

# Northern Rajasthan (Shekhawati)



Far less visited than most other parts of Rajasthan, the extraordinary Shekhawati region is most famous for its painted *havelis* (traditional, ornately decorated residences), smothered with dazzling, often cartoonlike murals. What makes the region all the more astonishing is that these works of art are largely found in tiny towns, connected to each other by single-track roads that run through bleak, arid countryside, where women's colourful clothes seem to flicker like beacons as they move across the barren fields.

Today it seems curious that such care, attention and financing was lavished on these out-of-the-way houses, but from the 14th century onwards, Shekhawati's towns were important trading posts on the caravan routes from Gujarati ports. Most buildings, though, date from the 18th and 19th centuries, when the local merchants moved to places with richer pickings, and sent all their money back to build grand edifices to house their families and impress the neighbours.

Part of what makes the artwork on Shekhawati's *havelis* so fascinating is the manner in which their artists combined traditional subjects, such as mythology, religious scenes and images of the family, with contemporary concerns, including brand-new inventions and accounts of current events, many of which these isolated painters rendered straight from their imagination. As a whole these kaleidoscopic images present a unique document of life, and all its concerns, a century and more ago. While it's impossible to detail all the beautiful homes you may stumble across on your journey through Shekhawati, this chapter includes a selection of highlights. Look out, too, for forts, *baoris* (step-wells), *chhatris* (cenotaphs) and mosques, all ripe for the discovery.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Gaze at glorious technicolour *havelis* (merchants' houses) in **Parsurampura** (p282), **Ramgarh** (p290) and **Mukundgarh** (p284).
- Head out on an ecologically minded tour from **Nawalgarh** (p280), exploring unchanged rural villages.
- Explore the derelict Khetri Mahal in **Jhunjhunu** (p286) – all arches, columns and architectural whimsy.
- Take in Sone ki Dukan Haveli, featuring lavish paintings using real gold, in sleepy, back-in-time **Mahansar** (p289)
- Take time out in the beautifully restored Haveli Nadine Prince in **Fatehpur** (p292), lingering over lunch in its cool café.





## History

A rich but lawless land on the trade route between the ports of the Arabian Sea and the fertile Ganges Valley, this region was, in its early history, dominated by the Shekhawats, with portions (principally Jhunjhunu and Fatehpur) held by the Muslim Kayamkhani Nawabs (Muslim ruling princes or landowners). The Shekhawati *thakurs* (noblemen), like other Rajasthani rulers, were once most noted for their penchant for arguing among themselves. Unlike other areas of Rajasthan, the region was thus never combined into a single principality, but remained a conglomeration of separate, quarrelsome feudal domains that were mainly run by the same family.

The name 'Shekhawati' can be traced to a 15th-century Rajput Kachhwaha chieftain by the name of Rao Shekha. As the Mughal empire declined after the death of the emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, his descendants, who had already installed themselves in the area to the east of the Aravalli Hills, encroached to the north and west.

The *thakurs* of the region retained a nominal loyalty to the Rajput states of Jaipur and Amber, which in turn honoured them with the hereditary titles of *tazimi sardars* (hereditary nobles entitled to be received at a ceremonial reception held by the chief). The Rajputs, however, never really trusted the *thakurs* – for example, when Jaipur was built in the 18th century, the Shekhawats were

offered land *outside* the city walls to build their houses. Despite not being allowed in the inner circle, it was probably exposure to the courts of Jaipur and Amber that encouraged the *thakurs* to commission the very first murals to decorate their *havelis*.

By 1732 two of these *thakurs* – Sardul Singh and Shiv Singh – had overthrown the nawabs of Fatehpur and Jhunjhunu and carved out their territories in the region. Their descendants, particularly the sons of Sardul Singh, installed themselves in surrounding villages, filling their pockets with heavy taxes imposed on the poor farmers of the area and duties levied on caravans carrying goods from the ports of Gujarat. But for the merchants travelling on the Shekhawati route, this trail was nevertheless a cheap option – the Rajput states on either side imposed even greater levies and the arid region soon became busy with trade, attracting more and more merchants. The riches, inevitably, also attracted dacoits (bandits), imbuing the area with a distinctly lawless, Wild West flavour.

The rise of the British Raj could potentially have been a death blow for Shekhawati, since the British ports in Bombay (Mumbai) and Calcutta (Kolkata) were able to handle a far higher volume of trade than those in Gujarat. Moreover, pressure from the British East India Company compelled Jaipur state to reduce its levies, so it was no longer necessary for traders to travel with their goods through Shekhawati. But Shekhawati merchants had received a good grounding in the practices and principles of trade, and were reluctant to relinquish a lucrative source of income.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Shekhawati's men thus emigrated en masse from their desert homes to the thriving trading centres emerging on the ports of the Ganges. Their business acumen was unparalleled, and soon some of the richest merchants residing in

Calcutta were those who hailed from the tiny region of Shekhawati. Some of India's wealthiest industrialists of the 20th century, such as the Birlas, were originally Marwaris, as the people of Shekhawati later became known.

## Information

### BOOKS

For a full rundown on the history, people, towns and buildings of the area, try tracking down a copy of *The Painted Towns of Shekhawati* by Ilay Cooper, which, though currently out of print, can be picked up at secondhand bookshops in the region.

Another good book, available locally, is *Shekhawati Painted Townships* by Kishore Singh, which is well photographed and has lots of background information.

Apni Dhani (p281) in Nawalgarh has a good reference library of books on the region, in English and French, available for use by guests and those dropping by for a meal.

### Activities & Tours

A number of operators offer camel or horse-riding safaris in the Shekhawati region. These are a relaxing way to see rural life and birdlife, fitting in well with the pace of life outside the towns. In Nawalgarh you have a wide choice of trekking, horse riding, camel safaris or tours by bicycle (p280). In Dundlod experienced riders can go horse riding (p284) on fine Marwari horses, or you can take a camel or jeep safari. Camel safaris are on offer at Mahansar's **Narayan Niwas Castle** (☎ 01595-264322) and camel and jeep safaris at Mukundgarh, while you have the choice of camel, jeep or horse trips at Mandawa (p295), or camel, jeep or bicycle trips at Jhunjhunu (p287).

There are also several places where, inspired by all this artwork, you can undertake courses in painting or local crafts (p280). In

### FESTIVALS IN NORTHERN RAJASTHAN

Shekhawati has a couple of festivals to its name, but also celebrates statewide and nationwide festivals with fervour (see p358).

**Shekhawati Festival** ([www.shekhawatifestival.com](http://www.shekhawatifestival.com); statewide; Feb) Promoted by the Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation (RTDC), the official programme includes safaris, tours of the region, competitions and fireworks, but remains a small and locally flavoured affair, for the moment at least.

**Bissau Festival** (Bissau; Sep/Oct) Ten days before the festival of Dussehra, Bissau hosts dramatic mime performances of the Ramayana. The actors wear costumes and locally made masks, and the performances take place in the bazaar at twilight.

**SEEING SHEKHAWATI RESPONSIBLY**

Though the tourist boom has not quite caught up here yet, it probably won't be too much longer in coming, bringing with it, as it has in many other parts of Rajasthan, seemingly unavoidable concerns for the culture and environment. For those lucky enough to visit the region before the tourist buses descend en masse, there are a number of things you can do to reduce your impact. Since many gorgeous *havelis* have, for decades, been plundered or left to fade away, responsible tourism can play a positive role in the preservation of the region's masterpieces, generating the will among locals to preserve and cherish its heritage.

Currently, only a few *havelis* are open as museums or specifically for display, and consequently many are either totally or partially locked up. They are frequently still owned by the family who built them a century or more ago, but these people often no longer reside in this dusty, out-of-the-way corner of the state, either employing a *chowkidar* (caretaker) or renting the place out to tenants. While the caretakers and tenants are often tolerant of strangers wandering into their front courtyard, be aware that these are private places, and that tact should be used. Some may ask for a little baksheesh to let you in; Rs 20 or Rs 30 is usually a good price to pay for a glimpse of hidden treasures.

- Local custom dictates that shoes should be removed when entering the inner courtyard of a *haveli*. Remember that most are private homes and you should ask permission politely before entering or taking photos.
- On your travels you'll doubtless find antique shops filled temptingly with beautiful items ripped from *havelis* – usually doors and window frames, and smaller pieces of carving or painted surfaces. Under no circumstances purchase any of these items – by doing so, you will be actively encouraging the desecration of the region's greatest treasure.
- Flashes from cameras can damage the paintings. In many instances, there may not be an express prohibition on flash photography, but even so, refrain from flashing away.

As in other parts of Rajasthan, try to limit your consumption of plastic products – especially plastic mineral water bottles and plastic carrier bags – as much as possible. The less waste you generate, the smaller the piles of plastic bottles blotting the landscape.

- In many towns, it's easy to get around by bike or on foot, rather than plumping for the pollution-heavy autorickshaw option whose fumes will, in time, erode Shekhawati's murals. Where you can, use your feet or pedal power to see the sights.
- Water is a critical issue in Shekhawati and every drop is precious (see p80). Consider washing with a bucket rather than using the shower, even if your hotel has one installed; equally, think carefully before staying in a hotel with a swimming pool.
- Camel and horse safaris are a popular way to visit the local villages. When on safari, ensure that your rubbish is carried away and insist on kerosene fires instead of using scarce sources of wood.
- It's possible in some places to stay in village homes, a good way to meet locals and gain an insight into their way of life: Ramesh Jangid from Nawalgarh has some interesting homestay programmes (p280). He is also the president of **Les Amis du Shekhawati** (Friends of Shekhawati; [www.apanidhani.com](http://www.apanidhani.com)) – to read more information about the society and its endeavours to protect the paintings of Shekhawati, see p370.
- French artist Nadine Le Prince's restored *haveli* (p292) in Fatehpur is now a cultural centre. Local and French artists work here, and the centre publicises the plight of the *havelis*: it's worth a visit.

Jhunjhunu you can also take cooking courses (p287) of various lengths.

**Getting Around**

The Shekhawati region is crisscrossed by narrow, dusty roads and all towns are served by government or private buses and jam-packed

shared jeeps. Old 1950s snub-snouted Tata Mercedes buses ply the routes, with turbaned villagers riding 'upper class' (on the roof). Buses may be busy but they are less crowded than jeeps, and generally a little bit safer. Many of the roads are in poor condition, so be prepared for an occasionally bumpy journey.

Though several towns are served by trains, services are currently slow and unreliable, so bus or jeep is definitely the better bet.

To zip from town to town more speedily and in greater comfort, hire a taxi for the day. The usual rate for a non-AC taxi is Rs 3.5 to 5 per kilometre with a minimum of 250km per day. Around four or five people can travel in one car, so having a larger group will keep costs down.

Another means of getting around the area is by bicycle – you can hire bikes in most of the major places – but be prepared for a bumpy, dusty ride. The best way to explore the towns themselves is on foot. Some of the larger towns also offer transport in autorickshaws and tongas (two-wheeled horse carriages).

**NAWALGARH**

☎ 01594 / pop 56,482

Nawalgarh is a small and lively town almost at the very centre of the region, and thus makes a great base for exploring. It has a fine bunch of *havelis*, a colourful, mostly pedestrianised bazaar and some excellent accommodation options.

The town was founded in 1737 by Nawal Singh, one of the five sons of the Rajput ruler Sardul Singh. The arrival of merchants from Jaipur increased the town's prosperity, and some of India's most successful merchants, such as the wealthy Goenka family (which built many *havelis*), hailed from Nawalgarh. The town is built in a depression where a number of rivers terminate; the accumulated silt carried by these rivers was used to make the bricks (some of the best preserved in Shekhawati) for local *havelis*.

