

Girnarji

Photo courtesy: Sorab Irani

MT. GIRNAR IN GUJARAT IS ONE OF THE HOLIEST PLACES OF PILGRIMAGE FOR JAINS AND FOR HINDU ASCETICS WISHING TO PAY HOMAGE TO DATTATREYA, THE GREAT GURU, WORSHIPPED HERE AS THE FORMLESS OR UNCLAD ASCETIC. HERE IS AN ACCOUNT OF A TRANSFORMATIVE PILGRIMAGE UP ITS PERILOUS HEIGHTS

I had repeated dreams of lions and the place was Girnar. The Gir forest is home of the Asiatic lion, and now its last refuge. In one such dream, my guru gave me mystical initiation to become a sadhu in a cave up the mountain, while the lions roamed outside. In another dream, the lions wandered onto a backyard porch on which nestled my workstation, and two of them came and sat on either side of my PC! I was afraid for all the dogs that were roaming around me, in case the lions hurt them. There was a palpable sense of urgency to this dream.

I understood the hukum or command that the dreams implied, unable to put it off any longer. It was barely a week away from Guru Purnima. I made enquiries and learnt that the rains were yet to set in at Junagadh, where Girnar is located. So I set off on an impulse with the barest of preparations, on the night train from Mumbai to Rajkot. From there it was just a couple of hours on the bus to the town of Junagadh, and on to the many dharamshalas offering inexpensive lodgings at the base of Girnar.

Mount Girnar is one of the holiest of the holies for Hindu ascetics and

Jains. There is a famous akhada of sadhus at its base. Many sadhaks and advanced souls have laid their lives to rest on the mountain, most notably, the Jain tirthankar Neminath, adding to its sanctity. It is home to the beautiful Jain temple complex on a small plateau, followed by the Amba Mata temple on one of the tunks (peak). Then there are steps rising and descending to the Gorakhnath shrine. There is also a spot venerated as the place of the Pir, sacred to Muslims. Girnar is said to have a total of 10,000 stone steps leading to its top!

Along the last leg of the climb is the Kamandalu Kund ashram, with steps descending to a ledge-like plateau on which it is located. It houses Dattatreya's akhand dhuni, the sacred fire of the ascetic. The ashram is home to young sadhus from different regions of India.

According to legend, there was a major drought in the region, and the great guru is said to have hit his kaman-dalu (brass water canister) on a spot in the rocks, from where emerged a perennial spring of freshwater, to quench the thirst of pilgrims.

Then, on the last peak, is the famous Dattatreya shrine, open to the elements, bearing his footprints clearly etched in



the rock. He is said to have engaged in rigorous tapascharya at the spot for 12,000 years.

A gruelling climb

I set off on the climb at around 5 a.m. as advised by the dharamshala official, armed with a sturdy staff to assist me on the steep stairs. He instructed me to rest awhile at the ashram close to the summit, before undertaking the last bit of arduous climb to the top of the mountain, to visit the shrine of the primordial guru. The first two hundred steps of the ascent along the wooded foothills seemed to be the most exacting. Then, as the skies began to lighten, the climb assumed a rhythm of its own, quite enjoyable.

It was a strange experience to be walking alone for hours on end without a shelter in sight. I had left far behind the endless forested foothills at the base, rising steadily above the flat-top Saurashtra landscape!

After visiting the temples and shrines on the way, I made my weary way down a short descent to rest and make inquiries at the Kamandalu Kund ashram described earlier. It was already past 1 p.m. It was a great relief to be assured by the young sadhu in charge of the ashram that on my way down, I could rest there that night instead of having to undertake the steep descent the same day! I knew well by then that I was simply incapable of it.

The boys told me with joy that they felt as though their mother had come visiting, and insisted that I should first eat lunch and rest a bit, before leaving for the holy shrine located at the very top. It was cool and foggy up there, but rains hadn't yet begun in Gujarat.

Then, just as I climbed up the last and final step, to cross the threshold of the open sanctum at the top, huge drops of rain and then sheets of it started pouring,

giving me a thorough drenching. The Dattatreya shrine itself is not even knee-high, just like our little mandirs at home, so that at that great height, you are completely exposed to the elements.

