

PEACE PARTNERSHIP INTERNATIONAL

Forging Alliances to Co-Create a Culture of Peace

Treasures of Discovery and Peace along the Silk Road

By [Robert M. Weir](#)



School Girls - Jark, Afghanistan

“We find out who we are by the reflection of how people respond to us,” says reportage photographer Marla Mossman whose search for her religious and spiritual roots is taking her on a peace journey along the ancient Silk Road from the Middle East to China. By traveling across nations such as Israel, Palestine, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Marla says, “I’m trying to learn who I am through all those strangers in interesting, strange places.”

Marla has traveled by foot, horse, donkey, camel, car, bus, train, boat and ferry on the Silk Road four times since 1996, with a fifth segment of the trip, covering 2,000 miles, coming up in 2009.



Salam Khan Amini's Donkey - Dewan, Afghanistan

This New York City resident, who was raised as a Reformed Jew, says she may not be sure who she is but she knows where to look. And she believes that the treasures she is finding are of benefit to all people who are aware of the rising world peace consciousness. “I’m studying Judaism from the role of women in our culture. I want to find out what happened to the women’s voices that formed the foundation of modern Judeo-Christian religions that now guide our governments and our way of being,” she explains.

Marla adds that those voices of divine feminine reason have been lost over the centuries. “Before the Hebrews wrote the Torah, there was a pagan culture rich with sensuality, earthiness and knowledge from a different source,” she says. “Theirs was a mythopoeic, prelogical, innate thinking through which the sages gathered information. Then came logical thinking, empirical knowledge and scientific reasoning, much of which began with the Torah. And somewhere, somehow, the voices of women got hushed and left out.”



Woman Carrying Water - Dal Lake, India

She states that, after the Hebrews, human consciousness moved away from earth to man-made non-earth, so that the leading religious role for a woman was to give a virgin birth to a Divine Savior.

Drawn by this imbalance between masculine and feminine energy, Marla chose to travel the Silk Road, describing it as “the great trade route between the Orient and the Fertile Crescent, the crucible of pagan culture, the beginning.” By entering the venues of Zen, Buddhism, Confucianism and Islam, and by interfacing with modern women and men and children along that sacred path, Marla is rediscovering that source of ancient feminine knowledge.



Ancient Silk Road

She formed an organization, called Peace Caravan, the mission of which is to nourish the principles of international cooperation, exchange cultural values, share understanding of the environment, and foster the equality of all peoples, including women and children.

“The Peace Caravan project looks at and compares the mystical underlying core of all religions,” Marla confirms, “and I’m doing that at the pedestrian level, by walking among the people who live along the Silk Road.”

