

# What it's like at the greatest spiritual gathering on Earth

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**B**ar some very cool sunglasses, Baba Rajharati is completely stark naked. Smearing only in ash, symbolising his commitment to the Hindu deity Shiva, this renunciate 'naga baba' lives a mendicant life of austerity in pursuit of self-realisation. At least that's what he tells me in between puffs of ganja.



Baba Rajharati smokes pot while a disciple takes his picture Credit: MARK STRATTON

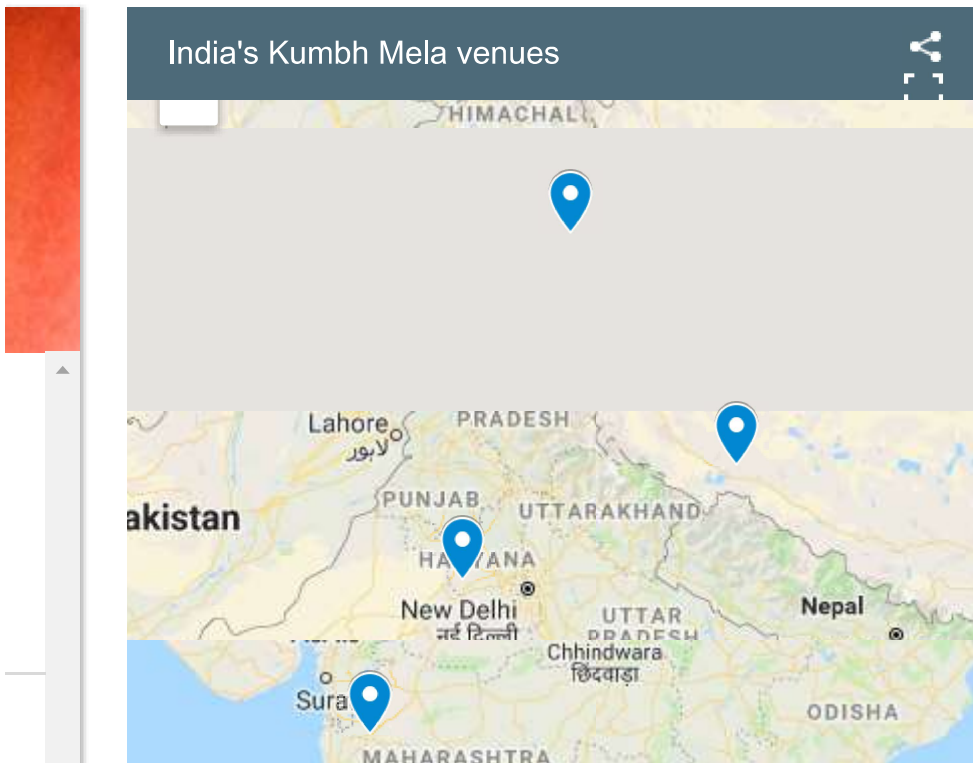
I meet him at the Kumbh Mela currently underway in Prayagraj, formerly Allahabad, in Northern [India](#): a 55-day long festival running until March 4. By its end an

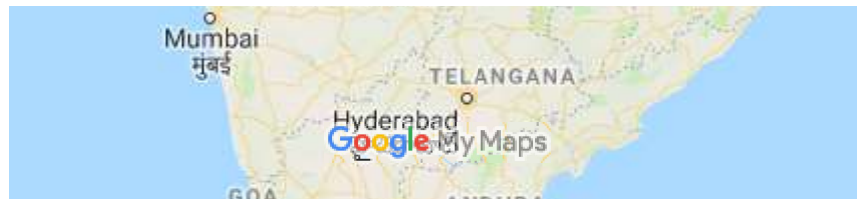
anticipated 150 million salvation-seeking Hindus will have attended the greatest spiritual gathering on Earth.



Around 150 million will attend the 55-day festival Credit: MARK STRATTON

Occurring four times within a 12-year cycle – its dates determined by astrology and ancient Vedic scripture – the mela (gathering) rotates between four sacred river cities: Prayagraj, Haridwar, Nashik, and Ujjain, each sanctified by an elixir of immortality that spilt from a ‘kumbh’ (pitcher) during a struggle between celestial forces of good and evil.





Throughout the festival Hindus' arrive from across India to bathe in the Ganges and accumulate good karma that they believe will contribute towards them breaking free from a cycle of reincarnation to ultimately attain a liberated soul free of worldly concerns. On the opening day of this mela 1.5 million pilgrims bathed together en masse.

This was my third mela. I once again felt the gravitational pull of a spectacle that distils everything that appeals to me about India: the fervently colourful theatricality of Hindu worship and the country's ability to magic unpredictable surprises such as elephants moseying down public roads and decorated holy cows.



Jangams are wandering minstrels from Haryana who sing songs about Shiva for money Credit: MARK STRATTON

Prayagraj's mela squeezes onto a floodplain where the River Ganges meets the Yamuna at a confluence called Sangam. The first sight of its temporary tented city simply beggars' belief. According to the Times of India

newspaper it encompasses 35-square kilometres. Put into context, that's larger than the Vatican City.



