

# Passage through

# India

Dramatic desert, amazing wildlife, breathtaking skies, good food, pilgrimages and curly eared horses.

**Pam Langrish** spills the beans on her Indian safari

PHOTOS: PAM LANGRISH



**I**NDIA! I CAN'T BELIEVE I'm here. I've longed to come to this vibrant, wonderful country for years, but I didn't expect it to be raining so hard that the landing was what I can only call 'interesting', and we'd had to stay on the plane for hours. No matter. The horses are waiting. This will be the ride of my dreams.

## The birth of a dream

I met my husband, Bob, 15 years ago when he returned from photographing Bonnie (Kanwa Raghuvendra Singh Dundlod to give him his

full name) and the Marwari horses. That was when I decided to ride these magical beasts one day too. Dundlod Safaris was created by Bonnie in 1985 and, as the secretary general of the Indigenous Horse Society of India, he's rustled up Marwari and Kathiawari horses for films and TV programmes, found locations, and advised on production and costumes, all helped by his assistant Sunayana. It takes 15 people working behind the scenes to make the safari possible, including Subhash, who creates the most incredible dishes from behind the curtains of the cook tent.





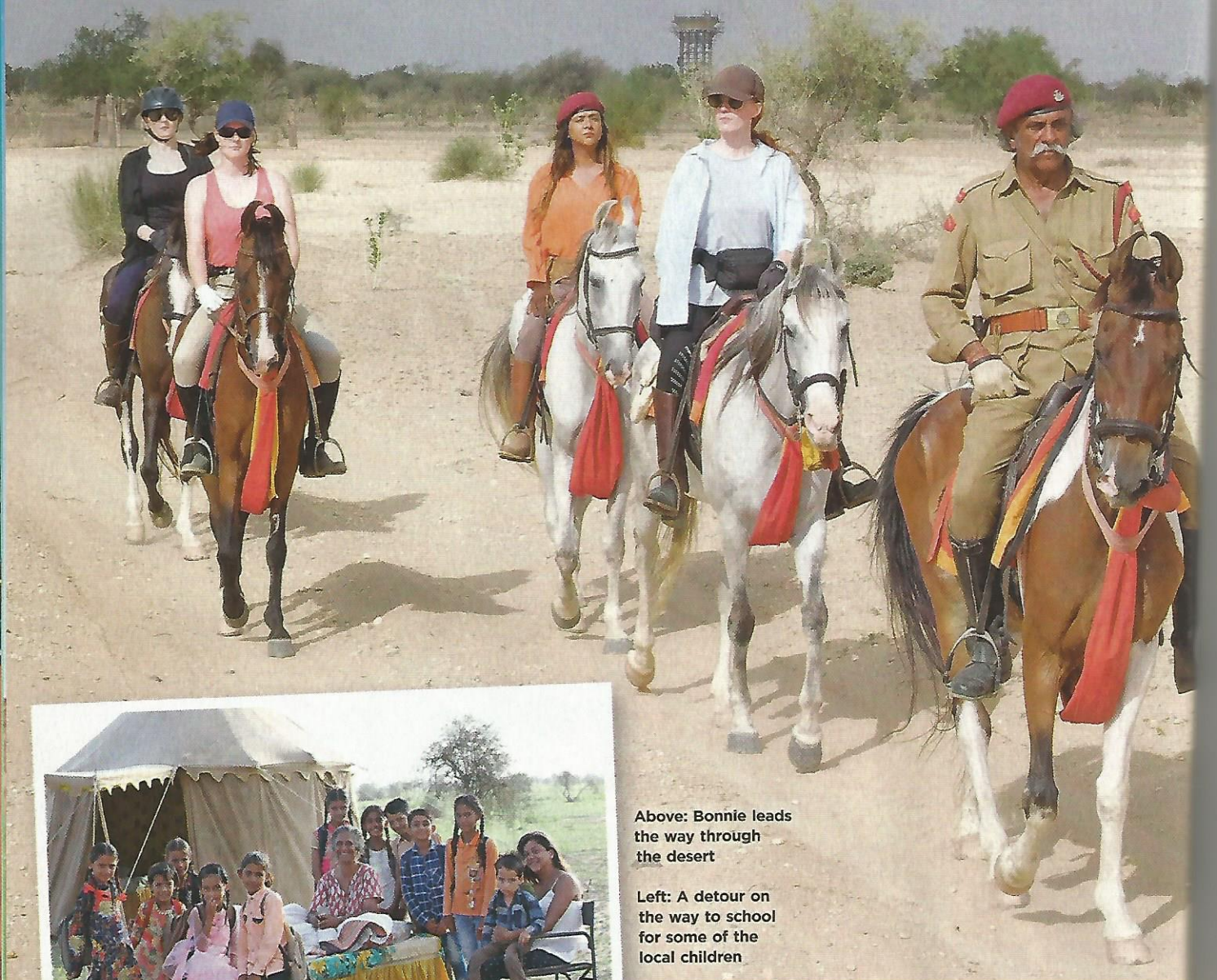
The group cantering for a photo opportunity on the last day of the safari — normally they would wear regular riding gear, including helmets

