



Photo: Parikshit Rao

# Into the Sacred Groves

A pilgrimage following the Buddha's life meanders through bucolic vistas—fields stretching up to the horizon, discreet ruins that form our historical treasures, and a sense of tranquillity that lies at the heart of his philosophy.

Simar Preet Kaur

The Indo-Gangetic Plain, where the Buddha spent his lifetime, is criss-crossed with a network of rivers that is as intricate as the plants and the stories that grow out of its rich soil. It encompasses a landscape so vast and so fertile that it feels only right that the peepul tree, under which the Buddha gained enlightenment, be right here. Mustard fields fringe the settlement around the tree, paddy fields and mango

groves cover the land where the first Sangha was formed near Varanasi, while his final resting place rests amidst sugarcane fields. These groves form a sacred trail that holds infinite rewards for the dedicated seeker and the curious wanderer alike.

If we follow the Buddha's life chronologically, at the beginning of the trail is an unassuming village that is given a miss by most travellers despite being his birthplace. Lumbini, as it is known, is steeped in contradictions—a World Heritage Site of supreme significance

The Seated Buddha at the Gupta Temple in Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh.



Photo: Parikshit Rao

adjoining a hot, dusty, and flat village; a well-maintained, sprawling complex of monasteries and temples built in traditional styles of architecture by Buddhist countries from around the world, flanked by landscaped gardens, all of which can be explored from atop the hard saddle of a local bicycle equipped to kick up more dust—it lies just across the Sunauli border on the Nepal side. A pillar of Ashoka constructed in

249 BC to commemorate his visit here was discovered in 1896, as was the Maya Devi Temple, which marks the place of Buddha's birth. Recent excavation work revealed the ruins of a wooden shrine pointing to the 6th century BC, making it evident that the site still holds many surprises.

It is believed that Prince Siddhartha Gautama renounced civilisation and walked out of his childhood home in Kapilavastu

Golden statues of Gautama Buddha, Padmasambhava, and Amitayus in Namdroling Monastery, Bylakuppe.

in search of enlightenment, which he found 500 km away from Lumbini in a village called Bodh Gaya in present-day Bihar. The fig tree under which he meditated for 49 days and became the Buddha has since come to be known as the Bodhi Tree. Over 200 years later, Emperor Ashoka commemorated the site by building the Mahabodhi Temple, a restored structure of which stands today beside a Bodhi

tree that is considered a direct descendant of the original. The town remains the nerve centre of the Buddhist pilgrimage trail, having drawn the pious into its aura for centuries. It is here in Bodh Gaya that the grand Kalachakra initiation ceremony is scheduled to be held early next year from January 14 to 25.

Moving on to the adjoining state of Uttar Pradesh, we come to the timeless ghats of Varanasi.

## Buddhism's many facets

Whether it is relics or rituals, signs of Buddhism's evolution over the past two millennia are present in remote mountains and deep caves alike in India. Here are five places that make for a good introduction to the many layers of the trail.

**Sanchi Stupa** in Madhya Pradesh to experience tranquillity in one of the oldest stone structures in the country.

**Namdroling Monastery** in Bylakuppe, Karnataka, for a glimpse of Tibetan Buddhism amidst sandal groves.

**Thiksey Gompa** in Ladakh for the awe-inspiring 15m-high statue of the Maitreya Buddha high in the trans-Himalayas.

**Nalanda** in Bihar to reckon with the ruins of an ancient university that sheltered 10,000 students and flourished for 800 years.

**Karla Caves** in Maharashtra to see rock-cut caves where monks took shelter from rain as long ago as 2nd century BC.



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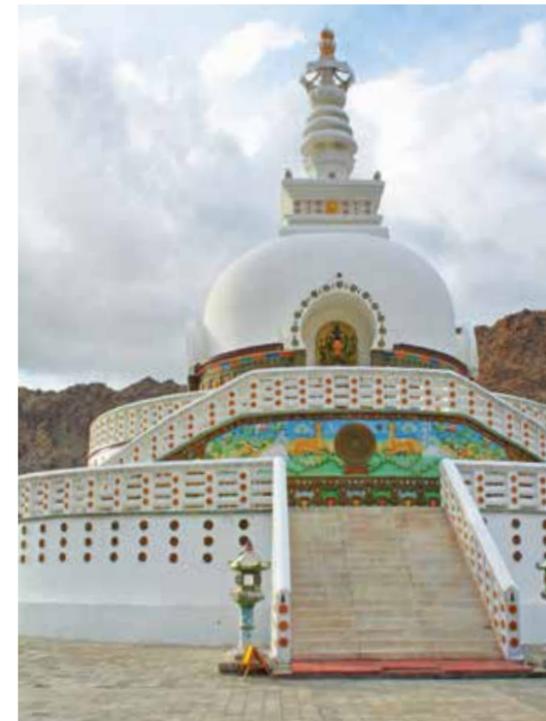


