

THE SUCCESS OF THE BOOK *EAT PRAY LOVE* HAS ENCOURAGED MANY WOMEN TO SET OUT ON THEIR OWN VOYAGES OF SELF-DISCOVERY. Catherine Keenan MEETS SOME, AND LOOKS AT THE INDUSTRY THAT'S BEEN SPAWNED.

spirited away

As at least eight million people know, Elizabeth Gilbert hit rock bottom one night as she was weeping on her bathroom floor. The door was locked, and her husband was sleeping outside. He was a good man who wanted to have children with her, and watch them grow up in the lovely house they'd just bought. She had everything she thought she wanted, and yet she was miserable. So she prayed. She could not in her wildest dreams have imagined the consequences of this.

Her own life, of course, changed radically. As readers of her mega-selling memoir *Eat Pray Love* know, she left her husband, and then her lover, and spent a year searching for God and ice-cream in Italy, India and Bali. Remarkable enough, perhaps.

But this was just the beginning. Her book was the flap of a butterfly wing that sent a wind rushing around the world. And this wind blew away millions of women who read the book and decided they, too, wanted something like that. They wanted to travel to exotic locales to find God and themselves (and now, with the movie version starring Julia Roberts out on Thursday, perhaps Javier Bardem as well). They wanted to feel yogic energy tearing up their spine, and glide like Roberts through rice paddies on a bike, freer than a bird. And pretty soon there was a global industry only too happy to help them.

One can search for *Eat Pray Love*-style enlightenment in endless ways. You can do what Gilbert did and head to an ashram in India, enfolding yourself in silence and meditation for weeks on end. Don't have the time for that? Then maybe slim down to an 11-day *Eat Pray Love* tour, squeezing five nights in an ashram along with a whizz around the Taj Mahal. You can twin spiritual enlightenment with spa treatments at any number of luxury resorts in Bali, but if even that takes too long, Kiya Coté of Bali Blessings will do the travelling for you. She'll go to Bali, and for only \$US55 (\$57) will remotely send you a "transmission" that will activate the "belonging, bliss and beauty in your life". Easy!

But do any of these tours, well, work? Crazy transmissions aside, is it possible



Life cycles
Julia Roberts pursues
happiness in exotic locales
in the movie version of
Eat Pray Love.



to find any sort of spiritual revelation in a few short weeks of yoga, let alone a few days? Can one really arrive at self-knowledge while having a facial peel?

Strangely, perhaps, a lot of women who go on these tours would say yes.

As many have noted with teeth-gnashing chagrin, Gilbert's journey was indulgent and luxurious. She had funding from a publisher and an entire year that she divided into leisurely thirds: the first spent living a sensual (read, pizza-filled) life in Italy; the second being spiritual in India; and the third in Bali, trying to balance the two and falling in love with a Brazilian called Felipe. The paradox is that so many women yearn to follow in Gilbert's footsteps because they feel weighed down by obligations to children, partners and work. Yet, precisely because of this, they cannot get away for long.

Judy Frazer had two weeks. She spent eight days of that on an *Eat Pray Love*-inspired tour of Bali, organised by Spirit Quest Tours. It involved meditation, t'ai chi, visits to Wayan and Ketut (the traditional healer and elderly palm reader, respectively, whom Gilbert wrote about), and daily readings from Gilbert's book, often on the bus on the way to restaurants or temples chosen because, yes, they were mentioned in the book. Frazer, 62, says it changed her life.

Her husband had committed suicide seven years previously, and she was still tremendously sad about it. This sadness kept coming up in the daily journals she and the others on the trip were encouraged to write by the organisers, Halle Eavelyn and Greg Roach. "So I approached Greg," Frazer says, "and we sat and chatted for quite some time. And he helped me shift my thoughts and reframe the whole process, which just changed things so much for me."

She shed the feeling of responsibility she had around her husband's death. "It made a huge difference to my life. I felt lighter. It was just amazing."

Not everyone had a similarly revelatory experience. Alana Jane Baker, a 30-year-old midwife currently working in Karatha, WA, was on the same tour and thoroughly enjoyed it. She says she also learnt useful tools that gave her "clarity and stuff". But was she fundamentally changed by it? No.

