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# FOOD & ART

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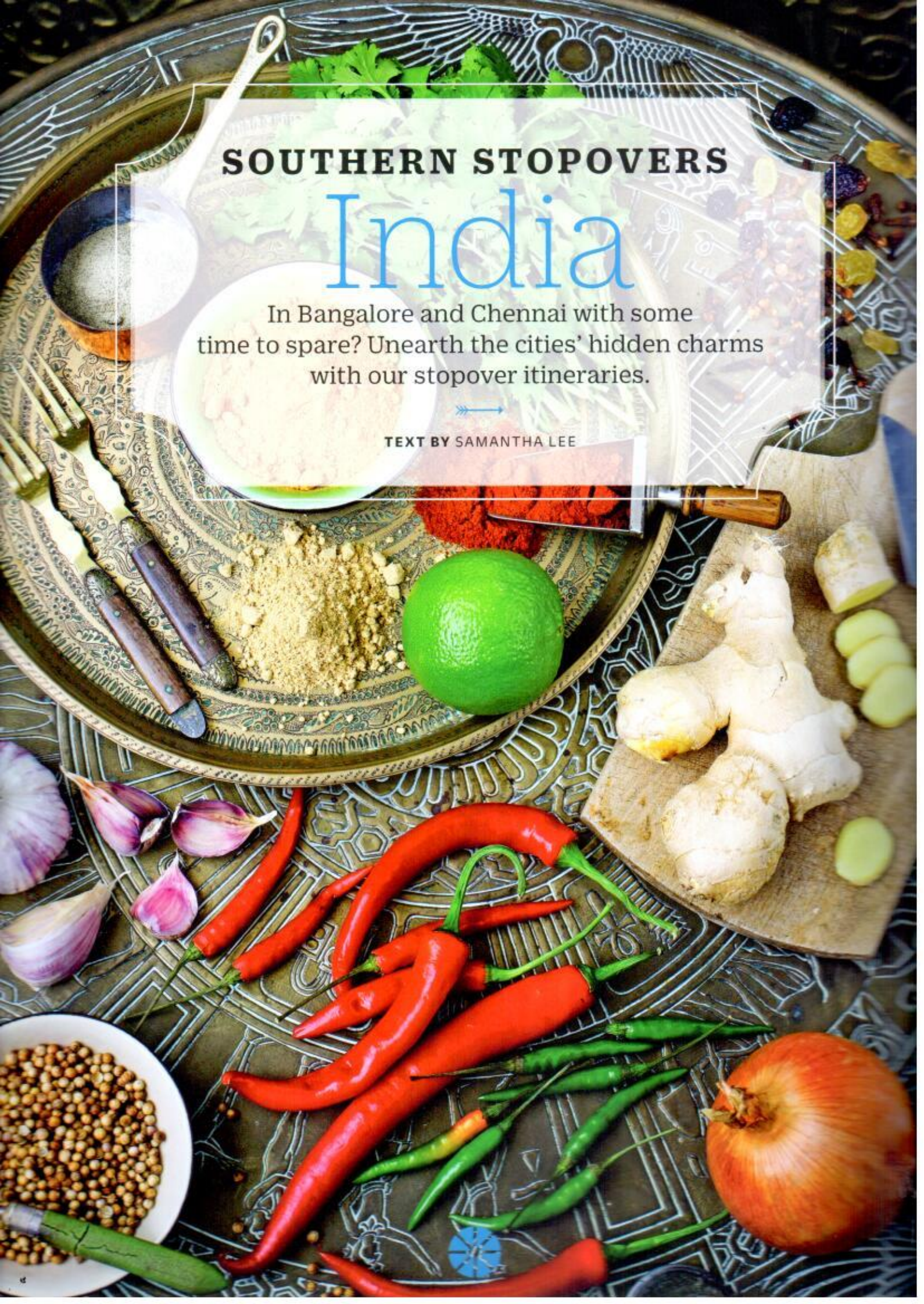
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## SOUTHERN STOPOVERS

# India

In Bangalore and Chennai with some time to spare? Unearth the cities' hidden charms with our stopover itineraries.



TEXT BY SAMANTHA LEE



**THE CITIES OF BANGALORE AND CHENNAI** rarely register blips on the traveller's radar. Known respectively – and unpromisingly – as the Silicon Valley and Detroit of India, these cities don't radiate the immediate opulent romance as Rajasthan, nor the brash, commercial swagger of New Delhi or Mumbai. Yet, peer a little closer and you'll find much to linger over. If you're stopping over in Chennai before hopping on to the rest of South India, or resting in Bangalore before heading to the 14th century ruins of Hampi, you'll be richly rewarded for leaving the hotel room. As with anywhere else in India, bewildering, fascinating dichotomies exist: gleaming BMWs pause reverently for indifferent cows; rudimentary fishing villages thrive in the shadow of towering luxury hotels. And, as with anywhere else in India, there exists a fascinating panoply of food, vibrant with spices and colour. So take a deep breath and plunge into the unknown. You're in India now. There are things to see.



