



# Bathing with the immortals

Following a cycle dictated by the Sun, Moon and Jupiter, millions of pilgrims flock to the River Ganges to celebrate the Kumbh Mela, the world's largest religious gathering. Gustasp and Jeroo Irani captured this year's spectacle in words and pictures

With a concerted shriek they plunged into the river and thrashed around, the swirling, ice cold waters enlivening their senses like the pinpricks of a million serpent bites. Later the ladies surfaced with beatific smiles and proclaimed that the dip had been therapeutic.

We were in Haridwar, located in the foothills of the mighty Himalayas and one of the most sacred cities in India. Here the River Ganges leaves the mountains and enters the plains. We had come for the Kumbh Mela, one of the largest Hindu festivals, which unfolded over a period of three months earlier this year. The holy dip was near Lahore House, a vintage riverfront haveli (mansion), where Leisure Hotels, Uttarakhand's largest hospitality chain, had pitched luxury tents on the terrace. Equipped with bath and toilets, accommodation frills included hot water bottles, vegetarian cuisine, guided visits to shrines, religious discourse, yoga and meditation.

Pilgrims who stayed here were a relatively pampered lot and less likely to suffer the hardships of a regular pilgrimage, but we saw the contrasting faces of devotion: a holy man in orange robes sitting cross-legged, deep in meditation, for what seemed like an eternity, on the opposite misty bank, the steely cold wind knifing through his



Above left: the ladies brave the chill for a therapeutic dip  
Above right: flower offerings ready to be made to the river  
Below: crowds assemble at Har ki Pauri for the aarti prayer ritual



frail, reed thin body; men stripped down to their underwear and women in dripping saris, taking purifying dips in the freezing jade green waters of the Ganges; pilgrims floating offerings of flowers, burnt camphor and incense sticks; ash-smeared sadhus with flowing beards and knotted manes, who had descended from their quiet retreats in the neighbouring mountains, roaming around the city on foot or astride cycles and motorbikes like rock stars at a festival.

Indeed, there was the sense of camaraderie that comes when strangers get together to share a common stage. We found ourselves adrift in a surreal world where different realities overlapped – the intersection of the spiritual and temporal worlds. A young disciple washed the feet of his

stooped, grey whiskered guru. Others scooped up the river water in containers to take back home. Some holy men had cell phones pressed to their ears as they cycled past with an air of purpose. Many were camera friendly and aware that they were the focus of the spectacle.

The narrow lanes brimmed with stalls where bare-chested men sat hunched over large pans, frying orange jalebis (an Indian sweetmeat) or stirred a white morass to make milky barfis (a sweet). Vendors proffered silver trays brimming with colourful offerings for the Ganges, while half-veiled women huddled past in tight groups.

Later we strolled to Har ki Pauri, the most sacred bank, or ghat, in Haridwar, where pilgrims and holy men immersed themselves in the chilly waters, with an air of forbearance and piety. This was the Makar Sankranti Snan, the first holy immersion, on 14th January, when a million-strong crowd braved the bitter early morning. The banks were a heaving sea of devotion and we saw it all from afar as security was heavy and slow dribbles of pilgrims were being let in to avoid stampedes.

Orange-robed holy men floated serenely in the fast flowing waters, holding on to the chains at the side. In an expression of wifely duty, women soaped partially clad husbands, who sat hunched on the bank of the river. Children leapt playfully like dolphins in the eternal waterway, while women with petticoats tied to their chests dressed behind impromptu changing rooms created with towels. People of all shapes and sizes and from different walks of life were levelled by the mighty, jade green river that skips along unmindful of the deep reverence she evokes in her devotees. The

Clockwise from below: flowers and incense float on the sacred waters; a Khumbh pilgrim wraps up warm; Haridwar street children; a sadhu resplendent in orange robes; offerings depicting the Hindu gods





Above: women in brightly coloured saris make offerings at a holy tree shrine near Haridwar  
Below: pilgrims of all ages and occupations can be seen on the streets of the holy city

sadhu, the merchant, the lady executive and the homemaker were bound by the collective desire for purity and immortality.

