

The Pushkar Trail in India – a country full of surprises

India is a country full of contrasts. India is noisy (at all hours of the day and night), chaotic, colourful and vibrant. Thousands of people bustle about everywhere, and the sound of car horns blaring in different melodies and volumes (depending on the size of the vehicle) is accompanied by the colourful sight of Indian women in brightly coloured saris. Many stray dogs live peacefully on the streets, enjoying a nap on the central reservation or at the roadside – they are unfazed by anything. Nor are the cows, which live in both towns and the countryside and remain undeterred by even the loudest of vehicles. Naturally, consideration must be shown to the sacred cows. Every Indian carefully gives way and slows down at the sight of a cow, in contrast to the otherwise very fast driving style of Indian drivers. The people you meet on the metro or in the street are curious, friendly and helpful.

It's not uncommon to be asked to pose for a photo together; with blonde hair – and, as a woman, with fair skin – you're still something of a curiosity. In India, it takes a bit of time, patience and composure to get over the culture shock and start enjoying the country's beautiful sides: India offers a wealth of varied landscapes, crazy moments, friendly, helpful and hospitable people, and is always good for a surprise.

In early November, we landed in warm Delhi and were looking forward to two eventful weeks in a completely different country. Even at night, the streets were still bustling, and we arrived at our accommodation tired and exhausted. For the first two days, the two of us explored Delhi by public transport or rickshaw, which are a great way to reach all the main sights. A lovely lady from Germany joined us on the third day of our trip, and we had eventful days in Agra and Jaipur. Due to the Indian government's sudden decision to withdraw the 500 and 1,000 note banknotes from circulation overnight, it became very difficult for us to get hold of money. Nevertheless, we enjoyed our time there and, thanks to our driver who was with us throughout the day, it was a relaxed and pleasant experience visiting the sights and travelling from one place to the next. In the evenings, we usually ate in restaurants and were very satisfied with the food. In Jaipur, on the last morning of our short tour, we met our fellow rider Uli, who entertained us over the next few days with stories of his previous horse-riding trips. We travelled together to Pushkar, where our first tour ended and where Ute, our host, and the whole team gave us a warm welcome. This is where our Pushkar Trail began, and we were already looking forward to meeting our horses. The tented camp was comfortably furnished with camp beds, and everyone had the chance to enjoy a hot shower (the water was heated in a large kettle and provided in large buckets for showering).



The first part of the Pushkar Trail ran from Udaipur to Pushkar; our tour went in the opposite direction. On the first and second days, we had time to take our time exploring the Pushkar Fair – an absolute experience! There were huge crowds of people; camels and horses were for sale everywhere, along with all the trinkets that go with them. Household goods, souvenirs, fruit and vegetables, riding gear – you could buy everything here, and if you still hadn't had your fill, you could enjoy one of the beautifully lit fairground rides in the evening. There was something for everyone here!

In the afternoon, two more ladies from Bavaria arrived to join us on the tour. So there were six of us in total, although one of the ladies was accompanying us as a non-rider. In the evening, we enjoyed our first freshly cooked dinner and chatted by the campfire.



In a cosy atmosphere, we discussed the horse allocations and then went to bed with a warm hot water bottle, accompanied by the sounds of a concert from the Pushkar Fair. During the day it was always warm and quickly became hot in the sun, but in the evenings it cooled down rapidly after sunset, so we were very grateful for the hot water bottle. The next morning, we were treated to chai, tea, toast and a fresh omelette or scrambled eggs before setting off on our riding adventure. Everyone was assigned a horse, and I was allowed to ride the tour on Shanti, a wonderful, forward-going mare. All the horses were mares and belonged to the famous Marwari breed, known for their distinctive sickle-shaped ears. This breed was originally bred by the Rajputs as war horses and is characterised by a noble temperament, resilience and diligence. Ute and her husband, a German-Indian couple, look after the horses at their home on the farm, and Ute in particular has many stories to tell about each horse. Ute knows her horses very well, has trained some of them herself, and assigned each of us a suitable horse. In the morning, we rode through the Pushkar Fair and enjoyed the early morning hustle and bustle from horseback. Even at that early hour, there was already plenty going on.

Our horses were completely relaxed and weren't unsettled by loud car horns or any other noises, smells or sights. Only a man with a handful of pink candyfloss made a slight impression on my horse, prompting her to prick up her ears towards the candyfloss man and keep a metre's distance between herself and the candyfloss. Otherwise, hardly anything could faze or startle the horses. No sooner had we left the fair than we were enjoying the silence. We rode past a lake

with a view of the mountains, and the odd sandy track invited us to trot and gallop. Time and again we came across herds of cows or goats. As the afternoon wore on, we rode along some rocky paths through mountainous terrain. We were even lucky enough to spot cranes and other colourful bird species from time to time, the names of which Ute told us. By late afternoon, however, we were glad to reach our campsite, where a warm shower and a few treats (fruit, nuts...) were already waiting for us. In the evening, we ate by the campfire and enjoyed the fresh vegetables and rice. Before that, there was always a tasty soup, followed by a delicious, sweet dessert.



