

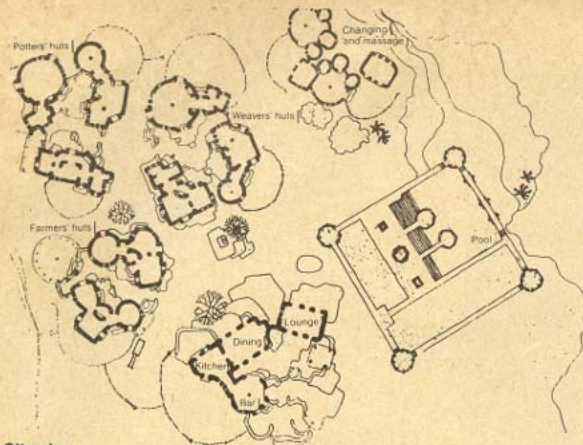
*On cloudless nights
when the moon is full and
the stars unusually bright
you may see a swirl of sand
and hear a host of tinkling bells.
It is the night of gypsy bliss.
And if you sit for long enough
and see the dawn abreaking
you may see the gypsy caravan
vanish in the dunes.*

THE DESERT CAMP

*Text: Sheila Mohan
Photographs: Bipin Mistry*

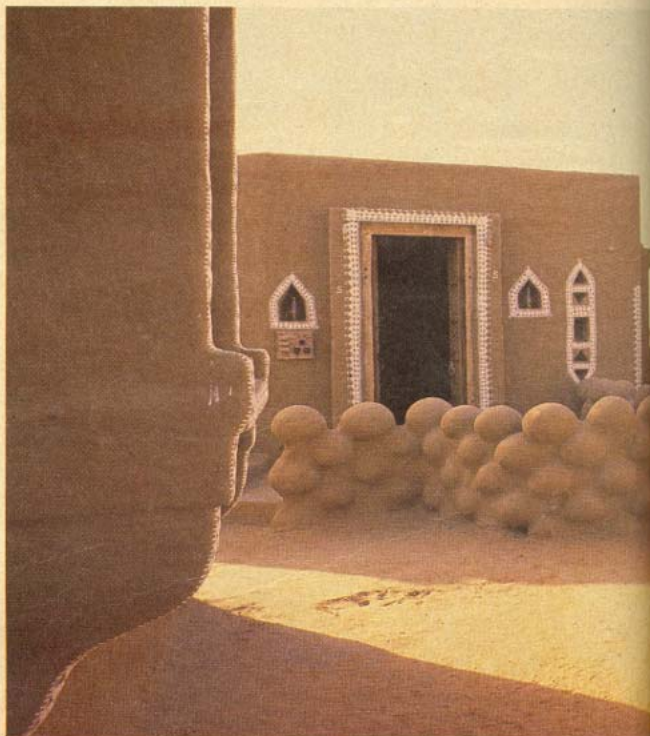
A few kilometres away from Mandawa town in Rajasthan, is a cluster of mud huts on a large sand dune. From a distance, they look like any other village homes — perhaps just a shade cleaner and devoid of the usual clamour of people and animals. On closer examination one realises that these are very extraordinary dwellings, indeed.

Designed by the talented Delhi architects, Revathi and Vasant Kamath, these huts are literally a poem in mud. They are a convincing example, proving it is within the realms of possibility, to effectively combine modern creature comforts with very basic rural dwellings.



Site plan

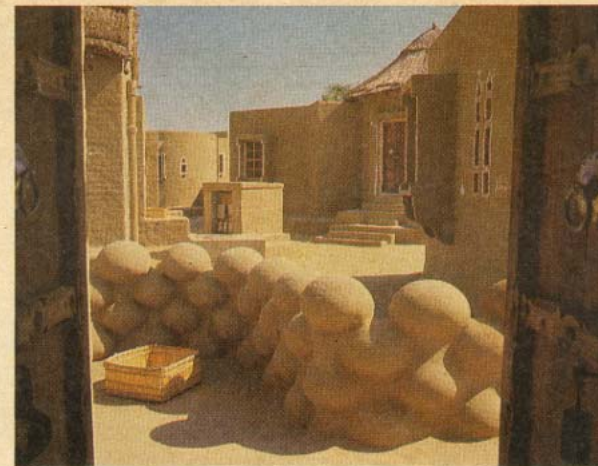
The huts form a cluster of eight — two are meant to represent farmers' huts, three weavers' huts and three more, potters' huts. They are not placed in a row, nor do they share common walls; each is a separate unit and yet part of the group. Social interaction in our rural areas being what it is, spaces have been provided where the fabric of daily interaction is woven. A *chakki* (stone flour mill), a grinding stone, etc, are embedded in the platforms and steps outside the huts, to indicate how people sit and chat while going about their chores, or how neighbours walking past stop to exchange pleasantries. The tourists who visit now, often do the same kind of thing — relax with a drink, while squatting at their front doors, swapping stories of their travels. Everybody in an Indian village



Previous page: The lounging area with the Desert Camp camel in the foreground seated near the huts.

