

ROMANCE IN THE RUINS

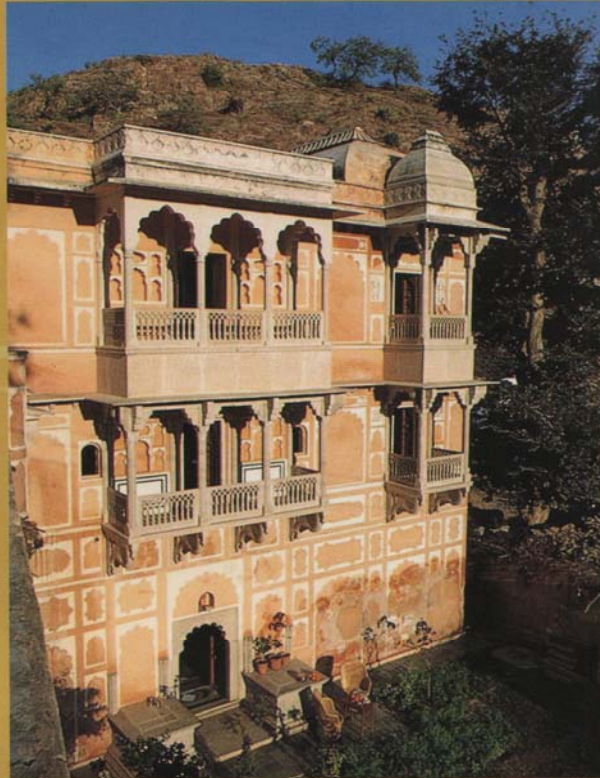
Londoners John and Henry spent a few contemplative moments in India at Chanwar Palkiwalon ki Haveli - a mansion in the city of Amber in Rajasthan, built in the 11th century, restored in the early 1990s as an experiment by John Singh, co-founder of the famous block print company, Anokhi.



photography Henry Wilson
text John Snelson
(painstakingly) styled by Henry Wilson + John Snelson

Together with architect Nimesh Patel, they tested out just how long and how much it would take to bring one of these cultural relics back to life.



