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Pakistan Cities

In Lahore, on the Quest for a Grandmother's Past

Exploring the city's mosques, markets, and cuisine for traces of the familiar.



The Badshahi Mosque was originally built to house a strand of the Prophet's hair. Photo:Aatish Nath

BY Aatish Nath POSTED ON February 4, 2015

Crossing over to Pakistan is best done on foot, or so I'd like to believe. For one thing, it's probably the cheapest way into the country, and it also echoes history, as you'll also be retracing the route taken by millions of families during Partition. My reason for making the journey from Amritsar to Lahore by car (and ultimately walking across on foot) was because my grandmother used to live in Lahore before Partition, and I was keen to see the distances between the Wagah-Attari border and both cities when I visited last month. My grandmother came over to India on a train in 1947, the type that often arrived in India's stations laden with the living, as well as the dead. My journey was not as fraught, thankfully.

I was going to attend the wedding of two very close college friends, but also to try and find the store my grandmother's family owned pre-Partition.



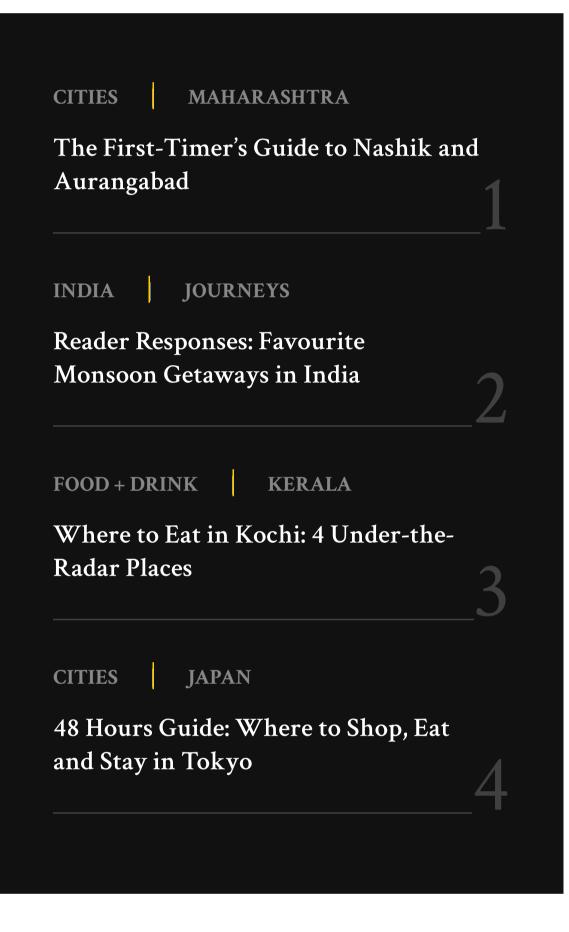
The Attari checkpoint is 45 minutes away from Amritsar. Photo: Aatish Nath

You know you're getting close to the Attari check post when your car starts to squeeze through a forest of trucks, waiting patiently on the road. They're in line to be screened and cleared by the army, after which they'll be driven into warehouses on the Pakistani side of the border. We ended up meandering through a maze of trucks with handpainted sides, until we were blocked from going any further as the trucks had closed in. Never mind, we did a three-point turn and drove back against traffic (see pic) to the open road. We finally made it to the Integrated Check Post by driving on the traffic-free, but wrong, side of the road.

The check post is reminiscent of government buildings all over north India, and is a low but imposing angular mass built of red stone, with a central dome. Here, I hired porters clad in indigo blue coats, vibrant against the perpetual grey winter fog, to wheel my luggage. It's also where immigration and customs are done. But first, the Border Security Force scans all of the baggage you have - both oversized and hand.