A seller of festival paraphernalia Credit: MARK STRATTON

Accommodation needs to be booked in advance as demand is high. Mine is a luxurious tented camp called Sangam Nivas located on the Ganges' left bank on Jhusi hilltop, where local lore says an ancient city was once turned upside down by a curse.

The camp's 44 large en-suite tents are for those not ready to renounce hot showers. The camp provides three vegetarian meals per day, yoga, Ayurveda massage, and experienced guides to navigate guests through the bewildering chaos beyond one's canvas walls.

The first thing that hits you is a bludgeoning soundscape that continues for 24 hours a day. Loudspeakers' marmalise devotional songs and mantras, bells ding repeatedly, and booming vibrato calls to prayer remind how this former Mughal city retains a strong Muslim presence.



An excited bather charges into the Ganges to perform his puja (prayer) Credit: MARK STRATTON

My own advice for exploring the mela is to venture among the pulsating crowds and see what karma sends your way.

Six particularly auspicious 'royal bathing days' (the next is February 4) during this mela attract the biggest influx. On those days the Sangam is claustrophobically crowded yet the energy is palpable. Thousands of naked sadhus parade towards the Ganges waving Shaivite tridents before frolicking in the river yelling invocations to Shiva. On less-auspicious days the atmosphere among pilgrims is of infectious joy, splashing around on the Ganges' edge like happy children at the beach. They chant mantras entering the water and light little wax lamps and josticks as offerings. Women bathe fully dressed and dry their saturated saris in the breeze flying them like kites.



Women bathe fully dressed and dry their saris alongside the Ganges Credit: MARK STRATTON

You might take your bathing suit and join them. But check out the untempting colour of the water first before deciding whether to take the plunge.

The most compelling viewing, however, is the 200,000-or-so attending holy men: from orange-robed sadhus and full-bearded gurus to the naga babas, who are more commonly seen dwelling in their birthday suits in the Himalayas. They are the festival headliners, ordered into akhara (sects) dependent on their spiritual loyalties to usually Shiva or Vishnu. During the mela they reside inside compounds fronted by faux temple facades fashioned from painted cloth and wooden scaffolding.



200,000 holy men will attend the Kumbh Mela; the posters reflect a huge variety of babas, swamis and gurus Credit: MARK STRATTON

Here they hold court sitting cross-legged in front of burning firepits, smoking pot, and dispensing blessings to Indian visitors for a few rupees. Their devotional austerity is almost lost to their photogenically freakish appeal.

Besides my baba in shades, I meet a naked cowboy who renounces everything bar his Stetson; a sadhu who has kept a now withered arm raised for years as a test of his devotion, and Khade Siri who hasn't sat or lain down for nine years. He sleeps on a suspended swing upright, his dreadlocks almost touching the floor.

"I'm doing this for world peace," he says enigmatically.



Sadhus go to extraordinary lengths to express devotion. This one has kept his arm raised for so long it has atrophied and locked above his head Credit: MARK STRATTON

Another akhara hosts women sadhus (sadhvis), orange-robed and warmly welcoming. They tell incredible stories. Some were unwanted babies offloaded to ashrams so they grew up in a spiritual environment.



Female Sadhyis are a minority among the male-dominated akharas but they follow the same strict rules of austere living Credit: MARK STRATTON

In between stops for addictive masala chai, sweet and milky tea best drunk from throwaway clay cups, I take a three-wheeled autorickshaw to the mela's newest akhara – the Kinnars. They are transgendered and identify as women. Queues of locals wait outside their tent marked by a rainbow flag to receive a blessing from this much discriminated against minority who are nonetheless revered historically for the power of their curses and blessings.



A five-headed Vishnu deity at the Hanuman monkey temple, popular with the Kumbh Mela crowds Credit: MARK STRATTON



Finally at sunset an aarti beckons me. These are beautifully choreographed fire purification ceremonies honouring India's pantheon of gods performed by seven Brahmin priests on plinths alongside the Ganges. They twirl lit camphor lamps that leave trails of fire in the velvety blackness as the raucous sounds of souls being saved carries on throughout another sleepless night.



A woman performs a small prayer ceremony besides the Ganges at the sacred Sangam site Credit: MARK STRATTON

## How to get there

Kumbh Mela official site: <https://kumbh.gov.in>

I flew with Air India ([www.airindia.in](http://www.airindia.in)) which has a daily flight from London via Delhi to Prayagraj for £612.

I was hosted by Cox & Kings (020 3642 0861, [www.coxandkings.co.uk](http://www.coxandkings.co.uk)). Their five-night Kumbh Mela trip costs £1,745pp (two sharing), including two nights' B&B accommodation in Delhi, three nights' full-board with guided excursions at The Ultimate Travelling Camp's Sangam Nivas, international flights and all transfers. They will offer trips to the next Kumbh Mela in Haridwar in 2022.

