

From Patna to Benares – FOM Study Tour January 2013

By Andra Leo



Patna Museum - chauri bearer



Group photo at Vulture Peak, courtesy of Gisella Harrold



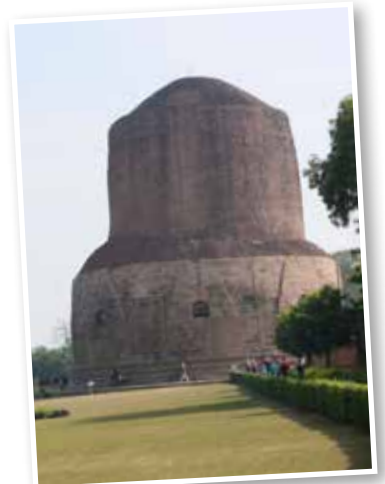
Pieces of the Ashokan Pillar in Sarnath

A journey is best measured in friends, rather than miles. (Tim Cahill)

So it was with this study tour – a group of 20 Friends, who became friends during the course of a perfectly organised trip, led by Abha Kaul. The tour took us to ancient imperial capitals and several pilgrimage sites in lands sacred not only to Buddhists, but also to Hindus, Jains and Sikhs. We travelled along the Gangetic Plain in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states, the very region in which the Buddha had lived and had wandered through around 2,500 years ago – seeking enlightenment, finding it, then teaching the meaning of life. The journey began in Patna, capital of modern Bihar and also of Ashoka the Great. The lion capital he erected atop the Sarnath pillar is today the national emblem of India. Our trip's principal focus was on two of the most important sites associated with the Buddha – Bodh Gaya, where he attained enlightenment, and Sarnath, where he delivered his first sermon in the Deer Park. En route, we visited Rajgir and climbed up to Vulture Peak where the Buddha preached the Lotus Sutra, which promised salvation for all beings. Near Rajgir, we visited Nalanda, believed to have been the world's first university. Both these are important sites for Buddhist pilgrims, many of whom we encountered as they followed in the Buddha's footsteps. We ended our own pilgrimage with an evening visit to the prayer ceremony (*aarti*) on the banks of the Ganges in Benares, India's holiest city, followed by a dawn boat ride along its famous *ghats* (waterside steps).



Ruins of Nalanda University with the great stupa in the rear



Sarnath - the Damekh Stupa



Cave near Vulture Peak with gold leaf pasted on the rocks



Benares - the Ganga aarti ceremony



The Mahabodhi Temple



Benares - dawn at the ghats

Andra Leo delights in travelling and making new friends, an achievement guaranteed by going on an FOM study tour.

Unless otherwise noted, all photos by the author



The bodhi tree at the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya