



# On the Road to BEING

Kristin Pettit runs rivers, prays in temples, and discovers that understanding is out and experiencing is in.

**M**y Asheville, North Carolina friends – Miami runaways, it's fair to say – are in the travel business. Ellen Lyon and Reda Kay have the “necessaries” to provide clients not only getaways or distractions, but real adventures, life-enriching travel experiences. So when I had a chance to go to India with a small group, escorted by them, I took it.

In October 2000, I flew, alone, from Central Europe over the mid-East, hoping that after India, I would be able to go there, somehow. The young Indian men and women passengers (software designers in California) struck me as thoroughly American. At the flight's end I knew they were not. Maybe they were the emerging World-Person whose home was an airport. They would visit family, take an Indian wife, but they would return to the States. I thought of the hordes of immigrants to America, from the Protestant Northern Irish who gave us President Jackson, all the way through to the arriving Indians in high-tech and even Tibetan Buddhists. My God, I wasn't even there yet and I was getting wired. I couldn't shut off my thinking. I hoped I could, though, because, in India understanding is out, experiencing is in. I thought, “Yeah, right.”

Descending into Bombay was eerie: the pyromaniacal light show I was used to on night flights into Miami or the dazzling opening shot of Las Vegas at night on CBS's “CSI” never happened. Instead, it was an inky background, daubed with sporadic smudges of dulled-out orange. Yet millions moved below. I was afraid. But, I remember I didn't want to cop to it.

A Pakistani businessman moved me through the intricacies of the Bombay airport,

and as I boarded the plane to Delhi, he said, “First time here?” I nodded yes, and spoke of my amazement at the splendid, colorful chaos “Ah, well, then ... but please remember, we are not amazed by all this. It is our life, and you are welcome. Namaste.” I offered a handshake goodbye.

I met up with the tour group at the Claridges Hotel and we spent the day and night getting acquainted and psyched. We were a small band, 11 in all, counting our guide, Prince (his real name), and our van drivers, two of the most centered, unflappable beings I've met yet. These three would be with us for most of the 19 or 20 days we would spend in India.

We drove north to fabled Rishikesh in the foothills of the Himalayas. In the 1960's the Beatles, seeking enlightenment and spiritual renewal, came to Rishikesh and as the electric media flashed pictures of their bowed heads and prayerful hands, millions overnight heard what the first-wave hippies had been saying: Rishikesh – Place of the Sages – shows ardent seekers a new path when the burdens of material acquisitions have begun to taste like ashes. The world saw, and India was hot! I saw my first ancient Shiva Temple and participated in puja – a blessing for our up-coming journey – and students at the Sanskrit School presented us with the gift of chanting. I was buzzing in my head, trying to think what I thought.

We drove to the Himalayan River Runners Rafting Camp high above the ashrams, the priests, the temples, the pilgrims, tourists, shops, and markets. We slept in tents by the Ganges River and in the morning we rafted into Rishikesh, on absolutely pristine water, calm at times, allowing us to enjoy both the forested

and terraced hillsides. The rapids (up to class III-V) encouraged us to finally scream and shout-out the apprehensive awe, but also the thrill each of us had been feeling – probably the minute we touched down in India.

Then came Hardiwar, where Lord Vishnu left his footprint, and on the evening trek, there were hundreds moving down to the river. People were chanting, and priests were bowing over and over, and zillions of flower petals with candles on them were released to give thanks to Mother Ganga. I couldn't remember anything like it at home – at least the unbridled expression of thanks.

In Dehradun, a hill station, we visited the Sakya Center, which offers education for monks and nuns and serves the Tibetan Buddhist community, and in Shimla, once considered the abode of the goddess Shama, we marveled at the chalets and castle-like government buildings that Kipling, in the days of the British Raj, called his “utopia.” But I thought it was too much like a movie set à la “Bollywood,” and I missed the rambunctious India. The vibrancy was under wraps, and I noticed we were walking in lines and saying “pardon me” in this English place.

After Mandi, with its Bhutnath Temple (to mention just one among the 81 Hindu temples in the area) we drove to Kullu, to participate in a weeklong festival. Villages for miles around bring their deities out of the village temples on ceremonial palanquins, carrying them to Kullu to pay homage to the king of the deities in the “Valley of Gods.”

Walking to the festival from Hotel Vaishali, we smother our mouths and noses with bandanas, against the dust and diesel

stench. The rags we clutched were our bit of American color. We seemed to me to be what we, in fact, were: Western, well-intended, but beginning to fall in love with wandering among folk dancers, snake charmers, holy men – Sadhus – market stalls with local handi crafts, sacred possessions, traditional dress ... we wanted to stay for more than our two days, but it was day nine (or ten?) and the van was there waiting to move on.

We hit the road for Dharmsala, McLeod Ganj, the home in exile of his Holiness the Dalai Lama; the stops we make, the road through the towering conifer forests up to McLeod Ganj, the mysterious sounds of gongs and horns and prayer flags flying and prayer wheels spinning – the monks and nuns – all leave no doubt that this is Tibet, in exile, a spiritual epicenter. Walking here, hiking in the forest, among the shepherds, late night talks – it was a retreat that someone said was like floating, dropping out of time.

The overnight train ride to Delhi for our flight to see the famed Hindu Temples of Khajurahjo was so engrossing, and against all odds, soothing, that we let go of “Tibet” to feel the India vibes. (And, please, Lord Shiva, when will the Americans bring back their trains?)

In Khajurahjo, the sensual but erotic temple sculptures were crafted of buff sandstone, reddish-brown. And as I stood there looking, my mind threw up a picture of the Red Stone Campus, UVM. What was this? I was flashing on American temples and gods, our linear, not circular, “take” on the World (corporations, compartments, street grids, closet