

TimeOut

Delhi

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INSIDE

DOGG DAYS

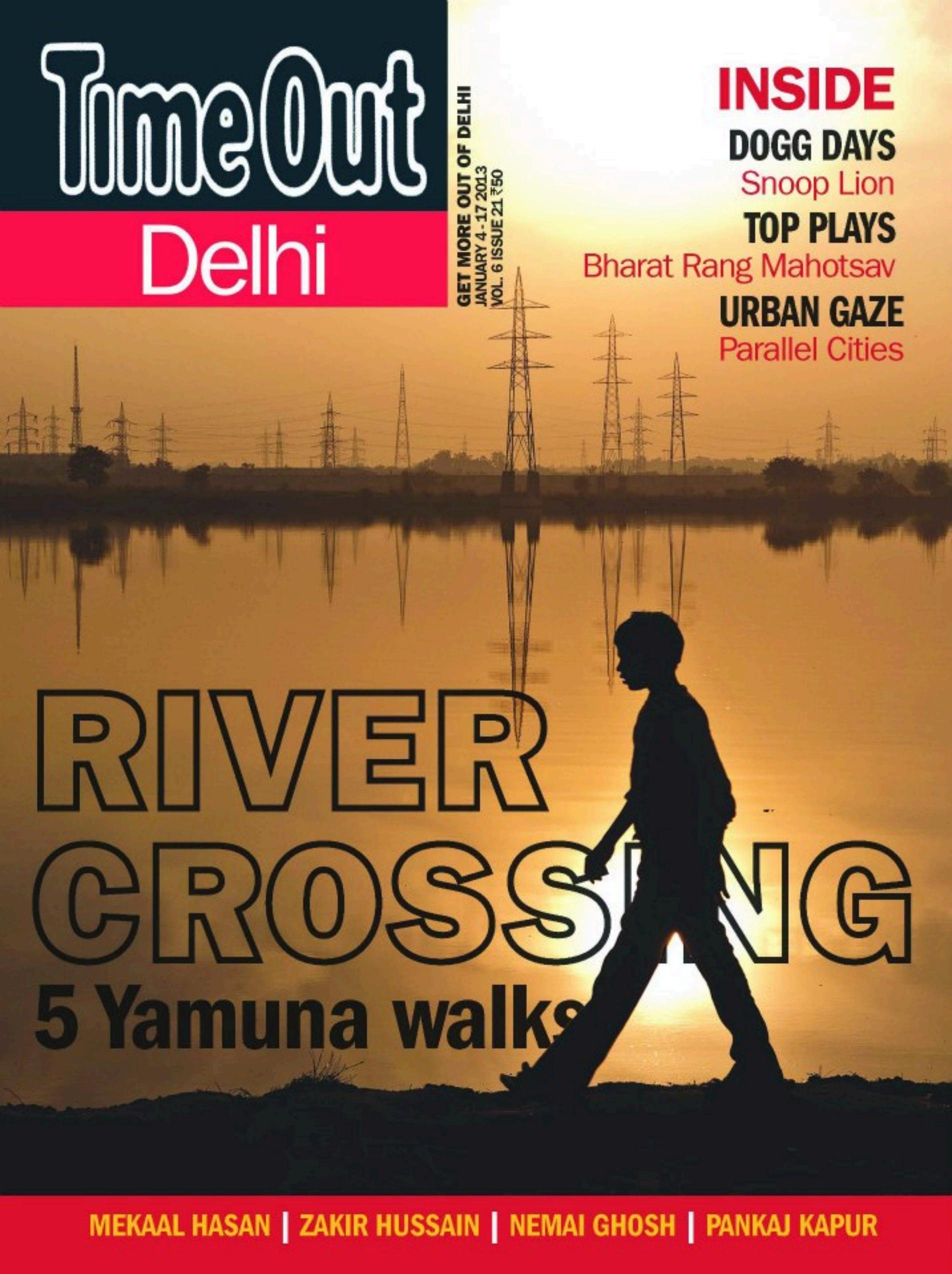
Snoop Lion

TOP PLAYS

Bharat Rang Mahotsav

URBAN GAZE

Parallel Cities



RIVER CROSSING

5 Yamuna walks

MEKAAL HASAN | ZAKIR HUSSAIN | NEMAI GHOSH | PANKAJ KAPUR

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Cover story

Walk on water

The Yamuna is polluted, yes, but we're not going to cry you a river. Instead, we navigate you to the many offbeat sights along Delhi's waterfront. These include forgotten tombs, peaceful shrines, assorted ghats, bird sanctuaries and an elephant camp. Just go with the flow.



MANI BALMIKI

O mere majhi Boatmen at Qudsia Ghat



Over troubled water

Cities usually consider a river to be a blessing, but us Dilliwalas tend to turn our backs to ours. We hold our breath while driving across the Yamuna, thoughtlessly discharge our waste into it, pour concrete over its banks and, during the occasional festival, dump statues, diyas and other religious paraphernalia into its choked waters. This fortnight, we invite you to walk to the water rather than shun it, with a series of guided strolls over and around five of the city's road bridges, from Wazirabad to Okhla. Delhi does its best to kill the Yamuna, but take a closer look – our riverbanks are surprisingly alive. Photography by **Manit Balmiki**.

Wazirabad Bridge

Wrestlers and rumours

Several interesting landmarks dot the river between the ISBT-Shastri Park Bridge at Kashmere Gate and the new "Signature Bridge" coming up near the Wazirabad Bridge. However, it's tough to actually walk this route because of all the construction and blocked access to the water, so we'd recommend travelling between points by auto or taxi (parking isn't much fun either).