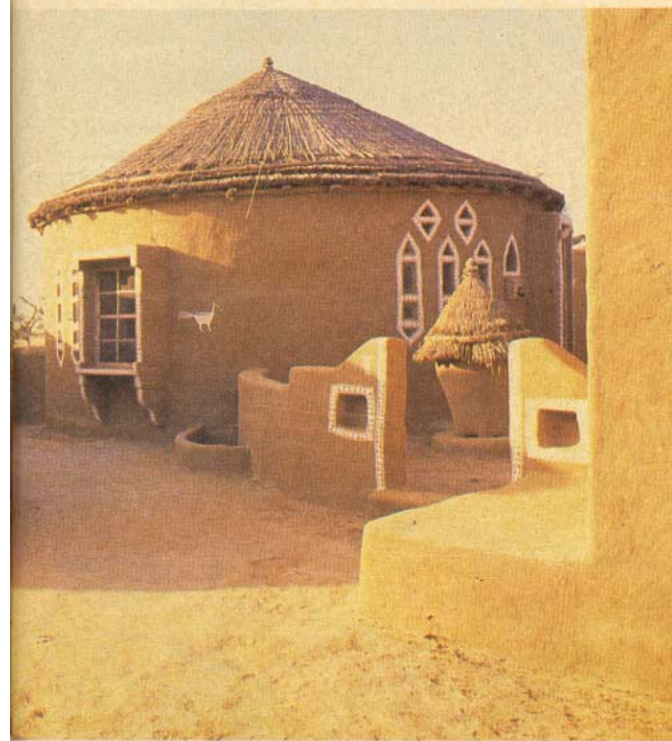
knows what everyone else is doing. Curiosity and inquisitiveness are not looked down upon as they are in the West. In fact, seclusion and an aloof attitude are suspect!

Built on brick foundations, the walls, sleeping platforms, ledges, etc, are also made of brick, plastered with mud and covered with cow-dung. Outside, the walls and windows are decorated with motifs painted in white by the local village artists. The cow-dung plaster can be renewed several times a year and so can the wall paintings. Kesari Singh Mandawa, whose brainchild this is, even pointed out his own brick kiln below the sand dune, where the bricks used in the construction were manufactured. But the most surprising revelation he made was that, water needed for the