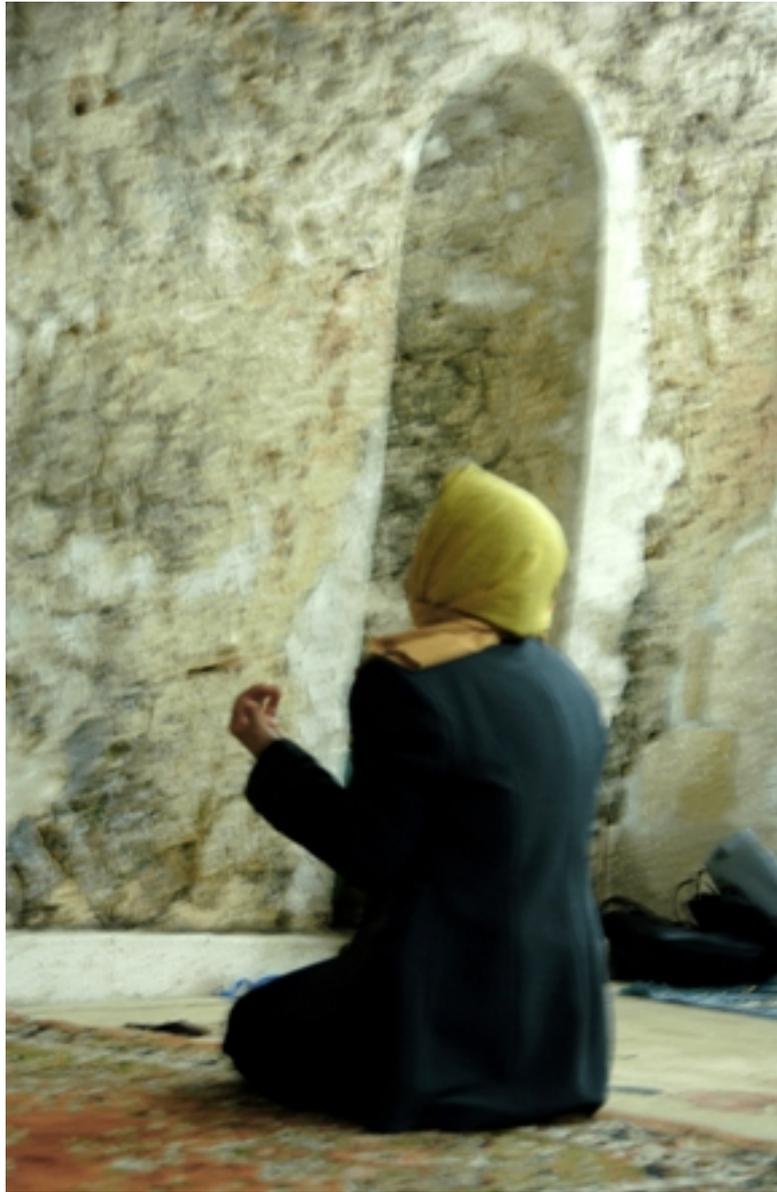
Marla finds peace in the subjects she encounters and the pictures she takes. “Fear and violence come out of prejudice of the unknown. I’m breaking down the barriers of fear by projecting images of ordinary people while they eat, sleep and live their daily lives.”



Prayer Wheel - Leh, Ladakh, India

She believes that individuals traveling to foreign countries can make a huge difference for peace by bringing the concepts of love, trust and respect for each other. “Mitzvahs (good deeds) are the diplomacy of the streets that give people a sense of freedom, a sense of themselves. This is what we can do as peaceful travelers and peaceful tourists,” she says.

Marla sees her photographic images as educational tools for children and adults, and she displays the photos, as well as her fine art, in exhibitions and on her web sites: www.peacecaravan.com and www.marla.net. She says, “People see the pictures as being ecumenical and without prejudice — a woman praying in a mosque, a Jewish boy, a monk, a nun, people like you and me who are out of the mainstream of history.”



Cave of Prophet Abraham - Sanliurfa, Turkey

Marla’s search for global multiplicity and cultural pluralism started at an early age. She, her identical twin sister, Myra, and brother James were born of middle-class Canadian parents in Detroit, Michigan. When the girls were three months of age, the family moved to a suburban neighborhood in Windsor, Ontario. With dual citizenship, these siblings traversed the 1.5-mile Ambassador Bridge, which spans the Detroit River, or went underground via the Detroit/Windsor Tunnel that connects those two cities. “Often Myra and I went by ourselves,” Marla says. “We went into racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods where we weren’t supposed to go. We intermingled and became very fluid in different situations. This has made it easy for me to travel across borders today.”

In 1967, when the twins were 12, Marla, Myra and James watched from across that international boundary

as violent race riots erupted in Detroit. They felt fear and excitement as they watched flames from burning buildings illumine the night sky, and that was followed by a sense of being left out of the action because they were not permitted to visit downtown Detroit again for a long time.

After earning a degree from the University of Western Ontario in 1977, Marla worked in the advertising industry in major cities such as Montreal and Chicago, representing three commercial photographers who specialized in national multimedia campaigns.



Mass at the Church of Agony - Garden of Gethsemane, Jerusalem, Israel

Not until she fell in love and moved spontaneously to be with her beau in London, England, in 1983 did she pick up a camera for the first time. In doing so, she experienced the thrill of reportage photography. “Drifting through a city with a camera, I became part of the now, experiencing the geopsychology, looking beyond the surface and seeing the realities of daily life. When doing street photography, I become aware of existing situations, then I wait for the decisive moment of simultaneous recognition when the variables of a four-dimensional world coalesce into the elements necessary to communicate that perfect vision in two dimensions, captured in a fraction of a second,” Marla says.

