

The Sacred Pilgrimage

I PRAY—Offering Morning Prayers

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Sometimes, when you merely *enter* a city, it presents itself in the most photogenic manner. Everything you see around you makes for a delightful photograph. You just need to take a stroll around with a camera in tow, and the frames are made by themselves. Have you stepped into such a city? Well, I have, into Varanasi. As an experienced photographer and traveller, I have seldom come

across places that make me surrender to its character. Varanasi, also called, **Banaras** or **Kashi**, had that overpowering influence on me.

“Varanasi has been known before Rome was known, and for centuries has claimed and gained the homage of every devout Hindu. It is the Oxford and Mecca of Hinduism. Its river, its banks and Ghats, its temples are known and revered throughout India. Its very air and soil are counted holy. Residence in this city ensures salvation; death there makes salvation doubly sure.” Thus, wrote the Reverend Charles Philip Cape, in his book, *Banaras, the Stronghold of Hinduism* in 1909. And the following imitable prose from Mark Twain describes Varanasi and its mythological origin in a profound manner—“Banaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together.”

It is rather hard to introduce a city like Varanasi, justifiably. In certain ways, Varanasi epitomizes the two sides of the coin, called India. Varanasi must be experienced to be believed. Being among one of the most impressive sights in the world, this fantastically photogenic historical city in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh is a destination every photographer wants to visit.

In other words, it is like stepping into the blindingly colourful, unbelievably chaotic and the



DROPS OF SOLITUDE—Last Rites Performed for the Departed Beside the River

world's oldest continuously inhabited city, which can surprise and shock you, all at once. This is a place where spirituality and carefree attitude integrate seamlessly, where you witness the medley of human faith and Indian culture, confluence of Birth and Death, all in and around River Ganges. For anyone visiting Varanasi, they see a city where life comes a full circle.

For the shutterbug in you, it can be an addictive playground given the plethora of genres and themes one can work on. Being one of the best places for street images, it's a treasure trove for other genres too—people, portraits, culture, heritage, creative, abstracts, festivals, action and night photography. It is a vast canvas for experimentation and for building a theme-based portfolio. Little wonder that I have travelled to Varanasi, five times so far and will continue to in the future. There is a definite frame hidden in every little thing that unfolds here.

It is to our advantage that locals are accustomed to photographers, as it is one among the world's most photographed cities. People share a smile and go about their own ways. You find Sadhus (who according to general belief, are the religious, ascetic men, considered holy who have renounced the worldly life) who are good subjects, both for candid and staged portraits. They may oblige to pose, upon request. For this you need to pay them. Hire a local guide; this is very helpful, as they show the city like no other, point out vantage points for photography and even help to work with the Sadhus (a preferred approach). The hotel can give you the details about the guides. Unlike certain assumptions, locals do not expect money when photographed. But if they do, as a goodwill gesture one should pay them especially for having taken their photos. This is not a norm, however.

As a frequent visitor of Varanasi, I wish to share suggestions here for good photography opportunities:

Ghats by the Ganges

Varanasi is a city of Ghats. Ghats in Varanasi are riverfront steps leading to the banks of the River Ganges. Not one or two, but 80 of them. This is the first thing one will see as one enters the old city and by the river. Spend time at the Ghats—you will see most of the action here every morning and evening. Ghats are nothing but fleets of steps by the riverfront and are categorised into religious (for rituals), bathing (for dips and prayers), dhobi Ghats (for washing linen) and the Burning Ghats (for cremation). People offer prayers, take a dip, chant to their heart's fill and even perform the last rites of their departed kin. The colourful boats come and go, picking up and dropping off visitors and devotees. It is chaotic, yet colourfully so, against the backdrop of the century old heritage



NEVER ENDING—Steps in the Ghats are never ending and steep



SKYLINE ALONG THE GHATS—Varanasi View



CELEBRATING THE SUN—Morning Subah E Banaras

temples and the river. Sit on the steps to watch things unfold and work on your frames.

Any of the lenses can be used here, an all-purpose lens for width and close-up (ex: 15-85mm, 24-105mm, 18-135mm or similar), a 50/85mm for portraits and a good telephoto lens. Time-lapse is a good idea with so much movement. Also one can frame creative motion blur images with narrow apertures and use of an ND filter (if available).

Varanasi is one place where the Sun is received with as much celebration as anywhere else on the

Earth. As the ripples of the Ganges gently touch the horizon, the sun rises to the glorious prayers offered by the locals.

Subah-e-Banaras Arathi

Called by this name, this daily morning ritual is a magical experience. **Arathis** are prayers offered to the Sun and the Ganges. The one in the morning is called Subah-e-Banaras. Dark skies transform to golden orangish-red as the sun rises. Prayers are offered with the aid of large lit up bronze lamps



CULTURAL NOMADS—Sadhus and Religious Men in Varanasi

with smoke emanating all around. Chants rise in pitch with the sun rising. These are brilliant backdrops for silhouettes and golden hour images. This happens at the 80th Ghat, called **Assi**. So, be there before sunrise to frame the fascinating scenes.

