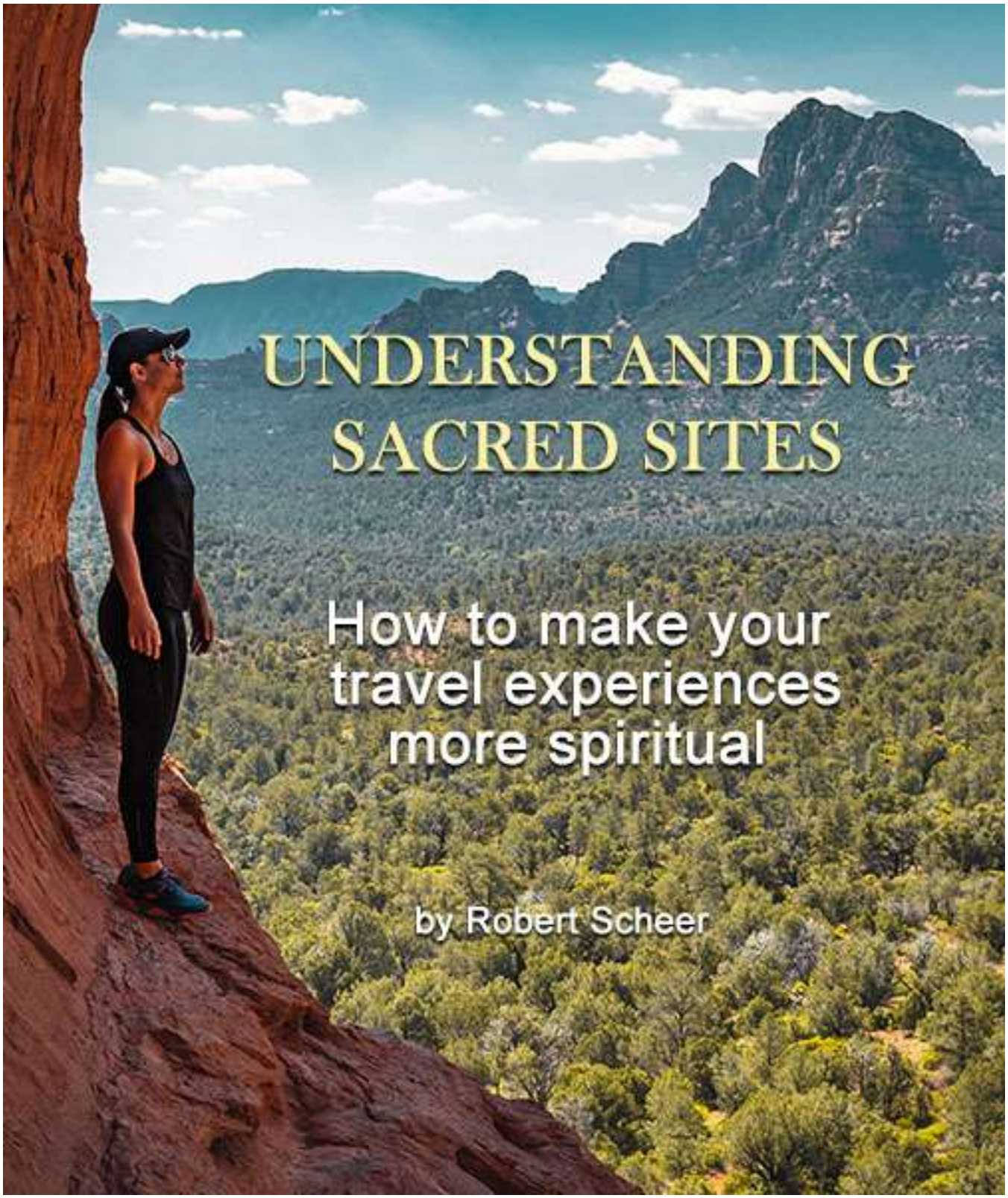
UNDERSTANDING
SACRED SITES
How to make your
travel experiences
more spiritual
by Robert Scheer

Understanding Sacred Sites

How to make your travel experiences more spiritual

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“Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like, but the spirit of place is a great reality.”
- D. H. Lawrence

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Introduction

Stonehenge, Machu Picchu, The Great Pyramids, Uluru, Glastonbury, Sedona, Newgrange, Mount Kailash, Callanish, Tiahuanaco, Mount Shasta, Lake Titicaca, the Ganges River…

These are a few of the best-known sacred places on our planet, but there are thousands more – stone circles, holy wells, sacred groves, mountain tops, pyramids, caves, shrines, megaliths, ancient pilgrimage and vision quest sites. Mainstream scientists may scoff at suggestions that old stones can deliver messages from the spirit world, or that holy well water can cure illnesses, but the concept of powerful places has been known to many cultures for thousands of years.

When I started doing research in the mid 1990s, I was amazed to discover how many prophecies, visions, inspirations and other important messages pilgrims have received at the sacred places of Mother Earth. By learning more about sacred sites, and then actually taking a spiritual journey, you too will discover more about this magical planet, and – at the same time – learn more about yourself.

History

Since the earliest times, people have been attracted to certain places that felt more "special" than others. The indigenous people of North America have words that describe them. In the Hopi tradition, special nodes of concentrated vitality are the "spots on the fawn." They are centers of light, power, creativity and healing.[1] The Salish of the Pacific Northwest speak of *skalalatude*, "a sacred state of mind where magic and beauty are everywhere."[2]

The oldest poem we know, The Epic of Gilgamesh, written in ancient Mesopotamia circa 2100 BC, has a scene set in a sacred forest of cedar trees.[3]

In ancient Greece about 3,400 years ago, Pliny the Elder was asked to find the best site for building a shrine to honor Gaia, the Earth goddess. He chose Delphi on the slopes of Mount Parnassus because he believed it was a powerful place, because an abundance of the mysterious Earth force called *plenum* bubbled up from the ground there.[4]

In the Chinese tradition there is a similar life force called *chi*. Sufis call it *baraka* and Hindus know it as *prana*.

