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TRAVEL

An Innersearch Diary

Inspired pilgrim records once-in-a-lifetime mystic odyssey at sea

For eleven full days and 12 nights in August of 2001, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami (publisher of Hinduism Today), six assisting monks and 65 students from six countries cruised Europe's North Sea aboard the MS Amsterdam to ten countries on a mystical travel/study journey entitled "The 2001 Northern European and Russian Innersearch." Wondrous sights seen along the way mixed and mingled with mystic truths discussed afloat a rolling ocean in daily yoga classes with Gurudeva and his swamis. Sheela Venkatakrishnan was there through it all and shares her diary below.

Friday, August 10

Today the Innersearch begins. We are waiting in London at the Georgian Hotel, Gloucester Place, for the coach to take us to the ship. One by one, fellow Innersearchers are showing up. So many faces from so many places. We are all looking forward to meeting Gurudeva, our guide on this journey.

We board the ship. The Crow's Nest perched high on deck nine provides a great view. There is an elegance here. So much attention has been given to each little detail. The staff caters to the needs of every single person on board.

Gurudeva arrives. He is radiant, dazzling and as happy to see us as we are to see him. We gather on deck to learn how to put on the life jackets properly. It's reassuring to be told that the life boats won't sink.

As the sun sets, the nightly "Broadway show" beckons, and we all make our way to the "Queen's Lounge" for the evening performance entitled "The Cats." It is a show like I have never seen before.

Saturday, August 11

I feel light and silent and at peace as I get ready for our first full day on the boat. We go up to watch the sunrise. It is so beautiful. For a second, it seems all upside down. There is no distinction between sky and sea. The clouds seem like waves on the ocean. Then, it all becomes "normal" again.

"Seeing God everywhere is a nice theory," says Gurudeva. "But how do we make it practical? We do this by remembering that the energy is the same in all of us. This same energy comes from Siva. This is a good teaching for Innersearch, because here on this ship you are totally disoriented. Also, all of your external needs have been taken care of temporarily, and you are free to soar within undistracted."

Sunday, August 12

The ship docks at Oslo, Norway, at about seven in the morning. We have our first hatha yoga session. The ladies are in one room and the men are in another.

There are about six hours of classes each day for us on the ship. After morning hatha yoga and meditation, we meet with Gurudeva for about two hours. In the afternoon we have classes with the Acharyas for two more hours.

In the early afternoon we go to a Murugan temple, where a grand reception has been arranged for Gurudeva and all of us. Oslo is such a clean city. We drive for about 15 minutes through the narrow streets. The temple is on the upper floor of a warehouse. On the ground floor are the priest's quarters, a kitchen, a hall and the washrooms. Upstairs is the "home" of the Deity, Siva Subramaniam. Lord Ganesha is to His right— Goddess Durga to His left.

A radio interview has been arranged for Gurudeva. More people come in to listen and soon there is no place to sit. Some have to stand near the wall. Gurudeva talks in a very measured tone into the microphone. "The emphasis should be on ending the war in the home if the war in the world is to end," he explains. Gurudeva later shares with the group a mantra which should solve all possible human conflicts. It is: "I love you, you love me."

The temple congregation has prepared a veritable feast for all of us, with neem flower vadais, jackfruit curry, dal, payasam and more. This day also marks the inception of the "Banana Leaf Club" for those who are eating off banana leaves for the first time in their lives. On the bus ride back to the ship, we drive past the Palace "where the King and Queen live" as the guide puts it. One Innersearcher remarks it's nice to see them living in the same house.

Monday, August 13

Today we are docked at Helsingborg, Sweden. After a full morning of classes and lunch, there is some time to look around the city. So we take off in a shuttle from the ship and go to a place called City Center. The Karnan Castle, of Hamlet fame, is a few yards away from the bus stop. We take a quick walk around it down little cobbled streets. It's colorful, stylish and clean.

Time has flown. We rush to the ship for a class with Acharya Palaniswami and prepare for the evening meal. Dinner is dressy business on the ship. Each evening we wear formal Hindu clothes and make quite "a fashion statement." We stand out among all the other passengers who are wearing black suits and dresses. In our group, women wear colorful silk saris, mostly. The men wear kurta shirt and pants.

