

whole life times

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DEEP SPIRIT

A Pilgrimage Close to Home

In Taos, spiritual connection is an ancient tradition By Diana Rico

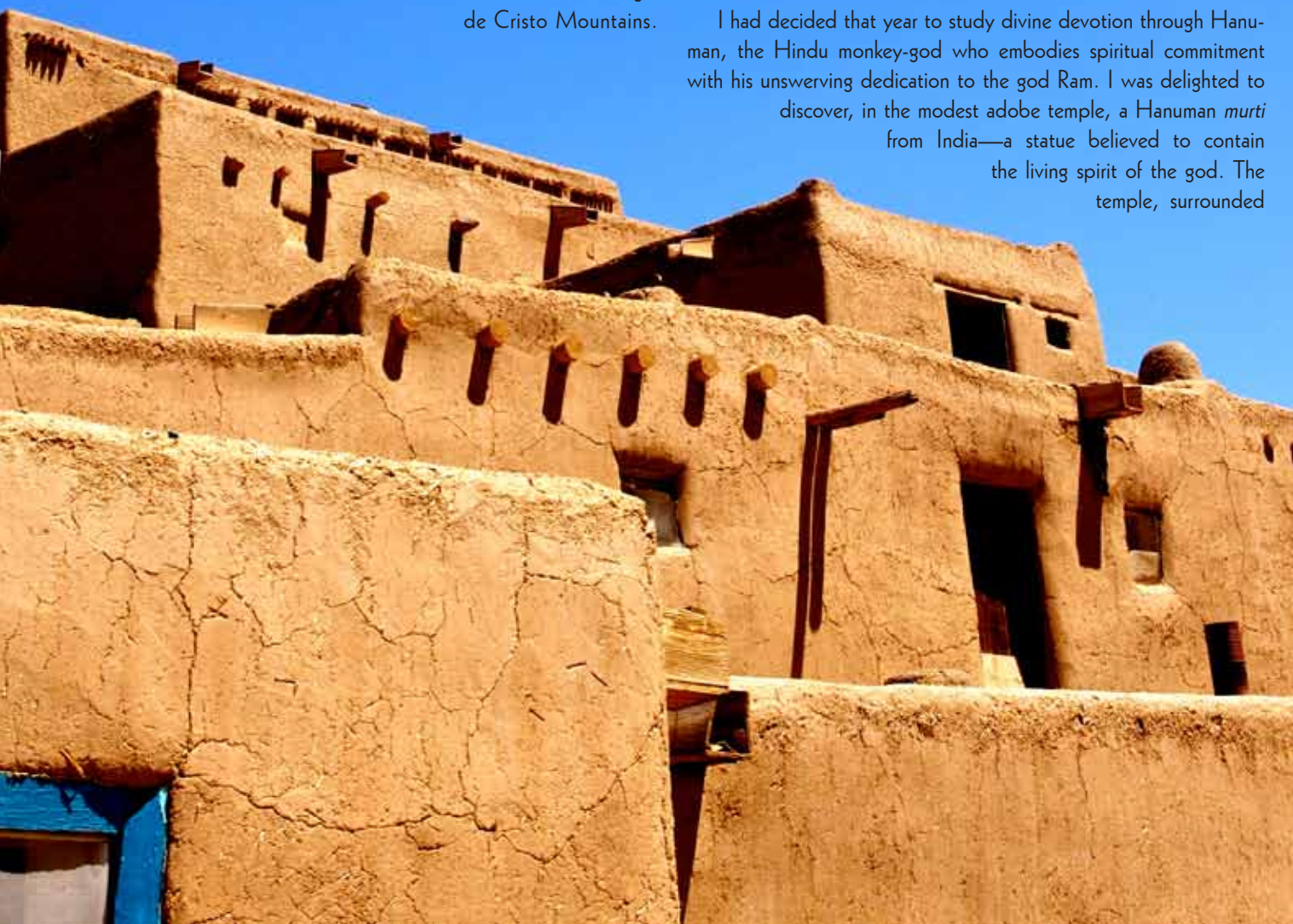
The graceful young man balances on top of the tall pole, gleaming with sweat, and faces the direction of the sun. The pole represents the Tree of Life, and he has struggled to reach its pinnacle, competing against other youths before an enthusiastic crowd. He turns his head, his elegant profile perfectly silhouetted against the pristine blue sky, and calls out prayers in Tiwa, the ancient language of his people.

