

SPIRITUAL INDIA HANDBOOK

A GUIDE TO TEMPLES, HOLY SITES
FESTIVALS AND TRADITIONS

STEPHEN KNAPP



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Contents

Introduction	1
PURPOSE AND BENEFITS OF PILGRIMAGE	5
TAKING THE TRAINS	9
BE CAUTIOUS	10
AVOIDING SCAMS	11
BEING PREPARED	14
DEALING WITH RICKSHA OR TAXI DRIVERS	14
CURRENCY EXCHANGE	15
FOOD PRECAUTIONS	17
HEAT STROKE OR HEAT EXHAUSTION	17
EXPECT PERSONAL CHANGES IN YOURSELF	18
WHAT IF TEMPLES DO NOT LET US IN?	18
C H A P T E R 1 The Major Holy Places in East and Central India and Nepal	21
NEW DELHI	22
MATHURA	29
GOKULA	31
VRINDAVANA	33
GREATER VRAJAMANDALA	40
AGRA	45
FATEHPUR SIKRI	50
GWALIOR	52
JHANSI TO ORCHHA	53

KHAJURAHU (or KHAJURAO)	54
CHITRAKUT.	59
ALLAHABAD (PRAYAGA)	61
THE TRADITION OF THE KUMBHA MELA.	63
VARANASI	64
SARNATH	73
AYODHYA	74
NAIMISARANYA (TIRUNAIMISARANYAM).	76
GORAKHPUR/KUSHINAGAR	80
GOING TO NEPAL AT SAUNALI FOR LUMBINI	81
GOING TO NEPAL THROUGH RAXAUL TO BIRGANJ	82
LUMBINI	83
POKHARA	84
MUKTINATH	85
GOING TO KATHMANDU	86
KATHMANDU	87
JANAKPUR	94
WHERE TO GO NEXT?	95
PATNA	95
VAISHALI	96
NALANDA	96
RAJGIR.	97
PAWAPURI	97
GAYA	97
BODHGAYA	99
BARABAR HILL.	100
DEOGHAR	100
VISHNUPUR	101
KOLKATA	102
MAYAPUR	104
EKACHAKRA	116
RAMAKELI	119
GANGA SAGAR.	120

REMUNA	121
JAGANNATHA PURI	124
BHUBANESWAR	134
SRI KAKULAM to KURMAKSETRA	136
VISAKHAPATNAM	137
NAGPUR & RAMA GIRI	139
VIJAYAWADA	139
MANGALAGIRI	141
AGIRIPALLI	144
HYDERABAD & YADAGIRIGUTTA	144
BASARA	145
WARANGAL	146
PALAMPET	147
VEMULAWADA	147
SRISAILAM	149
ALAMPUR	150
NANDYAL	150
AHOVALAM	150
NELLORE	155
GOING TO TIRUPATI	155
CHAPTER 2 The Historical Holy Sites and Temples of South India	167
TIRUPATI	168
TIRUMALLA	170
OTHER TEMPLES AROUND TIRUPATI	175
KALAHASTHI	176
CHENNAI	177
TEMPLES IN THE CHENNAI AREA	180
Tiruneermalai	180
Mangadu	180
Tiruninravar	180
Tiruvallur	180
Tiruthani	180

Sholingar	180
Thiruvidadenthal	181
MAMALLAPURAM	181
TIRUKKALIKUNDRAM.	182
KANCHIPURAM.	183
TIRUVANNAMALAI	188
THE STORY OF THE SHIVA LINGAM	189
THIRUKKOVILUR (or TIRUKOILUR).	191
AUROVILLE	192
TIRUVANDHIPURAM.	193
CHIDAMBARAM	194
SIRKAZHI	198
VAIDESVARANKOIL (or VAITHISVARANKOIL)	198
MAYURAM	199
KUMBAKONAM.	200
GANGAKONDACHOLAPURAM	201
DHARASURAM.	202
SWAMIMILAI	202
TIRUVALAMJULI	203
SURYANARCOIL	203
TRIBHUVANAM (THIRUBHUVANAM or TIRUBHUVANAM)	203
OTHER TEMPLES IN THE AREA OF KUMBHAKONAM	204
NACHIYARCOIL	204
TIRUCHERAI	205
THIRUVARUR	206
NAGAPPATTINAM	207
THIRUKANNAPURAM	208
MANNARGUDI	209
VEDARANYAM (DAKSHINA KAILASAM).	211
TANJORE (or THANJAVUR)	211
TIRUCHIRAPPALI (TRICHY)	212
THADICOMBU	217
PALNI (PALANI)	218

MADURAI	218
ALAGARCOIL	223
THIRUPPARANKUNDRAM	223
TIRUMOHUR	224
SRIVILLIPUTTUR	224
TIRUTHANGAL (TIRUTTANGAL)	224
RAMESVARAM	226
TIRUCHENDUR	229
PILGRIMAGE TO SIX MURUGAN TEMPLES	230
VAIKUNTHAM	230
TIRUNELVELI	232
KRISHNAPURAM	233
KANYAKUMARI	234
SUCHINDRAM	236
THIRUATTUR (or THIRUVATTUR or THIRUVATTAR)	237
TRIVANDRUM (TIRUVANANDAPURAM)	240
VARKALA	242
KOLLAM TO AMRITAPURI	243
HARIPAD	244
CHANGANNUR	244
ARANMULA	245
SABARIMALA	245
ALAPPUZHA	247
ETTUMANOOR	247
VAIKOM	248
KALADI	248
CRANGANORE	249
GURUVAYOOR	250
TRICHUR (or THRISSUR)	251
KARAMADAI	252
UDUPI	253
SRINGERI	254
KOLLUR	255

GOKARNA	255
MYSORE	256
SRIRANGAPATNAM	259
SRAVANABELAGOLA	259
BELUR, HALEBID, and SOMNATHPUR	260
MELKOTE (or MALAKOTE or MAILKOTE)	263
SUBRAMANYA	265
BRINDABAN GARDENS	265
BANGALORE (BENGALURU).	266
DENKANIKOTA	269
ENDING OUR TOUR BACK AT BANGALORE	269
CHAPTER 3 The Major Holy Places of Western India	281
STARTING IN NEW DELHI	281
KARALI	282
JAIPUR	283
AJMER & PUSHKAR	289
OSIAN	292
CHITTORGARH	292
UDAIPUR	293
NATHDWARA	294
KANKROLI	297
CHARBUJAJI	298
EKALINGJI	298
NAGDA	298
RANAKPUR	298
RIKHABDEO	299
MOUNT ABU	299
AHMEDABAD	301
AKSHARDAM	303
MODHERA	304
PATAN	304
DAKOR	305
DWARAKA	306

BEYT DWARAKA	311
PORBANDER	311
VERAVAL & SOMNATH	312
JUNAGADH & GIRNAR HILL	314
BHAVNAGAR & PALITANA	315
LOTHAL	317
BARODA & MORE	318
UJJAIN	318
FROM BHOPAL TO SANCHI AND VIDISHA	324
SANCHI	324
VIDISHA	325
BHIMBEKTA	326
INDORE & MANDU	326
MANDU FORT	327
OMKESHVARA	328
AURANGABAD TO AJANTA & ELLORA CAVES	329
AJANTA	330
ELLORA	331
VERUL	332
NASIK	333
PANDU LENA	336
TRYAMBAKESHWARA	336
PARALI	339
MUMBAI	339
KARLA & BHAJA CAVES	343
PUNE	344
THE ASHTAVINAYAKA YATRA	345
BHIMASHANKAR	346
SHIVPUR	346
MAHABALESHWAR	346
PANDHARPUR	347
KOLHAPUR	350
BIJAPUR	351

BADAMI	354
PATTADAKAL	355
AIHOLE	356
LAKKANDI	358
DAMBAL	358
HOSPET & HAMPI	359
ANEGUNDI	365
HARIHARA	367
TADPATRI	367
PUTTAPARTHI	367
LEPAKSHI	369
TUMKUR, SHIVAGANGA	370
BANGALORE	370

CHAPTER 4 **The Major Historical and Holy Places of Northern India. 379**

SHUKRATAL (SUKARA-TALA & SHUKTEERTH)	380
HARIDWAR	385
RISHIKESH	388
DEHRA DUN	391
MUSSOORIE	391
GOING TO SEE THE CHAR DHAM TEMPLES	392
YAMUNOTRI	394
GOING TO GANGOTRI	395
GANGOTRI	396 ON
THE WAY TO KEDARNATH	400
KEDARNATH	401
VISITING THE PANCH (FIVE) KEDAR TEMPLES	403
IMPORTANT TOWNS ON THE WAY TO BADRINATH	404
JOSHIMATH	405
BADRINATH (TIRUVADARIASHRAMA)	407
MANA	410
THE FIVE BADRI TEMPLES	412
DEVA PRAYAG (or DEOPRAYAG)	412

NAHAN	413
CHANDIGARH AND GOING NORTH	414
SHIMLA	414
MANDI	416
KULLU	416
PLACES ALONG THE WAY NORTH TO MANALI	417
MANALI	418
PLACES AROUND MANALI	419
FROM MANALI TO LEH	420
BACK FROM MANALI TO MANDI OR CHANDIGARH	422
AMRITSAR	422
GOING TO DHARAMSALA	426
DHARAMSALA & MCLEOD GANJ	428
CHAMBA	434
JAMMU	435
VAISHNO DEVI	437
GOING TO KASHMIR	440
TOWNS ALONG THE WAY TO SRINAGAR	441
GOING TO AMARNATH	443
AMARNATH	444
SRINAGAR	447
ADDITIONAL SITES AROUND SRINAGAR	452
THE GRAVE OF JESUS	453
MOSES IN KASHMIR	456
GOING INTO LADAKH FROM SRINIGAR	457
IMPORTANT POINT	459
ZANSKAR	459
LADAKH AND THE GOMPAS WEST OF LEH	460
LEH	464
TOWNS AND MONASTERIES SOUTH OF LEH	466
LEAVING LEH FOR MANALI	469
KURUKSETRA	471
BACK TO DELHI	475

C HAPTER 5	The Major Holy Sites and Temples of Far Northeast India	487
	ENTERING THE NORTHEAST REGION.	488
	DARJEELING	489
	KALIMPONG	491
	PERMITS FOR SIKHIM	492
	GANGTOK	492
	RUMTEK	494
	PEMAYANGTSE	496
	PHODANG & LABRANG MONASTERIES	496
	TASHIDING MONASTERY	496
	ASSAM	497
	GUAHATI	498
	ARUNACHAL PRADESH	504
	MEGHALAYA	505
	TRIPURA	505
	NAGALAND	506
	MANIPUR	507
	Conclusion	517
A PPENDIX A	Preparing for Your Trip to India	
	A Short Guide	519
	GET A PASSPORT AND A VISA	520
	IMMUNIZATIONS	520
	PACKING LIST	521
A PPENDIX B	Suggested Routes for Short Pilgrimages	525
A PPENDIX C	About the Photographs	527
	Travel Books That Were Helpful.	529
	Glossary	533
	Index	533
	About Stephen Knapp	549
	Stephen Knapp	559

Introduction

Reading about Eastern philosophy is one thing, but going to Eastern lands and actually experiencing it is quite another. Seeing the local people who understand and practice this knowledge in their customary surroundings can be quite enlightening, but it can also be perplexing if you do not know what is happening or the reasons behind what people do.

India, like other places in the world that have unusual mystical traditions, is a land that can be both physically and mentally demanding. India is an exotic, beautiful, and wondrous country, depending on what aspects of it you see. Living and traveling there can be pleasant and exciting, but it is also likely to provide you with many trying situations. It can be terribly hot, dry, and dusty. Good food and water may not always be readily available. And living conditions and transportation can often leave much to be desired. But it is a total experience on every level: a testing ground that is not for every-one. It can separate the serious from the frivolous; the real truth-seekers from the superficial and worldly sight-seeing tourists. But if you want the real treasure of India, the spiritual heritage of the East, it can be found if you are determined. But you have to know where to look and how to find it.

