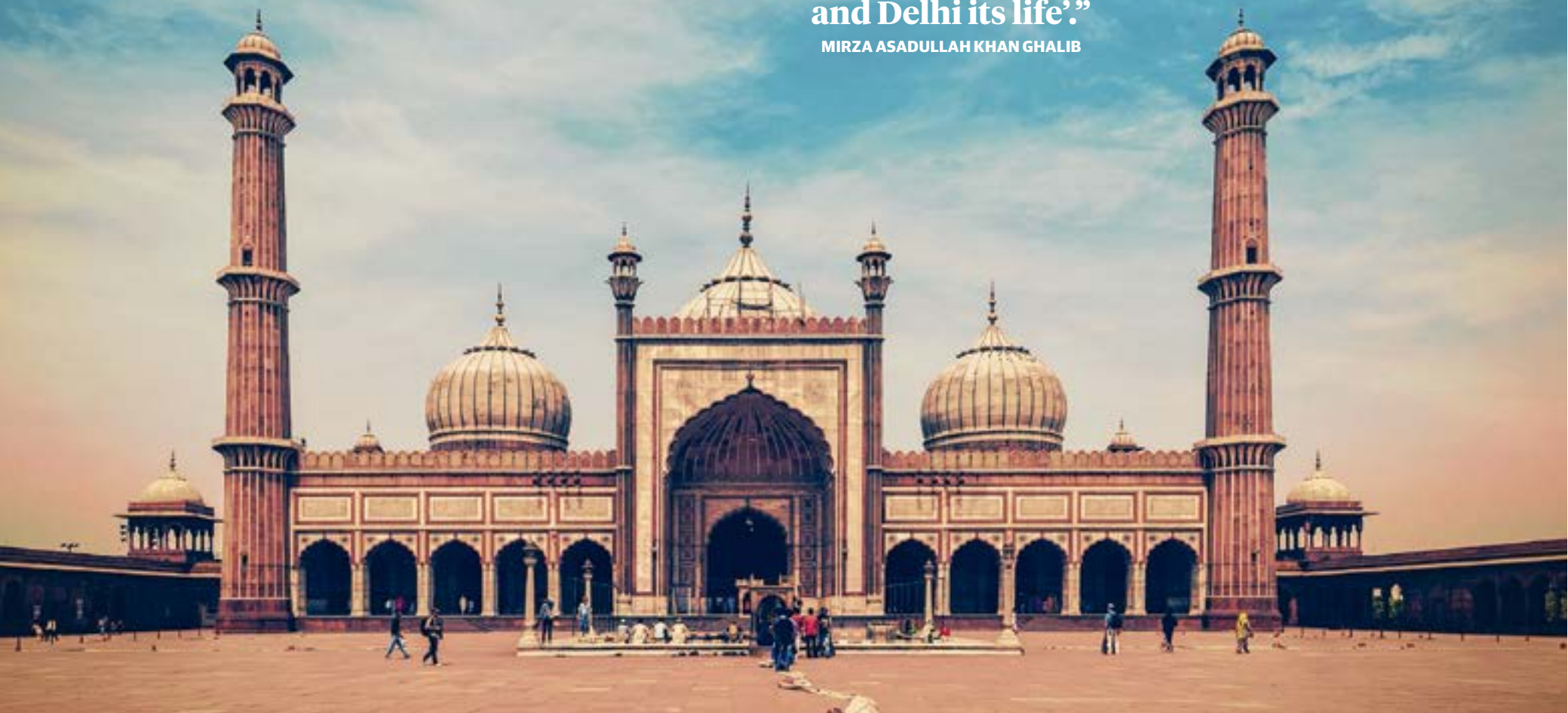


# GET OUT OF TOWN escape

“I asked my soul:  
‘What is Delhi?’  
She replied: ‘The  
world is the body  
and Delhi its life.’”

MIRZA ASADULLAH KHAN GHALIB



India was never on my to-do list. My least favourite travel illness is the stomach bug and India has a bad rap. Perhaps it is to do with middle-age but it suddenly became all important that I face my fears and see India before I die.