A couple minutes' drive from the Civil Lines Metro Station, we began our day at **Chandgi Ram Akhara**, one of the NCR's premier wrestling schools. Ram was a legend of Indian wrestling – a gold medallist at the 1970 Asian Games, a Padma Shri and Arjuna awardee, and one of the first supporters of women's wrestling in India. Fittingly, the akhara he founded has provided training to several top wrestlers of both sexes since its inception in 1975.

After Ram's death in 2010, two of his children, wrestlers Jagdish and Sonika Kaliraman, took over the ropes. We ran into Sonika, who took us around the gymnasium with a steam room, the indoor stadium for bouts and practice, and the traditional mud pit outside. Though morning practice was over (it begins at 6am, whatever the season), she asked a few of the pahalwans to demonstrate their warm-up routines. One shimmied up a 12-foot rope, another dragged a plough-like wooden slab called a kudhal across the akhara's dry, fine mud. Though fight practice has mostly shifted indoors in recent years, they haven't completely abandoned the old-style outdoor bouts. "In mat competitions, we get medals and recognition," Kaliraman

said. "In the mud arena – which is more popular in rural areas – we get paid."

After a brief stop at nearby **Majnu Ka Tilla** (hot, sweet gurdwara halwa on a cold morning an admitted draw), we headed to **New Aruna Nagar**, the Tibetan refugee colony famous for its momos, chang, and for being a one-stop shop for everything under the sun from the roof of the world. Where else could you find the latest season of Korean TV comedy *My Princess*, a traditional chuba and a Dalai Lama T-shirt, all on the same corner? We skipped local fave Tibetan Dhaba ("Tee Dee") to try out the recently opened New Hot Yak Restaurant. It wasn't as hot as we hoped, though perhaps

we weren't adventurous enough with our orders (the menu lists such exoticia as black fungus and sautéed large intestines).

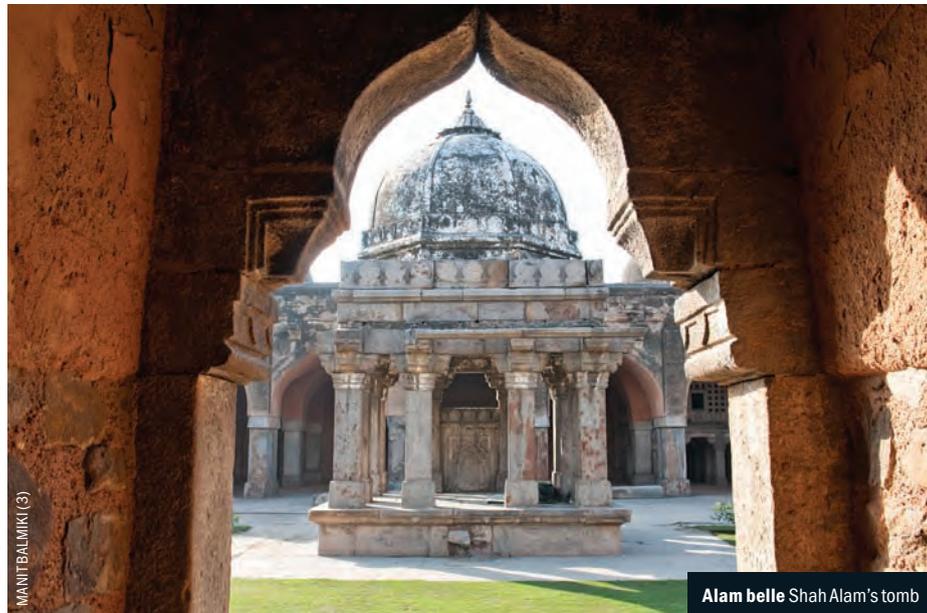
Even if you wanted to, it's impossible to ignore the fact that this is a colony established by a people whose presence here has tragic overtones. In the square in front of the Tantric Buddhist Cultural Society Office, there's a small, candle-lit display that says, chillingly: "92 self-immolations this year".

You can access the river from the back of the Tibetan colony, but there's not much to see (the pontoon bridge here is only linked when the water level is high).

So we set off towards the Wazirabad Bridge to find the **tomb of Shah Alam**, a 14th-century saint who lived during the reign of Feroze Shah Tughlaq. Inside a small, gated complex scattered with elderly gentlemen and school kids was the tomb: a domed structure with pillars – not grandiose, but well maintained. The

ECLASS

According to the Central Pollution Control Board, Yamuna water is "Class E", which means that it's unfit even for animal bathing. The water is fit only for industrial cooling.



Alam belle Shah Alam's tomb





ILLUSTRATIONS BY ASINHA



Pit stop A wrestler training at Chandgi Ram Akhara



Blowin' in the wind The riverside park at New Aruna Nagar, Majnu Ka Tilla

complex has been closed to the public for two years now, amid rumours that it housed both a mosque and a temple. (A representative from the ASI told us that though this theory may be credible, the compound was closed down due to it being frequented by “unlawful elements”.) Nonetheless, we were shown around by the gatekeeper and Raja Babu, a local conspiracy theorist who tried to convince us that there was never any tomb here at all; that the government had made the story up in the interests of communal harmony.

Across the road from Shah Alam’s tomb is **Sur Ghat**. There’s a government-maintained swimming pool on its banks, where they supposedly change the water every three days. It didn’t look especially fresh, but that didn’t stop a group of kids from splashing about – at least it was cleaner than the river. From here, you do get a nice view of the Signature Bridge coming up. The much-delayed project, slated to open late this year, will connect Outer Ring Road with the beautifully named Khajoori Khas on the eastern side.

