

NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST

Rita Lobo explores what drives people to hit the road
in search of meaning and fulfilment

There are many reasons that lead people away from comfort and safety onto the roads of pilgrimages. The first is a belief that there are greater forces in operation in the universe, and the second is the faith that each individual can craft a connection with those forces.

Christians do it; Muslims do it; Jews do it; and Buddhists do it. In contemporary times, even atheists do it. That habit of embarking on a pilgrimage transcends religions. “There is no single type of pilgrimage site,” says Linda Kay Davidson, author of *The Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland; an Encyclopaedia*. “Destinations may vary from religion to religion, from century to century (even from decade to decade) and from individual to individual, according to personal circumstances.”

The UK is an extremely diverse country, in culture and religion. As such, pilgrimages have been a part of our cultural lexicon for thousands of years. The vast majority of Britons are of Christian heritage, though only 41% identify as Christians today, but we have been influenced by our travels, and the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and Muslim

brothers and sisters we met along the way and with whom we share modern-day Britain.

According to Douglas Davies, Professor at the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University, there are two main reasons that make pilgrimages significant across religions and faiths. The first is the perception of certain places as being sacred, “and second, the significance of movement as itself a form of ritual activity,” he explains. “Walking produces an attitude, a perspective all of its own, which is impossible to gain virtually. You can’t get it on screen, but you can get it in body, in reality.”

KUMBH MELA

For Hindus, the Kumbh Mela is the most important of all pilgrimages. Held once every 12 years in one of four main fairs at Prayag (Allahabad), Haridwar, Trimbak-Nashik and Ujjain, the festival has uncertain roots. According to medieval Hindu mythology, the four sites of the Kumbh Mela along the Ganges and its tributaries are the locations where Lord Vishnu sprinkled Amrita (the drink of immortality) on earth. >

HINDU PILGRIMS VISIT THE
GANGES AT ALLAHABAD
AS PART OF THE KUMBH
MELA. HELD EVERY 12
YEARS, IT IS ONE OF THE
LARGEST RELIGIOUS
GATHERINGS ON EARTH.
IN 2013, 120 MILLION
PEOPLE TOOK PART



LEFT, PILGRIMS AT THE WAILING WALL IN JERUSALEM. ABOVE LEFT, MUSLIMS FROM AROUND THE WORLD PERFORM THE HAJJ AT MECCA IN SAUDI ARABIA. ABOVE, LINDISFARNE. RIGHT, A PILGRIM BURNS HIS CLOTHES UPON COMPLETING THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO. NEXT PAGE, ELVIS PRESLEY'S GRACELAND HOME



CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

The Camino de Santiago de Compostela, or the Way of Saint James, was once the preserve of devout Christians serving pilgrimage to the shrine of the eponymous apostle in the Cathedral of Compostela. Like the Wailing Wall though, today the Camino de Santiago attracts pilgrims of many faiths and none, seeking a retreat for spiritual growth and introspection.

The Camino is actually a network of walks, generally starting on the border of France or in the Asturias region and snaking its way to Compostela on Spain's Eastern Coast. Though the pilgrim's mass at the cathedral is a vital closing ceremony, the joys of the Camino are the days of solitary walking, nights in pilgrim hostels and general endurance the journey requires. Over three million pilgrims made the walk in 2017 – only a small minority for strictly Christian reasons.

The ritual itself is a huge part of the process, and the Camino is full of opaque traditions that help the pilgrims tap into the mysticism of the process. They carry seashells, like St James before them, as a way to connect with the pilgrims that have suffered along the same path. At the end of the road they wash in the stream at Lavacolla just outside Compostella, or pilgrims that extend their journey to the shore at Fisterra traditionally burn their clothes on the beach.

LINDISFARNE

Once the most sacred of British Christian sites, the Holy Island of Lindisfarne in Northumberland still attracts more than 650,000 visitors each year. The tidal island is separated

from the mainland by a treacherous causeway, and only accessible when the water is low. It is said to be the birthplace of Christianity in England. There has been a priory on this remote, windswept island since 635 AD and the much-revered St Cuthbert (now buried in Durham, another holy pilgrimage destination) was the abbot here in the mid 8th century.

