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# Majestic heights

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Constructed atop a plateau, the Kumbalgarh fort has the world's second longest wall. ASHISH KOTHARI

I CAN safely bet that very few Indians know this. The world's second longest wall is in India. To be precise, in Rajasthan: at the Kumbalgarh Fort. I was blissfully unaware of this myself till I actually visited the fort recently, and got a glimpse of its impressive ramparts.

It may not be a patch on the Great Wall of China, but it is still impressive. With a total length of 36 km, the 7-metre wide Kumbalgarh walls snake up and down the Aravalli hill range in the Rajsamand district of southern Rajasthan. Contained within them are some of the State's most impressive palaces and temples, well worth a visit if one is anywhere near Udaipur, which is about 90 km away.

## History and setting

Like most of India's fortresses, Kumbalgarh too has a fascinating history. The current structure is said to have been built by Rana Kumbha between 1443 and 1458 A.D., but some experts believe that this itself may have been constructed upon a more ancient structure commissioned by the Jain prince Samprati back in the 2nd century B.C. Kumbha's Mewar empire was vast, stretching from Ranthambhor to Gwalior and encompassing huge areas of today's Rajasthan

and Madhya Pradesh. Over the last few centuries, Rajasthan's most famous rulers have added their own stamp to the fort complex, including the beautiful Badal Mahal that Maharana Fateh Singh got built over 100 years ago. The fort was conquered only once, reportedly due a combination of water scarcity and the combined strength of the forces of Emperor Akbar, the rulers of Amber, and Raja Udai Singh of Marwar. And of course, there is the usual palace intrigue: Rana Kumbha was killed by his son while kneeling in prayer at the Mama Deo temple.

Sitting majestically on one of the area's highest plateaux (at a height of 1,100 metres above sea level), Kumbalgarh is flanked by dense forests on one side and old human settlements on the other. The forests form a part of the Kumbalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary, declared in 1971 and stretching over 610 sq. km. The sanctuary is home to Sloth bear, Leopard, Four-horned antelope and several other mammals, over 200 species of birds, and much else (including, as one tourist site boasting of its tours to the fort says, "scientifically bred crocodiles"! ). As one of the region's largest remaining patches of relatively intact forest, the sanctuary also has enormous hydrological value, a number of streams emanating from it and feeding agricultural populations and towns downstream. No wonder that if you enter any of its valleys, the dry heat of southern Rajasthan turns miraculously into delicately moist, cool environs. Undoubtedly this must have been the refuge of many a battle-weary foot soldier who marched onto, or from, the Kumbalgarh fort in the last few centuries. Undoubtedly too, the forests have seen plenty of *shikar* in the heydays of hunting (a number of ancient hunting *ohdis* bear testimony to this), though mercifully that has stopped over the last few decades.

## The fort complex

But back to the fort. As I entered the imposing main arched gate, I was immediately struck by the multitude of temples all around. Another impressive statistic Kumbalgarh boasts of is the number of places of worship: a mammoth 360, of which about 300 are Jain, and the rest Hindu. Amongst the more important of these are the Neelkantha Mahadeo temple, the Parsvanath temple, the Vedi temple, the Bawan Devris, the Pitaliya Shah temple, and the Golera

cluster of temples. Strangely enough, though there is a picturesque looking village with a predominantly Islamic population within the complex, including the regular maintenance staff, there appears to be no major mosque!

From the main entrance where one buys an entry ticket, the path winds its way up through one impressive gate after the other, with names like Aaret Pol, Halla Pol, Hanuman Pol, Ram Pol, and Vijay Pol. Each of these had massive pointed wooden spikes, much like the deadly thorns of an acacia or silk cotton tree, designed to stop elephants from knocking them down.

Half way up, I stopped to catch my breath. I looked back, and began to see why there was local pride in the length of the wall. Now that I could see into the distance, it really did seem as if the fort went on and on, at one point disappearing into the grey aridity of the terrain. From this vantage point I could also see a number of water tanks; like all the forts built in Rajasthan and Maharashtra, the rulers and inhabitants were masters of the art of capturing even what little rain fell, and storing it for lengthy periods of time without contamination.

Further up as I reached the topmost structure, the imposing Badal Mahal (Palace of the Clouds) built by Fateh Singh, a small board on a side entrance caught my eye. "The birthplace of Maharana Pratap", it simply said. For every Rajasthani this must surely be place to pause with respect, for Maharana Pratap's name even now evokes awe and admiration.

For a long time Kumbalgarh, not nearly as famous as other Rajasthani forts like Chittorgarh, and hardly visited by tourists, lay in ruin. In 2002, it is reported that the then Union Minister for Art, Culture, and Tourism, Jagmohan, paid a visit, and was shocked by the state of affairs. The Archaeological Survey of India swung into action, and in less than 2 years undertook some very impressive restoration work. This included rebuilding some of the structures to their original shapes, as much as was possible. The ASI's work is evident today, for, it is a pleasure to walk through the complex. It is a job probably worthy of Maharana Fateh Singh, who himself undertook major renovation work over a century ago.

The place could, however, do with much more evocative and intelligent signage, for there is very little to tell the visitor about the history and the rulers, and nothing at all about the lives of the thousands of ordinary people who stayed within its walls. Some local guides do ask if you want a tour, but there is almost nothing available in the form of literature.

### **Blessing or curse?**

The ASI renovation and the Rajasthan State government's aggressive tourism drive seems to have considerably increased visitation to Kumbalgarh. On the one hand, this is welcome, for, what better way for people to learn of their history and environment than to visit such a site? On the other, with not enough facilities and capacity to handle large-scale tourism, the impact can be disastrous. One of them is the mushrooming of hotels and lodges along the road to the fort. There are at the moment less than half a dozen functional hotels, but I saw ongoing construction of at least another half a dozen. Almost all of these are on the hill contours along the road, and I could not see many signs of ecological sensitivity in their planning. Quite a bit of the land in the area is privately owned, and local owners are selling off with land prices having skyrocketed. Members of the NGO Seva Mandir, which works on sustainable development and livelihood options for local villagers, expressed great worry at the trend. So did the Forester accompanying us, Arjun Lal Purohit, his main worry being the impact on the forests and the adjacent wildlife sanctuary.

### **Successful initiative**

One silver lining to this was an initiative by Aaret village, helped by Seva Mandir. About two km short of the fort, the Maharana Kumbha Common Interest Group, consisting of nine lower income group residents of the village, has set up a Swiss Tent complex called Dera Kumbalgarh ( [www.derakumbhalgarh.com](http://www.derakumbhalgarh.com) ). This camp has basic but comfortable furnishings, and a great view looking onto forested hills and valleys. Started just six months back, the camp has already earned them a profit of about Rs. 1,00,000. One of the group's members speaks English, one is an expert camel-rider, and one a cook trained in various cuisines. Lacking is a good wildlife

expert who could take visitors birdwatching or on tree and plant identification hikes.

If the Rajasthan government is serious about making its tourism drive ecologically and socially sensitive, it needs to encourage efforts like Dera Kumbalgarh, rather than rich hoteliers from the cities. Kumbalgarh's mighty ramparts and dense forests have withstood centuries of harsh climate, invasions by armies and other forces but they may not be able to survive a couple of decades of irresponsible tourism.

*Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, an environmental action group.*

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