When entering India, you will most likely go through one of three places: Kolkata, Mumbai, or New Delhi. Like any big city, they can be somewhat overwhelming if you do not know where to go or how to handle the various situations that one is likely to encounter, especially in such a different culture. Some people may handle it quite easily, while others will find that the difference in lifestyle will make them ask, "Why did I ever think I wanted to come to this place?" For those, India may be a country where they stop long enough merely to see the Taj Mahal, the Jaipur Palace, and a few other places before going on to some other part of the world. Then they can say that they have been to India. But whether they actually see the real life of the people is another thing.

When visiting India, you have to be willing to readjust the way you see the world. It is a country that moves slowly. For example, trains and buses are often late. So you must have patience and plenty of tolerance, otherwise you may experience much to complain

about and little of the beauty and wonder that exists there. You have to look beyond the poverty, the dirt, dust, smells, and overcrowded living conditions in the cities if you expect to enter into the mysteries of India's spiritual culture.

If you are attached to your Western ways or particular standards of comfort and are not willing to adjust, then, quite honestly, you have no business going to India, not at least if you are looking for its spiritual aspects. To do that requires you to drop your guard and your pretenses, and get out amongst the people, especially the *sadhus* or holy men, and see them as they are, doing their regular business, visiting their temples and attending their religious festivals. Whether you understand it all or not, it is bound to awaken a part of you that you never knew existed or have rarely experienced. You may either be confused by it, or you may find that you are quite at home with it, feeling a spiritual tranquility, the likes of which you have hardly realized before.

Attaining this spiritual serenity is a matter of evolving your consciousness. And how can your consciousness evolve if you do not decondition yourself from the habitual materialistic thought patterns in which you have grown accustomed? You must set aside your normal (or is it unnatural?) everyday ways of thinking in order to look at things from an entirely new perspective, a different state of mind. This is what expanding your consciousness and becoming aware of higher realms of existence is all about. And this is the real spiritual heritage of India. It offers an individualistic process of personal transformation and development for understanding yourself, your position in the universe, and your relationship with the Supreme. However, let us remember that the goal of Eastern philosophy or yoga is not to escape or cut yourself off from the outside world, but it is to BRING IN the awareness of self, the understanding of your real identity. Upon attaining this perception, one is never shaken in any situation. Of course, this does not mean that if you go to India you will see everyone intensely absorbed in this aspect of life. Like any place else, most people will simply be engaged in the struggle to survive, work, career, or ways to make money. Nonetheless, the people of India, generally speaking, are the most spiritually oriented people in the world.

In one's attempt to see the spiritual side of India, it is very important to know where to go and what to see in order to maximize whatever spiritual experiences you are looking for. Naturally, some places have more to offer than others, and certain towns are more sacred to specific religions or spiritual paths.

There are places in India like Vrindavan, Mathura, Mayapur, Dwarka, Varanasi, Puri, and others, as well as rivers like the Ganges or Yamuna, which exist and can be experienced in the normal three dimensional way. But these places are said to also exist in the spiritual realm, the higher dimension. This means that these places are where the material and spiritual energies overlap. Although the spiritual energy may pervade the universe, at such holy places or *tirthas* the experiences of higher dimensions are easier to attain. This is what gives these places special meaning amongst those who can perceive or know of this multidimensional aspect. This depends, however, on how receptive and elevated the person is in spiritual knowledge and awareness.

For those who are not spiritually aware, these cities and rivers will appear as no different from any other. Such people will say that the Ganges is not a holy river, that the Dei-

ties in the temples are merely stone idols, and that the sages are ordinary men. But the Vedic texts say that people with such a vision have a hellish mentality. They are forced by their own limitations of consciousness to be aware of nothing more than the most base level of existence and cannot perceive the higher realms of life that are all around us. For them this three dimensional material universe holds more mysteries than they can imagine, what to speak of the spiritual dimension which they cannot see at all.

From the gross sensory perspective, many of the values the people of India have, as well as activities they perform in the name of spirituality, will be completely bewildering for an uncultured tourist who lacks the spiritual knowledge that India has to offer. Such people may see a variety of activities, customs, and traditions that people enthusiastically perform in their abandonment for unity between the soul and God. Yet the average tourist will have no idea of why or what is the meaning of such customs. Then, as to be expected, they will view everything as being very strange. Therefore, only for those who are spiritually elevated does the higher dimensional realm of India exist, not simply as something to observe or study, but as a reality to be experienced. For others who lack such spiritual awareness, this aspect of India will forever remain a peculiar mystery. However, with the proper knowledge they can understand what is going on and the purpose of the numerous traditions that have existed for many hundreds and thousands of years.

Spiritually, the temples are like launching pads where one performs those activities that assist in reaching higher dimensions. They are the doorways to more advanced realms and where pilgrims and devotees go to make an outward display of their devotion to their deities. Though God is within us all, and religion or yoga is very often an inward process, God can manifest externally as the deity, the *arca-vigraha* incarnation, through which He accepts the devotee's service while he or she is in the material realm. These devotional activities, such as simple *darshan* (seeing the deity and being seen by the deity), are considered purifying for one's life and consciousness. The goal is to continue on this path until one's thoughts are purified to the point where one sheds his or her materialistic consciousness and can enter the spiritual realm, at least by the time of death if not before. Thus, everyone tries to visit the nearest temple a few times a day, or tries to make pilgrimages to the famous holy places.

The temples usually have a main shrine with smaller temples or shrines surrounding it. These shrines may have *murtis* or carved images of important spiritual masters, or deities of various demigods, such as Parvati (Lord Shiva's wife), Durga (the warrior aspect of Parvati, sometimes called Kali, Tara, etc.), Sarasvati (goddess of knowledge and intelligence), Lakshmi (goddess of fortune, Lord Vishnu's wife), Ganesh (a son of Shiva, said to destroy obstacles and offer good luck), Murugan (meaning divine child, the Tamil name for Subramaniya, another son of Shiva, especially worshiped in the South), Brahma (born from Lord Vishnu and who engineered the creation of the living beings within the uni-verse), and Shiva (the benevolent one, part of the triad of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva who continually create, maintain, and destroy the universe), and other deities of the Supreme, such as Vishnu (incarnation of the Supreme appearing as the All-pervading One, the preserver or maintainer of the universe), or Krishna (the Supreme Being, source

of all other incarnations, such as Rama, Vishnu, Narasimha, etc.). The temple is usually dedicated to a particular form of God or demigod which you will find on the main altar.

It is explained that the deity is not a product of someone's imagination, but is made in accordance with the ancient Vedic texts, called the *Shilpasutras*, which deal with the science of iconography. Everything about the deity, such as its proportions, the postures, hand gestures, weapons (if any), the emblems, etc., all mean something. Therefore, it is very important that every part of the deity is formed properly. The deity may also have different features which represent different aspects, abilities, powers, or pastimes. After the deity is formed, there is the elaborate installation ceremony during which the deity is installed in the temple. At this time the devotees and priests petition the personality of the demigod or Supreme Being to take up residence in the form of the deity. Only then does the deity become the *arca-vigraha*, or a worshipable incarnation of the Supreme Being or particular demigod.

It is considered that since God is the controller of both material and spiritual energies, He can turn something material into spiritual energy or vice versa. Thus, the deity, which may appear to be made of common material elements, becomes spiritual and allows us to see spiritual form with our material senses. Out of the causeless mercy of the Supreme, He agrees to reside within the form of the deity to accept the worship of His devotees. Of course, we should not think He is forced to remain there. If He is neglected or if harm is allowed to come to the deity, He may leave the form of the deity at any time.

There are many stories in both traditional Vedic writings and local legends that relate how various deities have reciprocated with devotees. Such relations have taken place in dreams as well as in the awakened state in which the deity has come to life to show Him-self or Herself as He or She is, or partake in pastimes with their devotees. There are also some instances when Krishna or Shiva spontaneously manifested themselves as stone deities. Such deities are called self-manifested because they were not formed by any artist or priest. Lord Venkateshvara at Tirupati, Vishvanatha Shiva at Varanasi, and several Krishna deities at Vrindavan are a few examples of this. Of course, most Westerners of little faith cannot explain such occurrences, and can hardly accept that the Supreme would exhibit Himself in this way, which many would call miracles. They would rather look for some "logical" or non-mystical explanation for such things. But for the devoted and the sages who have glimpsed and understand the spiritual dimensions of existence, the deities are a living reality. Even if one cannot accept the concept of deities, then even in the most abstract sense the images, such as in Buddhism, represent cosmic principles which affect us all. Therefore, they remain a part of the reality we experience at every moment. In this way, the temples are the places where one can see and even experience the Divine.

Furthermore, many of the temples are built at locations where ancient historical or holy events involving the incarnations of God or the demigods have occurred. Such temples give evidence for the legends that are described in the *Puranas* which explain how the Supreme Being appeared there. Therefore, these sites become very sacred, even spiritualized for having been the site of the pastimes of the Supreme. It is for this reason that people can acquire great spiritual merit by visiting these places. Thus, these sites become important centers on the pilgrimage routes for many of the devout. In this way, the tem-

ples are the most significant of the surviving monuments where religious, social, cultural, and, in many cases, political aspects of history have been preserved.

Historically, the temples were also major centers for education. The larger ones would maintain priests and students for the recitation of the Vedic and Puranic texts to the people at large. Thus, both literate or illiterate people could be provided with a cultural education. The villages, however, had schools for basic study and learning, but beyond that the temples often had libraries full of books from all branches of learning and teachers who taught all these subjects.

The temples also served as centers for the arts since they would employ many artists to paint scenes from the Puranic legends or carve beautiful sculptures. There were also jewelers and goldsmiths who would make articles and ornaments for the deities. Musicians and singers were also employed, and dancing girls would perform exotic dances in times of worship, especially during festivals.

The larger temples had hospitals and doctors and areas for feeding and caring for the poor and destitute. In order to do all this, the temples consumed large amounts of fruits and grains. Thus, the temples were given plots of land that were used mostly by the farmers for growing food for the offerings in the temples. These offerings, however, would then be redistributed amongst the temple employees and the poor who needed food. The temples also had systems of banking. Thus, with such a variety of activity centered around them, the temples played a very important part in Indian culture, and in preserving that culture and distributing knowledge. In many cases, the temples are still the center of cultural and spiritual activity in the towns.

PURPOSE AND BENEFITS OF PILGRIMAGE

There are several reasons why many people go on pilgrimage tours of holy sites and temples. One, of course, is to dovetail our interest in traveling and seeing foreign lands into a way of acquiring spiritual merit. Most everyone likes to travel and see new countries and sights and inspiring places, and some of the most stimulating places are those of spiritual importance where historical events or miracles have taken place, or where significant spiritual incidents have happened as described in various spiritual texts and epics, such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, etc.

One of the most important reasons for going on pilgrimage tours and seeing the places of spiritual importance is to meet other saintly people who follow a spiritual path and see how they live. This is especially the case with saints and sages who can help us by giving their association and sharing their spiritual knowledge and realizations. This is of prime importance for us in order to align our lives in a similar manner so we can also make spiritual progress.

Also, by staying in such spiritually vibrant holy places, even for short periods of time, or by taking bath in the spiritually powerful rivers, such experiences will purify and enliven us and give us a deeper understanding of how to live a spiritual lifestyle. Tours like this can give us an everlasting impression that will inspire us for years to come, maybe even for the rest of our lives. Such an opportunity may not happen often, even after many

lifetimes. So if such a possibility does come into our lives, we should seriously take advantage of it.

Pilgrimage is a sacred journey. It is a process that is not meant simply to get away from it all, but to allow oneself to encounter, see, and experience the Divine. This is accomplished by associating with holy people, visiting the holy places where the pastimes of the Divine have taken place, and where the sacred temples allow *darshan*: The vision of the Supreme. *Darshan* is the process of approaching the deity in the temple in a state of spiritual communication, open and ready to receive sacred revelations. It means to see the Absolute Reality, and also to be seen by that Supreme Reality, God.

Pilgrimage means living very simply, and going toward what is holy and most sacred, and remaining focused on the opportunity of having a life-changing experience. In this way, we will undergo voluntary austerities for purification to relieve ourselves of lifetimes of karma. This process will help change our consciousness and our perception of our spiritual identity and how we fit into this world, and help us gain access to the spiritual dimension through enlightenment.

