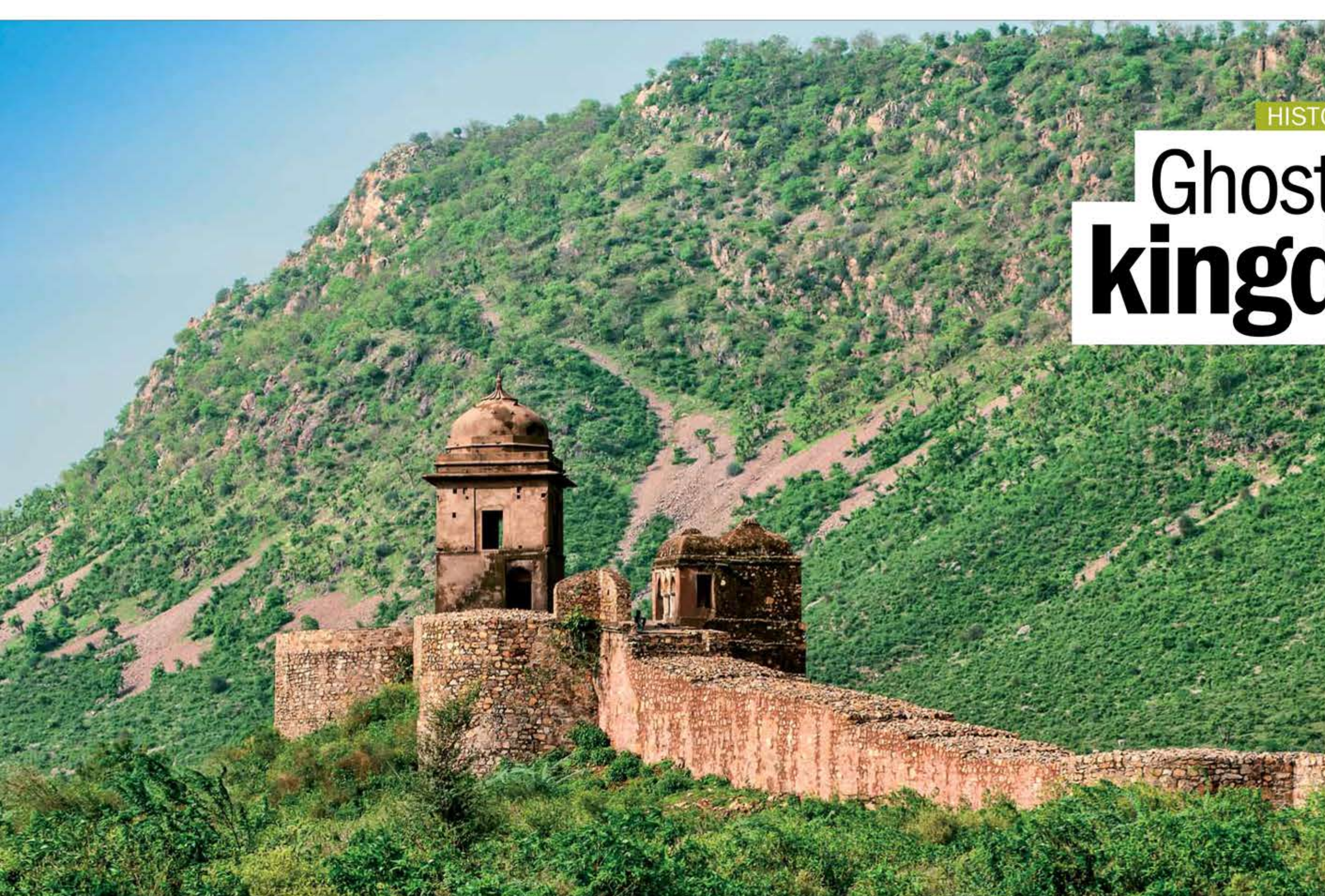


Ghosts of kingdoms past

Pass up the grand palaces and imposing forts synonymous with Rajasthan in favour of a forsaken village with a magical past
Text & photographs
 Gustasp and Jerroo Irani

