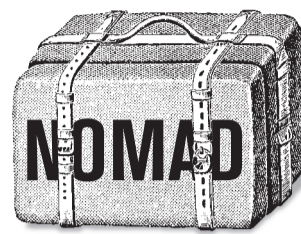


# The holy city that welcomes all, the pilgrims and the dreadlocks

Pushkar is the perfect weekend destination, and is best remembered as a mix of tranquility and magnificence situated amidst the haunting sounds of the desert, writes SHWETA SHARMA



**T**he holy city of Pushkar in Rajasthan is a tiny town, but it has a heart that's big enough to embrace both the pilgrims and the dreadlocks. I came to define it not by its Brahma temple (the only one dedicated to the diety who according to Hindu beliefs is the Creator of the Universe), or the little lake where the Karthik Purnima Puja is held every year, or even the ground where camels and cattle are traded after Diwali. To me, Pushkar is best remembered by that mix of tranquility and action by Pushkar lake at sunset.

Every evening, as the sun goes down, a ritual unfolds here that rarely finds mention in a tourist guidebook. The sound of *aarti* summons the faithful to the ghats, and soon, the place is thronged by dreadlocks, foreigners in noodle straps, orthodox Jews and fire-eaters. While the pilgrims float their flower boats and oil lamps into the lake, the globe-trotting Israelis pray to the rays of the settling sun. It is a sight that boggles the mind, and is another example of the uniquely syncretic and accepting culture found in many parts of India.

I intended it to be a getaway destination after a hectic week at work, but I was sceptical that I could have "fun" in a city renowned for its religiosity. Pushkar, as it has done to so many people, proved me wrong. While the new highway makes the drive a real pleasure, the Ajmer-bound Shatabdi train is also an excellent way to reach here. The train takes about seven hours to reach



A man dressed as the Hindu deity Hanuman at Nrsingh ghat in Pushkar

PHOTO: KAUSHIK SAHA

Ajmer, and Pushkar is hardly 30 minutes away. This drive, from Ajmer to Pushkar, is meandering yet scenic, and there is one point along the way where you get a view of the entire city of Ajmer. But by the time I reached Pushkar the sweltering heat and the traffic had dented a bit of my enthusiasm. The beautiful resort we were staying at, the Orchard, gave me an almost royal welcome, and as I gulped down their welcome drink of rose petal sherbet, I was convinced this was the most refreshing drink I'd ever had!

Lying on the shore of this ancient lake, Pushkar is one of the oldest cities in India. Legend associates the creation of this town with Lord Brahma. Devotees believe that

Brahma performed a sacrificial ritual for 60,000 years so he could get a glimpse of Lord Vishnu. Pushkar houses one of the very few Brahma temples in the country. Of course, this town also becomes one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country during the famous Pushkar Fair, which has its origins in ancient camel-trading customs. The town does not really beckon with thrilling places to explore, though it has more temples than you can count on your fingers. But it does help you to destress.

After a quick nap in my magnificent luxury tent, which was located in the midst of a verdant amla orchard, I set off to enjoy the evening on the sand dunes. The hotel

staff was good enough to arrange camel carts for us, where we sat and watched the the sunset over the undulating hills. All the while, an old Rajasthani man sang the songs of the desert for us and the few others assembled, his voice echoing gloriously over the sand.

The next morning I was woken by peacocks and chirping birds. The day began with a visit to the Brahma temple. I was lucky to find the lake brimming with clear water. It had gone dry a few years ago and was cleaned last year after 70 years. The lake has 52 palace ghats, with one donated by Queen Mary of England. These allow pilgrims to bathe in the sacred waters. After a few moments there, I was ready for

the moment every girl eagerly awaits — shopping time. I stuffed my rucksack with authentic Rajasthani souvenir and other knickknacks for friends back home.

Shoring up what little energy I had after hours of shopping, I set out to see an age-old Lord Shiva temple. Old it might have been, but to me it seemed more like a bunker. It is surrounded by a stream; and herein is the strange wonder of this place, because even today the source of the stream remains undiscovered. This place is a favourite picnic spot for children living in Ajmer and Pushkar.

Waking up on my final day, I decided to put my last few hours here to good use. After breakfast, I headed to the Pink Floyd Cafe. Though the heat was unbearable, being a Pink Floyd fan, I was unwilling to miss out this completely. The hotel has a coffee and hookah bar and all its rooms are named after Floyd songs. So I stood surrounded by *Another Brick in the Wall*, *Wish you were here* and *Comfortably Numb*. And the rooftop bar is one of the friendliest places in Pushkar. I clicked a few pictures, despite the ubiquitous signs saying, 'No Photography'. I couldn't care less. I enjoyed a latte, while experiencing the sights and smells of the ghats.

Before we hit the train station I decided to pay a quick visit to the Ajmer Sharif dargah. It was my first visit to a dargah. I also made a quick round of a Jain temple museum, which held a replica of the battle scene of Ayodhya. One thing I will always remember: the sight of the setting sun from the Jaipur ghat of Pushkar lake.

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