

In the land of the Buddha

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In the chaos and unrest that define much of the world, peace feels increasingly elusive. The celebration of Buddha Purnima on May 12 seemed more relevant than ever. The world can draw inspiration from the timeless teachings of Gautama Buddha, which guide us towards peace, harmony and spirituality. Embark on a spiritual journey in Bodhi Gaya (Bihar), the sacred land of enlightenment where seekers from across the world gather to find solace. A sense of serenity pervades the Buddhist temples and *viharas* (monasteries) where monks engage in daily prayers and meditation.

"Thousands of monks and devotees descend on Bodhi Gaya on Buddha Purnima," says Bhante Dinanath Bhikhu of the Mahabodhi temple. At dawn, all are welcome to join the vibrant procession from the 80-foot Great Buddha statue to the Mahabodhi Temple — accompanied by chants, drumbeats and fluttering prayer flags. Prayers beneath the sacred Mahabodhi tree mark the day, culminating in the evening with the lighting of butter lamps and serene chanting.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the magnificent Mahabodhi Temple complex stands as the best preserved example of brick architecture from that era. Its lofty tower with Chaityas, a Nagara Shikara-style spire and the sanctum, houses a gold-plated meditating Buddha from the 9th century Pala dynasty. The sprawling complex has ancient

Seeking spirituality and peace in Bodhi Gaya

vestibules, circumambulatory pathways, and the sacred Bodhi tree, under which lies Vajrasana, the diamond throne, built by Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BC, marking the spot where Buddha meditated.

The sacred sites where Buddha spent the subsequent six weeks are marked as Animeshlochana *stupa*, Ratna Camlamana (the jewelled promenade), Ratnagar Chaitya, Ajapala Nigrodha tree, Muchalinda Sarovar and the Rajayatana tree. The entire area is adorned with marigolds and lit butter lamps, the scent of incense lending a spiritual aura. The decaying flowers are recycled to make incense sticks while solar lighting is used on the premises.

The Mahabodhi Sadhana Udyan (Meditation Park) in the temple complex is idyllic for meditation.

Bodhi Gaya is also ideal for temple trail.

One can hire an electric vehicle or cab and explore the Buddhist monasteries built by several Asian

countries, each reflecting its unique architectural style. These have colourful paintings, vibrant *thangkas*, besides striking red and gold ornamental designs. The meditation halls are spartan and peaceful.

Visit the impressive Royal Bhutan monastery with its embossed frescoes; the modern Thai temple of Metta Buddharam and the traditional Wat Thai Buddhagaya temple with red-tiled gold rimmed rooftops; the elegant Indosan Nipponji Japanese temple and other ornate Tibetan, Burmese, Vietnamese and Chinese temples.

An especially meaningful stop is the 80-foot Buddha statue, Sujata Stupa at Bakraur, commemorating the young tribal milkmaid Sujata, who offered *kheer* to Buddha — an act that led Buddha to abandon austerity for a middle path.

Those looking for a more immersive spiritual experience can attend courses at Urubela forest meditation *vihara* and Dhamma Bodhi, the Bodhi Gaya International Vipassana Meditation Centre. The Root Institute for Wisdom Culture offers a residential basic programme for an in-depth study of Buddhist philosophy.

In winter, the town transforms into a microcosm of Asia. Monks in maroon and orange robes can be seen chanting in unison.

Seasonal eating joints spring up serving Tibetan, Thai, Burmese, and even Korean and Japanese cuisine, and stalls brim with a variety of Buddha statues, *thangkas*, prayer beads, bowls, and Tibetan woollens. Bodhi Gaya is an experience not to be missed.

— The writer is a freelance contributor

The 80-foot Great Buddha statue. PHOTO BY THE WRITER