**Orientation & Information**

Nawalgarh is quite compact, and most of its *havelis* are centrally located and easy to reach on foot. The train station and bus stands are all at the western end of town, while accommodation is concentrated in the north and west.

There are several internet cafés around town; they change frequently but all charge Rs 30 to 50 per hour. Ask at your hotel if you have any trouble locating one. The **State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur** (SBBJ; Bala Qila complex) changes currency and travellers cheques, and there's an SBBJ ATM near the post office, though it's not always working.

The best sources of information on Nawalgarh and its painted *havelis* are Ramesh

Jangid at **Apani Dhani** (☎ 222239; [www.apanidhani.com](http://www.apanidhani.com)) and his son Rajesh at **Ramesh Jangid's Tourist Pension** (☎ 224060). Both father and son are involved in the preservation of Shekhawati's *havelis* and in educational programmes to raise local awareness about their rich cultural legacy. They also run ecologically minded tours through their agency Alternative Travels, mainly in Rajasthan but also to Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. See the website [www.apanidhani.com](http://www.apanidhani.com) for more details.

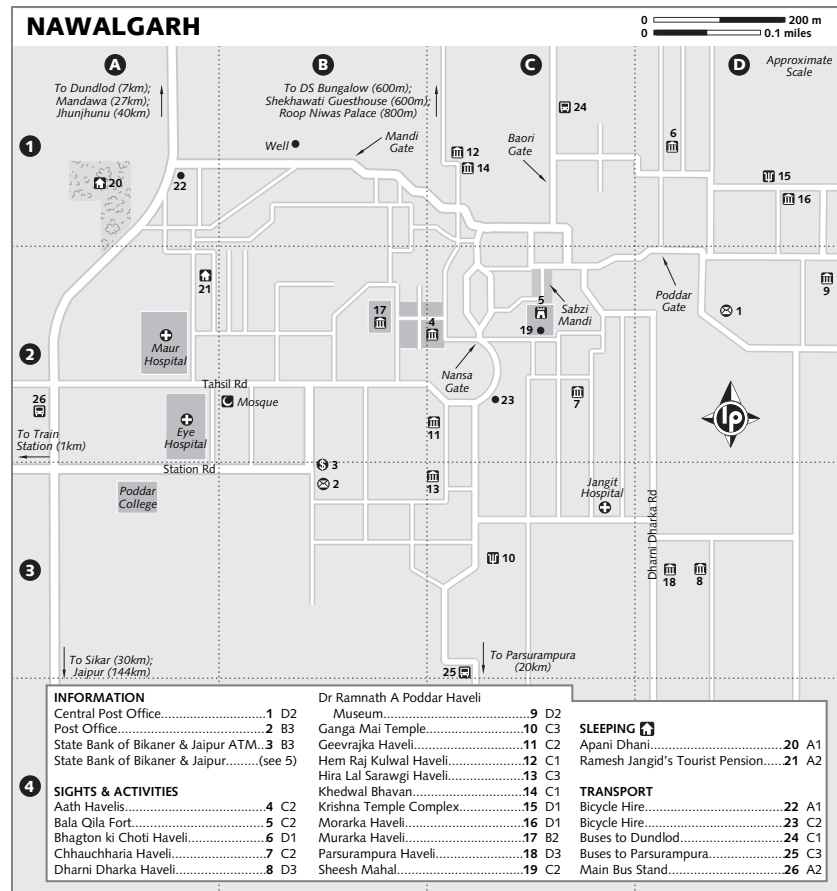
**Sights****BALA QILA**

The fort of Bala Qila was founded in 1737, but today its modern additions largely obscure the original building, and it houses a fruit-and-vegetable market and two banks. The **Sheesh Mahal** in the southeastern quarter of the fort, though, is one room that retains mirrorwork and beautiful paintings on its ceiling, depicting map-like street scenes of both Jaipur and Nawalgarh from the mid-19th century. The grand but rather spooky room was once the dressing room of the maharani of Nawalgarh. To find it, climb a small greenish staircase in the southeastern corner of the fort to the 2nd floor. The room is hidden behind a sweet shop, where you will be asked for Rs 10 or Rs 20 to be allowed through.

**HAVELIS**

To the west of Bala Qila is a group of six *havelis*, known as the **Aath Havelis**, erected around 1900. *Aath* means 'eight', and they were so named because originally eight *havelis* were planned. The paintings are not technically as proficient as some others in this town, but they are interesting because they illustrate the transition in painting styles over the decades. As you approach the group through the gate from the road, for example, the first *haveli* to the left has older paintings on the front of the side external wall, while newer paintings, with synthetic colours, are at the rear. The front section depicts a steam locomotive, and the back section features some monumental pictures of elephants, horses and camels. There are lots of eclectic, lively subjects to peruse, including barbers, trains and false windows.

Opposite this group of *havelis* is the beautifully preserved **Murarka Haveli**, which has some fine paintings, including miniatures above the entrance depicting the Krishna (the most



celebrated of the Hindu deities) legends. The *haveli* is nowadays rented out for weddings. Unless there's an event going on, the courtyard is, sadly, likely to be locked; you can still catch a glimpse, though, through a gap in the gate.

About 10 minutes' walk to the north is the **Hem Raj Kulwal Haveli**, built in 1931; this *haveli* remains lived-in, but you'll be allowed entry for the customary *baksheesh*. Here, above the entrance, are portraits of the Kulwal family, of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and of a European lady putting on her make-up. Kaleidoscopic architraves surround the windows, and the outer courtyard features a triumphant train. An ornate silver door adorned with mini-

ature peacocks leads to the inner courtyard, which features paintings depicting mostly religious themes, though most are obscured by soot from decades of smoky kitchen fires. Opposite is the household's guesthouse, built in the same year, which looks as if it's strayed from Brighton (England).

Nearby is the still-inhabited **Khedwal Bhavan**, which features beautiful mirrorwork above the entrance to the inner courtyard, and fine blue tilework. A locomotive is depicted above the archway, and a frieze along the north wall shows the Teej festival (spot the women on swings). On the west wall is a large locomotive crossing a bridge and underneath are portraits of various English people. On the outside north wall is the story of Dhola

## THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE HAVELI

The Persian term *haveli* means 'enclosed space', but the architecture of the *haveli* did much more than simply enclose space; it in fact provided a comprehensive system that governed the everyday lives of its inhabitants.

Most *havelis* have a large wooden gate (usually locked) as their main entrance, in which is set a smaller doorway that gives access to the outer courtyard. Often a huge ramp leads from the street to this grand gate, up which a prospective groom would have been able to ascend in appropriate grandeur on horse- or elephant-back. Above the entrance you can usually see one or more small shield-shaped devices called *torans*. These are wrought of wood and silver, and often feature a parrot – the bird of love. In a mock show of conquest, the groom was required to pierce the *toran* with his sword before claiming his bride.

The doorway leads into an outer courtyard known as the *mardana* (men's courtyard). To one side there's usually a *baithak* (salon) in which the merchant of the household could receive his guests. In order to impress visitors, this room was generally the most elaborately crafted and often featured marble or mock-marble walls. Here, you'll frequently see images of Ganesh, god of wealth and good fortune, and this was where the merchant and his guests reclined against bolsters and were fanned by manually operated *punkahs* (cloth fans) as they discussed their business. Opposite the *baithak* is often a stable and coach house for accommodating camels, horses or elephants called a *nora*.

The outer *mardana* leads into the second, inner women's courtyard, known as the *zenana*, where the women of the household spent the majority of their lives in strict *purdah* (seclusion). Between the two courtyards there was often a small latticed window, through which they could peep out at male guests. Sometimes, there was also a screened-off balcony, known as the *du-chatta*, above the *mardana* for them to spy on proceedings. Entry into the inner courtyard was restricted to women, family members and, occasionally, privileged male guests.

The *zenana* was the main domestic arena – the walls today are often smoke-stained by countless kitchen fires. Rooms off this courtyard served as bedrooms or storerooms, and staircases led to galleries on upper levels, which mostly comprised bedrooms – some of which were roofless, for hot nights. The courtyard arrangement, together with thick walls, provided plenty of shade to cool the inner rooms, a vital necessity in this sun-scorched land. The *haveli* thus provided everything for the women and there was no need for them to venture into the outside world – and in Shekhawati these were spectacularly gilded cages.

In the wealthiest of families, there were far more than two simple courtyards, some *havelis* enclosing as many as eight, with galleries up to six storeys high. This meant plenty of wall space to house the elaborate murals that wealthy Shekhawati merchants were so fond of commissioning.

Maru (p292), painted in two frames. In the first frame, soldiers chase the fleeing camel-borne lovers. Maru fires arrows at the assailants while Dhola urges the camel on. Above this is a smaller painting of an English woman with an infant.

To the northeast of the Baori Gate is **Bhagton ki Choti Haveli**, where you need to pay the caretaker around Rs 40 to be allowed in. On the external west wall is a locomotive and a steamship. Above them, elephant-bodied *gopis* (milkmaids) dance. Adjacent to this, women dance during the Holi festival.

Above the doorway to the inner courtyard is a detailed picture of the marriage of Rukmani, at which Krishna cheated the groom Sisupal of his prospective wife. The walls of the salon

resemble marble, painted black with decorative incisions. The inner chamber upstairs contains the family quarters, also elaborately painted. A room on the west side is home to a strange picture of a European man with a cane and pipe and a small dog on his shoulder. Adjacent, a melancholy English woman plays an accordion.

About 200m east is the **Morarka Haveli** (admission Rs 40; ☎ 8am-6.30pm). This has well-presented original paintings, preserved for decades behind doorways blocked with cement. The inner courtyard hosts some gorgeous Ramayana scenes, and look out for the slightly incongruous image of Jesus on the uppermost storey, beneath the eaves in the southeast corner of the courtyard.

On Dharni Dharka Rd is the **Parsurampura Haveli**, which dates from the early 20th century and belongs to a merchant from Parsurampura. Demonstrating the change in style that came with the influence of magazines and Western art, the grandiose paintings, with religious and secular themes, are almost *too* perfect.

In the street behind this *haveli* is the **Dharni Dharka Haveli**, which dates from 1930. There's an ornate painted carving above the arches and there are portraits of Gandhi, Nehru in an automobile, and Krishna and Radha (favourite mistress of Krishna when he lived as a cowherd) on a swing.

A short distance south of the fort are a number of interesting buildings, including the **Chhauchharia Haveli**, behind Jangit Hospital, with paintings dating from the last decade of the 19th century. These include a hot-air balloon being optimistically inflated by several Europeans blowing vigorously through pipes, and a man who at first glance appears to be exposing himself – though closer examination reveals that he is, in all innocence, holding out his finger. The elaborate floral motifs over the enormous doorway have been restored with oil paints.

To the southwest of the fort is the **Hira Lal Sarawgi Haveli**, famous for its different representations of cars. Other entertaining pictures on its external walls include an English couple sitting stiffly on a bench, a tractor with a tip-tray – an exciting new invention – and a woman trying to distract a sadhu (holy man) with an erotic dance. A short distance north is the **Geevrajka Haveli**, which has fine paintings on the ceiling of the entrance depicting various Hindu deities.