When you are traveling in harmony with the Divine, it is not unlikely that you will experience spontaneous help from others when you may need it. This has happened to me in many ways and many times. In such a state of consciousness, seeming obstacles will quickly disappear. However, other challenges may be there to test our sincerity, but usually it is nothing so great that prevents us from reaching our goal, unless we have some serious karma to work out. It is divine guidance that assists us in our mission and prepares us for higher and higher levels of spiritual perception. Perceiving this assistance is another form of experiencing the Divine and the spiritual progress that we are making.

The objective of pilgrimage takes on more meaning when we realize the purpose of life. Life is meant for becoming free from the wheel of *samsara*, which means the continuous cycle of birth and death. It is for making spiritual advancement and to perceive our real identity. For this, we need to continue performing our regular religious practices to acquire virtue and freedom from sins and karmic reactions. It also requires purification of the mind, which then paves the way for clarity in perceiving who we are and the importance of spiritual progress. It leads to the destruction of ignorance of reality and the means to see beyond the illusion of material existence.

Such a practice to elevate our mind and consciousness is a type of yoga, which means the process to link ourselves to God. And the *yatra* or pilgrimage to holy places can be a step in that yoga process. Thinking about, arranging to go to, or even the process of reaching holy places is a process to elevate our consciousness and realign it to be more aware of God and the higher dimensions of the spiritual strata. *Sadhus* and saintly people may go on such *yatras* on a regular basis. But to do a pilgrimage can be especially rewarding and beneficial for householders who are often closed up in their daily business, cares, anxieties, and concerns. On such a *yatra* they can give up their ordinary concerns and replace it with the joy of traveling to the places that give spiritual merit. Such holy sites are often where great and sacred events have taken place. Then people can remember the purpose of life and experience a mental and spiritual rejuvenation. They can also find uplifting association with other *yatris*, or pilgrims, and with *sadhus* and sages who can

share their own experiences and wisdom. This association with saintly people and the spiritual atmosphere is the main goal of pilgrimage. We can gather that impression in our consciousness and take it with us wherever we go.

The devotee may start out with God's name on his lips, or the thought of reaching the Divine, yet take the process of traveling as a form of penance that they undergo for a higher purpose. The pilgrim may also stop along the way to visit sacred rivers and shrines, or be elevated and blessed by having *darshan* of the deities at the temples one visits. Of course, the level of tolerance and endurance will also have to increase as one undergoes the usual difficulties of traveling in places that are foreign, strange, or unfamiliar, and sometimes crowded with other pilgrims. And where there may be little in the way of modern amenities. You may also have to travel lite, without many of the things you would like to take with you. Yet, that is the idea, to free your mind from many of the usual attachments and concerns of life. This will also help you take in the higher vibrations of the holy places that you visit, which is the main focus during pilgrimage. But take it slow if necessary, and be sure to keep the meaning of it in the forefront of your purpose.

The holy places may be a mountain like Mount Kailash or Arunachala Hill, a holy lake such as Manasarovara or Pushkar, a temple town like Vrindavana or Dwaraka, a sacred river like the Ganges or Yamuna, or other place or area like the Char-dham route consisting of Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath. All of these are sanctified by tradition wherein historical and spiritual events have happened. Or we may go to places where there are still traditions and rites to be performed that offer spiritual credit. Such pilgrimages can be done any time on an individual basis, or with a small group. Or they may be done at special times during the year when a huge gathering or festival may take place. The holy site may be a short distance away, or it may be reached only after a long drive or walk, under easy circumstances or after undergoing difficult physical austerities. Some simply walk around the hill, while others may do a *dandavat parikrama*. The latter is when you bow down and prostrate on the ground a full body length and then move forward that same distance to bow down again. This continues all the way around the hill. Others undergo a particular vow they have made. It is all for spiritual merit.

The significance of pilgrimage is that the *yatri* or pilgrim does not consider the physical aspect of the journey, but focuses on the spiritual power of the place, the Divine presence, or the sacred events that have happened there, and the opportunity to tap in and experience that dimension. Through faith and dedication, you make yourself receptive to the higher vibrations of the holy site. The waves of spiritual energy can purify and uplift all levels of our being, destroying the dark elements in our consciousness and bad karma, and awakening our dormant spiritual tendencies. Or if we already have strong spiritual inclinations, they will become ever more apparent. By traveling to and associating with powerful holy places, the divine atmosphere and energy, and the saintly people who live there, if we are receptive to it, will bring us to a heightened state of awareness and unity with the Supreme. This is the importance and the inner effects that can take place through such pilgrimage.

As we begin our travels, we should bear in mind that India, at its present place in time, may be materially less advanced than the West but is far more spiritually developed. Of

course, India is changing rapidly and is acquiring many material amenities. The average person in the streets of India knows more about spiritual science than most educated Westerners. Though someone from the West may know about religion, they still may know very little about real spirituality, which includes the knowledge of the soul, what happens at death, reincarnation, karma, etc. Try to have a conversation with a Westerner on these topics and it usually will not last long. But take any person from the East and the talk may go on for hours. Thus, there is a difference in cultures from the spiritual point of view.

To truly understand spiritual topics requires a change of consciousness, not simply a change of intellectual disposition or viewpoint, as many academicians tend to think. It requires one to rise above the bodily concept of life. Thus, even a poor man who superficially might appear to be uneducated may still attain great levels of spiritual realization. But some people may not agree with or understand spiritual knowledge because they, quite simply, might be incapable of changing their consciousness or of rising above the material conception of life. The ability to do this is a qualification that is far removed from simply acquiring a material education. Thus, regardless of one's position in life, everyone can try to understand spiritual knowledge. And one of the best ways, aside from studying spiritual texts, is to travel and experience the special nature of the sacred places that exist in India.

By entering deeply into the mysteries of spiritual India a person may experience a culture shock. Not a culture shock merely in the sense of having to deal with strange new situations and customs that you find in a different country, but also in the sense of taking a new look at yourself and the world and what your position really is in this universe. When you are traveling in the East, you are occasionally forced to be somewhat defense-less to new ideas, values, and perceptions. You may not have the easy access to Western forms of escapism. In India, life and death as it is stares you in the face, and you can either come to terms with it or simply try to avoid thinking about it. But by understanding the transitory nature of life through the spiritual knowledge that India is known for is something that can give you levels of realization you never had before. These may be simple realizations that you might reflect on from time to time, or they might be the kind that makes you change your way of seeing yourself, the world, and the way you want to live. So in spite of customs or traditions that you may not be used to or able to fully accept, you may still attain a new understanding of your real identity. Or you may also get a clearer glimpse of the infinite realm of divine consciousness. What you find within yourself depends on you and how open you are to new perceptions.

So let us begin our journey and see what happens. (I must clarify that when I say *we*, I mean *I* the traveler and *you* the reader. Together on this tour in the following pages *we* see these places.) In this journey I also tend to be very nonsectarian, and I visit and will describe many important holy places of many religions. I believe that all spiritual places have potency, some more than others. Yet, they all have something to offer. As you travel, you can also purchase the small books that more fully describe the history and legends that are connected to each location. I regularly do this to get additional information about each place which increases my appreciation for it.

TAKING THE TRAINS

Traveling from one part of India to another is often accomplished through the use of trains. Taking the train during our travels in India can be quite an adventure. You can definitely see some great landscapes as you go through hills, valleys, or travel past the lakes, cities, villages, farmlands, rice fields, and groves of fruit trees. At the train stations there are often vendors who will come through the train cars or call through your window selling anything from bananas, biscuits (cookies), cool drinks, magazines, nuts, salad, etc. And, of course, there are the tea sellers with their loud and often annoying shouts of “Chai, chai”. There may also be children (or old men and women) who seem to live at the train stations by begging. Or a blind beggar will use his cane to find the door to the train car, board and carefully walk down the aisles asking for donations while playing an instrument and singing songs as the train goes on to its next stop, where he will get off.

There may also be village children who sing songs or play with monkeys as a form of entertainment outside your train window in the hope of getting a few rupees. Or maybe they will perform some acrobatic tricks to gain your favor. And while traveling, the people you meet on the train are often friendly and willing to share conversation, ask you questions, or even share their food. On the average, Indian people are much friendlier than Westerners. But if you are a Westerner you may have to get used to people staring at you, especially when in smaller towns. There were many times when I was the only white person on the train or the bus, and the people could not help but be curious and watch every move I made. One time in a small town in Central India I got off the bus to buy a few apples. When I had made my purchase and turned around, I was facing a large crowd of local people who had gathered behind me simply to watch what I was doing. Who knows when the last white man went through their village.

When using the trains, if it is available, always travel in the first-class or second-class AC section where it is a little cleaner (most of the time) and more organized and roomier. People are also likely to be more trustworthy, and traveling with them will make you less susceptible to theft or robbery, of which you must always be careful. In third-class, anything can happen and people sometimes squeeze in until there is standing room only. It also creates easier pickings for pickpockets. One time I was sitting in the crowded third-class section and with each stop more and more people left the train. So I got on an upper bunk to take some rest. Just as I was getting to sleep the train stopped at a place where the whole village must have tried to get on. There were eight people sitting on benches that were meant for four. I did not get much sleep that night. Another time I was at a train station waiting for a train when one train pulled out that was completely full. There were no more seats available, the aisles were full, and there were people hanging onto the doors and windows on the outside of the train. How long they could hold on like that I don't know. But these kinds of things are not unusual to see while traveling by train. Now, about the buses ...

When traveling shorter distances, buses are the usual form of transport. However, there are some areas and routes where trains simply are not available, and long distances must be made by bus, unless flying is a possibility. Going through the mountains or the

highlands of north India are areas where you must take buses, unless you choose to go by taxi. I have had fairly good luck taking buses in India. They are also an adventure, although generally slower, less safe, and much bumpier.

BE CAUTIOUS

No matter how you travel, you must be careful. In spite of India being a place where you could have some of the most extraordinary experiences you could ever find, there are certain precautions of which you need to be aware. Crime here is still an ongoing thing. There are police here, but they are not as efficient as in the West, and in some areas they just don't care, which makes crime easier to get away with. There are also elements of darkness, meaning those individuals who will view Westerners with envy and as a source of money, even if it must be acquired through cheating, robbing, or even killing. In all my travels of India, I have heard great stories from travelers as well as tales of horror.

You must also keep in mind that India is not a place where women should be left to travel alone. I have known and met some women who have traveled by themselves to find great adventures, but I have also heard of those who have met with much trouble for having done so. Even upon arrival in India one needs to be careful. Taxi drivers are usually good and dependable, but some people have died at the hands of taxi drivers who have robbed or killed newly arriving tourists, especially women traveling by themselves. I have even heard of one man being taken to a dark area of Delhi instead of the place he requested, and had to flee the taxi with his possessions to get away. This is not likely when you travel with others. So if you are traveling alone, try to have someone meet you at the airport and give you a ride to your destination. Or call an organization or temple that you are affiliated with to make arrangements for your pick up. Iskcon members can especially call the New Delhi temple and have a dependable taxi driver take you to the temple where you can stay in the guest house, and then sort out your travel plan or itinerary.

I have also heard where a single woman went to Kashmir to stay on a houseboat and returned to Delhi two weeks later with absolutely no money, not even enough to get back to Finland, where she was from. She had arrived in Delhi and was immediately convinced by a Kashmiri tourist agent to go to Srinagar. The owners of the boat where she stayed intimidated her into buying things she did not want, to give money for their son's so-called education, and using her credit cards to the maximum. Only with the help of an Indian friend who gave her some money was she able to get back to Finland.

Let me say that Kashmir is now much safer than it once was, but in the past, such as in the 1990s, there have been kidnappings of Westerners by the Islamic insurgents for ransom money. This has also gone on in Nepal where the Maoists, who often lived in the jungles, have kidnapped trekkers and held them for ransom, which they use to fund their cause. Another time a tourist in Delhi was looking for the best rate he could get in changing his money and looked for a black market exchange. [This was back when you could get more rupees to the dollar on the black market than what banks were giving. This is not the case anymore.] Someone talked him into going down an alley where several others

then came out and stole everything he had. He was lucky they did not beat him up, but he was left with begging for money for the rest of his trip in India.

I have also heard where one Western lady was kidnapped in India and kept as a sexual hostage for months until someone found out and released her. This kind of stuff goes on everywhere, even in America, but when you are in a country like India, tourists are not always given the protection they need, or their unfamiliarity with things makes them an easy target for cheaters or robbers. And don't wear fancy or high-priced clothing or jewelry or camera bags. It only sends out a red flag that you have money or are wealthy to those who are looking for someone to cheat.

