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EXCLUSIVE COVER STORY

**SHEREE ATCHESON**





Hi!! Travel  
varanasi

*On the banks of spirituality*

# VARANASI

*The oldest living city in the world*

*Text and photos Tina Edward Gunawardhana*





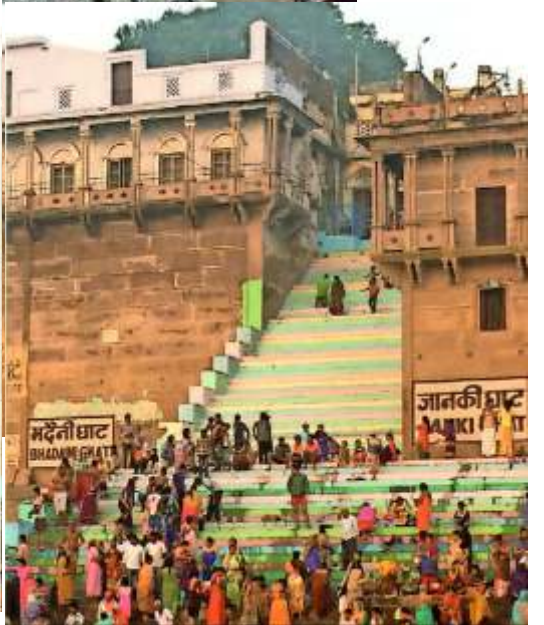
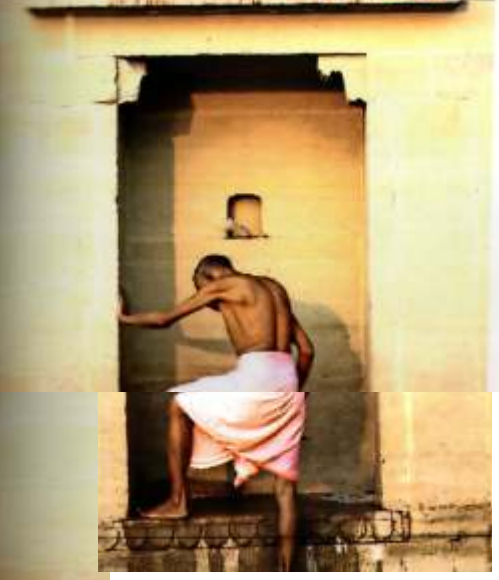


On the banks of the Ganges, Varanasi or Benares or Kashi as it was called in days gone by, is one of the holiest cities for Hindus. Thousands travel to this city billed as the oldest continuous living city in the world to gain spiritual enlightenment, a deeper understanding of religion, or to depart the worldly realm as Varanasi is said to be the closest point to heaven for Hindus.

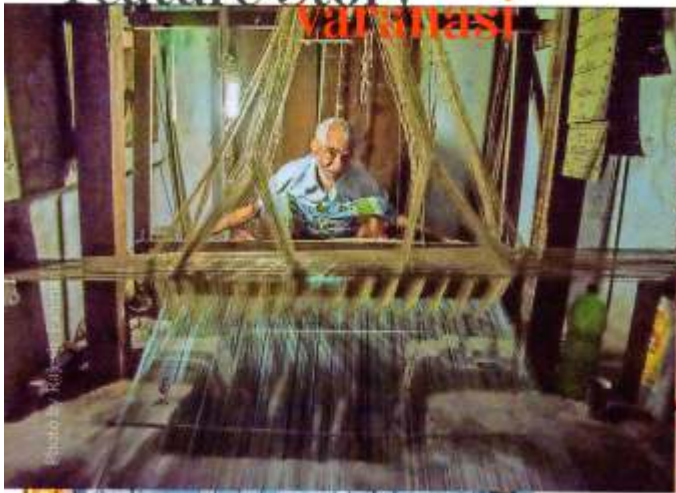
It was author Mark Twain who said "Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together". As you traverse through the narrow alleys and streets of Varanasi this rings true.

Varanasi is the land of pilgrimage. This city which evolved almost 3000 years ago has its foundation ingrained in a powerful spirituality. It is known as the city of salvation and death where the circle of life is unending.

