

WHAT MAKES A PLACE SPECIAL?

There are certain places in the world that hold an inexplicable magic. Either stumbled upon or actively sought, they have the power to stir something within us: something profound and memorable that is beyond the everyday. This feeling can be hard to describe, but it is instantly recognisable and familiar. Ancient and eternal, it is the same



Phu, Nepal

emotion that moved our distant ancestors and prompted them to build stone circles, construct temples and carve monumental statues. The Ancient Greeks understood about the power of place – they had two words for space: “topos” describes its physical characteristics, and “chora” its mysterious or poetic qualities. Spiritual or sacred places have an abundance of “chora”.

Defining life-changing places is an elusive business. A sense of wonder can arise in many different locations, from visiting a Mayan pyramid, entering a prehistoric stone circle, walking through woodland, ascending a mountain or dipping your fingertips into a holy spring. One way to identify a place as life-changing is simply by the emotional response provoked by its atmosphere.

Reasons for visiting life-changing places are as diverse as the sites themselves. We might be driven there by the need to escape the humdrum and to explore, or by the pull of history, myth and legend. Our own beliefs and faith may propel us to visit somewhere of meaning, or we may seek a powerful, peaceful place in which to meditate and discover more about ourselves. Or we could simply be curious to see what it looks like; to experience it.

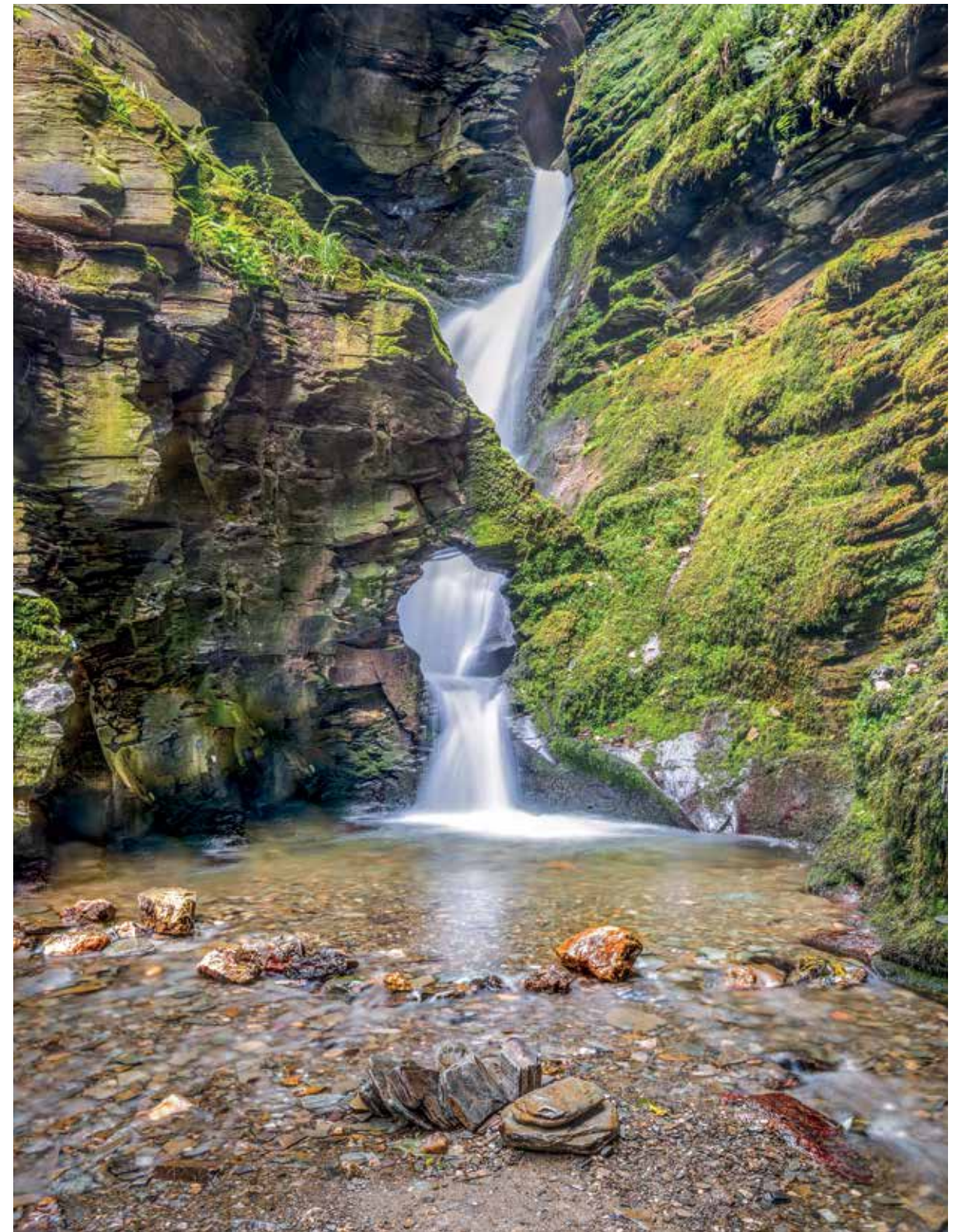
The growth in “meaningful” travel has seen more of us looking for a spiritual depth to our wanderings. Rather than booking a holiday that simply promises non-stop

