

Calcutta's city park, the Maidan

Jack Goldfarb takes a stroll through the "city with a soul"

Following the fall of the British East India Company's stronghold of Fort William in Calcutta in 1756, legendary British general and empire-builder Robert Clive recaptured the post and reinforced its defenses by leveling huge tracts of land surrounding it.

Swept away in the razed area was a dense forest inhabited by tigers, snakes, jackals and crocodile-infested creeks. Today this vast open space is known as the Maidan, Calcutta's principal city park, which provides an airy, all-purpose urban oasis of verdant parkland. It is much more of a "happening" than just a big city park.

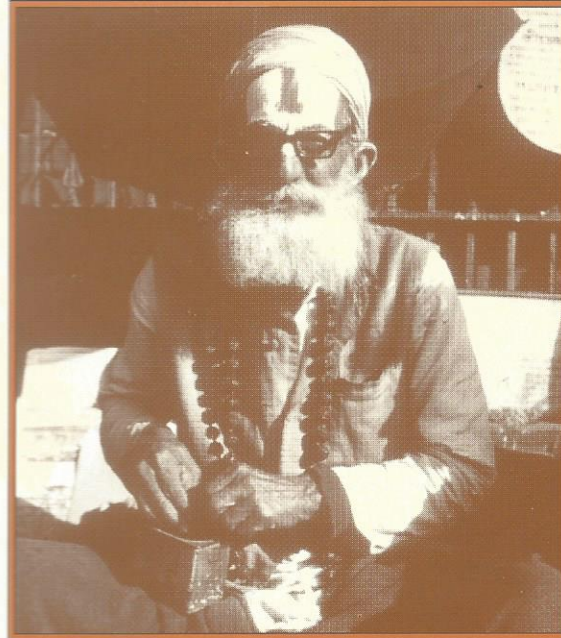
Its 1,000-acre sprawl of grassy flatland, much larger than both New York's Central Park and London's Hyde Park, is dotted with flowering trees and evergreens and served as a playground where Calcuttans seek escape from the oppressive heat, traffic fumes and environmental pressures of their crowded city. There are cricket, soccer and field hockey matches in sports stadiums, political rallies and family picnics, as well as poetry and essay readings, concerts, games, yoga classes, snake charmers, jugglers, and performing bears and monkeys.

Along the borders of the Maidan there is an array of historic buildings and landmarks. On the east, the faded glory of the 19th century Raj mansions of privileged colonial officials have now been converted

into offices, shops, movie theaters and hotels. On the western flank, beyond the warehouses and trucking depots of Strand Road, the muddy Hooghly River separates Calcutta from its industrial sister-city, Howrah, across the water.

To the north, the British-built, Queen Anne-style Government House, now Raj Bhavan, resident of West Bengal's governor, looms imperiously over the Barabazar commercial district and the 19th century buildings of historic Dalhousie Square. And on the southern rim rises the magnificent domed and turreted Victoria Memorial Hall with its precious collections of three centuries of Indian art and history. Built in tribute to Queen Victoria, the gleaming white marble edifice is considered one of the most splendid architectural achievements in post-Moghul India.

In this vibrant, compelling city, those who love Calcutta point to its humaneness and verve, its cultural and intellectual vitality and they call it the "city with a soul". The best place for visitors to get to know this soul is the Maidan.

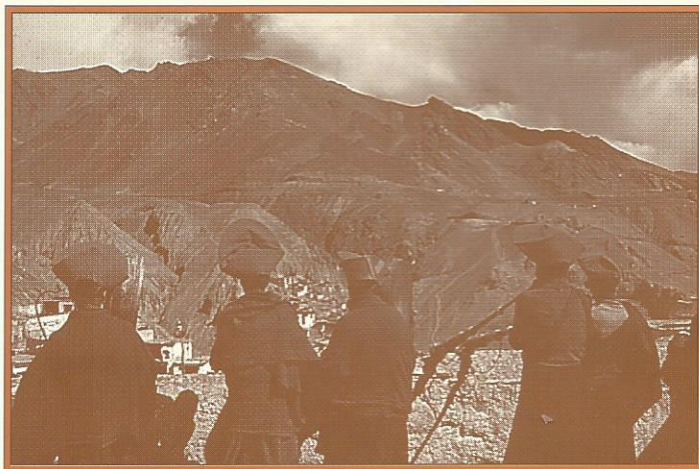


A fortune teller sits in the maidan awaiting customers

Air-India Reservations, telephone (212) 751-6200, for air booking to Calcutta. Calcutta is at the eastern end of the Grand Trunk Road. An extensive bus operation from and to Calcutta allows inexpensive travel within West Bengal. Booking Office: Calcutta State Transport Corporation, telephone 2481916

Ladakh Sarai offers unusual experiences for travelers

Ladakh, first opened for tourism in 1974, is one of the few strongholds of Tibetan life, culture and religion accessible to western travelers. It is located in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, cradled in a niche north of the Great Himalayas with the Zaskar range to the south and the Ladakh range to the north. The Karakoram lies a little further to the north-west.



Buddhist monks at the Lamayaru Monastery in Ladakh

The Ladakh Sarai, a yurt camp for 30 guests, is situated at 11,500 feet. In the village of Stok, a 30-minute drive from Leh, the capital of Ladakh. Perched high above the Indus valley, the Sarai is set in a green meadow amid a grove of willow trees with a dramatic backdrop of snow-capped mountains.

The Sarai offers visitors a variety of unusual experiences and adventures. There are leisurely walks to unspoiled villages and visits to the famous gompas (monasteries) of Ladakh. These include Shey, well-known for its two-story gold and copper statue of Buddha, Thikse, the 16th century gumpa housing precious thankas and wall paintings, and Hemis, the largest and perhaps the most spectacular monastery in Ladakh.

Guests taking the opportunity to explore the charming village of Stok may be invited by its friendly and welcoming people to take part in archery contests, a special feature of the village. Visitors to Stok are often invited to the Palace and Museum, home of the Rani.

Ladakh Sarai is 30 minutes from Leh airport. The Sarai is open from June through mid-October. During the summer months, the days are usually warm, but early mornings and late evenings, the temperature drops. Travelers stay in spacious canvas and bamboo yurts, modelled on the Mongolian akoi. Each yurt has twin beds and a sitting area. For reservations and additional information, Travel Corporation (India), telephone 212/935-4825, fax 212/753-3956