





DELHI WONDERLAND

Stay with an Indian family to get the best insider knowledge on everything this chaotic city has to offer WORDS GRAHAM BARKER

Delhi INDIA

“We call this the *Alice In Wonderland* door,” explains Mamta, as we step through to a dusty, bustling street in Sultanpur village. The contrast with the cool, ordered serenity of her house comes as a shock.

HOME FROM HOME

This is our first visit to India. We’ve opted for two homestays – essentially, smart B&Bs

– in the hope that our hosts will steer us to sights off the tourist trail. And here we are, walking with Mamta through the swirl of vegetable carts, shoe-shine boys and noisy auto-rickshaws on her high street.

She takes us to the new Metro site. “When it opens in July, it will only take 20 minutes to get to Connaught Place [Delhi’s business district],” she says. Chhatarpur station, elevated above the

highway, is a foretaste of preparations for the Commonwealth Games in October.

THE INSIDE TRACK

Back indoors, over a cup of sweet masala chai, Mamta advises us on the daunting choice of cafés, restaurants and street food.

“Go to Karim’s for the kebabs,” she suggests, as we discuss our plans for exploring the bazaars along Chandni



Zip about the city in a tuk-tuk



Ridin' high: surely room for one more?

NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO Visit Delhi between October and March to avoid the scorching summer and monsoon season.

GETTING THERE Fly with Kingfisher Airlines (flyingfisher.com) on brand new A330s. Other carriers include BA (britishairways.com) and Virgin (virgin-atlantic.com).

GETTING AROUND Use the Metro. For short distances, barter a fare on a tuk-tuk or rickshaw. Delhi is a well-linked hub for travel further afield, including Agra and Jaipur.

VISAS All foreigners require a visa. Visit in.vfsglobal.co.uk to download a six-month tourist visa application form and take it to offices in Victoria or Goswell Road.

CURRENCY Indian rupee. 1 GBP = 71 INR.

LANGUAGE Hindi is India's official language, though you might also encounter Bengali, Punjabi or Urdu. English is widely spoken in Delhi hotels, shops, stations and tourist sites.

GOING OUT Kingfisher beer can range from 70 rupees to 200 rupees.

ACCOMMODATION Visit mahindrathomestays.com for details of The Estate and Darshan Homestays, which cost from £35 a night. For a comfortable backpacker hotel, try Amax in Paharganj (hotellamax.com).

SEE incredibleindia.org or *Love Delhi*, a guidebook by Australian journalist and Indiaphile Fiona Caulfield.

 **TNT online**

For a full travel guide on visiting India go to intmagazine.com/travel

Chowk in Old Delhi. "They're known for their Mughlai lamb and kebabs."

With a discerning eye, Mamta and her TV journalist husband, Chetan, have created a welcoming five-bedroom home at The Estate. "We like giving our guests a bit of space, without losing that feeling of being at home," she smiles.

More warm hospitality welcomes us at Darshan homestay in Kailash Colony a few days later. The Gwalias direct us to their neighbourhood café to sample festival sweets – intense, creamy kaju burfi and treacly sponge gulab jamun. And when I mention visiting the Delhi War Cemetery, they pinpoint the location and arrange a taxi. It's this first-hand advice – along with chats about Indian life and culture – that enriches the homestay experience.

OLD TOWN

Armed with recommendations, we head to Old Delhi. The city streets are bumper to bumper with horn-honking taxis, battered cycle rickshaws and canary yellow and green tuk-tuks.

Chandni Chowk is a vibrant boulevard, a pulsating artery in the heart of Old Delhi. We work our way through a tangle

of alleyways – not for the claustrophobic – past Khari Baoli's pungent spice markets and sari stores vivid with fuchsia pink.

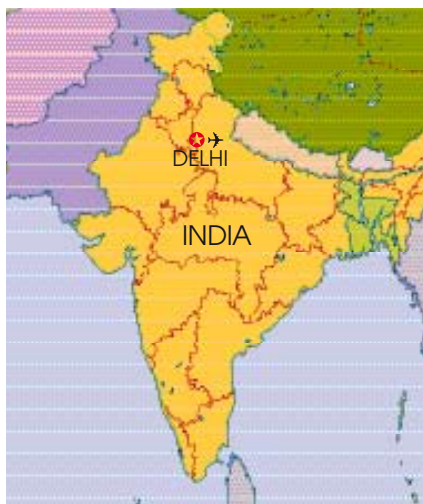
GOD SQUAD

Religion sits alongside commerce here: the Gurudwara Sis Ganj Sikh temple and Jami Masjid – India's largest mosque – both buzz with worshippers. We chance upon a small Hindu shrine, a peaceful enclave just steps away from the bustle. And even at fast food outlet Haldiram's, Ganesh, the elephant god of success, watches us eat our chole bature lunch – a Punjab favourite of spicy chickpeas, green chillies and roasted potatoes served with soft and airy breads.

