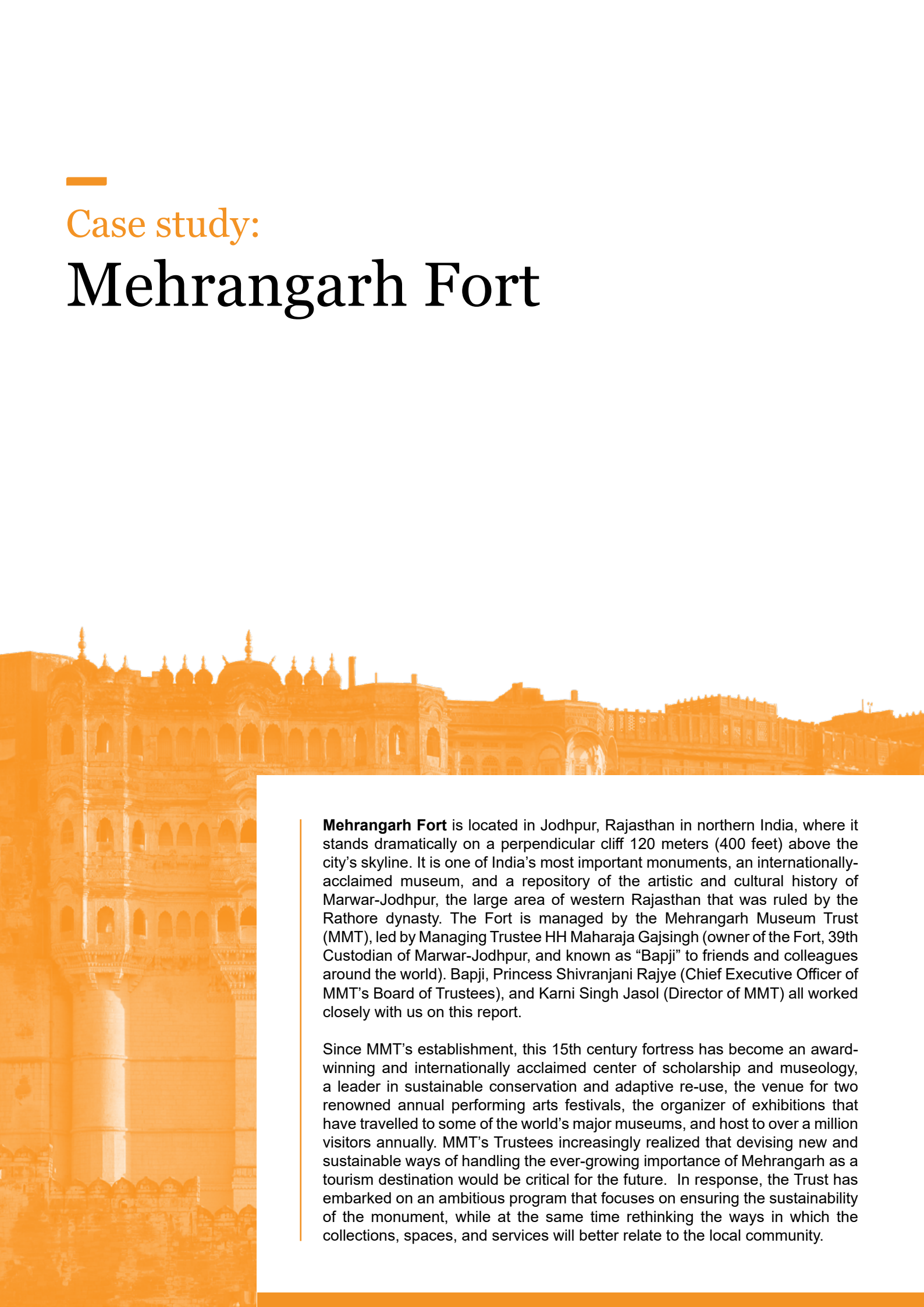




Case study:

Mehrangarh Fort



Mehrangarh Fort is located in Jodhpur, Rajasthan in northern India, where it stands dramatically on a perpendicular cliff 120 meters (400 feet) above the city's skyline. It is one of India's most important monuments, an internationally-acclaimed museum, and a repository of the artistic and cultural history of Marwar-Jodhpur, the large area of western Rajasthan that was ruled by the Rathore dynasty. The Fort is managed by the Mehrangarh Museum Trust (MMT), led by Managing Trustee HH Maharaja Gaj Singh (owner of the Fort, 39th Custodian of Marwar-Jodhpur, and known as "Bapji" to friends and colleagues around the world). Bapji, Princess Shivranjani Rajye (Chief Executive Officer of MMT's Board of Trustees), and Karni Singh Jasol (Director of MMT) all worked closely with us on this report.

