

# Opinion



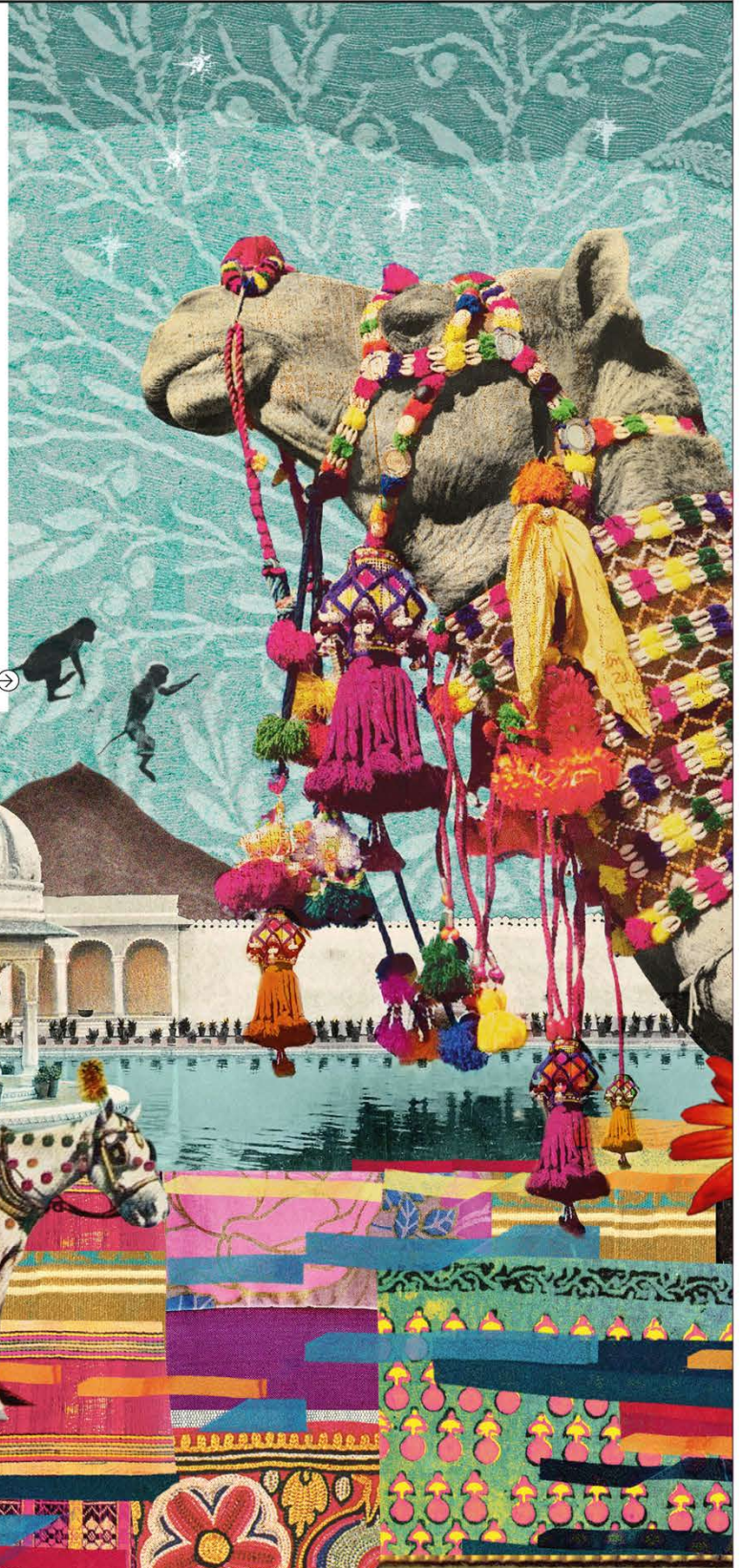
*Know your place* A FAIR TO REMEMBER, UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE, LITERARY LOUISIANA

## RIDE TILL YOU CAN'T NO MORE

An equine adventure in rural India is something all riders should experience once, discovers **Kat Brown**

"This is like Glastonbury for camels," my friend says in awe. I've only been in the holy city of Pushkar for an hour and my eyes are already boggling. I don't know whether it's the city's famous, six-legged cow ("Don't look at her or her owner will demand cash!") or the neon-decorated camels swinging past like galleons, but all told, this is quite the mood change from my past week riding through the peace of Rajasthan's Thar Desert in northeastern India.

