



ACCORDING TO A SURVEY,
50% WOMEN PICK EUROPE
AS THEIR IDEAL SOLO TRAVEL
DESTINATION, WHILE 33%
PREFER THE UNITED STATES

Bikaner: Glowing oasis in a deadly desert

In the first look, Bikaner seems to be a dusty desert town but as one explores its bylanes, a glorious saga of history begins to unfold, writes SOMEN SENGUPTA

Bikaner teaches us a very important lesson — you can be easily misled if you don't study history carefully. Most people think Rajasthan derives its name from its royal families, which took up arms against the Mughals for the sake of their dignity and independence, but that is only the partial truth.

There were many royal families in Rajasthan that instead of going to war with Mughals preferred to enter a diplomatic treaty for the sake of protecting their land and religion. Call it a political gamble or helpless submission, this made a huge impact on the land, especially in those parts where water and vegetation were scarce and life was not easy.

Marwar means the land of death. The vast and deadly desert of Thar, that makes survival almost impossible for humans and animals, justifies its name. Still for many centuries, several kingdoms mushroomed all over Marwar to rule the land and helped shape the rich culture and heritage. It groomed towns with elegant forts and amazing temples.

One such city is Bikaner that glows like a gem in the hot desert bed of Thar. The royal family of Bikaner cooperated with the Mughals and then with the British for peaceful survival and that ensured a colossal expansion of its wealth. In the first look, Bikaner seems a dusty desert town but as one explores its bylanes, a glorious saga of history begins to unfold. The unimaginable victory of a warrior race against all political and natural odds comes alive.

Legend has it that the mystical river Saraswati once flowed through the region. In *Rampona*, this place was referred as Karu jungle. Earliest references of history establish the fact that in 1488, Bika Rao — the 14th son of Rao Jodha of Rathore clan of Jodhpur — founded the city. He got this land from Nehara Jat ruler, who agreed to part with this land on the condition that their name will be added to the name of the city. Thus, with Bika another word Nehera or Nera was added to make it Bikaner. That is how a great city was named and a new kingdom under a new dynasty emerged in the middle of an oasis.

The first fort of Bika built in 1478 is in ruins, while the new fort known as Kendramani or Junagarh Fort built by the sixth Bika ruler, Rai Singh, is now the biggest archaeological attraction here.

Built with red and pink sandstone



Photo: Somen Sengupta

between 1587 and 1593, Junagarh Fort kept adding new structures — as many as 37 in the next 300 years — shaping itself as one of the best military garrison and a depot of artistic excellence of medieval Indian history. The square-shaped walled fort is encircled with a 40-ft-high boundary wall and it once had a 30-ft-deep moat around it for protection.

There are several gates to enter Junagarh Fort. The main gate built in 1593 is known as Surajpole, which is made of yellow sandstone. Other gates, which are equally massive and richly decorated, are Karan, Daulat, Chad and Fateh. At the Daulat gate, 41 hand prints of different women are carved onto the wall. The wives of various Bikaner kings committed *sati* after their husbands died.

Every pavilion inside the fort contains splendid stone carving and architecture influenced by the Indo-Islamic. Almost every ruler who lived in this fort added a new structure with unique architecture. The finest among them is Chandra Mahal, which has gold plated walls and tiled floor. Anup Mahal, perhaps the grandest of all, has gold plated wall paintings in the audience hall and excellent Italian marble floor.

The latest palace is Ganga Mahal built between 1873 and 1943; it houses a museum exhibiting a plethora of royal artifacts along with a bomber aircraft used in the First World War.

Lalgarh Palace, the most modern construction by the Bikaner royal family, is a mindblowing experience. Considered as one of the last iconic palaces in Asia after the first great war, it was designed by British architect Sir Samuel Swinton Jacob and built during 1902 and 1926. Initiated by Maharaja Ganga Singh, the palace is a fine blend of Mughal Rajput and European architecture.

Bikaner's royal family was so close to the British rulers that the king of Bikaner, Sir Ganga Singh, was given the honour to sign the treaty of Versailles in 1919 on behalf of India. Many British royals enjoyed the hospitality of this palace, including Lord Curzon, King George V, Queen Mary, Lord Harding and Lord Irwin.

Though standing in a desert, this palace was equipped with all luxuries for its guests. A lot of money was spent to build and maintain the five wings, which were decorated with artifacts collected from all over the world. The palace houses innumerable royal bedrooms, drawing rooms, smoking room, post-dinner playroom, games room, indoor swimming pool, lounges, pavilions, gardens and a grand dining hall. Now partly converted into a hotel, the palace houses a museum named Sharudil, which exhibits rare photographs and royal articles.

The magic of the desert city does not

TRAVEL LOGISTICS

- Bikaner is 321 km from Jaipur and 245 km from Jodhpur
- It is well connected by trains and buses from all major cities
- No leather items are allowed inside the Jain temple
- Being a desert city, it is very hot in summer and very cold in winter
- There are all kinds of hotels — Rajasthan tourism has very good staying arrangements
- Autos and five-seaters are best to travel around the city
- Trained guides are available at every tourist spot
- Both Junagarh Fort and Lalgarh Palace have been partly converted into hotels, so tourists are not allowed there
- Photography is allowed in all major places

end here. One must visit the unique temple popularly known as Ghee Temple. Formally known as Bhandreshwar Jain Temple, it was built by a wealthy businessman named Bhandasa Oswal from 1468 to 1514. Legend has it that while building this temple, 40,000 kg ghee was used instead of mortar! Till now one can smell ghee, and see it seeping out of the walls on a hot day. Dedicated to the fifth Jain Tirthankar Sumatinath, the temple is built in North Indian Naggar style, and the porcelain tiles were imported from England. The three-storied temple offers a breathtaking view of the desert city.

