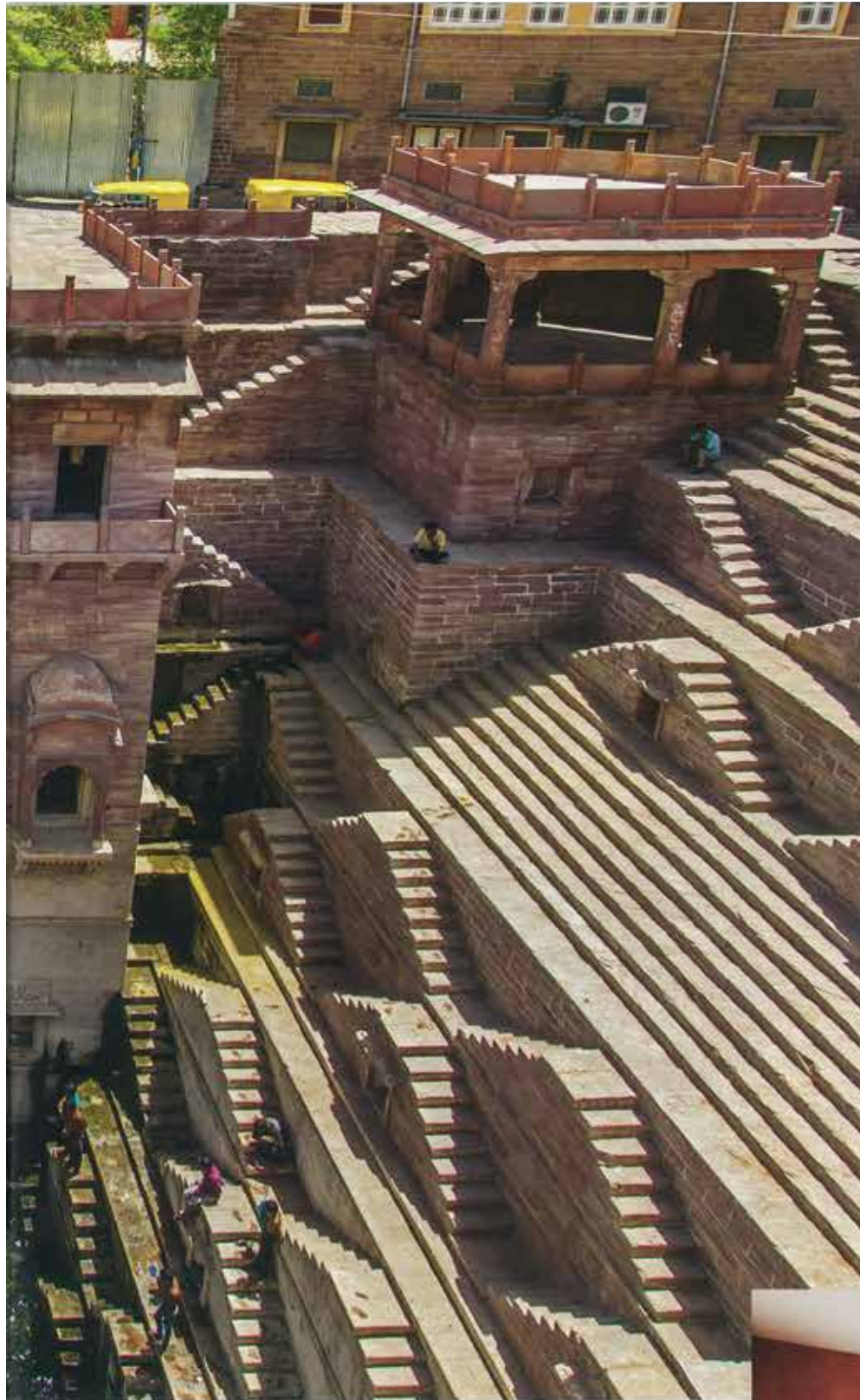


Clockwise from this picture: the restored Tinwarji ka Jhalra stepwell in Jodhpur. The brothers Nikhilendra and Dhananjaya Singh, who are behind the regeneration. A Heritage Suite at Raas Jodhpur hotel

