

PART 1 Mumbai to Jodhpur

We arrived in Mumbai airport at 9.30pm to be met by a representative of the tour company, who told us that an important political figure had died only hours before and that no-one was sure what would be happening the following day! What a welcome. Following Hindu tradition the funeral would be held within 24 hours in the form of a public cremation and that the police were asking people who were not intending to follow the procession and be part of the mourning, to remain indoors. We met our tour guide after breakfast the next day who told us that an official state funeral had now been declared and that our program was cancelled for the day. Bal Thackeray, the deceased, was an 86 year old who had founded a union group some 50 years earlier. He had never held an elected political position, but his union held enormous influence over many of the blue collar workers and most of the small businesses had closed up, all the taxis and most of the buses had stopped and restaurants and supermarkets were closed. We were able to take a 90 minute bus trip to some nearby sights; very easily because there was virtually no traffic on the roads; and then returned to the hotel to spend the rest of the day relaxing and watching events unfold on Indian news TV.. Over 2 million locals spent seven hours walking with the body on an open platform for the 7 kms between his home and a park where the cremation was to take place. Some reports said there were as many as 5 million people at the park. So much for the description in our travel notes - "Welcome to India and the city that never sleeps. Pulsating, alive, on the move, vibrant and fun - this is Mumbai!" Our guide was gob smacked at how quiet everything was - he had never seen it like this even when other significant political figures had died.

The following day we drove through what seemed to us to be fairly busy streets to the airport for our flight to Udaipur. Our guide still marvelled at how quiet it all was, as many businesses had decided to observe three days of mourning. Udaipur is an old city built around a number of lakes and we stayed in a fairly new hotel built in the old style, with a very "Exotic Marigold Hotel" feel with a view over the main lake from the roof top restaurant.



Our hotel



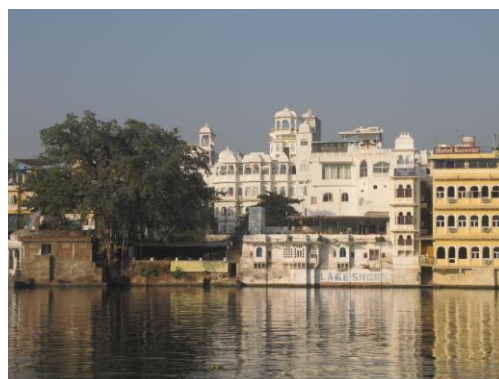
The garden matches my T-shirt!



Very comfortable room



The roof top swimming pool



Our hotel from across the lake

We toured the City Palace Museum which is the largest palace in Rajasthan and the second largest in India. It is an amazing complex of courtyards, pavilions, terraces, rooms and hanging gardens with a façade 244m long and 30.5m high, towering on a hill over the town. It used to be the palace of the Maharani of Udaipur and was given to the city to be converted into a museum by the current Maharani. The main courtyard is still used for high society weddings, and when we were there it was being set up for a big three day event which was going to cost \$A6,000.000! We did a walking tour around the town and visited temples and markets. We also went on a one hour cruise on the lake which took us around the famous Lake Palace Hotel where the James Bond film *Octopussy* was filmed. The hotel covers a complete island so that it looks like the building is floating on the water. It is one of the most expensive hotels in India.



The huge City Palace Museum from across the lake



Lake Palace Hotel from the Museum

After another comfortable night at our exotic motel it was off to Jodhpur. On the way we travelled to the fort of Kumbalgarh, built by the local Maharajah in the 15th century some 1100m above sea level with stunning views in all directions. The fort is the highest point on a 36km wall built to keep out the Moghul armies from Pakistan and Persia. This wall was wide enough for 7 horses to gallop abreast, and is second only to the Great Wall of China in length.

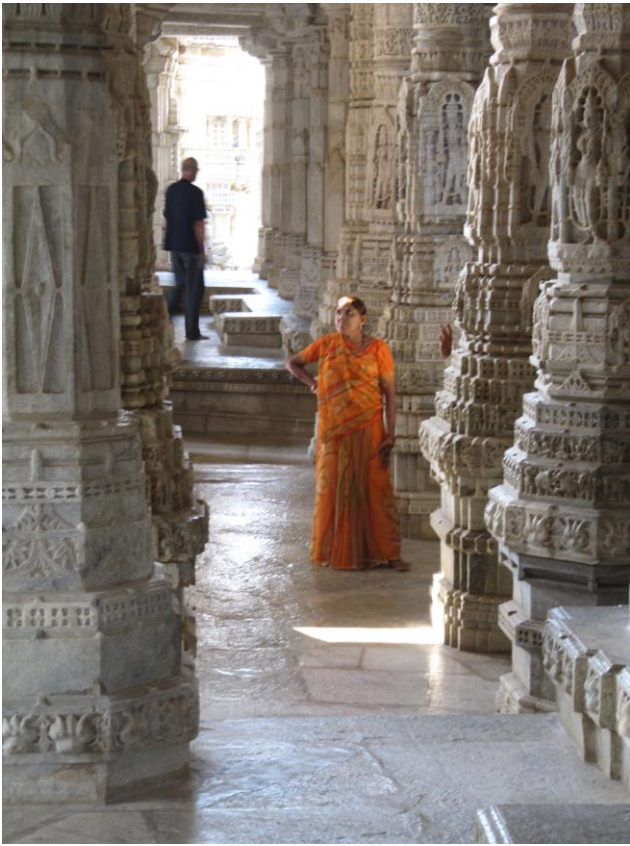


Part of the wall



The wall from Kumbalgarh Fort

After lunch we travelled on to a remote valley, down a winding and very steep gravel road to Ranakpur to visit a remarkable Jain temple with 1444 intricately carved columns, no two of which are alike. We had a delightful local priest as our guide who spoke beautiful English. He is only allowed to eat one meal a day, very plain vegetarian food, no onions or garlic as these stimulate sexual desire (... who knew? No wonder Italians are considered hot blooded!) Ranakpur is considered one of the five holiest places for the Jain community.



Some of the carved columns



Our monk and his brother



We finally arrived at Jodphur at 7.30pm.