**Dr Ramnath A Poddar Haveli Museum** (admission Rs 85, camera Rs 30; ☎ 8.30am–5.30pm), built in the 1920s on the eastern side of town, is one of the region's few buildings to have been brightly and thoroughly restored. The building also now partly houses a secondary school upstairs, funded by the Poddars. The paintings of this *haveli* are defined in strong colours, as they must have looked when new, though some people object to the fact that many have been repainted rather than restored. Note the trompe l'oeil windows on the façade, the fresco subjects, including religious scenes, trains, cars and the British people, and the curious panel that depicts a bull's head when viewed from one side and an elephant's head

when looked at from the other. On the ground floor are several reasonably interesting displays, including one room with examples of different schools of Rajasthani painting and another with dolls in the wedding dress of different castes.

#### GANGA MAI TEMPLE

Several hundred metres to the south of the Nansa Gate is this fine temple, dedicated to the goddess Ganga, and decorated with mirrorwork around the inner sanctum. The courtyard is surrounded by four aisles, each formed by five archways topped by floral motifs. There are some good, small paintings above the *mandapa* (chamber before the inner sanctum of a temple). The temple was built by the wealthy Chhauchharia merchants in 1868. Devotees arrive here to worship at dawn and dusk.

#### Courses

**Apani Dhani** (☎ 222239) and **Ramesh Jangid's Tourist Pension** (☎ 224060) both arrange enjoyable lessons and workshops in Hindi, tabla drumming, cooking and local crafts such as *bandhani* (tie-dyeing); tell them exactly what you're interested in and chances are they'll be able to arrange a workshop for you.

#### Tours

Ramesh Jangid at **Apani Dhani** (☎ 222239) and his son Rajesh at **Ramesh Jangid's Tourist Pension** (☎ 224060) are keen to promote rural tourism, in part by organising homestays with families in small Shekhawati villages. Numbers are kept to a minimum (a maximum of two couples at a time per host family), and an English-speaking interpreter is provided. They also organise three-day treks in the Aravalli Range, camel safaris around Rajasthan, and informative guided tours around the painted *havelis*, including walking tours and trips by bicycle.

Treks start at Rs 1800/1500/1250 per person per day for up to two/three/four people. Treks include food, accommodation, transfers and a guide, and involve such excursions as walks along a dried-up river bed (you can have your luggage carried for you between picnics and nightly encampments), and visits to ashrams and temples en route.

Prices for jeep tours to the villages of Shekhawati from Nawalgarh are as follows: a three-hour trip taking in Dundlod and Parsurampura is Rs 1500 for up to four people;

a five-hour trip taking in Mandawa, Dundlod and Fatehpur is Rs 1800 for up to four people; a seven- to eight-hour trip visiting Bissau, Churu, Ramgarh and Mahansar is Rs 2000. Guided walking tours of Nawalgarh cost Rs 350 and take two to three hours. Camel-cart tours cost from Rs 1500 per person, per day.

The **Roop Niwas Palace** (☎ 222008; www.roopniwasokthi.com) specialises in high-end horse and camel excursions, the horse riding mostly on Rajasthan's gorgeous Marwari horses. Horse rides cost Rs 500 for one hour; for more elaborate overnight excursions, including accommodation in luxury tents, costs start at around US\$200 per person per day. Camel rides cost Rs 450/900/1800 for one hour/half-day/full day. It offers themed package rides of a week or more; full details can be found on its website at www.royalridingholidays.com.

#### Sleeping & Eating

**DS Bungalow** (☎ 222703; s/d Rs 350/400, bigger r Rs 450/500) Run by a nice, friendly couple, this is a quiet, comfortable place with simple air-cooled rooms, a little out of town on the way to Roop Niwas Palace. It's backed by a garden with a pleasant outdoor mud-walled restaurant. The home cooking is excellent; a full dinner comes in at around Rs 250.

**Ramesh Jangid's Tourist Pension** (☎ 224060; s/d from Rs 400/450) Near the Maur Hospital, this pension is well known, so if you get lost, just ask a local to point you in the right direction. The guesthouse, run by genial Rajesh, Ramesh's son, offers homely, clean accommodation in spacious rooms with big beds. Some rooms have furniture carved by Rajesh's grandfather, and the more expensive rooms also have murals created by visiting artists. Scrumptious pure veg meals, made with organic ingredients, are available (including a delectable vegetable thali for Rs 80). The family also arranges all sorts of tours around Shekhawati.

**Shekhawati Guesthouse** (☎ 224658; www.shekhawatirestaurant.com; s/d/tr Rs 400/500/600) Next door to DS Bungalow, this is a clean, family-run place with six rooms (the best of which are the cottages in the back garden) and a lovely garden restaurant in a thatched bungalow, which offers home cooking made from organic produce. They'll make you a great (also organic) packed lunch for a day of sightseeing for Rs 125. Free pick-up from the bus or train station can be arranged, as can cooking lessons.

**our pick Apani Dhani** (☎ 222239; www.apanidhani.com; s/d from Rs 700/950) This ground-breaking, award-winning ecofarm is a delightful and relaxing place. Rooms are in traditional, cosy mud-hut bungalows, enhanced by thatched roofs and comfortable beds, around a bougainvillea-shaded courtyard. The adjoining organic farm supplies delicious ingredients, and alternative energy is used wherever possible, including solar cookers and water heaters, compost toilets and biogas. It's on the west side of the Jaipur road. Multilingual Ramesh Jangid runs the show, and is also president of Les Amis du Shekhawati, an organisation aiming to preserve the *havelis*. Tours around the area, via bicycle, car or foot, are available.

**Roop Niwas Palace** (☎ 222008; www.roopniwasokthi.com; s/d/sts Rs 2000/2300/3000; 🚗) About 1km north of the fort is this converted palace, with a dusty, back-to-the-Raj feel, grand grounds, a billiard room and comfortable old-fashioned rooms that are eclectically decorated. This was once the rural retreat of the *thakur* of Nawalgarh, Nawal Singh (1880–1926). Note that this is one of Shekhawati's swimming pool-equipped hotels. The hotel also runs fabulous camel and horse excursions (opposite).

#### Getting There & Away BUS

There are RSRTC buses between Nawalgarh and Jaipur (Rs 62, 3½ hours, every 15 minutes), and several morning services each day to Delhi (Rs 170, eight hours) and Jodhpur (Rs 190, nine hours, six daily). There's also a daily deluxe bus to Jaipur departing at 8am (Rs 112, 3 hours) and several private services, most of which drop you an inconvenient 5km outside Jaipur. There are also private services that go to Ajmer (Rs 105, six hours).

Buses for destinations in Shekhawati leave every few minutes, while shared jeeps leave according to demand (Rs 12 to Sikar, Rs 18 to Jhunjhunu). Private buses run to Fatehpur (Rs 26, hourly) and Mandawa (Rs 15, every 45 minutes).

#### TRAIN

At the time of research, train services to/from Nawalgarh were erratic and unreliable. It might be worth checking for up-to-date information at the train station, but generally it's quicker and more convenient to travel here by bus.



## Getting Around

Bicycles can be hired from various places on the Dundlod road and near Bala Qila for around Rs 50 per day. If you're staying at Apani Dhani or Ramesh Jangid's Tourist Pension, bicycle hire can also be organised.

A shared autorickshaw from the train or bus station to the main market costs Rs 5; you can wave them down anywhere along this route. To hire an autorickshaw or a horse-drawn tonga from either the bus or train station to the fort costs about Rs 30.

## PARSURAMPURA

☎ 01594

This sleepy little village, 20km southeast of Nawalgarh, is home to some of Shekhawati's best-preserved and oldest paintings. The **Shamji Sharaf Haveli**, just south of the bus stand, dates from the end of the 18th century and is decorated with a mixture of Hindu gods and Europeans. Pictures include a grandmother having her hair dressed, a woman spinning yarn and an intriguing image of a European woman in patent-leather shoes carrying a parasol. A frieze shows a marriage celebration – on one side is a priest presiding over the ceremony – while the opposite wall depicts Europeans in a car. Above the lintel are some well-preserved portraits, and below, portrayals of Ganesha, Vishnu, Krishna and Radha. Saraswati (wife of Hindu god Brahma) is riding a peacock in the right-hand corner.

Beautiful paintings featuring the lives of the gods ring the interior of the dome of the **Chhatri of Thakur Sardul Singh** cenotaph, 50m south of the *haveli*, which dates from the mid-18th century. The exquisite work here is reminiscent of miniature painting and its antiquity is evident in the use of muted, russet colours – these are natural rather than artificial pigments, which came later. Images include those of the *thakur* and his five sons, graphic battle scenes from the Ramayana, and the love story of Dhola Maru (p292), a common Romeo-and-Juliet-style theme employed by the painters of Shekhawati. To visit the cenotaph you must obtain the key from the caretaker, Sri Banwari Lal (nicknamed Maharaj), who sits in the little booth under the peepul tree outside the gate of the Shamji Sharaf Haveli. Maharaj is a Brahmin priest, and it's almost entirely through his efforts that the *chhatri* is so well maintained. He is responsible for the pretty flower beds of roses

and jasmine that surround the *chhatri*, and there's a toilet here. A small donation would be welcome – it'll be put to good use.

Also to be found in Parsurampura is the small **Gopinathji Mandir**, on the left just before you leave the village on the road to Nawalgarh. The temple was built by Sardul Singh in 1742 and it's believed that the same artist responsible for the paintings on the Chhatri of Thakur Sardul Singh executed the fine paintings here. According to local lore, the artist had half completed the work when the son of Sardul Singh chopped his hands off because he wanted the artist's work to be exclusive to his father's *chhatri*. Not to be deterred, the valiant artist completed the work with his feet. Perhaps this accounts for some of the subject matter, which includes a lurid vision of the various torments of hell.

## Getting There & Away

There are numerous buses to Parsurampura from Nawalgarh, which depart from the Parsurampura bus stand. The trip can take up to one hour (due to multiple stops en route) and costs Rs 12. You'll probably have to fight for a seat, or for cooler but dustier and more precarious roof space.

## DUNDLOD

☎ 01594

Dundlod is a peaceful, back-in-time village lying about 7km north of Nawalgarh. Its small fort was built in 1750 by Keshri Singh, the fifth and youngest son of Sardul Singh. Major additions were made in the early 19th century by his descendant Sheo Singh, who resettled in the region despite attempts on his life by Shyam Singh of Bissau (Shyam Singh also murdered his father and brother in an attempt to claim the region for himself). Members of the wealthy Goenka merchant family also settled here, and their prosperity is, as usual, evident in their richly painted *havelis*.

## Sights

The **Dundlod Fort** (admission Rs 20; ☀ sunrise-sunset) was built and frequently modified over 200 years, and features a blend of Rajput and Mughal art and architecture. Inside, it combines a mix of European and Rajput decorative elements; the Diwan-i-Khas (Hall of Private Audience) has a mustard-coloured colonnade, stained-glass windows, fine Louis XIV antiques and an impressive collection of

## SHEKHAWATI'S OUTDOOR GALLERIES

In the 18th and 19th centuries, shrewd Marwari merchants lived frugally far from home while piling up money in India's new commercial centres. They sent the bulk of their vast fortunes back to their families in Shekhawati to construct grand *havelis* (traditional, ornately decorated mansions) – to show their neighbours how well they were doing and to compensate their families for their long absences. Merchants competed with one another to build ever more grand edifices – homes, temples, step-wells – which were richly decorated, both inside and out, with painted murals.

