

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN SHEKHAWATI REGION OF RAJASTHAN

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Introduction

Shekhawati Region consists of the areas falling under Sikar, Jhunjhunu and Churu districts of Rajasthan state of India. Shekhawati is famous for its rich heritage havelis and beautiful architecture full of fresco paintings and is also known as “Open Air Art Gallery”. It is a paradise for heritage enthusiasts, artists and tourists alike.

This region has a distinct architectural vocabulary with blend of Rajput and Islamic forms. A range of themes can be witnessed on the buildings of Shekhawati, from religious imageries, ragamalas and folk mythology to historical events and emergence of industrialization in India. Despite of its location on the Delhi-Jaipur-Bikaner Tourist Triangle, it is often seen as eclipsed by these popular tourist destinations. It is also not on most tourist maps. Also, the extreme temperatures during summers make the tourist season very short in length. Hence, there is a need to promote destinations in this region so that tourists can have immersive experience of supremely unique Shekhawati Region.

About Shekhawati region

Shekhawati-the garden of Rao Shekha comprises of Churu, Sikar and Jhunjhunu districts of Rajasthan. This region is located in the north-eastern part of Rajasthan state of India. This region has derived its name from Rao Shekha (1433-1488 A.D.), a scion of the Kachchhawaha family of Amber. It was earlier a part of Jaipur state. This region adorns the international tourist map due to the exquisite frescoes that decorate the walls and ceilings of the magnificent havelis or mansions. It has therefore acquired the title of ‘Open Air Art Gallery’. No other region, anywhere in the world has such a large concentration of frescoes. It is in contrary to the general landscape of this region, which is totally bare-flat and colourless. Several historical and social

developments blossomed this previously colourless and flat region into a colourful profession of art and life over two centuries from 1750 to 1930 A.D.

The characteristic of this region, painted havelis were built by rich merchants and the business community famous as Marwari, for business purpose they travelled to different distant parts of the country during the 18th and 19th century. They grew wealthier than before and sent back huge sums of money to their hometowns in Shekhawati. Most of it was spent on the welfare of their community- Wells, Reservoirs, Schools, Dharamshalas and Gaushalas were financed. For their families, they built large havelis and had the most intricate frescoes painted in them.

Major Attractions from Tourist point of View

The things that are most liked by the tourists in Shekhawati region is its architecturally beautiful buildings, Forts, Palaces, Castles, Havelis, Temples, Dargah, Chhatris, Wells, Dharamshalas, Johras, among the build structures. Apart from this the rural lifestyle, farm side experiences, Cuisines, Adventure rides, etc.

Alsisar & Malsisar: Located on the northern most tip of Shekawati, these towns were founded in the late and mid 18th centuries respectively. The style of the frescoes here and lively colour combinations are a treat for the eyes. Also the forts in Alsisar & Malsisar, as well as the temples and the Jhunjunwala havelis are magnificent.

Lachhmangarh: Founded in the early 19th century by Raja Lachhman Singh of Sikar, this town is planned on the lines of Jaipur, with roads at right angles and roundabouts. The grand Char Chowk Haveli is reminiscent of the prosperous Marwari way of life. The fort, Sawant Ram Chokhani Haveli, Mirijamal Kyala Haveli, Bansidhar Rathi Haveli, Kedia Haveli and Sanganeria Haveli adorned with beautiful frescoes.

Fatehpur: Founded in the mid 15th century by a Kayamkhani Nawab. Fatehpur's frescoes are unrivalled. The ones done on the walls on the Devra and Singhanian Havelis, splendidly combine Indian and Western styles.

Ramgarh: This town was founded in the late 18th century by the Poddars. The dome of the Poddar cenotaph carries exquisitely painted scene from the Ramayana. The devotedly painted frescoes on the Shani-ji (Saturn) temple are splendid. Worth seeing are also the Ganga temple, Tara Chand Ghanshyam Das Poddar Haveli, Baij Nath Ruia Haveli and Bagaria Haveli.

Mandawa: One of the most finest of the small towns in the Shekhawati region, this feudal settlement not only has a royal castle, but innumerable havelis where the painted facades offer a

great variety of surprises. Mandawa was founded by Thakur Nawal Singh, a descendant of Rao Shekha after whom the entire region is named. It is today also a major center of a handicrafts and furniture industry. The havelis worth visiting are those of Chokhani, Saraf, Goenka and Ladia.

Lohargal: Lohargal is also a place of tourist because of its natural beauty. This place is associated with Bhim, one of the heroes of the great epic, 'Mahabharat'.

Harsha: Harsha is an ancient village at the base of a hill on which Harshanatha and other temples are located in Sikar district situated around 14 km from Sikar town. Harsha is known for its famous Shiva temple dating back to the Chauhan period. There is a 10 km. long road which leads one to the mountain, from where one can behold the natural beauty of the villages below. There are several temples at Harsha, chief among them being the Harsha temple.

