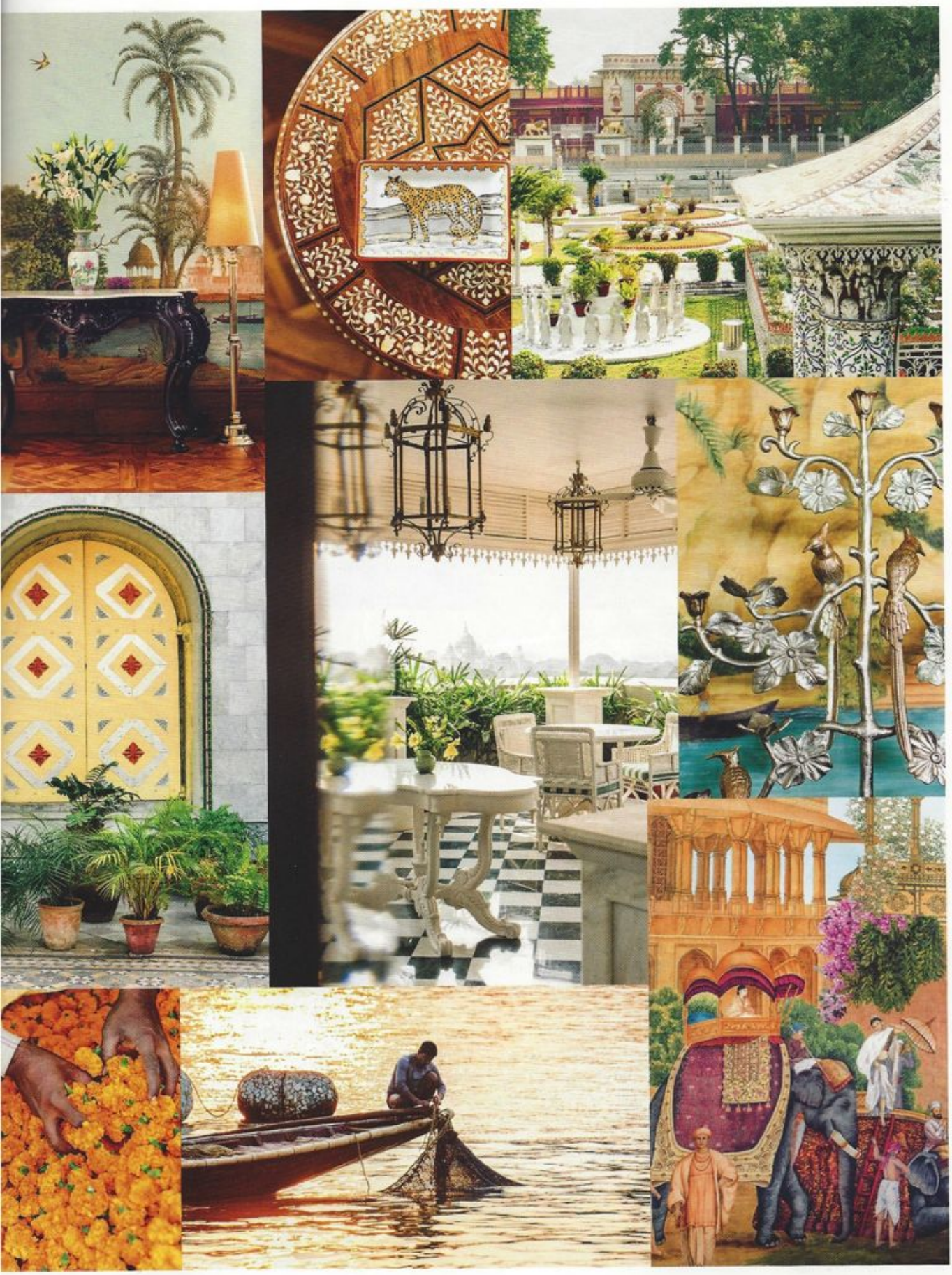

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HELTER SKELTER

Built to equal European capitals for palatial grandeur, Kolkata spins at many speeds. At once regal and ramshackle, intense and invigorating, it's a resolute metropolis that draws curious wanderers ready to hurtle into the hubbub