The Jaipur Literary Festival was the drawcard and my sister's 60th birthday pushed me over the edge. When I asked her how she'd feel about a trip to India she jumped at the chance. My fearful self was half hoping she would say: "Can't we go to Italy instead?"

So, with open minds and pashminas packed, we arrived at our first destination, Delhi. We heard that the smog there is more than twice as bad as Beijing, Delhi being the most polluted city in the world. As soon as the door of the plane opened, we smelt smoke in the air and it wasn't our plane on fire! We discovered that the ever-present smoky haze of Delhi is from small fires that people huddle around streetside, fuelled by many strange (and I really don't want to know how toxic) sources of fuel including dried buffalo dung.

Driving from the airport it felt like Armageddon. People walking miles from anywhere in the middle of the road through this pall of smoke, in no particular hurry and with no obvious place to go. You would think that would put you off a place but we found out that Delhi is a fascinating step back in time mixed with modern day influences.

Our first outing was to the 17th century Jama Masjid, the largest mosque in India, pictured above, built by the same man who brought us the Taj Mahal, the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan. The relative peace and space of the mosque felt like a dream we once had long ago as we entered the noisy and congested lanes of Old Delhi's adjacent market area of Chandni Chowk.

## THE SPICE of Life

A literary festival is the lure for a traveller who never imagined how much she'd enjoy the scenery, culture and magnetism of India

WORDS SARAH HENDER PICTURE ISTOCK

Despite vowing never to take one, I had to accept that man-powered rickshaws were the only way to navigate the tiny lanes of this market place. The pace we were travelling didn't matter as the kaleidoscope of sights along the way made our white knuckles worth it. There were moneychangers, spice sellers, tradesmen with their tools waiting to be called to a job, women selling kitchenware, barbers sitting cross-legged shaving a row of clients, buffalo walking across the road, monkeys on the roofs, and, all the while, the call to prayer accompanying us from a local mosque. Despite having my camera ready, I missed a thousand astounding scenes for the hundred I shot.

The place that, for me, has captured Delhi's mystical heart, is the 16th century Humayun's Tomb, the tomb of the Mughal emperor Humayun. Another piece of Mughal architecture, it is said to be the inspiration behind the Taj Mahal, smaller in size but with

the same symmetrical design. Set within lush parklands, it is a breath of fresh air in densely populated Delhi. The Tomb's domes appeared to us as a vision through the morning mist and kites, of the feathered kind, swooped overhead. Walking on its wide terrace, overlooking the sweeping green fields and symmetrical pathways, I was overcome by the serenity of this historic place.

As we exited the grounds, we noticed a sign on the fence seeking support for a transgender Bill currently before the Indian parliament. It seems we were in modern-day India after all.

Next stop on the itinerary was the iconic Taj Mahal itself in Agra, about a four-hour bus drive from Delhi. Although we may remember that famous photograph of Princess Diana sitting apparently alone there, it is not a peaceful experience visiting the Taj Mahal, accompanied as you are by hundreds of others doing the same thing. It is an experience worth >



### INDIA

#### Getting there

Singapore Airlines and Virgin Australia fly to Delhi from Adelaide via Singapore. See [singaporeair.com](http://singaporeair.com) and [virginaustralia.com](http://virginaustralia.com)

#### Staying there

There are many former palaces or havelis (mansions) transformed into heritage hotels. For more of a resort experience, the Oberoi Udaivilas in Udaipur has exceptional service, and its surroundings are other-worldly. See [oberoihotels.com](http://oberoihotels.com)

