Pilgrimage: How to Spiritually Prepare for Travel



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Being a pilgrim is a full-bodied experience. All your thoughts and feelings will be activated. People will experience sacred moments at different times and for different reasons. And this booklet will provide an excellent framework for your experience.

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Searching for the Sacred in Greece

We were in Patmos, Greece, a sparsely populated island in the middle of nowhere that ancient Romans used as a place of banishment—a kind of modern-day Alcatraz. According to tradition, a man named John wrote the last book in the Bible—titled Revelation—in a cave on this tiny island. The last time I took a group to Patmos, the group read Revelation aloud on the ferry ride over. Everyone got lost in the images of strange beasts, cataclysmic events, and gold-paved streets.



Upon docking, the time you spend in the actual Cave of the Apocalypse is only a matter of minutes according to *chronos* time—"clock time." Because of other pilgrims eager to pay their respects to John in a place where biblical history was made, the Greek Orthodox priests overseeing the chapel monitor how long each person remains at the sacred site. But while groups enter and remain momentarily in the cave, where the smell of the sea is overpowered by the gust of incense and the darkness is extinguished by the light from small windows peering out into the sea, you are able to transcend time measured in minutes and find yourself deep afloat in *kairos* time—"eternal time."



A Pilgrim's Life

Traveling overseas as a pilgrim is one of the most ancient forms of tourism. It has been practiced for thousands of years. All world religions encourage this demonstration of devotion, whether Jews and Christians to Jerusalem, Muslims to Mecca, or Buddhists to Bodh Gaya. In fact, pilgrimage is a billion-dollar industry. Every year, millions of tourists flock to popular destinations like El Camino in Spain, Machu Picchu in Peru, Varanasi in India, and many other places besides. Truth is, being a pilgrim does not mean that a person has to be religious at all. All that is required is a passport, a sense of adventure, and an eagerness to find meaning in an exotic land.



What Is a Pilgrim?

For those in North America, the word pilgrim conjures up images of black-and-white clad men wearing cone-shaped hats and women carrying baskets of produce. In the United States, the Pilgrims were a group of English settlers who established Plymouth Colony in the seventeenth century for religious freedom. Most famously, they are responsible for our nation's First Thanksgiving, which has since become one of America's most celebrated annual holidays. Although the Pilgrims

were, indeed, pilgrims—that is, people journeying to a sacred or holy place for religious or spiritual reasons—they do not play any part in modern-day pilgrimage.

Pilgrims today come in all shapes and sizes: religious, spiritual, seeking, atheist, and agnostic. I've met every kind of them on my journeys overseas, with some of the most spiritually hungry not professing to be religious or believing in God. This has caused me to expand my prior understanding of what a pilgrim truly is.

I define a pilgrim as "a traveler in search of meaning, sacredness, direction, or connection."

This definition necessitates three parts: (i) someone traveling (often overseas), (ii) someone actively looking for something, and (iii) someone acknowledging that certain locations are more spiritually charged than others.

If this describes your travel mentality, you are in good company. And you also have endless places to choose from. Today, there is hardly a country in existence that does not offer some compelling pilgrimage site, and some countries are world-famous for their time-tested ability to rock people's world with insight, energy, and illumination. Whether you want to pay homage to a legendary saint, worship in a sacred church, hike a solemn trail, or forge a spiritual memory, the world is calling to you. And, with it, meaning, guidance, and wisdom await you.

Your Framework before Your Pilgrimage

I will provide five interrelated frameworks to guide your pilgrim experience. They are all closely aligned and are not mutually exclusive. Focus on the framings that connect best with you.

And do not worry if these concepts are new or different. Find one that interests you.









(1) Between Heaven and Earth

There is a famous story about Russian envoys who traveled to Turkey in the tenth century to consider whether to adopt Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the state religion of Russia. Inside Hagia Sophia, the most grandiose church in the world that was built in the sixth century, they were overwhelmed with the church's grandeur and sheer beauty, confessing that "We didn't know if we were in heaven or on earth." This phrase gets to the heart of the pilgrim's dilemma: being pushed back and forth, like a game of tug-of-war, between heaven and earth. In the Middle Ages, when pilgrimage became increasingly common, pilgrims wore distinctive clothing and carried a staff and satchel to symbolize that they were "between worlds." This is what the word liminal means.

Deriving from a Latin term that can be translated as "threshold," "doorway," or "doorstep," being a pilgrim is like pitching a tent under a threshold, never quite sure whether you are inside or outside. This liminal existence is not easy. It is difficult to be a door that constantly swings both ways. Stated differently, although a pilgrim travels overseas seeking to encounter the splendor of heaven, we can only reach heaven with our feet firmly planted on earth. This reality can lead to confusion, disappointment, and misunderstanding. Spiritual moments, after all, are experienced in different ways at different times for different durations. No one can sustain them in perpetuity, and you never know when the spiritual high you are currently experiencing is going to land you back on the ground.

