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Visiting Delhi

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Introduction to Delhi: A Historical and Cultural Overview
- **Chapter 2** Getting There: How to Reach Delhi
- **Chapter 3** Exploring Delhi: Navigating the City
- **Chapter 4** Best Time to Visit: Seasons and Weather
- **Chapter 5** Accommodation Options: Where to Stay
- **Chapter 6** Red Fort and Other Historical Sites
- **Chapter 7** Qutub Minar and Other Architectural Marvels
- **Chapter 8** Religious Sites of Delhi
- **Chapter 9** Museums and Galleries
- **Chapter 10** Shopping Destinations: Markets and Bazaars
- **Chapter 11** Culinary Delight: Food and Drink in Delhi
- **Chapter 12** Experiencing Old Delhi: A Cultural Exploration
- **Chapter 13** New Delhi: The Modern Capital
- **Chapter 14** Lodhi Garden and Green Spaces
- **Chapter 15** Performing Arts and Cultural Shows
- **Chapter 16** Delhi's Street Food: A Gastronomic Journey
- **Chapter 17** Safety Measures for Tourists
- **Chapter 18** Health and Practical Travel Tips
- **Chapter 19** Ride-Sharing and Local Transport
- **Chapter 20** Essential Travel Information for Delhi
- **Chapter 21** Day Trips to Agra
- **Chapter 22** Visiting Jaipur from Delhi
- **Chapter 23** Neemrana Fort: A Historic Day Out
- **Chapter 24** Spiritual Escapes: Rishikesh and Haridwar
- **Chapter 25** Conclusion: The Allure of Delhi

Introduction

Delhi, the capital of India, is a city that echoes with the chronicles of its rich past while simultaneously embracing the vibrance of modernity. As a principal gateway to the country, Delhi is a microcosm of India itself, offering visitors a glimpse into the diverse unity that defines this nation. From the remnants of ancient empires to the bustling streets echoing with life, every corner of Delhi invites travelers to immerse themselves in its unique blend of tradition and innovation.

The allure of Delhi lies in its ability to juxtapose the old and the new. Majestic historical sites and monuments stand tall as testaments to times gone by, capturing stories of dynasties that once ruled the region. The magnificent Red Fort, the intricate carvings of Humayun's Tomb, and the towering Qutub Minar are more than just sights to behold; they are narratives of India's deep-seated heritage. As one strolls through these landmarks, every brick and stone whispers legends of emperors, battles, and an era where grandeur knew no bounds.

Beyond its historical grandeur, Delhi is a thriving epicenter of culture and creativity. The city's vitality can be witnessed in its diverse population, a melting pot of communities that have made Delhi their home. This cultural amalgamation generates a vibrant tapestry that is reflected in the city's festivals, cuisine, art, and clothing, offering visitors a spectrum of experiences that are as varied as they are enriching.

Food enthusiasts, in particular, will find Delhi a paradise. Known for its delectable street food, Delhi's culinary scene is a delectable journey through the flavors of India. From the tangy and spicy treats of Old Delhi's lanes to the refined cuisine of upscale restaurants, the gastronomic wonders of the city cater to all palates. Every meal in Delhi tells a story, weaving together ingredients, techniques, and traditions that have been passed down through generations.

Navigating Delhi's bustling streets is an adventure in itself. The city boasts a comprehensive network of transportation options, from the efficient metro system to the lively streets filled with auto-rickshaws and buses. Exploring Delhi requires an open heart and mind, tendencies embraced by travelers looking to immerse themselves in the soul of the city. With vibrant shopping streets, serene gardens, modern attractions, and rich cultural events, Delhi stands as a city that has something for every traveler.

