

## THE PUSHKAR MELA – A SALUTARY EXPERIENCE

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There are two main things travellers can worry about – if they are the worrying kind which I am not – and getting ill a long way from home, or having your personal effects stolen. Both have happened to me on my travels through India and I count them not only as salutary experiences to be learned from, but also ones which have brought me greater insight into the workings of this astonishing country and a richer understanding and love of its people.

In an earlier article I talked about Pushkar, that sleepy little desert town surrounding a beautiful Lake, hidden among the Aravali Hills in central Rajasthan, and its famous annual camel fair, the Pushkar Mela. Normally peaceful and somnolent, as the November full moon (*Kartik Purnima*) approaches thousands of itinerant people and animals flock to Pushkar, culminating at the night of the Full Moon, to worship Brahma on the shores of the Lake. It is also a grand market for the buying and selling of livestock and provides a fascinating spectacle for visitors who come from all India and indeed all over the world. I have been to the Mela on several occasions, a wonderful chance to experience Indian rural life and traditions as well as a great photographic opportunity. Every evening entertainments involving camels, horses, magicians and fireworks are laid on for the pilgrims and visitors in the makeshift stadium.

It was here that it happened. I had come to the fair

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for the second time, staying out in the luxury tents set up in the desert to accommodate the influx of tourists. It was evening and I was with a group of friends sitting on the rough concrete steps of the stadium waiting for the fireworks to start. Some gypsies came by selling drums, good-looking swarthy men and we amused ourselves listening to their patter and masterly demonstrations of the drums' capabilities. I demurred, haggled and eventually gave in and bought one, finely carved and deep-sounding. The gypsies melted having made a sale and two minutes later my bag was no longer at my side. I jumped up immediately.

“Rajesh!” I yelled “My bag’s gone!”

He leapt to his feet, looking round wildly. He saw an exit down a stairway close to where we were sitting and tore down it like a madman, but it was useless. It could not have been more than two minutes, but that was all they needed. I turned to the rows of Indians seated behind me. They must have seen something, but with blank faces and frightened eyes they said nothing. I saw a policeman in the stadium and went down to him, explaining what had happened and Rajesh panting and out of breath joined me.

As we were talking a couple of young men from Bombay came up to us. They had seen something, they said, a man with a large round face, head and shoulders enveloped in a tribal blanket who was in the row behind us, and he had moved away quickly down the very staircase Rajesh had taken.

It was about seven o'clock at night. In my leather bag was my passport, all my money, travellers cheques, dollars, swiss francs and rupees, my driving licence, house keys, credit cards, as well as many personal things, a favourite scarf and belt, photographs and you can imagine what else. In short, a disaster had occurred! I am not sure

why I was not more fazed by this, but I was in fact quite calm and absolutely sure that whatever we did now, I would never see my bag or its contents again. The crowds, the sheer numbers of people around, and their nomadic gypsy lifestyle made it seem a totally impossible task. I was only carrying so much because there was little or no security at the campsite and since we were away all day we had been advised to take our valuables with us.

However, Rajesh and I followed the policeman to the makeshift police station in a tent quite a walk away, and we told our story. Here time takes on a new dimension. First we had to wait, of course, then when the duty sergeant got round to us, I had to write out my version of events and a complete list of what was in the bag. The sergeant did not speak much English, but he copied out exactly what I had written and asked me to sign it. Then he called another policeman over, definitely higher rank and more educated, who proceeded to translate the story into Hindi. This version had to be copied out by hand *four times*, they had never heard of carbon paper, let alone computers or photocopiers, but we were in the middle of the desert and formalities had to be observed. I then duly signed each copy written in Hindi.

In between all this, plenty of other things were going on. Regular power failures interrupted the scribe's work, the most normal thing in the world, they just stopped and chatted amongst themselves till the lights came on again and resumed where they had left off. A huge Sikh policeman in a khaki uniform was lounging in a chair, with lots of others coming and going, wanting to know what I was doing there, sympathising, shaking heads, offering cups of sweet milky *chai* but generally as pessimistic as I was.