The artists responsible for these acres of decoration largely belonged to the caste of *kumhars* (potters) and were both the builders and painters of the *havelis*. Known as *chajeras* (masons), many were commissioned from beyond Shekhawati – particularly from Jaipur, where they had been employed decorating the new capital's palaces – and others flooded in from further afield to offer their skills. Soon, there was a cross-pollination of ideas and techniques, with local artists learning from the new arrivals.

*Haveli* walls, particularly at the entrance, in the courtyards and sometimes within some of the rooms, were frequently painted by the *chajeras* from the ground to the eaves. Often the paintings mix depictions of the gods and their lives with everyday scenes featuring modern inventions, such as trains and aeroplanes, even though these artists themselves had never seen them. Hence, Krishna and Radha are seen in flying motorcars and Europeans can be observed inflating hot air balloons by blowing into them.

As well as the *havelis*, the temples (for example Gopinathji Mandir in Parsurampura) are sometimes painted, and the characteristic village or town *chhatri* (for example, the one in Dundlod) and its adjacent quadruple-towered and domed well may be painted too.

These days most of the *havelis* are still owned by descendants of the original families, but not inhabited by their owners, for whom small-town Rajasthan has lost its charm. Many are occupied just by a single *chowkidar* (caretaker), while others may be home to a local family. Though they are pale reflections of the time when they accommodated the large households of the Marwari merchant families, they remain a fascinating testament to the changing times in which they were created. Only a few *havelis* have been restored; many more lie derelict, crumbling slowly away.

rare books. Above the Diwan-i-Khas is the *duchatta* (women's gallery) from where the women in *purdah* could view the proceedings below through net curtains. The *zenana* features walls of duck-egg blue, and opens out onto the reading room of the *thakurani* (noblewoman). This room has a hand-carved wooden writing table, which bears Oriental dragon motifs. Parts of the fort have been transformed into a hotel and you can also take horse-riding, camel or jeep tours from here.

The beautiful **Chhatri of Ram Dutt Goenka** and the adjacent well were built by Ram Chandra Goenka in 1888. They are about five minutes' walk southeast of the fort. If there's no caretaker in sight, ask to borrow the key from the Ram Chandra Goenka Haveli (p284). The interior of the dome has floral motifs extending in banners down from its centre, and is encircled by a frieze depicting Krishna dancing with the *gopis*, interspersed with peacocks and musicians. Paintings around the inner base of the dome illustrate a battle scene from the Mahabharata (an epic poem of the Bharata

dynasty), a marriage celebration and Vishnu reclining on a snake.

Nearby **Bhagirath Mal Goenka Haveli** is often locked, but you can see some fine mirrorwork above the windows on the upper courtyard walls. Portraits in circular frames nestle under the eaves. The *haveli* opposite is interesting, because the work is unfinished, so it's possible to see how the artist sketched the drawings before adding colour. Pictures include an elephant, a camel and rider, and a horse.

In a small square to the right just before the fort entrance is **Satyanarayan Temple**, which was built by Hariram Goenka in 1911. On the temple's west wall is a long frieze, with endearing pictures showing Europeans on sturdy bicycles and in cars, and a long train with telegraph lines above it (all very cutting-edge for the day). The portraits under the eaves meanwhile show nobles at leisure, reading and sniffing flowers. One fine moustached and turquoise-turbaned fellow has a bird in his hand, while another painting shows a woman admiring herself in a mirror.

A short distance to the south of the temple is the stunning restored 1875–85 **Seth Arjun Das Goenka Haveli** (admission Rs 30; ☎ 8am–7pm). As with all restored *havelis*, the bright colours, which is how they would have been in their original form, are something of a shock after becoming used to the discrete tones of murals faded with age. The interior offers a good illustration of the merchants' lives, beginning with their reception room, cooled by huge punka fans swinging from ropes. Above the window arches, mirrors are arranged in florets.

Well-preserved paintings can be seen on the east wall of nearby **Jagathia Haveli**, with a particularly animated train station scene – in one carriage, a man appears to be in a passionate embrace with his wife, but look closer and you can see he is furiously beating her. Another man hurries along on a bicycle, parallel to the train, pursued by a dog. Just south of here, the outer courtyard of the **Ram Chandra Goenka Haveli** is painted a soft yellow colour, featuring florets and birds.

## Tours

**Dundlod Fort** (☎ /fax 252519, in Jaipur 0141-2211276; www.dundlod.com) has around 60 horses stabled at its Royal Equestrian and Polo Centre – India's largest Marwari horse-breeding centre. They organise upmarket horse safaris, which cost from Rs 9000 per person per day, for experienced riders only. You can ride for three to 12 days, covering about 25km to 30km per day, and along various routes, for example around Shekhawati, to local fairs, in the Aravalli hills, or to other areas of Rajasthan such as Pushkar or Nagaur.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Dundlod Fort** (☎ /fax 252519, in Jaipur 0141-2211276; www.dundlod.com; s/d/ste from Rs 2600/3000/3800; 🍴 🍷) Still run by the extremely friendly and welcoming family of Dundlod's founder, a descendant of Sardul Singh, the fort has grand and imposing communal rooms, but the rooms themselves are rather shabby. The suites are better restored than the rest of the rooms on offer, and the restaurant's food is fresh and tasty.

## Getting There & Away

It's possible to walk all the way from Nawalgarh to Dundlod, although it's a hot walk along a busy, dusty road. For a quieter stroll, you can walk through the fields, ex-

cept for the last stretch towards Dundlod. Ask a local for directions. Alternatively, for just a few rupees you can catch one of the many local buses that ply the route every 15 minutes. Buses depart from the bus stand in Nawalgarh.

## MUKUNDGARH

☎ 01594

About 5km north of Dundlod, Mukundgarh is a crafts centre, renowned for its textiles, brass and iron scissors and betel-nut cutters. It's a charming, quiet town with little tourist development and some interesting painted *havelis*, including Kanoria, Ganriwal and Saraf *Havelis*.

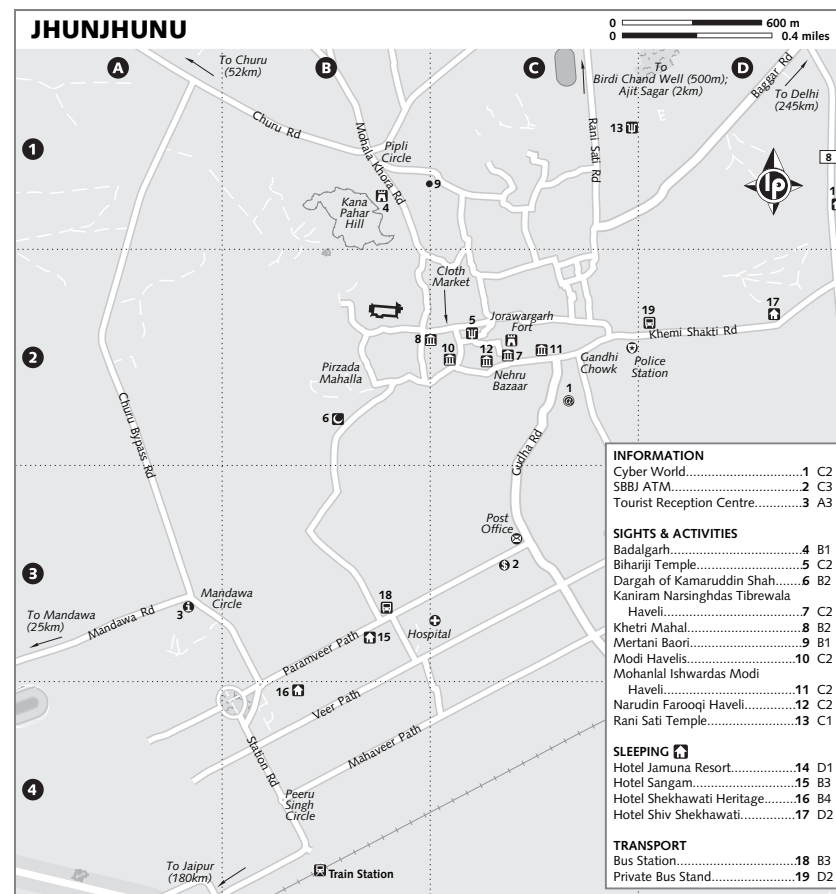
**Saraf Haveli** (admission Rs 40) is open whenever there's a caretaker around. The atmospheric house was built in 1909, though it took eight years to complete. The main entrance is on an elevated platform almost 3m high, and is big enough for an elephant. One of the biggest *havelis* in the whole of Shekhawati, it has eight courtyards, though not all may be open for viewing. Rooms retain old family pictures and punkas, while the paintings in the main courtyard are fine though faded and those in the second courtyard feature religious stories.

**Mukundgarh Fort** (☎ 7252397, in Delhi 011-6372565; fax 011-6814954; s/d from Rs 1000/2000, Maharaja ste Rs 6000; 🍴 🍷) is an impressive fort dating from the 18th century, although it's a little run down and some of the 46 rooms are beset by damp patches. Newer rooms are better, though less atmospheric, and the bathrooms are clean and modern. The Maharaja suite can accommodate up to eight people, though this isn't much use unless you're travelling with a group of good friends. Camel or jeep safaris can be arranged (a two-hour trip on a camel cart costs Rs 400 per person) and the staff and management are accommodating and friendly.

## JHUNJHUNU

☎ 01592 / pop 100,476

Shekhawati's most important commercial centre, Jhunjhunu has a different atmosphere from the smaller towns, with lots of traffic, concrete and hustle and bustle as befits the district headquarters. Though it's not the most exciting or inspiring of Shekhawati destinations, it does have a few appealing *havelis* and a bustling, colourful bazaar.



The town was founded by the Kayamkhani Nawabs in the middle of the 15th century, and remained under their control until it was taken by the Rajput ruler Sardul Singh in 1730. It was in Jhunjhunu that the British based their Shekhawati Brigade, a troop formed in the 1830s to try to halt the activities of the dacoits, local petty rulers who had discovered that an easy way to become wealthy was to pinch other people's money.

Jhunjhunu has numerous impressive *chhatris*, as well as some remnants of forts and a palace. Unfortunately, though, many of the fine frescoes that once adorned the town's architecture have been whitewashed out of existence. The town is also notorious for its Rani Sati Temple – enormously popular with locals

and dedicated to a young bride who burned to death on her husband's funeral pyre in 1595.

## Information

Laxmi Kant Jangid (owner of the Hotel Shiv Shekhawati and Hotel Jamuna Resort) is a knowledgeable, government-approved guide. He provides free guided tours around Jhunjhunu and can arrange car tours of surrounding towns.

**Cyber World** (per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9am–8pm Mon–Sat, 11am–8pm Sun) A cramped place near Nehru Bazaar.

**SBBJ ATM** (Paramveer Path) No banks in Jhunjhunu currently exchange money; you can try this ATM but it's rather unreliable.

**Tourist reception centre** (☎ 232909; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat, closed every 2nd Sat) Out of the centre at the

Churu Bypass Rd, Mandawa Circle, the office has helpful, cheery staff and can provide a few brochures, and a basic map of the town and region.

## Sights

### RANI SATI TEMPLE

In the northeast corner of town is the enormous, multistorey **Rani Sati Temple** (admission free, ☎ 4am–10pm), notorious and hugely popular for commemorating an act of *sati* (self-immolation) by a merchant's wife in 1595. Rani Sati Temple has long been embroiled in a national debate about *sati* (p43), especially after the 19-year-old widow Roop Kanwar committed *sati* in nearby Sikar district in 1987. It's fronted by two courtyards, around which 300 rooms offer shelter to pilgrims. The main hall is made of marble with elaborate silver repoussé work before the inner sanctum. (Photography is permitted.)

