

A garden of dreams

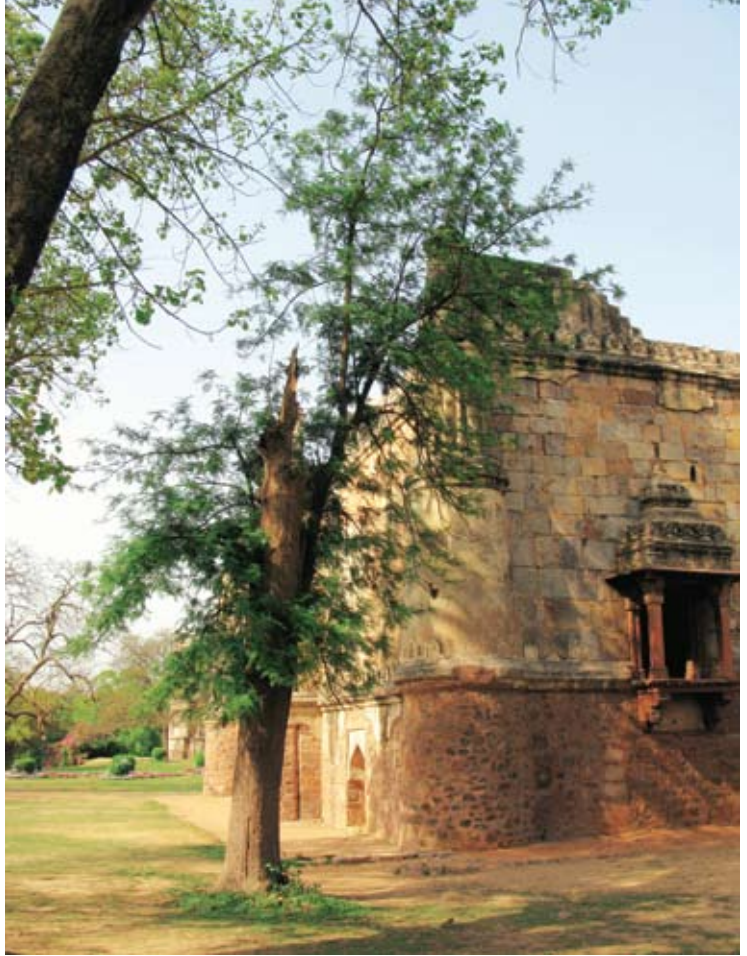
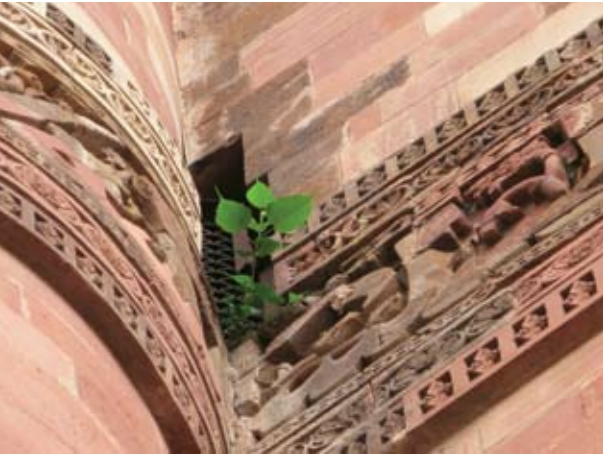
Taken for granted by many and cherished by a few, the trees in India's capital city make it seem like a verse from a Ruskin Bond poem.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS YD BAR-NESS

Delhi? Think human traffic and clogged roads, jangled nerves and rampant drivers, and a slice of pollution to top it all off. Like most of us, you appreciate green and quiet places, trees and wildlife. The capital city might seem a tad bit overwhelming during your first visit, but here's introducing its green and forested side. With a bit of an adventurous streak, you can escape the crowds and noise and find some unique natural attractions.

The giant semal tree near Sikander's Tomb gates, Lodhi Gardens.

When these khirni trees were seedlings perhaps 500 years ago, the Mughals were only just getting established in Delhi.



There are not only several remarkable and special trees, but also surprisingly large and peaceful forestlands within the vast, bustling city of Delhi. Treat yourself to a natural adventure within the capital and reconnect for a bit with the wild Earth.

INTO THE WOODS

Delhi was built where a blade of ancient sandstone reaches towards the Yamuna river. Most of this slightly higher area of land is covered by city now, but a handful of large forest areas remain. In the south of the city you can visit Sanjay Van for a respite from the relentlessly urban environment. The forest has changed dramatically over the years, especially due to a Mexican acacia tree gone rampant. However, it continues to offer the adventurous explorer some of the most valuable and rare services to be found: shade, walking tracks, wildlife habitat, exploration, solace and solitude.