From here, it’s a worthwhile drive to the **Yamuna Biodiversity Park**, which looks like an exclu-

sive club with a guard at its grilled gates. The friendly staff gave us a guided tour. Of particular interest was a magnificent man-made lake covered with birds. It started out as a cricket field, after which water was pumped in, fish imported and artificial islands built. Soon, migratory birds like red-crested pochards, great cormorants and northern shovellers started coming in from Europe, China and Siberia. Drop by if you like birds, butterflies or botany, and carry a pair of binoculars for a glimpse of what the Yamuna ecosystem could be like if cared for properly.

Anugya Chitransh and Uday Bhatia

Where to go

Chandgi Ram Akhara Dr KB Hedgewar Marg, Civil Lines. ☎ Civil Lines.

Majnu Ka Tilla Outer Ring Road, opposite GT Road intersection.

Shah Alam’s Tomb Mangal Pandey Marg, opposite Sur Ghat, Wazirabad.

Sur Ghat Mangal Pandey Marg, Wazirabad.

Yamuna Biodiversity Park Jharoda Majra, near Jagatpur, Wazirabad (2761-6569). Mon-Sat 9am-5pm.

Old Yamuna Bridge

Girders and ghats



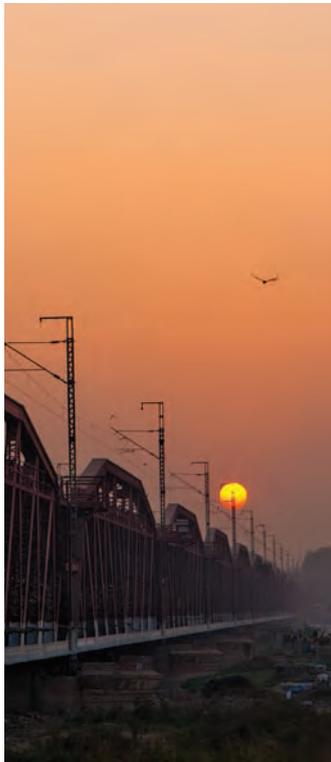
MAPNOTTO SCALE

What movie but *Deewar* could be playing to a rapt matinee audience on an eight-inch TV inside a nondescript tea shop by the river? Angry young Amitabh held the attention of the dozen or so men who had parked their rickshaws and settled down to while away a lazy afternoon hour, courtesy a DTH satellite on a lone stone slab outside. The tea shop is under the archway bridge that leads up to the old man on the river – the Iron Bridge or Lohe Ka Pul. Indian Railways' Bridge No 249, the Yamuna Bridge was the first rail link from Delhi to Kolkata. Built in 1866, it cost the East India Company 11 crore rupees, and was clearly constructed to last many lifetimes. Additions were made in 1913, including another railway line and two roads at a lower level. The bridge hasn't changed much since and continues to be the prime railway link to anything east of Delhi, as well as a routine road for commuters from Shastri Park, Kailash Nagar and Subhash Mohalla.

The tea stall was a good rest stop after our visit to the nearby electric crematorium (see box, p34). After a hot cup, we made our way past **Salimgarh Fort**, access to which is currently restricted and requires prior permission from the ASI office at the Red Fort (which connects to Salimgarh). Built in 1546 on an island, the fort was used for centuries as a prison by both the Mughals and the British; the CISF men positioned along its watchtowers make it an imposing structure still.

From here, it's a five-minute drive to Yamuna Bazaar, a congested area that is a haven for readily available, cheap narcotics. We didn't linger long, but did visit **Neeli Chhatri Mandir**, built on the remains of a structure made by the Pandavas, or by Humayun, depending on who you ask. Located just off the Yamuna Bazaar main road, the mandir may not have the grandeur it lays claim to, but is a popular stop for many heading towards **Nigambodh Ghat**. This ghat is a round-the-clock enterprise with more than 101 traditional cremation sites and an electric furnace. Inside the ghat, which is one of the few direct access points to Iron Bridge or Lohe Ka Pul – the river, the atmosphere is tranquil rather than morbid.





Udder side Jamuna Khaddar on the eastern shore; (I) sunset over the Iron Bridge

We headed next to the **Ladakh Buddhist Vihara**, opposite ISBT, for lunch. The complex houses a Buddhist temple, library and reading centre, built under the aegis of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1963. The Tibetan refugee community here owns small shops and restaurants. Armed with a couple of cheap scarves, we headed down to **Qudsia Ghat**, known for its affordable boat rides.

The ghat is across the Ring Road from ISBT and Civil Lines' Qudsia Bagh – once a royal

garden said to be a picnic spot for Emperor Ahmed Shah in the mid-18th century. Along the sandy shore of the ghat are small puja pandals and tea stalls. We had to walk through rows of parked trucks to reach the bank, where we saw men walking in the sewage-laden river in circles, their hands behind their heads. We asked Usha Sharma, the owner of a flower shop, what they were doing and she enlightened us: "They are digging for coins or other precious metal thrown off the bridge. They usu-

ally dig around for at least three to four hours before coming ashore," she said. On a winter afternoon, when the stench of the river is not too overbearing, a boat ride from the ghat is an exciting, unusual thing to do in the city. The boatmen even offer a stopover at islets, where a few decades ago watermelons were cultivated during the summer.

From here, we stopped at **Margadwale Mandir**, within a traffic island at Kashmere Gate. While it's basically like any other temple,

Odd job Voluntary lifeguard

Uma Shankar Sharma has lived by the Yamuna his whole life. His father, Shankar Sharma, was the priest at one of the small riverside temples at Qudsia Ghat, and Uma and his brother Ravi Shankar were good swimmers. They used to work for the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, but Uma is now a voluntary lifeguard (his brother is a lifeguard at a city pool). In between offering boat rides (his main source of income), the 43-year-old told **Sibi Arasu** about life on the river.

