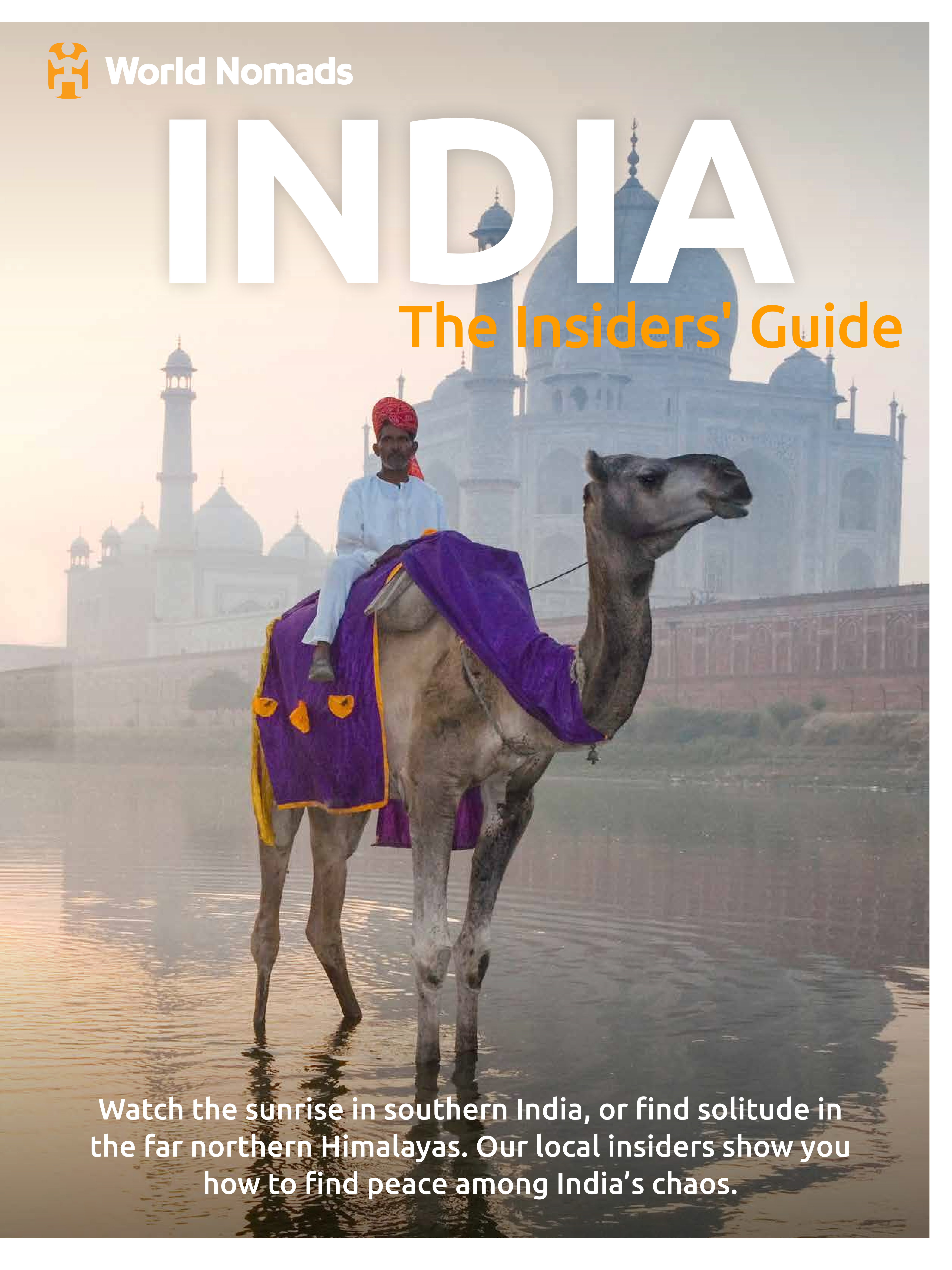


# INDIA

## The Insiders' Guide



Watch the sunrise in southern India, or find solitude in the far northern Himalayas. Our local insiders show you how to find peace among India's chaos.



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# Welcome!

India isn't all about clamor and spice. Find stillness in an ashram, experience culture on the ghats of Varanasi, go hiking through the high Himalayas, or hire a kayak in the Bay of Bengal. As long as you choose your seasons wisely, you'll fall in love with India's chaos.

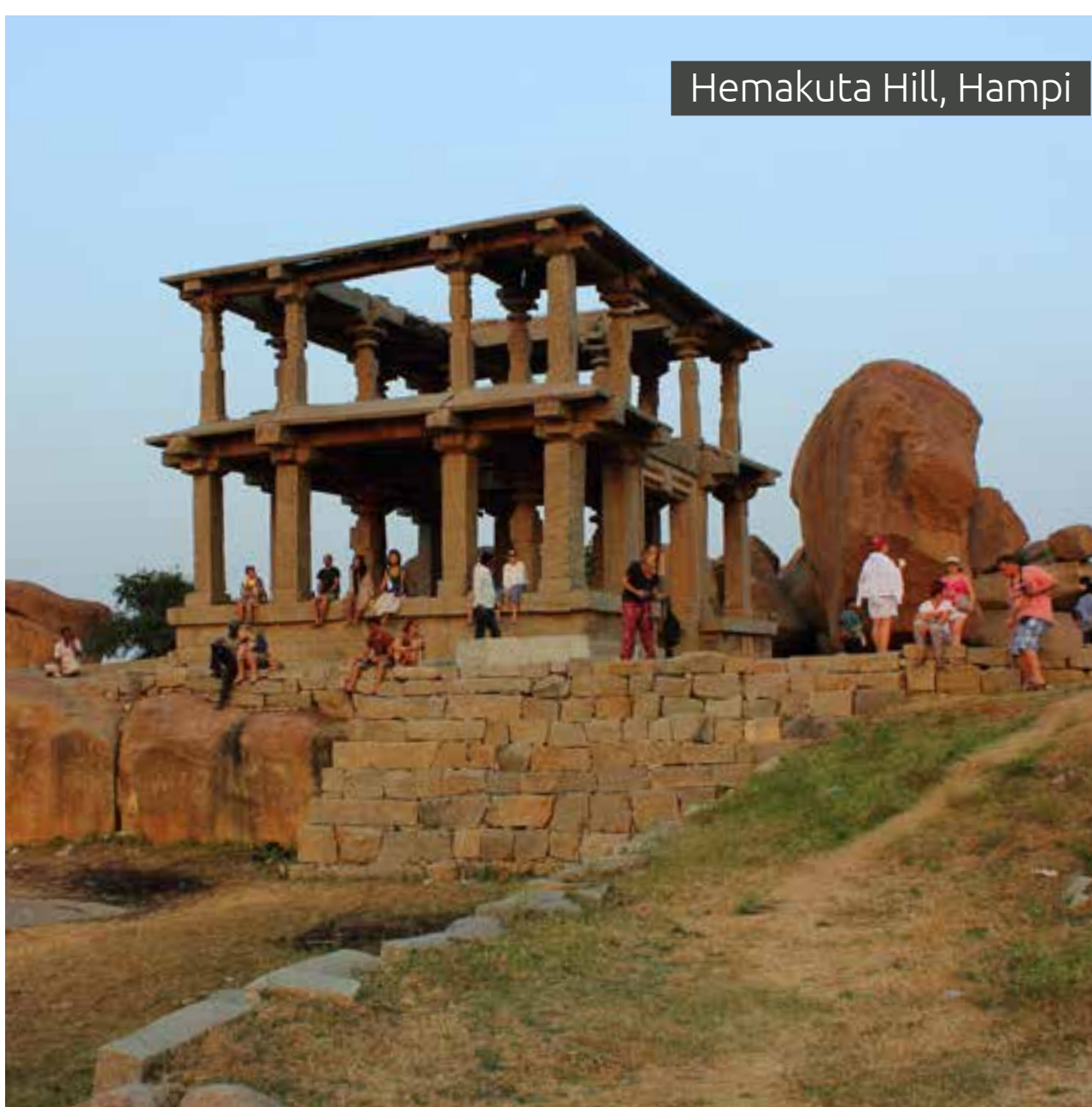
## Our Insiders' Picks of India's Top 10 Experiences

