

Breathedreamgo and Aurovalley Ashram : A case study narrative

A steady stream of Breathedreamgo readers visit Aurovalley Ashram in North India.

I'm at Aurovalley Ashram in north India, between Haridwar and Rishikesh, at the place where the Ganga River tumbles out of the Shivalik mountains, and begins its journey across the great plains of central India. A peaceful place immersed in the beauty of nature, it's where I go to allow the din and clutter of everyday life to subside for a while.



I have been writing about Aurovalley Ashram for several years and have published numerous articles and blog posts about it, including:

- Conscious eating at a yoga ashram in India
- One day at a yoga ashram in India
- A haven of peace and conscious living
- What life is like in a yoga ashram
- Help a soul to grow at Aurovalley

In 2010, shortly after arriving at Aurovalley Ashram for my fourth visit in as many years, I met an English woman named Andrea, and we went for a walk together among the mango trees. When I introduced myself as Mariellen, she said, "You're Mariellen? MARIELLEN WARD?!?"

"Yes, how do you know my name?"

"I read your blog about Aurovalley and that's why I'm here. You saved my life!" She went on to tell me about how she had been diagnosed with a serious illness and her prognosis was not good. Moreover, the doctors in the U.K. didn't know of an effective treatment. She looked around for an alternative, and using her instincts and the information on my blog, she decided to go to Aurovalley. After a few months of living here and following the daily routine, she regained her health and the illness went into remission, leaving the doctors puzzled.

It was the first time I realized that my writing had affected a positive change in someone's life. I felt elated. In fact, it was one of the greatest feelings I have ever had, and it bolstered my confidence in my writing and in deciding to build Breathedreamgo.

Now, whenever I visit the ashram, I meet several people who are here because they read my articles and especially my blog. These people add up to a significant percentage of the people who visit Aurovalley (I estimate about 20% of the solo travelers I meet at the ashram, not sure about groups).

Testimonials from the ashram

An American man named James who I met at the ashram recently told me he Googled "peaceful, quiet India" and the only relevant entry was one of my blogs about Aurovalley, so he booked in. A young German man named Aaron who was here because of my blog asked me if I am "the only person allowed to blog about Aurovalley?" -- because it was only my blogs he had seen.

Janice Varuna is a Canadian yoga teacher who I met through mutual friends. She travels regularly to India to study and practise yoga and she said:

"My first trip to Aurovalley was Fall 2014. I had read about this ashram on Mariellen's website Breathedreamgo. I have over the years witnessed a huge transition in Mariellen's writing and her general joy for life. She wrote of Aurovalley so lovingly that I wanted to experience also. Her description did not let me down, if anything it was more than I expected. The beauty of the campus and the work they are doing is very impressive. So much so that I have added Aurovalley to my Ashram Yoga tour offering, [a 13-day visit to various ashrams](#) in the Haridwar area."

Canadian Barbara Beveridge, from Vancouver, wrote: "I am writing this from Aurovalley Ashram, a wonderful ashram in north India that I would know nothing about if it wasn't for Breathedreamgo. When I started planning my five-month trip to India I bought the Lonely Planet Guide for India, which I found to be completely overwhelming because I knew very little about India. This actually stopped me in my tracks and I wasn't sure which way to turn. Then a good friend of mine sent me the link to Breathedreamgo.

I was greatly relieved and found so much valuable information, on topics, such as 8 Things You Should Know Before You Go To India; 10 Tips for Women Travelling in India; Do's and Don'ts in India; Packing List for India; Advice for First Time Visitors and Women Traveling to India, etc., all of which I bookmarked. This made such a difference to me as it gave me (and my children) a sense of security in the planning of my trip. As a 65-year-old woman traveling alone in India for five months, I needed to feel safe, and my children needed to feel that I was safe.

I am now in the fourth month of my five-month trip and I want to thank you because your assistance through your blog has been invaluable."

Adriana Loures, from Brazil, made two solo trips to India using travel blogs to help guide her. On her first trip, she was unfortunately misguided by outdated information, and did not have a good experience. On the second trip, she read this blog and said,

"Breathedreamgo's reviews were inspiring and matched with many other good reviews about the places she described. I decided to trust her reviews and booked most of my stay at one of the places she described, Aurovalley Ashram. The description matches reality and I'm very thankful to be in this blissful place."

