

In the Footsteps of the Buddha

The “Buddhist Circuit” is a time honored tradition in India that has attracted people from South-East Asia for centuries. They come to honor the places where Buddha lived, preached and traveled. The circuit covers:

Lumbini: where Buddha was born. The site is now just over the border in Nepal

Bodhgaya: where he attained enlightenment and where Buddhists from all over the world have established branch temples

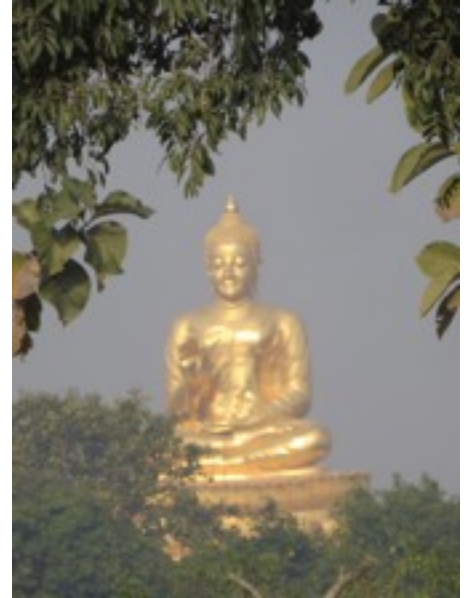
Sarnath: just outside of Varanasi where he gave his first teachings

Rajgir: where he lived for a time and wandered the hills and meditated in caves

Nalanda: the most important university of ancient India and where Buddha’s disciples started a monastic community

Sravasti: where he spent 24 rainy seasons meditating and preaching

Kushinagar: where he passed away and entered Nirvana

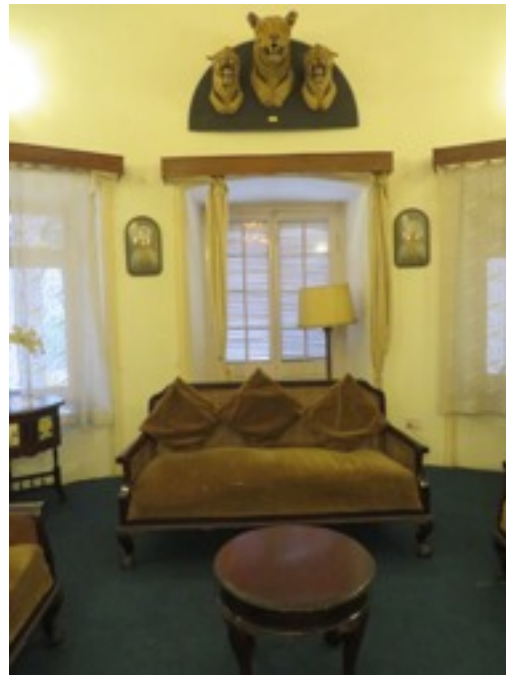


We travel through an India that few mainstream tourists visit in our efforts to visit these sites which are located in two of the poorest and most corrupt states of India: Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. It is often hot and always dusty. Roads are narrow, bumpy, pot-holed and most go from bad to really bad. We drive through the most stunning agricultural land I have ever seen in India, punctuated by teeny villages where we watch people disappear down crooked dirt alleys with chickens, pigs and mangey dogs underfoot.



These sites are visited mainly by pilgrims, many wearing white to identify them as they journey. Many stay in temples, monasteries, convents and small hotels and eat at roadside stands. At one point I tell Joan that we are Gucci-pilgrims as we stay in top hotels in the area (though the best are classed 3-star deluxe) and in heritage properties, the homes of royal families.

Heritage properties are an opportunity to stay in palaces, hunting lodges, tea estates, country houses, mountain houses that belong to maharajahs and other royals. We stayed at The Royal Retreat, a heritage property in Shivpati Nagar after our foray into Nepal. The home was originally part of a British owned indigo plantation during the Raj Era, then sold to Maharajah Shivpati Singh to use as a hunting lodge, as at that time, the area around was all forest. It has been in the same family for 120 years and, best of all, members of the family still live there and they spent time with us after dinner.



At the Royal Retreat

Our Journey

Buddhism flourished in India until the 13th century when it was wiped out by invading armies. Soon forests buried the damaged buildings and the holy sites were forgotten. During the Raj era, British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham made it his mission to locate and dig them up again. He was well aware of tales written by 4th and 6th century Chinese travelers who had documented their travels to the area in fine detail. Excavation work continues today - and probably will forever. In Nalanda, the Buddhist seat of learning which flourished from the third to the seventh century, we have the privilege of actually walking into and around a working excavation.

So the sites we visit are mainly archaeological sites with an occasional temple and we see very few structures more than one storey high. If we are the only visitors, it seems very sterile and cold. But the beauty of the Buddhist Circuit is to see and interact with the many pilgrims who visit. Many are from South East Asia, as well as Korea and Japan. They travel in large groups and are accompanied by their own monks who lead prayers at the sites. To me, this is what makes visiting the site a beautiful experience -- otherwise we are just looking at a piles of bricks and rocks.

