

Gurdwara Guide for Visitors

Introduction

The guide is intended to acquaint all to the spiritual and physical aspects of the Gurdwara. The introduction is prefaced by acknowledging that the concept of the Gurdwara comprises both a spiritual and a physical frame of reference. Implicit in the acknowledgement is the notion of mutual interdependence between the inner world (spiritual) and the external world (the material or physical).

Spiritual presence of the Gurdwara

The notion of the Gurdwara is conceptualised by the idea of a meeting place for those who are seekers of the 'Truth'¹. The original name for the group of like minded individuals who gathered to sing hymns in praise of the 'One True Lord'² or join in discourses on the nature of the Lord was 'Sat Sangat'³ (Gathering of the seekers of the Truth). As the numbers of individuals gathered pace so the need for a place which would offer shelter and respite from the elements became more and more urgent. The Gurdwara concept was given shape initially by the third Guru Nanak and then formalised by the fifth Guru Nanak. This took the shape of Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar in Punjab.

In reflecting the idea of seekers of the Truth the Gurdwara reflected social and spiritual inclusiveness. All were invited and encouraged to engage in discursive and social exchange. Individuals were invited to learn from each other and questioning ideas were encouraged. The exchanges took place underpinned by the principles as established by the first Guru (Guru Nanak). These were;

- Nam Japna (Meditation on Waheguru)
- Kirat Karna (Living life with integrity)
- Vand Chakna (Taking part in the community and being involved with the community)
- Sewa (Being of service to humanity regardless of the fruits of such labour)⁴

In any Gurdwara an individual should be able to observe the above principles in action and exemplified by the members of the Sat Sangat. Key concepts within Sikhism are that Waheguru is omnipotent, omniscience and is the creator. Waheguru is creativeness exemplified as witness the

¹ 'Truth' within Sikh thought is encompassed by the notion that death is the only truth since it brings to an end the sojourn of the flesh while the journey of the soul continues. Human life starts with separation from the 'One true Lord', thus all endeavours are about returning to the state of union with the Lord.

² In Sikhism the One True Lord is referred to as 'Waheguru' but other labels/ names are also used. Examples of the names are Hari; Maula; Daata; Har; Gobind; Akal; Sat Guru; Akal Purkh etc. these references can be found in the body of Guru Granth Sahib (for explanation see the latter part of introduction).

³ Even today the group of individual listening to hymns and discourses on the nature of the Lord (Waheguru) are referred to as Sat Sangat regardless of where they meet.

⁴ For a fuller explanation see under Principles of Sikhism.

diversity of the universe. There is no particular place which belongs to Him⁵ since the whole of existence is His creation. His presence is everywhere since he gives 'life form'.

Physical Presence of the Gurdwara

All Gurdwaras share common features regardless of where they are situated or in which country they are. The common features are as below;

- Entrances in four directions⁶ relative to East, West, south and North.
- A Langhar⁷ (Guru's bountiful food) and Langhar Hall⁸.
- Diwan Hall (The place or room where Guru Granth Sahib graces sangat by the presence of Shabad Gurbani⁹).
- A flag¹⁰ outside the main building reflecting the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib.

The Gurdwara at Gravesend

The Gurdwara has a main entrance which has marble ornate as features. It leads into the ground floor and entrance hall. On both sides of the entrance are shoe racks as pilgrims are required to take their shoes off¹¹ before entering the Diwan and Langhar Halls. On the left of the entrance halls are rooms that will be used as community rooms while on the right is a large hall with partitions which will form the nucleus of a crèche or a nursery for the children and families of Gravesend. Straight ahead is the Ground floor Langhar Hall which will be used occasionally for events such as weddings and as overflow from the main Langhar Hall.

Stairs lead to the first floor which houses further space for shoes and toilets. Lifts are also available on the ground floor to take pilgrims to the other floors.

⁵ Waheguru in Sikh thought has no form or shape but for ease of use and tradition Waheguru is referred to in the masculine terms. In further developing this idea Waheguru is the sole and only male while the rest of humanity are referred to as female in 'His' presence.

⁶ Guru Sahib felt it was important to make it explicit that all are welcome to the Gurdwara by having entrances in all directions. The Gurdwara concept of a place for seekers of the 'Truth' suggested that no one could be barred for reasons of caste, religion or family.

⁷ The first Langhar was prepared by the First Guru Nanak and the tradition was formalised by the Third Guru Nanak. The Third Guru insisted that before a pilgrim could see him they must participate in the Langhar. The Langhar was the bountiful kitchen by the grace of the Guru. The food continues to be prepared simply and with Sewadaars (volunteers). All are welcomed to contribute through material goods, money and hands.

⁸ The Langhar Hall exemplifies the Guru's teachings about equality. All pilgrims are expected to eat sitting on levelled seating. No one will be given preferential treatment because of their standing in the community or on a larger stage. Kings will sit next to a pauper and saints next to a pilgrim. In the house of Guru and Waheguru individuals are judged for their deeds not on their material wealth or the family lineage.

