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BUCKET LIST TRIPS

A dreamlike adventure in India

Picturesque Udaipur draws throngs of visitors annually.

This

New

By Becca Hensley - Special to the American-Statesman

Translated, Udaipur means Land of the Dawn.

So, it is no surprise that I rise before the sun to take advantage of the complimentary early morning yoga class offered to guests at Udaivilas, Oberoi's palace in India's central state of Rajasthan, on Lake Pichola. Though it's difficult at first to pry myself from the princely bed, I manage. After a night of enchanted dreams where I star as a maharani, adorned with rubies, donning an emerald-colored silk sari and riding a painted elephant, I only break the sleepy reverie because I know that the coming day promises to be nearly as fantastical as my night-time imaginings. My wakefulness, I must admit, is aided by the ministrations of my Udaivila dedicated butler, who delivers a porcelain pot of steaming masala tea. He pours it for me into a delicate cup — just as he would for a real maharani.



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A panoply of milky white palaces hem Lake Pichola, Udaipur, one of India's most captivating cities. Temples, gardens and narrow lanes ... [Read More](#)

It's easy to feel regal at this splendorous hotel, set on 30 acres of a royal hunting ground — even at dawn, wearing white kurta yoga clothes that look like pajamas. Heading to the outdoor yoga deck, which hovers above the resort, vaunting views of the glistening lake from one portal and of the hotel's fragrant gardens to another, I hear the cries of peacocks who reside in the reserve. Their otherworldly songs accompany me as I meander through the still charcoal-hued morning light. A burst of orange illuminates the path, which wends by tinkling fountains and over black granite and white marble mosaic flooring. A light wind wafts the cool, sweet perfume of roses. Along the way, a turban-and-sash-adorned staff member greets me, his hands held at his heart chakra — in the prayer position. “Namaskar,” says he, and I return the greeting. The route to yoga seems nearly as captivating as my dream.

A veritable jewel box, as precious and ornate as the miniature paintings and glass mosaics that draw throngs of visitors to Udaipur for sightseeing annually, Oberoi Udaivilas is a medley of architectural marvels. With courtyards aplenty, gilded domes, handcrafted bronze doors, fresco-painted walls, hand-knotted carpets and sumptuously upholstered furnishings, the resort showcases the majesty and heritage of the Mewar elite of yore. Its grounds sprawl to include reflection ponds, swimming pools, fountains, gardens and tranquil nooks and crannies, shaded by flowering plants and manicured trees. Newly built to resemble a centuries-old manse, the hotel blends both Mughal and Rajasthani influences to depict the lifestyle of the former royal families of this region. I experience this homage when I sit beneath the exquisite silk parasols, which provide shade around the pools. I notice it in the Candle Room, a place for guests to gather, where glass and mosaic artwork line the walls. I am nurtured by it in the coddling of the spa, a haven that brings to mind an ancient temple and exudes meditative serenity. I taste it in the restaurants, which serve Indian food with a refined twist. And, finally, I feel it lakeside, where Kashmir-style gondolas, called shikara, cruise the water and the festive piers are decorated with lit lanterns and strings of fresh-picked flowers. The Aravalli Range encircles Udaipur, wrapping it in a protective layer that proved useful to former kings bent on protecting their kingdom. From a modern perspective, the craggy mountains provide a mystical backdrop. Bordering the crystalline waters of the lake, the peaks suggest a castle's crenelated walls,

furthering the fairy tale quality of Udaipur — also called the White City. Lining the lake, temples, old homes and milky-white palaces stand. Canopied boats voyage from shore to shore. A favorite destination for weddings, Udaipur hosts legions of extravagant traditional Indian-themed fetes. Life-sized puppets, fireworks, Bollywood stars, decorated elephants and musicians galore all make a presence. And generations of families and friends arrive for multiday parties, sporting bejeweled saris, soaring turbans and other celebratory finery.

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A peacock rests on the castle-like walls of the Oberoi Hotel Udaivilas in Udaipur. I visit Udaivilas with Micato Safaris, an award-winning, family-owned travel outfitter that only leads bespoke tours through Africa and India, where they base with a little black book of intimate family and friends. Their ability to sneak me into VIP settings never ceases to amaze me on my ramble with them though India. While they can't get me invited to a wedding (maybe next time?), we enjoy many other adventures. I follow the lead of Hem Singh, one of Micato's most storied guides. An insider (like all of Micato's highly trained guides), Singh is known across India for his prodigious mustache, his collection of hats and his ubiquitous, trusty jodhpur-style pants. A regular at Udaivilas, and a man who seems to know everyone in this "Venice of the East," he takes us behind the scenes to museums, boutiques, galleries and historic sites. We tour the City Palace with him to marvel at the mosaics and the Crystal Gallery's collection of objects, from sofas to tables — all composed of glittering crystal. We end a fruitful day ensconced in a lime-colored boat on Lake Pichola, watching the setting sun transform the low-hanging

sky. Later, back on the water, we dine on a mid-lake, anchored pontoon, served by the Oberoi chef who transports our many courses from the hotel by a fleet of small boats.

Having toured romantic Udaipur with Hem Singh already, I decide to spend my last day in solitary confinement, enveloped by the resort — just as a maharani should. I begin with yoga, then retire immediately to the spa. Entranced by Ayurveda, India's 5,000-year-old healing science, I devote the next few hours to experiencing some of the holistic rituals offered at the spa. To begin, my therapist determines my body type — or dosha — via a lengthy questionnaire. I am pitta vata, a passionate, dream-charged fusion of fire and air. So, upon her recommendation, I soothe my ardent tendencies with a Synchronized Abhyanga, a rhythmic, herb-oil, lavishing massage performed by a duet of practitioners. After a lunch enjoyed by the spa's pool, I experience Shirodhara, a balancing treatment, characterized by the constant flow of hot oil repeatedly dropped mid-forehead. That's said to open the energy channels and clarify the third eye. I finish the day with a henna artist, who paints my hands with brown-inked curlicues and flowers, following an ancient tradition often reserved today for brides.

At days end, I feel like an honorary Rajasthani princess. To honor that, I edge my eyes with dark liner, dot a bindi between my eyes and make a courageous attempt to wrap myself in an Udaipur-purchased souvenir sari. At dinner, I ask Hem Singh, "How did I do?" "Becca," he says. "You look almost like a maharani."

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In India, ornate henna tattoos are applied to hands and other parts of the body to celebrate occasions such as weddings.

Almost? Well, that's good enough for me.

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Also called the City of Dawn, Udaipur is a warren of tiny streets offering vendors with stalls of all kinds. As ... [Read More](#)

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Micato Safaris: micato.com/india

Oberoi Udaivilas: oberoihotels.com/hotels-in-udaipur

India: incredibleindia.org

For travel planning: virtuoso.com