

Neighbourhood

Nizamuddin

Aayush Soni gets strictly orthodox about his iftar meats.



SHWAHJHA (2)

In his famous travelogue of Delhi, *City of Djinnns*, William Dalrymple writes that Nizamuddin Auliya would eat little, unable to bear the sight of starving people sleeping in the streets around him. The neighbourhood around his grave is still a beacon for Delhi's homeless, but also for visitors with great appetites for kababs and for qawwali.

During Ramzan, the area's forking bylanes are filled more than ever with the smells of roasting meat. But listening to qawwali – essentially what “going to Nizamuddin” means in Delhi parlance – is less of an option. The roza is a time of sombre abstinence, and after the lifting of the fast, the Nizami family gives over their dusk singing hour to the reading of the Quran. For that reason, to visit Nizamuddin during Ramzan is to get a sense



Meat packing district (below) Yaseen's Kebab Corner at Nizamuddin

of the direction in which the neighbourhood may be headed, as a lodestone of Sufism in North India slowly gives in to the sway of more orthodox Islam.

The erosion of Sufi culture from Nizamuddin, where it has thrived for seven centuries, is largely due to the rise of the Tablighi Jamaat, an international reformist Muslim movement that doesn't appreciate the company of syncretic Sufism. The Tablighis, who function out of

a mosque near the Nizamuddin police thana, run several schools in the area. In contrast, the Nizami family – which claims descent from the saint himself – have grown aloof, locals say. They've given back too little to the community, building no schools or hospitals, despite the money given by visitors at the shrine. “On the pretext of conducting special prayers, the *khadims* [dargah attendants] extract money from visitors and pocket the cash,” said filmmaker Yousuf Saeed, who has researched the life of Nizamuddin Auliya. “There's never any money to maintain the 800-year-old shrine, so it's in a bad state.” Recently, the Aga Khan Foundation was entrusted with the massive and controversial task of restoring the shrine to its former glory. They've restored the saint's baoli (stepwell), but restoring his true influence is not part of their mandate.

That might just fall to young

visitors who are less adventurous, or just seeking respite from the madding crowd and the late-monsoon humidity, it can be found in the air-conditioned interior of the local branch of **Karim's**. It rides on the reputation of the Karim's at Jama Masjid, so prepare your tastebuds for sikandari raan, barra kabab and other Karim's-popularised meats.

But the smaller restaurants of Nizamuddin are equally welcoming (and far more reasonably priced). No sooner does the muezzin signal the end of roza than floods of young men throng **Nasir Iqbal Restaurant** to devour its delicately spiced mutton qorma (₹ 60). The rough-edged **Ghalib's** eatery has a following greatly out of proportion with its size, mostly thanks to its soft, mouthwatering beef shammi kababs (₹ 40). Diners who prefer their meat tough and crispy should head to **Yaseen's Kebab Corner**, which specialises in crunchy fried chicken (₹ 50) and roasted beef tikkas, locally called “bade ka meat”. Here, in the space between the Tablighi mosque and the dargah, it briefly doesn't matter if you're a puritan or a Sufi, a rozadaar (fastkeeper) or a lapsed Muslim or not a Muslim at all – if you have an appetite, you can believe Nizamuddin is paradise. *Contact Sufi Kamaal Hassan Shah at (98107-18783) for details of his private qawwali evenings.*

Dastarkhwan-e-Karim 168/2, Hazrat Nizamuddin West (2435-0018, 2435-5458). *Tue-Sun noon-midnight. Ramzan daily 7pm-4am.*

Ghalib Kabab Corner Shop 57, near Lal Mahal, Ghalib Road, Nizamuddin (98107-86479). *Daily noon-midnight. No cards accepted. Meal for two ₹ 110.*

Nasir Iqbal Restaurant 268-A Nizamuddin West, opposite Markaz (98912-78628). *Daily noon-midnight. Ramzan daily 1pm-4am. No cards accepted. Meal for two ₹ 200.*

Yaseen's Kebab Corner 58-A Dargah Road, Baoli Gate, Nizamuddin. *No cards accepted. Meal for two ₹ 120.*