Our tour of Ajabgarh valley in the Alwar district of Rajasthan, began with a small tablet, dating back to AD 1720-1730, by the side of the main road of a deserted village. On it, a Bengali magician had conceded that the resident wizard had powers that far exceeded his own. According to legend, the visitor, who'd hoped to bring the community under his spell, was challenged by his local counterpart. The contest was brief and decisive. The resident magician made a huge boulder levitate and invited his opponent to bring it back to the ground. Spells were conjured, but were all futile. It was only when the visitor accepted defeat, that the airborne rock came crashing



AJABGARH

(Opening page) An abandoned watchtower stands guard over the ghost village of Bhangarh
 (Facing page) Temple ruins at Bhangarh make for a quiet breakfast nook
 (Below) Amanbagh is the sole hotel in the desolate Ajabgarh valley
 (Bottom) The rural landscape in Rajasthan

down with a resounding thud that made the earth tremble. The visitor was allowed to leave on the condition that he engraved his humiliation in stone. However the wily Bengali had one parting shot. He put a curse on the place that had driven him away that it would reject all those who lived in or sought to settle there.

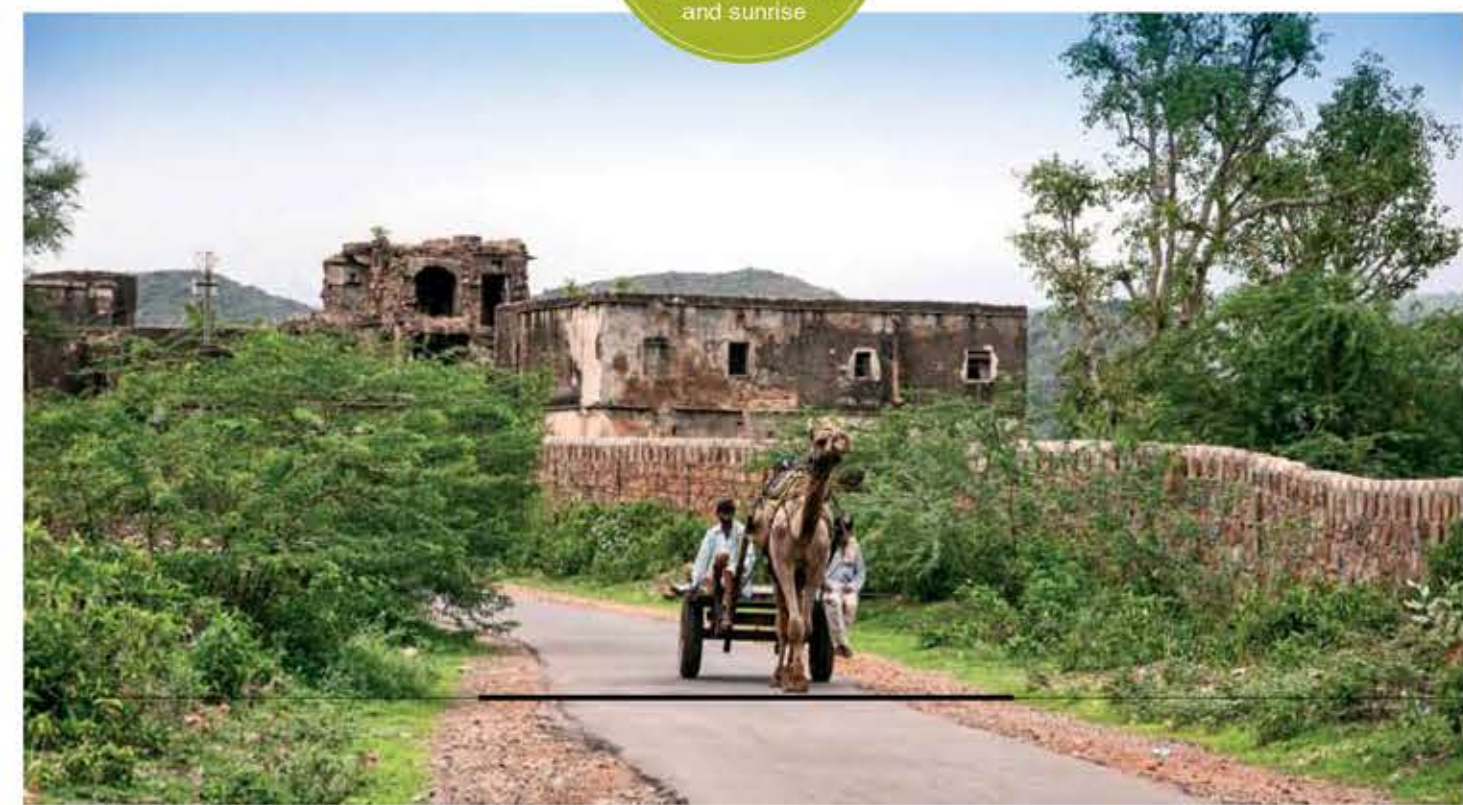
Today, a compact little fort, perched on a hillock surrounded by craggy cliffs, stands vigil over the desolate village of Ajabgarh that still seems to swoon under the old spell. An underground tunnel, it is whispered, connects the fort to a 17th-century temple which once housed bejewelled statues of Lord Ram and Sita in a 24-pillared courtyard.