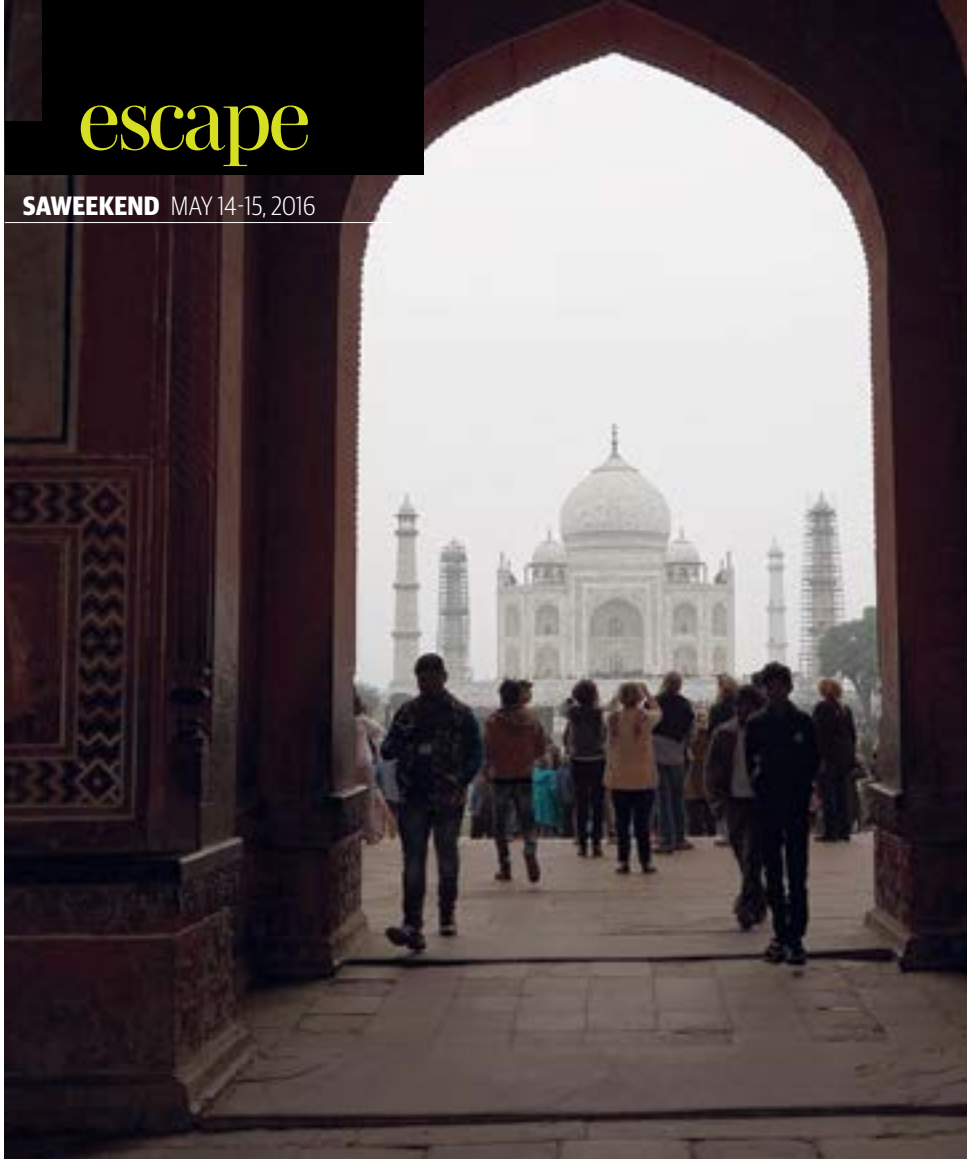
#### Eating there

Fearful of stomach bugs? Go vegetarian.

#### Getting around

A guide and driver are essential, to answer questions and navigate their way through the sort of traffic that beggars belief.





The Taj Mahal, above, and, below, there is never a shortage of festive colour in India. PICTURES: Sarah Hender



having though as a first glimpse of the Taj is thrilling. It is such an imposing sight, even in the distant mist.

Up close was a surprise for me as it is not just one giant piece of white marble, it is intricately inlaid with semiprecious stones depicting colourful flower patterns. Our guide explained to us that it took 20 years to build and more than 20,000 workers. How many of them died building it we will never know but with all that marble to be put in place and nothing but human strength to call on, there must have been a long line of back injuries. Legend has it that Shah Jahan cut off the hands of the workers once it was built so they could never again build anything else as beautiful. This may not have happened but once you see the Taj Mahal (built as it was for Shah Jahan's favourite wife) you come to the view that this man, unsurprisingly known as "the Prince among builders", was an obsessive character and certainly in love!

