

AUTOPILOT

Vignettes from the backpackers' trail

INTRODUCTION

Unplanned journeys, unknown destinations, unexpected co-travelers...

Random musings, chance encounters, stray conversations...

Beliefs, opinions, streams of consciousness...

Magical moments and small miracles...

All merging into a universal search that haunts us all...

Delhi, Agra, Ajmer, Jaisalmer, Benares, Haridwar, Rishikesh, Dharamsala, Manali, Leh...

Autopilot evolves with the landscape of the country. The visuals and the soundtrack reflect the state of mind of the central characters. Traveling through exotic destinations, the story culminates in Ladakh... where the central characters realize their individual destiny.

The story strings together loose snippets of experiences and conversations stolen out of interactions between the characters that populate this trail. The visuals reflect the mood of conversations on topics ranging from the '*best chai in Asia*' to the meaning of life, the importance of gear-oil to the grand unified theory... from the mundane to the metaphysical, **Autopilot** probes individual and collective mindscapes.

It is a kaleidoscopic jumble of free-flowing thoughts, images and experiences woven together into an enchanting colorful mosaic called the Indian backpackers' trail.

On this trail we meet mystics and drug peddlers, quantum scientists and *tantriks*, politicians and freedom fighters, filmmakers and grave-diggers, radicals and pacifists, fortune tellers and nirvana seekers... writers, thinkers and flower children... rebels all, with or without a pause.

This is **Autopilot** ... an attitude, a way of life, a state of mind.

STORY

AUTOPILOT is a quest – not for the right answers but for the right questions.

Josh is in India. A 35 year-old veteran of the American forces in Afghanistan, he is scarred by his experience in Afghanistan. A string of events have left him on the verge of a breakdown. Josh is seeking answers to difficult questions – moral, ethical and plain material. He believes that traveling in India he might find the answers. His belief is reinforced by the fact that he lost his girlfriend – Sara – of over a decade recently and she was in love with India. Sara's diary from her bohemian traveling days in India is serving as a guide to Josh.

Jade, 32, is heir to a multi-billion dollar business empire. The death of her father has awakened her to the futility of all things material. And it is her fame and fortune that she is running from. In India - the country that shaped her father's balanced approach to life. She is searching for detachment and spiritual fulfillment.

Josh and Jade start their individual journeys from Delhi. Their paths cross a few times before they finally meet at a chappal-stand outside Khwaja Moynuddin Chisti's dargah in Ajmer. Realizing they are thrown together on the same path, they decide to travel together as long as they can stand each other.

From here they travel together, meeting people from various walks of life. They talk to these people... discussing all things – mundane to metaphysical. And they listen to the interesting insights and perspectives each person brings to life.

They travel from Delhi to Ajmer to Jaisalmer to Benares to Haridwar, Rishikesh, Dharamsala, Manali and finally to Ladakh, traversing a backpackers' trail that many have blazed but few have actually 'walked'.

As they travel together, they also come to understand each other. Josh is traumatized by an accidental killing of a young Afghan boy during one of his raids. Jade on the other hand, is obsessed with detachment. The time they spend together helps each grow. Despite their

individual goals, Jade and Josh fall for each other, before Jade realizes that she is straying from her path and walks away.

Josh, who has felt at peace with himself in a long time after meeting Jade, embarks on a mission to search Jade across northern India. He travels from one place to another across the backpackers' trail till he finally meets Jade in Ladhakh. Here both Jade and Josh realize their true destiny and return to their individual paths...

KEY SCENES LAYOUT

Awakening - The Realization

Place: Paharhganj, Delhi

Guide: Chai Shop - Hazrat Nizammuddin

Ext. / Dawn

Paharhganj, Old Delhi

Early morning. Crows cawing. A couple of sweepers cleaning a narrow cycle-rickshaw-lined lane with long brooms. The swish-swash sound of the brooms. People deep in sleep in the rickshaws, on charpoys outside the shops and lining the lane. A newspaper boy passes on his cycle ringing the cycle bell... Greets out to the sweepers.

