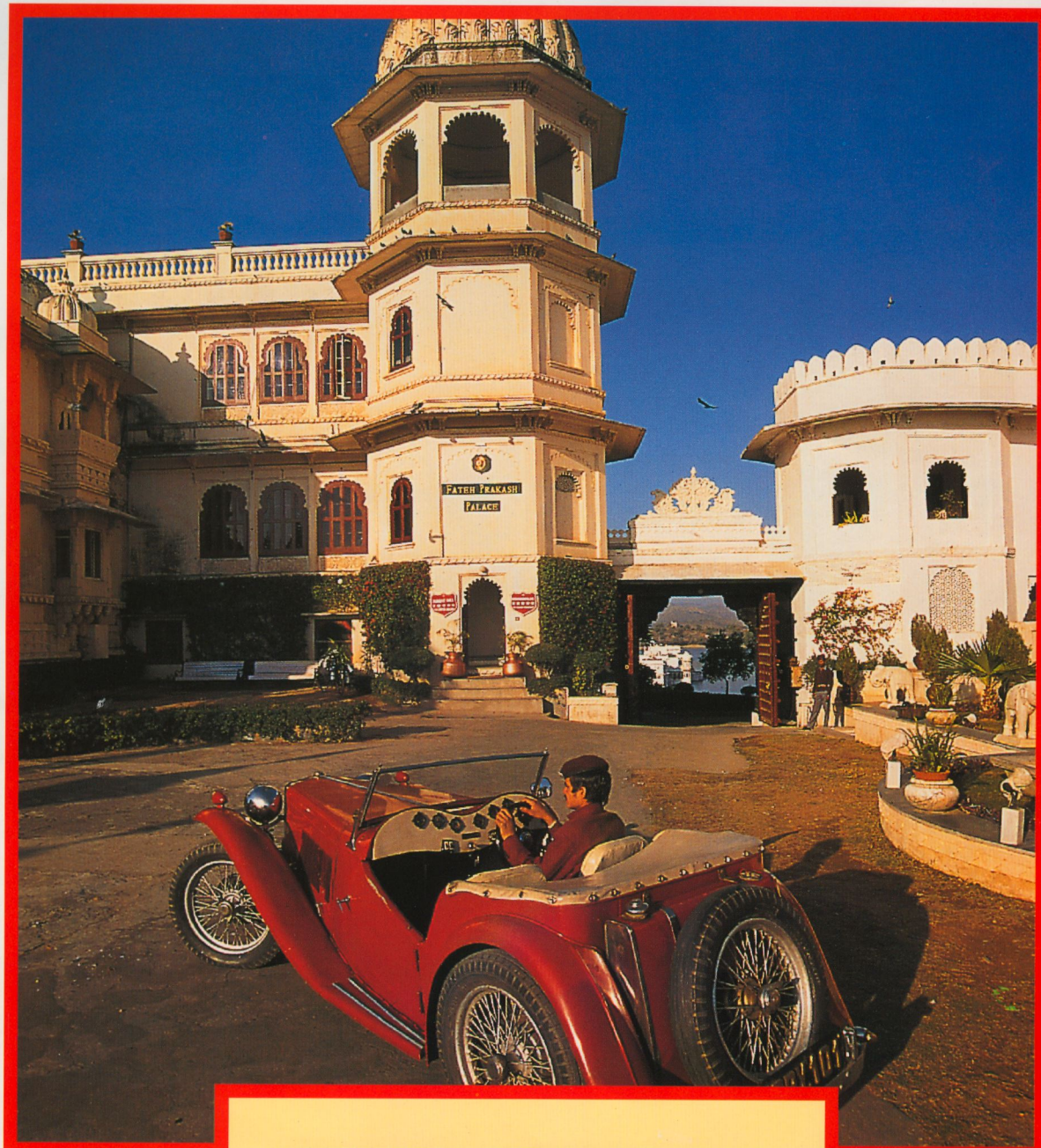


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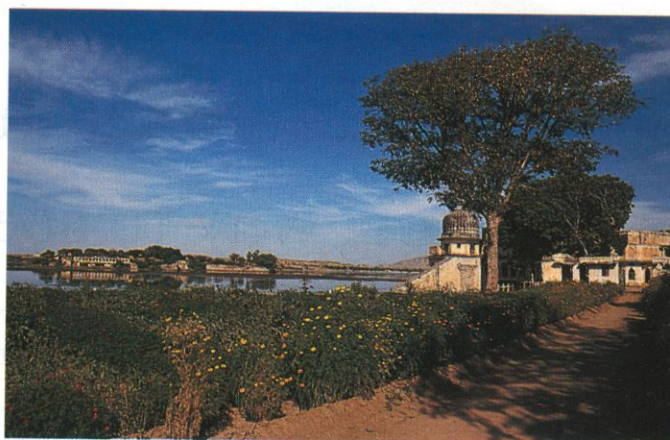
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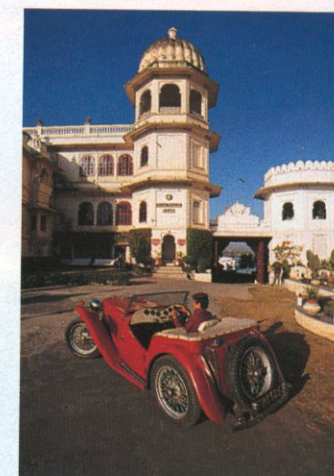