The best times to visit the ghats are at sunrise and sunset. Bathed in an orange glow, the same hue of the millions of marigolds found around the ghats, the sight of the rising and setting sun is spectacular. Just like the tide of the river Ganges, human life can be witnessed in its ebb and flow. Like a pause in eternity, the bustling backstreets behind the ghats are full of people of all ages making their way to the bathing ghats which leads them to the holy waters of the Ganges, believed to be the only living goddess and revered by Hindus worldwide. The star attraction for tourists are the ghats which are the steps that lead pilgrims to the river. The ghats number more than 80 and the most popular ones are Dashashwamedh ghat, Manikarnika ghat, Harischandra ghat, the oldest burning ghat is where cremation never stops and the Assi ghat, which is the southernmost ghat of Varanasi which stands at the confluence of the Ganges and the river Assi. »







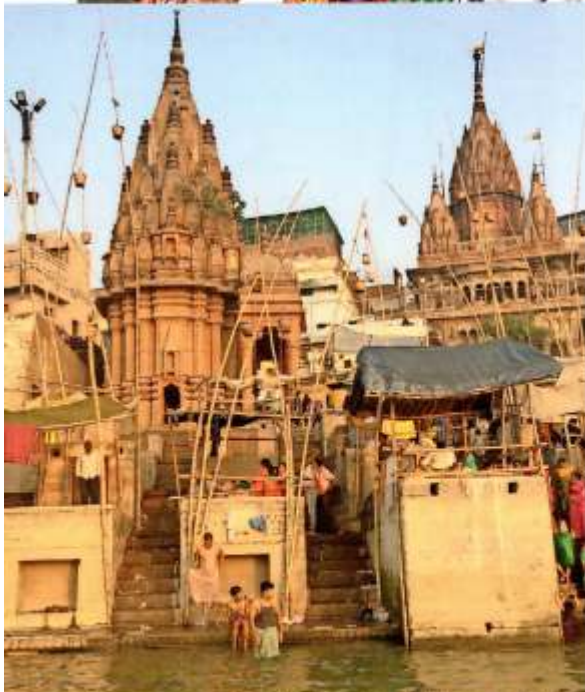
The narrow winding streets leading to the burning ghats of Manikarnika and Harischandra are lined with stacks of sandalwood which fire the pyres. It is these burning ghats, the only places where funeral pyres are permitted that Hindu pilgrims united in their belief that dying in this sacred place will free them from reincarnation, the ceaseless cycle of life, death and rebirth, have been seeking out Varanasi for generations. For Hindus cremating your body on the ghats and scattering the ashes in the sacred Ganges completes a timeless and holy ritual and facilitates the passage to Moksha, a state of blissful liberation beyond the human realm.

Walking downstream a hundred or so metres from the burning ghats where ashes and charred remains are disposed of in the river, life on the river carries on. Holy cows defecate while they are bathed by their owners, while others wash their linen. Further down, people submerge themselves in the Holy Ganges totally oblivious to the pollution of the river instead immersed in their faith that Ma Ganga will cleanse them from their sins and protect them from any evils that may befall them.

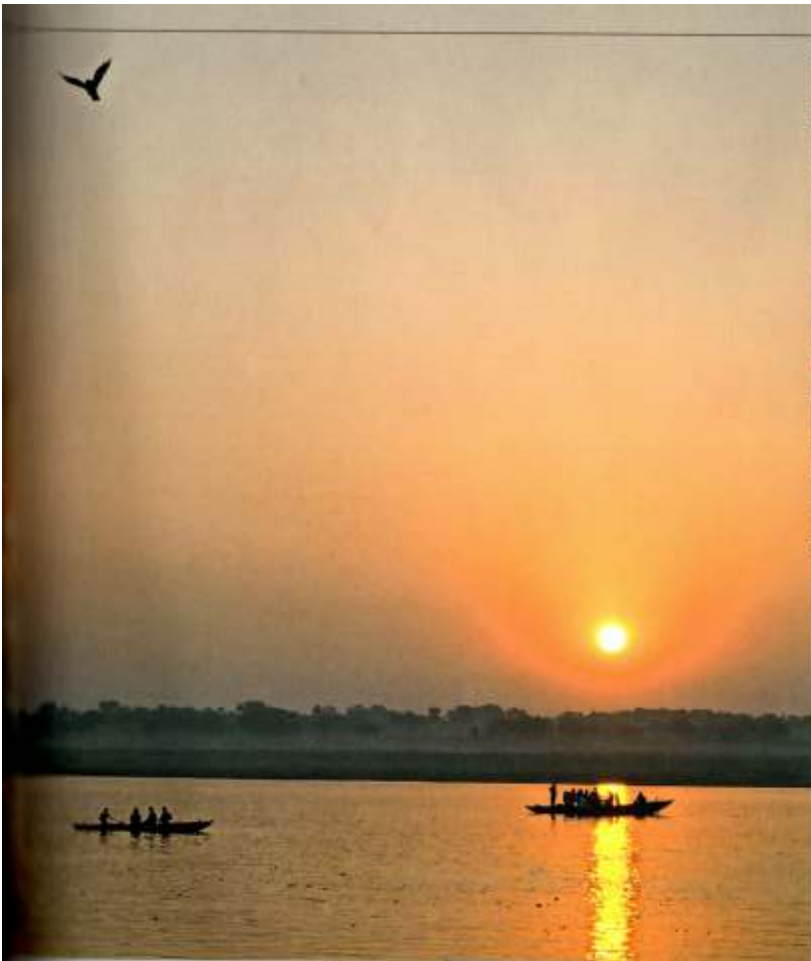
The narrow streets are lined with stalls selling everything from fake gold to cheap yellow shawls and chains of marigolds. Street food stalls are in abundance as people fry samosas in huge cauldrons of hot oil while chai sellers do a brisk trade selling their cardamom infused sweet tea served in tiny clay cups. Through this quotidian tapestry of life, a cortège rushes past. A stretcher laden with a body covered with golden marigolds and bell ringers in attendance make their way to the burning ghats. It is said that annually 32,000 funerals are held at the burning ghats.

