

Rajasthan



Rajasthan, the Land of Kings, is aptly named. It is indeed a fabulous realm of maharajas and their majestic forts and lavish palaces. The remnants of a rich and romantic past, either in evocative ruins or restored to former splendour, have earned Rajasthan a place on most travellers' wish lists. Yet there is much more to this iconic region of the subcontinent. It is a land of deserts and jungle, camel trains and tigers, glittering jewels, vivid art and vibrant culture. There are enough festivals here to fill a calendar and an artist's palette, and the shopping and cuisine are nothing short of spectacular. In short, Rajasthan just about has it all; it is the must-see state of India, brimming with varied, startling and incredible attractions.

Rajasthan's popularity has generated a formidable tourism industry that permits travellers on any budget to experience all its magic and sights. While its colour-charged cities throb with the crowds and chaos of emerging India, the treasures of the past hold pride of place in mind and spirit. There's magnificent Mehrangarh looming large over sea-blue Jodhpur, the golden sandcastle at Jaisalmer, the palaces of Udaipur, Pushkar's reverent yet carnival charm, the storybook whimsy of Bundi and the painted *havelis* (ornately decorated residences) sprinkled through Shekhawati. Rajasthanis are rightly proud of their rich and turbulent history and there's a recognisable acknowledgment of the economy's dependency on tourism.

The state is diagonally divided into the hilly southeastern region and the arid northwestern Great Thar Desert, which extends across the border into Pakistan. The highest point is reached at the pleasant hill station of Mt Abu.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Be mesmerised by the magnificence of **Mehrangarh** (p231), the cliff-top fort watching over the blue city of Jodhpur
- Cross the desert on a camel and explore the sandstone fort at **Jaisalmer** (p240)
- Be seduced by the lake and palaces of **Udaipur** (p213), where fairy-tale views combine with romantic fine dining
- Wander through the colourful bazaars and imperial palaces of the always pink, always chaotic capital of **Jaipur** (p168)
- Join the party in **Pushkar** (p195), a mystical small town around a holy lake, hosting one of India's most famous fairs
- Take it slow in **Bundi** (p203), a relaxed, hassle-free town with a rambling storybook palace
- Explore the forgotten towns and discover the crumbling frescoed *havelis* of **Shekhawati** (p189)





History

Rajasthan is home to the Rajputs, warrior clans who claim to originate from the sun, moon and fire, and who have controlled this part of India for more than 1000 years. While they forged marriages of convenience and temporary alliances, pride and independence were always paramount; consequently much

of their energy was spent squabbling among themselves. The resultant weakness eventually led to the Rajputs becoming vassals of the Mughal empire.

Nevertheless, the Rajputs' bravery and sense of honour were unparalleled. Rajput warriors would fight against all odds and, when no hope was left, chivalry demanded *jauhar* (ritual mass suicide). The men donned saffron robes and rode out to face the enemy and certain death, while the women and children perished in the flames of a funeral pyre. It's not surprising that Mughal emperors had such difficulty controlling this part of their empire.

With the Mughal empire declining, the Rajputs gradually clawed back independence – at least until the British arrived. As the British

FAST FACTS

Population 56.5 million

Area 342,239 sq km

Capital Jaipur

Main languages Hindi and Rajasthani

When to go mid-October to mid-March