There's a tile-and-mirror mosaic on the ceiling of the *mandapa* depicting Rani Sati, with Ganesh, Shiva and Durga (the Inaccessible; a form of Devi, Shiva's wife) watching over her. A relief frieze on the north wall shows her story. Her husband is killed by the nawab's army; Rani Sati mounts the funeral pyre and is consumed by flames while Durga sends her power to withstand the pain. In the next panel Rani commands a chariot driver to place her ashes on a horse and to build a temple over the spot where the horse halts. The final panel shows the ostentatious temple built in her honour. Rani Sati is the patron goddess of the merchant class, and the temple apparently receives the second-highest number of donations of any temple in India.

### KHETRI MAHAL

A series of small laneways at the western end of Nehru Bazaar (a short rickshaw drive north of the bus station) leads to the imposing **Khetri Mahal** (admission Rs 20), a small palace dating from around 1770 and one of Shekhawati's most sophisticated and beautiful buildings. It's believed to have been built by Bhopal Singh, Sardul Singh's grandson, who founded Khetri. Unfortunately, it now has a desolate, forlorn atmosphere, but the architecture – though doorless and windowless – remains a superb open-sided collection of intricate arches and columns, the unpainted lime plaster giving off a rosy cast.

In the private chamber of the *thakur* are two small alcoves that retain fragments of

paintings in natural earth pigments. The various levels of the palace are connected by a series of ramps (big enough to accommodate horses) along which the *thakur* and *thakurani* could be pulled. The *thakur* could reach the rooftop, where he could gaze down over his subjects without even having to exert himself up a single step. There are good views over the town from here, stretching across to the old Muslim quarter, Pirzada Mahalla, and its mosques.

### HAVELIS

Near the Khetri Mahal, the **Modi Havelis** face each other and house some of Jhunjhunu's best murals and woodcarving. The *haveli* on the eastern side has a painting of a woman in a blue sari sitting before a gramophone; a frieze depicts a train, alongside which soldiers race on horses. The spaces between the brackets above show the Krishna legends. Part of the *haveli* façade on the eastern side of the road has been painted over, but still remaining are a few portrayals of fairly lifelike rabbits (rabbits were introduced by the British). The enormous ramp enabled the bridegroom to ride into the *haveli* on elephant-back to claim his bride.

The *haveli* on the western side has some comical pictures, featuring some especially remarkable facial expressions. Note the different styles and colours of turbans on the inside of the archway between the outer and inner courtyards. Some of the subjects have enormous bushy moustaches; others are decked with perky little pencil-style numbers.

A short distance away is **Kaniram Narsinghdas Tibrewala Haveli** (admission Rs 10), fronted by a vegetable market. On the west wall of the first courtyard is a frieze depicting two trains approaching each other: the left-hand one is a passenger train and the right a goods train filled with livestock – these trains look like they have come straight from the artist's imagination.

A short distance west is **Narudin Farooqi Haveli**. In accordance with Islamic style, only floral motifs are depicted (there are no animal or human representations) and blue is the predominant colour. Unfortunately, the arches leading to the salons off the first courtyard have been sealed off with concrete.

On the north side of Nehru Bazaar is **Mohanlal Ishwardas Modi Haveli** (admission Rs 10), which dates from 1896. A train runs merrily

across the front façade. Above the entrance to the outer courtyard are scenes from the life of Krishna – in the centre Krishna has stolen the clothes of the *gopis*, who stand waist deep in water as he hides up a tree. On a smaller, adjacent arch are British imperial figures, including monarchs and robed judges. Facing them are Indian rulers, including maharajas and nawabs.

Around the archway, between the inner and outer courtyards, there are some glass-covered portrait miniatures, along with some fine mirror-and-glass tilework. In the second half of the antechamber, Krishna dances with the *gopis* while angels fly overhead. The inner courtyard shows the hierarchy of the universe, with deities in the upper frieze, humans in the middle band, and animal and floral motifs below.

### OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Northwest of Khetri Mahal, **Badalgarh** (originally called Fazalgarh after its constructor, Nawab Fazal Khan) is a mighty 16th-century fort, dating from the period of the nawabs. It belongs to the Dundlod family but is currently closed to the public, awaiting renovation.

On the northwest side of town, about 1km from Nehru Bazaar, is **Birdi Chand Well**, surmounted by four imposing minarets (two minarets generally symbolise the presence of a step-well), which are covered in fading paintings. As water is such a precious commodity in the desert, wells were sacred, and it's common to see a temple at a well – there's a small one here devoted to Hanuman (the Hindu monkey god). To the west of the well is an old inn where caravans would once have halted. A couple of kilometres further north is the picturesque lake **Ajit Sagar**, built in 1902.

The **Mertani Baori**, to the northwest of the fort, is Shekhawati's most impressive step-well, named after the woman who commissioned it, Mertani, the widow of Sardul Singh. Built in 1783, it has been restored and is about 30m deep, with sulphuric waters said to cure skin diseases. An English official reported in 1930, however, that the water here was so poisonous that anyone who drank it died a couple of hours later. On either side of the well, steps lead to a series of cool resting rooms for visitors.

To the south of Kana Pahar Hill is the **Dargah of Kamaruddin Shah**, a complex consist-

ing of a madrasa (Islamic college), a mosque and a *mehfilkhana* (concert hall in which religious songs are sung). Fragments of paintings depicting floral motifs remain around the courtyard, particularly on the eastern and northern sides (although many have been whitewashed).

A short distance northwest of Jorawargarh Fort is the fine **Bihariji Temple**, which dates from approximately 1776 and is dedicated to Krishna. It has some fine, though worn, murals. On the inside of the dome, Krishna and the *gopis* are rendered in natural pigments – their circular dance, called the *rasalila*, suits the form of the dome and so is a popular theme here.

## Courses

If you are interested in tuition in traditional Shekhawati painting, contact Laxmi Kant Jangid at the Hotel Shiv Shekhawati or Hotel Jamuna Resort.

Laxmi also runs hands-on cookery courses at Hotel Jamuna Resort; these cost around Rs 500 per day. One-day decorative art workshops are also available, and cover henna painting, textiles (including *bandhani* – tie-dyeing) and fresco painting; the Jamuna Resort also offers free daily yoga classes.

## Tours

Camel and jeep safaris can be arranged (along with packed lunch or snacks) at Hotel Shiv Shekhawati or Hotel Jamuna Resort. The hotel also arranges three- to five-day bicycle packages around the region. The tours cost US\$70 per person per day (including all accommodation, meals and jeep transfers), cover 90km to 110km and start and end in Jhunjhunu. Routes include Alsisar–Malsisar–Bissau, Mandawa–Fatehpur–Ramgarh–Mahansar, and Mukandgarh–Nawalgarh–Dundlod–Churi. Hotel Shiv Shekhawati also arranges full- and half-day excursions in the area. Costs are Rs 1000/1500 per person for a half-/full-day tour.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Sangam** (☎ 232544; Paramveer Path; s/d from Rs 350/400) This impersonal hotel, in the bus-station area, has large, passable but shabby doubles tiled in grey and blue; singles are small but still not too bad. Budget rooms are at the front and could be noisy; it's better to take one at the back.



**Hotel Jamuna Resort** (☎ 232871; s/d from Rs 600/800, d with AC from Rs 1200; 🏠 🚿) Operated by Laxmi Kant Jangid (who also runs Hotel Shiv Shekhawati), Jamuna Resort has air-con rooms either vibrantly painted with murals or decorated with traditional mirrorwork. There's a pool (Rs 50 for nonguests), also set in the serene garden. The hotel also has a large meeting hall and brand-new kitchens – all set up for the cooking courses.

**Hotel Shekhawati Heritage** (☎ 237134; Paramveer Path; www.hotelshekhawatih heritage.com; s/d from Rs 400/500, with AC from 700/800; 🏠 🚿) Near Hotel Sangam, this place, with kindly management, is the pick in this area. The clean, bright rooms have leafy outlooks and those with air-con are blissfully chilly, even in the hottest of weather.

**Hotel Shiv Shekhawati** (☎ 232651; www.shivshekhawati.com; Khemi Shakti Rd; d Rs 800-1200; 🏠 🚿) East of the centre, Shiv Shekhawati is a modern place built around a central inner courtyard, with plain but squeaky-clean rooms. It's 600m from the private bus stand in a quiet area on the eastern edge of town. The affable owner, Laxmi Kant Jangid (usually at Hotel Jamuna Resort), is a wealth of knowledge on the villages of Shekhawati.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Regular buses run between Jhunjhunu and Jaipur (Rs 80, four hours), Churu (Rs 25/30 in local/express, around 1½ hours, hourly) and Bissau (Rs 20, 1½ hours, hourly). Numerous buses go to Mandawa (Rs 15, one hour), to Nawalgarh (Rs 20, one hour) and to Baggar (Rs 8, 40 minutes) from 6.30am.

Buses leave for Delhi from 5am (Rs 130, seven hours, hourly). There are also buses to Jodhpur (Rs 180, 10 hours), Ajmer (Rs 142, seven hours) and Bikaner (Rs 95, five hours). A private bus stand on Khemi Shakti Rd runs a number of similar services.

### TRAIN

At the time of writing, there were no useful train services in or out of Jhunjhunu. Check in at the station to see if the situation has since changed, though buses are invariably faster.

## Getting Around

For local sightseeing, you'll pay about Rs 50 per hour for an autorickshaw. A rickshaw from the train or bus station to the Hotel Shiv Shekhawati costs about Rs 25.

## BAGGAR

### ☎ 01592

This small, peaceful village has few *havelis* to nose around, but the main reason to stay here is because of its great hotel. It's about 15km northeast of Jhunjhunu.

**Piramal Haveli** (☎ 01592-221220; www.neemrana hotels.com; r Rs 1500-2000) has just eight rooms so advance bookings are essential. This is a gorgeous, colonial-style, grand old 1920s house – somewhere between Tuscan villa and Rajasthani mansion – built by a merchant who traded in opium, cotton and silver in Bombay. The house is appointed with original furniture and kitsch paintings featuring gods in motorcars. The *haveli* serves up terrific vegetarian thalis for dinner (Rs 250); afterwards, sip a strong drink on the porch with a peaceful game of backgammon.

## BISSAU

☎ 01595 / pop 21,133

Pint-sized Bissau lies about 32km northwest of Jhunjhunu. Founded in 1746 by Keshri Singh, the last of Sardul Singh's sons, it has one of Shekhawati's fiercest histories. The town prospered under Keshri, but fell into brigandry during the rule of his grandson Shyam Singh. It is said that the merchants of Bissau, who had been encouraged to set up in the town by Keshri, packed up and left when Shyam extracted vast sums of money from them. The *thakur* then resorted to a life of crime, embarking on raids with dacoits to neighbouring regions. The British called on the Shekhawati Brigade to restore order in the anarchic town, but by the time the expedition was mounted Shyam Singh had expired and his heir, Hammir Singh, had driven out the brigands and encouraged the merchants to return. The British were impressed by the town's prosperity and left without a single shot being fired. Look out for the Bissau Festival (p275), which hits the town for tens days annually, in either September or October, when locals perform scenes from the Ramayana.

