

# Me and my RT—Sacred Travel

By Sandy Lundahl

I feel free and happy to be alive when I'm traveling long distances alone in my 2000 RoadTrek camper van, nicknamed RT.

I'm reluctant to tell people of my solo cross country camping trips because I get two universal, but mistaken reactions. The first is one of horror at the thought I would travel cross country by myself. The other reaction is just the opposite, one of assurance that I would have a great time: "Really? How exciting!"

Neither perception even comes close to capturing my motivation for this type of travel.

Each time, my trip has been a two-week meditation, accompanied by all the unexpected pleasures, sadnesses, fears, and irritations that show up in an extended state of reflection. More accurately called sacred travel, I am with myself and by myself, feasting on the sights and sounds of nature, delving into the depths of myself, and facing the fears only I know that I have. Each time, surprising insights appear.

Sacred travel, called a secular pilgrimage in the tourist industry, is one of the fastest growing segments of tourism. Faith-based travel includes both religious tourism and secular pilgrimage. Over 300 million religious tourists visit the world's major religious sites each year, a quarter of all international travel to these places, says The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). UNWTO is the United Nations agency responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism. The UNWTO estimates 600 million people take national and international religious voyages each year.<sup>i</sup>

Countless others, like myself, plan their own trips for unique and personal reasons.

Motivations of modern-day travelers to sacred sites differ from traditional pilgrims with religious motivations. Results from a 2015 study of more than 1000 people who had travelled the Camino de Santiago in Spain found that only 16 percent of contemporary pilgrims were motivated by religious reasons such as to pray and participate in rituals. Many more people walked the Camino to enjoy solitude and detach from materialism or to have a new experience. Many went for the outdoor experience or to escape from their routines and meet new people.<sup>ii</sup>

Although sacred travel and tourist behavior may look the same, the difference is motivation.

Sacred travel begins when you are in a restive state, or in deep disturbance, says Phil Cousineau in his book, *The Art of Pilgrimage*. Going on a pilgrimage attempts to fill that emptiness. What makes a pilgrimage sacred is the longing behind the journey. You experience an overwhelming impulse, an itch, fever, voice, or a knock that is both strong and subtle. It feels impossible to ignore, but is fleeting and can disappear only to reoccur minutes, days or months later.

If you have a similar restiveness, follow Cousineau's advice.

- 1. Capture the longing on paper.** Ask yourself: What is it that you seek? What is the fundamental question you want to answer? Write down whatever comes to mind.

For some it will be the need to fulfill a vow you promised to yourself or someone else. Others will succumb to their desire to see a wondrous place they have always wanted to see. A third reason may be to pay homage or honor someone's memory in a symbolic way.

Religious pilgrims travel to connect with subtle energies perceptible at sacred sites. Many sacred travelers want to visit their ancestral home to experience visible, physical symbols of their family origins. Well known pilgrim trails include going to Rome, or walking the UNESCO World Heritage Kumano Kodo in Japan or the Abraham Path in the Middle East.

Teachers may request a leave of absence, a sabbatical—derived from the word Sabbath—to pursue studies away from their teaching responsibilities. Others just need to get away from work.

"I was feeling nailed down [at work] and wanted to be free to be me." said Maureen Mills. Mills was working at Georgetown University Press with a dreary commute at the time and didn't have time or energy to work on the novel she was writing. She wanted to go to Boonsboro, Maryland—to Nora Robert's home town. Mills had read many of Robert's books. *Inn BoonsBoro Trilogy*, is a 3-book series in which the popular author describes the town's inn, bookstore, restaurants, and the barbershop in great detail as the backdrop for her story.

"My head said to stay, I had too many things to do." But Mills felt a strong urge to go and see Boonsboro for herself.

## **2. Commit.**

When you experience a faint or obvious upsurge in energy—take an action. Book the trip or make a reservation to be somewhere at a specific time.

"I signed up and paid for the course," says Don Horrigan. Horrigan, disgusted with teaching junior high, vowed never to return. Horrigan found out about a one-week course on unorthodox methods of job hunting being held north of New York City, not in Maryland where he, his pregnant wife and toddler lived. "I had not traveled alone since being married, but I had to go," Horrigan says.

My own journey started with a recurring day dream of traveling cross country by myself. Not to tour well-known sights, or take a vacation to rest and rejuvenate, or to see family and friends. It definitely felt different...more of an urge to just go.

This is crazy I thought, as I opened up Craigslist. But there it was—a reasonably priced Road Trek camper in Portland, Oregon. I called my son, who lived in Portland, and asked him to take a look at it. "Mom," he asked. "What is so reasonable about spending \$20,000 for an 11-year old vehicle?" He agreed to investigate and replied the next day, "It's perfect for you." I opened a home equity line of credit and one month later, I arrived in Portland to meet RT.

## **3. Prepare.**

Cousineau warns that a sacred journey includes risk. You may experience fear, confusion, chaos, frustration, or even theft and betrayal. No telling strangers details about your travels. Sleep in safe places and have plenty of supplies. You will rediscover what is most sacred in your life by the risks you take, the physical and spiritual dangers you encounter, the financial and personal sacrifices you make.

