

You enter through a knackered old Moghul gatehouse in the heart of the medieval walled city, reached by a maze of twisting, rutted mud lanes. And there suddenly it is: the just-finished oasis of Raas Haveli, Jodhpur's newest hotel and, for the moment, the most-discussed hotel project in India. After the bedlam, the ambling cows and honking auto-rickshaws of the lanes, you are first struck by the absolute peace and quiet

inside the compound, then by a cluster of restored palace buildings, the swimming-pool and the high-spec minimalist architecture. When you glance up, there, towering above you is the rocky escarpment and walls of Mehrangarh Fort, filling the whole view.

No contest – this the most spectacular view from any hotel in India, maybe actually the world. You stare and gasp. Guests lounging on sunbeds by the pool, in the restaurant, drinking on the terrace, soon develop cricked necks from gawping at it.

Jodhpur has long been one of my favourite cities in Rajasthan, but there has always been a problem with where to stay. The roster of hotels is limited and polarised: you choose between the monumental Thirties Umaid Bhawan Palace, home of the Maharaja of Jodhpur, or a long string of Lonely Planet dives in the old city, Umaid Bhawan, with its magnificent gardens, peacocks and air of eerie silence inside, is operated by the Taj group to high, expensive standards. Elsewhere are a couple of smaller heritage properties like the romantic Bai Samand >

JUMP FOR JODHPUR

Local grandeur with a dash of LA languor, Raas Haveli is sure to be all the raj. Indiaphile Nicholas Coleridge has always held a torch for Jodhpur, and at last he's found a hotel that feels like home



Top, a view of the Raas Haveli swimming-pool, with Mehrangarh Fort above it. Right, a Jodhpur haveli – local rumour says Elizabeth Hurley and Arun Nayar are considering buying it. Below, an 18th-century fertility shrine. Below right, the hotel dining area at night



