

INDIA

Land of
Mystery and
Majesty



Keith Bellows, Editor

RAJASTHAN

Majestic Retreat



Situated on Lake Pichola, the opulent Lake Palace Hotel is accessible only by boat. The Maharana of Udaipur opened the palace, his family's 18th-century summer home, to the public in 1961.

“**L**ook there! Through the red wrought-iron gates, can you see?” Eagerly I nudged my way past the other tourists to see what the hubbub was all about. “That’s him, it’s the Maharana of Udaipur!” our Rajput tour guide exclaimed. Around me, all I could hear were the frenzied clicks of cameras as fellow tourists scrambled to capture the elusive, potbellied king on film. Our guide informed us that Rajasthan, the land of kings, was once ruled for over a millennium by kings who claimed to have descended from the moon or flames of a sacrificial fire. But it was the Maharana of Udaipur who occupied the pinnacle of India’s royal hierarchy, descending from the sun, the most revered source.

Many of India’s palaces have opened their doors to guests, offering a glimpse at the luxury & pampering once reserved only for royalty.

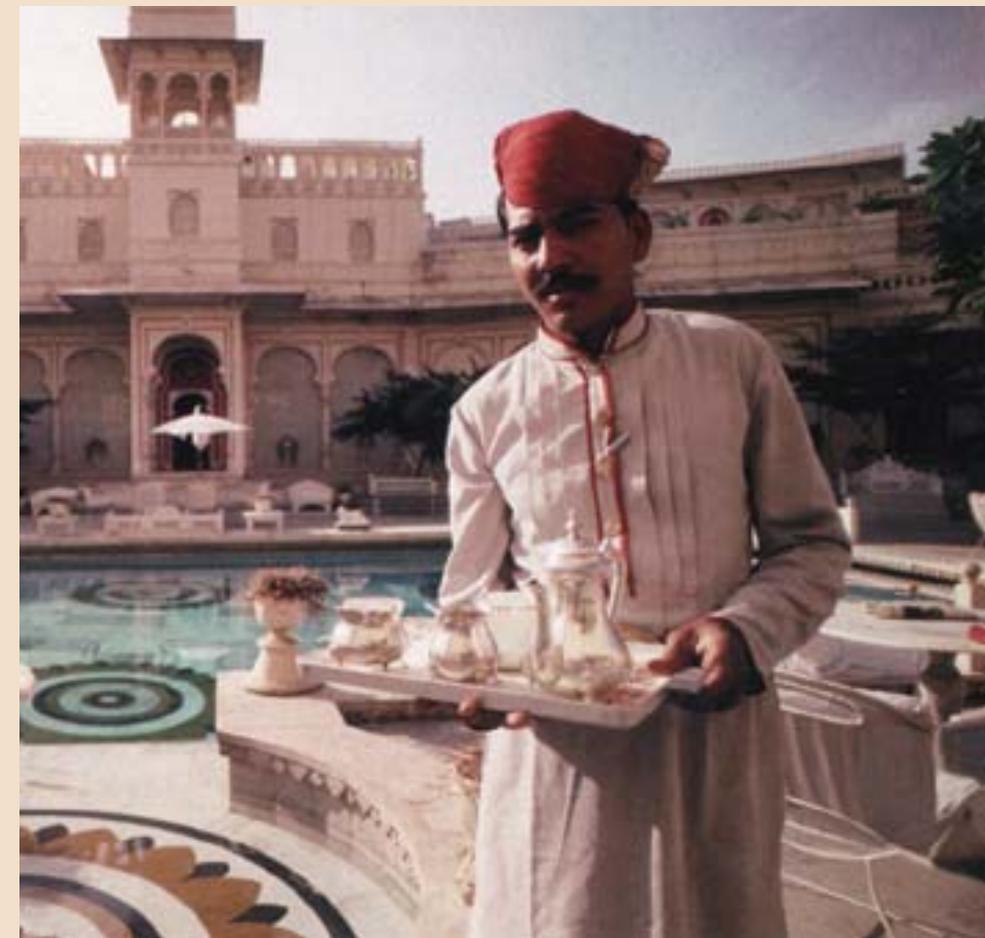
I turned back toward the Maharana just in time to catch a peek as he vanished behind the velvet drapes of Shambhu Niwas — his only palace that remained off-limits to tourists. The other three palaces here have been converted into gorgeous hotels, of which the most eye-popping is the Lake Palace Hotel, the royal family’s former summer residence.

Life for Indian royalty took a dramatic twist when India became an independent nation in 1947 and kings were eventually forced to earn a living just like ordinary citizens. Many royal families struggled to make ends meet, frenetically selling their priceless ancestral properties for a pittance, or watching them crumble into a state of disrepair. But a

handful, such as those of Udaipur, placed survival above royal pride, and opened their palace doors. The Lake Palace, built in 1754, is now one of India’s most unique and romantic hotels, replete with lotus-flower-strewn courtyards, plush furnishings, and restaurants serving authentic Rajasthani cuisine including delicious spice-infused curries.