As I was writing this, I took a break and went to the ashram dining hall for tea. There I saw a group of young foreign women and the leader, Erin, walked forward to introduce herself. "You're Mariellen?" she said. And by now I knew what was coming. "Yes," I answered. "Do you know my blog?"



Sure enough, Erin had read my writing about Aurovalley and stayed here two years ago.

Erin Watson-Lynn is the Founder of Generate Worldwide, a social enterprise specialising in international study and volunteering tours, and a Ph.D Candidate in South Asia studies. She is also the founder of Generate Worldwide, a social enterprise that designs and leads educational small group tours.

"I was first inspired to visit Aurovalley Ashram in November 2012. I was working at the United Nations in Delhi and feeling very claustrophobic among 20 odd million other people. I had found the Breathedreamgo blog during my endless online searching of other solo women in India, and when I read the post about Aurovalley, I immediately booked a train ticket to find some 'inner peace'. Since that first trip to India and Aurovalley, I have started my own company that designs and leads study and volunteering tours to India. During one of these tours in February, we were passing through Rishikesh when I suggested that we visit Aurovalley as an additional activity. The group jumped at the opportunity and just as last time I visited, we were warmly welcomed to participate in the daily activities. Aurovalley is a remarkable place and I plan to return with more groups as we pass through the region."

Trust is the most important factor

I believe there are two reasons that Aurovalley Ashram gets a steady flow of people who've read my blog. The first and most important is that the writing is genuine, it's from the heart, it captures the spirit of the ashram, and gives people a real sense of what it's actually like to go to a yoga ashram. (This is especially important to people who've never been to a yoga ashram before.) People who read my writing know I am genuine, they know they can trust me.

The other reason is technical, but is also about trust: It's because Breathedreamgo is a "legacy" blog that ranks high on Google. After almost six years of regular updates using

the same key words -- India, travel, yoga, spirituality -- the Google algorithm trusts that Breathedreamgo is an authoritative source, and so it shows up on page one of the SERP (search engine results page).

In other words, never underestimate the power of trust. As media conglomerates develop ever more clever ways of generating free or cheap content, they cannot replace the one thing that a genuine travel blog can provide.

According to marketing wizard Seth Godin, being trusted is the, "single most urgent way to build a business." Here's the quote from a recent [Contently interview](#):

"Contently: There's an obsession now with tying content to revenues—in other words, tracking whether people who are consuming your content will eventually buy something from you, and putting a hard number on each piece of content you create. Do you think that's misguided?"

"Seth Godin: Oh, I think there's no question it's misguided. It's been shown over and over again to be misguided—that in a world of zero marginal cost, being trusted is the single most urgent way to build a business. You don't get trusted if you're constantly measuring and tweaking and manipulating so that someone will buy from you.

"I don't have any problem with measurements, per se; I'm just saying that most of the time when organizations start to measure stuff, they then seek to industrialize it, to poke it into a piece of software, to hire ever cheaper people to do it. The challenge that we have when we industrialize content is we are asking people who don't care to work their way through a bunch of checklists to make a number go up, as opposed to being human beings connecting with other human beings."

The value of life-changing experiences



I'm pondering all of this at Aurovalley Ashram when Puja Uppal walks by. Puja is the first person you are likely to meet when you arrive at Aurovalley Ashram. She's a cheerful young woman from Canada, whose family originated from India, and she runs the reception desk and signs people in, among other duties. Puja has lived at Aurovalley for about three years.

Puja told me when I first met her that she came to Aurovalley after reading my article in the Toronto Star (posted here, on my blog now:). That article and her first trip to India really did change her life. She quit her successful journalism career and moved to India, to the ashram.

