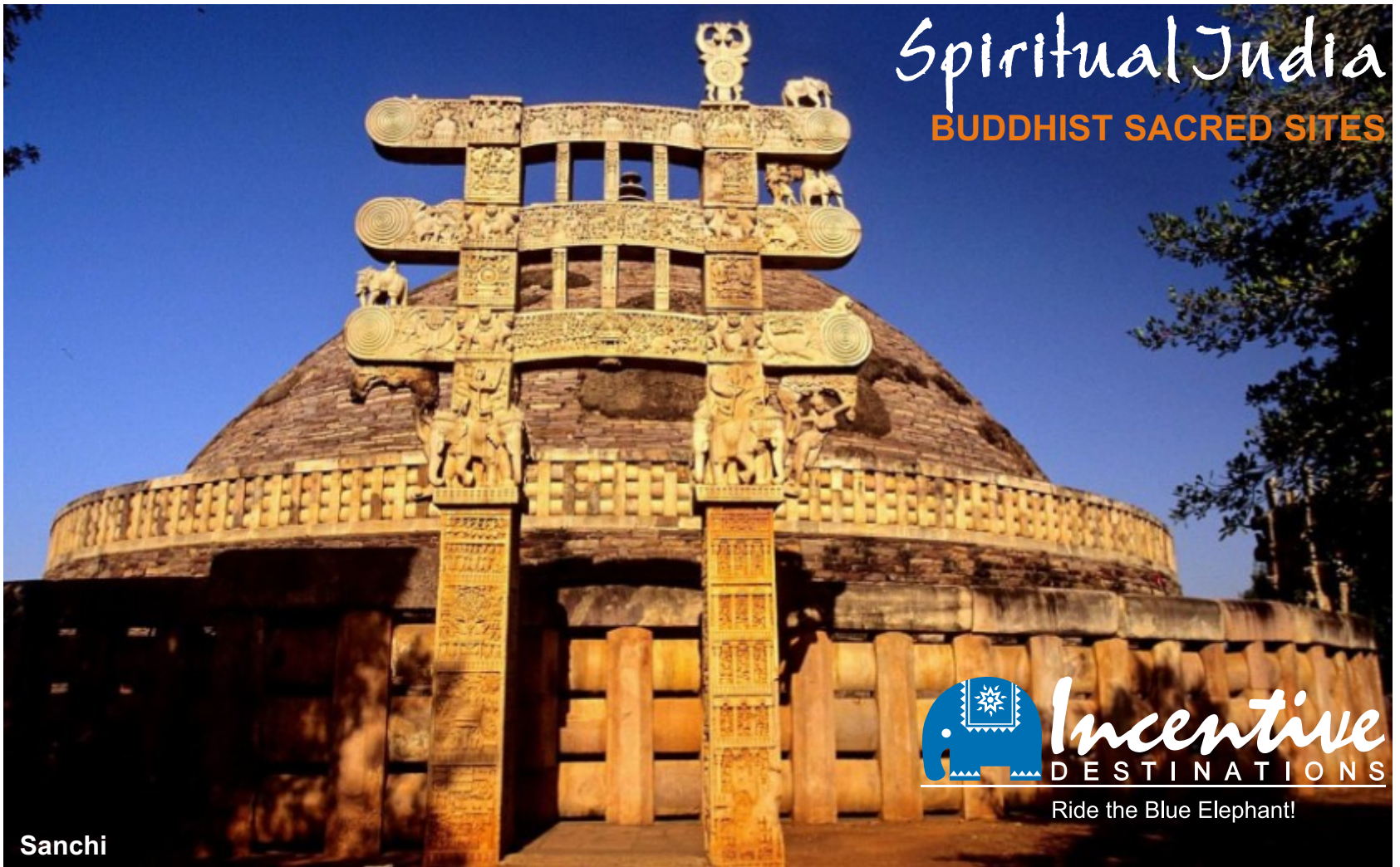


Spiritual India

BUDDHIST SACRED SITES



Sanchi



LUMBINI NEPAL

The birthplace of the Gautama Buddha, Lumbini, is the Mecca of every Buddhist, being one of the four holy places of Buddhism. It is said in the Parinibbana Sutta that Buddha himself identified four places of future pilgrimage: the sites of his birth, enlightenment, first discourse, and death. All of these events happened outside in nature under trees. While there is not any particular significance in this, other than it perhaps explains why Buddhists have always respected the environment and natural law.