Head to South Delhi towards the Qutub Institutional area, where a cluster of office towers, hospitals, ashrams, and universities are hiding amongst trees and gardens. You can start at the Mehrauli Nursery. Growing under large trees in shady, meadow fields, a team of gardeners is growing the next generation of trees for Delhi. It is dedicated people and institutions such as this that will keep Delhi green and shady for the future. You can head into Sanjay Van from here, and almost immediately you will feel the change in temperature and hear the bird songs. Wild peacocks and deer abound. Keep looking for a crumbling fortress wall rising above, and follow the tracks that lead you up, above the forest. When you finally reach the top, prepare to



be stunned by a view nobody ever expects in Delhi. You are surrounded by forest there, with no roads or houses visible nearby. The Qutub Minar towers almost close enough to touch, the skyscrapers of Nehru Place and Connaught Place can be seen clearly, the unique architecture of the Lotus Temple and the new Saket Select Citywalk mall stand like modern monuments. Tucked beneath the walls is a Sufi *dargah* (tomb), and just beyond is a field much loved for a weekend cricket match. You can not only hear the peacocks and other birds, but see

Clockwise from above: A rare Eucalyptus stands in the corner of the gardens of the Qutub Minar, Mehrauli; A small pipal tree grows in a crack of the ancient Qutub Minar tower, Mehrauli; A hollow Australian Silver Oak struggles to survive near the Bara Gumbad at Lodhi Gardens.



Clockwise from above: A curious specimen: a hollow royal palm tree in a park at Malviya Nagar; Pilkhan fig in South Delhi; Trekkers in the Sanjay Van Forest of South Delhi.

Delhi is fortunate amongst the world's cities to have such vibrant wildlife and extensive green space.

them below you perching in the trees. Scattered through the forest are outcrops of the rocks which make Delhi and the Ridge, the same orange-brown

colouring recognisable from all of the many ancient ruins. The castle wall upon which you stand is one of Delhi's oldest buildings, a reminder of the Lal Kot kingdom a thousand years ago.

SILENT SENTINELS

Go west and south along the fortress wall, following the giant spire of the 900-year-old Qutub Minar, a victory monument erected by the Tughluk conquerors. As you approach, you'll find yourself coming out into the crowded markets and alleys of Mehrauli village. Ask for directions to the Dada Bari Jain Mandir, and soon you'll find yourself out of the village at the gates of an elaborate temple complex, shining white. It was here that the *samadhi*, or final memorial, of the Guru Jinchanda Suruswarji Maharaj is to be found. The temple welcomes visitors, and amidst the cool marble halls and pillars are green gardens and shady corners.

Head outside, and continue a little way further into the picnic area of Ladho Sarai. This grassy clearing is in the heart of the Mehrauli Archaeological Park, but standing here are ancient, living memorials. Five khirni trees, gnarled and twisted, are most likely Delhi's oldest trees, far older than the newly arrived forest trees surrounding them. When these trees were seedlings perhaps 500 years ago, the Mughals were only just getting established in Delhi, and the British were nowhere to be found. They are indeed survivors, and spending time picnicking amongst these venerable giants can remind us of just how much Delhi has changed over the centuries. Nearby, some rocky knobs of Delhi's ridge are surrounded by neatly kept gardens and lawns. There's something special about manicured gardens intermingled with forests. As long as we appreciate and value these green spaces and wild trees, we'll be able to have some combination of gardens, cities, and forests.

YOUNGER THAN YOU REALISE

Hopefully on your excursion you've seen enough to interest you into exploring further. In the same region of Delhi, you can find an abundance of



Clockwise from above: C. MacDougall at the Ashoka Burmese Buddhist Mission, Mehrauli; A 60-year-old bonsai Pilkhan at the National Bonsai Park, Lodhi Gardens; C. Cadena below the giant neem at the Ugrasen ki Baoli stepwell, near Connaught Place.

ancient ruins, wild forest patches, hidden temples, rocky outcrops, and wild animals. There's still the overgrown ruins of Tuglukhabad, the forest pathways near Jawaharlal Nehru University, the parks within Siri Fort, the expansive spread of the Central Ridge, the popular Lodhi Garden and tombs, and soon, the Botanical Garden at Sundar Nagar. All of these can make exciting excursions for natural and archaeological enthusiasts.

Delhi is fortunate amongst the world's cities to have such vibrant wildlife and extensive green space. It's a treasure and a responsibility, and a natural way to indulge in some outdoor activity amongst the trees. When you are in the heart of the city, you might feel that the natural world is far away and distant, but actually, it is closer than you realise.



QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

By Air: Jet Airways has daily flights to Delhi from most major cities across India.

By Rail: Nizamuddin and New Delhi Railway Station connect the city to the rest of the country. The Rajdhani is the most convenient train when visiting Delhi from other major cities.

GETTING AROUND

Sanjay Van: Head south on Aurobindo Marg. Go past the Outer Ring Road and take a right turn onto Shaheed Jeet Singh Marg, towards Katwaria Sarai. Take the first left turn and follow it around into Qutub Institutional Area. You will see signs for Mehrauli Nursery.

Going directly to Mehrauli Archaeological Park: Take Mehrauli-Gurgaon road southwards from the Qutub Minar. Look for Ashoka Mission on the right, and take a right afterwards. If in doubt, ask for the Jain Mandir.

DON'T FORGET

A hat, some drinking water, and sufficient light left in the day. Make sure to keep your orientation; Sanjay Van can be a confusing collection of trails. If you are lost, try to spot the Qutub Minar and head towards it.

JETESCAPES

Jet Airways offers customised holiday packages called JetEscapes, which take care of everything from your flights to your meals and accommodation. Currently, there are four stopover packages available, which focus on the heritage as well as contemporary sides of Delhi.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to delhitourism.nic.in

