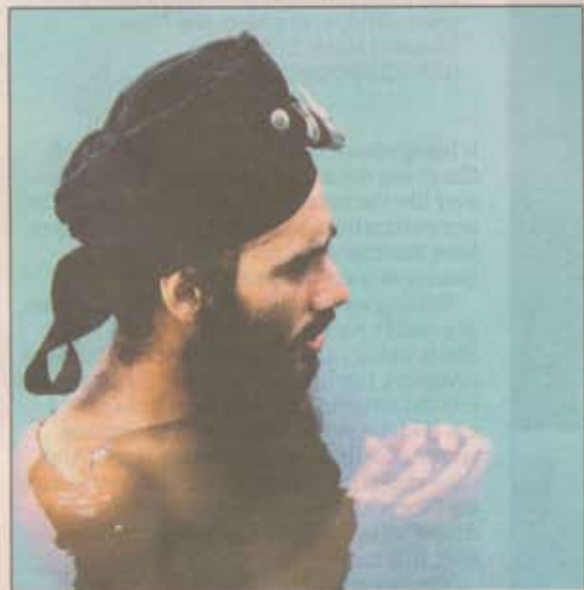


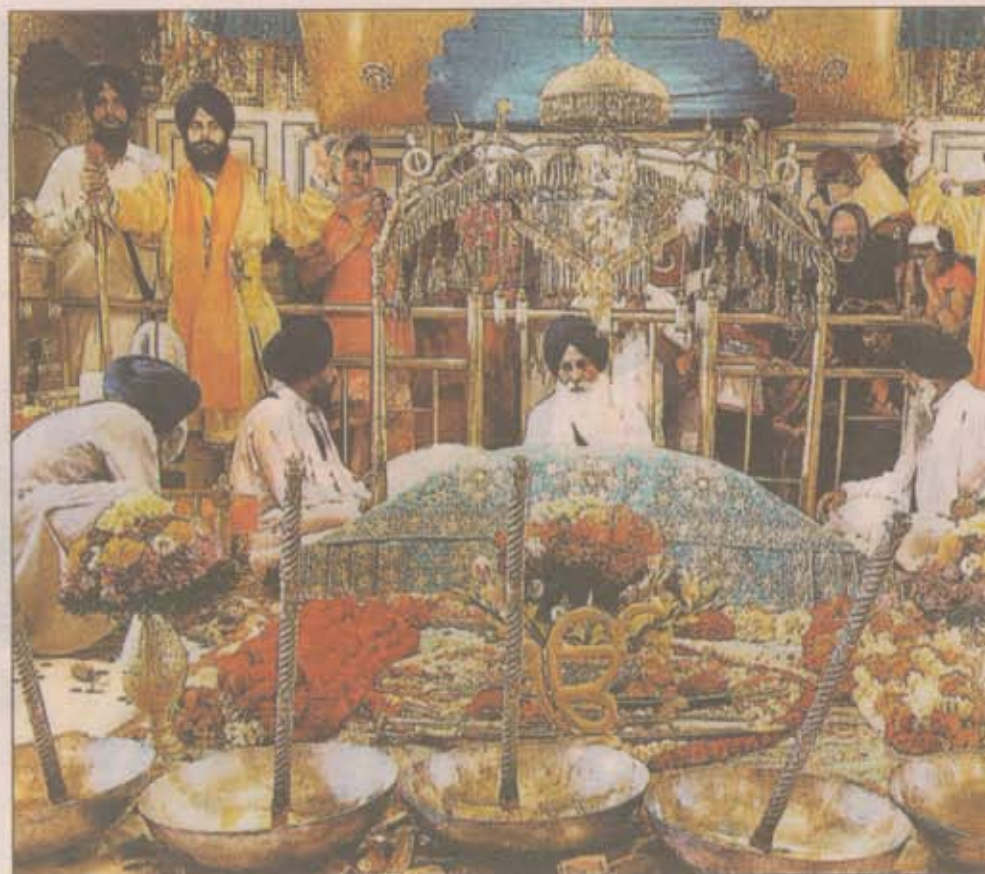
Custom

Going for gold



Water world ... a Sikh man takes a ritual bath (above); a priest sits behind the Guru Granth Sahib (right). Photos: AFP

Even with the best of intentions, **Sue White** discovers keeping Sikh temple customs is harder than it looks.



Tumbling out of a cab that has driven seven hours from the tranquillity of the Himalayas back into the "real" India, I inadvertently gasp for breath. At six in the evening Punjab's holy city of Amritsar is beyond hot. I am bathed in a stifling, overpowering sweat that drenches my Delhi-belly-ridden body.

