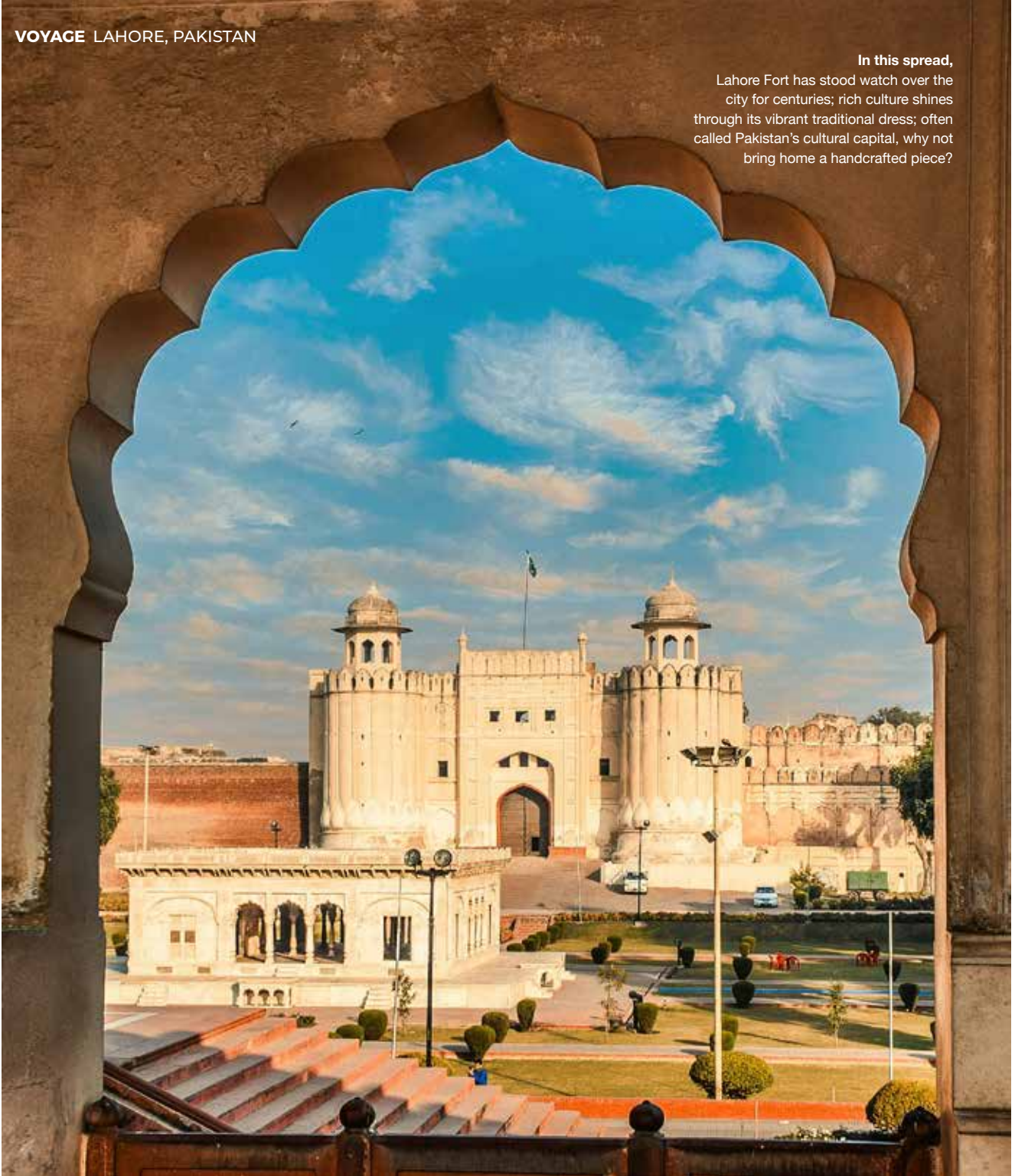


In this spread,  
Lahore Fort has stood watch over the  
city for centuries; rich culture shines  
through its vibrant traditional dress; often  
called Pakistan's cultural capital, why not  
bring home a handcrafted piece?



