

THREE PERFECT DAYS

# DELHI

To the delight of locals and visitors alike, India's capital has emerged as a true 21st-century metropolis—all without neglecting the sparkling palaces, ancient ruins and culinary traditions that have long made it one of the world's most enthralling cities

BY JAY CHESHES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAMEER PAREKH



**SACRED SPACE**

Jama Masjid, India's largest open-air mosque; opposite, a spicy spread at Hotel Saravana Bhavan



**98**  
**DAY ONE**  
Shopping in  
Chandni Chowk

**100**  
**DAY TWO**  
Dining on northwest  
Indian cuisine  
at Bukhara

**103**  
**DAY THREE**  
Taking in  
the spectacular  
Taj Mahal





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**URBAN OASIS** The luxurious Aman New Delhi hotel; opposite, Jama Masjid, built by the same Mughal emperor responsible for the Taj Mahal

## NORTHERN INDIA IS ICONIC

India, an awe-inspiring land of imposing forts, elegant palaces and impossibly vibrant markets—none of which have changed all that much since the days of the Raj, the name given to British rule over the subcontinent, which ended in 1947 after almost a century. But as India hurtles headlong from the third world to the first as one of the fastest-growing countries on earth, the throng of hawkers, beggars and *tuk tuk* drivers that once unfailingly met visitors upon arrival in Delhi is nowhere to be seen at the new Indira Gandhi International Airport, a modern marvel



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and serene point of entry completed in 2010 (just in time for the city's turn hosting the Commonwealth Games).

Today's Delhi is cleaner and greener than ever—yet no less intriguing—as you'll notice right away while cruising down its wide, leafy boulevards, where high-end restaurants and luxury shops coexist with centuries-old ruins. Delhi's many contrasts and contradictions are what make it such a fascinating city to behold, both for visitors entranced by its past and for those looking to boldly ride with it into the glimmering future.



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**DAY ONE** | You're up early. Coffee's good. A dip in your private plunge pool? Even better. Each of the 67 rooms and suites in the **Aman New Delhi (1)** comes equipped with one—a first for the city. After an invigorating soak, you take in the view from your terrace. Below is Lodi Gardens, where manicured lawns surround ancient tombs and young couples go to hold hands and steal kisses.

After a quick Indian breakfast of steamed *idli* (a kind of savory cake) in the hotel restaurant, you meet your guide/driver in the lobby. Delhi is a car town—too spread out and often too hot to tackle on foot—and a good guide is the key to avoiding long lines and traffic. You've signed on with Cox & Kings, a company that served British foot soldiers here in 1758 and has since become a worldwide tour operator. Your guide gives his name: Ravi Shankar. No relation, he says with a laugh, to the famed Bengali musician.

You've beaten the morning rush, so it's just a 15-minute trip from the center of the new city to the gates of the old one. Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan built what came to be called Old Delhi back in the 17th century, and the Brits unveiled its replacement in 1911. Near the winding alleys of Chandni Chowk, as the old city is known these days, you stroll up the steps toward **Jama Masjid (2)**. This stunning red sandstone edifice is the biggest open-air mosque in India, as well as where Shah Jahan himself used to pray. As instructed, you slip off your shoes—the floors are all marble—and, because you're wearing shorts, don a robe.

After touring the mosque, you step outside, where your rickshaw awaits. Pedal power is the best way to navigate the maze that is Chandni Chowk. On foot you'd be lost in minutes and wandering for hours, Shankar warns. The rickshaw turns down one alley and then another, cutting it close to an ambling cow. Chandni Chowk is a city unto itself, devoted to nothing but

commerce. One street sells only silk saris; others, silver jewelry, ornate stationery, even car parts. You stop for spices—hunks of fresh turmeric, a thimbleful of saffron—and haggle to good effect (with your guide's assistance, of course).

On the way into the center of Delhi, you pause to pay your respects to the father of modern India, Mahatma Gandhi. **Raj Ghat (3)**, a black marble shrine with an eternal flame, marks the spot where he was cremated. Even swarming with schoolchildren, it's a serene place for reflection—at least until the sky opens up. Rain showers can come fast and furious in Delhi, and this one sends shoppers and merchants alike scrambling for shelter. Some find it; others don't. You don't. Fortunately, it's over quickly.

