Yatra

Celebrating with the pilgrims of India

PHOTO ESSAY

BY JACK LAURENSON

Hindu pilgrims flock to the shores of the River Ganges in Varanasi, India, the holiest city in India and the epicenter of world Hinduism.
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
The hardships and trials of the journey serve as an act of devotion and Hindus believe this attracts good karma.
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.

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 Varanasi