Since MMT's establishment, this 15th century fortress has become an award-winning and internationally acclaimed center of scholarship and museology, a leader in sustainable conservation and adaptive re-use, the venue for two renowned annual performing arts festivals, the organizer of exhibitions that have travelled to some of the world's major museums, and host to over a million visitors annually. MMT's Trustees increasingly realized that devising new and sustainable ways of handling the ever-growing importance of Mehrangarh as a tourism destination would be critical for the future. In response, the Trust has embarked on an ambitious program that focuses on ensuring the sustainability of the monument, while at the same time rethinking the ways in which the collections, spaces, and services will better relate to the local community.



Key lesson learned in the study of Mehrangarh Fort:

Ensure that your core mission prioritizes local communities.

Other important learnings connected with MMT's recognition of the priority of the local community arose from this case study.

- Building local trust and support requires committed leadership working towards the vision, but with a sensitivity to changing challenges and needs in the contemporary context.
- Significant moves prioritizing the local community that are in alignment with the mission and long-term strategic plan can be accelerated due to the realities of a crisis such as the pandemic.

Brief history

Mehrangarh has been the headquarters of the senior branch of the Rajput clan known as the Rathores for more than five centuries. From the 12th through the 14th centuries, the Rathores consolidated power in the state of Rajasthan. Rao Jodha (r. 1438-89) began to build a fort on an isolated rock with a high elevation and natural defenses. Jodhpur, the town that sprang up at its base, was named after him. The Fort was named Mehrangarh, meaning "fort of the sun" — a reference to the clan's mythical descent from the sun god Surya.

The centuries following the Fort's establishment were unstable in India, and Mehrangarh was seen as a site of great power and prestige. Its uses varied, and the Fort served not just as a military base but also as "a palace for the rulers and their wives; a center of patronage for the arts, music, literature; and with its many temples and shrines it was also a place of worship." These various uses can be seen through the many buildings housed within the Fort's walls.

In 1972, Bapji — the owner of Mehrangarh and an INTO Ambassador — established MMT and entrusted it with responsibility for the conservation of the Fort and for developing it into a museum and center of excellence, accessible to local residents and visitors from around the world. MMT is an NGO and full member of the International National Trusts Organisation. MMT's awards for Mehrangarh Fort include the UNESCO ASIA-PACIFIC Award in the field of Architectural Conservation, Cultural Heritage and Adaptive Reuse 2005, and the DOMUS Silver Medal (Premio Internazionale di Restauro Architettico) 2011. In addition, MMT received a UNESCO Award of Excellence in 2002 for the restoration of Ahhichatragarh Fort in Nagaur, and HH Maharaja Gaj Singh has been the recipient of the World Monument Fund's Hadrian Award. In 2015, Princess Shivranjani Rajye, CEO of MMT, presented a keynote address at the 16th International INTO conference in Cambridge, UK. The talk focused on new paradigms for the role of heritage trusts in the 21st century, and how MMT was exploring the potential. Since then, MMT and Mehrangarh have had an increasingly important role in INTO activities.

Preservation and conservation

When MMT was created in 1972, the original goal was to establish a museum of international repute in Mehrangarh Fort. During the initial years of the establishment of the Trust, the challenge was to adapt historic spaces into museum galleries. Focus on sensitive architectural conservation and restoration, preservation and advancement of the region's intangible heritage, research and publication, and promotion of Marwar's rich art, craft, and culture were part of the program. In succeeding years, further emphasis was given to the care, display and documentation of the over 14,000 objects in the Fort's extraordinarily rich collections.

From the beginning, MMT hoped to bring real and meaningful change to the heritage conservation sector in India. Pioneering activities in this regard have included collaboration between leading conservation architects and master craftspersons with traditional skills, and being one of the first monuments in India to develop a Conservation Master Plan (which now guides all conservation activity at the site). Since 1996, the Fort has also housed a fully functioning Conservation Laboratory.

The decades of work involved in restoring, preserving and developing sustainable means of ensuring Mehrangarh's survival involved experimentation, testing, creativity and innovation, and included a large number of conservation architects and relevant professionals as advisers and consultants. The lessons learned were then applied to other heritage properties managed by MMT, most notably since 1985 the 12th century Ahhichatragarh Fort at Nagaur (150 kms or 93 miles northeast of Jodhpur).