Maya Devi Temple, Lumbini

Lumbini is situated at the foothills of the Himalayas in modern Nepal. In the Buddha's time, Lumbini was a beautiful garden full of green and shady Sal trees (Shorea). The garden and its tranquil environs were owned by both the ShaAsoka pillarkyas and Koliyas clans. The beauty of Lumbini is described in Pali and Sanskrit literature.

BODH GAYA BIHAR



Mahabodhi Temple, Bodh Gaya

Bodhgaya is one of the most important and sacred Buddhist pilgrimage center in the world. It was here under a banyan tree, the Bodhi Tree, Gautama attained supreme knowledge to become Buddha the Enlightened One.

Born in the foothills of the Himalayas as a Sakya prince of Kapilvastu (now in Nepal), most of the major events of his life, like enlightenment and last sermon, happened in Bihar. Buddhism as a religion was really born in Bihar and evolved here through his preaching and the example of his lifestyle of great simplicity, renunciation and empathy for everything living.

Buddha's passing away, the Maurya Emperor Ashoka (234-198 BC) contributed tremendously towards the revival, consolidation and spread of the original religion.

It is the monasteries, Ashoka built for the Buddhist monks and the pillars known as Ashokan Pillars erected to commemorate innumerable historical sites associated with the Buddha's life, mostly intact to this day, that helped scholars and pilgrims alike to trace the life events and preaching of a truly extraordinary man.

There is a magnificent Mahabodhi temple and the Tree from the original sapling still stands in the temple premises. The temple is an architectural amalgamation of many centuries, cultures and heritages.

VAISHALI BIHAR



Asanas at Vaishali Stupa, Vaishali

Vaishali, believed to be the first republic of the world, having an elected body of representatives, holds special significance for Buddhist devotees. At Kolhua, Lord Buddha delivered his last sermon, hinting at his impending departure from the mortal world. Later, Emperor Ashoka erected a huge pillar to commemorate the spot of the last sermon.

RAJGIR BIHAR



Located 12 kms south of Patna, Rajgir is a site of great sanctity and significance for Buddhists. The Gridhakuta Hill, in Rajgir, was the seat from where Buddha delivered many of his sermons.

It was here that the teachings of Buddha were recorded in writing for the first time. An aerial ropeway takes visitors up the hill where the Japanese have built a beautiful Stupa.

Many sites of historical and archaeological significance surround the holy city of Rajgir. Bimbisara Jail reminds one of the devoted Mauryan King Bimbisara (5th-6th Century B.C.) who, being a Buddhist, chose this as a place climbing up the Gridhakuta Hill to do his meditation.

NALANDA BIHAR



Another trip from Rajgir is to Nalanda. This small village and its surrounding area have numerous associations with the Buddha and his disciples.

Sailo 3 kms south-west of Nalanda is where the Buddha met and converted Maha Kassapa, the man who was later to become his successor. A large statue of Kassapa with an inscription on it was found in the village in the early 1900's but unfortunately its whereabouts is now unknown. The village of Kul some 1.5 kms south-east of Nalanda is the Kolita of old and the birthplace of Moggalana, the second of the Buddha's two chief disciples. Nalanda itself was often visited by the Buddha during his numerous sojourns through Magadha and he taught several important discourses there.

In about the 5th century CE a monastic university was established at Nalanda that was eventually to develop into the greatest ancient centre of Buddhist learning. Students from China and Korea, Sri Lanka and Indonesia and from all the regions of India came to Nalanda to study.

