

TOURISM UPDATE

PUSHKAR



PHOTOS © JOHN DEVEREUX / INDIAN MOMENTS

▲ **Catwalk Queen:** Camels are decked out in the most colourful finery and jewellery as they compete against each other at the Pushkar Fair.

◀ **Mirror, mirror...:** A herd of camels ready for the race adorned with colourful beads and baubles.

▼ **Desert Tunes:** Manganiyar singers from Barmer district entertain the residents at Camp Bliss with soulful renditions of desert music.

Rustic Charm, Simple Pleasures

It's an experiential roller-coaster ride in Pushkar, where all senses combine to throw up a thousand delights. **BY RAVI SAGAR**

The charm is legendary. This tiny lake city, said to have sprung up from the petal of a lotus flower of Lord Bramha, is mystical and magical. It attracts millions, and in droves, especially in the holy month of Kartik for religious reasons and others, to the Pushkar Mela, the largest camel fair in the world, for all the fun and frolic that it promises. The history too of this ancient, tiny and sleepy town is fascinating. Legend has it that when the demon Vajra Nabha killed Bramha's children, Bramha, in retaliation, struck him with his weapon, a lotus flower. The impact slayed the demon and



the petals of the flower fell at three places, one of them Pushkar, where a lake floated into being. Bramha further venerated the place by performing a sacrifice beside the lake. Another story would have us believe that Pushkar Lake sprung from the lotus petal that fell from Bramha's hand while he was in deep contemplation, moving around the earth in search of a place to perform *yagna*. This, then, was the spot he chose to do so.

A natural lake amidst hills and sand dunes is itself a miracle, but Pushkar's sacred importance in Hindu mythology is such that it finds mention in both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.

But the reason that it is today a world-famed tourism destination is more to do with Pushkar Fair, a brand in itself, held in October-November to coincide with the holy month of Kartik Purnima. The seven-day camel and cattle fair, the only one of its kind in the world, packs the many-hued vibrancy of Rajasthan in one non-stop entertainment package and holds the visitors spellbound with the vivacity of it all.

According to Pankaj Sharma, CEO, Indian Moments, a tour operator specialising in Pushkar tours, "Pushkar Fair is one of the most iconic travel destinations in Asia, with a uniquely exotic appeal for visitors, a chance to see one of the greatest traditional *melas* and livestock trading fairs. It draws visitors from all over the world."

The efforts of event organisers have further worked to multiply the charms of the destination. Sharma informs, "The event organisers, Rajasthan Tourism and Pushkar Mela Vikas Samiti, offer a full programme of events in the *mela* stadium and have also introduced a Balloon Fiesta (in association with www.skywaltz.com) so that visitors may enjoy hot air ballooning over the gathering. In the last day or two the focus is on Pushkar as a pilgrimage destination, as many, many thousands of pilgrims arrive from the surrounding countryside and from all over India to visit the temples and take a holy dip in the lake at the auspicious time of *Kartik Purnima*."

If all this has whetted your appetite, book your dates for the *mela* next year, as there is a heavy rush and accommodations are all booked months ahead. However, if you just intend to visit Pushkar and enjoy the sands and the safari, just pack your bags and head out.

You can opt to stay at one of the budget hotels, resorts or the luxury camps. Staying at the luxury camps, however, adds to the charm of this desert getaway. The secluded accommodations provide experiential learning for visitors with all the comforts of luxe living. As Sharma says, "The idea behind the camp is to create a relaxed atmosphere with authentic entertainment and opportunities to gain insight into culture. So for example, the decoration is inspired by the fair, Manganiyar musicians from Barmer district provide authentic entertainment, and knowledgeable staff provide some insights into local history,

FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. A DIP FOR SALVATION
PHOTO BY ABHISHEK BALI



The Pushkar Lake with its 52 *ghats* is considered one of the holiest pilgrim spots in Hindu religion.

2. RIOT OF COLOURS



Women folk from the surrounding villages of Rajasthan throng to Pushkar Mela for the shopping of the year.

3. PERFECT PAIR



The famous Rajasthani shoes that have no match in the world can be found here in many hues.

4. IN FAITH
PHOTO BY ABHISHEK BALI



It is customary to light earthen lamps and float them on leaves on the Pushkar Lake.

5. WINNER!

A local tribesman leads away his recent purchase, a young camel bought at the Pushkar Fair.



Folktales Retold: The folk dances of Rajasthan are brought alive at the fair and the camps every year.

the development of the fair, local cultures and the way of life of the camel herders. The aim is to interpret and enhance the experience of the event for guests."