Love was in the air in Jaipur on our arrival, after another four hours on the road. It was my first glimpse of an Indian wedding procession and it was as if we were immersed in a Bollywood film. The groom and his party, all dressed in red with matching turbans, were on horseback, accompanied by men carrying enormous lanterns, women dancing, turbans being wound on to mens' heads as they walked, and bringing up the rear was the generator being pulled along for the night's proceedings.

**T**he Jaipur Literary Festival is set in the grounds of the Diggi Palace, now a heritage hotel in the heart of Jaipur, the pink city of Rajasthan. At what is now the largest literary festival in the world you would expect to find chaos but once in the grounds, there was nothing but smiles and order.

The thrill began at the entrance, greeted, as we were by the inspiring sight of twirling Rajasthani dancers dressed in their colourful regional costumes. Despite the crowds it was easy to get around and find the places you needed to go. Listening to authors of the calibre of Margaret Atwood, Colm Toibin, Ruskin Bond and Stephen Fry in a joyfully communal atmosphere with an earthenware cup of steaming spiced chai in my hand, all felt right with the world.

Many attendees were schoolchildren, who were also the ones asking the authors many of the curly questions. Literature is taken seriously in India. The digital era has had its effect too.

As Atwood said in her keynote address: "In places where people may not be able to afford books, may not have a library or even a school, there is probably a cellphone and you can now read and write stories on a phone. There is a lot more access to literacy."

With a quarter of a million people now attending this literary festival in a country where many people fit Atwood's description, Jaipur is proving that this is so.

The beauty spot of our trip was, without doubt, the city of Udaipur, another Rajasthan city, nearly 400km from Jaipur and a day-long journey by bus. Udaipur has been referred to as the "Venice of the East", set as it is on seven lakes. Our hotel overlooked Lake Pichola surrounded by the Aravalli hills. While mesmerised by the view, a piper played a mystical tune while I sipped on my now favourite Indian comfort food of Mulligatawny, a hearty soup of spiced lentils and vegetables. I was hoping to spend much of the day just soaking in the atmosphere, but there were some pressing things to do first.

A must-see is the City Palace, a white vision of granite and marble, also built on the banks of Lake Pichola. It boasts unique treasures of miniature paintings and ornate glass mirror work on its walls, courtyards with hanging gardens and beautiful views of the whitewashed city below. We topped off our day by taking a late afternoon boat ride on Lake Pichola. We watched as the setting of the sun turned all of the palaces, temples and havelis on the banks of the lake a golden shade of sepia, just perfect for the photographers among us.

Our journey ended in Bollywood's heart, the city of Mumbai. The thriving metropolis that is Mumbai is unexpected after Delhi. A skyline dominated by high-rises had me thinking I'd had my last taste of India. Unlike Delhi there were no buffalo wandering the streets, traffic lights were obeyed and there were noticeably more women walking around in western clothes. But just when I thought that globalisation had had its way with traditional India, a lunch box delivery man rode past me on his bicycle, one of the famous Dabbawalas of Mumbai, delivering his tiffin boxes or dabbas to city office workers. Another extraordinary sight in Mumbai is Dhobi Ghat, the world's largest open-air laundry, where the washers, known as Dhobi Wallahs work in the open.

The vast gap between rich and poor is more obvious in Mumbai, more than 50 per cent of this city's population living in slums. Sprawling shanty towns abut high-rise towers. As my plane taxied down the airstrip headed for home, there was Dharavi, one of the largest slums in the world (as depicted in the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*), bordering the airport boundary fence. It is a shock.

India left me reeling from all of its contrasts — the ever-present spirituality, the vast distinction between castes, the traditional versus the modern. In short, modern-day India is an enigma. I never got that stomach bug but since leaving India's shores, I have been bitten by another — the need to know more. ●