

ESSAY

SEEKER

Written by Amie Potsic

Finding myself alone in India with just a backpack, my Hasselblad camera, and 100+ rolls of film, I was terrified yet certain. This was no accident. Despite my well-intended plans, the universe had something bigger and better in mind.

I had arrived in the middle of the night at the chaotic airport in Bombay after being invited by an Indian American friend to travel with his family to attend his cousin's wedding. When we had reconnected a few months earlier in Washington, DC, I had been planning to go to South America and he to visit India. After sharing our exciting travel plans, he called a few days later to ask me to reconsider and come with him to India instead. India? I hesitated for a moment as I had never even contemplated going there and knew virtually nothing about it. But, the photographer and backpacker in me was intrigued. How could I pass up the chance to go to India for a wedding and months of adventure? The decision came quickly, and before I knew it, I was dizzy with exhaustion trying to find our way to the family home in Bombay. We planned to travel around India for three months and then traverse Africa for another three months before returning to the states.

After attending the multi-day Hindu wedding festivities, my friend and I began traveling south via the storied trains of India. With the wedding, his family, and only a few towns and villages behind us, my friend "found himself" and decided he didn't want to travel anymore. His first visit to India, he wanted to "be" Indian, learn to speak Hindi, and live with his uncle instead of travel. I was shocked. Where did that leave me? Well, he assured me I would be fine because I was such a seasoned traveler and we could spend the next few days getting used to the idea and then part ways. Terrified but left with no choice, I agreed and began wrapping my mind around my new situation. At that time, traveling alone as a woman in India was very dangerous and almost completely unheard of. We had a few days until New Year's, which we would spend together and then make our own paths. I decided the glass was half full and to remain positive. I would be fine. I just needed time to adjust.

The next morning, we awoke and he decided he wanted to leave right away. No time for adjustment. Only time to get a ticket out of there. We went to the train station, waited in insufferably long lines for tickets and then met outside the station. By that time, I was furious. I took our Lonely Planet Guidebook for India, shook his hand, and said "Bye." I've never seen or heard from him again.

I gathered up my courage and decided to go ahead on my own. I was sure that I had found myself alone in India with my camera for a reason. This was meant to be. And, I

was brave enough to persevere, wasn't I? And so began the photographic journey of a lifetime, which earned me the guts to try just about anything even to this day.

My camera became my purpose, my baby, and my companion. She was my license to try anything and gained me access to friendship, adventure, and inner sanctums. Soon into my travels, I became fascinated by the way religion was such an integral part of people's identity in India. Religion dictated a person's name, job, who they marry, what foods they eat, what caste they are in, and what gods they worship. Religion was part of the very fiber of every aspect of daily life as well as what defined your future. Not only was religion pervasive, it was exquisitely visual, theatrical, and public. With rituals being carried out from every street corner, temple, private home, and train station, it was everywhere in everyone. I was hooked.

My six-month journey in India took me to the north, south, east, and west – to palm-lined beaches, deserts of Rajasthan, ashrams of Kerala, cesspools of Calcutta, misty mountains of Darjeeling, snowy peaks of the Himalayas, monasteries in Dharamsala, and the Ganges River in Varanasi. India was an assault on the senses and a delight for my photographer's eye. Being a young, 23-year-old, blond American with green eyes, I was an anomaly, completely non-threatening, and often invited into people's ceremonies, homes, and conversations. Like a press pass when I worked for my college newspaper, my camera was my conduit to experiencing the unknown and to befriending the people I met along the way. In spite of the constant threat of danger due to my solo female status, I was on a photographic mission with my camera leading the way.

That mission drove me to volunteer at Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, earning me a personal meeting with Mother Teresa herself. She placed her doughy hand on my forehead and skull and blessed me for working to help her flock. It drove me to a life-changing experience at the ashram of the only female guru in India, the Mother. It propelled me to scale the Himalayas in a blizzard lightning storm, to trek across the desert of Rajasthan on a camel, to meditate in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery, and to have an audience with the exiled Dalai Lama himself in Dharamsala. My camera enabled me to do and try anything.