However, the pleasures of the Ajabgarh valley are primarily deeply rural – this is not the Rajasthan of mighty brooding forts and grandiose palaces stuffed with treasures worth a king's ransom. We ran into a traffic jam and waited, alongside a tractor with a turbaned farmer astride it, for a shepherd to herd his flock down the road. Further down, cows loped home, kicking up a cloud of dust that filtered the dying rays of the setting sun. This was godhuli, or the cow dust hour, that's typical of Indian villages, laden with a smoky fragrance that emanated from open-air cooking fires. Dusky, bejewelled, veiled women in colourful ankle-length ghaghras and cholis or flaming orange, red and yellow saris, pulled water from village wells and then swayed with unknowing grace to

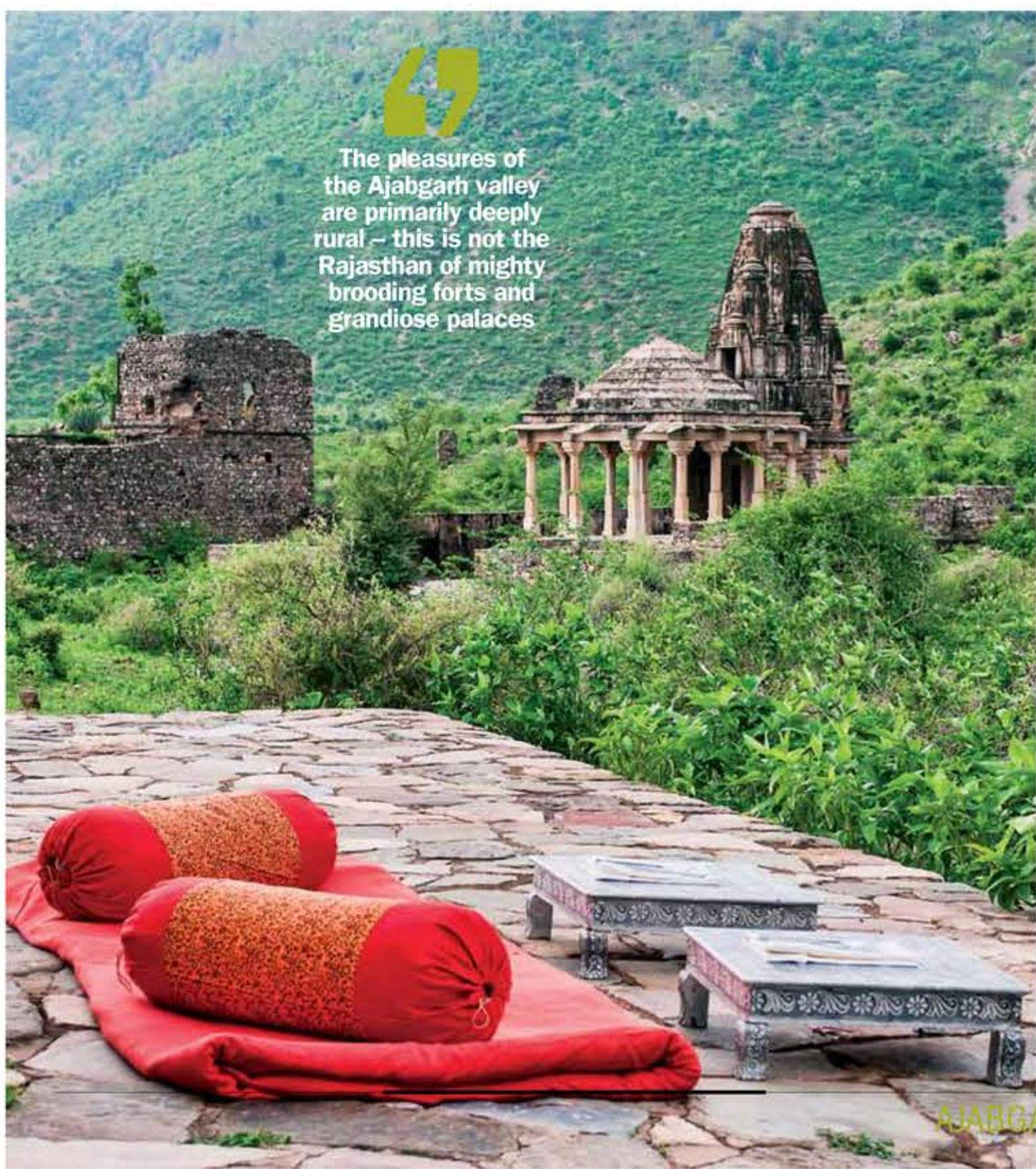


GRAVE TIDINGS
 Given Bhangarh's spooky history, the Archaeological Survey of India forbids visitors between sunset and sunrise

Pastoral musings
 Beyond the shrine, farmlands rolled out in all directions. These patchwork quilts in shades of green and brown were dotted with the occasional chhatra (pavilion), memorials to forgotten princes



46 – TIME OUT EXPLORER – MARCH/APRIL 2014



69
 The pleasures of the Ajabgarh valley are primarily deeply rural – this is not the Rajasthan of mighty brooding forts and grandiose palaces

AJABGARH

47 – TIME OUT EXPLORER – MARCH/APRIL 2014



(Clockwise from above) Farmers can be seen herding cattle back to their fields during the cow dust hour at sunset
 The Neelkanth Temple Complex comprises of around 300 temples built during the 6th-9th centuries
 Women of the region can be seen donning brightly coloured ghaghras and cholis
 Villagers gather around and share a hookah at the end of the day



their modest homes, bearing pots of water on their heads.
 There was a sense of fulfilment as the villages folded up after a day's work: men in white turbans batted the breeze as they passed around hookahs, women tethered their buffalos and children played in abandoned fields. We pulled up outside a village home where a young lass paused to look up shyly from milking a goat before continuing with the task in hand. Soon a gaggle of women, faces partially veiled, welcomed us with sweet milky tea that we sipped in the company of the family's elders in the courtyard.
 Back at our resort, Amanbagh, the only accommodation in these parts, tradition flowed on with a royal touch. The luxury resort is located on the edge of Sariska Tiger Reserve that was once the camping ground of Maharajah Jai Singh of Alwar. Atop a hillock, the former ruler would lounge on a seat carved from rock, known as The Throne, and have his men fan out across the jungle, pounding on drums, pots and pans and chase the terrified tigers towards where he sat. The big cats and other animals that strayed into the crosshairs of his gun ended up as trophies.

