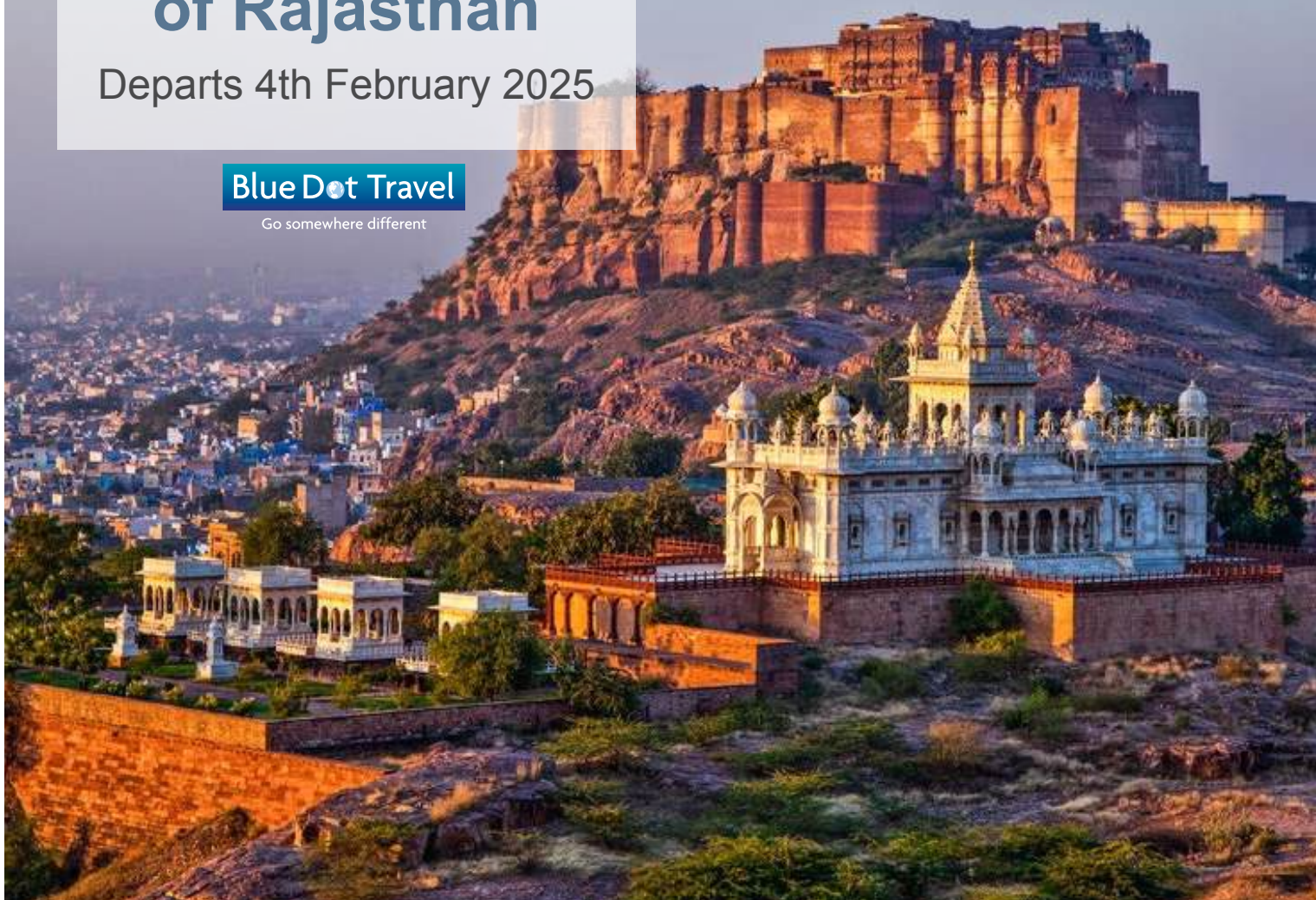


The Desert Trails of Rajasthan

Departs 4th February 2025

Blue Dot Travel

Go somewhere different



Itinerary correct as at 23 July 2024, but subject to change. All flights to be confirmed. www.bluedottravel.com.au



