creaminess of the liquid within as it dripped down to their fingertips.

We ventured onwards along the dusty streets towards the phool mandi, a flower market strewn with sacks bursting with bright orange and yellow marigolds, and red roses. It felt as though we had stepped back in time, as turbaned men wearing white dhoti pants auctioned off the bundles. It’s a booming business, with around 50 tonnes of flowers sold each day and used for decoration, weddings and offerings to the Hindu gods (of which there are millions).

We weaved between women veiled in vivid colours whose gold bangles glinted in the sunlight as they carried heavy parcels of fresh produce on their heads. Agile, like dancers, they stepped between the vendor’s piles of chillies, bean, eggplants and tomatoes.

Now, after pouring out of the temple with the throng of worshippers, it’s still only 8am but we’ve worked up an appetite. We leap into an auto-rickshaw and jerkily hurtle our way through the streets, joining the traffic as the chorus of honking builds to a crescendo.

Originally founded in 1727 by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, Jaipur was the first planned city in India. Built as a citadel enclosed within the city walls, the old town’s well-preserved streets were designed in a grid-like layout with the splendid City Palace in the centre. Unlike the tangle of alleyways of Old Delhi, Jaipur creates an impression of organised chaos.

In a stroke of genius, Jai Singh invited the finest artists, skilled craftsmen and visionaries from across >>



FROM TOP: *Afternoon tea is served on the lawns of SUJJAN Rajmabal Palace; The intricate Ganesh Pol (or Ganesb Gate) at Amber Fort. OPPOSITE (from top): A worker takes a break at Jaipur’s Amber Fort; The Jal Mahal palace appears to float in the middle of the Man Sagar Lake.*





FROM LEFT: *The swimming pool at Samode Haveli; SUJÁN Rajmahal Palace's stunning Colonnade dining room. OPPOSITE:* *The interiors of Bar Palladio channel an opulent Venetian feel with Mughal-style motifs thanks to its Swiss-Italian owner Barbara Miolini and Dutch designer Marie-Anne Oudejans.*



the empire, essentially forming a centre of culture, commerce and trade. Sujit elaborates, “So if I was a merchant coming to India for different products, I might go to Agra for stone, Varanasi for silk or fabric, and Moradabad for metal-work, or you could just come to Jaipur and get everything.” Each street was dedicated to a certain speciality, a system that’s still effective today. “We continue that tradition – you go to the Johari Bazaar to buy jewellery, Bapu Bazaar only sells fabric and the Tripolia Bazaar trades in metal-work.”

As the kingdom grew in fortune and power, the patronage of science, arts and architecture was a natural progression. “That is how Jaipur flourished into the city as we know it,” says Sujit.

For centuries Jaipur had a reputation across the empire for extraordinary craftsmanship – block-printed textiles, miniature paintings, blue ceramics and most importantly, the gemstone industry. It’s still India’s epicentre of cutting and polishing precious and semi-precious stones, from blood red rubies, deep green emeralds to sapphires the colour of a peacock’s neck.

Beyond its storied history, rich cultural heritage and creative flair, the ‘Pink City’ is beckoningly beautiful. The Rajput-Mughal architecture, awash in a blush-pink colour palette, was painted terracotta tones to welcome the visiting Prince of Wales in 1876.

The auto rickshaw drops us off at Chaura Rasta Road, a dusty, wide boulevard that runs north to south from the City Palace to New Gate. It’s along this bustling belt of shops that we devour hot-out-of-the-pan spicy samosas generously slathered in mango chutney, followed by squiggly, deep-fried jalebis – a dessert dripping in sticky saffron syrup.

The heat-hazed streets are perfumed with incense and tuberoses emanating from the white-marble temples tucked in between shopfronts, mingled with marijuana and spice. The scent intensifies as we near Sahu ki Chai, a street-side vendor selling masala chai (the national drink of India).

The chai wallah brings the creamy concoction of tea leaves, spices, sugar and milk to the boil over charcoal. The frothing mixture erupts with an aroma of ginger, cardamom, cinnamon and cloves. Holding the brass teapot from a height he pours the golden liquid into a line of terracotta cups. It’s thick, velvety and very sweet.