The crackling of a loudspeaker in some distance. A muezzin clearing his throat, before calling the faithful for the first prayers... A mesmerizing aazan engulfing the ambience and embracing the dawn.

Int. / Dawn

Lodge. Paharhganj, Old Delhi

Josh. Propped up in his bed. Eyes open. Staring into zero. It is obvious that he has not slept, just lost in thought. Flashes of gunfire and radio static in the early dawn. A raid party attacking a settlement. A loud explosion. Josh is shaken out of his reverie.

Hears the aazan.

Reaches for the military tab around his neck. Abandons his attempts to get sleep. Gets out of the bed. Opens the rickety room door and heads out.

Ext. / Dawn

Lodge Terrace, Paharhganj, Old Delhi

Josh opens the terrace door. Minarets and buildings glowing in fused light from all night-neon billboards and early morning sky. He walks as if in a trance, drawn by the Aazaan. The whole atmosphere is hypnotic.

The Aazan gets over. Josh crosses himself. Turns.

Reaches for his pocket. Takes out a cigarette and lights it.
Sees Jade. Dressed in leotards. Standing mesmerized just the way he is.
Both smile at each other.

Jade heads back to her yoga mat on the other side and starts practicing yoga.
Josh stands for a while taking in the ambience.

Ext. / Dawn

Chai shop, Paharhganj, Old Delhi

Josh at the chai shop.
News on the radio - George Bush has issued warning to Iraq. Weapons of mass destruction.
Blah.
Josh's head rings with the gunfire and explosions again.
Chaiwala kid gets a cup for Josh. Josh comes out of his reverie. Looks at the boy. Sees another boy's face. Is shaken.
Sees the Dargah at Ajmer Sharif in a picture behind the chaiwala's counter.

Int. / Morning

Jade's Room. Lodge. Paharhganj, Old Delhi

Jade packing her stuff into an expensive looking bag. After having packed everything else,
Jade takes a frame by her bedside. Picture of her in an exquisite evening gown with her father who looks like a regent of some land. Puts the picture in last.

Picks up her book - The Sufis. Collects the rose petals around the book she has brought from previous nights visit to Hazrat Nizamuddin.

Ambient sounds. Strains of an old Bollywood song... "Zindagi, kaisi yeh paheli, hai..." OR "Aanewala pal..." emanating from a radio.

A lodge help comes to pick her bags. She gives him a bundle of notes and refuses to let him pick her bags.

Ext. / Morning

Paharhganj, Old Delhi

Jade puts her bag into a cycle rickshaw.

Walks alongside.

The stores are opening.

Passes Josh walking with sack on his back.

She walks with the rickshaw to a taxi. Asks for domestic airport.

Gives a handsome tip to the cycle-rickshaw puller.

Ext. / Morning

Royal Enfield Rental Shop

Josh rents a Royal Enfield. Kick starts his tour.

Dharma - The Ethics

Place: Ajmer Sharif, Rajasthan

Guide: Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti and Rumi

Ext. / Evening

Way to Dargah, Ajmer Sharif

Narrow lanes lined with flower shops. Rose and jasmine. Chadors hanging in each shop. Incense smoke engulfing the atmosphere. Green Lights. A heady smell of dhoop, itra and rose petals... Strains of a qawwali faintly heard in the ear. Josh walks up to a shop. Buys a skull cap. Puts it on his head. Makes his way through the narrow lane leading to the holy shrine, the dargah of sufi mystic Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti. The qawwali sound becomes louder and louder as Josh nears the dargah. People of all faiths jostling towards the main dargah.

Int. / Evening

Inside Dargah, Ajmer Sharif

Jade inside the dargah. Squeezed in the crowds eager to kiss the tomb. Finds a corner in the back. Standing in absolute stillness. Looking reverentially at the tomb.

One of the attendants beckons her. Placing her head under the green *chadar* or sheet, he invokes, in the most moving and sincere manner, the blessings of the saint on her.

Ext. / Evening

Outside Dargah, Ajmer Sharif

Josh is sitting outside. He is lost in the hypnotic rhythm of the qawwals.

One team of qawwals finishes their performance.

