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*Spiritual India: September 27-October 10, 2011
coincides with Dusshera, Festival of Good over Evil*

One of the most comprehensive itineraries of North India, Spiritual India travels through a diverse cross-section of India, both geographically and spiritually, from the Himalayas through Rajasthan, visiting the holy pilgrimage sites of the various religions of India.

On this tour we traverse through seven Indian States, board three trains and an equal number of flights, stay at some of the best hotels and participate in special ceremonies. No one else either runs such a tour or is able to conduct it like us.

As spiritual traditions are the fabric of the culture of India, there is no better way to "get into the culture" than to visit its sacred sites. One has to embark upon such a journey to understand the complexity that is India and to unravel Indian Spirituality.



Our Escort: We are honored to have our India partner Sanjay Verman lead us on this spiritual journey. Not only is he an expert in the areas visited, but a certified yoga teacher as well. A travel professional since 1993, Sanjay is a most gracious and devoted host. Your experience of India will truly be enhanced by his guidance and companionship.

Detailed Itinerary

Navratri, or The Festival of Nine Nights, is celebrated during the first nine days of the Hindu month of Ashvin (September-October). The festival is dedicated to the worship of Mother Goddess or Shakti in her nine forms. This season is considered to be an auspicious one as it is generally associated with the sowing of seeds. People sow seeds on the first day, consecrate the plants and watch the sprouting during this festival. The last three days are especially considered most important. The nine-day festival is equally divided in worshipping three goddesses. The first three days are dedicated to Goddess Durga. The next three days are spent in worshipping goddess Lakshmi and the last three days are dedicated to Goddess Saraswati. The day after Navratri, the festival of Dussehra is celebrated.

Sep 27 Arrival in Delhi. Met at airport & transfer to hotel.

Sep 28 Delhi Orientation, Touring, Optional Yoga (B,D)

Breakfast (about 9 am) and orientation with your escort.

A full day of sightseeing in Old & New Delhi including: the Red Fort, Jama Masjid (the great mosque), a rikshaw ride through the Chandi Chowk bazaar in Old Delhi; Gandhi Darshan/Raj Ghat which marks the spot where Gandhi was assassinated; the Gandhi Memorial Museum in New Delhi.

Since a lot of people enjoy buying traditional Indian clothing to wear during the tour (salwar kameeze for women and kurta for men), we stop at the Fab India retail store, which has a wide range of garments made from hand-woven and hand block-printed fabrics, upholstery fabrics, durries and home linens. Fab India sources its products from over 7500 craftsmen and artisans across India, thus supporting the craft traditions of India by providing an urban market, helping to sustain rural employment and slow the pace of urban migration. Extending a partnership to the farmers in rural areas, Fab India now offers organic food products and ayurvedic bodycare also.

Next --for those interested--we go to the Shivananda Yoga Center, about a 10 minute drive from Fab India. A special hatha yoga class, 1.5 hours, has been arranged for us and starts at 3:30 pm. At 5:00 we return to your hotel to shower and change; then out to dinner at an authentic Indian restaurant in Delhi. Those who do not wish to participate in the yoga class will be taken back to the hotel.

Sep 29 Delhi - Kangra - Taragarh / Taragarh Palace (B/D)

Morning visit Qutab Minar, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the world's tallest minaret. It's height is 72.5 meters(237.8 ft). Construction commenced in 1193 under the orders of India's first Muslim ruler Qutb-ud-din Aibak, The Qutb Minar is notable for being one of the earliest and most prominent examples of Indian-Islamic architecture. Surrounding the building are many fine examples of Indian artwork from the time it was built in 1193.

Transfer to airport for a flight to Kangra IT4354 dep 14:30/arr 16:00) and drive (1.30 min) to the Taragarh Palace. Formerly known as Al Hilal (land of the crescent moon), Taragarh Palace was built in 1931 by the 27 year old Nawab of Bahawalpur as a large European-style summer residence for himself up in the cool Himalayan jungle of the Kangra district. He laid out lush gardens, built a glass pavilion and a mosque. It was bought by the royal family of Jammu & Kashmir in 1951 for the Maharani who lived there for several years. It is now run as a hotel by the present royal family.