Where did you come to Delhi from?

We've lived by the river for generations now – I remember my father telling me our family came here in 1920 or so, but I'm not sure where from.

And how long have you been a lifeguard?

As far as lifeguarding goes, it's something that both my brother and I have always done. We joined the MCD as temporary employees in 1985 and worked for them until a few years ago. Both of us quit our jobs because

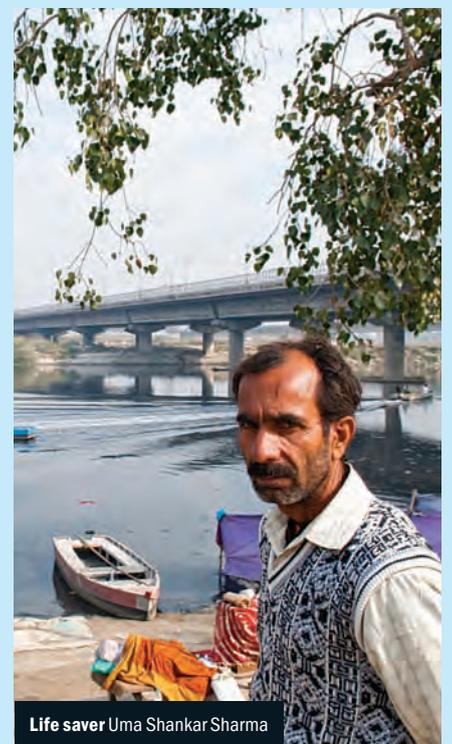
the pay was not enough. I still try to do my bit though, and whenever required serve as a voluntary lifeguard.

How many people have you saved?

I don't know the exact figure, but between us, we must have saved at least 200 to 250 people from drowning in the river. Many people who come to distribute ashes or offer their prayers tend to take a wrong step. When the river is full, it can just pull you in; most of the people we rescued were during these times. There have been a few we could not bring back to shore in time though.

How has the river changed from how you knew it as a child?

When we were children, the river was never so dirty. It was only after 1988 or so that so much sewage and industrial waste started being dumped into it, making it so unclean. We grew up by this same ghat and now my wife and children live here too. Nobody used to bother us during our father's day, since he was a priest, but now the Municipal officials want all of us to move out. And I do not know where to go or what else to do, since all that I know is the river.



Life saver Uma Shankar Sharma

Ashes to ashes Electric crematorium

Any space in the city with a parking lot that can hold more than a thousand cars was clearly built with the expectation of receiving a large number of visitors. The giant lot at the Bela Road electric crematorium is deceptive though, because once you enter the main premises, besides a few gardeners and workers, the enormous space seems to be inhabited only by ghosts of the past.

“When it was built in 1965, this crematorium was the biggest in the city,” supervisor Suresh Kumar told us. “All of the important people in the city came here whenever someone passed away in their family. But in the last decade or so, despite huge constructions such as the prayer hall and plans for additional cremation units, the place has just rotted away and now all of this property is just lying waste, put to no good use.”

The prayer hall, a massive ruin of an auditorium built in the late 1990s, can seat more than 5,000 people. Kumar said the cost of construction was more than nine crore rupees. The nine employees here take care of the grounds and two functional mini-units. These, as the board



MANITBALMIKI (2)

Electric slide Suresh Kumar at the moribund crematorium

outside the crematorium proclaims, are used only for infant cremations.

Kumar said the place fell out of favour when the MCD converted electric crematoriums to CNG units. “Once the conversion happened, many of the units

began breaking down and nobody ever came to fix it again,” he said. Now the crematorium is just another public institution dying a slow, pointless death.

Electric crematorium Bela Road, near Vijay Ghat, off Geeta Colony flyover.

Rajiv Sharma, who runs a kachodi shop inside the premises, told us an intriguing story. “The temple was constructed when the riverbank was where the ISBT is situated,” he said. “Like the Nigambodh Ghat, there was another ghat here and when the Hanuman Mandir was constructed inside it, it got the name ‘Margadwale Mandir’, which has stuck on for centuries since.” The temple attracts large crowds and long lines during lunch hours, when free food is offered to the poor.

Having had our fill of ghats and temples, we headed to the actual Iron Bridge itself, reaching it around 5pm – just in time for peak rush hour. The bridge is a kind of portal into the Victorian industrial age, with the rumbling of trains above and slow moving traffic below. The remains of the river and the habitations and constructions along the bank can be seen through its giant iron girders, which, though

they span less than a kilometre, took us a good 20 minutes to cross. On the other side, we walked down to the fields below. In this “**Jamuna Khadar**”, more than 300 people live in a small village, which also has a gaushala (cow shelter). Resident Rahul Gupta, who migrated here from Rajasthan, told us that they cultivate pulses, root vegetables and flowers such as marigold. When the river floods, the community moves up to the road-side into tents that the MCD sets up during the flooding season, and then returns after the water drains out and start all over. Gupta elaborated, “There is no other way really for us,

since this is the only space where we can at least stay for a while in this city.”

The bridge is a beautiful sight from here, especially at sundown. Crossing back, we stopped to admire the view from the Golden Jubilee Park (reflecting on the rather unpleasant fact that the park was carved out of land

originally occupied by Yamuna Pushta encroachments, whose residents were shifted out to the city’s outskirts).

Against the pink evening sky, headlights illuminated the Iron Bridge, under which glowed small fires made by homeless people. For a moment, we forgot the cesspool before us and imagined what the Yamuna must have been when the Iron Bridge came up: a gently flowing river and the lifeline of the soon-to-be capital of a new empire. **Sibi Arasu**

DRAIN PAIN

The 18 untreated drains that flow into the Yamuna within the NCR are largely responsible for its state. The Shahdara drain and the Najafgarh and its supplementary drains account for 72 per cent of sewage discharge into the river. (Central Pollution Control Board)



River clipper Keeping trim at Qudsia Ghat

Where to go

Ladakh Buddhist Vihara Outer Ring Road, opposite ISBT, Kashmere Gate. ☎ Kashmere Gate.