Expansion of work at Nagaur Fort: The Mehrangarh Museum Trust's restoration of Nagaur, based on an innovative blending of traditional and modern construction techniques and material and involving many local craftsmen, has become an internationally acclaimed model for architectural restoration and adaptive re-use. In the process, materials and methodology of earlier eras were re-discovered, an intricate and ingenious water system was found and restored, and the palaces and courts were conserved as an open-site museum. Today this formerly dilapidated structure has been brought back to life as a living monument. It serves as a venue for conferences, seminars and a spectacular annual performing arts festival. The section of the Nagaur Fort that formerly housed the "Queens Palaces" has been sensitively and beautifully restored into a "museum hotel," the Ranvas Havelis, that now draws guests year-round. MMT, in partnership with UK's Courtauld Institute, has established a training conservation lab at Nagaur, to disseminate and share the knowledge acquired through many years of wall painting conservation at Nagaur.

The restoration of the Nagaur Fort, beginning in 1996, required a decade of crisis management, experimentation, study and fundraising. Generous support from the Getty Trust, the Helen Hamlyn Trust, MMT's own funds, and many others made this conservation success story possible. In 2002 the Nagaur restoration received the UNESCO Award of Excellence, and in 2011-13 was shortlisted for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

Other projects: The visible success of MMT's conservation activities in Mehrangarh and the Nagaur Fort has led to the organization being given responsibility for conservation, restoration and management of several other important historic sites in the area, including the Mandore and Panchkunda Cenotaphs, Sursagar, and the early-20th century Ship House.

*Great cultural destinations are made
“not just with stones and bricks and
beautiful carvings, but by the people
and stories that give them life.”*

Princess Shivranjani Rajye, Interview



The changing nature of tourism and tourists at Mehrangarh Fort

Mehrangarh first opened for public tours under the auspices of MMT in 1972. Visitation trends have been tracked since 1979, when the Fort welcomed 73,119 domestic visitors and 6,236 international visitors. Over the ensuing 40 years, the trends have increased overall, but there have been periods of decline as well. In 2004-2005, the site first welcomed more than 500,000 visitors. In 2011-2012, Mehrangarh first welcomed more than 1 million visitors annually and in 2015-16 the number of domestic visitors topped 1 million for the first time.

In the three years before Covid-19, visitation stood at:

Year	International	Domestic	Increase (Decrease) from Previous Year
2017-2018	154,417	987,706	5.44%
2018-2019	166,219	1,116,687	13.06%
2019-2020	134,712	1,047,228	(6.22%)

The increase in tourism at Mehrangarh has brought new revenues to MMT, an important component of the site's business model. While those revenues were initially used almost exclusively on maintenance, the increases in recent years enabled support for other work ranging from updated signage to more extensive renovation efforts.

Mehrangarh attracts different types of visitors throughout the year. Those coming to see the Fort and museum arrive on a year-round basis. Religious pilgrims and festival attendees come during times of the year associated with those activities. Two international music festivals are an especially big draw.

Wedding celebrations also attract a specific type of visitor, and wedding nights at the Fort are important to the site's business model (although no weddings themselves are allowed on-site). Prior to the pandemic, visitors had begun spending more days in Jodhpur than in the past as the city was becoming a hub for tourists. As a result, MMT was seeing more repeat visitors as part of their trends.

In 1998, Mehrangarh created the first professional museum store in India, and now the Museum Shop plays an important role in MMT's community efforts. Shop staff, numbering 35, are all local men and women who have been trained on-site and now comprise a professional retail team. With an exclusive product range designed to reflect the history and culture of the Fort, the museum, and the surrounding area, the Museum Shop has become a major source of revenue, as well as an internationally acknowledged model of cultural commerce. The shop includes fine luxury items as well as more diversity in moderately-priced items for those with limited buying power.

Finally, an increasingly important segment of tourists is composed of visitors to the annual performing arts festivals (Rajasthan International Folk Festival; World Sacred Spirit Festival) held at Mehrangarh and Nagaur forts. The festival at Nagaur was, in fact, the impetus for restoration of the "Queens' Palaces" section of the historic fort into a sophisticated "museum hotel," which now draws visitors year-round.

KEY CHALLENGE:

Traditionally the Fort had been the fulcrum of local identity and pride, as well as the locus of economic and administrative activity. While maintaining its importance in the local economy (as the main attraction for visitors supporting the hospitality sector, as well as through direct employment), for many local residents the Fort had become primarily an excursion point and a religious pilgrimage destination.

