



# CHANOUD GARH

PHOTOGRAPHS **HUW KINGSTON** AND **NIKHIL KAPOOR**

In Rajasthan, away from the cities and tourist hotspots, a small palace in a small village has been in the same family for 14 generations. Twelve years ago, with the Chanoud Garh crumbling and the former Thakur (prince) ageing, three of his grandchildren returned from their city lives to renovate the palace as a homestay. Huw Kingston travelled to northern India for an unforgettable experience.

**J**AIPUR, JAISALMER, JODHPUR. Som, our driver, knows these colourful cities of Rajasthan so well he can probably find his way to, and around them, with his eyes closed. Such an approach is often the best way for passengers to endure the delights of Indian roads. Before turning off the highway we'd narrowly missed crashing into a tractor on the wrong side of the road, swerving to

miss the tractor, and a cow nonchalantly munching where the grass is always greener.

Now, on a rural road somewhere south of Jodhpur, Som is having his abilities well tested. At each junction he asks directions from red-turbaned shepherds or barefoot bike riding boys.

When we finally arrive at a village, a motorbike appears,



**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** PALACE EXTERIOR; CHANOUD GARH WARMLY LIT AS THE SUN GOES DOWN; SALT LAKE AND SUNSET CHAI STOP DURING A JEEP TOUR FROM CHANOUD GARH; VEILED WOMEN OF CHANOUD WORKING THE FIELDS; THE BREAKFAST ROOM AT CHANOUD GARH; AN EARLY MORNING SCENE ON THE STREETS OF CHANOUD VILLAGE; THE MAIN COURTYARD SURROUNDED BY GUEST SUITES.



# a community palace

almost magically, to escort us through narrow streets. Men sitting on temple terraces and shop steps wave as we pass, while the women pull headscarves across their faces.

“Welcome to Chanoud Garh,” says a tall, well-dressed man as my wife, Wendy, and I climb from the car in front of a grand house.

Mahiraj leads us to the main door where puja, or welcome, is performed at a small Hindu shrine. A few steps through an archway brings us into the most beautiful of garden courtyards, where parrots hang off flowering trees or play like children beneath sculptured fountains. Everywhere, there is colour. Nema, whose name means lemon, welcomes us with a cooling lime drink and a twinkling smile.

“My grandfather called all our family together 12 years ago,” says Mahiraj. “By then he was living alone in this place, a

place that had been our family home for over 300 years; for 14 generations. He was the Thakur, a nobleman. It is a title now with no legal standing in India, a title now held by my father, Sarkur Thakur Ajit Singh.”

Mahiraj tells us the house was in some disrepair and his grandfather had asked the family to come home. He and his brother and sister had successful business careers in the cities, but they followed his wishes. “For two years we looked at the best way forward,” he says. “The renovations took five years more. The house was covered in lime and nobody knew what was underneath. We cleared a section and found marble which, for us, was like finding gold. Our house has now been open to you, our guests, for the past five years. Please, let me show you to your room.”

We walk up some steps from the courtyard onto a marble



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT WENDY HOLDS A LAMB, COURTESY OF A RABARI SHEPHERD; CHANOUD GARH GUEST SUITE; A TABLE WAITS FOR THE ANNIVERSARY COUPLE; BIRDS ADD EVEN MORE COLOURS TO CHANOUD GARH.

terrace and enter one of the 10 guest suites. A large lounge area opens onto a bedroom with two wings, each a mirror image, each with a king size bed. Beautiful decor in shades of orange and red abounds, and marigolds and petals float in water everywhere.

Mahiraj points out photographs of his great-grandparents' wedding in 1937. I mention that the following day is our wedding anniversary. "That's great news," he says. "Congratulations."

Beyond our magnificent room there are nooks and crannies to explore; little rooftops and gardens. Eventually we find ourselves in a colourful, second floor room set for lunch. Each dish is brought in and delicately spooned onto the plate. Not for Chanoud Garh the omnipresent Indian hotel buffet.

When Mahiraj suggests a sunset jeep drive, it is tempting to refuse; to stay and enjoy this peaceful place. But we go and we're glad we do, for it is then that we began to learn how connected Chanoud Garh is to the small town in which it sits.

"In centuries past my family ruled a small princely state that has now gone," Mahiraj explains. "But when we came back to this place my brother, sister and I wanted to become a key and useful part of the town. Not just given respect for what we had been but for we could do." We listen as we bump along narrow tracks with wild deer grazing on one side and nomadic Rabari shepherds tending their flocks on the other. "A couple of times a year we organise a town gathering to hear what the community needs most. It is not that we fund everything, but we can certainly help to bring the community together to achieve community goals. I guess we are still well respected and this respect honours us with an ability to effect change."

By way of example, Mahiraj tells us the town had wanted a fence erected around 160 hectares of common grazing land to stop stray animals, mostly holy cows, roaming onto and destroying the crop fields. Now, with fences in place, crop yields are higher

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and farmers no longer sleep in the fields at night to protect them.

Driving onto the edge of a large salt pan, the sun is dropping fast behind distant hills. It is dark when we return to the homestay Mahiraj insists we call it, despite the opulence. "It is our home and you are our guests."

With drinks served around a fire followed by a fine dinner, we retire thinking things could not be bettered in Rajasthan – nor indeed in India.

"I am Ram Singh, your guide for the morning. I wish to show you my town." So, after breakfast we join this retired school principal, a man bursting with pride in his town. For more than three hours we walk the streets of Chanoud, meeting locals, visiting temples, the old fort, the new community-funded hospital and a house with the most astonishing collection of notes and coins.

"Let me take you to a school to meet some of the children," Ram Singh offers as he strides ahead down a narrow lane. We follow and enter first the school grounds, then a classroom. As we do a beaming class of children choruses, "Happy Anniversary, Mr Huw and Mrs Wendy," and presents us with handmade greeting cards. We have tears in our eyes.

Could a wedding anniversary get any better? In the hands of Chanoud Garh, indeed it can. That evening, as the only guests, we again drink gin and tonics around the fire pit before being taken into a dining room with a single table set in front of a fire. The table, decorated with a border of marigold flowers enclosing a marigold heart encircling a bowl of pink petals, is soon spread with food, finishing with a celebration cake. It is, we agree, the most special of anniversaries, made even more so as neither of us had planned anything.

In India, as in most countries, it always pays to step off the beaten track. In Chanoud Garh we find a beautiful home, and people who understand absolutely the value of community and their place within it. **HL**