Margadwale Mandir Outer Ring Road, near ISBT. ☎ Kashmere Gate. Temple daily 5-8am, 4-7pm.

Nigambodh Ghat Ring Road, near Yamuna Bazaar (2386-2948). ☎ Kashmere Gate. Daily 24 hours.

Neeli Chhatri Mandir 2067 Yamuna Bazar, off Outer Ring Road (78389-61234). ☎ Kashmere Gate. Temple daily 5am-1pm, 3-10pm.

Qudsia Ghat Behind Ladakh Buddhist Vihara. ☎ Kashmere Gate. Daily 8am-7pm. ₹100 for 30 min-1 hour boat ride.

Salimgarh Fort Access from the Red Fort Complex. Call ASI (2301-2836) for prior permission.



ITO Bridge Dawn to tusk

The Lok Nayak Setu, popularly known as the ITO Bridge, is an unlikely place to catch a glimpse of the India that foreign tourists crave. Yet the Yamuna bank nearby is one of the last refuges of elephants in Delhi, outside of the Zoo. While we had seen the occasional pachyderm bathing in the water below from the Blue Line Metro, which runs close by, one morning we made an effort to seek them out. From the red light before the bridge, we walked towards the river until a small road appeared to the right, leading to the **Chhath Puja Ghat**, where every year, around October or November, devotees come to worship Surya, the sun god. The steps were deserted, save for a sleeping dog. Underneath a peepal tree, Suresh Ram Das was making preparations for his morning puja at the makeshift temple dedicated to Shiva, Kali, Bajrang Bali, a terrifying Kaal Bhairav and other assorted gods and goddesses.

Before getting back to the ITO Bridge, we had to take a makeshift underpass littered with garbage, discarded flowers and other puja paraphernalia, to come to the middle of the road. After facing the ordeal of crossing amidst speeding traffic, we were directed to the **Elephant Camp**. Next to the banks, we found three elephants (we were told that it was home to five more) chained to the ground, chomping away lazily on sugarcane and other leafy vegetation. The elephants usually set out after 10am to temples or gurudwaras where they've been beckoned. They return in the late afternoon and take a second bath – except in the winter when they may catch a cold. Nowadays, they are also fed peepal leaves and shoots, which are supposed to keep their bodies warm.

The band of mahouts hanging about was

RUN ON THE BANKS
According to recent estimates, about ₹12,000 crore has been spent on cleaning the Yamuna over the last 18 years.

wary of talking to people in case of rousing animal activist Maneka Gandhi's ire. Their reticence is understandable also in light of the terrible accident last June, when a 40-year-old female elephant was killed by a speeding truck near the Noida-Delhi border. The elephant had been hired the previous day for a wedding. To transport the animals from one state to another, the owner has to obtain a No Objection Certificate from the divisional forest officer, then permission from a chief wildlife warden on the basis of this NoC. The permission is granted after it is ascertained that the elephant isn't subjected to cruelty, is accorded proper safety, given food and other facilities. In this case, the unfortunate animal was transported illegally. And apparently, most owners don't bother with tedious permits when the animals are hired.

Though the mahouts did not speak to us, across the river we soon found one chatty owner, Iqbal Khan, sitting at his makeshift office, which also doubles as a tea stall and biryani counter. In his mid-50s, Khan comes from a family that has handled elephants

for six generations. He himself was once a mahout at nearby Appu Ghar (where the Pragati Maidan Metro station now stands), taking visitors on elephant rides. Now he has a couple of elephants, camels and horses that he rents out. He came out in defence against "persecution" by wildlife officials and Gandhi. "She comes from a well-to-do family. They have their own ways," he said. "That's not to say we don't look after the elephants properly. They are like family. In fact, I look after them better than my own blood." The elephants make their owners upwards of ₹10,000 on every trip, but their upkeep is also expensive. Each animal consumes two to three quintals of food daily and also has to be fitted with a microchip behind its ear, to allow wildlife officials to track and inspect it every six months or so.

There is now a law preventing individuals from owning elephants and though people like Khan manage these animals, they are also considered government property and can't be bought or sold. Soon enough in Delhi, it will likely only be possible to catch a sight of the magnificent beasts inside zoos. It's probably better that way. **Kingshuk Niyogy**

Where to go

Iqbal Khan Hathiwale JJ Camp Thokar, NH-8, near Yamuna Bridge (93126-81806).

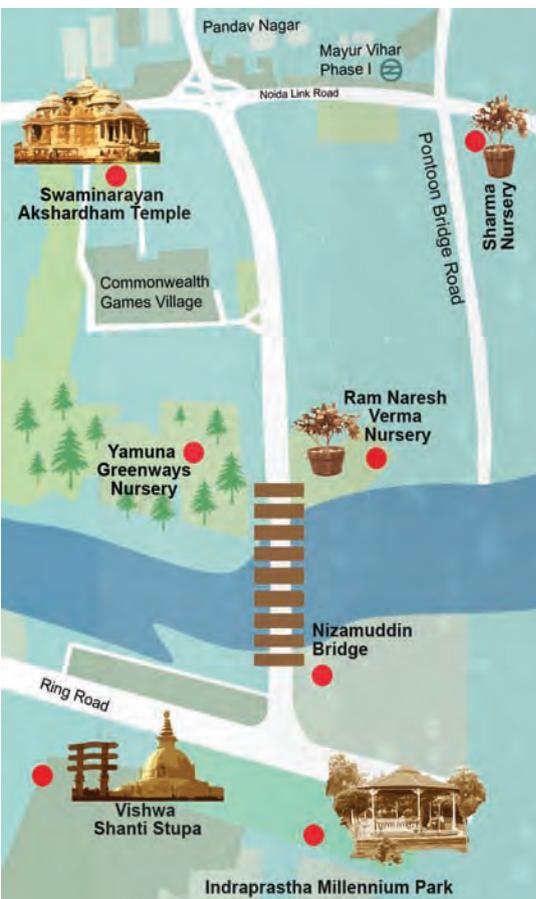


MAP NOT TO SCALE



MANJIBALMIKI (5)

