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Places & Spaces: Rajasthan's Fresco-Filled Havelis

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Jaipur is famed for its colorful gems, block printed fabrics and crowded, treasure-filled bazaars, but wander off the beaten track, just over 150 miles from The Pink City, and you'll find a rich, rare nucleus of historic havelis. Rosanna Falconer explores the past and present of these heritage buildings.

BY ROSANNA FALCONER | CABANA TRAVEL | 16 FEBRUARY 2024

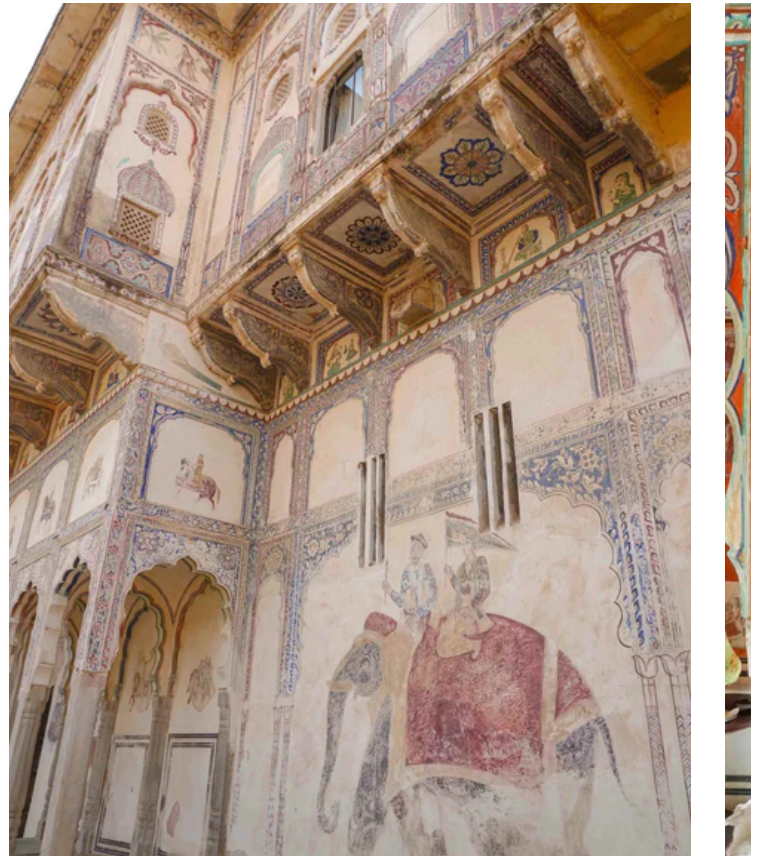


Deeppura Garh, Rajasthan © Rosanna Falconer

Known as Asia's largest open air art gallery, the *havelis* (mansions) of Rajasthan's *Shekhawati* region are the result of flourishing wealth among 19th century Marwari merchants and local *thakurs* (noblemen), derived from trade with the British East India Company. As well as family homes, these havelis were a status symbol, with owners striving for the most elaborate, intricate and flamboyant design.

From the 1940s, however, the glory days had passed, with haveli owners lured to India's cities, unable to maintain the upkeep of these once-revered mansions. Today, many are locked up, crumbling into ruin, while inheritance shared between various siblings means power and interest is diluted over a family estate.

Thakur Ranvir Singh, Rajasthan state co-convenor of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, has described the area as "a treasure trove of heritage", but noted a sober truth: "The tragedy today is that most of the havelis stand neglected."



Italian jewellery designer, Maria Grazia Baldan, happened upon *Deppura Garh* in 2015. After years of neglect, the once-grand haveli, the ancestral home of Rao Raja Kalyan Singh Bahadur (1886-1967), was being used as a grain store by villagers.

Despite the superficial disrepair, Maria Grazia "fell in love immediately". After all, the designer - who has spent the last 40 years travelling across India for precious stones for her collections, as well as to China, Pakistan and Afghanistan - has a unique eye, and appreciation, for beauty. She possesses an assured, elegant sense of style, from her rare antique finds to her ability to tie her silk foulards just so. The intangible beauty of the haveli is thanks to Maria, Belgian architect, Philippe de Villegas, and the 150 artisans and workers involved in its complex restoration.

Back in 2015, a guardian was living on the ground floor of the property, along with his goats (whose shed is now Maria Grazia's office). A year of cleaning ensued: lime wash was gently removed from the building's facade, revealing its hidden paintings beneath.

To this day, Maria Grazia does not know why lime wash was covering such beauty, though a movie was filmed here in the same decade with producers perhaps wishing to conceal its characterful mural. She recruited a master artisan and his team on a visit to Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur, captivated by his ability to restore a painted wall, "in a truly professional way with minute detail."



Deppura Garh in 2015, before restoration © Maria Grazia Baldan

Haveli frescoes, particularly in the Jaipur bazaars, are often restored in an eye-catching but inauthentic way. The pigments pop with modern dyes, the finish feels too polished. In contrast, the *Deppura Garh* team mixed natural ingredients with modern paints to replicate the muted hues of the 19th century. Once the final paint stroke had been made, the facade was distressed to echo the original.

Preservation continues to be at the forefront of the team's mind, with an annual lamination for protection from the elements. The facade captivates with its painted vignettes - and one new addition: Maria Grazia with her dogs, dated 2016 - but then it's through to the private inner courtyard for a true contrast. The haveli's 10 white

bedrooms manifest its motto: "Have a rest before moving on." While some might expect a heritage hotel renowned for frescoes to have bedrooms abundant in color and patterned textiles, these havens provide welcome respite.



Once the eyes have readjusted, the frescoes of the Maharajah's room on the first floor are a marvel. Tangerine orange walls are painted with swirling floral and leaf motifs in turquoise and ultramarine. The complimentary colors emphasise the curve of an arch or surround one of the honeycomb-carved windows. Traditional scenes are integrated into the walls, catching the eye in the way a modern framed picture might.

With restoration of the original frescoes complete, some might rest on their laurels. Not Maria Grazia. Up on the roof, the maliya rooms were once used as relief from the summer heat. At *Deppura Garh*, the artisans flexed their skills, showcasing a modern take on decorative painting. The colors of the Buddhist flag were the starting point: blue, yellow, green, orange (found in the Maharajah's room downstairs) and white

(throughout the hotel). A corner sitting room is painted cobalt blue to signify sky and space, while lotus flowers climb from the wall panels with Indian monsoon gods scattering petals from the clouds next to the gold cornicing.



Deeppura Garh, Rajasthan © Rosanna Falconer

A boldly striped floor energises the room with joy, a style that carries over to the turmeric yellow meditation room in the opposite corner of the roof. Finally, hidden up a narrow staircase and through a wooden door, the green room depicts jungle stories with peacocks, hummingbirds and wild boar dancing from floor to ceiling.

It is fascinating to find a hotel that not only places the utmost, and deserving, importance on the preservation of heritage frescoes, but also experiments with a modern take on the art. For the artisans, this was a project that combined the meticulous, rigorous task of replicating 19th century artwork, with the creative freedom to paint utterly new murals. For Maria Grazia's guests, it's a place of true peace before they continue their journey across this vibrant part of India.



Deppura Garh, Rajasthan © Rosanna Falconer

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