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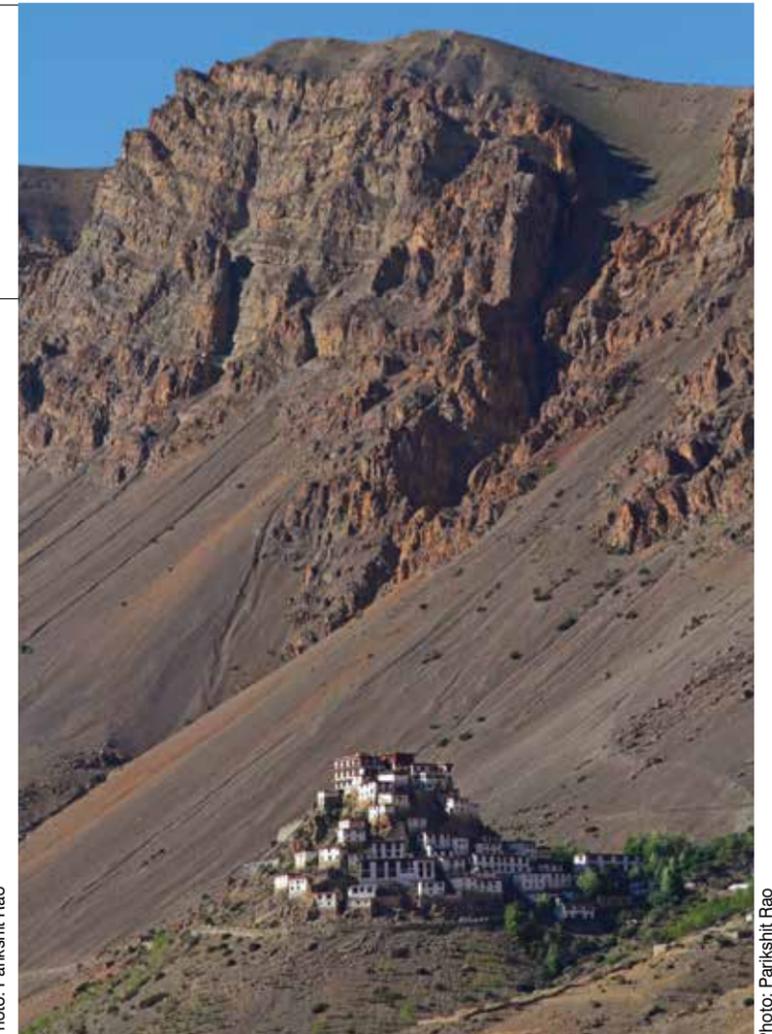


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From here, a 13-km drive takes you to the revered remains of the Deer Park at Sarnath, where the Buddha preached the first sermon to his five companions. Together they formed the first Sangha—a community of Enlightened Ones ordained by the Buddha himself. Excavations done since the late 18th century have unearthed remains of the Dhamekh Stupa built by Ashoka, along with other temples, sculptures, and inscriptions dating back to the 3rd century BC. Sarnath is an important excursion for serious pilgrims as well as neo-spiritualists, and is popular as a destination to undertake

Vipassana meditation courses.

Shravasti—home to the Jetavana Grove where the Buddha spent 24 monsoons, is also an ideal place for meditation. Remains of his hut are visible to tourists today, though during its peak era, Jetavana thrived with temples and meditation halls, with deep woods not far in the distance. You need not work hard to imagine the scene of the Buddha under a dramatic sky here; sit under the Ananda Bodhi Tree this monsoon and experience time travel.

Excavations were also carried out in the 19th century at Kushinagar, 300 km away. Signs of centuries of neglect were swept

The Thiksey Monastery at Leh comprises twelve levels ascending a hillside.

Below: The Great Drigung Kagyud Lotus Stupa at Lumbini.



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aside to uncover remains of a 6.10 metre-long sandstone statue of the Reclining Buddha inside the Mahaparinirvana Temple, which purportedly marks the site where the Buddha attained *nirvana* after death. It is built adjacent to the Mahaparinirvana Stupa; Ramabhar Stupa nearby is his cremation site. Like Lumbini, Kushinagar too has Buddhist temples belonging to various architectural styles, but also like Lumbini, the intangible charm of the place lies in its sacred aura, almost tangible to those willing to embrace the Buddha's teachings. ♦

Above: The Shanti Stupa was built in 1991 by Japanese monks to promote world peace in Changspa, Leh. Top right: Located at an height of 4116m and 7 km from Kaza, the Ki Monastery is the largest monastery in Spiti Valley.

## Begin with the arts

Here's our round-up of doors to begin unlocking:

**Literature:** *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* by Pankaj Mishra chronicles the life of the Buddha and addresses the question of Buddhism's relevance in today's complexities.

**Cinema:** *Kundun*, directed by Martin Scorsese, tells the story of the 14th Dalai Lama through unforgettable imagery.

**Music:** *Sacred Tibetan Chant* recorded by Sherab Ling Monastery Monks won a Grammy in 2003 for the traditional, deep-throated chanting in the album.

**Art:** National Museum in Delhi has a gallery dedicated to Buddhist art that spans many sects and eras, featuring stone sculptures, bronze statues, and *Thangka* paintings amongst much else.