

AWADHI Adventures

by CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT

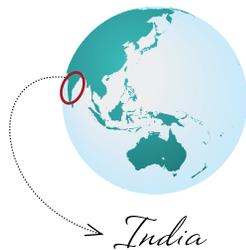
"DO YOU ALWAYS DO THIS TOUR AT night?" I shout.

My voice is lost in the din as a motorbike threads the gap between my guide, Cyrus, and me, and I'm forced to repeat the question when I catch up to him in an alcove minutes later.

"Yes, usually at night," he smiles. "So that visitors are able to get the full atmosphere." I take in the crush of shoppers and diners, awash in the fluorescent light and savoury aromas spilling from the open shop fronts into the ancient lane. And I have to concede: Cyrus has got the "atmosphere" part nailed.

We're on a food tour in Chowk, the oldest market district in Lucknow, a city of nearly three million people that sprawls across India's central plains. As the capital of Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow boasts much that is sleek and modern — including recent green initiatives whose success is evident in the tidy boulevards and well kept parks (if not yet in the quality of the air). Despite its easy access from Delhi, the city is oft-overlooked by international travellers, save for those who come for the sites important to Imperial British history. The ill-fated British Residency is here, refuge to 3000 British subjects during the Siege of 1857 and where 2000 of those perished — mostly through starvation and disease — during India's First War of Independence. The Residency still bears its 19th-century battle wounds in a 33-acre preserve marked with lawns and museums.

But before the British, this was the domain of the Nawabs: Muslim rulers who were strong patrons of arts and culture, and who governed their Hindu subjects with a liberal hand during the declining years of the Mughal empire. To the Nawabs is credited the beautiful 18th- and 19th-century architecture that graces the city, as well as the flourishing Chikan embroidery industry that still employs 20 percent of local residents. More to the point of my current adventure, the Nawabs' appreciation for pleasure extended also to food: they



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established a remarkable hierarchy of chefs and food specialists, drawing from Persian, Mughal, Kashmiri, and Punjabi influences, to create what's known as Awadhi cuisine. It's a culinary tradition grounded in long marinating and slow cooking that still thrives in these oldest of Lucknow streets in which I now stand.

Our first stop is Mubeen's Restaurant, marked by neon signs and piles of glistening orange flatbreads, called *sheermal*. The *sheermal*-maker is hard at work on his sidewalk platform, slapping balls of dough into large rounds before slamming them against the side of the glowing tandoor oven sunk into the concrete near his bare feet. Minutes later, he retrieves the flatbreads from the intense heat, douses them with saffron water that stands at the ready in metal cauldrons, and thrusts them back into the tandoor for their final signature glazing. The resulting breads prove soft and fluffy, and a perfect accompaniment to the kebabs that arrive at our newspaper-covered tables inside.

Kebab, in India, is a term more loosely defined than in British or North American English, and applies to a broad array of grilled meats that may or may not ever see the end of a skewer. Lucknow's Awadhi-style kebabs favour finely-sliced or ground meat, marinated in spices to a soft texture. Mubeen's serves us *pasanda kebab* — a Lucknow favourite made with yogurt-marinated lamb or beef — and a chicken kebab, prepared with ground cumin, ginger, garlic, and yellow chiles. Chicken sees another rendition in a mildly spiced rice pullao that's light and tasty.

Out on the street, charcoal braziers shower sparks into the night, as we weave our way past roast fowl impaled on rotisserie spikes and textiles glowing brilliant beneath electric bulbs slung from vendor stalls. We run a gauntlet of men intent over their *mahi tawa* grill pans to settle ourselves in