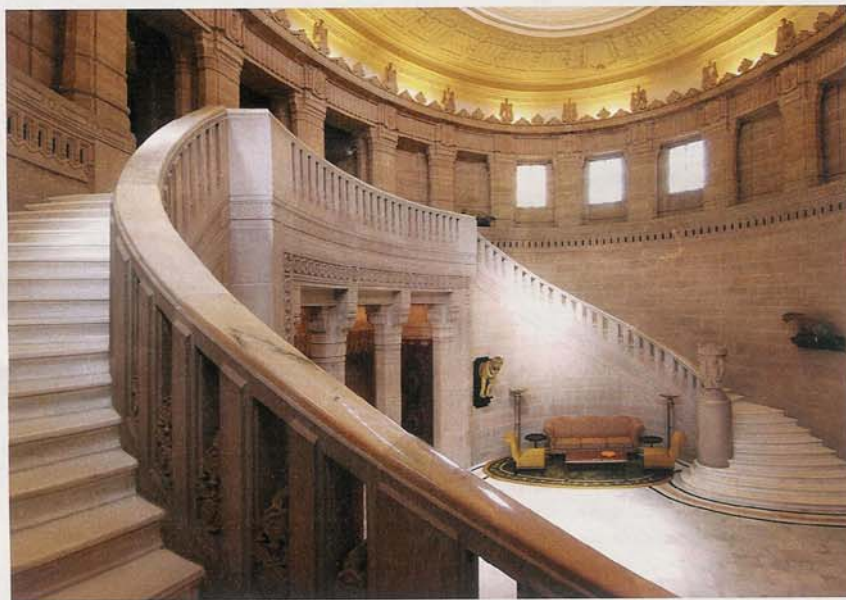


## Four of the best Indian palace hotels, by Francesca Syz



### UMAID BHAWAN PALACE JODHPUR

When India achieved independence in 1947, the maharajas ('great kings') who had previously ruled it lost their power. Gradually their extraordinary palaces, symbols of their wealth and influence, became albatrosses around their necks. Some abandoned them altogether; others watched them fall into disrepair; yet still others turned them – or at least parts of them – into hotels. One of the finest examples is Taj Hotels' 64-room Umaid Bhawan, named after Maharaja Umaid Singh, the grandfather of the current Maharaja of Jodhpur, who still lives in one wing with his family. If the name rings a bell, it's probably because Elizabeth Hurley and Arun Nayar got married here. And you can see why. Perched high above the city of Jodhpur, the vast golden sandstone art deco palace is one of the largest residences in the world and was once described as 'a majestic, handsome warrior, his arms spread wide for a loving embrace'. The hotel itself is gorgeous. Every room is different and some have terraces. There's also a great restaurant, spa, indoor and outdoor pools and a yoga pavilion. **The details** Doubles from about £580 (00 800 4588 1825; tajhotels.com).

**AHILYA FORT MAHESHWAR** While a stay at a privately owned palace may give you a fleeting glimpse into the lives of its inhabitants, it is rare that you actually get the chance to hang out with them. Not so at Ahilya Fort in Madhya Pradesh, home to Prince Shivaji Rao Holkar, son of the last Maharaja of Indore. Clinging to a cliff top high above the sacred Narmada river in Maheshwar, a town famous for its handloom weaving, the crumbling 18th-century fort has 14 shabby-chic bedrooms scattered around the royal compound, accessed via a network of hidden shady walkways. Prince Holkar loves cooking and entertaining and when he is in residence he does both with aplomb. One minute he'll be buzzing around the kitchen seasoning soup and chopping vegetables, the next he's inviting guests to his private terrace for sundowners. Expect candlelit dinners on the river and visits to the adjacent Rehwa Society, set up to revive the ancient weaving tradition and improve the lives of the weavers (a fantastic place to pick up shawls and scarves). Go in February and enjoy the fort's own Sacred River Festival, showcasing some of India's leading musicians. **The details** Doubles from about £160 (00 91 1141 551575; ahilyafort.com).



**UDAI BILAS DUNGARPUR** Beautifully located by the banks of Gaigsagar lake in Dungarpur against a backdrop of private forest, rambling Udaibilas, the home of the royal family of Dungarpur, was built in the 19th century and added to several times over the years as the family grew. Today there are 23 bedrooms for paying guests, scattered around the palace, more than half with gorgeous lake views, including six enormous suites with large sitting-rooms and dressing-rooms. Interior decoration is traditional and has changed little in the past 50 years; there's a faded grandeur but an abundance of deep-sprung sofas and corners to flop in, giving it a relaxed, comfortable feel. The overall vibe is old-school 'house party', with guests gathering for drinks in the drawing-room in the evening before continuing into the large dining-room for dinner around the banqueting table. Other meals can be taken elsewhere: breakfast by the pool, for example, or lunch in the garden. While the service is very good, thoughtful touches like a hot water bottle in your bed on cold nights give the place a uniquely homey feel. **The details** Doubles from about £65; superior, £80 (00 91 2964 230808; udaibilaspalace.com).

**SAMODE PALACE JAIPUR** On a small hillock in the eastern reaches of the Aravalli hills an hour from Jaipur, just above the medieval village of Samode, this 150-year-old gem fulfils every fantasy of an Indian palace. One of the finest remaining examples of Rajput-Mughal architecture, the walls of the palace, built around a series of courtyards, are completely smothered in ornate frescoes, mosaics and mirrors. The private residence of the noble Samode family, it was converted into a boutique hotel by two brothers in 1985. Every feature was beautifully restored, and the palace is now filled with a combination of original artefacts and newer additions such as stylish Rajasthani hand-block print textiles in warm, vibrant colours. Every room is unique in shape and size and each as ornate as the last.

Other nice features include two very good restaurants serving Rajasthani, European, Asian and international food, an outdoor marble mosaic pool and a four-treatment-room ayurvedic spa. What Samode Palace has done so well is to introduce modern hospitality without disturbing the fairy tale.

**The details** Doubles from €250 including breakfast (00 91 1423 240014; samode.com).