On her journeys on the Silk Road, the geopsychological world with which Marla must deal includes the logistics of lodging (indoors or out), Internet connections, cellular communications and electricity to charge the batteries on her three digital cameras, laptop, and a host of accessories.



Lamayuru Monastery - 14,000 Ft Himalayas - Ladakh, India

She often encounters another modern manifestation of empirical knowledge — fear. You’re going where? is the frequent incredulous response both from friends in developed countries and from acquaintances in war-torn nations. “People don’t like to be out of their comfort zone without an itinerary or agenda,” Marla analyzes. “Most Americans wouldn’t go to Kabul or Kashmir or sleep overnight against military orders at Israel’s Mt. Karkom, as I have done,” she says, adding that she met a man who had lived in Jerusalem his entire life and whose grandmother had been born in Old City, the .9 square kilometer area within modern Jerusalem, who said he would not dare enter certain sections of the Holy City.



Bhurkah Sellers - Herat, Afghanistan

Marla counters fear by reflecting peace and confidence in her inner self. “In the freefall of being alone in unfamiliar places and having difficulty with communications, my peace comes from being in the moment and trusting the basic goodness of people. When I walk the world, the freefall coalesces into the serendipitous. Grace coalesces. And, to me, every person I encounter is one hundred percent good.”

Yet, Marla also bases itinerary decisions on sound judgment, conventional wisdom and survival instincts. “Journalists and photojournalists in those countries don’t get in a car if they don’t know the driver, they always tell someone where they’re going, and they don’t sit in one location more than 45 minutes. Those are the ground rules, and I play by those rules,” she says.

She recounts one episode of circumstances beyond her control. “I had to cross the border from Turkey into Syria,” she expounds. “There was a crossing point 30 minutes from where I was staying, but that area had been bombed by Israelis the month before. So, I arranged for a taxi to take me to another crossing point two and half hours away. I gave the hotel the taxi’s license number and told them where I was going.



Bedouin Girl - Desert near Palmyria, Syria

“We were more than half way to the border when the driver saw another car, this one with a Syrian license plate. He hailed that car, stopped, got out and began to talk with the other driver. I couldn’t understand their words, so all I had to go on was body language. They were talking, thumping each other on the back and looked happy, and they were pointing at me. Then I realized my driver was making arrangements to switch me over to this strange guy’s car. And he did so, literally, in exchange for a carton of contraband cigarettes. There wasn’t much I could do, but the new driver had a valid license plate and driver’s license with photo, and he was playing rock ‘n’ roll, so I trusted him.

“When we got to the border, he dropped me off in a building where I was surrounded by men, and drove his little mini car away with my cameras, computer and clothes. I started praying Om Mani Madme Hum (the Tibetan Buddhist prayer for compassion), The Shema (a Judeo declaration of faith in one God), and The Ana

Be'co'ach (the Kabbalist's prayer for protection). Then, I looked around and realized that people were walking in and out, there were children, they were not hiding me, and I was not going to be kidnapped.

“The driver came back, and it turned out that he had given the authorities instructions and they were processing my papers and making transactions to get me across the border. It took about an hour because they went through all my stuff. Then he drove another hour and dropped me off at my hotel.”



East Gate of the Old Souk - Aleppo, Syria

Marla says her experiences teach her trust and cooperation. “I learned we need each other and that we have to give to each other. That’s the Bedouin way. Otherwise, you’re going to be stranded alone in the desert,” she says.

Relating these and other incidents to the U.S. Department of Peace and Nonviolence campaign, Marla says, “People involved in the culture of peace hold notions of peace as practical and necessary. We don’t have to be a perfected deity in order to achieve a sense of enlightenment. We are already divine in the moment. That’s the kind of positive energy we should start from in our institutions. That’s what the culture of peace is about.”



Pilgrim Path - Bethany-By-the-Sea, Jordan

The notion of peace. The culture of peace. Peace as practical and necessary. Transforming fear and coalescing grace. And finding the divine feminine-inspired roots of her religion. These are the treasures Marla Mossman has brought from the Silk Road — through her photos, her art and her mitzvahs. “We’re at an interesting threshold of change, a time of an enormous culling of old ways. There are many wonderful thinkers on this path to peace. We’ve just got to step out and get ourselves onto the path.”