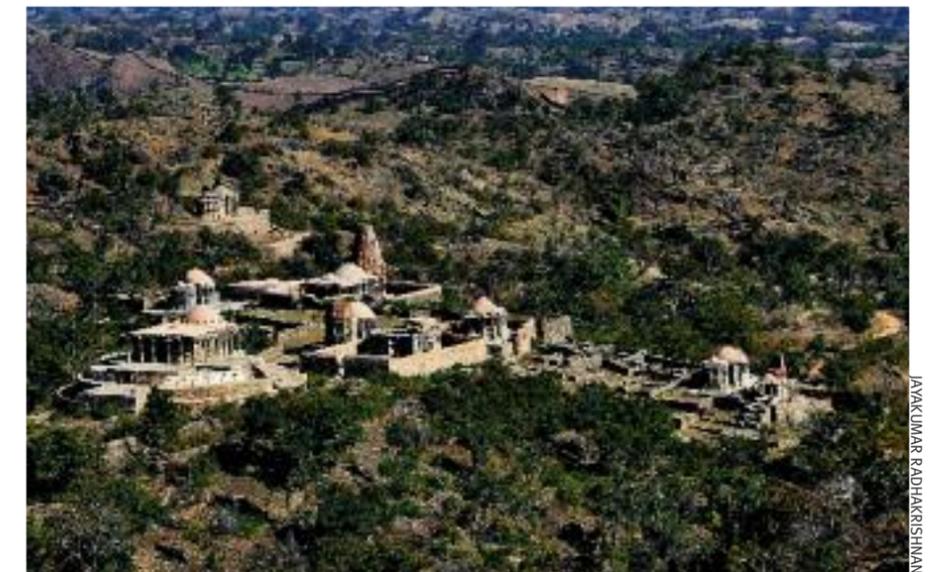


MARVELLOUS SIGHT: A bird's eye view of the majestic Kumbhalgarh fort ramparts; (inset) ruins of a cluster of ancient temples near the fort

THE EYE OF MEWAR

The Kumbhalgarh fort, spread across 13 hills of the Aravalis, flaunts classic Rajasthani architecture and boasts of the world's second longest wall, that's also visible from outer space, says **Hema Narayanan**



JAYAKUMAR RADHAKRISHNAN

ong and serpentine, the walls of the fort of Kumbhalgarh are the second longest continuous wall in the world, after the Great Wall of China. Extending for over 36 km, the walls of this fort are impenetrable. It was a stunning surprise to know that this is the world's second man-made structure that can be seen from outer space, satellite images to boot.

My first glimpse of the fortress left me wanting for more. Our guide, dressed in typical Rajasthani attire including a *pagadi* (or *pagda*, as he called it) on his head, took us to this elevated place from where the winding fortification could be seen for kilometres. It seemed so unconquerable that I wondered how the enemies would even plan a battle against this kingdom, let alone enter this massive fortress. Lo! My contemplation was spot-on when our guide endorsed that Kumbhalgarh fort is one of the most inaccessible fortifications ever built by humans.

Dated back to the 15th century, this fort was the creation of Maharana Kumbha, the great king of the Mewars. The fort derives its name from its creator, Kumbha, and is a representative of the past glory of the Rajput rulers. Walking inside the huge fort complex that has several palaces, impressive ramparts, temples and gardens, the panoramic view of the countryside from its turrets was magical. And it got better as we climbed higher.



RENAL BHALAKIA

FORTIFIED TO THE HILT >> Even today, centuries later, the fort looked so impregnable that in the heydays it must have been the enemy's envy. Touching some of the brick and mortar on the walls, it was clear that neither weather nor the passage of time had eroded them much.