### Watch the sunrise from Tiger Hill

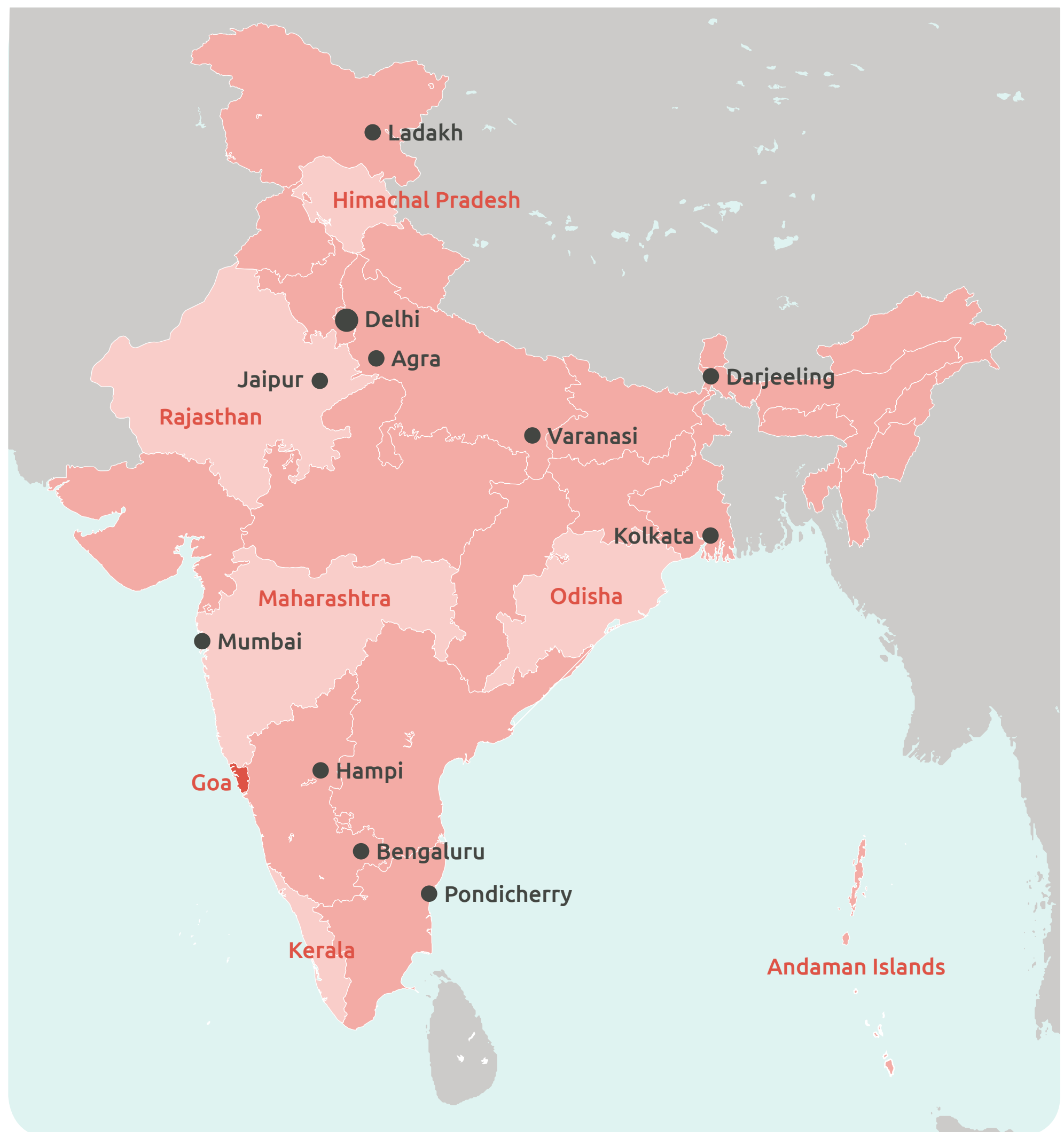
A 3:30am wake-up call is well worth the effort to hike three hours to the top of Tiger Hill in Darjeeling, just in time to see the sun rise over the Kangchenjunga mountain range. If you're lucky, on a clear day, you might see Everest in the distance!

### Go hiking in Hampi

Awash with mysterious giant boulders, secret caves, and ancient temples, there's so much to explore in Hampi.



Hemakuta Hill, Hampi



The rooftop of the Veerabhadra Temple on Matanga Hill is widely touted as the best sunrise/sunset point. But while the 30-minute climb offers stunning views of the boulder-strewn ruins, it's the little Hemakuta Hill that is truly charming at sunset.

### Discover the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Far off the coast in the Andaman Sea (much nearer to Thailand than mainland India) lies one of the

“Far off the coast in the Andaman Sea lies one of the country's best kept secrets.”

country's best kept secrets: the Andaman and Nicobar islands.

With only 38/500 islands permanently inhabited, coral reefs, active volcanoes, and pristine beaches are far removed from the rest of India, but still retain the feel and culture of the sub-continent.

### Explore Kerala's backwaters

From Kochi, it's an easy drive to Alleppey, the gateway to Kerala's famous backwaters. Here, you can rent a houseboat and crew to cruise the network of canals.

Better yet, hire a canoe or kayak for the day to access narrower canals that houseboats can't squeeze through. Wind your way through the backwaters, and listen to tales of local life from your guide. Learn a bit of the local language to impress the locals before you arrive.

### Day-trips from Pondicherry

Don a helmet, rent a bike or motorcycle, and visit the smaller villages on the outskirts of Pondicherry. A favorite is



Kerala backwaters

“Wind your way through the backwaters, and listen to tales of local life from your guide.”

Tiruvanamalai, a laid-back town on the southern hippie trail with good cafes and vegetarian food, as well as yoga classes. Here, you can hike up the holy mountain Arunachala, or walk around the base and stop off to see the nine temples, which are in honor of the nine celestial planets.

### Wander the Ajanta and Ellora Caves in Maharashtra

30km northwest from the city of Aurangabad, you'll find the intricate rock-cut Ellora Caves, dating back to the 6th and 9th century. More than 100 caves were carved from the stone face of the Charanandri hills, and 34 of them are open for public exploration.

100km northeast are the Ajanta Caves, where 30 caverns were cut into cliffs between the 2nd and 7th century for Buddhist temples, shrines, prayer halls, and dormitories.



Ellora Caves



Pushkar camel festival

## Join in the festivals of Odisha

Coastal Odisha is where most travelers head, and with good reason. Konark, almost directly east of Bhubaneswar, is home to one of India's most stunning UNESCO sites: the 13th century Konark Sun Temple.

Konark Beach is the site of the annual International Sand Art Festival, timed to coincide with the Konark Festival in February. Join in the five-day dance festival, where travelers are treated to classical Odissa dancers performing with the Sun Temple as backdrop.

## Experience Rajasthan's Pushkar Camel Fair

A trip to Rajasthan would be incomplete without a desert camel ride among the sand dunes, followed by fire-roasted flatbreads and camping under the starry skies.

If you time your trip right, for one week in November, the Pushkar Camel Fair brings camel and horse traders from across the country to the holy city of Pushkar. Throughout

the week, you'll see street shows, magicians, camel races, and beauty contests.

## Embrace the colors of Holi festival

Visit Vrindavan or Mathura at the beginning of March and join in the Hindu spring festival of Holi. Leave your valuables behind, wear clothes that you don't mind ruining, and join in the madness.

Locals smear *gulaal* (colored powder), and drench each other with water balloons, water guns, and buckets.

The only breaks are for crispy, sugar-soaked *jalebis* (deep-fried sweets) and *thandai* (a drink of milk, nuts, and spices).

## Find peace in Ladakh's mountains and monasteries

Sandwiched between the world's highest mountains, the high-altitude desert region of Ladakh is one of India's most unforgettable destinations, with jaw-dropping landscapes, and unique Sufi and Buddhist-influenced culture.

Centuries-old Buddhist monasteries, known as gompas, are an unforgettable part of Ladakh. Topped by snowy peaks, they're perched at the top of bare, twisted hills. A highlight is Lamayuru, located in Ladakh's famous "moonland," overlooking a strange, lunar-looking landscape. Inside, you'll find ancient ritual objects – some crafted from human bones.

## Estimated Travel Budget

### Low-end: US \$10/day

If you stay in rooms that are only US \$3-5/night, eat only cheap local food, and take trains every few days or less, US \$10/day will be enough.

You'll have to travel by uncomfortable buses or SL trains, and this doesn't leave much room for activities, entrance fees, or domestic flights.

### Mid-range: US \$35-55/day

This budget will allow you to have nice double rooms, 3 meals a day in restaurants, a few activities, and decent transport options, such as the AC2 trains.

### Top-end: US \$100+/day

This will get you into very nice historical/boutique style hotels. You can travel via AC2 and AC1 trains, eat extravagant meals, and take a number of internal flights. Lucky you!

# Climate & Weather

India's climate is really quite diverse – from steamy jungles and beaches in the south, to snow-capped mountains in the north. Whichever month you're traveling, there's somewhere to suit your comfort zone.

## High and low seasons

Peak season varies, but most visitors come to India in the cooler months, November-March. Temperatures in the most popular places – Delhi, Rajasthan, Agra, and Mumbai – are comfortable, and the rain is minimal.

Low season is April-June, when temperatures soar.

July-November are busy months in the Himalayas, but less so elsewhere throughout India.

## Winter

Winter in Delhi and across the northern plains is short, running through December-January, but gets very foggy. You'll need some warm clothes, including travel through the desert areas.

The major cities are quite pleasant in winter, with far more comfortable temperatures than in the heat.

In tropical southern India, far from the high Himalayas, it's hot all year-round, and winter isn't a concern. When it's winter in the north, the weather is best for beach-going down in the south.