Field day Near the eastern end of the Nizamuddin Bridge



MAP NOT TO SCALE

Nizamuddin Bridge Chants and plants

Rivers are the starting points of history. Civilizations grow around them. Traders and conquerors use them as pathways to new lands. And despite the Yamuna's dying state, it still inspires new, shining beacons of development to bloom around it. Our starting point, the **Indraprastha Millennium Park**, completed in 2004, is a stone's throw from the river bank. An erstwhile landfill, it was rehabilitated into gently sloping gardens with manicured lawns, odd sculptural art and large bushes that shield lovers looking for some quiet time. Walking through, we glimpsed Humayun's Tomb ahead of us, and the soon-to-be-restored Neela Gumbad, which was originally set on an island in the river. On the right, the **Vishwa Shanti Stupa** was built in 2007 under the auspices of Nichidatsu Fujii, a Japanese Buddhist monk, and inaugurated by the Dalai Lama as a symbol of peace and religious understanding. Its clear white surfaces and golden Buddha reliefs gleam in the sun, and the Stupa is quiet, despite the heavily trafficked roads just a step away.

Further ahead, cars cross the Nizamuddin Bridge (the city's most heavily trafficked),

oblivious to the river beneath them. The only attention-grabbing sight is the modern architecture of the CWG Village, juxtaposed against **Swaminarayan Akshardham**, a more grandiose display of religion than the Stupa. The main 43-metre high structure, smaller temples, films, musical fountains and boat rides make up a vast 90-acre complex, and it's as much a tourist attraction and spectacle of religious wealth as it is a place of worship. Between the two grand religious icons though, under the Nizamuddin Bridge approach, is the story of a very different India.

Here, people lead a hand-to-mouth existence on small plots of land that house farms and makeshift nurseries, which are destroyed annually by the rising water level. Walking the meandering path under the bridge, we met **Ram Naresh Verma**, the owner of one such nursery plagued by issues of rent and floods. "We rent the land for the nursery from the Gujjars on an annual basis," he said. "However, when there are floods [the last in 2010], we have to incur losses for the plants, plus find temporary accommodation and rebuild the nursery again." The river's rising acidity levels



Hay there The old approach to the Pontoon Bridge



Green thumb Mohan Dutt Sharma at his nursery



Have a ball Indraprastha Millennium Park



Peace out Vishwa Shanti Stupa

Cast a net Yamuna resources online

Toxics Link An environmental organisation with an ongoing engagement with water pollution. www.toxicslink.org

We for Yamuna A Swechha initiative that organises several activities on and for the river, including a "Yamunotsav". Last year, the nonprofit organised a cyclothon. www.swechha.in

Yamuna – Elbe A 2011 public art project about the Yamuna (in Delhi) and the Elbe in Hamburg. www.yamuna-elbe.de

Yamuna Gently Weeps From Ruzbeh N Barucha's book on the pre-Commonwealth Games Yamuna Pushta demolitions. www.yamunagentlyweeps.com

Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan A civil society consortium dedicated to restoring the river ecosystem. www.yamunajiyeabhiyaan.blog.spot.in

Yamuna Waterkeeper Part of a global alliance committed to reclaim drinkable, fishable waters. www.yamunawaterkeeper.org

also make the water unfit for personal use.

Further ahead, Ratan Singh Rana, the owner of **Yamuna Greenways** nursery and an ex-horticulturist, had his own set of woes: stray dogs spoiling the plants and a reliance on groundwater due to the toxicity of the river. "The advantage is that the water level is high and it needn't be pumped from as low down as the rest of the city, so that's why we supply to various other nurseries in the city," said Rana. Both Verma and Rana also expressed a fear about the river's pollution and the plans to build a Metro bridge here, which may take away their land and livelihood. Their relationship with the Yamuna is complex; one of trepidation and gratitude.

From here we drifted towards the eastern bank in search of the remains of one of Delhi's floating pontoon bridges. The road towards it was once a busy street for cars to cross, but now it contains more nurseries, farmland and a makeshift village for local labourers. Mohan Datt

Sharma, an ex-Government servant-turned-nursery owner (**Sharma Nursery**) engaged us in conversation. "I remember the old Pontoon Bridge, he told us. "It was dismantled 25 years ago, and though there have been talks of reinstating it as a means to ease the traffic on the DND and Nizamuddin Bridge, we don't know anything yet." Sharma's nursery supplies flowers across the city, including lotus buds – a relative rarity. He too is uncertain about the fate of the river, which he duly pointed us towards. There's little to see here, but a government portable toilet and a pile-up of refuse from religious offerings on the banks, making it a hotbed for disease and smells. Sadly, no lotuses growing in this muck.

Vilasin Roy and **Akshita Nahar**

TRAFFIC JAM

ITO and Nizamuddin are the most heavily trafficked bridges. According to the Delhi Traffic Police, the average waiting time on the Yamuna's eight road bridges is 15 to 30 minutes.