The Jaipur-based company, Indian Moments, was launched in 1999 by Pankaj and Neeraj Sharma. In 2010, the company was Runner Up, Best Value Tour Operator, Asia, in the Sunday Times Travel Magazine's Value for Money Awards (UK), that are voted by a panel of journalists and tourism industry experts, which, in Sharma's words, "is quite a distinction for a small company."

Indian Moments' tryst with Pushkar Fair began in 2004 when it set up Camp Bliss, a temporary (pop-up), stylish boutique-style camp. It is in its ninth edition this year.

Orchard, another similar operator and the first luxury tented resort at Pushkar, sets up camp very close to the Pushkar Fair grounds from September 1 to March 31 every year. The luxury tents come up amidst orchards of *amla* and fields of roses, barley, wheat and other flowering plants, where the ambience is one of purity, beauty and peace. Among the resorts, Pushkar Bagh is exceptional in its architectural heritage and has an ambience seeped in luxurious history. The centuries-old fort has been carved out of the famous pink sandstone of Jodhpur and restored into a heritage hotel by its current owner Kunwar Mahendra Singh Rathore. The resort offers 25 luxury cottages and 15 tents with a variety of tour packages to entertain guests.

Once you have booked your accommodation, the travel arrangements are much easier as Pushkar is only 11 km from Ajmer, which is connected by air and rail to Delhi and Agra. In

▶ **Magical Night:** Little lanterns light up the desert night at camps and cast a mystical halo.



▶ **Forever & After:** A camel and his master sporting similar colours are enjoying the sand, the sun and the fun at the Pushkar gala.



▶ **In Wonderland:** The giant Ferris Wheel and other rides add to the fun for visitors.

fact, two of the best trains of the Indian Railways, Pink City Express and Shatabdi Express connect Delhi to Jaipur and Ajmer.

It is said that the population of the secluded town of Pushkar, naturally cut off from Ajmer by the Nag (snake) Pahad (mountain) and surrounded by hills on three sides, swells from 15,000 to 300,000 during the fair. The camel, cattle and horse congregation accounts for another 30,000 heads. The animal trading is mostly concluded before the fair begins, for the *mela* is actually reserved for contests, fun and activities that help the villagers unwind in what is a long deserved *douceur de vivre*. For visitors, it is a spectacular display of colour, spirit and spectacle that brings together farmers, traders, livestock and villagers from one of the most colourful parts of the world in one place in a long-surviving tradition of our times. The jamboree is intoxicating where there is no dividing line between spectators and the locals as both mingle to play games and exchange notes.

Camel rides and races, giant Ferris wheel rides, the longest moustache contest, the *pagadi* contest, the horse and donkey races, and balloon rides up in the clear desert sky, are just among the few activities that keep the visitors returning day after day, hankering for more excitement. The local wares bazaar offering ethnic jewellery, utensils, household items, and garments richly crafted with local designs, is a great attraction for souvenir hunters.

The competitive battleground and the shoppers' paradise of the day turns into a hauntingly melodious cultural venue at dusk as local musicians take out their instruments and strum their strings to the lilting songs of folk singers. Women and men join in the dancing and this continues well past midnight. Fair authorities organise a host of cultural activities to showcase the vibrant culture of Rajasthan. Folktales by bards, dances by local dancers from all over Rajasthan, folk songs of different style, music, poetry, et al, Rajasthan brings forth its entire cultural repertoire for the entertainment

of its global guests. It would be rare to see such vibrancy come alive anywhere else in the world.

Once you have had your fill of the fair, head to the holy town of Pushkar to uncover the historic significance of the little temple town. At night, aglow with floating earthen lamps, the Pushkar Lake with its 52 *ghats* is a sight to behold. The pious light these lamps, and putting them on leaf bases, sail them on the lake waters. The ambience takes on an added mystical hue with *aarti* being offered at the *ghats* at the time. *Aarti* is also offered in the morning.

Do spare some time to undertake a camel safari under the expert guidance of the *Raika* or the camel breeders. Next on your travel itinerary should be a village safari. The best time to visit Pushkar is winter, between October and February, with temperatures ranging between 22°C to 8°C. Even if you miss the fair, there is a host of activities waiting to be discovered in Pushkar—from royal castles, luxury camps, the temples, the rustic life, or the camel safari to dinner for two on the sand dunes in the backdrop of the lake city, with stars for company and maybe the local bards singing a folk duet to the music of the folk musicians. ■



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