

ESCAPE TO THE PARK IN NEW DELHI

By Caroline Phillips

'Do not spit here' and 'Carrying tobacco products is prohibited,' read the signs. This is the Gurdwara Bangla Sahib temple, New Delhi, India; a peaceful Sikh temple with acres of white marble and a gigantic holy bathing pool. Originally it was a bungalow for an important military leader of Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb. It's as close to my hotel as, say, just 100 turbans rolled out end to end: call it half a mile. But let's rewind. I'm staying in a hotel known for being Anything But Ordinary. There's coconut juice, candies, comics and Wi-Fi in the hotel transfer car from Delhi airport. A welcome in the lobby by a sari-clad lady — with a dish of red powder on a rose-petal strewn copper tray — who places a marigold garland on me and a decorative Hindu bindi mark on my forehead. A lift with clouds on its walls and mirror on its ceiling: sort of Alice in New Delhi Wonderland.

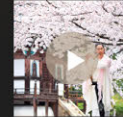


Then a cool suite with a vibrant burnt-orange rug, pink glass-topped coffee table and original contemporary artwork of a scrap-iron Tree of Life — good taste that's muted-funky, courtesy of Conran and Partners. Plus there's a view so lofty that it's worthy of an Indian deity: it's of Jantar Mantar, the 18th century astronomical observatory with gigantic equinoctial sundial and other ginormous scientific instruments, in the park below. I'm staying at THE PARK hotel, New Delhi.



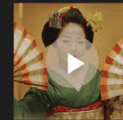
After breakfast of Masala Dosa (a South Indian rice and lentil pancake), I feel the urgent call for some jetlag busting: think massage and facial in the hotel's Aura spa with its trough of floating marigolds, watery green walls, slate and teak...plus views over Lutyens' Raj-era Delhi. A bare-foot therapist called Baby loosens my stiff joints with warm essential oils of sandalwood, rose and saffron, leaving me as supple as Shiva — the Hindu god who's, inter alia, the master of

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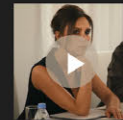
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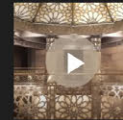
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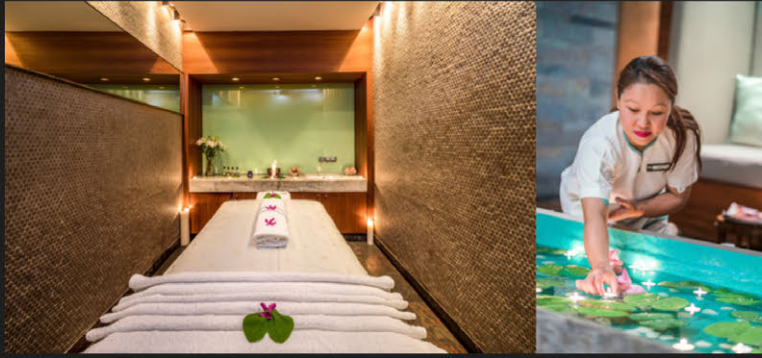
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dance.



It's time then for a cram-in-everything-I-can-in-what's-left-of-my-three-days jaunt: sightseeing, shopping, and eating. There's no need really to go anywhere, or certainly not far: after all, THE PARK is located at the heart of New Delhi's business and entertainment district. There is, in fact, no need to roam further than the 5-star hotel's back garden — where there's a small, weekly organic market: Delhi's only farmers' market. It's a go-to place for ardent foodies, tourists wanting to pick up unusual gifts and natural-health seekers. Stall-holders chat about the health-giving properties of fermented black carrot and mustard seed, Moringa powder supplements — an antioxidant from the drumstick tree — and the anti-inflammatory, turmeric. It's also somewhere to hit for food festivals and celebrations of local ingredients. Add to this my discovering a spicy Indian vegetable-pickling recipe there and having the chance to snack on an *idlee* (rice and lentil cake) whilst shopping, and it's an experience that no foodie who knows her garam masala from her tikka masala would want to miss.



Next, I decide to venture further afield. Well, just a few steps behind the hotel. Here I visit the Hanuman temple, an ancient Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Hanuman. (He is also known as the Lord of Celibacy and is one of the central characters in the Indian epic, *Ramayana*). Here,

like all visitors, I'm required to take off my socks. Afterwards, an auspicious vermilion dot, *Tika*, is dabbed on my forehead by a priest and I join the barefooted folk in a temple full of incense, pungent jasmine garlands, tinkling temple bells and monkeys frolicking nearby. Then there's my visit to Swaminarayan Akshardham, a 100-acre cultural complex in New Delhi completed in 2005. Think exotic workmanship, intricate carvings, towering domes and 234 ornate pillars in the Akshardham temple dedicated to the 18th century Bhagwan Swaminarayan. A Guinness World Record holder for size alone, it knocks the socks off London's traditional Hindu temple in Neasden. (The 148 life-size elephants plinth on which the ginormous sandstone and marble temple rests is a particular winner). Plus there's an ooh-ah fountains, lasers, underwater flames, sound and light show in Hindi. And a boat ride that whizzes past 10,000 years of India's civilisation and 800 life-size statues in just 12 minutes. It's Las Vegas meets Disneyland meets a showcase of India's art, architecture, culture, values and wisdom.



