

Brightly robed Hindu pilgrims converge in their millions for the Kumbh Mela festival in India, the world's largest religious gathering

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CAN AN INNER JOURNEY ECLIPSE THE PHYSICAL ACT OF TRAVEL?
CATHERINE MARSHALL LOOKS FOR ANSWERS BESIDE INDIA'S SACRED GANGES.





I'M RECEIVING a blessing from a *naga sadhu* (naked holy man) in an ashram draped in a canopy of crimson silk and shrouded in veils of cannabis vapour. "Self-realisation is the best religion," he intones, tugging at the ponytail he's made of his beard. "And love is the main tool."

It sounds vaguely Rastafarian or flower power (or it might be the chillums speaking) but I like it: a belief system in which I must bathe my own soul in beneficence so that light and peace might flow forth. I place some rupees in the *naga sadhu's* dish (already overflowing with devotees' largesse) and walk outside to where the Ganges river is sluicing away the sins of the pilgrims performing *puja* (worship) in its shallows.

I'm attending the world's largest religious gathering, the Kumbh Mela, during which tens of millions of Hindus converge on a river to wash away their wrongs. The festival commemorates a mythological tug of war between demigods and demons in which a droplet of the nectar of immortality fell from the *kumbh* (pitcher) onto four sacred sites in India: Allahabad, Haridwar, Nashik and Ujjain.

Each of these cities hosts the Kumbh Mela every 12 years, with an additional Ardh (half) Kumbh Mela held every six years at Allahabad or Haridwar. Set to host the Ardh Kumbh Mela from mid-January to March 2019 (kumbh.gov.in), Allahabad is said to be the most auspicious because it is here at the *sangam* (confluence) that three holy rivers converge: the Ganges, the Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati.

I've come to Allahabad not seeking forgiveness but to tap into the Kumbh Mela's all-encompassing, magnanimous spiritual flow. Self-exploration has become a common pursuit among travellers searching not only for a new destination but an experience that will fill an intolerable void. Elizabeth Gilbert (*Eat, Pray, Love*) found her answer while meditating in an ashram in India, guzzling pasta in Italy and communing with a medicine man in Indonesia. Cheryl Strayed walked out her pain on the Pacific Crest Trail in the United States and wrote about it in her bestseller, *Wild*. The lost have



A holy man at Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, one of the four alternating sites of the event



A woman with decorated hands holds an offering of marigolds, incense and oil (above); temporary pontoon bridges provide thoroughfares in Allahabad during the festival (left)



orange-robed *kalpwasi* (Hindu pilgrims) filing down lime-dusted roads for their morning dip in Mother Ganga; the naga sadhu wearing nothing but a thick caking of ash and a string of pearls around his penis; the Aussie who travelled here as a backpacker in the late 1980s and vowed to return one day with his family. “I just thought that the boats were so magical down there in the water and I wanted to be a part of that,” he says. “I thought, ‘I’ll come back and build a boat.’ So 24 years later, we’re here.” The family have christened their boat *Karuna*, “compassion” in Sanskrit, and are ferrying pilgrims to the sangam in it so they might take the holiest of dips.

long sought enlightenment by trudging the Camino de Santiago or meditating in a hut on some forsaken peak. But, increasingly, travellers are setting out on journeys that they hope will transform them: the balm for a bitter break-up; the resolution to a spiritual quest; the detoxing of a life filled with far too much social media and way too many pies.

“People go to Machu Picchu, Uluru, Sedona to seek energy,” says my guide, Aman Choudhary, as we drive to Allahabad from the holy city of Varanasi. “But when you come here you don’t have to seek it – it’s just there.”

Crowds are arriving in their thousands from the furthest corners of India and across the world: the

I’m now out on the water myself, cruising downstream towards the *melā* (fair) from my luxury pop-up camp arranged by The Classic Safari Company on the banks of the Ganges (classicsafaricompany.com.au). While the camp doesn’t spare any indulgence, it respects the sanctity of this Hindu event by serving neither alcohol nor meat.

It’s a particularly significant bathing day, for tonight there will be a full moon. The Ganges trembles with the inundation of rainbow-hued pilgrims: circles of bright sari-draped women holding hands and plunging joyously into the river; a bather sinking among the marigold petals, her scarlet shawl spreading like a pool



Hindu priests perform an *aarti* ritual in which prayers are said and fires lit as an act of devotion to Mother Ganga

of blood around her; a devotee raising his palms in salutation to the sun, his leathered face and faded *dhoti* (trousers) creased with rivulets of sacred water.

“We go to the water, take a holy dip, wash away our sins,” Choudhary says of the spectacle. “Then we take the water in cupped hands and offer it back to the sun.”

I’ve so far offered nothing to the sun – or to anyone, for that matter – but an opportunity has finally arisen. As we land our boat on the riverbank and step into the melee we’re greeted by a dreadlocked sadhu bearing a swatch of white-and-red fabric. He has come all the way from the Himalaya, Choudhary translates for me, and asks that I bless him with this prayer shawl.

Love is the tool, said the naga sadhu. Remembering these words, I shake out the shawl, place it gently around the old man’s shoulders and bless him with thoughts of peace and goodwill. He looks up with tender eyes and smiles a beatific blessing right back at me. ■

Fresh start

Other ways and places to transform yourself in 2019.

Flight path

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Qantas flies from Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth to Singapore with connections to New Delhi via partner airlines. qantas.com

Wellness

A 10-million-year-old rainforest is the setting for the new Nature Centre at The Datai Langkawi (thedatai.com), which reopens this month after refurbishment, on the Langkawi archipelago of Malaysia. Centred on the Malay concept of *ramuan* – the use of medicinal plants – the centre aligns wellness with nature through activities such as rainforest awakening trails, butterfly garden walks and coral reef exploration.

Meditation

Visitors are encouraged to organise their thoughts while taking the Path of the Senses, a meditation track that winds through peaceful lush forest at Propstei St Gerold, a Benedictine

monastery complex in Austria’s UNESCO-protected Grosses Walsertal region (vorarlberg-alpenregion.at). Enveloped by high mountains and alpine air, the centre also offers retreats.

Pilgrimage

Il Cammino di Francesco (viadi francesco.it) – the St Francis Way – is Italy’s Camino, a journey of more than 500 kilometres from La Verna to Rome following in the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and ecology. Passing through his hometown and the olive groves and vineyards of Umbria, the pilgrimage offers an opportunity to meditate on the value of nature and how to preserve it.

Soul

The power of the jungle and surf are harnessed for good health at Soul & Surf’s Sri Lankan retreats (soulandsurf.com). A program of meditation, yoga and surfing lessons is combined with wellness treatments, wholesome food, daydreaming spaces and music therapy to soothe even the most harried of souls.

Art and music

Radical inclusion, environmental respect, decommodification and the passing on of knowledge are some of the guiding principles of AfrikaBurn (afrikaburn.com), an offshoot of Nevada’s Burning Man event. Held annually in South Africa’s Tankwa Karoo, this carnival of art, music and communal altruism brings together like-minded people hoping to reinvent themselves – and the world. It will run from 29 April to 5 May 2019.