Tuesday, August 14

We dock in Warnemunde, Germany, and start the day with a yoga class at 6:00 am, followed by another wonderful session with Gurudeva. For lunch, we go on a picnic with food prepared for us by Gurudeva's devotees in Berlin. These good people drove six hours to bring us this meal, which we enjoy in a park on the banks of a river nearby. Again, it's great Sri Lankan food, including red rice, string hoppers, tomato gravy, aubergine curry and fried chillies. This quiet resort town

looks so peaceful with its little rows of shops and balconies with baskets of flowers, adding to the charm of its cobbled streets and colorful houses.

Wednesday, August 15

We arrive in Ronne, Denmark. A shuttle takes us to the center of town. Red buildings greet us in Town Square. The shops are well stocked and colorfully displayed. Everything is so clean and pretty. We all comment on how fresh the paint on the walls looks even in the small obscure side lanes. We see an elderly gentleman standing on a ladder, painting his walls, and stop to take his picture. Pointing to a young girl riding her bicycle down a lane, he says: "Take her picture. She's prettier than me."

Thursday, August 16

Here we are in Stockholm, Sweden. Instead of our usual morning class with Gurudeva, we depart for a temple at 10:00 am. We must drive 20 minutes through the streets of Stockholm to the Hindu Cultural Maintenance Center, located in a residential community. A group of Tamil families have gathered together awaiting Gurudeva, with a traditional welcome of lamps and coconuts. It is so touching to witness their devotion.

Friday, August 17

Now we are in Helsinki, Finland. We lose an hour today. In the morning we have a wonderful session with Gurudeva. He talks about the subconscious and superconscious states of mind, as well as dreams, visions and positive thoughts.

We have some time. A handful of us decide to explore. We set out walking towards the train station, which is reputed to be a beautiful building. It is. High ceilings and tall pillars enclose the foyer. Glittering shops with every conceivable commodity line the corridors. Finally, we take the subway a few stations further down.

The Market Square is empty. The business of the day is done. On the map, it seems like the walk back to the ship should take about 20 minutes. But, after 20 minutes, we are still walking, and the ship is nowhere in sight. Are we lost? We hail a cab. A lady driver takes one look at a worried fellow Innersearcher and says, "Don't worry. I will take you to your ship. Always depend on a woman to bring you home." Hungry, thirsty and hot, we run on board just in time for the evening events.

Saturday August, 18

Russia, here we come. St. Petersburg welcomes us this morning. We drive around for a while taking photographs, and we tour a place called

the Hermitage, so named because Katherine, wife of Peter the Great, chose to live a life of solitude here. Such high ceilings are everywhere— with more long corridors, elaborate and ornate walls and works of art on display. It is beautiful. Each room could take hours of exploring time. There was just so much to see.

That evening we go to the ballet at the Hermitage Theatre. Originally designed and constructed to stage the plays that Katherine wrote for a private audience, it is a cozy room, seating about 300 people in semi-circular rows. Words fall short when trying to describe the beauty of this ballet performance. The dancers seem to float in space. It seems they are using their arms and legs to spell out words in another language. Are they sending us a message?

Sunday August, 19

This is our second day in St. Petersburg. Thankfully, we get to start the day with Gurudeva's class. It is on "Penance."

While shopping we stop at a gallery. The shelves are covered with all kinds of handicrafts made of various materials. It is a colorful sight. A malachite elephant with a raised trunk calls out to me and comes home with us. One cart I am attracted to is owned by a very pleasant 32-year-old lady, who looks about 16. She blushes when I tell her that her English is good. She explains how cities around Moscow are designed for the protection of Moscow and listed the six cities that stood in a circle around the city, forming the "Golden Ring of Russia." From her I buy a "babushka doll" to provide company for my green elephant.

Monday, August 20

We dock for half a day at Tallinn, Estonia, today. It is time to have our picture taken. We go down and out for the Innersearch 2001 "family photograph" in front of the MS Amsterdam. Acharya Palaniswami brings the big banner with our Innersearch name on it. It is difficult to hold the banner up in the forceful wind.