Assorted cloths (Image courtesy of Annie Spratt)

On a less spiritual note, the hotel is also seconds away from the stalls of Janpath Market with its wooden tribal artefacts, fuchsia saris, embroidered Rajsthani bags and silver trinkets. And moments from Connaught Circus with its colonnaded Georgian-style buildings, vintage cinemas and Oxford Bookstore — the last with its buzzy cha bar and good selection of books, including Indian art and architecture.



These sights are all so close to the hotel that it's tempting not to leave the immediate vicinity. But leave I do. After all, I never miss a trip to Shaw Brothers by Mifi & Mubi (in D47 Defence Colony, about five miles from the hotel) for cashmere and silk shawls and pashminas sold in the colours of several rainbows and more — and costing thousands of pounds down to ones for

tens of pounds. I go every time I'm in Delhi to this shop that was established in 1840.



Indian Accent at The Lodhi (image courtesy of Rohit Chawla)

I can't miss a meal at Indian Accent at The Lodhi either — even though it has branches in London and New York too. This one is ten minutes by car from my hotel. Indian Accent boasts an inventive menu created by chef Manish Mehrotra, using local (often organic) and global ingredients. The six-course tasting menu (circa £40 for a vegetarian or non-veg option; mine's the former) is the stuff of Indian gastro dreams.



Dal Moradabadi, and Butter Baked Scallops, Saffron Cream Cauliflower and Sago Crisp (images courtesy of Rohit Chawla)

I'm served a sublime dosa amuse bouche, potato chilla — like gratin dauphinoise but subtly infused with fenugreek and 'painted' with smoked eggplant curry — and Kashmiri morel with lotus roots scattered on the side like teeny cartwheels (but nothing's twee or pretentious). Oh, and the anar (pomegranate) and churan (herbal powder) kulfi (sorbet) is a mouth-fizzling, salty/sweet digestive that sends me to paradise. Plus every plate is a pretty as an Indian miniature and as delicious as any Mughal emperor's feast.



What are the other highlights? My driver negotiating the thicker-than-dense traffic and missing the Kamikaze rickshaw drivers by centimetres (note to self: start believing in reincarnation). There's my visit to Lutyens' New Delhi (named after the early 20th century British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens who was responsible for much of the architectural design and building during the period of the British Raj, when India was part of the British Empire); driving past the colonnaded buildings of Connaught Place, the circular Parliament House and India Gate (the war memorial arch); and seeing holy cows sitting in the middle of the road.



India Gate (image courtesy of Annie Spratt)

There's my trip through Old Delhi with the rickshaw driver cycling past the mid 17th century sandstone Red Fort — built by Emperor Shah Jahan — standing majestic and castellated against the blue sky; and the driver then pedalling through the spice market with its mounds of curry, chillies and ginger. "My rickshaw is like BMW with natural air conditioning, no?" he asks, squeezing his vehicle between buses, tooting motors and the human throng. He continues, oblivious of his perilous driving, past dentists and local doctors plying their trade on the pavement. On we venture to the bird market with its twittering merchandise in bamboo cages, and through the Meena Bazaar with its tools and hardware. Next we wend our way to narrow lanes of silversmiths and other alleys where merchants sell ribbons embroidered with gold thread and mirror work. Then on he pedals to yet another alleyway in which vendors are wholesaling fluorescent artificial flower garlands for temples and weddings.



It's a relief after meeting most of the population of India in the alleyways of Old Delhi to chill again at THE PARK. This time I'm in Fire, its contemporary Indian restaurant with a curved bronze wall, strings of glass bead window dressings and its wall of roaring fire (of LEDs and Perspex) separating the restaurant from the bar. It's an award-winning modern Indian restaurant that offers food that's seasonal, diverse and 80 per cent organic. Plus it focuses on environmentally-conscious produce, and on farmers and artisans who practise sustainable methods and traditional food-manufacturing techniques: all the pioneering vision of the hotel group's chairperson, Priya Paul.





My meal at Fire is like an Indian grandma's home-cooked food but with a twist. As I eat a traditional *thali* — little bowls of Indian specialities — my dining partner, Sarah, tells me a little bit about the restaurant. This dish, she says, is *methi* — a seasonal green — with fenugreek for cleansing the blood; that one is paneer with pickled onions; and the other, a Keralan fish curry made with Bekkti fish. "During the Rice Festival at our farmers' market," she says, "the chef worked with 40 different kinds of rice."



Then Sarah tells me about the cheese. I know about that Italian (Puglian, to be specific) speciality of double-cream mozzarella di bufala and stracciatella, known as burrata. But it has been reimagined here at THE PARK. Who would have thought that one Father Michael, a Catholic priest from Bengaluru (Bangalore), would make their delicious Indian buffalo burrata?

Anything But Ordinary, again, I guess.

FURTHER INFORMATION

THE PARK NEW DELHI

For reservations, e-mail: resv.del@theparkhotels.com, or visit www.theparkhotels.com. Suites start at £149 plus 28% taxes per night.

CAROLINE PHILLIPS

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WEEK