Josh notices the present *gaddi nashin*, heir to the lineage, sitting solemnly in front of the shrine,

Dressed in saffron, he is the present *Khalifa* (representative of Prophet Muhammad or Allah on earth), and therefore the object of devotion of all those who sat in the courtyard. While everyone is looking at him, he looks only at the shrine or the sky.

As Josh sits in reverence, the Khalifa looks in his direction and their eyes meet. Josh feels the peaceful gaze and its soothing effect. The Khalifa smiles.

Another qawwali begins.

We see Jade sitting in the crowd. Eyes closed she is surrendering to the spiritual ambience.

Ext. / Early Morning

Chappal Stand, Outside the Dargah

An old fakir sitting with two pairs of footwear.

Josh walks to him. Takes his shoes and pays the fakir. The fakir blesses him.

As Josh is wearing his shoes, Jade walks up. She asks for her shoes. However, her shoes are not there. Instead, there is a pair of beautiful handcrafted chappals. Josh interferes. The fakir points to the token that Jade has. It is the same as the one with the chappals. The chappals fit Jade too. The fakir apologizes for the mistake. Jade does not protest. The fakir comments, she was destined walk in those beautiful chappals.

As Josh and Jade walk back together, Jade comments that she feels much lighter suddenly.

Int. / Morning

Restaurant, Ajmer Sharif

Josh and Jade discuss the sufi experience and the philosophy of universal oneness.

A young foreigner with a 'book of answers'. Hold a question in your mind and open the book. The text on the page that opens will act as guide to the reader.

The traveler offers the book to Jade and Josh...

Reading for Jade:

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim,
not Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi or Zen.
Not any religion, or cultural system.
I am not from the East or the West,
nor out of the ocean or up
from the ground, not natural or ethereal,
not composed of elements at all.
I do not exist, am not an entity in this world
or the next,

did not descend from Adam and Eve
or any origin story.
My place is placeless, a trace of the traceless.
Neither body nor soul.
I belong to the beloved
have seen the two worlds as one
and that one call to and know,
First, last, outer, inner, only that
breath breathing human

Reading for Josh:

'Today, like every other day, we wake up empty
And frightened. Don't open the door to the study
and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.
Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

Jade and Josh discover that they are both headed for Varanasi. Jade and Josh decide to hitchhike their way to Varanasi together.

Artha - The Security

Place: Varanasi

Guide: The Chandal and Death

Int. / Day-Night

Jaipur - Varanasi Road / Wayside Dhabas

Snippets of conversation. Eating at dhabas.

The bike breaks down. Hauled into a truck.

Ambient sounds of Punjabi folk music and Gurubani.

The two reveal their past to each other.

Josh is seeking peace.

Jade is seeking the way to ultimate oneness.

Ext. / Dawn

Ghat, Varanasi

Early morning prayers. Mantras chanted with ablutions.

The talk with the Chandala.

The meaning of death. The futility of life.

Sacred silence. Shared.

Ext. / Night

Ghat, Varanasi

Night at the ghat. Jade and Josh are sitting on the stairs leading to the Ganges.

A pyre burning near them.

A priest reciting the last prayers.

Kama - The Pleasure

Place: McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala

Guide: The Physical Self

Ext. / Day

Road to Dharamsala

Jade and Josh travel to Dharamsala.

Int. / Night

Shack, McLeodganj

Dope session. Trance music.

The seekers of Nirvana finding it in the high of a joint.

Jade and Josh too join in.

Jade angered at herself. Finds this demeaning to her pursuit.

Jade scared: Will I end up like these? Josh comforts her.

Love-making.

Int. / Early Morning

McLeodganj Lodge

Jade awake. Josh sleeping.

Ext. / Early Morning

McLeodganj Lodge

Jade walks to the terrace. The chanting of mantras and the echoing sound of the musical instruments the Venus sparkles over an icy mountain on the horizon.

Int. / Early Morning

McLeodganj Lodge

Jade walks up to Josh. Kisses him on the forehead. Picks up her bag and leaves.

Ext. / Early Morning

McLeodganj Bus Stand

Jade boarding a bus to Manali.

