

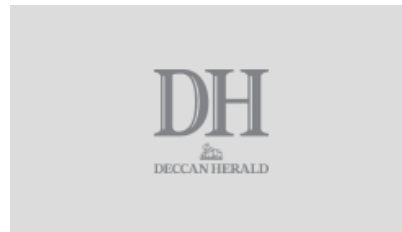
Blushing welcome

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Squeezing myself through the sea of people thronging Jaipur's Johri Bazaar (the jewellers' market), I am beset by guides and sellers alike.

"See and buy," I have been warned, but am totally unaware that as I walk past these pink-faced shops selling chooran, bedsheets, skirts, saris, jewellery and antiques, I will suddenly come face-to-face with the magnificent Hawa Mahal. The pink sandstone facade, five-stories high, dwarfs everything around, yet blends completely with its humble surroundings.

This is the uniqueness of the city — the wonderful amalgamation of old and new; of tradition and modernity; of the richness; of a secular culture and life with a scientific vision for the future. Swanky glass and concrete malls, an international airport, a world trade park and lifestyle stores stand shoulder to shoulder with the grand, graceful heritage buildings; local taxis, BMWs and Nanos zip past cycle rickshaws; people throng McDonalds and LMB (Lakshmi Mishthan Bhandar, established in 1727) alike.

A city so firmly entrenched in its rich culture embraces all that is new and forward, without losing its essential character. Just like the petite foreigner in a turquoise sari and wrists full of glass bangles sitting on a stool by the dusty street getting a henna pattern drawn on her palms.

Of wares and wherefores

This shoppers' paradise around Hawa Mahal takes you up to the twin markets — Bapu and Nehru Bazaars, where you will be welcomed as if it were your own home and also be made to feel like the shops' delightful wares were being offered to you for free. This is where all your bargaining power must come to play.

Cross the arched gateway, the Sanganeri Gate, and suddenly out of the chaos of the colourful bazaars, the wayward cycle rickshaws and smoke-belching auto rickshaws, you come upon the sprawling Ram Niwas Gardens with fountain squares, shady trees and

broad avenues. Once adorned by lush lawns, a dry grass stubble now covers the empty grounds, but does nothing to diminish the grandeur of the imposing Central Museum that sits serenely at its heart.

The Albert Hall is a fine example of Indo-Islamic or what evolved as the Indo-Saracenic architecture — ornamental arches, carved brackets, fluted pillars and filigree-latticed parapets. The museum houses an extraordinary collection of rare traditional arts and crafts, paintings, sculptures, textiles and even a 2,300-year-old Egyptian mummy.

Go further south on the wide and sweeping Jawaharlal Nehru or JLN Marg, and you will be treated to the sight of the beautiful Birla Mandir on the hillock, and just off the road, tucked behind on Moti Doongri or MD Road, the historic Ganesh Temple built in 1761.

Looming over these landmarks is the picturesque Moti Doongri Fort on the hilltop. Built to look like a Scottish castle, this was the residence of the Rajmata of Jaipur, Maharani Gayatri Devi, till her demise in 2009.

Heritage walk

Going back into history, we must start with the Amer Fort and Palace, where the royals lived before setting up the city of Jaipur. A ride up this fort that encloses palaces, pavilions, gardens and temples on a sashaying elephant is indeed a royal experience.

The Sheesh Mahal with its entire walls and ceiling inlaid with coloured glass and mirrors — the Palace of Mirrors — is a glittering favourite. Sunset from this fort with a magnificent view of the city below has been described in a poem by one of the English friends of the royals:

An amber sunset greets me
And the sun begins to sink
While far below us, Jaipur town
Awaits in twinkling pink.

The most recognised landmark of Jaipur, the Hawa Mahal, is part of the City Palace complex. Shaped like Krishna's crown and looking like a giant honey-comb, it was a lookout for the ladies of the royal household who maintained strict purdah.

Overlooking the main street of the old city from this royal gallery, women could watch street life and processions. It offers a mystical view at sunrise, when the soft pink light glows and filters through its 953 windows.

The City Palace itself is a grand structure in the heart of the city. Now part museum, Maharani Gayatri Devi wrote about its collection in her memoir: "Moghul and Rajput paintings executed on the finest rice paper, the lines traced with a single-hair brush, and

the paints mixed with the costliest and most brilliant ingredients: ground rubies, lapis lazuli, gold ..." She describes golden daggers and "guns with barrels bound with gold and butts inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl swords encrusted with precious stones."

Close by is the Jantar Mantar observatory built between 1727 and 1734, a UNESCO world heritage site. It is an example of the scientific temper of the rulers and their interest in astronomy. The enormous stone observation devices built then still provide precise results.

Pink City

The city of Jaipur was built on the principles of the ancient Vaastu and Shilpa Shastras. Maharani Gayatri Devi writes, "In the 18th century, when Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh moved his capital from Amber to Jaipur, he commissioned Vidyadhar Bhattacharya, the best architect and town planner of that time. Vidyadhar Bhattacharya built a walled city of unparalleled beauty. It had broad roads, perfect symmetry and civic sense for the inhabitants. Jai expanded the capital beyond the city walls — hospitals, schools, colleges, the university, the secretariat and residential colonies were all built during his reign."

In 1876, the city was painted pink to honour the visiting Prince of Wales (King Edward VII), a colour scheme that is still respected and maintained by the locals to a large extent.

There is an interesting anecdote about how the title Sawai, meaning one and a quarter, was bestowed on the Jaipur maharajas. Jai Singh once made a clever quip before Emperor Aurangzeb who was so impressed with his quick wit that he observed that Jai Singh was more than one, one and a quarter, or sawai; a title that has since been conferred on successive descendents. Similarly, the city has two flags — one whole and another, quarter sized.

Street life

One can spot the locals in their traditional dress everywhere. The Rajputana women wear ghagra and choli with a long veil, a borla, and ivory bangles that start from the wrist and go all the way up the arm. The bright colours of their dress and that of the men's pagri might have been a step to add colour to the arid desert landscape of Rajasthan.

For a good dekko of the Rajasthani culture, life and food, a visit to the Chokhi Dhani is a tourist must-do. Most aspects of the local life have been encapsulated very authentically within this village resort close to town.

To say that Jaipur is a shoppers' paradise is to state the obvious. The shops have the tendency to attract even a hardcore non-shopper, who will soon tire of saying no to themselves.

Among the fun things to buy are street clothes and jewellery, bandhani and laharia prints, sanganari prints, cotton razais, Jaipuri juttis (embroidered shoes) and lac bangles inlaid with glittery stones. Then, there are the antiques, precious and semi-precious stones and jewellery, miniature paintings and blue pottery.

On the food list, I would list the rich, creamy lassi being dished out in clay pots on MI (Mirza Ismail) Road, at the top. The historic LMB (Lakshmi Mishthan Bhandar, Johri Bazar) is famous for chaats, sweets, snacks and meals. The pyaz ki kachori (onion kachori), crisp jelebi, ghewar are other Jaipur delicacies available at most street halwais.

Best time to visit is early winter. Summers and winters are harsh. During Diwali, the markets are beautifully lit. On Makar Sankranti, the skies are festooned with multi-coloured kites. The festivals of Teej and Gangaur are celebrated with fervour.