

Mother of an experience

By Ruth Ostrow

"THE erotic temples of Khajuraho, you mean you've never been?" my companion had asked me, sitting at my table looking out over the lush, green hills. "You, a woman so interested in sexuality? The temples are the most extraordinary thing you'll see," he said, staring deep into my eyes.

I had heard about them. The legendary temples in central India built in AD950, which are home to some of the most exotic and erotic artwork ever created. These Hindu monuments are covered in relief sculptures depicting daily life and spirituality in India a millennium ago, but two details appear more than anything else - women and sex.

Apsaras - dancing, celestial maidens - appear on every temple alongside the mithuna or erotic figures depicted in a literal Kamasutra of possibilities.

As portrayed in the film of A Passage to India, sculptures like these shattered the British when they first arrived in the country, contradicting the Victorian notion of women as submissive, non-sensual beings, and portraying humans as free-spirited, erotic creatures.

In fact, when knowledge of the temples came to light and Sir Richard Burton, the famous explorer, translated the Kamasutra on which many of the sculptures were based and brought the book back to England, it changed the way a generation thought about themselves, their bodies, their souls.

So when my friend suggested the pilgrimage, it filled me with joy, not the least because I was about to turn 40 and had been feeling confusion around my changing female identity.

Forty for women is not a time to be underestimated. It goes right to the heart of our femininity and sexuality. It is the beginning of the body's last hurrah, a hailing of menopause, our last chance to have that baby and fulfil our biological, maternal purpose.

There is also a real threat to our womanhood and sexual power as we watch our fertility fading, along with the hormones that keep our bodies sexy, juicy and supple. And there is fear about what will emerge as time, gravity and reality begin to take their toll.

The truth is women go through mid-life crises too, the grief of letting go of the person we were - the one inside who still feels 20 - and the anticipation of who we are becoming.

Like a trapeze artist caught mid-flight feeling fearful, optimistic, dizzy, challenged, waiting to catch the next bar, lamenting the one past.

"Go to India," said my friend.

"You'll feel very differently about your body and life. The Khajuraho temples have the power to transform." Within a few weeks I was in the heart of exotic India, on a pilgrimage into Self as much as the continent. And on my 40th birthday I arrived at the temples - clustered like diamonds on an exquisite ring.

I caught my breath and wandered around staring agog at the visions playing out before my eyes.

The scenes are carved in layers, starting at the most mundane on the lower levels and rising to the sublime higher up. For instance, around the lower friezes there are battles, processions, but also some of the most sexually provocative scenes imaginable: threesomes, orgies, homoerotic love.

"Notice that the reliefs of pure pornographic intent move upwards towards the more subtly erotic, then finally to the spiritual, where the pantheon of gods and goddesses shine down benevolently on humanity," a guide was explaining to a group of tourists.

I recognised the elevation to be the basis of Tantra, or the path of finding spiritual enlightenment and higher consciousness, through sexual love. The teachings of the sculptures, and indeed the sacred Kamasutra itself, is the elevating of our primal needs into something holy and luminous.

Rather than repress the lower human functions as do most religions, pleasure is depicted as a vehicle to self-realisation and finally godliness - a transcended state where having savoured earthly delights we finally let go of cravings, attachments and worldly things.

Which is where I had been stuck. On worldly things. On clinging to the human body and grieving the effects of time. And suddenly here, spelt out in the exquisite sculptures, was my path.

For above the apsaras or female forms going about their maternal and erotic rituals, was Shakti. Mother Goddess. The Creative Source. Love.

Transformed symbolically from mortal female - loving a man, loving a child - to being Love itself. Ultimately liberated from possessive sexual love, childbirth and her earthly body, to become lover and Mother of all.

I returned to Australia 40 years young and ready to enjoy the sensuous fruits of my femaleness, knowing that the ripening would one day come. And with it, the spiritual richness of an awakening Soul.

www.ruthostrow.com

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