I'm here for the Pushkar *mela*, the annual horse and camel fair, which for centuries has taken place over a 14-day cycle linked to the full moon around





November. It's an auspicious time to trade and, when the moon is at its fullest, Hindu pilgrims bathe in the city's vast lake to absolve their sins.

It's also catnip for horse lovers, who, like me, have come to marvel at the finest examples of India's legendary Marwari. Long the horses of royalty, they are here to be sold, admired and readied for stud. Their distinctive scimitar-shaped ears twirl like satellite dishes, and their owners primp them like the show ponies they are.

I've ridden most of the way here on my own Marwari horse with the humanitarian adventure organisation Relief Riders International on their annual Pushkar ride, working in rural schools and medical camps. It's an eight-day journey and, after the peace of the desert, the shock and noise of this city is immense.

Stalls crowd the streets, selling everything from lustrous piles of red powder for blessings, to camel-leather bags. A funfair packs the skyline with three of the largest Ferris wheels I've ever seen, and riders gallop around the vast amphitheatre where equine displays take place throughout the day.

We retreat to the centre of the city for mint tea on Rainbow Restaurant's roof terrace overlooking Lake Pushkar, which on this afternoon looks extraordinarily like Venice.

Restored, we head back into the festival for a camel cart tour. It's a brilliant way to observe the parades of Marwari, some beasts munching happily on nosebags, others being ridden down the street; the Punjabi breeders decorating theirs as glamorous steeds, while extravagant banners outside each stable tent proudly display the photos and names of the key champion stallions.

As we move out of the Marwari zone, the sun beginning to set in flashes of pinks and gold, camels materialise out of the heat haze, and make the sunset in Pushkar feel as if we've jumped into the *Stars Wars* markets of Tattoine or Jakku.

I eventually tear myself away for a spot of shopping and meet an eight-month-old Marwari colt, gleaming like a lightning bolt next to his owner. Taking a walk through the city later, a concert in full joyful progress, I think what an extraordinary, magical, bizarre place Pushkar is. The colours and magic stay with me long after I fly back to London – and, for me, it's much better than Glastonbury.

✉ @katbrown

Kat Brown travelled with Relief Riders International ([reliefridersinternational.com](http://reliefridersinternational.com)) on their November Pushkar Relief Ride. The dates for the 2019 Pushkar Relief Ride are 1-10 November and the trip costs range from £4,667-£5,451pp (excluding flights), based on the number of riders



JOHN SIMPSON ON: CAMBRIDGE

## THE OLD COLLEGE TRY

What the world's most famous correspondent gets up to off duty

If you can't bear all that Oxbridge privilege stuff – and it gets up my nose from time to time, even though I went there – then don't bother reading any further; it'll irritate the bejaysus out of you. (Interesting how things have changed: there was a time, not long ago, when people were always going on about their days at Oxford or Cambridge. Now they seem a bit quieter.)

Anyway, I went to Cambridge in 1963, at the very end of the sports-jacket-and-tie era. When I left in 1966 we wore different clothes and danced to different music. I had a superb group of friends there, and have kept up with them ever since. In my final year I married a girl from southern California. We lived very happily in a gorgeous, rickety flat in the very centre of Cambridge, freezing in winter and broiling in summer. In June 1966 my college gave its traditional May Ball and we all went to it.

The college's name is Magdalene, pronounced 'maudlin' (which is what you get, if you're not careful, when you talk about your youth). It was founded (refounded, actually) by a thuggish character called Sir Thomas Audley, who rose to power in Henry VIII's gangster regime. Yet it's delightful, so all those rivals and grandees whom he bullied into early graves in order to make his fortune didn't entirely suffer in vain. Magdalene is a gorgeous chocolate-box confection in mediaeval red brick on the left bank of the River Cam. I first saw it in November 1962 when I arrived for a scholarship exam, and its sheer beauty hit me like a physical pain. If I fail to get here, I thought ☹

Illustration: Martin O'Neill. Photographs: Alamy

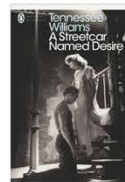


NOVEL DESTINATIONS BY DAMIAN BARR

## NEW ORLEANS

"America has only three cities," said Tennessee Williams. "New York, San Francisco and New Orleans. Everywhere else is Cleveland."

