



DIRTY Delhi

Suzan Crane gets sucked in to the vortex of sadness and destitution that is Delhi, only to realise that the capital does have its saving graces.

Entering Pahar Ganj, Delhi's backpacker ghetto, there is an overwhelming stench that makes some put on surgical masks. And the smell is all the more pungent after having spent nearly six months breathing the perfume of tropical palm grove-laden Goa.

This dirty bazaar is blemished by beggars, parapalegics and dirty children kicking cardboard boxes down dirty streets for fun, while other kids beg for rupees that will go into the pockets of their begging pimps, and still other street urchins (covered with Dickensian grime) steal cigarettes off the table at your favorite chai shop. Filthy beggars mime living hand-to-mouth, while filthy dogs sniff about filthy streets and filthy yet holy cows eat plastic and blow up like balloons.

The area's reputation for freaks, drugs and the down-and-out makes it a no-go area for the educated and well-heeled. A black rain falls as clear droplets meld with the thick, omnipresent pollution during an evening downpour. Bicycle rickshaws and motorbikes compete for precious space with pedestrians, hawkers, vendors and transients. So narrow and congested are the streets that I have twice been hit by bicycle wallahs.

A major transit hub, Delhi, like Bangkok, is for many simply a necessary pit stop en route to somewhere else. Pahar Ganj is sort of a bastard sibling of Khaosan Road, although the tourist haunts are more seamlessly woven into the local tapestry here. Heading north or south, arriving or leaving the country, every budget traveler hits the bazaar at least once during his or her Indian journey. There is something comforting in returning here, though. Inevitably, familiar faces beckon from crowds. Old friends reunite, as new friendships are forged over a chai cigarette.

But India's capital city, divided into Old and New Delhi, also attracts more conventional visitors. Isolated in one of the many deluxe hotels, and dining in restaurants where tandoori and mughal cuisine are presented on tables covered in linen, they race around behind overcharging guides, hitting the city's many points of interest: The Red

Fort, Jama Masjid, Purana Qila (Old Fort), Humayun's Tomb and temples like Lakshmi Narayan, Bahai and ISKCON. Or they head for market areas like Chandni Chowk in the Old City and the underground market of Palika Bazaar. Meanwhile, culture vultures roost at the National Museum and National Gallery of Modern Art.

Since Delhi enjoys relatively close proximity to Agra and the Taj Mahal, Jaipur and Pushkar in Rajasthan, Vrindivan, where Krishna devotees convene, and Rishikesh on the banks of the holy Ganges (where the Beatles wrote some of their most mystical music), it is a good launching point for exploring the many highlights of Northern India. It's also a gateway to the mountain regions of the Parvati Valley, Manali and Dharamsala.

While most people keep their Delhi visit to a minimum, a few I know have gotten lost in the maze of madness for months. Some come here to do business — buy stuff to sell stuff — and others actually like it. Certainly there is a huge expat community living and socialising in places to which I've never been invited. I'm ashamed — or should I be proud? — to admit that in the six or seven times I've been in Delhi over the past 12 months, I've rarely ventured beyond the chaotic confines of Pahar Ganj.

My big days out include a morning in Karol Bagh to buy air filters for my friend's Enfield, another cruising the narrow alleyways of Chandni Chowk, and yet another to Nehru Place to buy a part for my laptop. The nearby Connaught Place is the closest nook of civility, where proper coffee, designer shops and the Nirula Ice Cream parlour provides a quick and necessary respite from the pandemonium of Pahar Ganj.

But mostly I come here to leave here. Despite the duration of my stay, I'm happy to be back in the "real" India where I need to watch my step; where the piss, shit and spit serve as metaphors for life's little obstacles. And although I need to harden my heart in order to save my sanity amidst so much sadness and destitution, here in Delhi the Technicolor flamboyance of India is fully illuminated, and life is turned up to 11.