

BATTLE ROYALE

Two states are vying for a piece of the heritage pie. The Rajasthan royals are old hands in the business, but they're looking for more. In Madhya Pradesh, the rajas are now beginning to get their act together. Will we have a winner?

MANEK CHOWK, UDAIPUR



KAILASH TAAK

RATLAM DISTRICT MADHYA PRADESH



THROUGH THE ARCH A view of the Badi Pol entrance to the Udaipur City Palace from Aashka, the high-end boutique selling lifestyle products run by the princess Bhargavi Kumari Mewar

TO THE MAHAL BORN: Raghendra Singh and his wife Shivika on their Amla property. Singh has converted part of his family's ancestral palace into a heritage property with 11 rooms. On which they received 300 visitors in the last year

Moolah and the makeover

Hotels are history. In Rajasthan the royals are now pushing their art, photography and music

Gargi Gupta
Udaipur

THE BHAGWAT Prakash Mahal in the Zenana Mahal is a relatively modern addition to the 16th century Udaipur City Palace. It was built in 1939 as the special quarters of the bride of the then heir apparent, Bhagwat Singh. Today the rooms, meticulously renovated to preserve their quaint Art Deco styling, form the kernel of a specialised gallery showcasing the palace's rare collection of photographs.

This gallery, which opened on March 1, is the first step in a major conservation plan for the palace, helped along by \$150,000 from the Getty Foundation, which envisages adding a children's play area, among other conveniences, for the lakhs who visit Udaipur every year.

This is not the only evidence of change. Sometime last year, the present 'custodian' of the Mewar dynasty Arvind Singh Mewar had 'Eternal Mewar' — the umbrella identity he has thought up to connect all his diverse activities from hotels, to museums, library and music room, registered as a trademark. "It's our brand, says Mewar, using the jargon of the corporate leader that he is, considering that his HRH Group of Hotels manages a chain of 10 properties across Rajasthan.

The 'M' of the Eternal Mewar brand, artistically interpreted, now adorns doorstoppers, mirrors, trays, jugs and so on at Aashka, the high-end boutique that Mewar's daughter runs inside the palace.

Royal Rajasthan is changing with the times, reinventing itself as it did once before in the 1970s, after the abolition of privy purses, when it turned over its assets to trusts to prevent the government from



taking over and turned its palaces into high-end hotels. This phenomenon, which began with Udaipur's Lake Palace Hotel and Jodhpur's Umaid Bhavan Palace Hotel, has become so widespread now that there are as many as 178 heritage hotels in Rajasthan today. Clearly, the erstwhile rajas have proved very good at what Mewar calls "heritage as enterprise".

But if the earlier attempts at reinvention looked at the physical heritage — the palaces and other treasures — the more recent attempts have focused on consolidation and making the most of the 'immaterial' heritage — art, photography, architecture, even music.

The Bhagwat Prakash Photo Gallery is an example of this, but there's a similar gallery which opened recently at the Sadul Museum in Lallgarh Palace, Bikaner. "Going back to the 1840s, the photographs in our collection is perhaps the best pictorial record of the princely states," says Rajyashree Kumari Bikaner, chairperson of the Maharaja Ganga Singhji Trust which manages the museum. "We have been collecting and cataloguing these for years, but now we decided to put it in one place," says the princess who recently penned a coffee-table book on the architecture and history of the palace, inspired by Earl Spencer's *Althorp: the Story of an English*



GOLDEN ARCHIVES Rajyashree Kumari Bikaner points out photographs that date back to 1840

THE 'M' OF ETERNAL MEWAR, THE BRAND IDENTITY RECENTLY REGISTERED BY THE UDAIPUR PALACE TRUST, NOW ADORNS DOORSTOPPERS, MIRRORS, TRAYS AND JUGS AT AASHKA, THE HIGH-END BOUTIQUE THAT ARVIND SINGH MEWAR'S DAUGHTER RUNS INSIDE THE PALACE

House. A new annex to the museum, constructed at a cost of Rs 35 lakh, is almost ready and due to open in September. "It will have better preservation and display facilities for the manuscripts and artefacts," says Dalip Singh, coordinator, "and also improved facilities for scholars, restaurants and a museum shop."

But by far the most concerted efforts in this regard have been those initiated by Gaj Singh II, the maharajah of Jodhpur: A pioneer in the field of conservation efforts in India, the maharajah's magnificent home, Umaid Bhavan, was the subject of a handsomely produced and imaginatively laid-out tome. "Not even Buckingham Palace...has inspired so sumptuous a book," the blurb rightly claims. Last year, his Mehrangarh Museum Trust also started Sufi Darbar, the music festival at the Nagaur fort, a UNESCO heritage site, with the objective of attracting tourists and developing it as a "vital link in the desert triangle of Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur".