By Steve King. Photographs by Ana Lui







When I remember Calcutta – as the residents of Kolkata still call their city, despite its official name change – it appears before my mind's eye in sepia tones, muted and mild, as if everything were seen through a thick particulate haze. I suppose that's what diesel fumes can do to daylight, and to memory. People often speak of Calcutta's faded splendour, as if everything that is beautiful about the city had long since ceased to be quite so beautiful as it once was. But I would not describe it as faded, not exactly, if only because I find it impossible to imagine a time when it might have been otherwise. Calcutta seems to have been born faded. Its surfaces cracked and careworn and flaking at the time of their construction. The seeds of the trees that grow through so many of its broken rooftops presumably arrived two or three hundred years ago on the soles of builders' sandals. There is a kind of democracy to this decay that I love. The grandest of buildings tend to be as racked and blasted-looking as the most humble.

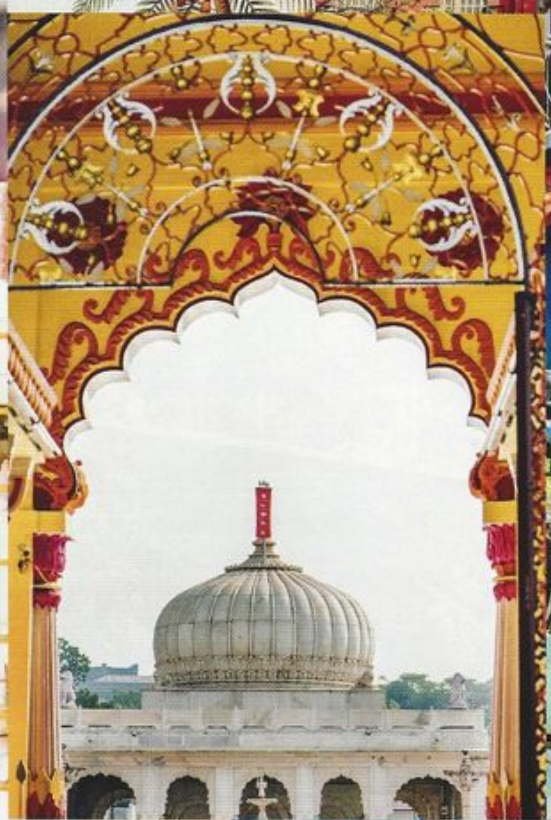
The sudden eruptions of colour that here and there cut through the haze are exceptions which seem only to prove this born-faded hypothesis. The supernatural radiance of the marigolds and sunflowers at Mallick Ghat, the wholesale flower market on the banks of the Hooghly River, for example. If you peer down at it from the Howrah Bridge, it is a little like the way trading floors in London and New York used to look, with hundreds of men waving their arms and shouting at each other, and litter all over the place, only the ground is strewn not with scraps of paper but with fallen petals forming a shallow lake of pure colour. I recall being similarly struck by the saturated blues of lapis-lazuli and greens of jadeite in the Jain temple, and the tomato-soup red that announces the 'Reynolds' painting in the Bengal Club as a fake at 10 paces.