The first Christian pilgrim was Helena, mother of the emperor of Constantine, who toured the holy land in 326 AD and identified (not necessarily accurately) many of the sites associated with Jesus.

In Medieval times, the tradition of Christian pilgrimages really began to take hold. Jerusalem was the primary goal, but pilgrims who couldn't manage the long voyage could still do penance or seek cures by visiting shrines devoted to the various saints. Canterbury Cathedral, dedicated to Saint Thomas, was England's most popular pilgrimage site, as described in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, written in the 14th century. In Spain, Santiago de Compostela, said to contain the bones of Jesus' disciple St. James, was second in popularity only to Rome as Europe's most-visited pilgrimage destination during the Middle Ages.

Why Are Some Places More Special Than Others?

One of the foremost experts on sacred sites is Martin Gray. An anthropologist and National Geographic photographer, Martin spent thirty-five years studying and photographing 1,500 sacred sites in more than 150 countries, traveling frequently by bicycle. He is the author of *Sacred Earth, Places of Peace and Power*, and his website is www.SacredSites.com. Martin lives in Sedona, where I met him in 1998. He believes Earth herself is a living being who speaks to us at sacred places. During his pilgrimages, he gained the ability to receive direct communications with a spirit of the Earth. "In ancient times," he said, "many cultures knew it was possible to communicate with living, non-human entities, of which the Earth is the oldest and wisest."

In his *Sacred Earth* book, Martin Gray lists 29 categories of sacred places.[5] They are are…

- Sacred mountains, such as Olympus, Fuji, Ararat and Kailash
- Human-built sacred mountains: the Giza Great Pyramid, Silbury Hill, Cahokia
- Sacred bodies of water: Ganges River, Lake Titicaca, Pushkar Lake
- Sacred islands: Iona, Lindisfarne, Delos
- Healing springs: Asklepions, Milk River, Bath
- Healing and power stones: Blarney, Men-an-tol
- Sacred trees and forest groves: Glastonbury, Anuradhapura, Bodh Gaya
- Places of ancient mythological importance: Vrindavan, Kachina Peak
- Ancient ceremonies sites: Machu Picchu, Palenque, Karnack
- Ancient astronomical observatories: Monte Alban, Stonehenge, Carnac
- Human-erected solitary standing stones: the menhirs of Brittany
- Megalithic chambered mounds: Newgrange, Gavrinis
- Labyrinth sites: Knossos, Glastonbury Tor
- Places with massive landscape carvings: Cerna Abbas, Nazca Lines
- Regions delineated by sacred geography: Kii peninsula, Languedoc
- Oracular caves, mountains and sites: Delphi, Mt. Sinai, Siwa, Hebron
- Male deity/god shrines/yang sites: Shiva jyotir lingams, Apollonian temples
- Female deity/goddess shrines/yin sites: Shakti Pitha, Diana temples
- Birthplaces of saints: Kushinager, Tiruvanamalai
- Sites where relics of saints and martyrs were/are kept: Canterbury, Mt. Athos
- Places with enigmatic fertility legends and/or images: Cerne Abbas, Sayil
- Places with miracle-working icons: Sabarimala, Tinos Island, Izamal
- Places chosen by animals or birds: Durham, Talpa
- Places chosen by geomantic divinatory methods: Koya San, Chinese *feng shui* sites
- Unique natural features: geysers, volcanoes, sink holes
- Ancient esoteric schools: Giza, Chartres, Uxmal, Ephesus
- Ancient monasteries: Lhasa, Externsteine, Milhintale, Ellora
- Places where dragons were seen or slain: St. Michael's Mount, Delphi
- Places of Marian apparitions: Lourdes, Fatima, Zaragoza, Knock

Each site has unique spirit. The ancient Greeks called it *genus loci*, the spirit of a place. Different sites have different energies. This is a topic I'll delve into at greater length later on, but for the moment, let's just focus on two elements – the basic, natural energy of a place, and other forces that are added on.

The power of most sacred places was initially recognized by shamans or other sensitive people, who realized that a particular site was blessed by an unusually high concentration of natural energy. Such energy can be caused by underground mineral deposits, underground water, reflected energy from surrounding areas, a combination these factors, and other little-understood factors. Through usage by humans or animals, places further absorb different kinds of energy.

Take Stonehenge, for example. Its builders chose the site because of the special energy they felt it possessed. That energy was enhanced and focused when stones were added – sarsen stones from nearby, plus so-called bluestones, quarried in the Preseli Hills of Pembrokeshire, Wales. Further energy has come about because of human input. Millions of visitors over millennia have come to Stonehenge and done ceremonies, prayed, meditated, and otherwise focused their energies on the stones. Over the centuries the stones absorbed the human input and became further energized.

The Amazing Sedona Vortexes

Another powerhouse of transformational energy is Sedona. I have made two pilgrimages to the land of the red rocks, a few hours drive north of Phoenix, and I was amazed by how tangible the energy of the Sedona vortexes actually was.

