



Marwari ears



Tent pegging at the Royal Polo & Equestrian stables

# TRAVELS ON A MARWARI HORSE

*Henry Dallal experienced the colour and tradition of Rajasthan, on safari from magical Dundlod*

**T**here are many holidays and trips where you are treated in first-class style. There are very few, however, on which you are immersed in cultural splendours, nature and treated as if you are royalty.

Such was the overall theme of our visit to Rajasthan, on a horse safari with Kanwar Raghuvendra Singh Dundlod, from the house of Dundlod, also known as Bonnie.

Having recently published my book

*Cavalry, Pageantry and Performance, The Household Cavalry In A Celebration Of Pictures*, I had the good fortune to take up Bonnie's long standing invitation to visit India and experience first hand, his native world full of colour, tradition, and the fabled Marwari Horse in Rajasthan.

It was just the right ingredients to tantalize anyone's appetite for travel and photography.

Upon arrival we had the honour of meeting the Maharaja of Jaipur, providing the opportunity to present a copy of *Pageantry and Performance* to him. His father was the celebrated polo player, Maharajah Sir Sawai Man Singh II, the first ever Indian to serve as an officer with the Life Guards in the Household Cavalry.

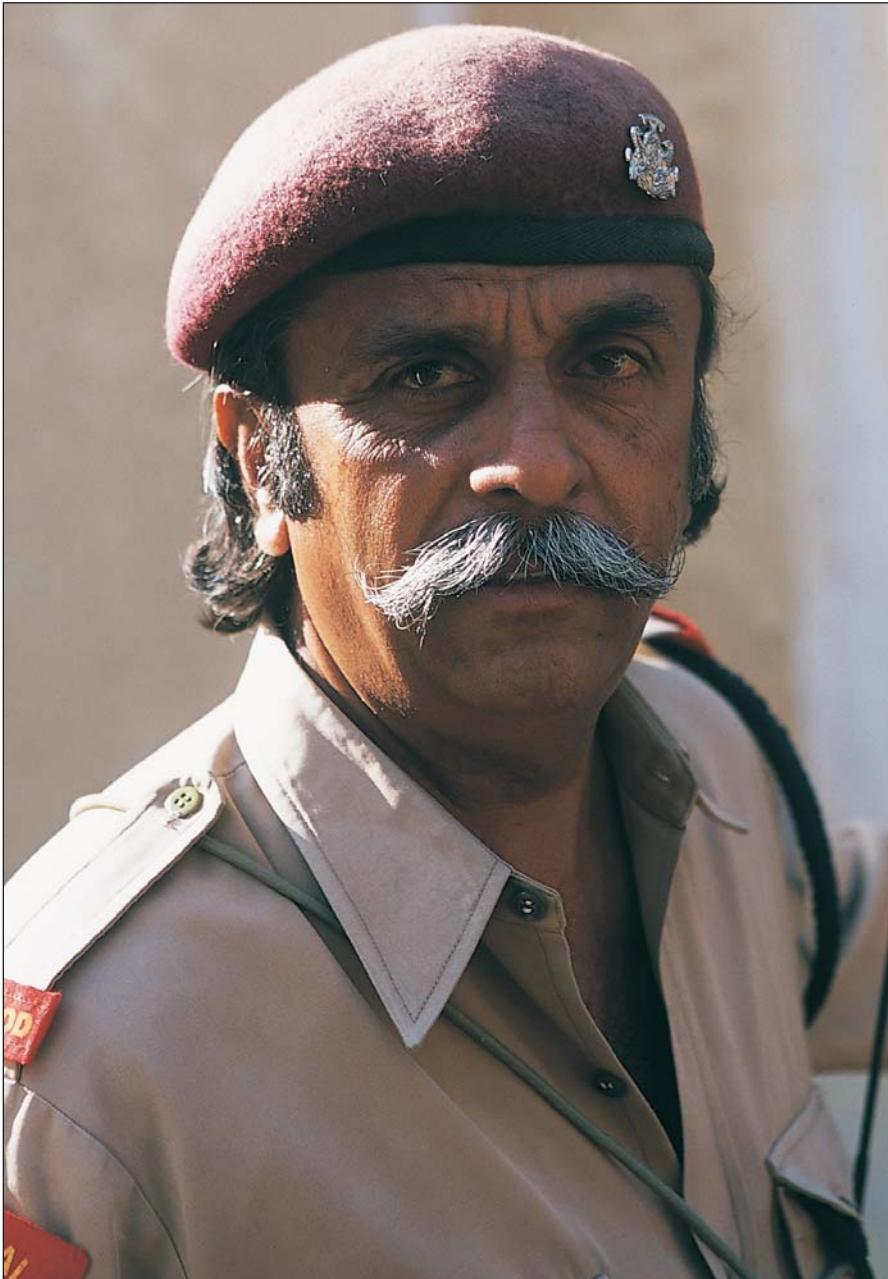
Our trip coincided with the annual Holi festival, a colourful holiday enjoyed throughout the land. The beginning of summer is celebrated with everyone throwing powdered paint and flowers at each other. In Jaipur, this follows the elephant festival with the brightly and carefully decorated pachyderms having paraded through the city the day before.