This year, Jodhpur's heritage outreach has notched a major high-point — a major exhibition of the distinctive miniature paintings of Jodhpur that is now showing at the Seattle Art Museum and will travel to the British Museum in the summer before finally showing in Delhi. Fifty-six works from Jodhpur have been loaned for the exhibition which prides itself on being the first time it will be seen in the West. "We've designed a set of post-cards, book marks, CD boxes as merchandise for the museums to sell along with the show," says Amrita Singh of Muse India: Heritage Concepts, a firm that has been working with the maharajah on the exhibition and other projects. To add to the things on offer at the Mehrangarh Museum Shop itself, a Palace Collection has been started which sells prints and replicas of the royal artefacts.

As the Rajasthan royals know well, everyone wants a slice of royalty. gargi.gupta@hindustantimes.com

Rising from the ruins

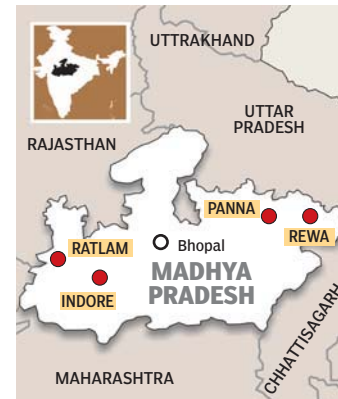
With enough royals of its own, Madhya Pradesh has woken up to the lucre in heritage tourism

Mini Pant Zachariah
Indore

RAJA SALIWAHAN Jamnia gives new meaning to single-hand driving as he manoeuvres his black Scorpio through recently harvested fields. En route from Mhow to Jamnia Fort, his ancestral abode, he waves out to villagers, greeting everyone with Jai Onkashwar, the name of his family's ruling deity.

Princely states may be no more, but Jamnia is still addressed as *raja* and his wife Riteshwari as *rani saheb*. Dressed in olive green corduroy trousers and a mauve T-shirt, this 44-year-old 'king' of a state that ruled over 86 villages is not averse to riding a tractor to plough the 200 acres of land that is now the family's main source of income. His dream is to transform the eight-room Jamnia Fort and its adjoining ruins into a heritage hotel.

Ask him why a tourist would come to Jamnia and Jamnia points to Rani Ropmati ka Mahal in Mandu, 14 kms away, the nearby lake and Sholay-like landscape around. "We'll offer a horse safari to Mandu, water sports, fishing and an experience



that's much more exciting than what Rajasthan offers." His wife, who heads an NGO for tribals in the area, adds, "One can study the tribal culture in this land of the Bhil tribals."

A couple of hundred kilometres away, at Amla in Ratlam district, Kunwar Raghendra Singh has already converted part of his family's ancestral palace into an 11-room heritage property. Brushing aside teething troubles like lack of power, water and approach roads, Singh says he got some 300 visitors to his property last year. A hundred kilometres from Madhya Pradesh's capital Bhopal, Maharaja Bhanu Prakash Singh of Narsinghar is getting ready to sign off the 300-odd room fort built in 1685 to a hospitality company, which will convert it into a palace hotel.

The Scindias and Holkars are the well-known royal families of Madhya Pradesh, but few know that the state is home to over 725 palaces, forts and *garhis* (small forts).

These lesser-known royalties now smell an opportunity in heritage tourism, a business that is thriving in adjoining Rajasthan. The Madhya Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation, which turned profit-making in 2004-05 after 25 years in the red, is keen to help. "Forts and palaces are enduringly fascinating. Everyone wants to experience the world of the rajas, even if for a

day. There is vast potential for heritage tourism in Madhya Pradesh," says Ashwani Lohani, MPPTDC managing director.

The MPPTDC too is developing two such properties it owns — the Laxmipur Palace in Panna spread over 13 hectares and Govindgarh Fort that once belonged to Maharaja Martand Singh of Rewa.

So why has MP lagged behind in wooing tourists to heritage sites? Lack of infrastructure, connectivity and awareness are the major reasons for this. Unlike in Rajasthan, the rulers in Madhya Pradesh, barring a couple, were not rich. As a result, when privy purses were abolished, they sold off their lands and moved to the cities where they now live as commoners.

Like Maharaja Vikram Singh of Sailana near Ratlam who moved to Pune and is busy popularising the Sailana cuisine across the world. His father Digvijay Singh of Sailana was a connoisseur who compiled a book on Sailana cuisine, apart from developing the first cactus garden in India in Sailana around 55 years ago.