Int. / Day

McLeodganj Lodge

The golden sun is pouring through the window. Spiritual Buddhist music plays in the backdrop.

Josh wakes up to find Jade missing.

Instinctively reaches for his military tab around his neck.

Feels insecure again. Decides to follow Jade.

THE SEARCH

Nightsong and Passion (Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan - Michael Brooks) music plays as a background for this part. The landscape gets desolate as Josh feels lost without Jade.

Ext. / Day

Hardwar

Josh talks to a group of foreigners in a shack. Enquires about Jade. No one has seen her.

Ext. / Day

Rishikesh

Josh draws a blank again.

Ext./ Day

Joshimath

Josh is all disheveled.

Ext. / Day

Manali

Josh sees a young girl serving chai at a shack. She is wearing Jade's locket around her neck. He asks her where Jade went. The girl tells her that the girl had come with a Buddhist teacher. She has gone up north.

Moksha - Nirvana

Place: Tibetan Plateau, Manali-Leh Highway

Guide: Inner Self

Ext. / Day

Manali-Leh Highway

Josh is traveling above the snowline. He comes across a patch of green. Decides to rest for a while. Walks around to a stream nearby.

See a woman bathing in the chilly waters.

The woman emerges from the pond. Naked. Josh hides behind a rock. She starts walking along the road to a hill nearby. Josh realizes that it is Jade.

As Jade walks away from where Josh is hiding, the whole ambience resonates with chants of Shiva. As she walks up a climb, the sound of chants become louder... a group of sadhus emerge from behind the hillock walking towards Jade.

The sadhus and Jade cross paths. Jade bows to them. The sadhus bless her and walk on along their path.

Josh comes out of his hiding and calls out to Jade. Jade stops.

Josh puts his jacket around Jade. Jade drops the jacket and tells Josh that she has abandoned the samsara. Josh wants to go with her. Jade tells him to think about it.

Tells him that she has taken refuge in a monastery. If he chooses to stay, he can join her the next morning.

Ext. / Night

Manali-Leh Highway, Josh's Campsite

Josh has burned a campfire. A fusion of Celtic Hymns, Hindu Vedic Chants, Buddhist intonations give way to a raw strains of Dhrupad voice coming from the eternal soul...

Josh churns the various thoughts going on in his minds.

As the dawn appears, Josh walks to the monastery.

Int. / Morning

Monastery

Josh is now a monk. We see him performing various duties. Whenever Jade passes by, he tries to speak to her, but Jade has attained another plain.

Int. / Night

Monastery

Josh is taking lessons from his mentor.

The two yogas -

Jnana Yoga: Giving up the samsara and pursuing nirvana through abstinence and penance

Karma Yoga: Staying within the folds of life, performing the duties and attaining nirvana.

Each has his or her own destiny to follow.

Int. / Night

Monastery

Josh awake on his mat. Clutching the military tag around his neck. Not still at peace.

Ext. / Morning

Store in a village near Monastery

Josh is out shopping for the weekly needs. The radio is on. News of US deciding to invade

Iraq. Call for all officers on leave. Josh runs back to the monastery.

Int. / Morning

Monastery

Josh meets Jade.

Gives Jade his military tag locket.

Walks out of the monastery. Kick starts his bike... heads back to duty.

Int. / Morning

Monastery

Jade watches Josh leave. Smiles as Josh becomes a dot over the horizon.

END CREDITS

SAMPLE SCREENPLAY WITH DIALOGUE

Ext. / Day

Dhaba, On Way To Varanasi

Sunny afternoon. A rustic dhaba. A charpoy put under a neem tree.

Josh is lying on the charpoy. Jade is by a farm canal some distance from him. She walks to the well from which water is being pumped into the canal. The motor is running. Water is gushing out of the half-cut pipe from some height into the canal.

Josh is watching her. Intently.

Jade stops near the well. Removes the scarf tied around her head. Pulls off the rubber band that tied her hair. A cascade of beautiful brown hair falls on to her shoulder... She puts her hand under the water and splashes her face with palmfull water. The water splashes off her face and breaks into tiny droplets of rainbows and sparkle.

Josh, who is watching her, sits up the moment he sees Jade loosening her hair.