\$14,750 pp

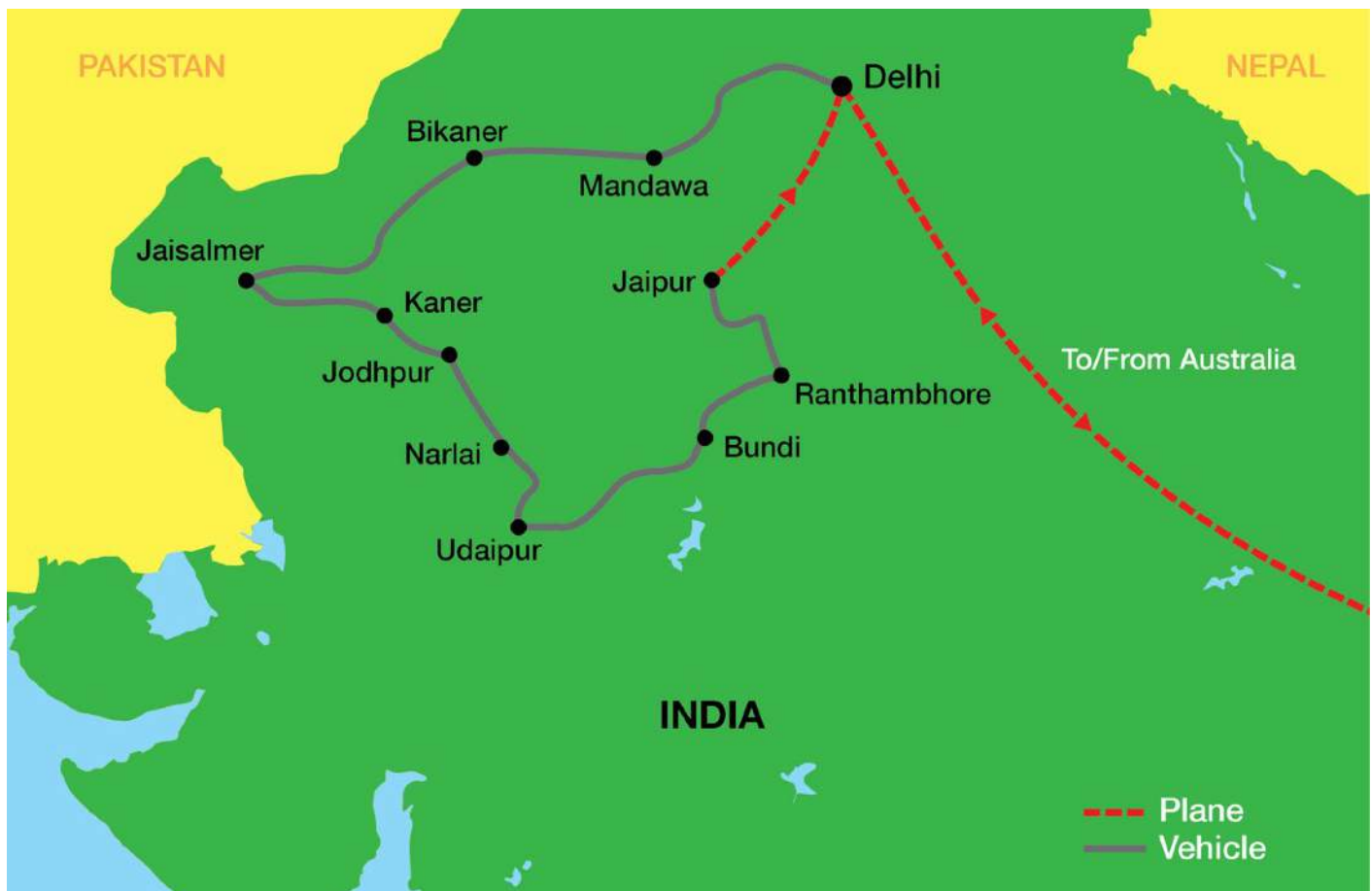
Twin-share, excluding
international airfares
Single supp \$3,950

THE DESERT TRAILS OF RAJASTHAN

India is a study in contrasts: a historical backdrop for a modern-day industrial narrative, a traditional outlook co-existing with fresh, global lifestyles, and an ensemble of ethnic disparities creating a cohesive cultural identity.

