

**Royal Style**

DREAM OF LIVING LIKE A MAHARAJA? IN RAJASTHAN, INDIA, YOU CAN,

AT LEAST FOR A WHILE. BY PAUL MARTIN PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE McCURRY



Keep your eyes open,” Pamela Singh advises. “In Jaipur, anything can happen.” Pamela’s sly smile conveys the same sense of adventure that I’m feeling. The Delhi-born art photographer and designer is showing me around her adopted city—Rajasthan’s capital—where she now lives three months of the year. We’re in the old quarter of Jaipur, the fabled Pink City, where every building is indeed painted deep pink.

Along the sidewalks, men in flaming magenta turbans vie for attention with women wrapped in saris of neon yellow, lime green, and screaming orange.

Baggy-skinned elephants lumber along stiff-legged, their faces painted with geometric designs. Humpbacked Brahma cows, sacred to Hindus, wander about, oblivious to all. Camels pull two-wheeled carts laden with goods. Cars, three-wheeled motorized rickshaws, wildly decorated trucks, and motor scooters carrying whole families form a tightly packed mass that seems headed toward terminal gridlock, except somehow everything keeps inching along.

The stores lining both sides of the streets bulge with jewelry, clothing, brassware, and a thousand other items. We make our way through the narrow alleys of the cloth bazaar, where unctuous salesmen in closet-size shops display bolts of fabric for their customers. Staccato Hindi sales pitches fill the air. There’s hardly an unoccupied inch of space, and I’m half-afraid to stop for fear of being trampled by the ever flowing river of people.

It’s all part of the total sensory overload that is India, a jostling, smoke-belching, horn-tooting bedlam. But tucked within this roiling mass, like candies in some vast pudding, are pockets of calm

and beauty. In Rajasthan, they’re the reminders of an era when warrior-kings ruled the land. Here in this desert state in northwest India, you can still get a taste of the royal style—stay in palaces-turned-hotels, stroll through rambling old hill forts, and shop for jewelry and other crafts fostered by those bygone rulers. If you’re lucky, you might even spy a tiger, the beast against which nobles once measured themselves.

Welcome to the land of the maharajas.

#### [ A Hotel Fit for a King ]

Rajkumar Vijit Singh casts his eyes upward. “Some of the ceilings are over 20 feet high,” he says. “We’ve had suggestions that we should lower them, for the air-conditioning.” He shrugs. “But we don’t want to. After all, what’s a palace for?”

In today’s Rajasthan, a palace is for anyone—with dozens of the former homes of the maharajas now open as heritage hotels. In the old days, the maharajas were rich beyond reckoning, but their fortunes began falling when the independent kingdoms of Rajasthan merged to form a state after India won independence in 1947. Then in 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi eliminated the government subsidies that had sustained the royal families, and many found themselves unable to afford the upkeep of their vast estates.



Rajasthan’s bright colors burst forth in the costumes of a puppeteer and his marionettes at Jaipur’s Raj Palace hotel. Rawal Yadavendra Singh and his wife, Rani Arpana Kumari Singh, (opposite) welcome guests in the receiving room of their palace hotel, Samode. Opening pages: Once home to the maharaja of Jaipur, Rambagh Palace hotel preserves the royal style with immaculate grounds and rich interiors.





Opening their homes to the public became a necessity.

A soft-spoken, cultured man in a well-tailored sport coat, Singh takes me through Rambagh Palace, the former home of his grandfather, Sawai Man Singh II, the late maharaja of Jaipur. The maharaja converted the palace to a hotel in 1958. Today guests can stay in his former private quarters or those of his wife or their son the prince, as well as any of the other hundred or so rooms in this sprawling structure, with its Lalique chandeliers and exquisite Indian furnishings. They'll tread the same marble staircases and eat in the same gilded dining room that once hosted the likes of

Lord Mountbatten, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Jackie Kennedy.

As we stroll through the former maharaja's handsome, wood-paneled study, I feel a twinge of sadness, as if I'm a voyeur in some lost Camelot. That's probably because I've just finished reading *A Princess Remembers*, the memoirs of Singh's grandmother, Gayatri Devi, which describes the fairy-tale lives she and her husband led. ...once upon a time.

In the 1930s, Singh's grandfather had been one of the world's leading polo players, a dashing figure who chummed with the crowned heads of Europe. Singh's grandmother was once listed among the ten most beautiful women in the world, and she went on to become a pioneering political figure in India. She still lives on the grounds of Rambagh Palace, in a private home.

