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# Ashram reunion

Friends celebrate the life-long journey of self-discovery and union

By Andy Vantrease



Sai Baba Reunion, Feathered Pipe Ranch, Montana, USA

“Sai Baba infused us with love and gave us a place to realise the goodness in ourselves, so we can bring that out into the world”

**T**he guests trickle in, an eclectic group of doctors, psychologists, painters, designers, travellers and business owners in their 60s and 70s, many with short white-grey hair, glasses and smiles ear-to-ear as they squeal in excitement at the sight of old friends. They embrace in long hugs, inhaling and exhaling several times in each other's arms, then lean back to make close eye contact and squeeze their companions' shoulder bones, as if to confirm that the human flesh in front of them isn't a figment of imagination.

These people are no strangers to arduous journeys, each one having made the pilgrimage to India over land and sea decades earlier, in search of community and a place to belong when their home countries became too harsh for their young, idealist souls.

They were the hippies of their time, leaving home after high school — or halfway through college - with a few backpacking essentials and a dream of finding a peaceful existence, enlightenment and adventure.

Now, they were meeting again, visiting from all over the world — Germany, Tasmania, the UK and the USA — for a long overdue reunion at the Feathered Pipe Ranch in Helena, Montana. Their shared connection? A deep and lasting love for their teacher and guru, Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi, India.

Sathya Sai Baba was — and is — God to millions of people, believed by many to be a reincarnation of the beloved Indian Saint Sai Baba. His powerful teachings focused on loving and serving all, and he was known for materialising necklaces, rings, watches,



Gene Massey

Sisters India and VJ in Puttaparthi, India

vibhuti (holy ash) and other small gifts for his devotees. In the early days — 1965 to 1975 — his darshans attracted 300-400 people (growing to millions near the end of his life), mostly locals from Puttaparthi and surrounding villages, with a handful of westerners mixed in. Among the westerners were the late founder of Feathered Pipe Ranch India Supera, her sister VJ, Michele Kaplowitz, Heidi King, Howard Levin and Gael Malloy, all of whom were present for the reunion.

Shortly after the group arrived — as with any proper reunion - the stories began.

## Friends reunited

India Supera, who passed in late 2019, grew up in Orange County, California and embarked on her spiritual journey at a young age. “I had trouble relating to my peers because I was just so serious about finding enlightenment,” she says. “I wanted to be around intelligent people who had visions and questioned the world the way I did. I couldn’t bear sock hops and shopping, so I went looking for more.”

At 20, Supera and her sister set off to Europe and travelled overland through France, Greece, Turkey, eventually reaching Pakistan on the trail to India. Along the way, she met Howard Levin, a Jewish boy from New York with long dark hair and a matching moustache, and he joined the entourage, which eventually landed at Sai Baba’s ashram in Whitefield, India.

“I had been travelling for years, escaping the harassment of America in those days, and I really liked India because the people were so kind and welcoming,” Levin admits. “I wasn’t particularly searching for a guru like the others were, but a string of serendipitous events led me to Swami’s ashram. The moment I walked in, I had this overwhelming feeling that I had arrived home.”

Levin’s story is mirrored by similar tales of longing for guidance and a sense of safety — a collective consciousness of the times that seemed to culminate in India. Famous actors, artists, musicians and politicians were flocking to the country in the counterculture era, and it quickly became known as a hot spot for those looking to reach a deeper understanding of the world, humanity and themselves.

## Travel tales

Gene Massey, a Los Angeles-based videographer and devotee sets up his camera to record shared memories, each person recounting how they heard of Sathya Sai Baba — through pictures, books, records or friends — followed by their journeys to meet him for the first time. They name exact dates and days of the week that they entered the ashram, what they were wearing, who they were with and where they had travelled from. They cry as they remember, and the others hold the sacred space, their feet swirling silently in circles underneath chairs as they listened.

After all, it’s not every day that you get to tell people how you met God.

“Perhaps the seeking stemmed from the generation, a collection of souls all born at the same time to change the world,” says Michele Kaplowitz, as she whispers song lyrics from the popular Beatles tune, Revolution: “We all want to change the world...”

“I was curious about the mystical at a very young age in New York, and in my twenties, I got into meditation because I wanted to find a way to reach revelations without doing LSD or marijuana,” she says. “When a girlfriend of mine returned from two years in India and told me she had met God there, I knew I had to go find out for myself.”