From a walled city in India to Sicily's volcanic islands, the cultural heritage of a handful of geographical gems is being revitalised by entrepreneurs with a genuine emotional investment. **Maria Shollenbarger** reports

JEWELS OF REI



In 2013, the first time I visited Raas, the hotel in the ancient walled city of Jodhpur, its co-owner Kanwar Nikhileendra Singh and I took a walk along narrow streets to a nameless stepwell, set just outside the old walls. Singh, I knew, harboured a particular affection for these architecturally significant structures, thousands of which dot the reaches of Rajasthan and

Gujarat. This one was modestly proportioned, a jagged terracing of moss-furred sandstone, with dozens of old water lines blurred into inky striations in its shadowy depths. Slim men squatted at its edges, smoking; plastic bags floated here and there in the brown-green water.

There was another, very beautiful stepwell right next to Raas, he told me at the time; called Tunwarji ka Jhalra (pictured left); it shared a high wall with the hotel – an exquisitely converted Thakur mansion, whose household servants would have utilised it. But Tunwarji ka Jhalra was in too egregious a state of disrepair to be admired; its water was filthy, its masterful stonework invisible under heaps of rubbish. To Singh – born and raised in Jodhpur, a prominent social figure and dedicated student of its heritage – this wasn't just a travesty of municipal oversight; it was, in some sense, an existential loss.

And so the story could have ended: a moment of commiseration, a shrug and a return to cocktails in the sequestered comfort of Raas's lantern-lit garden. In fact, Singh, together with his brother Kanwar Dhananajaya Singh (both pictured above), was busy enlisting a small group of investors – led by His Highness the Maharaja Gaj Singh II of Jodhpur – and undertaking an ambitious regeneration project to transform such scenes of decrepitude and neglect into ones of thriving commerce and culture.

Any place of exceptional heritage or natural beauty imperilled by lack of government protection, economic exigency or climate change can, to the visionary eye, contain opportunity. Such is the substance of the Singhs' story; and other stories like it are appearing across the world. In Sicily's Aeolian islands, for instance, a fund established by hospitality entrepreneur Luca del Bono and financier-environmentalist Ben Goldsmith has set an agenda to preserve the islands' unique way of life, with targets



NEWAL



Clockwise from left: a rendering of the arrival lounge at the new Amanyangyun near Shanghai. Ma Dadong, who saved dozens of ancient Chinese houses for the Aman resort. The first of the reconstructed antique houses on the site



“I had no idea whether I could successfully save the forest or the houses, but if I did not try, I knew I would deeply regret it”

ranging from the gazetting of marine environments to the implementation of land banking schemes. In Norfolk, Thomas Coke, 8th Earl of Leicester and owner of Holkham estate, recently introduced pioneering commercial initiatives alongside contemporary hospitality ones on Holkham's 25,000 acres. And preservation has taken ground-breaking shape in China – significant, given that country's enthusiasm for out-with-the-old development – thanks to a young multimillionaire called Ma Dadong (pictured top right), who funded and oversaw the disassembly and transportation of dozens of Ming- and Qing-era village houses that were under threat of flooding, along with a camphor forest of 10,000 trees, from Jiangxi province to the outskirts of Shanghai. Here they will have a new existence as an Aman resort and residences, Amanyangyun (pictured above and right), scheduled to open in 2017.

At the core of many of these initiatives is emotional investment, which seems to act as the catalyst for the financial one. Ma, who was born in Jiangxi, chose to act when he saw the landscape of his childhood threatened with total obsolescence by damming. “As children, my friends and I played hide-and-seek in those camphor trees; we climbed in them, dreamed in them. I had no idea whether I could successfully save either the forest or the houses” – in consecutive efforts that took more than six years, and involved a team of more than 100 people – “but I felt two things: one, that I could ‘afford’ to fail; and two, that if I did not try, I would deeply regret it later in my life.”

