

LONG STORY...

Whether you're after Rapunzel lengths or just a thicker, fuller mane, hair extensions have never been so popular. But with hair being sourced from Russian prisons and Chinese labour camps, isn't it only fair to look into the origins of yours?

A young Indian girl sits on a rustic stone bench, waiting patiently for a haircut. The line of people in front of her is long, but the barber, equipped only with a simple, razor-sharp blade, is working with the expertise of a man who has done this thousands of times. Soon she's in the hot seat, and in a matter of minutes the lustrous, waist-length black hair she's spent years growing, braiding and nourishing with coconut oil, is gone - as in, down-to-the-scalp gone. The barber might not be Frédéric Fekkai, but he is quick.

It's an occasion that would have most of us doing some serious mourning for our lost locks, but for the girl in question it's a beautifully spiritual moment. She's at the Tirupati temple in India, offering her hair to God in a ritual called tonsuring. The custom has been practised by Hindus for thousands of years, both as a symbol of a desire to let go of the ego (a bit like deciding to be big enough to wear your trackie pants to the movies... only way, way bigger) and as an offering of devotion. "Some people donate money, some donate food. But a lot of people don't have what they would consider a suitable amount of money to show their gratitude to God, so they donate



ALESSANDRO DELL' AQUA

their hair," explains Mayoor Balsara, from SDTC Exports, a company that deals in the donated locks. "I think if you ask most women, they'd say they'd rather give money than lose their hair, so you can imagine that it really is a very, very powerful sacrifice and very, very powerful donation."

A common practice is for a visitor to pledge their hair to the temple's resident god in return for the grant of a prayer they've made, then to shave their heads after the wish - for example, a good

marriage, or a healthy baby - is granted. Most Hindu Indians - men and women, rich and poor, from small children to the elderly - will do it at least once in their lifetime, and the temple receives literally hundreds of thousands of visitors every day. That's a whole lot of hair dropping to the floor. And what must be a whole lot of wishes coming true.

In the past, the hair was used to make wigs, as stuffing for mattresses and pillows (all together now: eeeuw), or simply burnt, but in recent years the

temples of India have found another, much more lucrative, use for the tonnes (literally) of hair they collect every day: hair extensions. Once the domain of football WAGS and sexed-up pop starlets, extensions are now used to add thickness and volume (not necessarily length) to all kinds of fashionable heads. The hair extensions market has exploded – so much so that supply can't keep up with demand.

Companies like SDTC Exports buy the hair from the temple at auctions, painstakingly clean and sort it, turn it into a 'product' and sell it on to companies such as Italy's Great Lengths, the largest hair extensions company in the world and pioneers of the industry. They, in turn, further refine the product (see Extensions: why you get what you pay for, over the page) and ship it around the globe to be used to add oomph to the hair of women from Perth to Paris. They may come from a variety of sources, but when it comes to hair extensions, Indian temple hair is like the Prada, the Balmain and the Balenciaga all rolled up into one. This is a lucky break for the temples, which use the millions of dollars the hair auctions bring in for maintenance, as well as charitable works like hospitals, orphanages and to feed the throngs of pilgrims who descend every day. It's hard to know how many of the devotees know what happens to their hair once they shave it, but it's unlikely that any of them would care. To them, it's the ritual of tonsuring that matters. Detractors argue that the devotees – many of whom live in poverty – are being exploited by the temples, but the truth is that in their eyes their hair is worth much more to them as a spiritually loaded donation than what they could reap by selling it for their own financial gain. "Tonsuring is not something the temples force upon anyone; people do it willingly. The temples actually have a different problem: where to keep all the tonnes of hair they collect," says Balsara.

This ethical high road is one of the reasons why Indian temple hair is suddenly so desirable. Unlike hair from

other countries, the sale of temple hair is fully traceable – you know exactly what you're getting. As for hair from other sources... well, there's not really any way of knowing what's being attached to your head or how it got there. Reports have included stories of impoverished European women being compelled to sell their hair for financial survival (news services report a boom in Spanish women selling their ponytails last year as a consequence of the GFC), hair being sourced from Russian prisons and mental institutions, Chinese labour camps and even – horrifically – from the bodies of the dead. Not even all Indian hair is the same: another type, known as 'brushed Indian hair' is literally collected out of

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brushes and from salon floors, though most often to make cheap wigs and toupees. Victoria Beckham succeeded in getting the issue some column inches when she famously declared in 2004: "My extensions come from Russian prisoners, so I've got Russian cell-block H on my head". However, the success of Great Lengths' ethical philosophy proves that not all of us are so glib about our crowning glory's past history or karma.