### The journey begins

As we left the luxurious Hotel Rang Mahal in Jaisalmer, we were longing to meet our Marwari horses with their expressive, curly ears. Many months had been spent getting the necessary clearances and permissions to cross military and tribal lands.

The first day's riding was across deserts with a mixture of soft and hard-packed sand, and along farm tracks bordered by stone posts with barbed wire protecting the valuable crops. The dunes were fantastic to ride on and the best place to see wild





Above: Bonnie leads the way through the desert

Left: A detour on the way to school for some of the local children



### All about the horses

Bonnie rode at the head of our cavalcade on Geetanjali, which means 'offering'.

just broke into a fast trot. He either assumed we were paying attention, or thought that if we weren't, we should have been, and it was up to us to keep up. Nikki and I found this very amusing as we raced after him.

Geetanjali kept a fast walking pace, but the other mares lagged from time to time so we'd have to trot to catch up. Riding beside Bonnie was a pleasure, with interesting discussions on geography, history, religion, sociology and ethnicity, his involvement with the film industry, the celebrities he has taken on safari, going to the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, and India's plants, animals and

### Camping India style

Sunayana was first up in the mornings, preparing fresh chai for Bonnie, who was never slow in waking. She would busy herself talking to Subhash, get breakfast ready, prepare the lunch meal for later. She'd also organise the camp team to get water for showers, dismantle the tents and furniture, pack the lorry and chivvy us along too. When she would be on her phone sorting out itineraries, flights, hotels, transfers and supplies. We drank 300 litres of bottled water during the safari, and that isn't found in the desert.

As darkness descended, wildlife would appear. Once I chased a pack of dogs who were risking waking everybody with their barking and howling. Unfortunately, in the night it's easy to get lost. I wandered around

animals. On our second day there were wandering camels, Chinkara deer, families of wild boar that ran beside us because they hadn't seen horses before, foxes, sand grouse, partridge, monitor lizards, squirrels and beautiful peacocks and peahens who called out stridently and piercingly even through the night. Wherever we rode the message was passed along the line to beware of some hazard or other, such as wires, thorny branches, or holes made by the ground rats.

At the overnight campsites we were visited by children going to school and the local 'big wigs' who sat and chatted to Bonnie. As this was an exploratory ride we were an unusual sight, and everyone wanted to know more. Out here the horse – and particularly the Marwari horse – is a symbol of royalty. The admiring looks made us proud and we waved and smiled even more.

The farmers' generosity as they welcomed us to water the horses was incredible. This selfless gesture was all the more humbling because they pay for water to be delivered as it hasn't rained in this region for a year. They wouldn't accept any money and even offered us chai and shelter in their homes.

Mallyka, his daughter, rode a rescued grey, Gulbadan – her name means 'beautiful body'. Then came Nikki on another grey called Mahima – 'highness', a truly apt name. Kate was on Sonia, who is also well named – 'beautiful', because she is with her high head carriage and rounded neck. Joanna rode Koel, 'nightingale', who is often the flag-bearer's mount when the ride is bigger, and the mare would eat whenever possible. Finally, there was me on little Sukhi – 'happiness' – who is a favourite for tent-pegging competitions because she is fast, accurate, nimble and sweet natured.

