

[HOME](#)[INSIGHTS](#)[TRAVEL NEWS](#)[JOURNALS](#)[CONTRIBUTORS](#)[ORIGI](#)

[Home](#) » [India Travel • Insights](#) » [THE RIVERFRONT IN VARANASI: Exploring a Source of Mysticism](#)

THE RIVERFRONT IN VARANASI: Exploring a Source of Mysticism

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by Kim Nightingale

'When meditation is mastered, the mind is unwavering like the flame of a lamp in a windless place.' ~ Bhagavad Gita

Having your cremated remains ceremoniously cast into the holy river Ganga (Sanskrit for the Ganges) that runs through Varanasi, India, is considered auspicious and the ghats along the river are filled with the smoke of incense carrying messages and spirits to the sky. Running from the Himalaya Mountains in northern India to the Indian Ocean, the culturally significant river is considered to be a goddess. To ritualistically bathe in her, is to be cleansed of all sin.



The Ancient City of Varanasi

Being an ancient learning and education hub for over 2000 years makes Varanasi, also known as Banaras, one of the top pilgrimage cities for devout worshippers, scholars and learners of Vedic heritage. Students from all over the world come to the oldest Sanskrit university, Sanskrit Vishvavidyalaya, to unlock the secrets of what is called the 'language of the gods.'

Situated near Prayag where the Ganga and Yamuna rivers meet, Varanasi is a place where millions of spiritual seekers and sadhus (holy men) gather to bathe in the sacred river. To keep the metaphysical dimensions of the faith alive, sadhus renounce the world along with possessions, occasionally pushing the limits of possibility through asceticism. The opportunity to dip my toes into the mother Ganga came at 5 A.M., the time which the monk I was travelling with decided would be most favourable. A small group and I took a tiny rowboat across the water to a shallow area free from rocks.



Boats Cross the Sacred River Ganges

It was a crisp December morning and the fog made it seem cooler, or maybe it was simply the thought of submerging myself into the chilly waters of Varanasi. We were asked to remain silent, to be fully present, and imbibe the blessings that come from this holy bath. Letting go of all apprehension, I dropped off of the side of the boat, came up and began to shiver. In this most opportune moment when I should be blissed out, I just couldn't stop. The combination of cold and wet always makes me suffer. Everyone else seemed to manage the situation just fine. How awkward – I broke the art of practicing discipline with the sound of chattering teeth. Undaunted, the monk smiled and handed me a blanket.

As the days passed, I watched many bathers on the banks of the river. Some in serious prayer, others playing with their friends and family as if it were a day at the beach. Mysticism pervades this region, and week after week, the conversations with monks who have lived here for years went to places many would find incredulous – flying monks, time travel and plenty of levitation. The stories are not told to impress, but merely come up in regular conversation. 'I need to pick up some spices near that market where we saw the monk rise off the ground,' or 'when I was taking my morning bath in the Ganga, Swamiji entered my lucid dream and told me where to meet him

morning bath in the Ganga, Swami entered my field dream and told me where to meet him tonight.' Yes, regular ol' conversation in Varanasi.



A Sadhu Leaves a Cremation Grounds

One morning, while walking alone taking photographs, I accidentally captured a meditating monk in the picture. He looked up from his prayer and shot out, 'There you go. Now you can take this picture back to Canada for your work. It might be useful near your birthday on October 17th.'

My jaw dropped. I was not carrying anything except a camera. No Canadian flag pin on my chest and I was certainly not talking to myself. How could he know? Sure, small miracles happen every day, but really? My exact birthdate? I looked down at this tiny man in his ochre robe, and he was actually doubled over with

laughter.

The mystery remains to this day.

Sometimes, when I get bogged down with the ins and outs of everyday life, I like to time travel back to the ghats of Varanasi and tell myself that he was not laughing at my reaction, but at the power of his mind. In this space, there are rivers of possibility.

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Editor's note: Original World Travel offers multiple travel experiences across India, including several [North India Journeys](#) that take you to the sacred Ganges River and holy city of Varanasi, the Chandella Temples of Khajuraho and the exquisite and romantic white marble Taj Mahal.