This book, 'Visiting Delhi: A Guide for Tourists,' is designed to be your comprehensive companion in exploring this magnificent city. Each chapter delves into the intricacies of visiting Delhi, offering practical tips, cultural insights, and recommendations that

ensure a memorable and hassle-free journey. Whether it's your first visit or a return to the captivating capital, this guide aims to provide you with the knowledge and inspiration needed to fully embrace all that Delhi has to offer.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction to Delhi: A Historical and Cultural Overview

Welcome to Delhi, a city that isn't just a place on a map but a living chronicle spanning millennia. Few cities in the world can boast such a long and tumultuous history, marked by the rise and fall of empires, waves of migration, and constant reinvention. To understand Delhi is to appreciate its many layers, like peeling an onion, where each layer reveals a different era, a different sensibility, a different story etched into its landscape. It's a city that has been destroyed and rebuilt numerous times, each iteration adding to its complex character. This enduring spirit, this refusal to be erased, is perhaps Delhi's defining feature.

The story often begins in the realm of myth and legend, with Indraprastha, the glittering capital of the Pandavas from the epic Mahabharata. While archaeological evidence for a grand city dating precisely to that mythical era remains debated, excavations near Purana Qila (Old Fort) have indeed unearthed pottery and artefacts suggesting ancient settlements dating back over three thousand years. This connection, whether purely mythological or rooted in some ancient reality, forms the foundational layer of Delhi's identity, linking it to the very bedrock of Indian lore and cementing its image as a place of primordial significance long before recorded history took definitive shape.

Moving from legend to documented history, the area around present-day Delhi gained prominence during the Mauryan Empire in the 3rd century BCE. Emperor Ashoka, known for spreading Buddhism and his rock edicts, left his mark nearby. Though not the imperial capital then (which was Pataliputra, near modern Patna), the region was clearly strategically important. Fragments of Ashoka Pillars found in Delhi, notably the one now standing proudly in Feroz Shah Kotla, attest to this early significance, proving that this land was already recognized as a vital node in the network of ancient Indian civilization, a place worthy of imperial markers.

The narrative of Delhi as a major power centre truly solidifies with the advent of the Delhi Sultanate in the 12th century. Following the invasions of Muhammad Ghori, his general Qutb-ud-din Aibak established the first Islamic dynasty here in 1206, choosing the area around the existing Rajput fort of Qila Rai Pithora in Mehrauli. This marked the beginning of Delhi's nearly seven-century reign as a major capital. Aibak commenced the construction of the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque and the magnificent Qutub Minar, symbols of this new era that still dominate the landscape. This wasn't just a change of rulers; it was the start of a profound cultural and architectural transformation.

What followed was a fascinating pattern: successive dynasties within the Sultanate – the Khiljis, Tughlaqs, Sayyids, and Lodis – often chose to build new capitals in adjacent areas rather than solely developing the existing one. Alauddin Khilji built Siri Fort, seeking better defenses against Mongol threats. Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq established the formidable, albeit short-lived, Tughlaqabad further east, a city whose imposing ruins still evoke a sense of rugged power. His successor, Muhammad bin Tughlaq, ambitious and perhaps eccentric, linked older settlements to create Jahanpanah ('Refuge of the World') and famously attempted, disastrously, to shift the entire capital hundreds of miles south to Daulatabad before returning.

The Tughlaqs, particularly Firoz Shah Tughlaq, left a significant imprint. He founded Firozabad, the fifth city, centered around the Feroz Shah Kotla grounds. He was a prolific builder, credited with canals, gardens, tombs, and mosques, and notably transported two ancient Ashokan pillars to his new city, physically linking his rule to India's deep past. These shifting capitals weren't mere whims; they reflected strategic needs, dynastic pride, resource availability, and sometimes, sheer ambition. Each new city added another layer to Delhi's expanding urban sprawl and complex history, leaving behind ruins and monuments that dot the landscape today.

The subsequent Sayyid and Lodi dynasties continued this tradition, though perhaps on a less grandiose scale than their predecessors. Their primary architectural legacy lies in the numerous elegant tombs they constructed, many of which now grace the tranquil environs of what we call Lodhi Garden today. These structures, characterized by a refined blend of Hindu and Islamic architectural elements, represent a distinct phase in Delhi's stylistic evolution. While their political power was less extensive compared to the Tughlaqs or Khiljis, they served as crucial custodians of Delhi's capital status, bridging the gap before the arrival of a new, formidable force from Central Asia.

