

# Discovering the simple life on a Punjab farm

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## *Kamal Sidhu finds peace (and her inner child) on a farm in Punjab, the land of her forefathers*



There are no original ideas, only borrowed ones. They are all out there floating like thought bubbles through the universe, available for anyone to reach out and grab them; bubbles of atoms forming molecules of consciousness which become full-fledged ideas waiting to settle within a kinetic mind. Ten years ago, I had this crazy idea to convert our ancestral land in Punjab into some kind of eco-tourism site, where the ancient ways of living off the land could be preserved for future generations seeking to relearn the ways of the wise.

Ideas however are only worth a rupee and a cup of chai if they never see the light of day. The beauty in borrowing ideas from the universe is that they're always primed for another soul to realise when the essential elements are aligned. I was delighted to discover just that when I returned to Punjab 20 years later.

On my way there, I had expectations, the first of which was of the air. One deep breath and I wasn't disappointed—fresh, clean, with a slight nip. Paired with the moist, cooling grass sashaying over my ankles, it awakened my senses at each step. It didn't take long for my three-year-old son, Niall, to wake up. Usually, he goes through a process of grogginess and a little whimpering before life around him becomes acceptable. But this time the rural air entered his lungs and filled his mind with curiosity. "Where are we, Mama?" he asked, as we walked in tune to the song of

crickets resonating from far and near. Before I could answer his question, we'd arrived at Punjabiyaat, a working farm in Saidowal-Gunopur village, near Amritsar. It's one of a new crop of farmstays that have sprouted throughout the fields of rural Punjab, promising authentic village experiences such as harvesting crops, milking cows and riding tractors.

Hurricane lamps lined the pathway that led us to our four cottages, which were as quaint, charming, real and comforting as I had hoped they would be. Their architecture was true to the area (and perhaps Punjabi villages everywhere); the walls were coated entirely with clay and looked just like the homes in my ancestral village, Pandori, near Ludhiana, at least as I remembered them from my last visit.

Niall jumped out of my arms as soon as we stepped onto the veranda, running off to explore the cottage. We had, in a very short time, been transported to another world, a world that seemed like a gift for the soul, even though we had just arrived there. Perhaps, we realised by the end of our stay, this is the point.

Grabbed by the hand, I found myself being tugged up a set of stairs. "There's a rooftop, let's go," Niall fervently insisted, and so we did. Our surroundings remained a mystery, save our imagination. But, despite the darkness, I could sense that from up here, come daybreak, we'd see nothing but fields for miles and miles.



Left: A bedroom in a Punjabiyaat cottage. Right: Sidhu with Niall on the cottage veranda.  
Photo: Chiara Goia

Summoned by a very welcome cup of tea, which the veranda seemed purpose-built to imbibe, I nestled into an armchair and stared at a sky spilling over with stars. It's funny how disconnected we can be from our ancestors' lives. Sure, I had visited the house my grandfather had built, hoping to return some day, and I'm aware of how my dad walked for kilometres to get to school. I've also grown up with stories about the incomparable work ethic of my great-grandparents and how my father discovered that a certain Lal Sidhu had travelled from Jaisalmer generations before, looking for fertile lands, which he eventually found in Punjab. For that matter, our lineage has been traced back to a tribe from Uzbekistan, carrying genetic markers that show them to be descendents of the planet's first-known humans. But knowing all that doesn't equal experiencing even a fraction of it. "We should try and get some sleep," said my husband Nico, interrupting the thoughts that were tumbling through my mind. "Right," I mumbled, nudged out of my mental wandering, and fell into a deep sleep in our cosy four-poster bed.

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"Good morning, Mama," said the chirpy voice I registered next, as it woke me from my slumber. "Let's go outside," Niall continued, with charming persistence. I stepped out into paradise: 360 degrees of paddy and sugar cane fields, broken only by narrow, grassy paths. I was awestruck by the brilliance of the morning sun as it bounced off the dew resting on gently waving fronds.

I hadn't noticed but, by this time, Niall had taken off. "Let's run," he shouted half-way down the path as though floating through the fields.

And then the most amazing thought hit me—I didn't have to yell for him to stop, get paranoid or chase him down. He could keep on running and there was absolutely nothing to worry about. No cars, crowds, crevices. Nothing for miles but freedom. And freedom was going to allow us the pleasure of peace, serenity and laughter, which was all I could hear, as Niall ran and ran and ran.

One by one the crew that staffed our farmstay started coming out of the woodwork, wearing smiles brighter than their crisp, white shirts. While room service was available, it only made sense to have breakfast on the veranda of the Punjabiya dining area. The first and most important meal of the day was a scrumptious feast and, as we later discovered, so was every other meal we were to eat there.

