



# Varanasi

**Life along the Ganges**

**Reto Steffen**

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## Life along the Ganges

Varanasi, also known as Benares or Kashi, is the holiest of the holy cities in Hinduism. It comes with a considerable chunk of history and a claim to fame.

I was, therefore, a bit surprised that, when checking in at the Geneva airport (in Switzerland), the airline staff had never heard about it and had no idea where I was going. But still I boarded, and a couple of hours later the immigration officer in Delhi was thrilled to tell me that it was his hometown, the best city in the world and that he was delighted that I was going there and was able to experience it.



Mark Twain famously said about the city “Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together.” And I would add it also smells its age.

The city lies on one bank of the Ganges, and its inhabitants claim that it has 23'000 temples. I didn't try to find or count them all, but the Ganges is, at least in my opinion, the most significant spiritual presence in the city. Hindus and Jains come from all over India and the world to perform ritual ablutions, give offerings and cremate their dead, to give their ashes to the river.

But it's also where people take baths, wash their clothes, kids learn to swim, tourists go on boat rides, buffalos get cleaned, and most of the everyday trash gets thrown.

The contrast is stark and fascinating.





For two weeks I walked along the Ghats, big stone steps leading to the river, observing the life around the river. Watching boatmen shout their next destination a couple of feet from a pilgrim slowly and religiously preparing his offerings on the stone steps. Most things you can imagine will happen every day in Varanasi a million times over, all at the same time: the first dip of a young boy in the holy river, a blessing for soon to be newlyweds in full wedding attire, funeral pyres burning one body after another. You can see it all, or at least try to. Walking alongside the Ghats shouldn't take very long, it's about 5 km from the first one to the last, but if you keep your eyes open, it takes much longer. I probably progressed by only a couple of hundred meters every hour; there is just so much to see, hear and smell.

Bathing in the river is believed to clean you of your past sins but for a westerner (even a well-travelled one) it's hard to grasp the significance of a purifying bath in one of the most polluted rivers on Earth, so I chose to live with my sins and watch it all unfold.





























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