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Visiting Hyderabad

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Introduction

Hyderabad, known by many as the City of Pearls, is a remarkable tapestry woven with the threads of history, culture, and modernity. Sitting gracefully on the banks of the Musi River in the southern region of India, Hyderabad captivates its visitors with its rich historical legacy and dynamic urban spirit. The city is renowned for its unique blend of the old and the new, where centuries-old architectural marvels coexist with bustling IT hubs and swanky shopping malls.

Founded over four hundred years ago by Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, Hyderabad has evolved from a flourishing center of diamond and pearl trading to an influential metropolis often referred to as India's Silicon Valley. The intricate architectural designs from the Qutb Shahi and the later Asaf Jahi dynasties are a testament to the city's regal past, while the recent infrastructural developments highlight its journey into modernity. As a visitor, you have the unique opportunity to explore this vibrant juxtaposition at every corner of the city.

Hyderabad's cultural composite is as intriguing as its history. The city hosts a harmonious blend of linguistic diversity, with Telugu, Hindi, and English widely spoken, alongside the melodious tones of Urdu. This linguistic medley is complemented by a warm and hospitable populace whose traditions and festivities offer a fascinating insight into the local lifestyle. It is a city where ancient customs peacefully coexist with contemporary practices, inviting tourists to experience a multitude of cultural expressions.

The culinary landscape of Hyderabad is nothing short of a sensory banquet. The famed Hyderabadi Biryani, rich with aromatic spices and tender meat, is a flagship dish that draws food enthusiasts from around the globe. Alongside staples such as Haleem and Kebabs, the city's food scene boasts an array of traditional sweets and the ubiquitous Irani Chai, ensuring that every meal is a memorable occasion for the taste buds.

Shopping in Hyderabad is an adventure in itself. Famous for its pearls and bangles, the city offers a wealth of products from traditional handicrafts to contemporary fashion. Whether navigating the bustling lanes of Laad Bazaar or exploring the chic outlets in modern malls, shoppers are bound to find treasures that serve as the perfect memento of their visit.

Embarking on a journey to Hyderabad opens up a world of discovery, enriching the senses and the soul. From historical sites and cultural landmarks to gastronomic delights and energetic bazaars, this guide endeavors to equip you, the prospective tourist, with detailed insights and practical advice, ensuring that your Hyderabad

sojourn is both enlightening and unforgettable.

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CHAPTER ONE: Getting to Hyderabad

So, you've decided to heed the call of the City of Pearls! Excellent choice. Hyderabad, a bustling metropolis cradled in the heart of Southern India, eagerly awaits your arrival. But before you can dive headfirst into its aromatic biryanis, explore its majestic forts, or haggle for bangles in its vibrant bazaars, you first need to get there.

Thankfully, Hyderabad is remarkably well-connected, acting as a major hub for air, rail, and road travel. Whether you're swooping in from across the globe, chugging along on the iconic Indian Railways, or rolling in on a bus from a neighbouring state, reaching this historic city is relatively straightforward. This chapter will guide you through the various ways to make your grand entrance into Hyderabad, ensuring your journey starts as smoothly as possible.

Touching Down: Arriving by Air

For most international visitors and many domestic travellers, flying is the quickest and most convenient way to reach Hyderabad. Your aerial gateway will be the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport (IATA code: HYD), located in Shamshabad, approximately 25-30 kilometres south of the main city centre. Don't let the distance deter you; the airport is modern, efficient, and well-linked to the city. Opened in 2008, HYD consistently ranks among the best airports in India and the world for its service quality and passenger experience. It boasts a single, large, integrated terminal building that handles both domestic and international flights seamlessly, making transits relatively hassle-free if Hyderabad is a layover point, though this guide assumes it's your final destination for now.

International travellers will find Hyderabad well-served by numerous global airlines. Major carriers from the Middle East (like Emirates, Qatar Airways, Etihad, Oman Air), Southeast Asia (Singapore Airlines, Malaysia Airlines, Thai Airways), and several European airlines offer direct or one-stop flights connecting Hyderabad to key international hubs like Dubai, Doha, Abu Dhabi, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, London, Frankfurt, and more. Air India, the national carrier, also operates a significant number of international routes to and from Hyderabad. Depending on your origin city, you might have a direct flight, or more commonly, a connection through one of these major hubs. Check well in advance for the best routes and fares, as prices can fluctuate significantly based on the season and how far ahead you book.

