

*It was 50 years ago today.....*



Rishikesh, India may not sound familiar to many people. But if I say “the Beatles’ ashram in India” - those of us of a certain age know exactly where I am talking about.

The town of Rishikish has become known as a center for studying yoga and meditation with lots of ashrams (some of which cost only \$3 per day and include meals and classes), small hotels, and a few more upscale properties. It is located in the Himalayan foothills in the state of Uttarakhand, a 45-minute flight or a 4-hour train or car ride from Delhi.

Most tourists who visit are Indian nationals who come on pilgrimages visiting a circuit of Hindu sites. It is important for them to travel to the Ganges and to take a “holy dip” in the river which will absolve them of their sins.

There are many Sadhus around who are easily identified in their dusty orange robes, with long hair, beards and painted symbols on their bodies. They give up all worldly goods and live mostly in ashrams, or have taken over the care of a small temple (there are many around), or even live inside caves in the surrounding hills.





Entrance to the ashram with three small meditation caves on the roof.

February, 2018 is the 50th anniversary of the Beatles' arrival in Rishikesh to study Transcendental Meditation with the charismatic Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. As it turned out, the best thing that came out of their stay (which was not without its problems) was 48 songs, many of which appeared on their "White Album" released later that year in November, and on their "Abbey Road" album released in 1969.

In the early 1960's, the Maharishi leased 20 acres of land at the edge of town from the forest department in order to build his Transcendental Meditation center. Construction began in 1963 and it was soon evident that he was a good architect as the site contained pleasant walking paths, water features, small shrines, attractive landscaping and private meditation "caves" (really small 2-storey domed buildings), as well as an auditorium and yoga and meditation pavilions. Accommodations were available in stand-alone bungalows and in a multi-storey hotel-like building. Many of the walkways, buildings and meditation structures were decorated with pebbles sourced from the nearby Ganges River. The whole property was considered quite luxurious in its day. At its peak, the ashram accommodated 1,500 followers.



The 4-storey building had en-suite rooms for devotees





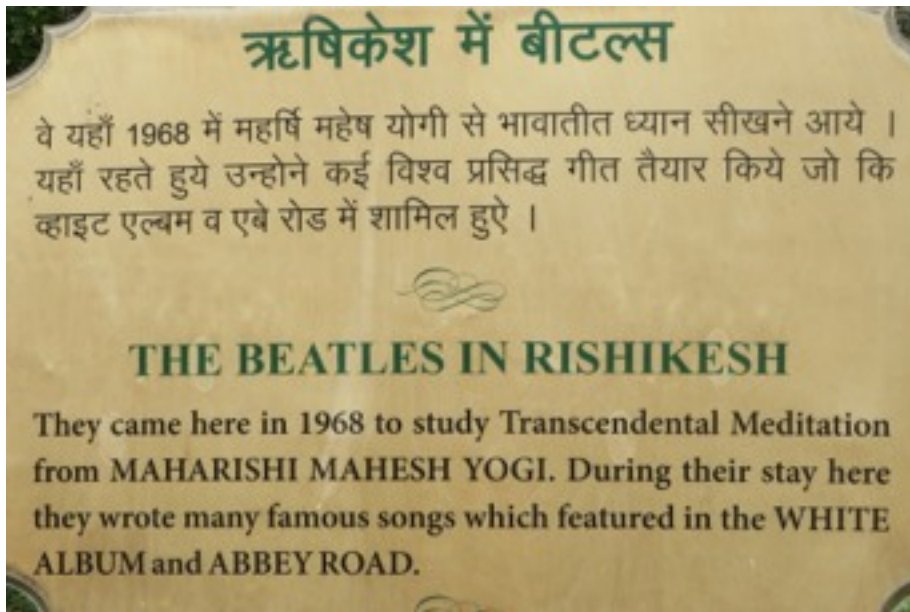
After the 20-year lease expired, the Maharishi moved his center to Switzerland, and the ashram in Rishikesh functioned for a few years without a lease, but finally was abandoned. In the mid-1990's the forest department locked the gates, declared it off-limits and let it be for the next few decades.

Slowly, the buildings fell into disrepair and the forest closed in. In 1983, the entire area of 317 square miles, including the ashram property, was merged with two neighboring wildlife sanctuaries and renamed Rajaji National Park.



The buildings are derelict and a few are ready to fall down. Most have been stripped of any decorative items and porcelain fixtures. Visitors are free to wander the entire property and explore any buildings they wish.

