

FINANCIAL TIMES

# travel unravelle



FINANCIAL TIMES  
**how to  
spend it**

## **Exhilarating travel with storytelling at its heart**

A vanguard of travel designers is putting the exhilaration of great storytelling at the heart of luxury adventures. Gisela Williams flies to Delhi for five days of... actually, she doesn't quite know what



Kudos Life Experiences' OneLife Game of Antikythera culminated with the chance to view the Antikythera shipwreck | Image: Brett Seymour/EUA/ARGO

March 1, 12 pm. A black limousine is waiting outside my house to take me to the airport. This in itself is not unusual – but when the driver opens the door to the back seat, there is a middle-aged man waiting, wearing a tweed hat. “Welcome to the game,” he says gravely, and hands me a box. “Er – who are you...?” I ask with a nervous laugh, but he doesn't answer. “Enjoy your trip to [India](#),” he says instead, opening his door and slipping out. “Someone will be waiting for you in Delhi.” And then I am alone with the driver and that box. As we make our way to the airport, I

examine its contents: a board game in the form of a map of Rajasthan; a Leica Sofort Polaroid camera; a leather-bound journal; a tiny copy of the Bhagavad-Gita; and a handsome ink pen.



A visit to Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur kicked off the Great Game itinerary orchestrated by Brown + Hudson for the author | Image: 4Corners Images

My mystery companion was genuinely unexpected, but the fact that I am shortly to depart for India, on a trip destined to include some unforeseen twists, is not a surprise. The London-based bespoke travel specialists at [Brown + Hudson](#), founded in 2007 by Philippe Brown, have spent several weeks masterminding my private mystery tour of Rajasthan – a place I have rather remarkably never visited. In several rounds of email correspondence and phone conversations, I have answered dozens of their questions, from “What are your passions?” to “Who would you like to have dinner with, dead or alive?” In response to a query about any personal connections to [India](#), I sent them an excerpt from the journals of my great aunt, who travelled through the country in the late 1920s with my grandmother and their siblings.

This time-consuming but hugely enjoyable process – half therapy, half professional interview – was part of a brand-new tailor-made service called The Great Game. Described on the Brown + Hudson website as a “modern-day cultural treasure hunt”, it’s one of an emerging style of ornately orchestrated trips that are taking the idea of experiential travel a radical notch higher, into the realm of storytelling writ large. “We don’t even necessarily talk about destinations any more,” says Brown. “We ask why you want to travel and then create a journey that will, we hope, engage all your senses. With The Great Game, what we want most to do is reawaken that childlike sense of wonder and play.” Thus all I knew was that I had five nights; the mysteries were all yet to be revealed.



Image: Gallery Stock

The apparition of the man in the car has me peering nervously around for another unexpected encounter at the airport and on the flight. But I arrive in Delhi without incident, am escorted through customs and handed over to my “master of ceremonies”: Indrajeet Sawant. “Welcome to India and welcome to The Game,” he says with a slightly enigmatic smile. We transfer to the domestic terminal and hop on a short flight to... I don’t know where, until just before I am told to board: [Jodhpur](#).



The mise-en-scène created for the author in India had a dreamlike quality | Image: Gallery Stock

From my bed at [Raas](#), the striking hotel in the centre of Jodhpur’s old town, I have unobstructed views of the centuries-old Mehrangarh Fort, which floats over 120m above the plain, seemingly carved into the side of the rust-hued cliff. That afternoon we embark on a walking tour; Sawant, a local guide and I wander through teeming markets overflowing with spices, ceremonial powders, henna stamp sellers and sweetmakers. So far, so standard. When we reach the oldest part of the city, Sawant urgently begins to push the guide onwards. “We’re going to be late,” he warns. “The fort closes at 5pm.” To my surprise, the guide doesn’t respond; if anything, he appears to slow down. Several minutes later, just as we are approaching the fort’s oldest entrance, Sawant abruptly announces that we are too late: “It’s closing,” he says, strangely calm. But as the last tourists are exiting, a young boy wearing a bright-pink turban darts out, grabs my hand and pulls me toward the entrance. Confused, I look back at Sawant, but he nods and says, “Follow him”.