Pamela and I take tea on the veranda overlooking the front lawns of the palace. Peacocks strut about the fountain-and-flower-filled grounds, which have been featured in "The Most Beautiful Gardens in the World."

"About 65 percent of our guests are foreign," Singh tells us. "Mostly European, although we get a few Americans."

"He's such a prince," says Pamela after Singh leaves us. "So modest and unassuming."

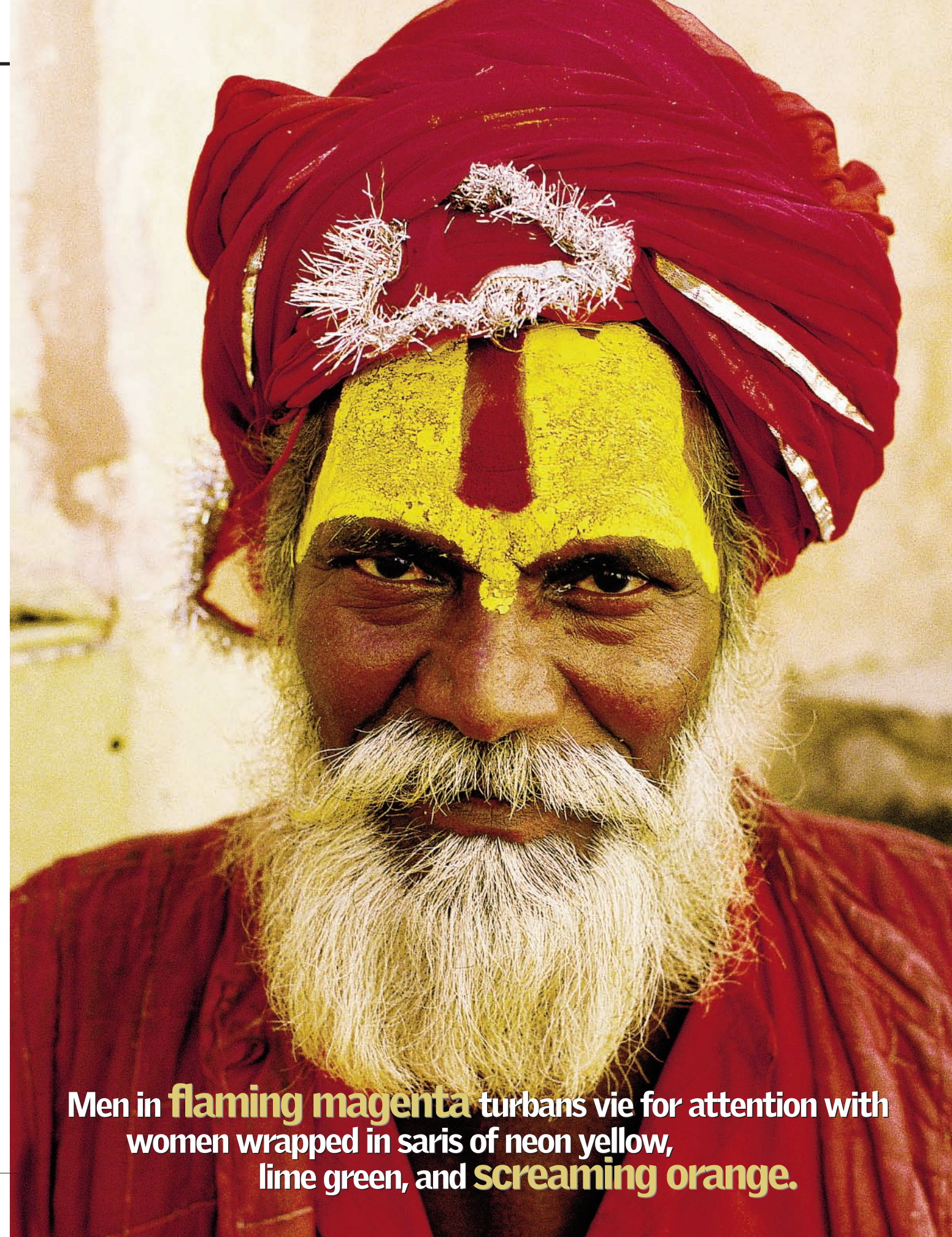
Pamela's right, of course—he's a legitimate prince. And his uncle "Bubbles" is a king.

