

Right: Dinner on the Dunes with a side of traditional music.  
 Bottom: The indoor pool at Suryagarh.  
 Opposite: Halwai breakfast spread in the inner courtyard.

in potassium, magnesium, and other minerals, ideal for deep, cellular-level cleansing. An hour later, we emerged like lithe spirits.

Another signature therapy was Stone, using the healing properties of tiger-striped seashells from the Philippine Islands with volcanic stones. These unique, specially sourced seashells, enclosed with a gel rich in lava powder, emit heat due to a natural chemical reaction. The shells, rich in calcium carbonate and trace elements, help nourish bones and tissues. The coarse texture of the shells made for a natural scrub, and we yielded to the long strokes and deep-kneading massage that boosted vascular circulation, drained toxins, and improved metabolism.

Back in our room, a secret bedside platter of assorted traditional sweets awaited us. This daily treat was the creation of Chef Gatta Ram, who would set them with little scrolls tied with silken strings, explaining each item. Tearing ourselves away from the pleasure palace that is Suryagarh was near impossible, but the task of continuing our Thar wellness tour to their property in Bikaner goaded us on.

Narendra Bhawan, the revamped residence of Narendra Singhji, the last Maharaja of



Bikaner, is the most idiosyncratic address in the region. Renouncing the comforts of the palace, he created his own residence where he stayed with his family, 86 dogs, and 500 cows (he knew each one by name). Long before bovine love was fashionable in India, he was given a 'Gauratna' for his service to cows. Legend goes that he never ate a meal till all his animals were fed.

Today, his *gaushala* (cowshed) is an alfresco bar, where we downed negronis and evening snacks on a fiery onyx tabletop. The property has the typical Bikaneri façade, for which red sandstone was brought from Dhulmera (80 kms away), but on the inside, it's anything but Bikaner. It took architect Ravi Gupta and interior designer Ayush Kasliwal six years to reinterpret Narendra Bhawan as a tribute to the man and his travels. "We imagined it as the house of a



COURTESY OF SURYAGARH (2)



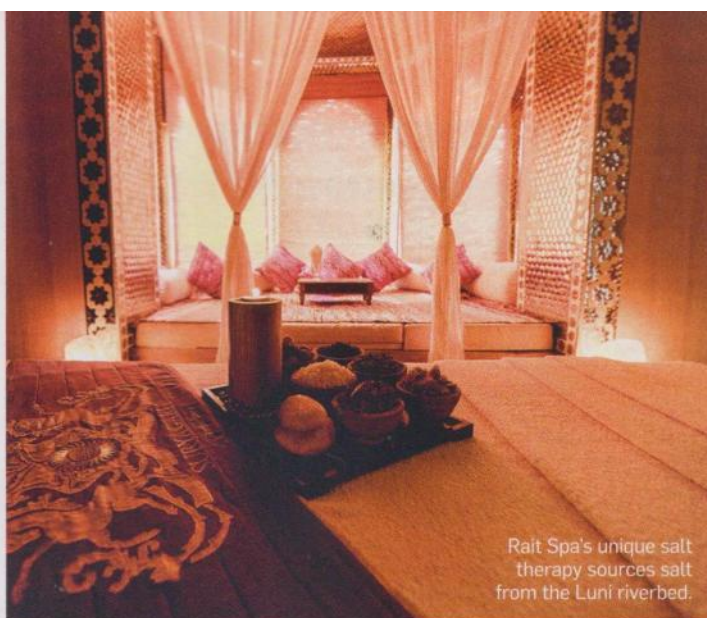
waiting on the town's outskirts led us with much pomp to Suryagarh. From the main gate, two camels ushered us up the slope to the resort's entrance where floral showers, drummers, and a traditional welcome swept us off our feet.

Founded by Maharawal Jaisal Singh in the 12th century, Jaisalmer lay on the southern strand of the legendary Silk Route. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the city thrived on taxes collected from the caravans travelling from Central Asia to Osian and China. Its caravanserais teemed with traders plying exotic goods. Inspired by this indigenous desert culture and its ancient healing traditions, Suryagarh's Rait Spa was named after the sea of *rait* (sand) it was set in. Drawing on the essence of delicate aromas of fine oils, elixirs, and spices, its signature thermal therapies were based on sand, salt, and stone. But Suryagarh's legendary hospitality, spearheaded by our host Manvendra Singh Shekhawat, was not to be taken lightly.

The traditional *halwai* breakfast of snacks and sweets was so heavy we could barely make it to our first spa session. Trudging with heavy steps from our opulent Haveli Residence, we secretly hoped that the short walk to the spa would be enough digestive exercise. Murals of mustachioed wrestlers dominated Akhara, the gym, while yellow lights provided the perfect contrast against the deep blue of Neel, the indoor pool. The flicker of oil lamps and flower petals announced Rait Spa, enveloped in an air of calm and soaked in ambient eastern music.

We tried the Sand Ritual, an age-old treatment handed down centuries based on the natural healing potential of heat. After a fragrant spice scrub, we surrendered to a massage using heated *potlis* (bundles) of Jaisalmer *rait* (sand), which helped relieve the tautness of our muscles. Knots of pain slowly melted away into nothingness. When the soft tinkle of a bell announced the end of the session, we couldn't believe that only an hour had passed; it had felt like eternity. After we had cooled off in henna and aromatic vetiver (extract from the roots of camel grass), the therapist explained how heat helped the body in releasing toxins and regaining natural rhythms, enabling better metabolism.

For the days that followed, we needed every ounce of metabolic willpower to take on the specially curated culinary experiences at diverse venues—breakfast with peacocks in the bush at dawn, speciality cuisine at Legends of Marwar, Jaisalmer kebabs and biryani at



Rait Spa's unique salt therapy sources salt from the Luni riverbed.