Arathis at Sunset

Locals not only welcome the Sun but also give a royal send-off each evening as it sets. It's one of the most thrilling sights to witness and cherish. Even bigger metallic lit up oil lamps in artistic designs are used for these prayers, where fire is a significant element. While Arathis are performed in different scales at a few celebratory Ghats, the biggest and the grandest is at the **Dashashwamedha Ghat**. People throng the Ghat or get on a boat, facing the ritual, to watch this. Don't miss this mesmerizing opportunity. A fast lens helps with faster shutter speed, and a camera with a good ISO performance can enable you to shoot with higher ISOs. Interesting compositions can be experimented as the men swirl the lamps, using the smoke as a veil.

Boat Ride on the Ganges

Take a ride on the Ganga, in the morning or late afternoon. From the boat, you get to face the Ghats giving an absolutely unique perspective. The river is utterly peaceful and calm at sunrise, and sailing in the boat is a blissful experience. Floating markets on boats come to you selling intricate local artifacts. Unique patterns are seen on the water from the ripples of other boats, even



RELIGIOUS FRENZY—Sunset Arathi in the Evening

as gulls and pigeons fly all around your boat. This is one of the best ways to take in Varanasi, as you sail across many of the Ghats to get a feel for it. You can get off the boat at some of the Ghats, shoot and then get back in. Hire a boat of your choice, and the boatman will oblige and slow down at places you desire. A telephoto lens helps for portraits and close-ups.

Ride on to the First Ghat

An interestingly shaped large boat (a mini-ship), called **Bajda**, sails a little further from



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ROADHOUSE BLUES—Streets of Varanasi



I WANT TO BREAK FREE—Boat Ride at Sunrise on Ganges

the shore of the river and can sail to the first Ghat, called Adi Keshava. Smaller boats cannot, due to the high current. Here the confluence of the two rivers, **Varuna** and **Assi** occurs, which is how the name Varanasi, was derived (or so, the legend goes).

Frame life as it happens, on the streets of Varanasi. Go on multiple photo walks through its gullies, connecting via the Ghats. Numerous heritage buildings, temples (including the famous **Kashi Vishwanath** temple), Mosque, Nepali Temple and dated ones can be seen. Eateries serving local delicacies, tea shops and those selling munchy snacks—try Mutka chai (tea in a pot) and spicy buttermilk. These walks give you a taste of their lifestyles, their homes, shops, and occupation. Being dated, we find colourful graffiti, textured walls, patterns and street art—subjects are infinite. It is every street photographer's dream to walk on the streets of Banaras. It is a riot of colours.

The Last Mile

If you are keen to experience the Hindu way of cremation, stop by the **Manikarnika** Burning Ghat (the larger) and **Harischandra** (smaller one). Photography is strictly prohibited here, and one must respect this. One can see a lot of 'Last Mile' scenes even in the city as the departed are carried on the shoulder of four people. Life and death integrate seamlessly here.

Dev Diwali: Most people are aware of India's 'Festival of Lights'—the, **Diwali**. But have you heard of the '**Diwali of the Gods**'? Come late October - November, **Dev Diwali**, a festival where more than a million earthen lamps (aka, **Diyas**) are lit up and placed on all the steps of most Ghats on the riverfront.

This happens on the full moon day, around 15 days after the actual Diwali in honour of the River and its presiding goddess. Locals believe that Gods



CARE FOR A SHAVE—a Typical Street Scene



LIT UP—Dev Diwali Festival



LEAD BY EXAMPLE—Master at the Wrestling Ring is Fitter Than the Rest

descend to Earth to bathe in the Ganges on this day. This is a visual feast and casts a magical spell on the city.

Meet the Wrestlers: Varanasi does not have gymnasiums. It has wrestling rings. Young men learn wrestling to stay fit and powerful. Called the **Akhada**, located on the Tulsi Ghat; young and middle-aged men are trained by experienced local Gurus (teachers) and champions. Their way of exercising can leave you in awe. Speak to the head of the ring, before photography is suggested.

Varanasi—This is a journey, one must *not* miss, a place one must not ever miss photographing. There is so much more to do here than meets the eye. One trip does not suffice. You may want to revisit. Many cities can be fascinating, but only a few are transforming. My sacred pilgrimage to Varanasi was one such sojourn. And it will continue to be.

Best Time to Visit: November to March

Best Time to Shoot: Morning hours till 10AM and after 4PM. Avoid the mid-day.

Special Time: Dev Diwali (*Diwali of the Gods*) during October end-November

Equipment to Have: Good to have a mix of lenses—an all-purpose lens for width and close-up (ex: 15-85mm, 24-105mm, 18-135mm or similar), a 50/85mm for portraits and a good telephoto lens. Optional to carry a ND filter, to try interesting slow shutter imagery. Tripod, will be a bonus. ■

Hema Narayan is a professional photographer, mentor and writer from India. Engineer by education, she found her true interest was in photography and writing. Graduate of New York Institute of Photography. She has been published in renowned newspapers, portals and magazines, such as *National Geographic Traveller India*, *Discover India*, *The Hindu* and *Deccan Herald*. She is also founder of the company Wider Angles that conducts workshops and photo walks in the city and does commercial photography. You can learn more about Hema at her website, www.hemanarayanan.com.



DIP OF DEVOTION—Morning Prayer



COME HOME—Sadhu Decked in Beads on the Ghats—a Special Appearance in Varanasi