Two lads were brought in, they had been caught pick-pocketing but were defending themselves to the death volubly in their local Rajasthani tongue. The big Sikh made them kneel down, hands behind their backs. The elder boy was crying, pleading, tears streaming down his face as the Sikh sat back laughing, seeming to make light of the whole thing, then suddenly bringing his *lathi* down hard across the boy's slender back with a loud *thwack*. The other boy started hollering loudly and this went on for quite a while. I was shocked at the treatment, but no-one thought anything of it, even Rajesh said "It's the only way to treat them – they are certainly guilty!"

A young Frenchman came in, he had been robbed too, by a couple of thieves on a motorbike who had snatched his bag as they roared past. He spoke no English, let alone Hindi, and of course none of the Police spoke any French so I found myself going through the whole

process again, translating his story into English before it was then translated into Hindi. I have to say the proceedings were lively and not without a lot of jolly banter and general good humour and laughter, even in our dire circumstances, and I was getting to know all these characters, the officers, the Frenchman, the gypsies and petty thieves all crowding into the police tent. I came to distinguish the different ranks of officers by their pips and the most senior with three pips was charming and spoke good English. His entire family came in at one point, five small children and his wife who sat smiling but silent on a long bench in the back of the tent, gazing at me intently as if I was some rare exotic creature.

Finally the ordeal was over. It was after midnight. The extreme heat of the day had gone and outside it suddenly felt cold. At night the Mela ground becomes a dark mysterious place, alive with hushed whispers and the gentle movements of the animals. We walked along the sandy desert paths with just the light of the nearly full moon to guide us, dodging the glowing camp fires. Rajesh and I tried not to stumble over the sleeping bodies wrapped up warmly in blankets on the sands, snuggled up close against their animals.

At last we got back to the camp. They had saved some dinner for us for which we were heartily grateful, and we recounted the tale to the local Maharajah who owns the camp and in typical Indian fashion he was furious - it was an insult to him that his own countrymen could do such ignoble things.

The next day we had to leave early following our schedule, driving back to Jaipur, a three and a half hour ride, in time for lunch. On arrival, we were met by the astounding news that the police had found my bag! I could not believe it possible, but yes, the descriptions were right, but no details. I was commanded to go straight back to Pushkar. Rajesh immediately hired a car, we gulped down a *masala chai* and a sandwich and fifteen minutes later were on our way back along the road so recently travelled.

It was the day of *Purnima*, the full moon at last, the climax of the festival, and on this day even more village people arrive in droves to perform their *puja* by bathing in the lake at midnight and floating candles and flowers on the water. As we approached the town, buses and lorries, coaches and tractors, with people hanging and sitting on the roofs and clinging impossibly on all sides, crowded the roads around us. Five kilometres short of the town the entire traffic seized up. We had to walk. It was now about four thirty and by the time we reached the police station again night had fallen.

The duty sergeant seemed unhurried. We waited in expectation and after about half an hour he produced a small polythene packet.

He held it up. "This is your bag!" he said heavily.

I stared in dismay at the tiny parcel.

"But, but where is the actual *bag*?" I wailed.

He looked at me fiercely as if to say 'if you don't behave you won't get *anything!*' and Rajesh signalled me to remain calm. With incredible solemnity the sergeant started pulling pieces out of the bag. My passport.

"Is this your passport?"

"Yes, yes," eagerly.

Then my credit cards, good. And my house keys – a big relief. I had to identify every piece of paper, every visiting card, photograph of my children, one by one until he was satisfied I was the owner of this small bundle. I was of course mightily relieved to have found the passport, keys and credit cards, I was operational again with just those. And it was lovely not to have lost the photographs and contact numbers. But then we were in for the next surprise.

The policeman put everything back in the bag and put them in his pocket.

"I am very sorry to tell you, you cannot have them back!" he announced.

I was by this time beside myself. I assured him in no uncertain terms that I was not leaving Pushkar without them, while Rajesh tried to keep me quiet.

"These papers are evidence in a court case, and must be presented at court in three weeks time. I do not have the authority for their release." The man was adamant.