Kaplowitz, now 75, was married at the ashram and lived there for over 13 years, raising her two daughters in India before returning to the States. “It was tough, living at the ashram while my girls were in boarding school,” Kaplowitz says. “But I believed that this is how I was meant to be spending my time, devoted to the greater good.”



Zane Williams Photography

Feathered Pipe Ranch, Montana, USA



Gene Massey

Sai Baba and Heidi King



Sai Baba Park at Feathered Pipe Ranch

Zane Williams Photography

Brothers Michael and Brian Steely travelled from Oregon to India to meet Sai Baba after feeling inspired by George Harrison and the Beatles. “I was curious enough to accompany Michael on the trip, but I had plans to take the train to Kashmir soon after because I had a healthy dose of skepticism about it all,” says Brian. “When I first saw Swami materialise something during darshan, I thought he must

have a tube up his sleeve. Then he came over, rolled up his sleeve and materialised vibhuti for the person sitting right next to me - all the while looking at me, as if to say, “Believe me now?” Of course, I stayed after that and got to know his teachings. He’s been my teacher ever since.”

The others laugh and nod their heads knowingly at the story of Sai Baba’s intuition

and humour, looking down at the wooden floor as they individually float off into their own memories.

### Life lessons

Later in the week, six guests sit in a circle on the clover-covered lawn, a few in chairs and others perched on the edge of the deck, cupping their hands over their foreheads to block the blazing sun. They tell stories of Sai Baba’s “tests,” a teaching tactic that each devotee remembers and appears equally entertained by.

“Swami always pointed us back to ourselves as the teacher, showing us that we held all of the answers inside — and yet, I couldn’t get enough of him,” says Michael Steely, tossing his hands in the air in light-hearted bewilderment. “Maybe that’s the human condition, always wanting more than we’re given... questioning the answers, seeking more understanding. Maybe we can’t help but go back to the external well, even when we’re being told we have our own wells to drink from.”

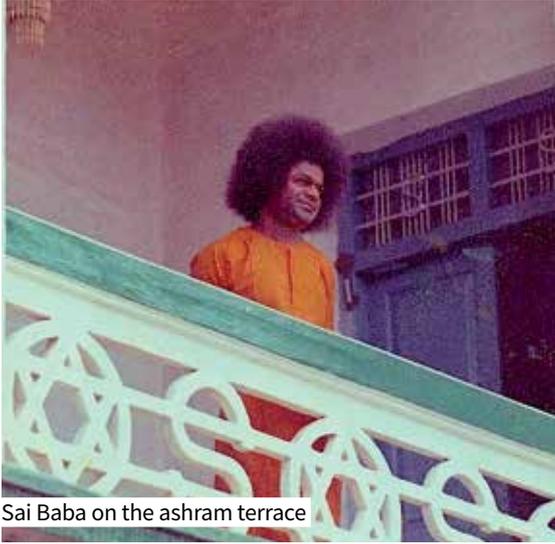
Kaplowitz chimes in: “The journey back to the self is ongoing — and it’s the longest journey you’ll ever take,” she says. “I am God; You are God: Swami was there to remind us of that, over and over again.”



Hundreds gather to see Sai Baba during darshan

Gene Massey

Gene Massey



Sai Baba on the ashram terrace

Zane Williams Photography



Feathered Pipe Native Statue

## Acceptance

For these 25 devotees, their reunion flew by, as they spent their days chanting, singing, praying, laughing, eating and telling stories, closing out each night with a slide show of old pictures from Whitefield and Puttaparthi. They listened to cassette tapes of recorded bhajans and left with full hearts, Sai Baba’s teachings confirmed after all these years: *“There’s only one caste: The caste of humanity. One language: The language of the heart. One religion: The religion of love. And one God, who is omnipresent.”*

“Sai Baba infused us with love and gave us a place to realise the goodness in ourselves, so we can bring that out into the world,” says Levin, who has travelled to Russia and Australia to give talks about his personal experience with Sai Baba. “Living at the ashram was blissful, but he would tell us to go home, get jobs and live our lives in service to others. Looking back, it wasn’t so different than what my parents were telling me, but he accepted me in a whole-hearted way and gave me time to figure out how I wanted that to play out in my life.” 🙏

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Feathered Pipe Ranch Peace

Zane Williams Photography



Prasanthi Nilayam, Sai Baba ashram