

Bodhgaya

The town of Bodhgaya with its magnificent temple is the trip favorite. Not only are Joan and I constantly surrounded by a sea of orange and maroon-robed monks and nuns, but a few blocks from our hotel is the most sacred Buddhist site, the Mahabodhi Temple. On just about every street there is a temple belonging to a different sect of Buddhism: Tibetan, Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai, Burmese, Cambodian, etc. And many include accommodation for pilgrims from country. This is the only place on our trip where we see Westerners - most from Europe and very few Americans. Each morning I am awakened by chanting from a nearby temple.

The town itself is bustling with lots of vendors selling postcards, statues, malas (Buddhist rosary beads), hand-crafted items like jewelry, pictures, paintings and we are lucky enough to find the section of the market where Tibetans from villages in the Himalayas bring items to sell. There are even vendors selling packets of "new" small denomination currency (at a price) to give as offerings in the temples and to the occasional beggar.

The big event is the Mahabodhi Temple and at the very center its Bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*) where 2500 years ago Siddhartha Gautama, the young prince who renounced his royal heritage, gained enlightenment and became The Buddha. His philosophy is so simple and elegant and is basically a universal truth-- be kind and compassionate and do not harm other living things.

Our guide Pappu (aka Rakesh Kumar) guides us thru the temple at dusk so we can see it under its atmospheric lighting. The next morning, he takes us back to the temple then leaves us on our own for a few hours. It is the best thing he could have done. I wander around the shrines and stupas then sit by the peaceful Macliada Lake - where I have the large Buddha statue that sits in the center of the lake all to myself.

Though the temple is crowded, it is very quiet. Pilgrims circumambulate on the different levels of the temple -- there are three - and many sit in shade of the Bodhi tree to meditate. It is, unfortunately, surrounded by a stone railing for protection.





Monks stake out a spot where they can comfortably chant from the sacred books.

Many monks bring tents to offer privacy while they meditate and pray, and it also keeps away mosquitoes.



The entire temple is festooned with flowers which are changed daily.



Someone has lent this lucky dog his meditation cushion.