Riding Marwari horses through Rajasthan

India Horse Riding Tour 17–26 February 2013: Riding and travelling like the Maharajas Mewar Trail – Experience India from a different perspective, through the prism of the Marwari horses' ears

India is loud, garish, colourful, chaotic and always good for a surprise. India is, above all, its people – beaming smiles, children's eyes shining. India is life and vitality, turbulent, mad…India is all about exotic impressions that come at you from every direction: colourful, fluttering saris, emerald-green wheat fields, vibrant markets, barking dogs, laughing and shouting children, the loud honking of cars and motorbikes whizzing past, sacred cows everywhere, joggers on the motorway – there's nothing you won't find in India! In India, everything is simply different – and it takes a little time, a great deal of openness and a calm disposition to get used to it. But a little patience is richly rewarded with touching encounters and lasting memories.

Our arrival in Udaipur was promising: we were greeted by a steel-blue sky, palm trees and a gentle summer breeze – plus bright sunshine and the taxi driver who navigated us safely through the chaotic traffic to our hotel in the centre of this small Indian town of 500,000 inhabitants. The view from the hotel's roof terrace was breathtaking: the city's rooftops lay at our feet and the imposing City Palace complex, magnificently illuminated in the evening, towered above the sea of houses. Against this magnificent backdrop, we enjoyed our first dinner together and were treated by the chef to a colourful selection of Indian delicacies, right through to the inevitable, sugar-sweet dessert. Over the next few days on safari, the kitchen came up with a number of creations – mostly vegetarian – but always varied and tasty.

Our friendly group consisted of seven riders: Sandra and Leni, two German girls doing a voluntary social year in Delhi; Marianne and Ludwig, a German couple; Jai, a rider from Ireland who had already been travelling through India for over three months; Reni from Switzerland; and myself.

The next morning we set off on our 10-day adventure, starting with a few sightseeing stops along the way: we took a boat trip on Lake Jaisamand, which was created in the 17th century as the world's largest reservoir and still looks very imposing today with its massive white marble dam. We then visited the temple complex of Jagat, one of the best-preserved temple structures in northern India dating from the 10th century, with impressive sculptural decoration that looked very lifelike. Thanks to the comprehensive explanations from our tour guide Ute, both the boat trip and the temple visit were a real treat and the perfect introduction to India.
At the camp, we were met by the whole team and welcomed in the Indian way: with a bindi (a rather generously applied red, good-luck dot of colour on the forehead, which, as it turned out, was supposed to last three days) and a fragrant garland of flowers. The mobile tented camp consisted of four comfortable tents, in the same style once used by the Maharajas for their safaris and hunting trips. The tents, with their colourful Indian décor and comfortable beds, immediately gave us a feeling straight out of One Thousand and One Nights, especially Reni's and my sky-blue tent with its pretty starry sky. After settling into our tents, we fortified ourselves at the lunch buffet and discussed the planned tour and the allocation of horses.

All the horses were the famous Marwari breed, the only horse breed in the world capable of rotating their ears 180°, and whose ears have the characteristic sickle shape, so that the tips touch like kissing parrot beaks. This lends an additional exotic appearance to these elegant horses, which were originally bred by the proud Rajputs as warhorses and are characterised by a noble temperament, loyalty and resilience.

The German-Indian couple, Ute and Virendra Sing Shaktawat, are happy to share their fascination with Marwari horses, as well as with culturally rich India and the state of Rajasthan in particular, on their unique riding safaris.
In the saddle of Kirti, a pretty, dark-brown eight-year-old mare with a silky, glossy coat, I immediately felt at ease. Kirti – the name means 'glory' and reminded me of the glorious history of the Marwaris, which is closely interwoven with the history of Rajasthan – strode diligently forward whilst I took in the many colourful sights all around me. A dazzling green peacock flew majestically over our group of riders, which impressed me greatly, as I had never seen a peacock fly before. I took it as a good omen for our riding tour, as the peacock is the heraldic animal of Rajasthan! We also encountered a herd of camels, driven by a young boy, and respectfully made way – camels have right of way! Filled with enthusiasm from the experiences of our first day's ride, we sank into our beds that evening, equipped with hot water bottles, and dreamt of further adventures. To lull us to sleep, there was a drum concert – possibly from a temple ceremony or wedding in the neighbouring village – and the barking of dogs searching for something to eat near our camp.