It was at the Rambagh Palace in Jaipur, under the well-known lithograph of the famous polo match when India crushed England in 1933, that Bonnie and his friends pioneered the sport of elephant polo.

As a visionary, Bonnie spends his life finding ways to regenerate his local countryside, its peoples, cultures, traditions and ways. In doing so, he has created the Royal Polo and Equestrian Centre,



Marwari-style capriole



*Kanwar Raghuvendra Singh Dundlod, known affectionately as Bonnie*

including taking visitors like us on safari throughout Rajasthan, on the wonderful horses he breeds.

Together with Francesca Kelly, he shares an ongoing passion to breed the Marwari horse, a line of unique horses characterised by inwardly curved ears that almost meet at the ends.

Throughout an almost forgotten history, they were bred as the ultimate powerful warhorse, displaying agility, endurance and good character to swiftly cover long distances in the hot desert.

We became immersed into a world steeped with tradition, culture, history and colour. Bonnie's father, Thakur Raghuvir Singh of the house of Dundlod, was a Cavalry officer and one of the few who gave up control of their army for the benefit of running the 61st

Cavalry. This proud regiment still carries on a tradition similar to that of the Household Cavalry at home.

On our arrival to Dundlod, Lise Hutton and I were overcome with the splendour of a royal welcome. Two fully decorated camels, and dancing horses, drummers, musicians, garlands of flowers and the Hindu ritual of rice pressed on our foreheads by Bonnie's team, welcomed us to the fort which has been owned by his family for generations.

During our visit a group was conducting an study considering Dundlod for designation as a World Heritage Site for upholding its traditional way of life and architecture. The Fort has meandering corridors and towers, rooms of photographs depicting history and colourful personalities of Bonnie's forefathers. Each



night our evening meal was served in a different part of the fort on an open terrace or under the stars with dancing shadows from the glow of flaming torches.

Our first afternoon was spent becoming acquainted with our four-legged companions who were to take us on our travels. Home to some fifty horses, the Royal Polo and Equestrian Stables at Dundlod is where Bonnie keeps his Marwaris and makes sure his staff maintain military precision and discipline. An exciting and riveting display of horsemanship and tent pegging by him and his team was played out on his grounds, which hosted the world Tent Pegging Championships in 2000. This mentally incites us in anticipation of our safari across the countryside.

Having been on numerous expedi-



Royal welcome at Dundlod Fort

tions by horseback this was by far the most colourful – hearing that it had been voted best riding outfit by Equitour USA was no surprise.