Ghost reveries
 The next day, we revelled in an atmospheric breakfast in the abandoned town of Bhangarh, 12km



48 – TIME OUT EXPLORER – MARCH/APRIL 2014



FYI
When to go
 Winter (Oct-Mar) is ideal. The monsoon (Jul-Sep) is also pleasant; but the neighbouring Sariska Tiger Reserve is closed then.
Getting there
 Jaipur (80km) is the closest airport and the most convenient railway station. Alwar (76km) is the closest railway station. You can reach by road via a detour at Dausa from NH11 between Jaipur and Agra.
Getting around
 Private self-driven vehicles or a hired taxi is ideal; public transport is almost non-existent.
Tourist information
www.rajasthan-tourism.gov.in

FACT FILE

AT A GLANCE
 Located 80km northwest of Jaipur, in the Alwar district of Rajasthan, the rural Ajabgarh valley is set against the backdrop of the verdant Aravallis. Brimming with vibrant colours and legends, it includes a ghost village where two headstrong magicians once clashed, an ancient fort upon a hill and a scattering of monuments and memorials to forgotten kings and princes. The area of the valley which lies at the edge of the

Sariska Tiger Reserve was also once a popular royal hunting ground.

EXPLORE
 The ghost town of Bhangarh (12km from Ajabgarh) was built in the 17th century by Raja Bhagwant Das, the then ruler of Amber, for his younger son, Madho Singh. The city, protected by five imposing gateways and three encircling walls, was abandoned in the early 18th century and is considered to be one of the most haunted places

in India. About 35km away is the Neelkanth Temple Complex which comprises around 300 Hindu and Jain shrines built between the 6th and 9th centuries. Of these only the Neelkanth, dedicated to Lord Shiva, is a functioning shrine. All the others, including the Jain temple of the tirthankara Parshwanath, are in ruins. Wildlife enthusiasts can enjoy a safari (36km away) at the Sariska Tiger Reserve (Chief Conservator of Wildlife, +91-141-222-7225.

www.rajasthanwildlife.com. Winter daily 6.30-10.30am, 2-6pm; Summer daily 6-10am, 2.30-6.30pm. Declared a national park in 1979, one can spot tigers, leopards, wild dogs, sloth bears, porcupines, antelope and deer.

EAT AND STAY
 In the case of the sleepy, off-the-beaten-track Ajabgarh valley, Amanbagh (Amanbagh Resort, Ajabgarh, Alwar district, Rajasthan 301027, +91-146-522-3333,

+91-9828-166-737. www.amansorts.com. ₹₹₹₹) is its ticket to popularity. The plush resort – the only one in the valley – has 24 Haveli Suites and 16 Pool Pavilions within its palatial environs, a state-of-the-art spa, live culinary demonstrations, romantic dining experiences for two, musical evenings and yoga sessions. Well-informed in-house guides are available for tours of the surrounding areas. Sariska Palace (Sariska village, Alwar district, Rajasthan 301027,

+91-144-284-1323. www.thesariskapalace.in. ₹₹₹₹) at the entrance of Sariska Tiger Reserve is a 125-room (including 4 royal suites) resort built on the site of a hunting lodge of the maharajahs of Alwar. Tiger Den (Near Forest Rest House, Sariska, Alwar district, Rajasthan 301027, +91-9783-804-623. www.rtdc.in/; Tiger Den, ₹₹₹), also located at the entrance of Sariska Tiger Reserve, is a 30-room lodge run by the Department of Tourism of Rajasthan.

49 – TIME OUT EXPLORER – MARCH/APRIL 2014