For those travelling within India, Hyderabad enjoys superb domestic connectivity. Almost all major Indian airlines, including IndiGo, Air India, SpiceJet, Vistara, and Akasa Air, operate frequent flights linking Hyderabad to virtually every major city in the country. Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, Kolkata, Pune, Ahmedabad, and Goa are

particularly well-connected, often with multiple flights throughout the day. The competition between budget carriers like IndiGo and SpiceJet and full-service airlines like Air India and Vistara means you can often find competitive fares, especially if you book ahead or travel during the off-peak season. Flying domestically within India is generally a smooth experience, with modern aircraft and improving on-time performance, making it a popular choice for covering long distances quickly.

Once your flight lands at Rajiv Gandhi International Airport, you'll find the facilities are world-class. The integrated terminal is spacious, clean, and easy to navigate. International arrivals will proceed through immigration first – keep your passport, visa (if applicable), and arrival card handy. The process is usually quite efficient. After clearing immigration, you'll head downstairs to the baggage reclaim area to collect your luggage, followed by customs clearance. Standard duty-free allowances apply, and random checks are possible, so ensure you're aware of the regulations. For domestic arrivals, the process is much simpler: deplane, walk to the clearly marked baggage belts, collect your luggage, and head out.

The arrivals hall, accessible after clearing customs (for international) or collecting baggage (for domestic), offers a range of amenities. You'll find currency exchange counters (though rates might be slightly less favourable than in the city), ATMs from various banks, mobile network provider kiosks for purchasing local SIM cards (more on this in Chapter 23), cafes, bookshops, and information desks. Free Wi-Fi is usually available for a limited duration, often requiring an Indian mobile number for an OTP (One-Time Password), though sometimes passport details can be used at a help desk. Airport lounges (accessible via membership, certain credit cards, or pay-per-use) offer comfortable seating, refreshments, and Wi-Fi if you have a long wait for connecting transport or just need to relax post-flight.

Getting from the airport to your accommodation in the city is the next step. We'll delve into the specifics of local transport in Chapter 4, but from the airport, your main options include official airport taxis (pre-paid counters are available just outside the arrivals hall – highly recommended to avoid negotiation hassles), app-based ride-sharing services like Uber and Ola (which have designated pick-up zones), and the Pushpak Airport Liner buses operated by the Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC). These air-conditioned buses run on several routes connecting the airport to various key locations across Hyderabad and Secunderabad at fixed, affordable fares, making them a very economical choice. There have also been long-standing plans for a Metro rail link to the airport, so it's worth checking the latest status on this when you travel, as it could offer the fastest connection if operational. Whatever option you choose, the journey to central areas like Banjara Hills, Jubilee Hills, or Begumpet typically takes anywhere from 45 minutes to well over an hour, heavily depending on traffic conditions.

Rolling In: Arriving by Train

For a more traditional, immersive, and often budget-friendly Indian travel experience, arriving by train is an excellent option. Indian Railways boasts one of the largest rail networks globally, connecting almost every corner of the country, and Hyderabad is a major junction within this intricate web. Travelling by train allows you to witness the changing landscapes, interact with fellow passengers, and experience a slice of everyday Indian life. It's generally slower than flying but can be significantly cheaper and more comfortable than long-distance bus journeys, especially if you book an air-conditioned sleeper class.

Hyderabad is served by three main long-distance railway stations, plus a few others that handle suburban traffic and some express trains. Knowing which station your train arrives at is crucial for planning your onward journey. The biggest and busiest is Secunderabad Junction (station code: SC). Technically located in Hyderabad's twin city, Secunderabad, it's a massive hub handling a vast number of trains from North, East, West, and South India. It's well-equipped with waiting rooms, food courts, book stalls, pre-paid taxi and auto-rickshaw counters, and is connected to the city's bus network and the Hyderabad Metro Rail (Blue Line).

The second major station is Hyderabad Deccan Railway Station (station code: HYB), more popularly known as Nampally Station. Located closer to the Old City and historical landmarks like Charminar, this station also handles numerous long-distance trains, particularly those connecting to Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, and Pune. Housed in a striking building reflecting Asaf Jahi architecture, Nampally station offers similar facilities to Secunderabad, including waiting halls, eateries, and onward transport options. It's also connected to the Metro network (Red Line).

The third significant station is Kacheguda Railway Station (station code: KCG). This is one of the most aesthetically pleasing stations, designated as a Heritage Structure, known for its impressive Indo-Saracenic architectural style. Kacheguda primarily serves trains heading towards southern destinations like Bengaluru, Chennai, and Tirupati, as well as some routes towards central India. It's known for being relatively cleaner and less chaotic than Secunderabad or Nampally. Facilities are decent, and transport options are readily available outside. Other stations like Lingampalli (LPI) on the western outskirts and Begumpet (BMT) closer to the commercial centres also serve some long-distance trains and are crucial hubs for the local Multi-Modal Transport System (MMTS) trains. Always double-check your ticket for the correct arrival station.

