

Peace, Love and Hare Krishna in Tampa

A small group of Hare Krishna devotees has left the counter-culture '60s and found Tampa, spreading their message and devotion, member by member.

By Rory Crump July 18, 2011

It may be tiny and lack curb appeal, but the Shri Radha Krsna Mandir temple – 14610 N. 17th St. - fosters big love and pure spirit for its 200 Tampa followers of the Hare Krishna movement.

The temple, hidden in a working-class neighborhood off E. Bearss Avenue, was founded in 1989 and moved to its current home in 2002. Almost an acre, the Shri Radha Krsna Mandir property packs in a modest sanctuary, a plush garden and a communal residence hosting a steady stream of local members eating, meditating and chanting.

The Hare Krishna movement is not a cult. At least, that's what the Tampa temple's spiritual leaders, Vivasvan and Giridhari Das, fiercely defend. "Don't lump us in with the other cults," said Vivasvan.

Lounging on a Spartan couch, the founder and director of the temple makes a casual, yet firm reference to David Koresh's Branch Davidians. "No roots, no philosophy, no historical basis," said Vivasvan.

Although the Krishnas have shallow roots themselves – formed in New York City in 1966 – they worship ancient Hindu scriptures, dedicating their spiritual lives to the Supreme Lord, Krishna, a Hindu deity dating back to 4th century B.C.

"Our organization is clear on where we get our authority," said Vivasvan.

Vivasvan encourages both stereotypers and naysayers to "look at our roots and see what we're doing."

Yet the Hare Krishnas aren't really Hindu, or a religion.

"It's not a religion, it's the highest science of spirituality," said Giridhari Das. A fit, 64 year-old former engineering professor and Italian immigrant, Giridhari Das correlates science and spirituality in soft tones – and relaxed Florida attire.

He's considered a natural healer inside the Tampa temple. Although resisting a direct comparison, Giridhari Das likens his powers to Jesus Christ, receiving his gift from "cosmic energy."

Like a Catholic monastery, The Tampa chapter of ISKCON – the International Society for Krishna Consciousness – houses the most devout Hare Krishnas. No alcohol, no tobacco, no coffee, and no, well, you know.

Any other rules?

"You've got to be a vegetarian," said Vivasvan. Food is a recurring theme here, and cows are off-limits.

The Tampa temple is a men's club, with members ranging from ages 25 to 65. On a weekday, members share scripture and philosophy in both traditional robes and khaki shorts. They also share haircuts. Loose locks – called a sikha – peak out from the back of Tampa Krishna heads like missed patches of grass. "It's the oldest haircut in the universe," laughs Vivasvan.

Servitude transcends hierarchy as members dote and distribute, topping each other's drinking glasses off with a funky, all-natural juice and sharing resources financed by Hare Krishna literature: hardcover books

moved with a message in public, touristy hotspots.

The Florida Aquarium is the most lucrative marketplace, although the elders acknowledge the cash-and-carry model of selling books has been threatened by plastic. Nobody carries cash, and the Krishna's don't take credit.

This modern dilemma illustrates the Hare Krishna's reluctance to embrace 2.0 culture. Internet, television, and most millennial technologies are discouraged, considered spiritual pollutants. Like their food, entertainment is organic. Live-music fills the temple, and food not homegrown comes from partnerships with regional farms.

The Hare Krishna's answer to outside influences is to turn more inward, striving to be more sustainable and self-sufficient, while remaining true to the ancient constructs of their faith.

The Tampa Hare Krishna movement pulls closer with daily chants: two-hours' worth. They even chant through their voicemail message. The leaders compare the chants, or mantras, with lifting weights to build muscle. "By chanting Krishnas everyday your strengthening your spirituality," said Vivasvan.

The group congregates on Sunday and Wednesday evenings, similar to mainstream denominations. The service, or ceremony, lasts 1½ hours and concludes with a full dinner. The Sunday meal is a sanctified experience, and symbolic of their service mentality. And Giridhari Das is revered for the Italian touch he adds to the vegetarian feasts.

Sundays, more like an open house, can stretch and meander all day, with members offering incense, sacred water, and food to their deity. And serious devotees gather at 7 a.m. each morning for more brotherhood and worship – and more philosophy.

Methodist, Baptist, Catholic – traditional denominations – engage in one-way Sunday services. The Hare Krishna difference, according to Vivasvan, "is we have regular discussions, regular classes."

The Hare Krishna movement is not without controversy. A 1977 California "brainwashing" case went all the way to the Supreme Court. And scattered lawsuits charging child abuse emerged in the late 1970s, bankrupting the accused ISKCON centers.

The bad press has faded, and anti-cult groups have watched the movement survive and thrive. Academics studying the Hare Krishnas appeal to their legitimate rituals and practices, labeling them a marginal religious group with, according to ISKCON, over 1 million members, worldwide.

On paper, the movement is decentralized. Shri Radha Krsna Mandir is an independent, non-profit organization – and growing. Plans are in place to purchase property next door and expand the temple space to meet demand.

Members ease around the property with big smiles and open arms, welcoming those willing to invest in their beliefs. And it won't be long before you can blink and still not miss them.