

Midnight in Delhi

(Quite unlike “Midnight in Paris”)

With few exceptions, all long-haul international flights arrive or depart Indira Gandhi International Airport between midnight and 3am. It has always been thus.

Dunno why.

Knowing that making good travel decisions through bleary eyes and a jet-lagged mind at that hour is iffy, I had made arrangements online for my favorite hotel (great location, great rates) ahead of time. I walked briskly and with confidence through Immigration and the Green Channel (Nothing to Declare).

Outside I sailed past the hordes of independent taxi drivers and chose one from the queue of "airport certified" vehicles. "Certified" means that the airport keeps track of them, and you: your name and destination and the taxi number are recorded in the event something untoward should happen.

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The grim ride at 2am into the city is certainly improved over yesteryear. Before suburbs edged up to the runways, the road to city centre was long, deserted and potentially dangerous. Your taxi might get stopped by thieves who relieved you of extra baggage. It never happened to me, but it was considered not uncommon.

Once, years ago in Delhi, a friend of mine was taking me to the airport at 5am on his motorcycle. Before we left, he removed his wrist watch and advised me to do the same. Just the month before, his arm jewelry had been noticed by local thugs on that road and not so politely (he still had a facial bruise) confiscated - along with all his cash.

Closer in to downtown Delhi, as the taxi inched down garbage-strewn alleys and around packs of dogs, I knew something was amiss. Even the driver fidgeted and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, and appeared hesitant, when lost, to alight from his vehicle to ask directions from the raggedy denizens of Delhi noir still roaming about.

Cutting to the chase: "My" hotel had changed its name, and another hotel, in this tough part of town, had latched onto that old name. One more look outside, at the hotel entrance wedged between a snack shop and an electrical supplies store, helped precipitate a quick decision.

"Let's get outta here," is what I wanted to say - the most often-used line in the movies I'm told - but I wasn't sure my taxi wallah would appreciate it fully. A fairly literal translation of what I said was, "This is a bad place. We will go."

Now, I don't pretend to know a lot of Hindi, and the driver understood basic English, but certain survival phrases are etched in my brain and pop out easily. I'll bet several of you travelers out there can say "Where is the bathroom?" in multiple languages.

Deepak (name badges are so helpful) headed toward Connaught Place, the hub of New Delhi, and eventually pulled up in front of the Hotel Asian International. "This is a good hotel for you." It turned out he was right - I'm glad I gave him a healthy tip.

Lo and behold - the Asian International is right behind my old favorite hotel!
However, that place has been super upgraded in decor and amenities and now charges
200USD per night - not for me.

To bed, to bed, I'm practically dead...

The Next Evening:

The 1911 Restaurant and Bar

The first page of the menu, at this nearby luxury hotel, says "In 1911 King
Emperor George V and Queen Empress Mary declared New Delhi the capital of India."
(Previously the capital had been Calcutta.)

This amazing turn-of-the-(last) century hotel, aptly named The Imperial, is a gem
of architecture and art, and a repository of history. 20+ foot ceilings grace this restaurant,
white pillars guard all entrances, and dark wooden and gilded interiors are the real deal,
not Las Vegas impersonations.

I just spent the last half-hour examining the old lithographs, photos, and drawings
that line the hallways and adorn the side sitting rooms. It's a history lesson on the Raj
(British rule in India - see footnote). I understand that some might not find such crass
imperialism very charming. Still, it's history and that Empire did give the world its most
international language today. (Sure, study Mandarin - good idea - but, 10,000 characters
just to get started? Okay, I'm lazy.)

Why am I in Delhi? Practically, it's where my freebie flight (love those mileage plans) could take me and allow me to get over jet lag before visiting friends in Nepal, and provide me with stopovers in Southeast Asia on my return.

Also, yes, I do have a certain nostalgia for Delhi where I lived in the early 80's - but the film *Midnight in Paris* was an insightful and entertaining reminder about the pitfalls of nostalgic illusion. Delhi of course is different these days, and so am I.

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OMG. The "Curried Prawns, Goa style" just arrived and is absolutely the best I've ever, ever tasted. Goa is a former Portuguese colony on India's west coast, south of Bombay/Mumbai, which I had visited many times in the 80's. In the 70's, Goa was the winter hangout for the foreign potheads who then drifted up to cooler Kathmandu for the summer – and hung out there on Freak Street.

So, I'm back in India and enjoying its fabulous indigenous food, while a live band in the adjacent bar plays the Theme from *The Godfather*.