


100 cobbled
ROADS 
and a million footprints on my soul



The most exquisite craftsmanship
awaits you in Bikaner

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Head for Junagadh Fort in Bikaner...

Set against the 200,000 square kilometre golden sand carpet that forms the Thar Desert (Great Indian Desert), is an Indian city that often misses the limelight. It has a capacity to delight you with unexpected architectural splendour...from ornamental havelis hidden in a mesmerizing old town maze to sumptuous palaces overflowing with examples of rich artistic craftsmanship. So, if Rajasthan is on your mind, look beyond the J-trilogy (Jaipur, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer). And be dazzled by Bikaner!

Kick off with the inspiring story of the city, the 15th-century result of an ambitious military adventure by enterprising Rao Bika, youngest of five sons of Rao Jodha, founder of Jodhpur. Bika realises that he doesn't stand a chance at inheritance, so, he moves far from home towards inhospitable desert terrain to create a new kingdom of his own. State flourishes, generations thrive. Bikaner's sixth ruler, Raja Rai Singhji accepts Mughal sovereignty and leaves behind a priceless legacy...Junagarh Fort (meaning big fort). The 986m-long wall with 37 bastions spread over a mammoth 5.28 hectares of land, encloses one of the finest examples of architecture in the country. Reserve a day for Bikaner's magnum opus. Wow factor guaranteed.

