

IN FOCUS

India's colourful, bustling capital, Delhi, is your gateway to chic shopping, fascinating history and excellent food and drink, discovers **Laura Millar**

[DELHI]



WHAT'S THE SCORE?

One thing you can't accuse Delhi – a teeming metropolis sprawling over 1,485 square kilometres and home to around 34 million people – of is being subtle. It is *not* a meek place. Rather, it makes itself felt from the moment you step outside Indira Ghandi International Airport into its somewhat sweaty embrace, largely in the form of honking. In Delhi, if you're behind the wheel of a petrol-powered vehicle and you're not beeping your horn furiously at least once every couple of seconds, are you actually even driving at all? The cacophony becomes the soundtrack to daily life (and often to your dreams, as it never, ever stops). Near misses on the busy roads are the norm, as is the sight of the occasional cow meandering alongside the traffic. But amid all this chaos, the city conceals many gems, from striking architecture to a hip drinking and dining scene. The British, as they so often did, left their mark after 200 years of colonial rule. Today, for example, what is now known as the Rashtrapati Bhavan, or President's House, was formerly called the Viceroy's House, and this powerful seat of government was designed by the eminent Kensington-born architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. The driving, erratic as it is, takes place on the left, and cricket is a national obsession.

Another immediately noticeable trait is how verdant Delhi is, from its thickly tree-lined avenues to spacious parks and gardens (there are over 18,000 pockets of greenery in the city). Hindu and Sikh temples rub shoulders with Christian churches and mosques, and branches of Marks and Spencer or Zara are as ubiquitous as chapati sellers and sari shops. The city is broadly divided into two parts, Old Delhi – the historic centre, where you'll find atmospheric streets, thrumming markets and Mughal-era architecture – and New Delhi, the more formal, administrative area which evolved after the arrival of the Brits. Wherever you decide to spend most time, the best way to enjoy it is to throw yourself into it wholeheartedly; travel in a rickshaw (they're conveniently available on Uber) piloted by a driver with an apparent death wish, or order that pani puri from the not-entirely-food-safety-compliant stall by the side of the road. Delhi, like India itself, can be a wild ride, and the only thing to do is step onto it, then hang on for dear life.

WHERE TO STAY?

THE LEELA PALACE

Sitting in the leafy Diplomatic Enclave, and ringed by embassies, the Leela Palace takes every Indian symbol, from elephants to multi-armed gods, and runs with them. There are marble carvings, silver sculptures and crystal chandeliers at every turn, and the hotel is also hung with dozens of pieces of classical and contemporary Indian art. The 254 rooms and suites are set over eleven floors, tastefully decorated in tones of

sand and cream. Beds are vast, with mattresses firmer than your old headmaster, and you can choose what to lie your head on from a menu which offers an extraordinary selection of 12 different pillows, including non-allergenic and spelt-filled. The toiletries are the hotel's own vegan brand, Tishya, scented with lotus flower and neelakurinji, a rarely-blooming plant. If you're taking your first tentative steps into home-grown Indian cuisine, book a table at Jamavar, one of The Leela's three restaurants, otherwise you can sample exquisite modern Japanese cuisine at Megu – an outpost of the one in New York City – which has been listed in the World's 50 Best Discovery. The elegant, wood-panelled Library Bar is a magnet for locals and out-of-towners alike, many of whom spill out onto its wide terrace to drink literary-themed cocktails such as the *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Around the World in 80 Days*. Rooms from £154 per night in low season.

Africa Ave, Diplomatic Enclave, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, 110023; theleela.com

WHAT TO DO?

MARKET VALUE

If you're the kind of person who likes to shop 'til they drop, you've come to the right place. Delhi is overflowing with markets, from civilised, indoor, air-conditioned ones to al fresco arenas necessitating a hat, lashings of sun-cream, and a hand-held fan. Dilli Haat INA is a popular example of the latter, showcasing crafts and artefacts from the 28 different states across the country, such as pashminas from Kashmir and terracotta pottery from West Bengal. Indian Loom, near Connaught Place, is housed in a nondescript building inside which treasures – including carved marble ornaments, inlaid wooden chess sets, brightly coloured bolts of fabric and jewellery – are sold over three, blissfully cool, floors. Step back into the past at Chandni Chowk, one of Delhi's oldest and busiest markets, spread over dozens of narrow streets. Different areas are dedicated to individual products, from silver and gold jewellery to embroidered fabrics, spices, shoes, stationery, and more. Khan Market, near Lodhi Garden, is a fabulous mix of more high-end independent stores and boutiques alongside stylish bars and restaurants where you can find anything from antique books to hip homewares and diamond necklaces.

