

Business Line

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There's a lot more to Pushkar than its world-famous fair..

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Kamal Narang



About town: The Pushkar mela draws hordes of visitors.

Veena Gomes-Patwardhan

Is the temple town of Pushkar worth visiting after Kartik Purnima and the famous Pushkar festival is over? Definitely. If you want to avoid the gaggle of pilgrims and tourists, the cacophony of the cattle fair, the hiked up hotel rates, and yet enjoy pleasant weather, that's exactly when you should head for Pushkar.

I landed in Pushkar two days after the annual festival had drawn to a close. After a half-hour drive from the nearest railway station, Ajmer, we got there close to sunset. Tucked between the Aravalli hills and the Thar desert, Pushkar is ringed on three sides by craggy hills and by desert sands extending to the horizon on the fourth.

On my request, the driver wound down my window so I could get a better view of what looked like a tranquil shanty town. We passed a jumble of tiny houses and shops, several Dharamshalas and the dusty mela grounds as we cruised towards the neighbouring village of Ganahera where my hotel, Pushkar Villa Resorts, was located, a mere 3 km from Pushkar town.

I noticed that the air was sweet with the scent of roses, and was told that plantations of the fragrant desi gulab flanked the narrow winding road. Then suddenly, I saw something that seemed to leap straight off the TV screen. Remember that popular Fevicol TV commercial in which a heaving small-town bus has passengers plastered around the sides and rear? The sight before me was identical. Neither the biggest bumps nor the sharpest curves could dislodge a single passenger clinging precariously to the contraption from outside. So much for the public transport in and around Pushkar.

Minutes later, our car finally swerved through the gates of the Pushkar Villa Resorts. Comprising 40 villas ensconced in attractively landscaped surroundings, the resort is also the only hotel with a permit for serving non-vegetarian food and hard liquor, items that are strictly forbidden anywhere in Pushkar.

By the time I woke the next morning, the sun was already flaring above the Aravalli Hills. Post lunch I set off for the Brahma Mandir dedicated to Pushkar's presiding deity, accompanied by the resort manager, Sukhdeo Rathore. After parking the vehicle, we picked our way through beggars and pilgrims along the Sadar Bazaar road — the main access route to the temple.

The temple itself is not particularly stunning, though a unique feature are the silver coins embedded in the floor and walls. With hundreds of temples dedicated to various deities, Pushkar is a perfect representation of the democracy of choices that Hinduism offers its followers. The two notable temples are of Savitri, Brahma's estranged first wife, and Gayatri, his second wife, both of which loom above the Pushkar's horizon to the South-West and North respectively.

Returning from the temple, I took a leisurely stroll down the colourful market road flanked by shops displaying assorted wares. Colourful skirts made of scraps of silk seemed to be particularly popular with Western women.

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BrandLine



'B-schools will see greater demand'

The market was a swirl of colours. Parrot green odhnis (scarves), bright pink saris and vibrant turbans, blended nicely with the pyjama pants and ethnic kurtas of the bohemian section of tourists. I noticed that many of the younger foreign women had succumbed to the fascination of sporting nose studs and bindis. The sight of a group of giggling tribal women sipping chai with European women outside a roadside tea stall was evidence of the locals here having adapted to the tourist culture.

I was resolutely haggling over a skirt when Rathore suddenly pointed to a gentleman a few metres away who, from a distance, looked like any other tribal from Rajasthan. I was flabbergasted to learn he was not a local but an Italian who is now known by the name of Jyoti and has been living in Rajasthan for around three decades. His wife Nashi, a Swede, and he have wholeheartedly embraced the Rajasthani tribal (gurjar) culture, live in a hovel like the tribals and speak chaste Hindi and Marwari. Nashi even organises tours of "real India" for Western women during which she insists on the women wearing the traditional Gurjar attire!

Bargaining and purchasing done, I asked Rathore to introduce me to the European gurjar. Unfortunately, by then Jyoti had disappeared among the crowd and I reproached myself for letting a wonderful opportunity for an interview slip through my hands.

Continuing with my exploration of the markets' bylanes, I passed through ashrams, temples, shops and cafés one of which, I was told, was run by a white lady. A common sight was groups of emaciated cows feeding on garbage often dumped just a stone's throw from temple doors. Considering Pushkar's spiritual heritage as one of the most important pilgrim sites in India, the filth one sees around here, and the absence of political will to keep the town clean, is not only shocking ... it's inexcusable.

Eager to get to what is called the sunset point on time Rathore hurried me along a narrow road. We turned a corner, and suddenly, there it was — the famed Pushkar Lake basking in the glow of the setting sun. The view was riveting. Encircled by 52 ghats, the lake is the central point of Pushkar. I could well imagine the throngs of pilgrims taking a holy dip here a few days before, on the occasion of Kartik Purnima. Near the steps that led down to one of the ghats, I noticed sign boards exhorting people to take off their shoes.

The next morning, I paid a quick visit to the Dargah of Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti in Ajmer. In the evening, I embarked on a desert safari. I had my own kafila — a canopied camel cart — and felt like royalty as I lounged on the padded seating. My driver was a smartly-dressed young local named Chand who, sans turban and the trademark bushy moustache flaunted by older Rajasthanis, was a man of his generation. While chatting with him, I learnt that at the camel fair this time the business was "thanda" (cold). Even the foreigners and religious tourists were fewer than usual. The ripples of the global economic slowdown are likely being felt in Pushkar too. But Chand had experienced a spot of good luck. An elderly Australian lady, who had lunch with his family during her stay in Pushkar, had gifted him a camel (costing Rs 30,000) before she left India. She had even given him her visiting card and offered to sponsor a trip to Australia should he be interested. A look at the business card revealed that the lady was a doctor from the World Health Organisation.

We ambled through the golden sandy expanse, before halting for high tea at a resort located on one of the highest sand dunes around.

A short while later as we got ready to leave, Chand suddenly stopped in his tracks, aghast. There was no sign of his camel cart on the path outside. Fortunately, his mobile phone buzzed just then. An acquaintance informed him that his unmanned camel cart was spotted on the road leading to his house. Without stopping for explanations, Chand broke into a sprint and went racing down the meandering desert road. He was back half-an-hour later with the errant camel. It turned out his camel had freed itself and gone loping behind a passing caravan. My brief sojourn in Pushkar ended on an adventurous note.

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