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# SPRINGTIME IN THE LAND OF FIVE RIVERS



Laughter, songs  
and carefree merriment  
ring in Basant Panchami  
in Punjab. Text  
and photographs by  
**Rita Sawhney**

**I**t's the ideal time to be going to Patiala; it's Basant Panchami and blossom time. In the words of Guru Nanak: "All is seemly; the woodlands are in flower and loud with the humming of bumblebees."

As we drive through verdant fields of mustard towards Patiala, we notice tall and robust Punjabi men and women. We pass them by in the bazaars. The flame of the forest is in full bloom; large red and orange petals stand out on leafless branches, falling with a thud on the unsuspecting passerby.

This is the land of plenty. Of laughter, song and carefree merriment. For me it is a pilgrimage to discover my roots. I gravitate towards the land of five waters. The 250 kilometer-drive down National Highway 1 takes only five hours and we find ourselves in Motibagh Palace (now the National Institute of Sports), admiring the well maintained facade glowing in the setting sun. We see athletic men and women absorbed in practice sessions; this is where our sportspersons are trained for international competitions.







The Patiala Heritage Festival is on and a host of interesting programmes are being offered, such as a golf match, art exhibitions, a Punjabi opera, a fashion show, Indian classical music by exponents of the Patiala *gharana* and a recital by Pundit Jasraj. The festival (held in collaboration with INTACH and the Punjab Government) is also supported by the Government of India.

After meandering through the intricate streets of an ancient bazaar, we enter an imposing structure—Qila Mubarak (the auspicious Fort)—

whose tall ramparts seem to touch the sky. This is the venue of some of the festival programmes. The evening session is on and as we walk in, the melodious notes of a raga welcome us. We are transported into another century.

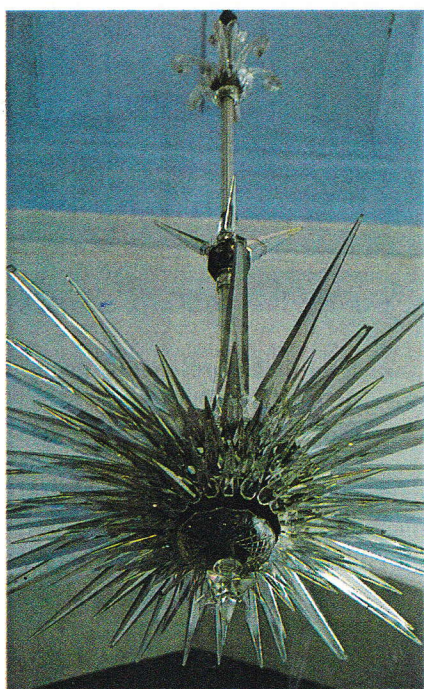
Early next morning, we embark on a tour of the *qila*. We learn that Baba Ala Singh had first built a mud fortress in 1763AD, which subsequent rulers reconstructed and fortified with bricks. We are led into the inner residential area called the Qila Androon, the facade of which is decorated with geo-

**Top:** Flame of the forest in full bloom  
**Facing page** Motibagh Palace  
illuminated by the last rays of the sun

metrical and floral designs in lime plaster. We follow a labyrinth of corridors leading into private courtyards where once flowers bloomed and fountains sprayed water.

Up a steep flight of stairs and we approach a raised courtyard where a gurdwara and a temple are located. Baba Ala Singh is supposed to have brought the sacred *jyot* (flame) from





**Above:** A chandelier made of Belgium glass; **Top:** Performers at the Patiala Heritage Festival

Jwala Ji in Himachal. It gave us a complete experience of the secular tradition promoted by the ruler. A smoldering log is placed near the *jiyot*. We are told the story of the *fakir* who gave it to Baba Ala Singh. The *fakir* blessed future rulers too, advising them to keep the flame burning as prosperity would follow in their footsteps while it burned.

We notice an amalgam of architectural styles, ad hoc added, yet so artistically put together that they do not appear out of place at all. In the museum, we are spellbound by the silver carriage made in Calcutta in 1909 that the rulers rode to enter the *darbar*. It was last used by Yadvendra Singh in 1948. We hear about the colorful character of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh who ascended the throne in 1900 when he was only eight years old.

He possessed extraordinary wealth and while travelling in Europe, often bought the entire contents of a store.

His favorite hotel was The Savoy, where he booked the whole second floor! He died at the young age of forty-seven.

The awesome chandeliers of Belgium glass catch our eyes, their colors varied—red, turquoise, and emerald—and some weighing a tonne and a half. A glass lamp rises many feet upwards, nearing the ceiling.

The old Motibagh museum boasts the world's largest collection of medals and decorations. We notice the Victoria Cross among them. The bazaars of Patiala are famous for items like Punjabi *jutis*, gold and silver *naalas* (pajama strings) and *parandaas* (worn at the end of braids). We shop to our hearts content.

No trip to the Punjab is complete without an authentic meal of *sarson ka saag*, *makki ki roti* and a large glass of lassi. We drive back, leaving behind the land of yellow fields swaying in the spring breeze.