

The town of Bundi with the Taragarh Fort at dusk

SECRETS OF BUNDI

AIR INDIA ROUTE



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An old-world-charm, ancient stepwells, vibrant culture and vivid miniature paintings... Irfan Quader lists the reasons why this quaint town in Rajasthan is worth a visit

Labyrinthine lanes lined with blue houses with a small temple at almost every turn criss-cross Bundi, a charming town in Rajasthan. With a lake that reflects the surrounding green hills, ancient stepwells and a fantastical palace that harks back to the glorious days of kings and queens, Bundi paints a captivating picture. From the outside, Bundi will appear similar to most tourist spots in Rajasthan. But take a closer look and you'll realise that this quaint town, nestled 210 km away from the state capital Jaipur, offers more than just that. Being off the tourist radar, it receives less travellers, as a result of which it still retains an old-world charm yet boasts some incredible sights and experiences for the intrepid visitors.

Here are a few highlights of Bundi (locally pronounced as *boondhee*), which will inspire you to go off the beaten path and explore this little paradise.

Absence of the usual crowds

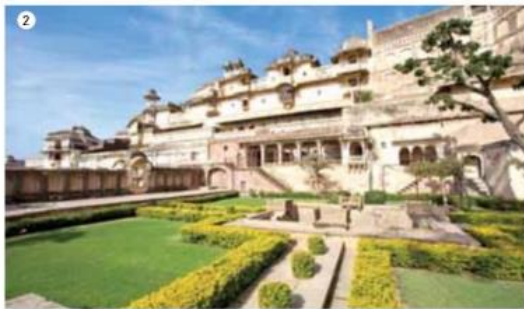
No matter what time of the year you decide to visit, cities in Rajasthan like Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, Pushkar, Udaipur and Ajmer and, not to forget, Jaipur are filled with tourists. Bundi isn't. You will find a few inquisitive travellers, which, in no way, will take away the feeling of being the only explorer here. Even the town's most famous sights hardly ever have more than a handful of visitors at a time. So if you want to explore Rajasthan's culture and history but want to escape the crowd, Bundi is a good place to start with.

The massive Garh Palace

One of the most well-known of Bundi's sights is the imposing hillside Garh Palace or Bundi Palace. Known for its Rajput architecture, the palace is said to be one of the largest of its kind in India. The palace is decorated with pavilions, arches and embellished windows, and is visible from almost everywhere in Bundi. A long



1 Stunning wall paintings inside the Bundi Palace
2 A garden and a swimming pool that was meant for royal ladies



or house of pictures. This small open-sided structure boasts some of the best-preserved murals in the palace, including an intricately-decorated corridor with a blue-patterned ceiling.

The Taragarh Fort

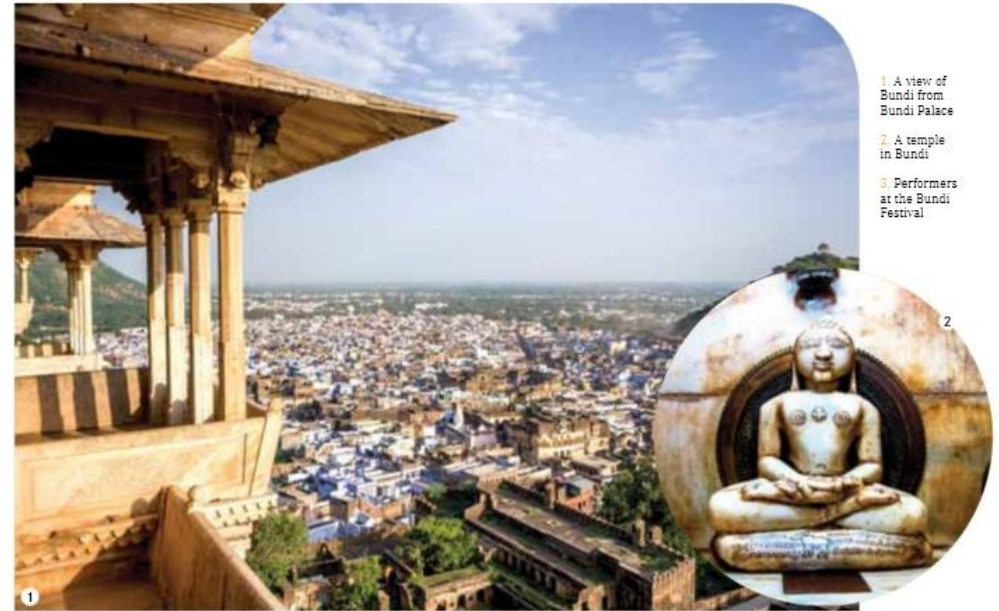
Further up the hill from the Garh Palace, the Taragarh Fort offers magnificent views of Bundi and the surrounding hills. Though overgrown with shrubs and populated by monkeys, you'll still find plenty of interesting sights hidden among the trees and bushes. The most well-known of these is the *Bhim burj*, or Bhima's bastion, a large stone tower on the northeast side of the fort. Also worth seeing are the stepwells carved into the hill. Overall, the fort is quite adventurous, so if you do decide to explore it, remember to wear sturdy shoes and carry a stick just in case.

