

TRAVEL / MELBOURNE



Take in the sights, sounds and tastes of all things Indian without heading to the subcontinent, at a place that's sure to whet your appetite, writes **SUE WALLACE**.

AQUA, pink and orange saris are flapping in the breeze, Bollywood music is blaring and the heady aroma of pungent spices fills the air.

If I close my eyes I could well be wandering along the back streets of a small town in India. Instead, it's downtown Dandenong, where more than 4000 Indian families reside.

It is also home to the Little India precinct, which has developed in Foster Street over the years as more Indian families moved to Dandenong. It's a great place to experience the tastes, smells and sounds of India without leaving the country and it's enough to whet your appetite to head off to discover the real thing.

At Little India you can purchase everything from a Maharajah's suit to the latest Bollywood CDs and

videos. There's also specialty Indian fashions and grocery shops.

I am doing a Masala Meander tour with guide Himanshi Munshaw-Luhar, who grew up in Mumbai and moved to Australia in 2005.

Her aim is to provide a greater understanding of the culture and history of Indian food and encourage those who love the cuisine to be more adventurous than just ordering chicken tikka masala or beef vindaloo at their local Indian restaurant.

"Everything in India is about food, and the dialogue and food changes every 50 kilometres in India, so there's plenty of different tastes as well as more than 1000 dialects," she says.

Our first stop is morning tea at Amritsari Sweets, a cafe that specialises in northern Indian cuisine, which Himanshi says is often deep-fried and heavier than southern Indian food. We start with a tasty samosa channa, a pastry stuffed with flavoured potatoes and channa, which is made from chickpeas with gravy.

The verdict? Delicious.

We finish our snack with an aromatic masala chai then head to an Indian supermarket and spice shop down the street where the aromas are overwhelming.

We wander up and down the crowded aisles discovering bags and boxes of all shapes and sizes offering everything from lentils to pappadams and there's even the equivalent of two-minute noodles — Indian-style of course. You can smell the bags of freshly roasted spices before you see them.

"People come from all over Melbourne to get their supplies at these shops, where you can buy everything from Indian cosmetics to the popular spices," Himanshi says.

She produces a box from her bag and passes around different spices to smell including cardamom, turmeric, chilli, cinnamon, mustard seeds and cumin.

"Indians wouldn't think of cooking without spices, it's such an integral part of our cuisine," Himanshi says.

Next, Indian fashion comes under the spotlight as we head into several shops with rows of saris in brilliant colours.

"Try one on" says the owner and I am draped in a hot pink sari with intricate beading and even find myself slipping on some beaded shoes.

Himanshi says the shops also stock Sherwani suits and kurta pyjamas for men and expensive wedding outfits.

They also do a great trade for Bollywood parties.

"These Bollywood parties have really taken off," says one of the assistants.

I leave with the hot pink sari, sparkly shoes and a handful of colourful bangles, secretly planning my own Bollywood extravaganza.

Clutching our purchases we enter the vibrant CJ's Indian Restaurant, which specialises in food from southern India that's known for its lightly spiced rice dishes and delicate flavours.

We work our way through a thali, a plate of southern Indian food with traditional dishes including an assortment of seasonal vegetables dishes, lentil soup



ABOVE: Bright saris flap in the wind in downtown Dandenong.

ABOVE RIGHT: Jalebis are fried 'pretzel' cakes soaked in syrup.

RIGHT: Bangles in every colour imaginable are part of Indian dress.

LEFT: The Indian supermarket stocks an array of traditional Indian treats.

BETWEEN: Beaded sparkly shoes feature in many Indian shops in Dandenong's Little India.



SHORT STAYS

ARCTIC CIRCLE



Seeing polar bears on the ice is just one of the amazing experiences visitors to the Arctic may enjoy.

SPICED UP A LITTLE

Travel notes

■ Masala Meanders are conducted in Melbourne's CBD and Dandenong with a group size of four to 14 people. The tour includes morning tea, a visit to an authentic Indian grocery market, three-course lunch at an Indian restaurant and a goodie bag. The cost is \$70. Phone Beacon Holidays on 1800 667 791; beaconholidays.com.au

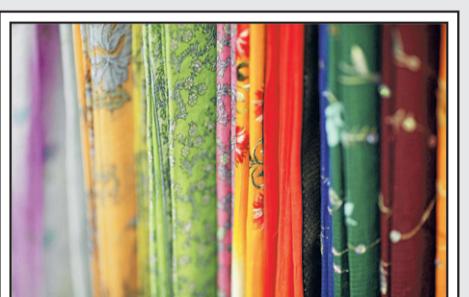
HEAD TO INDIA FOR THE REAL THING:

■ Beacon Holidays also offers Masala Trails programs, two unique itineraries that take the food aficionado on a culinary journey to the cuisine capitals of India. Set against a backdrop of bustling cities, palaces, lakes and architectural marvels, the Masala Trails programs showcases the culinary heritage of India through one of the richest, aromatic condiments that has contributed to the world's taste sensations — Indian spices.

■ The South India Masala Trails program will run September 30 to October 10 and the North India Masala Trails program departs October 13 to October 23. The programs can also be combined with a complimentary three-night stay in Goa. Outstanding accommodation is available at a variety of luxury properties and heritage hotels including Taj Hotels and Trident Hotels, numerous sightseeing, market and culinary excursions and an array of sumptuous Indian meals and cooking demonstrations.

■ "The Masala Trails programs have been designed so that guests not only visit some of the most captivating cities and regions in India but also savor the many zesty flavours and tastes as our culinary expert," Rushina Munshaw-Ghildiyal says.

■ For details, phone 1800 667 791.



■ The Masala Trails programs are hosted by Rushina Munshaw-Ghildiyal, a noted Indian cuisine author, who will lead the journey "off the road less eaten" and introduce guests to the flavours, delicate aromas and tantalising dishes that have influenced many cultures and imperial courts for more than 5000 years.

■ For details, phone 1800 667 791.

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known as dal, south Indian sambar and a chicken dish accompanied with rice, bread and pappadams.

Himanshi provides a condensed version of the history of Indian food, which has been influenced by different "invaders" throughout the centuries.

"There have been many rulers in India and each one of them has left behind an influence on the food," she says.

"Every one has left their mark on Indian cuisine, starting from the period of the Indus Valley when eggplant and sesame were the staple diet," she says.

"Then came the Aryans, followed by the spread of Buddhism and vegetarianism and finally the arrival of the British Raj, which is associated with the word curry."

We finish lunch with sweet treats wrapped in silver paper, listening to upbeat Bollywood hits.

I'm now looking forward to my next visit to my local Indian restaurant where I'm planning to be adventurous — beef vindaloo won't get a look in.



The Langham Melbourne's Melba restaurant will host a series of ladies fashion lunches soon.

All the fashion

THE Langham Melbourne will partner with Australian fashion icon Anthea Crawford for a series of ladies fashion lunches in its Melba restaurant.

The first of four Melba Mannequins events will be held on May 18 to showcase the designer's winter 2011 collection.

A fashion parade showcasing Crawford's designs will be staged with styling tips from fashion stylist Franco Schifilliti.

A delicious three-course lunch will be served.

There will be a door prize and you can support the Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation with a charity raffle incorporated into the afternoon. And \$20 from each event ticket sale will be donated to the foundation. The lunch includes a glass of Moet & Chandon champagne, Lancome pamper area and gift bag.

Tickets are \$110, phone 1800 641 107 or email rest.res@langhamhotels.com