Before lunch, you hit the open-air stalls just off Connaught Place, Delhi's Times Square, and pick up

a cheap cotton *kurta*, a long, loose-fitting top, to replace the soaked shirt you're wearing. Then you walk a few blocks to grab a table at a branch of the hugely popular vegetarian restaurant chain **Hotel Saravana Bhavan (4)**. Its enormous potato-filled *dosa* (a crêpe, basically) with coconut chutney is inexpensive and delicious.

You spend the afternoon browsing among silk scarves and Kashmiri throw rugs as you explore the Georgian-style buildings—formerly government offices, now shops—that run in concentric rings around Connaught Place. As the sun sets, you join the crowd heading to see the latest Bollywood blockbuster at the **Rivoli Theater (5)**, a movie palace that opened in 1933. You can't understand a word of the film, but the song-and-dance numbers are still plenty of fun.

Dinner and drinks are nearby at the historic **Imperial Hotel (6)**, where you check in for the night. The place is bustling with fellow travelers. Sipping Indian whiskey at the mahogany-filled 1911 Bar, you're transported to the last days of the Raj, when this great hotel opened its doors. Its restaurant, the Spice Route, is a destination in its own right, considered by many to be among Delhi's top tables. Though the expansive menu covers seven Southeast Asian cuisines, you stick to dishes from India's Malabar Coast. The shrimp and fish in thick coconut curries are worth lingering over, but



**ON THE MOVE** A bustling street in Chandni Chowk; opposite, clockwise from top left, the Evergreen Sweet House; Agra's Baby Taj; dinner at Bukhara; the ancient minaret Qutub Minar

## YE OLDE BALL GAME

A British import remains a fan favorite

Cricket has been a national obsession in India for well over a century. Though a match can last for days, you can pop in for a while to soak up the flavor (if not a full understanding) of the sport at the Feroz Shah Kotla cricket stadium. The Delhi Daredevils, the city's Indian Premier League team, play home games on the pitch here. Keep an eye out for the cheerleaders on the lawn and the Bollywood stars up in the rafters.









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**SOFT SPOT** Lavishly embroidered pillows at Good Earth, located in shopping mecca Khan Market

you wrap things up in short order. It's been a long day, and you're wiped.

**DAY TWO** | Getting a jump on the morning paid off yesterday, so, after a deep sleep and a breakfast of eggs and bacon from the Imperial's lavish buffet, you hit the road early once again. A short drive brings you to your first stop: **Humayun's Tomb (1)**, the last resting place of the second Mughal emperor, along with most of his family. Mission accomplished—you have the magnificent domed mausoleum and its idyllic gardens all to yourself.

You get back into the car, and then, in true Delhi fashion, become instantly mired in a traffic jam. Outside your window, you spot the India Gate triumphal arch, a monument to those who lost their lives for the Raj. You turn up King's Way ("Rajpath" in Hindi), the city's most impressive boulevard, which is bordered by parks. If it were Jan. 26—Republic Day—there'd be tanks rumbling by to commemorate the birth of the nation. Atop a crest, you reach the end of the road and find yourself surrounded by government buildings on India's version of Capitol Hill. You peer through the gates of the presidential palace, where visiting world leaders are often received. You can gawk, but unless you're receiving a medal, you're not getting inside.

## LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

THE INSIDE SCOOP FROM THOSE IN THE KNOW

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETER JAMES FIELD



**Raghu Karnad**

EDITOR, TIME OUT DELHI

"Now entirely forgotten inside a residential area in south Delhi, Begumpuri Masjid was once the largest mosque in north India. Kids fly kites or train pigeons nearby, but otherwise it's perfectly silent, and you can climb to the top of the gateway for a view across the city."