In his book *Star Temples in the Stones*, Raymond Mardyks says that the rock formations in Sedona are all aligned with matching stars or constellations. Snoopy Rock and Twin Butte, for example, are aligned with Sirius, the dog star and Gemini, the twins. Mardyks believes Sedona is one of many sacred sites on the Earth that are "connected with the stars and other dimensions of time and space. When approached

with the proper motivation and preparation, many of these sites offer the opportunity to experience very expanded levels of consciousness."

A very different explanation was told to me by Marty Wolf of Earth Wisdom tours. He said Sedona's red sandstone rocks get their color from a high concentration of iron, a metal that stores magnetic energy. Sandstone itself is rich in quartz, the mineral from which computer chips are made. Added to this high concentration of geological energy is the fact that Sedona was settled by four aboriginal groups who came from the four sacred directions: Athabascans from the North, Apache from the East, the ancestors of the Hopi from the South, and Yavapai from the West.

Bernyce Barlow, author of *Sacred Sites of the West*, said that underground rivers, geological cracks, fissures and fault lines, along with high amounts of iron and magnesium in the soil, give Sedona "a personality all its own." The vortexes "interact with so many other kinds of earth energies that the vortex experience can become a mental barbell workout." Barlow wrote, "before the Spanish arrived…pilgrimages were made to Sedona from as far north as Canada and as far south as Central America. The tremendous energies of the canyons were renowned…No one lived in the canyons; that would be sacrilege. They were reserved as a holy place for spiritual growth and knowledge."[6]

Power of Sites to Influence Dreams and Visions

There are places that seem to have the power to shape the content of dreams. There is a hot springs spa in West Texas where numerous people have had similar vivid dreams. The owner of a resort located at the springs, Jewell Babb, reported that many of her guests told her they all dreamed about nearly naked Native Americans and bands of wild horses.[7]

Near the Village of Long Compton in Oxfordshire, U.K. three reliable witnesses reported seeing strange phenomena on the same stretch of road that was being widened. First, a surveyor thought he saw a car with two passengers in it appear and then disappear. Not long afterwards, a scientist had a vision of a large dog or wolf-like creature with grey fur that materialized for a moment. A few months later, a third worker on the project reportedly witnessed a on old-fashioned, horse-drawn gypsy caravan appear and then vanish on the road.[8] Could they all have experienced time-shifts, and seen visions from earlier times? This area of road is very close to the Rollright Stones, a complex of three Neolithic and Bronze Age megalithic monuments where fertility rites were practiced in the 18th and 19th centuries, and modern pagan ceremonies are held there now.

One man who set out to understand the power of sacred places is Paul Devereux. In 1997 Devereux helped organize the Dragon Project, a group of researchers who used scientific diagnostic tools to study megalithic sites in the British Isles. In his book *Places of Power: Secret Energies at Ancient Sites: A Guide to Observed or Measured Phenomena* Devereux describes finding abnormally high radiation levels in several curious stone tunnels known as fogous (FOO-goos) in the southwest of England. Devereux says this radiation is what sends some visitors into non-ordinary mental states. It is not unusual for people who go into fogous to experience headaches, dizziness, messages from spirit guides or a distorted sense of space. One artist sketching inside Carn Euny fogou suddenly became aware she

was being watched by an Iron-age woman. A visitor who tried to enter Boleigh fogou said she found her path blocked by boulders which do not exist.[9]

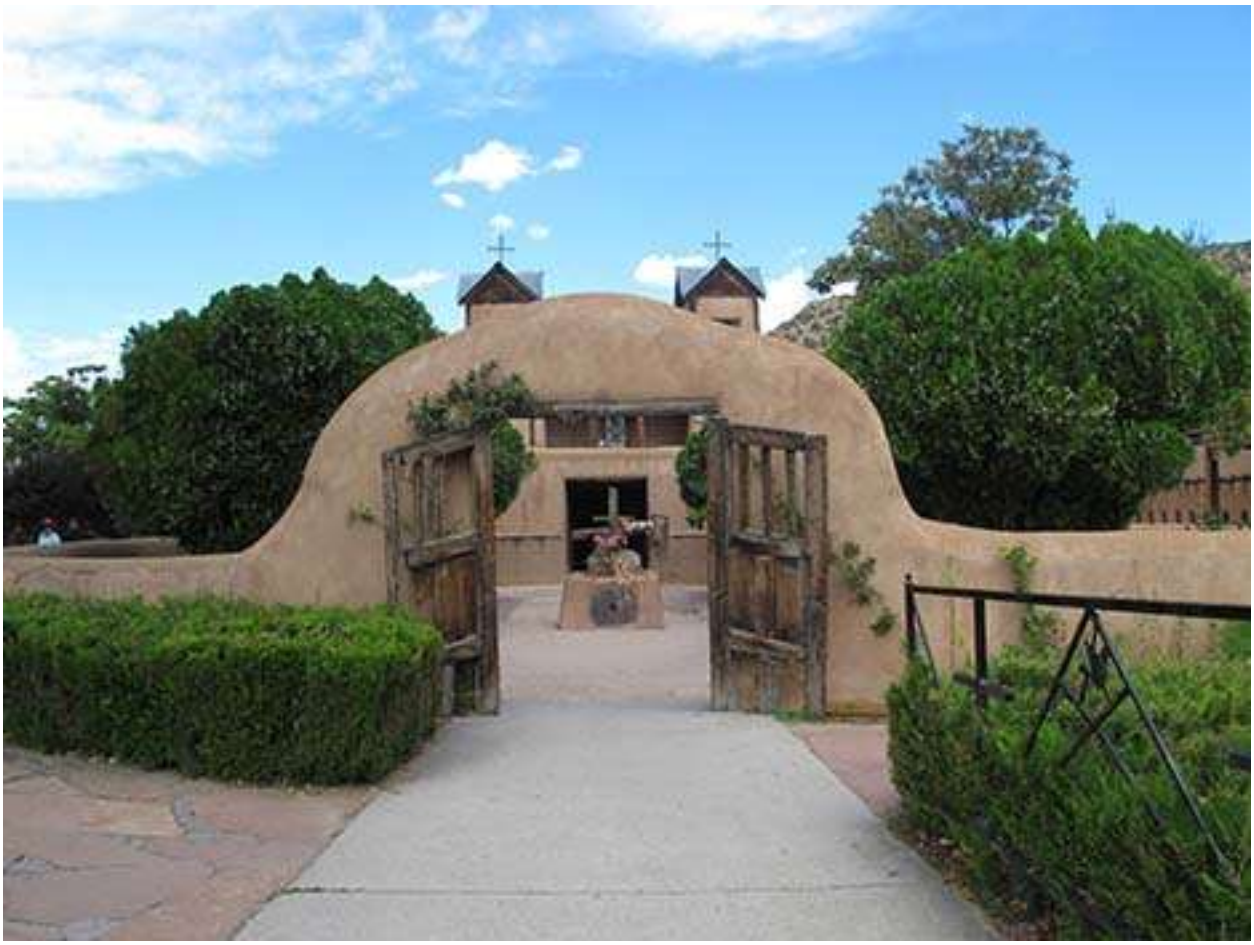
In the Preseli hills of Wales, where the bluestones of Stonehenge were quarried, is a mountain-top site called Carn Ingli, where Devereux took compass measurements. He discovered wild deviations in the magnetic field – in one spot his compass needle pointed due south. Devereux reported these observations to a colleague, who replied that he had gone to Carn Ingli with two friends, and all of them witnessed a vivid rainbow in the sky overhead – during the dark of night![10] Obviously there are more mysteries at sacred places than can be understood by taking readings with a compass or geiger counter.

