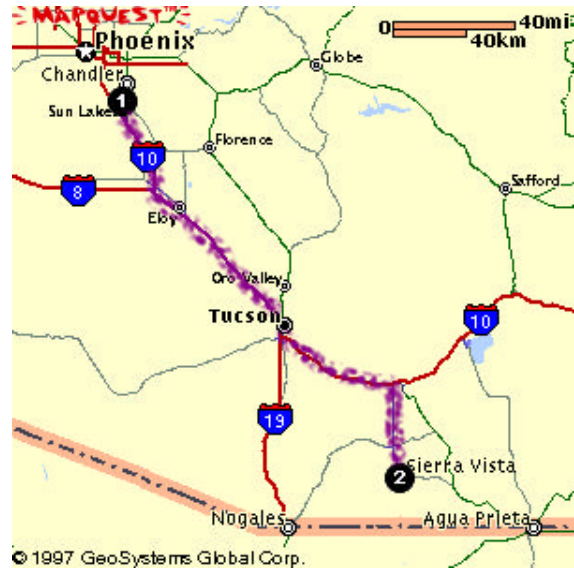


Maha Sivaratri in Sierra Vista, Arizona—Paradise in the Desert

Reported by Vinesh and Amber Sukumaran (little_india@hotmail.com) with help from Jay and Gabriele Mazo (innerguide@theriver.com)

A large group of devotees and the spirits of their Gurus and teachers quietly converged in a little desert town called Sierra Vista, Arizona. The members of this energetic group came from near and far to honor Lord Siva on MahaSivaratri, February 14, 1999.

A month ago, we were contacted by Jay and Gabriele Mazo. They saw Amber's letter in Hinduism Today from more than a year ago, where she mentioned that they didn't have a traditional temple in our area. Jay and Gabriele wanted to invite us to their small but powerful home Siva temple in Sierra Vista for Maha Sivaratri. We started off for the three hour trip on Sunday morning with a map, a cooler of flowers that we were praying wouldn't wilt, and some tropical fruits that we thought might be hard to find in Sierra Vista. Gabriele also asked us to bring some chapatti flour and besan, as they are difficult to come by in Sierra Vista.



About 30 minutes into our trip, we did a double-take at this strange sight! An ostrich farm in the middle of nowhere! Of course, we had to stop and take a picture.



This one had a good warning for us!

Back in the car, we headed South towards the Arizona-Mexico border. We had some beautiful views of the desert as we neared Sierra Vista. Siva was reminding us of His splendor.



Sierra Vista is nestled at the base of the Huachuca Mountains. Mexico is just a short drive behind it.



We were greeted at the door by Jay and Gabriele. The flowers were a little wilted, but Gabriele sprinkled them with water and put them in the refrigerator to be revived. Then they led us into their comfortable home. The large living room is their main sanctum and houses some beautiful bronze and metal murthis. They were a fine collection. All were lovingly decorated with flowers.

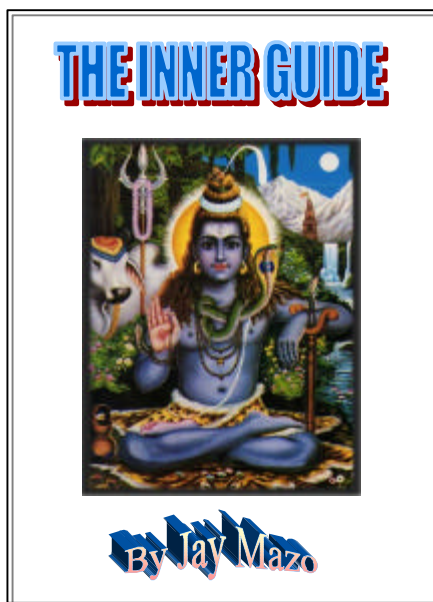


Mahadeva with Meru Sri Chakra in background

Jay and Gabriele met through their meditation teacher Swami Siva BalaYogi and were married in Chennai (Madras) in 1975. They have been strong Siva devotees ever since.

Jay has written a book called "The Inner Guide" giving five simple yet revealing poems per page, arranged for 365 daily readings. This 376 page book entitled "The Inner Guide" recently published in 1998. It was originally published in 1973 as a 200 page book.

Swami Siva BalaYogi (who has since left his body), blessed the book saying, "Aum. My best wishes for publishing this book. The author Jay Mazo came to my Bangalore Ashram in 1970 and was initiated into meditation. After following my instructions he is revealing through this book his experiences received in meditation to the world. Those who read this book should also learn meditation and then spread the practice among the people. By doing this they will attain peace of mind. This is my advice."



The Mazos have a multimedia room in their home where they hand-print the books, bind the pages by hand, and attach a beautiful cover (pictured above). Each book is lovingly made to order and we felt honored to receive one—the result of many, many hours of creative inspiration and manual labor.

At 4 p.m. we started a homa fire that lasted till 5:30 p.m. Jay and Gabriele chanted some moving mantras. We were joined by a family of three generations from Tucson. It was a good start of a wonder-filled night and we felt Lord Siva's presence very strongly. We were each invited to feed Agni's flames.



