

A Lust For Sacred Sites

By Jan Henrikson

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It all began with 4000 monkeys in the jungles of Kathmandu, Nepal - this lust for sacred sites. When Martin Gray was 12, his dad, a military pilot turned diplomat, and his mother, an opera singer turned art historian, moved their family to India. Martin accompanied his mother on all her traveling adventures.

But it was the Monkey Temple that made the deepest impression. In Kathmandu, he sneaked out of the hotel room he shared with his mother while she was sleeping. He walked a mile in the darkness to the Monkey Temple, his first sacred site. "I felt a magnetic attraction. I didn't understand it. I just felt at home," he says.

Eight hundred sacred sites and fifty countries later, Gray is still journeying (mostly solo by bicycle), sleeping in temples, archaeological ruins and forests around the world. After 14 years of travel, he's learned how to remain unseen so he's treated as one of the locals. He's even gone so far as to dye his skin with a pigment made from nuts and seeds so he could enter a secret temple in India. In Northern Greece, he feasted on Russian vodka and Swiss chocolate with a red-haired monk waved him into a monastery where he'd lived for eighty years. They shared their only common language - laughter.

Gray is not just a thrill seeker. He is a contemporary pilgrim, an emissary for the Earth's sacred sites. These sites from Ireland to Peru sweep through his every gesture and word. He speaks passionately, sitting cross-legged on the floor on a handy foam cushion in his tiny rented apartment. A unicycle leans against the stove. A cluster of juggling balls mingle by the bed (he is a world-class juggler). His bicycle waits next to the wall by the front door. Like his unconventional furniture, the wirey-framed Gray is made for motion.

"People have gone to these sacred sites around the world since the dawn of human civilization," he says. "Still more people visit sacred sites nowadays. Why? Sociologists and anthropologists will say people are visiting because of modern tourism, and from the momentum of religious tradition."

"Both answers are correct. But, why did these religious traditions start in the first place? I say there's a magic, an energy field, a density of holiness that saturates and surrounds the sacred sites. Magnifying that are the structures of the buildings and the focused intention of the thousands of people who have done ceremony there."

"These places have a sort of memory of the holiness of the millions of people who have come there, so when you visit a site with an intention that you want to experience that holiness, miraculous things occur," he says.

On a lighted table are the jewels he brings back from every pilgrimage - the slides he is organizing for his upcoming tour around the Southwest: "Places of Peace and Power: The Sacred Site Slide Show of Martin Gray."

His parents would be proud. Gray's father gave him his first camera at age seven. His mother introduced him to the power of art at museums worldwide. Gray's photographs of Mt. Fuji, the Pyramids, Stonehenge, and other lesser known sacred sites are windows to the world's most powerful healing places.

"These photographs carry the homeopathic essence of the sites, so if you have a strong enough intention, you will create a connection between your heart, your soul and these places. And something of the place will come to you from the photograph," he says. His photographs are projected on large screens, they saturate the soul, and evoke strong responses from within his audiences. "Many people have either had dreams or visions of these sites ever since childhood. Or throughout their life they've seen pictures of a certain site and felt irresistibly drawn to it. They don't know the appropriate response to the attraction," he says. "The appropriate response is 'Go!'" One man told Gray he'd reluctantly attended his slide show a few years ago simply to be with a woman he cared for. The man, then a nuclear scientist who designed the interiors of bomb silos, viewed the photos critically. Two years later, though, the physicist began dreaming about those slides. The dreams were so compelling that he quit his job and journeyed to these places around the world. Now he's back in the States and works for an environmental organization. "Young man," he told Gray, "What you do is sow seeds in the hearts and minds of people."

Gray's own seeds were planted well. Even as a young boy he had a "deep and passionate and sensual relationship with the Earth." He climbed high trees and played in them for hours and hours, relishing the wind blowing at the treetops where the limbs were thin. He learned to let go while swimming long miles in the open ocean, so that the ocean itself began to swim him. He became a skilled mountain runner, so in touch with the Earth that it moved him across the terrain.

As a child he slept in a room filled with National Geographic Magazines. Even before he could read he was enchanted by the pictures, especially those of Easter Island - the island in the Pacific Ocean with enormous and haunting stone heads carved by ancient Polynesians. Years later, Gray began seeing visions of Easter Island in his meditations. "Go here and you will begin to find the answers to your prayers," he heard. At the time, he co-owned a lucrative travel business in Miami Beach. Still, he acted on his inner knowing. When he arrived at Easter Island he ran around, snapping photographs, elatedly absorbing the isle's

beauty. "My excitement initially distracted me from knowing what was really there. Now that I have been to 800 of these places worldwide, I have become very sensitive to the incoming telepathic information, to the spirit and feeling of each place," he says.