## WALK IN THE PARK

**S**CRATCH THE NOTION THAT **BANGALORE** is a one-trick pony, manufactured for the good of the IT industry. There's enough quirk and personality here to satisfy a Google job application – you just need to know where to look. In fact, nothing less could be expected of a city whose name translates to 'town of boiled beans'. The legend goes that King Ballala of the Hoysala dynasty, while lost in the jungle, was offered boiled beans by a poor old lady. In gratitude, he christened the city thus.

Humble beans aside, the turreted Bangalore Palace is a magisterial Tudor-style relic of colonial ambition. Construction began in 1862 under the British, but the Maharaja of Mysore bought over the palace in 1884. Our stroll through the grounds (accompanied by the vastly informative audio guide) reveals anachronistic oddities of British rule, such as a massive stuffed elephant's head and a sleepy bagpipe band that plays Scotland the Brave on the hour.

An insider peek at Bangalore's hidden idiosyncrasies, though, is best seen through the eagle eyes of a local. Arun Pai's your man. The charismatic Bangalore native traded in his corporate suit for walking shoes eight years ago, and now leads meticulously researched walks through the city streets. His signature boast: "In three hours, I will unveil a thousand years of history in a four-mile radius." That's no bald-faced lie. He walks us through a residential Defense Colony set up in the 1960s for army retirees, where *Istri walah* still iron clothes by the street and pots of water are left outside homes for thirsty passers-by. We stop by Holy Trinity Church, built in English Renaissance style. Then we wend our way through the narrow streets of Halasuru, Bangalore's oldest neighbourhood and home to the Halasuru Someshwara Temple, which dates back to the Chola empire (3rd century B.C.).

Pai has picked a great city to hold long walks in: Bangalore boasts gorgeous year-round weather that hovers around the mid-20s. Trees grow here with fecund urgency, and there's no better place to appreciate it than in the famed 240-acre Lal Bagh Botanical Gardens. Centuries of royal attention have showered the area with a cavernous glass greenhouse, pellucid lotus pools, and the largest collection of tropical plants on the subcontinent. But we come here for one thing:



the Lal Bagh Rock, one of the oldest rock formations on earth that dates back three billion years.

In terms of horticultural excess, The Leela Palace Bangalore comes a close second. Amidst the corporate jungle of Dell, IBM, and Intel offices, this oasis packs more than 1000 species of plants into nine lush acres. We stroll the grounds in a stupor of gobsmacked wonder – but pull it together for a dinner at The Leela's restaurant Jamavar.

**THIS PAGE 1.** A home-cooked feast of bhaji, vegetable pulao, chappati, parathas, and dal tadka in a Chennai household, organised by local outfit Storytrails. **2.** The vast, lush grounds of the Lal Bagh Botanical Gardens in Bangalore. **FACING PAGE** Indian spices are a riot of colour and flavour.



Named for the intricately woven Kashmiri shawl, sought after by kings since the 16th century, Jamavar reflects the same obsessive attention to detail. Waving palms outside the restaurant frame the grandeur of the interior: lofty ceilings house chandeliers, while original jamavars and gold-leaf paintings adorn the walls. Pertinent fact: Jamavar was named one of Forbes' top power spots to dine.

From where we sit in the resplendent Maharajah Room, the show kitchen with its display tandoor is in full view. Corporate chef Farman Ali demonstrates true Indian hospitality by sending forth an armada of dishes. From the South: karuveppilai yera (tiger prawns flavoured with curry leaves) and a shallot-and-tomato spiked lobster neeruli. Explosive spices heave and intertwine, dream-like, with the richer aromas of the North: boneless chicken delicately scented with cumin and cooked in a tandoor; lamb shanks served in its gravy, thick with whole spices; and dal makhani, a black lentil stew crowned with a dollop of butter. As I sweep the last of my dal with a warm slice of garlic naan, I think dozily: I could get used to this.



## LARGE AND IN CHARGE

**I** DIDN'T HAVE TO WORRY. Our cocoon of luxury extended as far as The Leela Palace in Chennai. Rising up out of the Bay of Bengal like a cream-hued mirage, the hotel stands in profound contrast to the sweltering chaos of Chennai's streets. In the lobby alone, there are gold-threaded tapestries. Hand-painted murals. Pillars etched out in regal Chettinad style. In the rooms: the view of a fishing village and crashing waves on the bay; an unbeatable turndown service. After being lulled almost to sleep by a long bath, I make my way to yet another meal, but one closer to culinary shores: dinner at China XO, The Leela Palace's Chinese fine-dining restaurant.