Coke, who assumed management of Holkham from his late father in 2007, wanted above all for its legacy – and his own – not to be one of irrelevance. “We’re a traditional country estate, but we have to be forward-looking,” he says. “We want to be recognised as the leader in our class, the one against which others benchmark



themselves. It's impossible to stand still.” Coke has in truth been setting bars in this field for years, consistently realising the financial, environmental and communal benefits of creatively adapting Holkham's agrarian and architectural patrimony to 21st-century use.

“We have a lot of buildings on the estate that were the product of the agricultural revolution,” says estate director David Horton-Fawkes. “Quite a few of them have been redundant since about the 1850s – no longer suitable for modern farm machinery, but very beautiful and part of the rural landscape.” Coke cites their efforts to exhaustively consider options for their reuse – “wherever possible, we try to choose opportunities that will create employment or provide housing for local people. I believe local residents and our employees, not just visitors, respond to their environment. So I've concentrated on raising standards across the estate” – with all three groups in mind. By 2013 he had renovated The Victoria (pictured overleaf), the estate inn, along country-chic Dean Street Townhouse lines; last year

another 10 rooms were fitted into one of Holkham's oldest structures, restored (under the aegis of English Heritage, as have been all of the estate's Grade II-listed buildings) alongside Coke's next-wave, £4.5m growth phase. It will see Holkham's former pottery converted into a thoroughly contemporary exhibition and events centre, as well as the refurbishment of the café and construction of a new visitor centre at Holkham beach.

Another initiative is the conversion of 50,000sq ft of Longlands, a series of picturesque farm buildings and workshops, into slick, state-of-the-art commercial office space earlier this year. Its first corporate tenant: jewellery designer Monica Vinader. “Monica instantly saw the appeal of the juxtaposition: these traditional buildings and her modern company, the opportunity to offer her employees an environment that's pretty much unrivalled around here, and from which they can draw inspiration,” says Horton-Fawkes. “There was a time in the 1800s when those spaces would have been thriving: cattle, grain, the farmers, a blacksmith, the potters –



“The Walled City project is having a galvanising influence on the people who live here. It’s helped property value and has really affected self-esteem”

all the various tools and characters of agricultural commerce. Our sense is it could thrive again, with a 21st-century version of that.”

Such enterprising optimism – and personal investiture – characterises the Singh brothers’ Walled City Restoration Project, which, though it cohered only a few years ago, has roots going back a generation. Their parents are distant relatives of the Maharaja; their father spearheaded the transformation of Mehrangarh Fort from a royal residence into an important cultural institution that hosts the World Sufi Spirit Festival and the Rajasthan International Folk Festival; their mother was the first person to comprehensively map the bhitrī shahar, Jodhpur’s old inner city. “Even in the seven years Raas has been open, we’ve watched parts of the Walled City deteriorating so rapidly,” says Dhananajaya Singh. “We needed to save it; it’s that simple.”

Throughout 2016, 2017 and 2018, the project will see the restoration of multiple sites, acquired since 2014, around the old city; they include a dozen 18th- and 19th-century havelis, the historic Maharaja Sumer grain market and a prime shopfront in Sardar Market. All will be variously remade as restaurants and bars, a dozen galleries and boutiques, “heritage” (ie, sensitively restored) holiday apartments and at least 50 hotel rooms. There are plans for a standalone spa, and rooftop agriculture schemes are being tried out. But the first point of order was, of course, Tunwarji ka Jhalra: when I returned to Raas in late May, the stepwell had been drained, cleaned of rubbish (including an abandoned motorcycle) and thoroughly sandblasted. In the blazing heat of day, boys leapt from high cornices into its clear depths; in the evenings, it was artfully spotlit. Last December the Singhs converted the once-abandoned house just above it into the sleek Stepwell Café, an ideal viewing spot.