sun, a pool and a beach bar or ticking another destination off a bucket list, increasing numbers of us are seeking a holiday that delivers on another level. A journey to a place of meaning provides a destination and a purpose. It also reveals much about the history, myths and culture of the country. As Paul Devereux writes in *The Sacred Place*, “These

places offer a respite from secular world. Sometimes we need holidays for our souls, not just for our bodies and mind.”

Perhaps it’s because we have lost touch with the genius loci, or spirit of the land, that we seek out life-changing places. Most modern building is about scale of economy and functionality rather than what lies beneath our feet, surrounds us in the landscape or connects us with the heavens. Religion has played a large part in the acknowledgement and creation of life-changing places. A desire to connect with gods and spirits, to understand the cycle of life and death, and to tap into the earth’s mysteries runs through many faiths. Many man-made temples have been built in locations of great natural beauty, are aligned with the sun, moon or stars, or are positioned on energetic lines. Built to muster favour with gods and spirits, these buildings inspire awe and wonder in a similar way that a mountain or waterfall might.

However we define a life-changing place, it’s worth making the effort to visit one. Whether it’s an ancient tree in a local park or a magnificent temple in Bali, it’s an opportunity to take time out and walk away from our hurried lives. It gives us the space to connect with something beyond our own minds and bodies, and in turn to reconnect with ourselves.



AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

The birthplace of the world's most widely practiced religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the heritage and histories of these religions have been preserved across the region. Holy pilgrimage sites across Africa and the Middle East provide inspiration to anyone who comes looking to understand the divine mysteries of the universe, its origin and their place in it.





THE TEMPLE OF HATHOR, DENDERA TEMPLE COMPLEX

QENA, EGYPT

THE WONDER OF IT

On the west bank of the Nile between Luxor and Abydos, Dendera, a magnificent complex, stands alone in the desert. At its heart is a temple dedicated to Hathor, one of Ancient Egypt's most revered goddesses. There were more festivals devoted to Hathor than any other, and she was worshipped in temples throughout the country. Her temple at Dendera, however, is the most splendid. Contained within a mudbrick wall that encloses the complex, it dominates over the two smaller temples, sanitorium and sacred healing pool, and is intricately and beautifully decorated with hieroglyphs, colourful carvings and reliefs. Suitably impressive for a goddess held in such high esteem.

The joy of exploring Dendera is largely due to the fact that it is so well preserved. Walk through the Temple of Hathor's grand entrance and among the 24 monumental carved columns of its Great Vestibule and you get a sense of what it must have been like for Hathor's devotees arriving to honour their favourite deity. You can almost feel the press of worshippers and their gasps of wonder as they came to venerate the statue of Hathor in the temple's sanctuary, to be healed in the sacred pool, to pay their respects at ancestors tombs or to give birth in the *mammisi* (birthing temple).

