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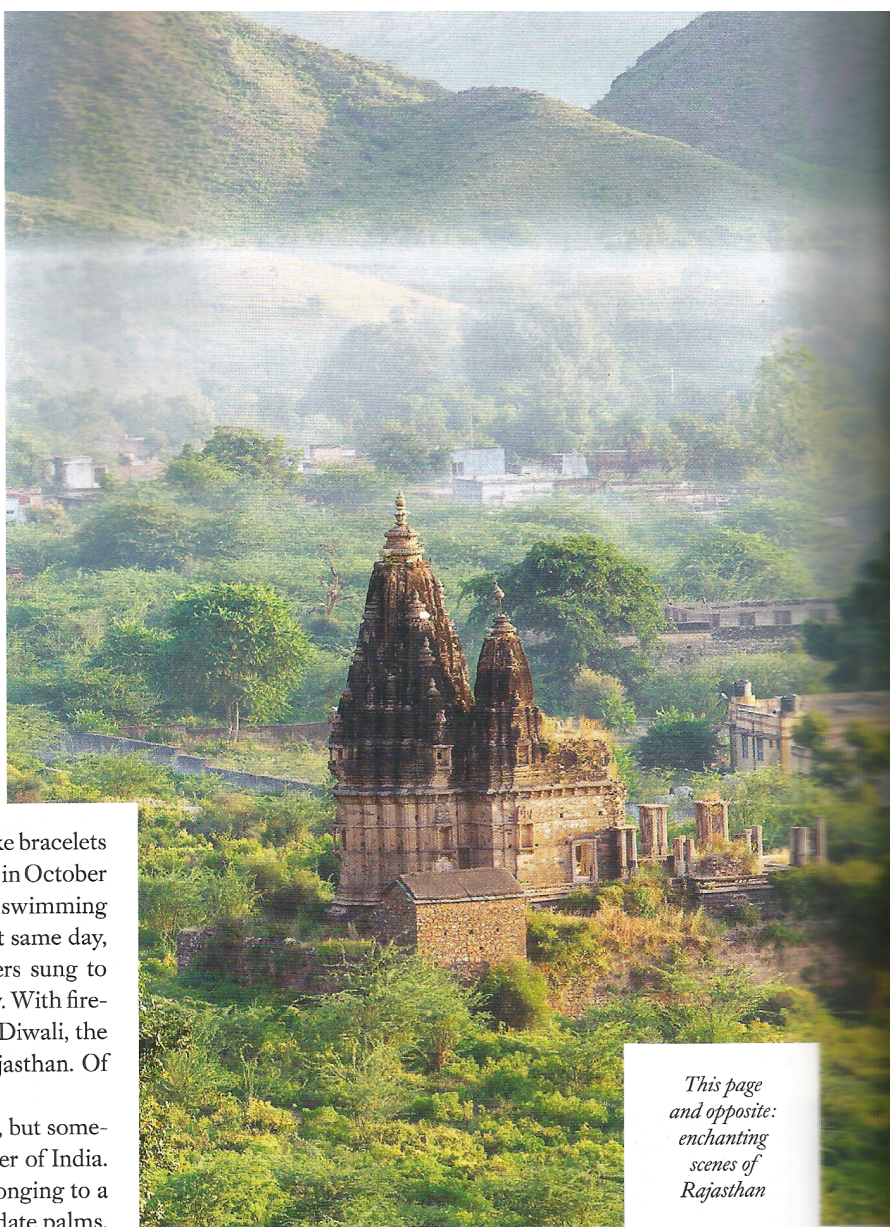
A former hunting lodge in Rajasthan is now a picturesque haven of spiritual serenity

By SASHA SLATER

Around my left wrist, hidden among all the Astley Clarke bracelets I wear every day, is a faded cotton thread. It was tied there in October last year, and for the first few days, before the sun and swimming pool bleached it white, it was a bright crimson. On that same day, vermilion was smudged onto my forehead, and prayers sung to Krishna and to the Lady Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity. With fireworks and a 17-course feast, this was how I celebrated Diwali, the festival of lights, at Amanbagh, an Aman resort in Rajasthan. Of course, my bleached thread is precious to me.

Not many hotels invite you to prayers before dinner, but somehow that felt the right thing to do in this remote corner of India. The property itself is a 1920s hunting reserve once belonging to a long-dead maharajah, and boasts sandstone pavilions, date palms, eucalyptus-trees, and langur monkeys leaping elegantly from roof to roof. It is near a national park and not far from Jaipur, but is defiantly not on the tourist trail. Nonetheless, there is so much to see here that the history of the place is almost overwhelming.