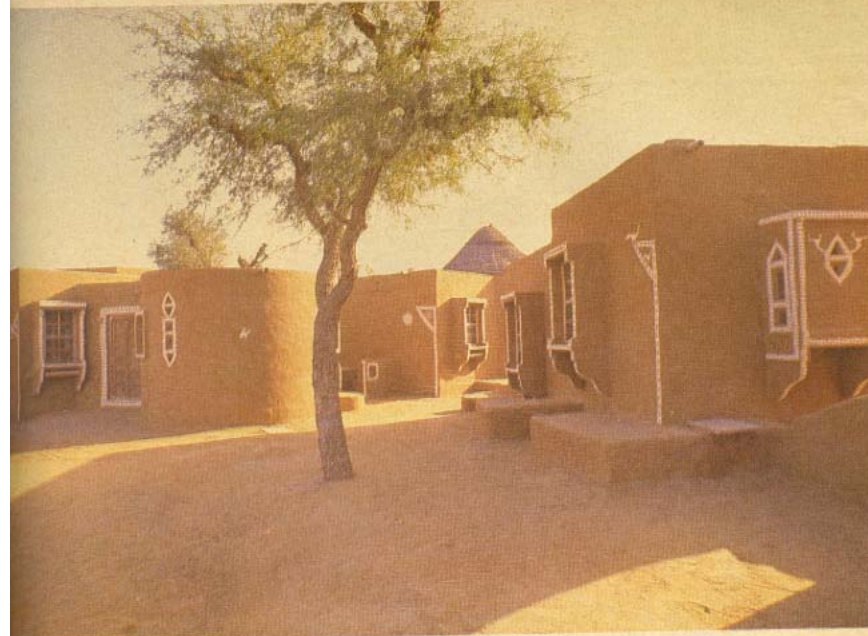
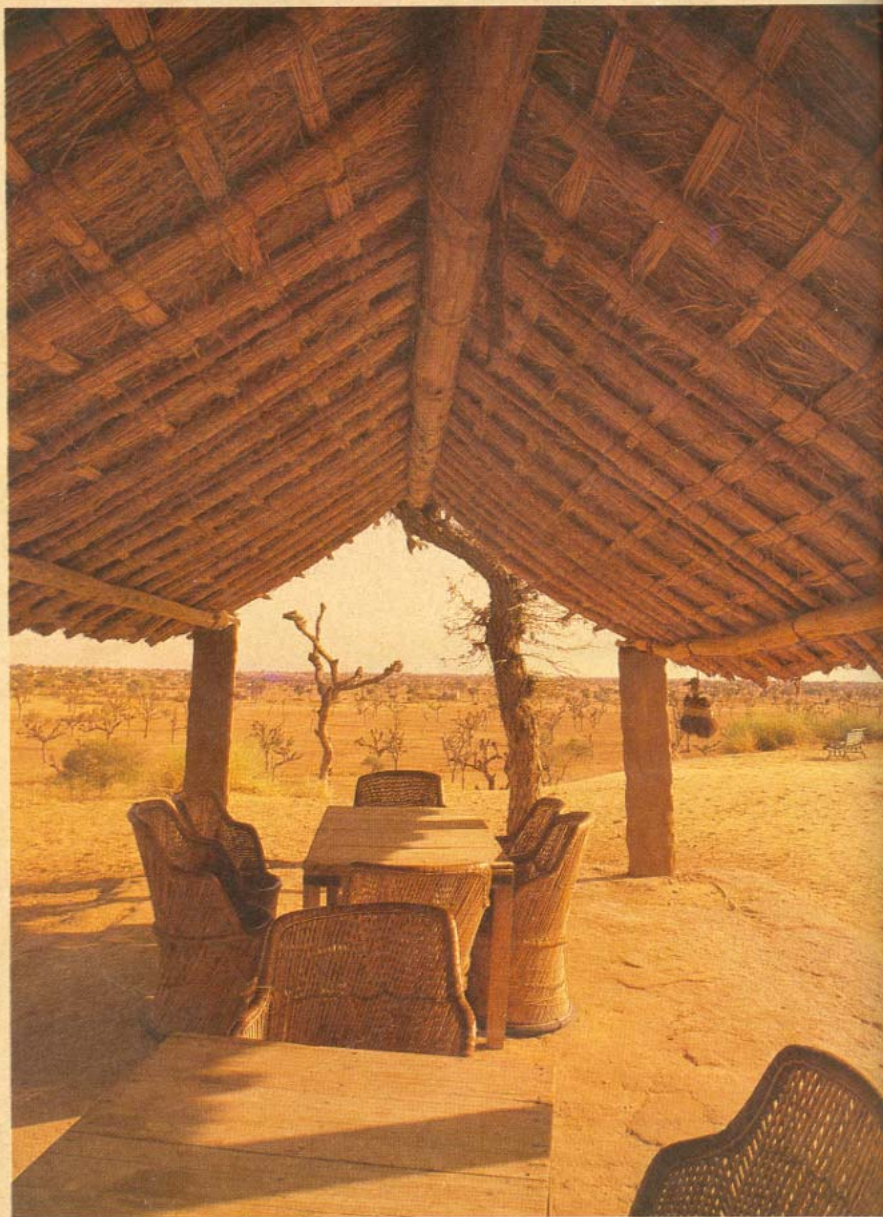


Reverie and Volant Kurnan

Above: A close shot of the 'pot-wall'.



Left: A view of the group of huts with the potter's hut in the background with its dividing wall made of pots.



construction was brought on camelback from nearby wells! Now, of course, they have a concrete water-lower which, though a blot on the landscape, is a necessity. Perhaps it could have been built to be as prominent.