That force arrived in 1526 when Babur, a descendant of Timur and Genghis Khan, defeated Ibrahim Lodi, the last Delhi Sultan, at the Battle of Panipat. This victory marked the end of the Delhi Sultanate and the beginning of the illustrious Mughal Empire in India. Babur captured Delhi and Agra, laying the foundation for an empire that would shape the subcontinent's destiny for centuries. Delhi, once again, found itself at the heart of imperial power, though its primacy would be briefly challenged before being spectacularly reaffirmed.

Babur's son, Humayun, inherited the throne but faced challenges, notably from the Afghan chieftain Sher Shah Suri. Sher Shah defeated Humayun and took control of Delhi, ruling briefly but effectively. During his reign, he significantly developed the city, strengthening the fortifications of Dinpanah (which Humayun had started) – the area now known as Purana Qila (Old Fort). Sher Shah's administrative and architectural contributions were substantial, showcasing his vision even in his short

tenure before Humayun eventually reclaimed the empire, returning to Delhi only to die tragically soon after.

Interestingly, Humayun's son, Akbar the Great, perhaps the most renowned Mughal emperor, chose not to rule from Delhi. He favoured Agra and later established his magnificent new capital at Fatehpur Sikri. This shift temporarily relegated Delhi to a secondary position within the empire, although it remained strategically and culturally important. Akbar's focus elsewhere meant that for several decades, Delhi saw less imperial construction and attention compared to the preceding Sultanate period or the subsequent Mughal era. This period underscores how the city's fortunes were intrinsically tied to imperial favour.

The grand return of Delhi to the forefront of Mughal glory occurred under Emperor Shah Jahan, Akbar's grandson, in the mid-17th century. Finding Agra too congested and its climate challenging, Shah Jahan decided to build an entirely new capital in Delhi. This ambitious project resulted in Shahjahanabad, the seventh city of Delhi, which forms the heart of what we now call Old Delhi. Conceived on a grand scale, it was a walled city anchored by the majestic Lal Qila (Red Fort) on the banks of the Yamuna River and adorned with the magnificent Jama Masjid, one of India's largest mosques.

Shahjahanabad was meticulously planned, with wide avenues like Chandni Chowk (Moonlight Square) designed by Shah Jahan's daughter, Jahanara, radiating from the fort. It became the epicenter of Mughal power, culture, and commerce. This era witnessed a flourishing of arts, poetry, music, and cuisine. Urdu, a beautiful synthesis of Persian, Arabic, Turkic, and local dialects, blossomed in the courts and lanes of Shahjahanabad, becoming a sophisticated language of literature and everyday life. The city buzzed with energy, a testament to the pinnacle of Mughal grandeur and refinement.

However, the splendours of Shahjahanabad were not destined to last unchallenged. As Mughal power began to wane in the 18th century following the death of Aurangzeb, Shah Jahan's successor, Delhi faced turbulent times. The Persian ruler Nader Shah brutally sacked the city in 1739, massacring thousands and carrying away immense treasures, including the fabled Peacock Throne. Later invasions by the Afghan Ahmad Shah Abdali and internal strife further weakened the empire. The Marathas, a rising power from the Deccan, exerted significant influence over Delhi during this period, often acting as protectors or controllers of the weakened Mughal emperors.

Into this complex scenario of declining Mughal authority and regional power struggles stepped the British East India Company. Initially traders, the Company gradually increased its political and military influence across India. By the early 19th century, they were the de facto power behind the Mughal throne in Delhi, treating the emperor with outward respect but holding the real reins. This uneasy coexistence continued

until the watershed event of 1857 – known variously as the Sepoy Mutiny, the Great Rebellion, or the First War of Indian Independence.