## Sights

On the façade of the **Chhatri of Hammir Singh** (1875), near the private bus stand, you can see British folk in fancy carriages, including one carriage shaped like a lion and another like a hybrid lion-elephant. The *chhatri* is now multipurpose, being both a primary school, with lessons held under the dome and even in the

sandy courtyard, and a storage place for fodder. On the external back wall is a portrayal of Dhola Maru (p292); unusually, the bard who features in the love story is also depicted.

Walking north from the bus stand, take the first right and on the left-hand side at the next intersection is the **Haveli of Girdarilal Sigtia**. The paintings on the external walls have been destroyed, but the rooms retain some vibrant murals in bright oranges, blues, reds and greens. A room in the northeast corner of the *haveli* shows Shiva (with the unusual addition of a moustache) with the Ganges flowing from his hair. Note the orange handprints on the outer courtyard wall; these are a custom peculiar to Shekhawati, signifying the birth of a male child.

On the opposite side of this lane is the **Motiram Jasraj Sigtia Haveli**, now a junior school. On the north wall, Krishna has stolen the *gopis'* clothes; the maidens have been modestly covered by the artist in the coils of snakes, although one reptile can be seen slinkily emerging from between a *gopi's* legs.

## Getting There & Away

There are daily buses from Bissau to Jhunjhunu (Rs 20, 1½ hours) every 30 minutes and to Mahansar (Rs 8, 20 minutes), Mandawa (Rs 18, 1½ hours) and Churu (Rs 12, 30 minutes).

## Getting Around

Bicycles can be hired for around Rs 40 per day from the shops near the Chhatri of Hammir Singh. Bicycles are an excellent way to tour this region, and are particularly good for the 6km trip to Mahansar.

## MAHANSAR

☎ 01595

A turn-off to the left as you leave Bissau on the Churu road leads 6km to the quaint, slow-moving and untouristed village of Mahansar, a dusty place with lots of rural charm where donkeys outnumber motorised vehicles. Because of its inaccessibility – set in the middle of vast tracts of arid field and sand – it has remained untouched and, as such, makes a good place to stay to explore the area.

Mahansar was founded by Nawal Singh in 1768, and the town prospered for several decades, with gemlike *havelis* financed by the wealthy Poddar clan, until one of the Poddars lost his livelihood when two ship-

loads of opium sank without a trace. The town is nowadays famous for homemade liquor, known as *daru*, which resembles Greek ouzo; imbibe with care as it's extremely potent.

## Sights

The **Raghunath Mandir**, dating from the mid-19th century, is a temple that resembles a *haveli* in its architecture. It has fine floral arabesques beneath the arches around the courtyard and a grand façade. There are good views across the small town from the *chhatri*-ringed upper floor.

A short distance to the northeast of the Raghunath Mandir is **Sone ki Dukan Haveli** (admission Rs 100; ☎ 7am-5pm). (Ask at neighbouring shops if it's locked up.) The name means 'gold shop', due to the striking paintings, which use a shimmering amount of gold leaf – unusual for Shekhawati. The scenes from the Ramayana in the southern section of the ceiling in the first chamber are particularly intense, with their glorious quantities of gold leaf. The lower walls are richly adorned with floral and bird motifs, a fantasy of butterflies, fruit-laden trees and flowers. Painted in gold script on panels on the west wall of this chamber are the names of the gods. On the north side of the ceiling, the life of Krishna is portrayed. A golden river connects the holy cities of Vrindavan, where Krishna spent his childhood, and Mathura, where he lived as a king. Lakshmi, Vishnu's consort (and Hindu goddess of wealth), is also featured, as are portraits of women playing different instruments.

About 10 minutes' walk from the bus stand, past the fort on the right-hand side of Ramgarh Rd, is the **Sahaj Ram Poddar Chhatri**. Some archways have been bricked in, but there are still some well-preserved paintings on the lower walls of this well-proportioned and attractive building.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Narayan Niwas Castle** (☎ 01595-264322; r from Rs 800) is the only place to stay in this remote village. It is located in the old fort, about 100m north of the bus stand. This is a proper creaky Rajasthani castle dating from 1768 that feels evocatively uncommercial. Rooms are dusty but characterful, some (including rooms 1 and 5) with antique furniture and paintings covering the walls. It's run by the down-to-earth *thakur* of Mahansar and his wife, an elderly

## THE COLOURS OF SHEKHAWATI

Shekhawati's colourful paintings were a vivid response to its incredibly parched and arid landscape, serving at once to educate, entertain and depict the concerns of the day.

Originally the colours used in the region's murals were all ochre based, the ochre colour obtained from the urine of cows fed on mango leaves – a practice discontinued after it was deemed cruel to the poor mango-eating cows. Other colours were obtained from stones and minerals: copper, lead, gold, indigo and lapis lazuli were all used, though since the lapis used for blue tones – a staple in the decoration of Muslim temples in the area – was extremely costly, most blues were created from synthetic dyes imported from overseas. In the 1860s, further artificial pigments were introduced from Germany, and colours began to change from the subtle tones of natural colours to the brasher, brighter effect of artificial hues: you'll still be able to make out the difference between the natural and the artificial on Shekhawati's *havelis* today.

To create the meandering fresco images, artists engaged in a painstaking process: first, the wall was covered in several layers of plaster (with clay often gathered from ant hills), to which were added various ingredients such as lime and hessian. The final layer was then of lime dust mixed with buttermilk and jaggery (coarse brown sugar made from the sap of the date palm). The painters worked on the plaster while it was still wet, which accounts for the brilliance of the colours. Once completed, the works were polished with agate and rubbed with dry coconut to seal them; some were also set with semi-precious stones. After the turn of the 20th century, the artists instead began to paint on dry plaster, allowing greater intricacy but losing the original urgency.

The early paintings are strongly influenced by Mughal decoration, with floral arabesques and geometric designs (according to the dictates of Islam, the Mughals never created a representation of an animal or human). The Rajput royal courts were the next major influence; scenes from Hindu mythology were prevalent – usually featuring Krishna and Rama (seventh incarnation of Vishnu) – and were used as moral teachings in which good prevailed over evil. Many such moralistic themes were employed near the *havelis'* front doors, in order to be edifying and instructive to the townspeople outside.

Other major themes included history, folk tales, animals, landscapes and eroticism (many of these works have since been prudishly defaced or destroyed). With the arrival of Europeans, walls were embellished with paintings of the new technological marvels that the Shekhawati merchants had been exposed to in centres such as Calcutta. Pictures of trains, planes, telephones, gramophones and bicycles appeared – often painted direct from the artist's imagination.

The advent of photography and exposure to European art had yet another dramatic influence on Shekhawati art. Previously, subjects were depicted two-dimensionally, with little emphasis on anatomical accuracy or shading for perspective. With the influence of photography, artists sought a more faithful rendering of their subjects.

The paintings of Shekhawati are thus an extraordinary synthesis of Eastern and Western influences, the cultural collision perfectly illustrated in paintings showing Krishna playing a gramophone for Radha, or the two of them flying off in a Rolls Royce.

couple who know lots about the local area and can tell interesting stories about bygone days. The food is sumptuous and a few glasses of the castle's own hooch before bedtime will be sure to have you seeing ghosts of Rajputs flitting by.

### Getting There & Away

Regular bus services go between Mahansar and Ramgarh (Rs 8), Churu (Rs 10), Fatehpur (Rs 15) and Bissau (Rs 6, 20 minutes). Change at Bissau for buses to Jhunjhunu.

### RAMGARH

Sixteen kilometres south of Churu and 20km north of Fatehpur is Ramgarh, which was founded by a disaffected group from the wealthy Poddar family in 1791, and has the biggest concentration of painted *havelis* in the region. The Poddars defected from nearby Churu in a fit of pique after the local *thakur* imposed an extortionate wool levy. They set about building extravagant homes for themselves, and Ramgarh thus has a splendid, albeit uncared-for and faded, artistic legacy.

It prospered until the late 19th century, but remains pretty snoozy today.

The town is easy to explore on foot. The bus stand is at the western edge of town; in the northern section of town, about 600m from the bus stand, there's a concentration of *havelis*, as well as the main Shani Mandir temple and the Ganga Temple. At the time of writing, there was nowhere to stay here, so it's necessary to visit on a day trip from elsewhere.

### Sights

The imposing **Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri**, to the south of the bus stand, was built in 1872. The main dome of the *chhatri* is surrounded by a series of smaller domes; on the west side of the main dome's outer rim, one of the projecting braces bears a picture of a naked woman stepping into her *lenga* (skirt), while another woman shields her with the hem of her skirt from a man's gaze. The drum of the main dome is brightly painted and has well-preserved paintings in blues and reds depicting the battle from the Ramayana. The building on the north side of the *chhatri* was where family members paying homage to their dead ancestor could rest. Unfortunately, the *chhatri* is in a sorry state – the northeast corner of the building is badly water damaged. To enter the compound, you will need to find the caretaker, who'll ask for about Rs 50.

A short distance north of the town wall, on the east side of the road, is the fine **Ganga Temple**. It was built by one of the Poddar clan in 1845, and is an imposing building with large elephant murals on its façade, with plenty of images of the local favourite, Krishna. The right side of the façade is deteriorating and the foundations are crumbling. The temple only opens for morning and evening *puja* (prayers).

About 20m further north, on the left-hand side, is a **Ganesh Temple**. It has a densely painted forecourt and a series of interesting paintings between the brackets under the eaves, mostly featuring birds and religious themes.

From here, a road heads east to the spectacular tiny **Shani Mandir** (Saturn Temple). This was built in 1840, and despite a crude exterior, has a richly ornamented interior, completely covered in fantastic mirrorwork. In the chamber before the inner sanctum are some fine murals worked in gold, and the overall effect is dazzling. Subjects in-

clude Krishna and Radha and events from the Mahabharata. To the south (left) of the inner sanctum there's a painting on the ceiling featuring the marriage of Shiva and Gauri (aka Parvati, another form of Devi). Unfortunately, the ceiling in the chamber on the right-hand side of the inner sanctum is badly damaged by damp.

Heading back to the main Churu Gate, continue past the gate for about 50m, then turn left to reach a group of **Poddar havelis**. Popular motifs include soldiers, trains and an unusual design, peculiar to Ramgarh, of three fish arranged in a circle. One *haveli* has a painting of women carrying water in pitchers, and there's a novel portrayal of the Dhola Maru legend (p292) on the west wall of another: while Maru fires at the advancing assailants, Dhola nonchalantly smokes a hookah.

### Getting There & Away

There are buses to Nawalgarh (Rs 25, 2½ hours), Bissau (Rs 8, 45 minutes), Fatehpur (Rs 12, 45 minutes) and Mandawa (Rs 16, 1½ hours) from the bus station at the western edge of town. For other destinations, change at Fatehpur or Mandawa.

### FATEHPUR

☎ 01571 / pop 78,471

A scruffy, workaday small town, Fatehpur is chock-full of wonderful but slowly disintegrating *havelis* on either side of the main street. Though many are still in a shocking state of disrepair, it's hoped that the grand restoration of Haveli Nadine Le Prince, now a wonderful gallery and cultural centre, will help rescue the area's other beautiful buildings by refocusing attention on the area. Currently, though, Fatehpur is poorly developed for tourists, making it a better stop-off than overnight stay.

Established in 1451 as a capital for Muslim nawabs, Fatehpur was their stronghold for centuries before it was taken over by the Shekhawati Rajputs in the 18th century. Curiously, it was even ruled by an Irish sailor-turned-mercenary, George Thomas, in 1799, before he lost it to the maharaja of Jaipur. The wealth of the later merchant community here (which included the rich Poddar, Choudhari and Ganeriwala families) is illustrated in the number of vibrant, grandiose *havelis*, fine *chhatris*, wells and temples interspersed along the dusty town streets.