Abhishek, a watery initiation

I couldn't see a thing through the wall of fog and rain! It was water, water everywhere, and the young pujari shouted, asking me to sit down, instead of standing there laughing up at the sky! He thought I'd be blown off the mountain top by the strong winds. I plonked down besides him, little realising that there was a flooded pond of chilled water on the floor. The water just seeped through the clothes right up to my waist to give me such a shock that I let out an involuntary scream. It was a completely mad moment!

The relief of having reached the top and the amazing abhishek happening at the exact psychological moment simply chased away all concerns of womanly decorum or about catching a cold. In that moment I was just a sadhu, sans worry about what I'd do without dry clothes until I got back to my secure dharmashala room at the base the following day!

I laughed and laughed with pure joy, flinging my head up to the rain and the sky, which was a tremendous purging of all my life's concerns. The pujari also started to laugh, touched with the infectious laughter, and we had a long chat through the lashing rain about Girnarji

and the guru force and all! It was so crazy to see all the notes offered to the shrine that day floating in a shallow pan filled to the brim with rainwater! And as I made my offering, he insisted that I place it right there in the water.

By then of course there was Girnarji in my heart and in my soul, and later when I thought about it, there was nothing to ask for or even to pray about at the end of the mercilessly long trek!

That kind of joy happens just once in a lifetime, I think. There were no thoughts, no worries, nothing... just the wind, the rain, the sky, the scrupulously clean marble floor beneath my feet, all pure... and a fountain of laughter bubbling out from the depths of my being, face raised to the sky.

It is just not possible to share what I felt in its entirety, carefree, degendered, just a part of existence, surreal and wet, facing God all alone with so much happiness. A cleansing, a new birth, a release... There was no view from up there, mind you, just the fog and the rain, so you could see a few steps ahead at a time! And it was so safe. Or rather, I was without a trace of fear, a being completely in control of my environment, destiny, purpose; a gentle being of power, self-containment and joy... if even for just that entire hour. But that feeling comes back whenever I think of it, and it will stay with me forever.

On returning to the ashram, a solicitous young man gave me dry and clean saffron robes to change into for the night in my room, but there was no way that I could dry my clothes through the steadily increasing downpour that resembled a cloudburst!

As I later discovered, many of the sadhus were highly qualified engineers. Truly, there was such perfect plumbing in the cave ashram, that the rains driven by insane high velocity



Jain temple complex

Photo courtesy: Norman Koren

winds could not make ingress into the ashram precincts, even as the water rushed down the steep stairs in a torrent. Lord Dattatreya displayed great discernment in his choice of sadhus for Girnar, I thought to myself.

On my return to the base of the mountain, I had taken in the fog, wind, rain, rocks and the skies so completely, it was like being a part of the landscape, as the natural meditative state continued undisturbed.

The downpour returned many times to soak me, just as the swirling wind had dried the clothes I was wearing. I can't tell you of who I met on the way down, by way of a darshan, but there were many important spiritual revelations during the journey that have changed my consciousness forever.

And a new consciousness

I think this strange episode in my life was in the manner of meeting self. It brought

to me a sharp awareness of the extent to which I enjoy my own company. Through it all, there began the emergence of a new detached consciousness, with



Mount Girnar

greater understanding of how my everyday actions influence the karmic record.

Reflecting on that experience of ecstasy, I think happiness is not the absence of pain; rather, it is the ability to go to the centre of pain... over a period of time, until it is gradually possible to diminish and dilute the attachments that are at the roots of the pain. People

we interact with remain the same, a necessary part of our sharing, but we are not, because it is a conscious, self-willed sharing, of free choice rather than bondage. It matters to see people as reflections of our own self, our mistakes, indiscretions, bad judgments, and also the good within ourselves. Until negativities being to loosen their hold over us, and a little step at a time, we learn to laugh at the absurdities of life, even through genuine pain and grief. There is always that thumb-high part of our integral consciousness that stays pure and untouched, always, the core that creates laughter, release and liberation. Yes, I've been extremely happy through most of my life, because of that being who has been the orchestrator of my life's path, self-chosen, self-directed for the major part. I think I have lived life as openly as possible under the circumstances, like the unclad man of the skies —Girnarji! ☯

Photo courtesy: Norman Koren