

Title:

"Incredible India" with Pushkar Camel Festival

Word Count:

1253

Summary:

I fell in love with India years ago when I did volunteer work with Mother Teresa in Calcutta. Initially, it assaulted my 5 senses with such extreme contrasts. It was however, nothing less than fascinating. The aromatic food fantastic, people so friendly, the fragrance and colors so exotic, it was intoxicating. It is my delight to present it to you now on a journey of discovery you will never forget. We focus on the best of India with the highlight of Pushkar, a once in a lifetime experience. In November the weather is perfect and we've secured top hotels throughout.

Keywords:

Article Body:

We arrive to the land of 1000 languages and 1000 gods. At the Intercontinental, the women in my group are welcomed with marigolds and branded with the typical red dot on our foreheads. This hotel is an oasis of luxury in a polluted city of 14 million people. Two days are spent touring Delhi. The obligatory sites include Gandhi's Tomb and many UNESCO World Heritage Sites. No where else have ancient traditions blended with the modern on a scale so evident as in Delhi. Fat sacred Brahma bulls block traffic creating delays. In this Hindu land, cows rule. Dogs, monkeys and children cross at their own risk.

I love spiced food and begin each day with a 3 alarm-curry breakfast. We head by coach for Rajasthan, the beautiful desert state where cows are replaced by camels. The air is sweeter and everything more colorful. Here is a microcosm of all that India is. The people are genteel with a humility if spirit and still light up at the sight of foreigners. We continually wave through our windows to those who stare with curiosity and seem to say, "why have you come here?" As a fan of the third world, this place has been on my dream list for years. I now vividly enter that element of travel that provides me astonishment.

We've come to attend the annual Camel Fair in Pushkar that has taken place for a thousand years. As the world's largest, it has at its peak attracted 50,000

camels with 200,000 traders. We unpack at our camp called Exotic Adventures. Our spartan tents did have ensuite toilets but toilet paper was at a premium. There was a 24 hour guard outside who stingily rationed our quota. In the desert, nights are frigid and afternoons sweltering. I confided to a guest there from the American Embassy that I felt like I was in an episode of "Survivor." She laughed assuring me that it was all worth it. Soon my shock turns to awe as I enter the fairgrounds.

Set on miles of shifting sand dunes with festooned camels and a flood of pilgrims, the scene looks totally surreal. Its like a State Fair on steroids. There is a flurry of horse, bullock and camel races, contests for milking, animal decorating, turban tying, tattooing as well as snake charmers, free carnival rides, mystics, astrologers and dazzling stalls of handicrafts at giveaway prices. The ground reverberates with activities. Thousands of Rajasthani woman have arrived dressed in their finest clothes in near neon colors. I watch trained monkeys, painted cows and cobra's dance. No words can adequately describe how this helter skelter overwhelms my 5 senses. Others can have Europe with its cathedrals and museums. For me, this exotic exposure and cultural immersion is the ultimate travel!

Covered in dust, we return to camp. Each night there is entertainment under the stars with musicians, folk dancers, puppet show or fire eaters. No alcohol is allowed here and all meals are vegetarian buffets. An Ayurveda Center offers us treatments to cleanse body toxins. We decline them: induced vomiting, enemas, nasal drainage and blood letting.

We tour the holy city of Pushkar with its sacred lake created by Lord Brahma. Pilgrims come from afar to bathe in the ghats and worship round the clock. We learn about religions here: Zorastrianism, Sikhism, the mystic Sufi's, Jainists who won't kill a mosquito, Hinduism that claims no absolute truth and the caste system. We tour temples at the lake; some are "blessed" by priests. Later, a highlight for me was a one hour Camel Cart Safari behind the scenes of the fair. Children line our route shouting to us "hi, hello, one pen please!" We see a camel slaughtered and half naked people washing. Back inside the grounds, we visit an orphanage and scatter individually to get lost in the feverish revelry. We ride huge spitting camels that provide us a heightened perspective of it all. I purchase a dozen garnet necklaces and silver ankle bracelets. Teenage boys approach Terry to photograph him. He's 6'5''. One politely asks him, "Sir, what do you eat?"

Our group was wonderful!

There are endless food courts however we must pass all enticements to prevent "Delhi Belly." I find the cacophony of chaos delightful. Pushkar is truly a

party affair for the locals and we are just observant guests. I'm so grateful to experience such but time to proceed on with our busy itinerary.

We arrive to the famed "Pink City" of Jaipur, now more deep maroon from pollution. In touring its palaces, fort and architectural marvels, we learn of the great Amber rulers and maharajahs of the Moghul empire. History comes alive and I find myself so interested in that which I never cared about. And here is a shopper's paradise for silk sarees, gems, jewelry and marble crafts. I visited an animal sanctuary called "Help In Suffering." The worst cases of various species are treated here by volunteer veterinarians. Forty five stray dogs are sterilized daily and I witness a surgery. (See www.HIS-INDIA.com) You can simply mail them a check to help.

At 'Help In Suffering' a dog spaying Making a donation Volunteer vets talk to Suzy

On to see the grand Fatehpur Sikri, "Ghost City of Akbar" that was abandoned due to scarcity of water. We finally reach Agra, a broken city of 2.5 million. Hawkers harass us. Chained bears dance for rupees in the street. Hungry children beg. We are thankful to lodge at the deluxe Sheraton here with its western cuisine and affordable massages at \$20. It was like a galaxy change from the downtown.

After witnessing an eyeful of wonders along the way, we have saved the best for last at the world's greatest tribute to love. Goosebumps rise as I enter the majestic gate to the Taj Mahal. Morning sunlight illuminates it like a flawless pearl...22 years to build by 200,000 men with 2 million pieces of inlaid semi-precious stones. After a lecture on why this perfect symmetry was created for Queen Mumtaz, we disperse to photograph what looks to be a mirage. It is poetry in architecture and as magnificent as can be imagined.

Back in Delhi, we all enjoy a free day of leisure to explore as we choose! Most go shopping as prices are extravagantly low but how many Pashmina shawls does one need? For our final evening we enjoy a show called "Dances of India" followed by a farewell feast of our Last (Indian) Supper.

I remises another journey well done with excellent guides, drivers, assistance and accommodations. I recall my favorite moment which took place at the fair when I hired two "body guides" to assist me through the crowds, Jamal and Ranshi. These two 11 year old boys bonded to me like barnacles and their beaming smiling faces will forever remain etched in my memory of India. This trip has renewed my curiosity of the world reminding me again that my love of

travel proliferates itself. The more I see, the more I want to see.

This country is for the seasoned traveler. I am extremely impressed with the fortitude and patience of my group of 60 people in a land of erratic infrastructure. For some it was their first visit to the third world but they all persevered like pros. To witness suffering first hand is the fullest way to appreciate home. We saw things both appalling and joyful. The word "fascinating" however would sum up the entire trip. I must return again.