Peering out the arched windows of my fit-for-a-king room, I was determined to use this serene setting to rejuvenate my body and soul. In the coffee shop I chilled out over a steaming cup of masala chai (Indian-style spiced tea) before heading to the Royal Spa. A jocund masseur gently marinated me with sweet-smelling coconut oil before proceeding to therapeutically pummel my stressed-out muscles. The one hour massage left me so divinely delirious that I went straight back to my room and crawled into the soft-as-a-marshmallow bed for an afternoon of blissful slumber. I arose just in time to take a leisurely sunset cruise around Lake Pichola, which surrounds the palace. The cruise included a stop at a nearby Jagmandir, a historic island palace guarded by a row of carved elephants.

Later that evening, under a star-studded black sky, Rajasthani musicians gathered in the hotel’s open-air courtyard and performed folk ballads with traditional instruments such as the *dhhol* (drum) and *sarangi* (stringed instrument). Sipping my frosty daiquiri, I thought about how profoundly different Rajasthan is today. Indeed, few visitors, including myself, leave the fairy-tale city disappointed.



Formal coffee and tea service is standard at palace hotels like the Shiv Niwas, another Udaipur landmark.



SARINA SINGH,
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KERALA

Taking an Ancient Cure



Boatmen pole their long canoe-like vessel on one of the many canals near Kollam in the green, green state of Kerala.

I spent most of my first three weeks in Kerala covered from head to toe in warm, sticky, earthy-smelling oil. Every day three female technicians dressed in cotton saris and aprons at the Somatheeram Ayurvedic Beach Resort would drizzle it slowly over me while I lay on a hand-carved treatment bench. Sometimes they would apply the thick orange-brown unguent over my entire body, while I struggled to remain still and not slip around. Other times, they'd keep the warm oil flowing continuously over my scalp, like a river, for

Explore landscapes of body and soul at India's most important locale for ayurveda, the subcontinent's science of natural medicine.

45 minutes. This treatment is called *sirodbara*, and it's supposed to calm the nerves. I think it worked, but I'm not really sure since after about five minutes of it I usually feel asleep.

Kerala, one of the smallest Indian states, is a sliver of tropical green tucked between the blue Arabian Sea and the abruptly rising mountain chain called the Western Ghats. Historically fascinating, it is said that the Apostle Thomas brought Christianity here, and the city of Cochin boasts a Jewish synagogue that was founded some 400 years ago. Not surprisingly,

the area is culturally rich (there are hundreds of Hindu temples, each with its own festival and some boasting their own resident Kathakali dance troupes). Kerala is justly one of the biggest destination draws of India.

Yet, on my first trip there, I hardly strayed from my little stone cottage on a cliff that overlooked a wide beach and a thundering sea. I had come to Kerala not to frolic or sightsee, but to detox the ayurveda way. Ayurveda, 5,000 years old, some say, seeks to balance the body into health through diet, a natural way of living, and medicinal herbs, which, in ayurveda, are both ingested (mostly via delicious Keralan cuisine, ingredients chosen by the doctors according your health condition) and infused into thick oils that are then massaged into the body for days & weeks on end.

Ayurveda has become so popular with travelers from Switzerland and Germany that Kovalam, the strip of coastline just south of the city of Trivandrum, has turned into a South Asian *Magic Mountain*, dotted with little resorts like Somatheeram, where oil-sticky guests tiptoe quietly to their treatments between naps.

I have no photographs of my first visit to Kerala, for after a few exhausting days of complete rest, torpor overcame me, and just getting from my cottage to the restaurant became my major activity. With every passing day, the idea of leaving the compound to visit the mountains or to glide in a wooden boat through the picturesque backwater canals that crisscross Kerala's interior seemed more and more remote.

But I didn't need to explore Kerala, for it had come to me. Its herbs were on my palate, its plants

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Travelers come to Kerala to unwind and detox at one of the many spas dedicated to ancient ayurveda.



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MAHARASHTRA

Culture Unearthed

The caves at Ellora faced west, so visiting in the afternoon affords the best light for appreciating the astounding architectural skill exhibited by the sculptors who carved them over a thousand years ago.

The caves of Ellora and Ajanta were the highlight of our last family holiday. Ellora features 34 caves, carved between A.D. 550 and 1000 by artists of different faiths: Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain. The monsoon sprinkled us as we arrived, but only briefly and halfheartedly, as if it didn't really want to get in the way of our view. We took in the rolling hills, rock-laden and stately, all around; the golden *gulmohur* blossoms, flaming insolent and tender in every garden; and then, in the afternoon sun, the caves themselves, opening into the Earth like a secret prayer.

The passing centuries have done little to diminish the mysterious caves at Ajanta and Ellora, where striking examples of sacred Asian art come to light.

Though referred to as caves, the rock temples are the work of men, hammering and chiseling diligently for centuries, creating two main kinds of structures; monasteries, or *viharas*, and halls of worship, or *chaityas*. The monks seem to have marked an outline on the surface of the hill and dug downward, cutting away the basalt to create entrances, columns, and chambers. Imagine the drama, turning mountain faces into works of art, working only with natural light, the metronomic poetry of hammer and chisel against rock. While one set of sculptors worked dexterously on the ceilings,

muscular excavators hacked away beneath them to reach the floor.

