

Top 10 in Kolkata

By TOM COCKREM

BACK in 1911, the proud city of Calcutta (now officially Kolkata) found itself abandoned. The British moved their capital to Bombay (now Mumbai).

Kolkata lost most of its economic power but it has never lost its will to survive. And never lost its soul.

Kolkata is Indian to the core. Newness and technology would seem hardly welcomed here. And in a city where rickshaws still get manually pulled, where oxen drays still ply the city streets, where trams and cars all look to be pre-war, the slick and the modern seem strangely out of place.

This means Kolkata still manages to retain much of its "medieval" feel, and this makes it a favourite amongst travellers and seekers of historical intrigue.

Below are the Top 10 to look for in this wonderfully eccentric old-world town.

The Maidan

You have not experienced Kolkata unless you have visited this heath-sized public park. Lying southwest of Central, it serves as a recreational and sports reserve (especially for budding cricketers), a training ground for soldiers, a venue for circus performers, and a pasture for herders with their goats.

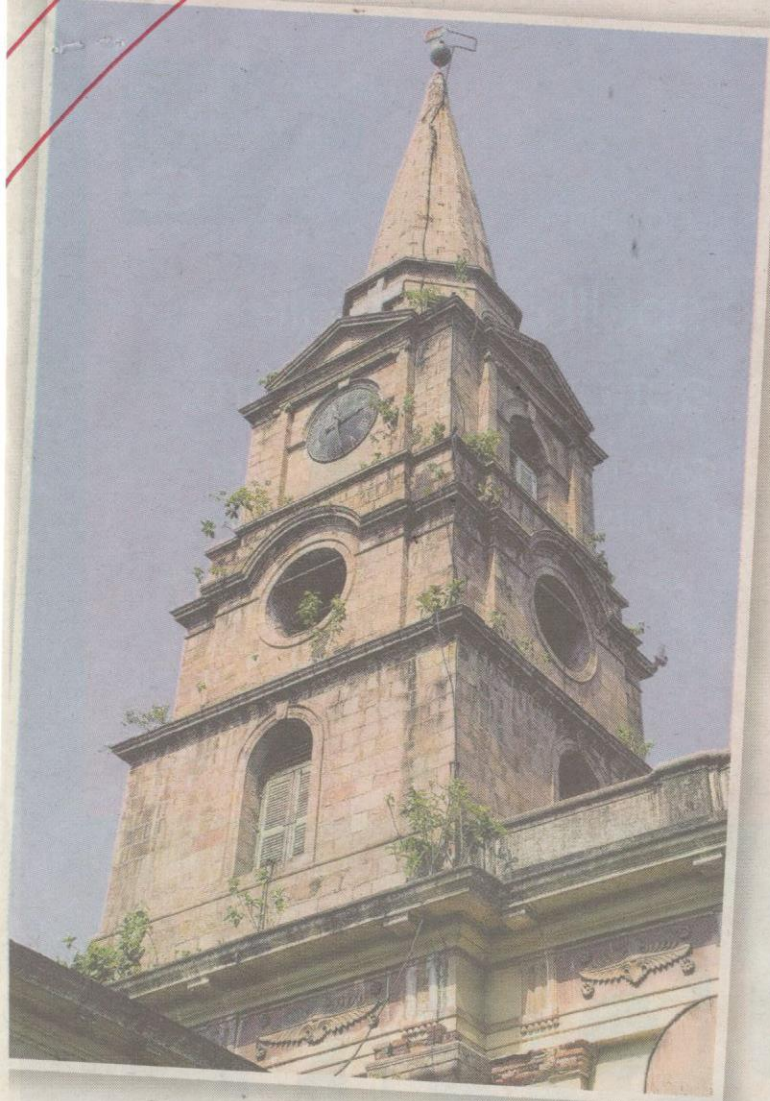
Within the precinct stands Fort William. Built in 1758, the old fort should, one would be inclined to

If you ever find yourself in Kolkata, a city seemingly caught in a time warp, here are the 10 attractions you must look up.

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Victoria Memorial gardens is at its peak in the mornings as people flock the park for their leisure walks.



Colonial times: St John's is the first Anglican church in this country.





Effigies of Hindu deities at Baba Ghat.



Dakshineswar Kali Temple turrets. This temple is at the east bank of the Hooghly River.

should. It would be inclined to think, at best now be a museum. Not so. It still serves as headquarters for the army.