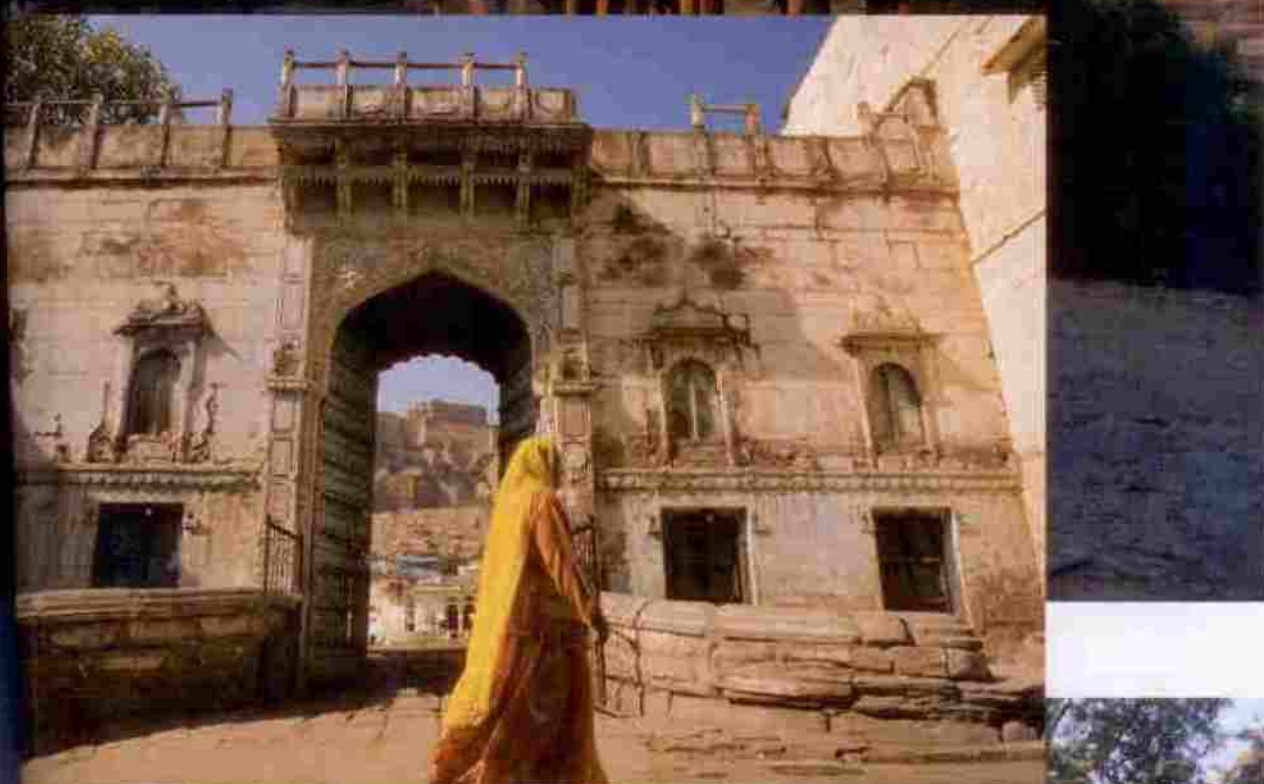
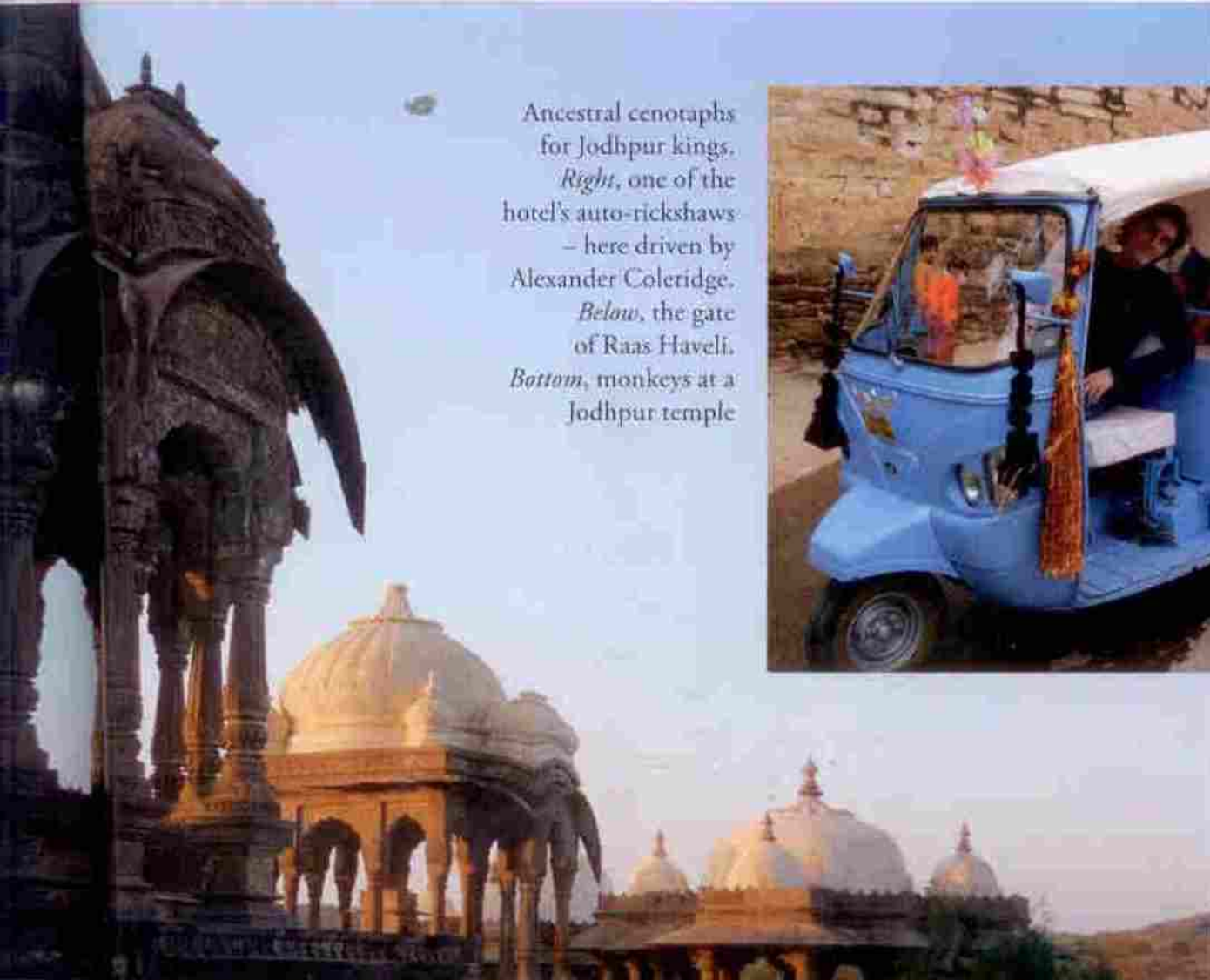
Ancestral cenotaphs for Jodhpur kings. *Right*, one of the hotel's auto-rickshaws – here driven by Alexander Coleridge. *Below*, the gate of Raas Haveli. *Bottom*, monkeys at a Jodhpur temple