On the western part of the country, the desert state of Rajasthan brims with heritage, from its beautiful palaces and historic forts to the regal painted mansions, or "Havelis", where we stay. The desert folk with lineages of royalty intermingled with rustic communities have long endured the adversities of the land. Their ways of life evolved in the arid environment — from the cuisine using the desert plant life to clothing helping them stand against dunes, from the folk music that sings of water and wells to the dance forms that mimic the desert wildlife. On this journey, we explore this resplendent and fascinating region.

Follow our Desert Trails of Rajasthan for an insight into what made ancient fiefdoms flourish and learn of their lost and lingering legacies!



Departure, Tuesday 4th February IN TRANSIT

Depart Australia and fly to Delhi. Our group flight will arrive at Indira Gandhi International Airport in the evening. We will then be transferred to our hotel in a private vehicle. Check in and relax in the comfort of the hotel.



Day 1, Wednesday 5th February DELHI

If you have arrived on our group flight, you will have this day at your leisure. There will be time to recuperate

from the flight, and you'll have time to explore independently. We'll have a welcome dinner tonight in the hotel. **B/D**



Day 2, Thursday 6th February DELHI

As a capital to many empires, Delhi has witnessed the ebb and flow of rulers across history who have left their cultural influences on the city – from the Tughlaq dynasty to the Mughal empires, from the imperial colonial stronghold to the present-day government. Today, Delhi is a cosmopolitan city, one of the greenest capitals in the world, flourishing as the political and cultural capital of the country. We'll start our exploration of Delhi with a trail that will take us through the city's colonial-era architecture. We'll drive

past the India Gate, a monument commemorating the deaths of over 70,000 Indian soldiers in the British Forces during World War I, and older British buildings that house today's President's residence, Parliament, and Secretariat. We'll continue to visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Humayun's Tomb – a red sandstone edifice constructed in the 16th century to become the first Garden Tomb in India to be built by the Mughal rulers. Later, we'll head down to Old Delhi, one of India's biggest trading centres. Follow the narrow lanes to reach Haveli Dharampura for lunch. Enjoy Mughlai cuisine with a meal at this heritage hotel tucked in the city's old quarters. After lunch, explore Chandni Chowk on cycle rickshaws. The bustling marketplace houses an interesting assortment of stores selling everything from jewellery to sarees, and numerous eateries have also been established along these lanes. You'll also ride past churches, mosques, and temples, walk through a wholesale spice market, and smell the freshly cooked street food as you immerse in the quirks of Old Delhi. Return to our hotel with dinner at a local restaurant. **B/D**



Day 3, Friday 7th February DELHI - MANDAWA

We'll be transferred to Delhi Cantt railway station early in the morning to board the train to Mandawa for our 4 hour train journey. Train travel in India can be a grand social experience if you are forearmed with a little knowledge of what to expect. Each coach in the

train has an attendant responsible for distributing bed rolls, looking after older people, and ensuring that the compartment and the facilities are clean. We'll hop off at Churu station, where vehicles will be waiting to pick up the group and transfer to our heritage haveli. Lying on an old caravan trade route, the Shekhawati region is renowned for the grand old painted mansions or "Havelis" of the wealthy merchant class, the Marwaris. Mandawa bears witness to a rich history with numerous havelis, and indisputably holds onto the claims of the Shekhawati region being among the lesser-known marvels of Rajasthan's landscape. On a guided walk of Mandawa in the afternoon, we'll explore the frescoed town, with several murals narrating their strange tales, with some amusing effects created by a lack of perspective, where horses may be as large as houses! The walk will end with a sundowner at a boutique property overlooking an old well. Once a neglected merchant home, this haveli has been revamped into a cozy heritage property with modern amenities. We'll arrange a high tea with cookies and sandwiches. Return to the hotel and enjoy an evening cultural show and dinner. Our two-night stay in Mandawa is at The Legacy Mandawa (or similar). **B/D (+ high tea)**



Day 4, Saturday 8th February MANDAWA

The Shekhawati region resembles an open-air art gallery with paintings from the mid-19th century. An excursion to Nawalgarh offers an even better perspective of how the Havelis looked, functioned, and evolved when they lived in. About 30 km from Mandawa, this was another estate of MahaRao



Shekha, the founder of Shekhawati, and has some of the best-preserved havelis of the region. Nawalgarh also gives an insight into the lives of the merchant community of this region. The Goenka Haveli in

Dundlod and the Poddar Haveli are some of the most well-maintained Havelis and have now been converted into museums. Return to the hotel with the afternoon at leisure or stroll around the vibrant bazaar – where curious local ingredients will catch your eye. Dinner at the hotel. **B/D**



