



# PAYING HOMAGE TO SHEKHAWATI

It was a sense of great expectation and wonder with which we carefully planned our trip to Shekhawati, the birthplace of the Marwari merchant, to whom we have dedicated one issue after another. Today Shekhawati is in flux. While offering glimpses into the lives of rich merchants, it is also a window into the developing present. A journey fraught with discovery, disappointment and finally epiphany, going back to study the roots is the right and the responsibility of each descendant.

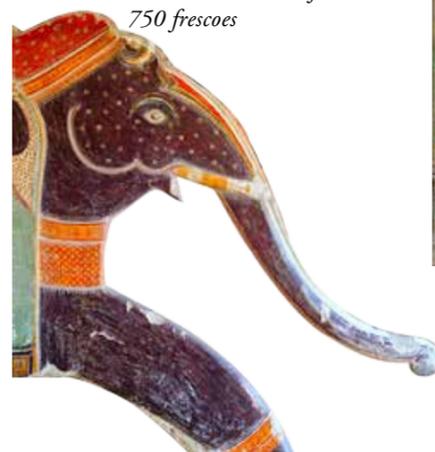
Text \* **Nirati Agarwal**

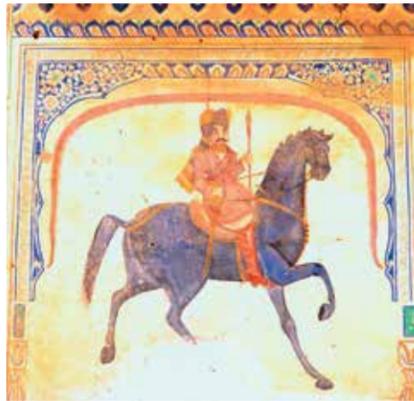
Photographs \* **Neehar Mishra**

**I** DON'T KNOW QUITE WHAT WE had expected to find in Shekhawati, but what we came away with was both more and less than what we had anticipated. In our journey from Nawalgarh to Bagar, then to Bissau on the way to Churu and then Ramgarh before we drove to Jaipur, we felt more than we saw. And we saw a lot. In two weeks, we saw over 300 havelis, got over ten hours of history lessons and spoke to countless people. From the director of a small museum situated in a by-lane of a

by-lane who showed us the 80-kali lehenga worn by a *sethani* 100 years ago, a local haveli guide who asked us as much about Mumbai as he told us about Nawalgarh, from a cook who had learnt how to make *gatte ki sabzi* from his grandmother (and tried his best to teach us!) and the taxi driver who urged us to write about the desecration and subsequent demolition of beautiful havelis, we learned about life lived—both then, about 180 years ago, and now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Facing page: A beautiful Jain temple in Churu, which is decorated with paintings, Parisian wall tiles and Belgian glass chandeliers; Right: The doorway leading to the second chowk (courtyard) of the Poddar haveli in Nawalgarh, which is a treasure house of over 750 frescoes*





If I had hoped to return and be able to write about roots—mine and yours—about what made Marwaris the community that had once controlled 40 per cent of industrial assets in the country; about what made these *pagdiwalas* so optimistic about risk and so good with numbers; about a community so attuned to giving back to their birthplace by building schools, hospitals, temples and wells, I was disappointed. If I had thought it was enough to appreciate the frescoes—art for art’s sake—when I came back and pondered over all that we had collected and discovered, it didn’t tell the full story either.

Shouldn’t a beautiful building be more than just a beautiful building? Even if we know about its chowks (courtyards), its *baithak* (guestroom in the first courtyard) its *sals* and *oras* (family rooms on the ground floor), it’s carved and painted *jharokhas* (casements),

its master bedrooms with wall-to-ceiling frescoes, it’s beautiful *jamia kanch* work, its pillars adorned with seashell plaster and intricately-designed Rohira wood doors, shouldn’t it matter more to us because of its history and present-day context? So, we began collating facts.

While we learnt that Didwania haveli in Bissau was considered the most beautiful in the region, that Ramgarh and Mandawa contained some of the oldest havelis—built around the early 1800s—that the tradition of building *chhatris* (cenotaphs) in memory of loved ones was prevalent mostly in Ramgarh, that traces of Parisian influence are apparent in havelis built during the 1920s, that havelis in Churu almost always had at least one painting of the beloved Maharaja Ganga Singhji (who had a great influence on the people there), they weren’t

*Clockwise from top: The portrait of Maharaja Ganga Singhji is visible in every haveli in Churu due to the tremendous influence and goodwill he enjoyed in the region; Churu’s museum, Lok Sanskruti Shodh Sansthaan, has such collections of padtas used by Marwari merchants over a century ago; an example of the Italian influence of these pillars belonging to the Hazarimal Kothari haveli in Churu; exquisitely rendered portraits of the erstwhile owners of the Surana haveli in Churu; an example of the British subject matter (in this case, soldiers marching in unison) that often found expression in the frescoes of Shekhawati*

**CHURU**

Malji Ka Kamra

One of the most travel-friendly hotels we've stayed in, Malji Ka Kamra is a restored guest house built by Seth Malji Kothari. Offering several rooms, with two that feature wall-to-wall frescoes, and an exceedingly friendly staff, it also has local guides on call for haveli tours, organises tea at sundown at a water reservoir said to be built by the wife of the first Marwari millionaire here, Bhagwan Das Bagla, introduces guests to local craftsmen, arranges traditional dance and music on request.