Booking train tickets in India requires some planning, especially for popular routes or during holiday seasons (like Diwali, Dussehra, or summer vacations) when trains get booked out weeks, sometimes months, in advance. The official way to book online is through the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) website or their mobile app, 'IRCTC Rail Connect'. Registration is required, and international travellers

might face challenges with payments or mobile number verification; sometimes using authorised third-party agents (both online and physical offices) can be easier. Tickets can also be booked in person at computerized reservation counters found at most railway stations.

Indian Railways offers various classes of travel to suit different budgets and comfort levels. AC First Class (1A) offers private, lockable coupes or cabins with bedding. AC 2-Tier (2A) has berths in open bays (four berths per bay) and along the corridor (two berths), separated by curtains, with bedding provided. AC 3-Tier (3A) is similar but with six berths per bay, making it slightly less spacious but more affordable. AC 3-Tier Economy (3E) is a newer, denser version of 3A. Sleeper Class (SL) is the most common option for budget travellers on long journeys, offering open bays with six berths (three tiers) and two along the corridor, but without air-conditioning or provided bedding (bring your own or purchase disposable bedding). Second Sitting (2S) offers reserved chair car seating without AC, suitable for shorter daytime journeys. Unreserved General Compartments also exist but are typically very crowded and not recommended for tourists with luggage or seeking comfort.

When booking, you might encounter terms like 'WL' (Waiting List) or 'RAC' (Reservation Against Cancellation). WL means you don't have a confirmed berth/seat yet, and your ticket will only be confirmed if enough people cancel. RAC means you are guaranteed travel but initially might have to share a seat (usually the lower side berth split into two seats during the day), potentially getting a full berth later if cancellations occur. It's always best to secure a confirmed ('CNF') ticket. Foreign tourists can also avail of the Foreign Tourist Quota (FTQ), a small number of seats reserved in certain classes on important trains, which can sometimes be booked closer to the travel date if general quota tickets are sold out. These usually need to be booked at specific reservation counters or through authorised agents.

The train journey itself can be an adventure. Expect vendors selling chai (tea), coffee, snacks, and meals passing through the coaches, though the quality can be variable. Major stations usually have food stalls on the platforms. In AC classes, bedding (sheets, pillow, blanket) is provided. Toilets are available at both ends of each coach (Indian and Western style), varying in cleanliness. Trains in India are notorious for potential delays, so factor in some buffer time if you have connecting travel or appointments. Keep your valuables secure, especially overnight. Enjoy the views, chat with fellow passengers (many Indians are curious and friendly towards tourists), and soak in the rhythm of the rails.

Upon arriving at your designated station in Hyderabad (Secunderabad, Nampally, or Kacheguda), disembark and make your way towards the main exit. Platforms can be crowded, so keep a firm hold on your belongings. Follow the signs for exits, pre-paid taxi/auto-rickshaw booths, or the Metro station if applicable. Using the pre-paid counters is generally recommended to get a fixed price based on the destination zone,

avoiding haggling with individual drivers outside, who might quote inflated fares. Ride-sharing apps also work but finding your designated driver amidst the station chaos can sometimes be challenging. Cloakrooms (luggage storage facilities) are usually available at major stations if you need to stow your bags for a few hours.

Hitting the Highway: Arriving by Bus

Travelling to Hyderabad by bus is another viable, often very economical, option, particularly if you are coming from nearby cities or states like Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, or even Goa. India has an extensive network of bus services operated by both state government transport corporations and numerous private companies. The quality and comfort levels can vary dramatically, so choosing the right operator and bus type is key for a pleasant journey.

Hyderabad serves as a major nexus for bus routes across Southern and Central India. The primary hub for inter-state and long-distance buses is the Mahatma Gandhi Bus Station (MGBS), located at Imlibun, near the Musi River and relatively close to the Old City. Often claimed to be one of the largest bus stations in Asia, MGBS is a sprawling, bustling complex handling thousands of bus arrivals and departures daily. It's the main terminal for the Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TSRTC) and also serves as a pickup/drop-off point for many private operators connecting Hyderabad with cities like Bengaluru, Chennai, Mumbai, Pune, Vijayawada, Visakhapatnam, Nagpur, and more. Facilities include waiting areas, numerous food stalls, inquiry counters, and booking offices.

