

NEW DELHI



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NEW DELHI

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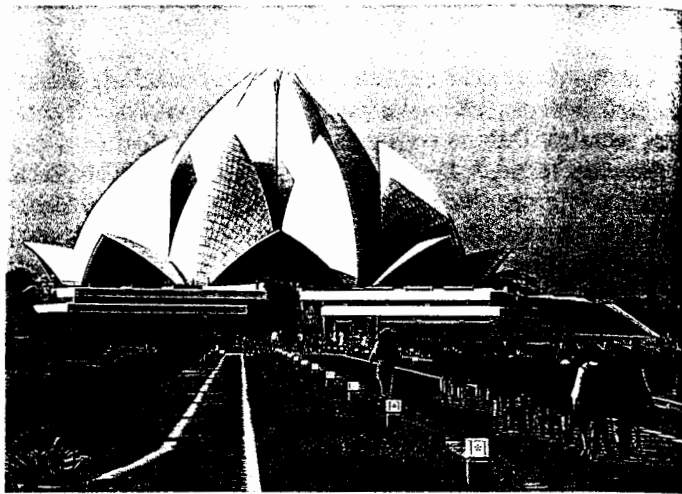
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Lotus design of the Bahai Temple

James Prinsep in 1837 – but the Sultan marvelled at them, convinced they possessed magic talismanic value.

From here, stroll down to the **National Rose Garden**, which lie in the southwest corner of Feroz Shah Kotla. By the entrance stands the **Khuni Darwaza** or “Bloody Gate,” which apparently served as an entrance to the Afghan king Sher Shah’s fortress town of Sher Garh, Delhi’s sixth city, whose remains interface those of the Purana Qila, which lies further up Mahatma Gandhi Road. Another monument to look out for near the gardens is **Abdu’n Nabi’s Mosque**, built in the 17th century by one of Akbar’s devout clerics.

Only doll-addicts or those with children in tow will be interested in the next stop on the itinerary – the **International Dolls Museum**, located on Delhi’s “Fleet Street” row of newspaper offices in **Nehru House**, 4, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg. This involves either a 15-minute walk past carbon dioxide-spewing traffic or a nippy rickshaw ride. It has quite a collection: some 6,000 dolls from 85 different countries. There’s an Indian tribal *haute couture* section, and dolls kitted out in the nation’s diverse regional costumes. It’s open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, except on Monday.

It’s time to extricate yourself from this noisy, dust-filled part of town and head for the oasis of a hotel coffee shop for afternoon tea. Try the Taj Mahal’s **Machan** for some South-Indian coffee and an afternoon snack, or sit out in the sunshine by the hotel’s lovely outside pool. Before you leave the hotel, it’s worth having a browse through their excellent *Khazana* shop, which sells quality leatherware, jewelry, fabrics, old lithographs and handicrafts. Prices are high, but so is the quality.

It should be about 4.30 p.m. by now, so hail a taxi and make the 20-minute drive out to the modern **Baha’i Temple**, which stands atop Kalkaji Hill, near the suburb of Friend’s Colony in south Delhi like a colossal unfolding white marble lotus flower. Delhi Baha’i’ites

are extremely proud of this architectural emblem, which was built from funds donated from Baha’i devotees across the globe, and like to compare it to the Sydney Opera House, and even the Taj Mahal.

It is certainly not the Taj Mahal, although it is made from the same Rajasthanian Macrana marble, but it is undeniably impressive. Set in well-tended gardens, each of its sculpted marble “petals” are surrounded by nine pools and walkways, each leading to a different entrance, which apparently denote the many paths leading to God. Inside the prayer hall tapers to 100 feet (30½ meters) high, with no supporting columns, creating a feeling of breathtaking spaciousness and serenity.

The Baha’i faith began in present-day Iran in 1844 by Baha’u’llah, a Persian nobleman, who proclaimed himself the “Promised One”, who had been entrusted with a message from God that the path to religious truth lay in the spiritual and social unification of the world. For this he was reviled by all religions and governments, and spent the rest of his life exiled in Constantinople and Adrianople.

In India there are some 1½ million adherents of the faith, and hundreds visit the temple in Delhi each day to worship. Before entering the temple, you’ll need to remove your shoes and maintain complete silence, except during the prayer hours at 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. every day. It’s most beautiful to visit at sunset, when the temple’s polished surface glows oleander-pink and peacocks start their melancholic evening song.

12. On the Gandhi and Nehru trail

Lunch at Claridges Hotel, visits to Gandhi Smitri, Teen Murti House and the riverside ghats.

This is a relaxed afternoon tour, combining visits to historic museum-houses with garden walks. Start with lunch at Claridges Hotel’s **Dhaba restaurant**, styled to resemble one of India’s numerous roadside *dhabas* or truck stops, with half a real truck – complete with authentic lurid decorations, swastikas and tassels – emerging from its wall. This is the place to sample excellent, earthy north-west frontier and Punjabi fare, especially *tandoor* and bread specialities.

Try the Chicken Kebabs and *Saag Paneer*, a dish of spiced cottage cheese and spinach, accompanied by *tandoori roti* and a *nimbu* soda.

After lunch, it’s just a five-minute stroll down Tees January Road to find **Birla House**, now called Gandhi Smitri at No. 5. This was the palatial residence of G.D. Birla, one of India’s wealthiest industrialists and a long-time follower and financial supporter of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Gandhi came here in September 1947, amid the holocaust of partition after Independence, still weak from a long fast undertaken to protest bloodshed between the Hindus and Muslims in Bengal. At that time Delhi was swollen with refugees, as more than ten million