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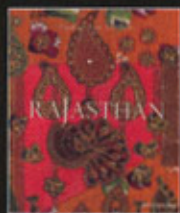
The biography of indigo, the magical  
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## Rajasthan

by Pauline van Lynden, Assouline Publishing, hb, pp320, £39.95

It's all too easy for coffee-table books to reduce the variety of life to glib simplicity, so when this heavy tome dropped through my letterbox, I thought, "Here's yet another glossy book of photographs of India." However, even those with an inbuilt resistance to the genre should be converted by the originality of this book.

*Rajasthan* contains few conventional views, instead combining straight images with carefully composed collages. In other hands, this approach might be pretentious, but here it succeeds, for the author – who became an instant convert on her first visit in 1988 – has explored the state with an artist's eye, revelling in the everyday life of villages, as well as local festivals and fairs. The images capture the mad exuberance and serendipitous juxtapositions in the mundane that make Indian travel such a delight. Though the author's view verges on the romantic, her desire to share her enthusiasm for what she has seen and the people she has met is contagious. In her own words, she was most struck by "the surprise of the moment". How can one not warm to a photographer who sees the beauty in such everyday details as a pile of white Diwali sweets, the rough edges of a stack of hand-made paper, the folds of a potter's turban or the shadows cast by a grain sieve on a wall?

The brief sections of text reflect the author's wanderings and experiences, resulting in such chapter heading as 'On the road to the countryside' and 'Shopping in the village'. The text is a painterly addition to the images; for example, she admires the women's dresses, which, she writes, are "stitched and embellished with patience and love" – a description that could easily be applied to her own work.

This book will be a treat to savour, especially by a fireside on a drab winter's day, where it will gorgeously evoke the luscious gaiety of Rajasthan.

Jenny Balfour-Paul