KUSHINAGAR UTTAR PRADESH

Set against a pastoral landscape, the small hamlet of Kushinagar, 53 km west of Gorakhpur, is revered as the site of the Buddha's Mahaparinirvana, his death and cremation, that marked his final liberation from the cycles of death and rebirth.

During Buddha's lifetime, Kushinara, as it was then called, was a small town in the kingdom of the Mallas, surrounded by a thick forest cover. It remained forgotten, until the late nineteenth century, when archaeologists rediscovered the site, and began excavations.

Today, Kushinagar is rediscovering its roots, as a center for international Buddhism, and is home to many viharas, including a Tibetan gompa devoted to Sakyamuni, a Burmese vihara, and temples from China and Japan.



SARNATH UTTAR PRADESH

Sarnath is a small village in Uttar Pradesh, about 13 km north-east of Varanasi. It's famous as the site of the deer park where Gautama Buddha first taught the Dharma and also where the original Sangha was formed. Consequently, it is one of the four main Buddhist pilgrimage destinations.

Within the deer park complex is the large Dhamekha Stupa, constructed by the Emperor Ashoka in 249 BCE, and several other Buddhist structures that were added between the 3rd century BCE and the 11th century CE.

In the streets around the temple there are a number of foreign temples and the Sarnath Museum. Among the many stone statues of the Buddha in the museum is a magnificent seated image of the Buddha in the dharmacakra mudra (the teaching mudra).



SARAVASTI UTTAR PRADESH



While in Rajgir the wealthy businessman Anathapindika first met the Buddha and invited him to come to Saravasti. The Buddha said he would be happy to come but asked that suitable accommodation be provided. When Anathapindika returned to Saravasti he purchased a park near the town and built a large monastery on in. Called Jetavana, this park became the Buddha's favourite resort and he spent every rainy season of the last 20 years of his life except one there.

Today the ruins of Jetavana's many monasteries are set in attractive and peaceful gardens. The Buddha delivered more discourses here than in any other place.

ELLORA CAVES MAHARASHTRA



The Ellora caves represent a unique synthesis of Buddhist, Jain and Hindu cave temples, all scooped out of the vertical face of the Charanandri hills. Located in the Velur village of the Aurangabad district in Maharashtra, the Ellora cave complex is home to 34 cave temples and monasteries. Out of these, 12 are Buddhist, 17 Hindu and 5 Jain caves.

The Buddhist caves date back to the fifth and seventh centuries and are the oldest caves in the Ellora cave complex. Most of these multi-storeyed structures, equipped with living quarters, sleeping quarters, kitchens, served as viharas or monasteries for Buddhist monks. The cave 10, popularly known as the 'Carpenter's Cave,' is the most famous of the lot and enshrines an impressive 15 feet statue of Buddha seated in a preaching pose.

A visit to the Ellora Caves is a breathtaking experience.

AJANTA CAVES MAHARASHTRA



Cave 26, Ajanta

Nestled amidst a lush green landscape, the Ajanta Caves are ancient Buddhist caves hewn out of basalt rock formations. These caves are located at the Lenapur village in the Aurangabad district of Maharashtra state. The origin of the Ajanta Caves can be traced to the second century BC and there is evidence that the caves were used for dwelling till 650 AD.

The Ajanta Cave complex contains 29 caves which served as retreats for Buddhist monks traversing long distances to preach Buddhism. Of the 29 Ajanta Caves, five are chaityas or prayer halls and the rest are viharas or monasteries. Hidden under thick vegetation they had been forgotten for over 1200 years. But the isolation, and the fact that the caves seem to have been abandoned over a short period of time, are likely the major contributors the fact that we can enjoy this remarkable piece of art today as they once were made and used by the monks.

REWALSAR HIMACHAL PRADESH



Monastery, Rewalsar

Rewalsar is a small town on the banks of Lake Rewalsar in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh. The sacred lake, according to Buddhist legend, was created out of a burning pyre by the accomplished master Padma Sambhava (Guru Rinpoche). As such, it is one of the main pilgrimage sites for Buddhists in Himachal Pradesh.

