

Hittin' the Pavement in Jaipur, India - Nikhil Gupta

Jaipur, the “Pink City” in Rajasthan, India, is a UNESCO World Heritage City founded in the early 18th century. The ruler Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II established the historic city to be not only his new capital but also a bustling trade hub, surrounded by hills and city walls to protect its residents from invasions. Jaipur is famously the first city in India that was designed with a robust grid plan, split into nine major rectangular blocks dedicated to different land uses. On a bright December morning, I wandered the streets of one of these historic blocks: Chowkri Vishweshwarji (the commercial block), which is today home to Johari Bazaar (jeweler’s market) and Bapu Bazaar (Gandhi’s market). It fascinates me how, since their inception, these streets have continued to be the arteries for the economic heart of Jaipur.

My Uber dropped my classmate Viraj and me off near Hawa Mahal, a palace with an ornate facade that attracts swaths of tourists year-round. But Viraj and I came to this part of Jaipur with specific goals in mind: Viraj was looking for silver *jhumkas* (traditional earrings), and I was looking for block-printed shirts. There was one clear direction of traffic - south - from the edge of the palace block, and we let ourselves get carried away in the raging current of tourists and locals headed toward the bazaars.

20 steps in, I faced the most chaotic roundabout I have ever seen in my life. Cars, tuk-tuks, and motorcycles were winding between the masses of people crossing the road (around five cars wide, but there were no marked lanes to confirm this) at any moment. Everybody and nobody had the right of way, vehicles and bodies missing each other by mere inches.

Even more impressive was how the roundabout was a commercial center in its own right: along the curb, a barber was trimming a customer’s beard, an elderly man was frying sweets, and a lady was seated on the road selling fresh produce on a tarp. Clearly, this transitional zone from one tourist area (the palace complex) to another (the bazaars) catered to local residents. I held my breath as Viraj and I snaked through the cars, staying as close as we could to 2 women who crossed unfazed. While this felt to me like the antithesis of walkability, it seemed to serve the people of Jaipur just fine. In fact, the traffic was the perfect reason for streetside vendors to be there: the locals, who are largely employed in the service sector to support Jaipur’s tourism, naturally passed this central intersection and could run errands while going about their days.

Immediately after crossing under the blazing sun, my heart rate slowed down as I was welcomed by a colonnaded walkway: I was at the bazaar!

The 2 main roads that are the backbones of Jaipur’s markets run north to south and are around 100 feet wide. While their width originally accommodated elephants and chariots, they now serve 4 lanes of traffic split by a median strip, a necessary infrastructure enhancement to curtail unruly driving. Unlike at the roundabout, crosswalks made it easy for me to traverse without fearing for my life. The shoulders of the roads were packed with parked cars and motorcycles. Directly perpendicular to these roads were side streets and alleys (every 400 or so feet) which alternate between being roughly 15 to 40 feet wide.

For the next few hours, I was relieved to wander the markets which embodied true urban walkability. The shops lined the main roads, and they looked remarkably uniform on each block: instead of being in distinct buildings, they shared a continuous coral pink facade. Each shop was

approximately 10 feet wide and 30 feet deep. I enjoyed being in the shade as I went from shop to shop: massive pillars lined the perimeter, forming a covered pedestrian path.

