



Imposing and hauntingly beautiful, the Golden City of Jaisalmer in Rajasthan owes its prosperity to its remote – but strategic – location in the Thar Desert (above)

WONDERS OF THE WORLD

THE HAVELIS OF JAISALMER, INDIA

After the Pink City of Jaipur and the whitewashed haven of Pushkar, the next stop for many on a colourful circuit of Rajasthan is the Golden City of Jaisalmer.

This desert outpost has always relied upon its dauntingly remote location – 200 miles west of Jodhpur in the Thar Desert – for its prosperity. Originally a Rajput stronghold, Jaisalmer became a major commercial centre on the crossroads of lucrative trade routes to central Asia.

Later, when threatened by the emergence of maritime trading and virtually sidelined by the 1947 Partition, its key location – just 60 miles from the Pakistani border – again contributed to its survival. Tensions in the volatile region attracted the military in numbers. Today, the army is outflanked only by battalions of tourists and Jaisalmer's future looks assured.

First impressions are dramatic. Its massive sandstone fort rises like a mirage from the desert floor, spiralling down to the city walls in a complex maze of twisting medieval streets. The imprint of the past is everywhere, but it is the legacy of the city's prosperous days on the camel train routes that shines most impressively through its magnificent mansion houses, or havelis.

The influence of the merchants at that time was such that they attained positions of hereditary ministerial power. Hungry to create monuments to their vast wealth, they commissioned stonemasons to construct

dwelling in keeping with their prestige. And so, with the skill of earlier ages – and money being no object – the craftsmen set about sculpting blocks of golden sandstone into these jewels in Jaisalmer's crown.

The havelis stand three or more levels high around an inner courtyard, but it is the sheer weight of detail that makes them unique. Patwon-ki-haveli, the most elaborate of the mansions, took 50 years to complete. Its single facade is so intricate that at first glance its sculptural filigree overwhelms the eye – only gradually do features such as carved heraldic beasts on lotus flower bases begin

to emerge. The eye is drawn up to glorious honeycomb balconies on every one of the four floors, each with fine lattice-work parapets, screen windows and cusped canopies draped overhead.

The sense of florid symmetry is reinforced inside the haveli. Stepping in from the narrow lane, Patwon-ki-haveli reveals itself to be five interconnected apartments originally built for a group of brocade traders, with faded but still beautiful murals visible in some rooms. Clearly, the inhabitants lived at the very peak of ostentation.

The nearby Nathumal-ki-haveli is

still occupied today, so no visitors may pass beyond the impressive sandstone elephants guarding the door. Even so, the exterior of this haveli, built by two brothers for a prime minister, has much to captivate the observer. Each brother decorated half of the building's facade, so the attraction for the visitor lies in pinpointing the discrepancies in style prompted by this sibling rivalry.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, an oligarchy of the kind that lorded over Jaisalmer in those times produced those who abused their positions. Salim Singh-ki-haveli, built in around 1800 not far from Gopa Chauk market, was home to the despised prime minister Salim Singh Mohta, who imposed heavy taxes on the people whilst bolstering his own position by corrupt means. Under the vaulted roof supported by peacock buttresses, Salim Singh hatched extortion rackets and legislation designed to keep the people suppressed.

However, his plan to construct two additional wooden floors on the haveli to make it taller than the Maharaja's Palace initiated a battle of wills that could have only one winner – the Maharaja promptly had the extra levels pulled down and later arranged for the minister to meet with an accident.

The grip of the merchants on Jaisalmer and its wonderful havelis has long since loosened, but today these beautiful monuments illuminate any visit to the Golden City.

Dominating the city is Jaisalmer Fort, which resembles a giant sandcastle (below)

