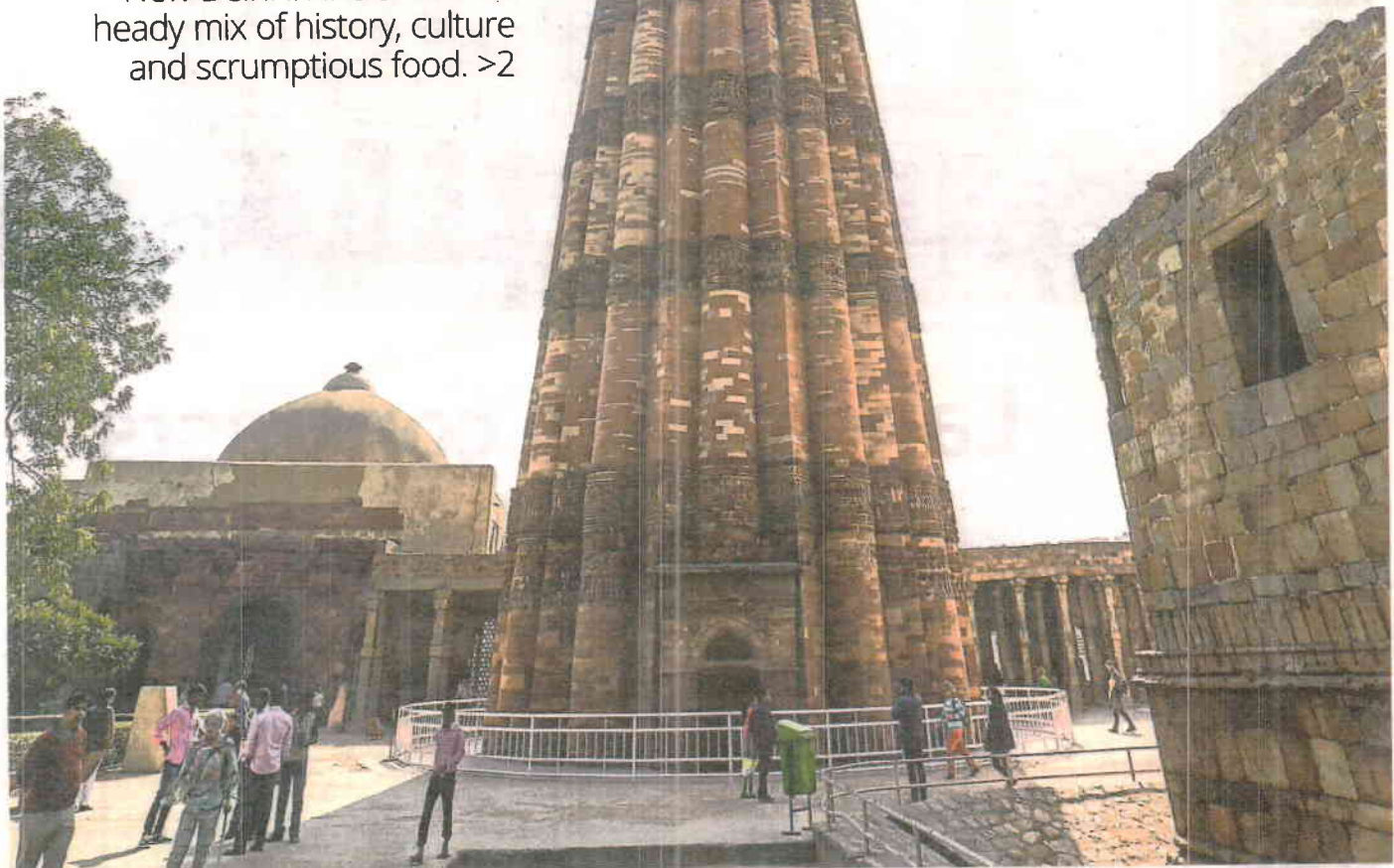


Dazzling Delhi

New Delhi in India offers a heady mix of history, culture and scrumptious food. >2



At 72.5m high, the red sandstone tower of Qutub Minar is the second tallest in India. — ARIFF SHAH/AirAsia X