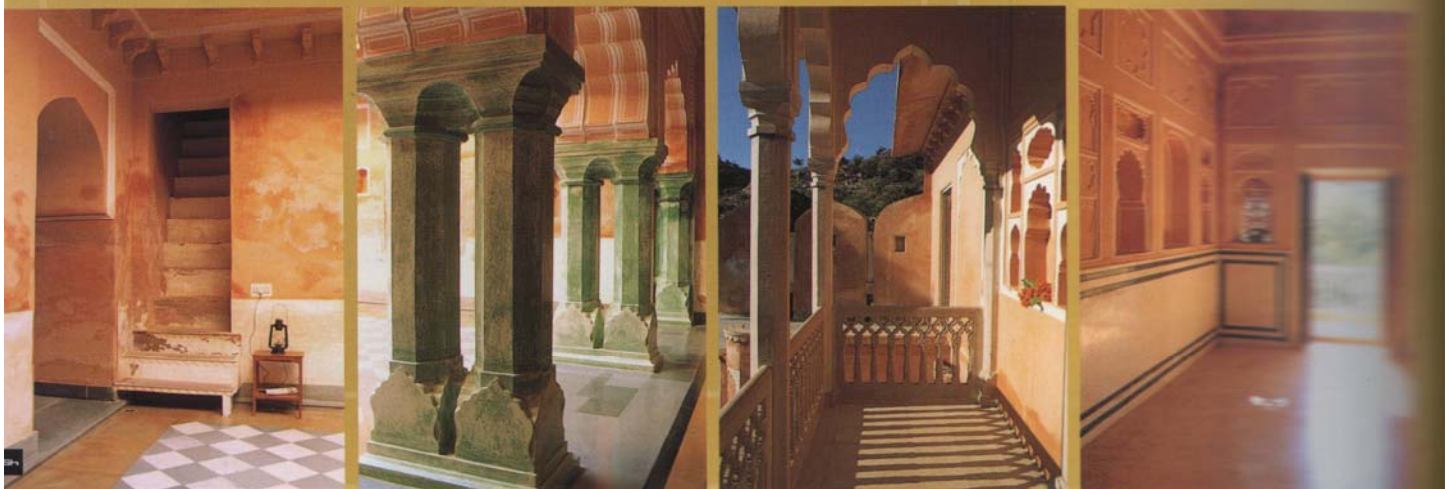


India is crowded. The city streets are perpetually packed in seemingly non-moving jams of buses, ox-carts, cows and people, lots and more people. Thrown into the middle of the turmoil are the tourists, surprisingly a big handful of them, who are chiefly concerned with ticking off the great sites on their shopping list, and in the shortest time possible, too: Taj Mahal on Monday, Quatab Minar on Tuesday, etc. Such "touch-and-go" tour will only enable them to usually see the grandeur of these constructs, and not feel the softer moments that these intimidating architecture are capable of. Fortunately, without being too influenced by these people, we managed some time to pause and spend a few fruitful moments to appreciate the inner beauty of Indian architecture.

In Jaipur, Rajasthan, the great architectural achievements of the Moghal empire are to be found everywhere, with triumphal gateways in urban centers, occasionally obstructing the traffic system (which the residents seem oblivious to anyway), and elaborate carvings of architecture visible across every corner.

A few miles out of Jaipur, at the Amber Fort and Palace, an elephant ride to the top is obligatory. And you can wander around, with plenty of other camera-clicking tourists, amid the exquisite sunken marble-laid gardens of the majestic palace, home to many past generations of rulers of Jaipur. Impressed, I thought to myself that this place would make a wonderful film set. There were many agile monkeys doing their best to entertain the tourists, nowhere near to the lightning speed of the tourists on their way to the next destination on their cultural sightseeing tour.

Chanwar Palkiwalon ki Haveli is quite a name, and also quite a place. Chanwar Palkiwalon is a family name while Haveli basically means palace or mansion. This piece of ancient architecture is certainly not a romantic ruin overran with tourist guides and in fact, it has yet to be published in any books. A few years ago, it was as much a ruin as its neighbours, with crumbling walls and only the odd bits of broken carving hinting at its former glory. Part of the sixteenth century city of Amber, in the valley below the Palace, this house was built onto the side of the city walls for a wealthy merchant many centuries ago. Unlike others around it, the Haveli decayed as the new city of Jaipur nearby drained Amber of its people and life. Ignored for hundreds of years, except by the locals and their goats, such deserted ruins show the passage of time more tangibly than their more famous, crowded and photogenic neighbours.

