

# TALES FROM

Stunning architecture, delicious food, unusual art and friendly people best sum up the city with a rich cultural heritage, discovers **Saba Siddiqui**

**T**here is an old saying, *jisne Lahore nahi dekha, wo janmeya nahi* (one who hasn't seen Lahore, hasn't lived). This might sound like an exaggeration, but is not entirely untrue. Lahore, in Pakistan, has a rich culture, beautiful architecture and delicious food.

A few years ago, our theatre group from India was invited to perform the play *Toba Tek Singh*, an adaptation of a story about no man's land, by author Saadat Hasan Manto, at the Indo-Pak Theatre Festival. The event was organised by one of Pakistan's oldest universities, Government College University, Lahore. Established in 1864, it boasts an impressive alumnus including Pakistani politicians Nawaz Sharif and Yousaf Raza Gilani.

On our first day there, we decided to explore the city. The roads were well maintained and the crowded lanes on either side made us curious about what was hidden from view.

Our first stop was the Shahi Fort (also called Lahore Fort). The fort's origin and builder's name is uncertain, but archaeological excavations suggest it was built before AD 1025. Its existing base, however, was built during the Mughal emperor Akbar's rule and was upgraded by the subsequent Mughal, Sikh and British rulers. Some famous sites inside the fort

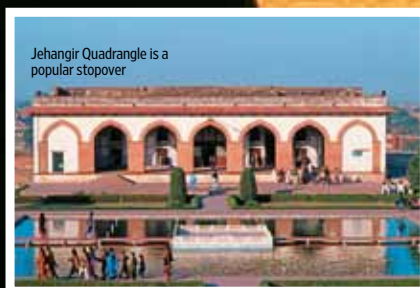
include Sheesh Mahal, Naulakha Pavilion and Moti Masjid. The fort has two gates — the Masti Gate, built by Akbar, and the Alamgiri Gate, built by his descendent Aurangzeb, which is also the main entrance and opens towards Badshahi Mosque.

#### Guided tour

We went to the Badshahi Mosque where we were welcomed by Shami, our frail and old yet lively guide. One of the largest in South Asia, it can accommodate around 55,000 worshippers in the prayer hall and about 95,000 in the courtyard and porticoes. Shami demonstrated its extraordinary inbuilt acoustics; he showed us how speaking

in certain corners of the mosque amplifies sound. Shami spoke fluent Urdu and English and regaled us with poetry and anecdotes. He also showed us religious artefacts that are maintained by the mosque.

Next, we watched the change of guard at the Allama Iqbal Fort, named after Pakistan's national



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poet and ironically the composer of the song *Sare Jahan Se Achcha Hindustan Hamaara* (our India is better than any place in the world).

The rest of the afternoon was spent exploring and bargaining in the winding streets of Anarkali and Liberty markets with their colourful *juthis* (traditional footwear), jewellery and kohl.

Tired, we headed to Cooco's Den for dinner. This restaurant is located in Heera Mandi, the area adjoining the Lahore fort. As we

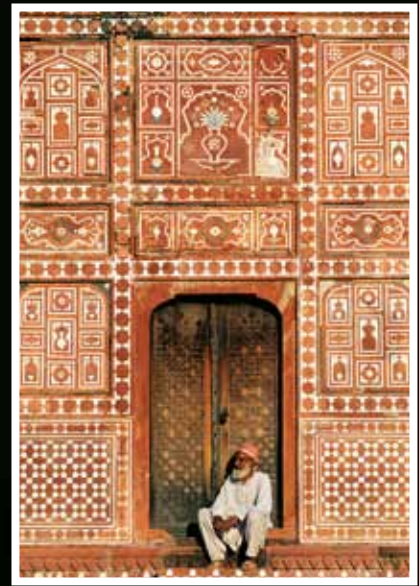
entered the small room leading up to the rooftop restaurant, we were surrounded by paintings by artist Iqbal Hussain, whose family runs the restaurant.

## A city of contrasts

Walking up the dimly lit stairs we reached the terrace and were amazed by the contrasting views — on one side was the beautifully lit Badshahi Mosque and Lahore Fort and on the other stood a district of ill repute. As we sat there, traditional lanterns glowed and young, smartly dressed Pakistani men and women chatted in Urdu-Punjabi while the smell of tandoori chicken being cooked on coal wafted through the air.

The next day was performance day and we spent most of it practising at the university — an effort that paid off with thundering applause and tear-streaked cheeks that evening.

The next morning, we saw the rural



Jehangir's tomb is a magnificent construct

side of Lahore, in Shahdara town, with cartloads of freshly harvested wheat and sugarcane as we crossed River Ravi to get to the tombs of Mughal emperor Jehangir and his wife Noor Jahan. The most striking feature of the tomb is the absence of a dome, a feature in most Mughal architecture.

We were allowed into the underground crypt of the tomb of Noor Jahan and her daughter at Dada Bari. The only source of light there came from candles provided by our guide and two *jharokhas* (overhanging balconies).

After stepping out into the light, we made our way to the Bahar Mela near Racecourse Park. We went on camel rides, ate and shopped for silver jewellery, embroidered bed sheets and stoles.

Night came, and we found ourselves on the Gawalmandi Food Street. Here, we satiated our craving for Lahori kebabs and burped our way back to the hotel.

The next day, we packed our memories and got ready to cross the political border.



When in Lahore, sampling Lahori kebabs is a must



Street vendors cook delicious local fare

Pictures: Corbis

Badshahi Big Mosque