Another significant bus terminal is the Jubilee Bus Station (JBS) in Secunderabad, located conveniently close to Secunderabad Railway Station. JBS primarily handles TSRTC buses operating within Telangana and to neighbouring states like Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Karnataka. Some private operators also use JBS or nearby pickup points. While smaller than MGBS, it's still a major transit point and offers basic amenities. Many private luxury bus operators might also have their own dedicated offices or pickup points scattered across the city in areas like Lakdi-ka-pul, Ameerpet, or Kukatpally, often offering more convenient boarding locations depending on where you're staying.

When choosing a bus, you'll encounter various service types. TSRTC operates everything from basic 'Ordinary' and 'Express' buses (non-AC, basic seating, frequent stops) to 'Deluxe', 'Super Luxury' (non-AC, better seats), and premium services like 'Rajadhani', 'Vajra', and 'Garuda Plus' (air-conditioned, Volvo or similar multi-axle buses with reclining seats, sometimes onboard entertainment). Private operators often focus on the higher end, offering AC sleepers (with individual berths), AC semi-sleepers (reclining seats), and standard AC seater buses for long-distance routes. For overnight journeys, AC sleeper buses provide the most comfort, allowing you to lie down. Always check reviews for private operators, as service quality, punctuality, and

bus condition can vary significantly.

Booking bus tickets is relatively easy. You can book TSRTC tickets on their official website or app, or at counters within bus stations. For private operators, numerous popular online portals like RedBus, AbhiBus, MakeMyTrip, and Goibibo aggregate options from various companies, allowing you to compare prices, check reviews, select seats, and book online. Booking in advance is recommended, especially for popular routes, weekends, or holidays, and particularly if you want a lower berth on a sleeper bus. Keep your e-ticket (printout or on your phone) handy for boarding.

The bus journey experience heavily depends on the route, road conditions, and the type of bus. National highways connecting to Hyderabad are generally in good condition, but state highways or internal roads can be variable. Expect journeys to take longer than predicted due to traffic or roadwork. Most long-distance buses make scheduled stops for meals and restroom breaks at highway motels or dhabas (roadside eateries) of varying quality. AC Volvo/Sleeper buses usually offer a smoother ride and better amenities like charging points and sometimes blankets (though it's wise to carry your own shawl or light blanket as AC can be strong). Punctuality can be an issue, similar to trains, so avoid scheduling tight connections immediately after your estimated arrival time.

Arriving at MGBS or JBS can be a slightly overwhelming experience due to the sheer volume of people and buses. Once you disembark, collect your luggage from the storage compartment (usually under the bus or at the back). Navigate your way out of the platform area towards the main exits or designated areas for local transport. Finding pre-paid auto-rickshaws or hailing regular ones is common, though negotiating fares might be necessary if you don't use the pre-paid counter (if available and operational). App-based cabs (Ola/Uber) are also an option, but coordinating the pickup point in the busy station environment might take a minute. City buses also connect MGBS and JBS to various parts of Hyderabad and Secunderabad.

On Your Own Wheels: Self-Driving

For the adventurous traveller undertaking a larger Indian road trip, driving your own car or motorcycle to Hyderabad is certainly possible. The city is well-connected by national highways, most notably NH44 (connecting North and South India, passing through Hyderabad) and NH65 (connecting Pune to Vijayawada via Hyderabad). The Outer Ring Road (ORR) encircling Hyderabad is a fantastic expressway allowing you to bypass city traffic if you're transiting through or heading to peripheral areas. It also provides fast connectivity between the airport, IT hubs like Gachibowli/HITEC City, and various entry/exit points of the national highways.

However, driving *within* Hyderabad city itself can be challenging. Traffic is often heavy and chaotic, adherence to lane discipline can be minimal, and parking can be a

significant issue, especially in older or commercial areas. If you do arrive with your own vehicle, ensure your accommodation provides secure parking. Be prepared for a demanding driving environment that requires constant alertness and patience. Unless you are experienced with driving in Indian cities or specifically need your vehicle for extensive travel around the region, relying on local transport within Hyderabad might be a less stressful option after you arrive.

Whichever mode of transport you choose, arriving in Hyderabad marks the beginning of your exploration. The city's transport hubs, whether the sleek airport or the bustling railway and bus stations, are your first taste of its energy. Plan your arrival route based on your budget, time constraints, and comfort preferences, book well in advance, and you'll soon find yourself ready to experience the unique charm of the City of Pearls.

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