The 1857 uprising saw Delhi become a major centre of resistance against British rule. Rebel sepoys rallied around the aged Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, proclaiming him the leader of the revolt. The city witnessed fierce fighting before being recaptured by the British after a bloody siege. The aftermath was brutal: large parts of Shahjahanabad were destroyed, its inhabitants suffered reprisals, and the last Mughal emperor was tried and exiled to Rangoon, Burma, bringing the centuries-old Mughal dynasty to a final, ignominious end. Delhi's landscape and demography were irrevocably altered.

Following the suppression of the rebellion and the formal transfer of power from the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858, Delhi's political significance diminished temporarily. It was annexed to the province of Punjab, and Calcutta remained the capital of British India. While scarred and somewhat neglected initially, Delhi began to adapt to British administration. New infrastructure, like railways, started connecting it more firmly to the rest of the country under the new imperial regime. A different kind of cultural layering began, overlaying British influences onto the existing Perso-Islamic and indigenous fabric.

A pivotal moment arrived in 1911. At a grand Durbar (a ceremonial gathering) held in Delhi to commemorate the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary as Emperor and Empress of India, a momentous announcement was made: the capital of British India would be shifted from Calcutta back to Delhi. The reasons were multifaceted: Delhi's historical resonance as the seat of past empires provided legitimacy, its central location was geographically advantageous compared to Calcutta on the eastern coast, and perhaps, a desire to move away from the increasingly nationalist atmosphere of Bengal played a role.

This decision necessitated the creation of an entirely new city, an imperial capital befitting the might of the British Empire. The task of designing "New Delhi" was entrusted primarily to British architects Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker. Their vision was monumental – a planned city with wide, tree-lined avenues, grand administrative buildings incorporating both Western classical and Indian architectural motifs, and imposing structures like the Viceroy's House (now Rashtrapati Bhavan) and the Secretariat buildings flanking the ceremonial axis of Kingsway (now Rajpath).

The construction of New Delhi, south of Shahjahanabad, took nearly two decades, officially inaugurated in 1931. It was designed to be a stark contrast to the organic, seemingly chaotic density of Old Delhi. Wide boulevards, spacious bungalows, geometric layouts, and imposing government edifices symbolized imperial order and permanence. This deliberate juxtaposition created the distinct identities of 'Old' and 'New' Delhi that persist today, representing two different eras, cultures, and urban

philosophies existing side-by-side, often intertwined yet undeniably separate.

The era of British imperial grandeur in New Delhi, however, was relatively short-lived in the grand sweep of history. India's struggle for independence gained momentum, and on August 15, 1947, the nation achieved freedom. Delhi, the capital built by the British, seamlessly transitioned into the capital of the newly independent Republic of India. But independence came at a painful price: the Partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan. Delhi became a focal point for the ensuing communal violence and mass migration.

Partition triggered one of the largest and most traumatic population exchanges in history. Hundreds of thousands of Hindu and Sikh refugees poured into Delhi from newly formed Pakistan, while many Muslim families migrated in the opposite direction. The city's demographics were transformed overnight. Refugee camps sprang up, new colonies were hastily established to accommodate the displaced populations, and the social and cultural fabric of Delhi was profoundly altered. This influx, particularly of Punjabis, brought new energy, entrepreneurial spirit, and cultural influences (especially in cuisine and language) that significantly shaped modern Delhi.

In the decades following independence, Delhi grew rapidly as the nerve center of the Indian union. Government ministries, administrative offices, diplomatic missions from around the world, and national institutions established themselves here. The city expanded outwards in concentric circles, swallowing surrounding villages and agricultural land. This expansion spurred economic activity, attracting migrants from all corners of India seeking opportunities in the capital. Delhi evolved from primarily an administrative center into a sprawling metropolis encompassing commerce, industry, education, and culture.

This rapid, often unplanned growth brought inevitable challenges. Pressure on infrastructure like housing, water, electricity, and transportation became immense. Issues of pollution, traffic congestion, and socio-economic disparities emerged, common to many large, fast-growing cities worldwide. Yet, alongside these challenges, Delhi continued to thrive as a dynamic and resilient city. Significant investments in infrastructure, most notably the state-of-the-art Delhi Metro rail system, have aimed to address these growing pains and improve the quality of life for its burgeoning population.

