

PAID POST

Celebrate life, celebrate India

There are myriad festivals celebrated in India each year, and every one of them is a spectacular manifestation of the country's rich culture and traditions



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Imagine a party to beat all parties and then, invite yourself. Welcome to incredible India – vivacious, diverse, rich, colourful and joyous. There are simply too few adjectives to describe India's festivals and fairs. When India has something to celebrate (which it often does) it is truly something to behold.



The awe-inspiring Hindu festival of Durga Puja is a major social and public event in India's eastern and northeastern states, where it is considered to be the most important of the annual festivals. Durga, the fearless warrior goddess, is revered for her victory in battle over the shape-shifting buffalo demon Mahishasura. This five-day festival celebrates the triumph of good over evil and sets India alight with exuberant dancing, delectable street food, funfairs, revelry and processions. Locals compete to build the finest pandals – carnival floats that range in theme from huge dinosaurs made out of recycled plastic to intricately detailed miniature temples inlaid with Rajasthani mirror work. Last year thousands of pandals were built in Kolkata and every corner of the so-called City of Joy was illuminated as tourists pandal-hopped to find the best of the best!

In the lush state of Assam in northern India, tucked beneath the foothills of the rugged Himalayas, it is the trio of Bihu festivals that are considered the most auspicious. Marked by all Assamese people irrespective of religion, caste or creed, the Bihu festivals celebrate the changing agricultural seasons with joyful feasting. Sweets are exchanged between friends, prayers are sent up to the gods on flames from roaring bonfires, and traditional games are played. Egg cracking, cock fighting, drumming, music and parades culminate in the highlight of the celebration: displays of sensuous Assamese dancing and singing, subtle expressions of fertility, eroticism and love.



Not to be outdone by the festivals in the north, the four-day harvest festival of Pongal in southern India is to the Tamils what Bihu is to the Assamese. Pongal celebrates all aspects of existence, but particularly the role of the sun as a giver of life. Happiness and fervour are translated into something tangible. Elaborate food offerings are made to the gods. Dusty cattle are thanked for their contribution to the harvest and are washed, painted in vibrant colours and lovingly treated to pieces of sugar cane. Friends chatter, exchange gifts and colourful clothing, and ebullient displays of machismo are joked about among the excited crowds. Traditional bull chasing, stick fighting and slippery pole games are arranged in every town.



Onam is the official state harvest festival of Kerala. Sometimes referred to as the festival of flowers, this bright and beautiful celebration brings great excitement to the tranquil Kerala backwaters. Onam is celebrated lavishly: elephants strewn with gold lead the grand processions that mark the opening of the festivities. Snake boat racing draws large crowds who cheer from the banks of the canals for their teams. Fabulously dressed dancers re-enact dreamlike myths and legends, brilliantly painted tiger men prowl and stomp down the streets to the thrumming beat of traditional instruments, while intricate floral offerings (pookalam) are placed outside the thresholds of homes and judged by their beauty.



Picture yourself on the shores of the sacred Pushkar lake at dusk. On the fringes of the dusty Thar Desert, when the fat orange sun begins to dip behind the undulating dunes, the vivid colours of turbans and saris belonging to the dealers and pilgrims come alive. Camels, horses and cows are briskly traded and agricultural wares bartered for. Amid the clamour there are playful scenes: the beautiful bride contest, camel shearing, cricket matches between locals and tourists. The cries of itinerant vendors, musicians, magicians and bangle sellers intermingle with the smell of jasmine that permeates the cool night air. Allow yourself to be swept away by the sheer size and splendour of India's diverse festivities. Bigger, better and more life-affirming than any other experience in the world. It is surely a life half lived to miss out on the thrilling drama of India's playful side.

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