

Showcase: Taj Lake Palace, Udaipur

RAJ REMINISCENCES

Vicki Williams travels to Udaipur to experience a one-of-a-kind royal incentive that is awaiting groups at the luxurious Taj Lake Palace



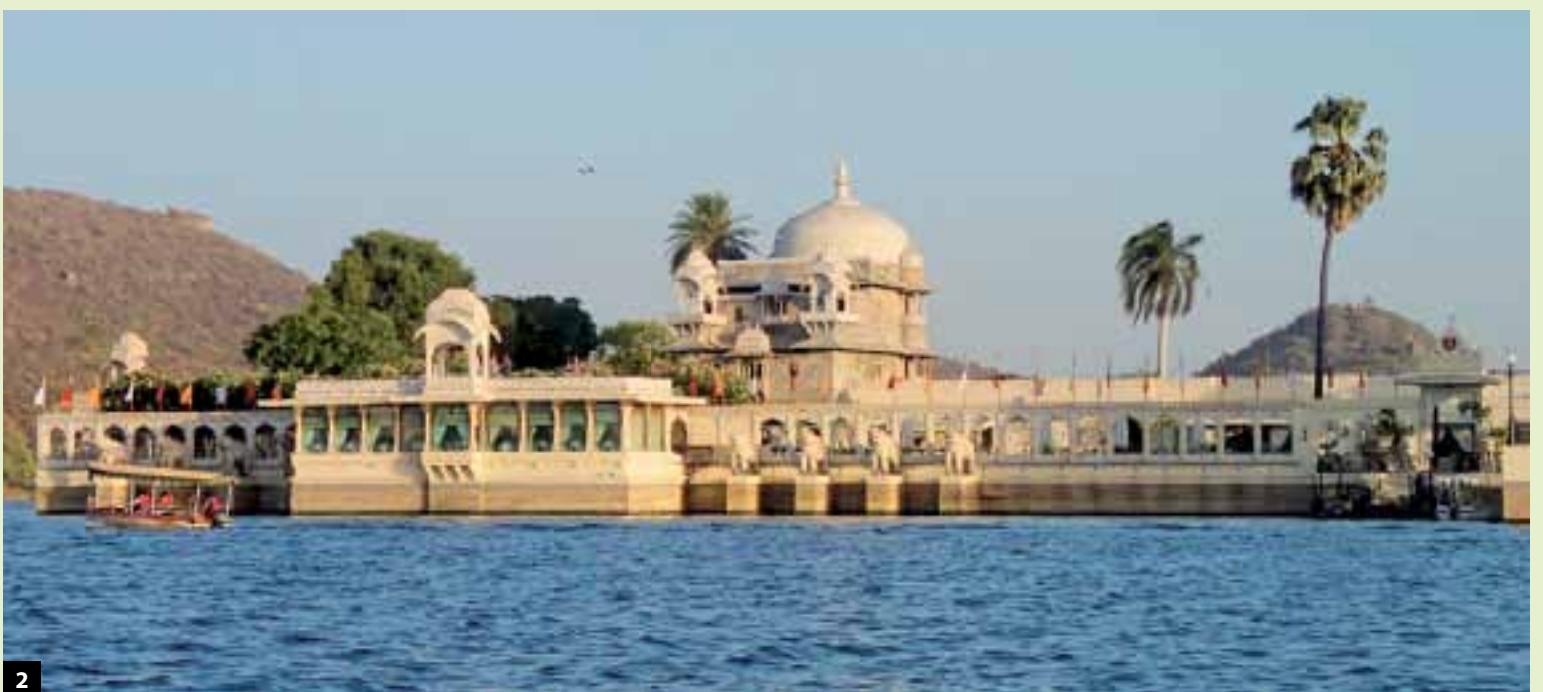
The City of Lakes, the Venice of the East, the White City... these monikers are all used to describe Udaipur in Rajasthan, western India. In the historic capital of the kingdom of Mewar, royal links continue to this day as the city remains the home to the current Maharaja, Sriji Arvind Singh Mewar, and his family. There are good reasons why Udaipur makes frequent appearances on global must-see-destination bucket lists: it is not only visually stunning, but culturally and historically rich as well. Additionally, while only a short flight from Mumbai and Delhi it is a universe away from the heat, hustle and bustle associated with those cities.

