

This Month: 108 Sacred Destinations

Priceless
July / August 2004

Heartland Healing

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Magazine

Interview With Author
Brad Olsen

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Critical mass:

Bicycles on a path to mass transit





TEMPLE OF ANGKOR

108 Destinations: *Sacred Places Around the World*

Sacred places give travel more meaning. An interview with author and world traveler Brad Olsen

More and more, vacation travel is becoming an exercise in intent. It was once true that traveling itself was such an adventure that it was its own reward. But we've become a mobile society. It's easier than ever to get around the country or around the world. Travel is commonplace and now people want more.

Vacations with a goal in mind are becoming more popular. To many travelers, it's not enough to just go somewhere. That

"somewhere" has to have meaning. Americans are taking their two-weeks away from the office to stay in yoga camps, go on diving trips, visit dude ranches, meditation

retreats, language-learning excursions, join an archaeological expedition or search for herbs in the Amazon with an herbalist. Sure, there are still some of us who enjoy (or need) the two weeks of doing nothing and then resting afterward. But organizing a vacation with substance — or at least a little intent — adds some memorable moments to the idea of "R and R."

San Francisco-based author Brad Olsen has put his wanderlust to word and written two travel guidebooks (with a third on the way) describing places travelers can visit that have a special energy that makes them sacred.

Sacred Places Around the World: 108 Destinations, (CCC Publishing, 280 pages, Second Edition, 2004) and *Sacred Places*

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WHY 108?

Brad Olsen notes the significance of the number 108 and credits one of his yoga teachers for reminding him. Olsen writes that both Buddhists and Hindus revere the number 108 and that is the number of prayer beads in the sacred mala. He didn't note that baseball aficionados or fans of the movie *Bull Durham* might recognize the number 108 as the number of stitches in a baseball.



North America: 108 Destinations, (CCC Publishing, 304 pages, 2003) serve as travel guides with intent. Both books document some of the sacred locations around the planet that can put meaning beyond the purchase of a plane ticket or tank of gasoline. Putting any of these places on a vacation itinerary can provide the traveler with a rewarding experience.

Olsen's books are filled with hand drawn maps, photos and historical references that intrigue and entertain the reader. He also includes practical information such as detailed instructions on how to reach some of the more remote locations and some hints on departure at journey's end. Those tips come in handy when it's time to hire a rickshaw for the final stages of a journey to Mohenjo-Daro along the Indus River in India or when it's important to know *not* to touch the lingams at the Temple of Angkor in Phnom Kulen.

We caught up with the peripatetic Olsen while he was at Book Expo America in Chicago. He was on his way to present a lecture in Kempton, Ill. to a group of 300 people attending the Ancient Sciences/Modern Mythology Conference. In a combination of email and phone interviews we discussed his travels and books.

Heartland Healing: Brad, what makes a place sacred and therefore included in one of your books?

Brad Olsen: What makes a sacred place? I guess you could say that it's somewhat subjective since it is I deciding to write about them. But some are really quite obvious and above dispute, such as Stonehenge or the Great Pyramids. And in this country, Devil's Tower monument in Wyoming was a sacred place to the native people. Then there are a lot of local places. In my book, I try to bring them in to make it a comprehensive guide to make up the 108.

What qualifies as a sacred place is a question I get a lot. As a journalist, I look for the story value of the place; how it's inspired people — past, present and even the future, like New Age sites. New Age sites seem to get more popular as the years go by. When I

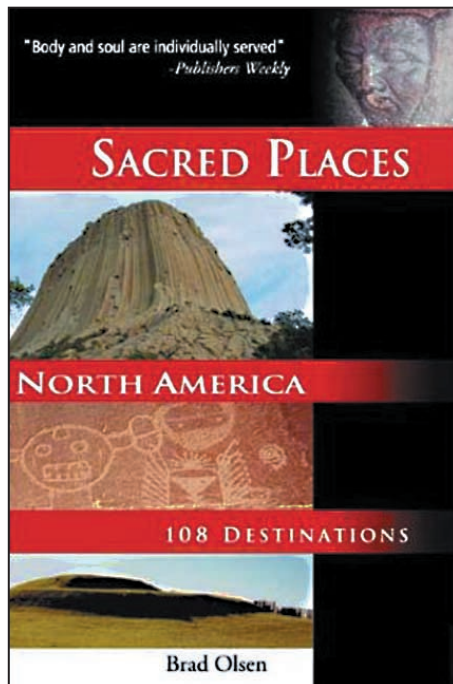


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go to Europe next month to research my new book, there's a site I plan to visit in Italy near Turin. It's Damanhur, an underground, New Age city that is just catching on and has become its own institution now. So there are some up and coming sites, easily recognizable sites in the present and then I like to include the ancient sites, many of which have been forgotten or perhaps could use a good dose of restoration.