Attempting to stay focused enough to survive the chaos of the typical Indian street, I dodge bicycles, cars, rickshaws, cows and pilgrims and eventually enter a hotel so nondescript its entry is cunningly disguised as a shopfront selling Indian sweets.

The combination of churning stomachs, non-air-conditioned hallways and three flights of stairs is incapacitating. My travelling companions and I flop helplessly on our beds to recover in order to visit Harmandir Sahib, better known as the Golden Temple.

We're not alone in making a big effort to get here. Millions of pilgrims from across the world try to visit the Sikh faith's holiest site at least once during their lifetime, coming to pray and soak up its peaceful atmosphere.

Peace here has not come easily. Since its construction in the 16th century the temple has been attacked by Mughals and Afghans, and in 1984, was the site of a battle between the Indian army and Punjabi separatists. It was a conflict with far-reaching impact: damage to the sacred site provoked the assassination of then prime minister Indira Gandhi by two of her Sikh bodyguards. This led to anti-Sikh rioting around the country.

But all is peaceful in Amritsar today. By 10pm we re-emerge into the heat to join the evening pilgrimage inside the temple walls.

While the Golden Temple is visited primarily by Sikhs, visitors of all faiths are encouraged to enter. Open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, it's easy to fit into any traveller's schedule, but standing outside the temple's main entry we discover visits should not be taken lightly.

Sliding scarves over our heads, we momentarily debate what to do with our shoes. Many Indian temples have designated shoe areas outside, but retrieval is often such a stressful experience that, watched by a group of young Sikh men, we decide to carry ours in our bags.

Walking through the shallow pool of water found at each of the temple's four entrances, a guard stops us in our tracks. "No, no," he indicates vigorously, "No shoes." Sweating in the heat, we are momentarily flummoxed until we see the group of young men looking on - they have obviously alerted the guard.

Slightly surprised at being dobbed in in a temple, we trundle towards a makeshift shoe area, where hundreds of pairs await their owners' return. Not good enough, we discover, as - flushed with the importance of their task - our self-appointed temple guides make us line up at the official shoe deposit and check them in correctly.

Wading through the water, we successfully enter the main doorway. Awe descends as we bask in the scene that opens up - an enormous courtyard surrounded by white buildings is

being slowly circled by tens of thousands of pilgrims, many in the brightly coloured turbans worn by practising Sikhs.

Although tourists are welcome, there's not a foreigner in sight and we feel very much a part of the scene, until our helpers appear out of nowhere. "No no, walk *this* way," they instruct stropily, pointing in a clockwise direction before melting back into the crowds. Chastened, we start the long, hot walk around the edge of the complex, circling a large lake known as the Sarovar. Marble floor steaming beneath our bare feet, we pass kitchens where thousands of free meals are served daily; bathing points where pilgrims immerse themselves in holy water; and glass cabinets displaying priests chanting sacred texts.

The main action is found on a platform extending into the middle of the lake, where the Golden Temple sits; the magnificent three-storey edifice playing host to a continuous reading of the Guru Granth Sahib - Sikhism's holy scripture.

Standing with uncertainty at the walkway leading out onto the lake and the temple, we discover that among thousands of people, our guides have managed to end up next to us. But now they are smiling, proud that we've chosen to engage so actively in heart of the temple

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experience - the ceremony accompanying the scripture being put away for the night. Encouragingly, they wave us forward, and together we inch our way along the bridge until, 30 minutes later, we are nearly inside.

Hearing music from inside the gilded temple walls, we make out pilgrims edging through the crowds to prostrate on their knees before the Guru Granth Sahib. With the human sea leading us in this same direction, I am crushed from all sides as I mimic those before me. It's an energetic opening, as the heart of the temple pulsates with the vibration of chanting, music, and the importance of this moment for all those inside.

Dazed, we are ejected onto the temple's outer rim where the boys beckon us upstairs to the uppermost realms of the intricately tiled building. From prime positions we look down as the holy book is wrapped.

Suddenly, our guides leap into action, and we dash downstairs to jostle with pilgrims transporting the scripture via a carriage to its evening home, before finding ourselves back on the marbled floor. Stunned by the experience, we begin profusely thanking our guides, who have transcended our cultural gaffs into an Indian travel highlight and I put aside my previous annoyance with the local boys' interfering ways.

"Thank you so much," I say, shaking one young man's hand.

"You are welcome," he says, before admonishing sternly with the waggle of a finger and a frown. "But next time, no shoes."