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THE FINAL FRONTIERS

India's largest state, Rajasthan is a heady concoction of colors and architecture. Men and Women adorned in extravagantly bright costumes and jewellery contrast brilliantly with the dry bare Aravalli hills and the arid brown Thar desert. Known in the British era as Rajputana meaning 'land of kings', this state was a lucrative location along one of the important trade routes where caravans loaded with fine silk and precious stones would ferry across the plains. The erstwhile rulers amassed vast money by levying taxes on the trans-Thar trade, which went into humungous building projects.

What does not fail to impress are the innumerable forts, havelis and palaces built during the medieval rule of Rajputs and subsequently by Mughals. The forts were the need of the day, as these trading markets, where fortunes changed hands, were vulnerable to political invasions. With the growing wealth of the Rajputana, gory clashes between clans and family feuds over princely real estates were witnessed, with the most savage battles fought with the later Mughal rulers.

The forts came up to the defense of the land and its people. Each of these frontiers was typically built as a walled complex situated on an elevated outcrop with a larger peripheral wall all around to encompass a town. The enemy would have to scathe across the walled city before entering the fort, where the wealth of the province was secured. The gates on the city walls were impressive and large, whereas the fort gates were strategically located to visually distract the invading army. These were heavily built and embellished with metal spikes pointing outwards. The gates were with a small front-yard flanked by rising turrets where the defending army would securely position to shower firepower during an invasion.

The structures within the fort ramparts were built in fine proportions and intricate stone carvings. Local stones were extensively used for the gigantic masonry construction where the walls would be as wide as forty feet at the foundation. Apart from the princely residence of the ruler, the forts would have refuge for the rulers numerous wives, his ministers, stables for elephants and horses, public & ceremonial halls and strong rooms. Large pavilions and open yards were built for the audience to participate in the imperial ceremonies. Between 1550-1650, there was a marked influence of Mughal architecture in most of the forts of Rajputana, when a truce was announced with the Mughals under Emperor Akbar. A princess from the Rajput family, Jodhabai married the emperor, which saw the ceasefire of the bloody wars. Later, under the tyrant rule of Emperor Aurangzeb, the Rajputana was again plundered with the Maratha support. The Rajputs had to eventually turn to the British Empire, who was gaining strength in India and signed formal treaties. During the mutual alliance with the British, wealth from overland trade, in the form of fine silk, jewels and carpets was bought to Rajputana.

In 1947, with the far and wide outcry of Independence, the British rule ended leaving the Rajputs slackened. With persuasion from the new Indian government the Rajput

provinces were offered 'privy purses' to join the Indian union, and in 1949 the 22 states of the erstwhile Rajputana finally merged to form the state of Rajasthan. The wealth of the forts became part of the government legacy, and till date is displayed in the museums within the forts.

In the present day, the forts along with havellis and palaces are the calling card of Rajasthan tourism. Among the many fort-cities this state prides in, the distinguished ones are the Chittaurgarh, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Jaipur and Junagarh.

JAISALMER- deep in the heart of the arid desert and the last princely bastion along the Trans-Thar, the golden fort, came to be celebrated for the valor of its rulers. The great filmmaker Satyajit Ray immortalized this fort in his Bengali title '*Sonar Killa*' (Golden fort). The fort boasts of delicate sandstone craftsmanship on its facades and balconies.

The golden fort crowns the 100 feet high *Trikuta* hills and holds within its ramparts the old city of jaisalmer. Walking through the serpentine lanes lined with a medley of cafes, temples, havelis and fusion stores, is an experience worth savoring.

JODHPUR – lying on the eastern fringe of the Thar, Jodhpur was once the center of *Marwar*, the largest princely state in Rajputana. The mighty Mehrangarh fort loftily sits 400 feet high above the blue city offering unhindered views all around. It is one of the largest forts in India and has witnessed many sieges, with tell-tale signs of cannon-ball hits (the fort guides proudly point out to the dents on the walls).

The Mehrangarh encloses many palaces, which are known for intricate carvings and sprawling courtyards. *Moti Mahal* (pearl palace) has delicately carved stone screen and the royal throne seat of Jodhpur, where all the rulers of this province have been crowned. The most elaborate of the quarters is the *Phool Mahal* (flower palace), a dancing hall for the entertainment of the Mahahraja and his guests.

JAIPUR- Jaipur being at the heart of Rajputana and its proximity to the erstwhile Nizam's Delhi demanded more attention to its defense. Located on the crest of a rocky hill about 13 km from Jaipur 'pink' city, the Amber was the capital of *Kuchwaha* Rajputs until 1728. The amber is fortified by natural hills and high ramparts and is accessible along a cobbled road.

The Mughal influence is most elaborate at Amber, with the '*Dil-e-aaram*' garden at the entrance to the fort laid in fine geometry practiced by the Sultans. The palace of mirrors, the *Sheesh-Mahal* has mosaics of mirrors plastered on the walls. The *Jas-mandir* on the upper level distinctly shows the amalgamation of the Mughal and Rajput architecture.

Rajasthan is one of the prime tourism destinations of India. Centuries of Rajput rule created a hierarchy of caste distinctions, bound by codes of chivalry and honor. For

visitors this state's strong adherence to its traditional values of the past is precisely what makes it a compelling place to travel?