

The Dwarkadhish temple in Dwarka marks the culmination of Mirabai's journey

EXPERIENCE

# Living the legend

A princess, an unwavering devotee and a celebrated mystic poet, MIRABAI's story continues to be shrouded in mystery. Canadian travel writer **MARIELLEN WARD** traces her legend by following the saint's footsteps from Vrindavan to Dwarka

As myths go, Mirabai's story is unique. It is said that in the early 16th century, Mirabai, motivated both by the persecution from her in-laws and her love for Lord Krishna, left her home and set out to follow the call of her heart and travel through India. She went from Chittorgarh to Vrindavan and eventually to Dwarka, where she is said to have disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

I, too, left my home and family and followed the call of my heart to travel through India. Along the way, I discovered the story of Mirabai. Intrigued, I followed in her footsteps across three states to visit the places and relive the stories most associated with the saint.

For five centuries, Mirabai's name has stood for piety, devotion and spiritual longing. To this day, people continue to honour her with songs, temples and even an annual festival. I wanted to find the woman behind the legend and uncover some essential truths in her story that would perhaps be relevant for women today. I also hoped to somehow shed light on the mystery behind her disappearance in Dwarka. With the help of an Explorer's Grant from Kensington Tours, I travelled for several weeks in October last year. I set out from Delhi and my first stop was Vrindavan—Krishna's playground.

## WANDERING IN VRINDAVAN

Upon my arrival at Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh, I joined pilgrims along Parikrama



Marg to look for the Mirabai temple. Down a narrow lane, I saw a battered sign and a door. Stepping through the gate, I found myself inside a small courtyard. Here, I met Praduman Pratapsingh, who told me that his ancestor built this temple for Mirabai and she lived here for 15 years. It was a lucky start to my Mirabai expedition. I was thrilled to find a living connection to the saint. Pratapsingh is the ninth generation of his family to preside over the temple, and while showing me around he talked about Mirabai with a knowledge and vigour that few textbooks can convey. I got a sense of Mirabai as a living, breathing woman.

## PURSUIT IN PUSHKAR

My next stop was Pushkar in Rajasthan, located close to Merta City, which is supposed to be Mirabai's birthplace (she was born circa. 1500

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Ward began her journey in Vrindavan



Merta City houses a temple and museum dedicated to Mirabai

AD). In Merta City, there is not only a Mirabai temple, but also a Mirabai museum dedicated to the Rajput princess, housed in the palace where she grew up. A must-visit for travellers, it contains statues and text detailing her life story.

At the Mirabai temple here, I was invited by a group of women (Bhakti saints) singing Mirabai songs to join them on the tiled floor. Sitting among these women, watching the joy on their faces, I felt a strong camaraderie. It was through this experience that I began to get an idea of the love she engendered and the sisterhood that is borne through her devotion.

### CHASING CHITTORGARH

A taxi ride away from Merta City is Chittorgarh, Mirabai's home after she married Prince Bhojraj of Mewar. With a guide leading us, we toured Chittorgarh, spending the majority of our time at the crumbling Kumbha Palace, where she lived, and at the exquisite Mirabai temple. Built for her by her father-in-law, Rana Sangram Singh, the powerful king of Mewar, the well-maintained temple contains a beautiful statue of Mirabai seated at the feet of Lord

Krishna. This is where Mirabai danced and sang for Krishna. A mere glance will leave you awestruck by the vastness of this mountain-top fort, which only hints at the obvious might of its rulers. This was no petty royal family Mirabai quarreled with and walked away from. I left Chittorgarh with a much greater appreciation for the struggles she faced, and eventually overcame.

### DWARKA DIARIES

Then came the final stop on the itinerary: Dwarka, on the coast of Gujarat. Mirabai was drawn to Dwarka because of the venerable Dwarkadhish Temple, one of the most important Krishna temples in India. It's a long way from Chittorgarh to Dwarka, even in modern times. So it must have been an incredible journey for her, by foot, in the 16th century.

Here is where Mirabai's story ends. At about the age of 50, she is said to have disappeared while singing in the temple, leaving only a piece of her sari wrapped around the Krishna murti. The spiritual tradition is that she dissolved into love for Krishna, which can be a little hard to understand today.

The fitting end to my journey was meeting Hardik Dwarka, the youthful but wise priest of the Dwarkadhish Temple. He explained to me that Krishna represented awareness, while Mirabai was emblematic of devotion, and together they merged to form a higher self. As I stood inside the ancient temple contemplating his words and enjoying the energy of the place, I suddenly felt buoyant waves of joy pulsing through me. I realised that Mirabai's story is a true reflection of love. ■ *Mariellen Ward is a travel writer based in Toronto and Delhi. Breathedreamgo.com*

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