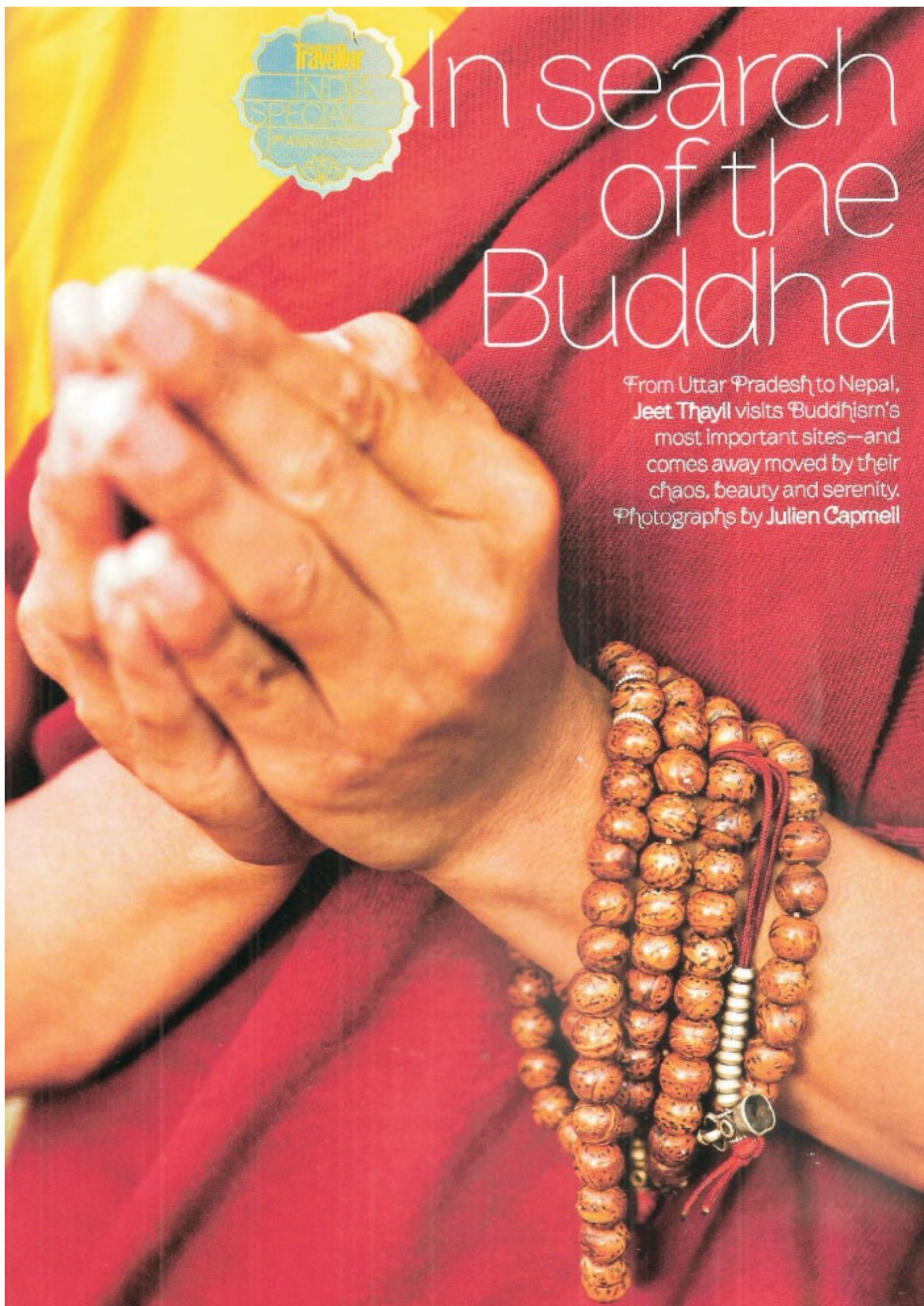




# In search of the Buddha

From Uttar Pradesh to Nepal, Jeet Thayil visits Buddhism's most important sites—and comes away moved by their chaos, beauty and serenity. Photographs by Julien Capmeil





I grew up in Hong Kong, where, at the age of 16, I became a Buddhist. It was a reaction to 18 months spent in the throes of Transcendental Meditation, or TM, as its practitioners call it. When I joined, the TM inductor, a young American in a business suit, whispered two syllables in my ear, which I was told was my personal mantra; no one else in the world knew it. I was instructed never to repeat it to anyone. Some weeks later, a classmate and I exchanged notes and discovered our mantras were identical. Much later I read that TM gave the same mantra to everyone in the same age range. I can still recall the exact sense of betrayal I felt, and the disappointment; soon after, I turned Buddhist.