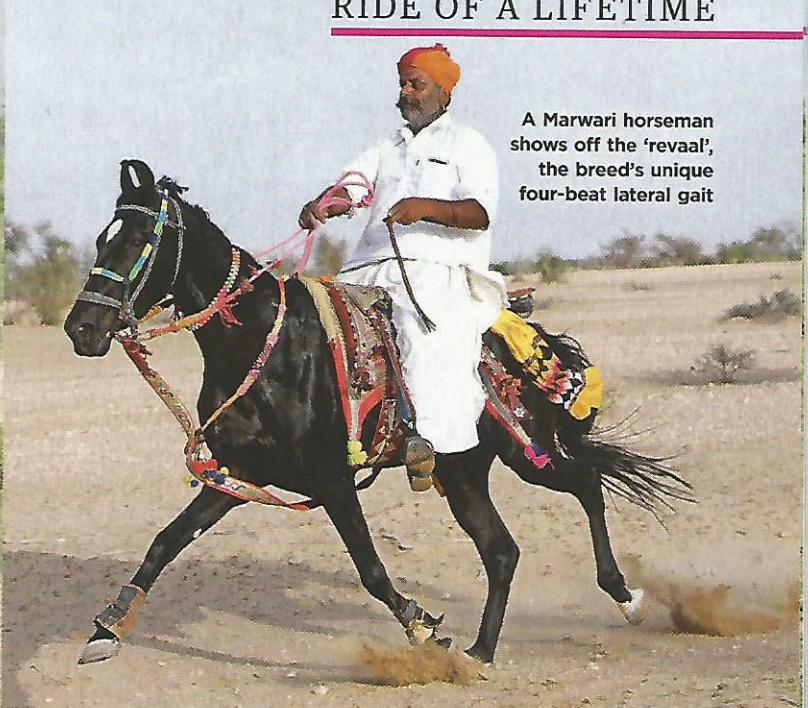
Dear Sukhi was tolerant of me and my antics. She was happy to leave the group so I could ride out at the side or in front to take pictures, and she didn't bat an eyelid when I rode backwards so that her ears weren't in shot. She's an old hand at safaris – so much so that she recognises the signs of Bonnie turning in his saddle to check his charges. This movement is followed by his deep-voiced call of "Trrrrroottttt..." although he usually only managed the "Trr" part before she responded. In the last couple of days, though, he neither turned nor called out, but



# RIDE OF A LIFETIME



An exhilarating canter



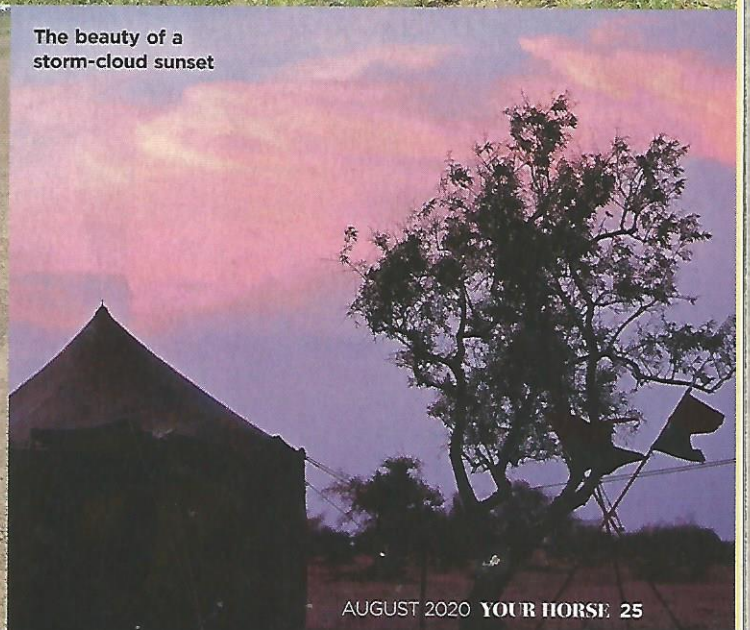
A Marwari horseman shows off the 'revaal', the breed's unique four-beat lateral gait



Riding in the arena at Reggie's Camel Camp on the last day of the safari



Koel, Gulbadan and Sonia, and those unmistakable Marwari ears...