The Healing Power of Sacred Places

To the modern, rational mind, the idea of miraculous cures from holy wells sounds, at best, illogical. But with so many people claiming to have been healed by water, it's narrow-minded to ignore the evidence.

The late Henry Dorst was a *Feng Shui* practitioner who used water energized at an energy vortex to make homes and offices healthier to live and work in. The power site is on Mount Baker in northwest Washington, near the British Columbia border. "I took a bottle of the water to a conference in Oregon I was speaking at," Henry told me. "When some of the other speakers were tired, I gave them some water and told them to put a few drops on their forehead and between their eyes. They instantly felt refreshed and had more energy."

The most famous healing water is probably at Lourdes in France, where over 2,500 healings have been claimed since 1858, with 65 of them recognized by the Roman Catholic church as "official miracles." But there are literally hundreds more holy wells in Europe credited with miraculous cures. There is a sacred fountain in the Breton town of Saint-Nicolas-des-Eaux where, it is said, if you dip a child in the water or soak its clothing, the child will be strong and safe from illnesses. In Nordenau, Germany, a reporter for the newspaper *Bild* investigated the spring water in an abandoned mine where pilgrims were going to be cured. After drinking some of the water himself, Guido Brandenburg reported that his fingertips were vibrating. He said "I felt as if an electric current flowed through me."



Americans don't have to go overseas to find places known for miraculous healing. In Chimayó, New Mexico there is an adobe chapel, El Santuario de Chimayó, where 2,000 believers congregate each Good Friday, and 300,000 pilgrims come every year. In a small room at the back of the chapel, known as the "Room of Miracles," is a hole in the floor through which people scoop out sand, said to have curative properties. The walls of the room are lined with hundreds of letters and pictures from visitors thankful for the healing they say they received.

There are healing waters in North America as well. Manitou Lake in Watrous, Saskatchewan is said to have cured three Cree men of smallpox in the early 1800s. Today there is a luxury resort hotel and health spa on Manitou Lake, where guests enjoy the mineral-rich waters. It is sometimes referred to as "Canada's Dead Sea."

When Spanish explorers began visiting the Caribbean islands in the 15th century, they heard legends of a Fountain of Youth, for which Ponce de Leon went searching. Martin Gray believes he found the "fountain," but the fabled waters were actually only a metaphor for a therapeutic mineral or thermal spring. In an era when knowledge of medicine was limited and even an infected cut could be fatal, Gray says, a spring that could heal wounds and cure disease might be seen as a magical fountain that could prolong life. Gray heard about a slave in Jamaica in 1609 who was severely beaten by a cruel master. The slave escaped into the jungle, where he found and bathed in a hot mineral spring. A few days later, he returned to the plantation with his wounds healed. The amazed owner told the slave he would not be

punished for running away if he revealed the location of the spring that healed him. Since that time, Bath Hot Springs in Jamaica has been a popular attraction.

When Gray visited Bath Hot Springs, he found an undeveloped springs where hot water gushes out of a rock cliff in the jungle a few hundred yards away from the hotel's pools. "It is very soothing to let the scalding water beat down on your head and back," Gray said. "When the heat begins to make you a bit dizzy you merely step a few feet away and slip into the cold mountain stream flowing from the foothills of nearby Blue Mountain." Gray spent several hours moving back and forth between the hot and cold waters, and he felt that a kind of terrestrial energy from the site was stimulating, strengthening and balancing the energy of his own body with therapeutic results, similar to the effects of Chinese acupuncture and Indian ayurvedic medicine. In essence, Earth energy can help the human body to heal itself.[11]

It's not the water in wells and springs that is beneficial, but the energy the water contains. Just as water can absorb heat and cold, Henry Dorst's work has shown that water can absorb and store energy from power vortexes. Western science may not yet acknowledge this energy, but other cultures have known it for thousands of years. Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, talked 2,000 years ago about nature having a healing force he named *Vis Medicatrix Naturae*. How long will it take for our scientific and medical establishments to admit that the answers to some of their most-asked questions may not be found in sterile laboratories but from ancient, moss-covered wells and mountain streams?

