

## Shaun's higher purpose

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Shaun Micallef is worried he may have missed his one shot at getting the answers to life's big questions.

Could the lawyer turned comedian, actor, author and TV host have been destined for a higher purpose than being an Australian TV personality? Should he have joined the priesthood? What is the meaning of life?

These are the questions he sets out to answer in Shaun Micallef's *Stairway to Heaven*, which sees Micallef explore the Hindu faith, meet swamis and sadhu holy men and confront the pollution of the Ganges River as he seeks enlightenment in India.

"It was many years ago when I was probably in about Year 9, so that would have made me 14, before I had been introduced to the wonders of the school social," Micallef says by phone from Melbourne about his flirtation with becoming a priest.

"It was an all-boys school. So the priesthood didn't last very long. But it was sort of seriously entertained as much as anything can be when you're 14 years old, I suppose.

"I have actually always been interested in faith and it doesn't really matter what religion it is; I have always been quite impressed and a little bit jealous I guess of people who have this unshakable commitment but also just an absolute certainty about their faith.

"I think that's a very enviable thing because it is not something I have had, I've always got questions."

The idea for tackling something more serious occurred to Micallef after he worked with WA's Artemis Films on his episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Initially he toyed with joining the army before the discussion turned to the "idea of immersing myself in somewhere".

Micallef starts his journey at the busy, loud religious pageant the Ratha-Yatra or Chariot Festival in Puri. He later meets the King of Puri who tells him to turn his attentions inwards and a guru will find him.

"For a man who is a bit of a control freak, who likes everything written and likes everything to be preordained it was very, very interesting," he says. "It was a bit like *Thank God You're Here*, it was a bit like going on and leaving yourself open to anything that could happen."

Micallef spends 25 minutes standing on his head while forming an intense connection with his guru, goes on an almost 50km trek carrying water from the Ganges back to a village and at the end, undertakes a solo trek looking for the source of life in the Himalayas.

"I am a very old man now Sue, you know, and they said to me 'We're going to go on a trek at the end, are you OK with that', and I think 'Yes, trekking, yes I walk every day'.

"I walk an hour a day but of course I walk on the very horizontal flat surface of Williamstown Beach, I don't climb anything.

"So the prospect of travelling 22km as an idea was fine, I thought 'Oh yeah, I can walk that easy', but it ended up being quite thin, the air."

The germophobe carried plenty of hand wash and wipes but avoided getting sick even after having to stand and pay homage in the Ganges. Another challenge was sleeping in a bat-filled cave after being warned by his companion a tiger and panthers had been sighted there.

"I reckon watching it I can see myself physically alter as the thing goes on," he says.

"Actually the airline lost my luggage for a week so I couldn't shave, so after a week, in the end I thought 'Oh hell I won't shave'.

"So I ended up not looking like the dapper individual I was hoping; I kind of descended into this wild man living in a cave.

"Despite how luxurious the cave looked it was very uncomfortable.

"I'd like to think of myself as being reasonably hardy but I've never gone camping, really, I'm just not used to sleeping on anything other than a bed.

"Even when we were in the ashram it was all pretty spartan, you're on a mattress the thickness of your handkerchief.

"I think that's the point, it's not a holiday package tour."

During his journey Micallef's improvised pieces to camera are a source of great amusement as he looks for "the source of the source" and tries not to talk and "think about not thinking" while trying to decide how much toilet paper he may need.

So what did Micallef take from the experience, which he hopes to continue in an ongoing series after another season of Mad As Hell for the ABC and his sitcom, The Ex PM?

"I think I understand the sadhus better for having gone there," he says.

"The idea is, your purpose on this earth is to smooth the rocks around you, whether that is a number of times you are here or whether it is even one visit as you bubble along with all the other droplets of water.

"I think if you can smooth the path for somebody else behind you or near you, that is a good thing; that is what you should be doing."

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