Victoria Memorial

The memorial stands to the east of the Maidan on Hospital Road. Opened in 1921, it was built to rival the Taj Mahal – and almost does. It's a palatial marble monolith built in the Italian Renaissance style with more than a touch of Mogul.

The museum it houses is at once a glowing tribute to the British Raj who built it, and a frank exposé of their considerable excesses. Daybreak sees the memorial gardens visited by throngs of mostly middle-class locals, who come here for a bracing early morning promenade. The museum is open from 10am-5pm, Tuesday to Sunday.

Two colonial churches

St Pauls Cathedral stands across from the Victoria Memorial in Cathedral Road. Completed in 1847, the church's soaring spires and cavernous interior epitomise a style known as Indo-gothic. It serves as the headquarters of the Church of North India.

Some 70 years its senior is sober old Saint John's. Set within a large walled garden compound in Central, the time-worn church strives vainly to match the grace of London's St. Martins in the Field on which it was rather loosely modelled.

Two Hindu temples

There are two notable temples in the city, and both of them dedicated to Kali, the city's none-too-comely patron goddess. The wonderful Dakshineswar Kali Temple stands



One of the communal bathing banks at Hooghly River.

near the east bank of the Hooghly in the northern district of Kumartuli. It is topped by nine curvilinear Bengali-style turrets.

However, the city's spiritual epicentre is south in Kalighat. The Kali temple here is the scene of some extravagant displays of devotional fervour, and is attended by a multitude of beggars, street kids, flower garland hawkers and sadhu holy men.

Sudder Street

Hang out for a time in the street where the serious "travellers" all stay. It's got a good selection of budget hotels, Internet cafes and air-conditioned restaurants and bars. In steamy old Kolkata the latter prove a

boon, especially pre-monsoon, when the temperature can soar to 45°C.

And they do some pretty mean cuisine – even muesli for breakfast (with curd instead of milk but that's all right) and a decent ham and eggs – with toast! And fruit shakes and lassies you'd die for in the heat – or maybe die without!

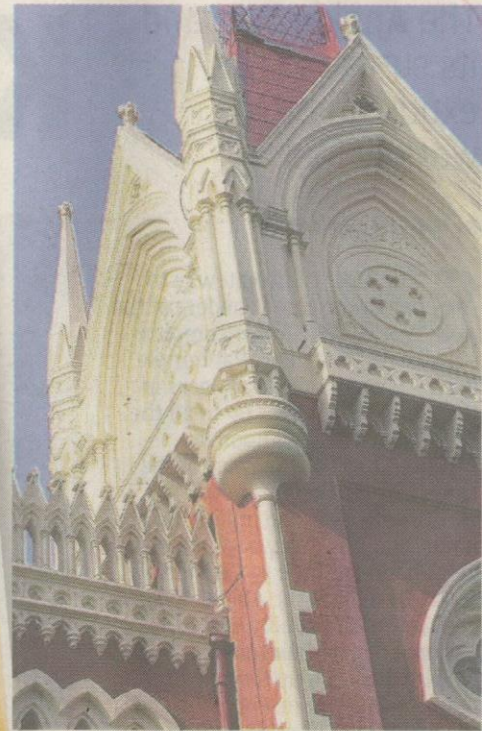
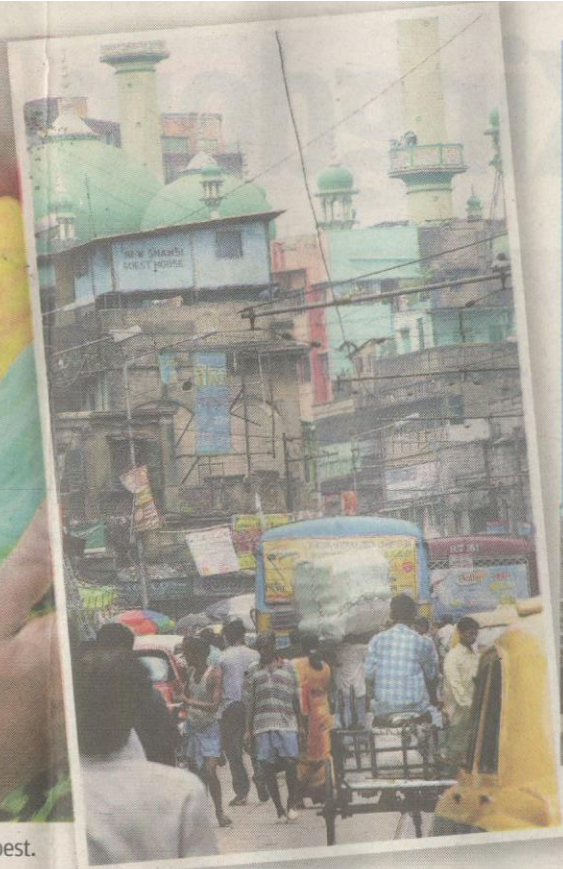
Babu Ghat

This is one of a number of such communal bathing sites on the banks of the Hooghly River.

