

FROM SUFFOLK TO INDIA

Julie Croucher from Travel With Jules experiences the colours and culture of Rajasthan and joins in festival celebrations in Udaipur

Landing in Delhi at one in the morning after already being awake for about 17 hours, we were met by the smiling face of an airport rep at the gate of the plane who speedily whisked us on a buggy to fast track immigration. Before we knew it we were out into the arrivals hall, marigold garlands placed round our necks and three hours later we were flying to Udaipur. I was so happy to be back in the heat and chaos of India!

As we descended into Udaipur I could see the full moon across the lakes and the lights of the palaces and forts as dawn broke. Outside the tiny arrivals hall we were met by smiling Devi who took us through the quiet city as it woke up to Holi festival day. Cows wandered the streets, stall holders swept their porches with the sun rising like a ball of fire across Lake Pichola...a magical sight.

After a welcome and breakfast in the tropical gardens of Udaivillas (Oberoi Hotel) we travelled across the lake by boat where we visited the Taj Lake Palace Hotel, a unique palace in Udaipur (often referred to as the 'floating palace').



Jules visited a textile shop in India



Sunrise over the deluxe rooms with semi private pool at the ultra luxurious Udaivillas Oberoi Hotel. Udaipur. This hotel has been voted the third best hotel in the world by Travel and Leisure Magazine.

Udaipur is very proud of being the 'location' choice for many films, most famously for James Bond's Octopussy much of which was filmed at the Lake Palace. We visited James Bond's car the next day at the Vintage Car Museum too which also houses a variety of classic cars owned by the Maharajah including many Rolls Royce models.

The city was coated in the coloured powders of Holi festival – along streets and covering most people we met from head to toe! Over my years of travels in India, I have learned that the Indians love a party and any excuse to dance and celebrate. On a previous trip we met a procession of tractors in a rural village blasting out tunes and were invited to join in!

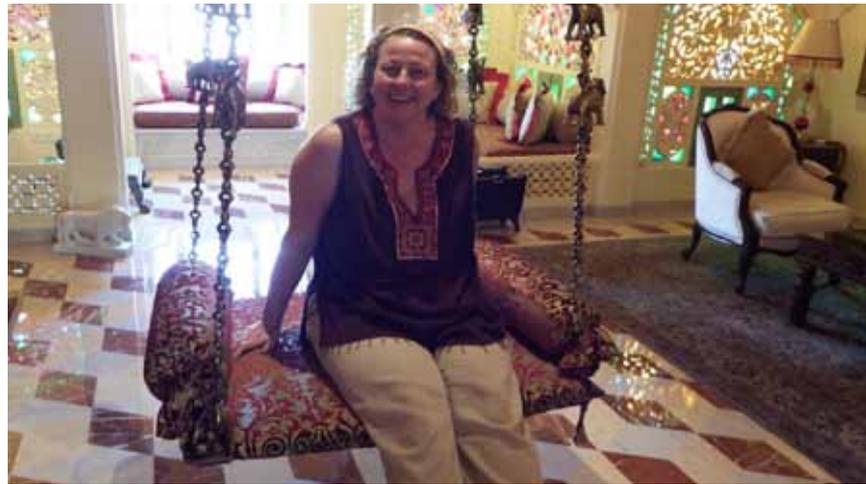
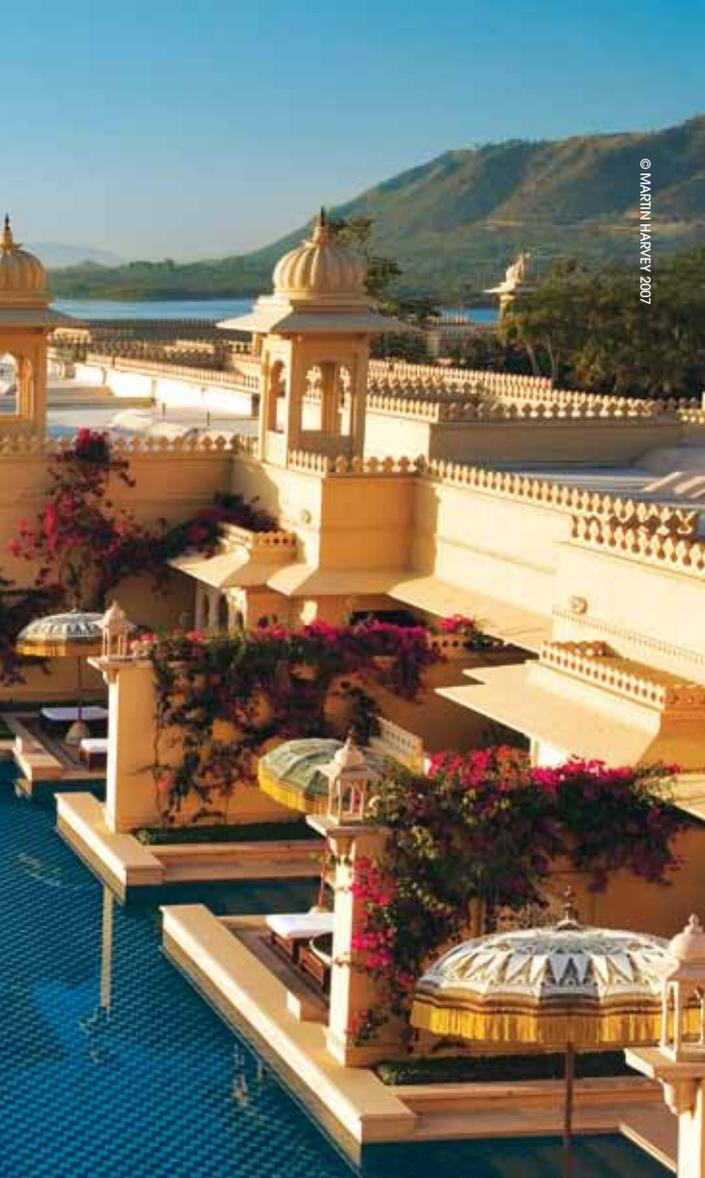
We stayed overnight at the Leela Palace hotel, where we dined under the huge moon with the music of Holi celebrations still drifting across from the town while