Eavelyn estimates that about half the participants on her Bali tours feel some sort of revelation, but one has to wonder if this has more to do with expectations than the tour itself. As Eavelyn herself says, "Greg is especially good at working with our guests to clear traumas or long-held issues they are ready to release." It may be that Frazer, who lives in Christchurch, New Zealand, was simply "ready to release". Perhaps it was her feeling that, after seven years, she was reaching a new stage of her grief that prompted her to look for a "spiritual tour" in the first place.

Almost all the dozen or so women I talked to for this story said that before they went on their various trips they were at a crossroads: with careers, or relationships, or both. Others felt plagued by a more general sense of wanting to do "something more" with their lives. Yet for every single one of them, the reason they went on a tour was because they felt they needed help to sort such issues out.

This is the main reason why people have criticised *Eat Pray Love* and the industry that's grown up →

WHY WOMEN LOVE ELIZABETH GILBERT

I am as prone to First World problems as the next Australian woman, but I also have a soft spot for Elizabeth Gilbert. She's a good writer, a thoughtful woman who was saddened by a divorce, had the guts and good sense to travel for months, and the honesty to write about it. She always seems slightly dazed, surprised by her success and uncertain as to how to sustain it. (Even if I did wince at times reading her book. It's enjoyable enough, but there's something off-putting about the predictability and neatness of the parable: go to Italy, eat delicious food; go to India, find enlightenment; go to Bali, find a smooth older lover. Simple!)

But somewhere, behind the merchandise and First World narcissism, is something authentic that women are particularly drawn to. Women have always been, historically, more overtly religious than men – they go to church more, volunteer more, visit the sick more. Yet many of the churches they devoted themselves to denied them equality, and treated them as inferior when it came to matters of spiritual discernment, and did not allow them to teach, or interpret, God's word. And, perhaps most importantly, many churches taught both men and women to distrust their own passions, emotions and instincts. It should come as no surprise, then, that a wildly successful tale of spiritual discovery involves a woman eating, meditating, having sex and falling in love; a woman who is delighting in her senses, not praying for restraint or discipline or control.

This surely is part of what has struck a chord, and part of what is most genuine about this spiritual search. Some of our drift to the East is pretentious and self-indulgent – as witnessed in the smugness of many yoga devotees – as well as lacking in awareness of the real history and nature of Eastern religions. As Christopher Hitchens wrote in *God Is Not Great*, those in the West are often "shocked to learn of the existence of Hindu and Buddhist murderers and sadists".

But it would be glib to dismiss this real desire for answers, for a peace or spirituality that does not force women to repress their feelings, or to be obedient to men in an awkward and archaic hierarchy. Gilbert's passion is appealing. "Look for God," she writes. "Look for God like a man with his head on fire looks for water." And beyond all the kaftans and candles, there is something quite simple and quite delightful about that.

– Julia Baird



ARE WOMEN GOING ON THESE TRIPS BECAUSE THEY FEEL THEY HAVE TO DO SOMETHING "IMPROVING" TO JUSTIFY SPENDING ALL THAT MONEY ON THEMSELVES?

around it. Joshunda Sanders and Diana Barnes-Brown argue in *Eat, Pray, Spend: Priv-lit and the New, Enlightened American Dream* that these stories are about women journeying towards a type of enlightenment that is, in practice, only available to those with plenty of time and money ("priv" is short for "privilege"). One of the things they particularly dislike about *Eat Pray Love* (they have quite a long list) is that such books foster the infantilising notion that women need guides to show them the way forward. And this, they argue, feeds an underlying assumption that women are inherently flawed; that we must attend to our spiritual development with the same diligence we bring to shaving our legs. On all fronts, we must improve, improve, improve!

There can be no doubt there are operators willing to take advantage of this yearning. There are plenty of dodgy ashrams in India, and the *New York Post* recently ran a story about people who'd been to the same ashram as Gilbert – Gurudev Siddha Peeth, in Maharashtra – but felt lighter only in their calfskin wallets.

Yet even if we leave aside the obvious rip-offs, there is a vast middle ground playing to women's desire for self-improvement. Here, trips are described in quasi-spiritual terms: "find yourself", "renew your mind, body and soul", "come away with a new and renewed sense of self and purpose". Yet often this is a cover to sell what are, in essence, holidays at fancy resorts with a bit of meditation or yoga thrown in.