KEY LESSON LEARNED:

Ensure that your core mission prioritizes local communities.

Challenges. Responses. Lessons learned.

Mehrangarh Fort historically played a central role in the lives of the local residents and communities, as the fulcrum of identity and pride as well as the locus of economic and administrative activity. Jodhpur possesses a unique character, as an area in which the art, culture, and symbolism of a royal kingdom merged with the rich traditions of the surrounding desert, tempered by influences from many parts of India and the world. Its citizens thus developed a multi-layered sense of cultural identity. From its inception, MMT has worked to reflect this vibrant identity within the Fort, not only through the museum displays, but through sensitive patronage of traditional skills, performing arts, and crafts.

A number of years ago, the Trustees of MMT realized that they would be faced with major challenges on many fronts as the Fort and the Trust adapted to the future. They embarked on a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and study of the options for responses with experts and specialists drawn into the conversation. The resulting plan, *Rethinking Mehrangarh: 2025 Strategy Document*, expresses the hope that this highly ambitious reworking of the function and identity of the Fort can change the way cultural destinations function in India. MMT believes Mehrangarh can continue to be a model for best practice in museology and conservation in the country in the future, as it has been in the past. And unlike other undertakings, the Trust very much encourages other organizations to take inspiration from its plans and work and engage in “even blatant plagiarism!”

Despite the work to reflect the city’s vibrant identity at Mehrangarh, and despite its importance as the primary draw for the city’s thriving hospitality industry, MMT observed that for many of the area’s residents the Fort had become primarily an excursion point for family groups and visiting friends on special occasions or a pilgrimage destination during religious festivals. The *2025 Strategy Document* found that while local residents comprised the largest numbers of Fort visitors, there was no specific plan in place to serve that population, leaving Jodhpur residents feeling disconnected from the Fort. The important role that the Fort played in the lives of the local population had declined and engagement with the community had decreased. MMT recognized that this was a loss not just to the community but to the Fort, as great cultural destinations are made “not just with stones and bricks and beautiful carvings, but by the people and stories that give them life.”

In response, there is a new and strong focus coming out of MMT’s mission on increasing the Fort’s engagement with the local population, in creating innovative means of addressing their needs and concerns, and on making the entire Fort experience more relevant to local visitors. On a deeper level, the Trustees have realized that Mehrangarh can play an important role in creating new models for ways in which cultural identity can evolve and remain viable within a contemporary context.

MMT has devoted significant thought and activity to sustaining the communities surrounding the historic sites while ensuring sustainable survival of the sites themselves. The architectural conservation of the Fort, which has always been the top priority, has been aligned with this goal, primarily through training and employing local crafts people in the building arts.

Conservation and restoration work in both Mehrangarh and Nagaur forts have involved local artisans and craftspersons, many with inherited traditional skills. It is a creative interaction, with teaching and learning on the part of both the traditional artisans and the contemporary architects and professionals. The massive restoration of Nagaur Fort created a new paradigm for this tradition/modernity interaction, and the UNESCO Award for the project included the names of all the traditional artisans who had been involved.

The Trust also provides significant income to local artisans and craftspersons through a variety of programs. For many years Mehrangarh has had a very popular Crafts Bazaar in which skilled local craftspersons, on a rotating basis, demonstrate their skills and sell their products. The Museum Shop stocks products by many talented local and regional artists and craftspersons. And a new project revolving around the Nagaur Fort, branded as "Nagori," has involved the upgrading of skills, design input, and marketing for traditional artisans residing around the Fort. Recently MMT partnered with a sister organization (and INTO member), the Indian Trust for Rural Heritage and Development (ITRHD), by hosting an exhibition and sale of crafts from an ITRHD project in Barmer (far western Rajasthan) during the heavily attended RIFF music festival in Mehrangarh. Future plans are in process for expanding Mehrangarh's role as a central focal point for craft activity.

The Fort provides substantial employment in the community, both directly (with 309 salaried employees), and indirectly to local artists, artisans, craftspersons, professionals and technicians, local businesses, service providers, and, of course, the thriving local hospitality industry. In the case of Mehrangarh, over the last two decades the creation of the large performing arts festivals and other attractions within the Fort have led to more stay nights per person in Jodhpur, thus benefitting the local hospitality industry.