**Robyn Bickford**

GENERAL MANAGER,  
AMAN NEW DELHI

"I like to sneak into the back room at Bharany's Jewellers in Sunder Nagar, which is like an Aladdin's cave of treasures—the most mind-boggling antique and modern jewelry, fantastic textiles—overseen by the wonderful Bharany brothers, Ramji and Mahesh."



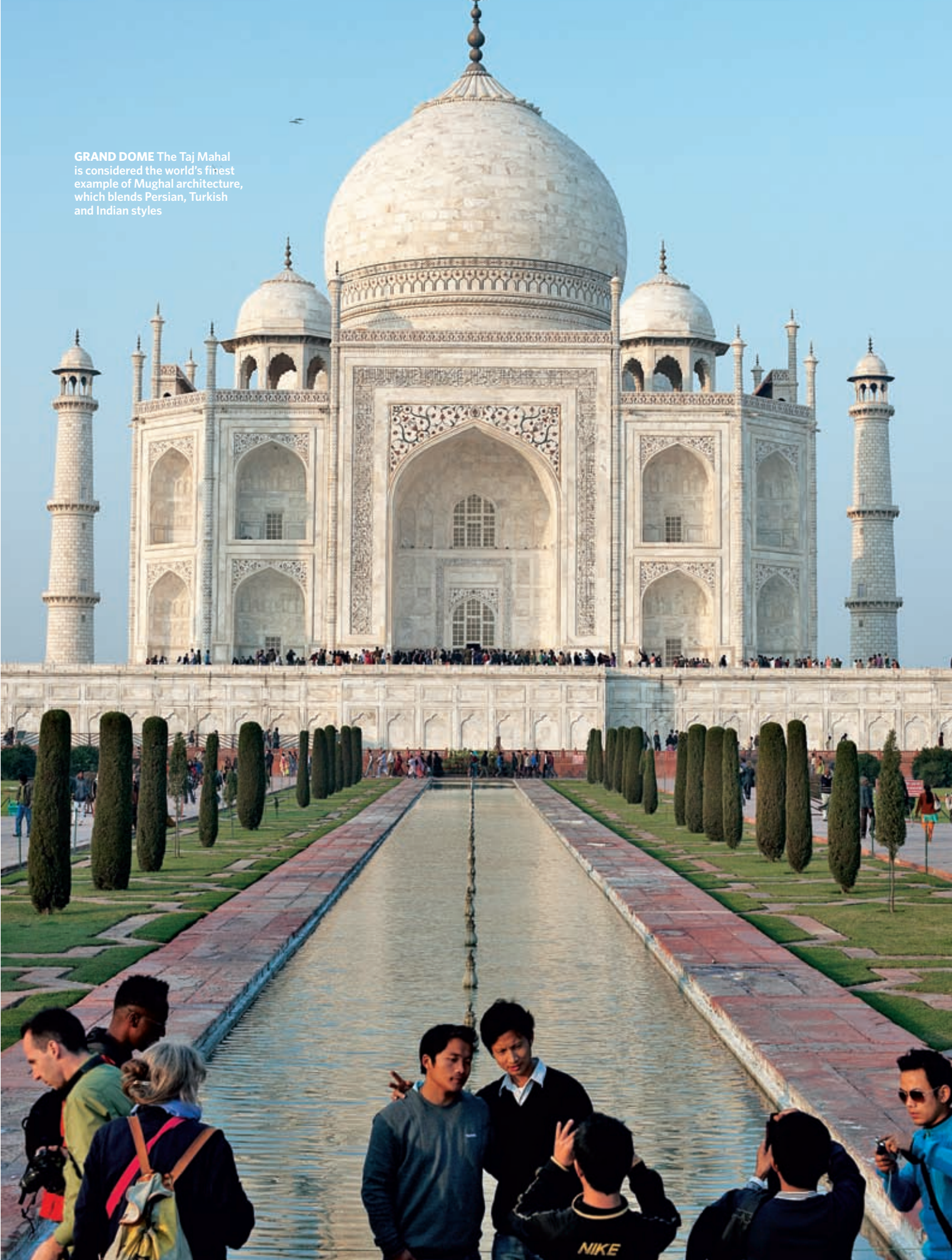
**Manoj Goel**

CHEF, VARQ AT THE  
TAJ MAHAL HOTEL

"Karim's in Old Delhi is my off-duty hangout, a favorite foodie spot known for its lamb and chicken delicacies. It's right in Chandni Chowk, which has the best street food in town, and the best shopping, too."



