

Old world, new world

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On time ... the faithful gather at Jami Masjid mosque in Old Delhi. Photo: Getty Images

As Delhi races to the Commonwealth Games finish line, Anthony Dennis explores the metropolis of three cities in one.

I'm on a crowded bus in Delhi and we're being tossed around like a cucumber and onion raita salad. Suddenly the driver slams on the brakes and the horn just after the vehicle in front, which is carrying men in turbans sitting atop a mound of freight in the blazing heat of the day, has come to a sudden halt. In the other

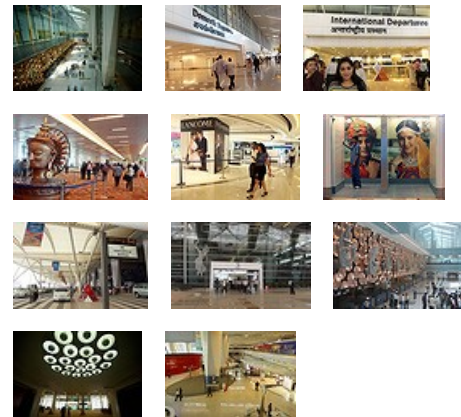
lane, equally ill-tempered drivers are streaming by in a similar frenzy.

I'm not on a city street of the Indian capital. I'm on the tarmac of Indira Gandhi International Airport, being transferred by bus from a jet to the terminal, following a vehicle carrying passenger luggage.



India's new multi-billion dollar airport terminal

Visitors walk at the arrival lounge of the newly inaugurated Indira Gandhi International Airport Terminal 3 in New Delhi. Photo: AP



Arrival and departure at Indian airports can be a harrowing experience. In Delhi, until recently bereft of modern airport facilities, it has long been a case of an aerobridge too far.

A few weeks after my arrival, however, the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, opened a new \$US2.7 billion (\$2.95 billion) terminal at Indira Gandhi International, one of 20 new infrastructure projects due to be finished before the Commonwealth Games open in October.

The world's fifth-largest airport now has nearly 80 aerobridges and the capacity to process 34 million passengers a year. It features one of the most modern terminals in Asia, which means fewer passengers will have to climb aboard a maniacal bus transfer from tarmac to terminal and vice versa. Importantly for Delhi, the massive terminal symbolises the Indian capital's emergence as a modern Asian city.

It's my second visit to Delhi and, like everyone else who has returned since construction began in earnest

on Commonwealth Games projects, I'm staggered by the scale of change and the level of activity. In degrees of difficulty for the capital of a developing nation, this preparation is the equivalent of delivering an Olympic Games anywhere else, even though the Commonwealth Games is a considerably smaller and less prestigious event.

Rarely has a city of this size, with its estimated population of 17 million, been dragged so forcefully and rapidly from misery to modernity. Typical of cities scrambling to stage a major event, cynicism among its citizens seems endemic and organisers are struggling to finish games infrastructure in time for the opening ceremony on October 3. Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, the main venue named after India's first prime minister, was still deep in renovation during my visit even though it was an existing stadium built for the Asian Games in 1982.

Earlier this month the treasurer of the organising committee quit in a contract scandal, two officials were suspended over dubious payments and there were calls for the chairman of the organising committee to resign.

In Delhi Metropolitan, the writer Ranjana Sengupta describes Delhi as an unloved city, at least by Indians. Yet, as a foreigner, I appreciate that this is a metropolis of two, maybe three, cities for the price of one - the ultimate Indian arranged marriage. Old Delhi, full of 16th- and 17th-century Mughal architecture and crowded bazaars, sits beside ordered, manicured New Delhi, carefully and respectfully maintained by its inhabitants. It's a planned city, designed by the British architect, Sir Edwin Lutyens, in 1911 as a kind of subcontinental Canberra. The stately Taj Mahal Hotel on Mansingh Road has a three-bedroom presidential suite, in which John Howard and Kevin Rudd have stayed, dedicated to the architect.

And beyond the planned and protected confines of New Delhi, a new high-rise city called Gurgaon has sprouted on the outskirts of the capital. Its glass and steel skyscrapers are owned by multinational companies, juxtaposed with gutterless streets, slow-moving rickshaws and emerging shanties around its perimeter.

Delhiites joke that their city is expanding so rapidly that it will eventually connect with Jaipur in Rajasthan, the so-called pink city that forms one point of the Golden Triangle tourist route, with Delhi and Agra.

New Delhi has acquired most of the accoutrements of an impending major-event city: smart new J.C. Decaux bus shelters, bright street signage and restored footpaths. My guide, Kanika, from Delhi Heritage Walks, points out that the government hasn't bothered to build any new footpaths in Old Delhi - there are none to upgrade and no space to install them.

The city, and indeed the country, is obsessed with constructing flyovers - roads that pass over impoverished pockets of cities and towns, at least providing some sort of shelter. They are everywhere, with a separate freeway built to convey athletes and officials from the athletes' village located beside the undistinguished Yamuna River, which flows all the way from here to Agra, the site of the Taj Mahal.