We are gathered in honor of San Geronimo Day, an annual September feast day at the Taos Pueblo (taospueblo.com), one of several powerful pilgrimage sites in the area of Taos, New Mexico. The only living Native American community that's been designated both a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a National Historic Landmark, the Taos Pueblo is one of the oldest continuously inhabited communities in the world. For more than 1,000 years the Taos Pueblo Indians have been spiritually and physically tending this craggy land nestled at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Very old spiritual traditions overlap seamlessly in this high desert-like land. Red Willow Creek cuts through the center of the earthen plaza and provides the only source of life-giving drinking water; and in the little San Geronimo Chapel, frescoes of corn plants are reminders of the indigenous roots of La Virgen de Guadalupe. The Catholic chapel is the site of a Vespers service the night before the traditional pole climb.

For someone like me, a seeker who drinks deeply from the wells of a number of religious traditions, Taos is an ideal destination. A town of fewer than 6,000, surrounded by a landscape of rugged, mystical beauty, Taos captivated me on my first visit, a 2004 pilgrimage to the **Neem Karoli Baba Ashram** and **Hanuman Temple** (nkbashram.org), an unexpected bastion of Hinduism in the heart of an old Spanish neighborhood just west of the downtown plaza. Little did I know that within two years I would be un-Velcro-ing myself from Los Angeles and making Taos my new home.

I had decided that year to study divine devotion through Hanuman, the Hindu monkey-god who embodies spiritual commitment with his unswerving dedication to the god Ram. I was delighted to discover, in the modest adobe temple, a Hanuman *murti* from India—a statue believed to contain the living spirit of the god. The temple, surrounded



by fertile gardens and farmland, is part of an ashram dedicated to Neem Karoli Baba, the Indian guru of *Be Here Now* author Ram Dass and musicians Krishna Das and Jai Uttal. During the week I like to drop in to meditate or join in a spontaneous *kirtan* (sacred Sanskrit chanting), and on Sunday mornings, the chant of the Hanuman *chaleesa*, a repeated song of praise that puts me into an ecstatic trance, is followed by a huge feast. The most important of the ashram's holy days, Bhandara, coming up September 10, is a celebration of the day Maharaj-ji left his body. Bhandara starts at 4 a.m. with the chanting of 108 *chaleesas*, followed by reenactments of the deeds of Lord Ram, his beloved Sita and Hanuman.

The '60s counterculture blossomed in Taos, and of the many hippie communes that flourished here, the **Lama Foundation** (lamafoundation.org) is the only one that still exists as an intentional community. Located about 20 miles north of Taos, on 110 acres set amidst Carson National Forest land, Lama is both a sustainable spiritual community and an education center dedicated to all spiritual paths. The summer high season brings a juicy program of workshops and retreats through September, and all are welcome at such regular weekly events as the Jewish Shabbat service and community feast. (Yes, Taosños love to share meals!) My favorite thing to do at Lama is the Sufi Dance of Universal Peace held some Thursday nights in the dome, a starburst-ceilinged structure that holds great spiritual power. These dances melt my heart as we hold hands, move gently in a circle, make eye contact and chant peace mantras from all world religions.

When I want to connect with the Spanish heritage of Taos (and my own Hispanic roots), I head south of town to the San Francisco de Asis Church (archdiocesasantafe.org) on the Ranchos de Taos Plaza. Completed in 1815, its massive buttressed exterior is famous from paintings and photographs by Georgia O'Keeffe and Ansel Adams. Inside, the slightly crooked wooden altar is covered with hand-painted saints, a charming example of the art of northern New Mexican *santeros*, whose humble methods for creating holy images is still passed down from generation to generation. The Spanish-language mass on Sundays, where locals sing *rancheras* to Jesus, and everyone knows everybody else (and their *abuelos* and *abuelas*), resonates with a feeling of deep community.