In a happy coincidence of nature (not to mention business), ethics aren't the only reason why temple hair is considered the industry's bee's knees. Indian hair is also the most structurally similar to Caucasian hair (unlike Chinese hair, whose different cellular structure makes it extremely straight, without the same natural wave and texture) meaning

that once it's been attached to our heads, it looks, feels, and moves like your own real hair – it has bounce. As the pilgrims are often from rural areas, it also tends to be overwhelmingly 'virgin' – meaning that it's never been coloured or chemically treated – and on top of that, Indian women are well practiced in the art of looking after their hair, using oils and scalp massages from an early age. Most importantly of all, temple hair is 'remy' – an industry word that basically means the hair is collected with the cuticle facing in one direction, resulting in hair that doesn't tangle or turn into a bird's nest the second it gets wet. The only way to fix this with non-remy hair (hair in which the strands are sold mixed up in different directions) is to treat it in acid baths, which strip and damage the hair. To make it more sellable, the non-remy hair is treated with silicone to make it soft and shiny – but unfortunately the effect doesn't last long after you wear it home.

"India is the only place in the world where you have this incredible situation of hundreds of thousands of people willingly donating their hair to the temple, which also finds it very convenient as a means of generating much-needed revenue and collects the hair in a manner [remy] that will maximise that revenue," says Balsara, whose company supplies all of Great Lengths' hair.

The problem is that it's nearly impossible for a lay(wo)man to tell the difference between remy and non-remy-but-silicone-treated hair on sight. To add to the confusion, the extensions industry is unregulated, so brands can claim to be Indian temple hair when what they might be is only a small part temple hair, and mostly a cheaper variety from goodness-knows-where.

So how can you be sure your extensions are ethically sourced? The only real way to be sure is to ask your stylist or salon where the hair they use comes from. Do your research on the company that supplies it, and if you're not satisfied, go somewhere else. And if you don't? Well, on your head be it. ▶



MATTHEW WILLIAMSON



BALMAIN



BCBG MAX AZRIA



MALO

EXTENSIONS: WHY YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

"One of the things people don't understand is that there are a lot of variables behind the creation of hair extensions," says Great Lengths' Thomas Gold. "Our most difficult task has been to teach the salons and consumers how we're different and why we're more expensive than the competition, when their hair seems very similar to ours on the surface." Considering that good extensions should last around six to eight months, it's worth knowing the facts.

The first and most important difference is the remy factor. The fact that Great Lengths uses 100 per cent Indian temple hair guarantees the hair is remy.


Secondly, Great Lengths uses an exclusive osmosis-based depigmentation process that takes black Indian hair down to the lightest shade of blonde without a hint of bleach or peroxide. This is done by sitting the hair in baths of a top-secret formula for up to 25 days. It's a slow process because it's incredibly gentle (so gentle that it can even be ingested!) - which results in hair that comes to you in better condition than any other.

"Other companies use much more aggressive methods of bleaching so they can reach the colour but inevitably destroy the quality of the hair in the process. They cover it up with amazing silicone technology, which gives it back its lustre and shine, so the client is happy initially but after only a few washes, the silicone washes off and the hair becomes dull and brittle," explains Gold. "It's mostly because of this that the competition is still light years behind us, especially when it comes to blondes."

"No one else has anything close to this system," he continues. "The market is booming so much that other companies don't see it as a viable option to spend so much time and money when even cheaply made extensions are walking out the door. But we do because we know there's a market of people who want the most natural and best product out there."

Behind all the technology there's also a quality control aspect that comes in to play. Great Lengths hair is 'triple drawn', meaning that after the hair is collected, it's combed through a special

tool called a hackle three times. The hackle separates the lengths, so the consumer can be triple-sure that the strands of extensions are the exact same length from the roots to the tip - and that the hair she's paying for is the hair she's getting. "If we were to apply hair to a customer that included shorter strands we'd have to apply double the amount to get the look she wants, which means she would have to spend twice the money and get an uneven result," explains Gold.

An increased use of henna in India has recently added another step to the process. "Sometimes there may be strands of hair that, because of the henna, can't be taken to the exact shade Great Lengths need," explains Balsara. "The moment the anomaly appears they send the batch back to us and we screen it and remove them. What a lot of companies do is just blend the anomalies into the rest. We're talking about tiny flaws, slightly darker individual strands, that the customer might think is passable. But Great Lengths demands that level of precision and perfection." 

WHAT'S NEXT? The hair extensions industry's next big thing is a system that will eliminate the need for clunky, and sometimes uncomfortable, polymer bonds (the little plastic casings used to attach the hair to your own) altogether. "[The new method] - which boasts the speed of a clip-in with the longevity of a normal Great Lengths application - will revolutionise the application of hair extensions and make other single-strand methods, clip-ins and wefts obsolete," promises Rob Aubin, from Great Lengths Australia. Like mascara that never comes off and a spray tan that lasts a month, it might sound like a way-out, futuristic beauty fantasy but you can expect it to start appearing in Australian salons in March. Bags first in... **Great Lengths, 1300 138 452, greatlengths.com.au.**