Executive Chef Dharmen Makawana treats us to an authentic parade of dishes: steamed garoupa in a ginger-and-scallion soy sauce; traditional Peking duck. "Authentic Chinese food is gaining popularity in India," says Makawana. "In terms of spice, the cuisines of the two countries are not that dissimilar."

Yet, we're happy to see items that cleave to the spirit of "Indian Chinese food". Ever heard of Hakka noodles? It's a "Chinese" staple found in restaurants around the city, where noodles are fried with vegetables, tomato sauce, and spices. Not really Chinese, yet not really Indian either. At China XO, we see luxed up examples of this hybrid form catering to the Indian clientele: vegetarian dim sum such as truffle and edamame dumplings, and asparagus cheong fun. It's an interesting insight into India's rapidly globalising dining trends, and their truly local brand of cultural - and culinary - fusion.

But here I am, blatantly disregarding my earlier mantra - that there is a whole heaving world outside the hotel. We rectify it the next day with Storytrails, a locally run outfit that pounds the pavement with themed cultural and historical tours. Sai Sandiya, our informative, chirpy guide, leads us on a Spice Trail: beginning with a trip to a local wet market and culminating in a South Indian home-cooked meal.

We're treated well in the market. We accept filtered Karnataka coffee from a bean grinder. A betel leaf walah, teeth stained red from chewing on his ware, offers up paan - a flowery concoction of sugar, spices, and fruit preserves wrapped in a betel leaf. Eaten as a digestive aid, the flavours unfurl like the concentrated essence of a department

In Sandiya's kitchen, she doles out tasks to her hapless audience: we grate coconuts, whip up digestion-enhancing buttermilk, batter up fritters, roll out chappati, and stuff parathas. A feast materialises.

store's perfume aisle. (I stick to my Tic Tacs after that.) We fall into The Grand, a wonderland of Indian sweets: chikki (peanut brittle), laddu (balls made of flour, sugar and milk), jangiri (whorls of fried batter dipped in sugar syrup), and much more.

Back in Sandiya's kitchen, she doles out various tasks to her hapless audience: we grate coconuts, whip up digestion-enhancing buttermilk, batter up fritters, roll out chappati, and stuff parathas. A feast gradually materialises: vegetable pulao (rice fried with vegetables), crisp

vegetable bhaji (fritters), dal tadka (lentil stew), and paneer matter masala (green pea and cottage cheese curry).

At Jamavar, the continent-spanning variety of its dishes mesmerised us with the kaleidoscope of India's cultures, cuisines, people. Here in the kitchen, a contradictory sensibility emerges. Biting into a misshapen bhaji made by yours truly, I am aware of the flour in my fingernails and the lingering scent of ghee in the air. Sandy is extolling the benefits of asafetida (a potent umami-releasing herb) and saffron. In this moment, India isn't so unknowable after all. ☉

**FACING PAGE 3.** The Leela Palace Bangalore boasts a gorgeous nine-acre garden. **4.** The tandoor at Jamavar is put to good use. **5.** Friendly purveyors abound at one of Chennai's many markets. **6.** The lobby of The Leela Palace Chennai is a cream-hued mirage of Chettinad-style décor. **7.** In Chennai's markets, fierce visages are painted onto produce to ward away bad luck and thieves. **8.** A sari swirls over a colourful kolam in Chennai's Kapaleeswarar temple.

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reservations and  
more information,  
please visit [www.preferredhotels.com](http://www.preferredhotels.com).

### CHENNAI INFORMATION

**Storytrails:**  
21/2, TTK Road,  
1st Cross,  
Sriram Nagar,  
Chennai 600018.  
Tel: +91 44 4501 0202  
[www.storytrails.in](http://www.storytrails.in)

**The Grand Sweets  
and Snacks:**  
Various locations  
<http://www.grandsweets.com/index.html>

**China XO:**  
Lower Lobby, The Leela  
Palace Chennai  
Adyar Seaface  
M.R.C Nagar  
Chennai 600 028.  
Tel: +91 44 3366 1234

