

Delhi delights: Shop 'til you drop

LESLIE SMITH

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Awe and wonderment at Karim's Restaurant, an Old Delhi institution. (DONALD DOW)

Delhi and its numerous markets and shopping areas are not for the faint-hearted nor the uninitiated. Barterers beware, for no matter how experienced you are, the local stall owners are one step ahead of you. But the plethora of markets — there is literally a specialty market for anything you can dream of — is something we Canadians just can't conceive. Shoes, shawls, saris, salwar kameez — you name it, they've got it in any style, colour, size and price. If only my bag was big enough to bring everything home. But wait, there's a whole market just for airline luggage! Consumers, start your engines!

Ignoring warnings of family, friends and neighbours, we delved straight into the seething mass of humanity that makes up Old Delhi the day after we arrived. A few days in hectic London had acclimatized us to an overcrowded city, or so we thought. Yet our first day loose on Delhi's streets felt like the equivalent of being trapped inside Neo's Matrix — though we were on a bicycle rickshaw, not a submarine — with similarly terrifying twists and turns through the most hideously effusive traffic on earth.

And what fun it was. Imagine a horizontal roller-coaster through a grotesque funhouse of eats, sights, sounds, smells and horrors and you've nearly got Delhi. Air pollution, traffic gridlock and overcrowding are serious problems but somehow the inhabitants not only take it all in stride but have time to assist hapless tourists. We lost track of the number of times people whistled down an auto-rickshaw for us, explained our destination to the driver, negotiated a price, then popped us into the back seat after wishing us well.

After wandering around Delhi on our own for several days, we signed up for a much more sedate group shopping tour which took us to Dilli Haat, an upscale market of crafts from around India, which charges an admission fee. Numerous school groups were already inside, the young students buying trinkets and chattering excitedly. Local Ayurvedic products (Indian traditional medicine) abounded, along with elegant scarves, wraps, shoes, jewelry, teas and other packed and ready-to-eat foods. Each outlet bore a plaque with details on where the products were made along with information on the stall owners. In the nearby Delhi enclaves of M and N Blocks of Greater Kailash 1, upscale neighbourhoods are laid out around small parks. Patrons of elegant shops and cafes, such as Starbucks, Fab India and Anokhi, step out onto streets perpetually under construction — where they collide with stray dogs, mischievous monkeys and ubiquitous street vendors offering everything from ironing, fresh morning milk, chat (pans of uniquely Indian snacks), Delhi-style cold coffee, heaps of cut-rate clothing, and yes, luggage to take it home in.

This comparatively idyllic environment was a respite from the riotous free-for-all that is Old Delhi, where rickshaws, cattle, donkey carts, auto-rickshaws, pedestrians, buses, trucks and ancient bicycles thrust into the melee that is Chadni Chowk, formerly a canal bordered by grand processional avenues leading from the Red Fort to Fatepuri Masjid. The canal was filled in long ago and the road has become an unimaginable traffic nightmare, which our indefatigable rickshaw driver deftly negotiated — though at times I closed my eyes and suppressed the urge to scream as buses and trucks lumbered straight at us, horns blaring in an unwanted game of chicken.

Greater Delhi has a population of around 24 million, with close to 320,000 people per square kilometre, double that of New York City or Tokyo. Coupled with chronic air pollution, the result of vehicle exhaust, cooking fires, seasonal fogs, burning of crops and brush in surrounding areas, and a cold-weather climatic inversion which traps air-borne pollutants near ground level, and it is little wonder the World Health Association nominates Delhi year after year for the world's least breathable air award.

Temples, forts and even luxury hotels are monstrously big, in keeping with the scale of the city itself. Hotels like the Leela Palace Kempinski, The Lodhi, Claridges, The Oberoi, Le Meridien, Crowne Plaza and a host of others offer unparalleled luxury service, some with ensuite private pools.

The Sikh Gurdwara Bangla Sahib near Connaught Place is associated with the eighth Sikh Guru Har Krishan and contains the Sarovar, a historically significant pool believed to heal the sick. The golden-domed complex offers guided tours and three daily meals free to all, embracing the concept of langar, demonstrating Sikh commitment to egalitarianism. Admission is free.

Swaminarayam Akshardham Mandir or temple complex east of the Jumna (or Yamuna) River is the world's third largest Hindu temple. Constructed in 2005 using ancient stone-carving techniques, the mandir has its own metro stop. The site features a stunning temple, an illuminated evening water show and a research institute. Other attractions include evening fire puja (aarti); the Hall of Values with mannikins displaying elements of Hindu culture; an entertaining boat tour through all of Vedic/Hindu history; extensive themed gardens featuring statuary and water channels; a cafeteria with numerous choices for lunch as well as a gift shop. An IMAX theatre tells the story of Neelkanth, an 18th-century child ascetic later known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan, to whom the temple is chiefly dedicated. Plan to be there at least half a day. Admission is free.

Humayun's Tomb and the Red Fort are two pleasant, surprisingly serene UNESCO World Heritage sites to wander and dream of life in the elegant Mughal court. Humayun's Tomb and its quiet gardens dating from the 1560s commemorate the Afghanistan-born second Mughal emperor. The grand tomb set the standard for all subsequent Mughal mausoleums, a building style which would reach its apex 80 years later with Agra's Taj Mahal. Bhadur Shah II, the last Mughal emperor, surrendered here during the 1857 Indian Mutiny. Entry fee and special line for foreign tourists.

Lal Qila—the Red Fort—was constructed in 1639 by the fifth Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (he also built the Taj Mahal) when Delhi was known as Shahjahanabad. Considered the epitome of Mughal creativity via its fusion of Islamic, Hindu, Persian and Timurid styles, the conquering British army thoughtlessly razed some of its elaborate pavilions in the 1800s to make way for barracks, ruining the layout of the carefully-planned complex. No wonder that it was here Jawaharlal Nehru hoisted India's flag of independence in 1947.