Some minor cheating is par for the course when you travel in India and you may not be able to avoid it all the time, but prior preparation, such as what I'm trying to give you in this book, can help prevent as much as possible. Remember to always protect your money and passport as much as practical. Do not keep money or valuables in loose pockets that allow a hand to easily enter them, even in the holy places or temples. I am one of those who has lost a wallet and money because of this, even while at a holy place. Just because you are at a sacred site does not mean that all the people there are of the same mindset. A criminal has no religion. This is why I usually wear fairly tight fitting pants while traveling so I can feel anyone's hand going into my pockets if someone tries such a thing. A money belt can be useful, but make sure no one sees you taking money from it. I heard of one person who went to sleep on a train with a money belt around his waist under his shirt, only to wake up the next morning to find that someone slit the bottom of the money belt and all his money was gone.

So if you take the proper precautions, you can still have a life-changing and positive experience while visiting India. Except for losing my wallet once or twice, or having to pay a Westerner's tax (a slightly higher price on things) from time to time, with proper precautions I have never had much trouble, even when I have traveled to numerous out of the way or even questionable locations. In general, Indian people are often much friendlier and more hospitable than you find in many western countries. And you are less likely to be robbed or held up in India than in places like London or New York City.

AVOIDING SCAMS

As much as we would rather not talk about this possibility, we must understand that there are always people waiting for those who are unfamiliar with India and who want to take advantage of them. So we must know a little about what to watch out for. Some cheating is bound to take place, and we just have to accept that as part of the expense of traveling. But we can keep it to a minimum if we are careful. So, for example, if you are entering India through Delhi, there are a few things you need to do. You can keep this in mind for any city that you are entering.

1. Have a reservation somewhere in a hotel or guesthouse to at least spend the first night or two. Years ago it used to be easy to fly into Delhi from overseas and find a room without having a reservation, but those days are gone. There are so many more travelers within India, and the consumer class of India is growing, so more people are traveling.

This means it is harder to find a hotel without a reservation in places like Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata. Once you get to India and spend the night somewhere, you can always look around and find a different or better place the next day. But if you come into Delhi at night, and most flights do arrive at night, most hotels can be booked up by then, especially on the weekends. So have a reservation somewhere. This will help avoid the second point:

2. Do not go to a government tourist office if trying to find a hotel when you arrive in Delhi. First of all, they usually are not really government offices. They just call themselves that to get you in and gain your trust. Then they try to sell you a package trip or something. Taxi drivers, if they know you have no prior reservation or arrangement to spend the night somewhere, will often try to drive you to such an office, working with the people in them to get your money. Or they may be willing to get you a hotel, but it is usually at a more expensive price.

If you do go to such a tourist office, they are usually just regular travel agents looking for a good profit from you. This is especially the case if they know you have just arrived and have all of your travel money to spend, or if you are unfamiliar with the prices of things in India. Thus, if they quote you a price, it won't seem as expensive as it really is because you have not done any or enough price comparisons yet. In other words, you won't suspect so easily that you actually may be getting ripped off.

A common ploy is that if you have not booked a reservation in a hotel, they may call some hotels for you but actually they may only be calling their friends who pose as the hotel manager or something who say the hotel is full. Then as this goes on, you don't know what to do and become more vulnerable to considering their advice to quickly leave on a package tour, like to Srinagar, Kashmir or somewhere. If you decide to book it, you have just bought yourself a trip that is more expensive than it needs to be. It still may be fun and worthwhile, but it will be for more than what you could have spent if you had gone about it differently. Of course, if you were planning to go to a place like Srinagar anyway, then if you don't mind paying the prices they want, it may all work out.

3. Do not go to a travel or tourist agent to buy a bus ticket. Just go to the Interstate Bus Terminal in Delhi, which is near the old train station, not the station at Paharganj. If you are going south, say to Agra, and want a government bus, then go to the Veer Hak-ikat Rai ISBT (Interstate Bus Terminal) on the south side of the city. Buying a ticket directly from the station or on the bus is always cheaper than buying it through an agent. Or if you are indeed going to someplace like Srinagar, check with the Jammu & Kashmir State Road Transport Corporation, which has a separate station a ways away from the Interstate Bus Terminal. Any taxi or auto-ricksha driver can take you there. Just be persistent in telling them that you are not interested to go someplace else. They offer direct buses from Delhi twice a day for the nonstop, 25-hour trip to Srinagar. Or you can always take a regular bus to places north, stopping at places to see along the way, until you get to a place like Jammu, and from there easily get a bus on to Srinagar. Or if you are in a tourist office and they won't help you in any other way, then just walk out. You can get another taxi, auto-ricksha, or just walk down a busy street to the next hotel you find.

4. You can also take a train to most places you want to see. If you are a foreigner to India, you can get your train tickets for the best price available at the International Office on the second floor at the main train station near the Paharganj area of Delhi. Don't fall for a scam and get lead somewhere else, or think that you have to go through an agent or something. The people at the station are usually very helpful and can book your tickets to several places at once if you know where you want to go and the train on which you want to book a reservation. However, you will be expected to pay for the ticket in dollars or Euros, or in rupees if you can show a certificate of where you exchanged your money, although this may be changing.

5. Don't listen to anyone, but only go to these bus or train stations to get your tickets if you want the best prices for them. And if you have a hotel reservation, don't fall for the trick of the taxi driver at the airport or train station telling you that you have to reconfirm it once you arrive in Delhi. If you fall for that, it is likely that you will only be told by someone on the phone that the hotel is full and you have no reservation. Or that the taxi driver knows a reliable and trustworthy government tourist office that can help you. If you listen to that, then you will be spending more money than necessary, or you have got more money than I do. If you have a reservation, then just get a prepaid taxi at the airport and have them take you to your hotel. Then you are set for the night and can take care of things the next morning without being exposed to these kinds of scams. You can always make changes, or even choose a different hotel the next morning.

6. If you do arrive in Delhi without a reservation, the problem is that many flights arrive late at night, which is a bad time to be looking for a room at various hotels for safety reasons. Also, many hotels are indeed filled up late at night, especially if it is a week-end when there are generally more travelers coming in to town.

If you do arrive without a reservation, and if you are going for the cheaper end and don't mind staying in the busy Paharganj area where many of the cheaper hotels are located, you can ask your driver to just drop you off at the train station and then just walk down the street of the main bazaar at Paharganj and stop at each hotel (there are many) until you find a room. And if you try them all and there's nothing to be found, find a taxi or auto-ricksha and go to the Karol Bagh area, which is not far away and where there are plenty more hotels. Somewhere there is likely to be a room available. Then the next morning you can scout around again and find something more to your liking, or just book your bus or train ticket out of town. And of course if you come in by train, especially before late afternoon, then just cross the street to the Paharganj area to look for a room, and it should not be a real problem.

Also, taxis from the train station to a place in Delhi are always more expensive than getting a taxi from somewhere to the train station. They always try to take advantage of you in this way, no matter whether you are a foreigner or an Indian national.

If you are going to be staying in Delhi for a while, once you have seen what you want to see in Delhi and hit the road to other places, things usually get easier. So don't fret too much about what happens in Delhi if things are not what you expected. Nonetheless, Delhi can also be a very interesting place once you begin to know your way around.

BEING PREPARED

One of the most important things you can do for yourself is to be prepared, which is one of the main purposes of this book, to help you be prepared and know where you want to go in India. Yet, this means to not only be knowledgeable about what can happen and what to expect, but also have an idea of what you want to do and where you want to go. If you have a hotel reservation when you first get into town, as previously recommended, then you can get settled and plan your itinerary. However, if you already know where you will be going, that will help you avoid making such decisions at the last moment, or being tempted by touts that are making business of pushing you into accepting ideas of going to certain areas of India.

Delhi has many touts from Kashmir, for example, and they will try to lure you into going to Kashmir by any means. If you plan to go there anyway, then it may be fine, but they usually charge more than you need to pay. The point is that if you have already done your homework and have an idea of where you want to go in India, that will help you avoid suggestions that may not be in your best interest once you reach India.

Places like Thomas Cook is also available in Delhi where you can get assistance and can change money, etc. Some hotels have information desks that can also provide information for you to decide where to go and how best to get there. They may be there mostly for assistance to their guests, which can be helpful to you. But remember to get your tickets at the train or bus stations themselves rather than through an agent. Getting them through an agent may be less hassle, but the cost will be higher, and sometimes considerably higher.

DEALING WITH RICKSHA OR TAXI DRIVERS

I want to offer a few words of caution which may save you some money and aggravation when visiting the bigger cities and dealing with ricksha and taxi drivers. You will some-times find that in some cities motor-ricksha drivers have formed a syndicate and charge exorbitant prices to foreigners. Locating drivers away from major tourist hotels or attractions, or train or bus stations, will help you find drivers who charge more reasonable rates. A few rules to follow are:

1. Find out what the going rates are before getting a ricksha or taxi, if you have time. The manager of your hotel can often be of help in this regard. Ask him or her how much it costs to go to a certain place before getting an auto-ricksha or taxi. Or he may have someone to recommend. Where travelers are especially susceptible to being cheated in this way are places when they come into a town for the first time, like coming into Delhi. Often times tired travelers just want to quickly get to a hotel and are willing to pay a higher rate without questioning or bargaining. Or they simply don't know what the proper rate is or where to get a reasonable taxi. That is why so many taxi or ricksha drivers seek out foreign travelers at the airports or train stations. In Delhi, you can get a prepay taxi as you leave the airport waiting area (where people are waiting to pick up friends and relatives) and go outside just as you enter the parking area. There will be a booth on your

right. Go to the window and book a taxi to where you want to go, preferably to your hotel or guesthouse and not a travel agent office. The prepay taxi services inside the air-port still charge higher prices, sometimes by a few hundred rupees.

2. In other situations, always set the price first before you get started. If the driver does not set a price, don't go with him. Find someone else who will set a price so you know what to expect.

3. Don't be afraid to bargain. If he says one price, set a lower price and see if he will go lower, or find someone who will.

4. If you do go with him and he says "Pay as you like," then make sure you stick with that and if he asks for more than you want to pay, don't pay more. First, before paying or bargaining, get out of the ricksha or taxi, take your bags with you, and only then begin any discussions about the price to pay. That way you are not still in the auto-ricksha or taxi and he does not have your things inside it. If there is a problem, if possible, check with another driver what the going rate may be. However, if the drivers are working together they will both say a high price. Or better yet, simply tell him that you want to find a policeman to settle the issue. If the driver knows the rate is too high, he'll immediately drop it. If you're still not satisfied, then go find a policeman to see what he says, or simply go off and get lost in the crowd (if there is one) and disappear without paying anything, as long as he doesn't know your hotel. Otherwise, you'll find him there waiting for you. This last suggestion may sound a little dishonest, but chances are that if he is ripping you off, you are not the first person to whom he's done this.

When you are a Westerner and unfamiliar with rates of travel, it is not unusual for drivers and shop keepers to suddenly raise their rates when they see you coming. Some-one told me that when you deal in dollars, the prices tend to be very high because Ameri-cans are used to higher dollar rates. But say, for example, you want the price in French Francs, the costs are comparably less.

Another point to remember is that drivers are often compensated by shop owners in money or gifts for bringing foreigners to their shops, which in turn will cost you in the form of higher prices on the items you buy. I went to a shop and was interested in buying a particular miniature painting. They wanted 1200 rupees. But after negotiating with them and when they learned I had no driver outside waiting for me and they would not have to pay any driver a commission, I finally bought the painting for around 700 rupees, almost half the original price. So it is often better when you go to a popular shop to have the driver simply drop you off, sometimes a little distance from the place, pay him for the ride and then let him leave. Thus, there is no driver for the shop to pay. Then after doing your business, simply find another driver to take you elsewhere.

CURRENCY EXCHANGE

If you are traveling with a group tour, they will often make arrangements for your currency exchange. They will probably provide arrangements for your travel from the airport to the hotel, so you wouldn't need to have money for taxi or the hotel to start off with.

However, if traveling alone or with a few friends, things will be different. So this is what I do.