## India

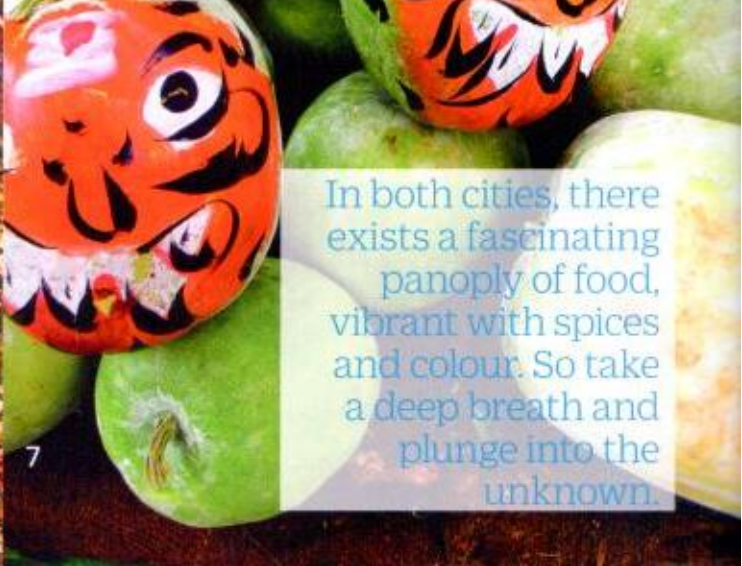
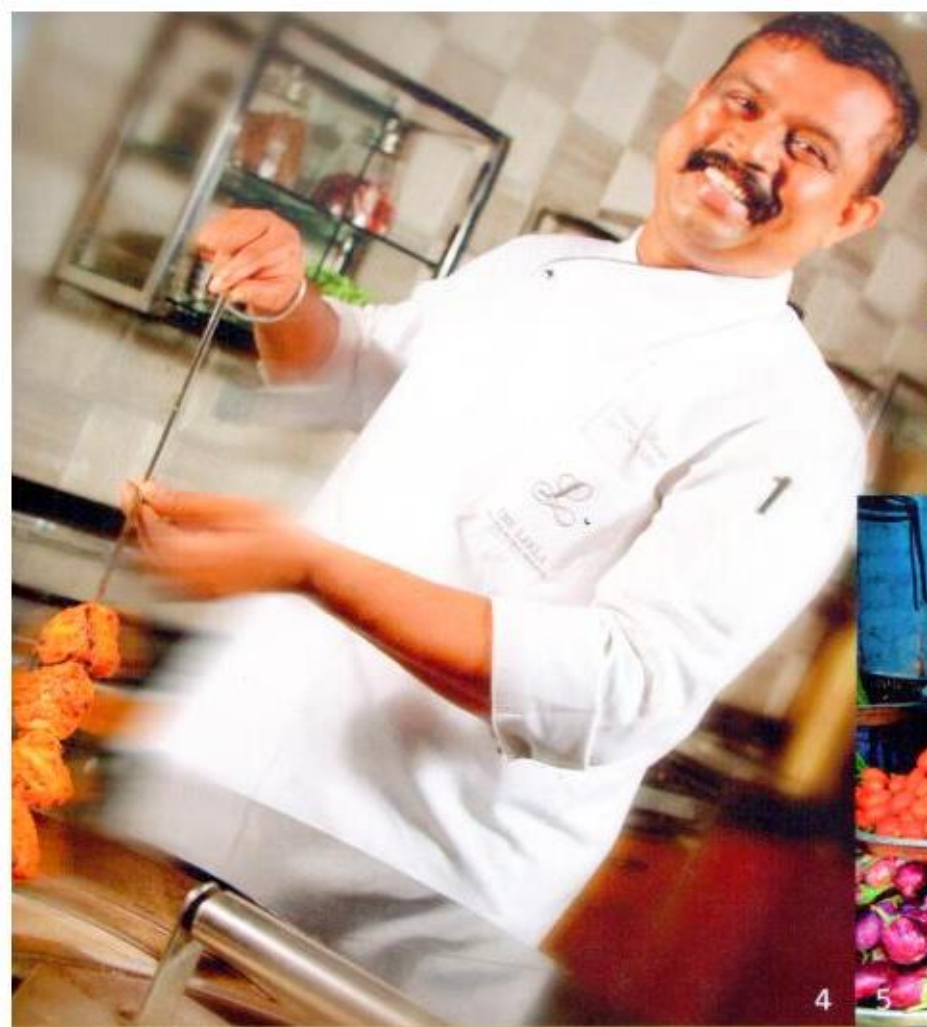
### BANGALORE INFORMATION

**Bangalore Walks:**  
[www.bangalorewalks.com](http://www.bangalorewalks.com). Walking tours for  
the public are held every  
weekend.

**Bangalore Palace:**  
Vasant Nagar,  
Bangalore, Karnataka  
560052  
Tel: +91 80 2336 3880  
Open daily 10am-4pm  
Entry fee: INR450/500

**Jamavar:**  
Lobby Level, The Leela  
Palace Bangalore  
The Leela Palace  
Bangalore K2, Koththal,  
Old Airport Road  
Bangalore 560 028  
Tel: +91 (80) 335734444





In both cities, there exists a fascinating panoply of food, vibrant with spices and colour. So take a deep breath and plunge into the unknown.