Together with their investors (who besides the Maharaja include Englishmen Nick Allan and Jonathan Boyer, former directors of Boyer Allan Investment Management, and Anita Lal, founder of India’s Good Earth retail chain), the Singhs enlisted preeminent brand consultants Mohit Jayal and V Sunil to help assemble a sort of pantheon of the national artisan experience. “As promoters, they’re responsible for the modern reconceptions of the spaces, through to identifying end-users who fit the bill” – names such as Gem Palace, fashion-accessories brand PlayClan and Ayurvedic luxury skincare line Forest Essentials, Dhananajaya Singh tells me. “It’s an evolution from

Clockwise from above:
renovated houses on the Holkham estate in Norfolk. The lounge of The Victoria Inn. Thomas Coke, owner of Holkham Hall and Estate



‘Incredible India’ through ‘Make in India’ – campaigns, he notes, created by Jayal and Sunil – “to ‘Best of India’” On Stepwell Square, the area immediately surrounding Tunwarji ka Jhalra, a small two-storey haveli will soon house a Forest Essentials store. On the facing corner is a multistorey retail complex, The Corner House, with ground-level shops already open: Via Jodhpur is owned by an Italian-Canadian couple with a keen collective eye for vintage furniture, textiles and silver. Royal Blue stocks cashmere shawls, hand-stitched kurtis and traditional attar perfumes; there is a satellite of the multicity photography gallery Tasveer Arts. Next door a 19th-century haveli, its façade a glorious puzzle of contrasting jaali panels, will be the atelier of fashion designer Rajesh Pratap Singh, with an outpost of CMYK, the concept café-bookstore created by Delhi-based art-design publishers Roli Books, in the forecourt.

Fortitude, the outdoor bar-restaurant spread across the roof of The Corner House, isn’t slated to open until weeks after my visit; but one evening we inaugurate its multilevel premises, admiring a view that takes in Mehrangarh Fort to the north, Umaid Bhawan Palace to the south and the glowing city – and the stepwell – in between. Over G&Ts, the Singhs describe their plans for the grain market (a combination of artisanal food producers and local vendors, with a possible restaurant



conversion of the market’s historic arcade to host rotating chefs) as well as for their architectural ace in the hole, a sprawling haveli built by the nobleman Ram Singh (probably destined to be an ultra-exclusive hotel; a handful of five-star names are bandied about as potential tenants). We discuss what locals have come to call “the Raas effect”. “The hotel changed the way visitors see Jodhpur, this is clear,” Dhananajaya says; and the brand’s current expansion – into the Himalayas, where Raas Kangra is soon to open, and to the south, where the Singhs recently acquired Raas Devigarh, outside Udaipur – is testament to its success. “But this project is also having a galvanising influence on the people who live here,” Nikhilendra says, finishing his brother’s thought. “It’s helping property value, it’s caused a paradigm shift in the sense of business potential. And – importantly – it has really affected self-esteem.”

Fragile self-image is probably not something that much plagues the residents of the seven islands that make up Italy’s Aeolian archipelago. Strung like black pearls off the northeast coast of Sicily, and long a summer idyll of the wealthy and taste-making, the Aeolians are almost absurdly picturesque: emerald vines, profusions of bougainvillea and cacti weave desultorily up their steep black volcanic slopes, and whitewashed houses cluster around glass-smooth harbours. Stromboli, an active volcano, glows photogenically on the occasional evening.

Ben Goldsmith first came here in 2014 at the behest of his friend Luca del Bono, a co-founder of Quintessentially and founder-director of the South Kensington Club, who grew up on Lipari, the largest of the islands. Goldsmith wanted the perfect romantic setting in which to propose to his then fiancée, Jemima Jones; del Bono assured him there was no better place. “I spent five days exploring; it was one of the most unspoiled places I’d seen in the Mediterranean,” Goldsmith told me when I met him and del Bono in



The near future will see grants allocated to the Aeolian islands' heritage, with a focus on architecture and culinary and wine traditions

London. "It's sadly nothing like what it must have been during our grandparents' time, but still – so much beauty."