No two huts are similar. Each one is a unique. What they all have in common, are the creature comforts provided — lights, fans, tiled bathrooms with Western-style toilets and showers with running hot and cold water; a bit incongruous in these surroundings, but for the modern traveller, an absolute necessity. The walls have niches for oil lamps and the very quaint mini-windows even have wire mesh to prevent insects from invading the interior. These are also typical rural ideas, the windows providing light as well as cross-ventilation, their size being small enough for them to be located anywhere without being intrusive. The floors, too, are plastered with

cow-dung; some roofs are thatched while others have stone slabs which have been left without polish or paint. The thatched roofs look very interesting with their perfect concentric circles formed by the bamboo strips holding the straw together; they seem to have been crafted by a perfectionist. Not a single piece is out of line, each fitting perfectly in its groove. Thatching is a local art and the people take pride in the intricate patterns they weave into their roofs.

A novel idea in the huts are the mirrors embedded in the walls with niches on the sides. With a stool below, they form excellent dressing-tables!

The wooden doors and windows have been covered and crafted by artisans from the nearby Laxmangarh area who have been in this trade for generations. In fact, since the increase in tourist traffic to this part

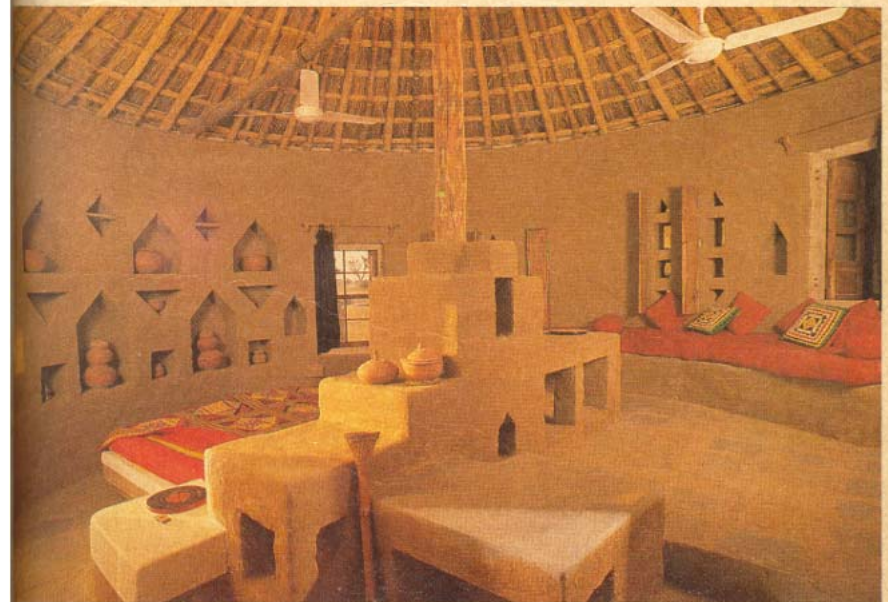
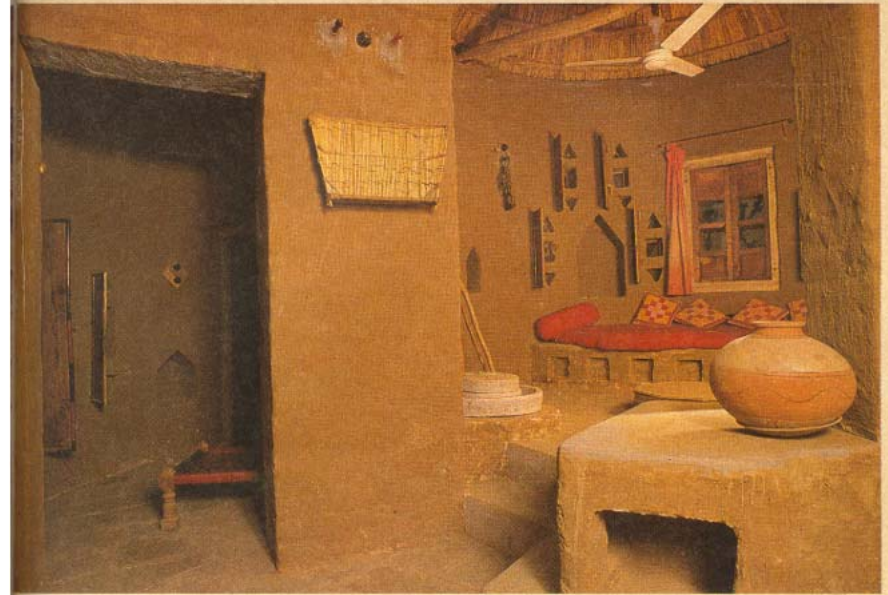
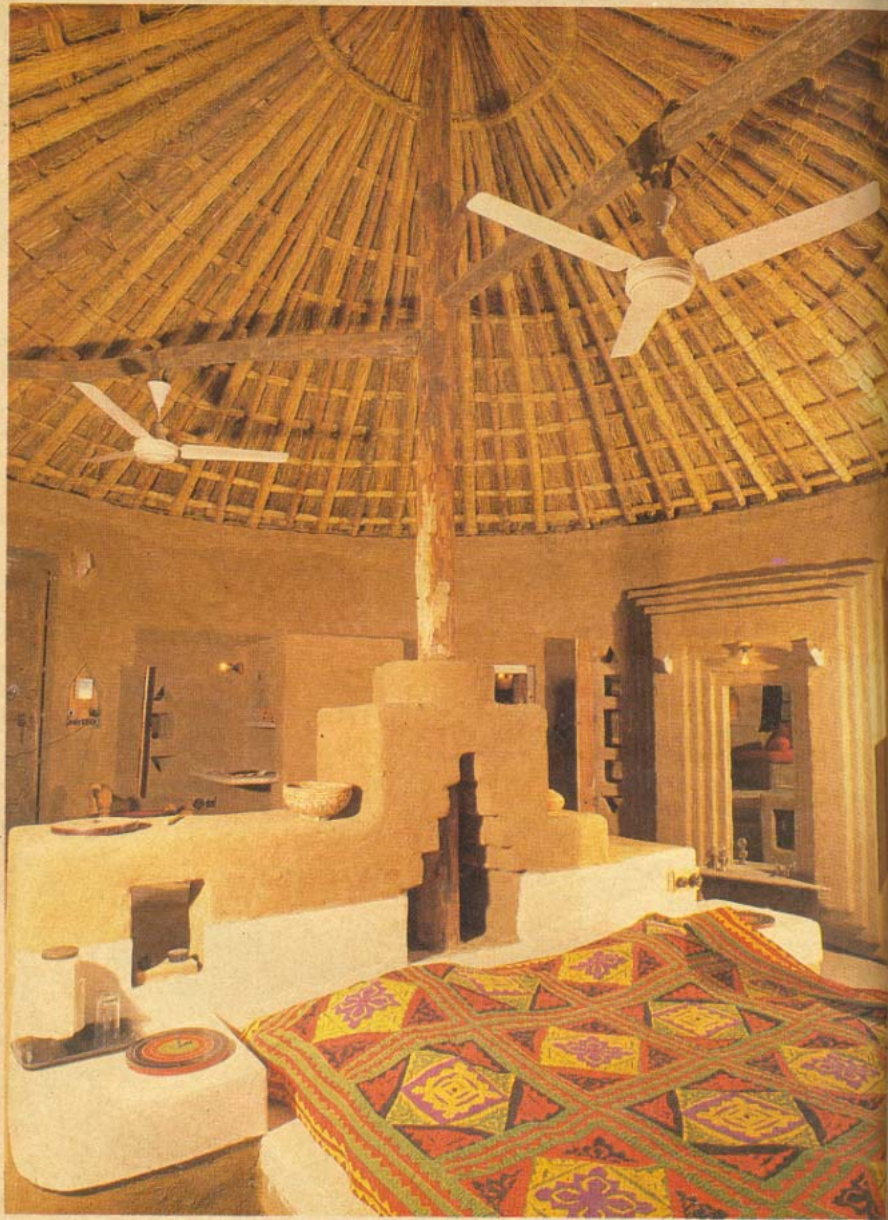
Above: Front door of one of the huts with an interesting tree in the foreground.