# Lahore

By Shannim Mohd Saad

It is half past six in the morning and a man is reciting the Quran. He is sitting in a doorway in a lane so narrow that his neighbours can probably hear him breathing when he sleeps. His voice climbs up through the blue pre-dawn, bounces off sandstone walls four centuries old and falls onto the street below like something that belongs there. In Lahore, it does.

The wheels hit the tarmac at Allama Iqbal International Airport and before you even leave the terminal, Lahore has already started to reveal its character. The smell of cardamom drifting from somewhere, a family of eight reuniting at the arrivals gate with the chaos that makes your own homecomings feel inadequate, a man in a *shalwar kameez*, the flowing tunic-and-trouser of Pakistan pressing his phone to his ear and laughing so hard he has to hold the wall.

Outside, the city swallows you whole. Rickshaws painted like moving shrines, horns in three different keys, a *chai* stall already doing serious business at an hour when most cities are still deciding whether to wake up.

This is Lahore. Five thousand years old and gloriously alive.

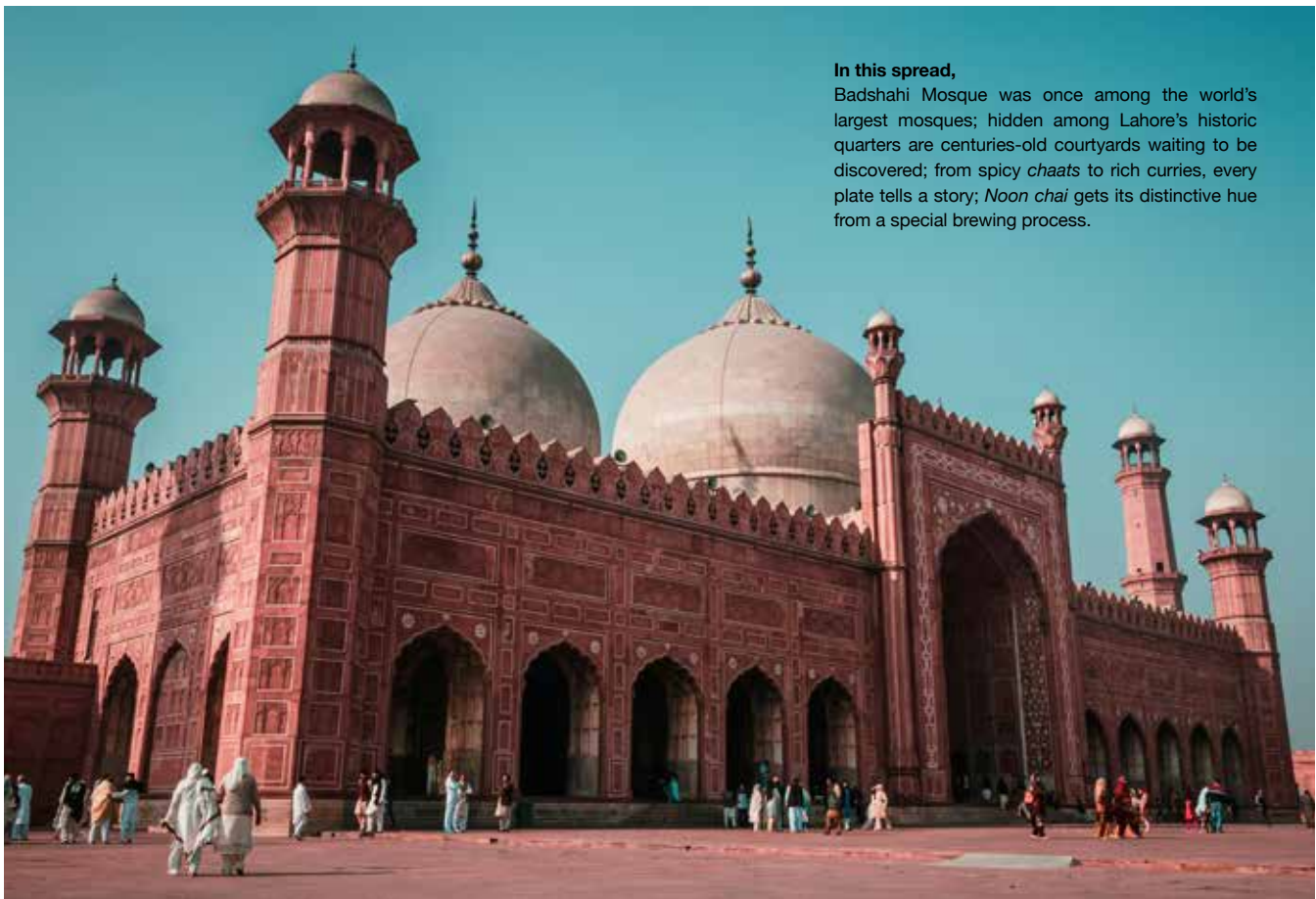
## The Walled City

Come to the Walled City at first light, when the lanes smell of bread and the light is the colour of weak tea. Enter through Delhi Gate and let the old city take you. Go without a plan. The best thing Lahore's old city can give you is the feeling of being genuinely, contentedly lost, turning a corner to find a courtyard full of pigeons, following a staircase that leads to a rooftop where a grandmother is hanging laundry against a skyline of domes and minarets.

Eventually, Lahore leads you to Wazir Khan Mosque, a masterpiece of tilework completed in 1641. Covered inside and out with *kashi kari*, glazed tilework in cobalt, cerulean and Persian blue, it is one of the most ornately decorated mosques of the Mughal era.

From the mosque, push deeper into the *gali*, the narrow lanes of the old city. The *haveli* - grand courtyard mansions built for Lahore's Mughal-era elite, are surrendering slowly to time, their carved wooden facades crumbling at the edges, the latticed upper-floor screens still filtering light the way they were designed to four hundred years ago. Some are still family homes. Others welcome travellers, offering the rare chance to spend a night inside a piece of Lahore's living history.





