Life flows slowly on Thar Desert, seemingly keeping in tune with the quietness of the sand dunes.

TEXT AND PHOTOS:
GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI

We could feel a surge of power as the 4WD gunned up to the crest of a dune that rippled golden-brown in the desert landscape. And then... Panic! The vehicle started to slip and slide as it careened drunkenly down the sandy slope. Our bodies tugged at restraining seatbelts and we clung on desperately to the backrest of the seat in front of us. Churning wheels kicked up a dust storm outside our window. However, we must confess: even as we gave voice to our terror, it was laced with licks of laughter.

Sand Dunes Rock in Rajasthan
Just as we had started to entertain a nagging hint of doubt that, maybe, something was really amiss with our vehicle on the dune bashing adventure across the ocean of sand outside Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, our driver skillfully pulled it out of the skid. We exhaled. A sigh of relief. But the respite was brief as the vehicle raced up the next dune only to come surfing down the sandy hillock whipping up a cloud of dust in its wake.

Dune bashing, Dubai style, has invaded Rajasthan’s Thar Desert like a storm. Sam Dunes, 42 km from Jaisalmer, is where SUVs, fitted with cutting-edge technology, give tourists the ride of their life as they zip across a sandy wasteland like tormented beasts. Three kilometres long and one kilometre wide, Sam Dunes are nature’s roller coaster and the drivers who ride them like daredevils are skilled professionals who know the limits to which they can push their vehicles without losing control of them. On the outside chance that they do get stuck, they carry tow chains, shovels and the necessary equipment to pry them out of the situation.

A feature of the Sam Dunes, as also of most deserts, is that the dunes are in a constant state of flux. Dunes are created by the wind, picking up grains of sand, as it sweeps across the desert. These grains are then deposited on sandbanks that slowly grow to become dunes. However, once they reach a critical height, they stop growing as the wind starts poaching more sand from it than it deposits. As a result, the desert terrain is not static but forever shifting. Hence the term ‘shifting sands’.

Geological details did not really matter to us as we enjoyed our rock-and-roll ride in a vehicle that felt like a boat tossed around in a stormy sea of rippling sand. However, we were quite relieved when the heady cocktail of an adventure was done with, and we got to stand on firm terrain. A few members of our group set off a short camel back ride. After the dizzy high-octane drive, we, however, deferred that option for another day.

Strains of music greeted us when we returned to our tented camp resort. Dancers in swirling ghaghras and eyes lined with kohl, musicians belting out folk songs, prancing puppets... We had waded into a Rajasthani cultural programme. The rich aroma of local cuisine—laal maas, dal bati churma... spiked our appetite as we sat down to dine at a candle-lit table. A crescent moon smiled down at us from a velvet-black sky, studded with stars.

We set off on the second leg of our desert safari the following evening. The previous day’s rush of adrenaline on the dune-bashing adventure had left us too shaken and stirred to really appreciate the gentler charms of the desert. So this time around, we planned to take things easy and engage with Thar Desert in a more meaningful way.

We drove past camel carts, a peacock perched on the compound wall of a village hut; women in bright ghaghra-cholis, red, orange, yellow, that stood out
in sharp contrast to the stark monochrome of the surrounding landscape... In the distance, a camel caravan ferried tourists across scrub lands that shimmered in the desert haze.

Did we just see a mirage or was that a waterhole? Illusions may be an integral part of a desert but this was the real thing: a glistening pool of liquid-blue that was alive with activity. Seeing our safari vehicle approach, a flock of migratory storks took wing and circled around in the deep blue sky. Since we kept our distance and meant them no harm, they descended in a flutter to resume whatever migratory storks do best before being rudely interrupted!

A white-breasted bird of prey on a grassy bank looked up to give us a cursory glance and proceeded to ignore us. For all practical purposes, we did not exist for a pair of sunbirds as they flitted about feeding on the nectar of desert blooms.

We left our feathered friends to their own devices and drove on. A few minutes later, we pulled up at the edge of a private sand dune where two men sporting colourful turbans helped us climb onto the humped backs of their camels. No sandstorm-churning, dune-bashing vehicle here to disturb the peace. The silence of the desert was punctuated by the occasional grunt of a camel and the whisper of the wind, stealing grains of sand from the dunes.

A portable refreshment bar comprising collapsible chairs and a folding table had been set up for us when we returned from the rocking camel ride. We watched as the sun slid off a flaming orange sky and kissed the lip of a softly spiralling sand dune. The cameleers and their animals receded into a landscape washed in post-sunset colours. The silver crescent moon turned to gold as the first stars started to speckle the darkening sky.

We reigned in the wannabe poet within us as it struggled to define the moment. That magical night was way too vast and eternal to contain in words.
The nearest airport to Jaisalmer is at Jodhpur (300 km). Jaisalmer has its own railway station. Roads to and around Jaisalmer are in excellent condition, thanks in part to the fact that it is a border town and the roads are maintained by the army. By way of accommodation, there are a number of options including old havelis converted into modern hotels, state tourism lodges, small hotels within the fort, and tented camps near the dunes outside the city. Most hotels and resorts will arrange jeep and camel safari tours for their guests. For more information on Jaisalmer visit Rajasthan Tourism at: www.tourism.rajasthan.gov.in