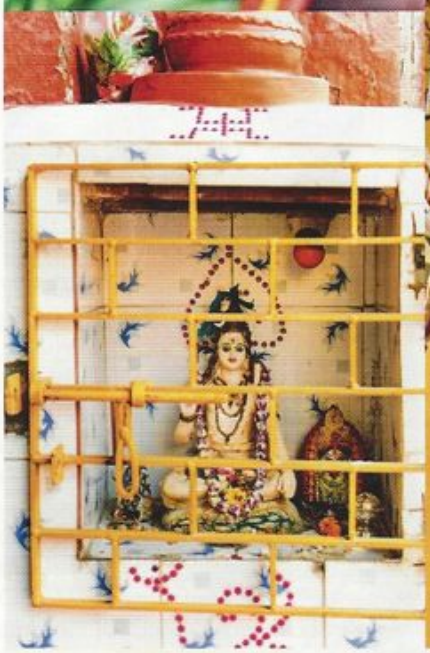
Calcutta has a sound, too, or a soundtrack, which is inseparable from the way it looks. Never mind the traffic noise. That is hardly unique. Listen instead to the way the people speak. The chatter in Calcutta is an irrepressible and inescapable force of nature. You are borne along day and night on a torrent of verbiage. There is a word, *adda*, for this kind of talk, which, according to locals, distinguishes it from the speech you hear elsewhere in India – not, of course, a tongue-tied nation. *Adda* is informed, intellectual, discursive, meditative. It is learned chit-chat for Bengali smarty-pants – though it is not the preserve of any one class. The novelist Kushanava Choudhury defines it as 'aimless digressive conversation'. Aimless, you will note, but not pointless. *Adda* is not all hot air. Dreams are born in Calcutta, plans hatched, ideas implemented, deals brokered, conclusions drawn. Leaving aside for a moment its historical position as the second city of the British Empire, Calcutta is also the home town, by birth or adoption, of Rabindranath Tagore (Nobel Prize in Literature, 1913), CV Raman (Nobel Prize in Physics, 1930), Mother

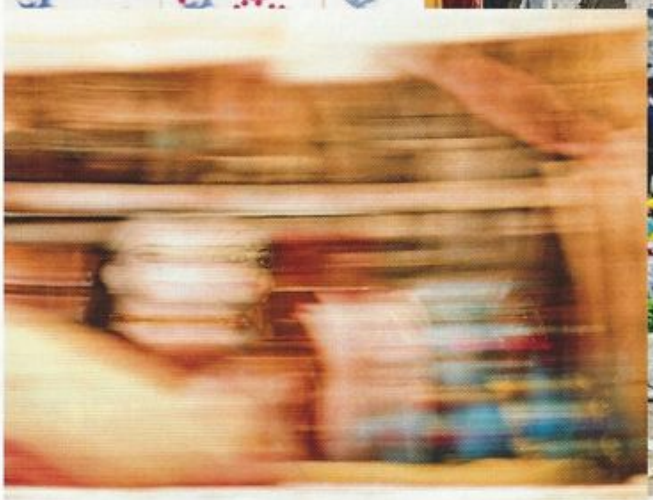
Above, clockwise from top left: masks, market vendor, and street corner; The Glenburn Penthouse; studio in Kumartuli potters' village. *Opposite*, Parshwanath Jain Temple. *Previous pages, clockwise from left*: Victoria Memorial; furniture, and inlaid table at The Glenburn Penthouse; Jain Temple gardens; candlestick, and mural at The Glenburn Penthouse; fisherman; marigolds; Jain Temple; The Glenburn Penthouse terrace







যতীন্দ্র নাথ পাল
এন্ড সন্স
গণেশ চন্দ্র পাল
শিল্পী ও ভাস্কর
অসীম পাল
মোবাইল:
৯৮৩১১০ ২৬৬১



Teresa (Nobel Peace Prize, 1979), Satyajit Ray (Honorary Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement, 1992), Amartya Sen (Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, 1998) and too many similarly brilliant overachievers to mention.

Adda is not a site-specific pastime or one that requires any special planning. It can be undertaken more or less anywhere, at any time. But for the sort of person to whom scenery and ambience matter, I would point you to the Indian Coffee House on College Street, an airy refectory built in 1876 as the Albert Hall. This is the Café de Flore of the East, the Deux Magots of the Indies. Those who cannot summon the spirit of *adda* here might as well retire to a monastery and take a vow of silence.