When I first arrive at the airport in Dehli, or any other big city, I will first stop at the bank exchange window that one of the banks will have not far from the luggage pick up area and exchange \$100 or \$200 of cash or traveler's checks into rupees. It is better to do it there than at the hotel, where exchange rates may not be as good, although this is not the problem that it used to be. After I'm in town, later I'll go to a bank where I can exchange more money if I need to. You can go to the American Express office for America Express Traveler's Checks, or to the Thomas Cook Travel Agency, or one of the prominent banks.

Another consideration is that I usually bring about \$1000 for every month I'll be traveling in India. I don't usually spend that much on travel, and I certainly intend to bring the rest of it back home, but if there is an emergency then I've got enough to handle whatever may come along. If you stay in cheaper hotels, and use less expensive means of transportation like buses, you can easily travel and stay in India for anywhere from \$5 to \$15 a day, or around \$400 to \$550 a month. Of course, it is more expensive while staying in the bigger cities and in bigger and more sophisticated hotels, or when traveling with a tourist group, but smaller towns can be especially affordable. If you are not doing so much traveling and staying in affordable places or smaller villages, you can get by on less. However, prices are always going up, on both travel and accommodations in India. And, actually, India is not the travel bargain it used to be, yet it is still cheaper than traveling in many other parts of the world.

A little less than half of the money I bring, I bring in cash. As I travel, I use the cash first and then depend on the traveler's checks later, since they are more secure. If you want, you can bring more money in checks. But I've found that unless you are careless, a person is not likely to be robbed in India. Besides, while traveling to small towns or villages, some places I've gone to do not have a bank with facility for exchanging traveler's checks, and could only exchange cash or the foreign currency. So you better have some cash on hand when you run out of rupees in such places, or make sure you plan accordingly. However, always keep enough dollars on hand for when you return to the US for taxi or other expenses until you get back home.

These days a safer way to handle your money is to use bank cards with ATM machines, which are in numerous places all over India. Then you only get what you need as you need it, and don't worry about carrying so much in cash or traveler's checks. In fact, when I was in Ujjain I could not cash any traveler's checks, but an ATM machine was available.

Another thing I do is spread my money in different places between my wallet, shoulder bag, and camera bag, and I don't carry too much money on my person. I've had my wallet pickpocketed once, and lost it once. Both times I did not lose that much money and had money elsewhere, making it possible for me to keep traveling in spite of the loss. On my person I keep my wallet in the front pocket of my pants, which are somewhat snug, making it impossible for someone to reach in to take it without me being aware. If I do wear loose fitting pants, I make sure they have a pocket that fastens shut. I only keep

several hundred rupees in my wallet at any one time, or maybe 1000 or so. Yet, if you keep most of your money in a money belt, do not let anyone see you taking money from it. It is better to show a wallet with a small amount than to reach in a money belt, because then people will know you have a bundle. Then someone will know where the majority of your money is. That's not good. Robbery can result. Of course, even in America or other countries such precautions are necessary, not just in India.

FOOD PRECAUTIONS

This is easy advice, but is probably the most important if you want to have a good trip. Watch what and where you eat. Please drink only bottled water in India, even for brushing your teeth, which is available most anywhere. Don't think that you can go up into the mountains and let your guard down because the water must be cleaner, at least in the restaurants. Not true. Even with all the experience I've had, and I've drunk water from a variety of places while in India, still one time I drank water from a restaurant in Gangotri and by that night I was sick, and was mildly sick and weak with a protozoa infection for the next five weeks. Bad move. As I've said, I always buy bottled water and sometimes keep a canteen with additional water in my shoulder bag. Whenever something goes wrong with my health during my travels in India, it's because I failed to follow these rules, unless I get a cold. It takes only one drop of bad water to cause stomach problems. You can increase the variety of foods you eat when at reputable vegetarian restaurants or at the *sattvic* ashramas and temples where they are strict about serving vegetarian foods.

Also, watch out for drinks that use ice, unless you are sure where the water for the ice comes from. You should eat only hot, cooked food or peeled fruits and vegetables. Do not eat cooked food from street vendors! And at bus or train stations, only eat fruits that can be peeled by you and certainly no salads. You never know where the water came from that they used to wash the salad.

Strictly following this simple advice will help a lot. You have to be in India a good while for your body to acclimatize, so to speak, to be able to drink water from various places, which you may not want to do anyway. When I first started going to India, I always lost weight. Now I'm so used to it that I may even gain weight. I love that Indian vegetarian food.

HEAT STROKE OR HEAT EXHAUSTION

This can happen more easily than you think. Make sure when you visit India that you keep your head covered while in the sun. Make sure you wear a hat or a cloth, or use an umbrella. Too much sun or heat in India can kill you, or put you seriously out of action for days. If you start getting overly hot, tired, or dizzy while in the sun, take a break in the shade, and don't forget to drink plenty of water.

EXPECT PERSONAL CHANGES IN YOURSELF

There is no way to prepare for what India may do to you! It can be magic! You just have to be open to whatever may happen and go with the flow. This will be one of the most memorable and possibly most profound experiences in your life! Go for it!!!

WHAT IF TEMPLES DO NOT LET US IN?

I must say one thing regarding temples that are restrictive about who they let inside. First of all, I can understand why those who are disrespectful should not be allowed entrance. And there is certainly a history of the white Christian missionaries who came to India to preach and blaspheme against the “pagan gods.” But for those who are sincerely trying to understand Eastern philosophy and have respect and veneration while in the temple, I see no reason why they should not be allowed inside. Otherwise, the local priests are simply keeping the temples to themselves without any concern for the spiritual well-being of others. This is due to their callous blindness and a tendency toward exclusiveness. They do not see the soul that exists within everyone. All they can see is that this person is Indian or Hindu, and that person is white or a Westerner. This person can come in, and that person must stay out. This is not proper. Spiritual understanding will not spread like that. They should be happy that people other than Indians are interested in their culture and philosophy, but if they don’t want to assist in this exchange, then their selfishness and lack of concern will be all that is recognized. It will only limit the growth or future of their culture.

Maybe Westerners in general have engaged in what to the brahmana priests are very low activities, such as eating meat, or taking intoxicants, not bathing daily, etc. But God is God of everyone, the Supreme Pure, and, obviously, must be able to purify anyone who comes before Him. So any old brahmana who feels that Westerners will only disturb or spoil the atmosphere of the temple lacks real spiritual understanding. And who can say who is really worthy of entering a temple? While riding the trains I have seen Indian brahmanas eating eggs and smoking cigarettes. This kind of activity certainly does not give them the qualities that differentiate them from anyone else. It merely shows their hypocrisy. In fact, according to the orthodox view, once a brahmana eats such food, like eggs or meat, he immediately is considered to have lost his caste or *varna*. He can no longer be a brahmana. So how can they enter a temple to see the deities when other Westerners who may be following a more pure or virtuous lifestyle cannot go in? This is ludicrous. I have seen many Westerners adopt a spiritual path that includes no meat-eating, no intoxication, no illicit sex, etc., habits that many Indians as well as some brahmanas cannot give up. Yet they hold sway over their temples to exclude these sincere souls from entering. So this should be changed.

As far as we are concerned, if a temple does not let us in, we can understand their limited mentality and their prejudice against our skin color, and then simply move on to those temples that do let us in. And I have been to both. I have been rejected numerous times from being able to enter a temple in India, and I have also been graced many times

to enter a temple and to be able to have truly amazing experiences between me and the people there, or me and the deity, in which I was raised to a completely new and unique perception of our spiritual connection. There will be plenty of such opportunities if you are receptive to it. Just be ready for it.

SEEING SPIRITUAL INDIA (PART 1)

The Major Holy Places in East and Central India and Nepal

For most people who visit India, they will either arrive at one of a few ports of entry, such as New Delhi, Kolkata, or Mumbai. Since we will begin our journey of India in the East and Central part of India, New Delhi will be a good place to start our descriptions of what to see.

You may arrive in New Delhi late at night, as many people from the West often do. You will need to go through customs, pick up your luggage, change some money into rupees at a bank desk within the airport, and then go to your hotel. I strongly suggest changing some of your money into rupees before you leave the airport simply because it will be easier for you and you will be less likely to be cheated in common transactions where you need to calculate the difference in currencies. State Bank of India, one of the most common, and another bank or two will have desks across from the luggage claim at the airport. Once you pick up your luggage, it takes little time to go over to change some money. I often change about \$200 to \$400 into rupees to get me started. I also change my dollar currency before starting to change my traveler's checks. The checks can always be changed later, and if they are stolen you can replace them. But I change my dollar currency first because if they are stolen, you are simply out of luck. However, if you are in small towns and need to change money, sometimes these small towns do not change checks, or are particular about which ones they do change. So without some currency, you may find yourself in difficulty at times when you are in a rural area and are running low of money.

After that you need to find a hotel, and there are desks that will help you do that with phones to call certain hotels. I never do that because often they are misleading and will try to direct you somewhere that you may not want to go because they are getting a commission from certain hotels that they recommend you to use. These days I make reservations with a guesthouse or hotel that I know since many hotels are often booked up by the time I can reach them. Otherwise, I simply go to find a hotel in the Paharganj area. This is right across from the train station. There are lots of hotels in this area and they are the least expensive in town. Unfortunately, all hotels have gone way up in costs over the last several years, and the Paharganj area still offers the best values in town, although some of the hotels do not have the best of facilities. Besides, when we are ready to start our journey, the train station is not far away, which is a convenience by itself.

The next thing to know is that the best taxi service to use is the prepaid taxi just out-side the door of the airport, as you enter the parking area. If you book a prepaid taxi inside the airport, and they will be hawking you to do so as you walk past their desks, the prices are higher. So wait until you exit the door of the airport and the last prepaid taxi desk will be on your right. Prepaid means you pay for it before you leave and there is no further question about how much it will cost. Just go up to the window and book a taxi to wherever you want to go, and name your hotel that you are interested in, and they will take you to a taxi and drive you there. If you are interested in a hotel that you find is booked full, the taxi driver will know of others to take you to. It is not difficult. And the prepaid drivers are often the most honest as opposed to those who are not prepaid. But don't let them take you to a Government Tourist Office. This is often merely a regular tourist agent that they may be working with to get you to book a tour package to some-place.

Once you settle in somewhere, and if you plan to follow our tour of East and Central India, then get ready to visit many of the various temples, holy places, and sacred towns that India is know for, some of which are considered by several religions to be the most holy in all of India, if not the world.

NEW DELHI

Unless I have to be at a certain place at a certain time, I stay in Delhi for a day or two just to get used to being back in India, and to pick up whatever else I may need for my travels. Delhi is often the starting point for wherever else you may want to go.

When you have decided on where your next destination will be, you can walk to the train station and go to the Foreigner's Office up on the second floor. This is quite helpful and they can book most of the tickets you may be interested in purchasing. They also accept foreign currency for payments, and you can buy the Indrail Passes here in foreign currency. The Indrail pass used to be a great bargain, but over the years they have raised the prices on them to such a degree that they are no longer the best way to go. They are way too expensive. So now I buy train tickets only as I need to.

In the meantime, Delhi is a great place to get your first taste of India if you have not already been here. New Delhi, a city of 13 million at the time of this writing, is not nec-

essarily a place of pilgrimage, but an innumerable number of people from all walks of life, holy and otherwise, come through this city. New Delhi is also a city that shows how much India has changed through the years, and is perhaps as modern as most any part of India we will find. New Delhi is where we can get most of whatever we need for continuing our travels. There are plenty of tour offices, banks, airline companies, and shops of all kinds for most anything we'll need, including bookstores where we can get additional information on places to see, or photo books on places we have visited to take home. And if you are looking for souvenirs, shops around Connaught Place have art work, sculptures, deities, religious items, carved wood figures, jewelry, textiles, etc., from all over India, Nepal, and Tibet. And there is a great deal one can learn about India and its culture just by investigating the many interesting places within the Delhi area. So while we are here, we can spend a few days seeing the sights before continuing our journey through another part of India, or before taking our flight back to our home country if we are finishing a tour.