Built between 54–20 BCE by Ptolemy XII and Cleopatra VII, the Temple of Hathor comprises a series of rooms, each intricately adorned with figures of emperors, pharaohs and dieties, plus screeds of hieroglyphs. There are chambers, crypts, shrines to various gods, and the sanctuary to wander between and marvel at. The wealth and intricacy of decoration on the walls and ceilings continues from room to room.

A climb up a spiral corridor leads to the top of the temple where a small

temple held rituals to greet the rising sun. Another chapel dedicated to Osiris has a relief of a circular zodiac on its ceiling, thought to be the only representation of the Ancient Egyptian sky during the age of Pisces more than 2,000 years ago (note that this is a copy: the original is in the Louvre in Paris).

The passage to the underground crypt requires a certain amount of stooping but it is worth it to see the "Dendera Lightbulb". The similarity of this carved relief to a modern bulb led some to conclude that Ancient Egyptians had knowledge of electrical technology. It is more likely, however, that it represents a djed pillar (a common symbol representing stability), a lotus flower and a snake (symbolizing fertility). Alongside is a portrait of sky god Horus, who was the son and consort of Hathor. The birthing temple at the front of the complex is also rich with decoration, mostly of the births of gods and pharaohs, and the small Temple of Isis behind the Temple of Hathor has a damaged relief of Isis giving birth.

THE CULT OF HATHOR

Hathor was the Egyptian sky goddess of fertility (including motherhood and childbirth), love, music and dancing. Commonly called "the golden one", texts found at her temple at Dendera say that "her rays illuminate the whole earth". One of the most popular goddesses in Ancient Egypt, a cult grew around her and more temples were devoted to her than any other goddess. Unusually, both male and female priests practised in her temples alongside musicians, midwives and dream interpreters. Hathor is sometimes depicted as a cow (a symbol of her maternal aspect), but more usually as a woman wearing a headress of cow's horns and a solar disk (the Eye of Ra).



The intricate interior ceiling inside the Temple of Hathor.



THE ANCIENT CITY OF VARANASI

UTTAR PRADESH, INDIA

THE WONDER OF IT

Intense and beautiful, the holy city of Varanasi pulses with life and at the same time celebrates death. Its 6km (3½ miles) of temples, palaces and ghats (stone stairs) stretch along the banks of the River Ganges drawing millions of Hindu pilgrims annually. Many come to bathe in the sacred river and be cleansed, but others come here to end their days. Death or cremation at Varanasi is an escape from the cycle of death and rebirth – moksha: 150 bodies are cremated daily on its ever-burning riverside pyres.

LIFE AND DEATH IN VARANASI

The River Ganges is India's most sacred river and Varanasi is its most sacred city. Lord Shiva, the supreme Hindu creator/destroyer god is believed to have lived here in one of his human incarnations. He stood on the Manikarnika Ghat (the holiest place in the Hindu world) with his wife Parvati as the world was created.

The golden-domed Vishwanath Temple in the centre of the city houses an ancient lingam, Shiva's phallic symbol, which the devoted queue for hours to touch. Varanasi is a major tirtha – a Hindu crossing place between this world and the world of the gods. As such it is a major place of pilgrimage for Hindus who aim to visit a least once in a lifetime to be cleansed in the river.

The city itself is a jumble of streets, crowded with holy men, pilgrims, pall-bearers carrying corpses to be cremated, tourists and sacred cows. All streets lead to the river where banks of stone steps that lead down to the river (ghats) are used for different activities: some are packed with devotees performing puja (prayers), some with sadhus (holy men) sitting cross-legged.



Everything is about the river here: regarded as the living goddess Ganga, it is the focus of all rituals and ceremonies. The most significant of which is the act of cremation which takes place on Manikarnika Ghat. Dead bodies are carried through the city on bamboo stretchers swaddled in brightly coloured cloth. Corpses are dipped in the Ganges before being cremated on stacks of firewood which smokes with the scent of camphor, mango leaves and ghee. The ashes are then thrown in the river.