**In this spread,**

Badshahi Mosque was once among the world's largest mosques; hidden among Lahore's historic quarters are centuries-old courtyards waiting to be discovered; from spicy *chaats* to rich curries, every plate tells a story; *Noon chai* gets its distinctive hue from a special brewing process.

## The Fort and the Weight of Empire

Along the northern edge of the old city, the Lahore Fort rises in red sandstone and white marble, a complex so vast it contains entire palaces and a ramp built wide enough for an entire procession of elephants to carry the emperor straight to the palace door.

Step into the Sheesh Mahal, the Palace of Mirrors, and suddenly, 1631 is impossibly close. Every surface is studded with thousands of tiny mirror-glass fragments set into plasterwork so detailed it could only have been made by people who believed beauty was a form of worship.

Across the Hazuri Bagh gardens from the fort stands the Badshahi Mosque, completed in 1673, and for centuries, the largest mosque on earth. At dusk, when the red sandstone deepens to amber and the call to prayer drifts out from the minarets, the esplanade fills with families, children running, couples sitting on steps, vendors selling sugar cane juice and corn on the grill. Here, the ancient and the everyday have never been formally introduced, they just coexist.



## Eating Like a Lahori

Let's be direct about something: the food in Lahore may be the best reason to come here.

Lahori cuisine operates at an intensity that recalibrates your understanding of flavour. Everything is hotter, richer, a cuisine that has been refining itself in this one city for centuries and has absolutely no interest in being subtle.

Go to Gawalmandi Food Street after dark, when the restaurant facades are lit up and the smoke from a hundred *karahis rolls* into the air above the boulevard. Order the *murgh karahi*, chicken cooked with tomatoes and green chillies in a blackened iron wok over ferocious heat, brought to the table still spitting. Order the *seekh kebabs*, minced meat grilled over coal and eaten with bread and raita so fresh it was made an hour ago. Drink the *lassi*, sweet, thick and cold, in a clay cup you will probably take home.