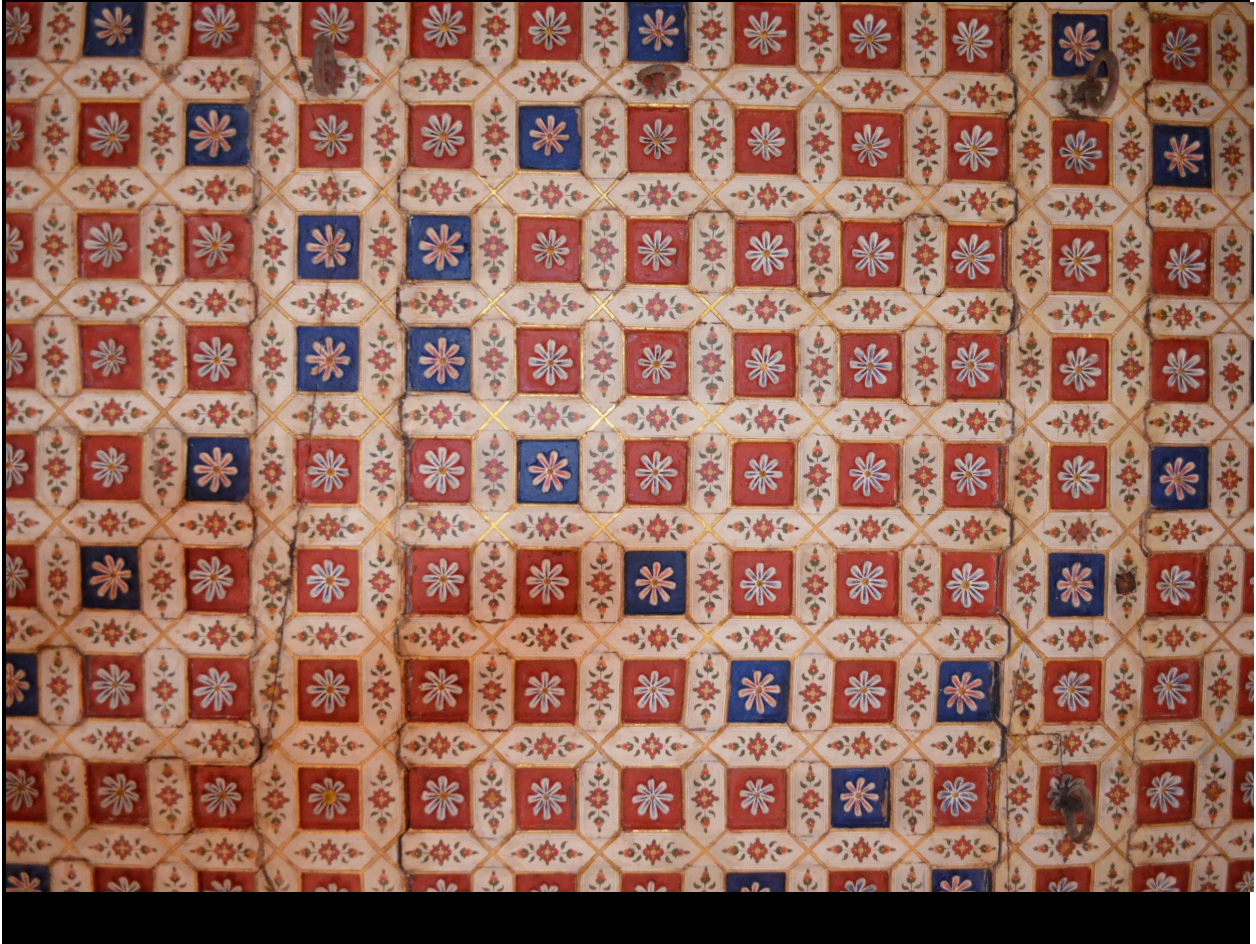


But Junagarh is more than just a monument of scale. First, tick off all the quintessential architectural elements of a Rajasthan royal palace fort... impressive public areas, luxurious private quarters, graceful pavilions, wide-open courtyards, elegant pillar columns, overhanging balconies, intricate jaali-screen windows (jharokhas) and the iconic chhatris.



Now zoom in for the finer details and wait for the jaw-drop. Intricate wall murals, elaborate stucco ceilings, lavish lacquered doors, pretty enamelled mirrors, even Dutch glazed tiles and Chinese wallpapers. Not just panels...entire rooms studded with exquisitely styled, gilded walls. There's delicacy in each flawless motif and innovation in every impeccable pattern...tasteful, inventive, poetic. Scan. And process.

