

‘A rhythm that helps us connect’

2020’s the year of cathedrals and pilgrimage, and it doesn’t matter what your beliefs – a long walk to a special destination is ‘a fundamental impulse’ with surprising power, says Guy Hayward.



▲ **ONWARD, PILGRIM**
Guy Hayward’s mission is to see more people of myriad beliefs – and no belief at all – discover the power of pilgrimage.

BRITAIN’S 42 CATHEDRALS are linked to the surrounding country by green lanes and footpaths – and they make the perfect focal point for a walk of special significance, says Guy Hayward, co-founder the British Pilgrimage Trust, urging Britons this year to realise the power of walks to help us move forward in our lives.

‘**The first thing you have to is to remove the barrier of belief.** The latin root of the word pilgrimage is ‘stranger through the foreign fields’. Which actually has nothing to do with religion but is more to do with that sense of feeling foreign or like you are in a special new place, even if it’s part of your own land. It’s flexible – bring your own beliefs.

A lot of people ask if it involves whipping yourself as you walk along. It’s weirdly common – almost like if you are not doing it, you’re not doing a proper pilgrimage. I tell them it’s a lot more positive than that and you can make your life better by doing it – it doesn’t matter how long the journey is. Others ask if it’s a nostalgia thing, or like a historic re-enactment. To which I’d say...

Is sex nostalgic, because we’ve always been doing it? We have *always* been doing this, it’s a part of who we are. In nature and human history you can see countless examples of living things making long journeys, to complete themselves or to keep themselves alive. Like salmon swimming 3000 miles across the world to find their home, or swallows and our hunter-gatherer ancestors seasonally migrating. When I did my first long walk, it felt in a funny way a more natural way of being than the life I had been living.

Cathedrals are just places that are designed to alter your state of consciousness. For hundreds of years, in some cases 1000s of years, people have been kneeling, looking up at the stained glass windows, crying and feeling their greatest worries and also asking for their greatest hopes here. They’re not places you have a meaningless chat. Even in London, if you go off the busy streets and go into a church, it’s suddenly silent and regardless of what you believe, that experience is amazing.

At the end of a journey walking through nature, when you get to a cathedral, you’re suddenly surrounded by a different level of human endeavour. They were built to the highest ability that could be



PHOTO: PETER PACKER/ALAMY

mustered, by people who would take years doing it, even give their lives to it. They’re usually massive, and the geometry of everything is beautiful, the echoes and the sounds through the stone, the stained glass create psychedelic, kaleidoscopic light over your eyes. Everything is beautiful and it raises the game of the journey when you finish it.

Completing a significant journey is a fundamental impulse of being on this planet. Holy places can give a pilgrimage a structure but the journey can be very personal. If I do a pilgrimage to Canterbury, Walsingham or Lindisfarne, classic Christian holy places, the way I make it my own is to set an intention at the beginning of the journey about what I want it to be about for me. Maybe something I want to bring into my life or let go of, or a question I want resolved in my life – to find a new way forward. You dedicate the journey to that and just so happen to visit places along the way that may or may not resonate. You *will* have breakthroughs.

Our footsteps fall in sync when we walk and talk.
It’s a rhythm that helps us to connect.
Looking in the

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same direction, rather than at each other, frees up conversation too, allowing people to talk about things they don’t usually. And the fact you’re going to the same destination – have a shared purpose – somehow enables you to talk to each other, no matter what your differences. Pilgrimage is about connecting with your companions, with strangers you meet, and with nature, plants, animals, the sky, weather and whatever you want – the cosmos, the universe, God, however far you want to go.

My favourite kind is a river pilgrimage, from the source of the river to where it meets the sea. It’s a natural metaphor for life. At the beginning a pure trickle of water, and as you go down the river, it’s wider and more tributaries add new influences and by the end, it’s less pure and more complex, then it meets the sea, the vast oneness of everything. And because humans have always settled along rivers, you always have human interest along it.

I want readers’ help to create more one-day pilgrimages to more cathedrals. I want people to feel the ‘can do’ pilgrimage attitude, to create routes for others to follow, so I can gather them all at britishpilgrimage.org. But more than that I want more people to experience what pilgrimage – large or small – can do for them. Through history, we’ve come up with different systems to find purpose in our lives, and I think with pilgrimage – focusing on a journey of particular meaning, and intention – we’ve got a brilliant one right at our feet.

► For pilgrimage ideas, 1-day cathedral pilgrim routes and to submit your own, visit www.britishpilgrimage.org

◀ RAISING THE GAME

A destination such as a Cathedral can’t help but raise the stakes of your journey – even if your pilgrimage is only a day long says Guy.

▼ JOINING THE DOTS

The ancient earthworks at Old Sarum suggest themselves as a natural waypoint on a pilgrimage toward Salisbury Cathedral.

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