In the evening, we visit Baijnath Temple, a Shiva temple dedicated to Shiva Vaidyanatha. It is supposed to be the temple where Ravana worshipped Shiva to gain immortality. The Baijnath is one of the twelve 'Jyotirlingas' and is thronged with pilgrims at the festival of Shivratri.

Sep 30 Taragarh / Taragarh Palace (B/D)

Morning yoga/meditation. Afterwards, we drive to Sherabilling Monastery, one of the world's largest buddhist teaching centers. The monks received a Grammy for their Sacred Buddhist Chanting. Afternoon attend the monks' prayer and chanting session.

Oct 1 Dharamsala (McCleod Ganj) / Hotel Surya Resort (B,D)

An hour and a half's drive will take us to the headquarters of Tibet in Exile, Dharamsala.

Enroute, we stop at the Norbulinka Institute, which is a major center for Buddhist teaching and practical work. Named after the summer residence of the Seventh Dalai Lama, it was set up to ensure the survival of the Tibetan

Buddhism cultural heritage. Over 100 students learn a variety of crafts in wood, metal, silk and thangka painting. The temple has a 4.5 meter (15 foot) high gilded statue of The Buddha and over 1000 painted images.

After checking into our hotel, we enjoy a guided walking tour of the town, visit the main prayer wheel, and a nunnery, Museum of Buddhist Artifacts, and some free time to stroll town independently & shop.

Attend early evening puja at Kalachakra Temple (pending occurrence).

Oct 2 Dharamsala- Amritsar (140 km/approx 5 hrs) / Hotel Country Inn (B,D)

In the early morning, at 6 am, we walk to the Namgyal Monastery (Dalai Lama's monastery) to witness the monks chanting/meditation. We join the locals for a walk circumambulating the monastery complex. It is a breath-taking and inspiring experience-- not to be missed! The walk will take 20-30 minutes, depending on how long you care to linger at the mid-point, where there are large prayer wheels and often monks chanting and playing music while locals pray at the chortens.

Return to hotel for breakfast and depart by 9 am for the drive to Amritsar (140 km/approx 5 hrs)

Amritsar is in the state of Punjab, in the Himalayan foothills called the Shivaliks and one of the most ancient and fascinating cities in India. It is an important seat of Sikh history and culture. The Golden Temple was founded by the fourth Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Ramdas, and completed by his successor Guru Arjan Dev. It is famous for its full golden dome, one of the most sacred pilgrim sites for Sikhs. The Mandir is built on a 67-foot square of marble and is a two-storied structure. Maharaja Ranjit Singh had the upper half of the building adorned with approximately 400 kg of gold leaf. The Golden Temple is surrounded by a number of other temples.

On arrival we check into hotel and lunch (pay direct).

Afterwards, we will witness the religious traditions of the Sikhs at the Golden Temple during a guided tour by one of the Sikh priests as well as time to stroll independently and reflect/meditate. Hypnotic meditative music plays as we walk the path with the pilgrims around the lake. We will enter various buildings, one where the Guru Granth Sahib or Adi Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture is read aloud from 4 am-10 pm. It is a voluminous text of 1430 angas (parts), compiled and composed during the period of Sikh Gurus, from 1469 to 1708. A collection of hymns or shabad, the text describes what God is like and the right way to live. Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), the tenth of the Sikh Gurus, affirmed the sacred text Adi Granth as his successor, terminating the line of human Gurus, and elevating the text to Guru Granth Sahib, the final Guru of the Sikhs.

