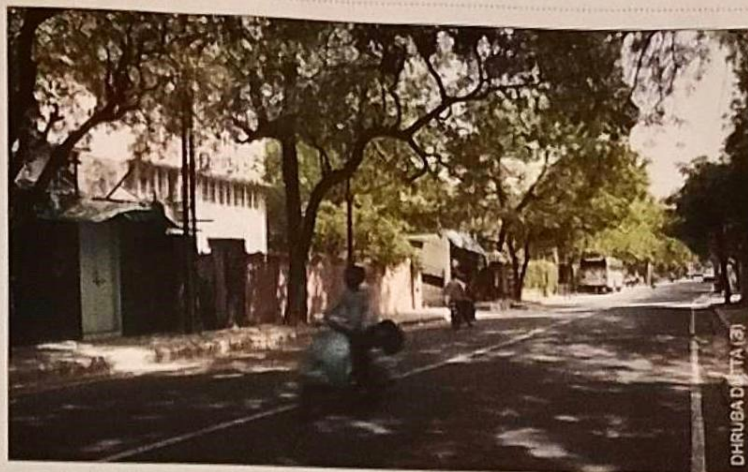


I love Civil Lines by Sonal Shah

When I came to Delhi for an exchange semester at St Stephens University, I was housed with several other students in a posh apartment complex built on the site of an old bungalow in Civil Lines. Though I spent only eight months there, I grew to love the neighbourhood as much as any of the long-time residents, who know that it's not as far as South Delhi residents think it is.

Meandering, shady lanes and sprawling bungalows characterise this British-built residential area, sandwiched between the Ring Road and the Northern Ridge. Our apartment used to be an extended family compound, but had been converted into flats. This gave us the advantage of a wonderful view of this quiet neighbourhood from our roof. On grey winter days, we would sit there, watching the prayer flags fluttering jauntily above the Ladakh Buddhist Vihar, and see a smudge of the Yamuna beyond. The green swathe of the Ridge was also visible. When the wind was right, you could see kites dotting the sky above the walled city to the South. Occasionally a loud truck horn floated up from the traffic, but more characteristic was the persistent gurgling sound of hundreds of pigeons.

I spent many a dusty afternoon wandering around the twisty, high-walled streets in the area



The shady avenues of Civil Lines

between the Ring Road and Shammath Marg. Peek between the iron gates and you find yellowed lawns and peeling colonnades. Occasionally I would walk through Qudsia Bagh, named for Qudsia Begum, the wife of Muhammad Shah. Dating from 1748, there's not much left of the building but a disintegrating gate and the old-brick Shahi masjid. Intriguingly, there's also a Masonic Club in the garden.

Civil Lines feels like a New Delhi colony without the gated divide and the arbitrariness of numbered lanes. We used to buy our vegetables under a Ring Road flyover and wander down to Exchange Stores to eat Cornettos on the swing outside.

When I lived there, the Metro construction was in full swing, but now it's all ready. Connaught

Place was always a hop, skip and jump away, and with the addition of the Metro, it's an even shorter ride. The station is just next to the Exchange Stores, the new Embassy Restaurant and the unassuming little Moets Chinese Room. A little further away is the weary but dignified Oberoi Maidens hotel.

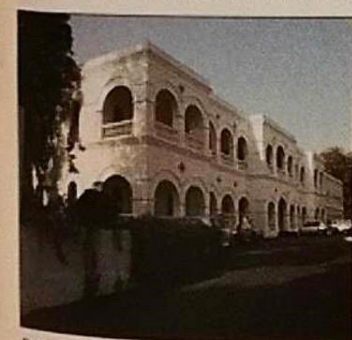
On the rare occasions when I would go to class, I'd catch an auto to take me up through the Ridge to North Campus. We would pass Flagstaff Tower, built on one of the highest points in Delhi. Apparently, in 1828 – when it was built as a signal tower – one could see as far as the Qutab Minar. Other understated highlights of the Ridge include the fourteenth-century Chauburji Mosque and Pir Ghaib, Firoz Shah's former hunting lodge.

In the Mughal period, several rulers built gardens around the Ridge. Early Europeans tended to live in the Daryaganj area, but after 1857 – when the military took over the Red Fort – most moved to Civil Lines. After the 1911 Durbar, North Delhi became the temporary capital, while New Delhi was being built. Once the imperial city moved to the areas around and south of India Gate, much of the North Delhi government buildings were taken over by Delhi University. And Civil Lines became home to more wealthy Indian families with Western educations.

The area retains its sleepy, old wealth atmosphere, though many of the large homes are locked up or have been redeveloped. For all that, the area is still charming, and even new buildings are fairly tasteful, steering blessedly clear of the "Punjabi Baroque" style so loved by other Dilliwalas. After 15 years abroad, my reintroduction to Delhi was set apart by a tranquillity and a tangible sense of history that both typifies and eludes this city.

It's surprising that the building boom has left Civil Lines relatively untouched. If you're lucky, you might find paying guest accommodation or a flat for rent. But, at the risk of sounding snobbish and of romanticising the Raj era, it's probably a good thing that living here is so selective.

Neighbourhood gems



Delhi's original Oberoi hotel

Oberoi Maidens Hotel
One of the oldest hotels in the city, the Oberoi Maidens is also one of the quietest. Built in the early 1900s, this Imperial-style building sits on eight acres of manicured lawn, ornamental palm trees, a pool and tennis courts. The elegant property retains an old world charm

with a restaurant called the Curzon Room, a coffee shop, and the small Cavalry Bar. Pool memberships are available as well, with seasonal rates as well as a Rs 550 per day option. The perfect place for perusing old photos and prints, or just having a cold coffee on a hot day. 7 Shammath Marg, Civil Lines (2397-5464). ☎ Civil Lines.

Exchange Store

Built in 1902, the store doesn't sell anything that unusual anymore, but is a good source for everyday items. Some gourmet imported products, toys for the kiddies and crockery for the kitchen is also available. Sit on the nice bench swing outside, where you can enjoy an ice-cream cone whilst gazing upon mountains of chocolate boxes.

13 Allpur Road, Civil Lines (2392-8986). ☎ Civil Lines.

Petite Hotel

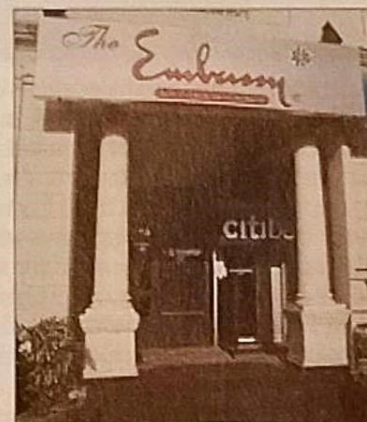
A small bed-and-breakfast type establishment on Flagstaff Road, the Petite Hotel caters to the odd tourist, businessmen longing for a quiet "homely" stay, and overflow from the Oberoi Maidens. Run by playwright Arun Kukreja, this diminutive hotel offers 10 rooms and a flowery garden-cum-conference room.

4A Flagstaff Road, Civil Lines (6519-0511). ☎ Civil Lines.

Embassy Restaurant

Part of the Exchange Stores building, this used to be Rasol. All redone in classy British club style is the new Embassy Restaurant – a branch of the CP venue. The menu is limited to North Indian Punjabi-Mughlai cuisine. The starters are the best deal, and once they have a liquor license in place (about a

month) it will be a nice place for a beer and tikkas with its effective airconditioning and high ceilings. 13 Allpur Road, Civil Lines (2399-3061). Lunch 12.30-3.30pm, 6.30-11pm. ☎ Civil Lines.



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