

The Amritsar Golden Temple



The kitchen that feeds 100,000 people a day

The Golden Temple is Amritsar in north-west India's most well-known attraction but it's not only a holy pilgrimage site for Sikhs, it's also home to a huge community kitchen, which serves up meals every day of the year.

The world's largest soup kitchen is in full flight by the time my bare feet hit the cool marble floor. Pausing momentarily to get my bearings, I'm jostled towards the community kitchen at Amritsar's Golden Temple, which is known as the 'langar',

Behind me a steady line of Sikh devotees surge forward clutching a steel tray, drinking bowl and spoon. Toddlers grasp the hands of mothers clad in rainbow-hued, elaborately embroidered Punjabi suits. Grey-bearded, turbaned men shuffle forward, some in jeans and shirt, others wearing traditional *salwars* in subdued pastels. Caught up in the pulsing wave, I'm carried by the crowd before squeezing through an inadequately sized doorway.

The 5,000 capacity dining hall, which will dish up more than 100,000 vegetarian meals before the day ends, is devoid of furniture. Instead, the floor is laid with woven mats running the width of the cavernous space, delineating seating areas from serving corridors.

Volunteers swinging stainless steel buckets filled with dahl, steamed rice and a sweet rice pudding called *kheer* ladle generous servings onto our trays. Another follows dispensing chapatis like errant frisbees. A cheeky adolescent boy manning a wheeled water trolley pours drinking water into my bowl by pressing and releasing a mechanism adapted from a bicycle handbrake.



My guide, Davinder Singh, explains how sharing is an integral part of the Sikh faith. "Sikhism is based on humanism," he says. "All the food here is donated. If we can't donate food we will donate 10 per cent of our income. If we can't donate money we share our time by volunteering – around three hours is considered a worthy contribution."

The langar is orderly yet chaotic in the way that only India can be: noisy, yet oddly subdued. As a sign of respect, every head is covered. It is a hive of efficiency. As diners finish their meals, they move outside swiftly, handing empty plates to be washed by hundreds of volunteers up to their elbows in soapy suds. Young men surge behind us wielding water-logged rubber squeegees, cleaning the floor for the next intake of devotees.

And so it goes for 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

Reflecting the Sikh faith's ethos of giving and sharing, this langar has been serving free meals since the 1570s, encouraging all castes to eat together before visiting the Guru of the Golden Temple, the holiest of Sikh shrines.

Surrounded by a man-made lake filled with holy water, the Golden Temple has been rebuilt countless times since the first marble was laid in the late 1500s. Each evening the Sikh holy book, known as the Guru Granth Sahib, is ceremoniously closed and carried from the sacred shrine on a floral-decorated pillow-bed to its nightly resting place accompanied by high-ranking, chanting devotees. At dawn, as thousands of pilgrims line up to pay respect to the Guru, the ceremony is reversed. But not before they've feasted on dahl, rice and chappatis at the world's largest community kitchen.

Words Fiona Harper

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