"All right, so who does have the authority?" we asked.

We would have to see the Captain, the one with three pips. I was relieved, he had been so charming the previous evening, he'd be sure to let us have them. But no. When we eventually found him he explained that it was true, they were now the property of the court. But he recommended us to try the Superintendent. The Superintendent did not have the authority either as it turned out.

"The only person who can release those documents is the Chief Superintendent of Police for Four States, he is the guest of honour tonight, you will find him somewhere in the ground, carrying out official engagements. But I will give you a man to guide you."

We set off with the guide, a solid young policeman with a well-used *lathi* under his arm, dodging in and out of the crowds, to try and find the great man.

The huge silver plate moon hung serenely over the heaving scene. As we walked, the policeman laid about him with his *lathi*, clearing our path, several times turning to berate some young man who had the temerity to say something to me, something to which I am now oblivious, but it made him furious. "Very bad, Indian men very bad!" he cried. A scooter steering a wild path through the crowds touched Rajesh with its mirror which made our escort round on the driver with a curse and upheld *lathi* ready to strike.

We chased the Chief all over the ground. It was rumoured he was appearing here at a prize-giving, then he didn't come. He would be there watching the dance programme – we hurried over but no, we must have just missed him. We saw his car with official flags, but no sign of his elusive self. After two hours of exhausting walking we finally caught up with him. We spotted his entourage quite a way off. He was in the craft-fair tent, going from stall to stall, speaking kindly encouraging words to each one, asking how they had made their wares. He was surrounded by dignitaries, police, photographers and journalists. Our guide suddenly became shy. He refused to approach the great man, even Rajesh was hanging back. The Chief Inspector was quite a young man, with a thin moustache and a beautifully cut tweed jacket, very dapper. We watched as he visited two stalls and was approaching a third when suddenly I had had enough. I marched straight up to him, cutting through the sycophantic crowd.

"Excuse me, I have a problem, and apparently you are the only person who can solve it!"

He looked taken aback, but smiled charmingly and demanded to know from his courtiers what it was all about. Then the guide, Rajesh and other people around who had obviously heard the story all started to explain at once in a mixture of Hindi Rajasthani and English. He listened attentively, looking at the ground. Then he turned to me.

"Madame, I suppose you would like to have your passport back?"

"Yes indeed I would!" I replied wholeheartedly.

He consulted further with his men and my guide.

"Madame," he bowed low to me, and proclaimed majestically, "you shall have it tonight!" at which point I think I nearly kissed his feet I was so relieved and filled with untoward gratitude that I would get back what was mine anyway.

We raced back to the Police station with our guide who would relay the permission, papers in hand, and even so it still took another hour to sign the release documents. Fighting our way back to the car during the height of the Festival was madness but even now, exhausted as I was, I could not help getting caught up in the excitement, the infectious magic of that night out on the Mela ground, with the Full Moon shining brilliantly above us, the strong scent of camels and horses all around, and the gaily dressed gypsies mingling with the fervent pilgrims. Then by midnight it was all over and we were on our way, complete with passport, credit cards and a few other precious bits and pieces.

Later I was telling the story to a Sikh Colonel friend of mine over breakfast. He laughed and said “All right, would you like me to tell you what *really* happened?” He told me the police had most likely found the man and the bag almost immediately. They had then beaten him up, taken the bag, distributed amongst themselves what they

could, ie the money and various goods, and returned to me the things they could not easily use, such as the passport and credit cards. He also said I should have thought of slipping a thousand rupee note to the first duty sergeant and he probably would have released the documents right away instead of us spending three hours running all over the Mela ground. Honestly that had never occurred to me. Knowing the country more now I can see he was probably right, although I would still feel uncomfortable about bribing anybody.

Travelling is made up of such events, and if people are not prepared to take risks, they should really stay at home. This was a salutary experience indeed! But from everything that happens along the way there is always something to be gained, something learned, and together with all the extraordinary – and mostly wonderful – experiences I have had in India, this one ranks high in my memory, adding to the ultimate richness of life’s journey. □