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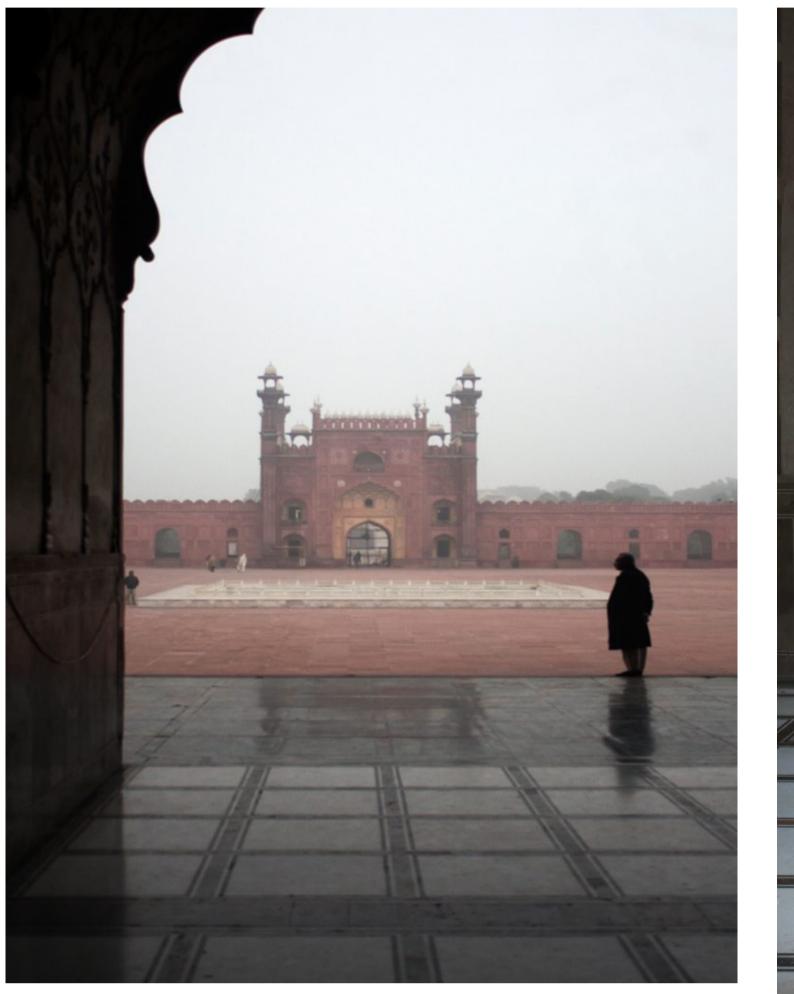
The view of the border check post from Pakistan. Photo: Aatish Nath

After clearing immigration and customs (neither of which asked onerous questions), there's the added step of proving that you've taken your polio vaccinations. Pakistan is one of the few countries that is still fighting to eradicate the disease and India is keen to ensure that no one brings it back with them. Huddled in the cold halls of the Integrated Check Post, I gladly followed a rather gruff guard to a bus. A rather empty coach took those of us that made the border crossing to the stretch of road that, at sunset, is filled with throngs of cheering, flag-waving Indians at the flag-lowering ceremony. At noon though, the difference couldn't be starker, with only a handful of people swaddled against the winter cold, walking across an empty road, with guntoting soldiers as our only witnesses. Taking photos from the Indian side isn't allowed, so this shot is from just across the border, looking back at the gates of both countries, since the Pakistani Rangers are more amenable to allowing photography.

Once in Lahore, you can't shake the feeling that you've stepped into a city that is in a similar but alternate reality. A reality with no stray dogs on the street and a lot of Urdu signboards, but not all that different from sprawling Delhi. I spent the first of many hours wandering Lahore's Liberty Market, a semi-circular amalgamation of street-level shopping in the city's Gulberg area, a commercial hub. *Khussas* (the Pakistani name for Amritsar's famous footwear, *juttis*) and bangles were on the list of things to buy for those accompanying me to the wedding, while I was just happy to look around. I spotted hawkers selling corn on the cob, enticing those seeking warmth in Lahore's chilly winter. Like India's markets, Liberty too is a maze, with everything from kebab stalls to leather stores around every turn.

My friend's *nikkah*, the official Islamic wedding, was in Badshahi Mosque, built by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in the 17th century. I was excited to make my way there, having heard so much about it. Like Delhi, the Old City is like stepping into another world. The red sandstone walls of the Lahore Fort have behind them the grand masjid, but also a gurudwara. The imposing, symmetrical structure is similar to Delhi's Jama Masjid. The December cold had seeped into the stone ground and while crossing the formidable red sandstone expanse to get to the masjid, my feet almost went numb. Inside, carvings adorn the walls and ceilings, and besides some concessions to modernity (like light bulbs and an digital clock), the mosque looks just like it did over 250 years ago.

The Badshahi Mosque was constructed in 1673 by Aurangzeb over a century after the Lahore Fort was built by Akbar. Originally built with the intention to house a strand of the Prophet's hair, the mosque has had a turbulent history. Under the rule of the Sikh empire, the mosque became a stable and to add further ignominy, a military garrison under British rule. It was only in 1852 that the mosque was restored under the aegis of the Badshahi Mosque Authority. After independence, the mosque was the largest in Pakistan until the Faisal Mosque was completed in Islamabad in 1986.