Where to go

Greenways Nursery Yamuna Bank, Noida Mod (99996-84576). ☎ Akshardham. Daily 8am-8pm.

Indraprastha Millennium Park Sarai Kale Khan, Mahatma Gandhi Marg. Daily 7am-8.30pm.

Ram Naresh Verma Nursery Yamuna Bank, near PWD office, Noida Mod, Pandav Nagar (98181-33512). ☎ Akshardham. Daily 6am-8pm.

Sharma Nursery Pontoon Pul, Yamuna Khadar, Mayur Vihar, Phase-I (93132-67814). ☎ Mayur Vihar Phase I. Daily 6am-6pm.

Swaminarayan Akshardham NH-24, near Noida Mor (2201-6688). ☎ Akshardham. Tue-Sun 9.30am-6.30pm. Tickets ₹170.

Vishwa Shanti Stupa Mahatma Gandhi Marg (Ring Road), Sarai Kale Khan. Daily 7am-8.30pm.



Kalindi Kunj

A barrage of birds

The **Okhla Bird Sanctuary** is a study in contrasts. On one side is a serene expanse of water, with birds fluttering over it. On the other, high tension wires buzz loudly along the boundary. Stepping down to a mud trail adjoining the river, we averted our eyes from the noxious-looking foam near the shore and the plastic rubbish, focusing instead on the breathtaking view of swimming brown-headed gulls and flying white terns.

Close to the juncture where the Yamuna leaves Delhi and enters Uttar Pradesh, this lake was formed due to the construction of the Okhla Barrage in 1986 (the choked diversion was dredged and cleaned for the first time this year). Passing the barrage and the **Kalindi Kunj Bridge** (currently partially closed for repairs), we arrived at the sanctuary, which was officially designated as a preserve by the UP government in 1990. The compact four-square-kilometre park hosts 320 species, according to a brochure. In the last few years however, there's been a fall in the numbers of winter migratory birds due to pollution and rampant construction. We ran into bird enthusiast, amateur photographer and regular visitor Jayanta Das, who complained about the lack of awareness among visitors and the decline in the number of birds. "By this time of

the year, there should have been many more birds here," he said. With these ominous concerns in mind, we headed deeper inside.

We'd recommend bringing your own binoculars and bird guide. Patient observation yielded glimpses of a beautiful white-throated, turquoise feathered kingfisher, a flock of brown geese leaving little triangular trails in the water and a group of snowy pekin ducks. Further ahead, several white cattle egrets pecked through the thick growth of water hyacinth. The way to the two watchtowers, over a rickety bamboo bridge and typha fields is less rewarding. There are almost no birds on this side, only

a few goats and, ensconced at the first watchtower, a group of Chandigarh tourists with alcohol and snacks and anything but nature on their minds. The view does offer a bird's eye view of the sanctuary, sandwiched between Okhla Village and Kalindi Kunj on one side and Noida's domed Rastriya Dalit Prerna Sthal on the other.

A solitary building here is the samadhi of local saint **Baba Makkolal**. "People who had some problem would come and pray to him and it would get solved," samadhi-keeper, Bhanwar Singh told us. "Earlier I used to run wild and drink heavily. Over a decade ago, I came to believe in Baba. Now, everything is alright." He said the surrounding structures

were demolished by the government a few years ago, as they were encroaching on the sanctuary. The samadhi, however, survived the bulldozers. "Earlier, there used to be a regular stream of visitors who would come for the kheer ka prasad," he said. Further ahead, a cremation ground caters to local villages like Narabans and Baraula.

From this spooky spot, it's a 20 minute auto-ride to the **Defense Services Sailing Club**, inaugurated in 1961 by the Navy. Childishly excited at the prospect of setting sail on the river, we entered through a small iron gate, walking a curved path that culminated in a garden bordering the Yamuna. On one side, overturned boats slept in a storage area; their slumber unfortunately not to be disturbed. One of the three mustachioed staffers told us the sailing club has been dysfunctional for over a year – and even then it was only admissible to members who must be part of the defence services. Further probing seemed to agitate him and he exclaimed, "Only God knows why it has been shut for so long and we don't know when it will be operational again. You shouldn't be asking questions about a defence-related thing." The smell of French fries lured us to a deserted reception area with a board listing Commodores back to 1965. There wasn't much else, except dogs sprawled in the garden and an exceptionally clean view of the river, so we headed out to Jamia Nagar.