Padma Sambhava, was an Indian Tantric sage who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet in the 8th Century AD. It is from Tsopema that he left to spread the faith.

The Tsopema festival - takes place every 12 years. Last occurrence was in 2004. It falls on the auspicious 10th day of the 1st month of the Tibetan lunar calendar).

DHARAMSALA HIMACHAL PRADESH

The Tibetan Buddhist roots of Dharamsala stretch back into the 8th century, although most of the local population long since reverted to (and remains) Hindu. It houses a large settlement of Tibetan refugee. Monks in their robes and old Tibetans walking with rosaries in their hands or turning the prayer wheels is a common sight here. There are a number of monasteries and temples in Dharamsala, which serves as the major attractions for the tourists coming here.

Mcleodganj was initially the home of the semi-nomadic Gaddi tribe. Today, it serves as the residence of His Holiness, The 14th Dalai Lama - Tenzin Gyatso. Tsuglagkhang, the main Buddhist temple of Dharamsala, is situated just opposite the private residence of The Dalai Lama. It houses the images of Shakyamuni, Padmasambhava and Avalokitesvara, all of them sitting in meditation postures.



Statue of Buddha in Tsuglagkhang Temple

LADAKH JAMMU & KASHMIR

Ladakh is now the last free bastion of traditional Tibetan-style Buddhism, and it is for this reason that tourists are coming in increasing numbers. The entire valley of Ladakh is dotted with monasteries of all kinds, belonging to various orders or schools of Buddhism. Almost all these monasteries are sited at scenic locales, enhancing their magnificence further.

The thirty or so great monasteries (known as gompas) that line the Indus valley in central Ladakh contain some of the finest and last-remaining treasures of the thousand year-old culture. And, unlike the situation in neighbouring Tibet, where it's estimated the Chinese have destroyed nearly 6000 religious sites, the great monasteries of Ladakh are being preserved - partly due to tourist revenues.

Ladakh, being the last free bastion of traditional Tibetan-style Buddhism is referred as 'Little Tibet'.



Shanti Stupa, Leh, Ladakh

SIKKIM INDIA

Sikkim, a tiny and once a remote independent Buddhist Kingdom ruled by the Chogyal Dynasty whose root goes back to the 13th century is nestled in India between Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet. Highlighting a visit to Sikkim are the stunning monasteries which form an integral part of Sikkim: it is here that Gods mix with the mortals.

Some of the famous monasteries in Sikkim are:

Enchey Monastery is the famous 200-year-old gumpa, located in the middle of a forest, to the north of Gangtok. Its impressive prayer hall has colourful murals and thangkas on the walls and several statues of Buddhist deities.

Tashi Ding Monastery is 145 km west of Gangtok and was built in 1717. It is believed that the great Guru Padmasambhava meditated here. It is surrounded by hundreds of small chortens (stupas), inscribed holy stones, and prayer wheels and flags. The main temple, however, was rebuilt in 1987.



Rumtek Monaster, Sikkim

Rumtek Monastery is the largest monastery in the eastern side of the Himalayas and is the centre for the Kagyupa order of Tibetan Buddhism. The new structure is an exact replica of the old and built by His holiness, the late 16th Gyalwa Karmapa. Seen in direct light, it looks like a sparkling jewel on the hill-side.

Pemayangtse Monastery is situated approximately 140 km to the west of Gangtok and is one of the oldest monasteries of Sikkim. It is the base of the ta-sang lamas (one of the purest sects). However, the monastery draws pilgrims from all the sects of Tibetan Buddhism.

TAWANG GOMPA ARUNACHAL PRADESH



Assembly Hall of Tawang Gompa

Towering at a height of 10,000 feet above the sea level, the Tawang Monastery appears to be more of a fort, guarding the votaries in the wide Tawang-chu valley below. This ancient Buddhist monastery has long attracted both religious seekers and tourists who come to experience the visual and spiritual splendors of one the most famous "gompas" in the Buddhist world.