In addition to these practical benefits, MMT is strongly committed to keeping the wellsprings of local culture alive. This can be seen most dramatically in the annual performing arts festivals in both Mehrangarh and Nagaur. Drawing hundreds of visitors from around the globe, they include traditional artists from the region, as well as folk, classical, modern and experimental performers from around India and the world. Traditions are at times presented in their pure and authentic form, they are at times presented in modern interpretations, and often they evolve before the very eyes of the audience as artists from around the world perform together in sometimes exhilarating and extraordinary cross-cultural, cross-generational and cross-temporal fusion performances.

These festivals demonstrate MMT's conviction that helping the region's extraordinary cultural identity to evolve and remain viable within a contemporary context is the major challenge of our times, and that keeping the local communities alive, relevant, and full of confidence and pride within a rapidly changing world is perhaps the most important service Mehrangarh can provide.

A three-part plan to make Mehrangarh Fort a more inclusive cultural site that better serves the needs of Jodhpur's residents is at the heart of this work. The three-pronged approach, summarized in brief, includes:

- **The Expansive Museum**, which calls for the redesign of the Museum to create a more seamless narrative, weaving history with architectural spaces and objects. There is a focus on rescuing untold social histories — the lives of the soldiers, cooks, maids, wet nurses, nautch girls, musicians, the munshis and the medicine men that walked the courtyards walls — to populate the Fort with their stories. Less formal and more utilitarian areas like kitchens, wardrobes, and bathrooms will be rescued to be able to interpret intimate and everyday events as a part of the Fort history and social narrative. Finally, access to the Fort will change from a rigid 9-to-5 routine to a more fluid and climate-suited evening and night-time destination.
- **Redevelopment of non-Museum** areas will make the Fort a site of production for refined craft and traditional skills. To help the local economies, MMT will create rentable workshop space for artisans who follow environmentally sensitive and innovative craft practices. The workshops will serve as a learning/viewing experience and an opportunity to sell products at the museum shop. These spaces will also allow the dramatic expansion of the Fort's program of cultural events, especially relating to local festivals, and will provide venues for social and cultural causes to engage residents, especially around local festivals.
- **Areas surrounding the Fort and access roads** will be converted into a heritage site, to expand the areas of interest to local communities and visitors alike. Already this has been done in the creation of the Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park on the Fort's periphery, in which 69 hectares (170 acres) of rocky wasteland was transformed into a park restoring the natural ecology of the area.



ADDITIONAL CHALLENGE:

Although a large site, overcrowding was a growing concern at the Fort prior to the onset of the pandemic. Lack of city planning along with inappropriate development was contributing to the problem.

OTHER IMPORTANT LEARNINGS:

Building local trust and support requires committed leadership working towards the vision, but with a sensitivity to changing challenges and needs in the contemporary context.

Significant moves prioritizing the local community that are in alignment with the mission and long-term strategic plan can be accelerated due to the realities of a crisis such as the pandemic

In October of 2019, Jodhpur was identified by the digital travel leader Booking.com, as one of the Top Ten emerging travel destinations in the world for foreign tourists. The list was developed after study of global booking trends. The Mehrangarh Fort was at the top of the list of city attractions, along with Umaid Bhawan Palace, the Mandore Gardens, and its winding medieval bazaars. According to the list, “Jodhpur is a destination promising novel experiences, untouched natural beauty and the chance to soak up the magic before everyone else catches on.”

In that phrase “before everyone else catches on,” one sees a key issue at Mehrangarh: overcrowding and the degradation of the tourist experience. While the Fort itself is large, the galleries and passageways can only accommodate a limited number of visitors due to their small size.

As an immediate response to Covid-19, MMT shifted the focus of its tours and incorporated more ecotourism at other sites managed by MMT. That move is in alignment with the organization’s long-term strategic plan, but was accelerated due to the realities of the pandemic.

For the longer-term response, MMT is working to address this issue of overcrowding by dispersing tourists throughout the site, focusing on

- better use of the existing spaces,
- development of different visitor routes through the Fort, and
- shifting uses for other areas of the Fort.

MMT is also working to encourage visitation at other sites, to provide for a different and less crowded experience for the tourist. Because of the extensive conservation work underway at places such as Nagaur Fort, MMT can provide visitors with a more detailed look at the work of craftsmen in the building arts and restoration.

Closely tied to the issue of overcrowding and the tourist experience is the condition of infrastructure, especially around the site. Roads — and specifically the narrow access road to Mehrangarh — are inadequate to handle the flow of tourists. In season, there are frequently traffic jams on the one, narrow access road.