Pilgrims clad in orange weave their way past bicycles, cows, goats and dogs. Its narrow pathways are absorbing, every where you look you are greeted to a visual overload, from a lassi seller to a mystical baba or peddlers selling their wares, your thoughts drowned by the cacophony of noise.

Away from the ghats amidst the warren of streets that crisscross the city, is Varanasi's Lohta area, a textile hub where more than a thousand factories work around the clock to produce Banarasi sarees and fabrics. Employing traditional practices of handloom weaving those engaged in the weaving industry turn out some of the most intricate and colourful silk sarees which are sought after across the world.







For those who want to indulge in retail therapy there are several modern malls which offer everything from clothing to electrical items. Indian sweets are also in abundance. The food is spicy and varied with rotis and biryanis served with spicy curries dominating the menus. If the ghats are too intense then the city offers an abundance of Hindu temples to escape to. The Benares Hindu University is a sprawling complex which offers a respite from the harsh realities of life on the ghats.

It is at sunset that the ghats are most spectacular, especially the Dashashwamedh Ghat where a nightly pooja called the Aarti takes place. This is a spectacle which attracts both tourists and pilgrims alike. Colour, fire, beating drums and the smell of incense permeates the air as people absorb this ritual, deep in concentration as they pray for salvation.

Despite Varanasi being a spiritual centre and pilgrimage city for Hindus, it is also popular amongst Buddhists and Jains. It was in Saranath, just 10 kms away from Varanasi that the Gautama Buddha preached his first sermon. For Jains, Varanasi is the birthplace for Parsvanath the 23rd spiritual leader and enlightened one of the Jain religion. With well connected transport links, and varying starred hotels to backpacking hostels, Varanasi is the perfect destination to explore and offers a multitude of great photo opportunities, apart from the culture, history and cuisine. Getting to Varanasi has been made easier with Air India's twice weekly direct flights to this destination.

A beautiful city steeped in the divine, Varanasi is a living example of people's attempts to find spirituality in a chaotic world. This is a city where you are constantly reminded that the meaning of life and death is shrouded in mystery. It offers a montage of faith and humanity. The ghats of Varanasi affords a glimpse of everyday life and is a display of India's timeless beauty.

Photo by Rajesh Puri



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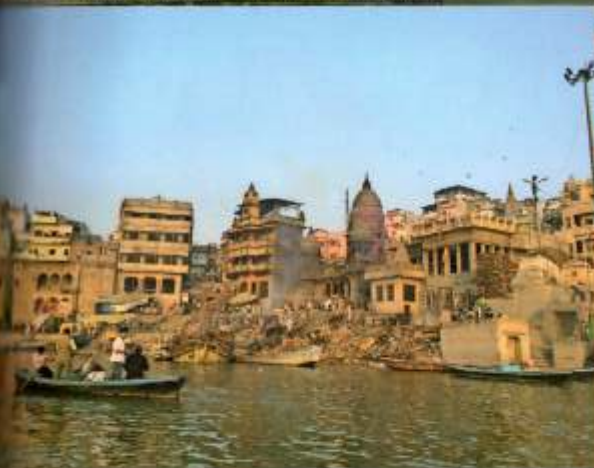


Photo by Anand Chandra