In the middle of the northern part of the monastery, is the statue of Buddha – a colossal, richly gilded image seated on a platform. Another precious possession of the monastery is a silver casket containing the 'Thankas' or paintings of Goddess Dri Devi which are said to have been gifted to Merak Lama by the Fifth Dalai Lama.

TAKSHANG MONASTERY

PARO, BHUTAN



Takshang Monastery (Tiger's Nest)

Precariously perched on the edge of a 1,200 meter cliff, this monastery creates an impressive sight, and is the unofficial symbol of Bhutan.

Taktshang was established as a sacred place for meditation by Guru Rinpoche who visited the site on his second visit to Bhutan in 747 CE, though the first monastery was not constructed until 1694. In 1998 a tragic fire destroyed most of the original buildings, but these have since been painstakingly restored to their former glory.

BHUMTHANG VALLEY BHUTAN

Bumthang region of Bhutan, because of the great number of sacred sites, is often referred to as the country's spiritual heart of Bhutan.

It was here that Guru Rinpoche cured a local king of a spirit-induced ailment in the 8th century CE, an event that resulted in the the king, and finally the whole country, embracing Buddhism. The Buddhist saint Pema Ligpa was born in the region and many other famous Buddhist yogis lived and practiced here.

Consequently, the area is a repository of sacred artifacts and monasteries.

Cultural and historic sites in the district include:

Membar Tsho (Burning Lake), where sacred scriptures hidden by Guru Rinpoche in the 8th century where later recovered by Pema Lingpa in the 15th century.

Kurje Lhakhang comprises three temples. these three temples are surrounded by a 108 Chorten wall.



Jambay Lhakhang

Jambay Lhakhang, one of the two most ancient temples of Bhutan, built in the 7th century by the Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo. It is one of 108 monasteries which he built to subdue evil spirits in the Himalayan region. Its present architectural appearance dates from the early 20th century.

Tamshing Lhakhang, the most important Nyingmapa temple in the country. Located across the river from Kurje Lhakhang, this temple was founded in 1501 by Terton Pema Lingpa, a reincarnation of Guru Padmasambhava. There are very old religious paintings around the inner walls of the temple, which was restored at the end of the 19th century.

THE DZONG AT PUNAKHA BHUTAN



Punakha Dzong

Punakha is one of the 20 dzongkhag (districts) comprising Bhutan.

Punakha Dzong, the administrative and religious center of the district, is the winter home of Bhutan's Central Monk Body. Since the 1680's the dzong has also been the site of a continuous vigil over the earthly body of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the founder of the country, which lies in a special chamber in the dzong.

Punakha dzong was the capital of Bhutan during the time of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. The Punakha Dzong is one of the most historic dzongs in the whole country.

Built by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in the 17th century, it is located between the confluence of two rivers: Pho(male) chhu and Mo(female) chhu.

TEMPLE OF TOOTH, KANDY, SRI LANKA

Located in Kandy, long a center of the Buddhist faith, the stunning 17th-century Temple of the Tooth (Sri Dalada Maligawa) is believed to house the left upper canine tooth of the Lord Buddha himself. This precious relic attracts white-clad pilgrims, bearing lotus blossoms and frangipani, every day.

According to legend, the tooth was taken from the Buddha as he lay on his funeral pyre. It was smuggled to Sri Lanka in 313 AD, hidden in the hair of Princess Hemamali who fled the Hindu armies besieging her father's kingdom in India.

It immediately became an object of great reverence and was enshrined in a series of nested jeweled reliquaries. The tooth was brought out for special occasions and paraded on the backs of elephants, which are sacred to the Buddha. where it survived numerous attempts to capture and destroy it.

When the capital was moved to Kandy, the tooth was taken to the new city and placed in temples built to honor it. The temple was originally built under Kandyan kings between 1687 and 1707, but later severely damaged during the 18th-century colonial wars against the Portugese and Dutch. After the wars, the original wooden structures were restored in stone.



Temple of Tooth