(2) Between Thin and Thick Places

In addition to the metaphor of heaven and earth, there are also other historic terms pilgrims have used to describe this mentality: thin places and thick places. According to author Mary DeMuth, "thin places are snatches of holy ground, tucked into the corners of our world, where, if we pay very close attention, we might just catch a glimpse of eternity" (Mary DeMuth, *Thin Places: A Memoir*). They are places that are spiritually charged, but difficult to locate. Encountering a thin place is the goal of a pilgrim. It is like an archaeologist discovering a lost city from the past, a paleontologist finding the remnants of a fully intact dinosaur, and a detective deciphering the location of a hidden ruby. A thin place radiates spiritual energy and power, but it only does so momentarily, individually, and seemingly arbitrarily.



This energy strikes out in untold ways, and you cannot hold on to the power for long before it flickers away. The opposite of a thin place is a thick place. This is not to be confused with a dark place, which is a place that has been tattooed by evil. Some of the darkest places I have visited, for instance, are the Killing Fields in Cambodia, where more than a million people were brutally murdered in the late 1970s, and Concentration Camps in Germany and Poland, where millions of innocent lives were taken in the 1940s. These are dark places. They feel as if they were animated by an evil spirit.



However, a thick place is a wholly mundane experience, a place of spiritual stagnation, where nothing illuminating occurs even when you try to animate it. Unfortunately, two people can and do visit the same site and yet walk away with a different sensation. I have led countless pilgrim tours where, upon visiting a famous church or religious site, a few pilgrims encounter a thin place, several a thick place, and one or two a dark place. The life of a pilgrim is about searching for thin places, but also recognizing that thick and even dark places are encountered without warning.



(3) Between *Chronos* and *Kairos* Time

All this discussion of straddling heaven and earth and shuffling between thin places and thick places intersects with the notion of time. The primary purpose of your pilgrimage is to recharge your spiritual batteries, to connect with your religious heritage, or to find comfort in a power greater than yourself. This mindset is what the ancient Greeks called *kairos* time, “eternal time.”

It is time measured in eons. It is when your spirit becomes so enraptured in the moment that you forget all sense of worldly commitments. You become a weightless balloon floating up into the cosmos.



But what goes up must also come down. All balloons eventually return to the ground. Therefore, you have to come to terms with the fact that all pilgrims face moments of disappointment, that some even get sick, and still others never find what they are looking for. This is *chronos* time, “clock time.”

It is time measured in minutes. It is when you get foot blisters from walking, disillusioned with a site you had always dreamed of visiting, and anger from being yelled out by someone in your group for spending too much time at a particular site.

(4) Between Divinity and Humanity

Indeed, for many, the most challenging part about a pilgrimage are the other people who accompany you. It is virtually impossible to stay on the same spiritual page as the others in your group, even if that other person is a spouse, friend, or church member. You may want to spend hours at a site, while someone else in your group prefers to simply take a picture and move on. Or, at night, you may want to pass the evening journaling about your incredible experiences and contemplating the places you will visit tomorrow, while your roommate only wants to watch TV and then go out for drinks.



The fact of the matter is that people will get in the way of your time with God. And that could be your greatest challenge on your pilgrimage. It is hard enough to maintain balance with our spiritual lives at home, so how much more so when overseas, when harboring unrealistic expectations, and when constantly surrounded by others who may get on our nerves and who have a knack for always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.



Regrettably, I have seen many spiritual moments shattered because one person was in a different state of mind than the other. I remember one incident in particular. We were in Bethlehem visiting the Church of the Nativity, the traditional site of Jesus's birth. Returning to the bus afterward, one woman began sharing how meaningful the experience had been and how she will always treasure being where Jesus was born. The response from the woman next to her was heartbreaking. She said, "Yeah right, that place was awful. It was too crowded, it reeked of incense, and all I wanted to do was run out of there. They probably just made up that Jesus was born there to make a buck off of gullible tourists. What a joke." Don't be that person. Hold your tongue. Take an emotional thermometer check before complaining, criticizing, or condemning.