### [ The House of Bubbles ]

In the heart of the city's old quarter I visit the home of the present maharaja of Jaipur, 72-year-old Sawai Bhawani Singh, better known as Bubbles. That's the nickname he was given as a baby, when his parents, giddy at having a male heir, threw grand parties at which inordinate amounts of champagne were consumed. Bubbles and his family live in the City Palace, a complex so large that some neglected parts at the rear have been overtaken by jungle.

A blend of Hindu and Islamic architecture, the palace is a museum as well as residence. Pamela and I peruse room after room filled with displays of royal paraphernalia. There are large open palanquins for transporting the

Mahouts maneuver their elephants through a narrow gate near the Amber Fort, where passengers can get a taste of this means of conveyance once used by the rulers of Rajasthan. Up until India's independence in 1947, Rajasthan was a patchwork of princely states. *Opposite:* A Hindu holy man inside the Amber Fort keeps the faith shared by over 700 million Indians.



Men in **flaming magenta** turbans vie for attention with women wrapped in saris of neon yellow, lime green, and **screaming orange**.



king, and smaller enclosed ones for his wives, who traveled in purdah, unseen by strangers. We see huge oriental carpets hundreds of years old, and the tentlike garments of 500-pound Raja Sawai Madho Singh II (who wore tiny shoes). Several rooms are filled with weapons, including some gruesome knives whose multiple blades sprung open like garden shears when someone was stabbed with them.

"The best of the collection is gone," Pamela says as we pass the snake charmer on the way out. "Sold, stolen, who knows."

In the hills above the city I see more evidence of the martial side of the maharajas. Looming over Jaipur are three forts—Amber, Nahargarh, and Jaigarh—built to house the rulers' huge armies. You can visit all three in an afternoon, as I do.

"Bubbles thought about moving up here once," Pamela tells me as we approach the 17th-century Jaigarh Fort, which is owned by the maharaja. Pamela and I stroll along the ramparts overlooking the hills, now patchy and dry as Rajasthan endures its fourth straight year of drought. There's a palace within the fort, where the maharajas used to rest up from their military campaigns. "People rent it out for parties now," says Pamela. "It's gorgeous lit up at night."

According to legend, in the 1720s Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II hid a hoard said to be worth 35 million dollars in Jaigarh Fort—guarded by warlike Mina tribesmen. These fierce guardians supposedly led each succeeding maharaja to the treasure once in his lifetime—blindfolded—and allowed him to choose one item. Indira Gandhi dispatched government agents to the fort in the 1970s to unearth the treasure, but nothing was discovered. Maybe it's still there.

#### [ Jaipur's Real Treasure Trove ]

**n**areesh Agroya spreads out the little folded packets of white paper atop his desk with a paternalistic smile, as if he were showing me photos of his children. We're seated in Agroya's office in the Johari Bazaar, a higgledy-piggledy warren of old-quarter shops. In a way, Agroya is showing off his babies. A tall, animated man in a blue blazer and white shirt, Agroya unfolds the papers to display their contents: emeralds, from pale to deep shades of green. Agroya, his father, younger brother, and sister are gem dealers in the city that ranks as the world's leading center for cutting colored gemstones.

"So how much are these worth?" I ask, hefting a pair of inch-and-a-half-long, teardrop-cut Colombian emeralds of a particularly dark green. The whole family is gathered around the desk. Agroya takes a moment to tuck a betel leaf-wrapped *paan*—a concoction of spices, tobacco, and other potent ingredients—into his cheek. He cocks his head and casually regards the stones. "Um, about 220,000 U.S. dollars," he says.

Pamela leans close to me. "That's wholesale. In a New York jewelry store they'd bring three to five times that much."