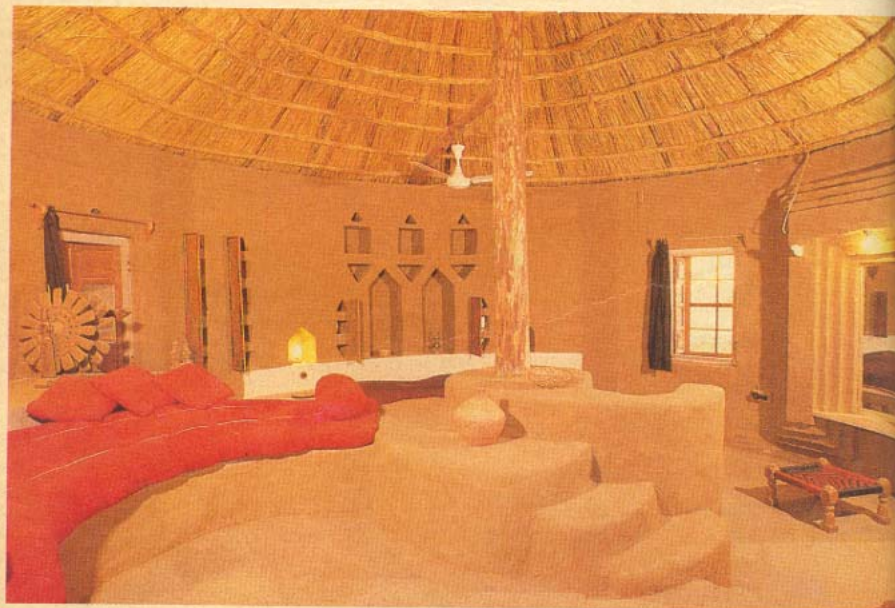
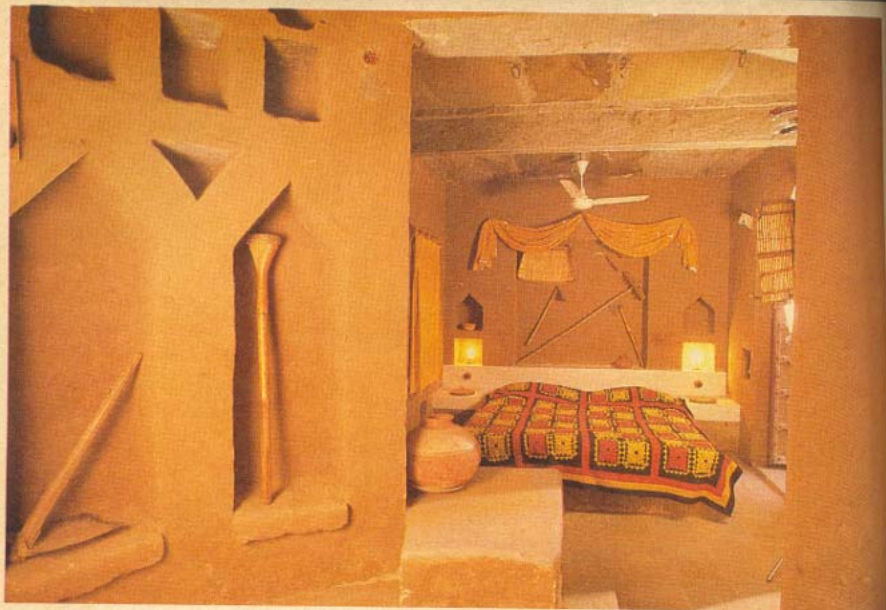
Left: The oblong dining shelter with a spectacular view of the barren countryside.

Overleaf: Left: The inside of a round hut with brightly coloured patchwork bedspread.

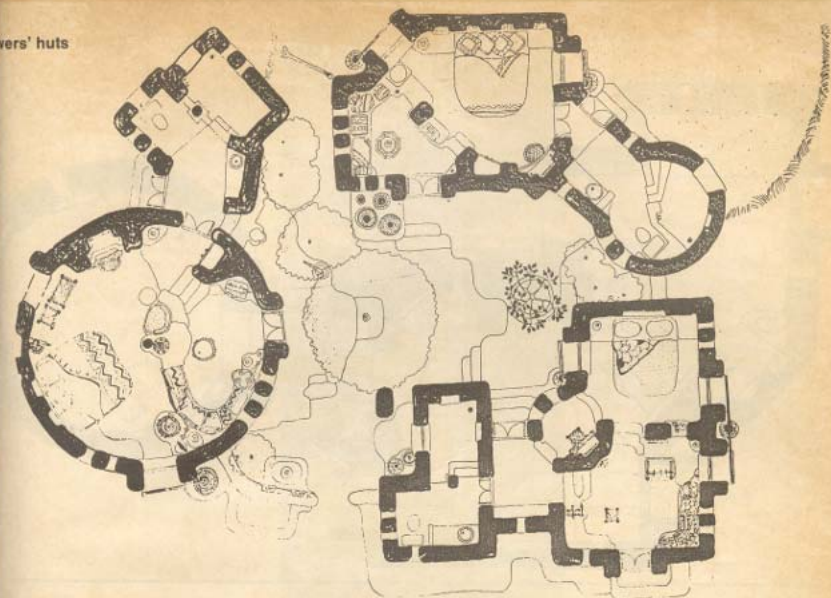
Right above: Another side of the round hut, viewed from the sleeping area.