New Delhi has much history connected with it that goes back 5000 years to the time when the Pandavas, as related in the *Mahabharata*, founded Indraprastha along the Yamuna. The ruins in the area of the Purana Qila are said to be all that remains of the ancient city of Indraprastha. This is surrounded by massive stone walls, entered through three gateways. The fort we see today at Purana Qila is said to have been built by Sher Shah, an Afghan ruler who held sway over Delhi for a time (1538-45) before the Moghul Humayan took control again. A small archeological museum exists inside the main gate. It is also interesting to note that the small octagonal tower, the Sher Mandal, made of red sandstone, was where Humayun slipped from the staircase while descending them and later died from his injuries. He had been using the tower as a library. Nearby is the Qila-i-Kuhran Mosque.

Several other locations also have ruins where different phases of the city's development took place. But aside from ruins, there are many monuments and places of interest that are worth a visit for tourists and pilgrims alike, depending on your own special concerns. New Delhi has something for everyone.

Most of the monuments in the area, however, have an Islamic link. It was the last great empire that held sway over the city before the British rule. There is, of course, the Red Fort along the Yamuna at the end of Chandni Chowk Road. It is said to have been built by Shah Jahan and completed in 1648. However, there is evidence that shows that it was a pre-existing building merely captured by Shah Jahan. It is a massive structure and inside is an assortment of interesting and decorated buildings. There are pools, fountains, meeting halls, rooms for infantry, courtyards, and inlay work on ornate columns that indicate how opulent was the lifestyle of the ruler when it was built. You can pick up a guidebook on the place when you visit that will explain each building.

Not far from the Red Fort is the Jami Masjid mosque, also said to have been built by Shah Jahan, completed in 1658. On what grounds this is established may be questioned because here again there is evidence that has revealed that it was a pre-existing temple building before Shah Jahan ever invaded the area. For example, Tamerlain (Taimurlang), one of Shah Jahan's ancestors 10 generations prior to him (about 230 years), gives his

own testimony that the Jama Masjid mosque was previously a Hindu temple. He relates that in his memories entitled *Malfuzat-i-Timuri* wherein he describes the take over of Delhi and how many of the resisting Hindus assembled in the Masjid-i-Jami (meaning the Chief Temple) of Old Delhi prepared to defend themselves. Thus, the Jama Masjid had to have been a Vedic temple prior to its Muslim takeover.

As of now, it is the largest mosque in India with a capacity of 25,000. You can go in with a camera and look around. For a fee, climb one of the minarets that stand 40 meters high. This gives a good view over the old part of Delhi. This place can be quite busy at times, especially during Muslim holy days.

Not far from the mosque along the Yamuna River is Raj Ghat park where Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and, more recently, Rajiv Gandhi were cremated. People still go there out of respect to such people.

Just south of Purana Qila is one of a number of Muslim tombs in the New Delhi area. This one is the tomb of Humayun, the second Moghul emperor, said to have been built in the 16th century by his wife, Haji Begum. It has lovely architecture with a domed building in the middle of a large garden, entered through large gates, one on each side in the walls that surround it. The building is another that could have been a pre-existing Vedic Lakshmi temple before the Muslims arrived. The style of the building, with the bastions, numerous gateways, surrounding annexes, guest houses, guard rooms and walls all point to a typical Vedic temple structure. There is even a Shakti Chakra, and overlap-ping triangles that adorn its top facade. Humayun is not even buried there. Abul Fazal says Humayun is buried in Sirhind while Farishta says he is buried in Agra. There are only a couple side rooms which have a few cenotaphs. And for that the whole structure is designated as a Muslim tomb.

Furthermore, French writer G. Le Bon has published in his book, *The World of Ancient India*, a photo of marble footprints that were found in the building. He describes them as the footprints of Lord Vishnu. This is also very typical of a Vedic temple, to have the footprints of the main Divinity of the shrine. In this case it is the husband of Lakshmi, Lord Vishnu. So it has all the elements of a temple, except for the added Muslim graves that are there now.

Across the road from Humayun's Tomb is the tomb of the Muslim saint Nizam-ud-din who died in 1325, along with a few other graves, such as that of the Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib. If you look at all the elements, you will notice that the Nizam-ud-din is also Vedic in design. The saffron colored tall archway under the tree at the left hand top is evidence of the Vedic origin of the site. The whole area, under Muslim occupation for the last few centuries, has a magnificent spacious stepped well which is a typical Hindu feature. The so-called Amir Khusro tomb with a white dome is part of that great Vedic temple complex. The lotus-petal border of the terrace and the lotus cap above the dome are strictly Vedic features.

The Nizam-ud-din complex contains Muslim graves because the area, being a Vedic temple complex, came under repeated Muslim attacks with carnage every time. Muslims would station themselves in captured Vedic ruins and lay claim to it by burying their dead leaders in such buildings and say it was Muslim property or Muslim constructed.

Since Islam existed only from 622 C.E., most Muslims in the area are the descendants of Hindu ancestors who were captured and forcibly converted to Islam.

Heading west from here we find the Lodi tombs, containing graves of some Lodi and Sayyid rulers. These are also interesting domed buildings that have been made into a pleasant park, but it does not take long to look them over. Though they try to maintain the serenity of the place, it is somewhat small and crowds can often gather here on Sun-days.

Farther southwest of the Lodi tombs is the tomb of Safdarjang, said to have been built in 1754 by his son who was the Nawab of Oudh. However, again it has all the elements of a pre-existing Vedic temple before the Muslims came to capture the building and make it into one of their mausoleums. Any visitor can see the typical Vedic design of the four towers, one in each corner of the complex (usually held for different deities that are viewed before going into the main sanctum), the walls of which are inlaid with marble, with a main shrine in the middle. If the evidence regarding this place is true, then it is originally another Hindu building. The point to consider is that there were two mounds of loose red-brick powder which would get blown away and which the archeology department would need to keep replacing fraudulently to maintain the pretense of the graves. The other mound is supposed to be Safdarjang's wife, but which wife is hard to say since he had a full harem. There are an additional two mounds in the basement but only one unlabeled cenotaph on the first floor. It is also known that Safdarjang was buried at Paparghat in Uttar Pradesh. Therefore, the tomb in the building at Delhi may not be real and only an attempt to give the Muslim claim some credibility.

Farther south, 15 km from New Delhi, is the Qutab Minar tower, 73 meters tall, that represents the Muslim victory over the last Hindu kingdom in the area. Most history books on this place say that the construction began in 1193 by Qutab-ud-din and was completed a few centuries later. Near the base of the tower is the first mosque built in India, the Quwwat-ul-Islam, or "Might of Islam" mosque. It is said that it was made on the foundation of a Hindu temple and constructed of material and parts gathered by destroying 27 other "idoltrous temples." If you understand architectural designs, you will recognize Hindu and Jain elements within the structure of the mosque. There is even a seven-meter tall iron pillar standing in the complex, known for not having rusted after 2000 years of being exposed to the elements, and for being a Garuda *stambha* taken from an ancient Vishnu temple.

One of the reasons why the mysterious iron pillar has not rusted for so many years is that it has been discovered that it was made with high levels of phosphorous in the 99.2 per cent pure wrought iron used to build the structure. Some feel that it was also not cast iron, but was constructed by a welding process. In either case, this shows the expertise of metallurgy that had been reached during the reign of King Chandra II, Vikramaditya of the Gupta dynasty, when the pillar is said to have been built. However, one of the legends behind the pillar is that the mighty Bhima, one of the five Pandava brothers in the *Mahabharata*, lifted the pillar in his right hand and impaled it into the ground. It is also said that an image of Vishnu surrounded the pillar, which was probably removed by the invading Muslims who left the pillar in place.

The Qutab Minar tower is also known to have been a pre-existing Vedic temple dedicated to the study of the planets. Different people suggest a variety of theories about its origin. Such theories range from it being built by Kutubuddin Aibak, the Muslim slave ruler who controlled Delhi from 1206 to 1210. Or it was built by his son-in-law and successor Iltmash. Or it may have been built or partly constructed by Allauddin Khilji. Feroz Shah may also have helped build it.

Mr. P. N. Oak gives some hints to the background of this building on page 30 in his book *Some Blunders of Indian Historical Research*: “The township adjoining the Kutub Minar is known as Mehrauli. That is a Sanskrit word *Mihira-awali*. It signifies the township where the well-known astronomer Mihira of Vikramaditya’s court lived along with his helpers, mathematicians and technicians. They used the so-called Kutub tower as an observation post for astronomical study. Around the tower were pavilions dedicated to the 27 constellations of the Hindu Zodiac.

“Kutubuddin has left us an inscription that he destroyed these pavilions. But he has not said that he raised any tower. The ravaged temple was renamed as Kuwat-ul-Islam mosque.

“Stones dislodged from the so-called Kutub Minar have Hindu images on one side with Arabic lettering on the other. Those stones have now been removed to the Museum. They clearly show that Muslim invaders used to remove the stone-dressing of Hindu buildings, turn the stones inside out to hide the image facial and inscribe Arabic lettering on the new frontage.”

On page 291 of the same book he goes on to explain that, “Even the Arabic term Kutub Minar signifies an astronomical tower. Kutub and Kutubuddin was a subsequent unwitting mix-up. Around the tower were 27 constellation temples which Kutubuddin’s inscription vaunts to have destroyed. The tower too has 27 flutings. Near the first storey ceiling are 27 holes—one in each is likely. True to the significance of the term Kutub, this tower’s entrance faces due north.”

On page 538 of *World Vedic Heritage*, Mr. Oak describes a little about the way the temple used to be. He explains that underneath (the tower) lay a giant statue of Lord Vishnu reclining on Seshanaga. At the top of the tower on the seventh storey was an image of Lord Brahma sitting on a lotus flower seat. But the Muslims destroyed both of those images.

The mosque at the base of the Kutub Minar, the Quwat-ul-Islam, is also said to be the very first mosque in India, built with the remains of numerous destroyed Hindu temples. However, the ornately carved columns provide proof that this was once a Hindu temple. Besides, if the tower was a Hindu observatory, it is in line with tradition that there would be a Hindu temple nearby and other shrines for the nine planets.

This is confirmed by Sir Sayyas Ahmad, father of the Muslim League and a founder of the Aligarh Muslim University. He has said, “The current tradition which ascribes the Minar and the adjoining temple to the Hindu period appears to be correct.”

In this way, Hindus have been robbed not only of credit for the architectural structures that they had made, but also for much else that is good and artistic, including music, poetry, literature, styles of painting, color decoration, gardens, fountains, pottery,

porcelain, carvings, etc., even when found in India. Thus, the glories of the original Vedic culture has been humiliated and made to appear small and puny by these outside forces. Or that anything really good in India was brought in by someone else. Thus, it is time for people to realize the immense contribution that the Vedic culture and the ancient people of India have given to the world. Furthermore, Muslim inscriptions on such Indian buildings, mosques, or tombs, should not necessarily be mistaken to signify the original builder, but only the captor, occupier, or usurper. Even Muslim chronicles may mention the building of such things as canals, giving themselves the credit, when actually the canals were already there.

To visit a few of the more modern buildings, another interesting place in the southern part of Delhi is the Lotus temple, which belongs to the B'hai religion. The architecture is totally unique in that it is built to resemble a huge lotus blossom. The B'hai religion is an offshoot of Islam, but they are very open and respectful of all faiths. As with any B'hai temple, anyone can come in to see it or use it for prayer. But this place does not remain very quiet because of the hundreds of people who flow through it. Most of them come simply to see the place. So if you would like to visit it, you must be prepared for the occasional long lines of people who are waiting to get in.

Not far from the Lotus temple is the beautiful "Glory of India" temple, one of Iskcon's Sri Sri Radha-Krishna Mandirs. This is a new and interesting temple, with a wonderful temple room with beautiful deities of Gaura-Nitai, Radha-Parthasarathy, and Sita-Rama-Lakshmana and Hanuman. There are also popular diorama exhibits and museum, giftshops, and a lovely vegetarian restaurant. Many people visit this temple, especially on weekends and weekday evenings. So it is worth the time.

Back in the city there are some fine museums, such as the National Museum on Jan-path Road, which I personally feel is one of the best in India. It has some very good exhibits of paintings, costumes, jewelry, ancient culture, sculptures of wood, bronze, terra cotta images, and many deities, etc.