Badshahi Mosque was built by Aurangzeb in the 17th century. Photo: Aatish Nath

The nikkah between my friends, Nabeel Akhtar and Sanam Waheed, took place at 10 on a chilly Monday morning. A



All smiles after the nikkah at Badshahi Mosque. Photo: Aatish Nath

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times, was a solemn occasion with little movement or noise.

After the ceremony, we had brunch – a hearty noon meal that was a smorgasbord of the best of Pakistani fare, featuring paya (trotters), haleem (preparation of meat and lentils), and nihari (meat curry made with a leg of lamb filled with marrow) all to be lapped up with thin, crunchy puris or soft rotis. Also on offer was channa for the vegetarians, and halwa.

wooden partition and thick curtains separated the men and women from both families. The ceremony, which included the

signing of an official document and confirming the marriage and both bride and groom saying "Qubool hain (I accept)" three



Breakfast on the streets of Lahore. Photo: Aatish Nath

Breakfast in Lahore, like in all Indian cities, can be had on the streets. In the cold, foggy morning, I walked on the roads skirting Liberty Market and found my senses tickled awake. The smell of spices rose from large dishes of paya, alongside the sizzle of hot oil, used to fry batura (a large puri made of maida). Also available for hungry early risers are vegetable sandwiches, like the chutney-smacked ones served on Mumbai's streets, and samosas stuffed with either *kheema* (minced meat) or cauliflower.

On the last day, I undertook something of a quixotic quest – to find some physical evidence of my grandmother's life in Lahore, pre-Partition. I didn't have much to go on, just the fact that her family used to own a store, the Amritsar Cloth House in Anarkali Market. I also knew that she used to live on Edward Street, opposite a college. My rickshaw driver dropped me off at the Old Anarkali Market, famous for food like dates. It was in the old market that I started asking shop owners about the Amritsar Cloth House. Even though no one knew where it was, as soon as I said I was from India, I was offered, "chai, coffee, ya kuch thanda (or a cold drink)", and invited to chat. Popular topics of discussion were Bollywood and Partition and its consequences. Everyone I spoke with was friendly and curious about daily life in India. The sizzle of frying chicken legs and the clink of hawkers opening soda bottles permeate the market.

Like most markets, the Anarkali Bazaar has expanded and a variety of items are available in different settings. Sure, there are the traditional shops, where you can enter, haggle and leave with items like china tea sets or bangles. But the market has spilled out onto the street with pavement stalls and pushcarts. The older generation tended to have shops, with the younger, fasttalking upstarts trying to entice shoppers on the streets with branded bargains. I stayed clear of the young 'uns, searching out the markets' old-timers (always men) to ask about the cloth house.

I was guided to the covered part of the old market, which is where all the cloth houses are (and have been since Partition, people say). Women moved from store to store, singly and with children, examining embroidered fabrics in bright pastels. No one seemed to have heard of Amritsar Cloth House. I was told repeatedly that the market had changed greatly, and the chances of finding the shop were as good as zero. Also hampering my search was the fact that old men I spoke to, were of the generation just after Partition, which occurred 67 years ago.

A last-ditch attempt led me into the dark, dusty New Muzammil Store – I was drawn by its old handpainted sign in wooden relief. The owner, a chatty old man, guided me to a side-street I had just passed, and told me that he knew a family that had a shop there that fled to Amristar during the Partition. He didn't know if it was my grandmother's family, or the shop's exact location. One side of the street was full of old stores that might have been unchanged since Partition, but the other was made up of new two- and three-storey plazas with barbershops and clothing stores. At the end of the lane stood the imposing King Edward Medical University – the oldest educational institute in Pakistan. Before leaving Mumbai, I was told that my grandmother's old house was on Edward Street and overlooked a college – in that moment, I decided that maybe my family's memory had gotten hazy with age (everyone I had asked about where to look for the house was over 70 years old), and maybe, just maybe, I had at least reached the general vicinity of Amritsar Cloth House.



Street shopping in the Old Anarkali Market.Photo:Aatish Nath

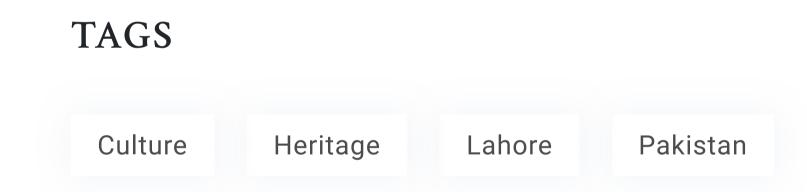
Was I giving up? Maybe. I had spent a few hours walking around the market, not sure what my day would yield. I was disappointed to see how the shops were changing physically – brick buildings were giving way to glass and concrete plazas. But I was even more upset at not being able to find someone who had lived through the events of Partition, so that I could hear first-hand about that time, and ask them more about the Hindu population in the market. Every storeowner I spoke to said that much had changed since Partition, but just like in India, there's a lot that stays the same. Anarkali Market straddles gaudy, reach-for-the-sky new, with the old. I satisfied myself with walking around a market that I'm sure my grandmother would be all too familiar with, although I'll never know which of those streets she knew intimately.