The Red Fort still impresses with the size and understated urbanity of its remaining water gardens (known as the Stream of Paradise) the Hall of Public Audience, containing the emperor's throne (Diwan-i-Amm); his private apartments (Khal Mahal); the Palace of Colours (the mirrored Rang Mahal, where the harem lived); a small but interesting museum, and other exquisite buildings. Chhatta Chowk, a bazaar at Lahori Gate, originated as a place for ladies of the harem to purchase jewellery, silks and other personal and household items. It still exists, luring Indian and foreign tourists to fondle its lovely scarves, try on ornately embroidered slippers and sigh over elaborate jewellery. Admission fee and special line for foreign tourists; guides available for hire and well worth their fee.



Wearing the robe of horror in the courtyard of Jama Masjid, Old Delhi. (DONALD DOW)

Nearby is Jama Masjid, India's largest mosque, its exterior courtyard packed with pilgrims and sightseers alike. The long, stifling climb up one of the minarets gives a birds-eye view over the chaos of Old Delhi, and a glimpse into the rabbit-warren of streets, shops, houses and markets that make up this seething City of Djinn (free-willed spirits or genies). Entry is supposed to be free, and robe-hire voluntary but we were charged for entry, paid for compulsory robe for me, and dished out more cash to get our shoes back after we left them at the entry (footwear is removed before entry to most religious sites)—and to climb the minaret. Tourists may not enter during prayer hours.

Shopping is always nearby; flag down a rickshaw and head to the Tibetan Wooden Market, Meena Bazaar, Kabutar Market or Paiwala Bazaar. Take extreme care if you are on foot: Obstacles abound and it is easy to get lost.

Accomplishing more than two or three things in a day in Delhi is nearly impossible due to traffic and the sheer size of the city. Detours and distractions — accidental and on purpose — are par for the course. Rest, relax and replenish before diving back into the swirling tide. Karim's Restaurant located in what remains of a haveli (a Moghul-era mansion) in Old Delhi is famous for its food but perhaps not its cleanliness. Squeaky-clean Piyu's Kitchen, tucked away in Shivali Stadium Metro Station, provides inexpensive, delicious food to rival any in the city. Beware of eating street food. Carry hand sanitizer or wipes and use frequently after opening doors, handling money and riding public transit. I even wiped down bananas before peeling. Examine bottled water carefully to ensure it is sealed—and not simply filled from a local tap. Delhi Belly is remorseless and could ruin your holiday.

Love her or leave her, Delhi inspires every visitor to emotional heights and depths . . . but she would really rather you stayed.

If you go

Hop aboard Air Canada's overnight Halifax-London flight and switch to Air India for the Delhi leg. Or take Air Canada's direct Toronto-Delhi flight. Once there, Delhi Aerocity is a newly-built complex near the Indira Gandhi Airport containing elegant hotels and a shopping centre, connected to the airport and downtown by a modern, sleek metro. The sumptuous JW Marriott has excellent service while the mid-range Ibis Hotel offers clean, comfortable rooms.

Top shopping can be had at Khadi Bandar and other upscale shops in Connaught Place, Fab India and other stores in Khan Market; Dilli Haat Market; along Chandni Chowk in Old Delhi; at Sundar Nagar, Lajpat Nagar, Matka Market, Shankar Market, Sarojini Nagar, Paharganj, Janpath and Tibetan Market — and many, many more.

Visit a travel clinic for vaccinations and preventive medications. Obtain an electronic one- or two-entry visa, depending upon whether you will be leaving and returning to India more than once during your trip; bring hard copies of your paperwork and passport photo page. Passing through customs and immigration upon entry and exit is time-consuming and bureaucratic; pack a generous dose of patience.

Buyer be-wear

Two young Indian ladies from Lucknow stopped me on the terrace of Jama Masjid Mosque.

“Why are you wearing that?” they demanded, pointing to the hot, ugly, salmon-coloured polyester robe dispensed to me by an abrupt turnkey at the entrance gate — who had charged me for the privilege.

“I don't know,” I shrugged sheepishly. “I was given it.”

“Take it off!” they insisted. “Make a difference!”

I eyed them a trifle warily. “Well, I don't know if I should,” I replied. “Maybe I am not dressed appropriately,” I ventured, opening my robe to reveal my Western-style clothing.

“But then neither am I,” retorted the second young woman, who looked to be about 20. It was true. We were dressed similarly in pants and T-shirt, though her companion wore a fashionable designer salwaar kameez consisting of leggings and a knee-length, side-slit caftan. Then we noticed another woman dressed identically in pants and t-shirt . . . and another . . . and another.

“Are you Muslim?” I asked them tentatively.

“No,” they emphasized, they were tourists just like me.

“You aren't counselling me to do something nefarious are you?” I asked, shirking in typical Canadian style from the merest suggestion of giving offence.

“No, no!” the girls grinned, looking like two sleek cats who had swallowed canaries. The mosque doormen, they theorized, were able to convince unsuspecting female tourists to don the robes due to their misplaced sense of modesty.

Trying to be unobtrusive, I took off the suffocating and hugely over-sized garment, which had bedevilled me as I climbed the endless stairs up the minaret tower. Nothing happened. No one batted an eye. In fact, no one noticed at all. The three of us exchanged knowing looks and gossiped briefly about Lucknow and the true price of salwaar kameez, then parted the best of friends. I returned my hideous robe to its guardian and stalked out of the gate, only to be stopped by the man who had minded our shoes. He demanded — and received — a generous tip.

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