Today's Delhi is a fascinating amalgamation of all its historical layers. It's a city where ancient tombs stand amidst bustling markets, where magnificent Mughal forts overlook sprawling modern suburbs, and where colonial-era bungalows coexist with gleaming corporate towers. This coexistence isn't always seamless, but it creates a unique urban tapestry unlike anywhere else. The city breathes history, not as a relic confined to museums, but as an integral part of its contemporary rhythm. Visitors can literally walk through centuries within a single day.

The cultural landscape of Delhi is as diverse as its history. While the influence of Mughal culture remains strong, particularly in Old Delhi, and the legacy of British town planning defines Lutyens' Delhi, the overwhelming flavor of contemporary Delhi is cosmopolitan and pan-Indian. The impact of the post-Partition Punjabi influx is palpable in the city's language, food, and general zest for life. Additionally, decades of migration from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, South India, and the Northeast have created a rich mosaic of communities, each adding its own threads to the cultural fabric.

This diversity is reflected in the languages heard on the streets. While Hindi is the most widely spoken language, Punjabi and Urdu have deep historical roots and continue to be significant. English serves as a crucial link language, especially in business, government, and tourism. However, wandering through different neighborhoods, one might easily catch snippets of Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi, or Haryanvi, testament to Delhi's status as a true melting pot where people from across India have made their home.

Delhi is also a major center for arts, culture, and intellectual life. It hosts numerous universities, research institutions, museums, art galleries, and auditoriums. A vibrant calendar of events includes classical music and dance performances, theatre festivals, literary gatherings, art exhibitions, and international conferences. This intellectual and artistic energy draws upon both its rich heritage and its contemporary global connections, making it a stimulating environment for residents and visitors alike. The city fosters creativity and debate, continuing its historical role as a hub of ideas.

The city's composite culture is vividly expressed through its festivals. Major Hindu festivals like Diwali (Festival of Lights) and Holi (Festival of Colors) are celebrated with immense enthusiasm across the city. Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha see vibrant celebrations, particularly in areas with large Muslim populations like Old Delhi. Sikhs celebrate Gurburabs (anniversaries of Sikh Gurus) with processions and community service at magnificent Gurudwaras like Bangla Sahib. Christmas is also widely celebrated, reflecting the city's diverse religious makeup. These festivals cut across community lines, showcasing Delhi's syncretic spirit.

The historical journey of Delhi, from mythical Indraprastha to the bustling modern metropolis, is a narrative of extraordinary resilience and adaptability. It has absorbed conquerors, builders, migrants, and influences from across the globe, integrating them into its ever-evolving identity. It has served as the capital for numerous empires, each leaving behind indelible marks on its architecture, culture, and character. Understanding this rich and layered past is key to appreciating the complexity and dynamism of the Delhi that greets visitors today.

The distinction between 'Old Delhi' (Shahjahanabad) and 'New Delhi' (Lutyens'

creation) is a fundamental aspect of the city's identity. Old Delhi pulsates with a chaotic energy – narrow, winding lanes, bustling bazaars overflowing with goods, centuries-old havelis (traditional mansions), fragrant street food stalls, and a tangible sense of history around every corner. It represents the organic, medieval heart of the city, retaining much of its Mughal-era layout and atmosphere, a world seemingly away from the city's modern sectors.

In contrast, New Delhi embodies order, space, and power. Its wide, symmetrical avenues, expansive green lawns, monumental government buildings, and stately roundabouts project an image of grandeur and authority, reflecting its origins as an imperial capital. While initially conceived by the British, it now serves as the administrative core of independent India, housing the Parliament, ministries, and diplomatic enclave. Exploring these two facets offers a fascinating study in contrasting urban philosophies and historical legacies within the same city.