Thousands of pilgrims arriving each day are offered shelter and food prepared and served by volunteers. The pilgrims travel for days from all over India, often on foot. The temple complex is a community run by volunteers and is truly amazing to witness the efficiency by which thousands are feed each day and also inspiring, as elsewhere in India, to see the devotion of the people to their faith. Voluntary service is one of the main paths of Sikhism. Everyone is contributing in some way or the other at the shrine; chopping veggies, cleaning utensils, making chhappatis, cooking daal, serving, cleaning, offering water, participating in ongoing maintenance and repair. Everyone is giving back to humanity by way of self less service. For those in the group who would like to participate, we will have an opportunity to volunteer in the kitchen.

Just before sunset we travel to Wagah, the border town between India and Pakistan, 32km (20 miles) from Amritsar. Here we will experience the nightly flag ceremony with the locals. It is an exciting high-kicking, toe-stepping, quick-marching ceremony wherein the Indian and Pakistani flags are lowered on either side of the only border that remains open between the two countries. A number of officers from each team put on a performance to the satisfaction of the cheering, chanting crowds, seated on concrete grandstands on either side. The exercise ends with the slamming of the border gates, at which time each side's flag is urgently carried to a room for overnight safekeeping. The Flag Ceremony is a touching, memorable experience.

We return to the hotel for dinner and then a return visit to see Golden Temple all lit up after dark.

Oct 3 Amritsar - Haridwar / Haveli Hari Ganga (B,D)

Morning train to Haridwar dep 06:30/arr 13:30. We spend the day in Haridwar visiting various sites including the Neel Parvat Temple, dedicated to the Goddess Chandi Devi (Durga), which is on top of a hill overlooking the Ganges and about 6 km (3.7 miles) from Haridwar. We get up to the temple via a ropeway. Local Indian women will be there performing devotionals to the goddess.

Attend the prayer ceremony to witness aarti (fire ceremony) performed by a Hindu priest at the Ganges, starts at 6 pm, We will enjoy pre-ceremony festivities on the promenade.

The Haveli Hari Ganga, a beautiful heritage haveli, is situated on the banks of the Holy Ganges, a short walk through the Bazaar from the sacred "Har ki Pauri" at Haridwar. It stands at the gateway to the Devbhumi, the abode of the Gods and the "Char Dham Yatra". The Haveli is an architectural marvel, where the ancient structure has been restored to recreate an old-world charm with modern day hospitality. The interior of The Haveli is interestingly reminiscent of old Indian Mythological times where there are balanced tones of tranquility & comfort.

Oct 4 Haridwar - Rishikesh (Homa Ceremony) –Delhi / The Great Ganga Hotel (B,D)

Morning at about 9 am, we drive to Rishikesh (40 min). Rishikesh is a pleasant town, much more peaceful than Haridwar. We enjoy a full day walking tour visiting Sivananda Ashram and Omkarananda next to it; then cross the Ram Jhula (now called the Sivananda Bridge) on the Ganga visiting several ashrams and temples including: Gita Bhawan, Gita Ashram, Swargashram and Parmarth Ashram. There are many shops stocked with spiritual books and music, clothes, articles of spiritual nature along the path.

We will reach Parmarth Ashram in time for the Homa ceremony at 2 pm.

Homa is a sacred fire ceremony in which various forms of the Divine are invoked in a sacred fire that has been kindled according to the guidelines in the Vedic scriptures. Certain special offerings are made into the fire while Sanskrit mantras are chanted. The combination of the powerful energy of the fire and the Sanskrit mantras creates extremely auspicious and purifying vibrations that are beneficial to all who attend the homa. The smoke that rises from a homa contains a powerful healing energy, and as it rises to the heavens it purifies the atmosphere, both physically and subtly, encouraging a peaceful environment and gentle weather. Even the damaging effects of natural catastrophes can be reduced through the performance of homas. The energetic vibrations that are invoked during a traditional Vedic fire ceremony represent the most powerful presence of the Divine on earth. The element of fire is associated with the upward motion of the divine kundalini energy and is considered to be the most powerfully purifying element. Every kind of negative karma can be purified by the sacred homa fire due to divine grace.