Which Places are the Most Powerful?

When people find out I'm a travel writer who focuses on pilgrimages to places of power, they often ask me, "What's the most powerful place on Earth?" Because there are more than 1,000 major power centers around the planet, it's hard to find anyone truly qualified to answer that question, but I have talked with someone who I believe has inside information.

When I was in Peru in June, 1998, I had the rare opportunity of meeting Anton Ponce de Leon Paiva. Anton is a native Peruvian who was taken blindfolded to a hidden village in the Andes and taught the true sacred history of not only the Incas but of all the Americas. Anton is the author of *The Wisdom of the Ancient One* and *In Search of the Wise One*. Shirley MacLaine wrote about Anton's encounters with ETs and UFOs in *Out on a Limb*. Anton told me that he was informed by Inca elders that the three most powerful places on Earth are Lake Titicaca, Glastonbury, and Mount Kailash. He said that great changes will be happening around the world, when the energy vortexes at Lake Titicaca, Mount Kailash and Glastonbury would become even more powerful.

Lake Titicaca

Lake Titicaca, on the borders of Peru and Bolivia, is where Inca legends say life on Earth was first created by Viracocha. In the center of the lake is the Island of the Sun, with an ancient, sacred temple. Nearby is Sillustani, where mysterious burial towers called chulpas were once plated with gold and held the remains of Inca royalty.

A few miles away is Aramu Muru's Portal, a doorway-shaped niche in a stone outcropping, located in a region known as the Valley of the Spirits. I visited there in 1998 as part of a small group tour organized by Body Mind Spirit Journeys. We were some of the first foreign visitors to explore the site, and we were fortunate to be guided by the Aymara Incan native who discovered it, Jorge Louis Delgado.

The local villagers who walked with us refused to come close to the portal. Perhaps they were influenced by legends that tell of people disappearing through the solid rock.

One by one, the members of my group sat or kneeled in the portal. Although I didn't have an other-worldly experience there, one of the women in my group told me she experienced a shift in consciousness as she was kneeling in the portal. She says she saw a light filling her inner vision and then felt herself "entering and experiencing the realms of total Unconditional Love." She heard a voice telling her about a past life experience, and that her life's work was to help others open the doorway of their hearts, which is the pathway to God. She was utterly overwhelmed by her vision.

Ancient Mount Kailash

Mount Kailash is the oldest pilgrimage site on Earth. In the Himalayas of Tibet, it is near the source of the sacred Ganges river, and it has been a holy travel destination for a mind-boggling 15,000 years. The peak is pyramid shaped, with four sides facing north, south, east and west, so some people believe the pyramids of Egypt were designed to emulate Mount Kailash. In the Hindu religion this is where the god Shiva sits and meditates. Buddhists say one circumambulation, walking the 32-mile circuit around the mountain, a three-day trek called a *kora*, washes away the sins of one lifetime. Make the arduous trek 108 times and you'll reach Nirvana!

Sacred Glastonbury

Glastonbury, in the county of Somerset in the southwest of England, was once known as the Isle of Avalon. The place has been sacred long before the dawn of recorded history. Ancient Celtic religious leaders performed rituals here, and legends tell of tunnels leading into the realm of the elves and fairies. Glastonbury is associated with Jesus, King Arthur and UFOs.

Dominating the skyline is St. Michael's Tower on Glastonbury Hill, where there have been several reports of mysterious lights. A local policeman reportedly saw "eight egg-shaped objects … hovering in formation over the hill," and another observer reported "several green and mauve lights hovering around the tower." Martin Gray, a renowned expert on sacred places, says he slept in the tower one night, during which he saw "the interior of the tower radiantly aglow with a luminous white light."

A Christian legend says that, as a child, Jesus visited Glastonbury with his uncle, Joseph of Arimathea. It is also said that Joseph returned with the Apostle Philip in 37 AD. Joseph supposedly leaned on his walking stick, which took root and grew into a thorn tree that bloomed every Christmas until Puritans

chopped it down in the 17th century. Joseph and Philip are credited with building the first Christian church in England, on the site where Glastonbury abbey was later constructed.

In Chalice Well, Joseph is said to have hidden the chalice of the Last Supper, the Holy Grail. Miraculous cures have been credited to the well's healing waters. The design motif on the well cover is the *vesica piscis,* an ancient pre-Christian symbol which evolved into the Christian fish. It represents the blending of masculine and feminine, the yin and yang, and the meeting-place of the conscious and unconscious.

Whether or not Glastonbury, Mount Kailash and Lake Titicaca will indeed grow more powerful over the coming years, these sacred places are at the top of my "most recommended" list for anyone interested in spiritual travel.

How to Decide Which Place You Should Visit

As you know, different sacred sites have different energies, which are picked up by one of the body's chakras. According to many ancient traditions, the human body has seven energy centers or chakras, and they correspond to different emotions or aspects of our personality. They are:

1. The first or Root chakra, near the base of the spine, deals with primary issues: survival and safety.
2. The second or Sexual chakra, near the pubic bone, corresponds to sexuality, plus home and family.
3. The third or Sun chakra, near the solar plexus, below the breast bone, is for identity, place and self.
4. The fourth or Heart chakra, near the center of the chest, connects with love, relations, connections.
5. The fifth or Throat chakra, deals with communication and self-expression.
6. The sixth or Third Eye chakra, in the center of the forehead, is for wisdom and seeing the truth.
7. The seventh or Crown chakra, at the top of the head, is for spirituality and connection to higher power.