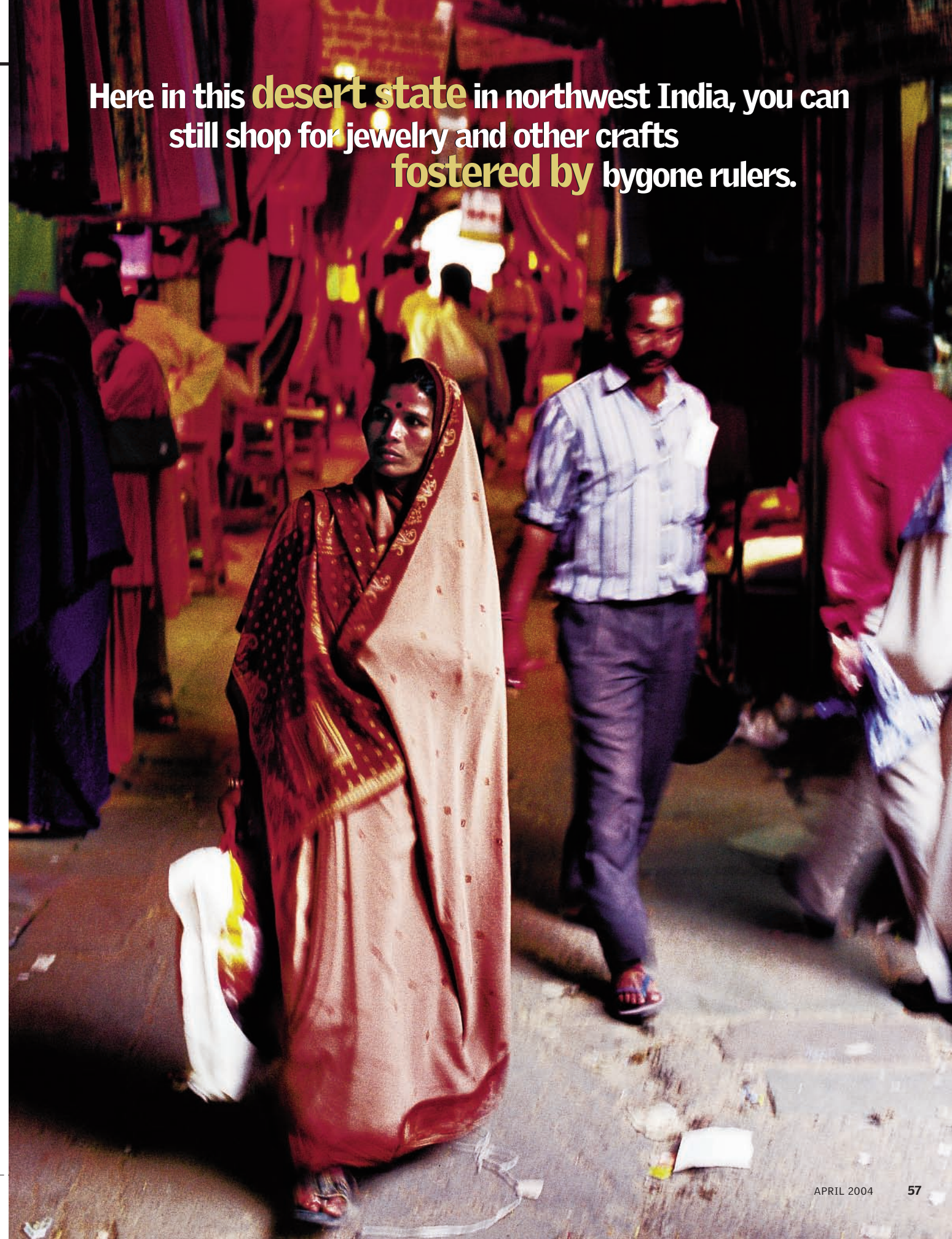
I stare at the two stones, realizing I'm holding a million dollars in the palm of my hand. Spread out on Agroya's desk are dozens of other fine emeralds, some as large as a silver dollar—a true king's ransom. The maharajas once slathered themselves with emeralds like these, along with rubies and diamonds. Extravagance was a way of life. If, say, you were angered by a Rolls-Royce dealer, you might buy an entire fleet of the cars from him and, as a maharaja of Bharatpur once did, use them to collect garbage.

Not far from the Agroyas' office I visit the Gem Palace—"jewelers to the maharajas"—where Sudhir Kasliwal escorts me around a showroom filled

The courtyard of the Jai Mahal Palace hotel takes on a dreamland aura at night. A stroll through the Katla Bazaar (right)—one of Jaipur's many marketplaces—is an immersion in the noisy, chaotic ways of Indian commerce, where bargaining is a must and theatrics a way of life. The author found the bazaars "impossible to resist...I brought home enough clothing and jewelry to open a shop."



Here in this **desert state** in northwest India, you can still shop for jewelry and other crafts **fostered by** bygone rulers.







with case after case of exquisite modern and antique jewelry.

“Jaipur was known as the Emerald City,” says Kasliwal. “Once all the world’s cutting and polishing of emeralds was done here. Now we do about 90 percent of it, mostly by hand.”

