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## Delhi: A Gurgaon homestay

Posted on [September 25, 2012](#) by [Olivia Greenway](#)



"Look for a balding, fat Indian holding a straw hat," were my instructions on arriving at Delhi International Airport. "That will be me."

Avuncular Major Singh runs a homestay, Abode Kolta, in Gurgaon; originally just beyond the city limits of Delhi, but now subsumed by the sprawling mass of new developments and building sites that have spread like lava towards the capital.

Down a bumpy track en route, Singh orders the driver to stop. He plucks a plant from the side of the road and passes it to me. "Marijuana," he announces, in case I need telling. "Here it grows freely. In your country, it has to be imported."

Singh is a self-confessed Anglophile and has many British friends. "But I'm very proud to be Indian," he adds quickly.

My room is tidy with fresh towels and vases of flowers; it'd be just like home except everything is covered in fine dust and it's incredibly humid. After a welcome cup of coffee, and a brief respite from the heat, Singh is keen for me to go to Carterpuri village nearby. Originally known as Chuma Kheragaon, it was renamed after US president Jimmy Carter's visit in 1978. As we walk up a potholed dirt track lined with rudimentary shops, thin cows tethered nearby giving us a cursory, indifferent glance. One shop sells eggs, flour and bottled water; another has a quack doctor, who can take your blood pressure or sell you some pills. A friendly shop owner invites us to his home. We sit in his courtyard and sip hot chai, speaking the language of smiles.

Singh stops at his local temple to light some candles. "We don't have intermediaries, like your religion. We talk directly to our god." Religion to him is a way of life; like visiting the supermarket. Job done, he pauses at a paan stall and pops a betel leaf, laced with tobacco, into his mouth.

Back at the house, Singh's lovely wife, Lakshmi, has started to prepare a feast. Tempting smells of paneer and mutton stew waft from the kitchen. This is a labour of love, as the tiny kitchen has no air-con. Singh has arranged for three friends to come round, "for a party", which coincides with an hour-long power cut. It feels a bit odd, taking to strangers in the dark, but power cuts are a way of life in India. We sip whisky — India's adopted national drink — and swap anecdotes until supper can be resumed. I struggle a bit eating with my right hand. "Would you prefer some gardening implements?" enquires Singh, mischievously, handing me a fork and spoon.

I retire when the guests leave, the ancient air-con machine clattering noisily to cope with the unreasonable demands. The monsoon is late and everywhere is wilting. Another power cut at 3am turns the room into a hothouse. I flee onto the terrace, hoping for some cool air. It's a futile wish.

Of course, one soon forgets about the heat and discomfort and one can wash off the dust and dirt, but some encounters, however brief, burn on in the memory.

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