

India: A Camel's-Eye View

As morning crept over the rooftops of Jaipur, I looked out of my window and straight into the eyes of a large rhesus monkey. As it clambered away down a lamppost, I looked beyond and saw a peacock strutting along a wall. In the courtyard below, a woman in a vivid red sari washed dishes, while a radio blared.

Outside in the street, pigs rooted through piles of rubbish while a goat cooled itself in a sewer. Rickshaw drivers hounded me with offers of transport, hotels or shopping bargains, while amid the squalor and the colour the tempestuous nonstop kaleidoscope of Indian daily life swirled ceaselessly.

These two scenes, these opposites, sum up a visitor's first impressions of Rajasthan, India's western border state. But no description can begin to prepare a first-time visitor for the experience. India is by turns beautiful, appalling, exotic, nerve-racking, sensuous and confusing.

I was in Jaipur to begin an "adventure travel" experience which would leave me hot, thirsty, tired, hurting all over . . . and very satisfied, with a set of memories to last a lifetime. Camel trekking through the deserts of Rajasthan might not be everyone's cup of tea: if you're more comfortable watching a film about the life of Thar Desert nomads than seeing them for yourself, then stay

The old knightly caste operated according to rules of chivalry and honour that would make Sir Galahad seem a peasant.

home. But if you go, you'll catch a glimpse into a beautiful and alien culture, and get to know a jaunty, humorous and immensely likable people.

by David Halperin



By camel through India's Thar Desert

The Thar Desert takes up much of the western half of the state, and spill over the border into Pakistan. For centuries, the remote desert fortress-towns such as Jaisalmer and Bikaner echoed to the sounds of clashing steel, battering rams and siege armies, as the warrior-kings of Rajasthan played out their military fantasies. The old knightly caste operated according to rules of chivalry and honour that would make Sir Galahad seem a peasant. The forts they built are monumental, and can be visited today.

Now, these towns' days as garrisons are over. Modern air power has seen to that. And trucks have put an end to nearly all the great desert caravans. But now the townspeople can see a new kind of caravan passing by. Instead of battle-scarred knights riding in after days on the trail, the new arrivals are pale-skinned, and wear funny hats. Arriving in Jaisalmer after 120 km on camelback, the tourists may well feel jaunty: by now, they're veterans.