Kasliwal reaches into a dark corner and fetches a cloth bag from among a pile of boxes. He removes a parrot fashioned of green-enameled gold and studded with diamonds and rubies. There’s even a gold tree branch for the parrot to sit.

“See,” he says, unscrewing a little cap on the parrot’s head, “you fill it with liqueur and then you sip here.”

Kasliwal tells me the parrot is perhaps 200 years old and once belonged to a royal family. When I ask him how much such an artifact might be worth, he shakes his head and smiles.

“It is priceless.”

Later, Pamela explains why shops like the Gem Palace are brimming with antique jewelry. “Some of the old maharajas spent a lot trying to keep up their grand lifestyles. Whenever they ran low on money, they’d sell off something. Some of them sold everything—right down to the last gold plate, the last silver nail clipper.”

Besides jewelry, Jaipur is famous for other, more affordable products. At the textiles shop called Anokhi, which has been featured in *Elle* and *Vogue*, I purchase reasonably priced cotton clothing and place mats that have been hand-block printed with lively designs. At Amrapali, I browse

**Dancers await their moment to entertain guests at Rambagh Palace, where evening performances of traditional music and dance take place.**

among the company’s own handmade silver jewelry and settle on a Tibetan-motif bracelet priced at less than \$40. And at Neerja International, I buy pottery plates, bowls, and candleholders for a song.

“When I moved to Jaipur from Calcutta 25 years ago,” says Neerja founder Leela Bordia, “I wanted to help the poor by fostering a craft with which they could support themselves.” She “adopted” a village outside Jaipur, whose inhabitants she employed to help her develop a thriving pottery business. Bordia now employs 150 potters. “Out of this craft they are uplifting themselves,” she says proudly. “We have everything in India. We can do it. We just need to push.”

### [ Tale of the Tiger ]

**a**re you all right, sir?” Rajesh Gujar repeatedly inquires as we race along the dusty roads of Ranthambhore National Park in an open four-wheel-drive vehicle. It is 7 a.m., and Gujar, a licensed park naturalist, is doing his best to scout up a wild tiger for me in the 40°F chill of a February morning. There are only about 40 wild tigers in the 116-square-mile park, a mountainous region of heavy forest about a four-hour drive south of Jaipur. For the past few weeks, Gujar tells

# 8 Magical Hotels

Here are other accommodations in India where you can taste the high life.

**O**ne of the chief pleasures of visiting India is staying at a palace hotel. Like Rambagh Palace, mentioned in the story, these eight hotels are among India’s finest. Rates are per night, double occupancy. For phone calls from the U.S., add the international access code 011 and the country code 91. For contact information on more hotels, go to [www.searchindia.com/search/hotel.html](http://www.searchindia.com/search/hotel.html).

## Historic Properties

■ **Laxmi Niwas Palace, Lallgargh Complex, Bikaner** (151-2202-777; [www.laxminiwaspalace.com](http://www.laxminiwaspalace.com)) Built in the early 20th century in memory of Maharaja Ganga Singh’s father, the sprawling 42-room red sandstone structure is renowned for its opulent architecture. The palace features a collection of rare Sanskrit manuscripts and a museum with possessions of the late maharajas, including British tin soldiers. Starting at \$77.

■ **Samode Palace, Samode** (142-3240-014; [www.samode.com](http://www.samode.com)) A 19th-century family fortress run by descendants of Jaipur’s former prime minister Rawal Sheo Singh. Family photos line the walls in several of the 43 rooms, which feature dhurrie rugs and antique canopy beds; a few rooms have their own fountain. Starting at \$165.

■ **Udai Bilas Palace, Dungarpur** (296-4230-808; [www.udaibilaspalace.com](http://www.udaibilaspalace.com)) The wings of this royal residence surround the intricately carved Ek Thambia Mahal, or one-pillared palace, creating an atmospheric courtyard. Inlaid walls embellish the grand suite, one of 20 distinctive rooms. Guests dine at a banquet table beneath a Burmese teak ceiling, while mounted animal heads add a Raj-era feel. Starting at \$58.

■ **Umaid Bhawan Palace, Jodhpur** (291-3316; [www.umaidbhawan.com](http://www.umaidbhawan.com)) Known as Chhittar Palace for the namesake sandstone of its stately exterior, the immense art deco edifice remains the residence of the maharaja of Jodhpur and features 47 guest rooms. Indian cuisine is served at the buffet-style Marwar Hall; The Pillars, an open-air eatery, overlooks the lawns. Starting at \$150.