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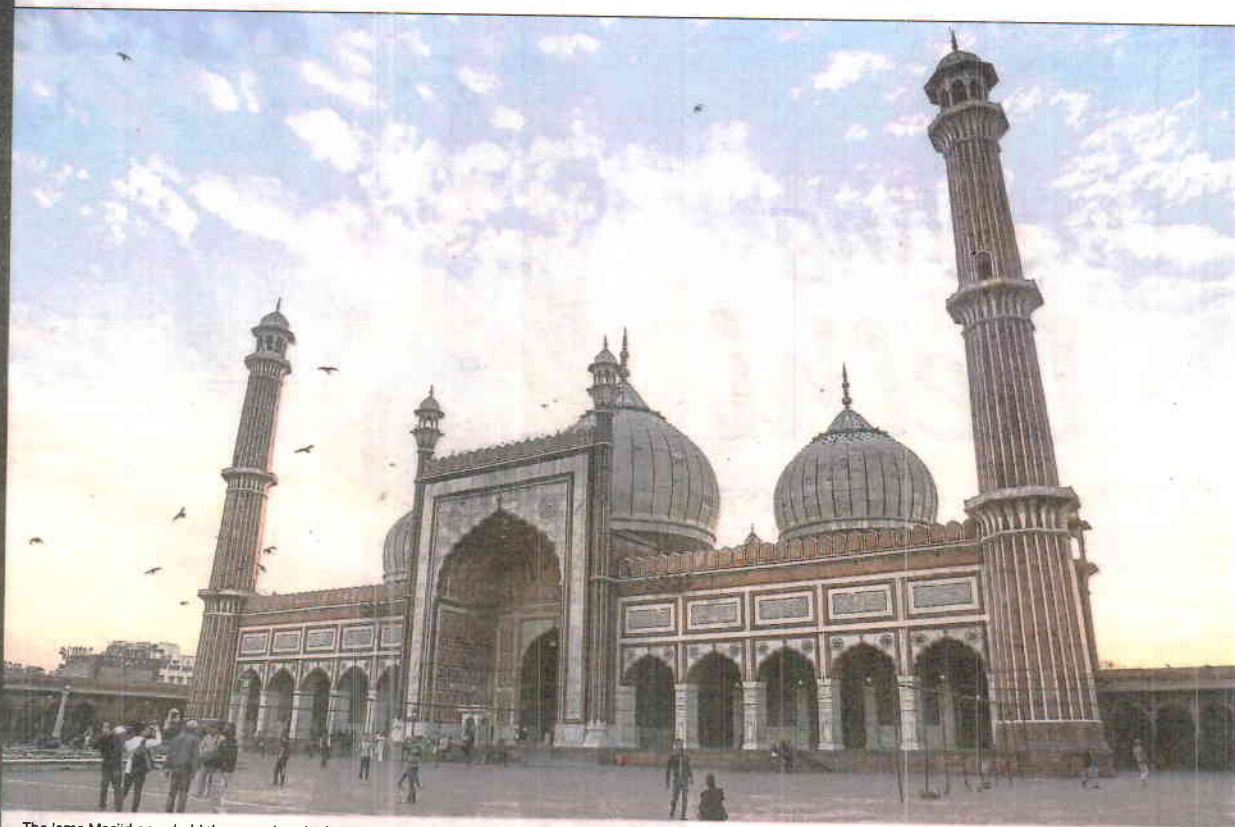
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The Jama Masjid once held the record as the biggest mosque complex in the world, until the late 1970s. — Photos: ARIFF SHAH/AirAsia X

Land of rich contrasts

Mention New Delhi and one immediately thinks of a certain iconic marble mausoleum – but there's so much more to this city and its surroundings.

By R.S.N. MURALI
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BLUE skies? Tick. Eagles soaring peacefully overhead? Tick. An induced state of mind where my mind is filled with images of classical Hindi movies with Sultans and Maharajas in regalia waving at common folk from ornate palaces? Tick.

It is my maiden visit to New Delhi, the capital of India, and I'm standing in front of the ruins of the Qutub Minar whose overwhelming beauty fills me with awe. I used to think that the only magnificent structure worth visiting, close to Delhi, was the Taj Mahal.

This 13th century Indo-Muslim site, some 20km south of Delhi is, according to Indian historian P.K. Sood (who accompanied me and the media group), a masterpiece especially the red sandstone tower, which at 72.5m is the second tallest minaret in India.

"You know, it is an Indian archaeological site listed as a Unesco World Heritage site. One of its two mosques, the Quwwat-ul-Islam, is touted to be the oldest in northern India," explained Sood.

