

# Welcome to Jaisalmer

**Sand dunes on our left**, a scarlet sunset over hardscrabble desert on our right: the end of the day on our camel safari. Our shadows stretch across the sand, my body just an extra hump atop the camel's



by *Jame DiBiasio*

massive chassis and his long, knobby legs. His name is Nipayan and, like the other camels in our group, he's a surly beast. The camels occasionally voice their displeasure with an alien, guttural growl. But you can't take them seriously, with their long necks and silly puffed cheeks and big brown eyes – goofy. Our village guide leads the convoy into the dunes, where we will camp for the night before returning to the castle tomorrow.

Welcome to the farthest reaches of Rajasthan, India. The castle-town behind us is Jaisalmer, until last year a remote spot in the Thar Desert on the Pakistani border. Last year Jaisalmer's airport opened, and flights from New Delhi have begun. For the traveler combining pleasure with business, Jaisalmer and the camel safari are now within easy reach.

**India's software industry is booming** and venture capitalists are combing Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay) and Bangalore for sizzling opportunities among the blossoming Internet sector. Until recently, India's contribution to the dot.com world has been to export its talent to Silicon Valley, but now a home-grown explosion in on-line content is also taking place. This led me as a financial journalist to visit India, and I was determined to come

away with memories other than Mumbai traffic jams and "Delhi belly." I wanted camels.

**India is a sensuous country**, and unfortunately it's often better known for attacking our senses in ways we'd rather forget. Jaisalmer is the perfect antidote: the romance of the walled town evokes *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, with its dense, but quiet streets, lined by ancient palaces of maharajas, yellow stonework and azure doorways. Drink a banana lassi among ancient temples in the cool of dusk. Pay peanuts to stay in an ancient haveli – an old palace – and greet the dawn on its roof.

You may be thrown back in time, but don't forget your credit card. The old aristocrats lost their titles after Independence and have recently turned to tourism to make a buck. Not only are you welcome to stay in their havelis, but their possessions are on the block, and all manner of exotica is for sale.

**But, the highlight is the camel safari**, which all the havelis offer. I spent two days traveling through the desert with Nipayan and his buddies, and you can get safaris ranging from half a day to a week. Doing business in India is nerve-wracking, and two days on the gently undulating back of a camel is a sublime way to lose your stress while seeing another side of India.

That night in the dunes came a full moon. We had no need for light as we sang Beatles songs around the fire. Then sleep, the first real sleep I got on the road, beneath layers of big blankets laid out across the sand. I awoke after five. The moon had just dropped beneath a dune, the sun not yet up behind us – both bright below the horizon. An unbroken sheet of white light ringed the land, nothing but blue above. Cool wind on my face, absolute stillness. And something you rarely get in India. Peace and quiet. 🌸

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