The day after Diwali, I was up early to drive to Bhangarh, half an hour's jeep ride away. This

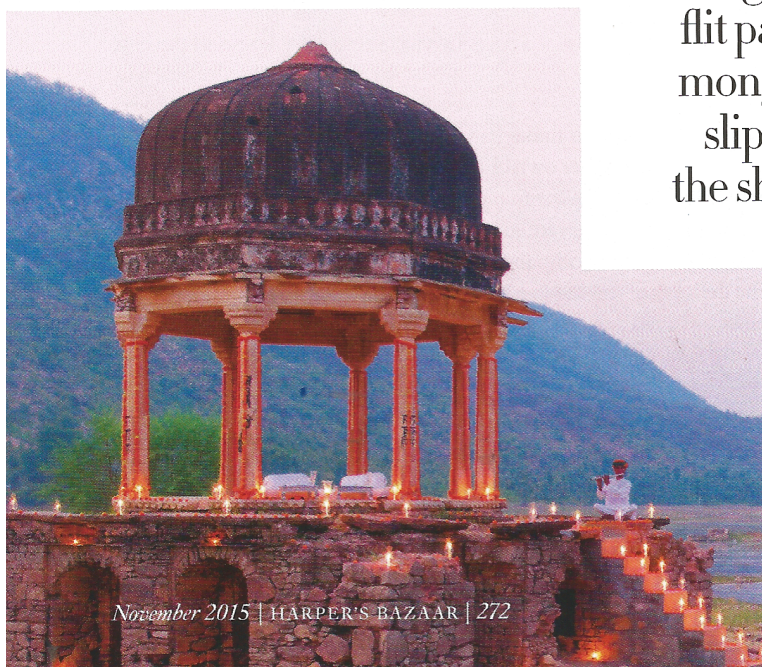


This page and opposite: enchanting scenes of Rajasthan

huge 16th-century town was, so legend tells, bewitched by a sorcerer who was spurned by a beautiful maharani. Everyone who fled was saved; all the inhabitants who stayed were cursed and died. No one ever comes here after sundown for fear of evil spirits. Banyan-trees are slowly engulfing the outer walls of this strange lost city and inside, on wide swathes of green, live hundreds upon hundreds of monkeys – the black-faced langurs and their crosser, less glamorous neighbours, red-faced macaques – who gambol and play within the houses and temples. Bulbuls and kingfishers flit past and mongooses slip by in the shadows. It is truly a scene from *The Jungle Book*, and I spent one of the great mornings of my life strolling, climbing and exploring this astonishing place.

Enchantment lies heavy on the land and on the people in it. For, when I stooped to pick up a scarlet flower dropped on a road the next day, my guide from Amanbagh stopped me sharply, saying it could have been left by a necromancer for some hidden purpose. But there was magic enough simply in the beauty of the landscape, intermittently rain-drenched and sun-soaked; the liquid eyes of the hump-backed cows whose hides are dotted and striped with shocking-pink paint for Diwali; the crimsons, fuchsias and oranges of the women's saris...

Kingfishers flit past and mongooses slip by in the shadows

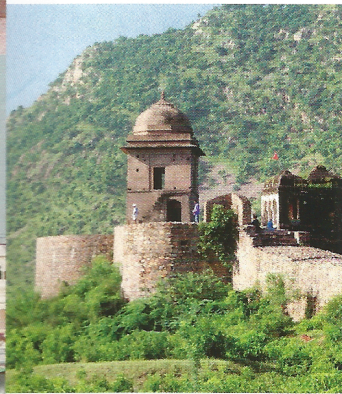




Amanbagh guides take visitors on tours of Ajabgarh, the village nearby, and encourage guests to get to grips not only with the culture but the religion too – I spent an intense, memorable half hour at a Hindu temple, dazed and overwhelmed by the ritual and the noise of gongs, drums and cymbals.

The hotel also wants you to dive into the food. Bhargava, or BG, the head chef, took me through the hotel's beautiful vegetable gardens to a specially built mud hut and taught me to cook Kerala fish stew, poppadoms, and chickpeas that had ferocity, freshness and bite. A yoga class by the huge sandstone-lined pool loosened me up, and then a massage with healing lime and patchouli oils reduced me to a state of near insensibility. This was followed by a dreamlike dinner – such as the hunting maharajah would have enjoyed – served by Amanbagh's cooks in a clearing in the jungle, lit by hundreds of candles and lamps. I long to return. □

A week's tour with Greaves India (020 7487 9111; www.greavesindia.com) costs from £2,400 a person B&B, including British Airways flights, two nights at the Oberoi, New Delhi, and four nights at Amanbagh; private transfers, guided sight-seeing, daily yoga, head massage and complimentary upgrade subject to availability.



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