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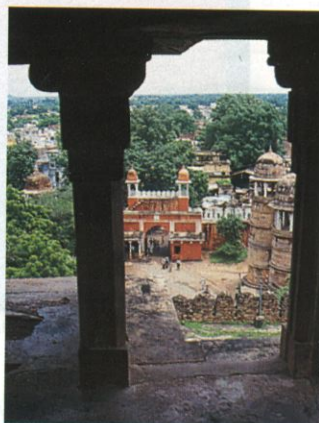
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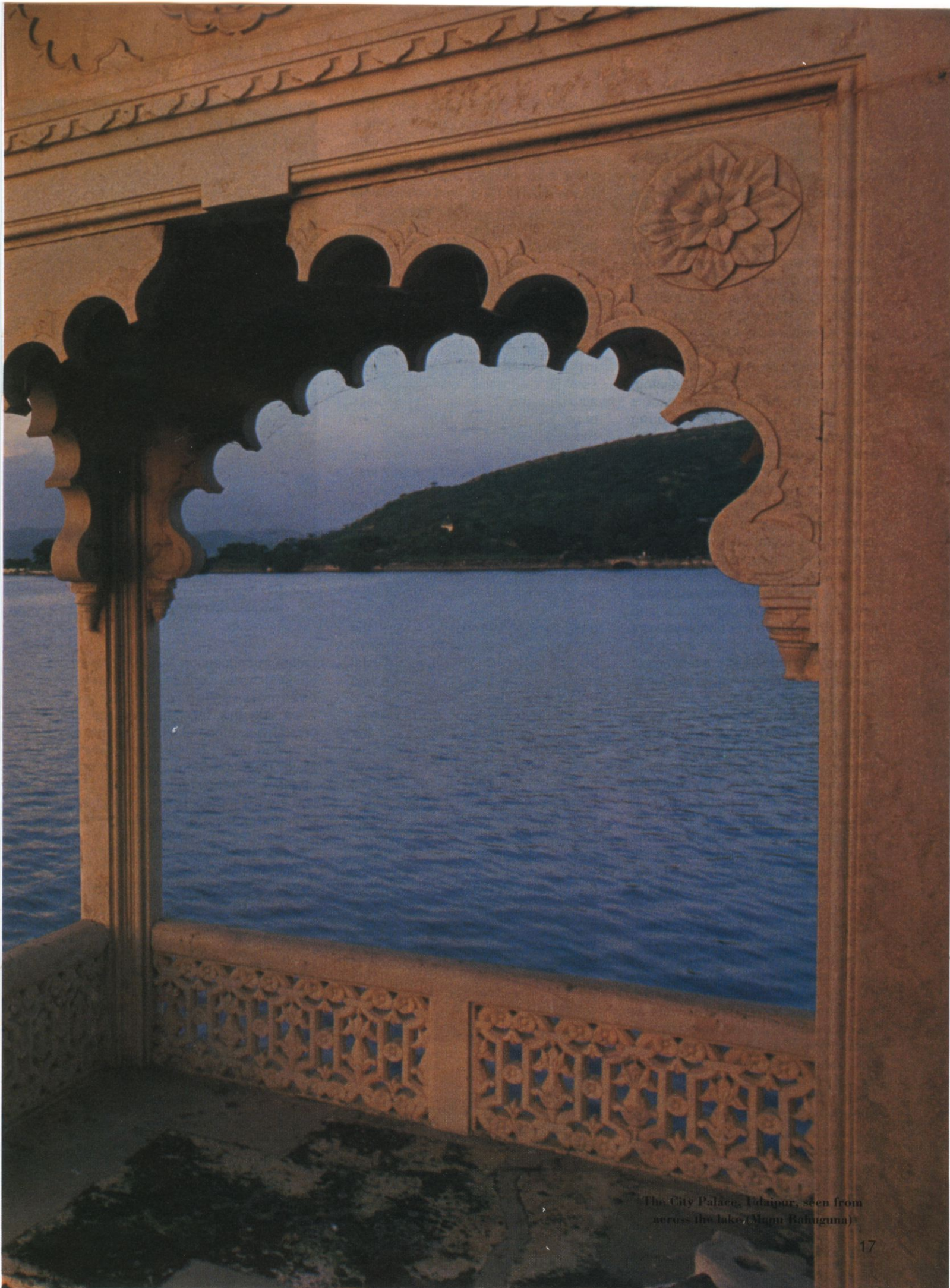
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“Abode of Kings”