This is the area that's really exploded in the wake of *Eat Pray Love* and it raises troubling questions. Are women going on these trips because they feel they have to do something "improving" to justify spending all that money on themselves? If so, is it wrong to sell relaxation as "spiritual rejuvenation" when it's really just a few days away from the kids, passed out by the pool with a martini? Certainly in Bali, which has felt the brunt of the *Eat Pray Love* push, there is a backlash against wealthy white women going to a Third World country to work out their "problems". One local restaurant reportedly got so fed up it printed T-shirts saying, "Eat Pray Leave".

Thousands of miles away from this, an hour outside Sydney, a two-night *Eat Pray Love* package is on offer at the Govinda Valley Spiritual Retreat. It includes Ayurvedic meals, yoga and meditation, and a goody bag valued at more than

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\$150. And the price? An “investment in yourself” of only \$447! At first I think Melissa Williams, who organises the retreats, is having me on when she promises that women can walk away from one of these weekends with “a deep connection to themselves, their power, their spirituality and some real clarity around their hopes and dreams for their lives”. Come on!

But over a series of emails, I realise she’s sincere. “It can take seconds to be connected and get clarity about the things we want to be, do and have,” she writes. “Often we don’t take time to get connected. Most of our lives are busy, busy, busy. At this retreat we provide that opportunity away from the busy.”

That may be the secret. For many women, spending 48 hours entirely free from the demands of kids and husbands and jobs is a spiritual experience. And at the end of the day, if a woman says she feels transformed by it, who can say she isn’t? The thing about transformation is that it’s subjective. And chances are, if you’ve paid good money to be transformed by a trip to India or Bali, or just the Govinda Valley, it’s not hard to feel you have been.

The great bonus for the industry is that you can keep on doing this, being transformed over and over again. The saddest thing, perhaps, is the huge number of women who seem to feel they need this.

Judy Frazer is obviously glad she went on her *Eat Pray Love* tour. So is Sophie Carver, 34, from Scotland, who returned from two months on an ashram and started up her own business running

Road to enlightenment
Julia Roberts (below)
plays Elizabeth Gilbert
(left) in *Eat Pray Love*.



yoga and skiing tours. Reem Shaath, 34, from Dubai, came back from 10 days at Bali Goddess Retreats kilos lighter, and with the determination to start the luxury travel business she dreamed of. Tammy Warner-Wilson, 26, of Erskineville, NSW, found 3½ weeks in India taught her patience and compassion, and gave her the resolve to go back to full-time study. Of course, one might argue these women would have done these things eventually anyway. We’ll never know.

When Cynthia McCoy-Romano, 43, from North Carolina in the US, told her friends she was going to an ashram in India, they laughed. “Oh, did you read *Eat Pray Love*?” But she was uncertain about her marriage, and couldn’t shake the feeling she wasn’t living her best life. So she went to the Tureya Foundation ashram for six weeks and, yes, it changed her life.

A frequent criticism of the *Eat Pray Love* industry is that it’s so radically about the self: self-improvement, self-realisation, self-love. This is probably a large part of its appeal to women thoroughly enmeshed in the lives of others, but it tips easily into self-obsession. One of the things McCoy-Romano liked about Swami Tureyananda was that he didn’t want people to “go sit somewhere on a mountain top and meditate”. He wanted them to get out there and do something good.

McCoy-Romano felt a lot of personal benefits from her retreat. “I got over some old blocks that had been inside me, I would say from when I was a little girl, that kept me sitting on the outside all the time,” she says, in the practised language of someone steeped in therapy and the search for spiritual enlightenment.

But the most tangible consequence of her time in India – and the thing she is least likely to have done without it – is her decision to establish an orphanage there. She’s raised \$US10,000 so far, donated \$US26,000 of her own, and is going back to India in December to break ground on the land she’s bought in Kodaikanal. It’s unlikely any of the children who end up there – she thinks they’ll mostly be the sons and daughters of prostitutes – will ever hear of Elizabeth Gilbert or have the luxury to chase their own dreams of self-realisation. But will that really matter? ●

The website for Cynthia McCoy-Romano’s orphanage is thesacredseed.wordpress.com.



“It wasn’t just Ben that swept me off my feet.”

Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat Pray Love*

“I don’t know what I’m doing, but I’m doing it.”

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