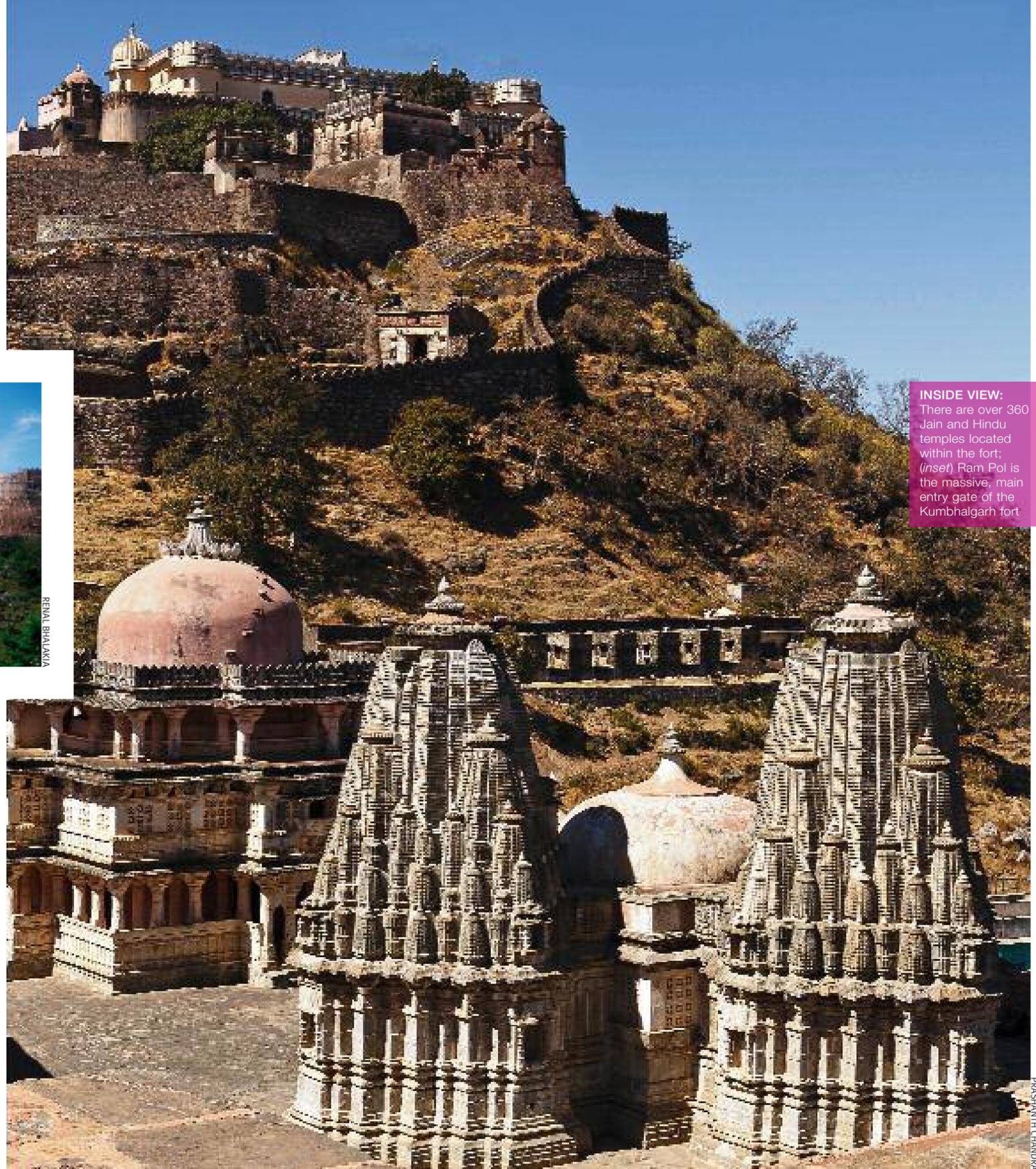
A true example of defensive architectural marvel, this fort in Rajasthan was built in 1443 CE. It snakes along 13 mountain peaks, has seven fortified gateways with seven ramparts folded with one another, huge watchtowers and 15 ft-thick front walls. Not having enough, Rana Kumbha chose to build this fort on an unassailable hill, 1,914 m above sea level. No wonder, this fort is called 'The Mountain Fortress,' having the natural advantage of the Aravali ranges surrounding it.

Its admirable fact in Indian history that this fort was captured only once, that too when the Mughal emperor Akbar had its water supply poisoned. Residents of the fort faced acute shortage of water and succumbed to the attacks.

THE POLS >> *Pol* was a word I stumbled upon many times in the fort – at every arch or entrance – Bagga Pol, Chaugan Pol, Ram Pol, Aaret Pol, Halla Pol, Pagda Pol, to name a few. *Pol*, in those days, meant gates. Each *pol* opened up to one part of the fort and signified something. For instance, Aaret Pol had the watch tower, Halla Pol expected people to maintain silence and at Pagda Pol, men were supposed to remove their *pagdas* as a mark of respect to the king, as this gate led to the king's arena. It got me thinking, what would Nimboo Pol signify?