The ceremony takes place in the open courtyard of the temple. We participate in decorating it with flowers, drawing Rangolis- religious diagrams on the floor with rice and colored powder similar to the mandalas done by the Buddhists. Each person will be given a personal receptacle to perform the ceremony and Indian dress; kurta, pyjama for both men and women with a turban or cap for men and a chunni (head scarf) for the women to wear during this ceremony. Each one will be individually blessed by the head priest and offered prasad (an offering). The timing of the HOMA has to be at a special holy time decided by the priest. Usually Hindus perform such an important ceremony after a bath, with fresh clothes, partake of Prasad and have their first meal after the ceremony.

The rest of the afternoon is independent for you to enjoy quiet time at the hotel, take a walk in the woods nearby, or indulge with an ayurvedic massage.

In the evening we can view the aarti ceremony from the rooftop of our hotel.

The Great Ganga Hotel is situated at one of the best areas in or around Rishikesh, at Muni-ki-Reti, the place where the holy Ganges meanders out of the hills and enter the plains. Surrounded by lush green hills, the hotel offers an atmosphere of serene tranquility. All rooms are equipped with air-conditioning, heater and attached balconies where one can enjoy the enchanting panoramic view of the River Ganges, the Chandrabhaga River and Rishikesh town. It is just 5 minute easy walk to reach the banks of the Holy Ganges. Yoga classes & ayurvedic massage therapies are also available. The nearby forest is a fine setting for a nature walk. T

Oct 5 Rishikesh-Delhi / hotel Svelte (B,D)

Morning visit Ved Niketan and Triveni Ghat. We'll stop for lunch at a local restaurant and return to our hotel for a brief wash and change, pick our bags and drive to Haridwar for evening train Shatabdi Exp. dep. 1815 / arr. Delhi 2245 (dinner will be served on the train).

Oct 6 Varanasi (Dussehra Festival) / The Gateway Ganges (B,D)

Transfer to airport for flight 9W723 dep. 1040 / arr. 1150 to Varanasi. Transfer to hotel.

A contemporary of Nineveh and Thebes, Varanasi today is the oldest living city in the world. One of India's most sacred cities, a devout Hindu believes to die and be cremated in Varanasi is to gain "moksha" or release from the eternal cycle of rebirth. The visit to the old city is a fascinating insight into the rituals of Hinduism. Every temple is well attended and every street corner has roadside shrines and vendors selling garlands, incense sticks and other items used in worship.

Afternoon, we visit Sarnath, the spiritual center of Buddhism (where Buddha gave his first sermon). The ancient ruins are fascinating, including the Dhamekh Stupa which is believed to mark the spot where Buddha preached his famous sermon; the archaeological museum is excellent. There is also a monument dedicated to Buddha and a modern Buddhist temple with murals by a Japanese painter depicting the story of the life of Buddha.

The 2 week long Dussehra Festival peaks today with the burning of effigies of Ravana and his two brothers Kumbhakaran and Meghnath. The essence of this festival is victory of truth over evil. Evening attend ceremonies and festivities which start approx 630 pm.

Dinner at the famous Kabab Factory.

Oct 7 Varanasi & Bharat Milap Festival / The Gateway Ganges (B,D)

Sunrise boat ride on the Ganges:

A visit to Varanasi reveals the spiritual heart of India, and the best way to experience this is to tour the Ganges in a country boat at sunrise. Pilgrims, yogis and mystics flock to the ghats (steps) which lie along the banks of the Ganges to take a cleansing dip in India's holiest river, practice yoga, meditate, or to complete mundane earthly chores such as washing clothes and vessels. Early morning life in this city revolves around the ghats.

After our boat ride, we walk through the narrow alleys where we share space with cows, scooters, cycle rickshaws, shops and people to the banks of the Ganges, visiting the temples and being able to watch the rituals of Hindu worship. Return to the hotel for breakfast.

