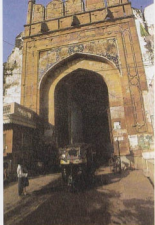


# AJMERIAN GOULASH

Sway with Sufi mystics, savour the taste of vintage sherbets, shop to the sound of trumpets. Then call it a night in SANJAY SINGH BADNOR'S home town under lakeside Mughal pavilions, musing how you would have felt going to school on elephant back



**N**ESTLING amidst the folds of the Aravalli hills, located in the heart of the western Indian desert state of Rajasthan is Ajmer. Once the capital city of the Chauhan Rajputs who ruled Delhi in the seventh century, Ajmer derives its name from Ajajpal, it's founder, who built one of the earliest of the mighty Rajput forts atop the Ajameru hillock.

The routine tourist beat at Ajmer would be a visit to the fabled *dargah* (shrine) of the great Sufi saint, view the Anasagar lake from the Mughal marble pavilions, go to the red sandstone Jain temple, and possibly, hike up to the Taragarh fort (now accessible also by metalled road). What it would not involve is meandering through the maze of streets around the *dargah* in search of unusual gems, experiencing the high of mystic Sufi singers, browsing for old silver at Naya Bazaar, sipping sherbet made of freshly plucked pink roses from Pushkar, or touring

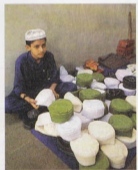
the prestigious Mayo College.

Though Ajmer has become a stepping stone for the more sought after Pushkar, there is no denying that it has its own peculiar charm. The *dargah* of Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti is the city's single most important site, attracting thousands of devotees belonging to all faiths and religions who come to pray for fulfillment of their wishes. Upon entering the old walled city through the Delhi gate you are immediately transported into another world. Rows of tiny shops line both sides of the road leading to the main gates of the *dargah*. In this bazaar and in the two main lanes, which flank the *dargah*, one can truly absorb the atmosphere overflowing from within the mosque. The shops sell bright *chaadars* (cloth sheets meant for offering at the mosque), joss and incense sticks, roses and other flowers, colourful lithographs of the *dargah* and of Mecca, glass bangles and music tapes of *qawwali* recordings.

Inside the mosque, live strains of the latter can be heard as the *qawwals* (singers) render verses in praise of the Saint in accompaniment to music. These *qawwalis* are sung with the passion, devotion and ecstasy inspired of a special spiritual bond existing between them and the departed saint. No wonder then that the robust melodies invoke a special feeling amongst the listeners. Go with an open mind and time to spare, for although the crowds in the inner sanctum may jostle and push, the surrounding ambience is worth soaking in. Life within the

complex reverberates with its own rhythm, pretty much oblivious to the happenings in the outside world. The cadence is both delightful and spiritually enlightening. Choose an inconspicuous corner and observe the proceedings.

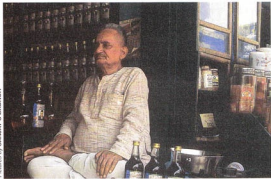
Stepping out of the *dargah* turn left into the lane winding towards



the Adhai-din-ka-jhonpra, yet another exquisite example of Muslim architecture. Roadside stalls sell lucky gems and birthstones; if you are fortunate you may find good quality amber, known for its healing powers. The Adhai-din-ka-jhonpra or 'the two-and-a-half-day-but' is certainly far more elaborate than a hut and it definitely took more than 60 hours to build. A long flight of steps brings you to the rectangular courtyard where once stood one of the finest centres of Sanskrit learning. Built by Vrigraj II, it is believed

Above right: Delhi Gate, Ajmer; Far right: caps for sale at the *dargah*; Bottom: *qawwalis* at the *dargah* are sung with exceptional fervour



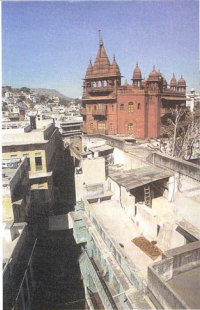


that on Mohammad Ghoori's command, this Sanskrit college was converted into a mosque in just two-and-a-half days, whereby the name. Pillars carved with Hindu gods and goddesses belie the ancient architectural skill. The main facade, which was later added, is a seven-arched wall covered with Islamic calligraphy. Though this mosque is seldom used for prayers, many a pilgrim from the nearby *dargah* seeks shelter in its compound.

The mosque visits can be followed by either a 45 minute hike up to Taragarh fort (for a splendid view of the city, especially during monsoon), or a walk through the narrow lanes and by lanes to the Madar gate (Ajmer's main market place) and on to the railway station, or a backtrack via the Delhi gate towards the Mudhla market. One of the thriving

cottage industries of Ajmer, *muddha* is basically furniture made from locally grown grass reeds. Available in different shapes and sizes, *muddha* furniture is comfortable, practical and good value for money. Just around the corner near the roundabout is the Nasiyan - an interesting Jain temple, better known as the Red temple due to its red sandstone construction. The temple is divided into two sections, the main temple where only the Jain community is permitted, and the second section, which is open to the general public. The unusual temple offers insights into Jain mythology and its concept of the perfect universe.