Vikram Singh admits that expecting tourists to go to Sailana just to experience a palace is foolhardy. But he has plans for the royal property. "It is to do with culinary tourism, if you may call it that. Tourists can experience the ambience while they learn to cook some of the Sailana dishes. Such holidays work in Italy and Australia. Given the craze for Indian cuisine, it should work here too," he says.

Better road, rail and air links are improving matters somewhat. The four-lane highway connecting Madhya Pradesh to most major cities is changing the way tourism is being viewed in the state. The Neemuch-Mhow national highway and the Bhopal-Mandsaur state highway, due to be completed in a year, will offer better connectivity to Rajasthan as well as places like Ujjain, Mandu, Maheshwar and Onkashwar.

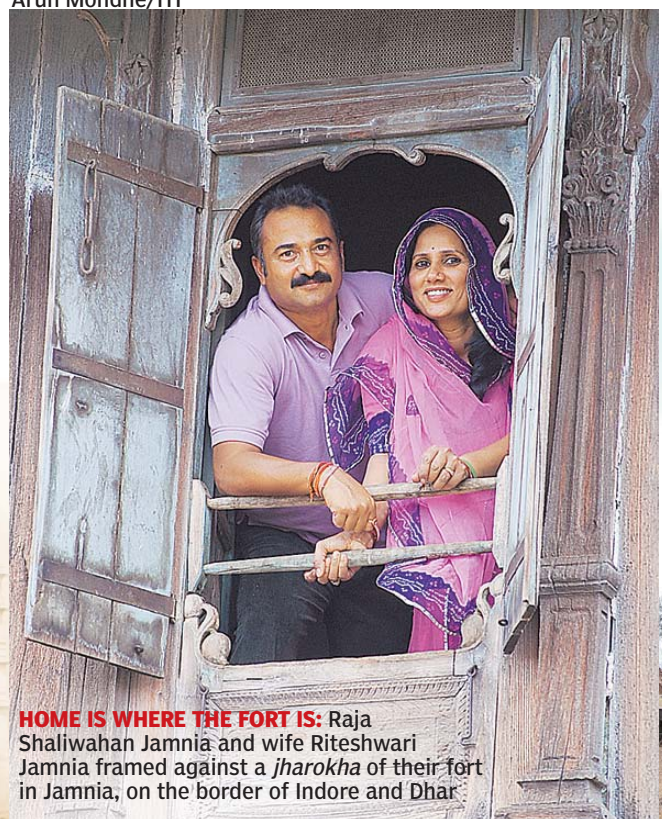
Of the 725 royal properties in Madhya Pradesh, at least 225 are in the private sector. But despite the potential, developing them is proving difficult because often there is no clear title. According to MPPTDC's Shrivastav, only 39 have a clear title. The owners do not have the money to develop these properties on their own and the developers insist on outright purchase, which is not acceptable to the owners.

"The royal families are like tigers: nearly extinct. Our forts and palaces are our only identity. We should not sell them to people who have no idea what our lifestyle was like," says Kunwar Giri Ratan Singh of Narsinghar.

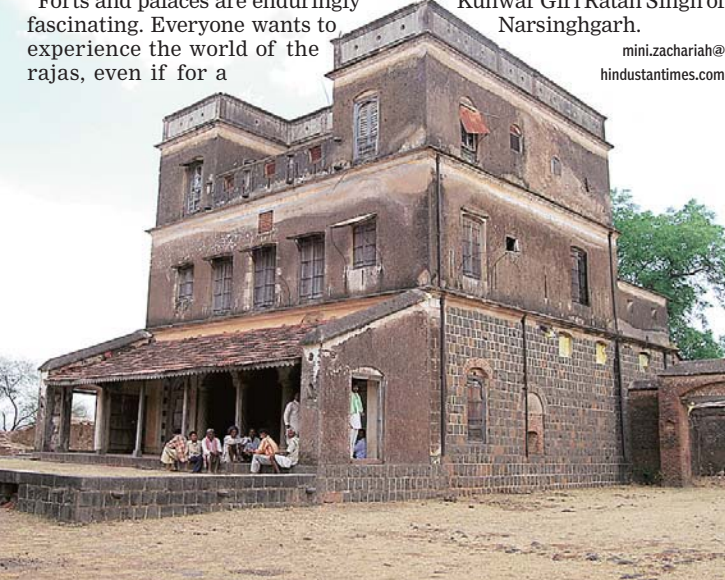
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Arun Mondhe/HT



HOME IS WHERE THE FORT IS: Raja Shaliwahan Jamnia and his wife Riteshwari Jamnia framed against a *jharokha* of their fort in Jamnia, on the border of Indore and Dhar



BLUE BOOK Books on Palaces have hit the market with a vengeance