After the Homa, we were introduced to the Siva Linga residing in the inner sanctum of a back room. Fully four feet wide and three feet tall, this massive Linga was very powerful, thanks to the daily devotion of the Mazos over the course of several years. This Linga, who revealed the name of Pasupati to Gabriele five years ago, has been associated with many miracles. One time it projected its image 12 feet across the room to another wall (there was no light behind it). Another time, when it was being transported, it was too heavy for four men to slide into a crate. The next day, their supervisor told them, "You are making one mistake. You must talk to it as if it has a spirit inside." When this one man single-handedly asked it to move, it slid right into the crate with very little effort. Jay and Gabriele can share other stories with visitors.

The Puja worship began with Gabriele chanting the Siva Sahasranaman Stotra for one hour followed by the first abishekam. With Siva's grace and Gabriele's persuasion, the flowers were fully revived after their long journey and ready to adorn Siva. By then a few more families had arrived and we were joined by Freedom Road, a 73 year old American Sadhu who had previously visited India and studied Yoga. All in all we were 18 people. We all chanted Aum Namasivaya as the Linga was bathed with Panchamrita, the five sacred liquids, milk, honey, yogurt, juice and ghee. Each of us had an opportunity to pour milk on the Linga, adorn Him with flowers and at the conclusion to the first Phase of the puja, do an arati. It was a very powerful experience, and we felt that all of the devotees were united together in worship to Lord Siva!



During this sacred night Amber experienced a little miracle of her own. As a chronic asthma sufferer, she can't remember the last time she was able to draw a full breath without discomfort. She often has difficulty with asthma during pujas because of the incense. Despite sitting close to the homa fire, and despite sitting in a crowded room clouded with incense, she was able to breathe in comfort for the entire night! At one point very early on, she felt a little irritation in her airways, and was about to regretfully leave the puja to get her inhaler. A voice spoke inside of her and said, "You don't need that. Just stay here." Then the discomfort passed and she was able to forget her disease for a night and focus totally on Lord Siva!

Following the puja, we sang bhajans for almost two hours. The Patel sisters from Bisbee, Arizona with their mother, who are ardent devotees of Satguru Ganapati Sacchidananda of Mysore, attended and with great spirit and enthusiasm sang many of their Satguru's bhajans. We felt his presence there as they sang. It was nice to see a family united in devotion to God and Guru. We brought bhajan handouts from Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami's collection and sang them as well. When they asked where we got the bhajans, we were able to tell them about Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. Many had heard of him and were glad to ask us some questions. We passed out several old copies of Hinduism Today. One woman asked me if Book Two of the Children's Course was out yet and we told her that it was. It seems that she ordered Book One from Hinduism Today's website for her young son. He enjoyed it so much that they are eager for the rest of the books to come out for the benefit of young Hindus, especially those growing up outside of a Hindu country. So all in all, we shared resources and each of us came away with something new.



The evening was divided into 4 phases, with abishekams, puja and four different decorations of the Linga. In Phase I the Linga was decorated with Flowers, Phase II with Rudraksha beads, Phase III with Cloth and Phase IV with Bhasma (ashes). By 12 Midnight, most people had left and we were a cozy group of five. We were introduced into the third eye meditation taught by Sri Siva Bala Yogi, the meditation teacher of the Mazos.. We sat in meditation for nearly an hour. It was the first time that Amber had ever sat that long! She didn't think she would be able to, but was pleasantly surprised Vinesh was able to keep very still; he heard the inner Aum sound and entered meditation--the perfect student! We felt that Sri Siva BalaYogi was helping us both.

Following meditation were two more Abhishekams, and some storytelling. The Mazos shared the story of their their meditation teacher, Siva BalaYogi (pictured below, in front of the Linga) and other stories of Lord Siva.



The third abhishekam was concluded with a cloth decoration of Lord Siva and an arati. Stories on Lord Siva's pastimes from the Siva Purana were read.



In Phase IV the Linga was bathed with coconut water and we all poured sacred ashes, which had been collected from previous homas and carefully sifted, on the Linga.



Just before the sun rose, we led a procession around the courtyard holding the murthis of Siva and Parvati, and chanting mantras to honor their marriage. The birds joyfully chanted along with us. It was quite a sight to see the sun rise over a new day!

Before we broke our fast with a big Indian vegetarian meal, we fed the "Brahmins", as is tradition. Gabriele said the birds were the local Brahmins. She gave them an extra large helping of birdseed and they all flocked down into the courtyard outside to share our company.



Later that morning Gabriele packed a large bag of prasad for us to take back to the Phoenix area and share with friends. Jay copied for us 25 floppy discs of Hindu Deity pictures from his large collection. After many goodbyes, and a copy of Jay's book, "The Inner Guide" in hand, we left for home with smiles on our faces, peace in our hearts, and bhajans on our lips!

Aum Namahsivaya!