

Travel to Mother Earth's Sacred Places

From ancient stone circles and jungle-tangled pyramids to gothic cathedrals and mountain-top shrines, sacred places attract us with a mysterious power. Since the beginning of time, people have been visiting sacred sites for healing, inspiration and guidance. Mainstream western scientists may scoff at suggestions that water from holy wells can cure illnesses or that ancient megaliths can deliver messages from the spirit world, but the concept of powerful places has been known to many cultures for thousands of years.



The First Pilgrimages

The oldest known pilgrimage site is Mount Kailash in Tibet, which has been a holy travel destination for an incomprehensible 15,000 years. Walking the 32-mile trail around Kailash takes about three days, at altitudes as high as 18,000 feet. Buddhists say the ritual circumambulation erases the sins of one lifetime, and 108 times around the mountain will enable you to reach Nirvana.

The first Christian pilgrim was Helena, the mother of the emperor of Constantine. She toured the holy land in 326 c.e. and identified (not necessarily accurately) many of the sites associated with Jesus. By the Middle Ages, when Chaucer wrote his *Canterbury Tales*, pilgrims who couldn't manage the long voyage to Jerusalem could still do penance or seek cures by visiting shrines devoted to the various saints. The Benedictine monastery in Montserrat, Spain attracted 50,000 pilgrims per year during the Middle Ages, and today it draws about 60,000 visitors, eager to see the image of the Virgin Mary said to have been carved by Saint Luke.

North Americans don't have to go overseas to find places known for miracles. In Chimayó, New Mexico there is an adobe chapel where 2,000 believers congregate each Good Friday, and 300,000 pilgrims come every year. In a small room at the back of the chapel, known as the "Room of Miracles", is a hole in the floor through which people scoop out sand, said to have curative properties. The walls of the room are lined with hundreds of letters and pictures from visitors thankful for the healing they say they received.

Even closer to home is Lac Ste. Anne, about 70 km west of Edmonton, where last July's annual pilgrimage drew 40,000 visitors, largely First Nations, to pray, sing and seek comfort. Although no actual miracles have been reported at the lake, participants describe feeling more calm and content, with their

spirits renewed. Visitors to many sacred places come away feeling inspired, with a greater sense of purpose. For millennia it was customary for North American native youth to go on vision quests to powerful places. After receiving instructions from a shaman, medicine man or wise woman, young people would go, alone, to mountains, canyons, caves or other sites where they would await visitations from the spirits. Rock paintings with images of spirit visions can still be found along the Stein River valley near Lillooet, BC, a popular destination for hikers from Vancouver.



Bizarre Stories in Cornwall

Much more unusual sacred places are fogous (FOO-goos.) These curious stone tunnels are unique to Cornwall, in the southwestern tip of England. Some people who go into fogous experience headaches, dizziness, messages from spirit guides or a distorted sense of space. One artist sketching inside Carn Euny fogou suddenly became aware she was being watched by an Iron-age woman. A visitor who tried to enter Boleigh fogou said she found her path blocked by boulders which do not exist.

One of the strangest first-hand reports about a sacred place this writer has ever heard took place in the Peruvian Andes. A woman from Olympia, Washington told me she was walking across the main plaza of Machu Picchu when a large spacecraft-like object materialized in front of her. An extra-terrestrial being emerged from the silver ship and sent her a telepathic message of profound, unconditional love. Neither Andrea's husband nor the other members of her group saw what she did, but they agree the experience had a profound impact on her. Now a Reiki Grand Master, she describes her life as divided into two parts: before and after Peru.

Sedona, Arizona has been a pilgrimage destination since prehistoric times. Not only the local Hopi and Navajo, but natives from as far as Canada and Central America would journey there for healing and learning long before Europeans invaded North America. Sedona's dramatically-shaped red sandstone rocks are said to emit powerful energy partly because of their high concentration of magnetic iron. Sandstone is also rich in quartz, the mineral from which computer chips are made.

Added to these geological forces is the human factor. Sedona was settled by aboriginals from the four sacred directions: Apache from the East, the ancestors of the Hopi from the South, Yavapai from the West and Athabascans from the North. This seems to be the way with many pilgrimage sites. They were first identified as places of natural earth energy. In time, the land was developed by adding monoliths, stone circles, shrines, cathedrals etc. Over the centuries, as people gathered to celebrate or worship at the places, they added their own human energies, which continue to accumulate and mingle with earth

energies.



Prepare for the Sacred Journey

For every bizarre story you hear about unusual happenings at sacred places, there are thousands of disappointed souls who go on pilgrimages hoping for miracles that never happen. This writer confesses to being a little jealous after I went to the same plaza in Machu Picchu where my friend Andrea had her close encounter with ETs and I only saw tourists. One reason why so many pilgrimages fizzle out may be lack of preparation.

Without going overboard, there are several practical steps you can take to make your pilgrimage experience more meaningful. First, do your homework. Learn about the history and folklore associated with a place. One of the reasons I was moved to tears in Canterbury Cathedral is probably because I had first read Becket. Next, approach sacred places with humility. Instead of barging into a stone circle, stop outside and ask the *genus loci* for permission before you enter. Know your reason for going. If some entity were to ask “Why have you come here?” how would you answer? Open your mind and heart to the spirit of a place. Meditate, or at least take time to absorb whatever energies might be there.

Dr. Jean Shinoda Bolen, author of *Crossing to Avalon* and *Goddesses in Everywoman*, recommends that visitors go to sacred sites “with an attitude like the Fool in the Tarot deck. You have to suspend your own critical attitude which usually prevents you from acting foolish and be free to do whatever you are moved to do, whether it be picking up a certain stone, singing, doing a ritual, walking around in a certain way or lying on the ground.” Openness to synchronicity is also important.

Self-discovery is, of course, the ultimate goal of any spiritual pursuit. All transformation must come from within, and pilgrimage is just one of many routes you can take to get there. But if doing yoga or Tao Chi seems less appropriate to your spirit than going on a Goddess tour of Turkey, then follow the path that feels best for you. In the end, all spiritual roads lead to the same destination, an idea beautifully summarized by T.S. Eliot in his *Four Quartets*:

“And the end of all our exploring, Will be to arrive where we started, And know the place for the first time.”

Photos: Sacred Earth Journeys

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