

A photograph of a forest path lined with tall, ancient trees, leading towards a traditional building in the distance. The path is made of gravel and is flanked by large, moss-covered tree trunks. The trees are tall and thin, with dense green foliage above. In the distance, a traditional building with a dark roof and a red wall is visible through the trees. The overall atmosphere is serene and majestic.

**JOURNEY**

# A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

FOLLOW FIVE OF ASIA'S MOST MAJESTIC PILGRIMAGES – FROM JAPAN'S SNOW COUNTRY, TO THE MOUNTAINOUS VISTAS OF TIBET AND SRI LANKA, AND TRACE RELIGIOUS PASSAGES THROUGH INDIA AND TURKEY

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Text Sophie Ibbotson

## *Bodh Gaya and Sarnath, India*

With the Dalai Lama exiled from Lhasa, it is hard to say where the modern spiritual centre of Buddhism lies. Perhaps the answer is to be found where it all began, more than 2,000 years ago, in the north Indian state of Bihar.

My first entry into Bodh Gaya was inauspicious to say the least: I was towed in on the back of a breakdown lorry, my car having given up the ghost several hours ago further along the Grand Trunk Road. Forced to wait for the requisite replacement part to be imported from Germany, there was nothing to do but sit still, be patient, and endeavour to put aside the frustrations of the modern world. And there could surely be no better place to do so, because Bodh Gaya is the place where the Buddha finally achieved enlightenment.

Buddhists journey to Bihar from all over the world. They come to Bodh Gaya, but also to nearby Sarnath, where the Buddha delivered his first sermon, guiding those who would follow in his footsteps. These sites are two of the four main pilgrimage sites relating to the life of the Buddha, the others being Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace, and Kushinagar, where he attained *parinirvana* after his death.

The two central sites are the terracotta red stupa at Sarnath, its exterior richly carved in details, and the bodhi tree — one of the oldest trees in the world — which was grown from a cutting of the original tree which shaded the meditating Buddha. The bodhi tree lies within Bodh Gaya's Mahabodhi Temple complex, an architectural masterpiece founded by the Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BC, and which is now celebrated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. No less impressive is the 25-metre high Giant Buddha, carved from sandstone and red granite, which guards over the complex. Consecrated by the Dalai Lama in 1989, it is one of the largest Buddha statues in India.

Pilgrims come here to feel part of the worldwide Buddhist community. Different countries have erected



**ABOVE** Bodh Gaya is a UNESCO World Heritage site known for the enlightenment of Buddha

**BELOW RIGHT** A monk holds the leaves of the bodhi tree at Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya

their own monasteries, temples, and guesthouses, often in their indigenous architectural styles. The Thai, Bhutanese, and Vietnamese temples are especially photogenic, and their teachings are open to all. Although meditation might be an individual pursuit, learning how to do it effectively

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is not, and there is no end to the number of monks and other practitioners to inspire you. Guests who stay in Bodh Gaya more than a couple of days are encouraged to serve the community, cleaning and cooking for fellow pilgrims. It is a privilege to eat simple meals with devotees and curious visitors.



**EXPERIENCE**  
**BODH GAYA AND SARNATH**

**WHEN**  
Visit between October and March.

**WHERE**  
Indus Discoveries ([www.indusdiscoveries.com](http://www.indusdiscoveries.com)) offers tailored itineraries to many of India's spiritual sites, and can provide knowledgeable local guides to explain the rich and complex history and heritage of Bodh Gaya and Sarnath.

**HOW**  
Fly to New Delhi, and you can then transfer to Gaya Airport, 5km away from Bodh Gaya, on a domestic flight, or travel by train or road.