Right below: Interior of a round hut with thatched roof.





weavers' huts



Rajasthan, a revival of the arts and crafts has begun. But the people are poor that, unless an impetus is provided by a competent authority, their talents will remain untapped. Pottery and low chairs are in great demand but this demand could be increased manifold if only proper encouragement, guidance and, most important of all, financial aid was provided to them. At present, whatever they produce is procured by middlemen giving them scarcely a fraction of the profits.

The revival of local arts and crafts, which are passed down from father to son, will help provide the craftsmen with a livelihood, and ensure that they are preserved for posterity. These talented artisans need to be promoted by the government and by private concerned individuals.

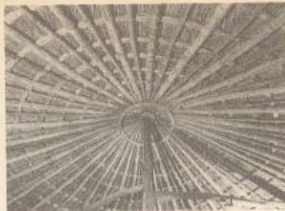
Furnishings inside the huts are in very simple cotton fabrics. However, the patchwork quilts and bedcovers made by the villagers in nearby Indawa are colourful pieces of art.

Over the sleeping platforms, used instead of beds, are foam mattresses ensuring sleeping comfort. Each hut is decorated with the implements and tools required by a potter, a weaver or a farmer; for instance, the weaver's hut has a spinning-wheel and the farmer's a hoe. Bright cloths, edged with silver *gota* (metal cloth) have been draped above some of the beds while the niches in the walls hold pottery and other local wares as decorative, as well as utility items. Dividers, in the form of small partitions, separate the huts; the most unique is the wall fashioned out of clay pots placed one above the other, plastered together and coated with cow-dung. Another wall has a conical urn, called an *obri*, with a thatched roof and a small opening at the lower end. A novel idea — the precursor of the silo! Yes, this is a miniature barn for storing grain. Slightly away from the huts is a thatched rectangular shelter provided with roughly hewn tables and chairs. This is the dining-lounging area which presents a magnificent view of the arid

Left above: Inside the farmer's hut.

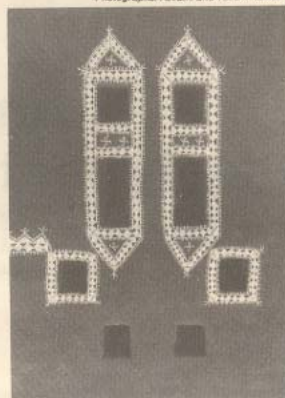
Left below: A view of the seating area with the dressing-table mirror embedded in the wall at left.

Detail of the thatched roof.



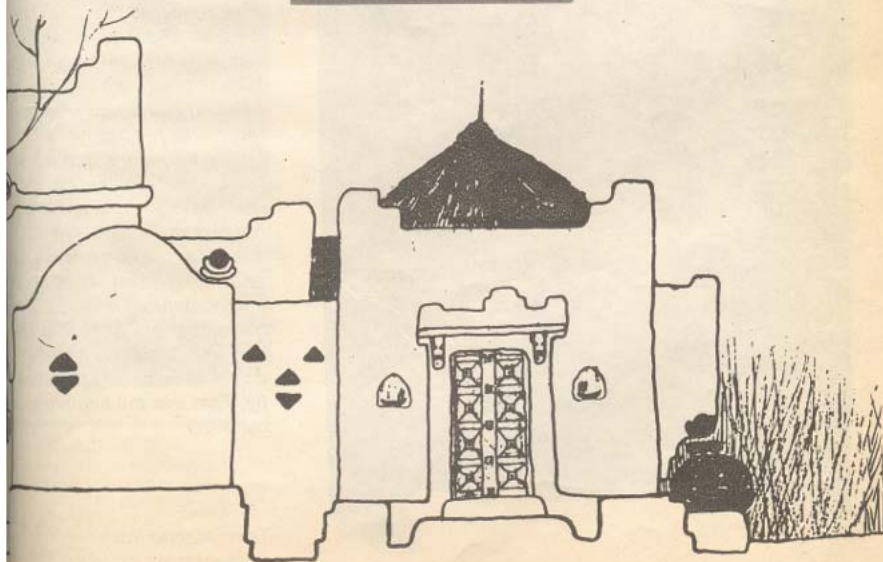
Photographs: Revathi and Vasant Kamath.