He noted too, though, as del Bono had long before, that in the high season ferries disgorged alarming numbers of tourists onto the docks at Lipari, Salina and tiny Panarea; and that pleasure boats and fishing boats alike were potentially compromising the health of the sea, and the wildlife in it. Del Bono had for years abstractly desired to do something to forestall rampant development; Goldsmith provided direction. In early summer of 2015 the two established the Aeolian Islands Preservation Fund, adapting a model Goldsmith had piloted on Ibiza and Formentera that disburses grants to initiatives spearheaded by Aeolians themselves – "basically a pass-through fund, getting it to the people doing things locally," says Goldsmith. "And because there was essentially zero philanthropic activity here, relatively small amounts of money are proving to be incredibly potent."

With fund coordinator Federica Tesoriero – born and partly based on Panarea, with a degree from Bocconi's school of management – they identified key focal points. The Aeolians' two biggest industries, del Bono tells me, are tourism and fisheries, in that order; currently the fund engages with both, supporting the designation and protection of key sections of coastal waters by marine biologists, and educating local fishermen about the long-term economic benefits of "no-take" zones. Tesoriero works with local politicians and facilitates citizens' access to them; del Bono cites as an example of the AIPF's reach how islanders, including schoolchildren, are now authorised to contact their port master, or even their mayor, if they witness transgressions within protected marine areas.

The other primary focus is on the food culture of the islands: the AIPF has funded organic gardens on Salina, and links suppliers with businesses. Borrowing from a programme that Goldsmith says has enjoyed particular success on Ibiza, it is also connecting local growers with foreign property owners in a land-banking scheme that allows unused parcels to be farmed. "They



Clockwise from top: the Aeolian Islands, off Sicily. The pool at Capofaro resort, set among vineyards on Salina. Luca del Bono and Ben Goldsmith, who together set up the Aeolian Islands Preservation Fund

can tend or resuscitate fruit trees, vines, produce, whatever, to sell on to local consumers. It's essentially building on a sustainable economy."

Del Bono tells me the near future will also see grants, and attention, allocated to the islands' heritage, with a focus on architectural preservation and education about culinary and wine traditions – something many of the islands' habitués already know, and value. To this end, the AIPF has unofficial but extensive reserve support on the ground, ranging from the Tasca d'Almerita wine-making family (whose small resort, Capofaro – pictured above right – sits amid their Malvasia vineyards on Salina), to Myriam Beltrami, the owner of the perennially chic Hotel Raya on Panarea, to Marco Miuccio, who

oversees both the Aeolian Coast Guard and its regional Slow Food chapter. "It is the perfect place for us to help develop a low-impact, high-end tourism model," Goldsmith says. "In my line of work we call it 'place-based environmentalism'. When you clearly connect degradation of the environment – or of heritage or culture, for that matter – to a place where someone's soul is, it galvanises them." He looks at del Bono and smiles. "It turns out Luca is a devout preservationist at heart." +

REVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Maria Shollenbarger travelled to Jodhpur as a guest of **Raas** (+912912-636 455; www.raasjodhpur.com) and **Greaves India** (020-7487 9111; www.greavesindia.com), which offers four nights at Raas Jodhpur and two nights at Raas Devigarh B&B from £1,350 per person, including British Airways flights, internal flights, all guides, sightseeing and transfers. **Aeolian Islands Preservation Fund**, www.aeolianpreservationfund.org. **Amanyangyun**, 0800-2255 2626; www.aman.com. **Capofaro Malvasia and Resort**, Via Faro 3, Salina 98050 (+39090-984 4330; www.capofaro.it), from €210. **Holkham Hall and Estate**, Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk NR23 1AB (01328-710 227; www.holkham.co.uk). **Hotel Raya**, Via San Pietro, Panarea 98050 (+39090-983 013; www.hotelraya.it), from €150. **Raas Devigarh**, +912953-289 211; www.raasjodhpur.com, from £251. **Raas Jodhpur**, +912912-636 455, from £212. **The Victoria Inn**, see Holkham Hall and Estate, from £105. **Walled City Restoration Project**, www.jdh.company.