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Students study world religions in India

December 01, 2009 | Johnnie Moore

After his journey through India, Mark Twain jested that the nation, “has two million gods, and worships them all. In religion all other countries are paupers; India is the only millionaire.”

Asia’s bustling giant is often cited as the world’s “museum of religions,” for within the yellowed pages of any old Indian history book one will find the recorded founding of at least one-quarter of the world’s 12 major religions.

So, when Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary President, Dr. Ergun Caner, and myself, determined to teach Religion and Missions students the tenets of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism and Islam, we chose India as the laboratory from which to study abroad.

During nine days in October, 24 Liberty University Online students toured with us via bus, planes and train for a week of hands-on learning through overt, multisensory encounters with India’s culture and homegrown religious systems.

Students learned Tibetan Buddhism from a close associate to the Dalai Lama at his exiled home atop a mountain situated in the snow-capped foothills of the Himalayan Mountains. They also learned the theology of the turban-wearing Sikhs from their famed gold-topped temple where they worship a 500-year-old “living book.”

On the banks of the Ganges River, students witnessed Hindu cremation, saw nomadic priests drinking its “holy” (and polluted) waters, and they attended a “fire service” that happens each evening on the river in honor of the “goddess” Ganges.

From the attributed location of Buddha's first sermon they received lectures on Buddha's "Four Noble Truths" and "Eight Fold Path," and from the historic capital of the Mughal Empire they learned of the opulence of the Muslim dynasty that ruled the Indian subcontinent for centuries.

The students even visited Taj Mahal, constructed by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan for his favorite wife who died delivering their 14th child, and they learned of one Asiatic emperor whose throne was so valuable that it could feed the entire world for seven days.

Liberty has long boasted of its "action-oriented" curriculum. Our professors are discontent to confine their curriculum within the walls of their lecture halls.

This journey was just one recent example of how Liberty University students have the opportunity to experience what they are learning.

Chace Murphy, a 33-year-old seminary student who is an on-air news director for several radio stations in Central Texas, believed it to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

"I benefited greatly from this trip, educationally speaking," he said. "I was able to meet great people affiliated with Liberty University and learn a tremendous amount about other cultures in a short period of time."

Catherine Wilcoxon, 23, is a registered nurse who went to India with an eye toward the poverty that plagues it.

"I learned so much more than I ever could have by reading a book, and I left with an acute awareness of the great physical and spiritual need of India's people," she said.

Libby Ritz, a 46-year-old insurance agent studying religion, said, "the time ... was priceless."