

PUSHKAR MELA – THE GREAT CAMEL FAIR OF RAJASTHAN

ANTONIA HOOGEWERF*

Nowhere in India, the land of contrasts, is this contrast more evident than at Pushkar, a sleepy little town set in the middle of barren desert wasteland tucked among the Aravali Hills in central Rajasthan. For most of the year nothing happens here. The whole town is vegetarian and alcohol-free, though it seems soft drugs are gently condoned. There are few smart hotels, mostly visitors stay in boarding houses or rent cheap rooms, and there are plenty of simple eateries. Cattle wander the narrow streets picking at anything they can find, cardboard boxes, paper, odd scraps of food.

The Lake dominates the town. Everything happens around it – praying, eating, chanting, drinking. The sun shines down all day or so it seems, and young people wander the market stalls which are set up everywhere along the narrow streets selling brightly coloured clothes and cheap silver jewellery. A somnolent air pervades the whole place. The *pandits* in the temples encourage passers-by to stop and pray and donate. In return, the priest tie a string of soft coloured cotton strands usually of orange red and yellow several times round the wrists making a kind of bracelet. A ceremony of prayers and chanting together with a dousing of holy water from the lake accompanies the bracelet tying.

Just before sunset the hippies, left over from the sixties Guru trail, congregate on the *ghats*, the broad steps

leading down to the water's edge, to watch the sun going down. They light their *chillums* and smoke *ganja* while the guitar and tabla players start up their music mingling with the ever-hopeful beggars, and everyone watches as the fire-eaters whirl their petrol-soused pois to entertain the onlookers. The sun sinks red and low over the lake as they sing softly and talk in muted tones and everyone seems to retire early.

According to legend Lord Brahma was locked in battle with the demon Vajra Nabh and finally slew him with a lotus blossom over the Aravali Hills. Three lotus petals fell from his hand, whereupon three beautiful lakes at once magically sprang up in the desert. To celebrate the miracle, Brahma convened a meeting of the whole pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses on the banks of the largest lake and performed a great '*yagna*', a sacred ritual, thus making the lake one of India's holiest sites and Pushkar, the Pearl of the Desert, was created. Every year the anniversary of that meeting, which takes place in the Indian month of *Kartika* (late October to November), is remembered drawing thousands of pilgrims to bathe in the waters of the lake at '*Purnima*', the full moon, which is believed to cure the soul of all impurities. Pushkar is one of the five pilgrimage destinations that are essential for devout Hindus to visit at least once in their lifetime. Until very recently Pushkar boasted the only temple in the whole of India dedicated to Brahma, the Lord of Creation (one in Southern India has just been built) which is curious as being part of the Hindu triumvirate he is equally powerful with Shiva the Destroyer and Vishnu the Protector who both have thousands of temples all over India.

Alongside the religious festival the tradition of bringing camels and also horses, oxen, buffalo and cattle to show and trade, has grown up over the centuries, making

* The writer is British born and bred but has spent much of her adult life in France; the Lorie Valley, the Deep South, and she has now been living in Paris since 1999. Her passion is for travel, exploring the world and its peoples, experiencing their various and diverse cultures. For the last 17 years she has spent the winters travelling widely in India, a country she loves, always coming to rest in Calcutta. These articles are random extracts from the travel notebooks she wrote to record her experiences around the world.

The author may be contacted at : antoniahoogewerf@hotmail.com

it the largest and oldest Camel Mela in India, and surely the most lively and colourful.

Come *Kartika* then, a transformation takes place and the gentle lazy peace is shattered by thousands of Rajasthani people who throng to the fair bringing their livestock with them. Around three hundred thousand Indians come every year, as well as thousands of visitors from the world over, but they are well outnumbered by the accompanying camels and horses. A few weeks before the fair, one becomes aware of the steady movement on the roads of camels, horses and cattle and people from all corners of Rajasthan, as they begin to make their way across ancient desert and mountain trails towards Pushkar.

The town's blue-washed houses and hotels are filled to bursting. The central Bazaar located in the maze of narrow streets winding round the lake and punctuated by temples and sacred ghats, now takes on new life.

