

HYDERABAD

Sandra Ramani heads into the heart of India and discovers a cosmopolitan city at the country's core.



Growth and change have been exponential on the Indian subcontinent in the last decade or so. Much like in China, the places that have been most affected are not already-worldly cities like Mumbai and New Delhi, but secondary cities like Bangalore, Chennai and—in the heart of the country—Hyderabad. Once known mainly for its pearls, diamonds and signature cuisine, this city of sloping hills and scenic lakes has become one of the fastest-growing cities in India—and, for me, one of the most exciting to visit.

ROYALS, RICHES AND RICE

If you've ever been to India, then you know that there are dramatic differences from state to state; everything from the food, architecture and cuisine to the language, topography and traditional dress can change when you cross a regional border. Generally, in the north you'll see more influences from Muslim cultures, as the invading royals from Persia and the Middle East—and later, the Mughal kings—ruled mainly in that region.

Hyderabad, though, is a bit of an exception: Technically in south-central India, the city was established in 1591 by a Muslim sultan, then later flourished under the rule of the Nizam dynasty. (Hyderabad also remained an independent princely state during British rule.)

All this history comes alive in the Old City, on the southern side of the Musi River. There, you'll find key tourist sites like Chowmahalla Palace, a UNESCO-protected complex with four palaces, gardens and antique-filled galleries. Built in 1591, Charminar—or "four towers"—is a

stunning monument of arches and turrets that serves as the center point of the historic quarter. Climb to the observation terraces to get a view of the frenetic swirl of colorfully decorated auto-rickshaws, overflowing produce carts and throngs of shoppers below.

The streets around Charminar are home to many of Hyderabad's famous markets, each of which is divided into dedicated sections for fresh produce, silverwork, housewares and more. The city's best-known artisan trades are bracelets—available in glass, lacquer, gold and silver, with or without semiprecious stones—as well as embroidered sari borders and various textiles. All this and more is available in the stalls and workshops around Laad Bazaar, where you can also watch the craftspeople at work.

Pearls and diamonds also played a vital role in Hyderabad's past, as much of world's supply was brought to the region to be cleaned, polished and set. (Hyderabad was known as the City of Pearls for centuries.) The Golconda diamond markets were world renowned for their



Bangles at Laad Bazaar

wares, and legendary pieces like the Hope and Koh-i-Noor diamonds hail from Hyderabad.

Today, you can bargain for seed pearls in bulk in the pearl market, or go for the high-end stuff at the hundreds of elegant boutiques around town, like those of fourth-generation jewelers Mangatrai (mangatrai.com). Expert local guides, available through noted operators like Kensington Tours (kensingtontours.com), can help you navigate the tangled markets and will set up private appointments with bespoke designers like Vinita Pittie, a society staple and textile expert who welcomes clients to her 230-year-old home.

Thanks to its unique history, Hyderabad is also known for its cuisine, and guides can lead you to the best (and most foreigner-friendly) spots to try local delicacies like biryani (rice



Biryani

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slow-cooked with yogurt, spices and charcoal-roasted chicken or mutton), Osmania biscuits (best served with thick Irani chai) and flavorful kebabs.

Historic Hyderabad will really come alive during a stay at the luxurious Taj Falaknuma Palace hotel, inhabiting the former residence of the Nizams. Perched atop one of the hills overlooking the Old City, with awesome 360-degree views, the property underwent a ten-year restoration process (overseen by the current reigning princess) to bring it back to its former glory.

Arriving guests are met at the main gate and transferred by golf cart or horse-drawn carriage through the gardens and up to the main house, which features many of the original royal living areas, including a library, galleries and a dining room with a table set for 101 guests. The individually decorated guest rooms surround courtyards, and there's a tucked-away pool and herbal-based spa for post-sightseeing relaxation.

Dining at the hotel is a must: The High Tea service mixes Indian and Western small bites, while the restaurant, Adaa, celebrates Hyderabadi cuisine and techniques like *dum* slow cooking, served to the transcendent sounds of traditional Sufi musicians.

