

24 Hours In The Holy City Of Amritsar

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Mostly, we plan a perfect itinerary for our travels. We spend ample time to detail out the routes, places to visit, accommodation, ticket bookings, etc. Everything is set ensuring a hassle-free travel. But sometimes fate is up to mischief, we happen to overlook a trivial detail and are up for something we didn't plan.

Something similar happened to me as I was returning from Spiti Valley. An overnight bus from Manali landed me in Chandigarh, where I was to spend 2 days with my friend and her family before boarding a train to Mumbai. The plan was perfect, except that I had accidentally booked myself for a train on the fourth day instead of the third.

The family was generous enough and I could have easily extended the stay for another day, but I couldn't exploit their hospitality. I decided to make the most of this unexpected opportunity and set out on an impromptu visit to Amritsar. I bid farewell to the family and took an afternoon bus to Amritsar.

Reaching Amritsar

Historically known as Ramdaspur and locally addressed as Ambarsar, Amritsar is situated in Punjab. The city is very well connected to every major city in India via rail, air, and road. Alternatively, there are daily connecting buses, trains or flights from Delhi, which is 450 km away.

Best Time To Visit Amritsar

Amritsar can be visited round the year, but summers can get scorching hot with the mercury rising to as high as 49-degree Celsius. Post monsoon and winter months see most tourists. Incidentally, I was in Amritsar in October, which is supposedly a good time. October through March is an ideal time to plan a trip to Amritsar. The weather is cool and pleasant, with the temperature occasionally dropping to a freezing point.

24 Hours In Amritsar

After around 5 hours of journey covering the 230-km distance from Chandigarh, the bus finally halted at the Amritsar Bus Stand in the evening. It was a pleasant evening and I decided to directly go to the famous Golden temple. I boarded a shared auto rickshaw with a few locals.

Faith, Devotion And Peace At The Golden Shrine

The Amritsar bus stand is around 2 km away from the Golden Temple and yet it took me about 10 minutes to get there. Suddenly, the landscape had changed, hundreds of Sikh devotees

wearing turbans and tourists flocked the narrow streets leading to the Golden Temple. One must cover their head with a scarf once in its premises as a sign of respect.

The famous Golden Temple stood beautifully lit up. The air was filled with constant Gurbani kirtan (chanting of hymns). The shrine is actually part of a huge Gurudwara complex that is known as the Harmandir Sahib. A vast water body known as 'Amrit Sarovar' surrounds the shrine, where numerous pilgrims and devotees take holy dips. I sat on the floor near the sarovar, awed by the shrine's stunning reflection gleaming in the holy water.

Eating At The *Langar*

Since it was nearing the closing hours, the crowd seemed to be dispersing slowly. I joined the people who were heading to the temple to have a last look before heading for the *langar*. I have visited several Gurudwaras and each time I've been amazed by their generosity of serving unlimited food to their visitors. This Gurudwara too had the *langar*, that served free food to thousands of devotees every single day. I ate the delicious meal to my heart's content.

Gurudwaras also usually provide accommodation to the visitors and travellers. I had never stayed in a Gurudwara before and so I went to look for the complex's administration office to inquire regarding the same.

Volunteering For 'Seva' At The Holy Shrine

After speaking to a kind, old Sikh gentleman who had volunteered at the Harmandir Sahib for decades, I was shown to the room. I learned that I too can volunteer for a 'seva' (service), from the old gentleman. Also, I wanted to see the Golden Temple during the day. Making a mental note of what 'seva' I can offer, I retired for the day. The following morning, I woke up to the holy chants. I dressed up quickly and headed towards the Golden Temple. Bathed in the golden rays of the sun, the shrine looked beautiful. As decided, I volunteered for serving tea in the huge kitchen for two hours. I must confess I was tired within no time, but with that experience, I grew an immense respect for the volunteers who ceaselessly do the tasks every single day.

Surge of Emotions At The Jallianwala Bagh

Feeling content and peaceful at the volunteering experience, I left the temple premises. I decided to explore the city by walking around. My first stop was the Jallianwala Bagh, which is 1.3 km from the Golden Temple. Following the map and walking for 7 minutes I reached the gate of the garden where a tragic historical event had taken place. The landmark event in the history of Indian independence, the Jallianwala Massacre of 1919 had happened at this very spot. Upon suspecting a rebellious gathering, General Dyer ordered the soldiers of British Army to open fire on unarmed men, women, and children. Overwhelmed by the heart-wrenching feeling, I walked quietly around the garden, looking at the memorial and walls with bullet marks and reading the displayed information.

Patriotism And Flag Ceremony At The Wagah Border

Though there are McDonald's and Burger King in Amritsar, given the number of global tourists, one must try the authentic Punjabi food while in the city. A big time foodie that I'm, I devoured a sumptuous Punjabi meal at a simple restaurant nearby. I took a taxi from the Jallianwala Bagh to the Wagah border, which is 35 km away. It took about an hour to reach the place. It is advisable to reach latest by 3.30 PM, as the place sees thousands of tourists every day.

I was excited and eager to see the border and the 'beating retreat' ceremony that takes place at sunset. Wagah border is just 29 km from Lahore, Pakistan. And tourists from both countries are present at the ceremony. There's a lot of enthusiasm among the crowd that fills you up with pride and patriotism. As the sun sets, the border gates are opened. Flags on both sides are then lowered and folded. With a formal, brisk handshake exchanged between the soldiers on either side, the gates close for the day.

Still filled with excitement, I was back to Amritsar. I reached the railway station and boarded a train to Chandigarh, from where I would start my onward journey to home. Delighted about spending an entire day filled with assorted events, I bid farewell to the holy city as the train left the platform.