The most mesmerising feature of Udaipur is the white marble palace that sits in the middle of scenic Pichola Lake. Completed in 1746, it was once the royal family's summer palace, but has been operated by Taj Hotels Resorts & Palaces group as the five-star Taj Lake Palace hotel since 1971. The management philosophy, expertly delivered by staff, is that all guests are to be treated as the royalty once was. This means that small groups coming to the hotel for a post-meeting incentive can expect an truly unforgettable, regal experience and a glimpse into history.

The royal treatment begins from the airport pickup, when it is possible to be transferred in a 1940s Dodge or Chrysler, restored and plushly refurbished – part of a collection of vintage cars belonging to the Maharaja's family (they can also be used for sightseeing tours). Arriving at Pichola Lake, guests board a pristine wooden craft, reminiscent of Venice's gondolas, for the short boat ride to the hotel. Groups are welcomed warmly by staff in traditional dress and can include a shower of rose petals.

The hotel is spellbindingly beautiful. Original features are numerous, including the Lily Pond, made famous by the James Bond film *Octopussy*. It was here that festivals were once celebrated, whilst in the swimming pool the Maharani and her ladies frolicked. Flute music fills the air, played by a musician perched on the roof like a bird, and intricate mirror mosaics glisten with light.

To fully appreciate the hotel groups can take a private guided tour to learn more about its history; the tour ends with a glass of sparkling wine in the bar, which is where the king used to hold court meetings. This tour can be



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combined with a guided cruise around the lake that stops at the former pleasure palace, Jag Mandir, used for moonlight outings. It is now used for weddings and extravagant parties by India's glitterati, and is a perfect spot to take in the sunset.

Other incentive activities at the hotel include private dinners that will further immerse groups in the majestic atmosphere. You can dine around the Lily Pond, or on the Mewar Terrace, which affords sensational views of the old city, opting for a banquet of Rajasthan specialities or a multi-course continental dinner, with musicians playing traditional instruments softly in the background. For stressed post-meeting groups there are private yoga classes (for all levels) held on the Mewar Terrace, or a range of treatments in the Jiva Spa.

The hotel's general manager, Shyam Kaikini, says: "At Taj Lake Palace, our aim is to create a unique, personalised experience, and treasured lifelong memories for all guests. To quote famous hotelier César Ritz, never say no when a client asks for something, even if it is the moon."

1. The Palace is a true historical wonder
2. Former pleasure palace Jag Mandir
3. Cruises take place on the royal barge
4. Craftsmanship befitting the royals

DINING ON A ROYAL BARGE

An unforgettable group dining experience, for up to 14, is possible on the restored 150-year-old Gangaur, an antique, one-of-a-kind royal barge of the House of Mewar that featured extensively in *Octopussy*.

Lit only with candles, rowers in magnificent traditional dress steer the barge around the lake, under a canopy of stars. On board (or onshore), a sitarist and dance performance is followed by a sumptuous wine-paired dinner, prepared by chefs on a floating show kitchen.

Groups are encouraged to dress for the occasion and a fancy dress theme can be a fun option, for example a James Bond evening or Royal Attire. The boat can also be used for cocktail gatherings.

The hotel can arrange a variety of private, guided sightseeing tours for groups, one of the most popular being a tour of the extensive museum section of the granite and marble City Palace complex that sits on the banks of the lake. Built over 21 generations, starting in 1559, it provides a fascinating insight into the lives of the Mewar, with Rajput architecture and a variety of vivid interior design styles that were favoured by each successive Maharana.

An impressive one-hour Sound and Light Show takes place at the City Palace each evening. The high-tech extravaganza takes the viewer on a journey back in time to the most prominent and dramatic moments in Mewar history, dramatically brought to life in 12 episodes and including the rich voice of the current Maharana. Far removed from typical light shows, that are so often boring, this is exciting and should not be missed.

Automobile aficionados will be thrilled to visit the Vintage & Classic Car Collection, all of which are in working order. Visitors are allowed to get up close and take photos with the cars, including such gems as a 1924 Rolls Royce and a 1938 Cadillac. Other options include nearby sites of interest such as the Monsoon Palace, the dazzling crystal collection, or a guided shopping trip. Excursions farther afield can also be arranged. Active groups can choose to go on a Jeep safari, mountain biking, camel and horse rides, and wildlife trekking.

The incentives team at Taj Lake Palace hotel are true to their desire to ensure a unique, royal experience for all groups, and these are just some of myriad options. Be prepared to leave already planning a return visit. ■

CONTACT Taj Lake Palace

TEL +91 294 242 8800

EMAIL lakepalace.udaipur@tajhotels.com

WEBSITE tajhotels.com