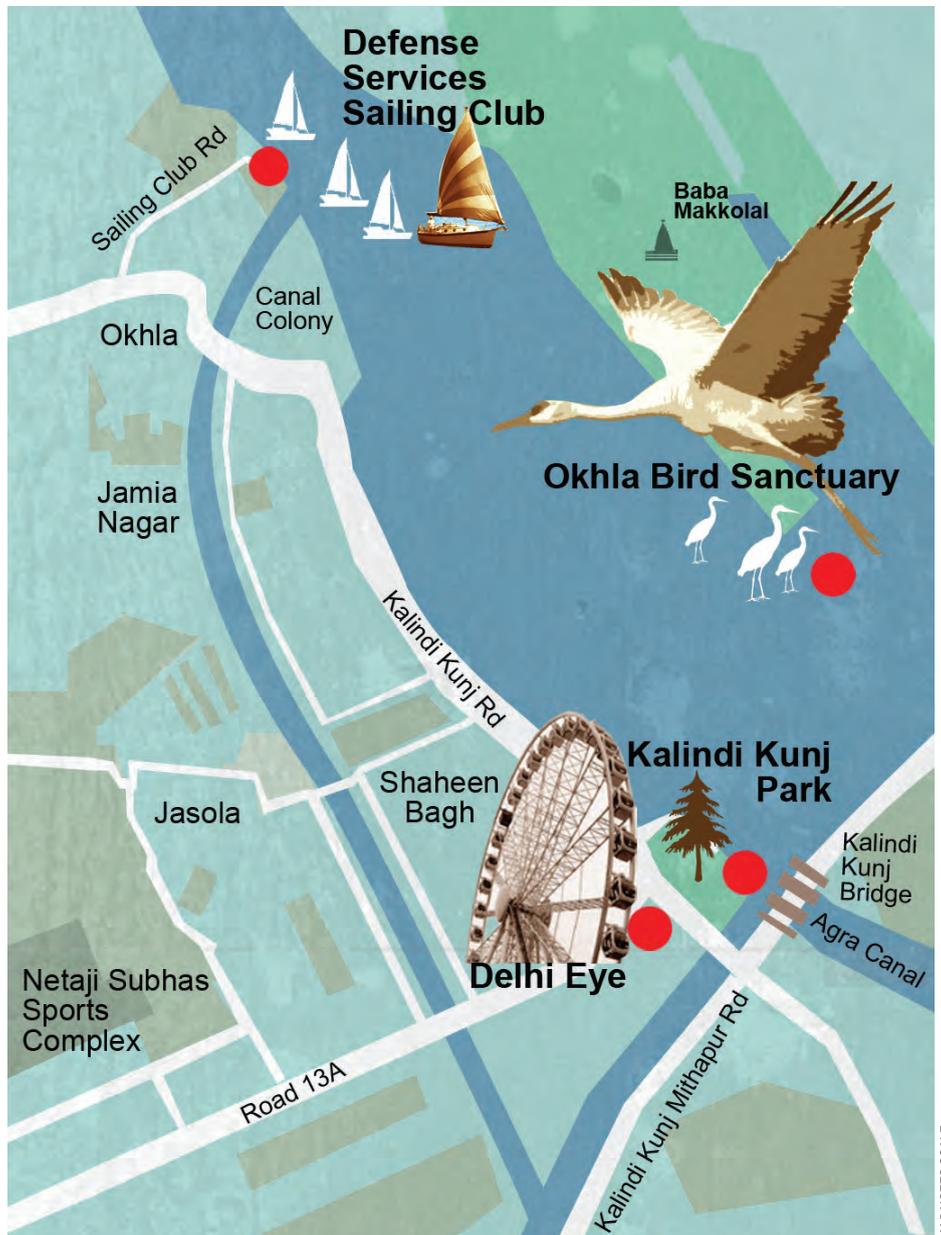
Picking our way through the pot-holed galis

BAD PATCH

Only two per cent (22km) of the Yamuna's 1,370km river basin runs through Delhi. Yet the NCR contributes to 80 per cent of the river's total pollution.



MANIT BALMIKI (3)



MAP NOT TO SCALE

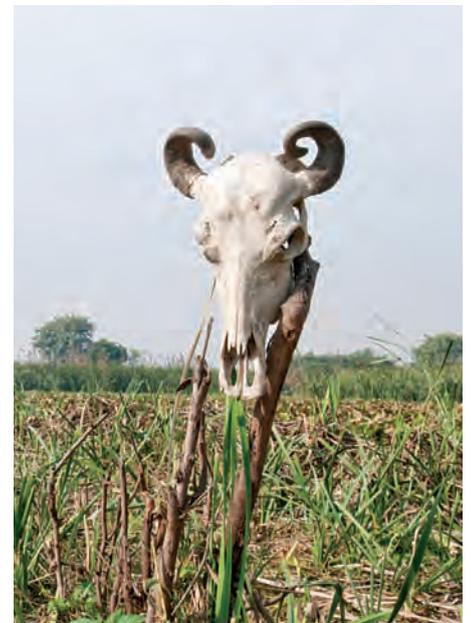
here, we had to stop at an intersection on Sailing Club Road, where at 1pm, namaaz proceedings in the middle of the street were blocking traffic. There are 15 mosques in the area, and the beautiful Jamia Millia Islamia University campus, founded in 1935. Other interesting landmarks include Radio Jamia, a station dedicated to the area, and further north, Batla House, where the famous encounter killing took place four years ago. Looking up from the bustle of poultry stores and Pakistani-style suits, we saw the 45-metre high **Delhi Eye** situated in the Delhi Rides amusement park, another establishment that hasn't been open to the public for over a year.

However, in the same compound is the 12.5-acre **Kalindi Kunj Park**, which attracts a large number of spectators with its exquisitely lit fountains. Rather exhausted, we headed to the snack bar and were pleasantly surprised to discover a little shop with bread pakoras, patties, chowmein, sandwiches and a host of greasy noshes. The sight of a few canoodling couples slightly inhibited digestion, so we walked the labyrinthian track, reaching a locked gate, which would have opened on to a boardwalk overlooking the Yamuna. Reflecting lights of different hues, the grime and contamination of the river were hidden by the darkening skies.

At 6.15pm, the fountains were turned on. Dancing in tinted lights, the water looked enchanting – a lovely end to the day. Casting a glance back over the joyfully shrieking children at the lonely bulwark of the abandoned Delhi Eye, we couldn't help hoping that someday the capital's many problems might be locked away, instead of its amusement spots. **Asmita Bakshi and Sonam Joshi**



Birdie num num A kingfisher and (r) skull at Okhla Bird Sanctuary



Where to go

Kalindi Kunj Park Kalindi Kunj Road, near Abul Fazal Enclave. Daily 10am-7.15pm. Entry ₹20.

Okhla Bird Sanctuary Road 13A, off Mathura Road, near Okhla Barrage, Gautam Budh Nagar. Daily sunrise-sunset. Entry ₹30.