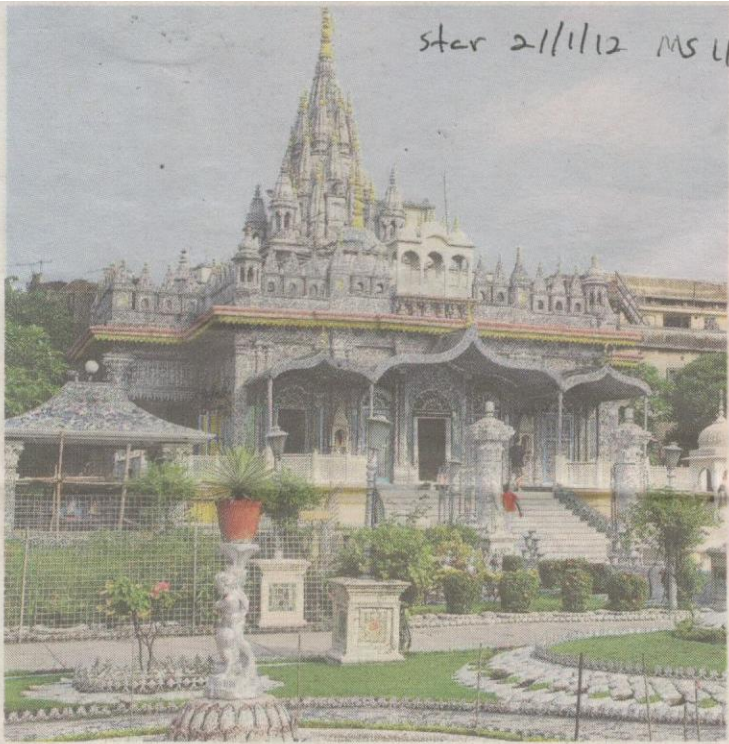
Bathers merrily brave the river's acrid black slush. Outside the ghat's entrance stand an array of clay and straw effigies of Hindu deities. These await the annual Durga Festival, when they too will be ceremoniously



A pleasant place to be is at the flower market, where the vendors and customers are at their friendly best.



(Left) Chitpur Road with the Nakhoda mosque in the background. (Top) The High Court is an old British building that is fastidiously maintained.



The Parrasnath Jain Temple was built in 1867 in honour of Lord Sheetalnathji who was the 10th Jain prophet.

dunked in this none-too-pristine stream.

The Flower Market

Located near the Babu Ghat, the Flower Market is where you see Kolkatans at their spontaneous, friendly best. The quiet traffic-free streets and the flower-scented air have a salutary effect on vendors and customers alike. Many of the garlands are temple-bound, where they will serve as offerings to the gods.

The old colonial quarter

The impressive array of old British buildings here are all fastidiously maintained. The standout is the High Court, with its striking Indo-Gothic brick façade. The Romanesque Town Hall next door now houses a multimedia museum.

Romanesque Government House permits only its stately Tuscan portico to show from behind its garden shrubs and trees. The imposing "Writers' Building" houses – not surprisingly – the Government Secretariat. It is one of many 1850s office blocks that boast impressive ornamental brick façades.

Chitpur Road

The commercial centre of "White" Calcutta was located in Chowringhee, immediately southeast of Central. "Black" Calcutta – so-called – had its commercial hub as well. This was Chitpur Road, which runs off to the north. Chinatown was here (its remnants still are), an array of princely palaces, and the city's grandest mosque, Nakhoda.

The street today succeeds in looking even more antiquated than most other parts of town, and you half expect an ox wagon to draw up next to the rickshaws and the old decrepit tram.

Parrasnath Jain Temple

Built in 1867, Parrasnath Temple is dedicated to Lord Sheetalnathji, the 10th of 24 Jain prophets. This stunner of a temple is set in a meticulously manicured ornamental garden, studded with statues. It dazzles and bewitches with its porches and interiors entirely clad in a fine mosaic of mirrors, glass and colourful stones. The temple complex lies around 4km northeast of Central in Canal West Road, and is open from 6am-11am and 3pm-7pm.