

Jaisalmer

Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, India - January 26, 2008

Brent:

After one night on a train, followed by a night in a desert tent, it was luxurious to arrive at our Jaisalmer hotel, a many-starred resort outside of town.



palacial hotel

Showering off a few days of cold and dirt was great. Great! The hotel looked like a small desert resort, like a smaller version of the fanciest place we once stayed at in Phoenix. I don't

think there were many other guests staying (maybe 2 or 3 other couples) while we were there, but one desk clerk told us they would be completely full the next day with Russian tourists (staying for one month!).



even more luxurious than the tent bed

After a couple of hours to rest, our guide picked us up for the day. The guide was a very nice and very polished man who told us, almost first thing, that he was of the Brahmin caste. (We would hear a lot about castes over the next couple of days, but I'm still not sure what it means to the locals—legally it has no meaning but it does still seem to affect traditions for marriage, position in society, self-respect, etc...)

The city of Jaisalmer is very pretty. It's known as The Golden City for the color of its rocks. Amy often said that it is her favorite city so far. Many homes and shops



sand castle on a hill

within the walled city are lovely carved sandstone "havelis". The Lonely Planet calls Jaisalmer "a giant sandcastle with a town attached"; I don't have a better description so I'll stick with theirs. To

me the city reminded me a lot of a French castle built on a hill for protection, with narrow winding streets, but it was much bigger. The Golden City used to be very strong and wealthy when it was part of the trade routes; but with the partitioning of India/Pakistan and the movement of trade to places like Mumbai, the wealth disappeared. In recent years they've been pushing very strongly to bring in tourism, and that has worked—there were lots and lots of tourists there (from India and foreign). I particularly liked Jaisalmer because wind farms were visible all around, but that wasn't part of any official tour.



distant city

In Jaisalmer we visited two of seven Jain temples. Although there are no (or few) Jains living there now, many of the old traders were Jain and so they created temples. Jainism was an offshoot of Hinduism, but



real purty haveli

without the violence & sacrifices – Jains sweep away mosquitos from their path and wear masks so they don't accidentally eat insects. The inside carving in the temples were

very elaborate representations of gods, men & women (some in pin-up and educational sex-positions), and carved stone shapes.



couple friends

We walked through some alleys for a while, passing many shops. All the shops had a lime, seven peppers, and coal out front for good luck (something everyone does on Saturdays to ward off the evil eye) Our guide treated us to terrific chai that his wife made for us in his shop (he is not just a guide



Jain hall

but also makes and sells clothing and also owns some farm land). I was smitten by the tea, and also liked his clothing enough to purchase one shirt and have it modified for me.



ward off the evil eye

Other sites of Jaisalmer included a cannon overlook, the fresh vegetable market, a dessert-making stall (where we ate a delicious sweet lentil desert), and a visit to “The Prime Minister’s Home” which was really the descendants of the old prime minister (they were very nice) and were selling some things to help pay for the upkeep of the really intricately carved home. One interesting story of the home is that it is two halves each designed by brothers, trying to outdo each other; so none of the designs came out symmetrically in the front or in any room. Many of the inside paintings are inlaid with gold. We also stepped aside at one point to let a sort of funeral procession go by—the ashes of the deceased were being carried at the start of their long journey to Ganges (which is many thousands of miles away, but not so long now that air flights were more frequent).



going local



Prime Minister's descendant

After viewing the city the guide intended to drop us off at the hotel for lunch, but we didn't like that idea because we wanted something more “authentic” in town. So he dropped us off at a restaurant which turned out to be exactly the same one we'd eaten at the day before (before our camel ride). I guess that's the place where they drop off all the fancy-pantsiest tourists. This time we spent more time talking with the people who worked there and they showed us some sights from the roof above their rooftop restaurant.

We went back to the hotel for a little more rest, then the

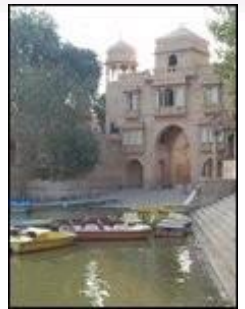


jaisalmer

guide and his driver picked us up again for more sights. We visited the local lake (The Maharajah/king had built a lake long ago) and saw locals boating around in it and just generally enjoying the steps (called ghats)

around the lake. We heard more stories, including one about the entrance gate that was built as a gift from a wealthy prostitute, but through which the nobles would never walk but which they couldn't destroy because of a Hindu religious figure she'd added to the top of the gate.

We ended our tour at a Brahmin-only temple ground, where they used to build temples in memory of their deceased before deciding it was better to donate such money to things like hospitals. An old man was playing a one-stringed instrument and singing, and Amy gave him a 10-rupee bill but he was not too happy with it. Our guide later told us that the bill was too old, and so probably wasn't any good, so Amy handed someone a newer 10-rupee bill and he brought it to the old man. Other tourists saw this and started to do the same. Our guide told Amy "you've done a good thing" and said she earned some good karma. We were at the grounds to witness the sunset, and it was indeed a jolly good show.



prostitute's gate

Because our hotel had such extremely expensive meals, and because we'd eaten lunch late, we had decided that for dinner we'd just have some junk food to eat on the bed and watch TV. So by the lake we bought a bag of chips, some biscuits (cookies), and candy. To make our romantic evening plans especially special we asked the driver to stop by somewhere where we could buy a beer. We didn't realize when we made this request that it was Republic Day (Indian Independence Day) and that buying alcohol was forbidden on Republic Day.



sunset

Our guide and driver may or may not have then driven to a closed English Wine shop, and someone may or may not have passed a Fosters (Australian for contraband) over the closed door, which we may or may not have paid for and then may or may not have enjoyed in our room.



best dinner ever

Dinner in our room was great, with TV, a warm, beautiful room, snacks, and a beverage. Who could ask for more?

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