What Stupa is That?

Of course no complete buildings or structures remain, just brick foundations. Over the centuries, people have built stupas and pagodas on the sites as memorials to honor the events that happened there. These often look quite a bit alike -- and is a case of "if you've seen one, you've probably seen them all."



We Cross the Border to Lumbini

As it turns out, the most difficult site for us to get to is Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, just over the border in Nepal. On our original itinerary, we were to do more in Nepal -- travel to Lumbini, then continue to Pokhara, Chitwan National Park and finally Kathmandu. But last November, we learned about political problems at the border leading to food and fuel shortages in Nepal creating even more havoc since they are still recovering from their devastating earthquake. So we revised our itinerary to stay in India, saving Lumbini for "next time."

In a chance conversation with a man guiding a Japanese group, we learn that it is possible to cross the India/Nepal border for a few hours to visit Lumbini, then return to India. Luckily Joan and I hold multiple-entry visas for India, which is half the battle. We contact our agent in Delhi, ask him if this deviation is possible and receive a positive response back. It would be one long, difficult day, but we can do it and our guide and driver are advised of the change.



On the appointed day, we have an early departure and head toward the border. If you have ever crossed from the US into Mexico at Tijuana, you know how hectic border crossings can be. Multiply that by about a thousand and you get the crossing at Sunauli. First, cargo trucks (which go thru a rigorous customs inspection) stretch for 15 miles waiting to do the crossing. Luckily they have lined up to the left so cars, motorcycles, rickshaws, bicycles, bullock-carts and people on foot can move forward on the right. This melee collides at the border with even more trucks, cars, motorcycles, etc. coming the other way.

The chaos! The noise! The pushing and shoving! It is not for the faint-hearted.

We make it thru Indian immigration, then thru Nepal formalities (where we must buy a visa), drive to Lumbini, stay a few hours, then return thru this mother-of-all-chaos to get back across the border into India. It was worth it.

Food (in search of Mo-Mos)



It seems we are always in search of mo-mos. These very tasty Tibetan dumplings can be eaten at any time during the day. The best ever was in Bodhgaya at Lobsang Mon, a 6-table restaurant owned by the parents of one of Joan's students. We jostle for space among monks, Tibetans and local families. If you ever want to go there, walk toward the Vien Giac Institute (aka Vietnamese Temple) then look for the signs to Lobsang Mon -- it is just a few doors away.

We were lucky to run across a mo-mo stand later at a street vendor in Lumbini Yum!

My next most favorite stop was the Be Happy Cafe in Boghgaya (can you see why Boghgaya is a trip favorite?) where we enjoy fresh brewed cappuccinos and killer desserts.



Some Favorites along the Buddhist Route



We've been blessed with good, knowledgeable guides and safe, considerate drivers. These are the people who become our teachers as well as keep us safe. They help us understand the local culture and how things are done in this part of the world.

Pappu (Rakesh Kumar) (above left) took us thru Bihar - leading us Gucci- pilgrims to the holy and historic sites. No question stumped him. And our favorite driver was Rakesh Yadov (above right) in Uttar Pradesh who also drove us across the border into Nepal. His English was excellent (most drivers are limited), and he kept a positive attitude throughout the days of very difficult driving.



Joan spent six summers volunteering in India's remote Spiti Valley teaching English to the nuns of Yangchen Choeling Nunnery. They have come to Boghgaya for several months to continue their studies and spend the winter as it is so harsh in the far north. One of my most heartwarming experiences was watching the reunion of these lovely Buddhist nuns with their teacher who they admire and love so much. Joan did a good job teaching as I could talk with many of them.

The nuns' daily schedule is posted on the wall. Up at 5:30 for puja (prayers) and a day filled with classes, cleaning duties, more prayers and at 3:00, a well-earned tea break. Then more of the same until 10pm.

TIME TABLE	
6. To 7	PUJA
7. To 8	LONZIN
8. To 9	BREAKFAST
9. To 10	PATHIT
10. To 11	PATHIT
11. To 12	ENGLISH
12. To 1	LUNCH
1. To 2	WRITING
2. To 3	TSUMTAK
3. To 4	TEA BREAK
4. To 5	TAKSAL
5. To 6	TAKSAL
6. To 7	(TSOK) PUJA
7. To 8	MEMORISING
8. To 9	DINNER
9. To 10	RANGJONG
10. To 5:30	SLEEPING TIME

KEEP
SMILE

A Souvenir

At various sites, enterprising vendors offer leaves from Bodhi trees - always reputed to be from a cutting of The Tree in Boghgaya, I gather my own at Saravasti (where Buddha meditated and preached) and add them to the ones Joan and Pappu gathered at the Thai Temple in Bodhgaya. I'll keep them to help me remember what it was like to travel amongst so many kind, gentle and devout pilgrims.

January 2016



This is my favorite monk-photo. Apple thinks of everything -- even a regulation Buddhist-orange iPad cover!