Text: Nihal Mathur

Rajasthan, the abode of Rajput warriors and breathtaking fortifications is still a land of magic and mystique. The Historic Resort Hotel Group invites you to a luxurious holiday in any one of their converted palaces and residences which form some of the properties in their exclusive chain.



The City Palace, Udaipur, seen from
across the lake (Magna Bahuguna)

Driving up, through a formidable gateway, the car skirted the rotund masonry walls of the imperial white palace and then broke open into wide spaces of distant hills and hotel set amidst the waters of a lake. But I wasn't going to the lake palace, one of the most well known hotels in the world. Instead, my destination was more fabled, a class of its own! We drove up a steep gradient and finally came to a halt outside a complex of stunning buildings. This was the residence of the former rulers of Mewar, the present day city of Udaipur. And I was going to stay in one section of that enormous building. "Welcome to **FATEH PRAKASH PALACE HOTEL**," said Ajay Singh a young executive who guided me to the lobby and then up the stairs to a royal heritage suite. "Each suite has been designed to provide sumptuous comfort and contains original portraits and furniture which have been in the family for generations," Ajay said in passing. I certainly did notice miniature paintings on the walls. Persian carpets covering the floor, an antique brass bed and of course, mahogany cupboards and tables. This indeed was princely luxury and I could have simply locked myself in for days to indulge in the feelings of being a maharaja but Ajay urged me to discover the place first.

Sure enough, there was a lot to explore and I was happy to have Major Raghbir Singh, administrator of the Palace, who took time out not only to show me around the building but also give me a small lesson in the history of Mewar! "It is important you see, because we are the HRH or Historic Resort Hotels group and each property of ours is connected to history!" In the fitness of things we began with the Durbar Hall.

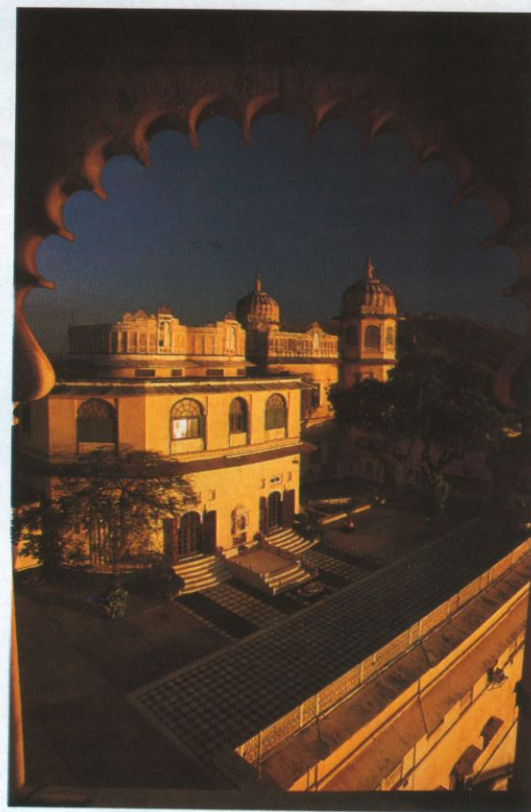
Stepping inside this princely court, I was silenced by its sheer size and splendor. Enormous chandeliers, weighing tons, hung down from the roof as a marvel of medieval civil engineering. The wall spaces were all but covered with painted portraits of its many rulers. "From A.D. 734 to present times, Mewar has been the oldest ruling dynasty in the world which has never been subjugated," Major Raghbir Singh stressed. And going around the Durbar Hall with him I heard many a heart rending story of valor, honour and sacrifice of this handsome and proud race of Rajputs, a warrior class of people called the Sisodias.

As opposed to Maharajas or literally

Great Kings, the Sisodias were titled Maharanas or Great Warriors. And it was Maharana Fateh Singhji who invited Lord Minto, the then Viceroy of India, to lay the foundation stone of the Durbar Hall in 1909. Also called Minto Hall in his honour, the majestic Hall, once upon a time, hosted formal court gatherings, state banquets and royal wedding parties. Today, painstakingly restored to its former glory, the dignified space of the Durbar Hall has become an ideal venue for equally important functions of the day like hosting civic receptions for visiting dignitaries, international conferences and seminars, corporate meetings and is also available for solemn ceremonies of private individuals, Major Raghbir Singh added.