Such is the desire to die at Varanasi and attain salvation that death

hotels have opened to cater for those at the end of their lives. In the past, people came here expressly to commit suicide: there is an account of 19th-century pilgrims using two kedgerie pots as floats, tying themselves to them, then floating out into the river and waiting for them to fill with water.

Above: Varanasi, on the banks of the River Ganges.

SACRED GANGES

To understand why Varanasi is so sacred, you have to understand the River Ganges. According to Hindu mythology, the goddess Ganga descended from the heavens in Lord Shiva's tangled hair, and was released in streams that became the river. In Hinduism, the river is the living embodiment of Ganga: unlike other gods and goddesses, she has a physical form (wearing a white crown and riding the Makra – a creature with the head of a crocodile and the tail of a dolphin).

Rising in the high Indian Himalayas at Gangotri Glacier near the Tibetan border, the Ganges flows 2,575km (1,600 miles) to the Bay of Bengal. Its holy status means that there are many temples along the river dedicated to Ganga, and Hindus believe that its waters have the power to cleanse and purify sins. The world's biggest spiritual gathering, the Kumbh Mela, takes place at the confluence of the Ganges, the Yamuna and the mythical Sarasvati rivers, once every four years. As at Varanasi, pilgrims bathe in its waters, despite it being one of the most polluted rivers on earth.



RISHIKESH

UTTARAKHAND, INDIA

TEMPLES, SHRINES & ASHRAMS

Rishikesh was put on the world map when the Beatles and their wives came to study Transcendental Meditation with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in February, 1968. Staying at his ashram, the Chaurasi Kutia, they meditated, ate vegetarian food and enjoyed a period of great creativity, writing 48 songs, most of which ended up on *The Beatles: White Album*. They eventually cut their three-month stay short following sexual misconduct allegations against the Maharishi, but the impact of their visit was significant.

THE WONDER OF IT

Hindu sages, yogis and sadhus have visited the city of Rishikesh in Northern India for centuries. They come to meditate on the banks of the Ganges, practice yoga, perform rituals and meditate. Temples line the river, and ashrams draw visitors from all over the world, including famously the Beatles in 1968, all seekers of spiritual solace and personal transformation.

Rishikesh became known as a centre for studying yoga and meditation, turning everyone on to India, and drawing pilgrims from all over the world.

The “Beatles ashram” still exists although in a delapidated state, but it is not the only ashram in Rishikesh – the city has masses of them. An important place in Hinduism; Lord Rama came here to do penance for killing Ravana, the ten-headed demon, it is a city defined by spirituality. The Swag Ashram district is at the heart and is where to find the ashrams, sadhus, bathing ghats and temples – the most impressive of which is the 13-storey Swarg Niwas and Shri Trayanbakshwar Temple on the east bank dedicated to Lord Shiva. Even the suspension bridge, the Lakshman Jhula, which connects the villages of Tapovan and Jonk, is sacred: it was built at the point where Lord Rama’s younger brother, Lakshmana, crossed the Ganges using a jute rope.

At sunset, temple bells ring to draw visitors to the nightly ceremony, the Ganga Aarti, performed on Triveni Ghat outside the temple of the Parmarth Niketan Ashram. Although increasingly popular with tourists, it is still an affecting experience, as singing, chanting, music and the