Apart from these, the royal graveyard named Devikund Sagar is a must see in Bikaner. More than 100 members of the royal families have been cremated here. Among them Rao Kalyam Mai tomb is the oldest, but the finest belongs to Raja Surath Singh.

Ganga Golden Museum, which is close to the fort, houses a rich collection from the times of the Guptas and Mughals. The iconic Saraswati statue made of white stone is a must see. Around 10 km from the city is the National Research Centre on Camel, a camel breeding farm-cum-amusement centre.

A visit to Bikaner will not be complete if the famous *bhujia* is not relished. All over the city, snack shops sell various kinds of mouthwatering *bhujias* and each one of them has a distinctive taste.



SOLO SOJOURNS

India's first online solo traveller community conducted a survey with India's top 100 solo travellers to understand their quest for exploring the world outside the comfort zone, says SHEFALI WALIA

In a country like India which is enrooted with centuries' long traditions and culture, speaking about something fervent and exhilarating like solo travelling can be perceived as a threat to the customs and values of the nation. But over the past few years, our society has been generating numerous solo travellers, both men and women, who exhibit a newfound passion for exploring the world outside their comfort zone, all by themselves.

WeTravelSolo, India's first online solo traveller community is on a platform that organises special interest tours to quench the thirst of a perfect solo trip. It recently conducted a survey with India's top 100 solo travellers to understand their personal accounts.

Asking about "when and where was their first solo trip", 31 per cent named foreign locations like Europe and East Asia as their first solo trip destination. 29 per cent listed Indian mountain beauty, especially in Himachal Pradesh, as their first solo trip expedition, while 27 per cent preferred to visit coastal beaches of South India. The remaining 13 per cent chose to visit Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Northeastern cities.

When enquired about what made them travel solo, a whopping 25 per cent attributed it to self-discovery and travel for recreational purposes or lack of company, 35 per cent said a simple getaway or a sabbatical from a mundane job or simply to feed their curiosity, while 21 per cent just wanted to break free of self-imposed shackles and meet like-minded people.

Among the top Indian and international destinations, solo travellers showed a higher preference for northern, southern and western India within the subcontinent. For South-East and Eastern Asia, neighbouring countries like Nepal,

Bhutan and Bangladesh were chosen as preferred locations, and Europe, US and western Asian countries for international travel. Some travellers confine themselves to exploring the remote pockets of India and country life alone.

When asked about their reaction to people asking questions like "what makes you want to travel solo?" or "*log kya kahenge*", the travellers seemed unperturbed and said they don't really pay attention! They supplemented the answer with a few tips to budding solo travellers: Travel light, befriend the locals for a better insight of the destination, stay alert, be armed with safety gear, travel with a zest for exploration, and relish every moment of the experience.

When asked about the challenges faced during journeys, 32 per cent solo travellers said that feeling lonely in terms of lack of support, homesickness, feeling alienated from co-travellers and the localities. Another 17 per cent were female solo travellers who felt insecure due to eve-teasing, ogling and suspicious behaviour. Then there were 21 per cent solo travellers who felt the budget pinch.

Other challenges included following culture codes, dealing with unpleasant eventualities, finding vegan food items, overcoming boredom etc. In times like these, solo travellers advise the aspiring ones to be highly circumspect by carrying the required safety gear, such as pepper spray, avoiding strange solitary lanes, conducting a thorough research about the destination and planning well, carrying phones, portable chargers and GPS to track locations and maintain communication with family back home, and the handiest tip by far is to keep one's equilibrium in inopportune times.

When asked about places they'd like to be stranded in,

about 17 per cent travellers preferred mountains (Himalayan ranges), followed by 10 per cent of them longing to be marooned on an island like Jeju Island and Golapogias Island. Among other places of interest was the countryside to revel in the bucolic beauty of the enthralling landscapes, countries like North Korea, Buenos Aires, Italy and intriguingly enough, haunted places.

WeTravelSolo endeavours to popularise a concept that's still taking its baby steps in a land where independence is at a premium given the vicissitudes of the changing times and hence, aims to know from its populace what it feels about solo expeditions.

Most of the respondents agreed that it's a great new way of forming interesting and meaningful connections with people who share your interests and shake off the threads of complacency that bind you and your experiences. While many approve of the concept as being solo travel-friendly, there are some who expressed their misgivings about the same. It certainly does purge you of your fears regarding travelling solo but packs difficulties within.

"Strangers are only strangers till you've met them," as put by one of the respondents. And how true! Finding life partners or life-time comrades is another gift that the practice offers; you never know who you might run into whose life becomes interlaced with yours.

Solo travel holds a much wider scope for exploring the places, cultures and communities better sans the interruption caused by companions. One does not merely travel but 'learn' on the go. Overall, the concept is thriving and thriving well and in times to come, it might just be a regular travel pattern. Who knows what tomorrow brings?

The writer is founder and chief traveller, WeTravelSolo