HIP AND HIGH-TECH

Before you even get to the Old City—or any other part of the metropolis—you are sure to notice evidence of Hyderabad's modern side. Rajiv Gandhi International Airport, opened in 2008 and voted among the best in Asia, features innovative touches like luggage carousels with sensors, so bags don't shoot out on top of each other.

In the upscale hillside suburbs and newer lakeside neighborhoods, you'll now find sleek malls, high-rise apartment complexes and trendy boutiques catering to the booming luxury market—including the stars of the Telugu film industry, based at the Ramoji Film City outside of town. (Visits to the Film City,



Tea at the Taj Falaknuma Palace



Charminar

the largest of its kind in the world, can be arranged; ramojifilmcity.com.) Spots to check out include the Hyderabad outpost of designer Tarun Tahiliani (taruntahiliani.com), whose contemporary Indian- and Western-influenced gowns are favorites of everyone from Bollywood stars to Lady Gaga.

At Creative Bee (creativebee.in), the husband-and-wife team (she's a designer, he's a painter and environmental expert) puts a modern twist on cotton and silk scarves, shawls, clothing and textiles, using natural dyes and revived artisan techniques.

You'll also find a contemporary crowd at the plazas, parks and restaurants (like the movie-themed 70mm) around Necklace Road, created about 12 years ago near Hussein Sagar Lake, NTR Gardens and Sanjeevaiah Park. Set just off the Necklace Road, the stunning, LEED-certified

Park Hotel Hyderabad, opened in 2010, draws the hip crowd to its Carbon lounge, Kismet nightclub, Aqua pool scene and gem-themed Aura Spa.

The most impressive modern addition, though, lies just outside of town. Begun in 1998, the Hyderabad Information Technology and Engineering Consultancy—known as HITEC City—is the largest IT park in India; spreads out over 151 acres; and has earned Hyderabad the nickname, "Cyberabad." The project is home to offices of all the major players, including Google, Dell, Facebook, Infosys, HSBC and Microsoft; the latter's Hyderabad campus is second in size only to the company's hub in Washington State.

To cater to this work force, HITEC City also features residential towers, shopping and dining complexes, gyms, country clubs and hotels,

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such as the Trident, the only luxury hotel to date in the area. Developed on what was once empty desert plains, the venture is now entering its second phase, with more emphasis on drawing finance-related businesses.

There's not much to lure the leisure tourist to HITEC City, though, except the excellent Shilparamam Cultural Society (shilparamam.net), a 65-acre part rural museum/part handicraft village that showcases the traditions, cuisine and artisan crafts of dozens of Indian regions—all under the shadows of gleaming glass high-rises, as you might expect in today's rapidly growing Hyderabad.

DETAILS

WHERE TO STAY:

- **Taj Falaknuma Palace**
Engine Bowli, Falaknuma
Tel.: +91 (40) 6629-8585; tajhotels.com
- **Trident, Hyderabad**
HITEC City, Near Cyber Towers, Madhapur
Tel.: +91 (40) 6623-2323; tridenthotels.com
- **The Park Hotel, Hyderabad**
22 Raj Bhawan Road
Tel.: +91 (40) 2345-6789; theparkhotels.com

WHERE TO EAT:

- **Ohri's at Jalavihar**
(Including Tansen, for pan-Indian specialties, and the Bollywood-themed 70mm)
Necklace Road
Tel.: +91 (80) 0890-2377; ohris.com
- **Adaa at Taj Falaknuma Palace**
Engine Bowli, Falaknuma
Tel.: +91 (40) 6629-8585; tajhotels.com

CONCIERGE CORNER

The Concierge at the Trident, Hyderabad, suggests:

- Waiting until after 5 p.m. to visit the Old City's Laad Bazaar, once the peak traffic dies down;
- Picking up boxes of Osmania cookies—a Hyderabad signature—at Bombay Bakery in Abids, and sampling the handmade ice cream from Ghafoor in the Moazzam Jahi market; and
- Visiting the 18th-century Paigah Tombs in Sanathnagar during the evening; the amazing architecture seems to come alive in the moonlight.