In 1690 Calcutta was considered a pestilent backwater best avoided. A plucky employee of the British East India Company by the name of Job Charnock thought otherwise. He pitched his tent on the banks of the Hooghly and less than a century later this grimy encampment had become not only a hub of global trade but also the thriving headquarters of the Raj, 'one of the most wicked places in the universe', according to General Clive, 'rapacious and luxurious beyond conception', dense with Palladian mansions to dwarf those of Piccadilly and Park Lane. If the city's rise was sharp, so was its fall. In 1911 Calcutta lost its capital status to Delhi and there followed, in quick succession, the end of empire, war, famine, civil unrest, more war, partition, a refugee crisis, more civil unrest, and a seemingly terminal descent into poverty and disease on an apocalyptic scale. In 1975 Paul Theroux – by no means an unsympathetic observer – likened Calcutta to 'a corpse on which the Indians were feeding like flies'.

It is still a city of almost unimaginable extremes, splendid and horrifying, exhilarating and shaming. A clue is in the name. It may derive from Kali, wife of Shiva, goddess of death and destruction, and by all accounts quite the temperamental so-and-so. Goats are beheaded in her name at the main Kalighat Kali Temple every day. The gold leaf on the lasciviously extended tongue of her effigy is tenderly reapplied daily, too.

The Glenburn Penthouse hotel, overlooking the Maidan and Victoria Memorial, provides respite from all this intensity. The younger sister of the thoughtfully converted and cultishly adored Glenburn Tea Estate in Darjeeling, it is unlike anything else in the city. Though decked out in a style similar to that of the Tea Estate, the Penthouse occupies the top few floors of a glossy high-rise. I asked my driver if he was sure we had come to the right place. But any misgivings I had were dispelled within moments of the lift doors opening. I soon came to think of it as my very own Merchant Ivory tower. The rooms are fabulous. Four-posters, ceiling fans, claw-foot tubs, vintage prints of wild animals. The public spaces are likewise immaculate, with gleaming chequer-board marble and parquet underfoot, and even more leopards pouncing out of the richly textured upholstery and elephants rampaging across muralled walls.

But a greater and more mysterious jungle is to be found at Glenburn's doorstep. Indian friends suggested that if I wanted to see how the city was changing, I should make my way farther afield, to neighbourhoods such as Gariahat where art galleries and concept stores are multiplying, and hipsters have painted the streets in rainbow colours. Maybe next time. I felt I had more than enough to get to grips with within walking distance of my digs in the middle of town, amid what Geoffrey Moorhouse referred to as its 'imperial residue'.

Calcutta was India's first truly cosmopolitan city and it remains a living encyclopedia of lost worlds, cultural cast-offs, hand-me-downs from faraway lands. Its multiculturalism is most visible in the Bowbazar area, the distilled essence of the city, Calcutta's Calcutta. Throughout the boom years of the 18th and 19th centuries it was divided into the exclusively British 'White Town' and the predominantly Indian 'Black Town'. Bowbazar grew up in the interstices between the two, and it was here that other ethnic groups made their homes, ran their businesses and built their places of worship. Standing in the right spot on one of the upper floors of the Magen David Synagogue, you can see, among other things, a mosque, a Buddhist temple, a Roman Catholic cathedral and several jazz clubs.

It was India's first truly cosmopolitan city and remains a living encyclopedia of lost worlds, cultural cast-offs and hand-me-downs from faraway lands

From here you may well catch, rising from the streets below, a whiff of mutton *rezala*, a rich, fatty stew heavy with cardamom, introduced by the chefs who came here from the Mughal courts of northern India; of Portuguese *pastéis de nata*; of the *sambusas* of the Sephardic Jews who emigrated from Baghdad; and of obscenely delicious *kathi* rolls, kebab-like wraps of flaky pan-fried *paratha* flatbread stuffed with anything that takes your fancy, and which belong exclusively to Calcutta. The proprietors of Nizam's Restaurant, a Formica-and-linoleum utopia on Hogg Street established in 1932, claim to have invented the *kathi* on the same premises. The powerful charm of Nizam's, like that of so much of the city, has to do with its staunch and unrepentant resistance to change. It may have been new once but it has been an antidote to novelty ever since.