Over the three months of the Kumbh (January to April), a series of ten ritualistic dips in the river coincide with auspicious days of celestial significance. The festival harks back to the creation of the universe. According to Hindu mythology, the devas (gods) and the asuras (demons) once decided to set aside their eternal differences and together retrieve the Kumbh (pot) that contained the nectar of immortality from the depths of the ocean. Using a giant serpent as a rope, the two groups started to churn the ocean, and almost immediately, the water began to release its many treasures, as well as other evil elements.

Just before it was ready to finally surrender the nectar of immortality, a cloud of vish, or poison, escaped and threatened to contaminate the entire universe. At that crucial moment, Lord Shiva stepped in and swallowed the vish in one large gulp. But rather than consume it, he held the deadly poison in his throat and, as a result, his body turned a deep shade of blue.

As divine healer Dhanvantari finally appeared with the Kumbh in his hands, a fight broke out between the two sides, both trying to wrest the pitcher for themselves. In the fierce battle that raged across the sky, a few drops of the immortal elixir fell at four different places in India: Prayag (Allahabad), Nasik, Ujjain and Haridwar.

Ever since, tradition has held that when the configuration of the Sun, Moon and Jupiter are right, the waters of the Ganges that run through these cities again turn into nectar. It is believed that at these times a dip in these miraculous waters heals and cleanses the soul and body.

The Kumbh Mela takes place at the four cities



in rotation over a cycle of twelve years. One complete cycle is called a Purna (full) Kumbh and every twelve Purna Kumbhs (144 years) comes the Maha (great) Kumbh Mela, which always takes place in Prayag. In 2001, about sixty million people attended the Maha Kumbh Mela, making it the largest religious gathering in the world.

This year Haridwar filled with an extraordinary distillation of spiritual energy. The pace was unhurried, marked by the number of dips one could have, trips to the local temple to reaffirm one's devotion to God, filling plastic cans with precious river water for the folks back home... The town was draped in mist, like a soft-focus photograph, but in the evening when we gathered on the banks of the river for the aarti – the special daily prayer ritual made more poignant on the occasion of the Kumbh Mela – the place lit up.

Under the watchful gaze of the Rapid Action Force, incongruously armed with guns and shields, devotees sat in disciplined rows on the banks, the atmosphere was hushed, and as dusk swaddled a shivering town, the lights came on at the bridges, temple spires and the Kumbh Mela control centre, stabbing the dark with a million sequins of subdued fire. Devotional songs and the sound of conch shells rode the night air as the aarti began. Trays of small, flickering lamps, or diyas, were held aloft and swirled over the Ganges to become flames of light – more and more tongues of fire sprang up on the opposite bank as lips moved quietly in prayer or sang

songs of devotion. It was pure theatre, a spectacle unmatched in terms of the sheer size of the canvas and its collective, otherworldly spirituality.

Hard-boiled TV journalists and newspapermen from overseas gazed open-mouthed at the intricately choreographed ritual. As the dance of the flames continued in great arcs of light, and chants of “Jai Ganga Mata” (Praise be to Mother Ganges) rent the air, a man clambered onto a podium to conduct the proceedings, arms flailing like the conductor of a symphony orchestra. The air, thick with piety, could be cleaved with a knife and soon the river was alight with hidden fire as diyas floated down its length.

After the cathartic outpouring of devotion, we returned to Lahore House in the misty dark, through twisting alleys where brightly lit shops were still open, hawking cheap toys and woolens, and were wreathed in the sizzling aroma of spicy samosas and other comfort foods. Our spiritual batteries had been recharged and we too felt like we could surge on and on like the Ganges.



Above: tying a holy knot  
Below: devotees take the waters from the sacred ghat at Har ki Pauri, beneath the clocktower



## Fact File

Haridwar, a bustling pilgrim town of around four million residents, lies 214km by road from Delhi, which also happens to be the nearest airport. The city's station is an important railhead on the line between Delhi and Dehradun and is connected by direct trains to Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Varanasi and Allahabad. By road, Haridwar is 24km from Rishikesh, 52km from Dehradun and 90km from Mussoorie.

The city has a wide range of accommodation to suit all budgets, including Leisure Hotels' luxury tented resort that sits on the banks of the Ganges River.

For more information, visit Leisure Hotels at

[www.leisurehotels.co.in](http://www.leisurehotels.co.in)

For the official site of the Kumbh 2010 at

[www.kumbh2010haridwar.gov.in](http://www.kumbh2010haridwar.gov.in)