

[All's Fair](#)

Category : [July/August 2000](#)

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CELEBRATION

All's Fair

Held every year in Rajasthan's oasis-city, the variegated Pushkar mela melds Hindu worship and bouyant revelry with tourism and camel trading

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As the sleek diesel-powered Shatabdi express train sped across the barren Rajasthan landscape, I was entranced by the flat countryside as it flashed by in endless rhythm. From the deluxe air-conditioned carriage, with my cushy seat reclined, I peered out as a peasant in a white dhoti toiled behind a plough pulled wearily by a bullock. The dichotomy of my aloof vantage was palpable. I saw women planting a sugarcane paddy...naked village lads frolicking in a muddy pool...a young girl with a goat in tow walking barefoot across freshly-tilled soil...a flock of crows perching on the uppermost branches of a leafless Keekar tree. On and on I witnessed these candid cameos of rural Indian life, which represents almost 90 percent of Her teeming millions.

It was late November, 1999, and I was on my way to the annual Pushkar fair. As many as 250,000 Rajput men and women were expected to venture here this year, not to

mention the hundreds of Europeans and Americans (most of the passengers on my train were British, European, American and Australian). The four days of festivities are held each year around the full moon day in October-November (Krittika). While Pushkar is most revered for its association with Lord Brahma, it is undeniably most renowned for this mela, the most colorful animal fair in the world. The extravagant camel bazaars and races are the images now most associated with the mela.

But Hindus do flock to the dusty city with devotion. For some, this is a pilgrimage they must make at least once in their life. According to ancient legend, Lord Brahma dropped a lotus leaf onto the sandy wastes and a lake was created here in the dry wilderness. This is the central lake of Pushkar, called Sarovar, and it is revered as much as Manasarovar is at the foot of Kailas in Tibet. Fifty-two bathing ghats surround the lake. The water at each is said to have unique powers, and pilgrims are sure to make the rounds to reap every blessing--for fertility, beauty, wisdom and even a cure for leprosy. A popular interpretation of the legend states that Brahma Himself sat here, on His lotus-leaf lake, when He issued forth the universe. Thus Pushkar was the beginning of all creation.

It is estimated that as many as 400 temples have been built in Pushkar. The most important being to Lord Brahma, Siva, Badri Narayan, Varaha, Gayatri and Savitri. But the sacred city's distinction is in having the only temple dedicated to Lord Brahma in all of India.

At the end of the six-hour, 400-kilometre journey from Delhi

via Jaipur costing the equivalent of ^{us}\$17.10--Indian railways are said to be the cheapest in the world--we arrived around noon at the Ajmer railway station. Jostling crowds and a cacophony of shrill voices erupted from the platform. As I emerged from the station--famous for its attractive cream-and-strawberry facade--into the sunny and dusty bazaar directly across the road, I was swallowed by a surging crowd of Rajputs, maybe 10,000 strong, and a kaleidoscope of color! The effect was staggering, to say the least, as tall, slim and moustached men in bright red, yellow, green and orange turbans--with an occasional lilac and pink--and their lissom women in gorgeous rainbow ghagras (full-length skirt) glided past in gay abandon, heartily singing "Jai Ram, Sita Ram!"

Dark, rugged faces lit up with broad smiles, so unlike the morose city dwellers I had left behind in Delhi. This sea of bubbly humanity surged through the main street of Ajmer in slow motion towards the desert township of Pushkar, eleven kilometers away on the edge of the vast Thar desert.

I was not particularly keen to walk eleven moistureless miles, so after heaving and pushing through a wall of struggling Rajputs, I nonchalantly clambered aboard a rickety, overloaded and battered bus and just managed to grab a seat. The eleven-mile, one-hour journey,

however, ended at mile eight with a terse announcement from the skinny driver, "Get off all of you lot and walk the remaining three miles!" The reason was obvious, a veritable sea of bobbing heads, maybe 50,000 strong, that stretched right to the horizon. The Rajputs on their march to Pushkar had blocked all vehicular traffic. Even the district police chief was hopelessly stuck in his shiny new jeep. So in good spirits we trudged the remaining 5,000 yards across a wide sandy track which made many a knee wobble. It was, nevertheless, great fun.

Pushkar and Lake Sarovar form an oasis in the otherwise barren desert. They are girted and protected by the Nag Pahar, or Snake Mountain Range. A modest hike up the hill nearby Pushkar city provides a striking study in juxtaposition. On the one side, the sandy wasteland stretches out to the horizon. The only hope to traverse such an expanse is with the aid of the camel. On the other side one sees the distinctive white-washed buildings of Pushkar sitting like jewels around the ring of the lake. Groves of trees fill in and complete the contrast.

