

A rangoli art session
at the Imperial New Delhi.

GIRL MEETS DELHI

MAKING NEW MEMORIES
TOGETHER IN INDIA'S
FAMILIAR CITY.

BY KRISTIN VUKOVIĆ
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ATUL PRATAP CHAUHAN

“AO,” THE KABOOTARBAAZ (pigeon handler) cried, throwing a handful of feed onto the rooftop and calling his birds to come. Above our heads, the pigeons made a U-turn, landing and clustering around the food. As they walked, their stacked identification bangles clinked like chimes, and a symphony of wings beat the air amid a cacophony of coos. Scattering fistfuls of feed, our 5-year-old daughter, Uma, was enthralled. As we descended the stairs into the chaotic streets of Old Delhi, she asked, “When can we come back?”

It was Uma’s first trip to India, but not mine: I’d visited a dozen times before, and my Sikh husband and I were married in New Delhi’s Vasant Vihar *gurdwara* (a Sikh place of worship). Jaidev, who grew up in India, had regaled me with tales of adolescent adventures in Delhi, from getting coiffed at an opulent hotel salon to sneaking into nightclubs. Everywhere we went, he had a story to share, and over many trips with him I had come to see the city through his eyes. But we were flummoxed about what to do with a young traveler during a three-day stopover in the country’s sprawling capital city. The usual suspects – the Lodhi Garden, Humayun’s Tomb, and the Red Fort – were fine options, but we wanted to immerse ourselves in Delhi’s culturally rich history in a way Uma would appreciate too.

To create an experience that could be altered depending on Uma’s energy levels, we enlisted tour company Micato India to guide us. We’d told them about

Uma’s love for animals, so learning about *kabootarbaazi* – the traditional winter sport of pigeon racing – topped the list. On a terrace atop an Old Delhi building, we met Anil Sood, a third-generation *kabootarbaaz* who takes care of some 2,000 pigeons of various breeds, including a pink-plumed one that was new to us. Uma delighted in

seeing her favorite color on a feathered friend, even as we reminded her that this didn’t mean she could start petting the pigeons back home in New York City. Old Delhi’s relationship with pigeon racing dates back hundreds of years – it was believed to have been brought to the capital by emperor and Taj Mahal builder Shah Jahan – and it’s





still a cherished part and celebration of the local culture.

Later that day on a bumpy cycle rickshaw ride, Uma clutched my arm as we were whisked down Old Delhi's narrow, twisting streets, past stalls full of saris, jewelry, spices, and strings of flowers, to another rooftop – this time for a kite-flying demonstration. Atop a restored *haveli* (a traditional Indian grand residence), we watched an expert flyer coax his kite upward until it became a tiny speck in the sky. Uma held the string and navigated the kite with help from Jaidev. Afterward, we sat down to a medley of street-food-style snacks. We loved the one-bite *dahi puri*: thin, crunchy, sphere-shaped shells filled with savory-sweet tamarind, yogurt, mint sauce, and potato, served with mint and tamarind water. The *palak patta chaat* – deep-fried chickpea-flour-crusted spinach leaves with yogurt, mint, tamarind, and sprinkles of pomegranate seeds – was an umami explosion. To a soundtrack of live flute music, we watched a family of rhesus monkeys jump from rooftop to rooftop under the hazy December sun.



DELHI'S LOCAL MARKETS are an obligatory stop when visiting the city. Surprisingly, my husband had never been to Dilli Haat, one of the country's largest permanent crafts markets. Spread over six acres in the center of the city, its 60-some stalls showcase a blend of crafts, food, and regional cultural activities; an entrance fee keeps the crowds smaller, making it more child friendly. I picked up a pair of camel-leather *juttis*, traditional loafer-esque footwear worn by men and women throughout India, while Uma coveted a purple Rajasthani toy horse and a mirrored Barbie-pink nesting box set. Incense filled our nostrils as we moved from stall to stall. We bought sets of bangles for Uma's kindergarten friends,

Kabootarbaaz Anil Sood's rooftop showcase, Dilli Haat souvenirs, and (opposite) Humayun's Tomb.

watched women braid hair with colored strings, and stood entranced as men painted Indian miniature figurines with tiny brushes – the art form flourished during the Mughal era between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, when artists typically illustrated characters from fables and religious texts.

In between excursions, we returned to the jasmine-scented Imperial hotel, the site of our 2009 wedding reception. I was happy to discover the addition of a subterranean spa, a bright marble sanctuary with strategically placed skylights. While Jaidev and Uma napped off jet lag, I snuck away for a hot-candle-wax massage. The hotel knew how to keep us all happy: One morning, staff arranged a *rangoli* art session with a resident expert, where Uma used colored rice and fresh flower petals to create an elaborate Indian design on paper nearly half her height that would invite Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. “Can we take this whole thing home?” Uma asked. I told her we’d figure out how to make an NYC-friendly version.

We wanted Uma to have fun learning about her father’s culture, but also felt it was important to introduce her to Sikhism in its birthplace. So we went to Gurdwara Bangla Sahib, one of the most prominent Sikh *gurdwaras* in Delhi. People from all castes and religions are welcome to visit. Uma wasn’t thrilled to remove her shoes and socks and walk on the cold marble floors, so my husband ended up carrying her part of the way, but it was worth it to hear the soulful *kirtan* (singing of hymns) and witness *langar*, a free community kitchen for visitors of all religions, which serves around 30,000 people daily. After making a small donation of uncooked rice and lentils, we watched as dozens of people sat in long rows and waited to receive food. It was humbling to see a room full of strangers breaking roti together on the floor as equals. I silently prayed that my daughter would keep this image – and trip – in her memory.





India for Everyone

GO Virtuoso travel advisors can work with on-site tour connection **Micato India** to customize itineraries throughout the country, including all the kid-friendly moments mentioned in this story, plus other experiences such as dinners with prominent local families, private Indian outfitting appointments, and exclusive music performances.

STAY Situated on a verdant eight-acre estate in the city center, the 235-room **Imperial New Delhi** has been a local landmark since 1936. Guests can relax in one of the city's largest pools or rejuvenate at the 44,000-square-foot Imperial Spa, home to a new yoga sanctum with a living green wall. *Doubles from \$400, including an upgrade (if available) at time of booking, breakfast daily, and a \$100 hotel credit.*

The **Taj Mahal, New Delhi** houses 213 guest rooms and suites in Lutyens' Delhi, one of the city's most exclusive neighborhoods. A new collection of one- and two-bedroom residences comes with living areas and full kitchens, making them ideal home bases for family travel. *Doubles from \$360, including round-trip private airport transfers and breakfast daily.* 📍

The Imperial New Delhi's spa and (opposite) Lodhi Garden.

collette



©Kakslauttanan Arctic Resort, Lapland, Finland

Dive into your next adventure.

Journey to the end of the earth in Patagonia. Lead a team of sled dogs through the wilderness in Finland. Search for the northern lights in Alaska. Whatever your dream adventure is, North America's longest running tour operator is ready to get you into the action.



Peru: Machu Picchu and Lake Titicaca

10 Days | 15 Meals

From the sacred citadel of Machu Picchu to the floating islands of Lake Titicaca, immerse yourself in the culture of Peru's past and present.



Icelandic Adventure

10 Days | 15 Meals

Encounter a world of untamed beauty as you discover Iceland's adventurous landscapes and rich cultural heritage.

Contact your preferred Virtuoso Travel Advisor to book or learn more.



VIRTUOSO.
PREFERRED