Day 5, Sunday 9th February MANDAWA – BIKANER

After breakfast, we'll take the 3-hour drive to Bikaner, one of the three great desert kingdoms of Rajasthan. It prospered because of its strategic location on the overland caravan trade route to Central Asia and China. The Shekhawati region is renowned for the painted mansions of its wealthy merchant class, the Marwaris. The region resembles an open-air art gallery with paintings from the mid-19th century. It

bears witness to a rich history with numerous havelis and, indisputably, holds onto the claims of being among the lesser-known marvels of Rajasthan's landscape. In the afternoon, we'll visit the 16th-century Junagarh Fort and Prachina Museum housed in the fort complex. Junagarh Fort dominates the city centre, and its history is intertwined with Bikaner's. Commissioned by Raja Rai Singh, one of Emperor Akbar's most distinguished generals, Junagarh remained an impregnable bastion that had never been captured. As you walk from the Fort past the decorative havelis, let our storyteller guide narrate the city's illustrious history of reign, riches, and ruin. The Prachina Museum displays royal costumes, textiles, and Rajasthani royalty accessories in the Junagarh Fort. The Poshaks (garments worn by ladies) are a reminder of the now-lost craft of traditional designs, styles, and artistry. The family portraits on display narrate a story about how changing cultural settings influenced the style of immortalising the former rulers. We'll organise dinner at a special venue at the hotel today. We'll stay two nights in Bikaner at the Narendra Bhawan (or similar). **B/D**



Day 6, Monday 10th February BIKANER

After breakfast, take a walking tour of the old city known for its intricately carved jharokas – enclosed overhanging balconies popularised by Mughal architects.

Bikaner's old city is a tribute to architectural finesse and historical richness. Its meandering streets and exquisitely adorned havelis, featuring intricately crafted facades, carved wooden or stone jharokhas, and jaali work (stone or latticed screen), offer a captivating glimpse into the city's bygone era. Amidst the well-preserved Havelis, the lanes of the old city still have the spirit of being a prime centre for trade commerce on the Silk Road, with a bustling marketplace filled with shops of sweetmeats, handicrafts, and leather articles still flourishing. We'll take a high tea or lunch at Bhanwar Niwas, a 100-year-old haveli of the Rampuria merchant family, who were prominent merchants and traders during the British Raj. The haveli, with an intriguing architectural mix of Rajasthani and European styles, has been renovated in parts and runs as a boutique heritage hotel. In the afternoon, drive to the National Research Centre for Camels. Bikaner boasts of some of the world's best riding camels and is nicknamed camel country. A visit to the research centre provides insights into the science and folklore behind camel milk, hide, and hair - and you'll come back with a newfound respect for these animals. You can also visit an art studio of Bikaner-style miniature paintings.



Developed in the 17th -century, this art form captures intricate details on a small scale but emphasises vibrant colours. Depicting a diverse range of themes —mythological stories, royal scenes, and everyday life—often with a regional flavour, the art form has a unique storytelling ability. **B/L**



Day 7, Tuesday 11th February
BIKANER – JAISALMER

After breakfast, drive to Jaisalmer, the golden city—a tagline given due to its distinctive yellow sandstone architecture that gives it a golden hue, especially during the sunset. This is a long but rewarding drive of over 5 hours. We'll stop for lunch at Fort Pokaran, a 14th-century fort converted into a heritage hotel. Check into your hotel – the Gorbandh Palace for two nights (or similar). **B/L**



Day 8, Wednesday 12th February
JAISALMER

Once upon a time, Jaisalmer was a bustling caravanserai along the Silk Route, and the royal Rajput clan grew wealthy, collecting taxes from merchants en route from India to Afghanistan. As with all trade, in due course of time, ransacking and pilfering led to feuds between the royal clans and the Delhi Sultanate, and the Jaisalmer fort was captured, forcing its people to flee to nearby areas that fall



within present-day Pakistan. After regimes of the Mughal and Maratha Empires and an annex by the British colony, Jaisalmer's trading glory faded with the establishment of seaports. Today,

