

TRAVELLERS' TALES

DINING IN

# Delhi

Olivia Greenway takes a culinary tour of the Indian capital and finds a mix of dishes from around the country

MOST BRITS ASSOCIATE Indian food with the stuff produced in the — mostly Bangladeshi-owned — curry houses around the UK, yet only a small proportion of food eaten in India is in fact 'curry'. It really isn't just a case of lamb, chicken or prawns in slightly different sauces.

India's capital, Delhi, is one of the best places to try traditional cuisine, as the city draws influences from all over the country. Northern Indian food tends to be rich, meat-heavy and nearly always served with rice. In the south, dishes are spicier, incorporating lentils and featuring various flatbreads, wheat pancakes and semolina cakes. In the coastal regions, as you would imagine, fish and seafood reign supreme.

With a top restaurant website claiming more than 7,000 listings for Delhi, the city isn't short of places to eat. A good way to dip your toe in this Indian food ocean is to go on an organised three- to four-hour tour with a resident foodie. Prashant Kalra, from Delhi Food Tours, collected me from my hotel. "Skip breakfast and come hungry" was his strict instruction.

Our first feast was south Indian. I tried a light and fluffy steamed rice dumpling, which is dipped in *sambar*, a thin spicy sauce, and often eaten for breakfast. Accompanying this was a *dosa* — my favourite — a long, crisp fried roll, crammed with potato and onion.

Our second stop was at a Muslim establishment serving Mughal dishes — a Persian-influenced cuisine originating from the Mughal Empire, which was at its peak in the 17th and 18th centuries. The style now dominates in northern India, including Delhi and the province of Uttar Pradesh.

The only cooker here is a charcoal grill. Customers stand at high tables in the immaculate premises or sit in their cars outside, if they want to enjoy their roast chicken Afghani or tender lamb kebab with most people's tippie of choice — whisky — as alcohol is forbidden on the premises. After much lip smacking and wiping of mouths with paper napkins, we tested another winner, chicken biryani, a spiced rice dish bursting with flavour, baked overnight in a clay pot on the dying charcoal embers.

By now I was feeling quite stuffed, but Prashant pressed on and we entered a busy sit-down restaurant typical of the Punjab, with 'butter chicken' being the equivalent of our homegrown chicken tikka masala. Along with this melt-in-the-mouth dish we had *paratha* (thick pancakes stuffed with vegetables), *jeera* (cumin) rice, creamy *dal makani* (black beans simmered for hours in a rich sauce) red lentil *dhal* (spiced stew) and cucumber *raita* (a cooling yoghurt sauce with chopped cucumber).

We moved on to a cafeteria-style place serving typical Gujarati street food. *Chaat* is a fragrant snack of puffed rice, freshly mixed with finely diced onions, chopped coriander, ground spices, pomegranate seeds and yoghurt. Desserts followed; I managed *gulab jamun* — treacle sponge-like balls drenched in rose water syrup — but had to give up when the pistachio *kulfi* (condensed milk ice-cream), milk cake and calorific *ras malai* (sweet paneer cheese flavoured with cardamom) appeared.

We finally moved to a teahouse — where I had my first taste of white tea — made mainly of the buds, rather than the leaves, of the tea plant. Rarely drunk in India, though more common in China, the beverage tasted crisp, fruity and delicate — helping to counteract my previous overindulgence.

Prashant had come equipped with wet wipes and a hand sanitiser, which I felt was a bit over the top, as all the places we visited were very clean. Keeping 'Delhi belly' at bay, this food tour is a safe and enjoyable introduction to a range of Indian dishes you might not find on your own. However, you will need to leave the diet at home. ■

## SAMPLE

● **BALES WORLDWIDE** offers a 16 days Palaces of Rajasthan tour featuring two nights in Delhi, from £2,165 per person, including flights. T: 0844 225 1235. [www.virginholidaysjourneys.co.uk](http://www.virginholidaysjourneys.co.uk)

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

Appam, rice crepes and paratha