After steeping myself in Hinduism and Buddhism in the eastern Holy Land of India where those traditions originated, I couldn't help wondering how religion affected people's sense of self and identity in the western Holy Land of Israel. As Israel was the genesis of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, I thought it must possess its own powerful energy. Having met many Israelis while traveling in India, I knew I had to see for myself. I bought a ticket from New Delhi to Tel Aviv and my journey moved west.

If India was a shock to the senses, Israel was a shock to the intellect. Unlike India, Israel was a tiny, modernized country with a much more insular approach to religious practice and a palpable political danger. Instead of everyone wanting to be photographed, Israelis and Palestinians were more cautious of strangers and religious

practices were strictly divided by gender. Soldiers with machine guns were remarkably ubiquitous as were religious families and completely secular Israelis. Arab markets bustled with men and produce while Arab women and girls were mostly kept behind closed doors. While religious ritual was decidedly less public than in India, one's identity in Israel was completely inseparable from their religion and historical connections to the land. With my blond hair and green eyes, I was usually mistaken for a European tourist so no one suspected I was Jewish or American. This gave me access to almost anywhere I wanted to go and photograph as I rode Arab and Israeli buses to the closest and farthest reaches of their borders.

My experience in Israel was every bit as much of a spiritual journey as India but with a monotheistic set of values and rituals. Because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam originated there and important sites in history are still celebrated by each tradition, Israel then boasted a very international community and religiously diverse environment. As such, my travels took me to yeshivas of Jewish learning in the Old City of Jerusalem, religious kibbutzim on mountain tops, churches on the Sea of Galilee, mosques inside fishing villages, and processions through the stations of the cross. I explored the mountains on the border of Lebanon, resorts by the Mediterranean Sea, brined water of the Dead Sea, and cracked deserts of the Negev. And, after months of Jewish learning in Jerusalem, volunteering on a kibbutz, and sharing many shabbat meals in Israeli's homes, I even received my Hebrew name at the Western Wall on Simchat Torah. My photographic mission, which affected me more and more personally, kept me going as I sought to capture the ineffable energy of this dramatic and conflicted country.

The Holy Lands at that time shared more than I expected and struggled with similar challenges, though each had its particular pain points. While India was full of wonder and discovery, it was also tormented by severe poverty and a brutal subjugation of women - truly a land of extremes. Simultaneously, Israel was in the midst of the Peace Process ushered in by the signing of the Oslo Accords. While terrorism was prevalent, coexistence was a reality and peace seemed just around the corner.

In the mid-1990's, both India and Israel were celebrating their 50th anniversaries of independence from British Colonial rule. Both countries were created through the indigenous peoples seeking self-determination and establishing their own states around the time of Britain's withdraw from its former colonies. In the years since, both countries have evolved greatly but with many things remaining the same. While the technology boom and export of Bollywood films have catapulted India to the world stage, their culture continues to subjugate women and girls and to struggle with generational poverty. Similarly, while Israel has evolved into a technology innovator and the only democracy in the Middle East, it continues to be challenged by violent attacks of terrorism, political turmoil, and never-ending land disputes. Throwing salt on these wounds, because religion in both Holy Lands is controlled by patriarchal systems, women's power and safety suffer. To say the Holy Lands are energy centers full of beauty and conflict would be a massive understatement. The points of origin of the

world's major religions - the axis mundi of human spirituality - both countries continue to redefine themselves in the contexts of modernity and ancient history.

After one uninterrupted year of traveling to the ends of the earth and the well springs of spiritual energy, my photographic odyssey turned towards home. By then, I was a different person. And a very seasoned photographer. I had faced many fears and earned an unparalleled adventure. My camera had brought me around the world and back. I will be eternally grateful. My photographs from that time, the ones you see in this book, are a testament to what you can accomplish when you choose the difficult path and let your camera and heart lead the way.