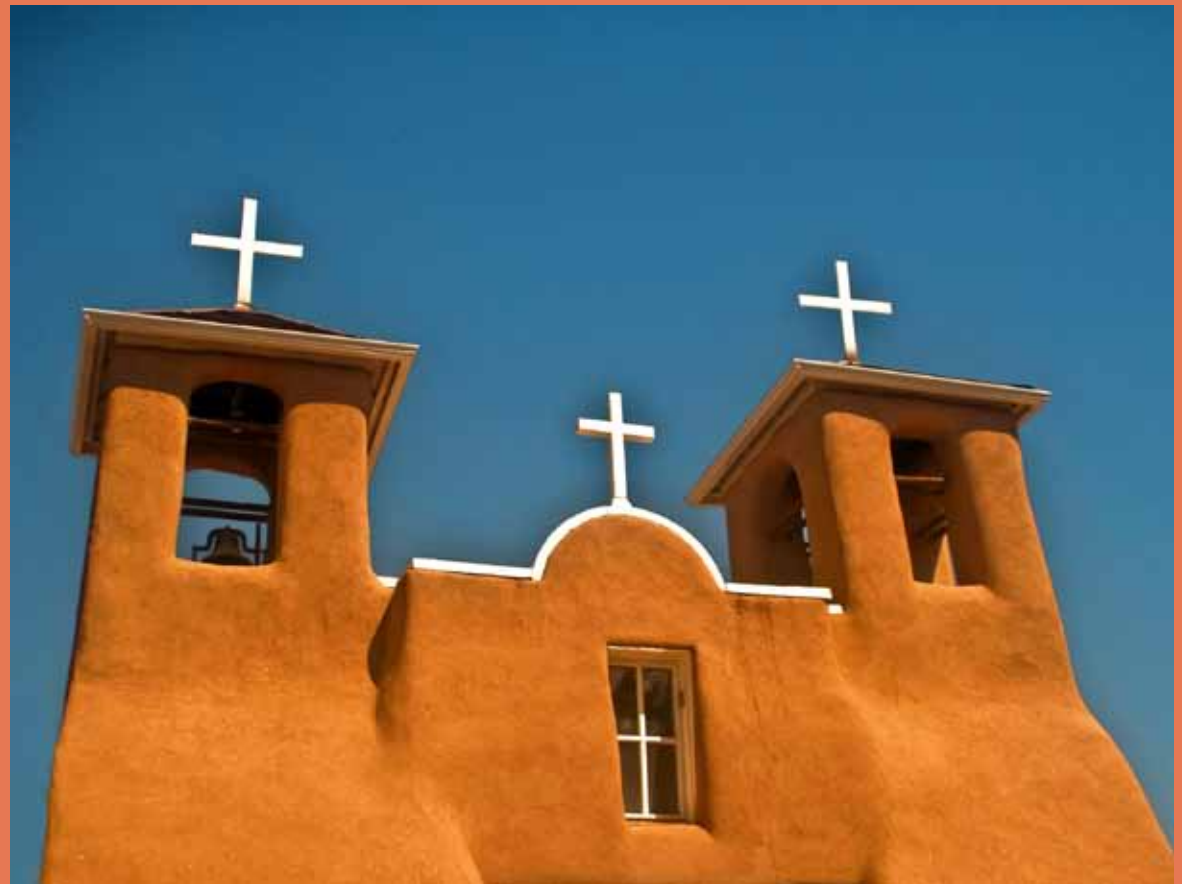
Sometimes, though, I crave a deep stillness that fills me with spaciousness and melts my boundaries. That's when I drive northeast of Taos, through the village of Arroyo Seco and up El Salto Road to **Hoko-ji** (hokojitaos.org), a rustic Zen Buddhist temple in the lineage of the late Kobun Chino Otogawa

Roshi. This sweet spot where piñon and juniper give way to ponderosa and white fir is a perfect place to refresh my spirit.

Kobun (whose shrine you can visit in the backyard gardens) always stressed that Hoko-ji was not a monastic training center but rather, "a place to practice *zazen*, and it will belong to the people who use it." This populist purpose rings true for Hoko-ji and, in fact, for all the pilgrimage sites in Taos. The more I use them, the more their power stays with me as a gentle, long-lasting influence. You won't find me at the top of a San Geronimo pole, but these venerable spiritual centers continuously lift my spirits. 🌀



The Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple



The San Francisco de Asis Church on the Ranchos de Taos Plaza