

Amritsar & McLeod Ganj

by Dr Choong Shoon Thai Arjun

India, it is often said, is a continent, and a traveler with limited time like me must contend himself with seeing but facets of the country on a single trip. Fortunately, with the great diversity of cultures found within the country, one can with a little planning, experience different traditions in the span of under two weeks.



Amritsar

Amritsar, located in the northern state of Punjab, is an hour's flight from Delhi and also well-connected by rail and road to the capital.

The Golden Temple

The number one reason to visit Amritsar is the holiest shrine in Sikhism – the Golden Temple is a haven of peace amidst the hubbub of the Old City where it is located.

It is possible to sit for hours on the marble floor of the temple compound, and just watch bathers dip themselves in the sacred tank while pilgrims with their families circumambulate the central temple under the protective eyes of temple guards armed with spears, all to the sound of hymns being sung continuously in the background.

The Old City surrounding the Golden Temple is a warren of dark, winding streets – some too narrow for cars to pass through – lined by houses which must have looked splendid in their heyday, but are now in a sad state of disrepair. I recommend getting lost here.



McLeod Ganj

McLeod Ganj, a little town perched on the side of the Outer Himalayan Range, is home to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan refugees who have settled here over the past five decades. It is a seven-hour journey by bus from Amritsar up winding mountain roads, but well-worth the trip.

Far from being a Shangri-la, it is in fact pretty much your standard backpacker's town, but with a strong Tibetan flavor, and the perfect place to kick back and soak in the small-town atmosphere – after the first two days the faces you pass on the streets become familiar, and the many cafes and teashops that line the streets are perfect places to meet the friendly locals who are always happy to share their stories with you over cappuccino or chai. **SMA**

Dr Choong wishes he knew how to stop traveling.



The Wagah Border

Two hours' journey by road to the west of Amritsar is the Wagah border with Pakistan. Each evening, tourists, both Indian and foreign, gather here to witness the border-closing ceremony, a display of military pageantry by the soldiers on both sides; preceded by loud music, dancing, and much waving of the national flag. The ceremony is obviously performed for the benefit of tourists, and the view can be quite poor if you arrive late (as I did), but the patriotic energy from the audience is palpable.

