




Travel can be a spiritual journey

Editor/author finds 'epiphanies of the heart' where she least expects them

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Regina Brandes finds spiritual renewal in travel and nature. She has wondered why the thousands of sheep on steep mountain slopes in Queenstown, New Zealand, don't stumble.

The Twinsburg, Ohio, retiree describes the Dolomites, mountains in the eastern Alps in Italy with deep, spectacular gorges and huge jagged pinnacles, as "breathtaking."

Seeing them "makes you believe in some kind of divine presence," Brandes said.

"When you see any kind of incredible natural phenomenon, it moves you." Brandes' experience is an example of what author Marlee LeDai calls "spiritual geography."

OPEN TO EXPERIENCES

"You'll find spiritual experiences – epiphanies of the heart – when you are not expecting them. When you are in an unfamiliar place, you are awake and sensitive to everything around you, the smells and the sounds. There is nothing that helps us grow spiritually like travel," LeDai said in a telephone interview from her home in Silvertown, Ore.

LeDai, author of "Go Girl: Finding Adventure Wherever Your Travels Lead," believes any woman – and man, too – can find an enriching experience, whether she travels to India, Japan, Antarctica, out of state on a business trip or to a nearby state park for a weekend retreat.

"Most men want to take part of a place home as a trophy, while women want to observe scenic beauty and reflect upon it," she said.

"Women look to be transformed because they are conscious that the inner landscape is as important as the outer landscape."

LeDai is the author of more than 25 books and is a former editor with the women's magazine *Virtue*. She has lived in several countries, including Denmark, England and Israel, and has traveled extensively since she was in her 20s during the 1970s, finding spiritual adventures along the way.

"As adventurers – unlike sightseers with map and guidebook in hand – we often don't know what we are looking for until we find it," LeDai said.

"Sometimes we arrive back home never having found something special. We may wonder about the purpose of the trip, and yet possess a sense that something even better happened than we hoped. Perhaps we helped heal others. Perhaps we ourselves were healed. Perhaps the trip taught us to laugh more often or to laugh at ourselves."

Travel is a mirror

Travel is a mirror that reveals to you the best things about yourself, said LeDai, who contends most women are far more courageous and resourceful than they think.

No traveling companion?

LeDai said that's no excuse not to go anywhere because "everyone travels alone. No matter who accompanies you, any trip is an interior one because it will affect you as it does no one else."

LeDai tells the stories of women who push fear aside. A Quaker minister took a solo, 5,000-mile motorcycle ride from Oregon to Texas with a plastic statue of St. Michael glued to her Kawasaki named Rosie.

Another woman named Diana refused to get help for her depression until she went trekking in Nepal. One night she awoke at 2 a.m. and went outside where she heard yak bells tinkling in the distance and saw the bright moon and stars. That's when Diana decided to seek treatment.

While she might have eventually come to the same conclusion at home, she felt the spiritual catharsis created by the adventure and solitude of the trip gave her the strength to ask for help.

"I saw how big the world is and how beautiful. Why shouldn't I be happy just to be a part of it?" she told the author.

LeDai also tells the story of a Canadian woman named Katie, who gave up her love of outdoor adventure for married life and five children. But after a relationship ended, she sought a spiritual journey and bought a plane ticket to California. The first night away from home, Katie walked the quarter mile to the beach, saw the sky turn "watermelon, peach and violet" and sat down in the white sand and cried. The natural beauty of the area renewed her, and she returns whenever she can to paint and volunteer her time as an art teacher.

"At 57 years old, you've got to do the things that feed your soul or you will end up being sick. Pure and simple," LeDai quoted Katie as saying.

Brandes has been feeding her soul with travel since the 1970s, when she took her first major trip with a college group visiting numerous European countries.

"I feel women have really come into their own in traveling," the 59-year-old Brandes said.

She has been inspired by the world's diversity of people and cultures. She loved seeing the colorful junks in Hong Kong's harbor, with each family's laundry hung up to dry on the small boats. But in southern China, it saddened her to see young children toting guns and wearing military uniforms that were too big for them.

It was in one of Europe's oldest churches that Brandes felt one of her most emotional travel experiences.

Although it was "long past the time that women were required to cover their heads when entering an American church," according to Brandes, it was at this centuries-old church that she saw so many women of all faiths and ages cover their heads with a scarf or hat before walking through the doors.

"It was a very humbling experience." A trip to a church turned into a moving experience for Karen Stary of Rocky River, Ohio, as well.

In 1998, during a business trip to New York, Stary took a few hours off to visit St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Stary, now chief executive officer of International Nursing Resources Inc., entered the church seeking comfort and inner peace. She was three months pregnant, approaching the time when she had miscarried several times before.

That day, the 2,200-seat church – the largest Gothic-style Catholic cathedral in the United States – was honoring St. Therese.

The saint from France was known for her simple and pure love of nature. It is believed by some that on her death bed, St. Therese said, "After my death, I will let fall a shower of roses" to help those on Earth. Many Catholics now say the Novena Rose Prayer to St. Therese, as did Stary then, praying for the safe birth of her child. If some connection with a rose is made, a prayer is said to be answered.

"I walked out of church and it was so hot and people were everywhere," the 47-year-old Stary said. "I was crossing the street when, all of a sudden, I had an overwhelming smell of roses – truckloads of roses. I started running in every direction. I knew New York street vendors sometimes sell roses, so I wanted to see if any were around.

"But there weren't any. At that moment, I knew my baby would be all right. My son, Alexz, was born two months early, but he was a healthy, wonderful baby."

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