

# Ancient Pushkar in Rajasthan

## The Town and Cattle Fair

By Nishta Sipahimalani

Travellers arriving in Pushkar during its world-famous, annual livestock fair will be confronted by a great expanse of desert sand dotted with countless hand-block-printed tents. Tethered around them and filling all the empty spaces is an extraordinary spectacle – a vast assemblage of camels, cows and horses. In town, the old Indian bazaar throbs with life and colour and as you cross the *maidan* or field, you will see horses and camels being put through their paces in hopes of a sale.

Pushkar, in Rajasthan, is one of the oldest towns in India. Archaeological evidence shows that there was possibly a settlement here even in pre-historic times. It is not clear when it originated and who founded this tiny oasis in the middle of the Thar Desert, but legend has it that in seeking an earthly abode for himself Lord Brahma the Creator scattered lotus petals from which three lakes were formed. The site around the lakes was named Pushkar.

Pushkar has been mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and in the *Kurma Purana*, which dates back to circa 550-750 CE. The town was restored in the seventh century and about 12 *dharamshalas* or motels were constructed, as were the *ghats* (steps leading down to the water) on three sides of the lake. It is also said that a Gurjara king constructed several step wells and supposedly 900,000 cows grazed in the area.

Several such legends and myths are attributed to Pushkar, one of the most sacred of all Hindu pilgrimage sites. According to another legend, Lord Brahma wanted to

perform a *yagna* or fire sacrifice in Pushkar. Since his wife Saraswati (who according to myth was a legendary river that flowed over Pushkar's sands before she disappeared) could not be there, Brahma married a local girl, as the *yagna* required him to have a spouse by his side. When Saraswati heard this she became enraged and cursed Brahma, saying he would henceforth never be worshipped anywhere else on earth. It is interesting to note that Hindus do not worship Brahma elsewhere in India, even though he is one of the holy *trimurti* (trinity) of Hinduism.

Pushkar has more than 400 temples with the most important being the Brahma temple, which has been destroyed and rebuilt over the ages. In fact the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, (who reigned from 1658 to 1707) destroyed temples and places of worship all over India and did not spare Pushkar's Brahma temple either. It is believed



A street scene in Pushkar, photo by the author



The area where the camel traders were camped, photo by Andra Leo



Brightly ornamented camels, photo by the author





*Pushkar Lake and one of the ghats, photo by the author*

to have been created by Brahma while rescuing the children of the earth from the evil demon Vajranabha. This thriving temple has a life-sized, four-armed marble state of the lord Brahma and is the only major one in India where he is venerated. Perhaps because Brahma, as the creator in the Hindu *trimurti*, has already completed his work and given what he can, he is the least worshipped of this trinity since no 'spiritual deals' can be struck with him.

Pushkar Lake is another important and sacred attraction here. Every year during November, with the exact dates depending on the moon's cycle, devotees bathe in the holy waters of the lake as it is believed to bestow salvation. The town is nestled in the wilds of the Aravalli hills, which are about a billion years old. The legendary Saraswati River, which disappeared near Kurukshetra, is believed to have reappeared at Pushkar in five streams, increasing the town's sacredness. The site is surrounded by hills on three sides and sand dunes on the fourth, all of which form a panoramic and beautiful background for the religious ceremonies as well as the livestock fair.

This fair is a great tourist attraction. People from around the world come to take in the spectacular event where a great deal of trade is transacted. While the traditional religious rites are being performed, the trading of cattle, camels, horses and donkeys draws people from all over the country, making



*A horse being put through its paces, photo by Gisella Harrold*

this largely a rural gathering. There are also camel, horse and bullock races and these are great crowd-pleasers. Camels brought here for sale are washed and adorned with jewellery; their tails are decorated with designs shaved into the hair and bracelets of silver bells are put around their ankles. One interesting ritual involves the piercing of the camels' noses. There is even a camel beauty contest when they are paraded around and the most beautiful animal is chosen.



*A section of the cattle fair, photo by Andra Leo*

The fair grounds are a hive of gay activity as women and men shop for bangles, utensils and leather goods. Body tattooing is another favourite activity. Add to this the profusion of colours, the beautiful bazaars, spectacular scenery and the sheer number of visitors and one sees Pushkar transformed into a great hub of life-affirming activity. At dusk the *ghats* by the lake take on a mystical hue created by the many floating candles and one can hear the haunting strains of music from across the desert, entertaining tourists as well as locals.

All in all, Pushkar is a feast for the eyes. The frenetic activity, vibrant colours and gaiety make it a magical place to visit.

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**Nishta Sipahimalani** grew up in India and has travelled extensively both there and throughout the world. She pursues her passion for visiting new places and cultures through treks and various activities revolving around travel.

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