

PHOTO ESSAY

BY JACK LAURENSEN

Yatra

Celebrating with
the pilgrims of India

Hindu pilgrims flock to the shores of the River Ganges in Varanasi, India, the holiest city in India and the epicenter of world Hinduism

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eight months each year thousands of sacred sites and temples on the vast sub-continent of India are swarming hubs of activity, worship, commerce and colour as Yatra season takes place. Millions of devoted Hindu pilgrims travel thousands of miles on foot or by bicycle, motorbike, car, train, or whatever mode of transport they can get their hands, or feet, on.

They visit sacred pilgrimage sites such as temples and places of religious importance, mostly locations in which Hindu stories and legends are said to have taken place and events of historical importance have transpired. They also journey to the confluences of holy and significant rivers, such as the mighty Ganges and the River Assi.

Throughout the months of April to November, the north of India - especially the towns of Haridwar, Varanasi, Ujjain and Rishikesh - are overrun by hordes of orange-clad, mantra-chanting Hindu Yatris, all of whom are carrying out their pilgrimage to gain good karma, perform rituals and prayers for their ancestors, or simply to take part in various Hindu festivals.

A Yatra is a Hindu ritual of



Pilgrims play in the holy water of the river Ganges

The hardships and trials of the journey serve as an act of devotion and Hindus believe this attracts good karma



**Above:
Young men
travel through
Haridwar on
their Yatra**

**Facing Page:
A Sadhu
washes his
damaged leg
at Gokarna**

pilgrimage; it is good practice, but not compulsory for a Hindu to perform it. Most Hindus however, will perform many Yatra pilgrimages in their lifetime, while some Sadhus – Hindu holy men – spend their lives on a constant Yatra, travelling from one sacred site to another, living off of the charity of other Hindus.

To traditional Hindus, the journey and travelling are as important as the sacred destination. The hardships and trials of the journey serve as an act of devotion and Hindus believe this attracts good karma. The visiting of a sacred place is believed by the Yatri to purify the self and bring one closer to the divine.

In present times, Yatras are highly commercialised and regulated affairs,

with specialised tourism companies catering to their need, and of course earning a buck or two.

It's amusing and fascinating how something like a holy pilgrimage can become such a commercial affair in a modern and developing India. The pilgrims, who must be bedecked in the Hindu holy colour of orange, buy their clothes from outlets stocking clothing made by Nike, Adidas, Reebok, Puma and other international brands. Globalised industry is now catering to one of the biggest religions on earth!

However, the industry and commerce in the areas that attract Yatra pilgrims caters almost entirely for them, and whole towns exist off the sale of products and services to





A sleepy Hindu pilgrim rests at Varanasi.

Dried and heavily polluted lakes and rivers greet many devoted pilgrims in towns that just can't handle the sheer amount of migrating people anymore