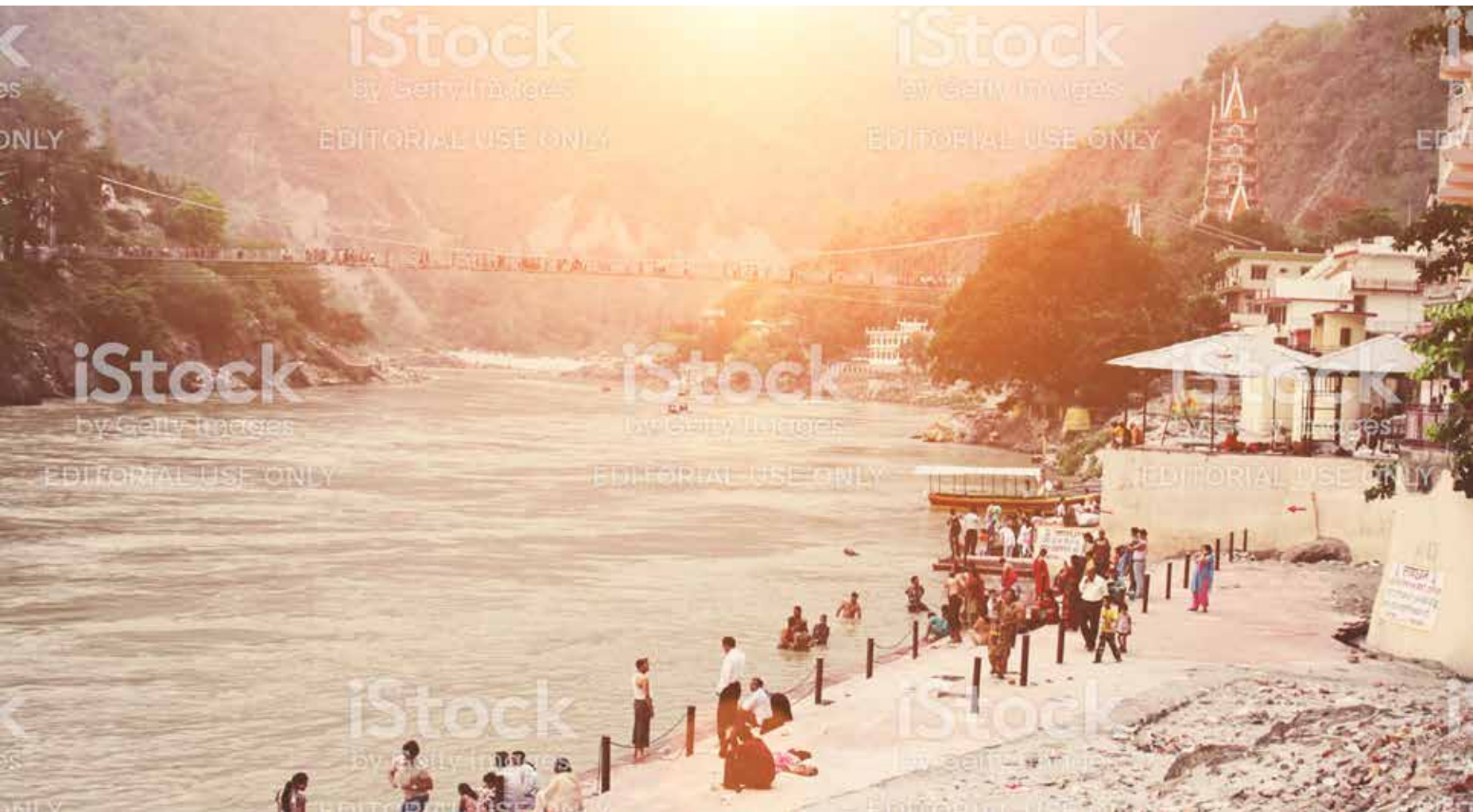
dispatching of little candle-bearing boats on the river, are employed to celebrate and venerate the holy river.

Calling itself the Yoga Capital of the World, there are many yoga studios in the city’s crowded lanes: plenty of opportunities to deepen your yoga practise and develop your asanas. The city also holds an annual week-long International Yoga Festival in March, which is attended by some of India’s leading spiritual leaders.

If the crowded streets get too much, visitors can also explore Rishikesh’s natural surroundings. Its situation at the foothills of the Himalayas, by a fast-flowing section

of the Ganges, surrounded by forests and waterfalls, make any hike an uplifting experience. The more dedicated pilgrims take water from the Ganges to Neelkantha Mahadev Temple, a 7km (4 mile), three-hour walk along a forested path from Swag Ashram.

Above: People batheing in the River Ganges in Rishikesh, with the Laxman Jhula suspension bridge beyond.



