

# The real Indo-Pakistan conflict

**Jo Caird** experiences border dispute as spectator sport in the Punjab

Every evening the Indo-Pakistan border explodes into life. But at this expression of nationalist feeling the hostilities are all choreographed and the loitering crowds are not refugees but tourists. This is the Wagah Border Ceremony, the best natured expression of a long-running border dispute the world has ever seen.

From Amritsar, the spiritual home of the world's Sikh community, an hour's autorickshaw ride through Punjabi countryside will get you to Wagah, an army outpost on the Indo-Pakistan border. At Amritsar's Golden Temple the pious wash in the goldfish-filled tank, queue for hours to spend a few moments praying under the central shrine's gilded dome and partake of the daily free lunch. Many thousands of pilgrims pass through the temple every day but the atmosphere remains tranquil.

Compare this to the mood at the border: hoards of excited Indians arrive by bus or autorickshaw and are dropped off by the shantytown of tea stalls. Tourists are practically tackled by small children selling paper Indian flags as they stream along the road towards the staging area.

On either side of the gateway that marks the border is a guardroom with a terrace area in front of it and several grandstands. Half an hour before the border closing ceremony is scheduled to begin, they are already filled with people; there must be 3,500 of them. The middle section of the biggest grandstand is reserved for women; their colourful saris make this the brightest crowd you'll ever see.

An MC appears on the road in front of the guardroom on the India side. The already-excited crowd are whipped into a frenzy by his patriotic calls. In between shouts a similar noise is heard from through the gateway into Pakistan. Music plays and a few men clamber down from their seats and begin to dance. These few become a crowd as more men, then a couple of daring women join in the revelry. The road is filled with people, all of them perspiring heavily as they leap and spin to the music. It's like a wedding



Photo: JO CAIRD

where every guest is someone's embarrassing dad.

Eventually the moment arrives for the border closing ceremony to begin and the MC calls for calm. The dancers return to their seats. A group of soldiers dressed in dashing red uniforms and shiny white spats appear in front of the guardroom. They walk proudly, staring straight ahead, then come to a halt. A long note is called and each soldier in turn stomps, strides and runs towards the gateway. There they meet their Pakistani

opposites; apart from the uniforms, which are blue rather than red, the ceremony is exactly the same on the other side of the border. The meetings of the pairs of soldiers are choreographed down to the smallest detail and the crowd roars its support throughout. The gates are flung open and the soldiers grimace at each other, goose-step about and trade mimicked insults. Finally each pair shake hands, a symbol of the potential for peace between these two strong-willed nations. As all this goes on the excited

audience surges onto the road to get a better view and take photographs of the po-faced and amazingly moustachioed military men.

When the gate is shut, the flags lowered and the soldiers back in their guardroom, the mood is one of jubilation as people are ushered back to their waiting autorickshaws and the gauntlet of opportunistic child salesmen. If only all India and Pakistan's issues could be resolved by men in ornate hats pulling funny faces at each other.

## TRAVEL DETAILS

### Where to stay

In Amritsar we stayed at Tourist Guesthouse (+91 0183 255 3830, 1355 GT Rd), where doubles with bathroom are 300Rs (approximately £3.50). The Guesthouse can organise an autorickshaw that will comfortably seat three people to and from the border for 300Rs. This is far easier and cheaper than hailing one on the street.

### How to get there

It is possible to fly directly to Amritsar from London with Air India. Most carriers fly to Delhi which is 10 hours away by bus or 5 ½ hours by express train.

“It's like a wedding where every guest is an embarrassing dad.”

Photo: MARK FLEMING

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