Walk on straight ahead from here to hit the Naya Bazaar, so called because it was the first new market place to be built outside of the walled city; a rather ironic name today, for the 'new market place' imparts a truly medieval atmosphere. The numerous small booths sell utensils, hardware, silver ornaments, tie-and-dye garments, wedding and festive wear saris and *lehngas*. Most of the quaintly styled shops are without counters. The customer has to remove his shoes and sit on the white sheet covered floor on which the salesman displays his wares from out of the cupboards. You can get good bargains here, especially if you are keen on old silver ornaments and the tie-and-dye fabric. What is most amusing is that some of the quarters above the shops have been let out to professional band players who provide live music as they rehearse with their trumpets, drums and pipes, while you shop.

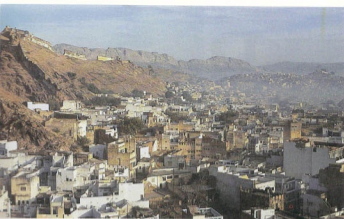


Only a stone's throw away is the 'magazine' - Akbar's ruined palace now housing the government museum. You can stroll through from here to the bangle bazaar and on to the main road, which emerges near the General Post Office and connects to the main station road. But first you must turn towards the Madar gate market and visit one of Ajmer's landmark shops, Bhikilal's.

Established in 1865, Bhikilal sherbets are a great favorite as they have kept up the tradition of using natural ingredients while minimising the use of artificial preservatives and

**Above left:** Bhikilal's, one of Ajmer's landmark shops; **Above:** the Red Jain temple; **Below left:** a shop selling roses and *chaadars* at the *dargah*; **Below:** *chaadars* or cloth sheets are the customary offering at the *dargah*





this event is known as the Alwar gate. Mayo College today is a residential public school open to all. For the visitor, the main attraction is most certainly the grand main building in white unpolished marble, the architectural style noteworthy for the fusion of Islamic, Hindu and Rajput styles. The large assembly hall has portraits of many a maharaja and their British headmasters. Also worth visiting is the museum, possibly one of the best school museums in India. Although the curriculum is abreast with the contemporary Indian education system the school still retains some of its past traditions. For instance, on the Annual Day the boys sport the *safa* (the customary headgear of the Rajputs). Visitors are advised to seek permission from the Principal or the Vice-Principal to be able to tour the school campus.

A trip to Ajmer would be incomplete if you have not been to the Government Circuit House to view the Anasagar lake with Shah Jahan's marble pavilions standing on the edge. Or perhaps even a walk in the evening on those marble pavilions, or a boat ride to the island in the centre of the lake.

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essences. Bhikilal, a local resident of Ajmer, began making sherbets just for a lark and to his surprise they shot into stardom. Today, his son, the elderly Gauri Shankar looks after the family business that has greatly expanded since its inception. Over 30 varieties of sherbets - mainly fruit based - pickles, preservatives and rose water are some of the items available at Bhikilal's. A glass of chilled rose sherbet is a must after a

weary day. The rose and the lemon sherbets are the most popular as they are still made from 100 year old recipes; the pink roses come specially from Pushkar. The old fashioned shop emanates the subtle fragrance of rose water and brings to mind the legendary Mughal queen Noor Jahan, who is said to have formulated the recipe of preparing rose water at Ajmer. These summer coolers, which range from lemon and khus to the more exotic *leechi*, mulberry, *falsa*, *kevera*, *kesar* (saffron), *elaichi* (cardamom), etc., are quite a steal for Rs 50 to Rs 150.

By now you would have had your fair share of the bazaars, *gallis* (lanes) and the chaotic bustle of Ajmer city. It is time to head to the Mayo College, one of India's leading educational institutions, known once as the Eton of the East. Sprawled on the edge of the city on 265 lush green acres the campus was founded by Lord Mayo, the Viceroy of India in 1875. Based on the English Public School system, Mayo was primarily meant for princes and other Indian aristocracy. Its first pupil, the Maharaja of Alwar, arrived on his first day of school in great style - seated atop an elephant. An arch erected to commemorate

Above: Ajmer town nestles in the folds of the Aravalli hills; Below: Mayo college was once known as the Eton of the East



**ACCESS: By Air:** The closest airport is Jaipur, (132 km). Indian Airlines and Jet Airways fly everyday from Delhi and from Mumbai.

**By rail:** Ajmer is connected by several trains running on the Delhi-Ahmedabad line. The Shatabdi Express to Ajmer via Jaipur from Delhi is a good train. So is the Delhi-Ahmedabad Mail.

**By road:** Ajmer is on National Highway No. 8 connecting Delhi to Mumbai via Jaipur. Delhi is 400 km from Ajmer via Jaipur.

**ACCOMMODATION:** RTDC Hotel Khadim in Civil Lines, tel: 52490, 52536. There are also the Ambassador Hotel on Ashok Marg, tel: 425095, 428479 and Hotel Mansingh Palace on Anasagar Circular Road, tel: 425855, 425857. STD code: 0145.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** Tourist Information Bureau at Hotel Khadim, tel: 52426.

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