⁹ All the Gurus saw their task as making Waheguru's presence explicit through His words. Guru Granth Sahib is the incarnation of the teachings of the Gurus with passages and hymns that directly speak to and of Waheguru.

¹⁰ In Sikhism the flag pole is referred to as the Nishan Sahib denoting the presence of the Gurdwara.

¹¹ Taking the shoes off is both a practical and a symbolic measure. It is meant to signify for the pilgrim that he/she is entering a sphere of influence which should provoke good and kind thoughts. They should be speaking of goodwill to all and wishing the best for all. Shoes by their very nature gather dirt through performing the task of keeping the wearers feet clean.

The second floor has the following features:

- Office suite for Gurdwara President, General Secretary, Treasurer and a committee room for the full management committee.
- Lecture hall with capacity for around a hundred delegates.
- Computer Suite for use for children and visitors to the Gurdwara.
- A library for research and lending with materials relevant to the Sikh philosophy and teachings.
- The main Langhar hall (see footnote 6 & 7).
- Exhibition space on both sides of the landing on first floor.

Stairs lead one to the second floor and to the Diwan Hall where Guru Granth Sahib¹² graces the pilgrims with Shabad. At the end of the Diwan Sahib on a marble platform is the throne of Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Granth Sahib presides over the proceedings accompanied by the Sewadaars. These are;

- Ganthi Sahib¹³: the Granthi is the person who will recite the words of the Guru Granth Sahib to the pilgrims and will lead the morning and evening meditations.
- Kirtaani Jatha: these are the minstrels of the Shabad (hymns from Guru Granth Sahib). They will sing Shabads both during the morning and evening meditations accompanied by musical instruments such as the Tabla, Harmonium etc. The Shabads are arranged in Ragas¹⁴ which lend themselves to musical recital.
- Katha Vachak: is the person who will lead discourse on a topic relevant to Sikh philosophy or lead a discourse on the verses from Guru Granth sahib.

Pilgrims are expected to kneel before the Guru Granth sahib as a mark of respect and with intention that they have come as seekers of knowledge. It is an expectation that in the court of King of Kings one can only be a beggar and seek blessings. The pilgrims can sit anywhere on the floor regardless of gender although in common with many Gurdwara in England women and men appear to sit separately. This has little to do with religious awakening. As one leaves the Diwan Hall one can partake of Degh¹⁵.

On both sides of the landing are small Diwan Halls for family functions and events as needed. They are similarly attired as the main Diwan Hall. Further along are some room that will be used as and when needed.

¹² Guru Granth Sahib embodies the knowledge of the Ten gurus in addition to saints and philosophers from other religions such as Hinduism and Islam. The Fifth Guru Nanak set the condition for entry into the compilation of the Guru Granth Sahib as those words and hymns that speak to and off The One True Lord. Implicit in this condition was the notion of universality and inclusiveness in accordance with the ideal that all belong and are part of The One True Lord (Waheguru).

¹³ In Sikhism until recent times there has not been a priest class. All Sikhs were and are expected to be able to read the Shabad and engage in discourses on the meaning of the words through participating in Sat Sangat.

¹⁴ Ragas are traditional ways of arranging words to musical accompaniment.

¹⁵ This is usually wheat flour prepared with melted butter, sugar and water while reciting and meditating on Bani (Passages and hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib). There is an expectation that prepared in this method it is imbued with the sweetness and serenity of the Shabad.

Preparing for the Visit to The Gurdwara

Below are helpful observations for the visit:

1. Please be ready to cover your head as you enter the Gurdwara. This is both meant to symbolise respect and also your readiness to gather your thoughts to engage with what you will receive and in return give.
2. Please do take your shoes off so as to leave the material world outside for a brief time.
3. There is a strict code of conduct about life style Drugs (Tobacco, Cannabis etc.) and Alcohol. These must not be brought to the premises under any circumstances.
4. Please abide by the rule that if you are intoxicated on either Alcohol or Tobacco/ Drugs you will not be allowed to enter the Gurdwara and it would seem prudent if you are able to give yourself permission not to arrive in such a state.
5. Once you are in the Gurdwara if you need help please ask any one for help.
 - a. Please do enjoy and join in the Langhar.
 - b. If you wish to do Sewa just let anyone present know of your wish.
 - c. Do treat the Gurdwara as place of Guru Granth Sahib's residence and look after it.
 - d. If you wish to carry out any activities please do speak to the Gurdwara President or the General Secretary for the Gurdwara committee.
6. Sikhs when bowing to the Guru Granth Sahib usually place money into the vault in front of the throne. The monies gathered through this are used to run all the activities that you will observe in the Gurdwara from the Langhar to a community school (that runs in the evenings and at weekends).

Finally please do enjoy your visit and if you further questions please do ask.