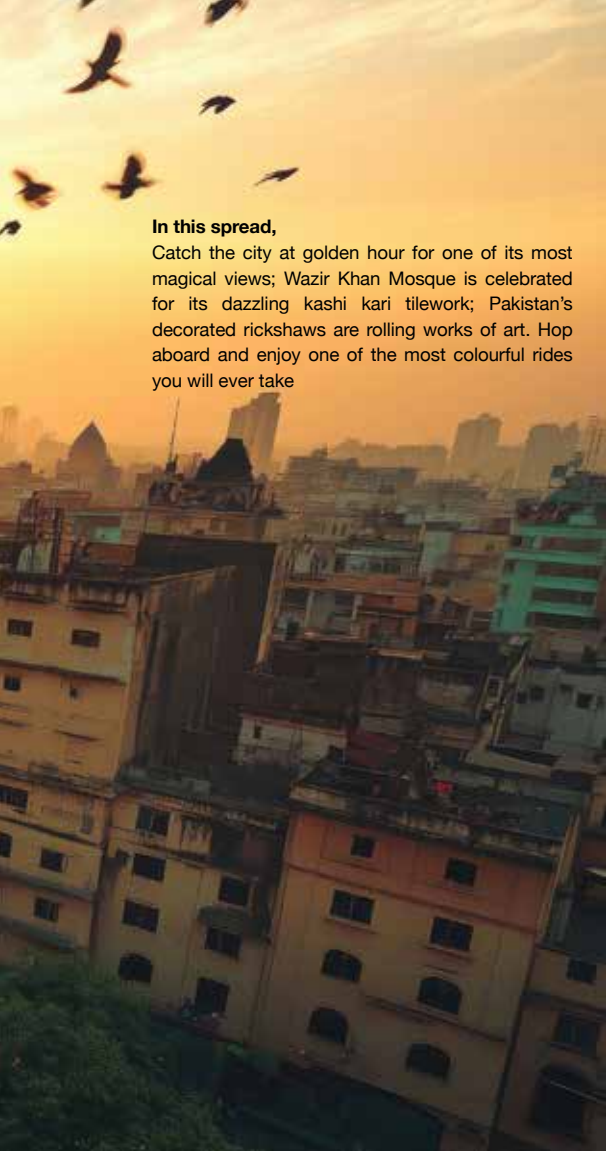
The true Lahori food education happens in the streets. At breakfast, *halwa puri* stalls appear in the old city like clockwork, fried bread and lentils and semolina pudding eaten standing up or squatting on a plastic stool while the lanes come alive around you. The *nihari*, a bone broth that has been cooking since before midnight, is collected in steel containers and eaten with *naan* in the same spots it has been eaten for a hundred years. And the noon *chai*, pink, salty, cardamom-heavy, poured from a great height so it froths, should be consumed at every possible opportunity. You will understand why when you are back home wishing you had more.



## Thursday Night at The Shrine

Before you leave, go to the shrine of Madhu-Lal-Hussain on a Thursday night. You will hear it before you see it, a single dhol drum in the darkness, then another and another, until the beat fills your chest and loosens your knees.

This is *dhamaal*, a Sufi trance ritual in which men surrender themselves entirely to the music, to God, to something that has no clean translation in any language. They whirl. They shake their heads until their hair is wild. They pound their bare feet into the earth with a force that seems to come from somewhere deeper than muscle. An old man dances with startling freedom that makes you wonder what he carries the rest of the week. Oil lamps flicker across the courtyard.



**In this spread,**

Catch the city at golden hour for one of its most magical views; Wazir Khan Mosque is celebrated for its dazzling kashi kari tilework; Pakistan's decorated rickshaws are rolling works of art. Hop aboard and enjoy one of the most colourful rides you will ever take

been a private, indoor thing, but something that spills into the night air, beats against the walls of ancient shrines, and draws strangers into its orbit. Here, the sacred and the everyday have never learnt to keep their distance.

Come for the architecture. Come for the food. Come because Lahore is one of those cities that sends you home with something you cannot quite name, a warmth, a residue, a persistent feeling that you were, for a few days, living at a register slightly higher than usual. That is what great cities do. And Lahore, despite everything, remains one of the greatest.



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A great old tree watches over everything. The air smells of incense and burning oil. Around you, the electricity of a crowd that has completely let go.

You do not have to share the faith to feel it. This is Lahore at its most primal and most sacred - a city where devotion has never



**CONTRIBUTOR**

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Shannim Mohd Sa'ad is a travel writer who has been exploring the world since 1992, drawn to diverse cultures and lesser known places. When not travelling, she enjoys Muay Thai, motocross, and snowboarding. Follow her adventures on Instagram @epicadventuress and at epicadventuress.com