A friend taught me the Nichiren Buddhist chant, 'Nam Myoho Renge Kyo', and I taught myself the zazen meditation, which was based on counting and breath control. I started to read about the Buddha's life. I was always pleased by the wisdom, the width, and the simplicity of the words attributed to him. One day, I thought, I'll visit the places he identified as sites of future pilgrimage: Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar: sites of his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and death. It was more than three decades later, long after I stopped calling myself a Buddhist, that I finally made the trip for *Condé Nast Traveller*.

Never having experienced the monsoon in North India, I expected a version of Delhi's rain: short-lived showers, dust clouds and dry heat. Instead, the land was lush and green and broken up with waterways. Rice paddies lined both sides of the road. There were coconut and banana trees. It could have been Kerala. But in fact, it was North Bihar, and I was headed to Nepal. On the other side, an hour from the border with India, the car turned into a road dwarfed by enormous trees: this was Lumbini. I stayed the night at a Japanese-owned hotel, and in the morning visited the place where the Buddha was born, where he lived for 29 years before taking to the road. I spent some time under a banyan tree by an ancient bathing pond. In the temple, a lone monk was chanting.



**Clockwise from top left:** Buddha statues on sale in Sarnath; a Buddhist temple in Sarnath; young monks at the Mahabodhi Temple, Bodh Gaya; a pagoda in the Wat Thai Temple, Kushinagar

I sat and listened. The walls were lined with murals depicting the Buddha's life. They were faded, but even the untrained eye could see that the colours had once been alive.

*'Suffering is an integral part of existence' — Buddhist proverb*

My journey began in Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, where the Buddha gave his first sermon in an area that is now a ruin. India's national emblem, the Ashoka Chakra, once stood in this park on a pillar erected by the Mauryan emperor, and now lies in a museum nearby. It was six in the evening when I reached the Kesariya Stupa on my way to Kushinagar, Bihar. The stupa is said to be the largest in the world. Fifty kilometres from Vaishali, it consists of six massive circular terraces that rise to a height of about a hundred feet. Each terrace is of a different size, and around the perimeters are cells for life-sized Buddha sculptures.

Its earliest excavators, the British, estimated that the stupa was built between 280 and 750AD. According to legend, it →





commemorates the place where the Buddha stopped on his journey from Vaishali to Kushinagar, where he later died. The stupa resembles a giant mandala which cannot be seen in its entirety, except perhaps from the air. It hardly matters, because today the monument is little more than a picnic spot. There is no enclosure, no boundary wall, no security of any kind. People park their cars on the road, walk over a grassy mound and clamber over the stupa. They sit on its ancient terraces and eat potato chips. They leave the litter where they please. Though the Archaeological Survey of India began work on the Kesariya Stupa in 1998, it has been only partially excavated. Much of it is still covered in soil.

At the time of my visit, the work at the site appeared to have been abandoned long ago. Of the hundreds of Buddha figures that decorated the stupa, none that I saw were intact; they were missing a head, or an arm, or indeed the entire torso. An interested party can wait till nightfall and make off with whatever takes his fancy. All he has to do is hack off a head (though none are left). What do they do with it, one

wonders. Does a piece of the Buddha grace an entrance hall where guests pay it more reverence than the picnickers at the original site? Does it stand as a symbol of inner wealth to a man who has installed it in his hutment, where the sun and rain are the only benedictions he receives?

*'It is possible for sentient beings to realise a dimension of awareness which is totally unconstructed and peaceful'*  
— Buddhist proverb

It is in Bodhi Gaya that the traveller will find something to equal the object of his pilgrimage. The Mahabodhi Temple Complex is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and marks the place where the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment. It is a surprise, not for the style of its architecture, which dates from the 5th century BC, but because it is one of the few places on the Buddhist trail that appears well-maintained. Nearby is an offshoot of an offshoot of the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha found enlightenment. It is an enormous green banyan tree protected by a wall, an enclosure and guards. It is possible as you sit in its shade, to feel something that approaches serenity.

Then there is the Great Buddha, an 80ft statue on an inverted sandstone lotus, which in turn rests on a bed of granite. He is cross-legged, his hands in his lap, seated in the meditation posture. Twelve thousand masons took seven years to build it. The statue is a marvel. Designed by a Japanese architect, and built by a Japanese engineer, it resembles the great bronze Buddha of Kamakura in Japan, though the Great Buddha is double the size of its Kamakura counterpart.