After classes, a shuttle takes us into the city of Tallinn. We run into an Indian man who works in a restaurant close by. He converses with me in Hindi, telling me there are neither temples nor mosques here—and only a few churches.

We reach Old Town. There is a very different scene here. It's right out of some medieval story. Stone walled buildings, curved streets, no vehicles. Charming.

We must now return to the ship and pack our suitcases for Copenhagen. Our trip is officially over. It seems like only yesterday when we first arrived on board. Well, whatever may have happened to our bodies, we have each gotten

lighter inside, the only place it really matters.

Life after Innersearch

Wednesday, August 22

Today, we are heading toward the Sri Ganesha Temple in Herning, Denmark, which is a four-hour drive from Copenhagen. The driver is doubling as tour guide, which we notice is a difficult thing for him to do as he negotiates traffic.

Nagaswaram and tavil (South Indian temple horn and drum) greet us as we arrive. There is a huge hall, with a shrine for Ganesha in the center. Murugan, Shiva and Amman are the other deities to the sides. The crowd is the largest we have seen so far.

We are arriving just in time to witness the

ceremonial parading of the temple's main Ganesha deity in its customary circumambulation of the temple during Ganesha Chaturthi celebrations. Many members of our group are participating in this event by helping to pull the cart.

Thursday, August 23

The bus comes and we all pile in, eager to see the Abirami Amman Temple we have heard so much about in Brande, Denmark. This is the unique temple founded by and named after Sri Abirami Upasagi—affectionately known as "Amma"—a very devotional and mystical woman who is famous for going into trance and channeling the Goddess Amman. It takes about 15 minutes to get there. The little stalls on either side of the entrance remind me of the temples back in the villages of India. Tamil songs stream through the loud speakers.

After walking around the temple we come full circle to the front of the main shrine. The same question is on everyone's mind, "Where is Amma?" Soon, she appears and leads us out to the site where the new temple is to be constructed. Little girls spread green velvet at her feet as she walks. At the site, Amma performs a short ceremony and sprinkles the blessed water around the construction area.

Later, back inside the temple, I go close to the main shrine and sit down. Amma comes in. She looks down at me and says in Tamil, "Are you going back to the hotel after lunch? Don't go. Stay here." Turning to the Amman Deity, she continues, "Once you come here, you do not want to leave." So, after lunch I stay on, preparing flowers and singing devotional songs.

Toward evening the temple bells start ringing and Amma comes in to perform a preliminary ceremony. Seconds before she starts, the Innersearchers arrive. Soon, the curtain is pulled back and the Abirami Amman Deity shines forth brilliantly. She's all dressed up and looks so

beautiful.

Now Gurudeva arrives. He is given a red-carpet welcome, literally. Little girls lay red velvet before him as he walks. A padapuja (a special guru ceremony) is performed for him before he makes his way to the new temple site and takes his seat across from Amma to participate in the evening's main events which now begin.

During Amma's earlier afternoon ceremony, I had perceived a strong image of my friend Geetha from Chennai in South India who has been suffering with a serious back problem for a long time. I think to myself, "Am I to ask Amma for something for Geetha?" I look around. Amma is not there. I send a prayer, "Please let Geetha get what she needs." A couple of weeks after the Innersearch when I am back in Chennai and chatting with Geetha, she says, "We went to an astrologer today. He said, 'You have a lot of Amman Arul. Do you do any Devi Puja?'" Amma works in mysterious ways.

The next day we leave Brande and go to Copenhagen to fly to Brussels. From there we take the long flight back to California. Writing this diary has put me in the "now." I cannot recall even an instant when I was focussed on anything other than what was happening in the moment. This Innersearch was a great success, and plans are already in the making for another one next year.

Author Sheela Venkata-Krishnan, 39, born in Chennai, India, has Master's degrees in Physics and Philosophy and is a practitioner of Reiki healing. Today, she makes her home in California with husband Narayanan, Senior Manager of an India-based software company.