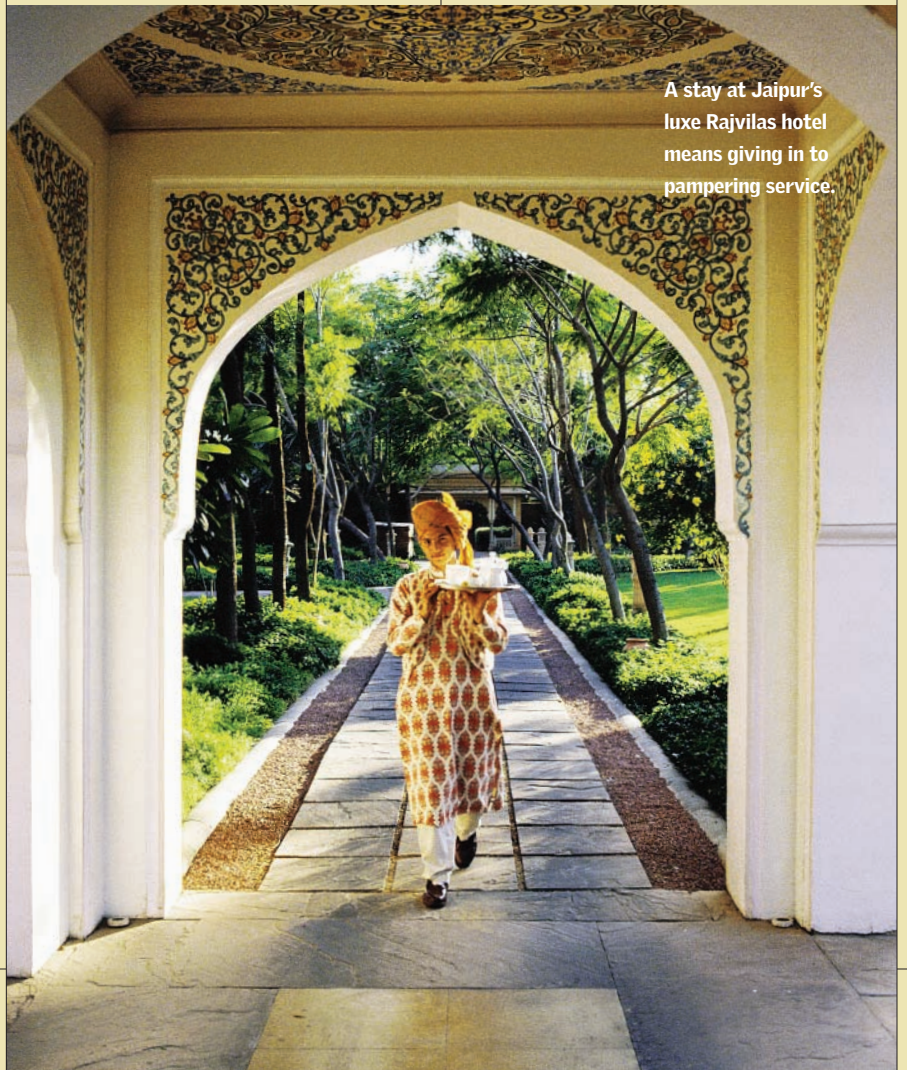
## New Properties

■ **Amarvilas, Agra** (Taj East Gate Road; 562-2231-515; [www.oberoihotels.com/oberoi/India/Amarvilas/](http://www.oberoihotels.com/oberoi/India/Amarvilas/)) Located just beyond Rajasthan in Uttar Pradesh, this 105-room luxury hotel is inspired by Rajasthani forts and Mogul architecture. Each room offers views of the Taj Mahal, less than half a mile away. Terraced gardens, reflecting pools, and inlaid breezeways accentuate the grounds. The Esphahan restaurant serves authentic Indian dishes. Starting at \$375.

■ **Rajvilas, Jaipur** (Goner Road; 141-2680-101; [www.oberoihotels.com/oberoi/India/Rajvilas/](http://www.oberoihotels.com/oberoi/India/Rajvilas/)) This lavish 71-room resort houses a restored 250-year-old Shiv temple and Rajasthani *haveli* (mansion). Indian and European cuisine are served in the Surya Mahal courtyard, which features torch-bearing columns and live folk music. Starting at \$395.