The nearby Iron Pillar is also a standout for many reasons – its precise completion date is still fuzzy (it is estimated at 402CE, making it over 1,600 years old), and it was moved to its present location in 1233. Sood claimed that the 7m tall pillar continues to baffle scientists, who have yet to conclusively determine what materials were used to construct the pillar that has kept the iron from rusting. It is thought to be made up of seven tonnes of 98% iron of pure quality, and has ancient Brahmī inscriptions glorifying the Hindu God Vishnu but there are also

inscriptions and graffiti from different periods.

A short drive away is another significant landmark of Indian history – Mahatma Gandhi's mausoleum at Kisan Ghat, adorned with marigold and where a flame burns daily. Indians from Kashmir, Jammu, Assam and Manipur were there to pay respects, many shedding tears, all with their hands clasped in prayer.

Yong Ngiah Lian, a native of Manipur, said, "Mahatma is our nation's independence icon."

Delhi is rich in Islamic heritage, having been under Mughal rule. The Jama Masjid, completed in 1656, was once the world's biggest mosque. It has three great gates, four towers and two 40m-high minarets constructed of red sandstone and white marble.

There's also the Red Fort, another World Heritage site built in 1648. It is a such vast and wondrous complex. Built during the reign of the Mughal king Shah Jahan, it is marvellous how the structure still stands strong until today.

The name Shah Jahan should ring a bell and that brings us to the *piece de resistance* of any visit to Delhi (three hours away in Agra), or to India, for that matter – the Taj Mahal. Also built by Shah Jahan, there are not enough superlatives for it but so much has already been written about it. The best I can say is, go see it for yourself.

What's often not written about is the sister monument to the Taj, the Agra Fort. While the original was a brick fort built by a Rajput King around 1473, the present structure (also on the heritage list) again owes much to Shah Jahan. I overheard a tour guide from a European group saying, "From this magnif-

icent fort, Shah Jahan sat and monitored the construction of Taj Mahal with his third wife Mumtaz Mahal."

Slightly bad news, though, as the same guide mentioned that from next month onwards, the entry fee of RP250 (RM16) will be revised to RP750 (RM48) per entry to any monument in India.

If you've had your fill of monuments and forts, don't forget India is a shopper's paradise, too. In Old Delhi, one of the oldest and busiest shopping areas is the famous Chandni Chowk which has been around since 1650. I went on a nerve-racking trishaw ride that criss-crossed a street filled with pedestrians and motorists, with everyone assuming right of way, often morphing into both sides shouting at each other to give way. But it's worth the aggravation. Imagine intricately embroidered silk sarees going for RS1,000 (RM62) and various other souvenirs at bargain prices. Do beware, though, of touts trying to jack up prices on seeing foreigners. Also avoid outlets without price tags or, better still, have a local help you with the bargaining.

In the heart of the city, there is also the Sarojini Nagar neighbourhood. While it is crammed, it has larger pathways and is more comfortable to get around.

There's also the Dilli Haat, which is an open-air arts and crafts and food centre in South Delhi that is worth a visit – it has a variety of fare from all over India!

One cannot visit Delhi and not sample its food. Of course hot, spicy and sweet is par for the course. Visitors should try dishes such as mouth-watering kebabs, *papri chaat* curry, *paratha* bread and of course Delhi *caiya* (herbal tea).



The Iron Pillar dedicated to Lord Vishnu has mystified scientists as it has existed for 1,600 years without rusting.



Mahatma Gandhi's mausoleum is adorned with marigold and a flame is kept burning.



The remnants of an ancient Hindu temple near the Qutub Minar minaret.



The Art Market in Dilli Haat offers an array of intricate art and traditional wares. You can get good deals if you haggle.



The Chandni Chowk shopping area is congested and quite chaotic but you can't say you have visited New Delhi if you have not been here. Note the Jama Masjid in the background.



The Red Fort is a vast and wondrous complex built in 1648.



The Taj Mahal is one of the wonders of the world, the monument Shah Jahan famously built for his wife Mumtaz Mahal. — ARIFF SHAH/AirAsia X

You may try the food sold by street hawkers, of course, but it's at your own risk because one can never be sure of the level of cleanliness and hygiene. It would be unfortunate to end up with a case of "Delhi belly" which will spoil your vacation. Don't fret, there are many good restaurants with good service in Delhi's central area.

Delhi bewilders with its modern skyscrapers juxtaposed against old run-down buildings, wealth amidst the squalor of the

streets, well-dressed people against unkempt beggars (many of them children). All this amidst a hundred different dialects and languages spoken by its varied populace. Yet it is mesmerising!

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