

Jag Mandir on Lake Pichola



# Not just a city of lakes

NEEHARIKA SATYAVADA

Think Rajasthan and immediately pops into your head a picture of undulating waves of sand shimmering golden in the sun and a row of women all but hidden in their bright twirling lehengas and odhnis, walking away with pots of water on their head as thick silver anklets catch the sun on a hot windy afternoon. But, you couldn't be more wrong with Udaipur. Touted to be India's most romantic city, it sits hidden among lush green hills endlessly stretching away in every direction.

Yes, we do know, Udaipur is the City of Lakes and the Venice of the East, but in Rajasthan, the colourful desert that is India's calling card in the international travel circuit, you don't really expect to land right in the lap of the Aravallis. Surrounded by thickly wooded hills, silent and stoic in a green so dark, this city is starkly different from the other popular tourist destinations in the state. The cool breeze blowing off the numerous lakes in and around a city - a total of seven lakes no less - is sure to take you by a pleasant surprise.

**Udaipur isn't just about lakes and palaces. With ancient temples and historic forts only a few hours from the city, Udaipur could be the next stop for history and archaeology enthusiasts alike**

To get a real feel of Udaipur and its old world charm, take a heritage walk along its winding thoroughfares. Chock-a-bloc with beautiful marble palaces, ancient temples, bright and colourful havelis with facades of intricate jharokas, there is a temple at every turn and every house along the way has walls

adorned with frescos in the miniature painting style of the region. There are boards everywhere directing you to the next point of interest on the walk, be it a ghat, a haveli, a palace or even a museum. Of these, the Ghangaur Ghat with its imposing gateway and stunningly white Jagdish Mandir are the most striking.

The city palace is too, in its flamboyance.

As you walk along the narrow crooked streets, you will realise just how popular Lake Pichola is with tourists. Every other building here proudly proclaiming its rooftop restaurant with a view of the lake. All the luxury hotels too, are built in and around this lake. In the lake are two islands, Jag Niwas and Jag Mandir. While the palace

on Jag Niwas was once the Summer Palace of the Maharanas, it is today the Taj Lake Palace and the one on Jag Mandir with its eight marble elephants, is now a heritage property run by the current royal family.

A boat ride in this 655-year-old lake and a walk in the old part of the city should complete your exploration of the city, but do not stop there. For the city has just as interesting and a historic countryside to explore. Less than an hour's drive from the city is Nagda, home to the Sahara Bahu Temple or the Saas Bahu Temple as it has come to be known. Dedicated to the God with a thousand arms, Lord Vishnu, this 10th-century temple is a fine example of architectural splendour. The sculptures carved into not just the walls but also onto the ceilings are quite exquisite. A short drive from here is the iconic Eklingji Mandir. Eklingji is believed to be the true ruler of Mewar and the Maharana only his dewan, ruling in his name. This sprawling temple complex has 108 temples of marble and sandstone, the brown and white coming together to give an impression of a pink haze on the structures.

Head back to the city to catch the sunset at the Sajjangarh Palace. This little-known palace in the Sajjangarh Sanctuary was only recently opened to the public. Here, as the sun begins to set, clouds start streaming in, coming at you from all sides. Built in 1884



Saas Bahu Temple in Nagda

on the summit of the Bansdara Mountain it was used by the then royal family as a hunting lodge and a Monsoon Palace. It is said that the Maharana would come here to watch the monsoon clouds go by.

Fact File: There are no direct flights to Udaipur from Hyderabad. Take connecting flights either from Mumbai or Delhi. Nagda is around 25 kilometres from the city of Udaipur and the Eklingji Temple is another 3 kilometres from there.



A view of the Aravallis from the Monsoon Palace