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INDIA – Art & Ritual in the Himalayas Itinerary

Days 1, 2

Our caravan of insight and adventure begins as we depart for India.

Day 3

Arrive in Kolkata and transfer to hotel. Rest from international flight. In Kolkata we will be staying at the **Vedic Village** – a renowned nature and health resort that takes us back in time to the ancient Bengali world of healthy living. Situated on more than 100 acres of fertile organic farmlands, natural ponds and coconut groves, the Vedic Village offers an ambience perfect for healing the body, mind and spirit. The Sanjeeva Spa offers age-old healing therapies of Ayurveda, Chinese medicine, yoga and meditation. Many of our travelers never want to depart from the Vedic Village! In the evening after dinner there will be an introduction to our program. Overnight - Kolkata.

Day 4

After breakfast we explore Kolkata, the true cultural capital of India that possesses a distinct Bengali soul. We will visit the **Indian Museum**, one of India's oldest that was founded in 1814. Local villagers come to the museum to make offerings the House of Magic as if it were a sacred temple. This museum has one of the finest collections of Buddhist stone and metal sculptures collected from all parts of India. After lunch we explore the **Pareshnath Jain Temple**. The Jain religion is one of India's three most important spiritual traditions that originated in India besides Hinduism and Buddhism. Founded in the 6th century BC by Mahavira, a contemporary of the Buddha, Jainism is dedicated and focused on Ahimsa – non-violence with a profound respect for nature and all living creatures. Overnight – Kolkata.

Day 5

After breakfast we visit **EMPOWER THE CHILDREN** – a non-profit program that delivers quality education opportunities and nutrition to street children of dire economic circumstances. Very often when travelers visit a country they take many things away from the cultures they visit. A visit to Empower the Children offers an opportunity to give something back! In the afternoon we explore Kolkata's most sacred Hindu temple, the **Dakshineswar Kali Temple** founded in 1847. We will explore this fantastic temple while we observe Hindus coming to perform their daily rituals and practices. In the evening we will experience a live performance of Bengali music and dance. Overnight – Kolkata.

Day 6

We depart Kolkata on a short one hour flight to Bagdogra where we transfer to our private vehicles. Our Himalayan Tour begins as we drive into the picturesque foothills to Darjeeling, a popular hill station established by the British in the mid-19th century. Darjeeling is one of the most charming towns in the eastern Himalaya that sits upon a 7000 foot ridge and surrounded by tea plantations. In Darjeeling we explore the world of Tibetan Buddhism. Overnight – Darjeeling.

Day 7

Our day begins with a visit to **Yiga Choeling Gompa**, the most famous monastery in the area that enshrines a beautiful image of the future Buddha Maitreya. After Yiga Choeling we then explore one of the largest and most beautiful monasteries in the area – **Thubpten Sangag Choeling**. This monastery has one of the most beautiful prayer rooms where we will have the opportunity to practice meditation. After lunch we visit Bhutia Busty Gompa, that offers a fantastic view of Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest mountain. The late afternoon is free time to explore Darjeeling's



wonderful market where we find people from all over the eastern Himalaya who come to work and trade. Overnight – Darjeeling.

Day 8

Early morning departure for Sikkim, a former Tibetan Buddhist Himalayan Kingdom. Sikkim was once regarded as one of the last Himalayan 'Shangri-las' because of its ancient Buddhist monasteries, pristine lakes, superb mountain terrain, and remoteness. On our spectacular mountain drive through Sikkim's terraced landscape, we are greeted by stupas, prayer flags, and its majestic mountain scenery. Sikkim is a *living botanical garden* surrounded by the Himalayas. We arrive in Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, and transfer to hotel. Overnight – Gangtok.

