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**Seven wonders of London: BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Hindu Mandir**

For our penultimate entry in our seven wonders series, we champion Neasden's answer to the Taj Mahal



BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Hindu Mandir

It's the sort of undertaking that requires faith, or one hell of a lot of chutzpah. Build the largest Hindu temple outside India, in the finest materials, using master craftsmen with ancient skills rarely found outside the diaspora. Ask unpaid, untrained members of the community to give up their time to work on the site. Raise more than £10 million to finance it, with no government aid. Finish within three years. And do it all in Neasden.

The great Pyramid of Giza took 100,000 workers 20 years to assemble its 2.3 million stones, but the Swaminarayan Hindu Temple can stand shoulder to shoulder with it. Inside, the mandir is a space of almost blinding whiteness and purity. Every vertical surface is carved with stories from the scriptures (veda) and lacy motifs. A forest of pillars fills the floor and above them soars the central dome, stepping up in wedding-cake tiers towards the two-and-a-half tonne keystone which drips downwards like a glorious stone chandelier. Soft lighting brings out the milkiness of the marble and the whole interior exalts in the intimate devotion that has gone into carving each tiny filigree. It is a labour of love and a work of art.

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'There is the saying that when people come to pray they forget about the outside world,' says Yogesh Patel, spokesperson for the mandir, himself one of the volunteers who helped build the temple. 'As they walk up the steps, the mind is focused on the pillars and the space within. When they can see the deities their mind then becomes at one with God. The architecture of the temple is evolved from nature. In the old days, wise old men used to go to the mountains to meditate and be at one with God. The peace that they found there, they wanted to bring back to the towns and villages; so they built temples. The shrines represent caves, the pillars trees and the pinnacles the mountain peaks.'

A mandir is, in a very literal sense, a house of God. Statues of the sacred deities (murti) 'live' inside its shrines, ritually fed, bathed and clothed by the resident monks as if they're alive. Photographs of them are posted each day on the temple's website, dressed in creamy silks, perhaps, or



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resplendent in crimson robes, elaborate headdresses and garlands of flowers for Diwali. A chamber behind the shrines houses statues of the gurus of the faith cross-legged and dressed in their orange monks' robes, with prayer beads (mala) in their right hands. These spiritual guides have successively embodied the energy and divinity of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, up to the fifth current guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Anyone is welcome to look around the mandir, Hindu or heathen. My own visit coincides with the third of the five daily arti ceremonies where I detect a faint aroma of cooking and ripe fruit hanging in the air. The gods have just had lunch. At 11.45am, a PA crackles into action, welcoming visitors and urging silence. To the strains of piped Indian music and nasal chanting, sadhus (monks) appear and unfold wooden doors revealing gold shrines filled with intense colours – orange, green, scarlet – a startling effect inside this otherwise white space. In the centre is the figure of Bhagwan Swaminarayan flanked by Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, the ideal devotee, and Aksharmukta Gopalanand Swami. Shri Harikrishna Maharaj stands in a shrine to the left, his face painted gold. The monks wave a lamp of lighted wicks in front of each murti before prostrating themselves. A collection tray with a small flame is passed round and devotees wash the light over their heads as a blessing. I'm invited to do likewise but my own deep-seated scepticism holds me back and I prefer to remain an observer.

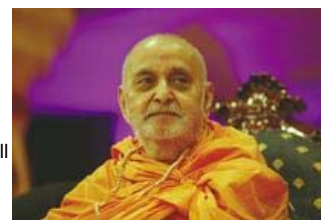
The ceremony is brief and the devotees/congregation are left to spend quality time with the gods. They file past the shrines, chanting mantras, touching the step in front of a chosen deity, or quietly bowing before them. The gathering seems quite informal: Indian grandmas in saris and cardies, middle-aged small businessmen in suits, minicab drivers in leather jackets, a young family with two small boys from Tuscany, Gujarat and Bulgaria who run about excitedly, a teenage girl in tight jeans and a hoodie, a small group of German tourists and a smattering of other curious onlookers.



At 12.15pm, the monks return to close the doors so that the gods can have their siesta. Lifesize photographs of the murti are propped in front so that devotees can still make a connection to the gods. Visitors will come and go throughout the day, paying their respects.

The story of the Neasden mandir goes back to the early '70s, when London's Asian population was on the cusp of a boom. Consecrating London's first temple at 77 Elmore Street, Islington, in 1970, Yogiji Maharaj, then head of the world BAPS (Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, a major organisation in the Swaminarayan branch of Hinduism) prophesied that 'this mandir will be too small to accommodate the devotees one day'. Two years later, thousands of Asians fled to London from Uganda and the new leader, His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, expressed his wish to see a marble temple built in the capital. The devotees took up the challenge and, after several false starts and planning battles, finally fulfilled his vision in 1995.

