



# india

## a land of festivals

*Andrea Hulme, one of Audley's India specialists, reveals that there isn't a more exciting time to visit India than during a festival.*

India displays her true spirit during her many festivals. Some of the best-loved and popular festivals take place between October and March when the climate is most pleasant. Each festival is characterised by colour, fun, enthusiasm, ritual and prayer, but the five day festival of Diwali, literally translated as 'rows of lighted lamps' has to be the most magical.

Because there are so many castes and regions in India there are numerous legends connected with the origins of Diwali but ultimately it represents the triumph of good over

evil. In the dark of night the flickering light of thousands of lighted lamps creates a world of fantasy, as homes across India prepare to welcome Laxmi, the goddess of money and good fortune, and to commemorate the return from exile of Rama and Sita, the stars of the much loved ancient epic, the Ramayana. No Indian festival would be complete without fireworks and I have great memories of sitting on a Bombay rooftop watching one rocket after another fill the sky with a shower of shimmering colour way into the Diwali night.

### Pushkar Camel Fair

Later in the same month thousands of villagers from all over Rajasthan flock to Pushkar, turning both the sleepy town and surrounding desert into the country's most flamboyant and exotic fair. Although most people associate Pushkar with the world's largest camel fair, the festival is much more than that. For many, it is the social occasion of the year and a brief respite from their harsh desert lives – a chance for business, relaxation, celebrations and holy devotions.

Horses, donkeys, cows, goats and sheep, as well as the ubiquitous camel, journey across the barren plains with owners and their families to be bought and sold in the market. Over the next five days bargains are struck between men in large gaudy turbans before their attention is turned to competition and sport. Camels are sheared, scrubbed, even perfumed, and dressed with embroidered back covers and hand made saddles decorated with long strings of cowry shells, sparkling beads and intricately woven straps, then paraded for the 'beauty contest'. Later there is the thrill and excitement of camel racing, while in the evenings the air throbs with the sound of beating drums as traditional music, dances and dramas are performed around blazing camp fires.



The closing day of the festival is one of ritual ablation. At dawn, devotees scramble down the ghats to the waters of Pushkar Lake to wash away the sins of a life time before taking their turn to worship at the temple devoted to Brahma, the god of creation. On the full moon night, tiny leaf boats, each carrying flowers and an oil lamp are set afloat on the lake, twinkling like thousand of stars as their flickering flames are reflected in the water.

## Holi

After the full moon in March comes Holi, undoubtedly the most fun-filled festival of the year. Originally a festival to celebrate good harvests and fertility of the land, Holi, or the festival of colours, is also linked with two popular Hindu legends. In the first, an evil king is infuriated by his son's devotion to god and orders the demon Holika to kill the son. Normally immune to fire Holika is burned to ashes, while the son remains unscathed after she forced him to enter a furnace with her. The festival is named after Holika and every year huge bonfires are lit, signifying the destruction of evil. On the following day, the second legend is commemorated. Krishna, the youthful blue-faced god who is forever chasing milkmaids, but remains devoted to Radha, is worshipped

for being true to his love. Idols of Krishna are smeared with 'gula', the coloured powder which literally colours the rest of the festival. Inhibitions are forgotten when old and young smear colour, throw water balloons and exploding bags of brightly coloured powder over each other. Anything that moves is considered a fair target and its not unusual to find shocking pink cows wandering dazed through the streets for days afterwards!

## Jaipur Elephant Festival

The last time I was in India for Holi, I happened to be in Jaipur where there is an amazing Elephant Festival. This incredible beast was once the chosen royal mount both in battle and ceremony, a magnificent, wrinkled symbol of strength and wealth. At the current annual Elephant Festival a procession of elephants with beautifully painted trunks, foreheads and feet, adorned with gold and other decorations, makes its way around the field where formerly elephant fights were organised for the entertainment of the royal court. These days the elephants are judged on appearance, before being enticed into a game of elephant polo and a more friendly fight - a tug of war against members of the audience.

## Diary dates

**Diwali** 11-15 November 2004,  
Around 1 November 2005

**Pushkar Camel Fair**  
23-26 November 2004,  
12-15 November 2005

**Holi** 25 March 2005

**Jaipur Elephant Festival** 25 March 2005

### Top tips to enjoy the festivals

**Diwali:** Get a good night sleep before the festival so that you can enjoy the fantastic fireworks throughout the night.

**Pushkar Camel Fair:** Look out for wonderful ethnic jewellery, fabrics and handicrafts and be prepared to bargain.

**Holi:** Ask your guide for the best places to enjoy the fun safely – crowds of young men can be rather boisterous. Wear your oldest clothes and be prepared for your hair to take on a new colour for a few days afterwards.

**Jaipur Elephant Festival:** Watch where you're walking!