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Pushkar is where it's kosher for Israeli tourists

Signboards and menus in Hebrew, shopkeepers greeting visitors with "shalom" and familiar food like humus, wraps and soup with dumplings. It's a mini Israel out here with hotels and other businesses tailoring their offerings to suit tourists from the 'promised land'

July 05, 2012
PUSHKAR

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Even in the scorching summer heat, hundreds of tourists from Israel are holidaying in this town, 11 km from Ajmer and about 130 km from the state capital Jaipur. Pushkar, an attractive tourist destination with its lake, desert safaris, camel rides and more, is home to the only temple in the world dedicated to Lord Brahma.



And Israeli tourists are flocking to soak in the experience. Moving around, the unsuspecting visitor could be forgiven for wondering just where they were with hoardings and signboards in Hebrew splashed at many places.

There is even a Chabad House, a community centre for the Jewish community run by missionaries.

Food familiar to Israeli visitors is easier to find than traditional Indian food. Where else will you see a menu featuring jachnoon, the traditional bread with tomatoes and eggs! Moussakas, cinammon cakes and even the humble vegetable cutlet are found in plenty, with menus printed in both English and Hebrew.

Local residents, including some priests who perform rituals at the ghats of the Pushkar lake, and shopkeepers have started speaking fluent Hebrew. And some are taking classes to learn the language.

Some hotel owners even accept shekels, the Israeli currency.

It all makes business sense.

According to the state tourism department, 46,425 foreign tourists visited Pushkar during April 2011 to March 2012. Israelis, many of them young men and women holidaying after their compulsory army training, counted as the highest.

"Israeli tourist arrivals increased up to 64 percent in the last three years and about 13,500 Israelis visited Pushkar last year," said a police official.

Israeli tourists usually come in September and stay for several months - mostly

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till April.

"Even at present there are about 500 foreign tourists in Pushkar despite the scorching heat and most of them are Israelis," said Ravindra Kaushik, a hotel owner in Pushkar, a key attraction in the desert state of Rajasthan.

The numbers have encouraged hotel owners to make that extra effort to ensure that the visitors feel at home.

"They are good payers and love to enjoy the place. They know how to enjoy holidays," said Ravi Ranawat, owner of the Om Shiva resort.

"I called a special cook from New Delhi and paid him triple rate so that he could make baked dishes and special sauces for the Israelis guests," Ranawat said.

But no meat please, as Pushkar is a vegetarian town.

The Israelis are not complaining.

"I love this place and would like to come on every vacation here," said Nehoraie.

Daniel, another Israeli, said: "It's very hot here but I enjoy being in Pushkar and am really happy to be here."

The fact that there is a Chabad House adds to the feeling of familiarity, say some tourists. One aim of the Chabad House is to help youth going "astray", said a tourist.

It is also a place where Israelis meet in familiar environs.

For spiritual connect and for a holiday, Israelis are queueing up at Pushkar - so what if it is thousands of miles from home?

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