



Method To Madness

Paharganj's shops, hotels, cafés and bars offer a bit of everything for everyone—a medley of locals, foreigners, world cuisine, Lord Shiva and Bob Marley.

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Quirky cafés serving international cuisines can be found tucked in the narrow alleyways of Paharganj



Once known as Shahganj, during the reign of Shah Jahan, Paharganj was one of the first marketplaces outside the fort walls of Delhi. It remains a marketplace, bustling, crowded and noisy, but with such vibrancy, charm and atmosphere that its numerous hotels, basic as well as upscale, are home to all sorts of travellers. Certainly, the proximity to New Delhi Railway Station and Connaught Place helps to make it a travellers' hub and a backpackers' haven but there is really much more to Paharganj.

For most visitors to the area, it is a market unlike any other in Delhi because of the liberal sprinkling of foreigners. They are all over, walking in the streets, buying in the shops, eating in the cafés, and drinking and chatting up a storm in the bars. And they range from the first-time tourist to Indophiles who live in the guesthouses for months and years on end.

Paharganj had always been an important part of the city but it saw a facelift of sorts when Lutyens' Delhi came into existence. And, during the 1970s, after India had been drawing the flower children and hippies for a while, Paharganj got on the backpackers' map. It has never looked back since.

My own first encounter with Paharganj was typical. Exiting the railway station, I was mobbed by rickshaw *wallahs* and went along with the one who promised he would get me the best hotel of all. As we went through the streets, there were foreigners around—on foot, visiting a number of hotels before picking one. Unlike them, I settled for the one the rickshaw *wallah* ferried me to.

Later, strolling through the alleys, I was aware of the march of history that the area has seen. I recalled reading about the savagery of the communal riots which Paharganj witnessed in 1947. Today, it has an air of warm inclusivity—which is what makes it a haven for people of all nationalities and ethnicities looking for affordable accommodation.

Several years on, I find myself back in Paharganj on a hot summer night. I check into Welcome Lodge, on Ara Kashan Road, and set out to revisit the area. I run into young backpackers who are in Paharganj on the advice of veteran backpackers who have passed through or lived here for years. "Paharganj is the perfect spot for backpackers, from the point of view of budget and easy access to travel-related help. And it's a meeting point for backpackers from around the world," they have been told.

Paharganj is a world within itself, removed from the global village ambience elsewhere in the city. You won't find a McDonald's or a KFC, but what you are likely to discover in its chaotic arteries is another form of globalisation, the one that relates to people. Paharganj has to be experienced and explored. Here one meets people shorn of prejudice. Travellers with their guitars and bongos. One has long conversations with interesting people who one might never see again. On a dimly lit rooftop with Lord Shiva looking down from a mural, and Bob Marley smoking a joint on the other wall, joints are lit all around. Such is the surreal ethos of Paharganj.

From backpackers, layover passengers to local residents, Paharganj is a mix of culture, languages and preferences



Café Club India is one of the hotspots which has seen celebs like Arjun Rampal and Abhay Deol. The rooftop gives a definitive view of Paharganj



For dinner, I have already settled on the popular Sam's Café. To my disappointment, they have separated the café and the bar. Now, the rooftop serves only non-alcoholic beverages, while the bar is haunted by the local office-going, middle-aged crowd. So I head to Club India Café. The place has a *Dev.D*-like ambience, with a splendid view of the bustling Paharganj market. Compared to my first visit, I see a large young Indian crowd. Everyone is trying to get the most out of the place.

In the past few years, Paharganj appears to have come full circle. No longer is it a hippie haven, into which middle-class Indians venture only in the afternoons for bargain shopping. Manisha Shah, JNU student, sits in Gold Resto Bar and Restaurant with friends, chugging beer and talking politics. She says, "It is not always fun to go to high-end places with the perfect ambience. What comes to my mind when I look around this place is *Chandni Bar*, and that is exciting. But we have never felt unsafe. Rather, I would say this place feels kind of liberating!"

Back outside, an elderly backpacker zooms past on

a bicycle in the exhausting heat, clearly accustomed to both the crowds and the climate. I travel with the crowd's flow into the heart of the market. Sweat trickles down my forehead but it is absorbing to see the shops selling colourful clothes, backpackers haggling with shopkeepers, colourfully dressed travellers with unique hairstyles, and hawkers selling street food and cheap sunglasses. There is a constant stream of people from both directions, bumping into one another to avoid the rickshaws who are perpetually in a hurry.

