

# Experiences

TRAVELLERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR

## MINDFUL OASIS

Jodhpur may be best known for its history and heritage. On her journey through the Blue City, **SATARUPA PAUL** comes across new initiatives by passionate individuals that showcase the food of the region in the most conscious ways.



FROM LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK; COURTESY OF MHAROKHET (2)

THE DINNER SETUP looks straight out of a southern Italian countryside—in the middle of an orchard, with strings of fairy lights twinkling overhead and lanterns hanging from branches. Yet, it's laid out with a flourish as is expected of a fine dining setting, with handpicked candlestands and floral arrangements, customised placemats and clipboard menus, and curated tableware. Sitting here and savouring a seven-course, farm-to-fork, plant-forward meal, it's easy to forget that I am, in fact, in India's prime desert country. More precisely, at the experiential farm of Mharokhet ([mharokhet.com](http://mharokhet.com)), just about an hour outside of Jodhpur in the northwest frontier state of Rajasthan.

Think of Jodhpur, and the first image that comes to mind is an old town painted blue, in the middle of Thar Desert. Home to the majestic Mehrangarh Fort and the resplendent Umaid Bhawan Palace, the Blue City is primarily known for its architecture and royal heritage. But apart from a few regional specialities, its food culture hasn't been exciting enough to write home about. Until now. New initiatives are shining a spotlight on the foods of the region, including native desert produce, in unique and mindful ways that are sure to appeal to the inspired traveller.

I arrive at Mharokhet with a few friends, and we are ushered in with a tractor ride to the reception, a mud house built with locally available materials. A shy woman dressed in a bright red traditional outfit, with the *pallu* drawn low over her face as is the custom in these parts, welcomes us with coconut water infused with blue pea flower. I try to learn her name, which she reveals after many giggles is Shampoo. She's one of a dozen or so local women from the neighbouring Manai village who are employed and trained by Mharokhet in organic farming and hospitality, thus upskilling them for alternate incomes.

Soon, we're met by the young couple who owns the farm—Rajnush is an entrepreneur and Vedika previously worked in the development sector. They take us on an immersive guided



INDIA INSIDE OUT

Clockwise from left: Famed for its architecture and heritage, Jodhpur now has many initiatives that are shining a spotlight on its food culture; the private dining set up at Mharokhet; Rajnush and Vedikam, founders of Mharokhet.





▲ Clockwise from above: Mharokhet harvests and delivers fresh produce across Jodhpur; Mharokhet's Culinary Trail serves a pre-plated, plant-forward meal; the Marwar thali at Kaner Retreat is a celebration of native ingredients.

tour of the 40-acre farm, while detailing the story of how it came to be. "The farm had been in my family for over three decades, but it primarily grew medicinal plants. It was only during the pandemic that we started experimenting with growing exotic vegetables, with the help of online courses," Rajnush tells us. Today, Mharokhet has flourished into an organic farm growing over 100 varieties of vegetables, fruits and herbs—both exotic and native. The chemical-free,

non-GMO produce is harvested fresh and delivered the same day across Jodhpur. But making the desert bloom is not all there is to Mharokhet, for the enterprising couple has also added delightful experiential elements to the farm, including a guided tour and a multi-course, plant-forward meal that is served al fresco. Strolling through the farm, the couple encourages us to try some of the produce. We excitedly pluck juicy guavas, scrunch our noses at tart gooseberries, get our hands dirty digging plump carrots, bite into sweet strawberries, challenge each other to spicy jalapenos, play a game of guess what with various herbs, and go shutter-crazy amongst the edible flowers in the green house.

Later, we find ourselves in the guava orchard, by the dreamy dinner set-up for the night. Chiming anklets signal the arrival of Shampoo and her entourage of women, who emerge from the kitchen nearby bearing plates of the amuse bouche—zucchini rosette on roasted pico de gallo. The next six courses of the World Cuisine menu that follow showcase the choicest of fresh, seasonal produce from the farm curated into a delectable meal by Sejal Jain, a former IHCL chef. There's a Regional Cuisine menu on offer as well, which too takes a hyperlocal approach with memorable numbers such as *matar kachori* in creamy *kadhi*, gourd roulade and *bati* sans dal with smoked yogurt.