HH: Not all the sites are so indisputable.

Olsen: So maybe there are a few, like in



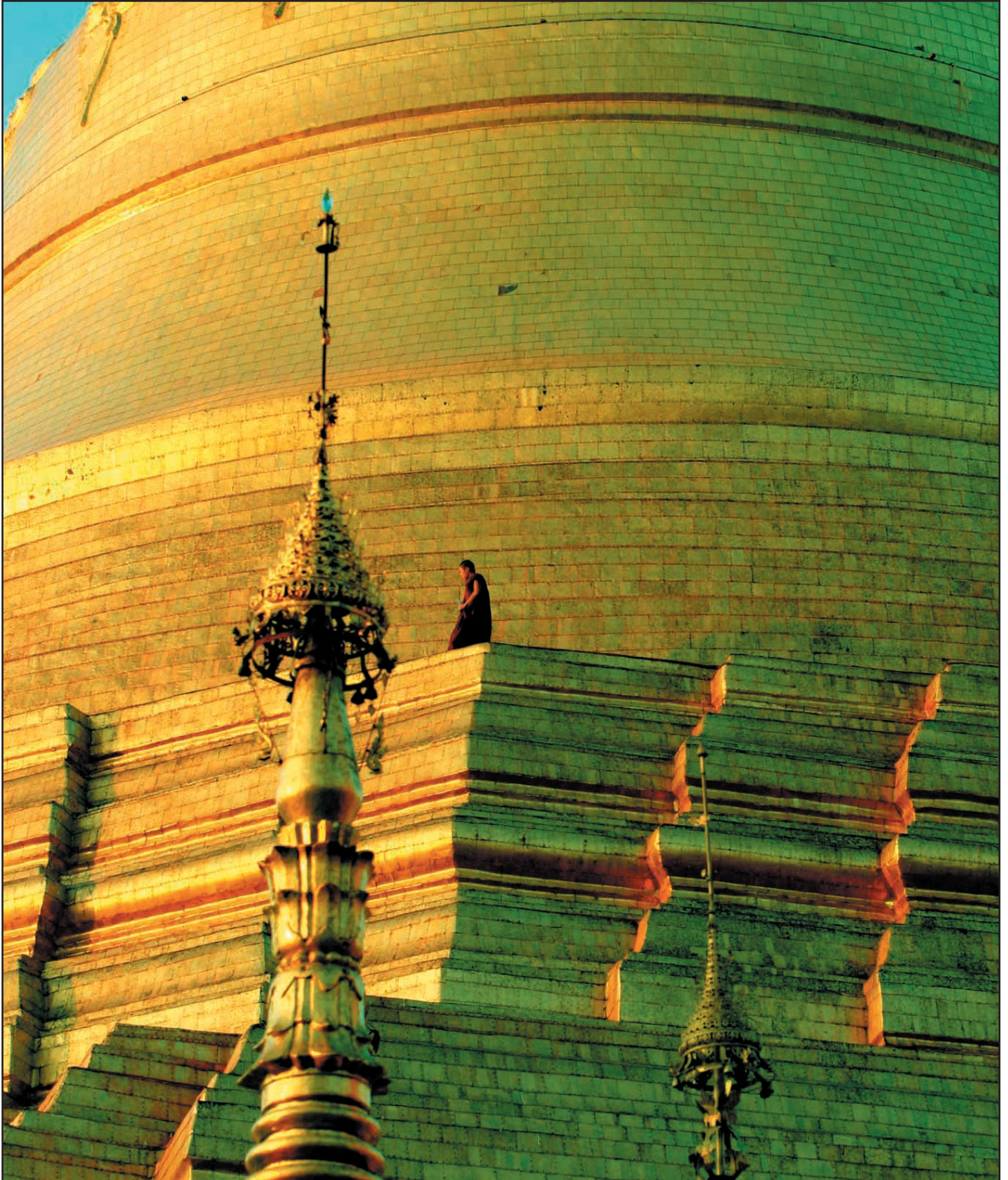
North America there's Graceland, that some might find kind of borderline. But let me say this, I went there when I was doing my cross country trip for the North America book and I saw some people who were kneeling down very reverently by Elvis Presley's grave or walking into the house like it was a cathedral. And I thought, "There's something about the persona of Elvis Presley that makes this a special place."