Major Raghbir Singh then escorted me to the first floor which he said, was once a viewing gallery for the ladies of the court who could peer down on official functions in the Durbar Hall below. Today it still remains a viewing gallery but with a difference. It houses a staggering collection of crystal that was ordered by Maharana Sajjan Singhji in 1877 but unfortunately his untimely demise robbed him of the opportunity to see the shipment arrive from England. Much of the crystal remained packed in cases and it was only in 1994 that it was arranged and opened for public display in its entirety.

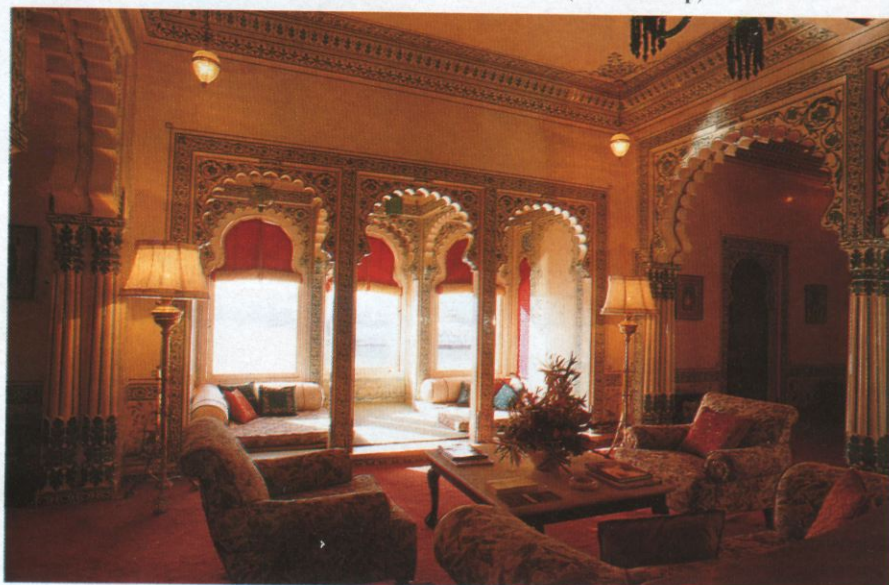
What is extraordinary about the crystal collection is not its size or vast variety - like furniture, fountains, flower vases, crockery and cutlery - but the ethnicity of the design. There are objects in crystal that are distinctly



The Shiv Niwas Palace caught in dramatic morning light (Manu Bahuguna)

Indian in conception like the *lotas* or drinking water containers and small decanters called *chuski*s etc. Alongside this fascinating range of crystal are other exhibited items in gold and silver, brocade and velvet. Major Raghbir Singh aptly summed up the experience for me saying, "So you are not merely staying in a grand heritage hotel, you are also living within

The Royal Suite, Shiv Niwas Palace (HRH Group)



a unique museum."

Dazzled by the crystal, I staggered out for some fresh air and walked down to the landing just below the Fateh Prakash for a boat ride to the island of Jag Mandir. "Every year a couple of films are shot here," the boatman informed me with a twinkle in his eye. I could see why filmmakers chose this pretty island. The Maharanas of Udaipur themselves had originally planned this place as a palace of pleasure to live out their own dreams!

In keeping with the old tradition, parties are still organized in Jag Mandir for the guests of HRH in a setting of fountains and flower beds, pillared pavilions and domed structures. What is significant about the place is the fact that it was here in Jag Mandir that a rebellious Prince Khurram, who later became the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan, was given refuge from his father in the 17th century. It is said that his stay on this island gave him the inspiration for the Taj Mahal which he built in memory of his wife. It is not surprising that Jag Mandir is sought by many as a venue for holding wedding ceremonies and feasts since in popular imagination it has come to symbolize romance.

It is hard not falling in love with the place as one goes gliding on the placid waters of Pichola past the Lake Palace which is also another property of the HRH and presently under contract with the Indian Hotels Company Limited. Perhaps the most unforgettable sight from the boat ride is that of the old walled city which spreads on a rising hillside abutting the City Palace of which Fateh Prakash is a natural extension.