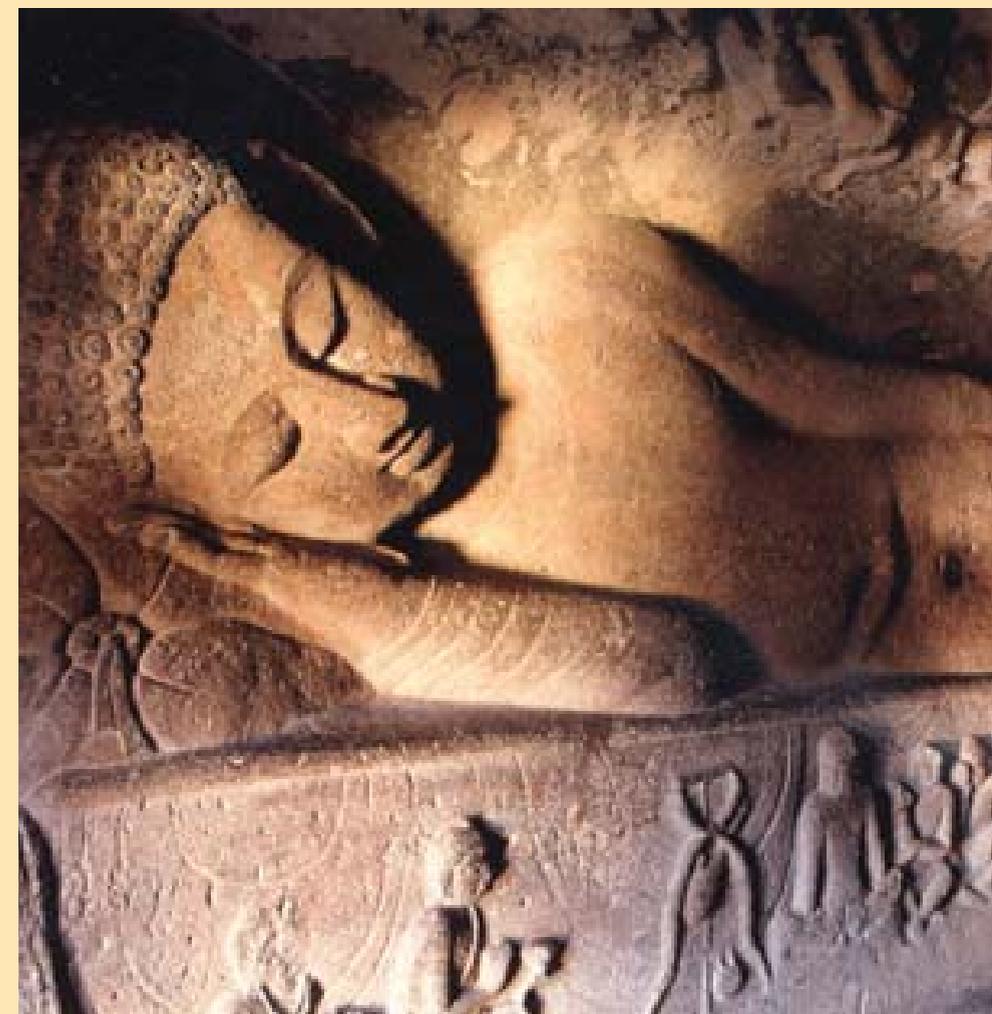
One remarkable feat is a three-storied hostel for the monks. Each room was carved into the rock with a stone bed, complete with stone pillow, and a niche in the wall for a lamp. Each floor has a room for an attendant and a rectangular space in the stone to serve as a notice board. As always, the past is full of resonance in the present.

Ajanta is an even older site, a series of 30 caves cut into the hill by Buddhist monks between 200 B.C. and A.D. 650 to serve as residences, temples, and schools. Each is adorned with statuary chiseled into the rock face and in many cases with remarkable paintings that tell stories. Ajanta had disappeared from popular consciousness around the eighth century, when Buddhism faded away in India, largely absorbed by a resurgent Hinduism. Centuries of neglect have preserved it well, particularly its paintings.

The Ajanta art is comparable in the history of Asian art to the frescoes of Siena and Florence in the development of European art. The Ajanta painters applied their colors on a thin layer of dry plaster rather than directly onto the walls. The plaster was made of organic material, including rice-paddy husks, mixed with mud and covered with sieved gypsum. The vivid paints were derived from locally available materials, though blue is believed to have come from lapis lazuli imported from Central Asia. Legend has it that attempts to reconstitute the paints after chemical analysis failed. The ancients knew a thing or two that the moderns cannot replicate.

Illuminated by a guide's portable light, we could see, from three angles, the extraordinarily enigmatic expression of the "bodhisattva Padmapani,"

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A 30-foot-long Buddha, asleep for all time in a temple at Ajanta, blissfully enters Nirvana.



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