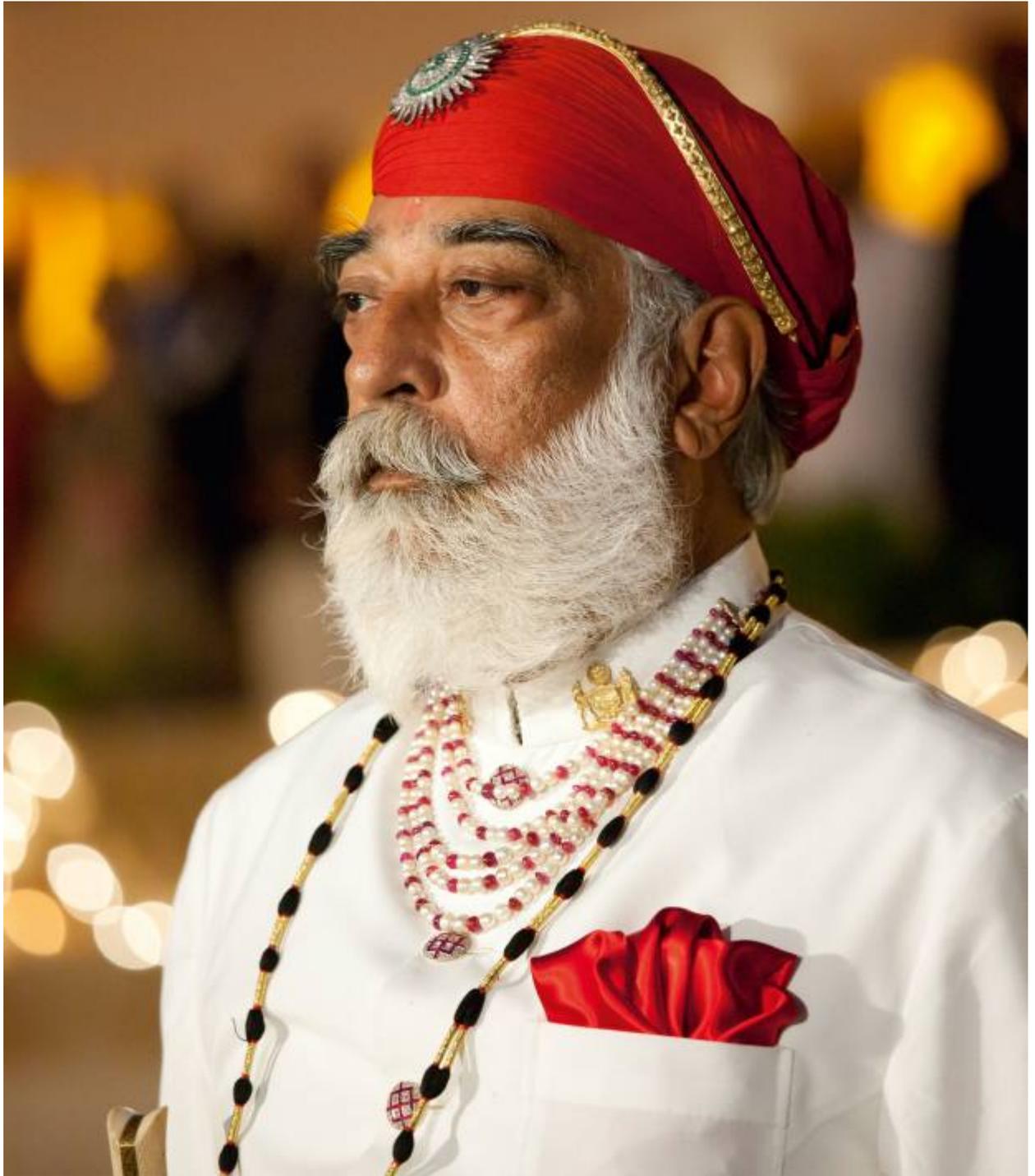
The Key has led clients on spiritual journeys through the Amazon | Image: Getty Images

The guard merely smiles at us as we start up the steep, stone-paved slope. By the time we have reached a midway lookout point, not a single tourist remains – but Sawant materialises suddenly next to us, smiling like a Cheshire Cat. We ascend to a courtyard that overlooks the city and the setting sun, where a handsome man sporting a tailored tweed vest and brocade mojari shoes is striding towards us. “I am Karni Singh, the director of the Mehrangarh Fort museum. Welcome.” For the next hour, I have the fort and the director completely to myself as the sky turns every shade of pink and purple and swifts whirl amid the eaves of the carved façade. Although by then, I realise the whole *mise-en-scène* has been scripted by Brown + Hudson, for one or two heady moments it had truly felt like that turbaned boy had materialised from nowhere and transported me inside a Mughal painting.



