

magical Mystery Tour

Suzan Crane gets drenched with local colour during the festival of Holi in a sacred town where the Beatles once stayed.

It's 6am and silver mist veils the village. The holy Ganges River flows serenely below our feet, the suspension bridge swaying slightly under the weight of our packs, while monkeys hang from the rafters. It is still and silent. Soon the chiming of bells and the chanting of devotees will float through the small town of Rishikesh in Uttaranchal. Ancient temples, well-used yoga halls and modern guesthouses melt into the landscape of one of India's great pilgrimage centres. By 8am, sadhus, sanyasins, spiritual seekers and plain old tourists amble leisurely alongside the sandy banks of the mythic river where schools of huge fish are fed offerings of puffed rice.

Shops and restaurants open for business and begging babas encamped at the foot of the Laxman Jhula Bridge intone "Hari Aum" with open palms inviting "donations" of baksheesh. Bearded Western men and women wearing *kutas* or *salwaar kameez* scurry to yoga and meditation classes. Hawkers in the entrance square to the bridge sell peacock feather fans, maps, cheap cameras. When the sun begins to thaw the early morning chill, tourists and Indians alike take a dip in the sacred water. At sunset, *pujas* will be performed on the ghats of Ram Jhula and a further calm will descend upon an already tranquil village.

It's a typical day in Rishikesh...

Reputed as the "yoga capital of the world," the village, surrounded on three sides by Himalayan ranges, is also known as a celestial abode from where pilgrims launch arduous journeys to such mystical outposts of the highlands like Badrinath and Kedarnath. According to legend, Rishikesh derived its name when God, under the moniker "Hrishikesh," appeared while Raibhya Rishi was doing hard penance in the area. It is also believed to be the site where Vishnu vanquished the demon Madhu and where Bharata, brother of Lord Rama, subjected himself to severe penance.

After the Bharata Temple was constructed, the town grew up around it.

Rishikesh gained further fame – or infamy – in the 60s when the Beatles studied here with their guru, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Meditating and embracing Eastern philosophy, the pioneering artists

created some of their most mystical music in the now abandoned ashram that sits majestically at the tip of Ram Jhula. Dubbed "The Beatles Ashram," the rambling remains of a not-so-distant past is now over-run by assertive monkeys who have laid claim to the crumbling buildings and round stone huts with river views – presumably where the band stayed – and tangles of trees that strangle the once orderly pathways through the sprawling estate.

It's barely 8:30am on March 15 and a booming bass and screaming vocals jolt us awake, as though loud speakers were hidden beneath our pillows. The town is jumping and awash in lavish colours. Gangs of kids yell, laugh, sing and prowl the streets looking for victims to barrage with coloured powder. The festival of Holi is in progress, after beginning the previous night with symbolic bonfires throughout the village. Across the nation, Indians are splattered with hues of green, pink, red, yellow and blue with women – and this is atypical – playing an almost equal part in the melee. There is not a white or brown face to be seen. Today everyone is a member of the rainbow race. Even cows and dogs are not spared.

This is my third consecutive Holi festival. The first, experienced in Varkala, Kerala, was mild and fleeting as celebrants coyly asked permission before dousing me with powder. Last year in Pushkar, another of India's most holy cities, the scene was quite different as uncharacteristically drunk Indians in this normally dry village amassed in the town centre. They tore the blouses off foreign women, grabbed their asses (mine included), and punched a few foreign men. I was physically detained by several Indian men while others poured liquefied colours over my head, temporarily blinding me and less temporarily turning my ears pink and my hair green. Distorted techno music blasted from massive public speakers and the small square was throbbing with human flesh.

Here in Rishikesh, where alcohol is also forbidden, a few pathetic skirmishes erupted but the vibe was less hostile. By 3pm Holi was over and tonight I'm back at my laptop, the yelping of a few hungry dogs the only sounds to be heard.