

INDIA UNFOLDED · CITY EDITION

DELHI

The Seven Cities

No. GT-01 — RAJASTHAN COLLECTION · 32 PAGES

IN 60 SECONDS

Seven cities were built here before New Delhi, each on the ruins of the last — Delhi is India's past stacked on its present, and you can walk through all of it in four days.

Tomar and Chauhan Rajputs, five Sultanate dynasties, the Mughals at their height, the British at theirs: every power that ruled northern India built a capital on this stretch of the Yamuna and left its walls standing. Today the National Capital Territory holds about 22.7 million people (the wider agglomeration around 30 million on the UN's latest count), runs on a Metro that reaches almost every monument, and is loud, polluted in winter, generous at its gurudwaras and astonishing at dawn. Come October to March, give it three or four days, and start at Humayun's Tomb when the gates open.

Founded

c. 1052 · 1639 · 1931

Lal Kot · Shahjahanabad · New Delhi

Best months

Oct – Mar

Nov–Jan mornings can be smog-grey

Give it

3 – 4 days

Old Delhi, the Sultanate south, Lutyens' centre

Fly into

DEL

Airport Express to New Delhi station in 20 min

01 The Story, in Six Acts

I INDRAPRASTHA · LEGEND

The Mahabharata's Pandava capital is placed by tradition at Purana Qila, and Abul Fazl's Ain-i-Akbari calls Delhi 'originally Indrapat'. Archaeology finds Painted Grey Ware under the fort from around 1100–500 BCE — the epic age's pottery — but no city to match the poem. Legend, with a real layer beneath it.

II THE SULTANATE CITIES · 1052–1398

Anangpal Tomar raised Lal Kot around 1052; Prithviraj Chauhan lost it at Tarain in 1192. Qutbu'd-Din Aibak laid the Qutb Minar's foundation in 1199 (ASI's date; others say 1193) and founded the Delhi Sultanate in 1206. Then the cities came one after another — Alauddin's Siri against the Mongols, Tughlaqabad in 1321, Jahanpanah, Firuz Shah's Firozabad in 1354 — each abandoning the last.

III SHAHJAHANABAD · 1533–1739

Humayun began Dinpanah in 1533, died on its library stairs in 1556, and got the first great Mughal garden-tomb. Shah Jahan laid out a new capital from 1639: the Red Fort (1648), Jama Masjid (1650–56), and Chandni Chowk — his daughter Jahanara's design, around a canal whose moonlit pool named it. In 1739 Nadir Shah's Persians killed tens of thousands in a day and left with the Peacock Throne and the Koh-i-Noor.

Stand here. Look for this.

Five things almost everyone walks straight past — where to stand, and what you're actually seeing.

1 **Isa Khan's tomb**

Just inside the main gate, in its own walled garden — an octagonal Sur-dynasty tomb of 1547, older than Humayun's, walked past by nearly everyone.

2 **The six-pointed stars**

On the spandrels of the west and south gates and the tomb's great arches — a Mughal solar emblem, not a Jewish one.

3 **The blue chhatris**

The small domed kiosks ringing the main dome once carried glazed blue tiles; the restoration put some back. Look up from the platform's corners.

4 **Nila Gumbad**

Outside the east wall — a blue-tiled dome said to hold a nobleman's servant, and possibly older than the tomb itself; now reconnected to the garden.

5 **The 1857 board**

Inside the enclosure, the ASI's notice records Zafar's capture here — the end of a dynasty, on a small painted sign.

One more thing

Be at the west gate at sunrise with a ticket bought online the night before; the first half hour is yours. Then Sunder Nursery next door for breakfast, and Nizamuddin's dargah ten minutes' walk away — keep the whole morning for this one corner of the city.

01 ARRIVAL

Humayun's Tomb at opening

Humayun's Tomb · Sunrise to an hour after · 1x · portrait · 1x

Arch as frame; dome centred; family in the gateway

02 THE GARDEN

Isa Khan's garden

Isa Khan's tomb enclosure · First half hour after opening · 1x · landscape · 1x

Path → child → octagonal tomb

03 THE LANES

Chandni Chowk waking

Kinari Bazaar or Dariba Kalan · Mid-morning · 1x · portrait · 1x

Lane to a vanishing point; wires; family walking

04 THE SPICE MARKET

Khari Baoli from above

The Gadodia Market rooftop · Late morning · 1x · landscape · 0.5x

Sacks below → family → minaret skyline

05 THE MINARET

Jama Masjid from above

Jama Masjid's south minaret · Midday, between prayers · 1x · landscape · 1x

Courtyard below → family → Red Fort

06 THE COURTYARD

Jama Masjid's east steps

Jama Masjid's east gate steps · Midday · 1x · portrait · 1x

Steps → family → gate