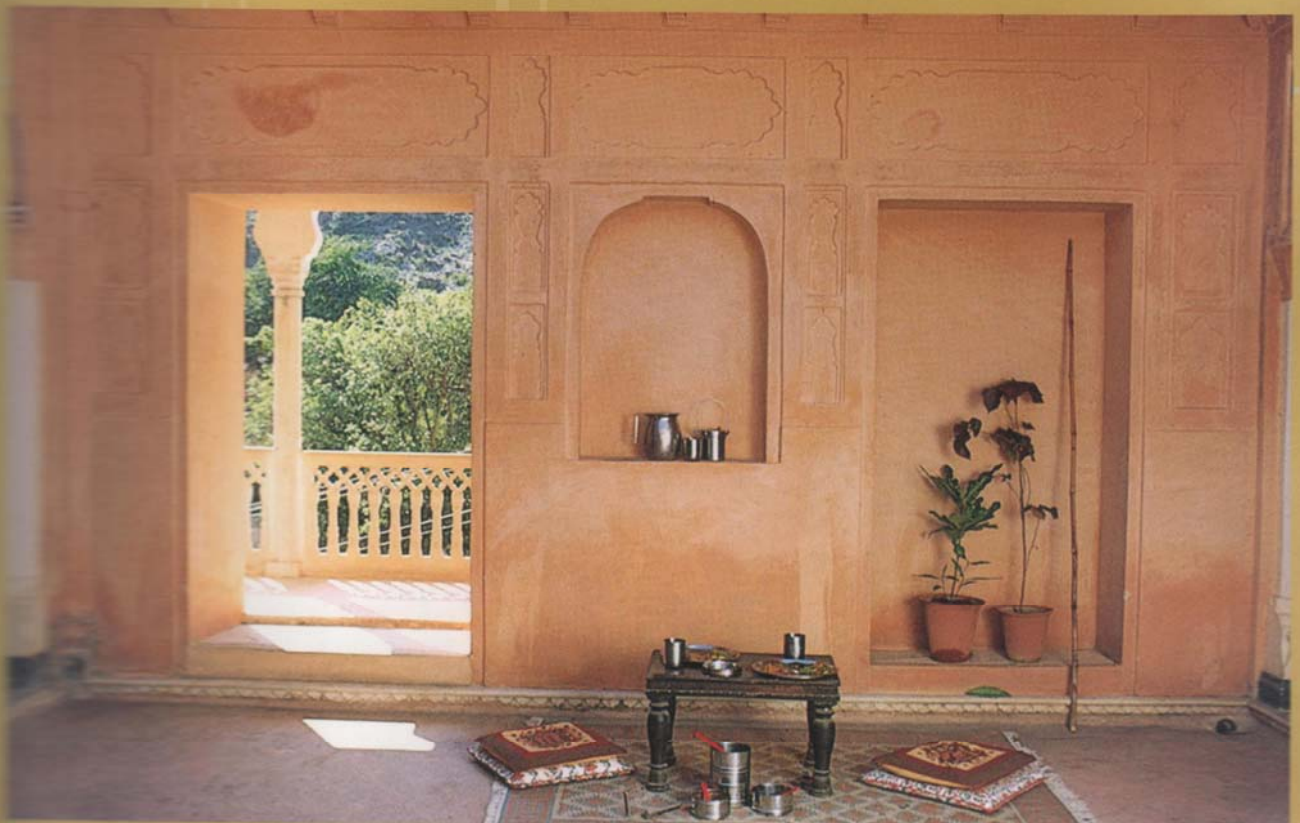




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daughter-in-law Rachel, who enthusiastically conducts exciting games of "Murder in the Dark" with her little friends.

The Haveli was eventually restored as an experiment by John Singh - the founder of the famous block print company, Anokhi, which he co-owns with his wife. He bought it in the early 1990s and, with the architect Nimesh Patel, decided to work out just how long and how much it would take to bring these cultural relics back to life. With about fifty workers, the Haveli was rebuilt and restored using only traditional methods - manual labour and local materials, and this is undoubtedly a long and tedious task! As John joked, "I don't think anyone here builds using local materials except damn fools like



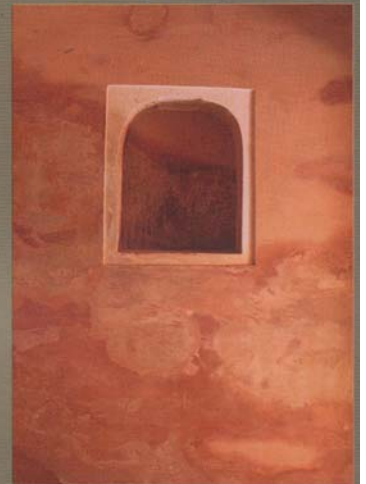
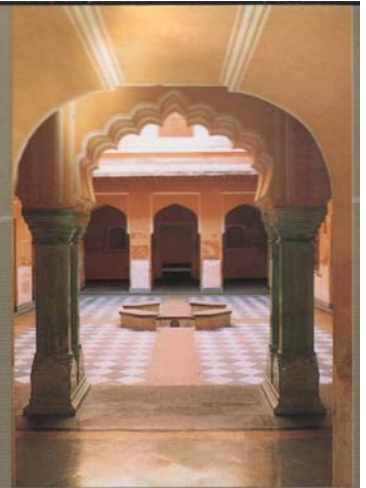
the only human they were sure of was Jagdish,
the young and enthusiastic caretaker who was only too keen to see a few visitors.