A stunning stepwell

Of the many stepwells in and around Bundi, the Raniji ki Baoli (queen's well) might well be termed the most beautiful. Built from yellow stone and with a single broad staircase leading straight down to the water, it is different from the more common symmetrical stepwells of Rajasthan. Meant as a private bath for one of Bundi's queens, the atmosphere around the *baoli* (stepwell) is pleasant, with embellishments on the

stone ramp leads from the gate to the main entrance: the Hathi Pol, or elephant gate. Once there, you can wander through the crumbling halls and corridors, which are more or less undisturbed. On the first floor, the once-grand mirror inlays of the Sheesh Mahal (glass palace) and the wall paintings of royal processions in the Phool Mahal (flower palace), are still impressive. Hidden up a small staircase in the southwest corner is arguably the most beautiful room in the main palace building: the Badal Mahal, or cloud palace. The surviving murals in this little chamber are intricate and colourful, and its Oriental art-inspired ceiling is unlike anything else in the palace.

Next door is a smaller building that was once a pleasure pavilion - the Chitrashala,



1 A view of Bundi from Bundi Palace
2 A temple in Bundi
3 Performers at the Bundi Festival



pillars and carvings on the walls adding to the timeless feel.

Ancient stone-age cave paintings

Bundi's attractions aren't just confined to the town. About an hour's drive away, stone-age cave paintings have been discovered along a deep river gorge. The paintings are believed to date back to between 10,000 and 20,000 years. Adjoining sites also contain multiple paintings in different styles, which suggest that these were frequently used over thousands of years. The best way to see these

prehistoric paintings is with the man who discovered them, Om Prakash Sharma, who goes by the nickname Kukki.

Bundi style of miniature painting

Not surprisingly, given the rich paintings in the Garh Palace, Bundi has its own traditional style of miniature painting. The Bundi style is said to have evolved in the 17th century, influenced by the Mughal and Deccan styles of painting and is characterised by bold colours, dramatic night skies, dynamic movement and refined facial features. A few traditional artists still practice their art in Bundi, and some have shops on the road below the Garh Palace. Some of them even offer private painting courses.

Apart from these, Bundi still has plenty to keep you engaged. Stepwells large and small, hilltop cenotaphs, ornate temples, abandoned havelis around every corner, and the spicy local cuisine all offer an unadulterated glimpse into this little town's rich history and tradition.

The author is an avid traveller and the views expressed here are his own

Did you Know?

Bundi Festival, celebrated in the month of Kartik (October-November), includes several spiritual and traditional activities. It offers a charming cluster of art, culture and craftsmanship. The programme features an arts and crafts fair, ethnic sports, classical music and dance programmes, turban tying competitions and a sparkling fireworks display. This year, the festival will be celebrated between November 26 and 28.