

# Cast out in the desert

The Pushkar fair has traditionally been a booming hub of camel trade. But with new regulations curbing this business, the annual event has been infused with new energy in entertainment and various sideshows.

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It is noon on a day approaching November-end. The roads are dusty, a loudspeaker is blaring somewhere as vehicles whiz past, honking like there is no tomorrow. As I inhale puffs of sand, I detect a strong smell of animals. No surprise.

I am in Pushkar, a town in Rajasthan's Ajmer district, to see an annual fair centred on camels. I am expecting to see the ships of the desert in unprecedented numbers. Indeed, they are all over the place.

The camels are stationed in a designated space on the sands of the desert, a short walk from the massive, circular Mela Ground in the centre of Pushkar. Opposite the camels' section, you have the horses. A small road separates the two. At no point do I dare to expect a moment of silence on this stretch — vehicles honking, camel-riders shouting, their mounts screaming, vendors from places like Agra and Uttar Pradesh crowding the roads, shouting prices of various trinkets and souvenirs.

At the entrance of the camel zone, a man is shearing the hair on one of his animals. He is making designs on its skin to make the camel stand out. It seems like standard practice among camel-owners, much like how many city folk customise their cars and bikes with unique stickers and designs.

Over the course of the next couple of days, I try to strike up a conversation with camel traders and owners. A camel trader — a small but well-built man in his late 40s, wearing a Rajasthani turban that has various colours all over it — asks me all of a sudden, “*Tum kya ho* [what are you]?”

“*Main patrakar hoon* [I am a journalist]...”

“*Nahi nahi... tum kya ho? Kya gothra hai? Kya jaathi hai tu?* [No, no. What's your ancestry? What's your caste?]”

I don't know what to say as I am taken aback. This is the first time I am being asked this question as an ice-breaker, that too by a rank stranger.

“You can find out the age of the camel by the number of teeth they have. The market value also goes up based on that,” another camel trader tells me, prefacing it with a statutory “*Tumhara jaathi kya hai?*”

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As the early morning sun rises, **hot air balloons sail up** in the air. As they keep rising slowly into the stratosphere, the whole world seems serene, calm and detached from the bustle that is about to erupt on the ground during the day. In the distance, one can see the rare temple dedicated to Lord Brahma. Someone rings the temple bell, a faint twinkling in this distance punctuating the silence of the dawn. The morning mist slowly vanishes and provides a wonderful view of Pushkar.

Pushkar is essentially a temple town. It has innumerable temples, the most famous ones being the Brahma mandir and the Savitri mandir, which, situated on top of a hill provides a brilliant view of the sunset over the sand dunes.

A little mythological history to Pushkar... According to the Padma Purana, Brahma kills the demon Vajranabha with a lotus flower, whose petals drift down to land in Pushkar, creating three lakes. Pushkar derives its name from ' *Pushpa* (flower)' and ' *Kar* (hand)'. Vishnu, the preserver, tells Brahma, the creator, to perform a *yajna* (an oblation ritual) at the spots where the petals fell. As Brahma prepares for the ritual on the banks of the Pushkar Lake he finds his wife Savitri is absent. In an ad-hoc move, Brahma marries Gayathri — a shepherd girl belonging to a lower caste — to fulfil the condition that a *yajna* must be performed together with one's wife. Enraged, Savitri curses Brahma that he would not be worshipped anywhere, but later dilutes the curse to limit his worship to Pushkar.

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Pushkar is about four hours by road from Jaipur. During this time of the year, tourists travelling to nearby places such as Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Udaipur and Jaipur come to Pushkar just to see the camels.

Business, however, isn't great this year. On Day 1, I see thousands of camels in one place. Still, it's clear that the fair has seen more prosperous years. By the end of the fourth day of the fair, the grounds start wearing a deserted look. The camels are dwindling in number by the year. In 2010, nearly 9,400 camels were brought to the fair. This number **>has almost halved** to 5,215 this year, as per official government data. Every camel entering and exiting Pushkar is given a slip so that a tab can be kept on their exact number, whether they are sold.

But this decline in the number of camels at Pushkar isn't surprising. The Indian camel has been declared as an endangered species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. The Rajasthan government too passed the Rajasthan Camel (Prohibition of Slaughter and Regulation of Temporary Migration or Export) Bill, 2015, banning trading, slaughter and unauthorised transportation of camels.

Camels usually sell for anywhere from Rs. 3,000 to around Rs.50,000. This is nothing compared to the price that horses fetch.

There is another problem. As Maneka Gandhi argued [in this piece](#) earlier this year, camels are “smuggled in large numbers to the States of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and through Bihar to Bangladesh as camel meat is considered a delicacy.”

In fact, India's Border Security Force (BSF), which uses camels to patrol sections of India's Western borders, have also been said to be hit by the [falling number of camels](#).

The organisers seem to have realised that the town could lose its charm and its tourism revenue if the slide isn't arrested. And so the Pushkar fair this year has been given a repackaging: a three-day heritage festival with more sideshows, including music, yoga, heritage walks, and dance performances.

No complaints there. I sway to Grammy-winner Pandit Vishwa Mohan Bhatt's Veena at the Sand Dunes. The audience is almost entirely made up of villagers and tourists. The Jaisalmer Boys, a band comprised by musicians aged between 6 and 16 years surprise the crowd with their energy. I guffaw along with the jumping crowd as Kailash Kher us to “behave”.

Shubha Mudgal croons on the banks of the Pushkar Sarovar on a chilly night. Yom and Wong Li — two musicians from Paris and China — forge an unlikely alliance to play some brilliant and crazy music on the clarinet and harp. Here's a sample of the duo:

On the other side, music flowed on the sands of the desert at various places with the camels in the background, as some men played the Ravanahatta, a stringed musical instrument. The instrument, according to mythology, was created by the demon king Ravana.

Then there are the 'Spiritual Walks', performances in Kathak, a ' *Maha Aarti* (divine flame offering)' on the banks of the Pushkar Sarovar, guided meditation sessions, camel and horse dance competitions. The works. Not surprisingly, the three-day event is named, "The Sacred", in tune with the sacredness of Pushkar.

Gulabo Saper, a Rajasthani dancer who had been buried alive when she was born before being rescued by her aunt, stunned the audience with her performance, alongwith with her daughters and sons. "This provides an opportunity to tell the people that even if you have a girl child, she can do wonders in this life. I want to be a lesson for all of them who think girls are a burden."

Elsewhere, huge crowds assemble as contestants flaunt their moustaches and turban-tying skills. There seem to be no parameters to declare a winner in the competition, though. What do you expect when the judges are picked out from the crowd?

Camels could, in all likelihood, become a mere sidelight of the annual event in the coming years.

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As my trip winds to a close, I walk down from the Savitri Mandir after taking in yet another brilliant sunset from atop the mountain. Two college boys are resting on a stone. As I walk past, one of them hails me: “ *Kahan se hain* [where are you from]?”

“Chennai...”

“Ah! Chennai Super Kings... Dhoni!”

“ *Haan!*”

“ *Achhaa... tumhara jaathi kya hai?*”