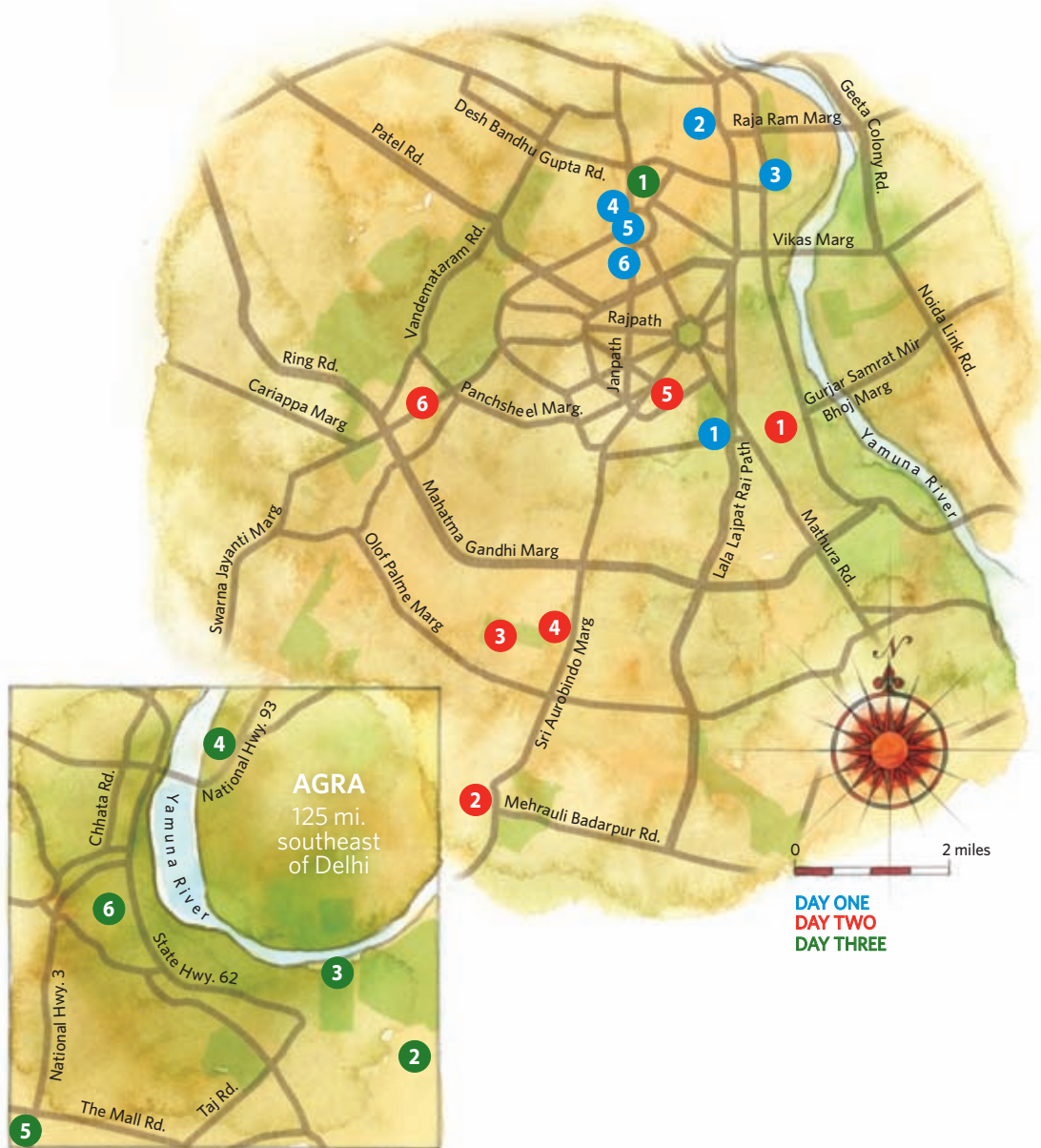
**GRAND DOME** The Taj Mahal is considered the world's finest example of Mughal architecture, which blends Persian, Turkish and Indian styles