There is the Nehru Museum on Teen Murti Rd., which was Nehru's residence turned into a museum if you are interested in his life. Not far away is also a Rail Transport Museum if, after riding the trains all over the country, you are interested in India's old trains. There is also a crafts museum on Mathura Road at the exhibition grounds that shows traditional arts and crafts of India. A doll museum is on Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg with over 6000 dolls from all over the world.

Not far from Connaught Place is a Hanuman temple with a variety of deities and worship that can be done, and a small Shiva-Parvati temple, both of which are regularly visited by local people. They often stop on their way to or from work to pay homage or say prayers.

A little walk away is the Jantar Mantar, one of Jai Singh II's unusual but very interesting observatories. A larger one is found in Jaipur. Though the instruments look peculiar, they are quite accurate in predicting eclipses and plotting the course of stars.

The one thing to understand about such sites as Humayan's tomb, the Kutab Minar, and now the Jantar Mantar and others, is that there is an entrance fee. It used to be the same price for everyone. But the Indian government has decided that foreigners can

afford to pay more. So the Indian nationals can pay 5 or 10 rupees for some of these places, while the Western foreigners can \$5 or \$10. Some of these places may be worth it, but others are definitely not worth seeing for that amount of money. You can decide what is right for you.

Walking west on Ashoka Road we will find an important Sikh temple which is very active. There are several Sikh temples in the Delhi area, but this one is called Gurudwara Bangla Sahib. It is named after the bungalow of King Jai Singh where the Eighth Sikh Guru, Harkrishan Ji, stayed during his visit to Delhi. It is said that, in his concern for the sufferings of common people, he put his feet in a water reservoir and then offered the sacred water to the sick and ailing who got cured of their grief and sorrows. Even today devotees visit the temple and drink the water that is served in a special area just outside the temple. Many Sikhs stop by in the morning and evening to listen to recitations of their holy scripture, the *Granth*, in the temple or over the loudspeakers. The Sikhs are very nice to everyone here, and you can go in, providing you leave your shoes at the stall and wear a cover on your head. There is also a guest office that may be open to help explain things to you. In the morning they distribute delicious halava near the temple exit door.

Farther west on Ashoka Road we find the large and beautiful Lakshmi-Narayan temple on Mandir Marg. There are some lovely deities of Sri Sri Lakshmi-Narayan (Vishnu), as well as Shiva, Ganesh, and others, with a side temple to Buddha. It is another temple built by the Birla family in 1938 and anyone is allowed in. It is definitely worth a visit. Before the threats of terrorists, you used to be able to photograph the temple and deities, but now that has changed and they have been very strict about no photography.

For Jains there is the Lal Mandir on Chandni Chowk across from the Red Fort. It is a small temple but has a very ornate interior and altars with images of their *tirthankaras*. At this temple they take care of many sick birds that are brought to them. But they have received some criticism for not giving more help to the local needy people.

Farther down Chandni Chowk is the Gauri-Shankara temple dedicated to Shiva, and there are altars with a variety of Vedic gods and goddesses as well as Lakshmi and Vishnu. Though this temple does not have a fancy exterior, it is very busy inside with people continually coming and going. Not far from here is another Sikh temple built where the ninth Sikh guru, Tegh Bahadur, was martyred by orders of the fanatic Muslim Aurangzeb because of not adopting to Islam.

Another lovely new site in Delhi is the pink sandstone and white marble temple complex of the Swaminarayan sect (BAPS), called Akshardham. It took 11,000 craftsmen and volunteers five years to complete this huge \$44 million project and temple for a grand opening on November 6, 2005. It is located on 105 acres near the banks of the Yamuna River. The temple complex itself covers about 30 acres. It has a center on Indian culture, exhibition on the origins and philosophy of the Swaminarayan sect, an IMAX theatre, gift and book shop, theme gardens, along with 120 ornate pillars and 1200 images of the Vedic gods and goddesses.

What I have given here is just a short description of the major points of interest in New Delhi. A variety of other sites and facilities can also be seen here. Not all of them may

be for you, and certainly not all of them may be for those with spiritual interests, so you can take your pick. But there is much that New Delhi can reveal in regards to the history, culture, and spiritual practices of India. So it is worth spending a few days here. Unfortunately, it has become one of the most polluted cities in the world. If you take a *rickscha* through the old section of town, the air can be so thick with exhaust fumes, dust, and so forth, sometimes you'll hardly be able to breathe. The outskirts of the city are not so bad, but in the summer when it is hot and there is hardly a breeze, it can be horrendous no matter where you go. So be prepared to be tolerant of this factor.

MATHURA

As we begin our tour of the holy places of East and Central India, the first major holy place to see is only a short three hour ride by train or bus ride south from Delhi. Now that they have built a nice highway through the area, the road is much faster than it used to be. Vraja, which has a perimeter of 168 miles and is composed of many villages and towns, is considered nondifferent from the holy places of Mayapur (Navadvipa), Jagan-natha Puri, and Dwaraka. The same spiritual nature is manifest in all of these places. But Vraja is considered the holiest of all holy *dhams*. In many places in the *shastra* are descriptions of the glories of Mathura and Vrindavan. The glories of Mathura are elaborately explained in the *Varaha Purana*, chapters 152 through 180. One verse states: "A moment in Mathura is worth a thousand years spent in Kashi (Varanasi)." And simply by bathing in the Yamuna River in Mathura one can be freed from all sins. Residing here for only a few weeks qualifies one for liberation from material existence. And each step taken in Mathura is equal to visiting a holy place elsewhere. It is explained that those who die here attain Vishnu-loka, the abode of Lord Vishnu in the spiritual sky of Vaikuntha, and do not take birth again.

The descriptions of the glories of Vrajamandala go on and on, but they are known only to a few rare souls in this world. Only the most fortunate get to hear about it, what to speak of getting the opportunity to visit this holy place. And since it is only a few hours away from Delhi, anyone who is spiritual inclined must visit this sacred place.

Many holy men can be seen visiting the temples, walking in the streets, singing or chanting as they go. Though they may seem destitute, they are often very jolly because of their spiritual wisdom and freedom from materialistic problems. Here the holy men and saintly women enter into a higher reality that makes their bodily condition less significant. Many *bhaktas*, sages, and mystics have experienced unimaginable levels of spiritual ecstasy here, though superficially the area may look like any other part of India where people are engaged in the struggle to survive. But as you look deeper, if you are capable of it, you will find quite another aspect of Vrajamandala that draws pilgrims by the thousands from all over India.

Basically, Vraja is the land of Krishna. If you really want to understand the pastimes of Krishna, you have to know Vraja. And if you want to know the significance of Vraja, you have to understand Krishna's pastimes. Krishna was born in Mathura 5,000 years ago but lived in Gokula for three years, then moved to Chatikara and Vrindavan for three years,

then lived in Nandagram for three years, and from age 10 to 28 He lived in Mathura. After this He moved to the western coast of India where He lived in Dwaraka for over 96 years. Thus, He stayed in this world for 125 years, but some of His sweetest and most attractive pastimes were performed in Vraja. To fully explain these pastimes and where they took place in this present volume is impossible, unless we wanted to greatly extend the length of this book. There are other books that you can acquire that will explain these pastimes much more fully. But there are some significant sites and temples that I'll try to briefly describe so you can visit and understand their significance. We will start our tour at Mathura since that is usually where we get off the train or bus.

Mathura is the largest city in Vraja with around 325,000 residents. It is a very busy, noisy, and dusty town with a large railroad junction. Nonetheless, it is an important town for pilgrims. Besides being the birthplace of Lord Krishna, Srila Vyasadeva also took birth here at Krishna Ganga Tirtha on the banks of the Yamuna, where there is a small temple to Ganga Devi and many Shiva *lingas*. It was also at Ambarish-tila where the great devo-tee King Ambarish fasted while waiting for the sage Durvasa Muni to return from being chased by Lord Vishnu's chakra, as described in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Not far from Krishna Ganga Tirtha is Vishrama Ghat, the best known of all the bathing ghats on the Yamuna in Mathura. Anyone can direct you to it. It was here that Lord Varaha rested after saving the earth from Hiranyaksha and spoke the *Varaha Purana*. Lord Krishna also bathed and rested here after killing Kamsa, the demoniac king. And Sri Chaitanya also bathed here while visiting Mathura. So many pilgrims come here to perform various rituals and take a purifying bath. You can also watch the aratika to the Yamuna River that takes place every evening around seven PM.

The most important temple in Mathura is the beautiful Keshava temple that represents the place where Krishna was born. It stands next to a mosque that the fanatic Muslim Aurangzeb built where the original Keshava temple stood before he tore it down in 1669. Nowadays it is all fenced in and you have to go through security gates to enter the temple. The present temple has lovely Radha-Keshava deities and paintings of Krishna's pastimes cover the walls and ceiling of the large interior. It is said that simply by seeing this deity of Keshava, within a second a person is relieved of the sins of one's past seven births and will not take birth again. You can also enter the mosque building to see where the original Krishna Janmasthan temple stood. There is a nice little altar there now with Krishna deities. The real spot where Krishna is said to have been born is a few blocks away, represented by a very small temple building, past the Potra Kund. The Potra Kund is said to be the location where Mother Yasoda would wash Krishna's baby clothes. Then down a side street is the place where King Kamsa's prison was located in which Lord Krishna first appeared. The building is not very well kept because it is located on property owned by Muslims. But this may change in the future.

Other important temples in Mathura include the Dwarakadish Mandira which is not too far from Vishram Ghat. It has a small, beautiful black deity of a four-handed Dwarakadish, similar to the deity in the huge temple at Dwaraka. This temple is quite popular and many people crowd to see the *arati* ceremonies. Nearby is a temple of white Sweta-Varaha, and another of Adi-Varaha which was supposed to have once been Lord

Indra's deity in Swarga, his heavenly abode. The deity was later taken by Ravana to Sri Lanka and then to Ayodhya by Lord Ramachandra when Rama defeated Ravana. Lord Ramachandra gave it to His brother Satrugna who brought it to Mathura. This story is more fully explained in Chapter 163 of the *Varaha Purana*.

Downstream from Vishrama Ghat is Prayaga Ghat where the ancient temple of Veni Madhava is located. It is said that by bathing here one gets the benefit of bathing at the *sangam* (where the three rivers of the Ganga, Yamuna, and underground Sarasvati meet) in Prayaga (Allahabad). A little farther is Bengali Ghat where Vasudeva is said to have crossed the river when taking baby Krishna in his arms from Kamsa's prison to Mahavana after His birth. Next there is Dhruva Ghat where there is a temple on a mound called Dhruva Tila which marks the spot where Dhruva performed austerities to get the *dars-hana* of Lord Narayana, as described in *Srimad-Bhagavatam*.

Across the river from Vishrama Ghat, about 200 metres from the river, is the small village of Isapur. Here you will find a temple with an image of Durvasa Muni which marks where the great mystic performed many austerities and meditated during Satya-yuga.

Mathura's most popular Shiva temple is the Rangeshwara Mandira, one kilometer south of Vishrama Ghat. This is one of four main Shiva temples of the city, which includes Bhuteshwara to the west near Krishna Janmasthan, Pipaleshwara in the east near Vishrama Ghat, and Gokarneshwara in the north. Near the Rangeshwara Mandir is the Keshava temple of the Gaudiya Math where Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami took sann-yasa, the renounced order of life. The temple has beautiful deities of Radha-Keshava and Sri Chaitanya.

During the afternoon when the temples are closed you can visit the Government Archeological Museum. It has a good collection of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist sculptures and art work. Mathura was a major Buddhist center with as many as 20 monasteries when the city was visited by Fa Hian around 401 C.E. and Hiuen Tsang in 634. But things drastically changed for Hindus and Buddhists alike when the Muslim invaders, like Mah-mud of Ghazni, arrived in 1017. After that Buddhism practically disappeared from Mathura.

Another place open all day is Ranga Bhumi, the area which was the wrestling arena of King Kamsa located across from the Main Post Office. On a hill, Kamsa-tila, is where Krishna killed the demoniac Kamsa, and just beyond it is where Krishna crowned Ugra-sena as King of Mathura.

