The following resources are designed to support a deeper exploration of the themes presented in SACRED TRAVEL: THE PILGRIMAGE EXPERIENCE. Video clips, questions, and other resources are offered to invite conversation and to encourage users to explore and add their own insight into the program’s many themes. Use these resources as a package or in part, in facilitated environments (such as viewing parties and classrooms) or in more informal contexts, in small groups, or, on your own.
We’ve arrived at dawn, that liminal point between night and day, the threshold that announces the shift between one world and another. We’ve entered the sacred space as pilgrims. My senses are fully saturated. I feel the need to take a moment, to pause, to pay attention, to reflect on death, my own death, my father’s death. I’m floating on this sacred river, feeling the very continuity of life and the journey of all souls.

—Phil Cousineau, writer, Global Spirit host

After three days of walking, not sleeping two nights, and exhaustion and the altitude, and everything, the sense of getting there, that sense of joy and happiness is just so intense. It’s intensified also because there, as opposed to any quiet or stillness, it’s music and dance and sound, and the senses get even more stimulated. So in fact I think the introspection happens after we’re back home and [ask] “What was all that?”

—Zoila Mendoza, anthropologist, writer

While not being grounded in any one tradition, I’ve made pilgrimages into the notion and spirit of pilgrimage….. I’m not a Muslim or a Christian or a Jew, but of course when I go to Jerusalem I am, to some extent, partaking into the mysteries and rituals of all those great traditions and therefore instantly being taken out my little self into something much larger in history and space.

—Pico Iyer, author, travel writer

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When you think of pilgrimage, what key characteristics come to mind for you?

Do you see yourself making a pilgrimage in the near future? If so, to what and why?

If you’ve experienced a personal pilgrimage in your life and/or travels, what was it like? Describe any particularly poignant moments.
Pilgrimage and Intention

My meditation when I’m leaving for a trip like this is inspired by Houston [friend, teacher, and religious studies scholar Houston Smith], where he said a good thing for a pilgrim to do is every morning revisit the original intention of why you left home. Just go back and hit that note again and again and again. “I’m leaving because I need to go on a pilgrimage of penance or thanks or a journey of homage to somebody I admire.” Go back and hit that note every day and you won’t get pulled astray from the original purpose.

—Phil Cousineau, writer, Global Spirit host

In all our ancient texts they say that a dip in the Ganges done with the purest of intentions at heart is the best thing in the world to do. Taking a bath in the Ganges is supposed to purify one’s soul, and I do believe that, if done with the holiest and purest of intentions. It’s a beautiful experience. She’s a goddess and I’m trying to touch a part of her. We all are going to go in there one day and be a part of her.”

—Runjhun Kejriwal, Hindu pilgrim

I think pilgrimage is not about the destination so much as the motivation, the spirit you bring to it. You know one of my favorite pilgrims is Henry David Thoreau, who said, “It matters not how far you go, the further commonly the worse. What matters is how alive you are.” And if you have that spirit of joy in life, you’ll find the beautiful and the sacred right here in this room and even more so in these charged places.

—Pico Iyer, author, travel writer

Of the many intentions to set for pilgrimage, which resonate with you and why (homage, penance, gratitude, reverence, health, fortune, connecting with the transcendent, community, or other)?

How might you express your intention for sacred travel in writing, by sharing with others, or through prayer, meditation, or other practice?

Why might it be important to set an intention in advance of a pilgrimage?
A couple times a year I’ll get a query from someone who’s interested in going on one of my pilgrimages who’ll say, “But can I avoid the labyrinth stage? I really don’t like that ‘dark night of the soul’ business that you talk about….” The Dalai Lama has said several times, “One of the beauties of pilgrimage is that it allows you, a human being, to feel the pleasure of overcoming an ordeal.” Rather than avoiding it, the ordeal is essential to the actual pilgrimage. The ordeal can be pain. It means there is some sacrifice; there is fear, perhaps, to overcome.

—Phil Cousineau, writer, Global Spirit host

I would say more than fear is the uncertainty, because there is a feeling of uncertainty that if you actually do it, is it actually going to be as amazing as people say? So when you’ve done it and when you’ve reached the place, the sense of transformation has to do with “Yes, I’ve done it and I’ve felt this anxiety, this uncertainty,” whether this is an important thing, and it is. And the confirmation that it was this worthwhile experience is what effects the transformation in them.

—Zoila Mendoza, anthropologist, writer

The people who walk the road to Santiago de Compostella come away with blisters; they end up in hospitals for a couple of days, and none of them regrets it. Light makes no sense without darkness: Jesus went into wilderness; Buddha faced the demons while he was sitting under the Bodhi tree. All the great heroes who have inspired the human race have to … have to engage with the darkness in the world before they can come out.