Remote beach near Alleppey, Kerala

Elen Turner

## Summer

Summer runs through April-June, which is pre-monsoon. The desert and northern plains (Delhi, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh) are best avoided at this time.

This is the best time to head up to the mountains. Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Ladakh experience their high seasons during the warmer months.

It's only possible to travel overland to Ladakh between May-September, as the road is otherwise snow-bound.

### Best Season for Trekking and Hiking

Most travelers will want to avoid the rain and snow while trekking in India, but that leaves you with a narrow window to choose from. Depending on where you want to go, here are a few tips:

- For jungle hikes in central and southern India, any time but monsoon is good, so avoid July-September.
- It's not possible to trek in Ladakh and the Himalayas in winter. April-October is the best time.
- Himalayan states can be wet through July-August, but trekking is still possible, and wildflowers are abundant!

# Where to Stay

In India, you'll find guesthouse rooms from US \$3 sitting right beside a luxury, Maharaja-style resort. Whatever your budget, your room will come with the smell of incense and a smiling owner, ready to show you what Indian hospitality is all about.

## Booking accommodation

These days, a lot of room reservations are made online. But, there are still many family-run guesthouses that take reservations by phone in India.

One of the easiest ways to find accommodation is to follow each guesthouse owner's family recommendation.

Almost every business owner seems to have a relative elsewhere, so if you really like the place you're staying in,

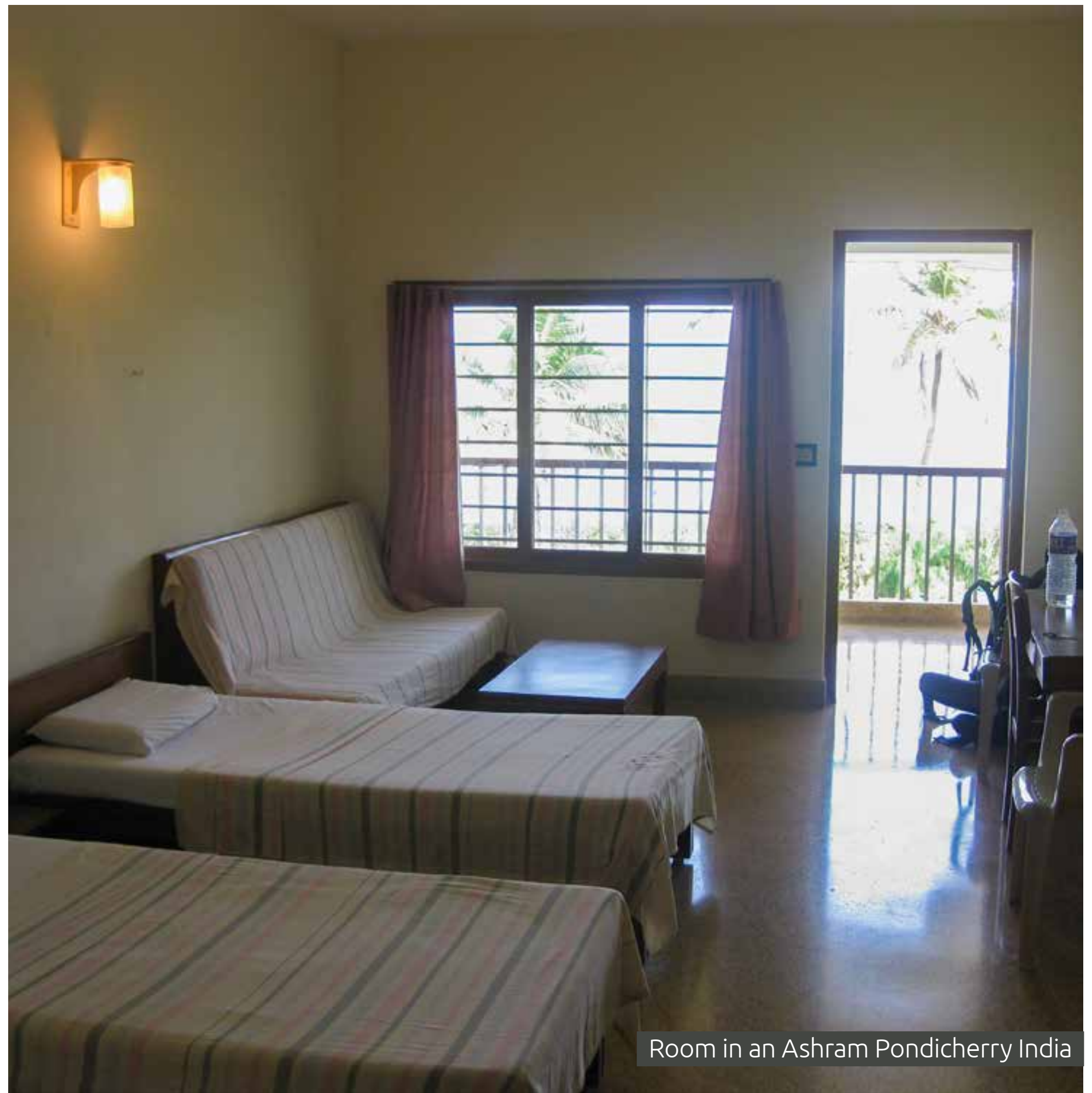
### Your Room, Your Way

Finding apartments, hostels, hotels, and guesthouses in India is easy. If you're not totally satisfied with your room, simply talk to the owner or manager.

Indians genuinely want to make sure you have the best stay possible, so their hospitality will take over and they'll generally fix whatever issues you may have.

If you read reviews, look at different rooms, and listen to local recommendations – you'll have a great stay in India.

Just remember that everything in India is different than it is at home, so enjoy the ride and don't be too picky!



Room in an Ashram Pondicherry India

Goats on the Road

ask the owner if they know someone in the next town you're heading to. More often than not, they'll have a "cousin" who would be more than happy to accommodate you in their hotel.

If you're more of a "roam and select" traveler, be sure to check all the rooms, and always look beneath the mattress for cockroaches and bed bugs.

In India, it's especially important that you read reviews from other travelers, as some hotels can be quite dirty, loud, and uncomfortable. Especially for those of you searching for accommodation on the budget end of the spectrum.

## Hostels

Whether you choose to stay in a dorm bed (from US \$3/night), or splurge and get a double room for you and your partner (from US \$10/night), there's pretty much a bed for all budgets in India's hostels.

“”  
**If you're more of a "roam and select" traveler, be sure to check all the rooms, and always look beneath the mattress for cockroaches and bed bugs.**

## Beware of Touts

When you arrive at a bus station or train terminal in a popular tourist destination, you'll see some tuk-tuk and taxi drivers holding up photos of hotel rooms.

Sometimes these rooms are decent, but often, the rooms aren't as nice as they look in the photos. If you do go ahead and book, know that a portion of your stay will be paid to the driver as a commission.

**Bonus Tip:** If you want to save money, try booking overnight train journeys, so that you can get to your next destination in your sleep, and save money on accommodation!



House Boat in Kerala

Goats on the Road

Hostels are generally clean and comfortable (read the reviews to be sure), and they come with the added bonus of common areas where you can meet other travelers.

## Hotels

A little more upmarket than hostels, hotels are still quite affordable in India. They typically range around US \$10/night for a room, but some might say they're not quite as good value as some hostels



Goats on the Road

or guesthouses.

Some rooms have private bathrooms, while others may have a toilet down the hall or in another building. It's worth checking if you're likely to wake in the night for the bathroom!

## Guesthouses

Arguably the best choice for accommodation in India, guesthouses are typically family-run places with 5-10 comfortable rooms.

Here, you get to know your host, and get a sense of what local life is really like. Sometimes your host will offer homemade food, or a small family party during your stay.

## Apartments

With AirBnB exploding all over the world, it's no surprise that you can find some pretty nice apartments in India. You'll find many beautiful one and two bedroom places going for just US \$30-50/night.



# Getting Around

With so many options between trains, planes, cars, tuk-tuks, motorbikes, taxis, rickshaws, bicycles, bicycle taxis, and camels – India’s transport system will intimidate first-timers without a doubt.

## Train travel

Trains are by far the best way to get around India. They’re quite affordable, and easy to book once you know how.

Here’s what you need to know about the most common classes of trains:

**2S - Second Seating Class:** Your cheapest option; long journeys on 2S trains can be as little as US \$0.10/hour. But they can be dirty, cramped, hot, there aren’t always assigned seats, and there’s no air-conditioning. These trains are so uncomfortable and unreliable that it’s worth avoiding them altogether, despite their low cost.

**SL - Sleeper Class:** With assigned beds that allow you to lie down all the



Goats on the Road

way, these are more comfortable than the seating class, but there is no air-conditioning, and they can be quite dirty. Tickets on SL trains cost around US \$0.50/hour on average for long distance journeys.

**3A - AC 3 Tier:** These trains have three tiers of beds with air-conditioning. They are considerably more comfortable, cleaner, and quieter than the SL trains. Rates average at around US \$1.50/hour.