While in Rajasthan, the author explored the Aravalli Hills in a safari jeep | Image: Getty Images

It's the exhilarating unexpectedness of such moments – the ones when you wonder, “Is this really happening?” – that are the currency of this kind of travel. Predictably, they don't come easy. In fact, in their complexity, execution and cost, itineraries like mine in India can rival small film productions. One of the first to orchestrate such elaborate, theatrical bespoke travel experiences was Niel Fox, who founded Based on a True Story (BOATS) in 2004. Fox's clients are typically royalty or international business leaders for whom the cost of a trip can run into seven figures; many of the journeys he creates require dozens or even hundreds of actors. On the first day of an anniversary celebration in [Marrakech](#), each guest found a note on their bed with directions to a magical tailor somewhere in the medina. “One by one they arrived at a beautiful old antique shop, where we had cleared out the second floor to create a space for the ‘magical’ tailor,” BOATS' managing director Oliver von Holzinger tells me. “Everyone was fitted with a medieval-era oriental costume, then the owner of the [shop](#) threw open another door to an interior courtyard, where dozens of musicians were already performing among braziers burning with the scent of flowers and spices.” It was announced that the musicians had lost their genie, and the guests were being conscripted to help them find him. And so it went from there – mystery upon mystery, for the next three days, from open-air feasts in an empty [desert](#) to music and dancing in private [villas](#). “We are opening doors to other worlds,” says von Holzinger. “They aren't necessarily completely made-up worlds. But we provide another prism through which to experience the history or mythology of a place.”



One of the author's surprise encounters was with Maharana Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur | Image: Tim Graham/Getty Images

Two hours after my sunset fort tour, over dinner on the candlelit terrace of Chokelao Mahal restaurant, Sawant hands me a large envelope, which I soon learn is to be an evening ritual. Inside are several blank pages with a few questions written on them, to be added to the journal I'd been given in the car, as well as a piece to attach to the game board, which represents the day's [adventure](#). "Answer these questions thoroughly," instructs Sawant, "and pay attention to how numbers might play a part." It could be the number of people I meet in a day, he says, or a sign or note – but each

day, a specific number would somehow make itself known. “If you have all the correct numbers at the end of your journey, you win the game.”



The Key’s “transcending” journeys might involve delving into Berlin’s nightclub scene | Image: Alamy Stock Photo

The next morning at breakfast, Sawant greets me with a tray holding three objects: a stone, a flower and tree bark. “The flower represents faith; the stone, nature; and the bark, adventure,” he says. “Please choose the next part of your journey.” I opt for the flower and we are off – I have no idea where to.