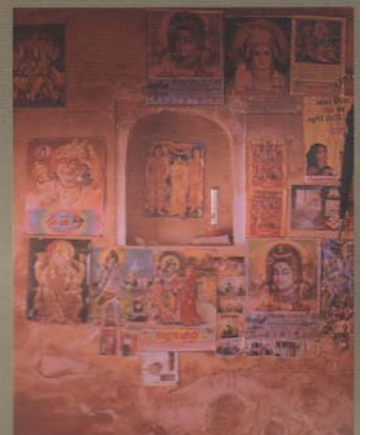
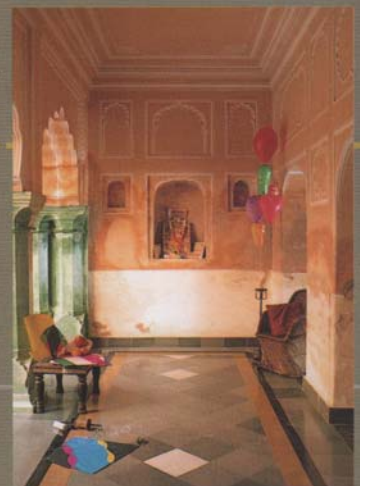
There is an extraordinary atmosphere standing alone in a building that is so old, and yet so new. But of course, this is by no means a blank canvas. The architecture alone represents a whole tradition of construction linked to a whole way of life. Four hundred years ago the first courtyard would have been used for receiving guests and for formal ceremonies. From high windows the women of the Zenana (harem) could look down unseen, onto the street below. A steep stairway off the main courtyard leads up to a small and dark entrance way. To the right is the public area and main rooms belonging to the master of the Haveli, while to the left through a small and concealed courtyard is the private area where the women lived: no windows here on the outside walls to prevent prying eyes. The chattering of these women, together with the bustle of their servants in attendance, would have provided constant life and energy previously. Now, with the occasional echoing sounds of single footfalls in the dark rooms and the lazy midday sun streaming in, is left to content with an air of uncertainty and vague unease.



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the rough broken cobbles to get milk for the tea.



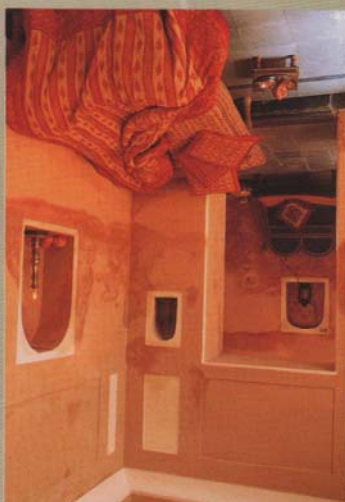
So what do you do with a perfectly restored ancient house designed for a society that has since long past its sell-by date? It has become a bit of a family albatross for the Singhs except for their daughter-in-law Rachel, who enthusiastically conducts exciting games of "Murder in the Dark" with her little friends. But unfortunately, such games are met with much disapproval from the adults. With the odd heights of doorways, uneven and steep stairways, and the constant obstructions of pillars and arches, "Broken Leg in the Dark" seems a more realistic title. Put to more constructive use, the Haveli provided home to thirty Australian students studying the ancient water system at the Amber Palace for three months. And scary enough, one of them saw the ghost of whom he thought to be the night watchmen ... This had undoubtedly caused the rest to be more cautious with suspicious figures moving around the mansion, the only human they were sure of was Jagdish, the young and enthusiastic caretaker who was only too keen to see a few visitors. Grateful for his humanly presence, the young Australians bought him a bicycle which he rides off down the rough broken cobbles to get milk for the tea.





The Haveli is the perfect place to get some sense of architectural priorities of the original owners. Much care was taken to reinstate every intricate carving that provided precious insight into the fine ancient craftsmanship. Many of the columns are finished with "aansh" - a traditional lime paste comprising of crushed shells, and sugar resulting in its marble-like look. The building has also been given the typical terracotta wash whose hue visually intensifies at sunset - the reason why Jaipur has been sentimentally named the "pink city". Till today, it is hard not to notice how colours and decorations had been a common part of everyday life - from the electric shades reminiscent of the 60s' hippies colours used in nearly every religious shrine, to the loud patterns of the women's everyday clothes. Even in an out-of-the-way place like this you find irresistibly-coloured balloons and kites being sold off the back of a bicycle to local children and indulgent visitors! (I confess ...)

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And what of 20th century progress in a place like that? It is worth a quick thought as you kicked the supposed "air-conditioner" in your hotel room, which is a tad too noisy and too warm to enable a peaceful sleep. Primitively designed without modern amenities, the windows are placed low against high walls to prevent direct sunlight into the interiors during scorching summers. Combing through the details, it is apparent that there is reason and sense in the old plans that one might not be able to observe in the more popular ruins of the tourist trail.

While one cannot deny that it is difficult to adapt these beautiful relics to 20th century life unless one is willing to adopt the ways of the 16th century, but great though it is to see, the Haveli remains a symbol of the past. Yet, despite its inconveniences (imagine carrying those shopping bags up the life-threatening flights of steps) its romantic allure is great - no satellite television but simply a great view of the stars.

No air-conditioner
but all the atmosphere
enough for you

to
fall
in

love

with

a

city.