◁ Lake Palace, five kilometres outside the centre, but nowhere decent inside the walled town where the action is.

The gap has been plugged by two dashing Rajput brothers, Dhananjaya and Nikhilendra Singh, cousins to the Maharaja, who open Raas this season. Dhananjaya, the elder, is a distinguished Cambridge historian and conservationist, playing a lead role in the preservation of Jodhpur; his younger brother, Nikhil, is a raffish polo-playing reformed playboy who organised Elizabeth Hurley and Arun Nayar's wedding three years ago, and who strides around the campus supervising everything with Bloody Mary in one hand and a cigarette dangling from his lower lip. Much of the investment for the project comes from two British hedgefunders, Johnny Boyer and Nicholas Allan, who operate super-successful investment funds across Asia Pacific. At this point I must declare an interest. Nick Allan has been a close friend of mine for 35 years, with whom I've been on countless holidays, including several in India. Naturally, I was hugely curious to see what he'd been up to in Jodhpur, making his first foray into the hotel biz. I was also rather envious, since buying an old palace in Rajasthan and renovating it was the sort of thing that I was supposed to do in life, not him.

'We'd been looking for investors,' Nikhilendra says, 'and a friend of ours, Roddy Sale [the Old Etonian Bombay social legend who provides open-house to pretty English backpackers], took us to meet Nick and Johnny in London. We only had time for a half-hour meeting because Roddy was going to Ascot in a helicopter and couldn't miss it. He was in morning dress, so were Nick and Johnny. I'm no good at fancy number-crunching presentations. All I can remember was a very attractive assistant pouring coffee. It was all a great rush, but after 15 minutes Nick and Johnny said, "Why not? We'd like to become▷