Jules saw Leopards at Jawai Camp



Rabari herdsman with their cattle



Jules enjoying her exploration of India



Holi Festival

lights flickered across the lake to the golden walls of the fort. This has to be one of the most stunning and atmospheric dinner settings in the world.

I asked if we could visit a textile shop before leaving the city. Three hours later we left with another piece of luggage containing three bedspreads, items of bags and clothing, plus gifts and having both been measured up for bespoke outfits! This was an amazing experience, the thousands of bolts of colourful fabrics, piles of scarves and traditional tailoring service. Turns out that this tailor's shop fitted out the cast of the Exotic Marigold Hotel film, which was filmed in Udaipur. I had my own 'Judi Jacket' made (as the tailor referred to it – a 'Julie Jacket'!).

Leaving Udaipur we continued into the heart of Rajasthan and spent a fabulous few days at Jawai Leopard Camp. Now, I've travelled

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to a lot of places in my time, but I had never seen landscape like this! The scenery is stunning, it feels prehistoric. Huge boulders (where the leopards like to hide!) tower over the semi desert with massive cactus plants clinging to them. A buzz of insect life surrounds you, punctuated by the raucous calls of peacocks. During our stay we spent time on foot with local Rabari tribesmen and their families in farming villages, who are supported through Jawai's conservation projects.

My favourite experience here was the 'cow dust trip' – we walked with the tribal elders and their huge herds of cattle as they walked from the fields where they spend their days, back to their village for the night. 'Cow Dust' is considered the most auspicious time (as the sun sets and cattle go home) usually the time for wedding ceremonies and special celebrations.

The rows of cows, goats and buffalo wandered past us, kicking up dust in the setting sun, their Rabari herdsman followed behind, as they have done probably for hundreds of years.

Eventually entering the village, we were amazed to see that the cattle all knew their individual homes! Each household has its own cattle and every morning they wander into the streets where they are picked up by the herdsman, taken out for the day and in the evening they all put themselves to bed...amazing! This was a very atmospheric and primeval experience, I loved it.

As a stark contrast to the colourful noise and chaos of India's cities, it is these rural areas where you can really connect with the people and experience the rich culture of this enigmatic country. I love personally crafting our clients' travels to India and I can't wait to return again myself! **L**