Emboldened by my morning tour, I delve into the boulevards lined with lively bazaars, pounding the portico-covered pavements festooned with hand-dyed scarves, rainbow-like turbans, embroidered juttis (leather slippers), glittering resin bangles and swathes of saris. There’s a riot of colour on every corner. Taking a slight detour around a snake charmer playing the punji to his slowly swaying cobra, I slip a little deeper into the city, along a back alley to discover corridors of wedding decorations where beautiful young brides barter over lavish chiffon and silks.

If I didn’t already feel as though I was in a waking dream, I certainly do as my driver for the next few days, Shankar, collects me from the bazaar and drives me to SUJÁN Rajmahal Palace. We pull into the cotton-candy gates, revealing an oasis secreted away in downtown Jaipur. “Wow, Mam, and here we are,” exclaims Shankar.

This glamorous pink hotel is a design lover’s fantasy – Wes Anderson whimsy meets magnificence fit for a maharaja. You could hold a symposium just on the 48 different bespoke wallpapers that cover the walls of this ineffably extravagant property. Whilst some of India’s five-star heritage hotels can feel a bit like a museum, SUJÁN Rajmahal Palace is as stylish and approachable as it is sumptuous.

I’m shown to the Queen Elizabeth II Suite, which hosted Her Majesty during the royal visit in 1961. It’s appropriately palatial. I flop down on the pillowy-soft bed to allow for a moment of >>

DON’T EVEN THINK OF MISSING THESE

WATCH THE LATEST BOLLYWOOD BLOCKBUSTER

Book a ticket to watch a Bollywood film at one of India’s most celebrated cinemas, the 1970s-era Raj Mandir Theatre. It makes for an exciting night out and whilst you might not understand Hindi, the simple plots, over-the-top-action and dancing make it fun to follow along. therajmandir.com

APPRECIATE ANCIENT ASTRONOMY

Jantar Mantar is a UNESCO World Heritage-listed astronomical observation site built by Jai Singh in the early 1700s. Hire a guide to explain the instruments used by astrologers to observe celestial positions with the naked eye. Don’t miss the world’s largest sundial made entirely out of stone.

WONDER AT THE PALACE OF THE WINDS

The 18th-century Hawa Mahal (Palace of the Winds), with its intricate, lace-like facade carved from pink sandstone, was designed to allow the ladies of the royal court to discreetly observe the street scenes below. The five-storey structure has 953 honeycomb-shaped windows, encouraging a gentle breeze to flow through the palace. The striking edifice is best viewed from the rooftop cafes across the street.

BE A SPECTATOR OF THE ‘SPORT OF KINGS’

Whilst the rest of India goes crazy for cricket, in Jaipur they have a passion for polo and the city is one of the premier polo-playing destinations in the world. During polo season from October to February, guests at SUJÁN Rajmahal Palace are invited to view matches from an exclusive box at the grounds.

TAKE A LEOPARD SAFARI The sizeable forest reserve of Jhalana Leopard Reserve feels a world away from Jaipur. The protected safari park shelters a population of Indian leopards, with safaris run daily from Samode Haveli.