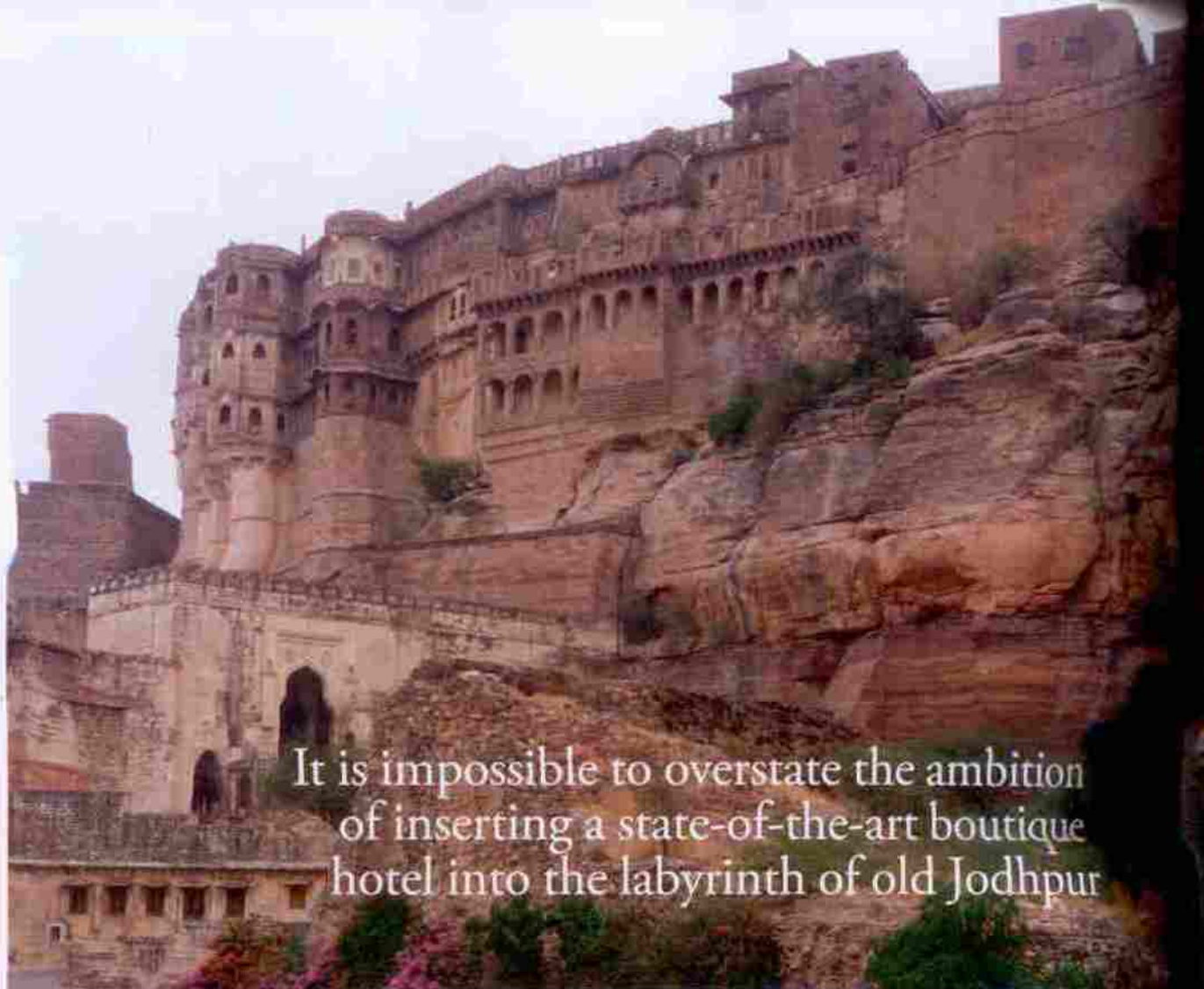


private investors." So that's how we became partners.'

