

Trip of a lifetime

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On a study abroad trip to northern India, author Paula Burch-Celentano encountered and photographed the area's residents, like this man who posed for a portrait. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

My journey to India began as a dare. "We should do this!" insisted Ginette Arguillo, the instigator, as she leaned toward me with a mischievous stare during a photography presentation by Ron Marks, dean of the [Tulane School of Social Work](#). For the past 15 years, Marks and adjunct professor Carolyn Weaver have been leading graduate students on a pilgrimage to northern India as part of [India Abroad, a graduate-level course](#). In India, the students experience daily life in a Tibetan community in exile, while providing social services to Buddhist monks and nuns. The dean, a talented photographer, has documented the adventures over the years, and he was inspiring students to enroll in the course.

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“It would be good for us, and look at the photos,” Ginette persisted. She made a strong argument. With both of us in midlife, married with teenage sons, and working full time at Tulane while pursuing a master’s degree in the part-time social work program, we had become close confidantes. For us, traveling anywhere for a month would be a challenge ... but India? The idea was so foreign to my daily routine that it was almost unimaginable, which also made it intriguing. Could we get away with it?

Naturally, I thought of reasons not to go: lack of funds, fear of flying, disruption of my comfort zone, concern about my husband and 13-year-old son’s survival in my absence. To appease Ginette, I told her that I would think about it.

Later that evening, I told my husband about Marks’ beautiful photographs and shared Ginette’s crazy proposition. Without hesitation he responded, “You should do it. Why not? It sounds like the trip of a lifetime.”

And so this fall, I enrolled in the course. ...

[To read the entire essay, click here.](#) This story originally appeared in the [December 2015](#) issue of [Tulane magazine](#).