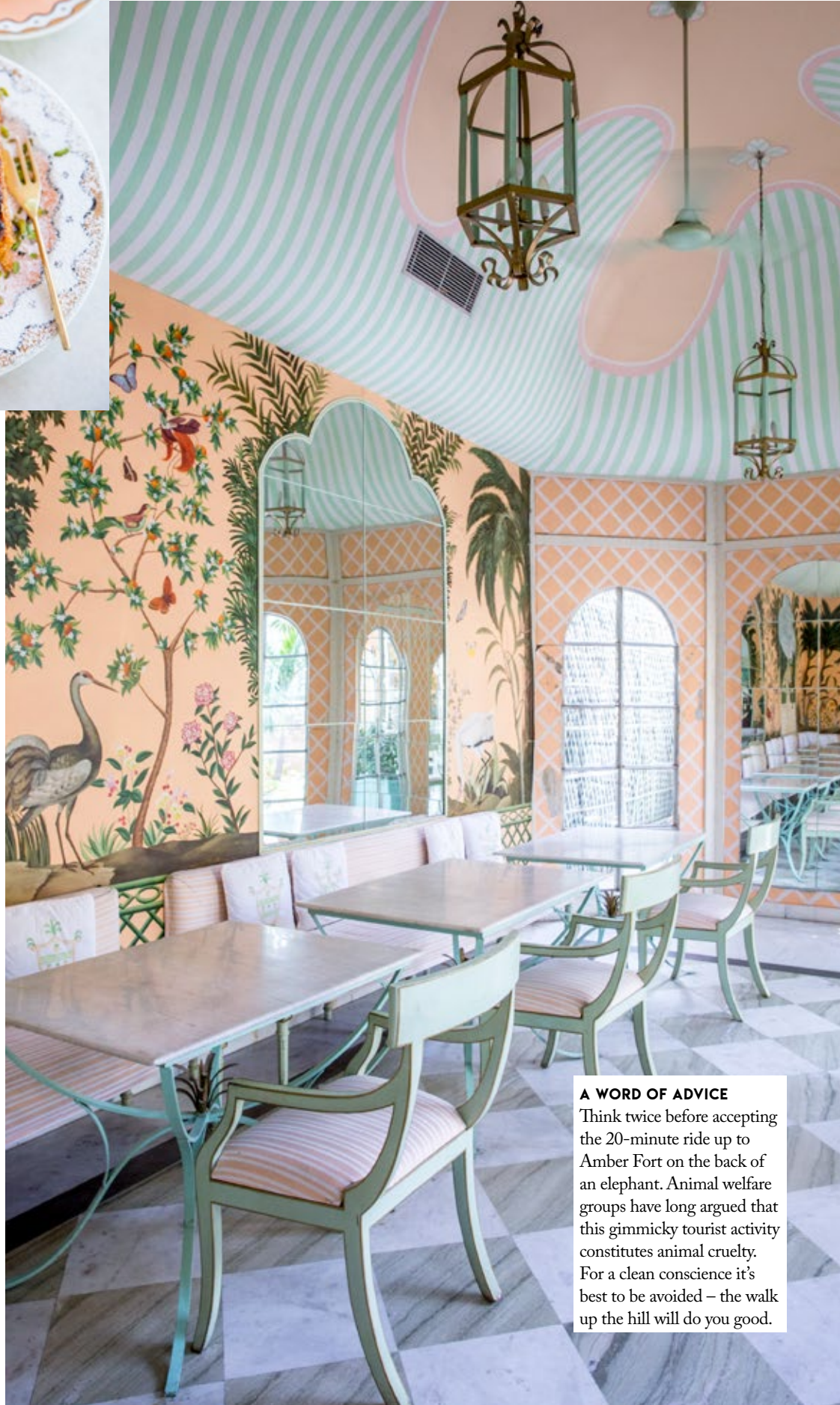
TRY YOUR HAND AT TRADITIONAL TEXTILES

The Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing, dedicated to the art of block printing, is located in a handsomely restored haveli in the shadow of Amber Fort. For an in-depth look into this age-old tradition check out the daily block printing and block carving exhibitions, you can even print your own scarf or t-shirt.





FROM LEFT: *A warm welcome means a shower of rose petals at the City Palace; The almond and rosewater cake at Caffè Palladio is a must; Pastels combine at Caffè Palladio; A fine greeting awaits at the Tuj Jai Mahal Palace.*



A WORD OF ADVICE

Think twice before accepting the 20-minute ride up to Amber Fort on the back of an elephant. Animal welfare groups have long argued that this gimmicky tourist activity constitutes animal cruelty. For a clean conscience it's best to be avoided – the walk up the hill will do you good.