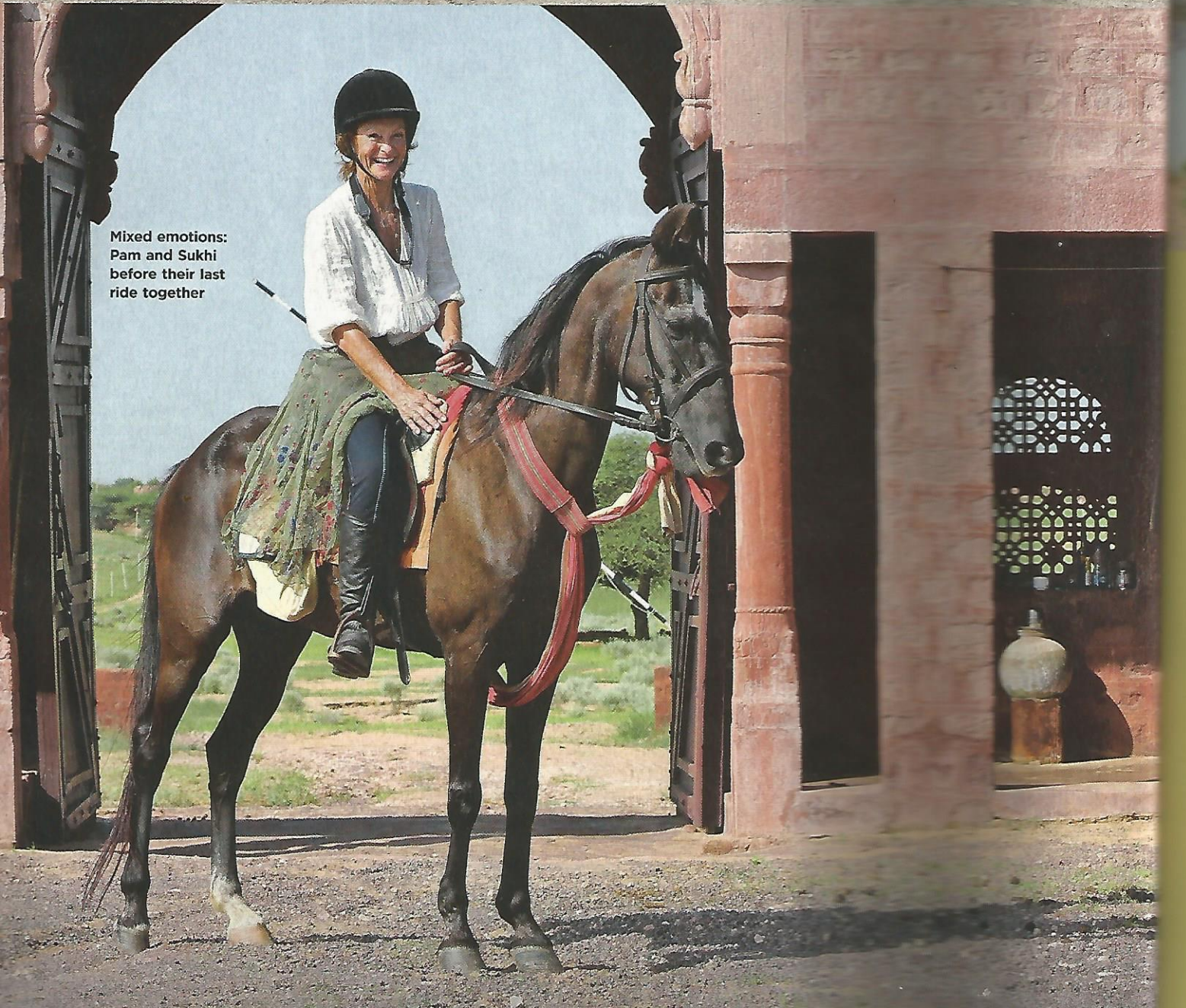


The beauty of a storm-cloud sunset





Relaxing in the evening

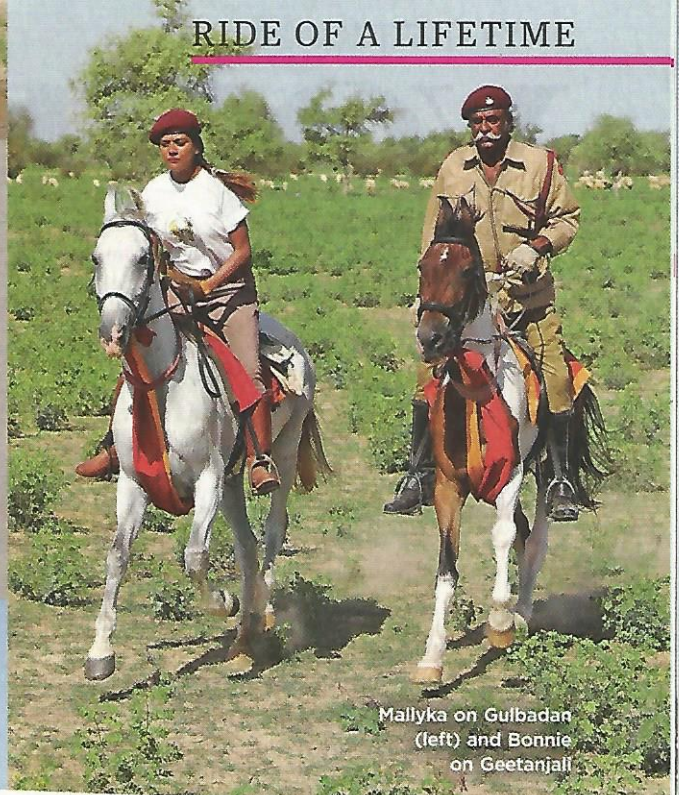


Mixed emotions:  
Pam and Sukhi  
before their last  
ride together





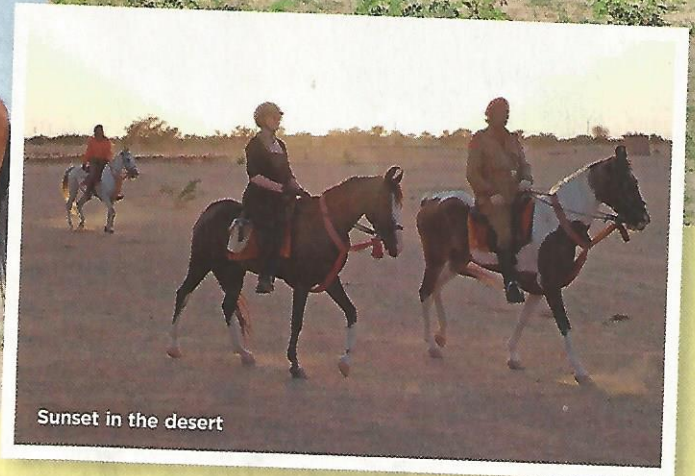
Geetanjali has fun cooling off in the water



Mallyka on Gulbadan (left) and Bonnie on Geetanjali



Taking in the view across the dunes



Sunset in the desert

a while, feeling extremely foolish. Thankfully Bunkit, who was sleeping on the top of the Maruti Gypsy vehicle, snored and, at the same time, one of the horses kicked a metal bucket, so I knew the direction to walk in.

### Chaos in the calm

They say New York is the city that never sleeps, but I have the impression that India is the country that can best claim this accolade. As the moon was so bright, the pilgrims made the most of the cool nights to walk to Ramdevra to pay homage to Ramdev Baba, a king and good man who helped the lower caste Shudra people. He was made a deity and every year devotees make the pilgrimage to honour him.

They take offerings, usually of flags on poles bearing his image riding a Marwari horse, and a sun and moon. Others show red footprints on a white background, symbolising luck and prosperity. The pilgrims walk hundreds of kilometres and to show extra devotion they discard their footwear about 25km away so there are endless piles of shoes dumped by the roadside. They are accompanied by DJ trucks playing music at insanely high volumes to keep them inspired. It makes you want to dance, but not at 3am. I would have cheerfully used one of the lances to spear the loudspeakers in order to get some sleep.

We were sleeping under the stars now and the skies were incredible. With no light

pollution, the stars tried to outshine each other with their brilliance and there were many shooting stars, so of course I made wishes.

### Magical sights

One of the most tranquil lunch stops was by a pond surrounded by trees, with beautiful mausoleums on the banks. The horses were taken in to be soaked and, as the others went in barefoot, there were squeals at the hundreds of frogs hopping and scuttling from under their toes. A pair of red-wattled lapwings made it very evident that they were furious at our invasion of their territory. The horses loved the welcome shade, a breeze, the water and lots of food and attention.