There are plans to phase out the wonderfully anachronistic Hindustan Ambassador taxis, manufactured since the late 1950s with few modifications to their body shape, though it seems that the green-and-yellow auto-rickshaws, the favoured transport of the middle class, are here to stay. Even New Delhi's resident primates, which I was shocked to see in large numbers beside the road on the way from the airport on my previous visit, seem to have been moved on by teams of civic monkey-wallahs.

One of the best ways to survey the new and old Delhi is via the city's metro, an above- and below-ground railway system, another piece of infrastructure that is helping the capital to align itself with other Asian cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Bangkok. A new elevated track will link Gurgaon and other parts of the city, including the airport. The metro is one major public project that the denizens of Delhi seem to genuinely appreciate.

When you arrive at one of the metro stations it's clear that you are in a city that exists under the real threat of a terrorist attack, particularly in the lead-up to the games. Passengers must pass through airport-

level security before being allowed to enter a station.

Security cleared, I make the transition underground from the modern city to the old city: from South Delhi station to the doorstep of Chandni Chowk, Old Delhi's manic main street. I emerge from underground into the chaos of the real, unmanufactured Delhi, past a raucous ceremony at a Hindu temple virtually on top of the metro exit.

As I travel by rickshaw through the narrow, souk-like laneways of Old Delhi leading off Chandni Chowk, I spot a flash of pastel-coloured facades down a side street and ask the driver to stop. The remarkably serene laneway is called Naugarha, with a Jain temple at the end; it's here that Atam Agarwal lives and runs his export business from his haveli (private mansion) - about 800 havelis have heritage status.

The affable, middle-aged Agarwal keeps an eye out for foreigners from the desk of his ground-floor office in his haveli, since he loves to invite them in for tea and a chat. He could live in well-to-do New Delhi but prefers the city's historic heart. "You can see a place like New Delhi anywhere in the world," he says. "But when you walk out the door here in Old Delhi everyone knows you and it's fairly safe. And if you walk through the streets you'll see beautiful old buildings."

Nearby is the magnificent Jami Masjid, the biggest mosque in India, where you can climb the minarets for views of the city. From here you can see that New Delhi in the distance is impossibly, improbably green.

A big swath of that shrubbery is Lodi Gardens, one of the world's most remarkable city parks. Early one morning I wander along the pathways of the park with sweaty middle-aged runners swerving around us. Kanika remarks drily that jogging remains an upper middle-class pursuit in India. The poor masses in Old Delhi are much too exhausted from their daily toil to consider such exercise. The gardens are dotted with 15th-century tombs, many of which have been spruced up for the Commonwealth Games. Elsewhere in Lodi Gardens is Delhi's most famous tomb. The symmetrical tomb of Humayun, dating to 1565, contains the body of the eponymous second Mughal emperor and is considered the inspiration for the Taj Mahal.

The next day I rise early again to avoid the heat and head to Mehrauli Archaeological Park, a series of mediaeval ruins on a ridge along the edge of the city. Delhi is a melange of seven cities dating from the 12th century, each of which grew and morphed into today's metropolis.

The park, also known as Jamali-Kamali (the name of a Mughal court poet), includes the mosque and tomb of Jamali, a three-storey deep sandstone step-well and a former British residence from the Raj era. In another, more formal, section of the park is the more visited Qutb Minar, a tower which in 1193 marked the site of the first Muslim kingdom in north India. Everywhere in the open spaces between these ancient sites are clusters of exuberant youngsters playing cricket, employing blocks of stone from the ruins as stumps.

On my last night in Delhi I'm back on a bus on the apron of Indira Gandhi International, being transferred to my waiting aircraft. I'm standing, facing the back of the bus when I notice a look of horror on the face of an Indian passenger, just before the driver applies the brakes energetically, bringing the bus to an abrupt halt.

"Oh my God," the woman says, as I turn to see a huge passenger jet crossing our path just metres away. The new New Delhi, and all those new aerobridges, can't have come a moment too soon.

Anthony Dennis travelled courtesy of Singapore Airlines and Taj Hotels.

FAST FACTS

Getting there

Singapore Airlines has a fare to Delhi for about \$1330 low-season return from Melbourne and Sydney including tax, flying to Singapore (7hr 30min), then Delhi (5hr 50min). Australians need a visa for India for stays up to six months; apply at vfs-in-au.net. The new Terminal 3 at Indira Gandhi International

Airport is about 45 minutes by road from New Delhi, depending on traffic. A metro train line servicing the airport is due to be completed this year.

Staying there

The Taj group has three luxury properties in Delhi: Taj Mahal (rooms from 16,000 rupees (\$380), 1 Mansingh Road); Taj Palace (rooms from 19,600 rupees, Sardar Patel Marg, Diplomatic Enclave); and the smaller Ambassador Hotel (rooms from 8250 rupees, Sujan Singh Park, Cornwallis Road). See tajhotels.com.

Touring there

Delhi Heritage Walks has a range of specialised walks around the city, which can be customised. These include tours of Chandni Chowk, Lodi Gardens, Mehrauli Archaeological Park and Jama Masjid and the lanes of Old Delhi. See delhiheritagewalks.com.

Security

The official website for the Commonwealth Games, staged on October 3-14, is cwgdelhi2010.org. Security concerns surround the games and Delhi in general. The Australian government has issued warnings on smartraveller.gov.au about travel to Delhi.

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