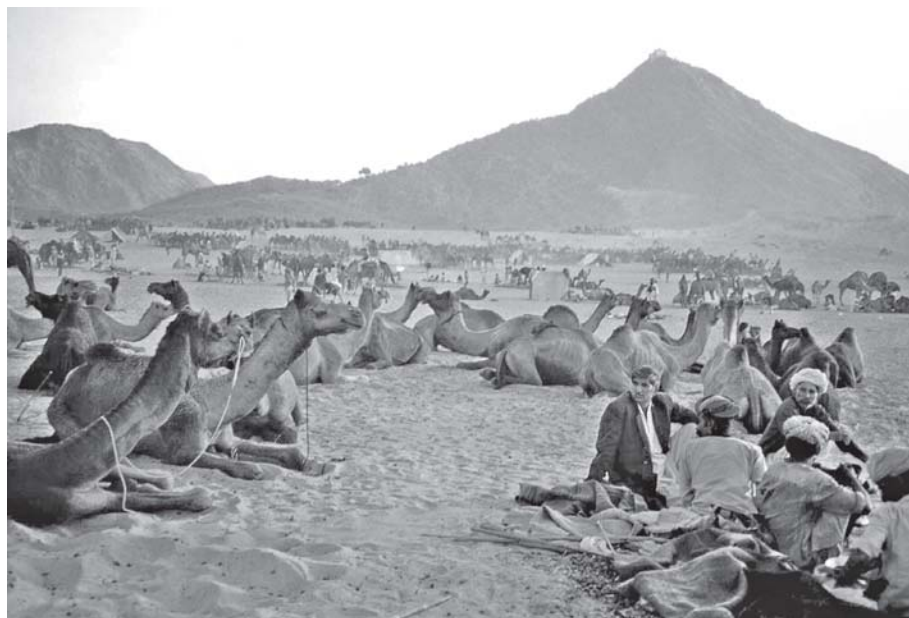
Camps are set up all round the town, mainly to the west, for both animals and men. For westerners, camps are built several kilometres away from the *Mela* ground, with luxury tents and restaurants and their own evening entertainment, and camel carts are provided to take them to and from the fairground.

As the fair gets under way, gypsies dressed in brilliantly coloured saris and *ghagras* pour in from the surrounding countryside, maybe with a few camels, sometimes with large herds, the men wearing classic red Rajasthani turbans wound round their heads often many

metres long. Market stalls spring up along dusty sand tracks selling all kinds of camel gear, saddles, highly coloured nosebands, bells and chains, and the traditional woollen blankets worn by desert tribesmen. There are food stalls everywhere, selling *jellabis*, exotic honeyed sweetmeats and *chapatis* and *dahl* and every kind of spicy dish. *Chai wallahs* wander around with great copper tea urns on their heads, perilously carrying the flaming cookers as they negotiate the crowds.

Large tents are erected for craft work stalls, and an encampment for the prize cattle. Every day of the fair there are camel races and games in the main stadium and competitions for camel dressing and cattle showing, with beautifully turned out oxen, Indian cows and buffaloes. There is also Camel polo and the famous "camel-loading" contest, where as many men as possible get on a single camel. A large unstable-looking fun fair goes up in days, with ferris wheels and bumper car rides. Riding a camel is a good way of touring the ground, not uncomfortable and giving an excellent viewpoint, and there are camel carts which give rides to and from the hotel encampments. Sideshows of every sort, magicians, fire-eaters and acrobats can be found all over the *Mela* ground. A small boy in a turban, not more than ten although looking about six, walks a tightrope with easy assurance as his father urges him on from below to perform more and more daring tricks. The tightrope is about twenty feet up, no safety measures of any kind as the lad prances and jumps and holds dishes between his feet and the crowd gasps and applauds.

Out in the ground, turbaned men haggle over sales of camels and horses and put the animals through their paces. Horses' mouths, ears and feet are thoroughly examined, and the horse must be made to lie down, roll over, then the prospective buyer or one of his young men will gallop bareback at full speed scattering the crowd right and left along the makeshift sand track, or ride, legs dangling, at a breathlessly fast trot. These are mostly *Marwari* horses, often piebald, with soft pointy ears that turn full circle when you talk to them and they are used for marriages, so must be of good equable temperament. They also make excellent Polo ponies.



Pushkar Mela Ground with the camels

Each night there are firework displays in the stadium and Rajasthani dancing, the girls in the traditional full black dresses heavy with *shish*, the glittering mirrorwork Rajasthan is known for, and coloured embroidery. The thumping music and blaring lights of the funfair in the town continue into the small hours.

Out in the Mela ground, the extreme heat of the day fades palpably as the sun sets, and the temperature drops like a stone. Then an uneasy hush falls over the encampment at night making of mysterious place, dark but alive with the gentle sounds of stamping feet and the movements of beasts and men. The pungent scent of the camels pervades the air. It is easy to stumble over a herd of grunting camels or sleeping bodies wrapped snugly in blankets against the sparkling cold air. Whole families of camel drivers and horse-owners sleep curled up close with

their animals and there is no light except from the soon-to-be full moon and the camp fires which stay in all night, people huddled round them, cooking and whispering.

The festival culminates at '*Purnima*', the night of the full moon, and on this day the numbers swell dramatically even further as the village people arrive in droves to perform their *puja* by bathing in the lake at midnight and floating candles and flowers on the water. Buses, lorries and coaches, with people sitting on the roofs and clinging impossibly on all sides pour into the Mela ground.

Then suddenly it is all over. Tents are hurriedly dismantled and put away till next year. The gypsies and farmers, camels and cattle, all disappear overnight and two days later no-one would know there had been this vast gathering of people – all is calm again and Pushkar is restored to its habitual age-old tranquillity. □