



The Laad Bazaar street market towards Charminar

## TIME'S OWN TRINKET

Hyderabad is a city of secrets where old eras preserve their coy privacy well. **CHARUKESI RAMADURAI** takes a walk through streets fragrant with living cultures, both glorious and ah!

Novelist Doris Lessing felt pearls are tears. In Hyderabad, it meant the laughter and glory of the Nizams. From the time they welcomed pearl merchants from the Arabian markets, Hyderabad has been the Pearl City. However, more interesting and lesser known is the story of the diamonds that light up the city's history.

Take the Koh-i-noor, one of the world's largest diamonds. It was once stored at Golkonda, just a hop, skip and jump (or a bumpy autorickshaw ride) away from the

Nizam's capital. Golkonda, then a mini town, was also the administrative seat of various dynasties, since the mid 10th century. It was only in the late 16th century that Muhammad Quli Qutub Shah moved a few miles and established the city of Hyderabad, building the Charminar at its core.

But this morning, I am not in the heart of Hyderabad to discuss diamonds with historians or purchase pearls from jewellers. I make my way towards Charminar, its four minarets casting a watchful eye over the neighbourhood. Walking through the narrow

shopping lanes branching out from this tower is a sensory overload, pleasurable in a way that is purely Indian.

I have ambled through these lanes several times before, ignoring the cacophony of traffic and spindrift of people brushing past me. I have enjoyed the burst of bling from the bangles at Laad Bazaar, their glass, metal and lac twinkling in the sunlight. I have laughed at the way canny shopkeepers call out to "just come in, madam, *dekhne ka paisa nahi lagta*", knowing fully well that to see is to succumb.

I have no favourites here,



er a little exploration of the old city's inscrutable streets. So I am on a "Deccan Odyssey" with Raize, Hyderabad's first female tourist guide.

On our way to the Charminar, I quiz Raize, a Hyderabad recently married to a Lucknowi, about the difference between the two styles of biryani. Raize's loyalty clearly lies with her *maika*, as she declares that the Hyderabad biryani—cooked for hours, with heaps of patience and generous sprinklings of secret ingredients—is the real McCoy.

Strolling around Charminar in the company of a local is a novel experience for me. Our first stop is at Nimrah cafe and bakery, an Iranian chai point, right next to Mecca Masjid. It is that no-man's time between breakfast and lunch, but Nimrah is a veritable beehive. Men of all ages stand outside gossiping, as they sip on *chai* poured on to saucers. Inside, trays after tray of piping hot biscuits, cookies and *dilpasand* are brought out from the desi oven, to be displayed on the counters.

I get to sample a bit of this and a bit of that, all of it still warm and fragrant. The specialty here is the melt-in-the-mouth Osmania biscuits, the favourite of Hyderabad's last

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Nimrah Cafe and bakery (above); Nimrah's famous cookies and biscuits



and risibly eccentric Nizam.

In my many visits to this area,

I have never noticed Nimrah. And I know that on my own, I would never have stepped inside. I leave clutching a box of Osmania, a gift from the gracious owner Abood Bin Aslam, "Hyderabad *ki tarafse*."

Then we head into the throbbing mass of humanity that is Laad bazaar, where Raize imparts interesting trivia about how it got its name. Popular belief is that it is derived from lacquer (*laad*) which is used in the bangles this market is renowned for.

However, I prefer Raize's theory that the bazaar was set up as a shopping destination by our old friend Muhammad Quli Qutub Shah for his daughter Laad's wedding to Aurangzeb's son. Even today, Laad Bazaar serves as the hub for trousseau shopping for many Hyderabad brides.

We shop at Nayeem Bangles; an incredible collection, from the very subtle and classy to the cheerfully glittering and sparkly crammed into a small shop. Here, there is no oversell as they let the trinkets speak for themselves.

Just down the road is Afzal Miyan Karchobwale's Lace Centre, here since 1951. Now run by the grandson of the original entrepreneur, this shop is legendary for

its *karchob* (hand embroidery) work, not just among ordinary wedding shoppers but also among the rich and famous.

I hear whispers that Afzal Miyan's craft—exquisite *zardosi* and delicate lace embroidery has patrons ranging from Princess Esra to Sabyasachi Mukherjee. I also learn that in this tiny space, some of the fabric that glitters is actually gold; from borders on saris to bridal *khada* dupattas.

Since we begin the tour with food, we also end it with a pit-stop at Navrang for a sachet of their biryani masala. For a shop that stocks condiments, nuts and spices, it is quirkily named Navrang Colour Merchant. The owner has never revealed the secret of his "Special Hyderabad Old City Biryani Masala" made of 15 spices, which guarantees a sublime biryani.

I catch a whiff of it and I can tell you this. The battle of the biryanis may never get resolved, but don't leave Hyderabad without a stash of this masala.

Lonely Planet, in choosing Hyderabad as one of the top 10 destinations for 2013, had said, "Elegant and blossoming, but also weathered and undiscovered, Hyderabad's Old City is ripe for exploration." Truly, Hyderabad reveals its charms slowly and bashfully to the visitor. Beyond the teeming masses and eager vendors, the old city has a warm heart.

For details on the Deccan Odyssey, email [krishna.hyderabad@tajhotels.com](mailto:krishna.hyderabad@tajhotels.com)