According to Dr. Jean Shinoda Bolen, author of *Crossing to Avalon*, different sacred sites give off different kinds of energy, which we pick up with one of our seven chakras. "Chartres Cathedral is a heart chakra site," she told me. Another powerful heart chakra site is Lake Titicaca, according to Andrea Mikana-Pinkham, a Reiki Grand Master and former director of Soluna Tours. Andrea and her partner Mark Amaru Pinkham included Lake Titicaca as an important part in the tours they led to Peru, as they said it is "the most powerful yin energy vortex on Earth."

Contrary to popular belief, the chakras are not doors or valves which open or close. They cannot become blocked, but they can be stimulated to help us balance our overall well-being. If someone is having trouble understanding who she or he really is, it can help to stimulate chakra #3, etc. Some people who

suffer traumas at a young age find they need work on their Throat chakra to help them be able to express their emotions.

Remarkably, you don't need to know any of this in order to benefit from travel to sacred places. You do not need to know, for example, that (a) you need work on your heart chakra, and (b) Lake Titicaca is a heart chakra site that might be helpful for you. The wonderful human mind/body system seems to do all this for us automatically. Here's how it works…

Suppose you browse a web site, read a travel brochure, or watch a presentation where you see several hundred slides, taken at twenty different sites in a dozen different countries. It's likely that one or two pictures will really "jump out" at you. They may seem especially interesting, or beautiful, or dramatic. Perhaps you'll feel "shivers" when you see them. If this happens, you're getting a signal about where you need to go.

It happened for one man when he was simply walking down the street one day, not thinking about going anywhere. He was walking past a travel agency when a poster in the window caught his eye. It was of the giant stone statues on Easter Island. He suddenly felt an unexplained urge to go to Easter Island. Even more amazing, a short time later, he happened to receive a free airline ticket to South America! Taking advantage of this remarkable serendipity, he went to Easter Island, where he received a message telling him what direction his life should take.

Most people never experience events quite so dramatic, but what we can do is learn to become more sensitive to images that we feel unexplained attractions to. Try going to the library or a bookstore and thumbing through travel books to see if anything catches your eye. Or "surf" through the many different pages of travel websites and see which ones you feel most interested in. Who knows where this journey might eventually lead you?

Helene A. Shik is a psychic healer and spiritual teacher who operated Purple Mountain Tours. She suggested that different sacred places "call" to people at different times, depending on what their individual needs at the time may be. Therefore, even though a place may be very powerful, it may not be the most appropriate place for you right now.

I don't think any reference book exists that lists "all" the sacred places on Earth, but I have found two books that certainly include long lists, plus a lot of other good information: *Sacred Earth* by Martin Gray as mentioned earlier, and the *Atlas Of Holy Places & Sacred Sites* by Colin Wilson.

How to Prepare for Transformational Travel

Modern transportation has made a huge difference in how people make pilgrimages to sacred places. Before the automobile and the airplane, a pilgrimage was something that took extensive preparation. It was a serious commitment. Today, it's possible to stop off at a sacred site during an otherwise ordinary vacation. Maybe that's why some people who visit places of power come home disappointed that they didn't get more out of their experience.

For example, the Stein Valley was a traditional vision quest site for the First Nations living in southwestern British Columbia. When an adolescent boy or girl was ready to come of age, he or she would have extensive study sessions with an elder or shaman, in preparation for a vision quest. There were important rituals to perform immediately before setting out into the canyon to receive a vision. These might include bathing and other cleansing rites, prayer and fasting. The neophyte might have to walk for several days to get to the powerful river, where they hoped to receive visions of guidance for their lives.

My experience visiting the Stein Valley is an example of my own transformational journey. It took my wife and me about three hours to drive to the Stein from Vancouver. When we arrived at the trailhead, we stopped at "Asking Rock," where we saw offerings such as tobacco and sweet grass had been left by visitors who knew this is a traditional place to pray for a safe journey. We respectfully let the rocks and the river know that we appreciated them, but we did not perform any specific rituals. After several hours of moderate hiking, we arrived at our destination, one of the single largest rock writing sites in Canada. Over 160 images, painted in red ochre (most of which are now very faded) are on a 50-foot long section of rock near a bend in the Stein river. We could feel the energy of this powerful place, but we saw none of the spirits that had inspired the rock paintings. (If you want to know

more about this magical place, I highly recommend the book *They Write Their Dreams on the Rocks Forever* by Annie York.)

Another example is when I was in Machu Picchu. I met a Peruvian shaman who told me about the powerful vision he had during his apprenticeship. He sat and meditated for six days, looking out at the sacred mountain, Putu Cusi. It was toward the end of his sixth day that he saw a glowing sphere rise up from the Urubamba River toward him. He was engulfed by the sphere, which took him inside Putu Cusi, where he saw an incredibly beautiful crystal city.

My own experience was more mundane, not surprisingly, as I only sat on the grass and looked out toward Putu Cusi for a few minutes. I did not see any glowing spheres or crystal cities, but I did feel awestruck by the overwhelming natural beauty.

I have heard stories about people who innocently traipsed into sacred places and had powerful, extraordinary experiences there, but I don't believe such events happen very often, mostly because they didn't put in enough effort. I believe that, in most cases, the strength of an experience you have at a sacred place is directly proportional to how much energy you put into your visit.

