



Spiritual journeys

One of the hottest travel trends today is one of the oldest

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Transforming. That's how Carol Levine describes her recent trip to Teotihuacan, a sacred Aztec site near Mexico City. "It was a fantastic experience," says Levine, a Minneapolis, Minn.-based organizational consultant. "I was looking for a special trip to help mark my 41st birthday, and ended up having a life-altering experience." She says that since returning from Mexico in February, her life is more peaceful, more grounded.

Tara Alain agrees. "I had what you might call a 'peak' experience," says the Squamish resident. "I was so changed by what happened on my trip to Peru that I quit my job and practice daily meditation."

Levine and Alain are among a growing number of travellers seeking more from time away than a comfortable bed, a good meal, and the chance to have their picture taken next to well-known monuments while stocking up on local souvenirs.

One of today's hottest travel trends is actually one of the oldest. Spiritual curiosity and passion for transformation are among the human race's oldest motivators to travel. In some cultures, this type of journey is a right of passage, as in the native American vision quest or the Australian Aborigine walkabout. Since the beginning of time, people have

also visited sacred sites for healing, inspiration and guidance.

"There's no doubt that there is a trend for people looking for a deeper meaning to their travel experience," says Helen Tomei, president of Sacred Earth Journeys, a company that specializes in travel to a wide range of sacred sites with many trips incorporating some sort of healing component such as a yoga program. Both Levine and Alain took trips organized through her company. "People are looking for an inner journey as much as an outer journey," Tomei says.

Pilgrimage to a sacred site is an important part of spiritual life for many people no matter what their faith or spiritual beliefs, and it can be an act of transformation that changes the life of the seeker in many positive ways.

"These trips are often a good time to address unresolved issues or past traumas," says Tomei. "They are often life-changing, profound journeys where people come back with a renewed sense of purpose and direction. With our hectic lifestyles, people are looking for opportunities to relax, restore balance into their lives, and

rejuvenate the body, mind and spirit."

Tomei notes that while spiritual travel is still considered a niche market, her clients "tend to be professional, educated, well-travelled people in their 30s to 60s. About 60 to 70 per cent are women, although more men are joining our trips now."

There are as many different kinds of spiritual journeys and pilgrimage routes as there are travellers upon them.

The oldest known pilgrimage site is Mount Kailash in Tibet, which has been a holy travel destination for an incomprehensible 15,000 years. Walking the 51-km trail around Kailash takes about three days. Buddhists say the ritual circumambulation erases the sins of one lifetime, and 108 times around the mountain will enable you to reach Nirvana. The mountain is also sacred to Hindus and Jains.

Varanasi on the banks of India's holy Ganges River is believed by those of the Hindu faith to be the first city created on the Earth, making it another active pilgrimage centre.

One of a Muslim's duties, as described in the Five Pillars of Islam, is to go on Hajj -- a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia -- at least once during his or her lifetime. The centre of the Islamic world and the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad, Mecca is so sacred that when Muslims pray they face in the direction of the city no matter where they are in the world.

England also harbours its share of sacred sites. Stonehenge is likely the most famous, but it is far from being the only pilgrimage destination. In medieval times, the tradition of Christian pilgrimages really took hold, with Jerusalem the ultimate destination. Pilgrims who couldn't manage or afford the long voyage could still do penance or seek cures by visiting European shrines devoted to various saints. Canterbury Cathedral, dedicated to Saint Thomas, was England's most popular pilgrimage site, as described in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

But you don't have to leave North America to find sacred places to visit.

Local Hopi and Navajo as well as native people from as far as Canada and Central America journeyed to Sedona, Arizona, for healing and learning long before Europeans invaded North America. The area's dramatically shaped red sandstone rocks are said to emit powerful energy partly because of their high concentration of magnetic iron.

L'Oratoire Saint-Joseph du Mont-Real is one of Canada's better known pilgrimage sites. It was built to honour Canada's patron saint, Joseph. Each year, thousands of devout visitors climb the 100 wood-clad steps of Montreal's famous landmark on their knees.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of other spiritual sites and routes around the world. But pilgrimages aren't for everyone. They tend to be long (the popular Camino route through northern Spain takes about one month to walk in one direction), which also means they are time-consuming, a real obstacle for many in today's busy world. Thankfully, labyrinths such as those found at Chartres Cathedral in France, or at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco stand in for those

wanting to embark on a faith journey but with only a couple of hours in which to do so.

For other sojourners, visiting a number of sacred sites or traveling in the footsteps of a saint or other spiritual figure as part of an organized tour group comes closer to answering their souls' desire -- and the group dynamic can add another powerful element to the experience. There are also those who prefer to focus on the inward journey so opt for meditation retreats instead.

The common thread in all types of spiritual travel isn't the method or even the destination of the travel, but the journey itself.

"People take my trips to learn about themselves and their true spiritual nature," says Tomei. Among other destinations, Tomei's Sacred Earth Journeys offers trips to Peru where participants can learn about the Inca spiritual traditions; to England to learn and meditate amongst the ancient stone circles of Stonehenge and Avebury; and Mexico to learn about the cosmology of the Maya and the Mayan Calendar, which ends in 2012.

And several people feel called to embark on more than one spiritual journey. Both Levine and Alain intend to take similar trips in the future -- Alain set off to Egypt at the end of March.

Self-discovery is, of course, the ultimate goal of any spiritual pursuit. All transformation must come from within, and pilgrimage is just one of many routes you can take to get there. In the end, all spiritual roads lead to the same destination.

FINDING A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

To get some sense of the range of spiritual travel opportunities available, do a Google search of "spiritual travel." Religious institutions such as the Vancouver School of Theology frequently offer group pilgrimage tours abroad. For destinations closer to home and ones that have less affiliation with a given denomination, consult Shared Vision or check out the bulletin board at Banyen Books.

To find out more about Sacred Earth Journeys, log on to the website at www.sacredearthjourneys.ca

To learn more about the organization Canadian Company of Pilgrims or to learn more about the experiences of other pilgrims who have walked the Camino, go to www.santiago.ca

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