## THE LEGEND OF DHOLA MARU

One of the most popular paintings to be seen on the walls of the Shekhawati *havelis* depicts the legend of Dhola Maru, Shekhawati's own, happier answer to *Romeo and Juliet*.

Princess Maru hailed from Pugal, near Bikaner, while Dhola was a young prince from Gwalior. When Maru was two years old, there was a terrible drought in her homeland, so her father, the maharaja, shifted to Gwalior, where his friend, Dhola's father, ruled. He remained there for three years, returning to Pugal when he learned that the drought was over. But before he left, as a token of friendship between the two rulers, a marriage alliance was contracted between their children, Maru and Dhola. After 20 years, however, the promise was forgotten and Princess Maru was contracted to marry someone else.

Wedding plans would have proceeded as normal, except that a bard, who'd travelled from Pugal to Gwalior, sang at the royal court of the childhood marriage of Dhola and Maru. In this way Dhola came to hear of the beautiful and virtuous Maru, with whom he immediately, sight unseen, fell in love and resolved to meet. Of course, when Maru laid eyes on him she returned his affections and they decided to elope at once.

Her betrothed, Umra, heard of their flight and gave chase with the help of his brother, Sumra. They pursued the camel-borne lovers on horseback as the brave Maru fired at them with arrows, though this proved of little use against the brothers, who were armed with guns. Nevertheless, they were able to elude the brothers, taking shelter in a forest where Dhola was promptly bitten by a snake and succumbed on the spot. Maru, thus thwarted by death, wept so loudly for her lost lover that her lamentations were heard by Shiva and Gauri who, luckily, were walking nearby. Gauri beseeched Shiva to restore the dead Dhola to life and thus the loving couple was reunited.

## Sights

Without doubt the main sight in town is the **Haveli Nadine Le Prince** (☎ 233024; www.cultural-centre.com; adult/child Rs 100/50; 🕒 10am-7pm), an 1802 *haveli* that has been brightly restored to its former glory. There's a finely carved lintel with Ganesh sculpted over the centre.

French artist Nadine Le Prince spent three years having the *haveli* restored (after it had lain empty for nearly 40 years), and turned it into a gallery and cultural centre. Inside, the grand hall retains the original woodcarving and has a ceiling lined with real gold. Charming features include a couple's winter room with specially designed steep steps to deter children, and niches for musicians in the dining room.

There's a gallery displaying art by French artists working here, as well as a tribal art gallery, which shows some beautiful, delicate work by local artists. Its Art Café is a cool retreat from a hot day and serves tasty snacks.

Just south of this *haveli* is the small **Chauhan Well**, which dates from the early 18th century and was built by the Rajput wife of a Muslim nawab. There's some painting around the windows and a couple of the pavilions, and the minarets retain fragments of geometric and floral designs.

West from the Haveli Nadine Le Prince is the **Jagannath Singhania Haveli**, dating from 1855. It has a fantastic ornately painted interior, but is often locked. There are some interesting paintings on its façade, including that of Krishna and Radha framed by four elephants, and, above this, some British men with guns.

Further south is the **Geori Shankar Haveli**, an atmospheric and still-inhabited ruin with fine mirror mosaics on the ceiling of the antechamber, religious paintings in the outer courtyard, and elephant statues on the roof. You'll probably be asked for a donation to enter.

Nearby, on the same road, is the **Mahavir Prasad Goenka Haveli** (admission Rs 20), which was built in 1885 and is considered by some to have the best paintings in Shekhawati, combining a perfect synthesis of colour and design. The rooms on the 1st floor are most dazzling: stepping into one is like entering a jewellery box – it glimmers with mirrorwork, colour and gold. One of the rooms shows elaborate Krishna illustrations. Unfortunately, the *haveli* is often locked, though you can usually enter the first courtyard; restoration work here is currently ongoing.

The **Jagannath Singhania Chhatri**, on the east side of the Churu–Sikar road (enter through a gateway behind the *chhatri*), has well-tended, pretty gardens. This imposing building has



relatively few paintings, some of hunting scenes and some which appear to be unfinished. There's a small Shiva shrine here at which villagers still pay homage. Opposite is the small, still-used Singhania well.

Near the private bus stand is a large **baori**, built by Sheikh Mohammed of Nagaur in 1614, which for centuries provoked legends of bandits hiding in its depths. There's a path to the *baori* from a lane opposite the private bus stand. Unfortunately, today the *baori* is in a shocking state of disrepair – even dangerous (don't get too close to the edges) – and appears to have a new incarnation as a rubbish dump. It was obviously a feat of some magnitude to dig to this depth, and around the sides there's a series of arched galleries, mostly collapsed. On the south side, a *haveli* has half fallen into the well, and its courtyard paintings are exposed. The minarets of the *baori* stand as sad testament to its former grandeur.

Diagonally opposite the *baori*, on the south side of the private bus stand, the **Harikrishnan Das Saraogi Haveli** features a colourful façade with iron lacework on the upper verandas and shops at street level. There's a vibrantly coloured outer courtyard. Spot the woman smoking a hookah and, in the inner courtyard, a camel-drawn cart juxtaposed with a motorcar.

Adjacent, to the south, is the **Vishnunath Keria Haveli**. The outer courtyard has some wonderful pictures on either side of the inner courtyard door that show the marriage of religion and technology. Radha and Krishna can be seen in strange gondola-like flying contraptions, one with an animal's head, the other with the front part of a vintage car, and both featuring angel-like wings. On the north wall of the outer courtyard is a portrait of King George and Queen Victoria. The paintings in the southeast corner of the inner courtyard have, like many others, been badly damaged by smoke from the kitchen fire. In this courtyard, the sun god Surya is seen in a carriage being drawn by horses. On the southern external wall, pictures include Queen Victoria, a train, a holy man and Krishna playing a gramophone to Radha.

## Sleeping & Eating

**RTDC Hotel Haveli** (☎ 230293; dm Rs 70, s/d from Rs 300/400, with AC Rs 700/900; 🕒) If you find that you really must stay in town for the night,

this is probably your best option, about 500m south of the Roadways bus stand on the Churu–Sikar road. Rooms are dark and shabby but it's friendly and there's the requisite gloomy dining hall (dishes Rs 30 to 75) serving reasonable food.

**Art Café** (Haveli Nadine Le Prince; dishes Rs 35-100) You'll have to pay to get into the *haveli*, but this is a good option for a light lunch. It's a cosy arched place with low tables, serving food such as omelettes, toast and rum-blazed bananas, as well as some Indian snacks.

### Getting There & Around

At the private bus stand, on the Churu–Sikar road, buses leave for Jhunjhunu (Rs 22, one hour), Mandawa (Rs 15/18 in local/express, one hour), Churu (Rs 20, one hour), Ramgarh (Rs 12, 45 minutes) and Sikar (Rs 24/30 in local/express, one hour/45 minutes).

From the Roadways bus stand, which is further south down this road, buses leave for Jaipur (Rs 75, 3½ hours, every 15 minutes), Delhi (Rs 160, seven hours, six daily) and Bikaner (Rs 102, 3½ hours, hourly).

Bicycles (Rs 5/40 per hour/day) can be hired near the private bus stand.

### MANDAWA

☎ 01592 / pop 20,717

No longer the quiet little market town of former years, Mandawa is nowadays Shekhawati's most frequented destination on the tourist trail. As such, you can expect more hassle from would-be guides and souvenir vendors than elsewhere in the region, though compared to some of Rajasthan's most visited destinations, it's still fairly relaxed. The gorgeous painted *havelis*, moreover, make up for a lot.

Settled in the 18th century, and fortified by the dominant merchant families, the town's fort was built by Sardul Singh's youngest son in 1760, though inhabited much later, and has some fine frescoes in what is nowadays an upmarket hotel.

### Information

**Deshnok Money Changer** (☎ 24hr) Changes cash and travellers cheques, and offers cash advances against MasterCard and Visa. Also offers slowish internet access, for Rs 50 per hour.

**State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur** (☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) In Binsidhar Newatia Haveli; changes travellers cheques and currency.

### Sights

**Binsidhar Newatia Haveli**, on the northern side of the Fatehpur–Jhunjhunu road, now houses the State Bank of Bikaner & Jaipur. The interior paintings have been whitewashed, but there are fantastically entertaining paintings on the external eastern wall (accessible through the bank). These include a European woman in a car driven by a chauffeur; a man on a bicycle; the Wright brothers evoking much excitement in their aeroplane as women in saris point with astonishment; a boy using a telephone; a strongman hauling along a car; and a bird-man flying by in a winged device. The paintings date from the 1920s.

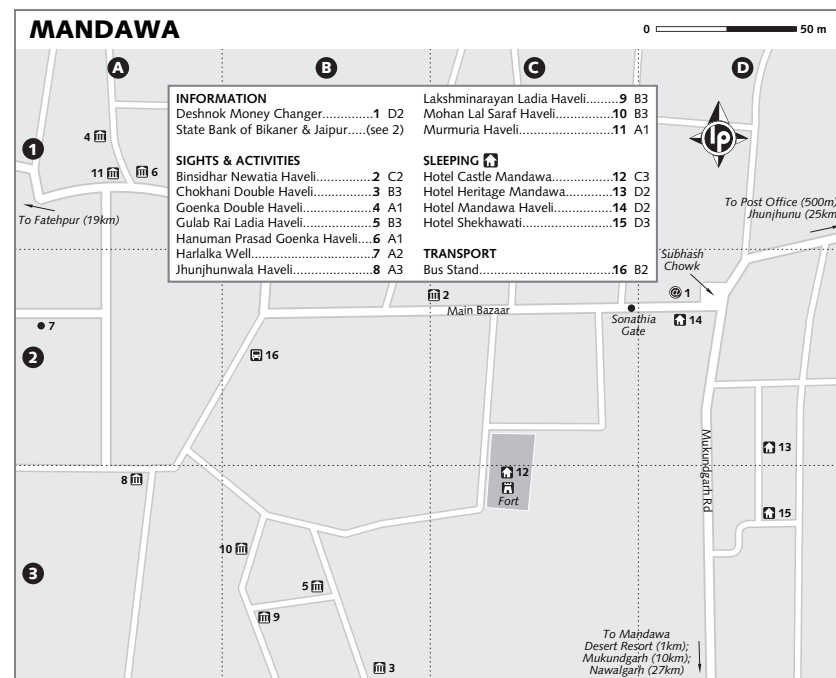
Several *havelis* to the northwest of the bank belong to the wealthy Goenka family: there's **Hanuman Prasad Goenka Haveli**, to the right of which is a composite picture that shows either Indra (the most important Vedic god) on an elephant or Shiva on his bull, depending on which way you look at it. Across the road is the **Goenka Double Haveli**, which has two entrance gates and monumental pictures, including of elephants and horses, on the façade.

Adjacent is the 1930s **Murmuria Haveli** – here you can see how European art and images were beginning to influence local artists. From the sandy courtyard in front of this *haveli*, you can get a good view of the southern external wall of the adjacent double *haveli*: it features a long frieze depicting a train, with a crow flying above the engine and much activity at the railway crossing. Nehru is depicted on horseback holding the Indian flag. Above the arches on the south side of the courtyard are two paintings of gondolas on the canals of Venice.