Detail of wall painting.



landscape stretching ahead for miles and miles. We were lucky to witness a glorious sunset. At nightfall, campfires are lit and visitors get an opportunity to listen to the plaintive ballads and folk music of the desert people and witness their dancing under the canopy of stars and if they are very lucky, even a moon. Yet another shelter to relax in is round in shape with slightly more protection. The camp has a kitchen and an administrative hut. A pair of camels form a great tourist attraction — a camel ride in the desert being a must, provided you are brave enough to cling on when the camel rises and sits down!

For a taste of rural living close to the earth and under the stars, the Desert Camp at Mandawa is an unbelievably enchanting experience. □

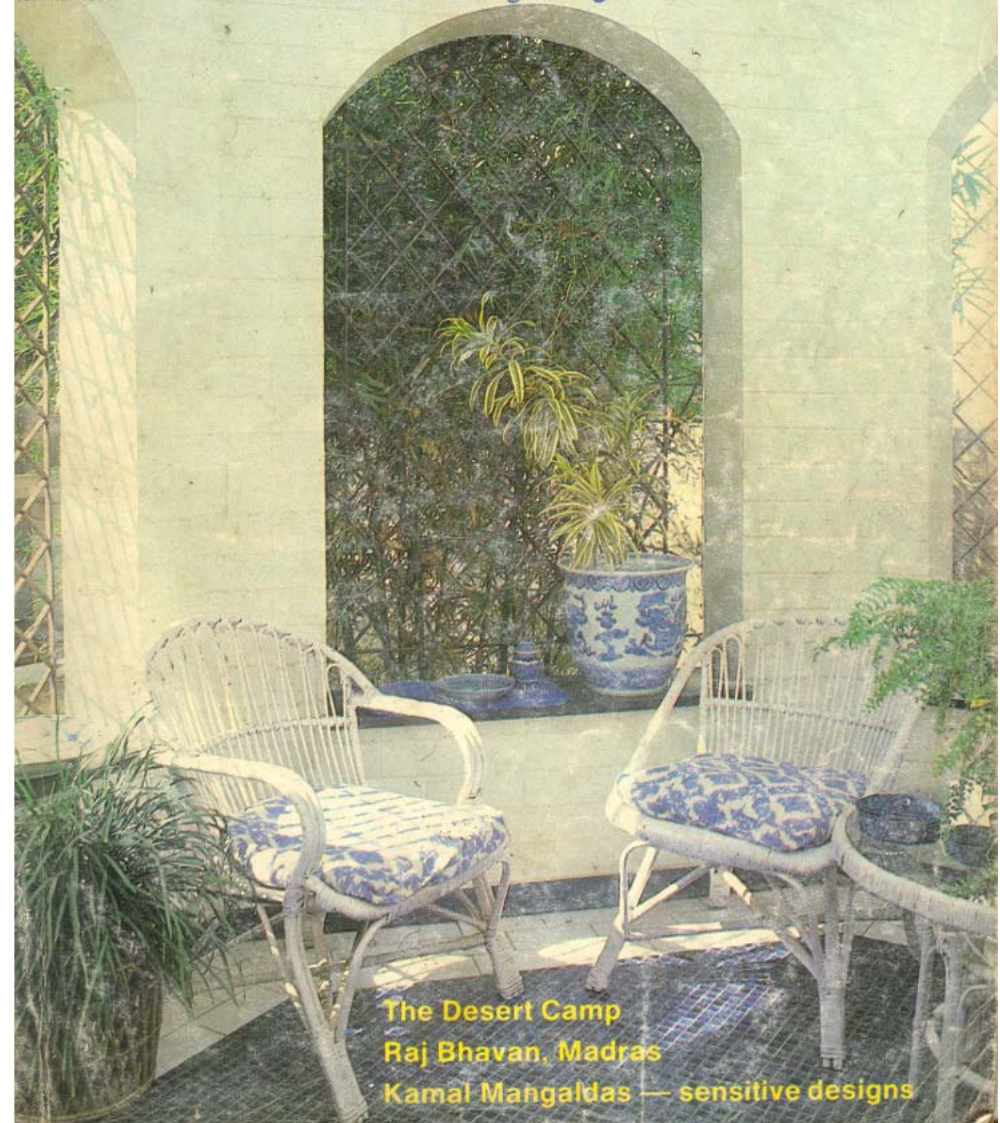


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