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## DAY ONE

- (1) Aman New Delhi Lodhi Road;  
Tel: 11-4363-3333
- (2) Jama Masjid Daryanganj,  
Chandni Chowk
- (3) Raj Ghat Mahatma Gandhi Marg
- (4) Hotel Saravana Bhavan  
Connaught Circus, P Block, Munrika;  
Tel: 11-2331-6060
- (5) Rivoli Theater Regal Building,  
Connaught Circus and Baba Kharag  
Singh Marg; Tel: 11-4760-4100
- (6) Imperial Hotel Janpath;  
Tel: 11-2334-1234

## DAY TWO

- (1) Humayun's Tomb Bharat Scouts  
and Guides Marg
- (2) Qutub Minar Ladha Sarai, Mehrauli
- (3) Gunpowder 3rd floor, 22, Hauz Khaz  
Village; Tel: 11-2653-5700
- (4) Evergreen Sweet House  
S-29 and 30, Green Park Main Market;  
Tel: 11-2652-1615
- (5) Good Earth 9 ABC, Khan Market;  
Tel: 11-2464-7175
- (6) Bukhara ITC Maurya hotel,  
Diplomatic Enclave, Sardar Patel Marg;  
Tel: 11-2611-2233

## DAY THREE

- (1) Shatabdi Express New Delhi  
Railway Station
- (2) Oberoi Amarvilas Taj East Gate  
Road, Agra; Tel: 56-2223-1515
- (3) Taj Mahal Agra
- (4) Baby Taj Agra
- (5) Dasaprakash One Gwalior Rd., Agra;  
Tel: 56-2236-3535
- (6) Red Fort of Agra Agra





**HISTORICAL FOCUS** At the Red Fort of Agra, the fortress built around the Mughal rulers' imperial city

Finally, you arrive at the ancient minaret **Qutub Minar (2)**, a 235-foot-tall, 1,000-year-old tower that leans like Pisa's, located on the southern edge of Delhi. They say you can see the entire city from the top; however, following an accident some years back, tourists are no longer permitted inside. You spend a long moment staring up at it, but by now the sun is beating down, so it's a good time to start thinking about lunch.

Luckily, you're just a short drive from Hauz Khas Village, a great welter of dusty streets lined with antiques shops, cafés and hip clothing boutiques set against a backdrop of 13th-century ruins. It's a Delhi rarity in that it's a pleasure to stroll, and few other places capture the paradox of modern India as effectively, with juxtapositions of ancient and new, gritty and chic. At **Gunpowder (3)**, you snag a seat on the terrace overlooking the reservoir. The modest restaurant serves "peninsular" cooking from the coastal regions at the tip of India. You order a dish of chicken and egg and shredded Indian flatbread called *paratha*, as well as an incendiary sweet and sour pork curry from the remote province of Coorg (you end up drinking half a gallon of water trying to put out the fire in your mouth).

On the way back to the center of Delhi, you pause at the **Evergreen Sweet House (4)** for a sweet snack—a delicious mix of yogurt and honey and crispy *poori*, a type of fried bread—before heading to Khan Market.

#### BOARDING PASS ➔

Fly United First to Delhi, and stretch out as you prepare to enjoy all the sights, sounds and sensations of northern India.

This cluster of outdoor shops doesn't look like much, but it's the epicenter of high fashion in Delhi: A square foot of real estate here is among the priciest in India. At **Good Earth (5)**, which offers a beautiful collection of clothing and housewares, you pony up for a pillow embroidered with elephants. You opt for one that depicts the trunks pointing up, which means good luck.