He believes there is an inherent intelligence, a "livingness" at each of these sites that communicates with anyone who will listen. Eventually, he climbed to the top of an extinct volcano on Easter Island and began to meditate. "After ten minutes my mind quieted down. A few words were sort of lingering over in a corner of my mind waiting for me to notice them. When I brought my attention to them, they were released into the fullness of my consciousness. These words said, "Follow the pilgrimage routes of the ancient religions."

From Easter Island, he ventured to Machu Picchu in Peru. His inner voice became his unfailing map. While meditating at Machu Picchu, he was directed to go to Japan. After eight months in Japan, he realized he didn't want to return to his business in Miami Beach. "I wanted to continue riding my bicycle around the world to these sacred sites, to fall deeper in love with the Earth, and to experience the magic of the sacred places. Then the visions said, 'You can do that if you wish. Here is a region by region journey to go upon across the planet.'"

That was 14 years ago and his excitement has only grown. He's visited such places as the Men-an-tol in Cornwall, England. It looks like a large stone doughnut. "I'd seen a lithograph of this in a book published in the late 1800's and was immediately attracted to the place. Legend has it that women would pass young children through the hole in the belief that there was a spirit residing in the stone that strengthens the children, thereby preventing them from having diseases when they were older," he says. For eight months, while he bicycled across Europe from Greece to England, he thought of the Men-an-tol. Once there, he was overcome by a feeling of ecstatic happiness. He spent days camping nearby, climbing through the hole and lying inside.

"I began thinking about dis-ease," he says. "There is no such thing as a body-mind connection. That implies a separation. There is just body with many interconnected things inside, so if your spirit or emotions are unhappy, they your liver is also unhappy. Every organ in your body receives the emotion. One of the reasons this place is so healing is that it produces and ecstatic happiness. If everything inside is happy, everything is healthy."

Other places such as the Temple of the Magician in Uxmal, Mexico, heal in a less peaceful way. "Sacred sites are sometimes confrontive. Some of them are like drill sergeants. They push you. They are frightening. You go into the underworld, into your fears there," he says.

Gray believes another place that empowers you by making you confront your fears is Mt. Kailash, Tibet, considered in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, to be

the most sacred site in the world. Ironically, it's the least visited major sacred site on the planet. Only a few thousand westerners have ever visited it as yet. It is 22,027 feet high. Just 7,000 feet under Mt. Everest. The Hindu god Shiva is said to live there. Gray spent months weeks traveling across the wilderness of Tibet to reach the sacred mountain.

"The different deities the sacred sites are dedicated to are metaphors for how the energy of the site will affect you," Gray explains. "Shiva is a paradoxical deity. He was supposed to live on the mountain in the snow, meditating all the time, but he's also the ultimate Tantric yogi, smoking enormous quantities of hashish and copulating with his wife (and other women) all the time. What does that say? It says we need to be broad-minded. We need to break preconceived boundaries of how things should be. Shiva holds everything sacred and at the same time nothing sacred. Shiva's nature is a metaphor for the power of the mountain; it helps us to be creative and spontaneous and free because we're not stuck with some preconceived agenda. The 30-mile walk around Mt. Kailash is a difficult one - between 17,000 and 19,000 feet. But it makes you stronger."

And it takes strength to follow your heart, especially when your heart is as wide as the world. "What I've done is a Jason and the Argonauts search for the Golden Fleece type of thing," says Gray. "I've thrown caution to the wind. I've gone on this mythical search around the world. For the first ten years the spirits of the sacred sites were testing me, seeing if I was honorable, a worthy presenter. Now the sites trust me. They say, "You can be our ambassador. You can speak for us." And why do the sites want someone to speak for them?

"We're at a critical, difficult time. There are lots of Lightworkers that came to Earth to help with the transition through this perilous age. But many of them have forgotten their assignments. The sacred sites have the extraordinary power to awaken people to a remembrance of what they came here to do," says Gray. People can also benefit the Earth at the sacred sites by doing what Gray calls "Planetary Acupuncture." He brings his hands to his chest, gesturing a circle over his heart. "A human being with a loving heart can function like an acupuncture needle in the living Earth. There is an actual technique for doing this, which I learned from the spirits of a certain sacred mountain in Colorado"

Gray used to be a militant environmentalist, angry about every wrong done to the planet. Now he feels there is "a new intelligence and a deep caring that's manifesting on the planet. Yes, there are forests dying and the ozone hole is growing and the military-industrialists are raping the Earth, but all these incredible crises are awakening people. We're recognizing the interdependence of all living things. Humanity is slowly but surely evolving into a more conscious being."