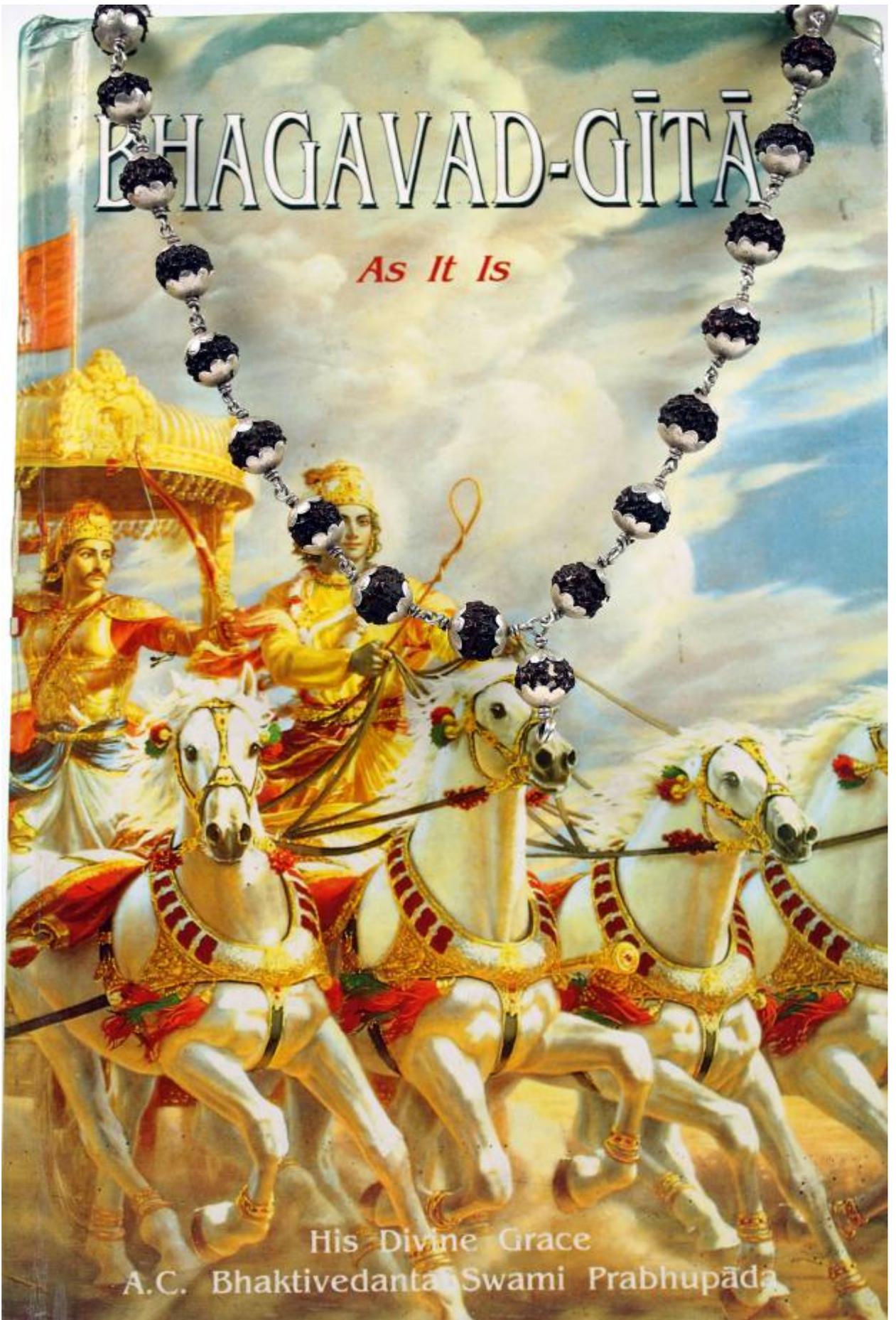


Kudos Life Experiences used private yachts in its Cycladic treasure hunt | Image: Getty Images

This “choose your own adventure” conceit is a popular device with specialists like Brown and Fox. The strategy partner at [Athens](#)-based Kudos Life Experiences, Maria Nikolakaki, has adapted the concept for many of the firm’s bespoke expeditions, among them an Odysseus-based [Cycladic](#) treasure hunt using private yachts.

# BHAGAVAD-GĪTĀ

*As It Is*



His Divine Grace  
A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda

A copy the Bhagavad-Gita, which the author received at the start of her Great Game adventure | Image: Alamy Stock Photo

This year Kudos is partnering with watchmaker Hublot to launch a truly next-level adventure: a quest for the Greek Antikythera Mechanism. Discovered in the 1900s in a shipwreck dating back to around 100BC, the Mechanism is now considered the world's first computer. The OneLife Game of Antikythera experience always begins with a visit to see the actual partial remains of the bronze Mechanism, in Athens' National Archaeological Museum – a visit interrupted at some point by the arrival of the “police”, who announce that the Mechanism has disappeared. From that point, the game diverges uniquely each time, tailored according to the travellers' budgets and amount of holiday time. Like characters in a Bond film, Nikolakaki's clients journey all over Greece by yacht, [helicopter](#) and private plane, following clues in search of the “missing” artefact. Every itinerary culminates in a live underwater archaeological excavation, with the chance to pilot a first-of-its-kind 3D-recording underwater drone developed by Hublot to view the real Antikythera shipwreck. “These days it's not enough for sophisticated travellers to just ‘immerse’ in a place,” says Nikolakaki. “That element of surprise and theatre we are creating for our clients awakens a variety of emotions; it inspires ideas and stirs up exhilarating responses.”

