

Western Rajasthan



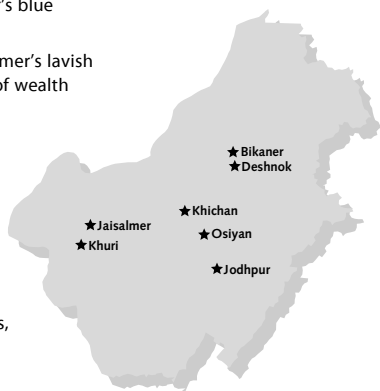
Rama, hero of the Ramayana, fuming with rage at the sea god who policed the straits between India and Lanka (Sri Lanka), resolved to fire a destructive arrow into the sea. However, in the nick of time, the sea god appeased the irate god, and Rama switched his aim. He fired the arrow into the northwest, creating the parched arid lands of western Rajasthan, represented today by the Thar Desert, which embraces the romantic citadels of Jodhpur and Jaisalmer.

The vast desert, extending into Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat, and into Pakistan, is not all barren and sandy. In fact it's the world's most populous arid zone. Desert culture, from the down-to-earth villages to the majestic forts, is vibrant and resilient, and such a vital ingredient of Rajasthan's allure. The towns of this region are powerfully evocative. Jodhpur, the Blue City, spreads out like an inland sea from beneath the glare of mighty Mehrangarh – a fort of impressive proportions. Jaisalmer, the Golden City, arises from the drifting sands of the Thar like an enormous sand castle. Bikaner, with no allotted colour, has narrow medieval bazaars, and its fort, Junagarh, has some of Rajasthan's most opulent interiors. Barmer, in the far southwest, is the colourful centre of handicraft production with treasures galore for adventurous shoppers.

The west is where you can ride a camel over a sand dune and into the sunset, camp under a desert sky and meet villagers in radiant robes. It's as if the romance of the great caravans has been preserved in the desert air.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Listen to a city's secrets from the soaring ramparts of magnificent **Mehrangarh** (p304), above Jodhpur's blue building blocks
- Marvel at the overworked stone carving of Jaisalmer's lavish **Havelis** (p326) – delicate yet powerful symbols of wealth
- Explore the ancient **Jaisalmer Fort** (p324) – the world's biggest sand castle
- Jump on a camel and embark on a **camel safari** from Jaisalmer (p330), Khuri (p336), Bikaner (p343) and Osian (p317) – the best way to experience the desert, and you get to sleep under the stars
- Spot a white rat at **Karni Mata Temple** (p348) in Deshnoke where rodents run riot, gnawing sweets, slurping milk and scampering over your feet
- Watch the skies over Khichan for the graceful **demoiselle cranes** (p318) flying in for a free feed





History

The district of Jodhpur was for a long time the ancient kingdom of Marwar, the largest kingdom in Rajputana and the third largest in India, after Kashmir and Hyderabad.

The region's history is hazy until the 3rd century BC. The indigenous inhabitants were subjugated by the Aryans during their invasion of northern India between 1500 and 200 BC. In 231 BC Chandragupta Maurya's empire came to power, spreading across northern India from its capital at present-day Patna, in Bihar. Subsequent centuries saw a bit of pass the parcel until the Rathore Rajputs, who hailed from Kannauj in present-day Uttar Pradesh, came out on top. This is when the state of Marwar

emerged. The Rathores originally settled at Pali, southeast of present-day Jodhpur, shifting to Mandore in 1381. In 1459 Rao Jodha, the Rathore leader, moved the capital about 9km to the south and founded the city of Jodhpur.

Jaisalmer was founded in the 12th century, after the Bhati Rajput capital at Lodharva had been destroyed by Mohammed of Ghori. After experiencing great unrest in the medieval period, Jaisalmer enjoyed a heyday from the 16th century to the 18th century, when it was a stop on an international trade route.

Meanwhile, the Muslims were entrenched at Nagaur. Mohammed Bahlim, the governor of Sind, erected a fort there in 1122, having subdued the local Hindu chief, Ajayaraja.