

TRAVEL

EXPLORE

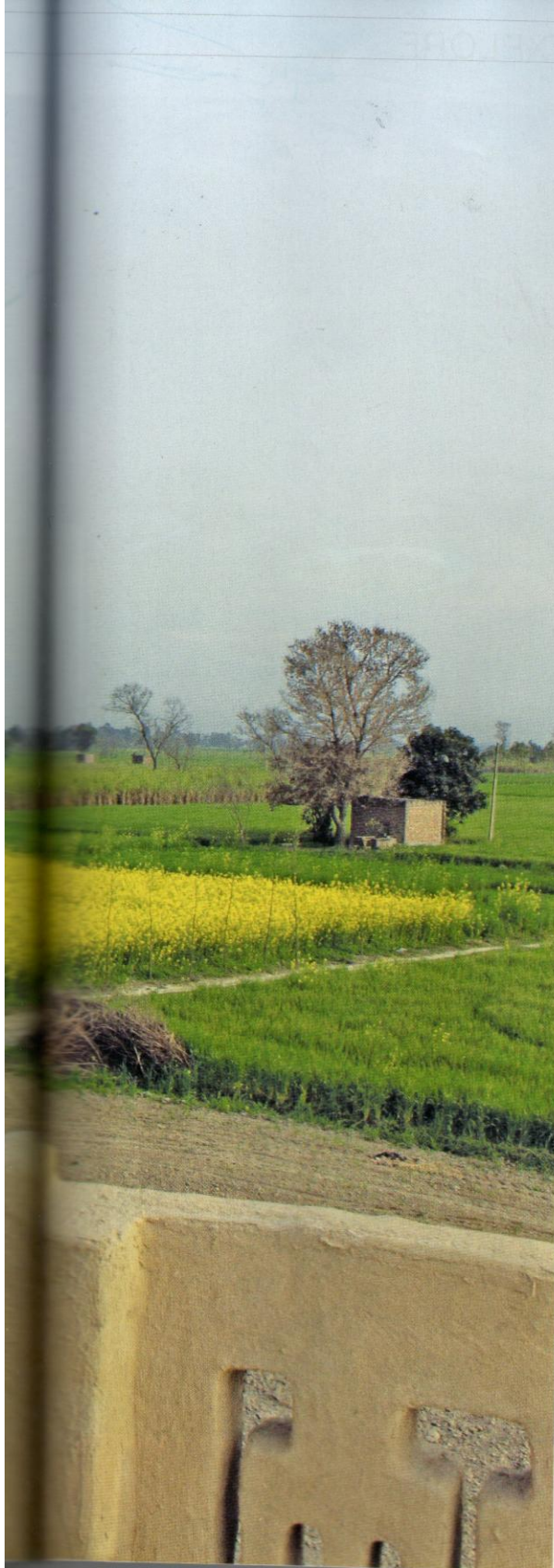
PUNJAB

PUNJABI *by nature*

Punjab is a state of many moods, flavours and colours; there is hustle and bustle in its markets, pleasant commotion in its cities and there is peace in its villages. **BY VATSALA ARORA**



2013
DO DIFFERENT



MY FINAL destination was a quiet village getaway in the heart of Punjab, but I found myself making sense and enjoying the flavours and foods of one of its most thriving cities first—Amritsar.

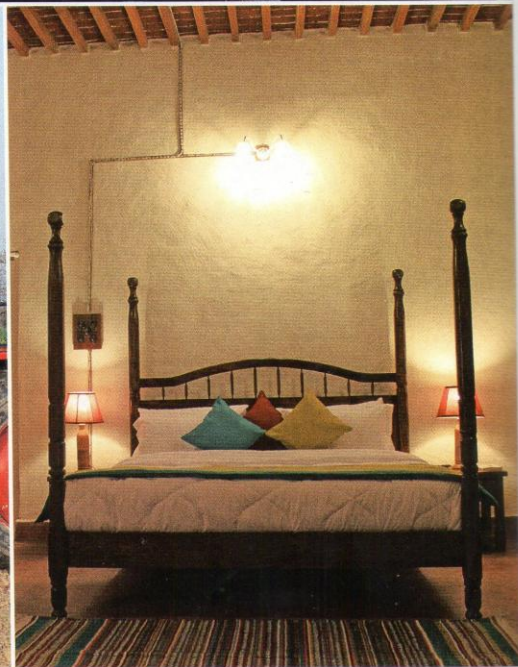
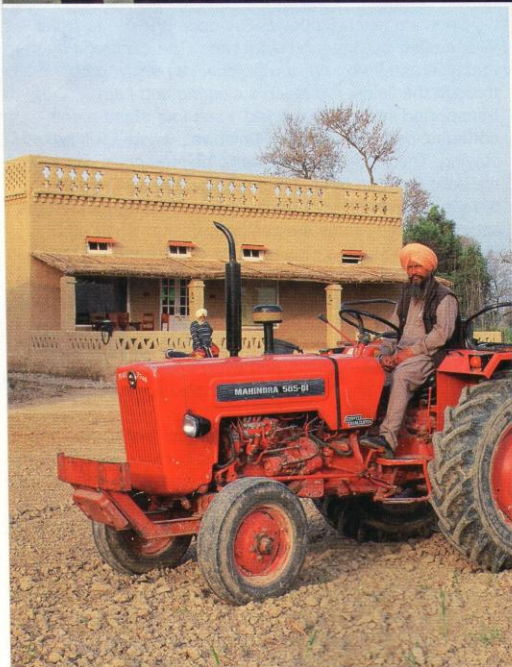
After landing in the holy city and visiting the Golden Temple, I took a rickshaw to the walled city. The maze of narrow criss-crossing lanes house a wholesale market of sorts. As I wander aimlessly, the bright *phulkari dupattas* hanging outside the shops attract my attention, but I am loathe to breaking the spell and turning this journey into a shopping spree. The *bartan bazaar* is no less fascinating.

