

In Buddha's Footsteps

After sharing 3.5 precious months, my New Year started with goodbyes to dear friends in Lumbini, Nepal. One friend joined me in a Nepali taxi to cross the land border into India. After immigration formalities, there was a smooth hand over from our taxi to an Indian friend's car for the drive south to Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh.

The following morning, we took a day trip to Ayodhya, 78 miles away. Ayodhya is the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram and is hence regarded as the

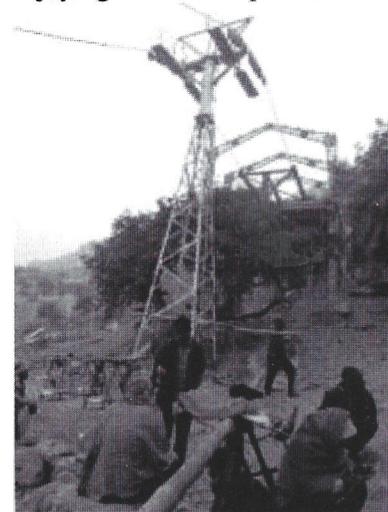


first of the seven most important pilgrimage sites for Hindus. The Ram Temple was only inaugurated recently on 22 January 2024 in a ceremony led by Indian Prime Minister Modi. I am informed it is only 30 to 40% complete. Spirituality oozes from everywhere. It is now the main site for Hindus as it attracted 110 million visitors in the first half of 2024. The planning for such volume was a mammoth task that has been successfully met. The craftsmanship on the Temple is exquisite. Even on the less skilled works, the standards are very high. Business is booming. I would describe everyone as

respectful. I never noticed any chewing tobacco wrappers or red spit marks. Everything about Ayodhya, and especially the Ram Temple, is greatly impressive, an awesome place. I appeared to be the only foreigner there. I would be keen to see it in another year.

My journey from Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, to Bodhgaya, the place of Buddha's enlightenment, was completed in the early evening after a 228-mile journey south. The wonderful adventure from Gorakhpur to Bodhgaya was in direct contrast to Ayodhya. While Ayodhya is becoming very modern, the Bihar state is the most impoverished in India. The journey through Bihar is of vibrant diversity. We drove through crowded markets and flat open countryside. We observed buffalo covered in cloth to keep off the cold and tasted some wonderful street food. The Purvanchal Expressway is an impressive statement of the new India. The 213-mile, 6-lane access-controlled expressway has a road surface devoid of pot holes or road works.

In Bodhgaya, we had an early start to see the Dungeshwari Cave Temple that Buddha had meditated in for six years and underwent austere fasting. Having previously visited in late August, it was wonderful to see many more people enjoying the most special of Buddhist sites. The work on the cable car is



progressing and I expect it will put the sedan chair carriers out of work. The carriers all look healthy, and I imagine they are well paid for their efforts, compared to other physical labour in the area.

Over recent weeks, the temperature has dropped and keeping warm is the main focus for everyone. Walking to the Mahabodhi Temple in the bitter cold just after 04.00, I see what could be mistaken for piles of discarded rags on the roadside, yet these are flimsy blankets that have families sleeping under them. Apart from the occasional snore, only the chappels at the end of the blankets give suggestions that human beings are underneath, attempting to sleep and keep warm. Leaving the Temple, I am fortunate to be able to pass a few rupees to two people with disabilities and an elderly lady. This will pay for piping hot tea and warm Tibetan bread. I am aware that "cold waves in the Tarai region of Nepal cause deaths every winter, primarily among vulnerable populations like children and the elderly due to lack of adequate shelter and warm clothing. One of the health hazards of cold weather is that it can lead to blood vessel narrowing and clotting, increasing the risk of cardiovascular problems."

Passing a few rupees is always welcomed, but I start to believe that, with a little planning, I could bring greater, longer-term benefit against the cold weather for those less fortunate.

"Do not lose your own path. Do not disturb the minds of others"

The Water Buffalo