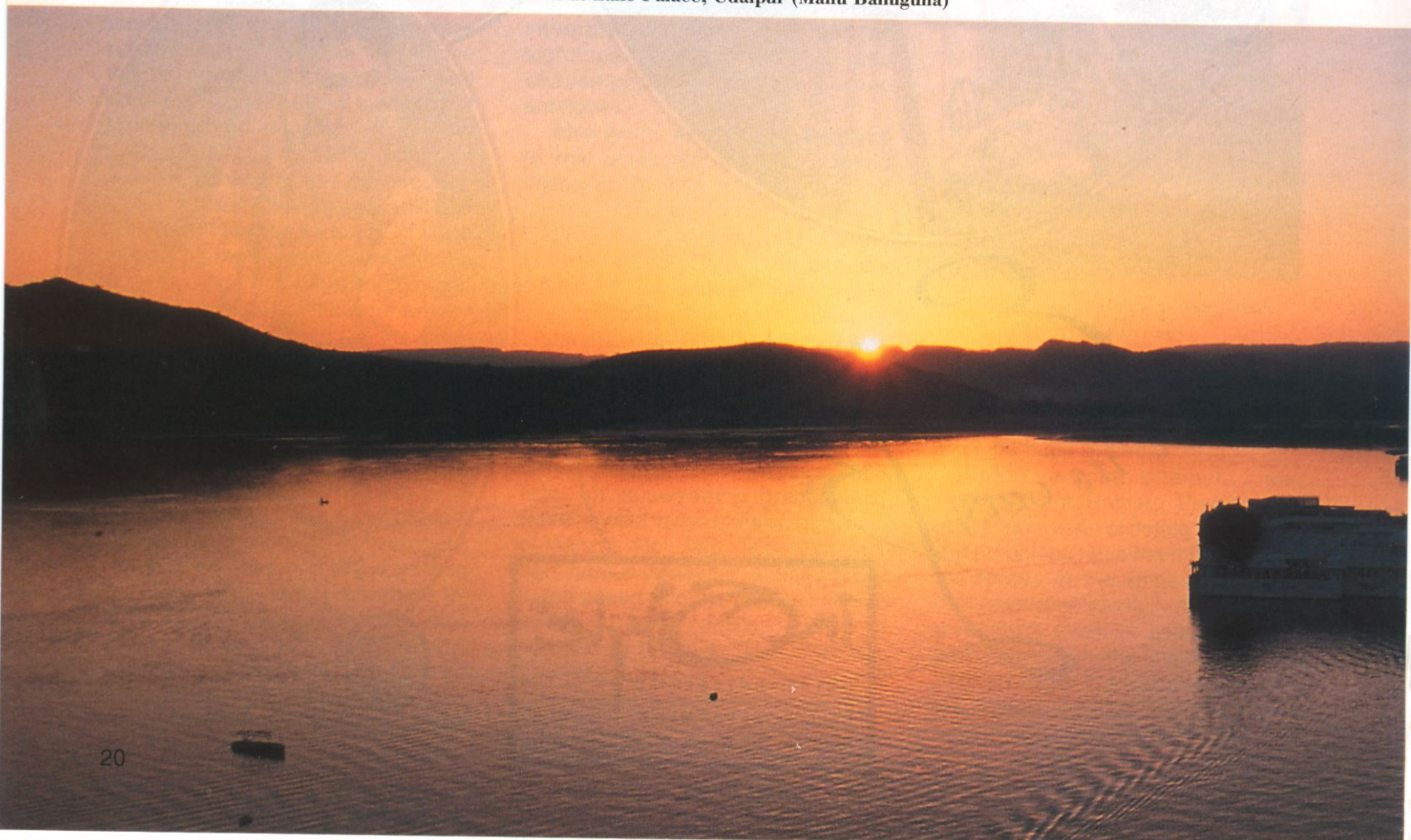
Getting off the boat, I made a beeline for the Gallery Restaurant in Fateh Prakash which serves High Tea in the finest British tradition every day between 3 and 5 in the late afternoon. I soon found out that this restaurant serves what it proudly advertises. "A wonderful world of different varieties of tea and a selection of traditional cakes and scones served with cream and jams." In the receding light of the day, the restaurant was awash in a golden glow while cool wind blew in from the large windows. I sat and savoured my cup of warm Darjeeling and watched the sun go down behind the backlit hills.

For an evening's entertainment, I was advised to go over to the SHIV NIWAS PALACE HOTEL which is just a minute's stroll away in the eastern

section of the Palace complex. I walked into the hotel to the sound of the Palace Band playing traditional Rajasthani tunes on bagpipes! Entering through yet another impressive gateway, I came to a large open courtyard with a swimming pool which was surrounded by an elegant crescent shaped building. This part of the palace was originally a royal residence but later, the apartments around this beautiful courtyard were used as a place for entertaining personal guests. It was the vision of the late Maharana Bhagwat Singhji which led to its conversion into a luxury hotel and today, it is undoubtedly the most special and palatial property of HRH group.

