



Down by the waterfront

In Rajasthan, a palace from the days of the Raj, redolent with history, is now a heritage hotel. With a private lake and its own hunting preserve, Gajner Palace Hotel is a destination where time stands still, says **Ranee Sahaney**



I think it was at a party, over jangled nerves and indifferent cocktails, that I first heard about the historic Gajner Palace from somebody I'd met a couple of years ago at a Pow Wow conference in Chicago, over a sit-down, pre-plated dinner for 6,000 delegates from the world's tourist trade. While the food and drinks at the party, and the dinner at the world's largest travel trade gathering, may have been a bit of a wash-out where I was concerned, what remained in my mind was the tantalising description of this lovely palace by a lakeside, conjuring up a mélange of images of space and colour, water and verdure coalescing into a dream destination barely explored.

After a practically dusk to dawn overnighter at work, a vision of this soothing, cooling emerald and aqua oasis drifted through my befuddled brain as the taxi wheeled me home through Delhi's dusty roads. Fumbling my way through my list of visited and unvisited heritage hotels in Rajasthan, I found nary a mention of Gajner. A couple of calls revealed that the image was not a hoax of my fevered mind and if I got my act together I could get rooms and solitude besides the flamingo-haunted lake, before the high season visitors discovered its endearing charms.

A rickety, chilling train ride cut a swathe through Rajasthan bringing me to the sandy bowl of Bikaner from where I hopped on to an ancient cab to whisk me away, just half an hour away on the Jaisalmer Road to the cooling environs of the lakeside village of Gajner, a sleepy backwater with promises of restful, languorous days to be enjoyed at leisure.

Once a hunting palace/lodge (can one even call it that?) of the erstwhile Bikaner royals, the rosy sandstone edifice by the lake with its private hunting preserve was reputed for its Imperial Sand Grouse shooting parties attended by the racy glitterati of the Raj days. It has now been converted into a heritage hotel where guests may enjoy the rich nuances of its wild and wooly past. Built by Maharaja Ganga Singh in the 'roaring 20s', the spacious palace today offers visitors the luxury of sensitively restored, refurbished and modernised suites, a private lake and wildlife sanctuary.

Less than a stone's throw away from the main palace and overlooking the lake and the woods are the crumbling ruins of

the evocative Shabnam Mahal, the brooding tower where a royal rendezvoused with his mistress. Part of the HRH Group of Hotels, the Gajner Palace Hotel shares the royal *chhattri* of Udaipur's beautiful Lake Palace Hotel and Kumbhalgarh's Aodhi Hotel. Tariffs begin at \$108 going up to \$132 for the Imperial and Royal suites.

It's early winter and mellow sunshine floods the lake setting it a-shimmer. The browsing ducks set the pace for your stay as they gently skim along its surface, bobbing deeply now and then for a tasty morsel hidden in its limpid depths. The sprawling palace, punctuated by landscaped gardens and tree-lined courtyards that heighten the sense of space and privacy, is embellished with the delectable tracery of *jharokhas*, sit-outs and terraces that are perfect for enjoying the vista of the lakes and woodlands even on a warm day. Scattered amongst this pretty foliage, where screaming parakeets wheel overhead, are 11 historic suites tastefully appointed with four posters, period furniture and glittering mirrors and an additional 31 deluxe suites with the most modern amenities to make your stay as comfortable as possible.

The Dungan Niwas overlooking the lake wing houses the lovely royal suites, while the Gulab Niwas wing is dotted with private sit-outs amongst lush lawns. The Mandir Chowk has its own tranquil courtyard under a canopy of trees and lined with a few rooms and a private shrine where you can spend a quiet moment in prayer. Traditional puppet shows and folk music and dance performances are arranged here for leisurely evenings by the lake. The Champa Niwas wing is a recent addition.

Mrigathrishna, the evocative bar area, is a bouquet of chandeliers, painted ceilings and the world renowned Bikaner 'jail carpets' woven by the inmates of Bikaner jail. The Ganga Bhawan restaurant is marked by high ceilings, gilded mirrors, animal trophies and sepia prints, grand fireplaces, chintzy furnishings and period chandeliers. You can unwind over a leisurely billiard game at the old billiard table dating back to the early 1900s, now lovingly restored to its original beauty.

Forget about room service here, instead breakfast early at the sit-out overlooking the waterfront. Keep a pair of binocs or a book by your side. If you're lucky you might sight one of the shy denizens of the



ENTERTAINING IN A PRIVATE RETREAT OF ROYAL COURTYARDS: Rajasthani folk dancers performing at Gajner Palace's Mandir Chowk

sanctuary — *chinkara*, blackbuck, *nilgai* or wild boar — quenching their thirst on the other side of the lake. Savour the tranquility, the picture postcard placidity of the lake, with its scores of ruminating black ducks and demoiselle cranes.

Breakfast over, follow the stony path up to the crumbling Shabnam Mahal, built in memory of Shabnam — the love interest of Maharaja Saddumal — but left incomplete because he died during its making. Stroll past the old tennis court and the old siding where it's planned to link the palace by its Royal Saloon from Bikaner railway station. If you've got kids with you, they can borrow bikes from reception and ride around the vast palace grounds and return for traditional lemonade by the lake-side sitouts. A solar powered boat and row boats allow you to explore the small lake from end to end — enjoy those vignettes of the rose-tinted palace spread across its embankments.

When you're done with lunch, catch a quick snooze in your private bower of tranquility, but I preferred to flop down on a sun-warmed bench under a canopy of trees

FACT FILE

Getting There

Air: The closest airports are at Jodhpur and Jaisalmer. It takes about 4-5 hours driving time from each.

Tariff: Ranges from \$108 - \$132 per night (inclusive of taxes, excluding meals)

Package: \$235 for 2 nights and 3 days (inclusive of taxes, breakfast and dinner)

Rail: Bikaner is the nearest railhead and is linked to Delhi and Mumbai by direct trains. Intercity and express train links are also available from Jodhpur and Jaipur to Bikaner.

Reservations

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by the waterfront, adrift on the sounds of lapping waters and a sighing breeze. I desultorily dipped into my book or just watched the ducks at play — with nary a soul to disturb me.

A round of tea rouses me enough to hop into a jeep around five in the evening to beat the setting sun for a glimpse of wild boar and black buck. A peacock calls as a fleet-footed *chinkara* breaks cover

ahead of us. An hour's run seems to be a luckless drive till we return homeward and are awestruck by the dramatic silhouette upon a hillock against the rosy sky of a blackbuck attended by his harem. I curse quietly as my camera runs out of battery as I try and shoot this timeless moment of wonder.

It's not hard to get into the mood of this hunting retreat after a vision like that. The maharaja's Christmas-time hunting parties were legendary as the throng of royals and celebrities from both home and abroad, including the Viceroy, would arrive to participate in the annual duck and Imperial Sand Grouse shoots.

Gajner Palace makes the most of its unique assets. Romantic dinners can be arranged in tented facilities in the private sanctuary where curious *chinkara* watch the proceedings from a safe distance. Jeep safaris to the Thar desert in the day-time can end with a sand dune dinner by twilight and riveting folk performances. When the migratory birds arrive you can keep score of the avian visitors by the lake and woodlands under the tutelage of a guided tour. 🌈