City planning and development in Jodhpur have not evolved to meet current situations. Plans and regulations in place are abstract and do not respond to the evolving nature of the city. Some high-rise developments are blocking views of the Fort, traditionally the visual focal point of the entire city. MMT officials are concerned that city planning in Jodhpur is not being coordinated with Mehrangarh.

In response, MMT is working with the local government to develop a different access road through a nearby forested area, freeing up traffic to and from the site, and the Trust continues to lobby with the government to address other problems. It is proving to be a difficult process.

There are, however, several positive developments in Jodhpur, all of which are encouraged by MMT. Local entrepreneurs, artists, and others are developing havelis — small traditional Indian townhouses — as upmarket shops and lodging. The British-Indian sculptor Anish Kapoor has bought two havelis in Jodhpur that he uses as his gallery, helping set a new path toward the development of small spaces in the old city, in keeping with its character. Others are using havelis as hotels, shops, and restaurants, showing more traditional developers that there is a market for rehabilitating old buildings instead of tearing them down.

As we see, the multiple crises of 2020 have prompted positive actions with long-term implications at Mehrangarh Fort. These actions, accelerated due to the realities of the crises, align with the organization's long-term strategic plan.



Prioritize local communities: Other voices and views

Beyond the efforts of MMT at Mehrangarh Fort, we uncovered others involved in the study and work of the critical importance of prioritizing work with local communities as part of an organization's core mission. Local communities and local cultures are the focus of work to support cultural appropriateness and authenticity in the face of pressures to develop tourist products and standardized experiences. MMT has shown a sensitivity to these questions for years, and as they expand out into the city the organization provides a model for others to follow.

Dr. Noha Nasser, an architect and academic with an interest in the influence of culture on urban form and design, notes that "globalising forces inherent in the shift from production to consumption are influencing changes in the built environment and in their local cultures." She sees this most directly in "places of heritage value where the local culture with its built heritage is being transformed into a product for tourist consumption." It is the scale of the global tourism industry and the uniformity it brings with "standardized hotel architecture, restaurant chains, and street furniture" that is contributing to local cultures "losing their local identities" Nasser asserts, as global "cultural industries" dominate. It is the drive to be competitive and attractive which can go against the grain of conservation and cultural heritage values, not to mention the efforts to bring authenticity to the work for resilient and equitable communities.

Authenticity is a topic many scholars and practitioners have addressed in recent years. It is a word that to many minds brings up the word "restoration" where, in fact, "most old urban structures are the result of much adaptive reuse." Ashworth and Tunbridge's *The Tourist-Historic City* suggests that, "Restoration therefore faces the problem of choosing which past from many should be restored." It poses a different set of challenges as one moves between a large cultural site and neighborhoods with a mix of traditional architecture from various eras.

Questions of appropriateness and authenticity will vary widely as they are culturally specific in nature. These are not insurmountable challenges, but any serious effort at community-focused sustainable tourism in the heritage context needs to address these issues with vision, commitment, and sensitivity.





- The question of authenticity is of deep importance when working with Indigenous communities and this is a priority for several INTO members, including the National Trust of Australia, the National Trust of Canada, and Heritage New Zealand. The National Trust of Western Australia, for example, gives equal consideration to natural, Aboriginal and historic heritage as well as moveable and maritime heritage. And it works with Aboriginal communities on community-based conservation programs.



- Three INTO member organizations — the National Trust, the Gelderland Trust, and Herita — have come together over the past three years to collaborate on Innocastle. This EU-funded project seeks to develop more heritage-friendly policies and legislation. The recommendations include suggestions to develop instruments that stimulate a shared sense of ownership, such as funding mechanisms that prioritize community-led heritage projects, as well as opportunities to engage as volunteers, members or activists. We see programs across the INTO network encouraging children and adults alike to take responsibility for their local sites: Heritage Keepers in Trinidad and Tobago; Place Keepers in Belgium; and Lighthouse Keepers in Canada.



- Social media is an increasingly important way to engage the public. Campaigns which invite local residents to participate by developing and sharing content, by contributing to research or by making or growing things at home can be effective at stimulating involvement. Badan Warisan Malaysia's ongoing campaign "love MY heritage" aims to gather, and archive the personal and historical memories of local Malaysians. The National Trust of Fiji has harnessed local knowledge in developing its heritage walks, speaking to residents and walking the streets of Suva to find locations and stories of community significance.



- A public consultation by the UK National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2017 concluded that "Heritage is situated not universal; people are interested in what historic buildings mean to them and how they can be used to benefit the community, not because of any established principles of architectural or aesthetic value. People want to see heritage used to address the social issues that they see as pressing in their local area."

