



Part 1: The Bodhi Tree and Buddha

Starting out - the trail ahead.

My trip begins in Delhi and from here I will travel to Bodh Gaya in Bihar State, to the place where Buddha gained enlightenment beneath a fig tree. From there I will follow the route taken by the remarkable Princess Sanghamitta, who travelled to Sri Lanka carrying a cutting of this tree, in a golden bowl, as a gift for the king to mark the arrival of Buddhism on the island. What makes this journey all the more amazing is that it happened around 2,300 years ago!

My trip will take me from Bodh Gaya to Patna where the famous city of Pataliputra once stood. Then, I will follow the Ganges River to Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) and out into the vast Ganges delta known as the Sundarbans. Here, at a small town, Sanghamitta began her voyage south, stopping at several major settlements such as present day Bhubaneshwa and Vizakhapatnam before negotiating her way through the Tamil Empire in southern India. She finally arrived in Sri Lanka at a port near the northern city of Jaffna in today's Sri Lanka. Here she was met by the king and his nobles, and they travelled the final few hundred kilometres in a great parade, inland to Anuradhapura. Here the tree that Sanghamitta had carried was planted in 288 BCE and is still alive today nearly 2,300 years later. This is where my journey will finally end at the foot of the Buddha Tree.



Day 1

I had been thinking about taking this trip for fifteen years, but to get to the starting point I had to first fly to the Indian capital New Delhi from the UK. Moving on from Delhi was not easy because the city was enveloped in a vast, thick fog that stretched so far north that it lapped against the foothills of the Himalayas. It was so thick that trains were running late and aeroplanes were being diverted to other cities. In the end I was lucky and there was a break in the weather. I flew eastwards to the city of Patna on the Ganges river: now it felt as though the trail had started.

On landing in Patna everyone from the plane had to find their way across tarmac between the planes to the baggage hall. Once outside a great crowd pressed in on every side, but I was soon able to find a taxi. The streets felt chaotic with a sea of vehicles – lorries, taxis, rickshaws – all vying for space. Nevertheless, it seemed that this chaos worked and people were managing to work and travel around. To me though, it was all a bit stressful!

Patna is a large city built where the golden palaces of the ancient city of Pataliputra once stood. Pataliputra was the capital of King Ashoka's vast Maurya Empire around 2,300 years ago and one of the most advanced, organised



and beautiful cities in the world at that time. It was so famous that it was included in what is thought to be the first atlas of the world, written in Europe in 1570. Today Patna, is noisy, dirty and has a level of poverty that shocked me.

As a photographer I am always on the look out for high places to get an idea of the layout, and select views for good photos. I had heard about a high building in Patna, so headed there. It was called the Golghar and was built in 1786 as a grain store following the Great Bengal Famine of 1770. I joined other tourists, mostly from India, to climb the two hundred and fifty steps curving around the big domed structure, finally reaching a very small viewing platform.

From the top you could see all round. On three sides the view was a bustling, dusty city with some tall buildings and couple of large parks with people playing cricket. To the north however, the view stretched across a great plain chequered with fields. At this time of year most had been harvested but some were picked out by the bright yellow mustard plants growing. A low mist stopped me from seeing as far as the banks of the Ganges. This great river runs across the top half of India from the Himalayan mountains to the Indian Ocean.



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Day 2

This was a big day for me. It was the day I would arrive at the Bodhi tree and officially start on the trail of the Buddha Tree. I was up early and soon after 8am a taxi arrived to take me to Bodh Gaya, a little over 100 miles away.

After three hours in a taxi, stopping and starting through towns along the way, I arrived with all of my bags at the guest house where I would stay. It was very near the entrance to Mahabodhi temple, and the site of the Bodhi tree - the tree beneath which Buddha gained enlightenment.

The Bodhi tree is the most important of four places that all Buddhists try to visit in their lifetimes. As I approached, a kind student informed me that bags and phones were not allowed in. Thankfully cameras were, so after paying a small camera fee, I walked to the entrance, slipped off my shoes, and was confronted by one of the most beautiful temples and gardens I had ever seen.





A giant fig tree caught my eye, covered in colourful prayer flags. It was enormous, beautiful, and undoubtedly an ancient tree. At first I had thought this was the Bodhi Tree, but I later realised it was just a brother or sister tree. I had to go a little further around the temple to find the tree I had wanted to visit for so long and there it was - a huge pipal fig tree, with branches snaking gracefully out in three directions. This current Bodhi Tree is not the actual one that Buddha sat under, but is a direct descendant planted in 1881 at the same spot. Over time, the temple monks have cared for the Bodhi Tree by building supports under its enormous branches. Its trunk is also protected by a golden wood cage, but its branches rise above this, spreading over the heads of the kneeling worshippers.