A GUIDE TO ASHRAMS

Rishikesh and Varanasi (see page 70) have become go-to places for those in search of an ashram. There are dozens in both cities offering people the chance to detox from the modern world: a sort of spa for those seeking meaning. The word “ashram” comes from the Sanskrit meaning “a step in the journey of life”. In the past, ashrams were located in remote locations where the natural setting was conducive to meditation and reflection, and where instruction in religious teaching often took place. These days, many ashrams are found in cities and offer a place to stay, vegetarian food and, most importantly, teaching in yoga and meditation. Many also insist that you undertake “seva” (“selfless service”): work inside the ashram or in the community. As types of yoga are numerous and varied, it is worth researching which ashram best suits you and what the requirements are of each before booking, to ensure you get the most out of the experience.

BALI

Spirituality is everywhere on the Indonesian island of Bali. Its dramatic mountains, coral reefs, waterfalls, volcanic-sand beaches, lakes and jungly interior are respected and often worshipped by its inhabitants, the majority of whom are Hindu. Balinese Hinduism is a mixture of animism and Buddhism and is propelled by a belief that the world is composed of opposing forces which need to be balanced, whether that be good and evil, order and disorder or gods and demons. The aim is to achieve enlightenment by practising karma and so escape the endless cycle of death and rebirth. Ceremonies take place to honour everything from trees and animals to birth and cremation.

The exceptional natural landscape combined with numerous temples and the number of incense-soaked rituals have also attracted westerners: the film *Eat Pray Love* based on the book by Elizabeth Gilbert about her spiritual quest was filmed here, and David Bowie asked for his ashes to be scattered on its beaches.

There are around 20,000 pura (temples) on Bali, making them more numerous than homes, and they are at the heart of every banjar (neighbourhood), each of which is required to have three. Surrounded by high stone walls and without roofs – to allow easy access for the Gods – they contain courtyards, shrines and altars, and can look confusing to the uninitiated. At the top of the village is the holiest pura, the pura puseh, which is dedicated to the community’s founders. At the centre is the pura desa, a place for everyday spiritual activities, and at the end of the village is the pura dalem, the temple of the dead, where the ancestors are remembered.

The Balinese consider the three mountains at the island’s heart to be the realm of deities. The sea, on the other hand, is inhabited by demons and giants, and the valleys in between are occupied by humans. The highest and holiest mountain of the three is Gunung Agung, which is also an active volcano, and where Bali’s “mother” temple, Besakih is found. Besakih is one of



The Floating Temple.



Above: Statue offering in Ubud.



Above right: Mount Agung.



Right: Purification ceremony in holy spring water.

THE WONDER OF IT: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

BESAKIH TEMPLE: Bali’s biggest and holiest temple is reached by climbing steps 1,000 metres up the slopes of Mount Agung. The island’s “mother” temple is best visited early in the morning or in the evening when the spirit of the place is easier to hear.

GOA GAJAH (THE ELEPHANT CAVE): enter through the grimacing mouth of the gateway into a cave darkened by soot from incense and occupied by statues of idols wrapped in red, yellow and black cloth. Outside are bathing pools, fountains and carvings.

LEMPUYANG LUMUR TEMPLE: accessible only by foot up 1,700 steps, this is one of the oldest temples in Bali. The path to the top passes other temples including Pasar Agung, which has a carved dragon staircase. At the summit, a priest blesses pilgrims with a sprinkling of holy water.

nine directional temples located on mountains, cliffs and lakes to protect the island and its people. The other two mountains, Gunung Batur and Gunung Batukaru, also hold great spiritual power. All temples, houses and villages are aligned in relation to the landscape that surrounds them: the holiest direction (kaja) looks towards the mountains, and upstream. The downstream direction (kelod) is closest to the sea (where the demons live) and is therefore impure.

During the Balinese New Year celebration in March, electricity is switched off over the entire island, flights are cancelled and everyone stays at home in the dark to encourage bad spirits to fly over Bali without stopping. It is a quiet, peaceful time when the stars appear to shine brighter in the sky, symbolic of the island’s reverential approach to seeing in the new year.