GOKULA

Six kilometers south of Mathura is the small town of Gokula next to the Yamuna River where Krishna lived during part of His childhood. There are several temples here, such as the Gokulnathji Mandir and the temple in the reconstructed fort, Nanda Qila, of Krishna's father, Nanda Maharaja. Across from the temple are diorama displays of Krishna's Gokula pastimes. These temples are interesting to visit, but the priests often act like they simply want to make a business of doing special *pujas* for you and then charge you high prices for them, like 125, 250, 501, or 1001 rupees. So if you do not want this,

be sure to tell them you simply came for *darshan* and then leave a small donation you can afford. Nearby is also a shrine that is the entrance to an underground chamber, located down a few flights of stairs, that has the deity of Mayadevi, who appeared as Krishna's sis-ter. She appeared from Mother Yasoda but was put into the arms of Mother Devaki by Vasudeva, Krishna's father, to fool Kamsa into thinking that their seventh child was actually a girl. King Kamsa was waiting for their seventh child to kill Him since he had heard that he would be killed by their seventh child, who would be Lord Krishna. However, when Kamsa learned that their seventh child was born, he went to the prison where he had kept them to see this child. But, instead of Lord Krishna being there, it was Mayadevi who rose up into the air and escaped his clutches. She warned him that the child he was looking for was born elsewhere, and then she disappeared.

Two kilometers south of Gokula is Mahavana where there is the Nanda Bhavan temple on a small hill. Inside are large images of Nanda, Mother Yashoda, Balarama, and baby Krishna. The pillars are said to have come from the original palace of Maharaja Nanda. This is also near the *janma-bhumi* or appearance place of Lord Balarama. A short ride away is the Yamalarjuna Bhanga, also called Ukal Bandan, where you can see an ancient grinding mortar said to be the one Mother Yashoda tied to baby Krishna in order to try and get Him to stay in one place. But He dragged it between two yamalarjuna trees and caused them to crash to the ground. When the trees fell, two demigods were freed who had been cursed to live as these trees for offending Narada Muni. However, Narada Muni had also blessed them to eventually be freed by Lord Krishna. Then the two demi-gods were allowed to return to heaven. The *Srimad-Bhagavatam* explains all of these past-times.

A kilometer further south is Brahmanda Ghat, which is not only a beautiful and serene bathing spot on the Yamuna, but also where Krishna's mother suspected Him of eating dirt. When she looked in His mouth she saw the whole universe. This place is a quiet place much of the time, but when you go during the month of Kartika (Oct-Nov) when many people come to Vrindavana for pilgrimage, the place can be very crowded with busloads of people doing their sacred bath and getting *darshan* of the local Krishna deity.

A short ride further south is Chinta-garam Ghat. This is indeed a very quiet and lovely spot along the Yamuna. Only a few sages live here with their cows and a small temple with a few deities of Krishna and a Shiva *linga*. It is soothing under the tree and sitting in the sand. This is the place where Mother Yasoda visited in order to sooth her mind after being confused by seeing the universe in her son's mouth. She could not fathom that such a sight could be seen in Krishna, so she had to come here to calm herself. So even today it is a nice and quiet place with the only sound coming from the wind and the birds in the trees.

Seven kilometers further south is the Dauji temple. Dauji is the deity of Lord Balarama that was originally installed 5,000 years ago by King Vajranabha, Krishna's great-grandson. In fact, he established a number of Krishna deities in the area. The present temple was built 200 years ago by Shyama Das of Delhi. Many people also attend this temple to get *darshan* of the single deity of 6 feet tall Lord Balarama. From the other

side of the temple you can see the diety of Revati, Lord Balarama's wife. Nearby is the Balabhadra Kund or Kshira (milk) Sagara (sea) where the deity of Lord Balarama had been hidden during the Moghul invasion. Near this kund is a temple to Harideva and in the bazaar is another temple to Banke Bihari.

VRINDAVANA

Back in Mathura we start toward Vrindavan and soon find the Gita Mandir, a very nice temple built by the Birla family. The temple has a very good standard of worship for the deities of Lakshmi-Narayana, as well as Sita-Rama. The central deity is of Lord Krishna explaining the *Bhagavad-gita* to Arjuna. In the courtyard is a column called Gita Stambha that has all the *Bhagavad-gita* verses engraved on it.

Twenty minutes away we find the Pagal Baba temple complex. It has residential facilities surrounding the courtyard, and a large temple with many dioramas of the different incarnations of Krishna on the bottom level. As you go to each higher floor there are altars with deities of Lakshmi-Narayana, Sita-Rama, Vamanadeva, etc. On the top floor you can look out and get a good view of the town of Vrindavan in the distance. Across the road nearby is a path leading to Akrura Ghat, which used to be along the Yamuna River until the river changed its course, as it often does in this area. Akrura Ghat is where Akrura, Krishna's uncle, got to see Krishna and Balarama as Vishnu and Ananta lying on the surface of the Yamuna. Akrura had stopped there to chant the *gayatri* mantra while taking Krishna and Balarama to Mathura. What the vision signified was that Krishna never leaves Vrindavan, He eternally resides there, but Krishna's expansion as Vishnu was going to Mathura.

Now we continue to the most holy town of Vrindavan which has many temples to see. In fact, it is said that there are over 5,000 temples in this town, both large and small. Out of all of these, I will describe the most important. Vrindavan is not a place you go to and expect all its secrets to become easily revealed. It is said that you do not get to Vrindavan simply by purchasing a ticket. Vrindavan is not only a geographical place, but it is a state of spiritual consciousness, without which you will not comprehend the special nature of the place. Thus, as you become qualified through bhakti-yoga, and by receiving the blessings of the resident devotees, Vrindavan will gradually reveal itself to you. I have personally experienced this. Only after staying in Vrindavan for several weeks was I able to find and understand the meaning of certain places and temples that I had been looking for from the time I arrived. Slowly I began to have my own realizations about the spiritual characteristics of this holy town.

For me, Vrindavan is my favorite place in all of India. I love to walk around the village visiting the temples and holy places, seeing the beautiful deities, dealing with the friendly residents, and watching the pilgrims who also tour the temples. Of course, this does not mean that you should not be careful as in other places in India. There may still be plenty of ricksha drivers and store keepers who are too willing to raise the price on their services and merchandise when they see a foreigner. And some tourists are easy prey for such people. But after having done as much traveling as we have throughout the rest of India

(unless you have come straight to Vrindavan from Delhi upon your arrival in India), we will find that Vrindavan is a small and very sweet village that is easy to get to know.

The spiritual nature of this place can be very apparent if one is able to perceive it, and some people feel it right away. But there can be plenty of things that can hinder your absorption in such spiritual bliss. Things like mosquitoes, noisy monkeys that fight in the night that keep you from sleeping, incredibly hot summers, cold winter nights without central heat, and so on. For the average person it is not an easy place in which to live. That's why it is recommended to keep your visits in Vrindavan short so you do not lose respect for the place and consider it an ordinary, mundane town, and, thus, become critical and offensive. Such an attitude makes one lose all ability to enter into even the most basic level of Vrindavan's spiritual atmosphere. In the proper consciousness, one can perceive that everything about Vrindavan is spiritual.

Rupa Goswami explains in his book *Sri Upadesamrita* that Vrindavan is spiritually superior to Mathura because this is where Krishna's highly esoteric *rasa-lila* pastimes take place. Rupa Goswami was the top literary disciple of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and chief of the Goswamis who lived in Vrindavan about 500 years ago. He wrote many books about the art of devotional service to Krishna and restored many of the holy places in Vraja, re-establishing its spiritual importance. The *rasa-lila* is the pinnacle of transcendental loving exchange between Krishna and His purest devotees, the *gopis* or cowheard girls, as explained in *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. The *rasa* dance is purely spiritual and not easily understood by mundane scholarly interpretations. If one is not a *bhakta* (devotee engaged in bhakti-yoga), one cannot comprehend such elevated love of God.

The *rasa* dance took place in the forest of Seva Kunj, which used to be a much bigger area than the small enclosed forest it is today. Nonetheless, it is considered the center of Vrindavan, and is where, according to *shastra* or the Vedic literature, the *rasa* dance takes place every night. In fact, it's said that Krishna never leaves Vrindavan; the spiritual pastimes are eternal. We will understand this more clearly as we visit a few of the temples and relate the pastimes connected with them. Just one thing about visiting Seva Kunj is watch out for the monkeys. There is quite a pack that lives there and they can be aggressive in ways such as stealing your glasses, which has happened often, or your camera, shoes, etc.

There are a number of important temples in this area. Just north of Seva Kunj is Imli Tala. Here we find a very old tamarind tree that has existed since the days of Krishna in the courtyard of a Radha-Krishna temple that was built by Bhakti Saranga Maharaja. Krishna used to sit under this tree and His body would turn golden from ecstatic separation from His dearest devotee, Srimati Radharani. Five hundred years ago, Sri Chaitanya would sit under the tree and due to His love for Krishna His golden body would turn blackish.

Heading east we visit the Radha-Damodar Mandir. The original deities of Radha-Damodar were installed by Rupa Goswami in 1542, but were later taken to Jaipur where they are now worshiped. The present deities are considered equal to the original. There is also a stone or *shila* from Govardhana Hill in the temple that has an actual foot-print of Krishna on it. Krishna personally appeared to Sanatana Goswami to give him the *shila*. He told Sanatana that because he was having difficulty from old age he should stop

his daily circumambulation of Govardhana Hill and simply circumambulate the *shila*. The footprint became part of the stone when Krishna stood on it and caused the stone to melt from the sweet sound of His flute playing. Now pilgrims circumambulate the temple four times, which is equal to walking once around the 15 mile path of Govardhana Hill. You can ask the *pujari* (priest) at the temple for Giriraja *darshan* and for two rupees he will bring the Govardhana *shila* for you to see.

On the left side of the Radha-Damodar temple, through a doorway, are the *samadhi* tombs or representative tombs of Jiva Gosvami, Krsnadas Kaviraja Gosvami, Bhugarbha Gosvami, and a *puspa samadhi* (flower or representative *samadhi*) of Bhaktisiddhanta Gosvami. Through a door on the right side of the temple is the *samadhi* and *bhajan kutir* (small and private place for worship) of Rupa Gosvami. On the right side of the courtyard are the rooms where Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada lived for several years from 1959 to 1965 and wrote his commentary on the First Canto of *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, which he later brought to America.

Not far away is the Radha-Shyamasundara temple, which is one of the seven main temples of Vrindavan and has some very beautiful deities. It was established by Shyamananda Prabhu who was a disciple of Sri Chaitanya and a very elevated *bhakta*. In fact, one time he saw Srimati Radharani. He would regularly clean the little forest area of Nidhibana and happened to find an anklebell. He thought it must be Radharani's since he knew Krishna and Radha often spent Their evenings there. When Radharani discovered one of Her anklebells was missing, she sent Lalita to find it. At Nidhibana Lalita saw Shyamananda Prabhu and asked him if he had found an anklebell. He said he had and asked if it was hers. Lalita said it belonged to her sister and asked to have it. Shyamananda said he would not give it to her but only to her sister. Lalita insisted that he give it to her, and Shyamananda continued to refuse. So Lalita returned to Radharani and Radha decided to personally go for the anklebell herself. Approaching Shyamananda, Radha asked for the anklebell and he was happy to give it to Her. Radha, being pleased with his service, revealed Her identity to him and by impressing Her anklebell into his forehead personally gave him a *tiloka* mark. Later, the other *bhaktas* criticized him for wearing a new style of *tiloka*. But that night Srimati Radharani appeared to Jiva Gosvami in a dream and told him that She was the one who gave Shyamananda the *tiloka* mark. Then all the devotees went to Shyamananda to ask for forgiveness and accepted that he actually saw Srimati Radharani. This is another story signifying that the eternal pastimes of the spiritual realm are continually taking place in Vrindavan.

A little walk (half-block) from the Radha-Syamasundara temple is Loi Bazaar, one of the main shopping areas in the village. Here you can find all the necessities for living in Vrindavana. There are shops of all kinds, for clothes, medicines, utensils, food, deities and worship paraphernalia. Walking eastward through the bazaar we next see the Shahji Mandir which was built in 1876 by Shah Kundan Lal of Lucknow. This is an attractive temple that has small Radha-Krishna deities, and shows how Shah Kundan Lal, a rich jeweler, appreciated service to Krishna in Vrindavan. To the left of the temple and down a lane is a small but pleasant Krishna temple of the famous poetess Mirabai.