In 2015, the forest department decided to rename the property "The Beatles Ashram," clean it up a bit, charge admission, and in December of that year, opened the area to the public.



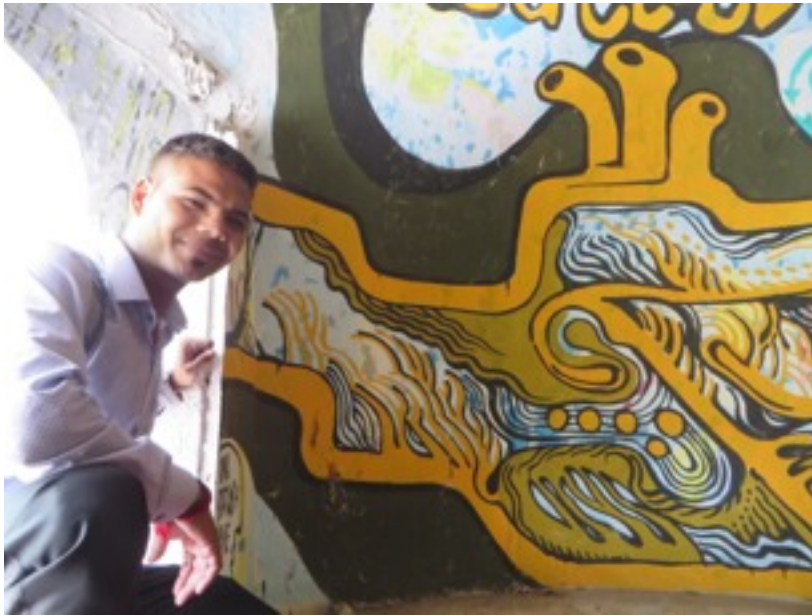
At the present time, this is the only signage about the Beatles on the property, though a museum and cafeteria are planned.

Over the years, graffiti artists (some good, some mediocre) have decorated much of the property, so even if you are not a fan of the Beatles, it is worth a visit for the artwork. Thank goodness an organization of well-respected artists called Artxpan trespassed onto the site in 2012 and garnished many buildings with high quality murals. If you want to see their work, it is at [www.instagram.com/beatlesashramofficial/](http://www.instagram.com/beatlesashramofficial/).



When I learned that the ashram is now open to visitors, I made arrangements to spend a week in Rishikesh at my favorite hotel, The Ganga Kinare - a Riverside Boutique Hotel.

I booked a Beatles Ashram tour through the hotel and they provided a guide and car for the trip, including two hours of waiting time while I visited the site. The cost of the tour was 2,700 Indian rupees (\$42) with the understanding that I would pay a separate entrance fee on site.



As luck would have it, Raj Singh was assigned to me. Raj had guided a friend and me in January, 2016 on a previous visit to Rishikesh. He is an excellent guide and so well prepared that he brought along insect repellent, water, candy and a hat for me to use.

He is a native of Rishikesh as well as an independent, licensed guide. This is a good combination. (He can be reached at [tourguideraj@gmail.com](mailto:tourguideraj@gmail.com)).

The site is open from 9am to 5pm daily and it is about a half-hour drive from town, across a bridge and then along a long and winding road. There is a higher admission fee for foreigners (600 rupees, \$10) than for Indian nationals (150 rupees, \$2.30) and one would hope that the extra “foreigner fee” helps with upkeep and restoration.

As I walked around I used my imagination and could almost see the Beatles standing there. Their personal “meditation cave” is signposted, but not the rooms where they stayed.





Each person could have their own meditation cave. Some were 2-storey with bathroom facilities. This is a photo of a standard cave, one of many throughout the site.

The area is quiet with just birds chirping and insects buzzing. Any rhythm comes from our footsteps. Maybe it was a pilgrimage, maybe it is a look at a bit of 1960's history, but I wanted to take in every little thing and remember it all my life.

I'm glad I believe in yesterday and designed my own magical mystery tour and spent time at the lovely Ganga Kinare hotel and know that all the ashram site needs is a little love to become a major tourist and Beatles pilgrimage spot.



I wish there truly were 8 days a week so my delightful visit would have lasted even longer.

As with many places to visit here, there and everywhere, it is important to go now and enjoy having it all to yourself. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!



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Note: this vignette is part of an article I am submitting to International Travel News about a visit to the Beatles Ashram and a stay at a spa hotel in Rishikesh. It was put together with a little help from my friends Dave and Karyn. But the photos are just for you!