

The Insider's India

We all get along with a little help from our friends. In the case of our recent trip to India, my husband and I benefited a lot from the suggestions offered by fellow travelers.

La Jolla ophthalmologist Padma Nanduri, a native of India, was the first to mention Bukhara restaurant in the ITC Maurya Sheraton Hotel in New Delhi. The American Airlines flight attendants on our Chicago-Delhi non-stop seconded her recommendation.

Bukhara is the place to go for kebabs, but having hosted Bill Gates, Bill Clinton, and Mick Jagger, the restaurant is hardly a best-kept secret. However, Nanduri also mentioned another less-known dining option in the hotel.

"Dum Pukht," she explained, "means 'cooking with breath' because the food is steamed. It's the cuisine that was served to the artisans who created the Taj Mahal, and it melts in your mouth." »

Humayun's Tomb in Delhi is an excellent example of very early Mughal architecture

« I scanned the menu printed on silk until I found the guchhi (morel mushroom biryani) Nanduri recommended. Just the right combination of cloves, cinnamon, ginger, and cardamom make this dish delicious. (www.sheraton.com/maurya)

she implored. “She’s a doll and has a wonderful Italian restaurant.”

Italian food in Delhi? It made sense when Dalmia explained that quite some time ago she went to Italy on behalf of her family’s marble business and fell in

wine list, so while the meals are excellent, the 17 pages of international offerings are truly remarkable. *Wine Spectator* says it’s “one of the best wine lists in the world.” (www.diva-italian.com)

I also used my insider sources to sort out Delhi’s many shopping options. Campbell and the AA flight attendants recommended Dilli Haat. This open-air arts and crafts market was also suggested by Del Mar resident Jas Grewal, a native of India who visits several times a year.

“The prices aren’t inflated for tourists, and they charge 15 rupees (36 cents) admission, which keeps the beggars out,” she told me.

As we entered the marketplace, I swear I could feel my pulse quicken. Spread before us were close to 200 stalls laden with colorful shawls, Western and Indian clothing, beautiful woven tablecloths, exotic embroideries, and bolts of vibrant textiles.

The goods at Dilli Haat are from all over India — brought to Delhi by the rural artisans who create them. Each vendor can describe the process and history of his craft. I learned, for instance, that the oft-coveted pashmina shawl is made from cashmere wool that comes from Himalayan goats. It can be blended with silk or sheep’s wool, made to single or double thickness, be embroidered or plain — all of which significantly impacts the price. I also learned that a shatoosh, a scarf woven from very rare antelope hair — in an effort to protect the animal — is outlawed in many countries (but sold under the counter in India). (www.dillahaat.org)

Dilli Haat was crowded, but my husband and I were almost the only shoppers at the stalls behind the Craft Museum. I am grateful to a fellow traveler who told us about this spot »



The sights, sounds, and aromas of The Spice Market in Old Delhi provide a feast for the senses



Artisans from various areas of India create and display their work in a courtyard behind The Crafts Museum in Delhi

Other dining tips came from Hallie Campbell, who grew up in La Jolla and now lives in London where she writes about India for *Condé Nast Traveler*.

“You must meet my friend Ritu Dalmia,”

love with the cuisine. Today the Indian chef operates Diva, a chic dining spot in an upscale neighborhood, as well as the restaurant in the Italian embassy.

Divya is the first eatery in Delhi to offer a

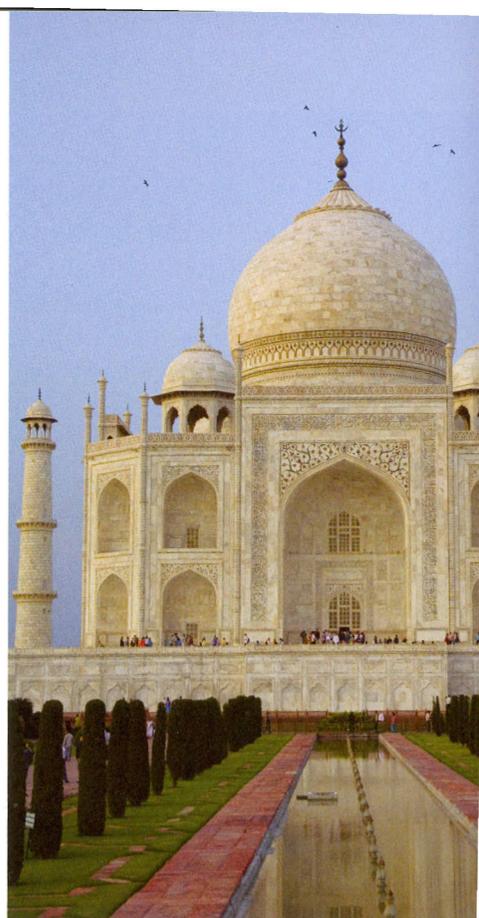
« where we watched block printing, weaving, and delicate painting on lacquer boxes. (www.travelgodelhi.com)

For designer clothing, my favorite shop is Anokhi, which has more than a dozen locations in India, including three in Delhi. Here I spotted a cotton quilted block print jacket for about \$30 (think \$300 at Nordstrom). Fabindia, also with multiple locations, reminded me of Crate & Barrel. In contrast to the modern shops, the expansive spice market in Old Delhi is colorful, crowded, and uniquely Indian. (www.anokhi.com, www.fabindia.com)

Coconut Lagoon is a lakeside retreat where bridges cross narrow canals and guests stay in heritage homes that have been brought onto the site

The Red Fort and Jama Masjid, India's largest mosque, are Old Delhi's top attractions, but we'd been urged to see Humayun's Tomb, where the gardens have recently been restored. Here we found a stunning Mughal tomb made from red sandstone and white marble in a beautiful park-like setting crisscrossed by walking paths.

After a warm day of touring, I thought of Nanduri's comment that "India — like no other place — can put you in the mood for a pool." She suggested we stay at either the The Taj Mahal Hotel or the Oberoi in New Delhi because "they have



the best pools."

We opted for the Taj and loved everything about it, including the Ayurvedic spa, which offers a special jet-lag recovery treatment, and the special amenities and services of The Taj Club. Over breakfast in The Taj Club lounge, we enjoyed a view of Humayan's Tomb on the horizon. (www.tajhotels.com)

In Agra we stayed at the fabulous Oberoi Amarvilas — one of the top hotels in the world and the only lodging that provides a view of the Taj Mahal from every room. (www.oberoihotels.com)

Coconut Lagoon was our home in Kerala. Here, 50 heritage houses have been moved onto a lush 17-acre lakefront site crisscrossed by canals and wooden bridges.

"See if you can get one of their pool villas," Campbell suggested. We did, and like the rest of our trip — thanks to our friends — it was wonderful. (www.cghearth.com) — Elizabeth Hansen, photography by Adams/Hansen Stock Photos

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