The Mharokhet experience leaves us decidedly excited about Jodhpur's emerging food scene, a feeling that gets cemented at Kaner Retreat ([kanerretreat.com](http://kanerretreat.com)). The place twinkles under a star-spangled sky, with a red sandstone and glass structure (the restaurant) glowing softly in the pitch darkness. Beyond it is a single row of 10 villas made conspicuous by a few glowing lamps.

Dubbed as India's first desert botanical resort, Kaner Retreat is remote, offbeat, and charmingly unique. The villas here are inspired by desert plants; mine is themed on the *kair* flower that blossoms twice a year and adds a burst of colour to the barren landscape, while *Kair* buds find their way into popular

Rajsthani dishes such as *kair sangri*. An ornate, locally carved wooden door opens into a verdant courtyard, and little touches add to the theme—a marble bowl of dried *kair* flowers, *kair* twigs woven into a wreath as wall art, a frame displaying information on the plant etc.

Next morning, we set off for a tour with Sapna Bhatia, an ex-journalist and filmmaker who returned home to Jodhpur and started Kaner inspired by her childhood spent on a farm. "We've deliberately kept much of the property in its natural state. We didn't want Kaner to take away from the great desert, but be one with it," Sapna says, before escorting us out of the main gate and across a narrow sandy road to what is perhaps the most interesting aspect of a stay here—a guided walk in the neighbouring *oran*, or sacred grove, one of 25,000 *orans* across Rajasthan where only foraging is allowed.

During the hour-long walk, Sapna provides an intimate and deeply insightful introduction to the native flora and layers the information with heart-touching anecdotes of how the sparse desert vegetation has helped people and animals survive severe droughts and calamitous famines through the ages. "Take the bark of the *khejri* for instance, which we call the 'tree of life'. During famines, people would use the sun-dried bark to make rotis. Or the black seeds of the *broont* plant that mothers would pound into flour to keep their babies alive," Sapna narrates. We are standing in the shade of a *kumtiya* tree whose beans are used in cooking.

Back at Kaner, the walk continues to the desert garden that showcases endangered and cultivated

native plants, before ending in a lunch. We're served a traditional Marwar thali laden with a variety of regional dishes, accompanied by a tall glass of buttermilk. Each item on the plate makes our tastebuds sing—they are a celebration of native ingredients, either foraged from the *oran* or sourced from Mharokhet.

Our tryst with Jodhpur's conscious food scene concludes the next morning at the 350-year-old haveli of a Blue City native, while on a heritage walk through the old town. Unlike other tour companies, BlueCity Walks ([bluecitywalks.com](http://bluecitywalks.com)) begins its morning tours before sunrise at the Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park. I meet the chief curator, Govind Singh Bhati during the wee hours of dawn. He then takes us through offbeat rocky trails and canals around the periphery of the Mehrangarh Fort.

After feasting our eyes on the sunrise, we pass by two historic manmade lakes inside the old city walls, and finally emerge in the narrow lanes bordered on all sides by blue havelis. Many photo-ops later, we climb the winding staircases of one such haveli to the rooftop and catch a gorgeous view of the fort and the Blue City while wolfing down hot stuffed parathas. Over cups of chai, Govind tells us about his initiative of including the locals in small ways and showcasing their culinary heritage. Seems like Jodhpur is poised to make a mark with its conscious food scene. ✦

#### GETTING THERE

**IndiGo** ([goindigo.in](http://goindigo.in)) operates regular flights from Delhi and Mumbai to Jodhpur. From there, Mharokhet is an hour long-drive away, while Kaner Retreat can be reached in about two hours.

#### STAY

**Kaner Retreat** offers 10 villas that are an ode to desert architecture. Doubles from ₹10,000; [kanerretreat.com](http://kanerretreat.com)

#### TOURS

**The Mharokhet Flagship Experience**, which combines their farm tour and multi-course culinary trail, must be booked in advance.

The botanical walk and Marwar thali lunch at **Kaner Retreat** are offered complimentary to all guests. Other culinary experiences include a desert safari and dinner on the dunes, an olive farm tour, and lunch.

The heritage walk by **BlueCity Walks** with breakfast at the 350-year-old haveli can be booked on [bluecitywalks.com](http://bluecitywalks.com)



Kaner Retreat is a red sandstone and glass structure.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF MHAROKHET (2); COURTESY OF KANER RETREAT (2)

COURTESY OF KANER RETREAT (2)

► Kaner Retreat organises dinner on the sand dunes as a part of its signature experiences. Below: The desert vegetation of Jodhpur has helped people and animals survive severe droughts.