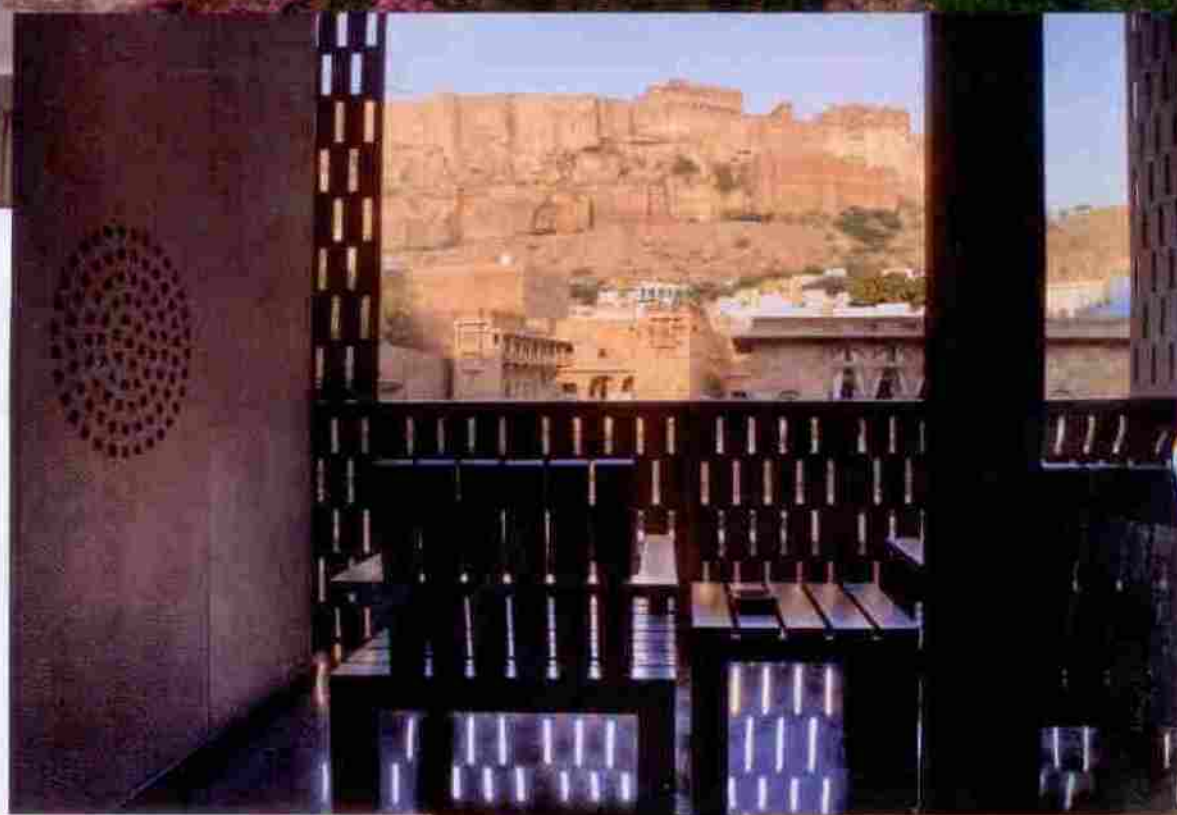
It is impossible to overstate the ambition of Raas, inserting a state-of-the-art boutique hotel into the labyrinth of old Jodhpur. Electric supply, solar power, plasma TVs, power plumbing and wi-fi, *massage tables for the spa* – all have been trundled by bullock cart through the lanes. Ninety staff have been vetted and hired from all over India to service the 39-room hotel. Fresh fish and prawns are flown in each day from Calcutta. Every red sandstone wall, every pebblewash, terrazzo panel is the product of hundreds of hours of local craftsmen. 'I'd be very happy if people who stay here don't perceive luxury from just a big bed and a big bathtub, but the luxury of the handcrafted work done especially for this place,' says Nikilendra.

The result is three-parts Rajasthani to one-part Los Angeles, with a twist of Aman in the vibe and something Brutalist too in the hard-nosed sandstone façades. Neem trees, ingeniously preserved during renovations, shade the courtyards; kites and fruit bats flit and hover far overhead. After an unlucky pigeon flew into the breakfast pavilion one morning and was cut to shreds by an overhead fan, one of the hotel's first guests, William Astor – David Cameron's stepfather-in-law – sent two large plastic owls to sit above the bar to scare them off. The writer Willie Dalrymple and his artist wife, Olivia, were other early guests tucking into the breakfast speciality, Raas Eggs Benedict.

Raas is acquiring a fleet of customised, chicly painted and cushioned hotel auto-rickshaws to ferry guests around town to the best markets in Rajasthan. Jeeps are on standby to take you up to the fort, the tombs and desert cenotaphs that surround Jodhpur. Alternatively, you can chill by the pool at this, Rajasthan's hippest new hangout. All day, Nikhilendra Singh and Nick Allan's iPod playlists echo poolside, competing with the muezzin call from an adjacent mosque. Joan Baez, Lou Reed, Elvis Costello and Pavarotti played constantly while I was there, drifting upwards towards the impregnable fort. □ *India specialists Cazenove + Loyd (tel: 020 7384 2332; cazloyd.com) can organise three nights staying at Raas, with breakfast and three nights at nearby Mihir Garh on a full-board basis, from £1,600 a person, including transfers and flights with Jet Airways.*



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Top, Mehrangarh Fort from the hotel. Above, the view from a Raas Haveli bedroom balcony. Right, a small suite at the hotel