Jaisalmer is preserved as a World Heritage Site. Its pale-yellow sandstone structures resemble a shimmering mirage in the desert, and it has the whimsical exoticism of a bygone, fairy-tale era. This morning, after breakfast, we'll visit Jaisalmer Fort and Haveli. In the afternoon, we'll drive to Kuldhara, a deserted village west of Jaisalmer, abandoned in the 13th century and considered to be haunted. Return for dinner at the hotel. **B/D**



Day 9, Thursday 13th February
JAISALMER – KANER

After breakfast, the group will drive to Kaner – about 3 hours' drive. On the way, stop at an olive farm offering more than just a break – an inspiring example of determination. About a decade ago, Satbiri Devi, a forward-thinking farmer, planted Olive saplings from the Negev Desert in Israel on her 40-acre farm. Today, with over six thousand olive plants, the farm produces organic, extra virgin olive oil – marking the success of agriculture in the desert landscape. Enjoy a stroll through the Olive groves and enjoy a Mediterranean-inspired alfresco lunch. Then, drive to India's first botanical desert resort – Kaner Retreat.

Kaner Retreat is the brainchild of Sapna Bhatia. Growing up on a small farm in Jodhpur, she often spent her childhood days with her grandmother, learning about the benefits and usage of desert plants. Later, she graduated in Botany and pursued her master's in international journalism, which led her to become a successful BBC TV journalist. The retreat's cuisine also reflects her understanding of local and international cultures. Later in the afternoon, we'll discover the principles of plant-based wellness, health, and healing in an interactive session with Sapna. Then, walk alongside her as she takes you on an immersive botanical discovery of the desert vegetation. Savour a 'Thali' dinner served under the stars with the warmth of a bonfire. Stay at Kaner Retreat for two nights. **B/L/D**



Day 10, Friday
14th February
KANER

After breakfast, witness the unique relationship the Raika community shares with camels. On a visit to the village of the camel herders, who



believe Lord Shiva created them to safeguard these majestic creatures, you'll find that camels are beyond mere livestock. Here, camels are a source of celebration, deeply ingrained in local folklore and music. The community goes the extra mile, creating delicate camel jewellery to express their deep affection. Late afternoon, enjoy a thrilling drive to the dunes and dive into the beauty of the Thar Desert. As the sun casts its golden hues across the landscape, you'll feel a sense of wonder. **B/L**



Day 11, Saturday 15th February
KANER – JODHPUR

Today we drive to Jodhpur – about two hours. On arrival, we'll check in to our hotel. Epitomising the romance and feudal splendour of Rajasthan with the striking Mehrangarh Fort towering over it, the city of Jodhpur was once a flourishing trade centre for opium, silk, and copper. Painted a brilliant shade of blue, Jodhpur is the last bastion of fort ramparts, colourful bazaars, and animated people with their storytelling traditions before the desert sands and dunes stretch away toward the horizon. You'll visit Mehrangarh Fort – one of the most majestic of Rajasthan's forts, described by the author Rudyard Kipling as "the creation of angels, fairies, and giants." Its forbidding ramparts are in sharp contrast to the flamboyantly decorated palaces within. Founded in 1459, the sandstone fort was added to by later rulers between the 17th and 19th centuries. Explore the massive fort complex and the exquisite museum collection. From the Fort, we'll walk down the narrow alleys leading to Old City, which has a mysterious quality to its quiet lanes, exquisite havelis, and pale

indigo walls. Our guide will take us through the lanes and to teach us more about the proud heritage of the inhabitants of the city. Stroll the bazaars – a community hub where you'll find everything from traditional handicrafts to copper pots, vegetables to spices, and daily essentials to lip-smacking snacks and sweets. As it is known, Sardar Bazaar has several beautiful havelis primarily made of red sandstone. Our guide will assist us in exploring the streets, stores, and hawkers selling several snacks and sweets, including mirchi vada, khoya, mawa, gulab jamun, laddoo, lassi and more. We'll stay for two nights at Ratan Villas (or similar). **B/D**



