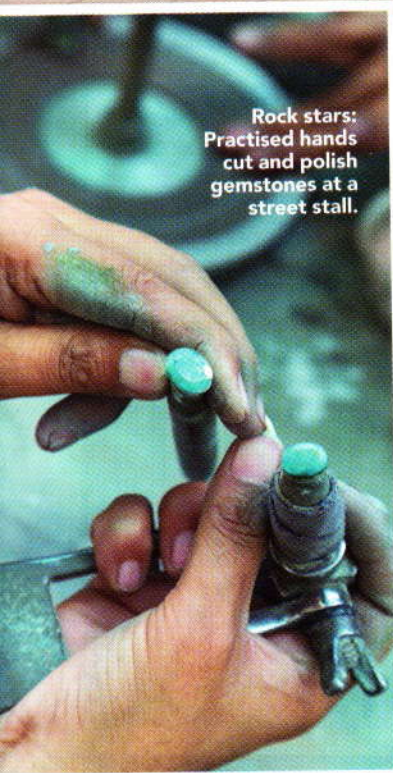


Destination  
FABULOUS!



# Palace in WOND



Rock stars: Practised hands cut and polish gemstones at a street stall.

I'm not sure what the Hindi word for extraordinary is but I'm looking at it: Hawa Mahal, the intricately carved, pink sandstone building modelled on honeycomb that is Jaipur's most distinctive landmark.

We're at the rump end of a nine-day tour which carves its way through Rajasthan, India's most colourful state. And although there have been plenty of jaw-dropping moments so far – including the Taj Mahal and Bengal tigers at a wildlife sanctuary – Jaipur certainly delivers when it comes to incredible sights.

Also known as the Palace of Winds, Hawa Mahal was built in 1799 for Maharajah Singh, and while we enjoy the spectacular views from its tiny windows, our guide tells us it wasn't much fun for the maharajah's wives

who were virtually imprisoned here and forced to view life from behind the intricate mesh screens.

Jaipur is known as the Pink City for good reason: pink is considered the colour of hospitality and in 1876, when Queen Victoria came to visit, the buildings were painted a dusky pink colour. Locals have kept up the tradition ever since.

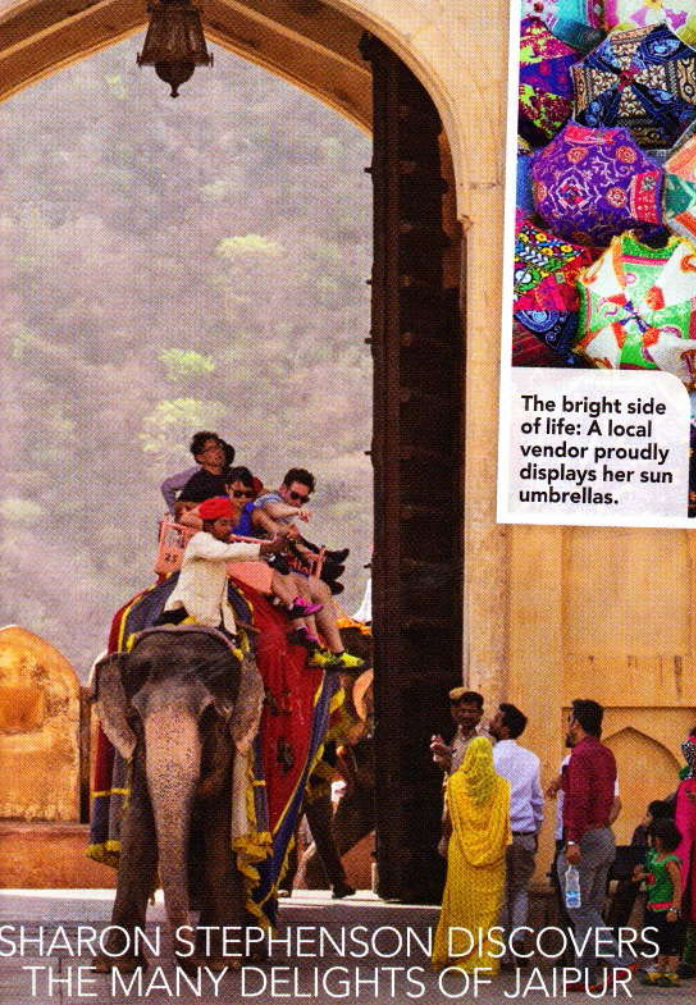
But pink is just one of many colours that greets us. Jaipur is famous for its vibrant hues and our eyeballs are given a workout by women in stunning orange, green and yellow saris.

We head 11km out of town to visit the Amber Fort. Perched high on a hillside, the sprawling honey-coloured sandstone building began life as the maharajah's summer palace.

There are several ways to scale the steep slope to the fort – hire an auto-rickshaw or taxi, walk (not recommended when the mercury hits 42, as it does when we visit) or hitch a ride on the back of an elephant.

Being an animal lover, I'm not keen on the latter, but our mahout (elephant wrangler) tells us the creatures are well looked after and only do five trips a day. So we climb on for the surprisingly comfortable trip up to the fort, which is divided into four sections, each with its own courtyard.

Inside, it's a riot of mosaic walls, mirrored ceilings and a chandelier that takes more than 100 people to clean it. The perfumed fountain was said to have been built for the maharajah's 12 wives and 365 concubines, and there are



SHARON STEPHENSON DISCOVERS THE MANY DELIGHTS OF JAIPUR

# ERLAND



The bright side of life: A local vendor proudly displays her sun umbrellas.



The incredible Hawa Mahal, which once housed the maharajah, his wives and many concubines, is admired daily by locals and tourists alike. The palace was painted a dusky pink (the colour of hospitality) in honour of Queen Victoria's 1876 visit.



ramps in the garden for the wives whose gowns were so heavy with jewels they had to be transported in wheelchairs. The best bit, though, is the view – across the lush gardens and lake to the mountains beyond.

**‘Our eyeballs are given a workout by women in stunning, orange, green and yellow saris’**

Many visitors are drawn to Jaipur for its precious and semi-precious stones. The main gemstone area is in the southeast of the city. If you're in the market for jewellery, make sure you buy from a registered gem dealer and don't forget the most important rule in India – to haggle!

For my money, which tends to be limited, the handicrafts of this region are more my scene. Textiles, paintings, pottery, carvings and elaborate carpets are just some of the wares on sale for a fraction of what you'd spend at home.

I buy a beautiful blue and white pashmina (about \$25) that's proved a hit back in New Zealand, as well as embroidered leather slippers (\$20 each) and two colourful wooden puppets made from old saris (\$40) that now have pride of place in my dining room.

After Agra and its stunning Taj Mahal, Jaipur is India's most visited city. It's easy to see why, and as I head back to New Delhi, my suitcase considerably heavier than when I arrived, I know I'll be back. ■

## Insider's guide to... Jaipur

**GETTING THERE:** Singapore Airlines has 21 flights a week from Auckland and Christchurch to Singapore. From there, it's a 5½-hour flight to New Delhi.

**HOW TO GET AROUND:** Adventure World makes navigating India easy with its nine-day Golden Triangle tour – a “taster” of northern India, which starts and ends in New Delhi. Plus, you get your own personal driver and can tailor the itinerary to suit yourself.

**MONEY TALKS:** Carry a good supply of lower-denomination currency (10, 20 and 50 rupees) as tipping is widely practised in India.

**SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE:** Although there are five regional dialects of Hindi spoken in Rajasthan, most people speak English. It's helpful to learn a few basic Hindi words, such as namaste (hello/goodbye), kri-pa-yaa (please) and thayn-kyoo (thank you).