The next morning came a bit too early for my liking, as I was still feeling the effects of jet lag with a 4.5-hour time difference, but after a fresh cup of chai and scrambled eggs with toast, I too was ready for the day in the saddle. The five-hour ride took us through rural Rajasthan, past emerald-green wheat fields where the colourful splashes of the women in their magnificent saris shone like jewels, and palm trees swaying gently in the wind. This was followed by bone-dry earth, before another small patch of green showed what the soil is capable of yielding with a little irrigation. India is above all a land of contrasts, something we were to experience in many ways over the following ten days.
In the numerous small villages through which our ride took us, we were always THE attraction! Children came running in groups, shouting “Dada” loudly, which means “Hello”, laughing and waving, followed by their mothers, who bowed politely with “Namaste”, the customary Indian greeting, or by the whole family, who all wanted to marvel at the exotic horsemen, for strangers or even tourists rarely stray into this area… All the better for us, as it gave us the unique chance to experience India authentically from a completely different, non-touristy perspective.
It even happened on rare occasions that small children were startled or even cried at the sight of us – having never seen a horse before! Instead, we encountered all the more sacred cows and awe-inspiring water buffaloes at every turn, as well as numerous colourful goats that even curiously surrounded us during lunch, sheep, pigs and much more.
Indian rural life was a kind of journey back in time for us: everything that we can now only marvel at in museums, such as wooden ox-drawn carts, flails or hand sickles, is still in daily use in India. Most of the work is still done by hand today, at least in the many small fields in the area, each managed by a single family, which we rode through during the first few days.
Weeds are pulled by hand, the grain harvested with a sickle and neatly arranged in sheaves. You often see whole families in the fields: the young women at work and the older women looking after the children in the shade; there was even a grandfather there rocking his grandson on a swing. Even though life in the countryside is hard and laborious, we also witnessed a great deal of contentment and joie de vivre among the people – something that is often missing in our hectic but comfortable everyday lives and which gave me pause for thought.
In the afternoon, a surprise awaited us: we drove to Bambora Karni Fort, a mighty castle complex that has since been transformed into a beautiful 4-star castle hotel, and were able to enjoy a pleasant dip in the stunning pool, lined with four water-spouting marble elephants, against a picturesque backdrop. Over the following days, there were repeated surprises and extra activities organised for us in the evenings, such as a ride through the village in an ox cart – a completely new perspective for us – or the performance by musicians and dancers around the campfire, who put on an impressive show.

The ‘show’ that nature had in store for us was also impressive, for example on the second evening, when the camp was set up by a large lake populated by countless waterbirds, ranging from tiny little grebes, ducks and herons to the mighty sarus cranes, which can grow up to 1.70 m tall – and thus taller than me – and live for over 40 years. The stars of the animal ensemble, however, were undoubtedly the pink flamingos, wading elegantly through the shallow

waters. When the flock then rose into the sky and drifted over our Maharaja Camp like a pink cloud, I felt as though I were in the middle of a fairy tale from One Thousand and One Nights. The whole scene was crowned by a golden-red sunset over the palm-fringed lake – almost too kitsch to be true…
And as if all these exotic sights weren't enough, two huge shadows suddenly flew over us at dusk – according to Ute, these were harmless fruit bats, which feed exclusively on fruit.
To me, these silently gliding, bat-like creatures were more reminiscent of pterosaurs from prehistoric times!

But the flora and fauna that surrounded us daily on our ride also provided plenty of variety: Emerald-green parrots fluttering past us, steel-blue iridescent kingfishers lying motionless in the branches by the lakeshore, waiting for prey, mighty nilgai antelopes – the largest antelopes in India, also known as 'blue cows' – eyeing us warily, chipmunks dashing away with their tails raised, and mongooses scuttling off at a run. Added to this were the bright orange-flowering flamboyant trees and the delicate blossoms of the mango trees, gleaming white poppy fields for the strictly limited opium harvest, lush vegetable gardens with aubergines, tomatoes, chillies and much more, cotton and mustard fields, bright bougainvillea, pink oleander and purple hibiscus by the roadside – our winter-weary eyes greedily soaked up all those magnificent summer colours!
The landscape, too, kept changing its face: from the barren, rocky, hilly foothills of the Aravalli Mountains, which our sure-footed horses climbed with ease, through the fertile Malwa Plain with its vast fields, to sandy, savannah-like terrain reminiscent of Africa, offering space for the odd gallop or two. One day, the ride also took us into a national park,