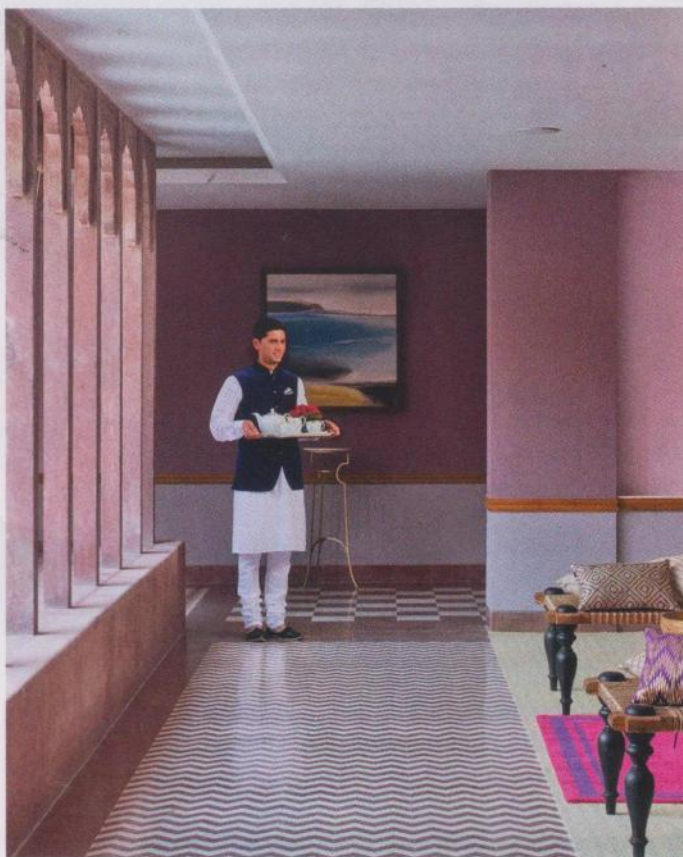
**The Rait Spa at Suryagarh offers therapies that use bundles of desert sand. The age-old treatment is based on the healing properties of heat.**



The P&C restaurant at Narendra Bhawan is a tribute to the hospitality of the royal ladies.



## From the walls to the artefacts, gold paintings, and books—everything at Narendra Bhawan pays homage to its founder's eccentric tastes.



From above: The food served at Narendra Bhawan fuses different themes; Suryagarh's Haveli Residences come with a sunken patio, stone bathtub, private plunge pool, and the occasional winged visitor.

mad uncle we all love—nothing makes sense initially, but eventually, it grows on you,” explained Manvendra.

Bright walls, framed *Banarasi* textiles, Ming vases, crystals, porcelain figurines from Dresden, Richmond-patterned chequered floors, Art Deco lights, framed photos of Narendra Singhji's royal lineage and dogs, old Encyclopedia Britannica and Penguin classics, *usta* gold paintings, a red piano—everything is an ode to the maharaja's eccentric nature and eclectic tastes. The rooms transcend his phases in life—flamboyant Prince rooms, leather-panelled Regimental rooms flagging his military lineage, India rooms reflecting Gandhian ethos, and Republic rooms showcasing works of Le Corbusier in a post-independent India. “It's not really a hotel but a landscape of memories—life's passage through time,” added Manvendra.

The same vein of creativity runs through the spa. Inspired by the great sanitariums of Europe, Clinic-The Spa is a novel concept based on holistic healing through flowers and plants. Using concepts from the Bach Flower Therapy, Narendra Bhawan's Flower Essences are designed to soothe one's senses, instill harmony, and bring balance. Aided with Bemer technology for Physical Vascular Therapy, it promises improved microcirculation.

The food served to us fused disparate themes like the banquets of kings at P&C (Pearls & Chiffon), colonial-era bakeries at the Mad Hatter, poolside Muslim feasts served in crescent platters, Jain thalis on a haveli's rooftop on the Merchant Trail, and cavalier grills at Reveille at Ratadi Talai. Listening to jazz while eating *dahi wale aloo*, *murgh sabja*, *kachre ki sabji* (variety of wild melon), and *angoor ki sabzi* was quite an experience. Inventiveness was at its peak with arrancini biryani, wild mushroom *gujiya*, and *seb ki kheer*. At open pastures beyond Bikaner, we enjoyed sundowners and char-grilled kebabs as folk musicians played the *ravan hattha* (a stringed instrument) by the dancing light of lanterns and the setting sun. Life was good in the Thar. ■

### THE DETAILS

#### GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is Jodhpur, from where Jaisalmer is 300 kms (5 hrs) and Bikaner 249 kms (4 hrs) by road. Jaisalmer and Bikaner are 312 kms apart.

#### STAY

Suryagarh offers nine types of lavish rooms and suites. From ₹18,000 per night; [suryagarh.com](http://suryagarh.com). Rait Spa therapies: Salt (1hr 45 mins) ₹5,900 onwards per person, Sand (2 hrs) ₹7,000, Stone (1 hr 30 mins) ₹4,400. Narendra Bhawan has four categories of rooms on offer (from ₹5,000 per

person in August, [narendrabhawan.com](http://narendrabhawan.com)).

#### SEE

**Jaisalmer:** The Fort, Patwon Ki Haveli, Kuldghara and Khaba ruins, Desert National Park, Sam and Khuri dunes.

**Bikaner:** Junagadh Fort, Laxmi Niwas Palace, Rampuria Havelis, Bhandasar Jain Temple, Karni Mata Temple at Deshnoke.

#### EAT

*Mirchi bada*, *mawa kachori*, local dishes like *ker-sangri*, *kachra* and *gatte ki sabzi* with *bajre ki roti*, and Bhikaji's Bikaneri *namkeen*.