pinch-myself perfection and gaze up at the twinkling chandelier. Before long I'm swanning around the tranquil gardens and cooling off by the Art Deco pool. A languorous afternoon is spent sipping tea in a marquee set on the manicured lawn. In a mere swish of a pale-pink turban, the immaculate butler returns with a three-tiered stand piled high with confections. Although I don't want to leave (ever), I'm whisked off for a personal tour of the City Palace. It's an invitation I simply cannot decline, as the vast structure is Jaipur's finest example of architectural grandeur, and guests of Rajmahal Palace can explore the private rooms upstairs. My guide ushers me into a small chamber favoured by Jai Singh, who was famously fascinated by astrology. Every surface is inlaid with small, shimmering pieces of glass. I lean in closer to admire the mirrorwork when, to my surprise, my guide shuts the door behind us. The room is pitch black. Without a word he swiftly lights a candle and holds the flickering flame up to the ceiling, which transforms into a sky of a thousand sparkling stars. The next morning I wake to the splendour of my royal suite and take breakfast in the ever-so-sexy '51 Shades of Pink' dining room. With Shankar waiting at

the door, we set off on a 30-minute drive to Amber Fort, located 13 kilometres north of the city. The imposing ancient fortress is a honey-hued sandstone and marble masterpiece fantastically reflected in the glass-like Maota Lake at its feet. I spend an hour or so wandering through the kaleidoscopic Sheesh Mahal (Palace of Mirrors), Mughal gardens and the ramparts with views over the rolling Aravalli Mountains, which are still roamed by wild leopards. When we return to the old town, I'm feeling quietly confident. I step out onto the road, determined to cross with the sureness of a local. Suddenly Shankar grabs me and pulls me back onto the sidewalk. "Be careful, the elephants!" he exclaims. Sure enough, a procession of the majestic creatures amble down the street as motorbikes and rickshaws criss-cross around them. Shankar notices my astonishment, shrugs and with a twinkle in his eye says, "Anything is possible in India." And, just like that, he has perhaps explained that overarching, inexplicable reason so many travellers, myself included, return to India time and time again. **IT**



DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Air India flies direct from Sydney and Melbourne to Delhi; Jaipur is a five-hour drive from the capital, so be sure to arrange an experienced driver through a reputable travel agency or hotel. Alternatively, catch a connecting flight to Jaipur International Airport. airindia.in

STAYING THERE

THE SUJÁN RAJMAHAL PALACE wouldn't be out of place in a Wes Anderson film with its pastel colour palette, Art Deco furniture, whimsical wallpaper and eye-catching symmetry. This historic hotel is one of Rajasthan's most treasured palaces, and in recent years the royal family has commissioned an extravagant restoration. sujanluxury.com **SAMODE HAVELI** This rambling, centuries-old mansion was once home to the aristocratic rulers of Samode. Today, the haveli is decorated with plush fabrics, Kashmiri-style rugs, hand-painted frescoes and historic artefacts. It's perfect for independent travellers looking for an authentic experience. samode.com

EATING THERE

CAFFÈ PALLADIO It's Rajasthani-meets-Sicilian style in this gorgeous apricot-hued salon hidden away in the heart of Jaipur. The Mediterranean- and Middle Eastern-inspired menu is refreshing after a few weeks in India. Treat yourself to a slice of the almond and rosewater cake. bar-palladio.com **1135 AD** For a royal feast of Rajasthani flavours, this theatrical restaurant in the swoon-worthy setting of Amber Fort is an absolute must. **PANDIT KULFI** Pop into this neighbourhood shop for Indian ice-cream made from milk, crushed almonds and cashews, sugar and cinnamon. Heavenly on a hot day.

DRINKING THERE

RAMBAGH PALACE The verandah of this former hunting lodge and royal residence is the perfect place to sip G&Ts on a balmy evening. The five-star hotel is every bit as magical as one might expect. tajhotels.com **BAR PALLADIO** Frequented by jet-setting Jaipurites and well-heeled ex-pats, this hip bar owned by Swiss-Italian Barbara Miolini is tucked away in the grounds of the Narain Niwas Palace Hotel. Stop by for an aperitivo. bar-palladio.com

SHOPPING THERE

GEM PALACE Formerly court jewellers to the Mughals, for generations the Kasliwal family have been at the forefront of India's illustrious gemstone industry. Nowadays their family-run store is a treasure-trove for tourists. gempalace.com **HOT PINK** This chic concept store stocks a collection of Indian fashion produced by some of the country's finest designers. Peruse the racks of silk tunics, patterned dresses and a rainbow of soft linen shirts. hotpinkindia.com **ANANTAYA DECOR** The design duo behind Anantaya Decor collaborate with skilled Rajasthani artisans resulting in Jaipur's most discerning home decor store. anantayadecor.com