THE SAFARI OUTING

Located 100 km from Udaipur and spread across over 570 sq km, the Kumbhalgarh Sanctuary is home to a variety of wildlife including wolves, leopards, sloth bear, hyenas, jackals, jungle cats, *sambar*, *nilgai*, *chausingha* (four-horned antelope), *chinkara* and hare. A typical safari route enters the sanctuary from the fort and cutting across the sanctuary, it reaches Ghanerao, a fort-turned-hotel.



PRAJANTH CHANDRA

INSIDE VIEW: There are over 360 Jain and Hindu temples located within the fort; (inset) Ram Pol is the massive, main entry gate of the Kumbhalgarh fort



GRAND DESIGNS:
(Clockwise from top) An exterior view of Badal Mahal; langurs at the fort; the fort is a good example of defensive architecture



NAVIGATOR

By air/rail/road:

Udaipur is the nearest airport — 95 km from Kumbhalgarh. Udaipur and Ratlam (80 km) are the nearest railheads and have good connectivity with Mumbai and Delhi. Kumbhalgarh is situated 84 km from Udaipur and 18 km from Ranakpur.

Best time to visit:

July to September

Where to stay:

Aodhi Hotel, Karni Palace and Dera Kumbhalgarh are some good options.

THE FAIRYTALE PALACES >> The fort, built in accordance with the Vastu Shastra, appears like the ones described in fairy tales – perhaps due to the gorgeous palaces atop the hills – the palace of Rana Kumbha and Badal Mahal or the ‘palace of clouds.’ Badal Mahal is so called because the clouds seem just at arm’s length during monsoon.

Marking the birthplace of Maharana Pratap, the great king of the Mewars, this palace is a favourite with visitors. The Rajputani style used to build this palace is so exquisite and thorough in its creation that I stood gazing in awe. Its rooms have a beautiful choice of colour – green, white, turquoise and blue – offering a delightful contrast to the earthy hues of the fort.

Do not miss looking out from the wooden windows to see the breathtaking view of the Aravali range. In fact, this palace underwent a remarkable make-over when Rana Fateh Singh, who reigned in the late 19th century, rebuilt it, bringing to it more character and grandeur.

TEMPLES GALORE >> I would not doubt the immense belief that the Rajputs had in their Gods – why not, when they had 360 odd temples built inside the Fort – with 300 of them being ancient Jain temples and the rest belonging to Hindu gods. One of the temples of Shiva I went into, had a huge, white *shivling* – the pinkish red rays of sunlight fell on it such that they accentuated the features of the *shivling*. The orange *dhoti*-clad priest added to the colourful contrast.

LEGEND HAS IT >> Rajasthan does have a admirable way of ensuring every visitor gets to know the state’s history. Every evening, at sunset, they have a Light & Sound Show inside the fort – where the tales from the Mewar period are narrated. And an interesting legend surfaced. It seemed Rana Kumbha had many unsuccessful attempts at building the fort wall, which is when a spiritual guru stepped in and advised that a human sacrifice would take care of whatever was causing the impediment. He told the king that if a temple were built at the place where the head should fall and the wall of the fort be built where the rest of the body lay, then the fort wall would stand tall. After a long wait for a volunteer, a pilgrim (some say, a soldier) surfaced for the cause and was ritually decapitated. Magical as it may seem, this time around, Rana Kumbha succeeded in completing the fort wall! In honour of this sacrifice, the main gate of the fortress, Hanuman Pol, has a shrine devoted to the pilgrim.

NIGHT LIGHTS >> The show lit up the fort splendidly and I was trying hard to photograph this enthralling experience even as the tripod swayed in the breeze. It brought to life a truly glorious era of Rajasthan wherein ideals, honour, sacrifice and chivalry ruled supreme. It was a sight to remember – a precious opportunity to witness the second largest wall in the world that was built to withstand every attack. They say that on the orders of Rana Kumbha, 50 kg of *ghee* and 100 kg of cotton was used everyday to light up massive lamps and provide light to farmers. Golden times! ■