

THE MELTING POT - Pushkar

ACCORDING TO THE ANCIENT SCRIPTURES, PUSHKAR CAME INTO EXISTENCE WHEN LORD BRAHMA, THE CREATOR, DROPPED A *PUSHPA* (LOTUS) FROM HIS *KAR* (HAND) TO DESTROY THE EVIL ON EARTH. AT THE SPOT WHERE THE LOTUS FELL, WATER APPEARED MAGICALLY AS AN OASIS IN THE MIDST OF THE THAR DESERT TO FORM THE FAMOUS PUSHKAR LAKE. EVERY YEAR IN OCT-NOV, A FAIR IS HELD ON THE PARCHED LANDS NEAR THE LAKE, CALLED THE 'PUSHKAR MELA'.

It made the perfect frame. The sprawling desert floor, otherwise barren and begging for the erratic Indian monsoon, was taken over by a sea of furry beasts. For the next 12 days this was their home turf and it was my fortune to amble amidst fifty thousand or more, ruminating, grunting and hoof stomping camels at the height of the Pushkar Fair.

From Ajmer, I opted for the most convenient mode of transport- the shackled bus ride across nagpahar. Although the crossing lasted twenty minutes, it bore heavily on the patience of the locals, as restless as the famed camels of the holy town of pushkar. Near fistful chaos reigned over seat sharing, spewing the choicest invectives in vernacular lingo. Not everyone was involved; the bus attendant let the matters mould into its own shape, while another traveler slackened over my shoulder pouring forth the grizzliest snores. Eyeing a pair of fair skinned travelers, relishing the polluted language, a lean tout slithered through the busy aisle, pulled out his business card, curtly addressed the Australian duo '*good hotel siir!*' in accentuated hinglish '*rates double for festival I give hotel cheap lake very close*' missing out the punctuations.

Pushkar is a simple affair to remember and relish. Meat and alcohol is forbidden, but the knotted streets make up in many ways doling out crispy saffron jalebis, stuffed kachoris and the heady '*bhang lassi*'. Walk along the main artery connecting the bathing ghats and you are sure not to miss out the masticating assembly of people fronting such stalls. The emanating aromas tempt you into indulgence of sin; the mind plays a tricky game '*the calorie conscious meter can be reserved for better use back home where such gastronomic temptations are a rarity*'. My lassi endeavor went unsuccessful. I got myself to asking gentlemen holding their fronts at stalls '*can I get 'special lassi*' here... somewhere else?', even the nepali boy at the german bakery counter was not spared. The concoction apparently was reserved for foreigners, although with my long hair and reebok cap, some eyed me with confused stares placing me geographically somewhere between India and Israel- what spat out was a curt '*No-not here, try somewhere else*' eyes darting in random direction. '*Where?... Forget it*' I thought '*there were better things to do*'. In the middle of all this was the Brahma temple, the shrine to the creator of universe, with believers cruising both ways across the steep steps under scalloped white arches.

Beyond lay the festival ground where the sale of the year was underway. Horses, Cattle, Camels, and even caged birds were displayed over the expanse.

Past the temporary stalls sprung up for the festival, the cratered tar road gave way to the soft desert sand. Kaleidoscopic events unfolded at every step. A snake charmer from nearby *Genada* village was reaping in the brisk business of a showdown between a mongoose and a hooded cobra, while an eclectic crowd gathered around Laila- the small girl showing off acrobatic tricks. She was adept at elevated ropewalk and backward rolls, applauded with frenzied fervor. The festival ground was choked with livestock and traders; camels far outweighing the other species. Each of these velvety animal was adorned with bells, bridles and pompoms, the not so lucky ones were in for a little barbering with their fur sheared in geometric motifs, resonating the spirit of arts and architecture this state of Rajasthan prides in.

As the sun rose higher, traders collected in their secrets to be charmed upon prospective buyers of livestock. Dressed in muddy whites and colorful *pagris*, they squatted in small circles sharing trading strategies over shared hookah. Kerosene stoves were lit on the open grounds. Intrigued by my presence, a younger group invited me to take their photographs and filled me in with some interesting camel facts. 'The strong bushy-eye lashed ones are from Bikaner'; 'the racing ones belong to Jaisalmer' and that 'the Indian one humped camel is a relative of the Llama and not the two humped variety found in the Arabian deserts'. In exchange for a couple of goldflakes, I was offered *chai* from the steaming antiquated kettle. Refreshed from a glassful gurgling down my esophagus I decided to explore more. Traders from all across Rajasthan and the neighboring Saurashtra and Haryana bring their livestock to the annual auction to Pushkar. A good harvest from the preceding monsoon results in good deals and about ninety percent of the animals are traded, but not allowed to be taken away from the festival grounds in view of the influx of tourists, coming in large numbers for the festival. The last but one day before the '*Kartik Poornima*' the traded animals are allowed off the grounds in a typical '*Rawangii*' (dispatches) where scores of animals kick up the desert dust

Pushkar sits in small valley like a cauldron surrounded by low rising hills. The postcard perfect town along with the lake- believed to have been created by a lotus dropped all the way from heaven by Lord Brahma barely covers 30 square kms. For the twelve day livestock auction leading unto the full moon- the cauldron effervesces as a melting pot of spiritual glory and hard pushed tourism. While the believers seek the unknown through the blessings of Brahma, the larger FII (foreigners influx in India) are pampered regally by tourism authorities, where the camel festival bundled with enamored white tents, night safari, and folklores become a huge draw. The streets come alive seething in colors and incense; trance and latest indipop blare across a polychromatic display of compacts discs and books. Intermittently scattered all over are the Internet cafes- hoardings splattered in world languages endorsing the boom in tourism. This otherwise sleepy little town revels in the brisk bonus of business post Diwali – the monasticism of the town giving way to the lure of quick money with prices spiraling up; hotels at 200% premium, books at 100%. Even the priests idling along the ghats of the lake take advantage of the free for all

profitable wisdom, charging exorbitant sums for a little ceremony. And we were all told that spirituality was free.

With a little cash in hand Laila, adorned with a big *bindi* headed for the 'Ferris wheel'. She had lot of things to entertain herself with after the ferris wheel. 'My fair lady', 'torator', 'the clown shows' and the most awaited- 'the bioscope' was prioritized in a sequence. To top it all, she was liberally allowed by her mother, two-ice candies- an orange and a mango, the assessment of choice being hers. Somewhere in the blackened mid-space the moon hung in pale color. Folk music around lit campfires drifted from tents put up by the tourism authorities. The snake charmer having put away his star attractions, the mongoose and the cobra, joined his folks around a hearth under the moonlit sky. With the shared chillum elevating his spirits, he soulfully played the flute, melodiously recreating the age-old romance of Krishna and Radha. And in return God blessed this fairy tale land once again.