

15. a passage to india

Centuries of trade plus nearly 90 years as the jewel in the crown of the British Empire created strong links between India and the UK. And when independence was granted in 1947 – and the country was carved up along religious lines into present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – many former subjects of the Crown headed to the motherland in search of a better life. In London, as in other British industrial cities, clearly defined Asian districts began to form. This journey takes you around some of the capital's most vibrant Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi areas; places that retain a strong cultural identity originally forged thousands of miles away.



Start point: Southall overground

End point: Liverpool Street tube

Duration: 4.5 hours

● When you get off the train at **Southall overground**, the first thing you'll notice is the bilingual signs – in English and Gurmukhi, the written form of Punjabi – which are the first clue this district is as every bit as Indian as it is British. When you come out of the station, cross the road and turn right. Catch the northbound **105, 120, 195, E5** or **H32** – passing the building that used to house the **Glassy Junction** pub on the right. Until it closed in early 2012, this Punjabi inn, which even accepted payment in rupees, was one of Southall's most famous landmarks – having made several appearances in Bollywood movies.

● The first Indians arrived in Southall in 1950 to take up jobs in a factory owned by a former British Indian Army officer. The proximity of Heathrow Airport and the jobs created by its expansion in the 1950s led to further waves of immigration, and the area became predominantly South Asian by the 1970s. The population is mainly Sikh and Hindu, though the district is also home to a significant number of Pakistani Muslims; and this cultural mix is evident as soon as you step onto the bus. As well as your fellow passengers – who are most likely to be speaking in Punjabi or Urdu – you will be surrounded by glimpses of India wherever you turn. Look out for the ornate **Himalaya Palace**

cinema on the left, which is a wonderfully faded Asian-inspired architectural gem amid the scruffy shops and cafés of South Road. There can be few places in London more appropriate a setting for the Bollywood films that are screened regularly here.

● Get off the bus at the **Southall Broadway** stop and continue walking up to the junction. Southall Broadway, which stretches to the left and right of here, is lined with Indian grocers, restaurants and other businesses, and from around 10am you'll see grills and miniature ovens being set up on the pavement to send out delicious aromas into the air. The UK's high-street chains also have a strong presence here, yet the likes of Gregg's and Costa make an incongruous sight when wreathed in spice-infused steam. If you're here on a Wednesday, Friday or Saturday, turn right and walk along to **Southall Market**, which is like stepping into the streets of Mumbai. Sizzling outdoor grills and stalls piled high with fresh chillies are packed in next to glittering boards of gold jewellery and racks of primary-coloured saris. What with all the sight, sounds and smells, it's very easy to forget you're in west London.

● Catch the eastbound **195, 207** or **427** from the **Southall Police Station** bus stop, which is opposite the entrance to the market. Get off at **Ealing Hospital** and, from the same stop, take the northbound **83** all the way up to **Clayton Avenue**. Get off the bus and walk back down

Ealing Road to the **Shree Sanatan Mandir**, which is situated on the right. This beautiful Hindu limestone temple, which cost £16 million and was built using only traditional techniques, took 14 years to construct and opened its doors as recently as 2010. Many of intricate designs that cover its walls and towers were hand-carved in the Indian province of Gujarat and flown to the UK; and it contains 41 marble deities – including one of Mother Theresa – which were specially sculpted in India for the building.

- Upon leaving the temple complex, turn left at the exit and walk up Ealing Road. The parade of shops here provides Wembley's mainly Gujarati Hindu community with all the South Asian clothing, foodstuffs and other reminders of their ancestral home they could possibly require. It's reassuringly noisy and colourful. Cross the road so you're on the opposite side to the Shree Sanatan Mandir and walk up to the **Eagle Road** bus stop. Catch the eastbound **224** from here to the **Swaminarayan Temple** stop on Brentfield Road in Neasden.

- Get off the bus right next to the stunning **Shri Swaminarayan Mandir** (better known as Neasden Temple), which was built in the 1990s as a focal point for northwest London's Hindu communities. Constructed from nearly 5,000 tonnes of Bulgarian limestone and Italian marble, it is the largest Hindu temple outside India. To visit its sumptuous interior, which includes seven separate shrines beneath each of its pinnacles, as well as an adjoining cultural centre and exhibition centre, you need to enquire at the reception desk inside the main entrance. But – be warned – though the temple claims to be open 365 days a year, you may arrive (as this writer did) to find all gates securely closed and no sign of anyone to admit you. Whether you get in or not, though, the temple is still an awe-inspiring sight.

- Cross the road and catch the southbound **206** or **224** from the **Swaminarayan Temple** stop down to **Knatchbull Road**. Walk back up to the junction, cross the main road and turn right to catch the eastbound **18** from the identically named **Knatchbull Road** stop on the A404. This bus goes through Harlesden, Kensal Green and Maida Vale – home to small Portuguese and Middle Eastern communities – before heading alongside the Westway and up Marylebone Road. Get off at the **Euston Station** terminus.

- Catch the eastbound **205** from the bus station in the railway station forecourt – it goes from stop D, which is situated directly in front of a branch of Nando's. This bus takes you through Islington and down City Road, before skirting the old City of London and heading up towards

Whitechapel – a traditionally Jewish district that is now home to a predominantly Bangladeshi population. Indeed, London's East End, of which Whitechapel marks the western frontier, has been the focus of successive waves of immigration from Bangladesh and Pakistan, and there are large, well-established Muslim communities everywhere from East Ham to Bethnal Green.

- Get off the bus at the **Osborn Street** stop, then walk back down Whitechapel Road and turn right into Osborn Street. This leads up to **Brick Lane**, the centre of London's Banglatown, around which families from the country's Greater Sylhet region began to settle from the 1970s onwards. A fabulous mix of Bangladeshi cafés, restaurants and shops, and boutiques and galleries that have sprung up around the fashionable east London art scene (with a handful of remnants from its days as a Jewish enclave), Brick Lane is one of the most fascinating streets in the capital. But despite all the young hipsters in directional outfits wandering between its trendy bars and exhibition spaces, this is still a traditional South Asian Islamic community. At its heart is the Jamme Masjid mosque, and signs – even the ones denoting the names of streets – are in Bengali as well as English.

- Once you've explored Brick Lane, turn into Fournier Street – which runs alongside the mosque – and walk to Commercial Street. Bear left across the road and continue up Brushfield Street, which flanks Old Spitalfields Market, to emerge on Bishopsgate. Cross the road and turn left to get to **Liverpool Street tube**.