"Part of the charm of this exclusive hotel is the range of accommodation which we categorize as Imperial, Royal and Historic. And mind you, no two suites are alike" said Mr. Satish Anand, the General Manager of Shiv Niwas. Walking along with him, he kept pointing out "Queen Elizabeth II stayed here" or "Shah of Iran was in this room" etc. Once the exclusive preserve of kings and queens, now of course Shiv Niwas is playing host to other equally important dignitaries. Of the few unoccupied suites I could manage to see, some with intricate glass inlay

Sundown at Lake Palace, Udaipur (Manu Bahuguna)



work, others with green crystal embellishments etc my own personal favorite was the Imperial Lotus suite that simply took my breath away.

To regain composure, I found my way to the bar where Bajrang, the bar man asked what would I like to drink? Well, what have you got to offer? Anything from a wide choice of wines to a food old Indian rum. And beers aplenty. Could I possibly have an Asaa? which I knew was a famous spirit from Mewar, specially brewed for the Kings. That is now a stuff of legend, I was told but I could get an aroma if I wanted. All I had to do was go down to one of the old wine cellars in the Palace where one could still get a strong whiff of Asaa. Eventually, I settled with a few Martinis in the company of a Canadian couple for whom this was the high point of their Indian experience. The food, however, was yet to come.

Under a full moon, candlelight dinner was in progress in the courtyard as I wandered out of the bar. A sitarist rendered a classic raga. Taking my place near the poolside, a steward appeared to take the order. After the soup, what would the main course be? I had a hard time making up my mind shifting from an exclusive continental menu to a wide range of Indian dishes. What would be the chef's recommendation for a taste of local

cuisine, I wondered. Eventually, I was treated to a memorable Rajasthani meal and topped it all with a delicately flavored saffron and rice sweet dish. That was a good way to end the long day, but back at Fateh Prakash, I was determined to go right up to the rooftop restaurant to see the city lights before turning in for the night.

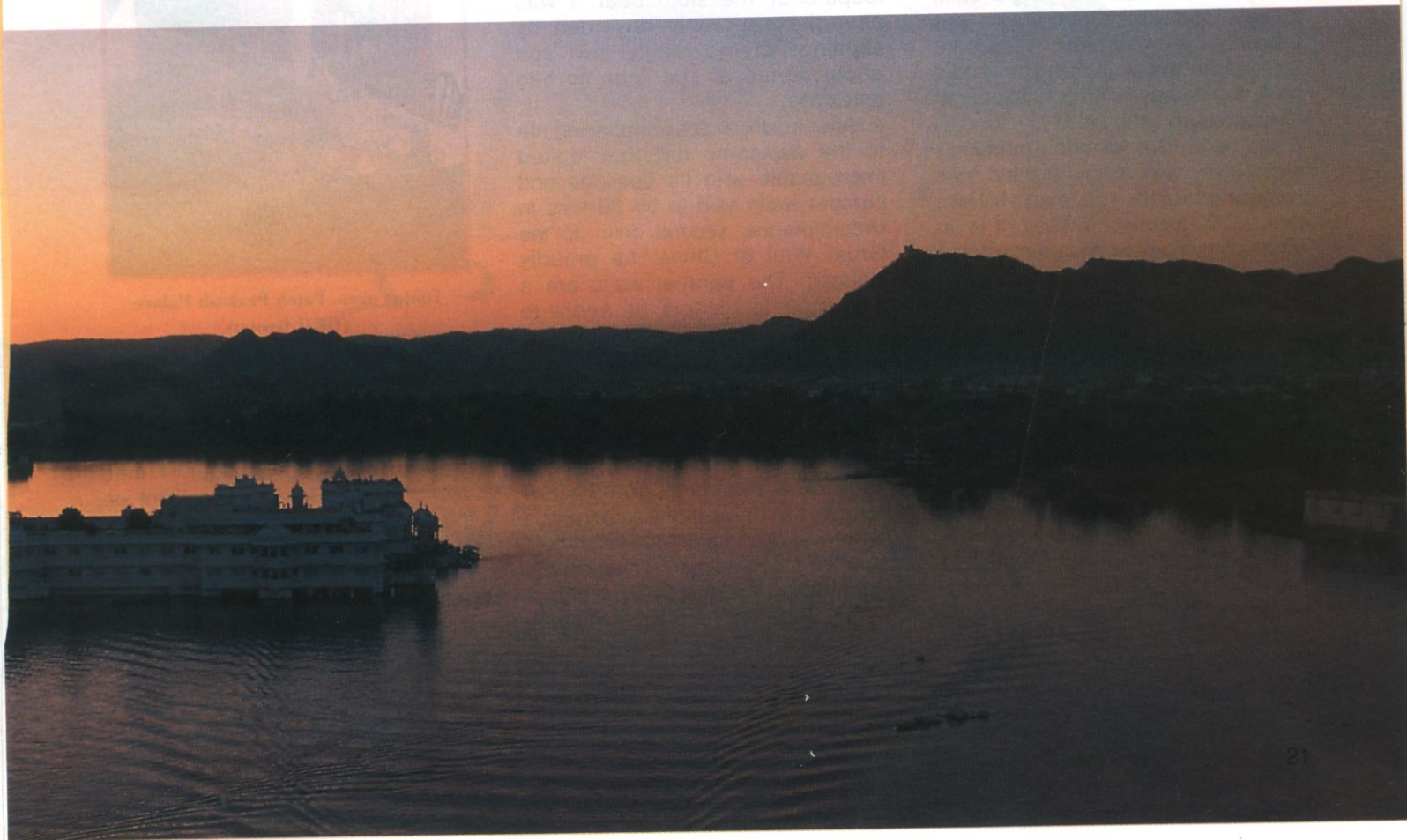
Sleep came quickly and I dreamt of magnificent Rajput warriors riding horses through landscapes out of the Mewar miniature paintings. Horse, this handsome animal, is not only a symbol of the pride of the Rajput but is also intimately connected to old palace traditions even today. To maintain horses has largely remained a princely prerogative. And so I wasn't surprised to learn that the current head of the Mewar family, Shreeji Arvind Singh Mewar was not only a patron of polo in India but also bred some of the prized horses at the Imperial Stud Farm located not far from the city, in the sylvan surroundings of Shikarbadi.