Day 12, Sunday 16th February JODHPUR

Today, we embark on a 'crafts, culture and community' experience with an interesting excursion to the villages where the desert communities reside. We'll visit Dhani (the smallest conglomeration of huts classified as a settlement), which promises an authentic rural experience. Centred around traditional artisan communities of the region – potters, Pattu weavers, hand-embroidered jootis, sari embroiderers, and bead craftsmen. Alongside these, we'll discover the ways of life in the expanse of semi-arid land in the Great Thar desert as you meet and interact with villagers. The experience also includes a proper sit-down lunch with the local Thakur (chieftain) at his Fort, where we discussed the region's history, traditions, and customs. We'll drive back to the hotel., with the rest of the day at leisure. In the evening, enjoy an exclusive Bhopa-Bhopi-traditional Rajasthan folk performance. The region of Marwar has birthed numerous tales of heroic deeds, and its thriving tradition of Bhopa Bhopi has maintained a symbolic attachment to this inspiring folklore. The Bhopa community are a nomadic people from the Thar desert. They are well known for their rich, traditional storytelling. The performance by the Nayaks (wandering balladeers) is akin to the Greek concept of a chorus, wherein songs of heroism are passed on to generations in song and recited along with the Phad (scroll), which depicts the important events. In the nomadic tradition, a long Phad (a scroll) is painted with various images that show the historical events of a great Rajput hero. A male narrator tells a story while the females dance at various interludes. **B/D**



Day 13, Monday 17th February JODHPUR – NARLAI

After a leisurely breakfast, we'll begin our drive to Narlai (about 3 hours) and check in to the hotel on arrival. The afternoon is at leisure. We'll enjoy a Step Well dinner tonight and taste the flavour of true Rajasthani royal hospitality at the 16th-century Baoli (Stepwell). Your hotel in Narlai for two nights is the Rawla Narlai (or similar). **B/D (+ high tea)**



Day 14, Tuesday 18th February NARLAI

We'll depart early in the morning for a leopard safari around Narlai, looking for the elusive felines. The rugged Godwad countryside around Narlai suits the leopards, and their numbers have increased. Return to your hotel for breakfast and then walk around the 17th-century village of Narlai—an authentic glimpse into rural living against the stunning backdrop of the Aravalli hills. The village's way of life has been etched by the natural terrain that surrounds it. You'll discover how the undulating landscape has influenced the village's architecture, with homes and buildings designed to harmonise with the contours of the land, and has also offered a haven for wildlife. The village folk share a deep connection with nature and the land they call home. Yet, life has continued much as it was back in the day – peaceful and unhurried. In the afternoon, enjoy another jeep safari under the expertise of resident naturalists and try spotting these species basking in the sun on the rocks. **B/D**



Day 15, Wednesday 19th February NARLAI – UDAIPUR

After breakfast, we'll drive an hour to visit Ranakpur Jain Temples, set in a secluded wooded valley of the Aravali Hills. The 15th-century temple complex is one of the five great holy places of the Jain faith. The grand scale and the sheer architectural complexity of the white marble temple, along with its exquisite sculptural ornamentation, make it the single most impressive example of Indian temple architecture—a hymn in marble. Then we'll transfer to Ranakpur for lunch. Later, we begin our drive to Udaipur, an oasis nestled in the lap of the Aravali Mountain. Originally a thriving caravanserai, it became the capital of local royal clans. Udaipur is unlike any city you'll visit in Rajasthan. Its serene lakes, beautiful gardens, and magnificent palaces lend a nostalgia that has often earned it the acclaim of being one of the most romantic places in the world. Apart from being a historical place, Udaipur has been immortalised in contemporary culture in iconic films from Jewel in the Crown and Richard Attenborough's Gandhi. Later in the evening, enjoy a stroll on Gangaur Ghat. When the sun begins to set, the ghat comes alive with a gentle buzz of activity. The transition is stunning, and the walk is a true sensory journey! Your stay in Udaipur for two nights is at the Taj Fateh Prakash Palace (or similar). **B/L**



Day 16, Thursday 20th February UDAIPUR

Today starts with a visit to City Palace. With its blend of stern Rajput military architecture and lavish Mughal-inspired decorative art, it is the largest palace in Rajasthan, sprawling over 5 acres, built between

the 16th and 20th centuries. Continue to the Jagdish Temple, a three-storied wonder of architecture comprising an intricately sculpted spire and beautifully carved pillar. Lunch is at Royal Repast restaurant and then enjoy a short tuk-tuk ride through the old city to



discover the various facets of markets, artists, and artisans at work. Mughal miniatures top the list, but other forms include handicrafts like puppet-making, wood carving, clay sculpting,

and metal embossing. At sunset, enjoy a tranquil ride on Lake Pichola, listening to the lapping of the water alongside your boat. It is one of the most beautiful ways to get to Udaipur. Admire the setting sun, creating a hue of orange that engulfs the surroundings, consisting of the Aravali mountains on one side and the City Palace on the other. **B/L**



