

EXPAT LIVING

OCT-NOV 16

HONG KONG

EXPATLIVING.HK

GREAT ESCAPES

From Luxury Villas to Indian Festivals



MEN
Looking Good!

CAR QUESTIONS
Buy or Lease?

Gift Shopping
The Fairs Are Here!

Plus
**OUTDOOR,
STYLE & DÉCOR**

Fashion Alert

Evening Wear
French Flair
Cool Kids

Counselling
What to Expect

Lamps & Lights



In Living Colour

We've all got at least one "must-see" place or thing on the bucket list. For Hong Kong-based photographer BELINDA BATH, it was Holi. For four years, Belinda had been hoping to make the journey to see this amazing festival in India, to fulfil her dream of trying to capture it with a camera. This year, she finally had the chance.

Holi is a Hindu festival, otherwise known as the Festival of Colours, celebrated in India and Nepal (and in other parts of the world with sizeable Hindu populations) on the last full moon of March. People come together to welcome the arrival of spring, and it's a chance to be free and simply play and dance.

I knew that I wanted to go to the festival with a photography tour, because this would provide me with the best chance not only to get great shots, but also be taken to the best places to shoot! I would then be able to focus on the photography rather than on logistics and getting around. So when I saw a relevant advertisement pop up on one of my social media accounts, I decided to take a huge leap of faith and just go.

I arrived in Delhi on my own, late at night, and I had a very early start the next day; that was when I met my wonderful group for the first time. It consisted of around 40 people from locations far and wide, including Dubai, Doha, Singapore, Kuwait, Hong Kong, Israel, Malaysia, the US and Australia.

On our first day, we had a four-hour drive to Barsana (in the Braj region, where Holi is particularly significant). We stopped along the way for breakfast, a debriefing and a lesson in protecting our camera gear. Once our cameras were encased in protective bags, we were back on the road and left to enjoy the scenery as the sun rose.







DID YOU KNOW?

Barsana is the birthplace of Lord Krishna's beloved Radha. Krishna was famous for playing pranks on Radha – including applying colour to Radha's face. Thousands of years later, the womenfolk of Barsana use the festival to revenge Krishna's pranks. The men of the neighbouring town of Nandgaon travel to Barsana to mischievously apply colour to the women during Holi, but instead of colours they are greeted with sticks. Completely aware of what awaits them in Barsana, the men come fully padded and try their best to escape the spirited women. The unlucky ones are forcefully led away to receive a good thrashing – all in the fun spirit of Holi!





Beauty in Barsana

Arriving in Barsana was nothing short of an assault on the senses; we were immediately met by a sea of faces and by handfuls of fine coloured powder being joyfully thrown at us. There was no time to prepare, choose a camera setting or think carefully about taking an image – it was just *on!* Thousands of people and photographers crowd into the tiny village of Barsana for the festival and we were swept along the narrow streets with people dancing, singing, playing the drums and throwing coloured water and powder in full celebration.


The morning was spent enjoying these street scenes and trying not to lose my group, as I'm pretty sure I would never have found my way back. After lunch, we went to watch the menfolk get dressed and prepare themselves for a special parade – one that involves them getting beating by women with large sticks. The parade through the crowded streets was a sight to behold, but I certainly didn't want to get too close to the women and their sticks!

By the end of the first day we were completely covered in the full rainbow of colours, hot and exhausted but completely exhilarated and in awe of the experience we'd just had. After spending all day trying to take photos through a hot, dusty and sweaty plastic bag, the joy of downloading the images and seeing the colour explode onto my screen was the jewel in the crown for me.

Neon Nandgaon

The second day saw us arrive in the neighbouring village of Nandgaon. We spent a lovely morning wandering the streets and interacting with the village children who were full of joy and laughter, and ready to play. Faces were painted and water buckets were filled, ready to be poured on unsuspecting passersby with a great squeal of delight. This was my favourite part of the trip: the chance to do some portrait photography away from the crowded streets; just having the time to spend with these families that had so little but were so generous and hospitable. They offered us seats out of the hot sun and then brought out cold lassis to cool us down; such beautiful people.





“The temple fills with people brave enough to run the gauntlet of coloured water and powder that are thrown with full force.”

The afternoon was spent in the Nandji Temple, where it is the men of Barsana’s turn to take part in the festivities. They reciprocate by “invading” Nandgaon and drenching the womenfolk of Nandgaon in shades of *tesu*, a natural colour made from a local flower. The temple fills with people brave enough to run the gauntlet of coloured water and powder that are thrown with full force. Throughout the afternoon the atmosphere intensifies with dancing, laughter and music until the temple is packed with people celebrating.

There is a second-floor gallery that offers a great view over the action below – and a respite from the constant drenching. This space is filled with photographers and spectators waiting for the ceremony that concludes the celebration. Photographing Holi is an intense and invigorating experience, and at times (for first-timers like me) quite intimidating; I found that I had to be prepared to fully immerse myself in the action in order to get the most spectacular shots. For the most part, I was happy to watch from above. But once the ceremony was over and the crowds started to disperse, it was great to get down among the action for some up-close photography, while quietly celebrating that I had survived the day!

Picture perfect

While waiting for the crowds to move off the hill where the temple is situated, we had a chance to reflect on what we had just witnessed and experienced. Our feet were bright red and yellow, and most of us were drenched, but it was wonderful to come together as a group and make our way down off the hill and get our exhausted bodies back on the bus.

This was the most wonderful three days spent with the most wonderful people. Apart from taking beautiful images in a beautiful setting, we made new friendships, gained historical knowledge and had unforgettable experiences. Our leaders Jassi and Sanjay were incredibly friendly and helpful, not to mention patient. The tour was extremely well planned and organised, with beautiful Indian vegetarian meals along the way each day. It not only gave us a rare glimpse into the Holi festival but also a glimpse into daily life in India. It has ignited a flame and a desire to explore more of this incredible country, and the memories will last a lot longer than the yellow and red stains on my feet. *u*

lightchasers.in
lightchasers.in@gmail.com
belindabathimages.com