



THE SIMPLE LIFE

Smiling faces, tall glasses of *lassi*, food rich with butter and *ghee*—these are vistas associated with Punjab. Escape the hectic urban bustle and experience the *pind*, with serene surroundings and slow-paced life.

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Happy. It is the name of a man I met deep in the countryside of Punjab. It is currently also my state of mind. Punjab is famous (and infamous) for many things but what I had always heard about and now enjoyed first-hand was the classic hospitality, as I sat with Happy Singh (Sukhjinder on his driver's licence) and my photographer, Behzad, and tore into *rotis* with a generous dose of *desi ghee*.

The setting was rural, in a village called Gunopur in Gurdaspur district near the border with Pakistan. The food was basic yet hearty—*dal*, *dahi bhalle*, *bhindi ki subzi*—served by the two women of the house who sat before the *chulha* (an earthen oven) making *phulkas* (small, soft *rotis*). The conversation was limited, the food not. As I rounded off my meal with a tall glass of *chaach*, I asked my host, "What next?" after the hearty meal. Happy smiled and said, "Now sleep like a baby."

And so I did, returning to my cottage at the Punjabiyaat, a farmstay in the region of Saidowal-Gunopur. There are many unique words in the English language, the meaning you may know of, yet their experience is something else altogether. 'Petrichor'—a word I was introduced to by a colleague—is the smell of earth when it rains. That was my initial and lasting memory of my stay in the countryside of Punjab. I sat in the balcony of one of the four standalone

mud cottages of Punjabiyaat and saw the world change—the brown land took on a tone of green and the sky became a pretty blue. I hadn't seen this sky in the city. I hadn't seen this shade of green either or tasted *phulkas* with *desi ghee*. I was smitten by the Punjab countryside.

I awoke to the sound of silence. The waft of a pleasant odour hit me rightaway as I walked out onto the balcony. It had rained all night and I felt a bit chilly, but the first rays of sunrise promised to enliven the feeling. The sowing season was ending and farmers had toiled hard since dawn. The only sound I could hear was the distant 'khat-khat-khat' of an odd tractor ploughing a field. "Farming is not an easy job, kid," an elderly farmer had said to me amiably, thumping my back and making his cheerful way to work. I couldn't help but notice that, in spite of the hardships and toil, they are among the happiest people.

Living away from the city, and in this case away from the nearest village too is an experience on its own. Punjabiyaat is located amidst fields, two km from the village, where time stands still. I remember driving into Punjabiyaat, with manager Jagdeep Singh and a staffer smiling and waving in welcome. The first day was slow as it rained incessantly, leaving me to relax and sleep off the fatigue of the drive from Delhi. "I decided on four cottages because too many guests at one time would compromise the calm and serenity of the area. The guests want a peaceful and private time and

(Facing page) Kewal Singh, Happy's father, proves to be a wonderful and entertaining host; (this page) Punjabiyaat strives to provide a rural experience with a touch of sophistication and luxury in the *pind*





The many faces and moods of some rural gentlemen



(This page) Happy Singh gets on the tractor; (facing page) a farmer smiles through a hard day of labour in the fields



DISCOVER THIS

Dera Baba Nanak is a city in Gurdaspur district, which borders Pakistan. It is among the most sacred places for Sikhs. It is said that Guru Nanak first communed with the Almighty near a village called Pakhoke, close to Kartarpur, which now lies in Pakistan. The famous gurdwara, Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib, where Guru Nanak breathed his last, can be seen from the border.

we strive to provide that,” said Kanwaljeet Singh, the owner of the farmstay.

Each cottage has a terrace, where the staff laid out tables for our meals. The lovely view of the surroundings, the tranquility and the cosy terrace beg for a candlelight set-up. The meals in Punjabiya are excellent. The staff is not professionally trained, but hospitality seems to be in their blood and chef Kuldeep knows how to perfect the local dishes. “There is no competition and neither do we have many guests. Punjabiya was not born for business...it was born out of passion,” says Kanwaljeet.

‘Khat-khat-khat-khat,’ said the tractor as I tried to jump on it. I had met Happy for the first time when he came to take us for a ride around the farmland on a tractor. We drove around the farm for a while before reaching a buffalo shed. Happy and Jagdeep had a quick word with the woman in charge and we went ahead to try our hand at milking a buffalo. On-screen it looks quick and easy, but not even a single drop of milk trickled down when we tried.

The children, delighted at the sight of a photographer

with his sophisticated equipment, hovered around him, chirping gleefully in Punjabi until he took some pictures of them which calmed them down. Thereafter, they sat on the traditional *khatiya* laid out in the yard. On the other hand, the woman continued milking and brought to us half a bucket of milk.

Evenings in the countryside are always lovely. The weather is pleasant, a cool breeze is always blowing, and a mug of beer beside you accompanied by a plate of freshly fried pakodas—not a drop of worry will bother you as you sit, staring into oblivion, and sip the brew. To give us more of a feel of the *pind*, Jagdeep called for the chef’s mother. She arrived with zeal, started up a fire in the *chulha* and cooked a lovely dinner, with a smile on her face evidencing her satisfaction at playing host to city slickers yearning for rusticity. The solace that abounds here, the peace of mind and the undisturbed silence make it a perfect setting for writers, poets and such creative minds.

A walk around the village is engaging, with contented villagers curious about our agenda and children bubbling



with enthusiasm at seeing visitors. After a round of the village, Jagdeep took us to his relatives' home, where we enjoyed a break with *chai* and biscuits, and again made our way back to the fields.

A trip to Punjab cannot end without visiting a gurudwara. Chhota Ghallughara Sahib resonated with prayers at five in the morning. Amid complete silence, there was just a soothing, melodious prayer playing. We sat for some time, taking in the atmosphere of piety. The *langar* was not ready yet so we sat and drank tea before leaving.

Later, Jagdeep said the gurudwara was built in memory of the Sikhs killed during the bloody skirmishes of 1746. 'Ghallughara' means a place where a large number of people were martyred. The wells of the villages were filled with human bodies and skeletons which could be seen there up to 1900, we learned. About a half-kilometre from the gurudwara lies the sprawling Chhota Ghallughara Kahnuwan Chhambh Martyrs Memorial, inaugurated in November 2011. It is spread over an area of 10 acres and its central feature is the memorial tower which can be spotted from a distance.

On the last night, chef Kuldeep laid out an expansive meal with mutton and fresh *subzi*. After having our fill, we retreated to our room. I sat and recapped the past three days in the *pind*. I had thought that idling away the time would make me want to go back to the daily bustle of my life but, to my wonder, I did not feel like returning to the city anymore. I even started considering moving out of the city and back to my roots. But the long drive to Delhi the next day took me back to reality. And, yes, don't forget to visit the Golden Temple on your way back... ♦

NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

Air Fly into Amritsar and take a cab. It is an hour's drive.

Road Gunopur village is 495 km from Delhi and takes around six-seven hours to reach and is a four-hour drive from Chandigarh (215 km).

Rail The nearest railhead is Gurdaspur, which is well-connected to Pathankot, Amritsar, Jammu, Chandigarh and New Delhi.

STAY

Punjabiyat is the only option in and around the village (www.itmenaanlodges.com). There are also a number of options in Gurdaspur town.

EAT

The chef at Punjabiyat makes excellent Punjabi meals. The menu is set for every guest, but you can request a particular dish. Ask the chef to cook his special mutton dish. Besides that, if you are invited to a local's house for a meal, do not skip it.