Fasting, drumming, chanting and the use of hallucinogenic herbs are some of the traditional ways that aboriginal people have made contact with the spirit world, but these techniques may be difficult, dangerous, inappropriate, or even illegal for today's pilgrims.

As discussed by Dr. Jean Shinoda Bolen, “Openness is the attitude that suggests will help Pilgrims benefit from the energy at sacred places. You should be humble and cooperative, willing to ‘go with the flow’ of whatever you may encounter. Pilgrimages invite synchronicity, but they won’t do you any good if you don’t take advantage of whatever opportunities may suddenly present themselves to you.”

Another example comes from Helene Shik, who told me about one of the most powerful and moving experiences ever to happen to her in fifteen years of leading tours to sacred places. She was on the isle of Lewis in Scotland, where she had been leading a group through the Callanish stone circle. It was getting dark, and the group was loading onto the bus, but she stayed behind to stand for one last moment and give thanks to the stones. She suddenly went into almost a trance, and it seemed as if the stones came alive. In her vision, she saw that each of the tall stones had a face with human features, and she felt their guardian spirit energy. One of them spoke, saying: “Thank you for coming and for walking all over the planet in the ancient, sacred way.”

“I knew then,” Helene told me, “that this was the meaning of being a pilgrim and not just a tourist who simply uses but doesn’t give back respect.”

Of course, if you travel as part of an organized group “pilgrimage”, your tour leaders or guides will very likely give you more specific information about how to prepare for the places you’re going to visit. If you get a reading list ahead of time, this is an excellent way to get ready. Knowing some of the history and mythology about a place will greatly enhance your appreciation when you go there in person.

A Very Helpful Book

If you only read one book to make your travel more meaningful, my top recommendation would be *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker’s Guide to Making Travel Sacred* by Phil Cousineau. This guide is not just for travelers who are about to embark on a sacred journey, but also for armchair travelers curious to know what it means to travel with soulful purpose. Aimed at the modern-day pilgrim looking for inspiration and a few spiritual tools for the road, it combines stories, myths, parables, and quotes from famous travelers of the past with practical suggestions and contemporary accounts from people traveling the sacred way today. Not a guidebook of ancient sites, rather this book can help travelers focus on the purpose and intention at every step of their journey, whether you are going for a walk through your local park, or on a trek to Timbuktu.

A Simple Breathing Exercise You Can Use to “Tune in” to Unseen Energies

The best technique I have yet to learn for actually getting in touch with sacred places is what sacred places expert Martin Gray calls **Planetary Acupuncture**. It is an easy-to-learn exercise in breathing and meditation, and I recommend it to everyone.

Martin wrote that he was on top of 13,323-foot Mount Hesperus in Colorado when he received a vision of a simple meditation and breathing technique that not only helps the practitioner connect with the spirit of the Earth, it also directs healing energy back into our planet.

Martin says Planetary Acupuncture can be practiced anywhere, and any time, but it is best both for you and the Earth if you do it outside, sitting directly on the Earth.

Here is how you do it…

Close your eyes and control your breathing, so each breath is long, slow and soft, with each inhalation and exhalation of equal length. The technique consists of a series of three in-and-out breaths:

The first time you inhale, visualize that you are taking in celestial energy — the spirit of Heaven — in through the crown chakra at the top of your head, and into your heart chakra. When you exhale, visualize that you have added energy from your own heart, and you are sending it down through your root chakra, at the base of your spine, and down into the Earth.

With your second breath, visualize that you are taking in terrestrial energies — the spirit of the Earth — up through your root chakra and into your heart. When you exhale, visualize that you have added energy from your heart, and you are sending the energies up through your crown chakra, and into the Heavens.

With your third breath, visualize that you are simultaneously taking in both celestial energy and terrestrial energy into your heart. When you exhale, visualize that you are sending out all three energies — celestial, terrestrial, and your own — radiating it out from your heart in every direction, and giving it out to everything and everyone around you.

Repeat this series of three breaths for a minimum of ten times every time you do it. Martin Gray says, "The more you practice this technique, the deeper you will experience a connection with the living Earth.

The Book That Got Me Started

The Kitsilano neighborhood of Vancouver is pretty much the Canadian equivalent of San Francisco's Haight Ashbury district. It's where the hippies hung out in the '60s, and that is where a visit to a bookstore in 1996 literally changed my life. The book didn't actually jump off the shelf and into my hands, but it might as well have done. That book is *Sacred Places: How the Living Earth Seeks Our Friendship* by James A. Swan. No book in my library has more underlines, highlights, yellow stickies, index cards and margin notes.

I have included so many references to this book in my work over the years because it so clearly reflects my vision about what I believe is the proper relationship between human beings and the planet that is our home. When we are able to hear the messages Mother Earth is sending, we can live a more fulfilled life, in harmony with the cosmos.

Why take a Sacred Journey?

Sacred travel tours offer unique alternatives to conventional travel in these changing times – an opportunity to leave the crowds behind and experience the world's most important sacred sites with like-minded travelers in ways that most tourists never do.

Imagine yourself gazing in awe at the Great Pyramid and Sphinx in Egypt. See yourself standing within the ancient circle of Stonehenge in England in a sacred ceremony with a group of other metaphysically-minded travelers. Picture yourself meditating within an ancient temple in spiritual Bali. Feel the amazing ancient energies as you partake in a shamanic ceremony at Machu Picchu in Peru. Think how awesome it would be to walk among the Aztec pyramids of Tiotihuacan, Mexico guided by an archaeologist and ancient mysteries expert whose life's work has been researching the site.

These sacred journeys are enriching opportunities for spiritual growth, and they can be life-changing, transformational experiences.

