



JEWEL OF India

SAVING JAISALMER, REALM OF THE RAJPUT PRINCES

photographs by SUE CARPENTER

Strategically sited on a Rajasthan hilltop, the fortified city of Jaisalmer is one of India's greatest architectural treasures. Founded in A.D. 1156 by the Rajput prince, Rawal Jaisal, Jaisalmer is known colloquially as *Sonar Kila*, or the "Golden Fort," after the luminous sandstone of which it is built, which glistens at sunset. Jaisalmer's merchants and townspeople prospered from the city's propitious location on a caravan route through the Thar Desert, which linked Delhi and Gujarat with Central Asia and the Middle East. With riches derived from trade in spices, silks, stallions, and slaves, the people of Jaisalmer built magnificent houses exquisitely carved from golden-yellow sandstone. Today, these buildings serve as poignant reminders of a bygone age. Collectively, they are a provocative backdrop for the hustle and bustle of an ever-growing Indian city that is strangling the monumental gem that lies at its core.

Though the fort had endured for more than eight centuries, it has been brought to the brink of destruction in the span of only a few decades due to heavy tourist traffic and water erosion, resulting from monsoon rains and the introduction of running water into a city without proper drainage. Thus far, of 469 historic properties within the fort, 87 have collapsed and many more are in poor condition. The complex physical effects of plumbing and sewerage within the walled city, inconceivable to the city's original builders, now under-





DOZENS OF SANDSTONE BASTIONS EMBRACE JAISALMER FORT, ABOVE. A SIMPLE MUD HOUSE WITHIN THE FORT, LEFT, STANDS IN SHARP CONTRAST TO JAISALMER'S GREAT SANDSTONE BUILDINGS. A CAMEL DRIVER, FAR LEFT, SUPPORTS HIMSELF BY TAKING VISITORS ON SAFARI IN THE THAR DESERT. MEN GATHER AT THE MANDIR PALACE, RIGHT, ONE OF TWO ROYAL RESIDENCES OUTSIDE THE FORT BUILT BY THE MAHARAWAL RULERS DURING THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.



mine the stability of the entire urban complex. Unusually heavy rains in August 1999 compounded this problem and resulted in the collapse of three of the city's dozens of sandstone bastions. This loss has hastened the deterioration of adjacent walls and buildings due to exposure, erosion, and moisture penetration.

Since Jaisalmer appeared on WMF's list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites* in 1996, several projects have been undertaken within the fort, including the reconstruction of one wing of the Rani Ka Mahal, or Queen's Palace. WMF, in partnership with the Giridhar Samarak Trust (Jaisalmer Royal Trust), and the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, has embarked on stabilization of the adjacent Har Raj Ji Ka Mahal, or King's Palace, and is finalizing a partnership agreement with the Archaeological Survey of India and the State Government of Rajasthan to develop a conservation plan for the majestic Rajput bastions. *Fragile Jewels of India*, an exhibition of photographs, architectural models, textiles, and tools that highlight WMF's conservation work at Jaisalmer and other Indian sites, will be on view May 28–September 10 at WMF's Gallery, 95 Madison Avenue in New York. ■



A WOMAN, LEFT, CARRIES WATER ALONG THE RETAINING WALL AT THE BASE OF JAISALMER FORT. BRIGHTLY TURBANNED MEN, FAR LEFT, GATHER IN THE COURTYARD OF MANDIR PALACE. ONE WALL AND A PORTION OF THE KING'S PALACE, BELOW LEFT, RECENTLY COLLAPSED. EFFORTS ARE CURRENTLY UNDERWAY TO STABILIZE THE STRUCTURE AND PREVENT FURTHER DAMAGE. ONE WING OF THE ADJACENT QUEEN'S PALACE, BELOW RIGHT, HAS BEEN RECONSTRUCTED AND TURNED INTO AN INTERPRETATION CENTER DEVOTED TO THE NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF JAISALMER AND THE THAR DESERT REGION, AS WELL AS THE TRADITIONAL LIVES OF WOMEN.





THE ORNATE ROOFTOP OF AN EARLY JAIN TEMPLE, ABOVE, WHICH HAS BEEN LOVINGLY CARED FOR OVER THE CENTURIES. A MUSLIM STONE CARVER, RIGHT, IS A DESCENDANT OF THOSE WHO CARVED MANY OF JAISALMER'S MOST EXQUISITE BUILDINGS. A DETAIL, FAR RIGHT, OF ONE OF THE CITY'S HAVELIS, OR MERCHANT'S HOUSES. THE INTRICATE, PIERCED STONework KEEPS OCCUPANTS COOL, EVEN IN 45° C HEAT.