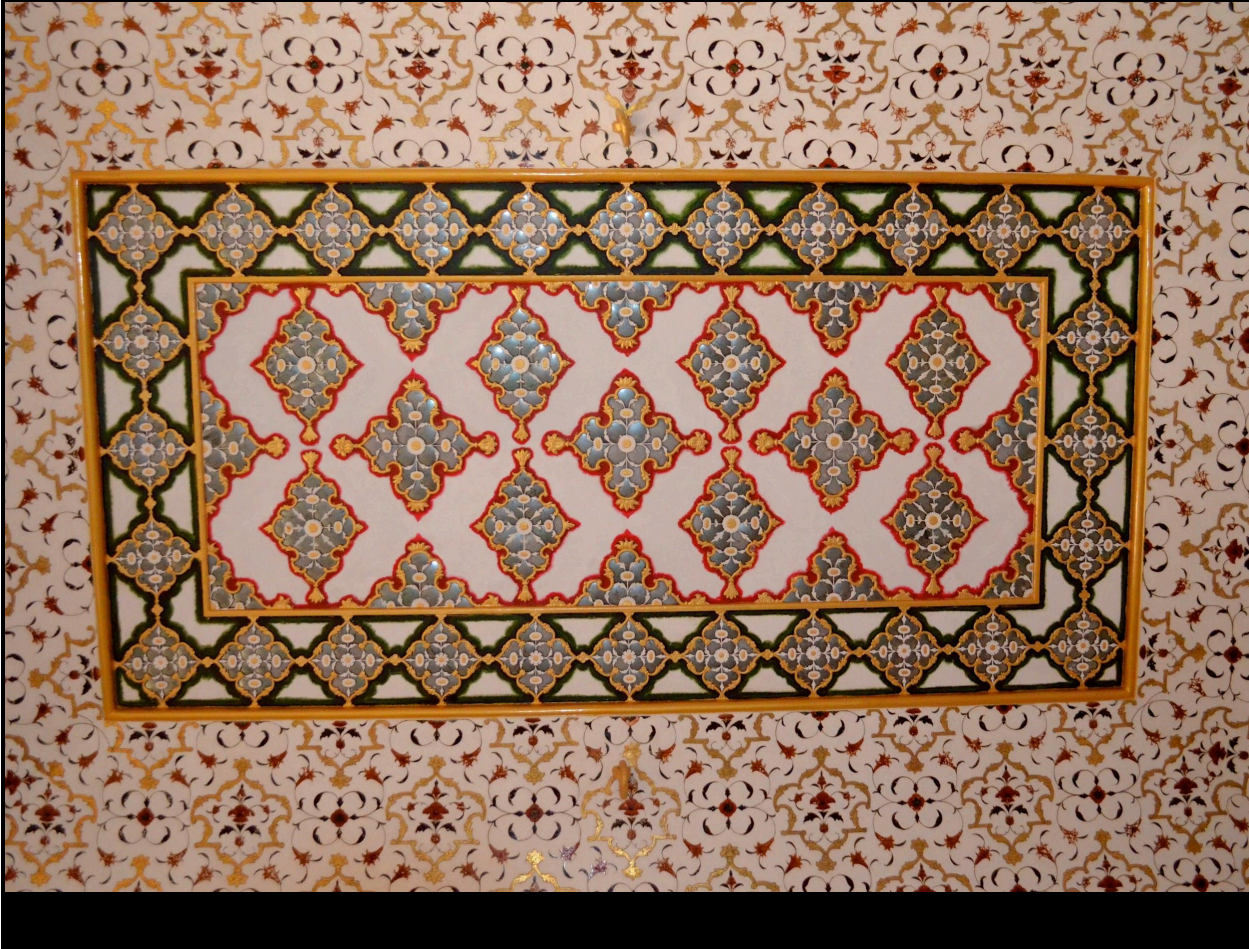
Dig deeper into the leftovers of art that bloomed to cross limits of imagination under a series of prosperous military leaders from the 17th-century Karan Mahal to the 18th-century Chander Mahal and the 19th-century Badal Mahal. Mughal-inspired white marble with wide-spaced floral and geometric ornamentation that make you sigh. Elaborate stucco ceilings that tempt you to be taller. Glass mosaic with gold leaf that evoke a silent 'unbelievable'. Gold plated deities that make you blink. Paintings inlaid with precious stones that challenge your conscience. Carved panels and mirrors that feel like Cinderella. Let your right brain take over.



And finally, gear up for the best in this palace-fort-meets-art gallery with my favorite takeaway...the finest examples of local Usta art in the country. If you've seen one example, you can easily recognize it all over the palace complex. This highly ornate and detailed lacquer work on camel hide ('Usta' comes from Persian word 'Ustad' meaning master) uses vibrant colours and striking gold motifs in floral and animal forms. For the most elaborate, more intricate, more opulent example, swoon over the gold-vermillion Anup Mahal.



Usta stuns you wherever you go in the palace complex. Practice spotting the popular Taarabandi (a star-studded sky) and Naqqashi, (patterns of flowers and motifs) on ceiling surfaces, door or wall panels. Three-dimensional and embossed. Resplendent like Indian jewellery. Royal like Persian carpets. And regal like French tapestries. Undulating curves and strong shapes. Each pattern unique, all very distinctly Mughal in styling. Overwhelmed much?





The handful of Usta artists who migrated from Iran to India during the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar were clueless that their craft would be relayed forward several centuries to become an icon of Bikaner. Ironically, just a handful of these skilful artists survive...as in all other demanding art forms across the world. But you can still scout the local handicraft stores for a handcrafted (very expensive) Usta souvenir. A coaster, goblet, vase, photo frame, or lamp...how deep is your pocket? More importantly, how large is your heart?

