

The Rajasthan Encounter



The Rajasthan Encounter took place directly after The International Forum in India, with 11 participants who were interested in seeing a different side of India than they had previously. Together, we traveled for a week through Jaipur, Udaipur, Ranakpur, Rohet, Manvar, and Jodhpur. Rajasthan's rich history of princely states and maharajas make it a particularly colorful destination for foreigners and Indians. Tourism is one of its main industries today.

Influenced greatly by its unique history, Rajasthan is a reminder of the tremendous wealth and tradition of the Maharajas who developed the kingdoms and traditions of this state. An experience in Rajasthan reminds us at the same time of the many influences that came from outside India from the North and West, that were integrated over time to fashion what is Indian society today.

Rajasthan's history is a particularly bloody one. The Rajput warrior clans that emerged during the 6th and 7th centuries existed in a continuous state of aggression with each other and with outside invaders. From their hilltop strongholds they resisted many incursions over the centuries. As such what emerged as Rajputana (present day Rajasthan) was a blend of Aryans, Afghans, Turks, Persians and others who settled there during five thousand years. Efforts to introduce Buddhism did not take hold. The Mughal Emperors subdued them, but only for a time. Rajputs were considered as Kshatriya (warrior class) whose lineage is traced to the sun, moon and fire. Today, that old warlike behavior of the Rajput kings is manifested in the bright colors, folklore, music and dance of the people of Rajasthan.



In Jaipur, the participants visited the Anokhi Museum of Handprinting and met with curator Emma Ronald. Anokhi is a clothing and textiles company that is working to revive the traditional craftsmanship of block printing in India while using traditional methods, safe dyes, and contemporary styles. In addition to being very popular with India's young fashion conscious consumers, Anokhi also exports to the international market with styles that are a mixture of Western and Indian influences. Their work over the years has helped to revive and sustain the craftsmanship and tradition of this important part of Rajasthan culture and provides an important source of employment and livelihood to many craftsmen in Rajasthan (www.anokhi.com).



In Udaipur participants engaged in the work of "Wells for India," a UK-based charity which focuses on the provision of sufficient clean water for drinking, cooking, washing, animals and crops in village communities in some of the poorest areas of the state. Priorities of projects in these communities are set by the villagers themselves with their active involvement and contribution so that they are responsible for the projects and are able to sustain them. We traveled with Wells for India to one of the villages that they are working with, and spent the day meeting the members of the community, discussing the issues they face, visiting their school, and spending time with the people (www.wellsforindia.org).

Rajasthan is home to many tribal groups. In Rohet, we visited with a Bishnoi family in their village. After traveling to the village by jeeps, we were warmly welcomed into the village to learn about the traditions and culture of the Bishnoi people. The Bishnois have been protectors of nature for five centuries and are arguably the world's first ecologists, responsible for the survival of such species as the black-buck antelope.

In Jodhpur we met with Roberto and Cathy Nieddu, owners of VJ Home (www.vjhome.com), who are involved in design and manufacturing of home furnishings ranging from wood furniture and decorative iron accessories to textiles and hardware. Their interest in Indian architecture and design has involved them in restoration and design projects. Spending time with Roberto and Cathy in their workshop and home also gave us an opportunity to learn from their own perspective about living as a foreigner in India.