The next few days were a bit quieter. We rode through small villages, past waving women and children who were always smiling at us and greeting us with 'Namaste' or 'Ramram'. For some of them, it was their first encounter with horses, so the children – and many adults too – came running out of their houses as soon as they saw us; we were probably often the most exciting encounter their daily lives had to offer. Many children would repeatedly accompany us out into the fields. They were delighted and waved whenever they saw us. In the fields, many women were working and tending their herds of goats and buffalo. Although the buffalo were large and powerful, they fled at the sight of us and often panicked when there was little room to manoeuvre. They were unfamiliar with horses and were afraid of them, as the horses towered over them. On one occasion, we were even lucky enough to spot Nilgai antelopes – the largest antelopes in India – from a distance.

The following days continued to offer a great variety of scenery. Right at the start, we rode along stony, undulating paths with beautiful views of the mountains; then we passed through wide plains and finally enjoyed a

savannah-like landscape reminiscent of Africa. Whenever the terrain allowed, we were able to enjoy the odd gallop. Towards the end of our tour, we reached several lakes, which we rode round, and on the final day we covered a long, brisk gallop that gave us all great pleasure. Our encounters in the villages were always exciting and full of surprises.

Hardly any spot in India is lonely or deserted; people live everywhere, and even on narrow country lanes we came across small motorbikes, some carrying amusing clusters of people. It wasn't just people being transported on the motorbikes: on one occasion, we also came across two laughing men who had three goats (alive!) perched on the back of their motorbike. It wasn't clear whether the goats were happy about it, but they were healthy and lively. Everyone was delighted by our presence, and it wasn't uncommon for Indians to stop to wave at us before driving past, honking their horns. Time and again, we came across colourfully decorated tractors. They were decked out with colourful glittery decorations, bows and coloured ribbons. We also passed several Indian weddings in villages. Weddings are celebrated on a grand scale in India – many guests are invited, music is played, and the celebrations go on for a long time, cheerfully and noisily. If you have enough money, you treat yourself to a white horse – a sign of prosperity and luxury.

The landscape and paths in India have been changing rapidly in recent years – as our hostess Ute told us. So, halfway through our trail, we kept unexpectedly coming across tarmac roads, on which riding was no great pleasure for either the horses or the riders. That's why Ute and her husband suggested skipping one day's stage and instead going on a day's ride at the end of the tour in the area around Udaipur. We gratefully accepted the suggestion – we were delighted to leave the tarmac tracks behind us and know that beautiful, unspoilt countryside lay ahead.



So, after an eventful day and a final, wonderful, brisk gallop along the shore of a lake, we arrived at the end of the tour and, once the horses had been loaded, were taken to our hosts' farm. Shortly before arriving, we stopped to visit the temple complex in Nagda.

The Sas-Bahu Temple dates back to the 9th century, and a surprisingly large number of stone carvings have been preserved, which you can admire at your leisure (with hardly any Indian tourists around).



When we arrived at the farm in the late afternoon, fresh tea and a hot meal were already waiting for us. Our tents had already been pitched on the farm, and we spent two nights on the owners' grounds. Naturally, our bucket shower had travelled with us as well. On the penultimate day of our trip, we visited Udaipur. Udaipur is a very beautiful town – small and cosy by Indian standards – with a population of around 450,000. We visited the stunning City Palace, took a boat trip to a small island and marvelled at what is probably the most expensive hotel in the whole of Udaipur, with its vast grounds. It's definitely worth spending an extra day or two here to enjoy the relatively quiet city life by Indian standards and the beautiful sights. On our final day, we went for one last ride on our hard-working four-legged friends and headed out into the countryside around the farm. We were greeted by a dreamlike landscape with palm trees, great galloping trails and a stunning view of the hills and mountains in the background.



Time and again we crossed little streams and rode along quiet, secluded little paths until we reached a clearing where we dismounted, unsaddled the horses and enjoyed our lunch break. On the way back, we savoured the silence and treated ourselves to a few final gallops. One path was so thickly overgrown with bushes that we had to dismount and send the horses through on their own. Down below, at the end of the path, they waited patiently for us and let us back into the saddle. The final ride was all too quick and short, and it was now time to say goodbye to the horses. We were taken back to the hotel for our final night. A proper shower and a stunning view from the roof terrace awaited us: the city's rooftops lay at our feet and the beautifully illuminated City Palace could be seen from here. In the evening, we all sat together cosily, looking back over the past few days and looking forward to the next morning with mixed feelings. We were a great, harmonious group and had enjoyed some wonderful days of riding. We hope to see you all again soon on another riding holiday!

You can find all the information about the trip at
<http://www.reiterreisen.com/inp010.htm>

November 2016, Angelika Kaiser