When in Amritsar, it would be a crime to not binge on the fairly simple yet flavourful Punjabi food and so I make my way to Kesar, perhaps the most famous *dhaba* of the city. Kesar Da Dhaba definitely lives up to its reputation. Lunch is an *aloo ka parantha* literally fried in ghee (forgive me God for I have sinned!) and I polish it off with a bowl of *dal makhani*. Now I am all set to head for the road trip to the rural hinterland.

The drive is comfortable and I struggle to keep my eyes open. After an hour or so, we reach Gurdaspur and turn off the national highway. My sore city-weary eyes soak in the unending verdant carpet of paddy and sugarcane fields and a scene from the movie *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* flashes in my mind. I am wide awake now. As we pass one village after another, lush green fields stretch into the dusky distance. Some tractors and an occasional two wheeler are pretty much the only vehicles I see and there are definitely more buffaloes than human beings.

Soon we reach Saidowal-Gunopur, one of the small villages that dot the rural landscape. The car stops by the roadside and I am told to walk down a narrow path through the fields. We reach a clearing and I am transported into another world. I see four stand-alone cottages, part of the lodge *Punjabiya*, where I will be staying. The mud-plastered walls, painted glass windows, the solid wooden beams that support the roof and the terrace atop give a very earthy feel to the cottages. At the same time, the rooms are aesthetically furnished and decorated to suit the requirements of a discerning traveller. The bed looks inviting and I flop down to snooze for a while but the urge to explore kicks in and soon I am on a bicycle meandering through the fields to visit a gurudwara nearby. I am in no rush so I stay at the gurudwara for some time, and while I cannot understand much, the soothing rendition of the *shabad kirtan* touches my soul.

There's definitely something in the air that makes you feel ravenous ever so soon. After the cycling excursion, a glass of possibly the best *lassi* I have ever had does not whet my appetite; it leaves me waiting impatiently for dinner. The food is not fancy gourmet fare but it's still quite a treat for the senses. Tandoori chicken, dal, a variety of seasonal vegetables, butter naan and more—typical Punjabi fare—yet more delicious and aromatic than usual because it's all cooked only from fresh farm produce or locally sourced ingredients. Add to this, the warm hospitality that Punjab is most famous for, and I am left





Punjabiya has four cottages set amidst lush green fields. Yellow mustard flowers and crisp pure air add joy to tractor rides during your stay

quite a fan. Lost in my thoughts, I enjoy a leisurely dinner on a lantern-lit terrace. There is just one light in the distance, probably a mobile network tower. When it's time to retire for the night, my date with the starlit sky and the love song of the crickets in the background comes to an end. Sleeping seems to be a waste of time here. I wake up at six next morning to go for a walk to a local dairy farm. The clean, crisp air is rejuvenating—indeed, I wish for once that time would come to a standstill. The local folk are friendly and enthusiastically show me around the dairy farm. On the way back I see a number of milkmen carrying urns on a motorbike. My host, Karnal Jeet Singh, tells me they are taking the milk to a dairy co-operative, from where it will be sent to a plant, where it will be pasteurised and packaged.

After breakfast, which is a mix of cereals, homemade granola and bread, fresh fruits and juices, eggs and *aloo ka paranthas* with a dollop of white butter, I am ready for a *tonga* ride to the neighbouring villages and the Beas river. As we pass endless fields of sugarcane and rice, I do not



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know where one farm ends and another begins or, for that matter, where one village merges into another. Everybody seems to know everybody here! A while later we pass a group of children playing a game of marbles by the roadside. I can't remember the last time I had seen this as I think back to my own childhood. By the time I come out of my reverie, we've almost reached the lodge.

It's time for me to head back to the concrete jungle. The contrast is quite unimaginable. I am sad and pensive and wish I could extend my stay. Perhaps a picnic in the fields the next day would be a good idea or a bonfire at night with *makki ki roti* and *sarson ka saag* or a tractor ride through the fields. There's a lot I could still do if I had some more time. I believe a Sikh history museum is set to open soon in the vicinity. One can also take off for a day to Amritsar to witness the ceremonial exchange of guard between India and Pakistan at the Wagah border.

There will definitely be a next time, I promise myself. Suddenly I see my laptop tucked away in the suitcase and realise that I did not even notice the lack of a television or Wi-Fi here! In fact, now I wish my mobile phone hadn't been functional either. That would have been truly liberating.

At a Glance

GETTING THERE

Saidowal-Gunopur is about 450 km from Delhi. It's about an hour and a half from Amritsar, the nearest airport and less than an hour from Pathankot, the nearest major railway station.

STAY Punjabiya—a farm style

lodge. Tel: (011) 2612 2509; www.itmenaanlodges.com/Punjabiya-Overview.html
Cost: Starts at ₹6,000 per night for double occupancy, including breakfast and taxes.

WHEN TO GO
October to March is the best time

to enjoy the outdoors and soak in the winter sun.

DO Nature walk, cycling tours and tractor rides are a must-do. Don't forget to take walking gear and lots of sunscreen.



TIP

It's best to dress a little conservatively when visiting common areas in the village. While the villagers are hospitable and friendly, one wouldn't want to stand out like a sore thumb.