I mulled this over as I made my way around the erratically palpitating heart of the city, as much as possible on foot, hot and confused and often bothered but always grateful not to be stuck inside a cab. I made up reasons to speak to strangers, simply to hear their voices – the excellent English, the gentleness, the pride. On a whim I tried to gain entry to what appeared to be some sort of government stationers on the ground floor of a falling-down building off the Chowringhee Road that I spotted and liked the look of. 'Sir, truly,' said its custodian, 'I would love

Opposite, clockwise from top left: leaves at the flower market; gilded lamp at The Glenburn Penthouse; the Writers' Building, once a British East India Company office; a street seller; sign outside a sculptor's studio in Kumartuli potters' village; garlands of marigolds at the flower market; a shop, and shrine with Hindu idol in Kumartuli; Jain Temple dome



nothing more than to invite you inside and allow you to explore the premises, but I am afraid it is impossible, quite out of the question...' Calcutta's history of communist politics and violent unrest is well known. Did ever another city so temperamentally highly strung maintain such impeccable manners?

Though nobody could accuse the guardians of Calcutta's architectural heritage of being neurotically vigilant or over-protective, relatively little has been lost outright, certainly not by the standards of India's other great early-colonial-era cities, Madras and Bombay – Chennai and Mumbai, if you must – which have been roughed up, knocked down and rebuilt practically beyond recognition. The few skyscrapers in Calcutta seem miserably out of place, goofy, self-conscious. It is as if they wound up here by accident, through some appalling clerical error that nobody could be bothered to sort out before it was too late.

To a remarkable extent, the city is not just stuck in the past aesthetically but also technologically. It is, by and large, a hand-cranked, pedal-powered affair. The most reliable, inexpensive and plentiful engines are human. Most things are stitched, shifted, scrubbed, swept, kneaded, knotted, folded, fabricated, inscribed, applied, carted, pumped and portered manually. The ubiquitous yellow-roofed Ambassador taxis that clog the streets are among the few conspicuous signs of post-Victorian mechanisation. Likenesses of the gods themselves are sculpted by hand. This occurs on an industrial scale in Kumartuli, a neighbourhood of open-air workshops where Hindu idols are assembled from mud, straw, cow dung and dirt taken from the thresholds of the nearby brothels of Sonagachi, the largest red-light district in India. Demand for this *punya mati*, or 'virtuous dust', becomes acute in the weeks leading up to Durga Puja, the most important festival in the city's calendar, which requires a bumper supply of sacred effigies for purposes of display, worship and, ultimately, disposal by means of a ritualistic but not obviously reverential dunking in the Hooghly.

There is, it occurred to me, a tremendous difference between multiplicity and abundance. All the difference in the world. I pondered this from the splendid isolation of the Glenburn Penthouse terrace. I leaned over the railings and gazed across the great sweltering city below and filled my lungs with its virtuous dust. So many of everything. Gods and flowers and yellow-roofed taxis. Though not, for most of the people out there, so much of anything. Except, perhaps, talk.

Getting here

Greaves India offers five nights at The Glenburn Penthouse from £2,000 per person, including Emirates flights, heritage walking tour, river cruise and daily guided sightseeing.
+44 20 7487 9111; greavesindia.co.uk

Above, The Glenburn Penthouse drawing room. *Opposite, clockwise from top left:* bedroom, and chair at The Glenburn Penthouse; rickshaw; Jain Temple; Kumartuli; picture of Hindu goddess Kali; statue at The Glenburn Penthouse; local at the flower market; The Glenburn Penthouse


आस-पास