From here a road leads south, and 50m along you can take a short detour to the right to see the impressive **Harlalka Well**, marked by four pillars and its old pulley and camel ramp. Nearby is the **Jhunjhunwala Haveli** (admission Rs 20), which has an impressive gold leaf-painted room to the right of the main courtyard.

About 50m southeast is the **Mohan Lal Saraf Haveli**. On the south wall, a maharaja is depicted grooming his bushy moustache. There's fine mirror- and mosaic-work around the door to the inner courtyard, and Surya, the sun god, can be seen over the lintel.

Further south on the same street is the **Lakshminarayan Ladia Haveli**. The west wall features a faded picture of a man enjoying



a hookah, and a good procession frieze. Between the wall brackets, *gopis* emerge from the tentacles of a sea monster upon whose head Krishna dances. Other pictures include that of Rama slaying Ravana (demon king of Lanka, now Sri Lanka).

Unfortunately, many of the erotic images in the **Gulab Rai Ladia Haveli**, a short distance to the east, have been systematically defaced by prudish souls. In the last pair of brackets on the first half of the southern wall, a woman is seen giving birth, attended by maidservants. There's an erotic image in the fifth niche from the end on this wall, but don't draw too much attention to it, or it may suffer the same fate as the other erotic art. There's also something untoward happening in a train carriage on this wall.

About 50m south past this *haveli* is the grand **Chokhani Double Haveli** (admission Rs 10; ☎ dawn to dusk) dating from 1910, and so called because it was built in two adjoining wings for the families of two brothers. The paintings inside include floral arabesques and peacocks above the archways, as well as the Krishna legends and some mournful British soldiers.

### Activities

You can organise camel and horse rides at the Hotel Castle Mandawa or the Mandawa Desert Resort. A one-hour camel ride costs around Rs 600 and a half-/full-day trip is Rs 900/1300. Both places can also organise horse and jeep safaris on request.

Another possibility is the Hotel Heritage Mandawa, which organises half-/full-day camel rides and longer safaris, as well as jeep hire or guide hire for around the same prices. The Hotel Shekhawati, too, offers camel rides, along with jeep and horse tours, at good prices.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Shekhawati** (☎ 223036; hotelshekhawati@sify.com; r Rs 400-900; ☎) Near Mukundgarh Rd, the only real budget choice in town is run by a retired bank manager and his son (who's also a registered tourist guide). Bright, naive and somewhat lurid murals painted by artistic former guests give the rooms a splash of colour. Tasty meals are served on the peaceful rooftop, and competitively priced camel, horse and jeep tours can also be arranged.

**Hotel Heritage Mandawa** (☎ 223742; www.hotelheritagemandawa.com; ₹ Rs 700-2500; 📍) South of the Subhash Chowk is this gracious old *haveli*. The somewhat dark, sometimes clashingly decorated rooms are set around tranquil courtyards; the best bets are the rooms with small upstairs areas. Nightly music performances and puppet shows are held in the little garden.

**Hotel Mandawa Haveli** (☎ 223088; http://hotelmandawa.free.fr; s/d/ste 1200/1750/2950; 📍) Close to Sonathia Gate and Subhash Chowk, this hotel is set in a glorious, restored 19th-century *haveli* with rooms surrounding a painted courtyard. Cheaper rooms are small, so it's worth splashing out on a suite, filled with arches, window seats and countless small windows. There's a rooftop restaurant serving good food; it's especially romantic at dinner time, when the lights of the town twinkle below. A set dinner will set you back Rs 375.

**Mandawa Desert Resort** (☎ 223151; in Jaipur 0141-2371194; www.castlemandawa.com; s/d Rs 2500/3000, cottages Rs 3600/4800; 📍 🚿) A top-end resort run by Castle Mandawa, this is laid out in the style of a Rajasthani village. The spacious rooms, in mud-walled huts decorated with twinkling mirrorwork, are a lot plusher than your average village home and have big bathrooms. It's in a pretty spot but all feels a bit contrived.

**Hotel Castle Mandawa** (☎ 223124; www.castlemandawa.com; s/d from Rs 2050/2650, deluxe Rs 3900/4800, ste from Rs 7500; 📍 🚿) Mandawa's large upmarket hotel in the old town's converted fort attempts a slightly twee medieval atmosphere but is still a swish and generally comfortable choice. Some rooms are far better appointed than others (the best are in the tower, with four-poster and swing beds), so check a few before you settle in.

### Getting There & Away

There are buses to Nawalgarh (Rs 15, 45 minutes), Fatehpur (Rs 12/16 in local/express, one hour), Bissau (Rs 15/18 in local/express, 1½ hours) and Ramgarh (Rs 22, 1½ hours). Direct buses also run to Jaipur (Rs 75, four hours) – change at Fatehpur – and Bikaner (Rs 70, 3½ hours). A taxi between Mandawa and Fatehpur costs Rs 300 (one way), or you can take a crammed share jeep for Rs 15.

### LAKSHMANGARH

☎ 01573 / pop 47,288

Off the tourist track, 20km south of Fatehpur, is this unusual town, laid out in an easy-to-

explore grid pattern, with a main north–south oriented bazaar dissected at intervals by three busy *chaupars* (town squares formed by the intersection of major roads).

The most imposing building here is the small fortress, which looms over the township to its west, built by Lakshman Singh, raja (king) of Sikar, in the early 19th century after the prosperous town was besieged by Kan Singh Saledhi.

### Sights

About 50m north of the bus stand through the busy bazaar, a wide cobblestone path wends its way up to the eastern side of the **fort**. A sign warns that the fort is private property, but there's a good view from the top of the ramp before you get to the main entrance. From here you can see the layout of the double Char Chowk Haveli, below and to the northeast. Head for this point when you descend the ramp.

Beneath the eaves on the northern external wall of the **Char Chowk Haveli**, you'll find a picture of a bird standing on an elephant and with another elephant in its beak. The large paintings on the façade of the northern *haveli*, meanwhile, have mostly faded, and the paintings in the outer downstairs courtyard are covered by blue wash. The murals in the inner courtyard, however, are well preserved, and the walls and ceiling of a small upstairs room on the east side of the northern *haveli* are completely covered with paintings. It has some explicit erotic images, but it's ill-lit, so you'll need a torch to see them properly.

In the same building, a room in the northwest corner retains floral swirls and motifs on the ceiling with scenes from the Krishna legends interspersed with inlaid mirrors. The black-and-white rectangular designs on the lower walls create a marbled effect. No-one lives in the *haveli*, but the caretaker may open it for you (for baksheesh). The front façade is disintegrating at the lower levels, with the plaster crumbling and the bricks exposed. The southern *haveli* is still inhabited by about 30 people.

About 50m east of this *haveli* is the large **Radhi Murlimanohar Temple** (1845), which retains a few paintings beneath the eaves and some sculptures of deities around the external walls.

If you take the road west from the temple, on the corner of the second laneway on

the right is the **Chetram Sanganeeria Haveli**. The lower paintings on the west wall are badly damaged; the plaster has peeled away and concrete rendering has been applied. But you can still spot a woman on a swing suspended from a tree, a man dancing on a pole while balancing some knives, folks enjoying a ride on a Ferris wheel, a man ploughing fields with oxen, and men sawing timber.

A little to the south of the temple is the busy **bazaar**, flanked by shops whose overhanging balconies have three scalloped open arches between two blank arches, which have lattice friezes. The shops were constructed during the mid-19th century by a branch of the Poddar family known as the Ganeriwala, who hailed from the village of Ganeri.

Located on the northeast corner of the clock tower square, about 100m south of the temple via the busy bazaar, is the **Rathi Family Haveli**. On the west wall, a European woman in a smart red frock sews on a treadle machine. The European influence is much in evidence here, with painted roses and a Grecian column effect. On the south side of this *haveli* are ostentatious flourishes and the British Crown flanked by unicorns. On the east side are some blue-eyed British soldiers and a railway station (with a sign saying 'a railway station' in case it wasn't clear enough).

There's a busy set of chai stalls on the west side of the *haveli*, a good place to sit down and admire these extraordinarily over-the-top paintings.

### Getting There & Away

There are many buses to/from Sikar (Rs 16), Fatehpur (Rs 15) and Nawalgarh (Rs 15).

### Getting Around

A bicycle shop just south of Radhi Murlimanohar Temple hires out bikes for around Rs 20 per day.

### CHURU

☎ 01562 / pop 97,627

Situated across the border in Bikaner district, Churu is not technically part of Shekhawati but it has a Shekhawati heart. It was once a centre of trade and commerce, and the many rich merchant families who hailed from here left a legacy of fine painted *havelis*. About 95km to the southwest of Churu is the small Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary, home to a

substantial population of blackbucks and other mammals and birds.

### Sights

You'll need help (ask a local) to find the **Malji ka Kamra**, which is north of the bus stand, down a lane on the west side of the main bazaar. It's worth the effort to find this place: it's an extraordinary edifice covered in pale-blue stucco and perched on green pillars like a wedding cake, though nowadays a rather stale one. Statues on the façade include a bored-looking woman dressed in a sari (with a handbag and wings), turbaned men, and angels. Built in 1925, its days of glory are long gone.

A short distance to the northwest (within easy walking distance) is the five-storey **Surana Double Haveli**, packed with hundreds of rectangular windows and achieving something of a Georgian effect. On the lower levels of the west wall are fragments of paintings, including processions and peacocks. The *haveli* is beyond an archway at the end of a narrow laneway.

A further 100m to the northwest is the **Surajmal Banthia Haveli**, which was built in the 1920s. It's best known for its infamous picture of a laconic Christ enjoying a cigar, on the external north wall, rather incongruously juxtaposed beside a British lady. Across the lane to the north is a **haveli** with what may well be the most bizarre paintings on any of the *havelis* of Shekhawati – beneath the eaves on the eastern side is a series of inverted paintings of naked men fondling rabbits.

### Sleeping & Eating

Not many travellers choose to stay in Churu, but if you do find yourself here for a night there's one reasonable hotel; note that English can be a problem.

**Hotel Deluxe** (☎ 251114; d Rs 350) faces the private bus stand and offers small, basic rooms. There's a restaurant downstairs that cooks up unassuming vegetarian fare at modest prices, with main dishes going for around Rs 25.

### Getting There & Away

The Roadways bus stand is 500m west of the private one. Regular services to destinations in Shekhawati from the private bus stand include Fatehpur (Rs 20, one hour), Jhunjhunu (Rs 25/30 in local/express, around 1½ hours) and Sikar (Rs 40, two hours). From the Roadways bus stand there are services to Delhi (Rs 175, six hours) and Jaipur (Rs 115, five hours).



## AROUND CHURU

### Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary

This little-known, small grassland sanctuary, which lies about 95km southwest of Churu and 210km northwest of Jaipur, covers 70 sq km of ponds, sand, scrub and salt flats. It has healthy populations of blackbucks, elegant antelopes with long spiralling horns, as well as fast, graceful chinkaras (Indian gazelles), wolves and smaller mammals such as desert foxes. The sanctuary lies on the migration route of a number of bird species, most notably harriers, which descend here during September.

Other wintering birds include various types of eagle (tawny, imperial, short-toed, steppe), and the demoiselle crane. Throughout the year there are populations of crested larks, ring and brown doves and skylarks.

It's best to visit the sanctuary in August or September. There's a **forest resthouse** (☎ 01562-250938; d Rs 300) near the sanctuary entrance at Chhapar – it's easy to find, so no need for further instructions – offering basic double rooms. For a day trip, a taxi from Churu should cost Rs 1000 for a return journey, including waiting time.