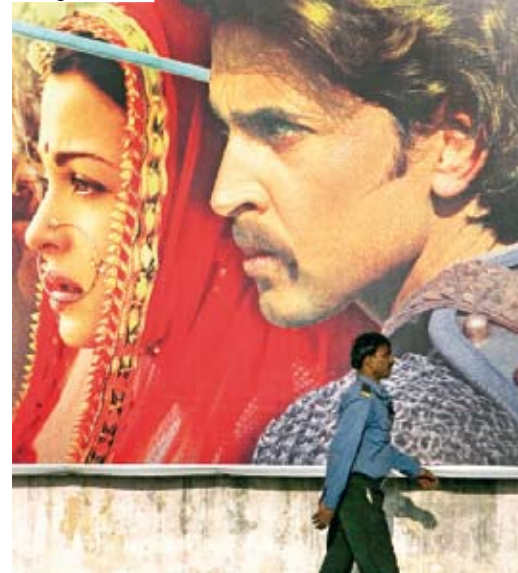
We hail a tuk-tuk to the Red Fort. For this short journey – indeed, for every trip – we haggle the fare, reducing the initial 100 rupees to a more realistic 30 rupees.

SENSE OF IDENTITY

The Red Fort – home to the Mughal emperors and where the Indian flag was first raised on Independence in 1947 – remains a potent symbol of national identity. "Go for the English son et lumière at 8.30pm," Mamta suggests. Fanfare



The Bollywood scene is huge in Delhi



sounds and history unfolds against silhouetted domes and minarets. "Kings came and went, like puppets in a play," we hear before listening to stories of Shah Jahan and the lustful Merry Monarch.

CITY OF CONTRASTS

We're feeling peckish – it's time to head for Karim's. Our rickshaw driver pedals tirelessly along pot-holed streets around the Jami Masjid, to a murky alleyway. It opens into a courtyard alive with cheery waiters zipping between the meat grills, bakery and seating areas.

We tuck into spicy lamb kebabs, rich and soupy aloo palak, mutton dosa and sweet, crusty sheermal bread. Karim was a legendary chef to the Mughal rulers and his descendants offer authentic regal recipes at street food prices.

After five days of exploring, it's clear Delhi is a city of surprises and contrasts, with imperial grandeur sitting alongside squalor and poverty. But the tantalising food, dramatic street scenes, cultural history and warm welcome ensure it makes a memorable destination.

NEXT WEEK: AFRICA

Go overlanding in the Serengeti



Organised chaos

“ Delhi is a city of surprises and contrasts ”

GAME PLAN

Wooden hoardings and construction workers are everywhere; Delhi is being spruced up for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, which run from October 3-14. Indira Gandhi International Airport has been remodelled, new Metro lines reach out to the suburbs. Connaught Place is being given a facelift and 26 new sports venues are sprouting up.

Like the Olympics in London, the Commonwealth Games haven't been met with universal approval. "Rugby nahi roti" – food not rugby – shouts the anti-Games graffiti. But these dissenting voices are lost amid a sport-loving city in dire need of better transport links.

Head out for an autumn break, perhaps to cheer on New Zealand as it defends its gold in sevens rugby, see Australia sparkle in the swimming events, and watch India and England spar for medals in shooting. Tickets went on sale on June 4, but with staggered release dates you can book online at cwgdelhi2010.org.

SEE ANOTHER SIDE OF DELHI

"After my parents separated, I lived with my aunt. But she treated me like a house slave, so I ran away," Brijesh explains.

We're on a guided walk with a difference. Former street kids from the Salaam Baalak Trust take us on a two-hour tour around New Delhi station and the crowded Paharganj streets.

Today's guide, Brijesh, is now a confident, charming 20-year-old. But en route he tells of arriving in Delhi as an eight-year-old boy, homeless and friendless. Drawn to New Delhi railway station – always abuzz with passengers, food vendors and opportunities – he scraped out a living collecting empty water bottles and selling them re-filled to train travellers. In a harsh hand-to-mouth existence he showered in the trains' waste water, slept on a station handcart, sniffed Tippex for highs and dodged the police patrols.

We cross the train tracks to meet the trust's outreach workers laying out a rug to welcome newcomers. In a dingy room above the station, six boys learn to write the days of the week. And after snaking through the cramped Paharganj alleys, we visit the trust's headquarters, greeted by a schoolroom of 50 curious faces.

It could be depressing, but thankfully,

there is hope, too. "When I was 13, I came to the Salaam Baalak Trust for help," says Brijesh. With food, shelter, schooling and stability, he has flourished, and will soon head off to study tourism in the US.

"This is a must-do experience in Delhi and probably the one that will stay with me above all others," enthuses

Fiona Caulfield, Australian author of *Love Delhi*, a guidebook written with heart.

Walks start at 10am, Monday-Saturdays, outside New Delhi railway station. Visit salaambaalaktrust.com for details. The suggested contribution is 200 rupees.



Child's play: get acquainted with Delhi's kids