Each experience is a journey into the unknown | Image: Taj Hotels

And sometimes, a life-changing epiphany. Antoine Sepulchre founded The Key in 2008 as an exclusive concierge and travel service offering five-star accommodation and amenities for the ultra-high-net-worth crowd at festivals such as Burning Man. But since late 2015, Sepulchre has expanded his remit, creating travel-related journeys that he calls “transcending”. And they're not for everyone: The Key only takes on clients interested in using travel to meaningfully transform their lives in some way. That might mean guiding someone deep inside [Berlin](#)'s eye-opening underground club scene. “We have led clients on spiritual [journeys through the Amazon](#), complete with sacred plant medicines such as ayahuasca, and organised a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash in Tibet for a couple, with a luxury tent and private chef,” he says. “Our goal is to introduce magic into every experience and involve all the senses in experiencing wonder.”



The contents of the box the author was given at the start of her Great Game adventure

My senses are most certainly engaged. One of the side effects of The Great Game's mysterious reveals is the occasional feeling – call it mild paranoia – that everyone around me is in on it. And sometimes I am right. One evening, after dinner in a garden courtyard at the stunning Rohet Garh heritage estate, Sawant and I make our way to a small gazebo, where a magician is showing off sleight-of-hand coin tricks for a few guests. At one point he beckons Sawant up on stage, deftly producing a few coins from his trouser turn-up and handing them to him – along with a piece of paper that Sawant passes immediately to me. I unfold it; the number seven is printed on it. “Hold onto it,” he says; by now I know why.



Based on a True Story organised a quest for a “magical” tailor in the medina of Marrakech | Image: 4Corners Images

While on balance my journey is more Darjeeling Limited than Skyfall, its unexpected surprises and riddles do have the effect of making me engage much more deeply than normal with my surroundings. At the bucolic [Dev Shree](#), a seven-room guesthouse in Deogarh, I spend a wonderful few hours exploring the surrounding Aravalli Hills in a safari jeep, with its owner Bhavna Kumari. We stop at an ancient shrine to Shiva, in a [cave](#) filled with sleeping bats. The priest is cooking dough over coals at the entrance. Even under normal circumstances, the exotic tableau would have sparked delight – but thinking that I might somehow be quizzed about it later makes me hyper-observant, trying to commit even the tiniest details to memory.

The next morning Kumari passes me a picture of a woman she says I might find in Udaipur. “If you do, you will find my family and your own,” are her cryptic words. After some gentle pressing and questioning on my part, I arrive at the revelation that this mystery woman is her sister-in-law. Only as we enter the outskirts of the city does Sawant tell me that said sister-in-law also happens to be the daughter of the Maharana of Udaipur, and that Kumari has asked her to arrange a meeting between me and her father that very afternoon. It transpires that Sawant has quietly passed along those pages from my great aunt’s journal in which she describes being invited, along with my grandmother, to visit the Lake Palace – then, in the late 1920s, still a royal palace and not the stunning Taj hotel it is today – for tea with the Prince of Udaipur and his ministers. I am instead to have tea with the Prince’s grandson Arvind Singh Mewar (now in his 70s) at his private wing in the City Palace. My family story has come full circle in a way I’d never have imagined, thanks to Brown + Hudson’s Great Game.

That is not quite the end. On my last day in Delhi, at the elegant Maidens Hotel, Sawant comes to me one last time, bearing a small box with a combination lock on it. He tells me to fetch all the numbers I've collected along the route. After putting them together in a few different ways with no luck, the lock finally clicks open; inside is a key. I am led down the hall to a door, which opens with a half-turn of the key. Inside the room is another, much larger box – filled, as I find when I open it, with pictures taken and objects collected unbeknown to me by Sawant over the previous five days: a sari that I had worn, my favourite masala chai, a wooden henna stamp I had admired but not purchased in Jodhpur. “Your reward for having collected the correct numbers; you solved your Great Game,” Sawant told me, as I sat rummaging through the mementoes with a delight as pure and satisfying as a child's.

Advertisement