

Where the CHAMBAL FLOWS

THERE IS MORE TO KOTA THAN ITS IDENTITY AS A STUDENT TOWN. IT IS A TREASURE TROVE OF HISTORY AND WILDLIFE, FINDS ANSHIKA NAGAR

The chimneys create a haze above the city, and within it, billboards dominate the landscape. Kota is known for a few things; coaching institutes and power plants being the most prominent. Once in the city, doubts from my friends crowd my mind. There isn't anything in Kota, they had claimed. Nothing but coaching centres and hostels.

However, before the fervour of industries and students took over, the city of *Kotah* grew under the Bundi state. Later, it gained independence and began

to exist as a Rajput state under British patronage, till it was absorbed by the newly independent India. The Chambal is a testament to its history, the river powering the city and the life in it.

Thick stone walls were built around Kota for protection, not once but thrice, to accommodate its growing size. Even today, walking in the old parts of the city, one can find the gates that controlled the number of people coming in or going out. Inside, worn-down buildings stick to one another, house after house, decorated with carved *Jharokas* and pillars,

repainted with the brightest colours.

The narrowing lanes lead to the river bank, where the walls were once thick enough for carriages to be drawn on top of them. Walking up the staircase, this seems like a bit of an understatement. Not only do the fortifications have multiple levels, but they are big enough to hold full-fledged gardens with lush trees and gazebos. There are temples at the base of the wall, and on the top too. They stand on raised platforms and are coated in the most vivid hues. A section makes for a makeshift wrestling ring. And if once

soldiers and kings passed through the walls, today they are host to children looking for a place to play. When we walk back to the main market, my hands trace the walls and small prayer idols, left behind and forgotten.

If we had driven for a second longer, we would have missed it. Overrun by street vendors, it is very easy to drive past the Kota British Cemetery. Luckily, we were accompanied by people familiar with the place. Kunal Jain, our tour organiser, had roped in Victoria Singh, treasurer of the Kota Heritage Society, to

walk us through the city.

The Kota Heritage Society maintains the cemetery and while photographs are not allowed, people are encouraged to visit. Not much is Christian about the graves. They were built in the Indo-Saracenic style, with pyramid-like roofs or bulbous domes. Most impressive is the memorial of Major Charles Burton and of his two sons killed in 1857. It is similar to the royal cenotaphs, with ornate *chhatris*, and was erected in support of the British by Maharao Ram Singh. A marble inscription reads the anguish and anger

KOTA



Chambal gorge from here, towers built by the former royals during hunts; a shepherd with a red turban; the Sukhdham Kothi; and the scaly-breasted mandia seen around the Chambal area



of Burton's wife.

Other graves follow suit, offering insight into their lives, some unmarked and some with detailed descriptions. The oldest grave here, built in 1826, has a small obelisk structure. The last burial at the cemetery was in 1891.

If the heritage of the city hides in its nooks and crannies, nature hits back with full force. Victoria leaves and Ravinder Singh Tomar, a naturalist and conservationist, joins us and then we are on our way to the Garadia Mahadev Temple. Our drive leads us through a small gatepost at the Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve and, with Tomarji on our side, we have easy access.

To reach the temple one must drive straight through the gatepost, but, instead, we off-road abruptly. The forest becomes dense as we drive around pointy shrubs and fallen trees. Officials have reintroduced two tigers into this reserve and there are plenty of sloth bears too, but we don't see any.

When we halt, it is because there is



no more land to drive on. I stand at the edge of the hill, some 500m above sea level, where the Aravali and Vindhya ranges meet. The Chambal meanders below, creating a horseshoe gorge. It is utterly magnificent—the red hills covered with green foliage that dips in and out of the river. In the monsoon, spurts of waterfalls cover them. The crevices make for great nesting areas; for birds as well as the sloth bears.

While Tomarji readies his bulky binoculars, Kunal is quick to point out

the ghost trees. Stark white against the brown and the green, at night they look like ghosts standing tall, he explains. Owls, eagles and vultures are found in plenty. "Notice the white on the hills?" he asks. "They are years of accumulated bird droppings, a great way to know where the nests are." Birdwatching is a silent game, I realise. When Kunal spots a painted spurfowl, we sneak in for a glance. As the sun sets, a shikra vulture soars above us and the birds suddenly wake up, a hustle in their calls. Tomarji doesn't look worried but when he explains that a big predator is in the area, I panic. We make it back to the safety of the car, but the Chambal is not done with us yet.

The next afternoon, we hop in Tomarji's boat, ready for crocodile sightings. If the bird's-eye view of the gorge was magnificent, the hill-view from the boat makes for an even more incredible scene. The river is choppy, but we find the crocodiles rather freely. They lounge out on rocks, with a foot or the tail in the water. A little ahead, Tomarji points

to an owl's nest with two of them perched inside. I am told they are brown fish-owl, and they don't seem pleased to see us.

The red-wattled lapwings are the easiest to spot. Their call is loud and consistent as they fly above us. "They are called *tittititia* here, for the sound that they make," Kunal shares.

We see more crocodiles a little further and feeding into their laziness, I feel myself relax further into my seat. I slouch till my face is angled towards the full force of the sunrays. On the way back, we retrace the hills and the long-forgotten hunting towers on top. I find it all quite baffling. Kota is the third largest city in

Rajasthan, a place that attracts millions every year. But all of it seems like a front, like a thick curtain drawn over, that needs to be pulled back to reveal a most spectacular show. For here lies a city, that was fortified time and again, yet has been unable to contain its people or the treasures that it holds.

THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Kota Junction in Rajasthan is well connected by trains from all major cities in the country. The nearest airport is in Jaipur.

WHERE TO STAY

I stayed at Sukhdham Kothi. This 19th-century home has 15 well-appointed rooms, a swimming pool and gardens that go round the property. The history of the kothi is quite interesting; what was built

as a home for a British surgeon after 1857, and was handed over to the rulers of Kota in 1922. It finally became the home of Col Th. Prithvi Singh of the Kotah State Forces. Converted into a heritage hotel, it makes for a charming stay option. Spend your time birdwatching, eating delicious Rajasthani food or chatting with the owners about history, art and such (from approx. ₹2,000 for single occupancy; sukhdhankothi.com).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

>My trip was organised by To Travel With, a company run by Kunal Jain (+91-9717148483; totravelwith.com) that organises off-beat experiences across north India and immersive wildlife trips across the country.
>In Kota, trace the steps of royalty and visit Garh Palace, Kishore Sagar, Brij Vilas Bhawan Museum and the City Palace.
>The British Cemetery is always

open to visitors and a guard sits outside to help them find their way. Make sure to leave a comment in the visitor's book.
>Spend some time at the Chambal Gardens and go for a boat ride.
>Try the *kachoris* for breakfast at any local joint. See if you can get your hands on some *doodh-jalebi* in the city. They tend to serve it like a milkshake, with crushed jalebi and a lot of cream. ■ ANSHIKA NAGAR