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TRAVEL

Luxury travel in India: Maria Grazia Baldan's dazzling Rajasthani fort

How a jeweller has turned a
tumbledown haveli into a tasteful
retreat



[Lisa Grainger](#) Saturday March 07 2020, 12:01am GMT, The Times

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Maria Grazia Baldan can tell you the day she fell in love with India. “It was my sixth birthday, when my parents gave me *The Jungle Book*,” the cashmere-clad Italian jeweller, 73, recalls as she accompanies me into the courtyard of her Indian fort.

“For a small Italian girl, it was so exotic. I read it again and again - and in every house I have lived in ever since, I’ve had a copy.”

Not only did Rudyard Kipling’s Mowgli and Shere Khan kickstart Baldan’s lifelong love of books, but also of travel, from Italy to the rest of Europe, then the US and, at the age of 27, China, a country that changed the trajectory of her jewellery career.

“Mao had been dead only a year and the country was very closed, very traditional,” she says. “Wherever I went people were selling old belongings and so many of them had wonderful stories attached to them, whether they were coins from remote kingdoms, or embellished pieces of gold from a warrior’s bridle, or carved

pieces of jade created to bring good luck.”



Maria Grazia Baldan

Having already made her name in Milan creating colourful floral bangles, Baldan started to use the treasures she had collected in China to create quirky pieces of jewellery: brooches embellished with antique beads, necklaces hung with gold icons, anklets jangling with bells worn by female farmers to scare away snakes.

As their popularity grew, so did her travels to find more tribal treasures. From China, she went to Pakistan and to Afghanistan, which was then, she says, “the most beautiful country in the world. I slept at the feet of the Buddha at Bamiyan, now sadly destroyed by the Taliban. We washed in waterfalls and hiked beside the

Band-e Amir lakes, which were an incredible turquoise blue, in the middle of the desert.” And then, having hiked through the Khyber Pass - “now an area far too dangerous to travel through, but then full of friendly goat and sheep herders” - she discovered India.

For a jeweller, the gems of India were always going to be appealing, whether the famous diamonds of Golconda, the deep blue Kashmir sapphires or the piles of semi-precious stones that have been traded in bazaars for centuries. What Baldan hadn't expected to fall in love with, though, was the country's architecture - and in particular the painted havelis of Rajasthan.

Originally built as country homes for noble Rajput families, many of the ornately painted havelis, or courtyarded homes, had been abandoned after independence as the aristocracy's power dwindled and its families moved back into the cities. When, ten years ago, Baldan began to consider closing her eponymous shops in Milan and Sardinia and moving to India for part of the year, most of the havelis she looked at were ruins. “They'd just been abandoned,” she says. “Not only were they too big for most families to live in, but they were too expensive to renovate.”



The courtyard
MARY-ANNE DENISON-PENDER

When she found Deppura Garh in a small village three hours' drive from Jaipur, the old castellated fort hadn't had anyone living in it for "probably a century", she says. If you looked up through what is now the library, "you could see the sky". One wall was "a pile of rocks". There was no garden. No bathrooms. No kitchen. "But what was really beautiful," she says, staring up at the intricately frescoed façade of her newly restored Rajasthani home, "was these paintings. Incredible! So I found Philippe and he helped me transform it."

The Belgian architect Philippe de Villegas wasn't as overwhelmed as other European architects might have been by the prospect of restoring a ruined 200-year-old fort - he had already renovated several historic buildings since coming to live in Rajasthan 17 years before. Deppura Gargh, he agreed, had "good bones": beautiful hand-painted façades,

crenellated towers, thick walls that would retain warmth during frosty winters and remain cool in the scorching summers. Baldan, he says, has “very good, very particular taste”, not to mention the millions of euros it takes to restore a property of this size. Most importantly, he says, Rajasthan has “incomparable craftsmen” who could make whatever the pair wanted: frames for the dozens of tiny new windows that perforate the formerly impenetrable walls, stone mantelpieces for the new fireplaces that warm the living rooms, elegant furniture for the ten guest rooms and for three bedrooms in Baldan’s private living quarters.

At one point - a year before the fort opened as a guesthouse in December - there were 150 workmen: carving stone, whittling chairs, repairing studded fort doors, restoring frescoes. “When the last 65 left, it was like being left by 65 boyfriends all at once: so sad,” Baldan says, throwing up her bejewelled hands theatrically. “Luckily, most still live in the village, so I can see them for tea. But it was so much fun with them here. You say to them, ‘Can you make this?’ And they say, ‘Of course’, and deliver it the next day. Not like Europe . . .”

Staying in Baldan’s tranquil new fortified hotel, it’s hard to believe that the courtyard was once filled with sand and Room 1 was formerly a

camel's stable. Beyond the thick, studded gates, lawns dotted with frangipani trees roll towards a courtyard planted with smart geometric-shaped hedges. The front of the building is covered with frescoes of elephants and horses, concubines and warriors, sensitively restored in muted shades by the master painter responsible for restoring the historic murals in Jodhpur's Mehrangarh fort. In the heart of the house a fountain splashes water on to polished marble and cool limed walls soar into perfectly plastered domed ceilings.



A swimming pool in the new garden and a sitting room with painstakingly restored murals

MARY-ANNE DENISON-PENDER; LISA GRAINGER

Wonderfully, de Villegas has ensured that each

of the rooms not only has little walk-in wardrobes, but also pretty views: of a pool or courtyard terrace or, from the second-floor Maharani's Quarters, where I bathe in a circular domed tower lit by thin shafts of sunlight that stream through arrow-slits, over a secret courtyard where Rajput queens once retreated beneath a neem tree.

If from the outside the building looks much as it did hundreds of years ago, inside the duo have created a restrained, refined aesthetic that blends Indian and Italian styles. Within plain white limewashed walls sit simple wooden and metal furnishings, accompanied occasionally by a sculptural antique: a pressed-iron ceiling tile, a bulbous terracotta water pot, an antique stone camel. "There's so much colour and noise in India that I wanted this to be quiet, more a retreat than a hotel," Baldan explains.

Guests can take a cooking course, learn to paint Indian miniatures or drive to nearby fortified towns to explore painted havelis in the nearby Shekhawati region. But the jeweller emphasises that she has restored Deppura Garh for travellers who want to do very little for a few days. People who want to lie by the big stone pool. To sit in the courtyard garden, reading. To take long lunches - fresh Italian mezze or spicy Indian thalis in a shaded tabari,

or garden house. To meditate or do yoga in one of three hand-painted towers: one sunflower yellow, one midnight blue and gold and illuminated at night by lamplight, and one decorated with green frescoes featuring lush forests, monkeys and tigers.

To Baldan's delight, the tropical frescoes were a surprise gift from her mural painter, who completed them just before he died. With its *Jungle Book* feel, it's a room Baldan would have loved as a girl too.

Greaves India (greavesindia.co.uk) can arrange a seven-night Rajasthan tour, with three nights at Deppura Garh, two nights at Sujan Raj Mahal Palace in Jaipur and two nights at The Oberoi in Delhi, with excursions to see the painted havelis of Shekhawati, sightseeing in Jaipur and Delhi, and private transfers, from £3,225, B&B

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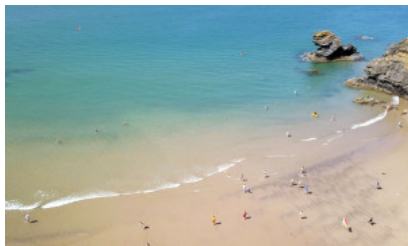
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