■ **Udaivilas, Udaipur** (Haridasji Ki Magri; 294-4333-00; [www.oberoihotels.com/oberoi/India/Udaivilas/](http://www.oberoihotels.com/oberoi/India/Udaivilas/)) The Aravalli Hills and Lake Pichola are the backdrops for this luxury resort set on 30 landscaped acres. Decorative domes, arches, and hand-painted frescoes distinguish the 87-room property. The Banyan Tree spa treatments include a yoga stretching massage and a milk and rose-petal bath. Starting at \$395.

■ **Vanyavilas, Ranthambhore** (Ranthambhore Road, Sawai Madhopur; 746-3223-999; [www.oberoihotels.com/oberoi/India/Vanyavilas/](http://www.oberoihotels.com/oberoi/India/Vanyavilas/)) More than 1,500 lemon, mango, and guava trees dot the 20-acre resort adjacent to the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve. A walled garden surrounds each of the 25 tents, which have their own decks. The 52-foot watchtower provides sweeping views of the surrounding hills. Starting at \$475. —Nandita Khanna



A stay at Jaipur’s luxe Rajvilas hotel means giving in to pampering service.





Spying a tiger at Ranthambhore National Park is the height of a visit to Rajasthan. Parkgoers can stay at Sawai Madhopur Lodge (right), the former hunting lodge of the maharaja of Jaipur.



me, no one has so much as glimpsed a tiger. A hundred years ago, there were an estimated 40,000 tigers in India. By 1973, that number had plummeted to 2,000—which prompted the Indian government to launch Project Tiger, an effort to save the species through habitat preservation and educational programs. Unfortunately, poaching still threatens the existence of these magnificent animals.

Ranthambhore was once the private hunting preserve of the maharaja of Jaipur. Here the royal family and guests stalked tigers, panthers, wild boar, and other game. Dominating the park are the monumental ruins of the old jungle fort of Ranthambhore. Built on a rocky cliff over a thousand years ago, the fort evokes the spirit of Indiana Jones. On a game drive the evening before, I’d looked up from the base of the vine-clad walls, which were tinted orange by the setting sun. High above on the battlements, monkeys and peacocks sat like sentinels, patiently waiting, as though keeping an eye out for the vanished lords of Ranthambhore.

As Gujar and I drive along this morning, I see other animals—chital, or spotted deer; sambar, India’s largest deer; and nilgai, a large antelope. But no tigers. We do see their tracks in the soft red dirt of the road, and several times Gujar tells the driver to stop and shut off the engine.

“Do you hear that, sir?” he asks as we listen to birds chittering loudly in the trees. “A tiger is moving there.”

By nine o’clock the sun has warmed the air and I uncloak myself from a heavy wool blanket. As we hurtle along, Gujar scans the brush continually. All at once he jabs the driver and we slide to a stop.

“There, sir. There, can you see?” Gujar says excitedly.

Following his pointing arm I spot a striped shape lying about 60 feet off the road in a thicket of saplings. Tiger!

I watch it through my binoculars. Every now and then the tiger lifts its head and looks around. When it glances our way, its white facial hair glints brilliantly like a beacon of light.

“A female,” Gujar announces.

“How can you tell?”

“The shape of the face, the color patterns.”

Suddenly our driver pokes my arm and points to the left, where an immense orange and black form floats through the forest half way between the road and the reclining female tiger.

“A male,” Gujar says triumphantly.

Like some phantasm, the nine-foot-long male pads through the trees parallel to the road. We follow him in the jeep until he lies down. When he looks directly at us with his mesmerizing yellow eyes I can feel his power, an electricity that flows between us. Occasionally he grunts, a deep *ahhh-oom* that rattles the air.

“He is content, sir,” says Gujar. “He has eaten recently, or else he would not be making any noise. He is asserting his power now.”

We watch the male for another ten minutes before we have to leave, since the length of every game drive is restricted.

“Oh sir, this is a beautiful morning,” Gujar proclaims as we pull away. “A magnificent sighting. Not one tiger, but two! You are very lucky.”

What Gujar doesn’t know is that I’ve been feeling lucky since the day I arrived in Rajasthan. That’s what living like royalty will do for you.

TRAVELER’s executive editor, **PAUL MARTIN** has also written about Vietnam, Egypt, Cuba, and numerous other destinations. Longtime National Geographic Society contributor **STEVE MCCURRY** has a special affinity for Asia. His latest book is *The Path to Buddha*.