Email: [reservations@maljikakamra.com](mailto:reservations@maljikakamra.com);  
Tariff: ₹3,500-8,000



**BAGAR**

The Piramal Haveli

A villa that combines the finer points of Marwari haveli architecture with Italian influences, this is a great place to stay as it offers easy access to Mandawa, Churu and Nawalgarh.

Tariff: ₹1,500-2,000



**RAMGARH**

Hotel Ramgarh Fresco

With an enthusiastic manager who knows the town and is eager to take guests on a walking tour, stopping at the popular halwai joints that offer *rabdi* and *ghewar*, this 14-room haveli hotel is the place to stay if you're planning on spending a night here.

Email: [ramgarhfresco@gmail.com](mailto:ramgarhfresco@gmail.com);  
Tariff: ₹2,000 onwards

**GUIDES ON CALL:**

**LAL SINGH SHEKHAWAT**, Bissau, Churu and Ramgarh: 9166977111 ([lalishekhawat@yahoo.com](mailto:lalishekhawat@yahoo.com))

**RAGHAVENDRA SINGH**, Ramgarh Fresco Hotel, Ramgarh: 9828071130

**YUNUS KHAN**, Govt approved guide of Shekhawati: 09414491281 ([yunus\\_khaan@hotmail.com](mailto:yunus_khaan@hotmail.com))

**NAWALGARH**

The Roop Niwas Kothi

This lovely heritage hotel was built in 1737 and features cozy, warm rooms and delicious food. It is best known for its Marwari horse stables, where visitors may feed the majestic breed and watch horses gallop across the field during their evening run. The hotel also organises full-day tours on horses as well as 3-day caravans for groups interested in exploring rural Rajasthan.

Email: [roopniwaskothi@yahoo.co.in](mailto:roopniwaskothi@yahoo.co.in);  
Tariff: ₹3,500-8,000



the facts either that could give us the complete picture.

It was when our guide told us that the men hired to move the fan in the *baithak* were usually deaf so that they wouldn't be privy to the business discussions of the seths (who usually made their money in speculation), that we understood why Marwaris were often considered ruthless businessmen. It was when Churu's museum director, Shyamsundar Sharma, pulled out an old red leather *padma* and pointed to the numbers, accounted right to the last *pie*, that we understood why they were lauded as accountants. It was when we saw that the Poddar haveli in Nawalgarh, built in 1902, which contains detailed paintings of steam-engine trains that were only introduced in the town twenty years later, that we understood the spirit of competition and pride that compelled owners to send

painters to towns like Mumbai to see the latest developments that could then be etched on their houses back home. It was when we spoke to the descendant of the Delhi-based Kothari family and present-day owner of the Kothari haveli, who was visiting his property and preparing it for the wedding of his granddaughter later that month, that we came a little closer to understanding the community's ties with traditions.

It was stories like these that made history come alive for us, and it was now that I understood that such journeys, taken to the land of one's roots, are best made alone, best made when we are open to discovery and best when they don't follow any itinerary or guide. And when you least expect it, at places you haven't planned to visit, something sublime happens.

*Below: The oldest haveli in Bissau, the Maheshwari haveli is 200 years old and has frescoes with a mythological and folk theme; this haveli has staunchly faced the ravages of time, surviving rains, graffiti and rust with admirable aplomb*



*Clockwise from below: A close-up of the intricate woodwork of haveli doorways in Ramgarh; an example of artwork found inside chhatris (cenotaphs) built in Ramgarh by seths; trains, carriages, cars and even planes were some of the favourite subjects of Shekhwati frescoes; Chhatris built during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, like this one in Ramgarh, could often be mistaken for temples due to the similarity in architecture*



IMAGE COURTESY: RAGHAVENDRA SINGH

And so it was in Ramgarh. As we were about to return to the hotel after hours under the hot sun, that we were urged to visit just one more haveli. In we went into a narrow street and out we came to a fork in the road. On the left, we saw two havelis facing each other. One had saris drying on its walls with children shouting from the terrace; the other was crumbling to ruin, its doors and windows missing, overgrown with bush and a century of disuse. Of course, this was the haveli we were told to enter. Ducking our heads under the branches, we stepped into the courtyard that was so dark and ghostly, our steps faltered. But, we were professional women from the big, bad city and couldn't show any sort of hesitation; we followed our local samaritan up the stairs, brushing cobwebs from our hair, walked across a floor of questionable stability and entered a fairytale. It was a gold room with red pillars, woodwork and frescoes. What was odd was that we could see what wasn't there. Its Belgian glass chandeliers were missing, we could only

see the shapes; its frescoes were scratched, we could make out vague sketches; its windows were missing, but we could see what they opened to.

After two weeks of history lessons, having witnessed debates between fresco restoration and conservation and having been to countless havelis and temples, what we had now was perspective. Our imagination was filling in for us what our eyes couldn't. Amidst the squalor and ruins, there was beauty and that beauty had a meaning, a past that couldn't be taken away, and for that we are thankful. While dozens of havelis have been razed to the ground, making room for movie theatres and department stores, this is the price I suppose we pay for the idea, however flawed, of progress. What makes us take heed is the fact that the passion for heritage and legacy is still alive, albeit in a precious few, who even 200 years later, preserve faded sepia photographs and decorate their courtyard for a wedding day. ✨