Another of our 'indoor' stops was in the burgundy-coloured Fort Pokaran Heritage Hotel with its amazing architecture, like all the historic buildings of Rajasthan. I wandered around photographing its beauty while the others slept, rested or worked in the cool rooms. We were in the private hotel part, while the rest of the fort is open to the pilgrims and they visit in their throngs.

### The end is just the beginning

Our final night was at Reggie's Camel Camp in Osian. Climbing the corridors leads you to the highest point and a fabulous hilltop pool and bar overlooking the town. We camped within the walls, which are interspersed

with torch-lit towers. There are thatched rooms with the most luxurious furniture, amenities and en-suite bathrooms. Bonnie said Sting and his family had stayed here on another horse safari he had organised.

On our last day, Bonnie suggested that for our ride back into Jaisalmer we dress in shirts, skirts or something different. We rode in the dunes and then made the most of the arena for Bonnie to display his tent-pegging skills. Here, I finally captured Kate and Sonia's 'revaal' – the Marwari horse's four-beat lateral gait used for crossing long distances in the desert. I hadn't managed it before, as Sonia was ordinarily paced when I was beside her and it's impossible to photograph when you are in a fast trot or canter yourself – unsteady pictures of feet or the sky don't do anything justice. I had dismounted to take the photos, but asked to remount Sukhi so that I could ride her for one last time into the fort area.

I had a sad ache as we had our final canter, trot and walk. Then it was time to dismount from our wonderful, beautiful, regal and tolerant horses. Soon we would be returning to 'normal' life away from this dream.

But dreams can come true. This one did – every brilliant, exciting and completely unforgettable moment of nearly 200km – and soon I will dream again, because you never know where dreams can lead you... 🐾