Day 9

After breakfast we have a full day to explore Gangtok – which literally means 'hilltop.' Set on a high ridge, Gangtok offers excellent views of the entire Kanchenjunga range. Our morning begins as we explore **Enchey Gompa**, home to about 100 monks of the Nyingmapa school. This monastery has a beautiful prayer hall with exquisite paintings and sculptures representing many of the most popular Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the vast Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. After lunch we will receive a lecture from one of the most renowned Buddhist Lamas in Sikkim who will share his many years of experience and in-depth knowledge of Buddhist philosophy and meditation. Overnight – Gangtok.

Day 10

Morning drive to the village of Rumtek located on the other side of the valley from Gangtok. Rumtek is the seat of the Gyalwa Karmapa, the head of the Kagyupa school of Tibetan Buddhism and one of the most important spiritual teachers in Tibetan Buddhism. He is believed to be an incarnation of the Bodhisattva of compassion – Avalokitesvara. Here we will explore the **Rumtek Dharma Chakra Center**. After Rumtek, we will visit our first nunnery and have the rare opportunity to sit with the nuns and actually chant with them in their monastery. In the afternoon we will visit the painting studio of one of Sikkim's most famous scroll painters. Here we will learn the timeless traditions of creating sacred art. Overnight – Gangtok.

Day 11

After breakfast we depart for **Pemayangtse Gompa** (Perfect Sublime Lotus). We are treated to a spectacular mountain drive through some of most inspiring natural scenery in the world - lush vibrant hills, leaping waterfalls, thundering rivers, tiny villages, and all beneath the gorgeous backdrop of the mighty Himalayan peaks. After lunch we explore Pemayangtse Gompa one of the most important monasteries in Sikkim. This Nyingmapa monastery was founded in 1705 and is a three story structure filled with magnificent frescos and sculptures. Here we will receive a lecture from a prominent Tibetan lama who will share his many years of experience and in-depth knowledge of Buddhist philosophy and meditation. Overnight – Pelling.

Day 12

After breakfast we explore **Sangachoeling Gompa**, the second oldest monastery in Sikkim built in 1697. This monastery is majestically positioned offering great mountain-views and belongs to the Nyingmapa order. At Sangachoeling, we meet both monks and nuns who invite us into their world's to show us how they live and study in a monastery. In the afternoon we drive to Sikkim's most sacred monastery, Tashiding Gompa, founded in 1716. This Nyingmapa monastery is majestically perched atop a hill, surrounded by a magical courtyard of stupas, prayer wheels and colorful prayer flags. Tashiding houses a superb collection of Buddhist sacred art - wall paintings and sculptures. Overnight – Pelling.



Day 13

Early morning departure for Kalimpong, a small town set among the rolling foothills and deep valleys of the Himalayas. Kalimpong was once part of the lands belonging to the rajas of Sikkim. It was once one of the most important commerce centers between India and Tibet. We arrive at the charming Himalayan Hotel, a Victorian landmark that once housed the 13th Dalai Lama! Late afternoon stroll through Kalimpong's bustling market. Overnight - Kalimpong.

Day 14

Our full day of exploration begins with a visit to Kalimpong's oldest monastery in the area – **Thongsa Gompa**. Here we will receive a lecture from the resident abbot on the tenets of Buddhist philosophy. In the afternoon we will visit Kalimpong's largest and most beautiful monastery – **Zong Dog Palri Gompa** built on the top of the spectacular Durpin Hill. Late afternoon is free time for shopping in Kalimpong's market. Overnight – Kalimpong.

Day 15

Our Himalayan adventure comes to its end as we depart Kalimpong in the morning on our last drive through the scenic countryside back to Bagdogra where we fly back to Kolkata. Overnight – Kolkata.

Day 16

There are more than 450 million gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. After breakfast we visit the section of Kolkata where the artists and artisans having been making these images for centuries. Overnight – Kolkata.

Day 17

Morning is free time. In the late afternoon we depart Kolkata on a flight to New Delhi. We then fly from New Delhi back to New York.

Day 18

We arrive back in New York at JFK.