**2A - AC 2 Tier:** The best option for people looking for a balance between cost and comfort. These trains only have two tiers of air-conditioned beds, so you’ve got plenty of room to sit up. They’re typically clean with good service. Long distance rides are typically around US \$2/hour.

**1A - AC First Class:** On this train, you’ll have your own booth with a bed inside, air-conditioning, food, and great service – but they come at a cost. They are more

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**Trains are by far the best way to get around India. They’re quite affordable, and easy to book once you know how.**



Julian Mannique, WhereNext.com

Train from Goa to Mumbai



Local bus in Delhi

expensive than 2A and 3A trains, with most costing around US \$3.25/hour on long-distance journeys. More famous journeys, like the Darjeeling Express, can be considerably more.

## Bus travel

Buses are a good option for short distances, or when there isn't a train station in the town you plan to visit. Some of them can be very uncomfortable, while others are luxury buses with air-conditioning.

It's important that you ask questions about the bus before you book it, and also ask to see a photo of the bus. Be aware that sometimes the salesman will say anything to get you to buy a ticket, and the bus that pulls up may not be what you're expecting.

## Taxis

Taxis in India are affordable, but you'll have to bargain. The best way to avoid getting completely ripped off by a taxi is to ask your hotel or hostel how much the taxi should cost before getting in. That way you have an idea of what price to bargain for.

Always ask the driver to use the meter, but it's likely they'll tell you it's broken.

## Motorbikes and scooters

You might see motorcycle taxis in India, simply flag them down, suggest a price, and hop on the back. Just make sure, like taxis, you decide on a price before starting your journey.

Motorbikes and scooters are also available for rent. You can typically get a motorbike for approximately US \$3-5/day, and it's a great way to get around – especially if you're on the south coast.

## Tuk-tuks

Motor rickshaws work a lot like taxis. You'll have to bargain with the driver, and the meter never seems to work for tourists. These are a bit cheaper than yellow taxi cars, but it all depends on your bargaining skills!



Goats on the Road

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**Always ask the driver to use the meter, but it's likely they'll tell you it's broken.**

# Indian Cuisine

The ‘Land of Spices’ lives up to its name by adding masalas (a creative assortment of spices) to almost every dish. But, contrary to common belief, there’s so much more to Indian cuisine than flaming hot chili.

## Quick eats

*Pani puri* is India’s most popular street-side *chaat* (tangy snacks that literally mean, ‘to lick’.) A *pani puri* is a wafer-thin hollow ball, with a little hole in the middle, stuffed with potatoes and sprouts. Here comes the fun part – just before you pop it into your mouth, pour in some *pani* (minty water) and gulp it whole. (🌶️ 7/10)

*Dahi vada* is a welcome relief if you have a low tolerance to spices. It’s a lentil ball soaked in cold yogurt and topped with a spicy-sweet sauce.

It’s great as a standalone snack while



Rajasthan, street food vendor

shopping on the streets of Delhi, or as a cooling side dish with your meal anywhere in India! (🌶️ 1/10)

A *dhokla* is a light snack from Gujarat. Made from gram flour, it’s like biting into a fluffy, savory sponge. It’s usually accompanied with a mint or tamarind chutney. Most Indian sweet or *chaat* shops offer them, but it’s best experienced in Gujarat – the state of its origin. (🌶️ 3/10)

“”  
A *pani puri* is a wafer-thin hollow ball, with a little hole in the middle, stuffed with potatoes and sprouts.



Thali

Peter Teys

## Food Safety in India

- It’s a good idea to go vegetarian on your trip to India. The meat on the streets can be dodgy.
- Avoid ice-creams from carts. Stick to the ones in restaurants.
- Cooked food all the way! Avoid eating salads, as the fresh veggies were likely washed in contaminated water.
- Only eat fruits and vegetables that you can peel.
- Never drink tap water. Either drink from a water bottle (check the seal first), or carry a water purifier with you.
- Eat at the most crowded stalls – they’re famous for a good reason!



Cooking chapatti


## Main courses

*Masala dosa* is a mouth-watering crispy pancake with squashed potatoes and onions. Eating *masala dosa* is an art in itself. You start with tearing a piece of the *dosa*, and use it to scoop up some of the potato stuffing. Dunk the piece first in the chutney, and then in a cup of *sambhar*, before finally taking a bite.

 **5/10**

The *thali* or 'plate' is a culmination of rice, spice, and everything nice. A *thali* comes with little bowls of curries, pickles, breads, rice, and sweets – almost like a crash course on Indian food. While every state in India has its own version, the most exotic of them all is the south Indian *thali* – served on a banana leaf.

 **4-7/10**

*Biryani* is made from long, slender Basmati Rice and succulent pieces of meat. It's usually paired with its faithful sidekick – *raitha*, made from yogurt and onions.  **7/10**

## Desserts and sweets

The *falooda* is an Indian dessert that you can both eat and drink. Iced milk is poured over strands of vermicelli, pistachios, and almonds, and is topped with a scoop of ice cream.

Made from a betel leaf, a *paan* is the ubiquitous Indian dessert, digestive, and mouth freshener – all rolled into one. A must-try! It's chewed for its stimulant and psychoactive effects, and either spat out or swallowed afterwards.



Paan

“”  
**Made from a betel leaf, a *paan* is the ubiquitous Indian dessert, digestive, and mouth freshener – all rolled into one. A must-try!**

# Festivals & Religion

Home to Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and Jains, India is a cultural smorgasbord – where festivals aren't just a means of worship, but a reason to unite and celebrate the vibrancy of Indian life.

## Holi

Holi, a Hindu spring festival that signifies the victory of good over evil, is celebrated at the beginning of March. On the evening before Holi, bonfires are lit to symbolize the burning of Holika, an evil character in Hindu mythology.

Locals smear *gulaal* (colored powder), and drench each other with water balloons, water guns, and buckets.

The only breaks are for crispy, sugar-soaked *jalebis* (deep-fried sweets) and *thandai* (a drink of milk, nuts, and spices).



Diwali



Holi

Clean and dry clothes on the day are unacceptable, and you'll most likely find yourself participating with the festival's tagline: "*Bura na mano Holi hai*", which translates to "Please don't mind, it's Holi."

Leave your valuables behind, wear clothes that you don't mind ruining, and join in the madness.

## Diwali

Celebrated in October-November, Diwali is a festival of lights that marks the victory of Lord Rama (righteousness) over King Ravana (evil) and his return from exile to Ayodha.

To welcome Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, tiny lamps flicker on colorful rangoli designs at entrances to homes, and windows shine with fairy lights.

In the evening, families sing *aartis* in praise of deities Ganesha and

### The Best Places to Join in the Festivities

**Holi:** Vrindavan and Mathura.

**Diwali:** Amristar, Mumbai, Delhi, Varanasi, or Jaipur.

**Durga Puja:** Kolkata. Visit the neighborhood of Kumartuli a week before it starts to see artists paint the eyes of the idol.

**Pushkar Camel Fair:** Pushkar, Rajasthan.

**Ganesh Chaturthi:** Visit Lalbaugcha Raja and the Siddhivinayak Temple in Mumbai.

Lakshmi, and adults and children alike burst firecrackers late into the night.

It's a great time to try homemade sweets like *barfis* and *laddoos*.