The leader of my Body Mind Spirit Journeys tour to Machu Picchu said that her life was divided into two sections: Before and After experiencing Peru.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons why I decided to join the BMSJ team – to help other travelers discover the benefits of spiritual travel experiences such as the one I enjoyed.

What Kind of Spiritual Journey Should You Choose?

Choosing a spiritual journey can enhance your travel experience and below are the kinds of tours you will find with Body Mind Spirit Journeys.

A Sacred Journey: These tours will offer mystical opportunities to connect and body with ancient spiritual energies at the most important sacred sites in the world. They are designed to induce spiritual transformation at all levels by giving you the opportunity to enter the sacred circle of time and explore the immortality of your soul. Led by authors and other experts in the metaphysical field they offer an experience that is both deeply profound and spiritually transformative.

A Mystical Destination: These tours are designed for traditional travelers who are now seeking travel alternatives in line with popular wellness, body and spirit lifestyle – a time for a truly indulgent escape to explore one's body, mind and spirit in a relaxing atmosphere led by one of BMSJ's escorts and metaphysical guides. It's a combination of a cultural, anthropological and archaeological experiences. It will most likely include spiritual activities such as yoga, meditation or a special ceremony.

A Women's Sacred Journey: These are tours created especially for women who appreciate being able to travel in comfort and safety with other like-minded women. These mystical tours offer the opportunity to connect and bond with the ancient spiritual energies at the most important sacred sites around the world on transformative journeys of inner exploration and outer adventure for the body, mind and spirit.

Other Advantages of Small Group Travel

You can spend countless hours researching the attractions in and around a destination that interests you, but there is no substitute for the expertise that comes with actually being there. That's why Body Mind Spirit Journeys works with "boots on the ground" who not only know what is at a place, but also the best way to get there, and the most appropriate places to find meals and accommodations nearby. Not to mention how much time to allocate to each stop and how many stops can realistically be included in each day.

Not only does group travel save you planning time and help you avoid making mistakes, it also can save you money by taking advantage of the shared costs of coach travel and guide services.

Another bonus you don't get when you travel on your own is the wisdom of expert tour hosts and guests, such as Eimear Burke, who joins many of BMSJ's tours of Ireland. Eimar is Chosen Chief of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids. A renowned Irish storyteller (and harp player), she founded the Kilkenny Druid Grove, where she holds pagan celebrations. Book one of the Ireland tours where she is featured, and you can ask her anything you want about Irish folklore.

One more advantage of small group travel to sacred places is the group itself. You get to share your experiences with people whose interests are similar to yours. It is not uncommon for strangers who meet on the first day of a tour to become lifelong friends who stay in touch for years afterwards.

When you choose to go on a spiritual tour with Body Mind Spirit Journeys, you are taking advantage of the benefits of decades of experience taking travelers to some of the world's most important sacred places in ways that are not available to regular tourists.

As an added bonus, BMSJ further protects each of their passengers with a $1,000,000 Errors and Omissions Insurance policy, as well as being bonded.

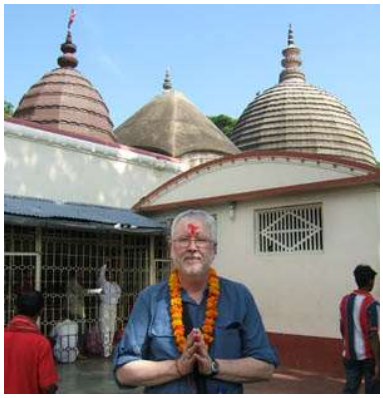
Conclusion

Our ancestors and their ancestors before them understood the importance of sacred places. For thousands of years, people have gone on pilgrimages or vision quests to seek answers to questions, to gain inspiration, receive prophecies or other messages about what direction their lives should follow. Today, with the very future of life on earth in serious jeopardy, it's never been more important to hear the messaged we can receive at places of power.

We yearn to visit those special locations around our planet where we can tap into mysterious, unseen forces with the ability to help us heal our bodies, nourish our minds and inspire our hearts.

We seek visions, prophecies, healing, answers to important questions and more meaning for our lives, and Mother Earth's sacred places can give us answers, if we will only learn how to listen.

About the author



Robert Scheer is a travel writer who specializes in sacred sites and pilgrimage places. He is a former president and Lifetime Member of the British Columbia Association of Travel Writers (BCATW) and a former president of the B.C. chapter of the Travel Media Association of Canada (TMAC). From 1997 through 1999 he was the editor and publisher of "Power Trips," the travel magazine devoted to Mother Earth's sacred places. He is now the Communication Director of Body Mind Sprit Journeys.

Footnotes

1. James A. Swan, *Sacred Places: How the Living Earth Seeks Our Friendship* (Bear & Company, 1990) p. 44

2. Ibid p. 42

3. Ibid p. 33

4. Ibid p. 31

5. Martin Gray, *Sacred Earth: Places of Peace and Power* (Sterling, 2007) pp. 11-12

6. Bernyce Barlow, *Sacred Sites of the West* (Llewellyn, 1996) p. 22

7. Swan, Op. Cit., p. 92

8. Paul Devereux, *EARTHMIND, A Modern Adventure in Ancient Wisdom* (Harper & Row, 1989) p. 120

9. Devereux, *Places of Power, Secret Energies at Ancient Sites: A Guide to Observed or Measured Phenomena* (Blandford, 1990) p. 193

10. Ibid p. 127

11. Martin Gray, *Places of Peace and Power, Teachings From a Pilgrim's Journey* (Pre-publication manuscript) p. 1-10.