

hip city

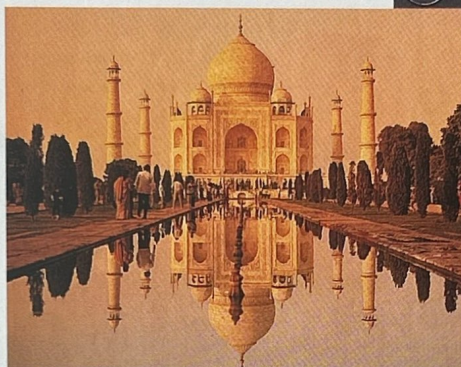
DELHI

India's teeming capital is a dizzy delight. Laurence Weinberger gets sensory overload

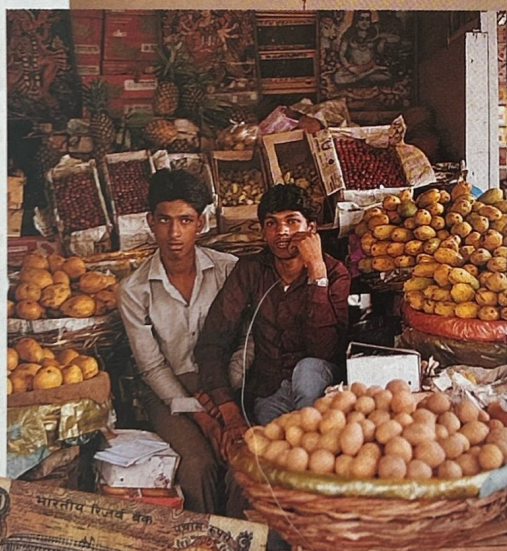
Picture London with the same number of people in about half the space. Add the traffic chaos of New York and mix in plenty of colour and confusion. You are now getting close to what Delhi is like. The city hits you with sensory overload the minute you step off the plane. Come rush hour, the whole place explodes into a vibrant mass of kamikaze traffic and non-stop chatter as the city's eight million inhabitants, along with monkeys, cows and the occasional elephant surge through in kaleidoscopic waves. Bankers and beggars, suits and saris, temples and tower blocks all have a place and, love it or hate it, Delhi makes the rest of the world a greyer place by comparison.

Getting to grips with the capital isn't easy. It feels as if there are several cities fighting for your attention. Which, in fact, there are. British New Delhi is a well-planned, vast grid of wide, tree-lined avenues radiating out from India Gate and leading to Janpath – the central shopping avenue – and the colonnaded shops of Connaught Place. Old Delhi couldn't be more different, with ancient warrens of chaotic streets and bustling bazaars winding their way around the Red Fort. There is no escaping the British legacy either. Even 50 years after the Brits vacated, you still half expect to see characters from *A Passage to India* wandering out from Lutyen's pompous colonial buildings.

Delhi is a shopaholic's dream. It is difficult to do anything without being confronted by a potential purchase, be it from street stalls, hawkers or the cool interiors of elegant emporiums. A shopping spree is one of the best ways to see the city, whisking you from the grandeur of Connaught Place to the medieval mayhem of the old bazaars. But whether you're getting lost in the bazaars or re-educating your tastebuds to the searing flavours of real curry, do it slowly. Gandhi



Delhi delights: the market at the Red Fort; the Taj Mahal at Agra (left); rush hour in Chandni Chowk (above); who will buy? (below, left)



Bankers and beggars, suits and saris, temples and tower blocks all have a place here

open-air observatory on Jantar Mantar, we hit **Connaught Place**. Dodging street vendors and tourist touts, we make our way around the amphitheatre of arcades to **Palika Bazaar**. It's an underground warren of shops teeming with goods but smelling like a toilet, so we divert to the **Tibetan Market** (on Janpath) where entrepreneurial refugees sell everything from flutes made from human shin bones to silk paintings. An hour and many haggling sessions later we dive into **Central Cottage Industries Emporium** (Janpath), a haven of peace, fixed prices and a vast selection of Indian crafts. We emerge loaded with Shaznaz Hussein traditional oils (guaranteed to banish stress for £2 a bottle) and beautiful silks (£5 a metre) destined to be tailored into greater things.

We stagger back to the Imperial Hotel for decadent Bloody Marys (£3) and lunch (£12), served on an immaculate lawn by turbaned waiters. Then our faithful taxi takes us 20 minutes south to check out **Hauz Khas**. Dubbed Delhi's Soho, the village has been transformed into a showcase of ethnic chic. Inside, ➤

always said passive resistance was the best way forward. In the cheerful chaos that is Delhi, it's often the only way.

Friday

We wake up in a city that feels a lot like a Hindi film – colourful, chaotic and very loud. Banishing jet lag with papaya, lime juice and strong South Indian coffee in the Rajera **Imperial Hotel**, for £5 we ease our way into Delhi with a tour of the old colonial capital, courtesy of our 50s-style Ambassador taxi (£10 to hire for the day). Having taken in India Gate, the rhubarb-coloured **Rashtrapati Bhavan** (President's Residence) in Rajpath Avenue, and the bizarre



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