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A PASSAGE THROUGH INDIA

It's a food lover's journey of a lifetime, across northern India by train on the luxurious Maharajas' Express. On board: Cinnamon Club chef Vivek Singh. On the itinerary: sharpening his street-curry skills, searching for the world's finest spice, and dining with a movie mogul

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Vivek Singh in Old Delhi and, left, vegetable traders in Gwalior.

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Dawn, a dusty railway siding outside Varanasi, where for 3,000 years Indian Hindus have performed rites for their dead. Sari'd women loom out of the gloom, shadowy shawled figures huddle patiently, waiting to cross the track, our train shudders and we move off again. Outside, endless fields of yellow mustard, vivid green wheat, toor dhal and chana (chickpea). Early morning mist clings to the crops.

A few hours later, we are in the sacred city. Only feet from the Ganges and the ghat where last year he cremated his father, chef Vivek Singh is taking over Manoj Yadav's Sankatha Cafe for his own Cinnamon Club-style sabji – a winter vegetable curry with puffed fried bread (the cafe's usual offering comes with a brimming leaf bowl, puri and a sweet for 10 rupees: 12p). We shop from one of many market stalls a few feet away – bright white gobi (cauliflower), aloo (potatoes), mattar (peas), tomatoes, green chillies, carrots, coriander. The mustard oil we will be cooking with comes in a tiny clear plastic bag; small packets of spice wrapped in newspaper are bought by the day. No point in storing anything when space and money are in short supply.

A few quizzical words and notes are exchanged and we are in business. Vegetables are quickly washed and chopped. The cafe's own knife, a deadly sharpened-down hacksaw, is discarded in place of the chef's one "luxury item": an exquisitely beaten Samurai steel blade. Peas are podded, ginger and onions finely sliced, vermilion carrots and cauliflower diced. Peelings and other waste are fed to a wandering cow waiting patiently outside.

Traveller's rule: it's the darkest, dingiest, even dirtiest places that serve the best food

The kadai (an Indian wok) sits on a blackened oil can of coals kept blazing with a frantic electric fan at its open base. Vivek checks for temperature the traditional tandoor way – holding his forearm over the heat like a concerned parent checking a child's bath. Whole spices are added, then the powders: scarlet chilli, cumin, coriander and turmeric of an astonishing orange, more like poster paint than the ochre yellow we are used to. Water is added, rock salt; he stirs, tastes, adds more salt and spice, stirs again, tastes. Finally, chef satisfied, the pot is covered with a lid.

Next, he rolls and rounds out the fermented dough, flat and fast. Vivek used to make 5,000 puris a day for Oberoi's international flight operation. He expertly spins the discs into the boiling, smoking oil – no gas regulator here, the only option burning hot. The breads are turned quickly a couple of times, puffed and browned, then laid into leaf bowls to be served with the sabji. The cafe's young cook (perhaps 12), happily chewing tobacco, looks on, unconvinced by Vivek's London-style lunch, and bullies a smaller boy into trying it. A lady beggar with an infant child, though, is pleased to be offered. She squats, eats quickly, urgently, smiles and comes back for seconds. Vivek's cousin, who lives in Varanasi, pronounces it "very tasty". The photographer, Howard, and I join the baby's mother in asking for more. This is simple, clever cooking: fresh, fragrant and subtly spiced.

More smiles and notes are exchanged and an hour after we arrived, we leave. The Ganges flows. The boys return to their 10 rupee puris and this busy corner of the ancient city returns to normal (well, as normal as a town where people pray to die and a stream of wrapped corpses is carried through the streets to be burnt on open pyres ever can).

Next, we are back on board our super-luxe Maharajas' Express train to Lucknow, home of Avadhi cuisine, a complex marriage of Mughlai and Hindu cooking favoured by the Nawabs of the city. We are on a pilgrimage to the best kebab cafe in India. Tunday's shop, in the sprawling Aminabad bazaar, is run by the grandson of one-armed Tunday, creator of the Galawat Ke kebab. Here, they serve various kormas and biryanis, but it is the smoothness of the ground lamb kebab that everyone fights for – witness the anxious queues here compared to the mostly empty neighbouring stalls. Meat sizzles in its bubbling fat on a huge flat pan in the burning sun.