## Durga Puja

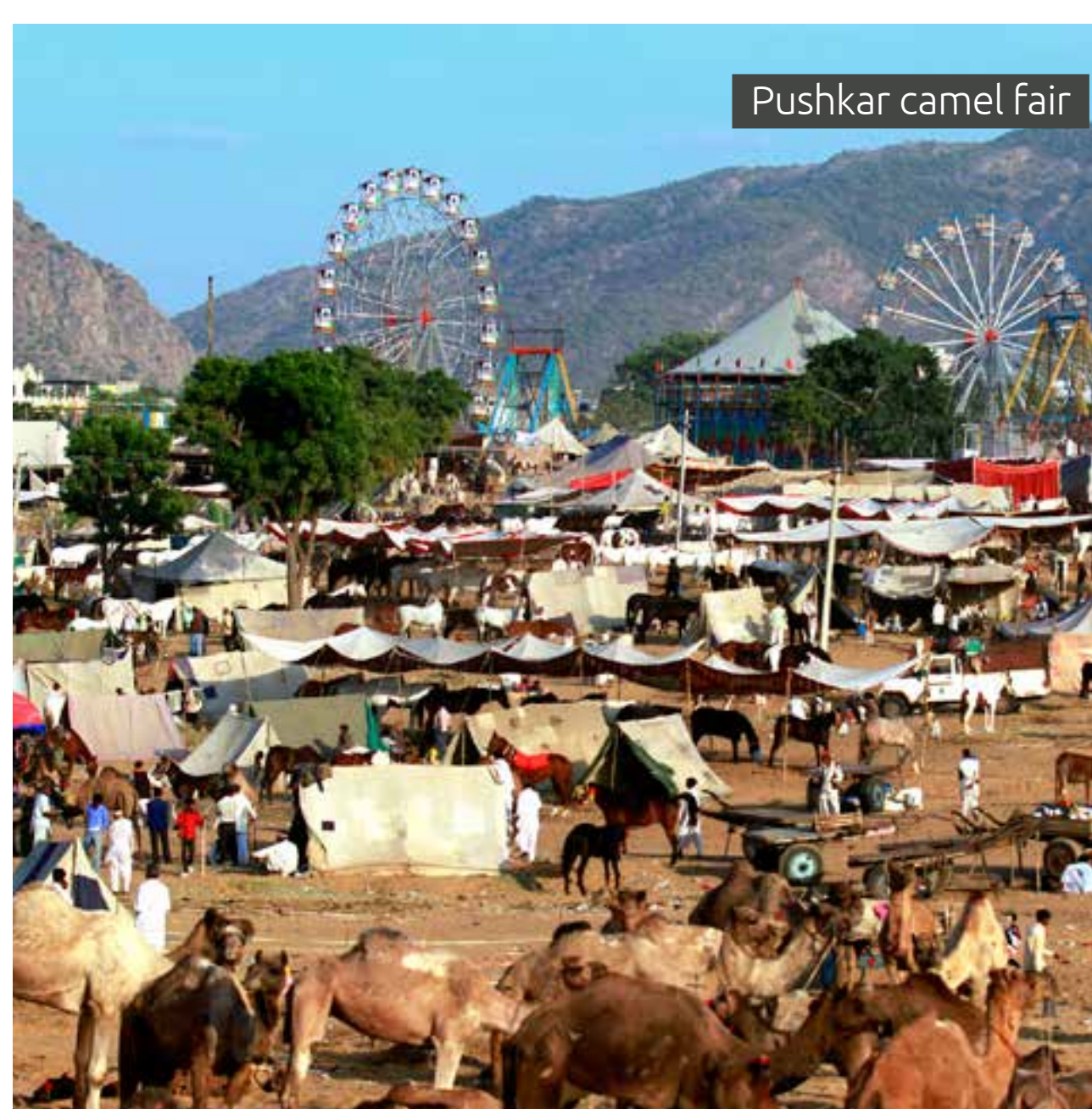
This ten-day festival, celebrated September-October in West Bengal, celebrates the victory of goddess Durga over the demon Mahishasura.

The energy in the air is palpable, as worshippers chant in front of giant, bedecked idols of the goddess.

On the final day of Vijayadashmi, the idols are immersed in water. Married women apply *sindoor* (vermillion), the symbol of matrimony, to the idols and each other. It's believed that on immersion, the goddess reunites with her husband, Shiva.

## Pushkar camel fair

Come November, the desert town of Pushkar in Rajasthan comes alive for Kartika Purnima. Expect to see street shows, magicians, camel races, and beauty contests during the week-long festival.



Pushkar camel fair



Ganesh Chaturthi festival, Mumbai

Pilgrims from around the country bathe in the holy waters of the Pushkar Lake. Herders arrive with thousands of camels in time for the full moon, in what initially began as a fair to trade camels, but has become one of India's biggest tourism draws.

## Ganesh Chaturthi

Celebrated in August-September, Ganesh Chaturthi welcomes the elephant god Ganesha for eleven days of positivity and happiness.

On the first day, processions carry massive bejeweled Ganesha idols to pandal venues (open to the public), and families bring smaller idols into their homes.

Over the next days, friends and relatives visit to seek Ganesha's blessings and sing hymns. Sweet *modaks*, Ganesha's favorite, are placed by the idols as an offering before being distributed to devotees.

On the last day, the idols are immersed into the sea. To see Ganesh Chaturthi, visit Lalbaugcha Raja and the Siddhivinayak Temple in Mumbai.

## Customs & Etiquette at Festivals

- Both men and women should dress modestly, keeping shoulders and knees covered.
- A box of Indian sweets for your hosts is an appropriate gift for every festival.
- In some communities, men and women are seated separately, so observe and do as the locals do.
- Always ask for permission before photographing people, rituals, temples, and idols.
- If you're joining a Holi celebration by yourself, avoid large crowds of strangers that are known to get rowdy.
- At public celebrations, avoid the intoxicating *bhang* drink made with cannabis leaves, as the effects can take days to wear off, depending on the amount of the drug.

# Etiquette & Faux Pas

Indians are a polite lot. They're not likely to point out your social faux pas – unless you're at a place of worship. Even so, it pays to know what their cultural pet peeves are.

## Dress appropriately

Always dress modestly in India. As a woman, wearing revealing clothes will attract anti-social elements.

It's a common misconception that it's okay to dress like a hippie in India. You'll be surprised at how fashionably men and women dress in cities like Mumbai, Delhi, and Bengaluru.

Unlike its cities, wearing "modern clothing" is not recommended in villages. Instead, choose loose, conservative clothing. You could opt for a comfortable *kurta* with a *salwar* if you're a woman, or pants if you're a man.

## How to behave in public

Public displays of affection are a big no-no. Kissing in public is taboo – even though Bollywood movies have another story to tell!

The "side hug" is considered a casual, friendly gesture between members of the same gender.

While using public transport, be mindful of offering your seat to elderly people or those traveling with young children. It's an unsaid social rule.

Crossing the roads in India can be tricky. Maneuver heavy traffic carefully,

as vehicles don't wait, and rules aren't obeyed.

## How to address people

The remnants of colonial times, "Sir" and "Madam", are used across all strata of society.

Don't hesitate to address someone by his or her first name, unless it's an elderly person.

In formal situations, affix a Mr. or Ms. to show respect. Informally, you could use "Uncle" or "Aunty" – even though they won't have the remotest chance of appearing on your family tree.

## Living in a local homestay

Rule #1: leave your footwear at the door – unless told otherwise by the host.

While it's common to use your hands while eating *rotis*, you can ask for a spoon to eat your rice – unless it's a modest, rural homestay. While eating, don't bite or sip on something and pass it on. It is now "*jhootha*" or tainted.

Wash your hands with soap before and after a meal. It's not only hygienic, it gets the stubborn curry smell off your hands.

## Photographing locals

The easiest way to photograph locals is to chat with them first. Rural Indians are particularly friendly and will love posing for you – just show them the picture once you've taken it.

Photographing children in urban areas must be avoided, unless their guardians approve.

Snake charmers, musicians, or street performers outside tourist places usually demand a fee.

“”

**Public displays of affection are a big no-no. Kissing in public is taboo – even though Bollywood movies have another story to tell!**

### Poverty in India

Despite being Asia's third-largest economy, poverty is still a reality for many in India. While you (rightly) may be moved to lend a hand, just be aware of potential pitfalls.

If you participate in a slum tour, make sure that your fee directly benefits the community – and avoid orphanage tours altogether.

Giving to beggars can also be problematic. Instead, research reputable NGOs and consider donating your money or time through these organizations.

# Spiritual Travel

Whether it be on the banks of the Ganges River in Rishikesh, on the ghats of Varanasi, in the high Himalayas, or on the hot plains, here's how to start your spiritual journey through India.

## Yoga and meditation

You can find ashrams, retreats, and yoga centers all over India, suited to both beginners and advanced practitioners. You'll find there's much less of a distinction on styles of yoga, or indeed on the concepts of beginner or advanced.

You might see your bank teller in a suit and tie at work, but later, performing a time-honored puja on the banks of a sacred river, wearing an orange robe with *tilak* marks on his forehead.

Yoga comes from the Hindu tradition and includes meditation as a core practise. This is the main difference between yoga in India and in the west, where it's seen as more of a physical exercise.

Meditation is also associated with the Buddhist tradition, where it's the main form of spiritual practice. There are many forms of meditation in India along with yoga, including Transcendental Meditation and Vipassana.

## Where to go

Rishikesh, in the north of India where



Meditating in Hampi

the Ganges River tumbles from the lower Himalayas, is often called the world's capital of yoga. This is the best place to start your spiritual journey.

The peaceful valley is lined with ashrams, and yoga and meditation centers. People come from all over the world to study, practice, and chill out.

Mysore, a small town in Karnataka, is the center of the Ashtanga Yoga world. The founder, Pattabhi Jois, established the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute here in 1948.

Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa in south India are also popular spots for yoga retreats. You'll find them all along the tropical coasts of these states.

The Sivananda organization has a center near Trivandrum, located among lush forest greenery.

These retreats vary in terms of accommodation standards and prices, from simple to luxurious. But there's a spot for just about every budget.

You can stay for just a few days, do a one or two-week yoga retreat, or take an in-depth yoga teacher training course – which usually lasts a month.

“”

Yoga comes from the Hindu tradition and includes meditation as a core practise. This is the main difference between yoga in India and in the west, where it's seen as more of a physical exercise.



# Hiking & Trekking

Home to part of the Himalayas, dense jungles, and hill stations, there are plenty of gentle day hikes and challenging mountain adventures throughout India. It's best to acclimatize before trekking, and check to make sure your insurance policy covers you for the heights you are reaching.