Beyond Old and New Delhi, the city has sprawled into numerous other distinct areas. South Delhi is known for its affluent neighborhoods, trendy markets like Khan Market and Hauz Khas Village (with its historical ruins backdrop), numerous parks, and cultural venues. West Delhi is heavily influenced by its predominantly Punjabi population, known for its vibrant markets and residential colonies. East Delhi, across the Yamuna River, is a densely populated area that has seen rapid development. North Delhi houses the old Civil Lines area (from the British era) and the sprawling Delhi University campus.

The Yamuna River itself has played a crucial, though often overlooked, role in Delhi's history. Most of Delhi's historical capitals were situated near its banks, relying on it for water and transport. Though heavily polluted today and largely disconnected from the city's daily life compared to the past, efforts are underway to rejuvenate the riverfront. Historically, it was the lifeline influencing settlement patterns and strategic decisions for centuries, witnessing the rise and fall of empires along its course.

Delhi's strategic location in North India, at the crossroads of ancient trade routes and on the fertile Gangetic plain, has always been a key factor in its historical importance. It commanded access to the rich agricultural hinterlands and controlled the routes leading northwest towards Central Asia and eastwards towards the Ganges valley. This geographical advantage made it a coveted prize for aspirants to power throughout Indian history, explaining why it repeatedly became an imperial capital despite frequent destruction and rebuilding.

The culinary heritage of Delhi is a direct reflection of its layered history. Mughlai cuisine, with its rich gravies, aromatic biryanis, and succulent kebabs, traces its roots back to the imperial kitchens of Shahjahanabad. The influx of Punjabi refugees after Partition introduced dishes like tandoori chicken, butter chicken, dal makhani, and chole bhature, which are now synonymous with Delhi's food scene. Street food,

particularly chaat (savory snacks), has its own long and vibrant tradition, offering an explosion of flavors in the city's bustling lanes.

The architectural landscape is perhaps the most visible testament to Delhi's past. From the imposing Qutub Minar complex representing the early Sultanate period, through the robust Tughlaq-era fortifications and elegant Lodi tombs, to the sublime Mughal masterpieces like Humayun's Tomb (a precursor to the Taj Mahal) and the Red Fort, and finally, the imperial grandeur of Lutyens' New Delhi – the city is an open-air museum of evolving architectural styles, blending Islamic, Persian, Turkic, Indian, and European influences.

This historical and cultural richness makes Delhi not just a political capital but also a major tourist destination. Visitors are drawn by the opportunity to witness firsthand the remnants of ancient empires, explore magnificent monuments, delve into vibrant markets, savor diverse cuisines, and experience the pulsating energy of a city where the past and present constantly interact. It offers a concentrated glimpse into the complexity and diversity of India itself.

Navigating Delhi requires embracing its contrasts. One moment you might be negotiating the crowded alleys of a centuries-old bazaar, the next cruising down a wide, leafy avenue. You could be marveling at intricate Islamic calligraphy on a medieval tomb in the morning and attending a contemporary art opening in the evening. This constant interplay between different worlds is part of Delhi's unique charm, demanding flexibility and an open mind from those who wish to truly explore it.

The people of Delhi, known as Delhiites (or Dilliwalas), reflect the city's diverse history. While stereotypes exist – often portraying them as loud, aggressive, or status-conscious – Delhiites are also known for their resilience, entrepreneurial spirit ('jugaad' or finding innovative fixes), love for food, and a certain large-heartedness often hidden beneath a brusque exterior. Engaging with locals, whether a shopkeeper in Chandni Chowk or a student at Delhi University, can offer valuable insights into contemporary life in the capital.

Understanding this historical backdrop and cultural milieu enhances the experience of visiting Delhi. Knowing why the Red Fort stands where it does, why Old and New Delhi look so different, or why Punjabi food is so prevalent adds depth to sightseeing. It transforms a visit from a mere checklist of attractions into a richer journey through time, appreciating the city not just for what it is, but for how it came to be. Delhi's story is India's story in many ways – a narrative of continuity and change, invasion and assimilation, destruction and rebirth. It's a city that demands attention, challenges perceptions, and ultimately, leaves an indelible impression on all who wander its historic streets and modern avenues.

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