



Painted Palaces of Rajasthan

Jodhpur, Nagaur, Bikaner, the Shekhawati & Jaipur

4–16 November 2025 (ML 843)

13 days • £7,530

International flights not included

Lecturer: Dr Giles Tillotson

A survey of the remarkable phenomenon of architectural paintings.

Forts and palaces, from the grimly defensible to filigree finesse.

Includes places rarely visited by tourists, many by special arrangement, and lingers longer at well-known sites.

Led by Dr Giles Tillotson, a leading expert in Rajput and Mughal history and architecture.

Rajasthan has long been famous for the great forts and palaces built by the Rajputs. These Hindu maharajas initially resisted Muslim expansion in North India but then became co-architects of the Mughal empire. Their fine cities have been magnets for tourists and travellers since the days of Pierre Loti and Rudyard Kipling. Some have ancient origins, but in the more settled times of the heyday of the Mughals and of the period of British rule they built increasingly elaborate and delicately ornamented palace apartments within the embattled forts of their forebears.

The Rajput rulers represent the warrior class, the people who carved out kingdoms and asserted the right to rule by force of arms, but they could never work alone. They looked to other communities – to the priests and the merchant classes – to provide the administrative brains and business acumen that ensured their states were well governed and prosperous. The most successful merchants built exquisite painted mansions in some of the smaller towns of the region and developed their own styles of architectural opulence.

This unusual tour of Rajasthan presents both categories of patronage, and combines relatively short travel distances with maximum cultural impact. The three forts of Mehrangarh (in Jodhpur), Ahichhatragarh (in Nagaur) and Junagarh (in Bikaner) include some of the finest painted interiors in all of Rajasthan. The stylistic starting point is the composite culture that the Rajputs developed with the Mughals, but this was invigorated by elements drawn from Rajasthan's distinctive folk culture. There are also exquisite gardens, especially the recently restored garden complex in Nagaur. And with the later palace buildings of Jodhpur,



Jaipur, watercolour by Mortimer Menpes, publ. c. 1910.

the Sufi shrine of Nagaur and the temples of Bikaner, these three cities have much else to offer besides.

The second part of the tour takes us through the best preserved towns in the area known as Shekhawati. Here especially, the merchant communities constructed elegant palatial homes or courtyard houses known as havelis. In the arid landscape these buildings appear like a colourful pageant celebrating the muralists' art. Even the exterior walls are covered with lively scenes drawn from religion, folklore and everyday life. Ironically, some of the leading patrons never got to live in these homes. With the rise of British power in the 19th century, they migrated to Kolkata, where the greater business opportunities lay. They continued to remit funds in generous quantities to the towns of their origins, funding public welfare schemes as well as their own estates – all undertaken against the day of eventual return, which has still not come to pass.

The tour begins in Delhi, where the Mughal and British monuments place the various phases of our Rajasthani odyssey in the larger imperial context; and ends in Jaipur, the celebrated capital of Rajasthan, built according to the Vastu Shastra, the architectural treatise from the Vedic age which enjoyed a revival under the Hindu rulers of Rajputana.

Itinerary

Flights to Delhi are not included. We recommend the British Airways flight from London Heathrow on 3rd November at c. 11.15am, which arrives at c. 1.15am on 4th November.

Rooms are ready for occupation from 2.00pm on 3rd November, allowing those arriving from London early on the 4th to check in immediately, and those arriving from elsewhere the opportunity to settle in the night before.

Day 1: Delhi. The tour begins at c. 12.00 noon with a talk in the hotel, followed by lunch. In the afternoon visit Humayun's striking tomb, with its high-arched façades set in a walled garden, is an important example of early Mughal architecture. Continue to the severely beautiful 15th-century tombs of the Sayyid and Lodi dynasties, located in the serene Lodi Gardens, close to the hotel. Overnight Delhi.

Day 2: Delhi, Jodhpur. Fly from Delhi to Jodhpur (Air India). Presiding over the capital of one of the largest Rajput states in western Rajasthan is the magnificent Mehrangarh Fort. Described by Kipling as the 'work of angels, fairies and giants', it was built in 1459 and has some of the most imposing fortifications in the world. Private dinner in the fort's garden. First of two nights in Jodhpur.

Day 3: Jodhpur. Created in resplendent white marble, Jaswant Thada is the large 19th-cent.

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continued

memorial of Jaswant Singh II and cremation ground of the Marwar rulers. The visit to Mehrangarh Fort examines the painting tradition of the Marwari Rajputs, with special admission to the gallery led by the curator. The buildings of the lively Old City are painted in a variety of blues, originally the colour denoting the homes of Brahmins. Overnight Jodhpur.

Day 4: Mandore, Nagaur. Mandore was the capital of the Marwari state until 1895 when it moved to Jodhpur. On the ancient cremation grounds, the royal cenotaphs are unique in Rajasthan as they resemble Hindu temples. Drive through the desert to Nagaur, one of the earliest Rajput settlements and an important Sufi centre. First of two nights in Nagaur.

Day 5: Nagaur. Ahichhatragarh Fort (linked to the hotel by a corridor) was founded in the 4th cent. and developed and embellished in the 18th. Pre-Mughal and Mughal architecture is well preserved in the palace chambers; the Akbari Mahal, built to commemorate the visit of the Emperor Akbar in 1570, has some original floral murals, while the Hadi Rani Mahal houses some 16th-cent. murals in shades of green depicting daily and courtly scenes. The rest of the day is free. Overnight Nagaur.