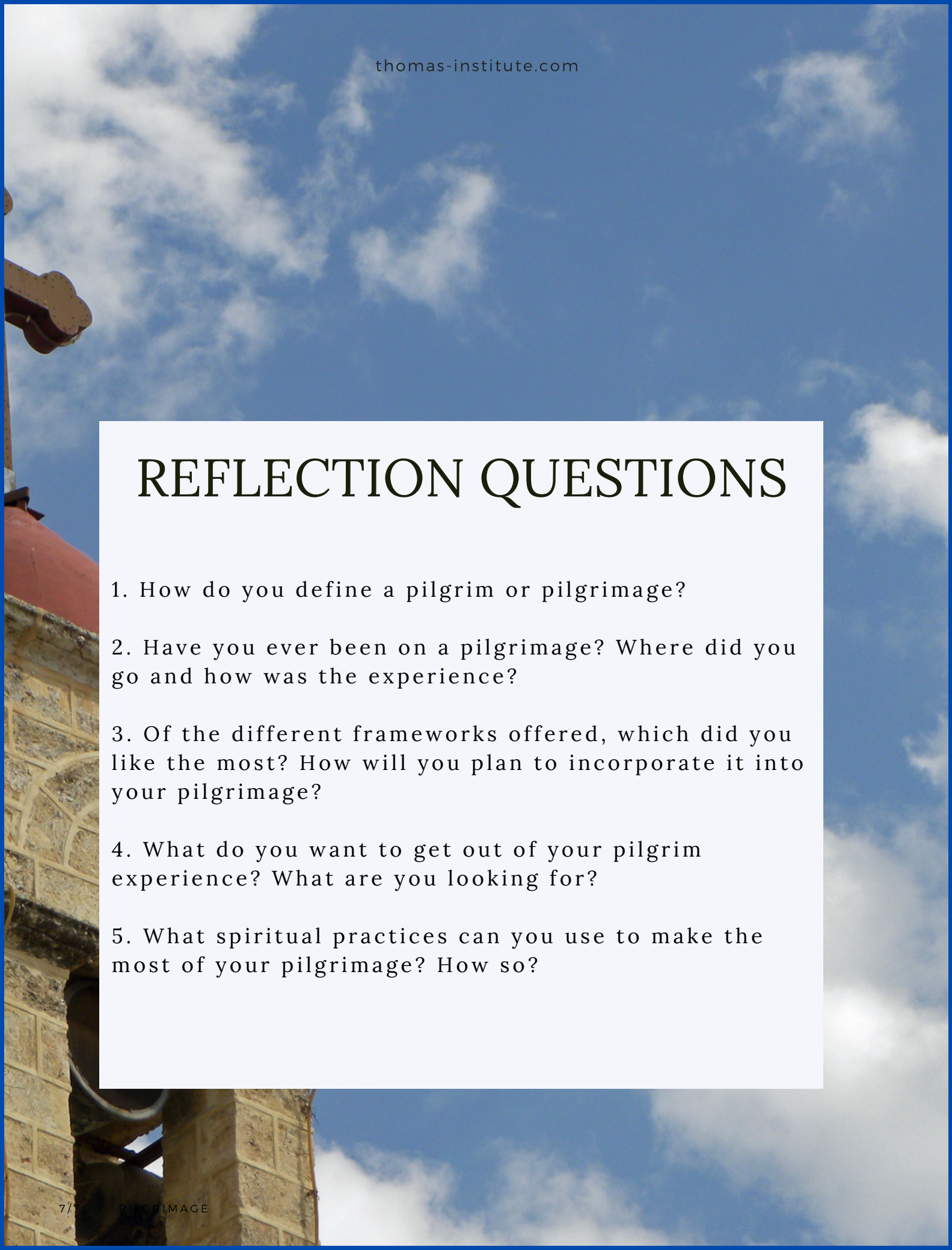
(5) Between Setbacks and Surprises

I have written in other booklets that international travel increases the chances of risk, disillusionment, conflict, and stress. No one wants to experience these things, especially during a pilgrimage. However, they cannot be entirely avoided. The life of a pilgrim is living between the disappointment of setbacks and the excitement of surprises. Let's not sugarcoat your pilgrimage. There will be moments when you will not feel spiritual, when you wish you were somewhere else, and when you would give anything to be with another group. But don't despair.

Although there will be setbacks, there will also be surprises. An unanticipated yet delicious conversation with a stranger, a moment of sheer serenity when you have total peace, or unplanned visit that turns out to be the most meaningful one of all. When on pilgrimage, lean into surprises when they come your way. They are divinely-kissed moments that have the ability to make memories that last a lifetime. Ride these moments like a roller coaster, committing to staying with them until you arrive at the end of the way. As for setbacks, though, take them in stride. They will not last too long ,and owning and admitting that you will face them is more than half of the battle. Besides, surprises always outweigh setbacks. They are worth their weight in gold.

Conclusion

Being a pilgrim is a full-bodied experience. All of your thoughts and feelings will be activated. Throughout your trip, you will walk, listen, pray, reflect, sleep, eat, laugh, tear up, get upset, learn, and wonder. People will experience sacred moments at different times and for different reasons. This underscores the fact that when you are on pilgrimage, you will constantly be straddling between different worlds, different time horizons, and different feelings and emotions. Regardless of how many spiritual moments you schedule, how many prayers you utter, and how many shrines you visit, this tension will frame your pilgrimage overseas, so it is important to give it full consideration. Fortunately, there are many frameworks that you can adopt while away that can offer you equilibrium and set you up for success, surprises, and illumination.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you define a pilgrim or pilgrimage?

2. Have you ever been on a pilgrimage? Where did you go and how was the experience?

3. Of the different frameworks offered, which did you like the most? How will you plan to incorporate it into your pilgrimage?

4. What do you want to get out of your pilgrim experience? What are you looking for?

5. What spiritual practices can you use to make the most of your pilgrimage? How so?



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