



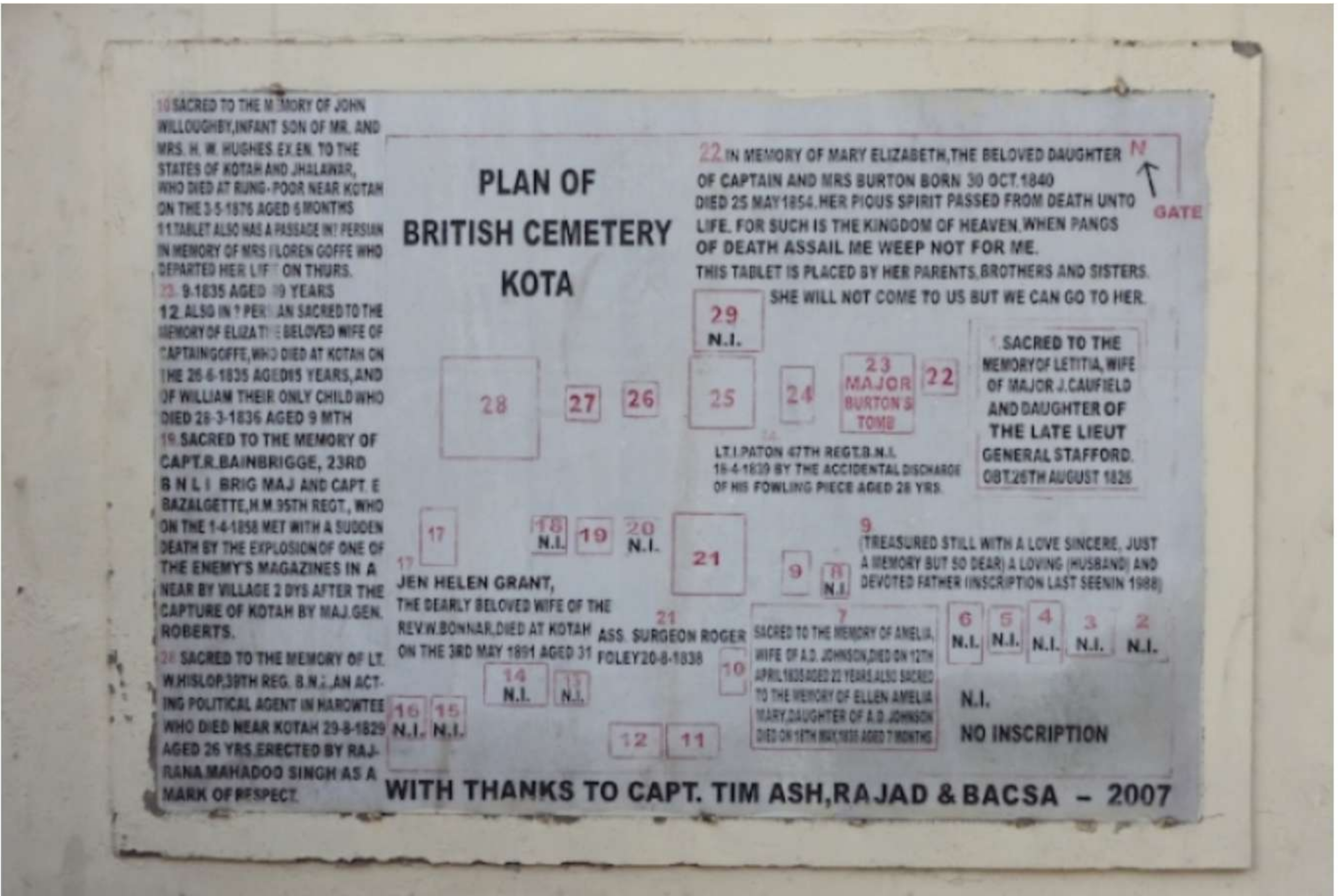
Photography: Kunal Jain

Deep Into the Ravine Chambal Valley

Chambal is a myth. A villainous, venomous valley painted in bullet-belted khaki by Bollywood Gabbars, a land barren and dangerous and full of empty expanses. Why would anyone go to Chambal? And there began the quest.