Led by Bonnie, we set off. Following in the rear was the ever-present saffron and orange standard of Dundlod. The standard, together with the flowing turban of Mehboob, waved in the wind as Bonnie and his mount proudly display this symbol of Dundlod as we travel through the different territories. On our Marwaris we come across villages, farms, a wedding party, fellow travellers on camels and beautiful open country.

The *bandobast* was at its best. We were the beneficiaries of Bonnie's many years of experience in taking teams of visiting riders and travellers on safari across the desert and open countryside of

Rajasthan and, more recently, Sri Lanka. The team of supporters are all smartly uniformed in flaring jodhpurs, symbolizing the 'army' of Dundlod, attend to every detail and whim. In our case, we felt thoroughly spoilt as our team consisted only of Bonnie, Lise Hutton and myself with my uncontained excitement to photograph everything and countless delights.

On these beautifully bred horses, we felt as if we were floating across the countryside. When Bonnie says 'trot' he actually means full-on gallop. And gallop we did a lot, sometimes even in the dark, as we would ride through the magical hues, colours and calmness of dusk to arrive at a campsite meticulously set up. Roaring fires, with dancing flames of torches to mark our very comfortable tents

equipped even with postcard-sized mirror. Water was being heated on an open fire, symbolizing the ultimate mark of luxury in creature comfort in the outdoors – a hot shower after a long day's ride.

A colourful *shamiana* served as the travelling kitchen for the cook and his helpers, who created gastronomic delights at every mealtime. In the heat of the day, we would arrive at a small oasis-like setting, and dismount. Lunch and ice cold beer was presented with six different curries and vegetable dishes and slowly cooked rice. A wonderful unhurried *siesta* for our horses and us followed while we waited for the earth to cool before we cantered into the sunset.

Dinner was served around a campfire and, if we were lucky, usually includ-

ed wild fowl and game. Local talent would frequently provide entertainment – accompanying staff, using home-made instruments and drums, and singing joyfully well into the night.

As we retired to our colourful tents, I lay in my *charpai*, listening to the sounds of thousands of night birds, and the odd neighing of our horses nearby. The singing has finished, but the memory of another wonderful day plays over in my mind. The feeling of the sands warmed by the fire going through my bare toes and fingers as we sat around the fire listening to Bonnie's stories still provide a wonderful memory of that magical lakeside campsite, after a full day's riding in open country.

My imagination wanders to the time three hundred and fifty years ago, when our campsite and surrounding area was an actual battleground between the Mongols and the Shekawati rajputs, whose descendants live in this land. After many battles the Mongol ruler, Aurangzeb, could not defeat the local Shekawati tribe. As a mark of respect for the bravery shown by them and their Marwari horses, he left a pair of drums in the local shrine, which still beat today.

A brief stop over in Delhi to catch our flight home provided us with an opportunity to visit the barracks of the President's Body Guard. Impeccably smart, it was a pleasure to visit a different version of state ceremonial, not dissimilar to the Household Cavalry. One must stop at least for a drink, if not for the night, in the Imperial Hotel in Delhi. A museum hotel, it boasts an arresting collection of British art on India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with a continual theme of land war gallantry through lithographs and paintings. These provide ample pleasure from bygone days when the horse was used for fun, games and battle.

For information on Bonnie and his exciting horse safari and inland travel see [www.dumdlod.com](http://www.dumdlod.com)

Henry Dallal is a travel photographer. His work has been exhibited in the USA and UK, including the Royal Geographical Society, Kensington Palace and as a son *et lumiere* on the walls of Windsor Castle, with images from his book **Pageantry and Performance, The Household Cavalry In A Celebration Of Pictures**, reviewed in PQ international of Autumn 2003. BBC Radio 4 Today programme awarded him Britain's Best View at 6am, with an image of the Household Cavalry contained in his book.

Further information is available on [www.henrydallalphotography.com](http://www.henrydallalphotography.com) or [www.westernoriental.com](http://www.westernoriental.com)



Happy lads celebrating Holi in Jaipur



Lise Hutton followed by Nivan & standard bearer Mehboob



A wedding party encountered on our journey