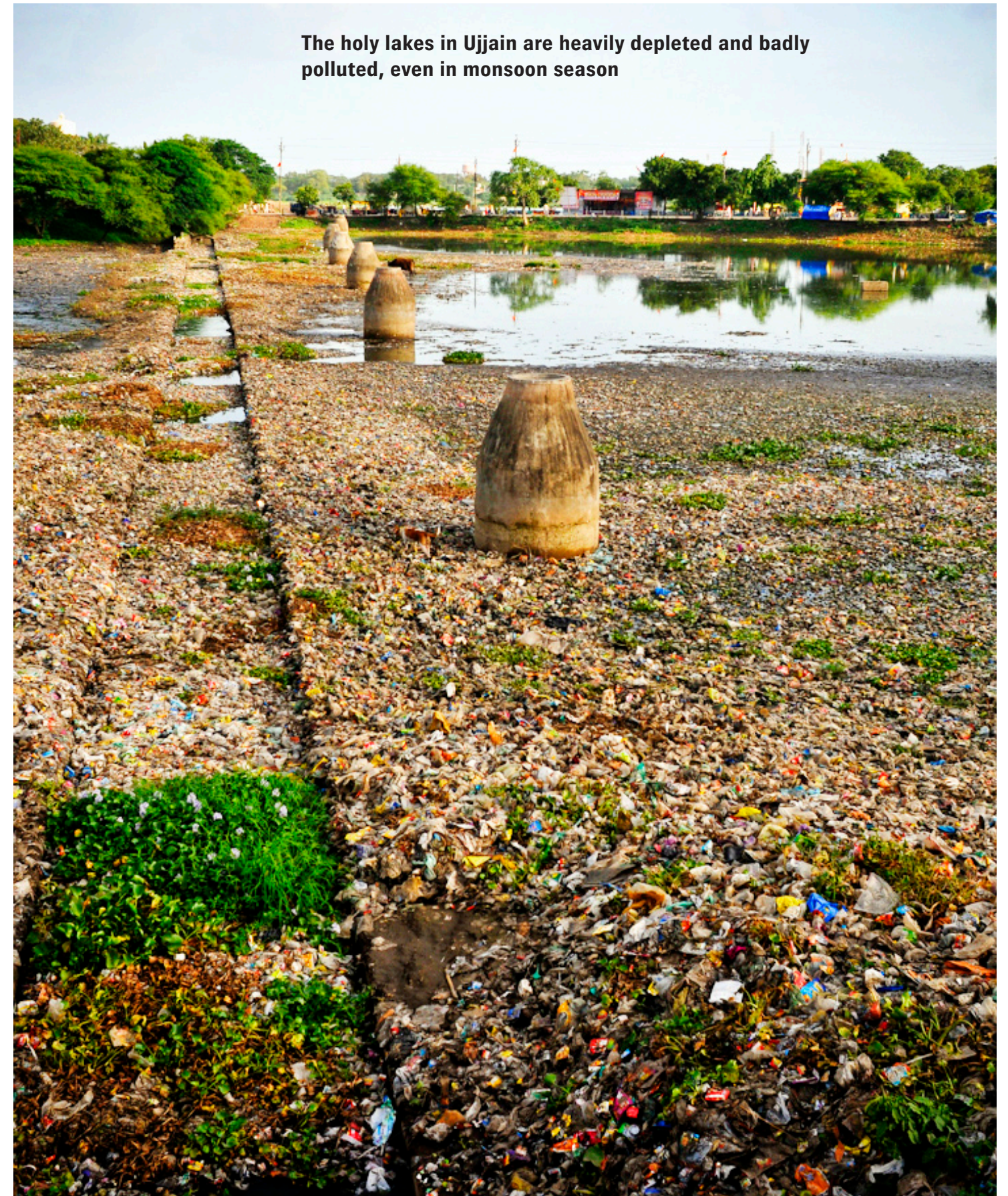


A Hindu holy man - or Sadhu - rests in Gokarna, a holy town in the southern state of Karnataka

these Yatris from all over India. More recently the pilgrimages - which have consistently expanded in sync with India's rapidly growing population of eight-hundred million Hindus - have begun to inflict some severe consequences on infrastructure. The ecological and environmental impact of these mass migrations (and population growth in general) is becoming more apparent. Dried and heavily polluted lakes and rivers greet many devoted pilgrims in towns that just can't handle the sheer amount of migrating people anymore. As India begins to rival China in

population (its population is predicted to exceed two-billion in the next few decades) the mass religious migrations of Yatra season - which are an integral part of traditional Indian culture - will continue to inflict a heavy toll on this country's delicate infrastructure and environment.

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The holy lakes in Ujjain are heavily depleted and badly polluted, even in monsoon season



Above: Ujjain, holy Hindu city which is frequented by thousands of pilgrims.

Right: Pilgrims rest at Ujjain

Centre, right: A man and his sons, on Yatra pilgrimage to Varanasi.

Far right: Sadhus share a smoke at Varanas