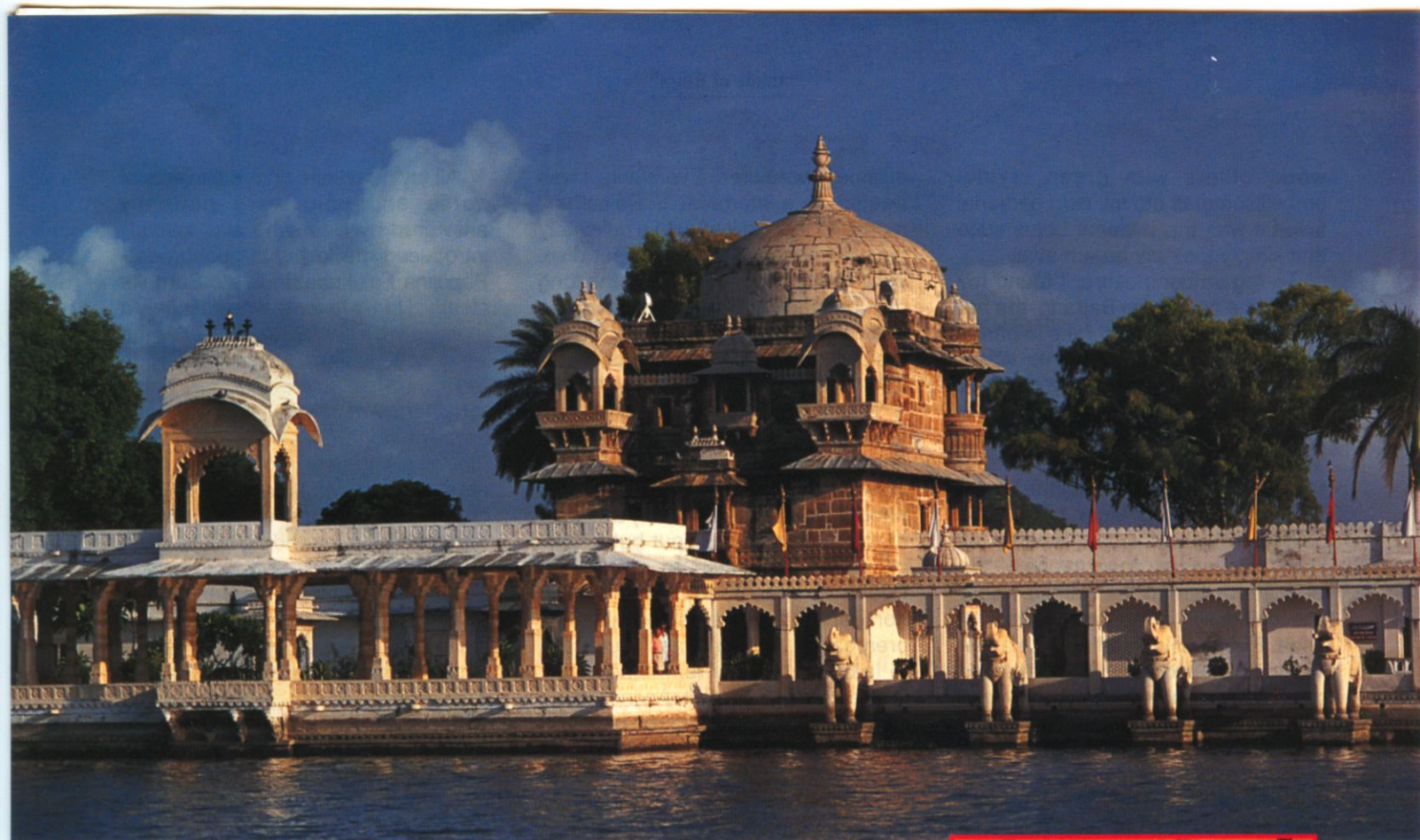
Once the personal hunting lodge of the Royal Family, SHIKARBADI today serves as a hotel and is yet another property of the HRH. Major Durga Das, ADC to Arvind Singh Mewar, insisted that I should include Shikarbadi in my itinerary and arranged for Udai Singh, the Stable Master to take me around the premises.

