

PUSHKAR
Words : 1290
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In the heart of Rajasthan, Pushkar is one of India's most ancient and sacred cities. In November it is home to the Holy Kartik Purnima Festival as well as the greatest camel fair in the world.

ORIGINS

According to legend, when lord Brahma flew over the land, three lotus petals fell from his hands to create lakes when they hit the ground. One of these was the holy lake of Pushkar. Surrounded on three sides by the rugged hills of Rajasthan the lake indeed looks as if it sprang out of nowhere. On the fourth side, two hills, each adorned with a temple, stand at either side of the town, like a giant gate looking out over the desert beyond. The actual date of the founding of the city is not known, but it is mentioned in the ancient Ramayana scriptures whose oral tradition dates as far back as 1000 BC. What is known is that from time immemorial it has been a pilgrimage destination for Indians. It is said that no devout pilgrim's journey is complete until he has reached Pushkar. The lake itself is almost entirely surrounded by bathing ghats, steps leading down to the water where Hindus perform their ritual cleansing and prayers. Despite its small size, the town boasts 400 temples, amongst which one of only three temples in the whole of India dedicated to the god Brahma. Legend has it that his wife, having been slighted, cursed him, saying that his people would erect no more temples to his glory.

KARTIK PURNIMA FESTIVAL

In November the normally sleepy town suddenly comes alive as thousands upon thousands come to celebrate the Kartik Purnima festival, when it is said that all 330 million Hindu deities inhabit the lake. On this day it is believed bathing in the lake's waters will completely purify you. The town literally bursts at the seams, with human traffic jams blocking the streets, whole families of newly arrived pilgrims carrying their luggage on their heads, others wearing their best outfits and jewels on the way to the Brahma temple. Hawkers peddle their wares at every street corner and tent cities and temporary markets are erected all around the town's outskirts. Security is stepped up, scores of police patrol the streets and metal detectors are placed outside the entrance to the Brahma temple. On the night of the full moon everyone converges on the bathing ghats, as on this day the purification will be multiplied, and the normally placid waters suddenly froth with people performing their bathing ritual.

CAMEL FAIR

November is also the time of the camel fair. The largest in the world, it attracts thousands of buyers and sellers from around northern India. They set up camp in the sand dunes just west of the city, where there are watering holes for the animals. Some have come with their herds from other states, starting their journey weeks in advance and covering the distance of hundreds of kilometres on foot. Once there, everyone will try to negotiate the best prices. The Rao family have come out in force to the fair from neighbouring Ajmer district. They have 50 camels to sell. Each animal fetches between 6000 Rs (90 €) for an older beast and 30 000 Rs (450 €) for a young one in good health. A buyer makes his way through the herds, moving from one to the other, inspecting the animals in each. This is not the first time he has bargained with Mr Rao, and when he reaches his herd, he launches straight into negotiations. After a few minutes of hard talking, he goes away again, disgruntled. He will be back many times before they reach an agreement. Mr Rao is unruffled. "Today I have sold 11 camels," he says.

When night falls the women prepare the meal on an open fire while the men and children feed the camels, then the men sit a while around the fire smoking pipes and discussing the day's round of bargaining and eventually everyone curls up in a blanket to sleep under the stars.

ROMA PEOPLE

The religious festival and the camel fair are also an occasion for people to indulge in a number of attractions like the funfair and a huge market that will sell anything from pitchforks to horses. Entertainers of all sorts converge on the city in November, singers, musicians and dancers, acrobats, fortune tellers and numerous others. Perhaps the most colourful of these are the Roma people, or gypsies. You will spot them easily by their dress which in many ways resemble the dress

of western gypsies. This is no coincidence, as these are the direct descendants of the original roma tribes, some of which left India around one thousand years ago. They were originally employed in the service of the great temple complexes of the north west of India as musicians and dancers, where their particular style of music evolved in worship of the Narasimha god. They were also employed as warriors, and in the 11th century had to fight off increasing incursions by the raiding armies of Mahmud of Gazni from Afghanistan, attracted by the legendary wealth of the temples. Mahmud eventually defeated the Hindus, and it is believed that the Roma people followed him north and west, and over the centuries went on to migrate to Europe.

WEDDING

When the festivities are over Pushkar returns to its normal sleepy self. Yet life never completely stops. On one Sunday night the streets are suddenly alive with wedding processions, the grooms dressed like maharajas riding brightly costumed horses behind a fanfare orchestra and rows of boys bearing electric torches. "We have come all the way from Jaipur to celebrate the wedding", tells me the groom's father, beaming with pride. Celebrating your marriage in Pushkar's holy city is considered auspicious and will bring luck to the newlyweds. For hours the streets will be alive with the wedding guests singing and dancing through the night.

TOURISM

In recent years Pushkar has also become a favourite destination among foreign visitors. In the festival weeks the number of tourists can be as high as twenty thousand, and special tent cities have to be erected as the hotels cannot accommodate the sudden influx of visitors. However most foreigners 'in the know' prefer to visit the holy city outside of peak times, and many who come here for the first time planning to stay just a few days find themselves still here weeks later. Hotels have learned to cater specifically to their needs and tastes, and cybercafes will go as far as installing keyboards in Hebrew for the many Israelis who come to stay. Meat and eggs, deemed 'unpure' in the Hindu religion, are outlawed throughout the city, but restaurants have learned to adapt and diversify their menus in such a way that the imposed vegetarian diet almost goes unnoticed. Many visitors come here looking for spirituality. The magnificent settings, the quiet pace of everyday life, and of course the temples, are certainly conducive to meditation. Others still come to perfect their skills in Indian musical instruments. Every evening at sunset on the shores of the lake you can watch students and their teacher practising complicated rhythms on drums and tablas.

ROSES

If you walk along to the eastern outskirts of Pushkar you will suddenly find yourself in the middle of green fields studded with red blooms. This is one of the town's lesser known treasures : fields of roses that will be sold all over India. Kavita, an 18 year old girl who works here, shows me a handful of blooms and explains that it will fetch her around 10 Rs. And to think all this beauty once came from a single flower dropped to the ground.