to Sita-Mata, which is home to leopards, plenty of gazelles and antelopes, amongst other animals. We didn't spot any of the shy animals, but we did see plenty of Hanuman langurs, who were only too happy to tuck into the leftovers from our picnic lunch and promptly took over our jeep.On the way, we kept coming across people; hardly a spot in India is truly deserted. Even on dirt tracks, we kept seeing motorbikes coming towards us – typically Indian, usually carrying at least four people, all without helmets but with flowing saris, and the driver still on the phone – as well as tractors, more colourfully decorated than any Christmas tree, with glittering tinsel, flower garlands, bells, bows, ribbons and pom-poms, which could have rivalled any 'Love Mobil' from Zurich's Street Parade in terms of noise (the loud Hindi techno music boomed across the fields from a distance), and cyclists.

Once, an old man in a red turban approached us on his rickety bicycle – as we rode past him, he dismounted, clasped his hands, bowed to us and wished us Namaste. But also the small children by the roadside, the girl who was surely only four years old, holding her little sister in her arms and waving to us with beaming eyes, the grandfather lying on a bed in the shade in front of the house with his two grandchildren and playing with them, naked children being washed by their mothers at the village well's pump, covered in soapy suds, women carrying water jugs or bundles of green fodder on their heads, the boy balancing his little sister on the front of his bike and following us for quite a distance… It was precisely these encounters and little moments that made this journey so special for me, quite apart from the overwhelming cultural and religious heritage of this impressive country.

We were granted a small glimpse of this too, even though it is hardly possible to grasp the complex world of the millions of Hindu gods in such a short time. Yet on our journey we repeatedly encountered some of the principal deities, such as the elephant-headed Ganesha, the most popular Hindu god and bringer of good fortune, or Krishna, Shiva, Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, or the famous monkey god Hanuman, in a wide variety of forms: in temples, as roadside shrines, or even as miniature sculptures on our taxi driver's dashboard. For us Europeans, the lived religiosity and the firm place of faith in everyday life in India are often unfamiliar.
I was particularly struck by a small scene one morning in the city by the roadside, where a woman gave a cow something to eat and bowed briefly before her before moving on.

On the penultimate day of riding, I changed horses, as Kirti had to be taken back to the ranch early due to swelling in the girth area, which fortunately healed quickly. I was given Kajal, a pretty grey mare and a real lifesaver! As a true Indian Marwari horse, she was completely unflappable – the ride through the bustling little town of Barisadri, across the crowded market square and right through the chaotic, noisy Indian traffic didn't make her bat an eyelid! Not even a maddened sacred cow, which came charging towards me from an alleyway, chased by a barking dog, and raced past my horse at close quarters, could rattle her, for which I was truly grateful!

Our ride ended at a camp on the banks of a small pond, where a very special atmosphere prevailed in the evening by the campfire under the full moon…
The next day, our farewell was made all the sweeter by a sightseeing tour: we visited Chittorgarh, one of India's most beautiful and famous forts. The city, perched on a massive rocky plateau behind mighty walls, covers over 13 square kilometres and, in addition to numerous palaces, over 120 temples and shrines, is also home to numerous myths and legends, including that of the beautiful Padmini, wife of Rana Ratan Singh, who was coveted by the enemy sultan. To spare the city, Padmini granted him a glimpse of her face, which was reflected in the water outside her palace window and which the Sultan in turn beheld in a mirror.
Nevertheless, the city was conquered and the men sacrificed themselves in battle, whilst the proud Rajput women followed Padmini to their deaths in the flames to escape enslavement by the Muslim conquerors.
In the evening, we returned to the starting point of our Mewar Trail, the hotel in Udaipur, where we were able to reflect once more on the many experiences of the past nine days over a farewell dinner together. The next day, sadly, it was time to say goodbye. Some guests had booked extra nights in Udaipur, and fortunately Renate and I still had a few days of touring India ahead of us. So we were able to spend the whole day exploring Udaipur and its huge City Palace, enjoying a boat trip on the lake and watching the ghats, where the women were washing clothes, pass by.

Our Indian adventure ended in Agra with a visit to the Taj Mahal at sunrise, before we flew back from Delhi to Zurich in the evening, back to the grey, never-ending winter, yet with our suitcases full of Indian souvenirs and, above all, our hearts brimming with Indian joie de vivre, colours and sunshine. Namaste and see you soon – India, we'll be back, perhaps for the horse-riding tour to Pushkar.

Julia Kretschmer

Information on the horse riding tour at http://www.equitour.com/inm010.htm