Williams has done more than any other writer to put New Orleans on the map – every year acolytes flock for the Tennessee Williams Literary Festival. He moved to the city in 1938 and wrote his most famous play not far from the streetcar tracks by The Pontchartrain Hotel – it's still standing, so drop in for a Sazerac, he did (often). A *Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole may be the most famous novel set in NOLA. It's bonkers and tells the story of Ignatius J Reilly, a smart but slothful 30-year-old who devours all the local favourites – sugary beignets, crawfish and gumbo. By the end you'll be reeling and drooling. Just as you will if you set foot in this delicious, sinful city. [theliterarysalon.co.uk](http://theliterarysalon.co.uk) [@damian\\_barr](https://twitter.com/damian_barr)



### THE CLASSIC

***A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams (1947)**

OK, it's a play, but allow yourself the luxury of focusing on the words on the page, not the actors on stage or screen.

Swelter with wild Stanley, seemingly innocent Stella and troubled fading belle Blanche in the ultimate Southern psychodrama.



### THE CONTEMPORARY

***A Kind of Freedom* by Margaret Wilkerson Sexton (2017)**

This debut from a writer born and raised in NOLA follows several generations of a black family, joining three characters at critical moments as they try to do their best in a city where dreams can be swept away by prejudice and hurricanes, but hope somehow always stays afloat.



### THE CHILLING

***Interview with the Vampire* by Anne Rice (1976)**

Forget the terrible film with Tom Cruise and sink your teeth into this sexy story of vampires in the South. Lestat is the vampire being interviewed and the book is the story of his glamorous and gory undead life in NOLA and beyond.



Damian Barr's *Literary Salon* is on board in Audio (selected flights), with guests including Kirsty Wark

with adolescent self-pity, my life will be ruined. Regardless of what's happened to my life, I've loved Magdalene ever since.

But a May Ball turns it into something different and altogether more magical. In 1966 we dressed up in the obligatory white tie and tails, and our girlfriends, or in my case my wife, looked superb; and the whole group of us danced to the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band and the Temperance Seven until the midsummer light came up over the river. At six o'clock my wife and I hobbled home on aching feet through the bright empty streets, our finery drooping around us.

Spool forward 53 years, to 2019. Those young, eager, enthusiastic people who danced through the June night in 1966 are now celebrating their 75th birthdays, and it seemed to me we should mark the milestone by going back to the Magdalene May Ball. Sadly, not everyone was there. One of my favourite people has died. Others were abroad, one was too ill to come and one couple said their dancing days were over. Nevertheless five out of the original 11 turned up with partners (in my case with my second wife). And because Magdalene, despite all the changes that have happened to it, keeps to the old standards, white tie and tails were still obligatory.

I suspect we were all nervous. Creaky joints and expanded waistlines don't make for easy dancing, and being surrounded by hundreds of lithe young people can be embarrassing. And what about the excessive drinking and crudity that we read so much about in the *Daily Mail*? All I can say is that my generation of students behaved much worse than this lot, I promise you.

We strolled around the grounds, which were transformed by brilliant shows of lighting, sampling food stalls, checking our programmes for the amazing variety of entertainment. There were burlesque dancers and contortionists and men and women who twirled in fluorescent hula-hoops.

In the charmingly intimate 15th-century hall a chap in a vest and braces shoved a curved scimitar down his throat with no obvious ill-effects and, to envious applause, a naked dancer enfolded one of my friends, a

distinguished architect, under her wings. It was under very different circumstances here that I watched Nelson Mandela make a speech of acceptance for an honorary fellowship that was so charming and funny and noble that I still sometimes choke up when I quote it. ("I am very nervous to be here for three reasons: first, because I am a pensioner; second, because I am unemployed" – he'd just stepped down as South Africa's president – "and third, because I have a very baaad criminal record.") And when the choir on the balcony at the back of the hall sang a song from the part of South Africa where he grew up, Mandela stood and danced in his slow, courtly way, and all the dons sitting beside him stood and danced, too. I filmed it all for that night's television news, and making that report is still the most enjoyable moment of my entire career.

Now, though, the strobe lights were flashing around us and the audience of beautiful young people (and one or two older ones) was laughing and clapping the performers, and at the end of the hall the old rogue, Sir Thomas Audley, watched disapprovingly from his portrait at what we were doing, 477 years after he refounded the place. "Things weren't like this in my day," he was probably thinking. But maybe they were, a bit.

[@JohnSimpsonNews](https://twitter.com/JohnSimpsonNews)

John Simpson is the BBC's world affairs editor. His novel, *Moscow, Midnight*, is out now in paperback (£8.99, John Murray)

**THE WHOLE GROUP OF US DANCED TO THE BONZO DOG DOO-DAH BAND AND THE TEMPERANCE SEVEN UNTIL THE MIDSUMMER LIGHT CAME UP OVER THE RIVER**