Jade washes her face and walks back to Josh wiping her face with her scarf.

JOSH

Jade Fontaine...

JADE

(taken aback)

How did you know that was my last name...?

JOSH

GQ Magazine - Europe's 50 Power Women List. 2002...

JADE

And you **had** to remember that....?!

JOSH

(smiles)

Of course, I **had** to. I was in UK then...Joint Training Exercises... I was single. Of course, so were you.. In fact, you were the only single woman on that list. And a single guy has to keep his eyes open, you know...

JADE

(laughs)

Aaha.. good reason...So... US Army Lt. Col. Josh has blown my cover, isn't it?

JOSH

(joins in the laughter)

My lips are sealed, your majesty!

(gesture of zipping his lips)

Ext. / Night

Night Stop

TREATMENT NOTE: ROTOSCOPIC ANIMATION FOR THE SCENE - DEPICTING VISUALLY WHAT JADE IS SAYING.

A small fire lit in a wayside farm. Josh and Jade have rolled out their sleeping bags. Josh is making hot chocolate on a small stove.

JOSH

So, the heiress to a multi-billion dollar empire traveling incognito...?

Dissolve into the middle of this conversation...

Jade looking reflectively into the fire. Josh propped up against his sack...

JADE

Doors open when you have all the riches in the world. Yes, they do... One door opens. You enter a magnificent hall... At the end of which there is another door. And it opens into another room full of distractions.. which leads to another... and then another and another... And soon you are lost in a maze of doors and rooms... Now I know, they call it Maya around here. I used to wake up in the middle of nights... feeling trapped... claustrophobic... I had everything around me... Money, sex, power....but inside.. inside I felt empty... hollow...

Dissolve to another part of the same monologue....

JADE

I was tired of it all. So, I retreated into my shell. Then one day, when I was on a walk near our chateau... I saw this kid. He was sitting all by himself. And he was blowing soap bubbles... He dipped home-made wire thing into the soap solution...Then he gently pulled it out... Blowing into the soap film that formed ever so delicately... And a big bubble formed. He released it... The bubble sparkled in the morning sunlight... Millions of colors on its thin ephemeral surface... And the boy's face... it was the happiest face I had ever seen... The bubble blew in the air for a few seconds... And the boy followed it around... full of life... And then, the bubble burst... And the boy's face.. it fell to the ground. In that moment, I knew... my bubble was going to last only so long... and I had a choice... I could keep making new bubbles all my life or I could go beyond that... I made my choice...

Ext. / Day

Roadside Dhaba

The bike is parked outside a dhaba. Jade and Josh are sitting on a charpoy. Josh is playing with the military tag around his neck. The chai-wala boy gets two glasses of chai... Josh is lost in his thoughts...

JADE

So, what is the tough soldier running from...?

JOSH

(smiles)

Tough soldier. He is running from the past...

JADE

Running from the past...? So, you went to war and your wife abandoned you...?

JOSH

(playing with the tag and the ring next to it)

Both facts. But not the ghosts I am running from...

Dissolve to Jade and Josh. Second night camp. Fire lit...

JOSH

We had Intelligence. Confirmed intelligence. That hut was a Taliban hideout... Our orders were clear... to blow it off... We reached there... it was 4 0'clock in the morning... As we got near the hut, an old man saw us and started running and screaming... One of us brought us down... We were afraid that he might have warned those inside so I just pulled the trigger on my rocket launcher... and the hut exploded into pieces right in front of my eyes... When we reached there... we found a limbless body of a young boy of around 12, a woman of around 34 and a small baby hugging to her, sharpnesl all over their bodies...

Josh wipes the tear from his eye...

JOSH

I never knew I could cry... but that day, it all poured out. After that day, I haven't slept a wink peacefully...

Josh is fiddling with the military tag locket...

Dissolve... into another section of the same conversation...

JOSH

Our past is the ghost that haunts us forever. I followed the orders. So, I was a good soldier. I killed a child... so I am the worst human being. I am carrying the cross of guilt and nothing gives me peace any more...

Dissolve... Jade watching Josh as he sits staring into nothingness...