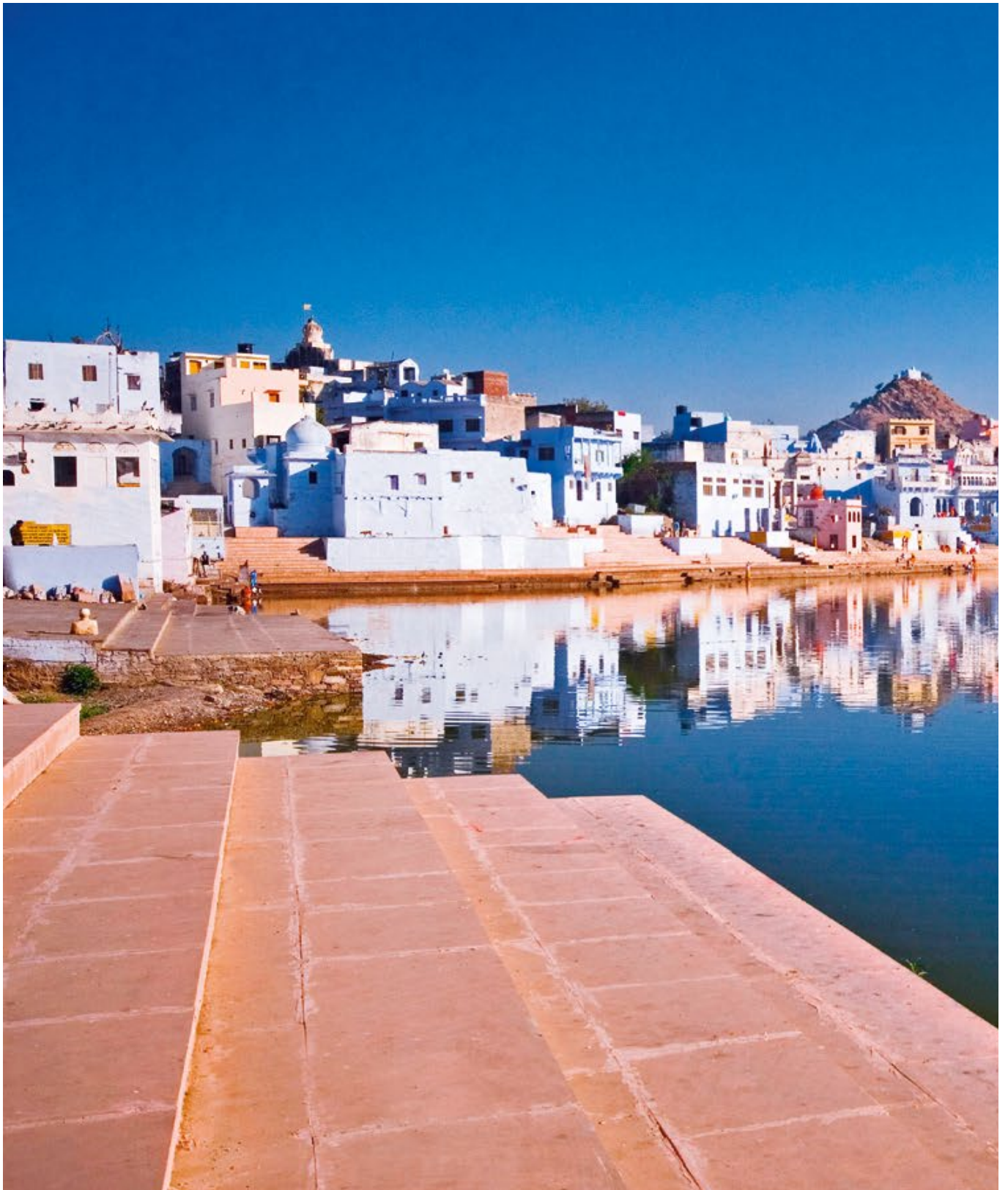






DESERT ROSE

A serene lake, rustic charm, ancient temples. Neeharika
Satyavada has the low-down on this king of all holy places



TOP AND ABOVE: Pushkar Lake, and Brahma temple

Tirth Raj. The king of all holy places. Though Rajasthan is in itself among the most popular destinations in the country for both international and domestic tourists, Pushkar stands alone in the kind of charm that it exudes. Unlike most destinations in Rajasthan that are famed for their forts and palaces, the only palace in Pushkar is the Man Mahal. Simple yet elegant, it once served as a guest house for Raja Man Singh I. It is today the government-run Hotel Sarovar. Separated from Ajmer by the Nag Pahad or Snake Mountain and surrounded by the Aravallis, Pushkar is secluded from the rest of Rajasthan even geographically.