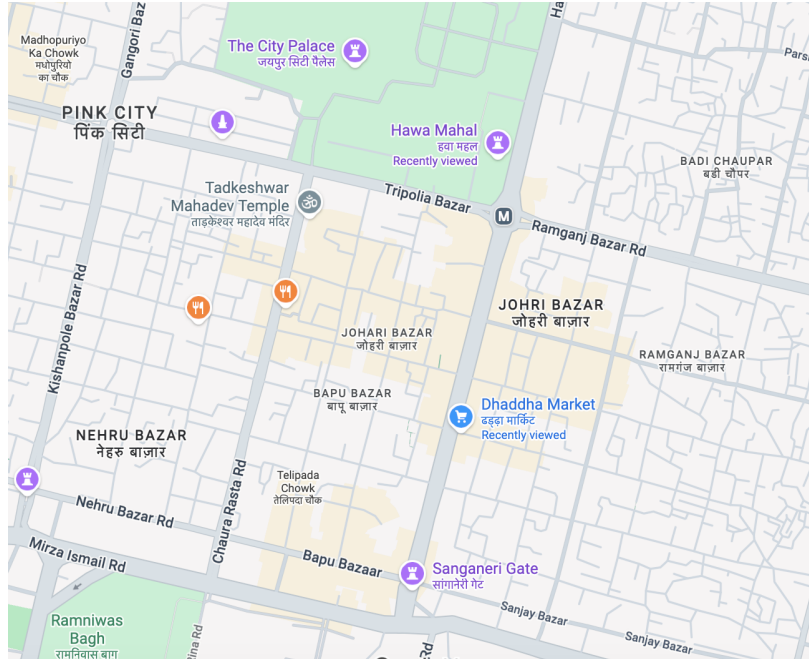
This shade made for a very pleasant shopping experience: Viraj and I could take our time to peruse the product displays and mannequins outside each shop without getting exhausted from the sun. I could also pause to look across the street and admire the 3 to 4 stories that sat on top of the shops. Those upper floors were the same bold pink (painted to welcome an English prince many years ago and preserved under city regulations to continue attracting tourists). They had white floral motifs and latticed dome windows, constructed to prevent women from being spotted as they looked down on the streets below. Those upper stories are the shopkeepers' residences and production workshops even today, and their grandiose artistry proudly reflects their inhabitants' heritage.

Thanks to the bazaar layout, Viraj and I bought more than we anticipated: instead of being separated by product (e.g., metalwork, jewelry, clothing, and religious paraphernalia in different zones), the stores were interspersed - I couldn't tell where the 'jeweler's market' ended and 'Gandhi's market' began. Each store name was painted in bolded Hindi or English, but I never paid attention to the signage. This is because the stores were open-fronted units where the storefronts themselves were the entrances, removing physical barriers and making it effortless for shopkeepers to lure us inside. I would get carried away as I discovered new stores, but finding Viraj again became difficult given the architectural uniformity. There were no nodes for me to leverage to spot him amidst the crowd. I had to find him using iPhone location sharing.

After we got tired of shopping, we ventured into the perpendicular side streets, which were so narrow that barely any light trickled through. These transported me to a new and calmer world which paradoxically felt more full of "real life." I didn't see any other tourists, and it was clear why. The retail mix was oriented toward locals (shops sold traditional bridalwear, wholesale spices, gas cylinders, and bulk sweets). Unlike the aesthetic uniformity of the main roads, these properties were small, cluttered buildings with weathered paint jobs (in white, gray, and gold instead of Jaipur pink), exposed power lines, and varying heights. Some embraced modernity with glass display cases and bold commercial signage in yellow and red. And instead of homes being constrained to the floors above shops, some buildings were entirely residential in nature.

These alleys represented a truly mixed-use environment: Hindu and Jain temples were at every corner, where the honking faded away to the sounds of bells and Vedic chants, allowing worshippers to pray in peace. Even the wildlife seemed to relish the (relative) lack of chaos on these streets: a family of rhesus macaques took refuge perched at the entrance to a temple dedicated to Hanuman, the Monkey God. Perhaps they were the neighborhood's original landlords, looking with judgmental eyes at the evolving tenant mix.

