

2001 – An Indian Odyssey **“ A Journey without Distance”**

India is a country of beautiful landscapes, diverse cultures, fabulous cuisine, rich art, ancient temples, magnificent monuments and friendly, warm & welcoming people! India also is a place of depth and wisdom and if you open to her, she will totally transform you. As such, India must be experienced in order to be known for neither words, pictures nor stories do justice in describing her magnificence. For a first time visitor to India however, there are many unique challenges. Part of this is due to the sheer ‘intensity’ of the place. As an Indo-Canadian, I speak the language and have a good working knowledge of the Indian culture. When I first visit to India in 1992, I had family there to receive and guide me and even then, I found it to be an overwhelming and challenging place to be. As I was there for 6 months, I experienced what I can describe best now as a ‘love-hate’ relationship with India. There were days when I wanted to stay there forever and others, where I couldn’t wait to get out.

Since then, I have made 5 more trips there & India has shown me the value of learning patience and acceptance through letting go of my need to control outcomes. As such, I realized that going to India is much more than simply a vacation – rather it is a personal journey which nourishes body, mind and soul. As many of my clients noted during their retreats, if you don’t push but instead ask, “I wonder how something can be resolved”? India listens and supports you with miraculous solutions. Today, I look forward to my yearly Indian Odyssey as by having let go, I find that India, although always the teacher, nevertheless welcomes and nourishes me with her wisdom and warmth, unconditionally!

The Gifts of India

One key observation that I as well as my retreat guests have made is how India and the Indian people portray a quality of ‘aliveness’, an ‘energy’ or as the French would say ‘a joi de vivre’ around them. Initially, this was confusing since in the west, we have been told that **we** are the “haves: and they are the “have nots” and therefore, we enjoy a higher quality of ‘life’. However, my observations revealed that ours is more a ‘quantity of life’ rather than a quality! In India, despite the obvious, physical ‘poverty’ that many endure due to over population, there nevertheless is a noticeable absence of the ‘misery’ which seems to have become a mainstay of western living. People are not chasing after more ‘comforts’ and in the process, sacrificing their families, their time and their sanity. While traveling through Delhi, for example, a city of 12 million, I observed that despite horrendously crowded streets, there was no road rage; that despite having only an old tin can and some sticks and pebbles as play things, children played happily and never laid claim to ‘boredom’; and that workers, even those doing hard labour on road crews, had a indescribable serenity which lacked the ‘stressed out’ and ‘edgy’ energy typical of many of our people. Therefore, India reminds us that we too can choose to be centered, happy and at peace despite the challenges and hardships which confront us in our daily lives.

In the west, although we have the luxury of physical space however, we have managed to translate it into emotional isolation and loneliness. We have lost our sense of community here which is not the case in India. It was evident in both cities and towns that there was an innate sense of community and belonging and that people had a sense of love and caring amongst them, rather than judgment and condemnation. Even when conflict was taking place, it was as if it was safe for it to occur because it was taking place within a cohesive and loving environment – much like having a field within which to play ball. That feelings of belonging and acceptance, permeate the air and invites an opening of our hearts. It gifts us with the message that beyond the surface, which can be deceiving, we have a worthwhile place within the greater scheme of things. I found that even the most fearful, judgmental and resistant individuals ‘warmed up’ and opened to India when they looked beyond the surface with some wanting to extend their visits. In it’s own magical way, beyond the surface logic, India finds it’s way into our hearts, softens those hardened edges, and invites us to feel like we finally belong!

A Meaningful Journey

There is a definite and distinct rhythm and pulse to the Indian way of life. I discovered that the most effective & enjoyable way to learn this rhythm is to be immersed in it as authentically as possible. Ignoring this rhythm & trying to follow our own familiar one usually resulted in havoc. The power and momentum in India is such that like a rushing river, as we learn to work with it, go with its flow, it supports and carries us fully in our journey. As one member in our group put it, “India can be a very humbling, yet highly enriching experience.”

Another client, who was not aware of this dynamic, decided to travel ahead of us to Southern India and tour for a few weeks before meeting with our group in the North. I had advised against it and tried to explain how differently things operated in India and how shocking that could be to the system. He persisted however and upon arrival there, within 3 days, was ready to fly back and within 3 weeks, had cut back his 2 month vacation and returned to Canada. Another well- traveled client would not let go of my arm for a week, such was the intensity of the culture and the environment. Therefore, in choosing how to first experience India, I have always suggested a retreat setting where one can get their proverbial feet wet, so to speak.

For me, an ideal place to visit for an authentic yet safe experience (where there is some refuge from the chaos), is the Holy City of Rishikesh. Rishikesh is located North East of Delhi and is situated on the banks of the Holy river Ganges. It houses over 100 ashrams and is a Mecca for those wanting to go to a place where they can rest, rejuvenate, explore and ultimately have a real, authentic experience of India. There is much to do in the area from temple visits, to going on Hill City excursions to white water rafting. Much of the spiritual traditions of the east which have found their way into the west have had their birthplace in Rishkesh. The Beatles were there, the T.M. movement started there as did the work of Deepak Chopra, the well-known author of Ayurveda, an ancient Indian Science of Life.

Within the auspices of an Ashram, our retreat groups learn Cleansing and Hatha Yoga, enjoy massage, partake of a healthy vegetarian cuisine and take time to contemplate and reflect on life. They learn to 'slow down' and just be and in the process, experience how simple life can be. This experience brings a fresh perspective and gives us an awareness of how we too can live more in harmony within our lives back home.

A Journey without Distance

In this regard, going to India is really going on a **Journey Without Distance** because the experience will bring you closer to who you are by opening your heart and thus enriching you. This is contrasted to other kinds of vacations where we go to escape, only to realize that ultimately, there is no escape! Rather, going to India is more of an "IN-scape", that is, one which brings us deeper into our own center. This can be a highly fulfilling and ultimately enlightening experience which awakens within us a joy, an enthusiasm and an overall appreciation for our life. By getting us in touch with ourselves at the Soul level, India leaves you feeling positively inspired and moves you to live a more positive and passionate existence.

Personally, each time I return from India, I inevitably come back 'inspired'. India reminds me to maintain a balanced perspective in my thinking and not become so stressed and worked up over the 'doing' disease. I always come back feeling a deeper connection within myself, and with an 'attitude of gratitude' which acts like a wake up call to remind me that although life will always challenge us, we can still choose to be happy through invoking the gifts of acceptance, trust and faith. Miraculously, by remaining open and truly letting go, India enriches us beyond imagination. As such, India is truly the journey of a lifetime.