She says, "It was sometime in 2010 when I came across an article about a woman's real life experience of staying at an ashram, that I had ever heard the word Aurovalley. The woman was Mariellen Ward and never in my wildest dreams would I imagine that I too would one day write about my experience living in an ashram. It's been five years since I read Mariellen's article and over 3 years since I left Ottawa on a journey to find, which I didn't know at the time, my true self. I've been living at Aurovalley Ashram for 2 and half years. It's hard for me to believe sometimes, especially since I had only planned to come here for a week, two tops. But as soon as I stepped in the front gates, I knew. I knew I had found the place that I had been looking for, what seemed like, my whole life. A place enveloped in peace and silence, surrounded by nature. A place that I could sense would help me discover the answers about life I had been asking since I was a child. Aurovalley has exceeded any idea I had about what living at an ashram would be like. It's not just about doing yoga asanas (postures), meditating and sitting in for Satsang (Question and Answer session with Swamiji), it's more so about giving each person the space and atmosphere that enables her to find the stillness within and discovering her true nature – that which is unchanging. Aurovalley is not a place to me, it's an attitude – being open, receptive and allowing life to just be. Aurovalley has changed my life completely and words cannot express the gratitude I feel for this place and Swamiji."

I have an enduring memory of watching Puja dancing to Bollywood songs during the ashram's 25th anniversary celebrations, her slim, graceful figure moving joyfully to the upbeat rhythms, a million-watt smile on her face. She chose to reunite with her culture of origin, but in her own unique way, and was finding fulfillment and peace.

I marvel at the small but perhaps integral part my words played in the journey of her life, and how when we choose our words to uplift others, we can have a positive impact we might never have imagined.

How do you calculate the value of that?

Final words from a grateful reader

I have been very blessed to receive hundreds, possibly thousands, of emails and comments from readers, but this one from Adrienne is one of my favourites:

"Thank you very much for your inspiring writings, I do love reading all your impressions, experiences, advice about India. I could imagine myself being there and seeing through your eyes. Yes, through your eyes. I am visually impaired. I see only 4% with one eye, the other one is fully blind. I can see light, colours and bigger shapes but not details. Therefore it is really important for me to get well-detailed descriptions. Yours are also full with love and respect.

I am so glad and thankful that I have found your blog when I was searching for information about India. You gave me inspiration, help and made me more enthusiastic.

It was a dream for me to visit India once. I can not really explain why exactly, I think I hope to find that feeling and/or myself there. To open my mind, to understand and accept things even better and find my way in my life. In April, this dream will become true, we travel to India for three weeks. I wasn't excited until I started reading your blog and posts. You really managed to wake up something in me. Thank you again for your stories, I will remember them when I am in India."

I have introduced Adrienne to a travel agent here in Delhi, and together they are planning her dream trip. The satisfaction I feel is immeasurable.

Mariellen Ward

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BIO

Mariellen Ward is a professional travel writer and blogger based in Toronto and Delhi. Breatheditgo.com, her award-winning travel blog about "meaningful adventure travel," is inspired by her extensive travels in India. She writes for many print and online sites including Conde Nast Traveller India, Vogue India and BBC Travel, co-founded the Toronto Travel Massive, Delhi Travel Massive and founded the WeGoSolo online community for female solo travellers. Mariellen is a Kensington Tours Explorer-in-Residence and the recipient of an Explorer's Grant, which she used to trace the life of Mirabai in north India. Though Canadian by birth, Mariellen considers India to be her "soul culture" and has spent many years immersing herself in the culture.

BREATHEDITGO

Breatheditgo is one of the world's leading independent travel blogs about India; one of Canada's leading travel blogs; and a leader in championing "meaningful adventure travel" and female solo travel. Breatheditgo won Canadian Weblog Awards for Travel in 2013 and 2011, a Made in Blog Award for 2013, and was named one of the Top 50 Indian Blogs 2012 by Indian Top Blogs. Mariellen was a finalist for Best Blogger at the Canadian Tourism Awards 2014. Breatheditgo has been featured in India Today magazine, Conde Nast Traveller India, BBC Travel, Nomadic Matt's Budget Travel book, among many others, and is syndicated by the Times of India's travel site, HappyTrips.com. The Breatheditgo blog site and extensive social media platform, which includes Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, Instagram and more, is one of the world's best known and leading India online travel influencers, reaching 50,000-100,000 people monthly. Readers are from India, USA, Canada, UK and Australia.