Dundlod: One of the principal feudal principalities of Shekhawati, the havelis of this charming small town are beautifully painted, and some of them are over two hundred years old. These include the Goenka Haveli that is well known for the exquisite quality of its frescoes.

Nawalgarh: The seat of the Poddar families, among other, Nawalgarh is known for the high quality of its paintings, even in the richly frescoed Shekhawati area

Surajgarh: The 18th century fort, in a dilapidated condition and the painted temples and havelis here are the main attraction.

Bissau: Founded in the 18th century, this town has fine havelis including the Sigtia, Khemka, Tibriwal and Kedia Havelis. The chhatris or cenotaphs of the Thakurs are also attractive.

Khetri: Founded in the 18th century, Khetri was the second wealthiest Thikana under Jaipur and is known for the painting adorning the Raghunath Temple and the Bhopalgarh Fort.

Mahensar: This 18th century town has some fine havelis such as the Sona-Chandi-Ki-Sal and business shops built by the Poddars. The Meenakari work, the figures of birds and floral and tree motifs, as well as the gilded walls and ceilings leave the spectator amazed. Raghu Nath Temple is another interesting place to visit.

MUSEUMS & ART GALLERIES:

Birla Museum of Science & Technology - Pilani: At Pilani, in the campus of Viday Vihar is located the Birla Museum of Science and Technology. The museum contains the latest science equipments, models of material science and illustrative diorama, working models, charts & Photographs explaining the principles of the science.

SHOPPING:

Shekhawati is world renowned and the region is popularly termed as "Open Air Art Gallery" because of its painted havelis and frescoed walls. Today the tourist can take home a piece of this art and decorate their walls at home for these traditional murals are being recreated on paper and also on cloth.

The carved and decorated chests, chairs, cradles and low tables & stools are simply a steal. Each object is desirable whether inlaid with brass sheet work or painted with dancing figures or embellished with hunting scenes. Ramgarh is renowned for the carved Wooden doors & chairs.

Present State of Tourism

This region is equally popular among both Indian and international tourists. Among the international tourists it's the French tourists, who come here in maximum numbers. Most visitors will approach Shekhawati from either Delhi or Jaipur. Most of the foreign tourists visiting this region arrive at international airports at Delhi and Jaipur from there they hire the private taxis and buses to reach at their pre-booked hotels in the region. Booking of the tour and hotels is mainly through online means.

Domestic tourist mainly comprises of people from NCR and family of migrated Marwari. Most of the domestic tourists, use their personal vehicle for commercial hired taxi or buses for the tour to Shekhawati region. Their stay in Shekhawati region is mostly of single day as the tourist are mostly enroute to Bikaner or Jaisalmer from Delhi or Jaipur. This single day stay and sightseeing need to be improved to a longer stay in this region.

The road connectivity to Shekhawati from Delhi, Jaipur and Bikaner is in very good condition however roads joining different painted towns of Shekhawati are in fairly good condition. The quality and network of Roads within Shekhawati needs further improvement. Rail connectivity also needs improvement. The heritage train run by Government of Rajasthan also goes wide away from Shekhawati region. There is a need of functional domestic airport in the region.

The facility of staying here in Shekhawati region is much improved these days than a few years before. A number of Havelis of the region have now been developed into Heritage Hotels. The guiding facility is also sufficiently available in this region however cases of illegal guides locally known as 'Lapakkas' trying to snatch work of approved guide too cannot be denied.

Suggestions for Tourism Development

With presence of a number of places important from tourist point of view in Shekhawati region, makes this region hold great potential to grow into a major tourist hub in near future. Suggestions for concerned stakeholders are as following:-

- Improvement in network of means of transportation is required.
- proper arrangement of parking around tourism attractions is required.
- bypass roads for heritage towns be built.
- proper and innovative way of advertisement and marketing.
- tax and other incentive schemes for hoteliers.
- Tourist Assistance Force required to ensure proper safety and security of the tourists
- Proper signage and notice boards be placed at proper places.
- Development of domestic Airport.
- Proper training of the people involved in tourism sector
- Shekhawati be included in the route of heritage train ‘Palace on Wheel’.

Conclusion

Shekhawati region has great potential to develop as a great tourist destination hub in coming future. The built heritage full of paintings along with typical Rajasthani culture promises to provide complete tour experience to the tourists visiting this region. The region has so far been eclipsed by nearby major tourist destinations and has to compete to make a prominent place of itself in the tourist map. There is need to improve infrastructural facilities, increase the number of tourist arrivals, increase the tourist season, increase average length of tourist stay, Increasing daily expenditure of tourists through providing more spending opportunities and need to attract high yield tourists/ specific interest tourists.

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