One of the oldest cities in India and home to the only Brahma temple in the country, this pilgrim town is built around the fifty-two ghats of the Pushkar Lake. The lake that lends its name to the holy town is believed to have come into existence from the petal of Lord Brahma's lotus that fell to Earth. There is but one main street which leads to all the places

in town and also doubles up as the bazaar that tourists flock to all day in between visits to the various temples and ghats. The ghats are yet another hub of activity. They are the heart and soul of Pushkar, and you can see the town rising up in arches and domes, of temples both ancient and new. Head to any of the ghats in the evening and you can lose yourself in the tranquillity of the *aarti*. During the day, the ghats alternate between the languid and the commercial, with the pilgrims relaxing in the shade after a dip, while urchins and guides look around with a keen eye for a likely customer that might be interested in a local anecdote.

While there are numerous temples in Pushkar both abutting the ghats and elsewhere, here are the most prominent ones.

Brahma Temple

Made of marble and studded with silver coins, this temple, dedicated to the creator of the universe, is Pushkar's biggest draw. Cursed by the god's wife,



Savitri Devi, for taking another wife, a local tribal girl, Gayatri, Pushkar is the only place in the country where Brahma is worshipped along with his consorts, the two goddesses, who each have a temple of their own atop hills on opposite sides. A marble statue of the sun god, Surya, in warrior boots, stands sentinel here.

Savitri Temple

Located at the summit of the Ratnagiri Hill, this temple, dedicated to Goddess Savitri, Lord Brahma's first wife, can be reached by a short cable car ride. While the ropeway up the valley

sings through vistas of lush green, the hilltop itself offers a bird's-eye view of the lake and the town encircling it, complete with the fair grounds and the makeshift tent city that comes up during the Pushkar Mela. One can also take the steep flight of steps to get here, but it is a difficult climb and takes anywhere upwards of an hour.

Gayatri Temple

Atop the opposite hill is the Paap Mochani Temple or the Gayatri Temple, dedicated to Lord Brahma's second wife, the Goddess Gayatri. A *darshan* of this powerful goddess, manifested here as the Ekadashi Mata, is said to absolve one of all sins, hence the name Paap Mochani. The thirty-minute trek that brings you here is well worth the effort for another reason, too. For here is the town's best sunrise point, offering beautiful views of the sun rising up on the golden sand dunes surrounding the town.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Gayatri Temple; Hanuman Temple and Sri Venkateswara Temple



Pushkar Camel Fair is held in November and it is a riot of colour and sound



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Purana Rangji Mandir

South meets north at this 175-year-old temple on the Varaha Ghat of the Pushkar Lake, and not just through its architecture, but also in its people and customs. The Purana Rangji Mandir leads you in through a series of small shops lining the street and a facade that is typically Rajasthani. It is only when you enter the main complex, the outer Parikrama Marg as it is called, that you are transported to a South Indian Vaishnava temple, complete with the *Shanku – Chakram, Dwaja Stambham* and the intricate South

Indian *Gopuram*. The main deity of the temple, Lord Krishna, is known as Venugopal in South India and is manifest as Ranganatha Swamy in Srirangam, Tamil Nadu, and it is he who gives this temple its name. Beautiful paintings depicting scenes from religious and Dharmic stories, the *Ramayan*, *Sagar Manthan*, *Krishna Leela* and even the *Dasavatram*, crowd the faded walls that are now undergoing restoration.

A fascinating city even otherwise, come November, this mythical town turns into a rowdy riot of colours full of hustle and bustle. For it is the time of the annual Camel Fair, serious business for the local tribals and a major event on the tourist's festival calendar. A week-long affair that culminates with the full moon on Kartika Purnima, it is more than just one of the largest, and the most famous, livestock markets in the country. It is a social and cultural gathering. From the camel races and the folk music and dance to the matka phod competition where tourists compete with the local ladies to race with an earthen pot of water, only to break it at the finishing line, this earnest pilgrimage centre dons an air of festivity and fun.