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It is curious just how connected to religion figs are. In India, only a Brahmin priest (Hindu holy man) or other religious leader is can give permission to cut down a pipal fig or banyan fig tree (two common types found in India). In Christianity, figs are mentioned 57 times in the Bible, including in the very first story of Adam and Eve who use a fig leaf to cover their nakedness. The ancient Egyptians also have a link with figs, believing that they would travel a path lined with sycamore figs on the way to the nether world or afterlife.

After spending a couple of hours in this amazing spiritual place I headed off to a street café for dinner. I had a mixed vegetable curry, rice and a garlic nan with chai (tea) all for the princely sum of just 95p. I have decided to be vegetarian for the duration of the trip. Eighty per cent of the Indian population is vegetarian – that’s close to a billion people!



Day 3

The next day I spent more time at the temple learning and thinking about the Bodhi Tree. It was amazing to think about how important it is to millions of Buddhists around the world, many of whom will not get to enjoy the privilege of visiting it. Fig trees are common throughout India, but it is the connection with Buddha that makes this spot and this tree so special.

Buddha was originally called Siddhartha Gautama and came from the foothills of the Himalayas in what is now Nepal. He was born in 566 BCE and although we’re not sure exactly how long he lived, new information suggests that he died around 410 BCE. The name Buddha means “the enlightened one” and was given to Siddhartha Gautama after he had sat for six days and nights under the Bodhi tree until he had understood everything about life and the universe.

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It is from this very same spot that some 2600 years ago, Buddhism began to spread, radiating like the spokes of a wheel - north to the Himalayas, south to Sri Lanka, east to China and Japan, and west towards Europe. I had come to the Bodhi Tree at a very busy time and right now it was as though this whole process was happening in reverse. Tens of thousands of pilgrims were arriving by air, road, train and on foot from across the planet to be at this special place where Buddha gained ultimate enlightenment.





In the afternoon I met a group of boys, one of whom, Santosh, invited me to see his house in a slum area a little way out of town. I was led down small alleyways between crumbling buildings to his home. It had two rooms and a small court yard with a water tap in it. The walls were mainly mud with a thatched roof, although parts of the building had also been made with bricks.

He said that they had moved into the town recently. Before this, they had had a small farm growing rice and root vegetables, just a short distance out of the town. However, his father had got into debt because he had borrowed money for seed, fertilizers and pesticides, but the monsoon rains that make the crops grow had failed for the last three years. The farm had been sold and now they lived in town.

Santosh was 16 and studying at school. His English was excellent and he said he hoped to be a doctor one day. We sat around and talked drinking chai (Indian tea) before I headed back to my hotel.

Day 4

Today I had to travel back to Patna to get a train onwards to Kolkata. Before that I had some time to spend in Patna so I headed in a cycle rickshaw to visited the city museum. The museum was a bit run down and empty, but I managed to find out a little more about the ancient city of Pataliputra that once stood here, and about things like the clothing people once wore - a sort of early type of sari. As I was on the trail of the Buddha Tree, I wanted to get a feel for where Sanghamitta would have left Pataliputra by boat, with the cutting of the Bodhi Tree - supposedly carried in a golden vase.

I found a taxi driver to take me to the riverside suburb of Chowk, near to where it is thought Sanghamitta left. We drove through dusty side streets full of animals and street sellers until we reached the Ganges beneath the Mahatma Gandhi Setu bridge. This giant bridge is 5.6 km long and crosses the Ganges between Patna and Hajipur and is the world's longest single river bridge.

As I wandered down to the dusty river bank to gaze at the vast Ganges I thought about what Sanghamitta must have felt as she set sail. In among the rubble and rubbish it was difficult to imagine the royal pomp and splendour that must have seen her on her way. I also found myself wondering how long a small tree in a solid gold pot would last on the present day shore side.

Under the bridge I could easily see some of the contrasts of India. A few metres in front of me small boats bobbed in the current, and a man washed himself in the holy yet undoubtedly polluted river. 30 metres above four lanes of traffic thundered on a bridge that must have cost a massive amount of money, and which was built to help the economy grow. There is wealth and poverty side by side here.

