

Gulliford's Travels **A column for the *Durango Herald***

Andrew Gulliford

Crestone, CO

At the northern edge of the San Luis Valley, on the western shoulder of the Sangre de Christos—the blood of Christ—mountains, lies a religious community unlike anything else in the United States. Gathered together are practitioners of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and new religions like Shumei which comes from Japan and brings a message of health, happiness, harmony and natural agriculture. People are drawn to Crestone at 8,000 feet in elevation, because of ley lines, energy sources, and sacred geometry. At Crestone visitors and residents can choose among 20 different religious paths.

Americans have always embraced the concept of kindred souls living in religious communities or even communes. The austere Western landscape of high mountains and rim rock canyons attracted Catholic Penitentes, Midwestern Methodists and Eastern Episcopalians. Yet never before in the West have so many religions been represented in a tiny former mining town like Crestone, founded in 1880, where the economy has evolved from gold and silver extraction to spiritual tourism and religious real estate.

Followers of Buddha and devotees of physical conditioning and yoga have beaten a path between Boulder and Crestone. Californians are moving there, and ex-Durangoans, and the massive, ill-planned 3,000 lot Baca Grande subdivision and resort from the early 1970s has evolved thanks to the vision of Hannah Strong and her Manitou Foundation founded in 1988. Dr. Dean Kehmeier moved there from Durango in 2005 and he says it represents a “spiritual smorgasboard” and a “microcosm of what must happen around the world” if we are to have peace and sustainability. Tibetan Buddhist scholar Reginald Rey has proclaimed Crestone one of the best places in the world to live a contemplative life, and indeed, the town draws visitors and residents alike who seek the mystery and power of spirituality without religious dogma.

Canadians Maurice and Hannah Strong created the area's spiritual focus by giving land to religious organizations and various faiths to establish programs and attract diverse people. Religious centers include Savitri House, associated with the City of Human Unity in South India, the Karma Thegsum Tashi Gomang Project House and the Tashi Gomang Stupa of “many auspicious doors” representing the Kagyupa Order of Tibetan Buddhism. There is a Carmelite Catholic Monastery for those who want to go “into the desert and pray.” Shri Haidakhan Baba of India inspired the Hindu Haidakhandi Universal Ashram, and there is the Choying Dzong

Buddhist Retreat Center and the Dharma Sangha Crestone Mountain Zen Center, built of interwoven wood similar to a giant basket and originally designed for the Lindisfarn organization. Architectural styles are as diverse as the spiritual faiths, and the recently completed Shumei International Institute combines the clean lines of Japanese design with solar orientation, built-in waterfalls, and centuries-old pinon trees at the Old Independence Mine Site.

At the southern edge of the Baca Grande a replica of the ancient Assyrian prayer tower the Ziggurat floats above the sagebrush plain.

Jack Ward, a Crestone Charter School high school student says that “I can meet lots of different people with lots of different perspectives,” though there are not enough girls in town. His fellow student Brandon Goodwin explains that Crestone is “a real communal town for the 20-40 year olds.” Annie Bell says that Crestone is for “those of us on an inward journey” and “a yearning to be connected to the divine.” She believes that Crestone is “representative of the world transforming to a higher vibration.” Daily, residents can study Aarati at the Haidakhandi Ashram or Sampai with chanting and healing Jyorei in the sanctuary at the Shumei Institute. Mondays there are classes in Hatha Yoga, Iyengar Yoga, Hari Om chants and meditation. Tuesdays it’s Tai Chi and Wednesdays it’s Reiki at the Rainbow Healing Center. Evenings are for Somatic Meditation. Personal coaches, facilitators and healers travel between Boulder, Taos, Santa Fe, and Crestone, and California Buddhists purchase residences designed in Tibetan architectural styles.

Many mining towns in the Rockies have become ski towns, but only Crestone has evolved into an international spiritual center welcoming seekers from all faiths. Dean Kehmeier says “the high desert valley is open, silent, receptive. This really is a female place. It seems to open those who inhabit it. “At sundown, multi-colored Buddhist prayer flags snap in the wind. Spiritual seekers face west across the vast San Luis Valley. From Hindu ashrams and Buddhist stupas they pray for peace, renewal and balance in a confused and conflict-ridden world. Across a vast sagebrush sea they pray towards the rugged San Juan Mountains. In Durango, we benefit from their blessings.

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Andrew Gulliford is a professor of Southwest Studies and History at Fort Lewis College. He can be reached at gulliford_a@fortlewis.edu