Built on an old car lot just off the North Circular, the temple complex falls into two distinct parts: the marble and limestone mandir, based on ancient Shilpashastra architecture, and the conventionally built prayer hall and community centre. Though the latter was contracted out to a building company, the mandir itself was constructed by



members of the community; 1,100 volunteers regularly gave up their weekends to work. Some even sold their businesses to devote themselves fully to this collective undertaking.

Eighth-generation architect CB Sompura, based in Ahmedabad, was approached to draw up the plans, such knowledge being handed down from father to son rather than documented in books. Concessions were made to the UK's building regulations and climate; Indian temples are, for example, open to the elements and don't generally have underfloor heating or lifts for the disabled. It is said that if a mandir is made perfect in every way, then there will be perfection in the universe as well. Quite a responsibility, so the best materials had to be sourced: 1,200 tonnes of Carrara marble from Tuscany (the same quarry used for Michelangelo's 'David'), 920 tonnes of Ambaji marble from Gujarat (used for the ceiling pieces) and 3,000 tonnes of Bulgarian Vratza limestone were shipped to the Indian port of Kundla where it was taken to workshops across Gujarat and Rajasthan, carved, then shipped to England.

Meanwhile, there was a flurry of activity in north-west London. Fundraisers were knocking on doors, children were collecting cans to recycle. Women set up a canteen fuelling the workers with superb veggie curries.



Twenty-four craftsmen were brought back to the UK for the final stages of polishing and finessing. The shop and entrance foyer in the an incongruous sight squatting with Haveli, made from carved wood their chisels as JCBs chugged around them. Volunteers who had never before worked on a building site were given sheets of sandpaper or physically lifted stone on top of stone, and everyone came together for the pouring of the foundations, done in a single day. In all, 26,300 pieces of ornately carved stone were assembled in a 3D jigsaw puzzle, without using any conventional structural materials such as steel or lead, thought to interfere with the force fields of the meditative mind.

The finished building, inaugurated on schedule in 1995, caused a sensation. Its clean white pinnacles and domes stood proud above the residential streets of NW10. It was unlike anything London had seen before. Since then, the temple has attracted more than 5 million visitors, from politicians and royalty to tourists and school parties. Everyone is welcome.

Though the mandir is the unequivocal showpiece, the adjoining community centre or haveli is of an equal, if more quotidian, importance. It is used for sports clubs, yoga, football, badminton, temporary clinics and study groups. On Saturdays, it hosts 2,000-strong prayer meetings.



Though functional, it is not without beauty. Here too, in the Burmese teak portico and foyer courtyards, are abundant carvings: layer upon layer depicting peacocks, elephants and lotus flowers. A souvenir shop sells henna kits, incense and photos of the deities. A permanent exhibition 'Understanding Hinduism' explains the history and philosophies of the world's oldest living religion through videos and dioramas. As a PR machine, it's impressive. Next door is the Swaminarayan school, eighteenth in the 2006 GCSE league tables. Across the road, the Shayona grocers' shop sells sacks of chapatti flour and Indian sweets, with the adjacent café serving vegetarian curries. Mind, body, spirit (and purse) are all catered for here.

The figures are considered to be living gods

London has 45,000 Hindus living in Harrow, 40,000 in Brent, and many more in Hounslow, Ealing and Finchley. The Neasden temple is the epicentre of this community, but its reach extends further. Charity walks and the world's largest finger painting have raised money for the British Heart Foundation, Breast Cancer Care and international disaster relief. The original volunteers have also used their experience to help build more increasingly elaborate mandirs around the world.

At November's Diwali celebrations, thousands came from all over the UK to offer their devotion, have their account books blessed (it is effectively the Hindu new year) and watch a spectacular firework display. Prince Charles and Camilla visited, commending the Hindu community for the way it has integrated into the fabric of Britain and pronouncing it 'one of the most positive forces that bind the country together'.



The story of the Neasden mandir could have come from scripture, illustrating the triumph of the human spirit. It is humbling and inspiring that a group of ordinary Londoners could join forces and – using only their faith, hard work and business nous – pull together the money, land, materials and skills to build something so spectacular. When the current Swamiji proclaimed his vision in 1972, he said that 'the stones will inspire divinity in people'. While the Hindu 'no meat, no alcohol' rule makes me unlikely to convert, it is impossible to stand inside here without feeling spiritually moved and inwardly contemplative. This is a quasi-religious quality common to all truly great buildings. It is the power of architecture to thrill the emotions and stir the soul.

The marble was shipped from India

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, 105-119 Brentfield Rd, NW10 (020 8965 2651/[www.mandir.org](http://www.mandir.org)).

Jessica Cargill Thompson. Photography Belinda Lawley, Tue Dec 11 2007

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**Jitu Somani** said...

This is a very informative article. What a great Mandir for Generations to appreciate. Thanks to Pramukh Swami and Swaminarayan Sanstha for such a gift.

Posted on Dec 15 2007 13:46

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