

# Journey of transformation fulfilled in Calcutta slums

At first blush, Simone Jordan's adventures over the last year sound a lot like the New York Times bestseller *Eat, Pray, Love*. She left her job, packed her bags, and spent a year hiking in Europe, visiting ancient Indian temples, and discovering it all alone.

But that's where the similarity stops. Because for Jordan, her sabbatical year of 2017 went far deeper than Elizabeth Gilbert's "finding herself" and falling in love with a foreign businessman.

Jordan spent a year away fulfilling her dreams of serving in the slums of Calcutta, and found herself falling in love with the poor.

## Chasing a dream

"It was a childhood dream. Since I was 12, I wanted to get to know Mother Teresa,"



Simone Jordan says her life was transformed. Canadian Catholic News

Jordan, a clerk at the Archdiocese of Vancouver, told the *The B.C. Catholic*. "I actually made my mother phone the congregation. I can't remember what she did, but she told me: 'You're too young. You can't go.'"

Jordan, born and raised in Switzerland, didn't want to become a nun but she felt strongly about going to Calcutta. "I just always admired Mother Teresa. She was an idol for me."

She even studied pharmacy in hopes of volunteering in India or joining the Red Cross, but those dreams fell by the wayside as she raised three sons and moved to B.C.

It was only after a close friend received a devastating cancer diagnosis three years ago that Jordan realized she couldn't sit around waiting for her dreams to be fulfilled anymore

"I told people around me: 'If my time is written in the stars to be not anymore on this earth, then it will happen here or in India or wherever. But I cannot hang on to the anxiety anymore. I have to do what I always wanted to do.'"

Jordan applied to take a one-year unpaid leave from her work, then caught a flight Feb. 4, 2017.

## **Vietnam**

Jordan's journey to Calcutta was far from direct. She had a lot to accomplish, starting with volunteering with Medical Aid for Vietnam.

"It was such an experience. It gives you so much," said Jordan, who put her dormant pharmacy skills to work during two weeks of service in remote Vietnamese villages. Her companions were Canadian doctors, nurses, and other volunteers who provided emergency medical and dental work.

The mission was founded by Vancouver priest Father Tien Tran in 1995 and Jordan fell in love with it the first time she joined; this trip was her second. "It changes you in so many ways."

After the medical mission, Jordan spent a few days touring temples and other sites in Vietnam and Cambodia. "People would say: 'Are you crazy? Travelling alone, as a female?' But (I faced) nothing challenging at all. I felt safe.'"

Then, Jordan returned to Vancouver to re-pack her bags and get ready for the big trip that would eventually take her to India.

## **The Camino**

When Jordan got back on an airplane, she had two personal goals: to learn Spanish, and to prepare for Calcutta. That's why, after a brief stay with her son in London and her parents in Zurich, she arrived in Spain.

Three days later, she was hiking the Pyrenees at the start of what would become 24 days of trekking the Camino pilgrimage route to Spain's Santiago de Compostela.

"The Camino was preparation for India," she said. Most of the people she met were walking for a reason, praying for personal healing or strength on the trail. For Jordan, it wasn't a pilgrimage in that sense. "I wanted to be physically and mentally fit for India."

She walked 650 kilometres, stopping at a checkpoint 200 kilometres from the end of the pilgrimage. The Camino "empties you," she said. "It clears your head so you have room for something new."

Jordan took a bus to Santiago de Compostela, went to Mass, and spent a few days mapping out where to go next. She ended up in Portugal, visiting Fatima and other religious sites.

### **Learning Spanish**

While taking a 10-day break to visit friends in the south of Spain, Jordan found a Workaway program, which allows people to work abroad in exchange for food and accommodations.

She accepted an offer to live on a farm for seven weeks, hoping to learn Spanish through immersion. As it turned out, most of her co-workers spoke English and one of her tasks was to walk three dogs. Jordan has a fear of dogs.