—Pico Iyer, author, travel writer

What types of challenges might you encounter on a sacred journey?
What can these challenges teach you?
How might facing the unknown in the context of a pilgrimage contribute to transformation?
Is it a pilgrimage if you do not encounter an obstacle, a fear, or uncertainty? Why or why not?
There is a marvelous phrase and metaphor that the Irish use, “These are the thin places,” the thin places where there is a real power. It’s not an intellectual abstraction—there’s a power in the earth. There’s a power in the stones, usually most easily apprehended at dawn and dusk, when the mist and the fog have descended and the separation between our world and the other world is as thin as a moiré.

—Phil Cousineau, writer, Global Spirit host

Pilgrimage is a journey that people take to a place that they consider special, a place they need to be part of and a place that they have learned something about through stories, through oral tradition…. Since you were a child you’ve heard about this place and the stories of what happened there, and you want to be part of that story. You want to get to that place.

—Zoila Mendoza, anthropologist, writer

What happens to me here is that I have a more direct connection with the Buddha. Something happened here, and in a way my life really is now a process of trying to understand what that was. When I sit here at the Vajrasana, in the very place under the Bodhi tree where this happened, I can’t explain it to you rationally, but I can tell you that I have a closer more heartfelt sense of what that thing was that we give names to like “nirvana,” or “enlightenment.” But really it’s beyond words and beyond concepts.

—Buddhist pilgrim

Pilgrimage sites can be natural, spiritual, historic, religious, sacred, and mythical.

—What are the most sacred spaces or places to you, and what qualities make them so?
—What do you experience when you feel you’ve come to a sacred place?
—What practices, remembrances, or rituals might you perform in a sacred space?
—If you were to make a pilgrimage because of your nationality, faith tradition, personal passions, or your family, where might that be?
I think of Mircea Eliade the great religion historian, where he describes the encounter with the sacred as an encounter with the deeply real. I like thinking of the sacred as something that is worthy of our reverence and our respect—something that lifts the heart, takes the breath away.

— Phil Cousineau, writer, Global Spirit host

[It’s about] just getting your mind purified, so your “sacred” is not only the outer sacred place…. You’re securing your mind in this very moment from attachment, aversion, and illusion, and your mind itself becomes so sacred at that time.

— Devika Fernando, Buddhist pilgrim

It’s the journey toward the sacred that sends you back a different person. Once you come back…, something has turned inside you. An Islamic pilgrim wears that name ‘haji’ as soon as he or she has completed the haj. I think we all know that we travel not to move around but to be moved, and we travel to Jerusalem or Lhasa not just to see Jerusalem or Lhasa but to visit those states of mind and intimations, longings, moods inside ourselves that we sleepwalk past in our usual lives.

— Pico Iyer, author, travel writer

The external and internal are intertwined. I don’t like to separate it because I think a lot of people don’t separate it. It’s connected to the feeling and the feeling is connected to the music… which is supposed to drive you to feel something. That feeling I wouldn’t call it “internal” because it’s in your guts, it’s in your skin. It’s to me what brings together the inside and the outside.

— Zoila Mendoza, anthropologist, writer

All my ancestors have been cremated here or had their ashes submerged here in the river. So I feel that I touch a part of my own self here. That exact spot—it’s so easy to just reach out and touch a bit of me. Maybe in some previous life, I might have been submerged—my ashes—here again.

— Runjhun Kejriwal, Hindu pilgrim

What aspects of pilgrimage take you “inside” and “outside” yourself, or do you find them intertwined?

In your life or travels, have you experienced a pilgrimage that shifted something inside you? Can you describe that shift?

How have or might personal pilgrimages affect your core values or beliefs?

How would you describe an inner sense of the sacred?
Sacred travel can be both an individual journey and a collective experience.

— How might an individual pilgrimage become a communal experience? in time? in space?
— If you’ve experienced a profound sense of connection, what do you think triggered that feeling? Try to describe this experience through your senses.
— If you were to join others on a pilgrimage, what would you consider essential for the group’s journey and why?

When I am taking a palm full of water I’m connecting to all of the people who are probably touching the [Ganges] river from where it begins and where she goes and meets the ocean. I’m connecting with everyone, so many millions of people. There is this sense of oneness.

— Runjhun Kejriwal, Hindu pilgrim

[In Andean culture,] you’re never an individual, because you’re so connected and you’re always part of a group. People will say, “We will not be able to make this pilgrimage without the music. We will not see anything. We will not be able to move if we don’t have the music.” So all the emphasis is on the communal, but that’s not just the pilgrimage, that is how social life and the culture are structured.

— Zoila Mendoza, anthropologist, writer

[The beauty of pilgrimage is you come out into the larger world and you dissolve within that huge throng…. You’re walking the path of allegory, not just the Route 101 or whatever it might be…. Joseph Campbell talked of the hero’s journey, and when you embark on a pilgrimage you’re joining the hero’s journey that so many people share. So you’re coming out of your particular story into common ground.

— Pico Iyer, author, travel writer
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