Journey to Jaipur

WITH TEXTILE DESIGNER MOLLY MAHON

DAY 1

I reach Delhi before the heat of the day was properly upon me. Without a hitch, I was on my way—whizzing merrily along the highway. It's a 5 hour mission to Jaipur, but with the wind in my hair, and the sights before my eyes, time dissolves into insignificance.

By the afternoon, I am in the garden of my hotel making my adjustment to the warmer climate. Quite frankly, it is heaven. This is what summer should feel like. (Sorry England, no offence.)

Not one to sit around for long, I head straight into the old city in a tuk-tuk for a full blast of the India I know and love. There is nothing like a tuk-tuk ride to get you into the spirit. I find myself giggling with gay abandon as we wiggle in and out of carts, cows, and people, somehow seamlessly, as if we are part of a synchronised dance. My first observation is the array of new tuk-tuks beautiful pastel colours, larger (my head no longer hits the roof) and electric—so much better for the lungs!

I stand to look at the Hawa Mahal as the sun goes down and the buzz of the city moves around me. I am only here for a week, but there is a lot to achieve.

DAYS 2-4

Up early. Too excited for words as today I head to Bagru to see Gitto, the doyenne of block-printing, and someone I have tremendous respect for. They have carved some of my designs as blocks ahead of my arrival. Today is about playing with colour and sampling the blocks for our new range of quilts, table-linens and bedding.

These guys are meticulous in their work, and they have some impressive clients. They have a highly-skilled colour master and Gitto herself is much more than the owner of this operation. She is an artist and a lady of precision. I adore working with her as she is a mentor to me— teaching me something new about the technique every time I go. I feel as though we are working together on this collection. And of course, she is a woman! It's a rare honour to be working side-by-side with another female, it brings a sensitivity and an understanding that I have found hard to attain elsewhere.

The difference with my work is that I take simple designs, often using only one colour, to the table. Historically, fabrics would be printed with layers and layers of colour, each needing an individual block – think paisleys, chintz, etc.

Our approach is much more simplistic, and the result is a wonderful mix of age-old traditions creating modern designs. This is what our company is becoming recognised for. It's exciting to be taking block printing into a modern era here in the UK.

We are printing direct onto the cloth with the block, whereby the printer dips the block into the dye tray and then stamps the block with a heavy thud onto the fabric. They have a tight line of thread to show them the top line and then it's about printing by eye. They are accurate, fast, and rarely make a mistake.

The area of Bagru is a district well-famed for its printing. I also work further down the road with a community of printers called Bagru Textiles. The set-up is very different from the cool and calm white setting of Gitto's hanger-style workshop. Here, the tiny houses are situated around the communal drying fields of Vijendra's house. When the monsoon comes, it's difficult for them to print because the drying field is awash, but at Gitto's, they continue to print throughout the rains.

DAY 5

I'm joined by my sister today and we are tourists. We set off early. It's so pleasant and calm then, and the best time to get out of the city quickly. We are headed for the Amber Palace, just north of Jaipur. Built between 1550 and 1614, it combines Rajput and Hindu elements, and has a majestic air to it that captures the imagination. It's a feast for the eyes, especially if one is searching for new textile designs!

Afterwards, it is rather refreshing to go and be the only visitors at the Anokhi Museum. This is one of the most impressively curated museums I have ever been to. It's beautifully laid out with a clear and concise history, and it leads you around the rooms in a lovely way so you don't miss a thing. The highlights included watching the master block carver at work, printing our own little hankies, and in the end, nibbling on the fennel and cheese biscuits in the pretty courtyard.

We arrive at the Raj Mahal Palace hotel that afternoon. I have been desperate to visit this property from the moment it opened and have been commissioned to write about my mini-stay here. Decorated by Adil Ahmad of Good Earth, there was no holding back in using colour, pattern, and print. Most walls are wallpapered, and there are loads of patterns all going on together.

If any space is left untouched, it has been painted pink – my kind of heaven! It's sumptuous, high end, comfortable, and unique – it's really a treasure of Jaipur and I feel lucky to have stayed one special night here. I use this location as the base for my meetings. So, dhurries, fabrics, and the next trip are all discussed between the 51 Shades of Pink room, the Polo room, and the stunning gardens that are lit by candles in the evening.

Happy and exhausted, my sister retreats to bed while I sit outside under the stars, listening to the train soar by, chatting with the friendly manager, and imagining what it would have been like here during the Raj.

DAY 6

But, alas, to Delhi we must go, and so we board the late night train, weighed down by the memories, the impressions of colour and design, and the relationships that are formed. I will be back very soon. My connections grow stronger, my attachment feels more real, and my working relationships are becoming an obsession. I look forward to the arrival of the products that Gitto and I shaped and planned and can't wait to get them back to the UK. Pattern, print, colour, and joy are the mantra of this trip.