Day 17, Friday 21st February UDAIPUR – BUNDI

After breakfast, the group will drive for around 4 hours to the little town of Bundi, which is often described as the undiscovered jewel of Rajasthan. Surrounded on three sides by the rugged, thickly forested Aravali hills, this walled town has retained much of its historic character. It is noted for its ornate forts, palaces, and baoris (stepwells), as also the frescoes in the Bundi Palace and the miniature paintings that adorn its walls. On the way, visit the 12th-century Bijolia Temples that stand as evidence of their era's architectural and artistic excellence. The detailed carvings and structural ingenuity mirror the dedication and skills of the craftsmen behind their creations. The temples provide a window into that time's religious practices and cultural heritage, granting us insight into the past. Later, you'll visit the Taragarh Fort, constructed by the Chauhan dynasty in the 14th century. The fort was strategically positioned as a defensive bastion against potential invasions. Its high vantage point, affording sweeping landscape views, enabled its role as a sentinel, guarding the region from adversaries. We have a one-night stay at Bundi–Dev Niwas (or similar) tonight. **B/D**



Day 18, Saturday 22nd February BUNDI – RANTHAMBORE

After breakfast, we'll depart for the 3-hour drive to Ranthambore National Park, one of India's first wildlife

sanctuaries declared a protected forest under Project Tiger in 1974. The dedicated efforts in conserving the forests and protecting the Tigers have resulted in healthy numbers of the big cats in the Ranthambore

National Park. Spend the rest of the day in the comforts of your hotel, where you will stay for three nights at Khem Villas (or similar). **B/L/D**

Day 19, Sunday 23rd February RANTHAMBORE

Enjoy morning and afternoon safaris through the ruined ramparts in search of the Royal Bengal Tiger. Ranthambore is also home to the common leopard, nilgai or blue bull antelope, wild boar, sambar, hyena, sloth bear, grey langur, rhesus macaque, and chital. There will be some downtime to enjoy the wonderful grounds of the hotel. **B/L/D**



Day 20, Monday 24th February RANTHAMBORE

Most wildlife enthusiasts come to Ranthambore with just one agenda—to catch a glimpse of the tiger. But, while sighting a tiger might be the



ultimate thrill, the overall jungle experience is something to be treasured. The silence, the misty mornings, and the sights, sounds, and smells of a forest are a rare delight for most city inhabitants. In fact, for ears used to the jangle of traffic, just the sound of silence can be very tranquil, especially when you are inside the park in the morning. In the afternoon, visit Dhonk Crafts, a non-profit organisation spearheaded by Divya Khandal. Dhonk provides sustainable livelihoods to the community's women by teaching them crafts, embroidery, and tailoring techniques, which they use to make various handmade products, including ethnic prints in modern styles. Sales proceeds go towards paying wages and sustaining the operation of the non-profit. **B/L/D**

Day 21, Tuesday 25th February RANTHAMBORE – JAIPUR – DELHI

Enjoy a leisurely breakfast at the hotel. Later, we will be driven to Jaipur airport – about 3 hours - to board a flight to Delhi or Mumbai for the transit night. Flight IndiGo Airlines 6E 2176: Dep. Jaipur: 05.30 PM / Arr. Delhi: 06.40 PM (to be confirmed). Check-in at an airport hotel on arrival. Stay at the Novotel Aerocity for just one night. **B**

Day 21, Wednesday 26th February DEPARTURE or CONTINUE TO JAIPUR AND AGRA

We'll be met and transferred to the airport for our homeward flight, or there is an option to stay for a few extra days and take in Jaipur and Agra.*

***5-night post-tour extension to Jaipur, Agra and Delhi. From \$2,600 twin share. Ask us for details.**



Icon indicates a day where there is **moderate physical exertion**. A basic level of fitness is required: eg. A trek over 'mostly flat' terrain or climbing several flights of steps without the support of handrails or elevators.



Icon indicates a day where there is a **particularly active section**. A good level of fitness is required: eg. A longer trek over non-groomed, uneven terrain, or ascending to reach a panorama. May also include exposure to higher altitude. **An alternate activity may be offered if you choose to sit out an active section.** Please call - we are happy to discuss each tour in more detail.