Investment banker turned wildlife specialist Kunal Jain's curated experience of the wild, wild [mid]west came as a brow raiser. What spectacle teen population of Kota had dared to look up from their civil services books into the far horizons where lay the richest flora, fauna and history of the forbidden Chambal Valley? The adventure sounded too rare to pass, and this is just one of the many expert led expeditions offered by his baby, *ToTravelWith.com*. Thus, I found myself on the tracks to Kota, which would be the gateway to our great riverine explorations. Kunal gave us the warmest welcome right down to the best exit to the Kota railway station, where a bright sun showed us the way to the majestic Sukhdham Kothi. Built in 1870 by the British and maintained impeccably by generations of army men from Col Prithvi Singh's family thereafter, the haveli is the handsomest home-hotel to anchor you by night in Kota as you wade the river and walk the wild by day. A few days into our stay, I would have some animated, enriching and endearing conversations with the silver-haired heirs of the haveli that I would take back with me just as fondly as I would the wildlife and wind of the valley.



On the first day, hungry and curious as we came, Kunal treated us to a satiating lunch with the signature *sev ki sabzi* and *safed maas* that was as sublime as nourishing as the winter sun outside the luxurious Kothi. A quick shower later, it was time to set off into the deep. Guided by Kunal and two of his best men who were thorough with the knowledge of the local wildlife right down to an animal's last dump about the place, we drove into the thickets of the Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve, affording and unprepared for the most breathtaking surprise. A gorge, plunging 40 deep into the Chambal, stared at us straight into the eye. Dangerous, divine, deviant, dense in its caves of bears, dance of monkeys and the banter of birds. Kunal and team, armed with binocs and their camera, challenged our observation with the rarest sightings—the Dusky Eagle Owl and Peregrine Falcon among others. The horseshoe gorge is one of India's best kept secrets in the wild; you wonder if the coiner of the word 'gorgeous' had an epiphany there. The place makes you lose words and all other worlds; there is no high quite like the deep. It took a gorgeous portion of *laal maas* at dinner to give the stomach a treat to match the one that was made to the senses earlier that evening. Carefully cooked in preserving the traditional flavour while minding spice, it put us to a good night's sleep to be followed by a rich day of walking through the city's history.



At the breakfast table, Kunal introduced us to Victoria aka Vicky, an expert in the city's rich Rajput history, politics and its workings up to modern-day life in the city. We walked through the fortresses, the British Cemetery, the Kotah Garh, the beautiful bylanes busting with the indomitable spirit of a small-town so gifted in its great legacy. Deep in the gully, I spotted an auto rickshaw wrapped in a bright yellow-red floral cover, quite the bride's ride. No corner is too small for the colours of joy to seep in. Another first was the town's famous doodh jalebi that was served to us by the Che Guevara-esque owner of the place. The jalebis soaked in milk made for an iconic sugar rush, enough to fuel us through the rest of the walk where history met modernity in all architecture, culture and art.



We flew in sight with the rarest birds—Bonelli's Eagle, Painted Sparrow, Long Billed Vultures, Common Coot, Pintail, Rudy Shalduck, Grey-Leg Goose and gang, we walked with the most ordinary men, and next we'd float the river for the most wondrous wildlife that dwells in the Chambal. Languid crocs sunbathing without a care, the otters so playful giving us a miss, the bears equally lazy but many a shy bird deciding to show up to say hi. The river itself is the most fascinating creature, deep and dangerous and yet calm and comforting, a warm wind blowing the hair out like tentacles that couldn't possibly catch, even if they wanted, the creatures that live deep below in the blue-green waters. We cruised into the sunset and emerged entranced to retreat into our own little sanctuary surrounded by mango trees, resident peacocks, and the protecting souls of the land, the souls of the Rajputs.

Chambal is more than a myth—it is the purest magic.

Text Soumya Mukerji