“I tried to find someone to go with me [to Boonsboro] because I had never driven outside the DC area and I felt anxious” Mills explains. “I don’t know why I underestimated my ability to find the town. I don’t have the fear anymore, I guess because it turned out to be so easy.”

On my trip, I braved the single-woman-who-is-camping-by-herself isolation and decided to have coffee one morning with a bunch of old-timers who told me that the most scenic route from California to Surprise, Arizona is through the Sierra Nevada mountain range and Death Valley. I decided to go. My reward? I got to see extraordinary geology very few humans have ever laid their eyes on.

However, in the middle of the desolate Death Valley, I saw a danger sign warning me to turn off my car’s air conditioning because it may overheat.

Gripped, I had premonitions of my death from burning up in 130 degree heat if RT overheated and broke down; or fainting because there’s no AC and I would run off the road and crash into the monstrous geological formations; or driving in the wrong direction for miles, running out of gas, and dying in the frigid desert night air.

I began to bargain, “God, I promise to be extra special good if only I can travel through the desert without anything bad happening.”

Soon I began to think of contingency plans, and realized that I could and would dip into my pool of resilience should the engine of my new-to-me camper van burn up.

#### **4. Follow a theme.**

While planning for your trip, take some quiet time to visualize the trip. See if you uncover a leitmotif that will help you structure where to go and how to spend your time.

For the first few days of your travel notice what captures your attention, says Cousineau. It might be an architectural detail, an animal, a shape, element of nature, type of person. Then for the rest of your travel notice that focus of attention wherever you go. Photograph it or write about it.

#### **5. Allow plenty of free time.**

Unlike a vacation or a business trip, sacred journeys allow the time, flexibility, and brain space to meander. Something catches your attention and you veer off your itinerary. Or you follow your theme and spend time at some unexpected stop. Trust in synchronicity. Shun habitual impulses that keep you in your routines. If you always shop—don’t shop. If you always chit chat with strangers—don’t, just smile and keep moving.

#### **6. When you arrive at your destination, acclimate to the present moment.**

Upon your arrival take time to recall the longing that led you to this place, advises Cousineau. Then venture out and see, as if for the first time, the landscape; hear, as if for the first time, birds or the sound of conversation; smell something you’ve never smelled before; and taste, truly taste your morning beverage.

Pay attention to your thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

Don’t expect nirvana...you are on a journey of self-discovery.

At my first campground, I discovered a hidden part of myself: self-hesitancy. That morning I debated if I should go to the café and have the free breakfast they offer on Sundays. Should I ask for hot water for tea when I only see coffee on the breakfast bar? Which way should I go for a walk, or should I even go for a walk? Should I go for a walk and then eat breakfast, or maybe I should eat breakfast and then go for a walk? Geez! So many hesitancies hidden inside myself.

### **7. Allow yourself to be surprised.**

You won't know until it happens that someone you meet will say something of great value for you or something happens that answers your fundamental question: What must I learn?

Mills delighted in seeing all the places Nora Roberts wrote about in her novels. After exploring the town, she sat on a park bench and started to write in her journal. She heard giggling, looked up and saw two women, probably tourists, watching her.

"They think I'm Nora," Mills recalls thinking. "That was the coolest feeling. I felt that if Nora arrived, she would stop and talk with me. We would be talking about writing."

### **8. The story you bring back to share is the boon.** One sentence is enough, otherwise you may bore your listeners.

What was the boon for Mills?

"Re-energizing my perception of myself as a writer," she reveals. Mills realized that she wanted a simple life in a small town like Boonesboro so she would have more time to write. Just a few years later Mills retired to the small Midwest town where she grew up. She's working on her books and teaching others to write.

Don Horrigan left his pregnant wife behind and drove by himself in a 1972 Pontiac to New York. His feelings? Exhilarating, excited, free, light. What was his boon?

"I got a new set of eyes," he says. Horrigan realized he worked in the 11<sup>th</sup> largest school system in the country and hadn't even begun to look for opportunities there. When he returned to Maryland, he got a new position and had the best year ever teaching in middle school.

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On my first cross-country trip I learned, or perhaps, re-learned how to decide for myself and follow my internal urges. Four times I have traveled solo across the U.S. When taking these trips, my spirit takes the driver's seat and steers me to places that show me not only the wonders of nature, but the resilience I have when unexpected troubles arise. By stopping at unplanned rest areas, meeting new people, and taking unusual side trips, my soul's wisdom has the opportunity to do its magic and present me with the time and circumstances needed to clear old thoughts, and make space for something new to take hold in my life when I return home.

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<sup>i</sup> Network of Religious Tourism, Project Brief. [http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/nrt\\_proposal\\_flyer-14july2016-lowres.pdf](http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/nrt_proposal_flyer-14july2016-lowres.pdf) and [UNWTO.org](http://UNWTO.org)

<sup>ii</sup> Suzanne Amaro, Angela Antunes, Carla Henriques. A closer look at Santiago de Compostela's pilgrims through the lens of motivations. *Tourism Management*. September 2017.