All my questions on the subjects of horse and polo were patiently answered by Udai who also lovingly introduced me to his throughbreds - Papolina, Faluknaaz India etc. But quite clearly, Udai's favorite was definitely a mare called Keol. "She is as fast as the wind and is the best polo pony in India," he declared. Besides these thoroughbreds, there were Marwari horses which Udai said were used by the house guests at Shikarbadi for riding purposes. Safaris were also organized for those who wanted to discover the surrounding countryside on horseback.

Although I had come essentially for an equestrian experience. I eventually landed up discovering the various facets of this exclusive resort replete with its swimming pool, sprawling lawns, bar and two restaurants. In winters, a tented village comes up around the Risala restaurant, for those who prefer a more earthy feeling. To set the mood right, a camp fire is lit under the starlit heavens with folk musicians and dancers providing beat and rhythm to an evening's celebrations, that includes barbecued delicacies washed down with shots of rum and whisky!

"The enduring charm of Shikarbadi is its small patch of reserved forest which is rich in bird and wildlife," said





The impressive Jag Mandir (HRH Group)

Paramjit Kaur who manages this property. "All through the day one can see some animal or another like black faced monkeys, peacocks, spotted deer, bluebull antelope, wild boars or even mongooses and hares." Other denizens included the jungle cats, jackals and foxes but they were primarily nocturnal. "But to see the leopard and the sloth bear you should go to the nearby wildlife sanctuary of Kumbhalgarh," she said.

So be it. The following morning I was on my way to this historic 15th century fortress that sits atop a hill less than a 100 kilometers away. It is an interesting two hour drive through the Aravelli range and tribal country and before I could doze off the car arrived at another HRH property — the AODHI HOTEL. Literally meaning a Shooting Tower, Aodhi is a carefully designed property that seems to merge with the hillside along which it is spread. It provides an ideal base from where to begin a trip of discovery of the fort and the surrounding forests for wildlife.

"You could either go on horseback along with the groom and a packed lunch or take a jeep and come back for a meal at the restaurant" said Alok Sharma, a young executive at Aodhi. With constraints of time, I chose to go in a jeep with Ram Singh, an expert driver at the wheel. After a thrilling jeep

ride down the hill we reached the base where there was a lake with crocodiles basking in the sun. After a short respite, we made our way back to Aodhi through the tropical dry deciduous forest. And although I didn't see the leopard or the sloth bear. I was nevertheless amply rewarded by sightings of red jungle fowl and *chausinghas* or the four horned antelopes.

After lunch, Alok accompanied me to the awesome fort that looked impregnable with its bastions and parapet walls said to be 36 kms in circumference, second only to the Great Wall of China, he proudly claimed. The parapet walls are a challenge to visitors at Aodhi to undertake a circumambulation. I was told an Australian family held the record of doing the entire circuit in six and a half hours.

It took me more than an hour to climb right up on top of the fort at 3568 feet, for a sweeping grand view. Pointing west towards the empty plains of Marwar, Alok said, "300 kilometers from here is Jaisalmer, a magical city in the desert and the GORBAND PALACE HOTEL of the HRH." Turning northwards he said, "The HRH has two more properties in Bikaner, the KARNI BHAWAN and GAJNER PALACE. Both were homes to the former maharajas



Dining area, Fatch Prakash Palace (HRH Group)

of Bikaner. You should also go there." Well, perhaps someday.

Before leaving Udaipur, I met Jitendra Singh Rathore, President of this unique chain of hotels. "Almost all our properties have been the former residences of the kings and today they have been carefully remodeled to give you a chain of hotels which is perhaps one of the most exclusive palace resorts in India. We offer you the Abode of Kings." And I couldn't have agreed with him more.