

# Devout, simply curious still flock to Osho's Poona ashram

By PATRICK JOHNSTON

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, probably the most famous of India's export gurus, was never far from controversy. He advocated the end of organized religion, promoted free sex, and a ranch he began in Oregon managed to get a nearby town to legalize nude sunbathing. The press branded him "sex guru," the people of Oregon considered him and his band of followers a menace and the federal government got him out of the country on trumped up tax fraud charges.

The "ranch" in Oregon has long since disappeared but his movement has not. The ash-

ram (religious community) he started 20 years ago in Poona, India, an hour outside of Bombay, is still alive — and not a bad place to visit if you're in the neighborhood.

The Bhagwan, or Osho, as he is presently known, died two years ago, convinced to the end that the American government had poisoned him during his stay in an American jail. While the ashram will never be the same without him it is not going to roll over and die; there are still plenty of people around that knew him when he was alive to keep the spirit of the place flourishing.

Poona tourist authorities of-

fer tours but they are really only of interest to Indians who want to gawk at freaky-looking westerners. To get a real feel for the place you're better off spending a few days there. Some have come with such a plan in mind and have never left.

If anything, the ashram provides a bit of relief from the harsh Indian road. It's clean, cool, the water and food purified and a steady stream of soothing music can be heard most of the day. If you're so inclined the ashram has also become what it claims is the first AIDS-free zone — all participants must have a medical certificate

verifying that they do not carry the virus before they can enter the grounds.

The only other entrance "requirement" is the wearing of a maroon robe. This isn't so much demanded as is urged (it is difficult to refuse when virtually everyone else has one on). Fortunately once you leave you can take the thing off. In the early days of the movement the Osho demanded that an orange robe be worn at all times — flooding Poona streets with long haired westerners dressed in traditional Indian garb. Rules have eased up since then.

Basically once inside you are free to do whatever you

want — including nothing.

Of course, there is much you can do. Various forms of meditation take place all day which are free and open to everyone. Some of these include more than just sitting around in the lotus position. Kundalini, a popular activity held every afternoon, is a kind of self purging and includes, in addition to meditation, 40 minutes of free dance — and free shaking.

To do more than meditate will start costing you. Programs vary from individual sessions lasting not more than an hour and costing only \$5 or \$10 to groups that can continue on for a week and run into the hundreds.