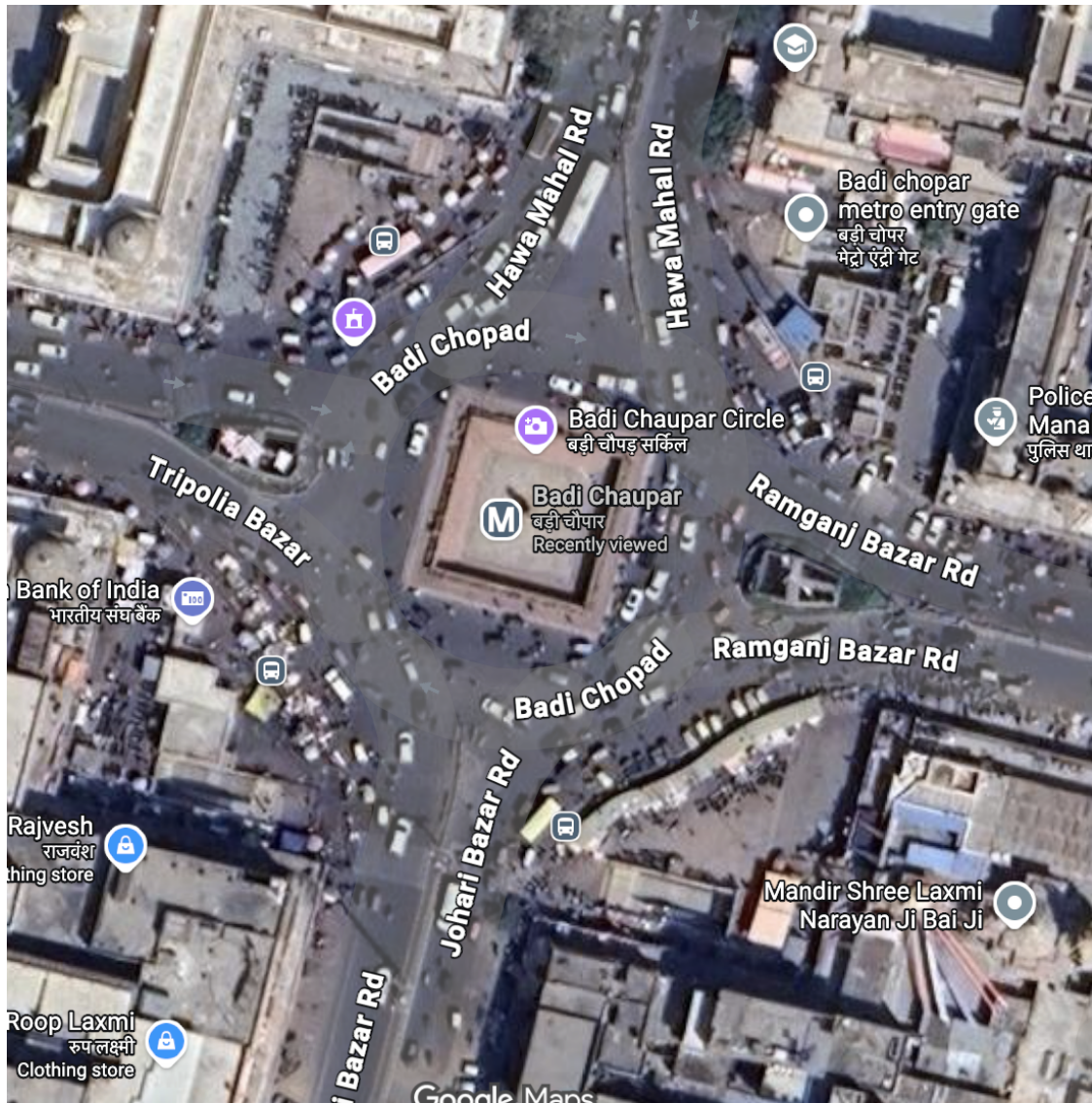
As we exited the city walls via the historic Sanganeri Gate, we were parched and starving: we were shocked to not find a single cafe or sit-down restaurant over the course of our 2.5-hour stroll. We called an Uber but couldn't cross the 6-lane road to meet our driver at a lot where he was parked (no car could stop to pick us up from the road given the congestion). We waited a few minutes to find the right moment to cross the first 3 lanes, we hopped the 4-foot high median, and we waited another 5 minutes to cross the remaining lanes. After 5 more minutes on the phone with the driver due to the lack of landmarks, we finally found him. As I sat in the car, I vowed to never again complain about the bike traffic on Jane Stanford Way.



The area I walked around



Hawa Mahal, the palace where my walk started



The chaotic roundabout



Bazaar main streets with historic buildings full of stores



Quieter, narrow side street and the Hanuman temple with monkeys relaxing



Gates to go in and out of the historic walled city