

*The Wall Street Journal Europe,  
Friday-Saturday, November 10-11, 1995*

## **North London's Answer to the Taj Mahal**

By ELLEN CROSBY

London

Next door to the Eurodollar car rental, sandwiched between boxy cookie-cutter homes and the beat-up warehouses and discount stores of north London, is the recently opened Swaminarayan Mandir, the largest Hindu temple ever built outside India. The mandir, said by some to rival the Taj Mahal in beauty, is an iced-gingerbread confection of marble and limestone built in a style of Indian architecture not used for 800 years.

The building boasts numerous superlatives and frothy extravagances: It has the only cantilevered dome in Europe built without steel, and its richly carved domes (six of them), pinnacles (seven) and columns (nearly 100) are decorated with more than 500 designs depicting fragile-looking Hindu deities and sacred symbols. Three thousand tons of cream-colored Bulgarian limestone and 2,000 tons of white Italian Carrara marble were shipped to India, where craftsmen spent two years chipping the stone into 26,300 intricately carved pieces. These were then numbered and re-shipped to England for assembly like a giant jigsaw puzzle.

It is an elegant jewel set in an otherwise blighted landscape, all the more breathtaking for being built largely by unskilled volunteers. More than 1,000 members of a small sect of Hindus who worship Lord Swaminarayan, a 19th-century guru revered as an incarnation of Shiva, took time off from jobs as doctors, accountants, bankers and lawyers to lay drains, install electrical fixtures, polish marble and sweep the ubiquitous cloud of stone dust as it settled. They were supervised by *sadhus*, "living saints," who mingled among them in sandals and saffron robes with more temporal accouterments like saffron hard hats and portable phones.

Others contributed financially, launching Britain's largest-ever campaign to collect refundable aluminum cans for recycling. There are accounts of senior citizens who kept track of football matches, showing up as games ended to scavenge rich pickings left by the fans, in all collecting some 5.5 million cans, which yielded £55,000 (\$87,000).

In the frantic days before the mandir's six-day inaugural celebration, work continued all night so that the sweeping marble staircase seemed to appear by magic one morning. Bare brick walls were hidden behind sheets and guides spoke over the drone of jackhammers. Crates of marble were shifted behind the hospitality tent. The festival was a mix of Indian tradition and slick, high-tech organization and public relations. Women in teal and peach-colored saris acted as guides; men in dark suits and ties emblazoned with the mandir domes directed traffic with mobile phones clamped to their ears. In six days

more than 100,000 visitors passed through the ornamental gateway to walk barefoot on cool, newly polished marble floors. Some 30,000 meals were served.

The adjacent cultural complex, containing meeting rooms, marriage hall, library, kitchen and sports center, is no less splendid than the mandir, for it is made of elaborately carved Burmese teak and English oak in a style called Haveli, or courtyard, architecture. The smell of newly carved wood—and there is much of it—lingers like heavy incense in a room big enough to accommodate a football field. But our guide, a 40-year-old accountant named Girish Patel, stresses that the teak came from ecologically sensitive farms, and that for each of the 226 English oaks felled, 10 new trees were planted.

Next on the tour is a meeting with Atmaswarupdas Swami, one of the sect's senior living saints. His life of strict asceticism prohibits contact with women, so a kitchen tour is tactfully arranged for me while my husband, my young sons and two other men are whisked away by car. Girish and I, meanwhile, remove our shoes and enter a long, darkened room where rows of women in saris sit cross-legged on the floor chopping vegetables into huge heaps. In the kitchen open fires burn brightly on this sweltering day as cooks place *bhajia*, spicy potato dumplings, into kettles of boiling oil. The air is filled with the pungent aromas of lunch. We must sample everything, Girish says, and it is our luck that an enormous tray destined for the temple's idols arrives in the kitchen. The food is sweet or fiery, made only from root vegetables, as it is a fast day. It is all very good but I feel as though I am inside a clothes dryer as we stand barefoot, talking and licking our fingers.

Like most of Britain's 20,000 Swaminarayan Hindus, Girish came from East Africa, where many Swaminarayans settled after leaving India. In the 1970s, they were expelled by Uganda's Idi Amin and emigrated to Britain. Asked if he feels more Indian or British, Girish replies that his heroes are the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson and Lennon & McCartney. But the lighthearted answer doesn't obscure the fact that the temple was built by a community seeking to strengthen Indian culture and traditions against Western anomie. Their leaders worry that preserving Hindu values while living in a foreign land is, Girish says, "like swimming in water without getting wet-impossible." They fret that Hindus and Muslims are lumped together generically by the British press and that the greater awareness of the Muslim community comes at their expense.

They are concerned about their children's values in a dissolute Western society, so there are strong educational and cultural programs with special attention paid to the dangers of drug and alcohol addiction. My husband says later the swami spent much of his time talking to my sons.

"The mandir is tangible proof of our presence in the community," says Girish. "It is something Hindus can be proud of. Britain's oldest monument, Stonehenge, was built without steel 3,000 years ago. Our mandir was also built without steel so it, too, will stand for a millennium."

*Ms. Crosby is a free-lance writer living in London.*