We are in search of the food lover's holy grail: Kashmiri saffron, the finest in the world

In the corner, a heavily sweating cook is spinning a constant stream of fine, fluffy "handkerchief" naans over an upturned kadai. Hungry, we head inside for food, cool and shade. Grandson Tunday's kebabs are not subtly spiced but are brilliantly balanced: creamy, fiery meat, heavily spiked with pepper. We gorge on lamb and beef kebabs, intense, fatty, bony, mutton kormas and more breads than anyone can eat washed down with Pepsi (about £7 for five people, and most of that is the cola). Cooking of this class confirms the traveller's rule: that the darkest, dingiest, even dirtiest places almost always serve the best food.

That evening we dine at the fabulous house of a famous Indian film director and his uber-glamorous wife. Here »

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Clockwise, from right: railway food, India–style; fresh chickpeas in Varanasi; boy worker with Vivek Singh's vegetable curry at the Sankatha Cafe, Varanasi; pomegranates in the spice market at Khari Baoli, Delhi; Rajasthan chillis.

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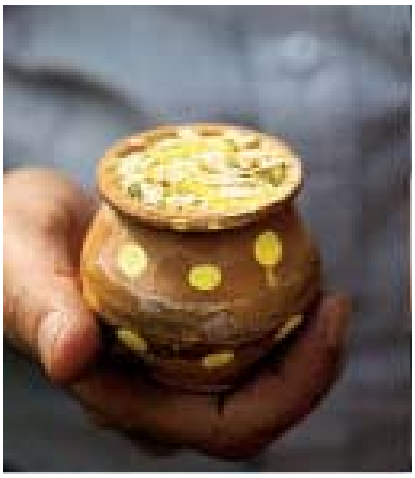
the people, kebabs and pulaos are more refined but somehow lacking the vitality we find on the streets.

Our final train destination is Delhi, in search of the food lover's holy grail: "number one" Kashmiri saffron, the finest in the world. Vivek meets with his spice supplier and old friend Punit Kothari. But first, more food. As Punit says: "If chef cannot come to lunch, then lunch must come to him."

Punit commandeers the boot of a car and lays out a feast: his wife's finest stuffed spinach and cauliflower parathas with tangy buffalo curd, and homemade sugary sweets. We stand and savour them in the midst of the turmoil of Old Delhi's spice market. Teeming pavements five people thick, packed pedal rickshaws (there is no room for cars in the bustling lanes of Khari Baoli), porters shrugging off metre-high piles of boxes carried on their heads, others straining with ancient barrows stacked to the sky with sacks of spice. The air is thick with throat-closing cumin.

Vivek arranges for a supply of dried wild Afghan fungus, the mushrooms he can get in London "too weak and watery" for his needs. In the dark, choking passageways, we pass specialist stalls selling sulphurous Himalayan salt, water chestnut flour to bypass Brahmin rules on fasting, tree moss for boosting the flavour of a biryani, and a raisin said to boost the effects of bang (marijuana). My eyes and nose stream by the Rajasthan chilli stalls, the most brilliantly coloured you'll ever see, but too hot for western taste, warns chef. I stock up on fresh fenugreek leaf, which Vivek says is vital for butter chicken. We scoff exquisite mango kulfi that comes in polka-dot-painted terracotta pots. Finally, pockets stuffed with saffron courtesy of Punit, we head to our hotel and the long, late flight home. Vivek is off to visit his mother in Madhya Pradesh. 2011 signals 10 years of success with his award-winning Cinnamon Club. Mr Singh Sr would have been proud. **OFM**

OFM travelled on the Maharajas' Express with India specialist Cox & Kings (020 7873 5000; coxandkings.co.uk). The 11-day Classical India itinerary, including four nights at the Leela New Delhi, is priced from £5,725 per person. Vivek Singh is executive chef at the Cinnamon Club, The Old Westminster Library, 30-32 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BU; 020 7222 2555, cinnamonclub.com



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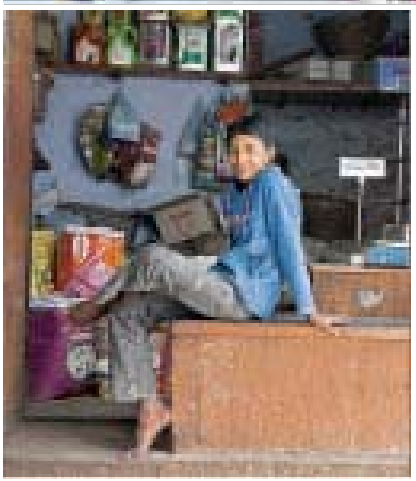

Clockwise, from top: the Maharajas' Express, plus cow, in Varanasi; boy selling spice; Vivek Singh buying food for the puri shop curry; mango kulfi comes in a terracotta pot.