

JOURNEYS

TO THE ENDS OF THE WORLD

A pilgrimage isn't just a vacation; it's a meaningful journey filled with challenging but beautiful experiences. Be it a sacred journey to the Holy Land or a quiet voyage to an ancient site steeped in mystery, to go on a pilgrimage is to undergo a metamorphosis, renew your spirit and redefine your purpose

Writer Danielle Parla



Pilgrimages have a long and honourable history that dates back several thousand years. Personally, I have long been fascinated with the courage and conviction of pilgrims to leave their daily responsibilities and voyage great distances to sacred sites. My intrigue led me to my first pilgrimage – the Camino de Santiago along a route called ‘The Way of St James’ several years ago. Since the ninth century, Christian devotees of St James travelled the route from France across northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela, where the tomb of Saint James the Great resides – now the city’s cathedral.

Now, you have to understand – I am not a deeply religious person, however as a yoga teacher and someone drawn to spiritual teachings, I thought it would be a wonderful way to bring meditation into motion and experience Spain in a way I had never done before. The process of walking 25 to 40 km a day for four weeks through the most beautiful mountains, farmlands and towns and the not-so-pretty highways, with everything I needed in my small backpack was transformational. It amazed



PANORAMA OF LAKE NAMTISO IN TIBET/THINSTOCK DANIELLE PARLA (RIGHT) PAULO SPFRANGER/ATLANTICO PRESS/CORBIS



OPENING PAGE: Pilgrims bathe during Kumbh Mela in Allahabad. THIS PAGE: Pilgrims converge on the Sanctuary of Our Lady Fátima in Portugal during a candlelight procession. OPPOSITE PAGE: Pilgrims praying in front of the Potala Palace in Lhasa; Lake Namtso, Tibet

The pilgrimage was a reflection of life – lots of beauty and also many challenging experiences

me how the momentum and energy of the *camino* carried me across the north of Spain to Santiago de Compostela and then on another 90 km to the Atlantic shores of Finisterre, which literally means ‘end of the earth’.

The pilgrimage was a reflection of life – lots of beauty (people, scenery and experiences) and also many challenging experiences: beating sun and cold rain, dark emotions, industrial zones, urban expansion and physical pain. This, I came to understand, is why pilgrimages are so powerful and call to millions every year. It is a physical journey, but by its nature it touches on many aspects of our existence

and offers a profound inner spiritual journey. I was so touched by it, I have walked two *caminos* since.

Witnessed throughout time, sacred journeys are performed by people who physically travel towards a spiritual goal or sacred destination. The act of physical travel is called a pilgrimage and the traveller, a pilgrim, coming from the Latin word *peregrinus* (someone on a journey or temporary resident). Motivated to find a miraculous cure, absolve a crime, fulfil a vow, a rite of passage or simply to deepen one’s faith, the pilgrim journeys to sacred places that have become steeped in spiritual significance for various reasons.

The site may be a place where miracles have been witnessed or performed; a person of significance was born, called to, awakened or died; spiritual powers are said to be strong; connections with the divine have been had; and/or a remarkable geographical feature or structure like a temple, church or shrine that ‘houses’ a particular deity or energy.



LEFT: Millions of Muslims pray around the Kaaba in Mecca

Nowadays people from all walks of life can be found to be walking, biking and riding historic pilgrim routes of the world for reasons as diverse as they are. I personally have been told by fellow pilgrims that they were motivated by the physical challenge, to find answers and guidance during difficulties or times of transition, for a unique holiday, religious reasons and simply because it was there. What is for sure is that journeying to a place of spiritual significance plays a part in almost all cultures and religions and continues to beckon the religiously devout and devoid, inspire poets, artists and writers, and shape the spiritual and physical landscape of the countries they reside. We all seek meaning in life and I invite you to take a glimpse at the process of pilgrimage to some of the world's most sacred sites.

In the Abrahamic religions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity, the Holy Land is a place of spiritual significance (modern day Palestine and Israel). Christian pilgrims have engaged in physical travel towards a spiritual goal in order to close the distance between themselves and God since the fourth century, says Art Historian, Jean Sorabella. Initially drawn to the Holy Land to see places where Jesus and the Apostles had lived on earth, Christian pilgrims have continued to walk sacred routes throughout the globe.

In places like Europe, there has been a resurgence in pilgrimages in recent years. Both Lourdes in Southern France and Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fátima in Portugal, where alleged sightings of the Virgin Mary have taken place, receive approximately five million pilgrims annually. Jerusalem and other Holy Land sites described in the New and Old Testaments continue to draw pilgrims despite the conflict in the regions.

