

Cut and Paste, Indian Style

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A haircut in India comes with extras—like an orbital sander and some spinal realignment.

Indian men take a special pride in their hair—from their coiffed heads to their impeccably trimmed Magnum, P.I. mustaches. So an Indian haircut is a precious cultural experience. Here's how to enjoy the ritual.

The Ask

Most barbers will try to ascertain what length you'd like your hair. Not Raju, who cut my hair in Aurangabad. He already knows. After thoughtfully surveying my head and tugging on a thick handful of my hair, he looks me in the eye and says, soberly, "Haircut." "Sounds perfect," I reply.

The Cut

No electric razor; Raju is a magician with a pair of freshly sharpened, 30-year-old scissors. He's lightning-quick on the top and impossibly close on the sides. I'm convinced he could have cut my hair drunk and standing on one foot in the dark. He's done in 10 minutes, but the fun is just beginning.

The Shave

Raju makes a big production of washing the razor in front of me—I'm not his first foreigner. He snaps in

a fresh blade and makes quick work of my sideburns and neck hair. He offers to continue closer to my jugular, but paranoia gets the best of me and I decline. Disappointed, he dismisses my stubble with a wave of his hand and says, "Rough."

The Oil

Asian haircuts typically come with a bonus, and sure enough, Raju asks if I want "light oil." Out of a mysterious genie bottle comes a dollop of ayurvedic oil that warms my scalp and envelops my eyes, nose, and mouth in a menthol cloud. My eyes water, but I can still see Raju strapping an electrical appliance to the palm of his hand. It looks disconcertingly like an orbital sander. He turns it on, and it sounds like an orbital sander. I finally get a good look; it's basically an orbital sander. But Raju has replaced the sandpaper with a soft cloth, and he moves it around my head in slow circles, for long enough that I nearly fall



asleep. Then he sprays my head with water and massages my face with his hands. This goes on for longer than it took him to cut my hair. I was only semiconscious, so let's call it 13 minutes.

The Adjustment

Now that I'm relaxed and trusting, he stands behind me and cradles my head in his arms. With one lighting-fast jerk to the side, my neck cracks like firecrackers at a midsummer block party. I'm so startled that I resist a little when he twists my neck to the other side. He wags his finger at me and I relax again. He grips my head once more, and bingo—my neck pops like bubble wrap.

The Peanut Gallery

No barbershop is complete without old men sitting around shooting the breeze. This crowd wants to

know about America. They don't know Oregon, but they can picture "North of California," so we go with that. There's general agreement that Californians were wise to elect the Terminator as governor, on account of how strong and incorruptible he is.

The Damage

I paid five dollars—an outrageous amount presumably charged because it was Raju's day off (he was cutting an uncle's hair when I walked in) and because he considered it an emergency haircut. My travel companion visited the same shop the next day and paid one dollar. That 400 percent premium made me feel much less guilty about asking Raju to pose for this picture.