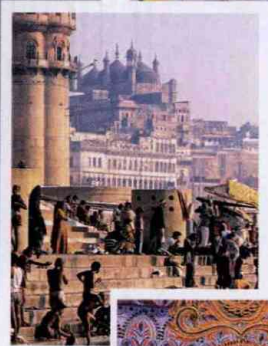
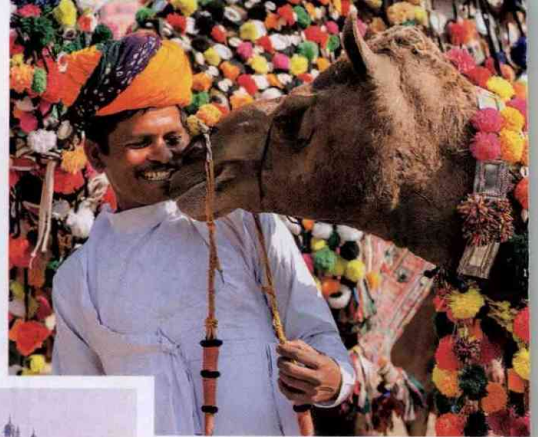
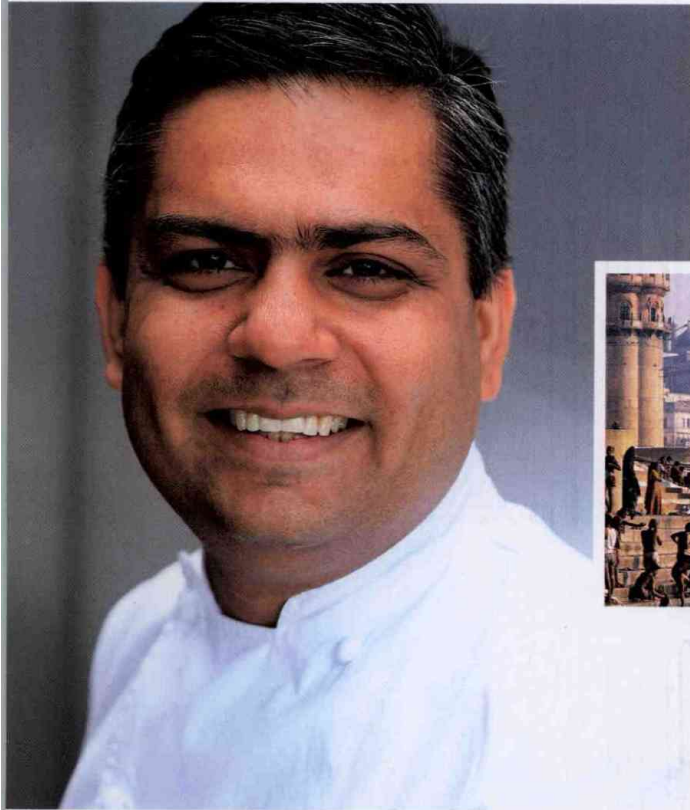


**Tips from the top**



**For a less touristy Holi, make a date with Udaipur — Rajasthan's lake city.** After huge bonfires are lit to see off the winter, big colour 'fights' break out, as teenagers on mopeds drive around powder-bombing everyone. Then it's down to the ghats to clean up. You don't get much more Indian than that.



**To tap India's spiritual side, visit Varanasi, on the Ganges.** The city is edgy and hectic. Baati Chokha (baatichokha.com) is the best address for simple, veggie dishes, done on a traditional chulha stove (set menu £2.65). Varanasi is known for its *paan* (spices in a betel leaf) and *lassi* (yoghurt drink). Don't leave without trying them!

**How to find festival feasts**  
By chef Vivek Singh

The Cinnamon Club restaurateur and Saturday Kitchen regular serves up tips on India's tastiest celebrations

**Festivals mean street food — but don't panic about 'Delhi belly'.** Look for places with queues. They have higher turnover and fresher food. Always carry small change, too: a *thali* is only 50p, so trying to buy anything with a 1,000 rupee note (about £10) is a nightmare for everyone.

**The city of Kolkata does a great festive spread.** From *puchka* (fried, puffed dough balls) to sweet *rasgulla* (a syrupy semolina dessert), the food served over the four days of Durga Pujais superb. With great weather (it's normally in September or October), it's the main celebration in the Bengal region, and is held for Durga, the destroyer of evil. Visit as many *pandals* (decorative displays) as possible. It's called '*pandal-hopping*'.

**If you're into art, try Mumbai's Kala Ghoda.** It's a series of (free) events each February in Kala Ghoda 'art district': screenings, dance — and lots of food (kalaghodaassociation.com). The hip Woodside Inn in Colaba (Woodhouse Road, mains about £7) is the place to eat.

**Like a drink? You'll love Holi.** It's the only Hindu festival where alcohol is consumed openly, as we welcome in spring, tossing colourful powders into the air in the streets. Mumbai does it best. Book in to Abode (abodeboutiquehotels.com; doubles from £53, room only), a gorgeous boutique hotel, and party on Chowpatty Beach. You might be invited to a family picnic and the kids will cover you head-to-toe in colour.

**Winning pose: from top, decorated camel in competition at the Pushkar Camel Mela; ghat by the Ganges at Varanasi; the goddess Durga**

**If you're in India over the five days of Diwali, stay put.** It's the biggest festival, and the traffic's going nowhere. In cities, the streets are crammed with people lighting *diyas* (lamps) and fireworks. Taking place in autumn, it's a family-oriented festival, like Christmas, so book a homely guesthouse where the owners will treat you like one of their own (homestay.com; from £9 a night).

**The most surreal festival for me is Pushkar Camel Mela.** It's Rajasthan's most famous: 50,000 camels and hundreds of thousands of revellers descend on Pushkar town and its dunes (October 28–November 4 this year) for turban-tying contests, moustache competitions, and tugs-of-war — locals versus tourists. The best view is from the Ferris wheel — or a hot-air balloon (pushkarcamelsafari.com; £180).

**'BIG COLOUR "FIGHTS" BREAK OUT AS TEENS POWDER-BOMB EVERYONE'**

Vivek Singh's Indian Festival Feasts is out now (absolutepress.co.uk; £26) ■

INTERVIEW: STEPHEN UNWIN; PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN CAREY/CAMERA PRESS; AWL IMAGES; GETTY

