

Micato Musings

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Getting Wrapped up in the Wonders of Jaipur

by Becca Hensley

Today, I'm in Jaipur, the largest city in Rajasthan, India's most awe-inspiring state. Visiting for the second time with my friend, Kevin, we are ensconced at the Oberoi Rajvilas, a lavish five-star palace meant to mimic a maharaja's country estate. Not far from the city's frenzy in the countryside, with its own temple, walled gardens and private villas, this stately hotel has the appeal of a haven from pandemonium. We're waiting to be reunited with our [Micato guide, Hem Singh](#)—a resident of this ancient capital, known for centuries as “the Pink City.” Hem has promised to join us for tea to make plans for our foray into this undisputed capital of intrigue, shopping and the arts.

A dead ringer for a Bollywood cast Sean Connery, sporting a prodigious mustache, Hem is sometimes called the most famous guide in India. I'm certain, though, that his celebrity extends beyond this nation to embrace the entire world. Nobody having seen Hem can forget him. Dapper and jaunty, Hem mirrors Jaipur, his luxuriant city. Forever bedecked with a hat, he dons jodhpurs, immaculately pressed shirts and leather shoes which curl at the toes and vaunt gold filigree—like what you'd expect a magical genie to wear. Walking through town with him is to trek with royalty. I personally have seen people bow to him, cars and elephants stop at the wave of his hand, and bartering hawkers tremble in trepidation.

Today, he surprises us by remembering our interest in turbans. “So, I thought I would teach you to wrap a turban today,” he says. That's so Hem. He doesn't miss a thing. We've been entranced by Hem's headwear both times while travelling in India. You see, Hem doesn't just wear handsome hats. Hang out with him long enough and you'll likely find Hem's debonair head capped with a silk turban. Rambling through India, we've seen our share of turbans, and Kevin and I had been wondering about just what they mean and how in the world you get one to stay on your head. Hem brings along a bolt of orange and gold cloth. He tells us it takes nearly 30 feet of material to create the perfect head wrap. And, I'm stunned. I wore a sari the last time I visited Jaipur with Micato, which meant I was wrapped by the Oberoi “ladies in waiting” in 18-feet of emerald green raw silk, an adventure that opened my eyes to how much cloth it takes to create this elegant national Indian outfit. But 30 feet atop your head? That's another story entirely!



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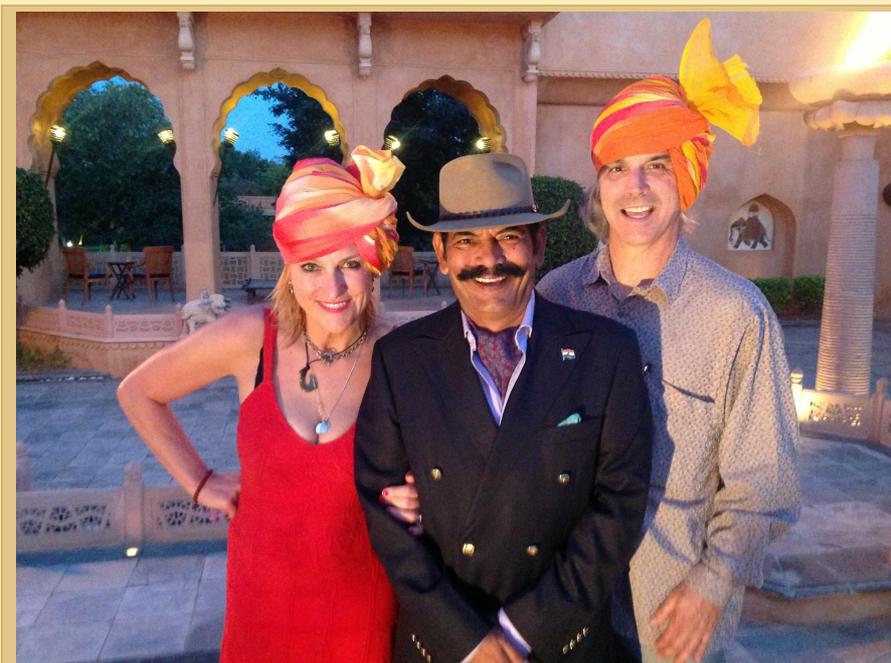
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Hem Singh with 30 feet of Turban Cloth!

Hem, utterly unperturbed, enjoys our excitement and lust for knowledge. Here, in the majestic gardens of Oberoi's Rajvilas, he proceeds to wrap a turban for Kevin. It's a sight to behold—like watching a fairytale character spin gold from straw or make stars from dust. Within moments, Hem's created the Rajasthani version of a crown, and Kevin's rocking it. Instantly, he is transformed from curious American photographer to noble sire. Though women don't normally wear turbans in India, I can't help myself. I want one, too. And, bless Hem Singh's dignified heart, he wants to make me happy. So, he wraps one for me, as well. He does it right there at the Oberoi, where the coral-colored stucco walls and garden's white columns form the perfect backdrop for our game of dress up. Peacocks croon their otherworldly song as background music. Long lengths of cloth puddle on the floor. Hem Singh's covered with sunbeams of orange and gold as he works, twisting and rolling the fabric. At last, he finished mine. Giddy with turban joy, we do a photo shoot. We're American tourists in turbans, and Hem Singh, laughing at our ebullience, smartly attired in blazer and cravat, leather hat at a rakish angle, poses, too.



The Fine Art of Turban-Wearing in Jaipur

As it happens, it takes some training to wear a turban. After an hour or so, we feel like we're carrying the weight of the world, so we leave our turbans behind and head to the city centre to sightsee. "How DO you do it?" I ask Hem Singh, as I rub away the slight headache left from the weight of the thing. He smiles, demurely. "Its an art," he says, shrugging, giving me his arm so he can escort me through traffic as thick and unyielding as molasses. We're off to explore the Spice Market in the centre or Jaipur. Here, an exotic perfume greets us amid the grit of the immense city. There, carts, stands, buckets, wagons and store windows hold golden curries, black, smoky cardamom, pungent coriander, shelled pistachios and salts. Men in white gowns (and snow-colored turbans) make tea using outdoor burners, their silver ladles dipping into the masala-spiced liquid. We taste betel leaves wrapped around spices—aniseed, cloves, rose petals. And, we devour sweets, such as mawa kachori and deep fried, honey-flanked ghevar.

That night, we're in for another surprise. The day before Hem has asked us to

choose some colours and textures from a room full of cloth. A tailor measures us. When we arrive back to our suites at the Oberoi, we find that someone has filled our bathtubs with bubbles and rose petals, and left us each a parcel. Inside, I find a beautiful sari, and Kevin discovers a long, Hem Singh-worthy tunic and a matching turban—each made from the cloth we had chosen the day before. With today's parcel, we also receive a written invitation from Micato to join Hem Singh and a host of locals—including the Maharaja of Jaipur and other luminaires— at the City Palace for dinner. This is something unique which only Micato can offer—and it is worth every string they pulled to make it happen. We arrive through arches and colonnades to be doused in flower petals, to see life-size marionettes dancing, adorned elephants standing at attention, camels swaying to flutes and other instruments in play, and a legion of dancers twirling. In the Maharaja's royal dining room, we dine like members of the court on platters of rich Rajasthani cuisine.

And, all through the fete, there's princely Hem Singh. His turban, as orange as the full moon that illuminates the sky, shines bright, a symbol for the glamour of Jaipur itself.

To discover the secrets of Jaipur with Micato India, contact our India Specialists at India@Micato.com.



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