## Day hikes

Some of the best day hikes are in the mountains of southern India. The Western Ghats run through the west, and encompass some beautiful national parks of hills and jungles, such as Kerala's Wayanad.

The Nilgiri Hills, around Tamil Nadu's Ooty, is a good area to hike through tea plantations. You'll also pass interesting tribal (Adivasi) cultures throughout these regions.

In the Himalayan areas, you're never far from a good day hike. Check out local recommendations upon arrival.

## Short treks

Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand are the places to go if you want to attempt a short trek of 3-5 days, and Manali and McLeod Ganj/Dharamsala are good bases for short treks in Himachal Pradesh.

A highlight is the Naggar to Malana, a 3-4 day camping trek, via the Chandrakhani Pass (3,650m). Malana is an isolated town where the people



Trekkers in Ladakh

speak their own dialect, practice extreme untouchability, and believe they are descendants of Alexander the Great.

The trek from Naggar starts gently, and then descends sharply down a vertigo-inducing trail. Bring hiking poles.

Another highlight is the three-day Har-Ki-Dun Valley Trek in Uttarakhand. This area is remote, with a beautiful valley full of wild forests, glacial streams, and snow-capped mountains. You'll stay in tents or basic homestays.

## Long treks

In Ladakh, the Markha Valley trek is a popular long trek, with dry but colorful mountains, remote villages with homestays, and Tibetan Buddhist culture. It can take up to eight days, but shorter sections are possible, such as Spitik to Stok (three days).

For a longer-distance challenge, the Parang La trek is a two-week, high altitude trek, beginning in Himachal Pradesh and ending in Ladakh. There's an incredible change of scenery as you pass into the rain shadow of the Himalayas.

Ladakh is above 3,000m. Once you arrive in Leh, acclimatize before trekking.

“““

For a longer-distance challenge, the Parang La trek is a two-week, high altitude trek, beginning in Himachal Pradesh and ending in Ladakh.

## Top Trekking Tips

Hiring a guide and/or porter is quite affordable in India, so it's highly advisable for multi-day treks.

Women can hire female guides and porters in Ladakh, but elsewhere, female guides are scarce.

If you're a solo female traveler, choose a well-reputed company, and there's no doubt you'll feel comfortable with male guides and porters.

# Travel Safety & Scams

Generally, travel in India is safe. But, like anywhere in the world, you should take some precautions and always be aware of your surroundings.

## Transport safety

It's not recommended for women to take tuk-tuks or taxis late at night. Trains and buses are safe, but to avoid unwanted stares, a good tip is to hang a few sarongs or scarfs around your bunk on overnight trains.

If you feel like you're being harassed on public transport, don't be afraid to make a scene. Be loud, and let the harasser know that you won't have it.

It's important that you keep an eye on your belongings. When you're on an overnight train, bring a metal chain and a padlock to lock your bags to your seats. Another handy tip is to tie some thin fishing wire or dental floss from your luggage to your wrist. That



Julian Manrique, WhereNext.com

way, if anyone tries to take it while you're sleeping, you'll wake instantly.

## Taxi scams

When a taxi or tuk-tuk driver tells you their meter is broken, it isn't. Demand they turn the meter on before you get in, and if they don't, find another taxi.

When you catch a taxi from the airport to your hotel, you might be told some silly reason why they can't take you there. Instead, they might suggest taking you somewhere they can get a commission from a hotel or hostel owner. Simply demand they take you to your booked accommodation, and hop out if they aren't willing to take you there.

## Scam artists

A "poor student" might ask to take you sightseeing in exchange

“Tie some thin fishing wire or dental floss from your luggage to your wrist. That way, if anyone tries to take it while you're sleeping, you'll wake instantly.”



Julian Manrique, WhereNext.com

Train from Goa to Mumbai

for schoolbooks. Unfortunately, when you come to buy their books, you'll find they are tremendously overpriced, and happen to be sold from a bookstore the "student" is affiliated with.

Be careful of the bank note scam. As of November 2016, 500 and 1,000 Indian Rupee notes are no longer valid. If someone tries to give you these as change, refuse them, and ask for different bills.

It's a good idea to avoid street moneychangers. Instead, head into a bank or proper exchange booth, and always check your change – almost everyone will try to shortchange you.

Beware of fake "train captains." It's common to pay to upgrade your train ticket while on board, but always check that he has a seating chart, and a badge with his name and number. If he's legit, he'll be checking all tickets, not just tourists'.

## LGBT travelers in India

Many potential LGBT visitors became concerned after homosexuality was recriminalized in 2013, after having



The Taj Mahal



Peter Teys

been decriminalized in 2009, causing a whiplash among LGBT locals and visitors alike.

The ruling is currently being reviewed. However, much to the surprise of the global LGBT community, transgender rights have improved in recent years, with a ruling in 2014 granting legal recognition of a third gender in India, helping nudge acceptance of the mostly marginalized trans (*hijara*) community.

While the legal status of LGBT locals is complex, visitors don't have to worry about this – as long as they behave according to local customs. Travelers must note that all forms of public displays of affection (even among straight couples) are discouraged.

There are no "no go" zones in India. All the spots that attract mainstream tourists are open and welcoming to LGBT guests, though it's always important for all visitors to be modest with respect to behavior. Still, it's advisable for same-sex guests (especially males) to avoid public displays of affection.

## Safety for Women in India

- Avoiding stares is completely impossible, but dressing a little frumpily can keep the stares curious, rather than lecherous.
- Wearing the traditional *salwar kameez* is a comfortable and appropriate way to respect culture, and stay covered.
- Covering your hair is not a necessity, but keeping your hair back helps unwanted glances stay away. Dark sunglasses will also help you avoid uncomfortable eye contact.
- Going to a male-staffed pharmacist to explain female "complications" is far less than fun, so try to pack the proper medications to spare you any embarrassing conversations (or dodgy remedies).
- After dark, you'll notice the only people that are outside will be male. For this reason, it's a good idea to stay indoors and chat over tea.

# Visas & Vaccinations

## Visas

If you're from the Maldives, congratulations! You hold the only passport that is allowed to enter India visa-free. And if you're from Japan, you belong to the only nationality that can get a visa in India upon arrival. Pretty much all other passport holders will have to get an eVisa to enter India (unless the person is of Pakistani descent).

As of 2017, there are over 150 countries eligible for eTourist Visa (eTV) in India. These countries include The United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, The United Kingdom, and many more.

To view a full list of countries eligible, you should visit [the E-Tourist Visa Facility page of the Indian pib.nic website](#).

The cost of the visa depends on the passport with which you apply, and can vary from US \$0-60.

Applying is simple. Simply click [here](#), scroll to the bottom of the page, and click the "Apply online" button to begin the process. After filling out the application form, you will be prompted to pay online by credit card. Your application will then be processed and, if approved, the eVisa will be sent to your email. Simply print out the eVisa and present it upon arriving in India.

## Vaccinations

Your health professional will be able

to give you the most up-to-date information so that you can make the right choice.

No vaccinations are currently required to enter India, aside from Yellow Fever if you're arriving from a country with risk of yellow fever virus (YFV), but according to the [wwwnc.cdc.gov](http://wwwnc.cdc.gov) website, travelers to India should at least have all routine vaccinations, as well as Hepatitis A and Typhoid.

Typhoid is a real risk in India. It can be contracted from contaminated water, which is not uncommon in the country. Other vaccinations to consider include Cholera, Hepatitis B, Japanese Encephalitis, Rabies, and Yellow Fever.

## Staying healthy

The best way to avoid Malaria is to sleep under a mosquito net, wear clothing that covers as much as possible, and use mosquito repellent. Check with your doctor before choosing to take Malaria tablets.

Travelers to India are likely to contract some sort of food poisoning, because the sanitation standards are so different to back home. Always aim to eat in busy places, and only eat during meal times when the food turnover is high.

Do not drink any water that doesn't come from a sealed bottle. If you have a salad or raw food, don't eat it if there's a lot of water on it. Only eat raw fruit and vegetables that can be peeled, and never drink directly from a can or bottle – try to get a clean straw instead.

## Key Hindi Phrases for Travelers

### Hello/Goodbye:

*Namaste*

### My Name is \_\_\_:

*Mera naam \_\_\_ hai*

### What's your name?

*Aapka naam kya hai?*

### I'm from \_\_\_:

*Main \_\_\_ se hoon*

### Thank you:

*Dhanyavaad*

### How are you? :

*Kaise ho aap?*

### It's very nice:

*Bahut accha hai*

### I'm fine:

*Main theek hoon*

### Yes: Ji Haan

### No: Ji Nahin

### How much is this?:

*Yeh kitane ka hai?*

### That's too much:

*Bahut zyada hai*

### Please reduce it:

*Thoda kum kijiye*

### Do you accept cards?:

*Kya aap cards lete hain?*

### I want a small size:

*Mujhe chotta size chahiye*

### I want a big size:

*Mujhe bada size chahiye*



# NORTHERN INDIA

**F**ind forts, mosques, palaces, and temples in Old Delhi. Watch elephants walk side by side with rush hour traffic in the Pink City of Jaipur. See the Taj Mahal. Enjoy sunset lake views from ancient hilltop palaces. Dodge scammers, and find bargains in the bazaars of northern India.

