

Shoestring Spirituality

A Satire by Nisha Ligon

Aspiring Religious Wanderers:

Lonely Planet's "Religion on a Shoestring" series helps you to get the most out of journeys through religion on even the tightest budget. Trek the misty isle of Avalon, marvel at the Pillars of Islam, climb Mount Olympus or take a guided tour of Purgatory. Let Lonely Planet help you take the first steps on the journeys you've always prayed for. Check out these free excerpts then head to a bookseller near you to start the voyage of your life.

From Buddhism on a Shoestring:

Nirvana

population: very few

Closed to those unworthy. No pets allowed. *Due to unstable conditions we were unable to travel to the site for on-the-ground research so some information in this chapter may be unreliable.*

This remote state is perhaps Buddhism's hardest to reach; yet after the long journey, visitors will no doubt find inner peace in the quietly enlightened destination. For many, it has taken lifetimes to reach Nirvana, and the journey is not recommended for those simply seeking to sightsee or pass through. If you lack time for the long journey or your main intent is tourism, try Salvation instead (see Lonely Planet's *Christianity on a Shoestring*). Yet for those willing to devote themselves and ready to put in a strong effort, the path is peaceful and the destination rewarding. Most who reach Nirvana find it so agreeable they never return.

Nirvana is located far off the beaten path at the mountainous tip of the Enlightenment Peninsula. The state is often mistakenly called an island, thanks to its first known explorer, Gautama, who dubbed it the "Island of No-Beyond," yet modern Buddhist geographers now agree it is connected by land to the continent. The elevation is extremely high and visitors claim they can see everything from the peak. Nirvana's vast area and tiny population mean that you will not run into many fellow travelers, but then again, that's sort of the point. Don't worry about reservations or planning in advance—everything will become clear when you get there.

GETTING THERE AND AWAY

Many have reported reaching the Nirvanan border only to be denied entry. Persistence here is the key, for rarely is a visitor granted entry on the first try. Visas are granted by application on the spot, and all are welcome to apply, though most visas are given to those from within Buddhism, or neighboring Hinduism.

By Air

There are no direct flights into Nirvana, so you're best bet is to fly into one of Buddhism's major hubs (try Theravada or Zen), then travel by land from there.

By Land

The overland route is the most common path to Nirvana, though be warned, many who embark on this route get so distracted along the way they never reach their destination. Most take the Meditation Path stopping at Wisdom along the way. Another option is the Alms Path, slightly more strenuous but equally rewarding. These two paths cross often, and a good route should include travel along both.

By Sea

It is uncommon but completely possible to travel directly to Nirvana by sea from Christianity, Atheism, Paganism, or just about anywhere else. The seas are difficult to navigate and no commercial trips are available, so you'll need to either have your own boat or be a very strong swimmer. If you are not extremely committed to the difficult journey, we suggest you travel to Buddhism first, and then take the land route.

From *Islam On A Shoestring*, Sight's and Activities Section:

The Five Pillars

Open to the public, but foreign "infidels" are urged to be wary of aggressive locals. No alcohol, pigs or exposed female heads allowed on premises.

The Five Pillars are a not to be missed on any journey through Islam. Residents of Islam love to visit their own sites, and you'll no doubt encounter many locals.

Shahadah is the ornate pillar of faith to Allah (*tel. 1-800-GO-ALLAH*) and should be visited first. Islam's upstanding citizens go there daily, but a quick tour should do the trick for passersby.

Salat is the pillar of prayer, which points toward Mecca (*open in the morning, after midday, between midday and sunset, right after sunset and one hour after sunset*). At each of the five main opening hours, there is a massive influx of visitors, and though this can be a hassle, it's worth going for the experience. By decree, all signs and tours are in Arabic, so don't look to understand it, just enjoy the sight and the mystical feeling.

Siyam is the pillar of fasting (*tel. 1-866-NO-2-FOOD, open during daylight hours of Ramadan*). This is the gastronomically minded visitor's least favorite pillar (no tasty falafel or kebabs here), and the locals tend to be grumpy and unfriendly. Yet the areas surrounding the pillar have a vibrant nightlife that is not to be missed.

Zakah is the pillar of alms (*entry fee: 2.5% of whatever you've got*). If you're traveling on a tight budget, hide your money in the hostel before going to this pillar.

Hajj is the pillar of pilgrimage and takes a much more time and travel to get to than the other pillars. *Heaven Here I Come Tours* provides an all-inclusive package that makes brief stops at each of the pillars, and includes full luxury transportation to Hajj.

Jihad is a monument of personal struggle that some claim to be the sixth pillar. Though it is aimed toward internal soul searching, its message is often misconstrued, and from it many terrorists emerge. Travel there is not recommended.

From *Christianity on a Shoestring*, Baptism Chapter:

Börnagen

population: fluctuates, as residents drift in and out

Open to tourists and potential residents.

Börnagen (from the English "born again") is currently Baptism's hippest neighborhood. Over the past decade the borough has been booming, and it is fast becoming the new center for Christianity's active pop-culture. Sophisticates beware: this is not Eucharist or Confirmtown. If you want history and high culture, stay away from Börnagen's neon lights and squeaky-clean, bubblegum-popping youths.

Information

You won't have to look far for a tour guide. Residents are frighteningly eager to talk about their home, but be careful what you ask for. Most of those who approach you are not certified guides and have been known to spout inaccurate information. Head to one of the many Pastor Centers (located on almost every block) for formal information, but again, don't expect consistency. Each center seems to have its own take on what this quarter's all about.

Dangers & Annoyances

It's a good idea to be on your guard in Börnagen, especially if you're visiting from outside Christianity. Theft and violence are uncommon, but the frequent verbal abuse against foreigners can be degrading and unbearable. If you are antagonized, walk away. There's no sense in getting into a fight when passionate Börnagens unwilling to compromise will no doubt outnumber you. We'd like to remind you (and all belligerent Börnagens) that in the end, this is only a trip, and there is no need to get so worked up.

If you like what you've read and are eager to start your next trip through spirituality, grab yourself one of Lonely Planet's Religion on a Shoestring guides and get ready. There's no better time than now. Enjoy the journey!