It's a place of extraordinary natural beauty and is a popular destination for bird-watchers and hikers, as well as for some pilgrims. Today, Lindisfarne's significance as a Christian pilgrimage has waned, but according to Professor Davies, a resurgence in interest in Celtic Christianity, where people are

trying to reconnect with the origins of their faith, is leading to an uptick in visitors. "A lot of people still go to Holy Island," he explains. "The rise of so-called Celtic Christianity fostered this in the last 20 or so years. It's a fashion again."

YOUR OWN JOURNEY

Pilgrimages and holy destinations evolve and the meaning sometimes gets lost or changed forever. The Camino de Santiago and the Wailing Wall were once exclusively religious pilgrimages, but are now popular tourist destinations in their own right. Equally, different tribes of people have created their own personal pilgrimages and

attached their private meaning to them; rock and roll fans might journey to Elvis Presley's home at Graceland to find inspiration, while American author Cheryl Strayed's 2012 memoir, *Wild*, in which she recorded her solo pilgrimage up the Pacific Crest Trail in the wake of her mother's death, has inspired millions to follow in her footsteps. Ultimately, the reasons for the walk, and even the destination, are vastly less important than

the journey itself. "Beyond physical travel through space, there is another traditional extension of the concept of pilgrimage," says Davidson in her *Encyclopaedia*. "If pilgrimage is a journey to a place that opens a door to some transcendental experience, then life itself may be considered a pilgrimage." ■

"There is no single type of pilgrimage. Destinations may vary from religion to religion, from individual to individual"

Photography: Ollie Blackwell; Alamy

The information contained in this document is believed to be reliable and accurate, but without further investigation cannot be warranted as to accuracy or completeness.

› The Kumbh Mela attracted an estimated 120 million pilgrims during 2013, with many of that number making their way to Maha Kumbh Mela in Allahabad over the two months of the festival. Once at the site, pilgrims bathe in the Ganges, seeking purification and a blessing from Lord Vishnu's pot. "It is wonderful," wrote Mark Twain of the 1895 Kumbh Mela. "The power of faith like that, that can make multitudes upon multitudes of the old and weak and the young and frail enter without hesitation or complaint upon such incredible journeys and endure the resultant miseries without repining. It is done in love or it is done in fear; I do not know which."

The cultural and religious importance of the festival continues to grow to this day. Even though a pilgrimage must involve an element of self-sacrifice, the Kumbh Mela is about celebrating faith as a community.

HAJJ

Islam requires all practising Muslims to travel to Mecca, the site of an ancient shrine to Allah built by the Prophet Ibrahim and restored by Muhammad. The Hajj brings hundreds of thousands of Muslims of every nationality, ethnicity and social status together around the holy Kaaba. Pilgrims circle it in sync, performing acts of worship and renewing their sense of purpose in the world.

As the fifth pillar of Islam, every adult Muslim who has the means and the health to perform the Hajj is required to do so at least once. It is a huge event, with more than two million pilgrims arriving in Mecca for the four days of

pilgrimage. "It's about sharing in the ummah of Islam; the grand unity, oneness of the whole show," explains Professor Davies. "To get an awareness of ummah you have to walk and be with hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of other people. In that cultural context, a mass of people is itself an expression of a theological, ideological idea."

WAILING WALL

What is known as the Wailing Wall was once the western wall of the ancient Second Jewish Temple begun by Herod the Great, in Jerusalem. Though the temple itself is long gone, the surviving wall derives its holiness from its connection to Temple Mount, where the First Temple once stood. It's called the Wailing Wall in remembrance of the loss of the temple to which it belonged.

According to the Torah, God commanded the Israelites to travel to the temple in Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage festivals: Passover, Shavut and Sukkot. Today, the pilgrimage to the Wailing Wall is made throughout the year, and is an opportunity for the Jewish diaspora to reaffirm their faith and reconnect with their heritage.

Like many Jewish festivals, the pilgrimages are about rebuilding communities torn apart by war and persecution. Like the Hajj, the journey to the Wailing Wall will probably be undertaken on an airplane, or by car, rather than walking, but the ideological process is the same, according to Professor Davies. Millions of people, of all religions, make the journey each year, tucking their hopes and prayers, scrawled on folded notes, into its crevices.