# Delhi

Travelers who merely touch down in Delhi and eagerly escape for other destinations are missing out on one of the country's most fascinating and culturally-significant cities. Do yourself a favor, spend a few days in Delhi.

## Chandni Chowk

Delhi's unmissable Old City is a mad cluster of tiny streets and back-alleys, crowded with rickshaws and bullock carts. It's also a major shopping hub.

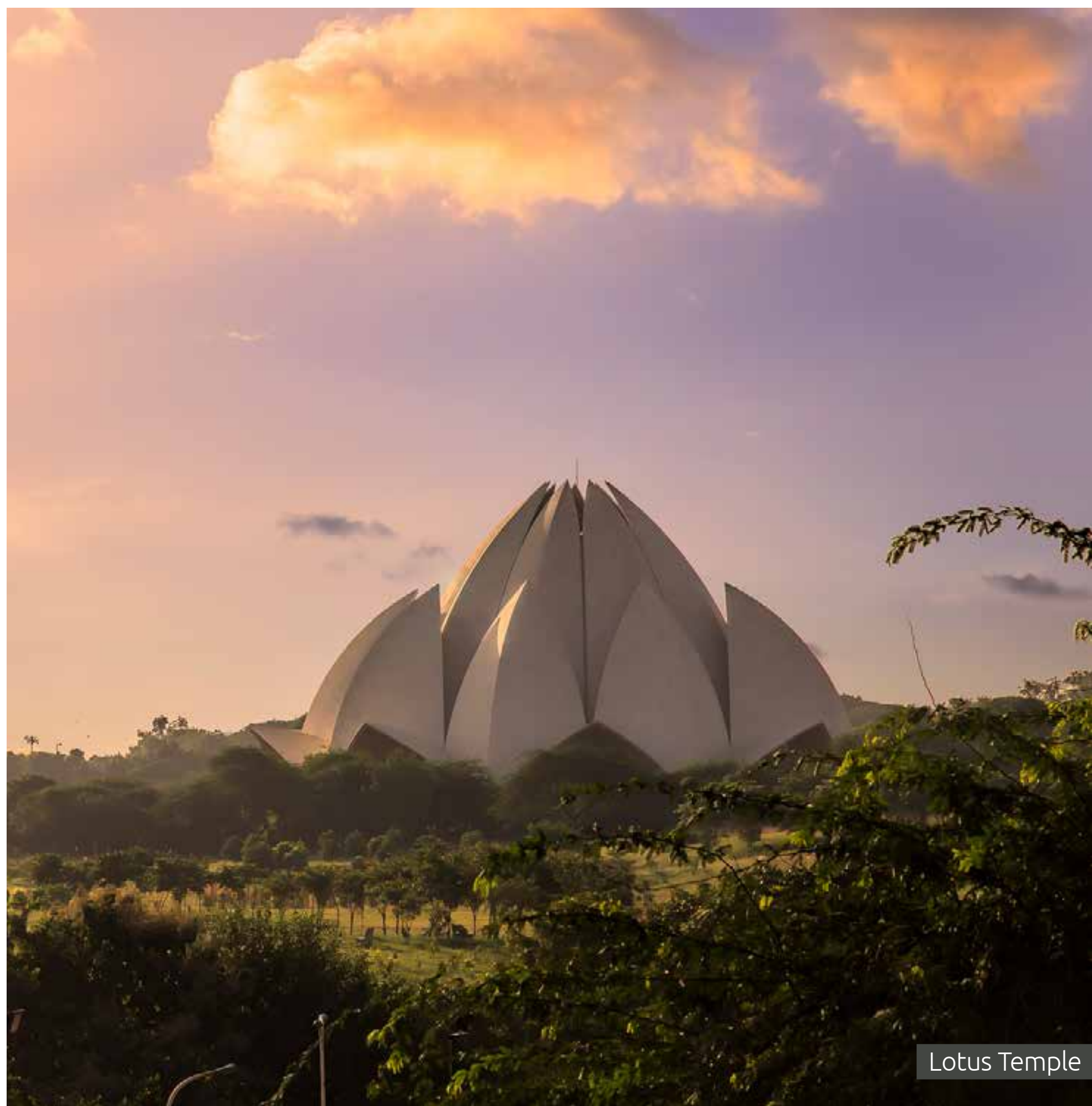
For silver and *attars* (essential oils), head to the 17th century jewelers' lane of Dabira Kalan. You'll see brides haggling over ribbons and *lehengas* (long, embroidered bridal skirts) in Kinari Bazar. There's even a vintage camera market at Kulcha Choudhary.

Bring your appetite, and grab a bite to eat in Old City. Head to Sitaram Bazar for *aam kulfi* (mango ice cream) or *daulat ki chaat* (a foamy, saffron-infused dessert that takes up to six hours to prepare).

For kebabs, look no further than the



Old Delhi



Lotus Temple

famous Karim's, founded in 1913 by the son of a cook in the Mughal royal court. Its mouth-watering recipes are still a family secret.

## Laxminarayan Temple

None other than Mahatma Gandhi himself inaugurated this Hindu temple. You can join the faithful in offering garlands to the gods, hand-carved by master craftsmen from Benares.

But be warned, worshippers swell during festivals, so you may have trouble squeezing inside!

## Lotus Temple

This gleaming-white, blossom-shaped sanctuary is one of Delhi's most distinctive buildings. As one of seven major Baha'i temples around the world, it celebrates all religions and faiths. Despite four million visitors a year, the temple always remains blissfully calm.

“”

**Be warned, worshippers swell during festivals, so you may have trouble squeezing inside!**



Jama Masjid

## Jama Masjid

Built by emperor Shah Jahan just a couple decades after the Taj Mahal, this mosque's domes and marble-and-sandstone minarets are standing strong after four centuries. Visitors can explore the grounds, but entrance is forbidden during prayer times.

## Nizamuddin Dargah

Uncover Delhi's thousand-year-old Sufi culture in this Muslim mausoleum where throngs of devotees go for



Meena Bazaar Market

prayers. Vendors loudly hawk rose petals and kebabs in a warren of surrounding stalls, and every Thursday, world-class *qawwali* singers perform to packed crowds.

## India Gate

Delhi's answer to the Arc de Triomphe, this British-built memorial commemorates Indian soldiers killed in World War I. But don't expect a solemn mood from this lively hangout. You'll see vendors with balloons and ice cream, some even selling rides on remote-controlled cars.

Keep an eye out for the Flame of the Immortal Soldier, known as Amar Jawan Jyoti, which has been burning since 1971.

## Janakpuri

Had enough history? Take a stroll through Asia's largest suburb. Janakpuri is a high-tech enclave that will shortly be home to the country's first driverless metro cars.

## Scams in Delhi

- Watch out for frauds at religious tourist attractions, where scammers occasionally prey on tourists unfamiliar with religious customs. If a priest or guide offers to treat you to a religious ceremony, find out what it will cost you first. Don't be pressured into donations of thousands of rupees – simply walk away.
- Another popular scam in Delhi is for someone to throw garbage or feces on your shoes while you're not looking, and then graciously offer to clean your shoes for a small fee.

# Agra

Most visitors make a beeline to the city's (and the country's) most famous monument – the iconic Taj Mahal. But there's so much more to Agra. From stunning tombs to meandering gardens, stay a while and explore this historic city.

## Taj Mahal

Arguably the world's finest work of Mughal architecture, this symmetrical mausoleum was commissioned by Emperor Shah Jahan as the final resting place for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, and was built over a period of 16 years.

While it's a sight to behold, even from a distance, it's worth getting up early and battling the crowds to watch the sun rise over the beautiful, shimmering, white-marble structure.