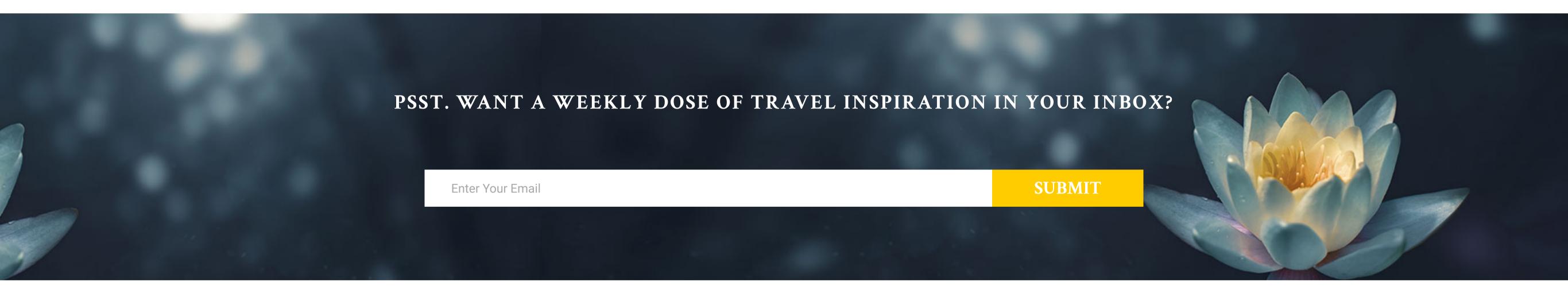
Later in the day, while trying to catch an auto rickshaw back to my hotel, I managed to take a walk down Edward Street too. An afternoon spent in the market was an eye-opening experience, if only for how similar life is across the border.

Aatish Nath is a freelance writer based in Mumbai. He has written for Time Out Mumbai, Mumbai Mirror, and GQ India.

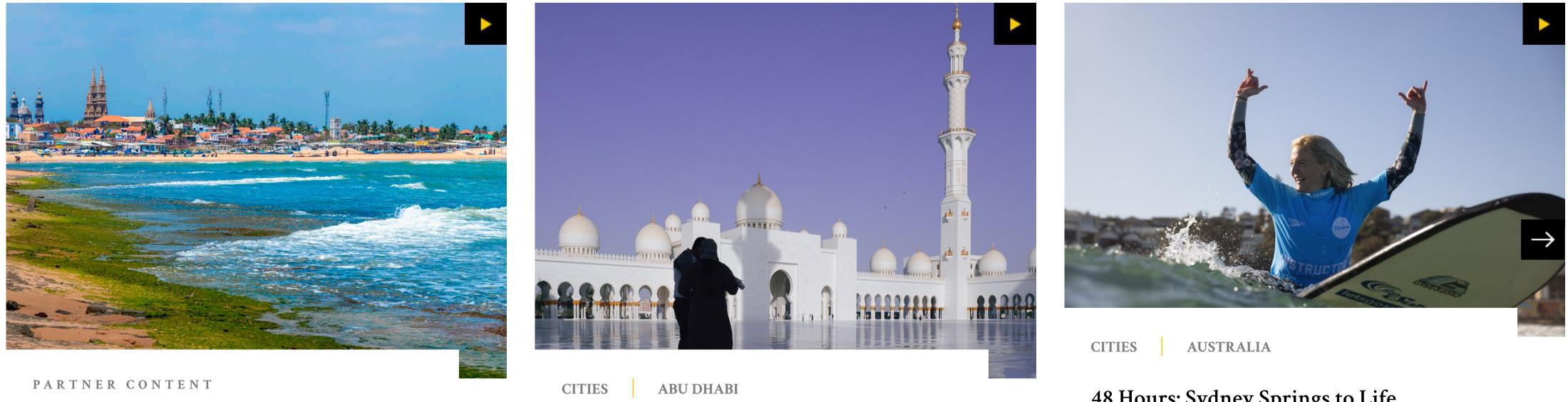
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