GARDEN STATE

The aforementioned greenery makes for a welcome oasis from all the pesky traffic fumes. You're never more than a few minutes from a pleasant park or garden, perfect for strolling around as a break from all the frenetic



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW:
[clockwise from top left] Gurdwara Bangla Sahib; a rickshaw drives through Chandni Chowk; Lotus Temple; Qutub Minar in Delhi

sightseeing, eating and drinking. Lodhi Garden is one of the most elegant, festooned with bright flowers, shrubs and trees, among which you'll find a handful of historical monuments. Even more magnificent are the formal, landscaped Mughal Gardens which fringe the **Rashtrapati Bhavan**; spread over 15 acres, it has various areas dedicated to different plants, flowers and herbs, and you'll find colourful blooms from roses to dahlias and marigolds. There's even a deer park, located in the southern part of the city, where you can observe these ruminants roaming around. Who needs Richmond?

TOMB RAIDERS

The Mughal empire was obsessed with commemorating the death of their loved ones by building ever more extravagant mausoleums, and there are many significant tombs scattered around the city. Design details which link them include a symmetrical square structure, domed roofs, corner towers and long ponds leading up to their entrance. One of the most impressive, Humayun's Tomb, in New Delhi, is also known variously as the 'Baby Taj' and the 'Red Taj' (it's made from deep-russet sandstone, and inspired the Taj's design). Built between 1565 and 1572, it too was a symbol of a spouse's deep passion for their deceased partner. Less well known, but just as striking, is the 18th-century tomb of Safdarjung, dedicated to the memory of a former governor and prime minister by his adoring son. ➤

Since 1950, after India became a republic, **Rashtrapati Bhavan** has served as the president's residence and the site for official functions, ceremonies, and receptions

DELHI IS OVERFLOWING WITH MARKETS, FROM CIVILISED, INDOOR, AIR-CONDITIONED ONES TO AL FRESCO ARENAS



TAJ TIME

Recreate *that* Princess Diana moment at one of the seven new wonders of the world. A very manageable day trip from Delhi (three hours' drive each way), it's impossible to fully appreciate the insane splendour of the Taj Mahal until you get close. It took over 20 years and more than 20,000 workers and 1,000 elephants working night and day to build, and features tonnes of pure white marble inlaid with precious and semi-precious stones. It's still regarded as one of the most prominent symbols of love in the world, commissioned by Mughal emperor **Shah Jahan** in 1631 after his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal, died giving birth to their 14th child; her tomb is in its centre, alongside that of her husband. After a British royal visit in 1992, the Taj Mahal became somewhat of an ironic setting for the Princess of Wales to make a rather barbed point about how loveless her marriage to then-Prince Charles had become. She posed alone, looking sad and demure, on a bench in front of the monument while her husband was off schmoozing VIPs, and has since spawned a million cypcat selfies (guilty).

SET IN STONE:

[above] The Taj Mahal was commissioned by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan after the death of his wife

Shah Jahan was known as the 'architect of paradise', championing monumental architecture and the arts, fusing Persian, Islamic and Indian styles

WHAT TO EAT?

JAMAVAR

Owned by the same group which launched Jamavar in London, this elegant Indian restaurant is housed within the Leela Palace hotel. Here you'll find traditional but elevated local cuisine, from the likes of showstopping tandoor-baked whole leg of lamb to elegant lobster simmered in a shallot and tomato masala and sole marinated in mustard and baked in the tandoor. Do *not* miss their signature daal; it is utterly legendary, with an intense, creamy consistency you definitely won't find anywhere down Brick Lane.

Africa Ave, Diplomatic Enclave, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, 110023; jamavarrestaurants.com

GOLD STANDARD:

[above] The rooftop pool area of The Leela Palace; [below] the opulent interiors of The Leela Palace located in the Diplomatic Enclave

COSY BOX

Set in a secluded, tree-lined courtyard not far from the Leela Palace, Cosy Box blends a cool cocktail bar with a buzzy restaurant, not dissimilar to its original outpost in Cannes. The menu may roam somewhat erratically around the globe – you'll find sushi alongside pizza, pasta, kebabs, and even dim sum – but each dish is made with care and attention, and, in the case of the Turkish grilled meats, served with love by the chef (yes, that does mean he feeds you your first mouthful himself). As the evening goes on, the music cranks up, and the shisha pipes come out, but the bar is open until 1am so sip on one of their creatively named libations.

cosybox.in

SLY GRANNY

Located in the buzzy Khan market area, Sly Granny's eccentric name is neatly matched by its decor, which is heavy on glossy images of an Arnold-Schwarzenegger-like bodybuilder, contrasting with the deep teal velvet banquettes, corniced ceiling, and globe pendant lamps. Epically named signature cocktails include the Betty Ford Tribute, with whisky, orange, jaggery and makrut lime. The menu is largely Western – think mezze platters, chicken tacos or even fish and chips.

Khan Market, Rabindra Nagar, New Delhi, Delhi 110003;

slygranny.in ♦

Virgin Atlantic have just celebrated 25 years of their route between London and Delhi; return flights start from £472, virginatlantic.com