The Japanese and the Thai have taken on the task of preserving some of India's Buddhist sites. But there are corollaries to all acts of charity. The Bodhi Gaya Buddha is Japanese in its features, as are many contemporary images of the Buddha. Which leads to an unanswerable question—what did he really look like? And to a parenthetical question—if the image of Christ is most often that of a blond, blue-eyed white man, why can't the Buddha be plump and Japanese? —

**Clockwise from top left: The Great Buddha statue in Bodhi Gaya; a view from the cable car going up to the Japanese-built Vishwa Shanti Stupa, Rajgir; a section of the stupa; the ruins of Nalanda university**





Ease is not what the Buddhist pilgrim is looking for. In fact, he may be looking for its opposite, to share some of the pain and hardship the Buddha underwent

There is nothing easy about travelling the Buddhist trail. I visited five cities in six days, spending one night in each, and still didn't see everything. On some days I was on the road for nine or ten hours at a stretch. For miles there were no restaurants or toilets. The hotels were serviceable though far from luxurious. But, as my guide told me, ease is not what the Buddhist pilgrim is looking for. In fact, he may be looking for its opposite, to share some of the pain and hardship the Buddha underwent. Each year, said the guide, he brings around 3,000 tourists to these sites from predominantly Buddhist nations such as Thailand, Japan and South Korea. And that figure has been steadily increasing.

As we journeyed from one site to the next, it occurred to me, as it probably does to every traveller and pilgrim on the trail, that my hardships were a fraction of those that Siddhartha underwent in his quest for enlightenment. He ate

only what was given to him, slept in the open and covered the great distances of North India on foot. In a car or coach, the modern pilgrim's hardship is not comparable, but it is possible to feel compassion and admiration.

At the hotel in Kushinagar, the receptionist was an elderly Indian Buddhist. There was only one other guest at the time (it was off-season), and I heard the receptionist speaking to him in Japanese. Later, on my way out, I asked the receptionist whether foreign visitors remarked on the state of ruin of Indian Buddhist sites. He looked at me for a moment without replying. Then he said, "Yes, they do." I asked him what it felt like, as a Buddhist, to visit the sites. It made him so angry, he said, that sometimes he forgot he was a Buddhist. He invited me to sit with him. We moved to the lobby, which had high ceilings and glass walls looking out on the trees in the garden. We sat in silence for a while. Then he said, "Have you seen the monastery next door? You must visit, just to see what is possible."

Before leaving Kushinagar, I stopped at the monastery whose pagodas were visible from my room. Inside the great gates, behind a screen of Ashoka trees, were canals with water lilies and lotuses, benches carved from old wood, dark green shade, and the sound of birds and water. There was accommodation for more than a hundred guests and each of the cells was a model of simplicity and comfort. I had never seen gardens like it: umbrella-shaped trees and plants shaped like animals and birds, both real and mythical, and numberless flowering plants. Some trees had been placed on large stone blocks so their roots entwined around the stone. Pots ran monsoon water down to small pools. Porches and walkways surrounded each house. I wandered around, wondering how the gardeners had done it, then I heard shouted voices and saw half a dozen men emerging from the dining hall and heading toward the trees. The gardeners were returning to work. They were all Thai, as were the cooks, the architects and the monks.

From the monastery, I went to the part of Kushinagar administered by the government. Here were stagnant pools and litter, and a raw concrete

**Above:** Buddhist statues in Wat Thai Temple, Kushinagar



structure that housed a huge reclining Buddha. Everything was shabby and in need of maintenance. You didn't have to be Buddhist to be angry at the sorry state of the monuments and relics and heritage sites, and to wonder what it would take to rescue the sites, in other words to give the Buddha back to the Buddhists.

*'All things come to an end' —  
Buddhist proverb*

Little I had heard about the great Buddhist monuments of India prepared me for the actual experience of visiting them. I was expecting serenity, tidiness and possibly a sense of spiritual surrender. I did find it, though in unexpected places — under trees, by bodies of water, in parks. As with the four sites of pilgrimage identified by the Buddha, these places were always outdoors, away from predators, money-collectors and tourists.

At Kohlua, which isn't far from Kesariya, there is a pond where a group of monkeys, it was said, gave honey to the Buddha. Today, the pond is covered in green scum and the usual litter: cigarette packets, plastic bags and food wrappers, the accoutrements of a worldly existence. Yet, there is also an Ashoka pillar, the only intact pillar on the trail, a lion still perched on top and facing toward Kushinagar. Surrounding it are hundreds of stupas. What's left of each is a thin foundation layer of brick.

All that remains of ancient Patliputra are the excavations of Kumrahar. Much of the site is underwater throughout the year and resembles a flooded jungle or wasteland. Only one pillar remains of the hundreds that stood there. This is not a popular stop on the Buddhist itinerary, though Ashoka's palace is said to have stood there.

While I saw disrepair—site after site where nothing remained, only broken brick to suggest that once there had been monasteries or tombs—I could still sense an aura of stillness in these places, as though nothing could fully eradicate a core of beauty, however deeply buried it might be. ❸

*A trip similar to Jeet Thayil's can be booked through Top Travel & Tours (011 4367 7777)*

*See overleaf for booking information.*