With no menu as such, the courses just kept on coming. Fresh, local dahi and a fruit platter, granola squares and muesli, eggs, toast, cheese, confiture. And just when you thought you had eaten well enough for a full day of activity, you realised those were just the starters—before you knew it, making their way onto your plate were achar, parathas and aloo sabzis to truly die for.



Sidhu and her husband Nico Goghavala drive a tractor with Niall. Photo: Chiara Goia

I've never really been partial to potatoes, but grown and plucked directly from Punjabiya's garden, these potatoes were nothing short of delectable. If this is how they eat in the village, well, I've got a story or two to parlay to my folks about hardships such as getting up from the table before breakfast turned to lunch.

As it turned out, there was no shortage of ways to burn calories on the farm; when a young farmer ploughing fields at 100 miles an hour, complete with bhangra music blaring from his boom box, disembarked from his tractor, we decided to give him a break and take the load off him for a bit. Okay, so the lines in the soil weren't as straight and we didn't cover as much ground as we'd have liked, but I'm sure he didn't mind. And though it wasn't as easy as he made it look, it sure was fun.

We then decided to try something we couldn't go wrong with: cycling. Our host Karnal Singh brought out a bunch of bicycles and we all hopped on. He'd actually arranged for a child seat attached to Nico's bicycle, which got Niall even more excited (if that was even possible). "Let's go, Dada," he yelled.

After a little wobble and a giggle, we settled on to the bikes and rode out of the farm through endless fields and across villages. Eventually, we wound up in the heart of the village community, the local gurdwara, where Niall discovered a newfound love for the prasad served there made of semolina, sugar and ghee—so much ghee, in fact, that with no napkins we didn't know what to do with our greasy hands. We looked around and noticed



that this was not just ghee but multi-purpose ghee. Some men seemed to get a little carried away with the greasiness and were oiling their long beards and moustaches with it. We stuck to moisturising our hands. When in Punjab...

It's a rarity in today's India to find yourself virtually alone on a road, but here we were under a cloudless sky, whizzing parallel to the horizon, with nothing in between but standing crop, haystacks and buffaloes and, at a closer look, what seemed like camps of gypsies. Feeling as if we could keep on pedalling until we hit Kashmir, hearing Niall screeching with joy and with the world as we know it far, far away, a stillness overcame me.

I knew this would be a moment we'd cherish for a long time to come. There, gliding between earth and sky, I finally understood the feelings that a place like this conjures up deep within one's soul. For generations before me, these were the fields of dreams, where the mind was allowed quiet, and the soul could see to eternity. With the possibility of experiences like these, so will it be for generations to come.


"Turn right, up ahead," Nico said. We weren't far from Punjabiyat. In fact, it turned out we were just across the road, on what they call the Dairy Farm. Down another tiny path, we parked our bicycles and took a walk on the wild side. There, before us, was a dairy farm all right, but it was nothing like I'd imagined it would be. The gypsies who had intrigued me with their no-nonsense glares during our bike ride were everywhere. An extended family spread over four generations, with the young and fit scattered among the herd of buffaloes and the odd horse, and the elders lounging on daybeds alongside the wee ones—humans, calves and kids. "They are here from October to April and provide us with our dairy; in exchange we allow them the use of our land," Singh explained. And use they did, by creating a temporary rural setting that none of us could get enough of. It was surreal and simply beautiful—a rustic, elongated, clay-covered home, which presumably housed the entire clan and a separate smaller shelter, perhaps their kitchen, with the sun waiting to set behind. One couldn't ask for a better rural, ranch-chic setting.

While we were trying to assure the female buffaloes that we were of no threat to their calves, Niall had scoped a more interesting prospect. "I want to climb the ladder," he shouted and was off. Leaning against a 30ft haystack was an equally long bamboo ladder. The head of the clan, who I then realised had been our security guard for the past few days at Punjabiyat, nimbly scaled the ladder like some henna-tinted Spiderman and signalled for us to join him. Niall by this time, to our amazement, was already halfway up, with me and Nico following closely behind. There we were on top of the world, hay flying all over the place.

What I thought would be an incomparable experience for my child also brought out the child in me, in all of us. We had, in those moments, become little three-year-old rascals again, simply having the time of our lives, which tells me that sometimes there's something to be said about exploring our own backyard, instead of considering yet another trip to London, New York or Bangkok. Farmstays such as Punjabiyaat aren't just pioneers in a new genre of tourism; they offer timeless experiences.

So when you reach Saidowal-Gunopur, make sure you take a moment to meet a handsome, old farmer who'll stop and share his wise tales; wave to the schoolgirls skipping through the fields in their colourful salwar kameezes; pop into the kitchen to meet Punjabiyaat's chef who single-handedly prepares your meals; and tip your hat to Singh and his team, who create a most inviting, enriching and entertaining experience among these fields of dreams.



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