After a reviving massage at the Imperial spa, you take a cab to **Bukhara (6)**, which specializes in the cuisine of India's northwest frontier. It's the only place in the country that made the influential San Pellegrino list of the world's 50 best restaurants last year. Seated on a low stool in the grotto-like dining room, you dig into puffy naan and leg of baby lamb, both cooked in a 1,000-degree tandoor oven. You eat yourself silly but don't linger, knowing you'll be up early—very early—for your date with the Taj.

**DAY THREE** | You rise before the sun and catch a ride to Delhi's main train station. The **Shatabdi Express (1)**, the quickest, most efficient route south to Agra, departs every morning at 6:30. Don't worry about breakfast: A first-class seat comes with hot tea and a *thali* (a tray with a variety of dishes) bearing savory doughnuts and spicy masala, along with newspapers and air conditioning. Two hours later you pull into Agra Cantt Station, your gateway to the "City of Taj." The **Oberoi Amarvilas (2)**,



## STREET CRED

Delhi's classic car motors on **The Ambassador**, grandfather of India's booming automotive industry, is the country's most iconic car, largely unchanged since 1948. It's ubiquitous in Delhi, where it remains the official vehicle of government bigwigs. If you're staying at the Imperial, they'll send out a classic white "Amby," as it's affectionately known, to pick you up at the airport; you can also hail a taxi version, recognizable by its distinctive black body and yellow roof.



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**SPLASHY VIEW** The pool at the opulent hotel Oberoi Amarvilas in Agra, with the legendary Taj Mahal gleaming in the distance



one of the country's most palatial hotels, has sent a driver, as well as a wreath of fragrant fresh flowers for you to wear. After you check in at the hotel, you head to the window in your room. And that's when you see it for the first time, in the distance: the **Taj Mahal (3)**. Even from here, it's breathtaking.

Refreshed by a quick dip in the pool, you leave your digs and embark on a tour of the great monuments of Agra, former capital of the Mughal empire. Your first destination is the shrine known as the **Baby Taj (4)** (its official name, I'Timad-Ud-Daulah, is a bit of a mouthful). To get there, you navigate the teeming sprawl that is modern Agra, a city of more than a million people along the Yamuna River. Your ride comes to a standstill as a herd of water buffalo crosses the road. And then you arrive, lucky enough to have the Baby Taj almost all to yourself (it's not on the standard tour bus circuit). Like its more famous sibling, this white marble mausoleum is a memorial to love, but this time it's filial—built by an empress in her father's memory.

Heading back into town, you stop for lunch at **Dasaprakash (5)**, a bright and cheerful southern Indian restaurant serving all-you-can-eat vegetarian fare. For virtually nothing, you eat your way through a massive *thali* laden with *idlis*, *dosas*, *poori* and eggplant, and wash it all down with fresh watermelon juice.

The Taj Mahal is packed at midday, so you kill a few hours touring the **Red Fort of Agra (6)**. Its strong red sandstone walls held off countless invaders until the Brits broke through in the 19th century. You get in and out easily enough. It's an immense complex, with 94 acres of sculpted gardens and marble shrines with gems embedded in the walls.

You hop into an oversize golf cart and make for the Taj Mahal. Gas-powered cars aren't permitted near the site, so electric rental vehicles are lined up on the road going in. A mile and a half later you reach the gates, and at last, there it is in all its glory, sparkling at sunset: Shah Jahan's white marble love letter to his third and most beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who

died in childbirth in 1631. This is the best time to be here, when the temperature has dropped and the crowds have thinned out, and the twilight reflecting off the river reads purple, pink, orange and gold. Like everyone else—including many new Indian brides—you pose for pictures in front and then follow the line inside under the twinkling dome, which is quite possibly the most stunning piece of architecture you've ever seen.

That night at Esphanan, the hotel's restaurant, you can still make out the Taj in silhouette through a window. You dine on tandoori cauliflower and quail curry, old-fashioned regal recipes served in a 21st-century palace (the Oberoi opened in 2001). The food is rich and delicious—some of the best of the trip, in fact. After dinner you retreat upstairs, spent, and drift off to sleep with CNN on the flatscreen, enjoying the new India, but dreaming of the old.

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Hemispheres contributor **JAY CHESHES** would be more than happy to show you his Bollywood dance moves.