From its roots in India around 550 BC, various schools of Buddhism have

flourished in Thailand, Myanmar, Tibet, Nepal, Cambodia, Japan, China, Laos, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. While each of these countries has important pilgrim routes, the holiest sites are those that relate to the Buddha Gautama. These sacred sites include his birthplace in Lumbini in present day Nepal and the place where he became enlightened beneath the bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, India.

Tibetan Buddhism is a unique form of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism and it plays an important role in the day-to-day life of the Tibetan people. The significant sites in Lhasa for Tibetan Buddhists are the Jokhang temple, Potala and Norbulingka.

Even today, Tibetan pilgrims remind us of the physical demands and challenges that historically faced the pilgrim. Whether travelling to Lhasa or circumambulating sacred mountains (Mount Kailash) and lakes (Lake Namtso), they walk performing body-length prostrations that require incredible effort. With wood blocks on their hands and knees, they lift their hands overhead in prayer, kneel and slide their body forward across the ground and release their forehead to the earth as their hands stretch forward in prayer before getting back up, stepping forward and performing it all over again. Secondly, they carry little supplies with them, are exposed to harsh conditions and inhospitable terrain, and can take weeks or months to complete the pilgrimage.

In Islam, Muslims have the religious duty to perform the Hajj – a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of the prophet Muhammad. Held over five days in the final month of the Islamic lunar calendar, the Hajj (meaning 'intention to journey') signifies both the physical/outward journey and the inward journey. This religious journey is performed

RIGHT: Two girls dress up as the Hindu goddess Shakti at the Kumbh Mela. BELOW: Pilgrims gather on the banks of the Sangam to take a holy bath during the Kumbh Mela

at least once in a Muslim's lifetime and demonstrates solidarity of Muslim people and submission to God (Allah). Those who are physically and financially able to make the journey will perform the five stages of Hajj starting in Mecca and onto Mina, Plain of Arafat and Muzdalifah before returning to Mecca.

During these five stages, pilgrims perform various acts, such as praying for Allah's forgiveness at the Mount of Mercy and performing seven *tawaf* or circles around the Kaaba – the house of worship built by Prophet Abraham. Wearing white for purity and equality, millions of Muslim women and men pray inside and around the Grand Mosque, Masjid Al-Haram, in what is the largest gathering of Muslim people in the world every year. It is estimated that more than three million pilgrims gather to perform the Hajj every year and the sea of devoted Muslims praying and circumambulating the central Kaaba is nothing short of awesome.

Unlike Muslims, Hindus are not required to make pilgrimages during their lifetime; they are however deeply devoted Hindus

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who journey to sites in India, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, China and beyond where they perform *pujas* (ceremonies) to a specific god or goddess in order to communicate directly with God and help elevate their body, mind and spirit to a higher level.

Yatra is a mass pilgrimage in India at specific times of the year to holy places depicted in Hindu epics, such as the *Ramayana*. Lasting more than a month, the Kumbh Mela is believed to be one of the oldest and largest festivals of religious pilgrims on earth and is held every three years and rotates between the holy cities of Haridwar, Allahabad (Prayag), Nashik and



Ujjain. The Maha (great) Kumbh Mela was held in Prayag on January 13, 2013 and saw an incredible 100 million people gathered on the banks of the Sangam – the confluence of the holy rivers Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati.

Pilgrimage is not exclusive to religion as seen in ancient Europe, where Pagans worshipped druids, gods and goddesses in various guises during the second and eighth centuries. Despite historical records being largely lost, modern pagan practices are guided by oral histories and historical interpretations. The sacred journeys of pagans today increase every year with visits to ancient sites steeped in mystery like Stonehenge and Glastonbury Tor in the UK. In fact, many are drawn to the mystery of

ancient cultures and visit sites like Machu Picchu in Peru and the pyramids of Egypt.

In truth, the act of pilgrimage is perhaps a lot more common than we might believe and is witnessed with people around the world returning to places that have special personal meaning – to celebrate, to mourn or simply to remember. Places of national significance (eg Berlin Wall), resting places of celebrities (eg Elvis Presley – Graceland), and sports arenas (eg Roman Colosseum, Wimbledon) suggest that the attachment to special places is a very persistent human characteristic that extends across a wide range of cultures and belief systems. Take the time to consider the places that call to you and let your next voyage be a journey of inspiration. 🌿