The Rajput people are known for their valor in the battlefield and chivalry towards a defeated foe. The Rajputs, an ancient race with a history and culture quite diverse from other Indians, especially inhabitants of the South, roamed the sandy wastes of the expansive Thar desert as far back as 3,000 years bce. Ardent Surya (Sun) worshipers, these hardy folks adapted very well to an extremely harsh and unrelenting environment, with no civic amenities whatsoever. They had a minimum of personal belongings. They never stayed for too long in one place, didn't own a house of their own and slept under the stars.

Their constant and close companion has been the camel, without which the Rajputs would be lost. Able to survive and travel effortlessly in the desert, the camel is their only mode of transport. Out of this close rapport was created the famous Jaisalmer Camel Corps, a crack army detachment that saw active, and meritorious, service in 1942 in Alamein (Libyan desert), and today patrols the Indo-Pak border. Some years ago I spent a day with a JCC unit. With their high-powered rifles and tall, swift mounts, they are aptly suited as guardians of this wind-blown frontier.

Historically, the Rajputs are a warrior race, gallant fighters and a formidable foe in battle, as the Turkmani and Mughal invaders were soon to realize. Whereas almost all of the Hindu population eventually capitulated to their new masters, the Rajputs alone never accepted Muslim domination and were in constant opposition to the Islamic forces, especially the Mughals. The Rajputs also spurned the conversion of Indians to Islam. While they were eventually defeated in 1191, they were the last to succumb. Similarly, Jaisalmer was the last kingdom to submit to British rule.

As devout Hindus, the Rajput's last act at the end of the day is a visit to the local temple for darshan (obeisance) of the resident Deity. They are kind to a stranger and follow a strict code of conduct. It is said that the most impressive aspect of Rajasthan is the hospitality. Every home has a special place set aside for visitors, or anyone needing board on their journey.

There are various Rajput clans, created more or less on the Hindu caste system and each

identifiable by the color, pattern and style of their turbans. The Rathore clan is from the ruling class (notable among them being the Maharajah of Jodhpur), and so are the Chauhans, whose greatest ruler was Prithviraj Chauhan (12th Century AD). They are also called Thakur as a mark of respect. The other clans are subservient to them, especially the Mahar (camel drivers), Lohar (ironsmith), Berupia (entertainers), Bhopa (reciters of epic tales), Gracia (untouchables), and the Rabari (Shepherds).

So, indeed, entering Pushkar was like coming to a huge boisterous carnival! And from the rooftop of the tallest building in town--owned by the richest landlord, who kindly allowed me access--the huge masses seemed like an army on the march.

At the end of my first day I managed to get a room in a local lodging house called Krishna Kutir, which had a fairly comfortable bed, table, chair, electric light, ceiling fan and nothing more. Tourists and pilgrims staying at this place had to share a common bathroom with no door, but at ^{US} \$4.60 a night no one was complaining. The

window had strong iron bars "to prevent local hoodlums from escaping" from what many years ago was a local lock-up! A makeshift restaurant on the roof provided cheap but good hot meals and cold drinks.

It was here that I learned that the entire town had been declared a "No Meat, No Alcohol" zone during the holy festivities. This happens every year. No one has a choice but to be vegetarian. It is not uncommon for non-vegetarians to continue their abstinence from meat for long after the festival, and some pledge to maintain the observance for life; such is the inspiration in the air.

The typical pilgrim routine begins with a daily round to the temples, attending the pujas and making offerings. Taking a dip in Sarover lake is not to be neglected.

Then, time is spent leisurely--walking through the bazaars gawking at the gaudy goods in hastily-erected wooden stalls, shopping for fresh fruit and vegetables and generally mingling and making friends. Food shopping is no small affair. Rajasthanis do not eat at the local restaurants, but cook their own food over fires in camps in the dunes surrounding the city. The heaps of produce in the many stalls will be gone before the day's end, only to reappear in the morning .

At nightfall it was fascinating to join these cheerful people, who laughed a lot and loved spinning a yarn or two over a raging campfire as we sat cross-legged on the soft sand. Quite taken by my handlebar moustache and intrigued with my Hindi, the Rajputs asked me, "Sahib, from where have you come?" Before I

could give an answer, a group of men and women sprang up and began doing a vigorous dance amidst wild clapping from the delighted onlookers.

And as the drums rose to a deafening crescendo, and the singing got louder and the fires grew brighter, these desert folks gyrated in endless rhythm. At that moment time stood still. Amidst the massive gathering of humanity, I had found solace under a starry night out in the vast wilderness of Rajasthan. Jai Ho Brahma Devta Ki!