In an alley, I find Delhi's only Jewish Chabad House. With its bookshelves, low tables and wooden chests, the hall appears to be a meditation retreat but in the early afternoon it is empty.

I return to the maze of streets and a shop selling bongos and pipes for smoking pot catches my eye. Inside, manager Anand tells me that, rather than foreigners, it is local guys who are his customers.

The highlights of Paharganj are the various international cafés—among them a Japanese café serving only Japanese

food and a delightful German Bakery. Take, a traveller from Japan, says, "I like staying in Paharganj because it's easy to find cheap guesthouses here and you can find anything you need on the street. The food you get here, if you want to have it in any other place in Delhi, you need to spend a bomb."

Shimtur, a Korean restaurant, is difficult to find. The owner, Chang, was backpacking through India 20 years ago when he got the idea of opening a Korean restaurant. He says, "It's a diverse crowd. I did not want to have a huge client base. *Shimtur* means a place to rest and, keeping that in mind, I only used to host people from my country so I chose a hidden location. But recently the locals have found out about my place and they are very enthusiastic about wanting to try our traditional dishes. I like that, though I don't have any plans to expand."

The nightlife in Paharganj is picking up. The joints remain open from midday to midnight, but come alive after 8 pm. Start with a couple of beers in a bar, but you will never know where your night might end. There are a lot of

exclusive parties, but it all depends on chance encounters with the right people.

My Bar, a hugely popular place, is frequented mostly by college students. There, I make friends with Pete, a backpacker from London who has been in India for a few months. "I haven't seen much of Delhi. I have been inside Paharganj, because this is the place where you can get it all," he says. He adds, "The whole of Delhi is not authentic, but Paharganj is. This place defines what real Delhi is."

There is one other serious activity in Paharganj: shopping. There are innumerable handicrafts shops but they all quote absurd prices for cheap products so bargaining skills are essential. From clothes to household accessories, there is nothing that you cannot find in the alleys of Paharganj.

Metaphorically, too, there is nothing that you cannot find in Paharganj—a true melting pot, with its abundance of languages, cuisines from all over the world and the characteristic lack of convention inherited from the old days. In its own way, it is a global village. ♦

Not only the Main Bazaar road, but even dank alleyways can lead you to the hippest joints

NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

Air Fly into Indira Gandhi National Airport, take a taxi to Paharganj, it's about an hour's drive.

Rail New Delhi Railway Station is in Paharganj. Ride in a rickshaw.

STAY

There are countless hotels and guesthouses you can check into, with room rents ranging from ₹500 to ₹3,500. Backpackers can check into Zostel (5, Ara Kashan Road, Opp New Delhi Railway Station, Tel. (0) 88262 90005, www.zostel.com), Smyle Inn (916, Chandi Wali Gali, Main Bazaar, Tel. (011) 2358 9107,

Tariff ₹951). Other hotels include Neha Inn, Hotel Le Alfonso, Hotel Delhi Continental and Welcome Lodge.

EAT

• Sita Ram Diwan Chand is famous for their *chole bhatures*. A plate will cost ₹100 for two people (2234, Rajguru Marg, Chuna Mandi, Tel. (011) 2358 7380).

• Sam's Café serves decent Israeli fare (Main Bazaar road, Tel. (011) 2358 2904).

• Visit Shimtur for excellent traditional Korean food. The chefs,

though, aren't Korean, but have been trained in Korea (Hotel Navrang, Tooti Gali, 6, Kaseru Walan).

• For a hearty vegetarian meal, visit Darbar (8956, Opp. Bikaner Sweets, Multani Dhanda, Tel. (0) 99996 61413).

• Gold Resto Bar serves excellent North Indian food, and has live music after 9 pm every night (4350, Main Bazaar, Tel. (011) 2356 2101).

• Club India Café is an excellent spot for people-watching and for some beer and food (4797, Tooti Chowk, Main Bazaar, Tel. 9971479062).

SHOP

• Buy leather goods from the unnamed shops right opposite Sam's Café.

• Emporio, on Main Bazaar road, is a good place to buy furniture and handicrafts.

• All the junk jewellery one finds in Sarojini Nagar and Janpath are sourced from Paharganj. Visit Emporio or Jewel Junction on the Main Bazaar road.

• Pick up some cool cloth bags at Shanti Handlooms in Main Bazaar.