Within nearly two months, she had overcome that fear and had many inspired moments while working amid the farm's olive trees. "I was looking at all of the olive trees and thinking: 'This is what Jesus walked through.'"

On weekends, she took Spanish courses online and travelled to famous cities including Malaga, the birthplace of Picasso. "You constantly talk to people. That's the advantage of being alone. You don't just talk to your partner or whatever. You talk to people."

The next few weeks involved some private Spanish lessons, a birthday trip to Switzerland, and even a surfing lesson. By mid-September, she had a visa. It was time to fly to India.

### **Finally, Calcutta**

Jordan was "totally overwhelmed" when she entered Calcutta and checked in at a cheap hotel 30 minutes' walk from Mother Teresa House.

"I looked out my window totally discouraged. I was like, 'why in the world did you have you come here?' Why alone? I was upset. Do I have to prove anything? I scolded myself."



**Simone Jordan says she was shocked to find happy children in the slums.**

She began walking to Mother Teresa House, where she would check in as a volunteer, when rain suddenly began pouring down. Within a few minutes, Jordan was completely drenched and becoming lost. She asked a young man with an umbrella to guide her.

"I had to walk through slums. That centre is literally in the slums of Calcutta," she said. "It's terrible with the heat; they have no AC. Some have electricity, some don't. They have no running water; there are centres where they get their water in buckets or whatever containers they have. They have no washrooms in their huts. It's outside somewhere. You're just there thinking: How in the world is it possible to live even a day there?"

Finally at the volunteer site, she told the Missionaries of Charity she would volunteer wherever they needed her. The nuns sent her to Premdan, a home for about 50 poor elderly women who would be otherwise living on the streets.

"I'm not good with older people at all," said Jordan. When she entered the home, she found some lotion and, noticing their dry, wrinkled skin, offered to massage their arms. "They seemed to like it, I could see it in their smiles."

### **Transformation**

She then offered to spread some lotion on their feet, and finally, their faces. Suddenly, something changed for Jordan.

"Some started crying. They were so overwhelmed by that touch. It was beautiful. It was so touching, that you can give with so little, so much," she said in tears. "My heart was instantly filled with love. It's just inexplicable."

One woman seemed angry as Jordan gave her a massage. "She grabbed onto my hands and repeated something. It sounded angry! So I asked a novice: 'What is she saying? Did I do something wrong?' She said, 'No, contrary, she said: please don't leave me. Stay with me.'"

Jordan's daily routine became attending Mass with the sisters, caring for the elderly women, and then watching over the babies of poor single mothers in another part of the sisters' compound. She spent five weeks in Calcutta.

"You have no choice (but to rely on God)," in India, she said. "There was a constant connection."

As she walked through the slums and the compound every day, she was shocked to find laughing children running around asking visitors for chocolate.

"They try to touch you. Some are probably trying pickpocketing and you

have to be careful, but (there are) really happy people. You're standing there and your brain cannot understand. There's no explanation. You're there, looking at this whole scenario and thinking: 'How in the world can you be happy?' They are happy. They live today. There is no yesterday or tomorrow. It's today."

## **Finish line**

After five weeks, Jordan left Calcutta. She did some sightseeing in India, then hiked in Nepal. With some time before her year was up, Jordan spent three weeks in Goa, then a few more in India's Hampi and Kerala regions. Everywhere she went, she looked for opportunities to volunteer in schools, hospitals, or among the poor.

In Kerala, she met a man who made it his personal mission to serve breakfast to the homeless. She joined him and volunteered at a government hospital for some time before flying back home Dec. 18.

"You hear: 'Step out of your comfort zone.' And then you are on this edge of this cliff and with faith you actually have to step out," said Jordan.

For her, 2017 "was one of those moments. It's beautiful when you actually do it. You have things coming along that you didn't expect. You just go, do it, and see from there."

She said she learned much from her experience. "It shaped me to be more tolerant, more loving, more open to things, not stuck into things, more present, and more connected."