Day 6: Nagaur, Bikaner. In the morning, drive to Bikaner to visit the Laxmi Vilas Palace, a masterpiece of Indo-Saracenic architecture designed by Sir Swinton Jacob (1902). The Jain Bhandasar Temple is said to be older than the city itself, although the current building dates from the 15th cent. and has fine paintings. First of two nights in Bikaner.

Day 7: Bikaner. Unlike most Rajput strongholds, Junagarh Fort is not built on a hill. Founded in 1588, it displays a variety of painting styles, from traditional Rajput motifs to early 20th-cent. depictions of trains. The Monsoon Palace has some highly unusual paintings of rain clouds and lightning, while the Diwan-i-Khas, the hall of private audience, is profusely decorated with gold leaf. There is a special opening of the Phool Mahal, the oldest part of the palace. Overnight Bikaner.

Day 8: Bikaner, Mandawa (Shekhawati). The desert villages of the Shekhawati region of northern Rajasthan are celebrated for their painted havelis (merchants' mansions), which go back to the 18th century. The Nand Lal Devra haveli in Fatehpur has some newly restored examples. A leisurely walk in Mandawa reveals some interesting depictions of flying machines and other modern appliances. Overnight in Mandawa.

Day 9: Mandawa, Jaipur. The 4-hour coach journey to Jaipur drives through the scenic Aravalli range. Founded in the 18th cent. by the prominent Rajput ruler Sawai Jai Singh, the design of Jaipur demonstrates its creator's obsession with mathematics and science. The dramatically located site of Galta outside Jaipur features temples, leisure pavilions, sacred water spring and tanks. First of three nights in Jaipur.

Day 10: Jaipur. The City Palace contains an unsurpassed collection of paintings and artefacts. The Jantar Mantar, the 1730s observatory is equipped with massive astronomical instruments that are astonishingly accurate. A walk takes in the many-windowed façade of the pink sandstone Hawa Mahal (Palace of Winds) and attractive havelis. The former duck-hunting lodge Jal Mahal is situated in the middle of Man Sagar lake (subject to confirmation). Some free time to visit the painting and gem markets for which Jaipur is famous. Overnight Jaipur.

Day 11: Jaipur. Athwart a natural ridge, the magnificent yellow walls of the 18th-cent. Amber Palace conceal fine craftsmanship – mirrored chambers, latticed windows, carved alabaster. Located in a traditional townhouse, the Anokhi museum showcases the art and heritage of wood-block printing. Overnight Jaipur.

Day 12: Jaipur, Delhi. Drive to Delhi (c. 5 hours) and on arrival visit the Qutb Minar, site of the first Islamic city of Delhi, established in 1193 on the grounds of a defeated Rajput fort. The towering minaret and its mosque survive as testament to the might of the invaders. Overnight near the airport.

Day 13: Delhi. Car transfers to Delhi Airport are arranged for your onward journey.

We recommend the 10.50am British Airways flight to Heathrow, which arrives at c. 3.15pm.

Lecturer

Dr Giles Tillotson. Fellow (and former Director) of the Royal Asiatic Society, Giles is currently Senior Vice President at DAG (a Delhi-based art gallery). He was earlier Consultant Director at the City Palace in Jaipur, and before that Reader in History of Art and Chair of Art & Archaeology at SOAS. His specialisms include the history and architecture of the Rajput courts of Rajasthan and of the Mughal cities of Delhi and Agra; Indian architecture in the period of British rule

and after Independence and landscape painting in India. His books include *Taj Mahal, Jaipur Nama, Delhi Darshan*, and the historical novel, *Return to Bhanupur*.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £7,530. **Single occupancy:** £8,940.

Included: arrival and departure airport transfers; domestic flights with Air India: Delhi to Jodhpur (Airbus A320); travel by private air-conditioned coach; hotel accommodation as described below, breakfasts, 9 lunches and 9 dinners with beer, water, soft drinks and coffee at lunch plus wine at dinner; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and local guides.

Flights: flights between London to Delhi are not included in the price of the tour. We send the recommended flight options when they are available to book (December 2024) and ask that you make your own flight arrangements. The cost of a World Traveller (economy) seat with British Airways at the time of going to press is c. £750.

Visas: required for most foreign nationals, and not included in the tour price.

Accommodation. Taj Mahal Hotel, New Delhi (tajhotels.com): 5-star centrally located hotel. **Hotel Raas, Jodhpur** (raasjodhpur.com): A boutique hotel within the walled city. **Hotel Ranvas, Nagaur** (ranvasnagaur.com): 17th-century palace converted into a luxury hotel. **Narendra Bhawan Hotel, Bikaner** (narendrabhawan.com): A 5-star luxury hotel. **Hotel Vivaana, Mandawa** (vivaana.com): A painted haveli converted into a comfortable hotel. **Trident, Jaipur** (tridenthotels.com): A comfortable 5-star hotel close to Man Sagar lake. **Roseate House Hotel, Delhi** (roseatehotels.com): A 5-star hotel near the airport.

How strenuous? A good level of fitness is essential as this tour involves a lot of walking and standing. Uneven ground and irregular paving are standard. There are a few fairly steep ascents to hilltop forts and temples. There are some long coach journeys during which facilities are limited and may be of poor quality. Most sites have some shade but the Indian sun is strong, even in the cooler seasons. Average distance by coach per day: 60 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.