

PUSHKAR FAIR



Traders Travel From Far Across Rajasthan and Saurashtra in Carts

Every Kartik full moon Pushkar, the sleepy oasis on the eastern fringe of the Marusthali Desert in Rajasthan, becomes the epicenter of ritual and festivity and is transformed both into a place of pilgrimage as well as cattle fair.

On Kartik Full Moon (October – November), three hundred and thirty million Hindu Gods are said to take a ritual bath in the serene waters of the Pushkar Lake, making it an auspicious time when mere mortals can share in its holiness. With so many celestial deities' blessings the waters of the lake and the ancient temples on its fringes, pilgrims throng the fifty-two bathing ghats for the Kartik Snan – holy bath. Infused with exceptional powers each lakefront ghat bestows upon the believer the opportunity to be blessed by a miracle. For example there's Naga Kund for fertility, Roop Tirth for beauty and charm, Kapil Vyapi for curing leprosy and the waters at Mrikand Muni Kund bestow wisdom. Even if one is not on the lookout for a miracle of that sort, a dip in the Pushkar Sarovar is said to wash away past sins. And all this is overseen by the sacred temple town's custodian deity – the four-headed Lord Brahma, creator of mankind.

Such immense celebrations, stretching into days, need provisional measures, which begin soon after Diwali (Kartik Amavasya). Herders and traders travel long distances on foot, in carts and on tractors with their livestock for the annual camel bazaar, blissfully unaware that they rewrite history each year for the Unt Mela, billed as the largest Camel Fair. The scrublands beyond the west of the Brahma Temple transform into acreage of closely pitched tents and temporary barricades for the bleating and bellowing livestock. But the real flurry of activities is awakened five days before Kartik full moon.



Brahma temple Pushkar

At daybreak, on Prabodhini Ekadashi, the rising sun slowly peels away the wintry haze, revealing the excitement of a timeless fair. Pushkar undergoes a time warp. The expanse exemplified ancient landscapes, now lost to textual history – traders mounted on jute charpoys assessing their stock of masticating camels tethered to the bamboo pegs; trails of smoke billowing out of pitched tents and curling into the skies. Beyond, the sand dunes, otherwise barren and parched, are taken over by more than fifty thousand camels. For the next few days this is their turf.

Livestock and traders crowd the dunes in a restive bustle. In the motley sunrays frayed through the spiky Khejri trees, camels, cattle and horses stomp restlessly upon the driest of earths. In muddy white attire and capped by colourful turbans, merchants squat in circles unwinding over a shared hookah. Their limited pastoral knowledge conveys interesting camel facts: The strong bushy eye-lashed ones belong to Bikaner whereas the racing ones are from Jaisalmer. The one humped Indian Camel (camelus dromedaries) is the descendant of the Llama than its two humped Bactrian cousins.



Decorated Colourful Camel



Colourful Fair



Turbaned Marchants Sharing Trading Secrets

From all across Rajasthan and neighbouring Saurashtra, livestock is brought to the annual auction of Pushkar. A good harvest from the preceding monsoon results in modest deals and about ninety percent of the animals are traded but discouraged from being taken away from the festival grounds in view of the tourist influx. With the fair authorities offering free fodder, buyers are induced to stay back. A day before Kartik Poornima that traded animals are allowed off the grounds in typical rawangii (dispatches), where scores of camels kick up the desert sand into low aesthetic clouds of dust against the melting sun.

The buyer has a mental checklist while inspecting a camel – The teeth and posture are physically examined. With the camel sitting, the tail is tugged sharply to check on the reflexes. For the difficult buyer the seller takes every effort to make his wares stand out in the large crowds. Each of these velvety animals is ornately adorned with tinkling bells, bridles and pompoms; some have their fur sheared in geometric motifs evoking the spirit of Rajasthan's arts. Symbolic hair motifs called moondra are carved onto the mowed fur and tattoos are stamped on the sheared skins using black henna and heated ladles. Meticulously groomed, the camels are then lined up and auctioned.



Pushkar Ghat



Pushkar Street Shop



Pushkar Fair colorful Stall

A shallow crescent along the north of the lake connects Pushkar's three main ghats. To the northeast is the Varah Ghat named after the third incarnation of Vishnu, the Boar; the Gau Ghat, with a small marble statue of 'Gau Mata' (motherly cow) is where the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were deposited in the lake. The third is the Brahma Ghat, believed to be where Lord Brahma took a bath before sitting for a yagna (fire sacrifice).

According to one story in the Padmapurana, Lord Brahma released a swan with a lotus in its beak and decided that he would perform a yagna where the lotus would fall. When the pushpa (lotus) fell in Pushkar, from where the town gets its name, Brahma's wife Savitri was not around. Since a yagna cannot be performed without a spouse, Brahma married a local shepherdess, Gayatri and made her sit around the sacrificial fire. Savitri, furious on seeing this, cursed Brahma that he would not be worshipped anywhere else apart from Pushkar.

It is interesting to note that Pushkar has the only temple in honour of Brahma, even though He is one of the Holy Trinity of the Hindu pantheon. A long flight of marble steps leads to the temple. The main shrines houses a life-size idol of Lord Brahma with four hands and four faces positioned in the four cardinal directions. The walls of the temple are adorned with beautiful images of Goddesses Saraswati and Gayatri. A door finished in silver leads down to the small cave temple of Shiva. At the entrance of the main shrine is an image of hans (swan) and under it sits a life-size silver turtle.



The Giant Wheels Are a Big Draw at the Fair



Pushkar Lake

Pushkar being a Teerthraj (literally – ‘King of all pilgrimages’), devotees follow the ritual beginning with a bath at one of the principal ghats, then a darshan of Lord Brahma followed by the Parikrama (circumambulation) of the holy lake. The parikrama path along the southern bounds of the lake ambles through quaint settings of ancient temples and equally ancient trees. Bearded sadhus with coarse matted dreadlocks offer pilgrims free audience. Some fake novices attempt to draw crowds with strange tricks, which they try to pass off as miraculous feats.

At Pushkar spirituality does not come free. During Kartik Poornima this laidback settlement revels in the quick bonus of post Diwali business – the monasticism of the town giving way to the lure of fast money with prices spiraling up. Even priests idling along the ghats take advantage of the need of pilgrims by often demanding astronomical donations for small rituals.

The road leading to the fairgrounds winds from behind the Badi Basti – Pushkar’s main street parallel to the lake – meandering past the Brahma Temple. For visitors, women dressed in colourful, mirrored skirts lay their wares of trinkets and puppets. Strings of stalls take up the pinched spaces where people gather in groups, bidding and haggling. People from pastoral communities, distinguished by their groomed moustaches and colorful Bandhani pagris, pensively gaze at the whirring handheld tool that creates vivid tattoos, mostly in Devnagiri scripts, of their clans or communal deities, upon their forearms. Others gather in circles around magic shows and the wrestlers of snake-and-mongoose. Girls do tight rope balancing acts and cartwheels through flaming rings.

To enhance the festive atmosphere, the Fair authorities also line up a number of events at the nearby mela (fair) ground, where locals compete with tourists in tugs of war, camels are raced and paraded and folklore and dance inspire melodic evenings.

Seen from the summit of the Savitri Temple, perched on a nearby hill, the camel bazaar blooms in the stark stretches of desert as a spread of monochromatic flourish of celebrations.



Cheerful Girls at Pushkar Festival