This afternoon we attend Bharat Milap festival which is always held the day following Dussehra at Nati Imli, Varanasi. It is an important festival of Kashi or Varanasi, celebrated to commemorate Lord Ram's return to Ayodhya after 14 years of exile and his reunion with his brother, Bharat. The people of Varanasi celebrate Bharat Milap with great fanfare and devotion. Thousands gather in the streets to see the procession of Lord Ram and his reunion with younger brother, Bharat. People pay their respect by putting tilak on their forehead and garlanding Lord Ram and his brothers. The story of Lord Ram is the main theme of Valmiki's Ramayana and Tulsidas' Ramcharitamanas. Another interesting part of the Bharat Milap celebration is the presence of Kashi Naresh (former king of Varanasi) with all his royal entourage and regal finery. There will be a grand procession followed by ceremonies performed just before sunset.

Oct 8 Varanasi-Khajuraho / Hotel Taj Chandela (B,D)

Transfer to the airport for a flight to Khajuraho (Flight 9W333 dep 12:20/arr 13:00). After lunch, we visit Classical Temples from Chandella Style of the 9th-11th century, illustrated with remarkable sculptures of the classical erotic literature, the KAMA SUTRA.

Oct 9 Khajuraho-Orchha-Agra / Hotel Trident (B,D)

Morning visit the eastern complex of temples and the old village of Khajuraho. Afterwards, we drive to Orchha (170km/ 105 miles), the capital of the kingdom of the Bundella Rajputs from 1531 to 1783. We visit Jahangir Mahal Palace, an Indo-Persian style palace of the Mughul period and the Ram Raja Temple, built in the 17th century. Lunch stop here, then we drive to Jhansi and board Shatabdi Express to Agra dep 17:55/ arr 20:10.

Oct 10 Agra-Mathura-Vrindavan-Agra (240 km)/ Hotel Trident (B,D)

Sunrise visit to the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort. Return to hotel for breakfast. Afterwards, excursion to Mathura, birthplace of Krishna, and Vrindavan, where Krishna spent his childhood. We visit Krishna temple and the birth place of Lord Krishna. Drive to Vrindavan; visit Radha Raman, Madan Mohan, Govinda Mandir, Raga Ji Ashram; witness religious ceremonies--music & chanting--at ISCON Temple, the temple devoted to Krishna.

We have a lunch stop here before continuing to Delhi. On arrival in Delhi, transfer to hotel near airport for wash/change. Dinner and late night transfer to international airport for flight home.

PRICE \$3870 per person based on min 6 people **Single Room Supplement** \$1085

Plus Airfares (estimates/exact TBD when booked) Delhi - Pathankot \$198, Delhi - Varanasi \$135, Varanasi - Khajuraho \$130.

Includes:

Accommodation (subject to availability)
Three nights Delhi at Svelte Hotel
Onenights Dharamsala Surya Resort
Two nights Taragah at Taragarh Palace
One night Amritsar at Comfort Inn
One night Haridwar at Hari Ganga Haveli
One night Rishikesh at The Great Ganga Resort
Two nights Varanasi at The Gateway Ganges
One night Khajuraho at Taj Chandela
One night Agra at Trident
Shared Room at Ashok Country Resort.

Breakfasts and Dinners

Arrival, departure transfers and land transport by ac vehicle; Train tickets in A/C Chair Car Amritsar - Haridwar - Delhi and Jhansi - Agra

Accompanying escort Sanjay Verman

Professional local guide during sightseeing in Delhi, Varanasi, Khajuraho, Agra as per itin.

Monument entrance fees, Boat ride on River Ganges, Elephant ride to Amer Fort, Yoga classes in Delhi, Dharamsala, Taragarh & Rishikesh; Homa Ceremony in Rishikesh

Mineral water during long drives; Porterage at train stations and domestic airports.

Indian Gov Service Tax

Does Not Include: International flight, visa fee, insurance, camera fees, personal expenses such as laundry, telephone calls, tips