So of all the reviews I get on the book, it's featured in about two-thirds of them. They'll mention it in the context of 'Even a place like Graceland...' and sometimes with a touch of sarcasm.

HH: You mention some sites are in need of help.

Olsen: That's right. One that comes to mind is the Lovelock Caves in Nevada. They were littered with cans and debris, which we picked up. Another site in New England, — this old beehive chamber made out of non-masonry, stacked bricks, one of the coolest sites I saw, — had a big, discarded tire in it. I feel that some of these sites that are under-recognized could use a little support from the communities that are part of them or we should make them part of the park system. They're remarkable places.

HH: Is a place sacred because of an inherent



quality or because of the influence of the humans associated with it?

Olsen: That's a great question. For example, in the case of Graceland, it's obviously considered a sacred place because Elvis lived there. Many people revered his life and his music and go there to pay respect.

An alternate example is certain mountains. Many mountains around the world have been revered as sacred peaks and obviously they were here long before we came around. So it goes back to what I look for in a sacred place and that's 'What kind of story value does it have?' What is the interest of the people in the region surrounding it? What legends pervade this sacred mountain? And just what makes it different from all the rest? Because, after all, there are tens of thousands of mountains above the water and below but only a few are considered sacred mountains.

So that's why, when you go to see them, they are oftentimes the most remarkable mountain around. They're either the tallest or have the most distinguished features or maybe the only ones that support glaciers like Mt. Shasta in Northern California. There's usually something really remarkable about the mountain that makes the indigenous people respect it.

HH: Sometimes it seems that auspicious buildings were built at locations on the planet that people believed to be spiritual places in the first place.

Olsen: Right. And that prompts the whole discussion about ley lines on the planet. The Gaia Hypothesis, as put forth by the ancient Greeks*, holds that the whole planet is a living entity. And if so, then wouldn't this living entity resemble a life form as we know it; with pulsating energy and/or veins? Like on a human being or a leaf on a tree. And if that's the case, that there are these energy lines on the planet, then where they intersect may also be another clue for early people to think about a place to erect their sacred sites.

Along those lines also, with the opposite of the yang lines according to some geomancers, are the straight, squared-off lines that we recognize as latitude and longitude



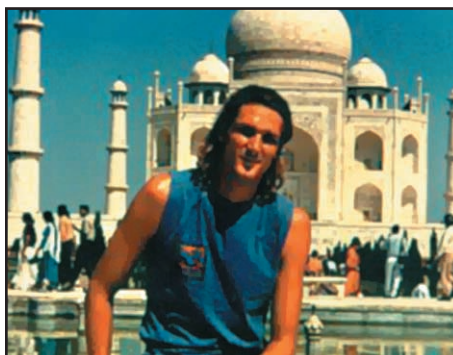
MT. SHASTA

lines but certainly don't correspond with the latitude and longitude that we know but more of the energy of the earth. Including what they call yang lines or curved lines. The bend in the stream, the serpentine cave, all the different natural curving features are also considered part of the ley line family.

It's known that ancient people from the Native Americans to Neolithic Europeans worshipped the underworld. So anytime there was a cave or spring or animals that emerged from the earth, it was quite a fascinating feature of the landscape to ancient people and oftentimes, sacred places will emerge around those important sites.

(* Editor's Note: Most references name James Lovelock as the originator of the Gaia

BRAD OLSEN



Hypothesis and biologist Lynn Margulis (first wife of cosmologist Carl Sagan) as the originator of the term "Gaia Theory;" although the word Gaia is one from ancient Greek mythology.)

HH: You mentioned that you were on the way to Europe. Will a new book result?

Olsen: Yes. This will be my fourth trip to Europe and it will evolve into a new book and several magazine articles. This time I know specifically the sites and places I want to visit. Admittedly, I'm building an itinerary that may take a superman to complete because I always want to visit more places than I have the time to possibly see. My record is five sacred sites in one day and that was on the North American tour. Europe might be a little more challenging because I will be doing most my traveling by train.

The tour will range from Mediterranean islands and the Baltic to Scandinavia in the north and include eastern and western Europe. It should be out next year. In the meantime, people can stay busy visiting the places described in the first two books!

Brad Olsen's books are available at www.Amazon.com or at the website www.cccpublishing.com 