



# Jaisalmer, Jodhpur & Western Rajasthan

## Includes »

|                               |     |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Jodhpur .....                 | 253 |
| Around Jodhpur .....          | 267 |
| Jodhpur to<br>Jaisalmer ..... | 271 |
| Jaisalmer .....               | 275 |
| Around Jaisalmer ..           | 288 |
| Bikaner .....                 | 292 |
| Around Bikaner .....          | 301 |

## Best Places to Eat

- » Indique (p264)
- » Nirvana (p264)
- » Desert Boy's Dhani (p286)
- » Jaisal Italy (p286)

## Best Places to Stay

- » Rohet Garh (p269)
- » Hotel Killa Bhawan (p285)
- » Singhvi's Haveli (p261)
- » Devi Bhawan (p263)
- » Desert Moon (p283)
- » Badal House (p292)

## Why Go?

The west is a different Rajasthan, with the romance of desert cities and camel caravans. Most of the region is covered by the Thar Desert, which also extends into Punjab, Gujarat and Pakistan. The Thar is the world's most populous arid zone, mostly covered by scrub vegetation, with plentiful villages eking out a living from their animals and maintaining a richly colourful desert culture. Three atmospheric old cities form the focus of most travels here, each with a majestic fort at its heart. Proud Jodhpur is a halfway house between the relatively urbane cities of eastern Rajasthan and the state's wild west. Bikaner and above all Jaisalmer are romantically isolated desert towns and the main starting points for renowned desert safaris. These adventures need careful organising, but you won't quickly forget nights sleeping under the desert stars or your camel's rhythmic rambling progress across the landscape.

## When to Go

The west consists largely of desert, so the best months to come are October to February, when the weather is at its most moderate for camel safaris and just about everything else. It even gets chilly at night in December and January, but that's easier to deal with than the searing heat of mid-April to mid-July, when daytime temperatures normally top 40°C. The monsoon brings a small drop in temperatures in late July and August. Jodhpur has a slightly less extreme climate than Jaisalmer and Bikaner.

## History

In Hindu mythology, Rama, hero of the Ramayana, enraged at the sea god who policed the straits between India and Sri Lanka, resolved to fire a destructive arrow into the sea. In the nick of time the sea god appeased him. Rama switched his aim, firing his arrow into the northwest and creating the Thar Desert of western Rajasthan.

Legends aside, the region's early history is hazy. Aryan tribes from Afghanistan or Central Asia seem to have moved into the region from about 1500 BC, and in the 4th century BC the Mauryan empire spread 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, east of Agra, came out on top. 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. The Rathores' kingdom, Marwar, grew to be the largest in Rajputana and the third largest in India, after Kashmir and Hyderabad.

Jaisalmer, the second of the west's major kingdoms, was founded by the Bhati Rajputs in 1156, after their capital at nearby Lodhrava had proved indefensible. Jaisalmer enjoyed its heyday during the 16th to 18th centuries, when it was a stop on important international caravan routes.

The third major city and kingdom, Bikaner, was founded by one of the sons of Jodhpur's founder Rao Jodha, and like Jaisalmer it flourished as a caravan trade centre from the 16th to 18th centuries.

The desert kingdoms retained their autonomy for 1½ years after Independence in 1947, before their princes were finally persuaded to unite their territories with India. The forces stationed near the India-Pakistan border today underscore the area's high strategic importance.

## Jodhpur

0291 / POP 846,400

Mighty Mehrangarh, the muscular fort that towers over the Blue City of Jodhpur, is a magnificent spectacle and an architectural masterpiece. Around Mehrangarh's feet, the old city, a jumble of Brahmin-blue cubes,

## FESTIVALS IN WESTERN RAJASTHAN

Western Rajasthan's colourful festivals, often featuring camels, splash colour against the desert. For details of statewide and nationwide festivals, see p24.

- » **Bikaner Camel Festival** (Dec/Jan; Bikaner, p292) Witness decorated camels and best-breed competitions, camels dancing to drum beats, and camel tugs-of-war, processions and races.
- » **Jaisalmer Desert Festival** (Jan/Feb; Jaisalmer, p275) Touristy festival with camel races, camel polo, folk music, snake charmers, turban-tying contests and the famous Mr Desert competition. Many events take place at the Sam sand dunes.
- » **Nagaur Fair** (Jan/Feb; Nagaur, p270) A several-days-long cattle and camel fair – more about trading and more authentic than most. Plenty of song, dance, camel fashion and trinket traders.
- » **Karni Mata Fair** (Mar/Apr & Sep/Oct; Deshnoh, p302) Devotees throng to the Karni Mata Temple, where rats are worshipped as the reincarnations of local people. The spring fair is the bigger one.
- » **Ramdevra Fair** (Aug/Sep; Ramdevra, p273) Ramdev Mandir is the focus of this festival, celebrated by Hindus and Muslims to commemorate Ramdev, a saint who helped the downtrodden. Female performers with small cymbals attached to their costumes dance the *terahtal* (a traditional dance) while balancing pitchers of water on their heads.
- » **Marwar Festival** (Sep/Oct; Jodhpur, p253) Celebrates the rich cultural legacy of Marwar (Jodhpur), with events in evocative settings including Mehrangarh fortress.
- » **Kapil Muni Mela** (Oct/Nov; Kolayat, p301) A kind of mini-Pushkar, with fewer camels but lots of sadhus and very few tourists. As in Pushkar, devotees take a dip in the holy lake at the full moon.