

DEVI GARH

The Glitter and the Glamour



THE EPITOME OF ELEGANCE AND TRANQUIL BEAUTY IN A LAND REDOLENT WITH VALOUR: The imposing Devi Garh Fort Palace resort

An old palace grandly restored in historic Rajasthan has been making waves on the tourist circuit. What makes the Devi Garh experience so special? **Ranee Sahaney** finds out.



THE DRIVER arrives on the dot. Slipping into the car I'm enveloped by the welcoming air-conditioned embrace of Devi Garh Palace Resort's efficient but warm and caring world. Chilled mineral water quenches my thirst as a choice of CDs is proffered for my indulgence on the 45 minute drive to the palace resort, cited amongst the world's top 101 hotels in the Tatler Travel Guide for 2001 and one of India's finest world-class, all-suite boutique hotels. It's a good feeling — this anticipation of a dalliance with this topnotch luxury hideaway, the epitome of elegance and tranquil beauty with its zealously guarded reputation for privacy and customised care. Perfectly geared for high-end leisure travellers as well as world-weary corporates it's increasingly popular with well-heeled privacy-seeking honeymooners too.

Entering my suite I'm immediately drawn to the vast bay window that dominates one wall. The rain gods have been magnanimous this year and the earthy browns around Udaipur turn into a mosaic with verdant greens. Birds flutter amongst the woods on the facing hill and a lone eagle wheels high above the palace.

Turning back to the quiet tranquility of my suite, it's hard to visualise it as a bat infested room in an abandoned palace outside one of Rajasthan's world renowned cities. The principality of Delwara, home to Devi Garh Palace Resort, was awarded to Sajja Singh, a Gujarati soldier, by the legendary Rana Partap Singh of Mewar, for his heroic deeds at the battle of Haldighati (1576) against Mughal emperor Akbar. The palace itself was built in the 1700s.

By the time Lekha Poddar — reputed for the restoration of Neemrana Fort near Delhi — chanced upon it, the abandoned palace was a plaything of the elements. The Devi Garh Palace Resort, I was to keep rediscovering during my sojourn, is a true labour of love. Anupam, Lekha's son, ensures that the maintenance of its impeccable stan-

dards is a continuous process. It took 10 years to turn this ruin of a palace into one of the world's most enviable holiday destinations. And yes Devi Garh is a destination in itself; For when you are in Devi Garh, you do Devi Garh.

Surprise is one of the most important ingredients of the Devi Garh experience. Unasked for pleasures are provided at all times. Rose petals in the bath and scented candles at your bedside are the least of it. The complimentary wine, the lunch menu, your dining venue each night, the reading of the stars — its all a deep secret — till the time is ripe.

The dazzle of the Devi Garh makeover is as much a part of its lure as is the glamour of its luxury lifestyle. The cascading levels of the hotel cut into a hillside, have been used to their full advantage in the restoration process. The marriage of native skills and crafts and international design in this grand palace resort has been engineered with masterly finesse. As you wander around its vast expanses you'll discover that the bounty of space and terraced construction acts as a delectable foil to the dignity of the interiors.

Space has been used with liberal insight in the entire design. Guestrooms and luxury suites are scattered along the cascading terraces, punctuated by generous courtyards, terraced flower beds and tranquil lawns, private pools, jacuzzis and tinkling fountains, offering visitors a splendid choice of rooms with a view. The spacious Palace Suites and Aravali Suites are beautifully planned for privacy, inviting the visitor to kick off his shoes and pace the marble floors, day dream at the bay windows, browse through the selection of in-room CDs, then slip into a comforting bath in the luxurious bathroom. The Garden Suites, a little less expensive, have their own little garden.

From October to March when the weather's just lovely you have the choice of tented accommodation. You don't have

Fine dining has been converted into an elegant game at Devi Garh. Every night guests are led to a different venue in this vast castle to dine at an impeccably laid table.



A NEVER-BEFORE EXPERIENCE: The Palace Resort prepares for a celebration, come sundown

to slum it in these at Devi Garh for each one comes fitted with electricity, heaters and fans, a telephone, bathrooms and running water. But my own favourite is the glamorous Devi Garh Suite, beautifully appointed and comes with its own black-marbled swimming pool and jacuzzi.

The state-of-the art gym beckons the guilty and the fitness freak. Opt for some major pampering — head for the in-house spa and its expert masseurs from Kerala. Or just chill out at an open air jacuzzi or the swimming pool. I emerge relaxed and ready to take on the world afresh... If yoga and meditation are too slow for you ask for a horse or a bike and

take a ride into the hills or go trekking amongst the wooded trails nearby. Croquet, kite flying and camel rides, star gazing and pool, books and music — all the things you never find time for in the mundane run of life — are available.

Looking for some company? Follow me down to the village of Delwara at the foot of the palace hill. Powder blue and baby pink houses define the mixed company here. Hindus and Muslims have been living in harmonious ease with the Adivasis for centuries at Delwara. A microcosm world of old mosques and temples, the rich and the poor — farmers and traders spinning out the days in casual cohesion.

Dusk descends gently on the rooftops.

The palace lamps come on one by one. I come upon a cavalcade of attendants putting the finishing touches to a dinner setting for 350 guests at the Phool Bagh. The manager tells me that one of the most popular venues for a party is the pool deck with its grand backdrop — the imposing palace itself. An evening bonfire party is already in progress at one of the courtyards as I slip into my room to change for dinner.

Fine dining has been converted into an elegant game at Devi Garh. For every night guests are led to a different venue in this vast castle to dine at an impeccably laid table. It could be at any one of the quiet nooks that dot the terraced floors, the grand table at the window-lined Darbar Hall, at any one of great courtyards — sometimes even under the stars — and on a full moon night — on the rooftop.

Is it the rooftop I ask my escort? He smiles mysteriously as he takes a long winded route and with a grand flourish seats me at a splendid table for two on the rooftop. They don't give the secret away so easily....

Fresh flowers and a scented candle compete quietly with the moonlight. I order one of the superb cocktails that are all the rage with guests here — then plunge into the joys of choosing a gourmet meal.

Satiated, my head upon the scattered rose-petaled pillow I listen to the lullaby of the night sounds — The great stars look down upon me willing me to slip into dreamless slumber.

DEVI GARH FACT FILE



journey by taxi. Devi Garh is about 28 km/45min away
 RAIL: Udaipur offers train links to Delhi, Jaipur, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai.

BOOKINGS

Devi Garh Resort
 Village Delwara, Tehsil Nathdwara
 District Rajsmand, Rajasthan
 Tel: 91 2953 289211

Fax: 91 2953 289357
 Email: devigarh@deviresorts.com
 Website: www.deviresorts.com

Delhi Reservations

Tel: +91 11 23354554
 Email: reservations@deviresorts.com

BEST SEASON

The winter months (October to February) are lovely. The monsoons are special.

ACCESS

AIR: Udaipur airport has direct flights from Delhi, Jaipur & Mumbai. Onward