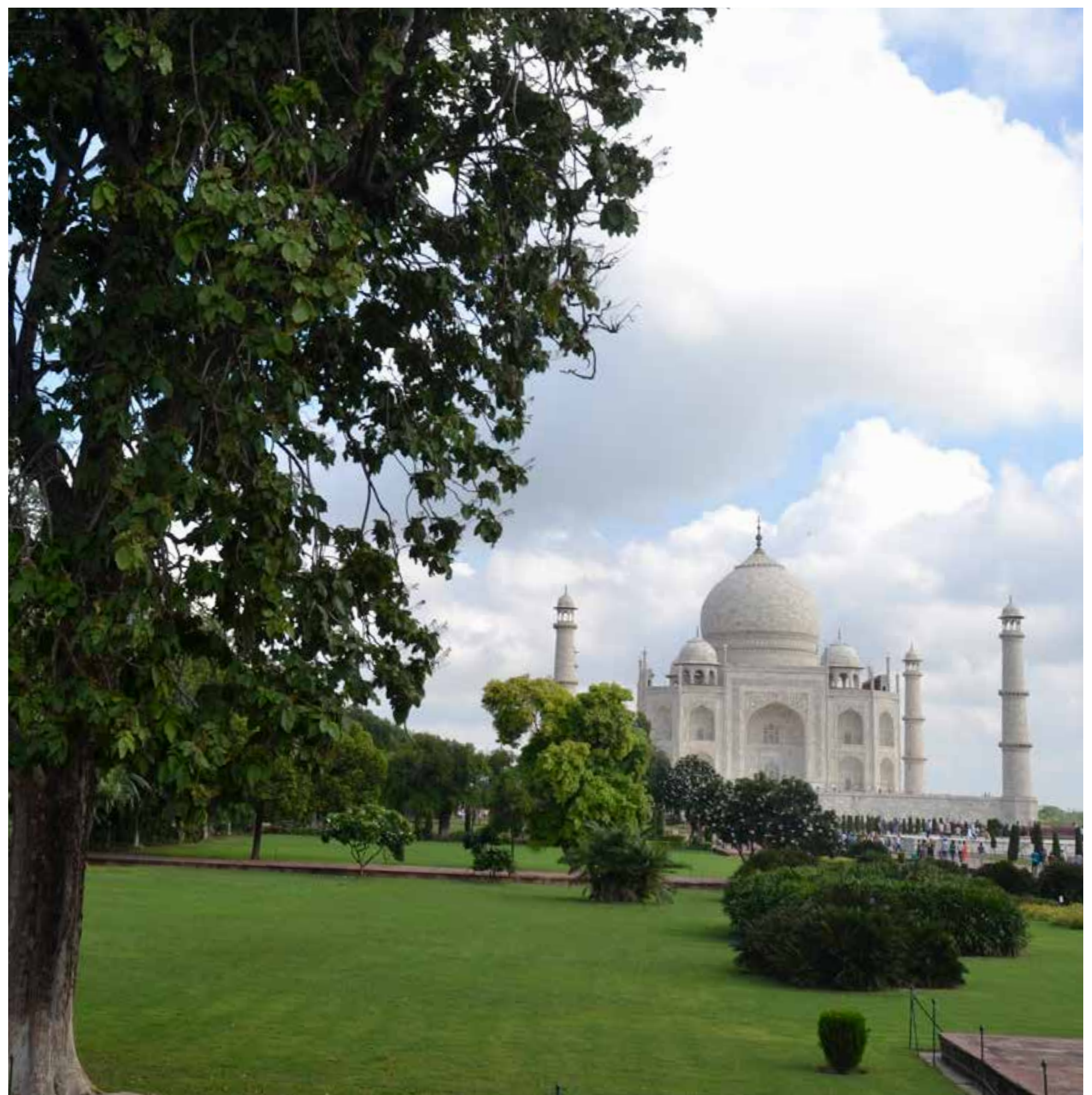
## Agra Fort

This 16th century red sandstone behemoth is noteworthy for its



Margot Bigg

Baby Taj



Margot Bigg

blend of Central Asian and Indian architecture.

Must-sees within the complex include the Jehangir Mahal, a two-story complex that once served as a *zenana* (a mini palace for women of the court).

Other highlights include the intricate Khas Mahal – a former harem room with a central fountain that once spouted rosewater to keep the place smelling great.

## Tombs

In the shadow of the Taj Mahal are many much smaller – but nonetheless impressive – tombs of various figures of the Mughal courts.

The two that stand out the most are the tomb of Itmad-ud-Dualah, usually referred to as “Baby Taj,” which actually predates the Taj Mahal by a couple of years. This white-marble

### Secrets of Agra

#### In search of the perfect Taj shot?

Skip Mehtab Bagh and continue a few hundred feet down the road, where there's plenty of open (but muddy) riverbank space where you can shoot to your heart's content from the water's edge.





complex is covered with Arabesque-style *pietra dura* inlay, and mosaics full of semi-precious minerals.

While not as eye-catching, the considerably less-visited Chini-ka-Rauza is worthwhile for its interior mosaic tile work and lush surrounding gardens.

## Gardens

Agra has some of the country's finest examples of historic landscaping. Ram



Bagh is thought to be among the earliest Mughal gardens in the country, and uses a *charbagh* (or quadrilateral) layout, which originated in Iran and came to dominate in Mughal India.

The now-dry fountains were once filled with water channelled from the nearby Yamuna via waterwheels, and was once a top cool-down spot for Mughal elite.

Mehtab Bagh across the River Yamuna from the Taj is another popular garden, though today it's a bit ramshackle. The main reason to visit is to get great photos of the Taj with the river in the foreground.

If you're actually after greenery, your best bet is the much newer Taj Nature Walk, a lush garden with tons of flora and bird life, plus some great Taj views. Along the nature walk, you'll pass shops selling local souvenirs. If you're visiting at night, it's well lit by decorative lamp posts for an evening stroll.

## The Gemstone Scam

A popular scam in the gemstone region of Jaipur and Agra could get you into financial strife.

Tourists have reported being approached by a "gem dealer" who convinces them to buy gemstones, and transport them back home under their duty-free allowance.

They're told that once they arrive back home, one of the dealer's partners will buy them back for much more money than they originally paid.

Of course, the details about the "partner" are fictitious, and you'll be stuck with worthless gems when you get home.

# Varanasi

Known as Banaras or Kashi to locals, Varanasi is the holiest of all religious places of worship for Hindus, and it's one of the oldest continually-inhabited places in the world.

## The ghats and Ganges

There are 87 ghats (riverfront steps or stairwells along the banks of river Ganges) in Varanasi, and the best way to explore all of them at once is to take a boat ride.

Soak in Hindu culture at the Dashashwamedh Ghat, the main ghat that's always buzzing with activity. The star attraction here is the evening *aarti* (prayer) ceremony. It's a spectacular event, and is best viewed from a boat.

Assi Ghat is also worth visiting to see people perform their daily rituals and meditations.

Finally, the most enigmatic of all ghats, Manikarnika Ghat, is where Hindu cremations take place. Hundreds of *pyres* are lit everyday, after which the ashes are flown into

Ganges river, Varanasi



the river Ganges. Such a cremation holds a special significance, as Hindus believe it frees the soul from the cycle of birth and death, or *Moksh* (ultimate liberation).

While at the ghats, you'll also see many people bathing in the river Ganges. That too is an act of religious belief, signifying absolving of one's sins.

## Hindu temples

Kashi Vishwanath Temple is the main temple, drawing thousands of Hindu devotees to the spiritual city every year.

The Kaal Bhairav Temple is one of the oldest Shiva temples in Varanasi, and is also worth a visit. The presiding deity at both temples, and Varanasi, is Lord Shiva.

Keep in mind valuables like cameras and cellphones are not allowed inside

“”

**While at the ghats, you'll also see many people bathing in the river Ganges. That too is an act of religious belief, signifying absolving of one's sins.**



Sadhu in Varanasi



Carima Garg

the temples, so put these away while you're inside.

### Buddhist sites

While Varanasi is undoubtedly important to Hindus, it also has a major significance for Buddhists. Less than an hour's drive from Varanasi, you can visit Sarnath. This is where Lord Buddha delivered his first sermon, and is one of the four pilgrimage sites of Buddhism.

### Wrestling matches

For something a little different, head over to the *akhadas* (traditional wrestling houses), which can be found in parts of north India.

There are many *akhadas* along the ghats, and each has its own tradition and style. The bouts take place early morning at 8am, and in the evening around 5pm. Wrestling matches are

good fun to watch, and offer a unique opportunity for photographers to capture offbeat frames of Varanasi.

### Markets and food

Outside the Dashashwamedh Ghat, you'll find the main market of Varanasi, where you can buy the traditional Banarasi Sari, and buy local, artificial jewelry.

Or, forget about shopping and get your fill of lip-smacking street food instead. The main places to cover are Deena Chat Bhandar for their delicious *tamatar chaat* (spice tomato soup), and Ram Bhandar for savories like samosa, *kachori*, and sweets like *jalebis*.

A trip to Varanasi would be incomplete without eating *banarasi paan* (betel leaf filled with sweet syrups and spices) and a *malaiyo* (whipped cream dish).

““

For something a little different, head over to the *akhadas* (traditional wrestling houses), which can be found in parts of north India.

### Transport in Varanasi

**Cycle-rickshaw:** Rs. 20 for about 2km.

**Shared auto-rickshaw:** Rs. 10-12 per head for fixed routes (approx. 3km).

**Reserved auto-rickshaw:** Rs. 50 for about 2-3km.

# Jaipur

Take a walk through history in Jaipur's forts, taste delicious Rajasthani cuisine, enjoy sunset lake views from ancient hilltop palaces, see the crumbling, pink old quarter, and snag a bargain in the chaotic bazaars.

## Sunset views

For a spectacular view over Jaipur and the surrounding Aravallis, take a 60-minute hot air balloon ride at sunset, launching off from one of the forts, such as the Amber Fort.

## Tordi Garh

Experience the royal lifestyle at Tordi Garh, an 18th century residential property in Tordi village – part of which has been converted to a hotel.

The lime and mortar architecture, spacious courtyards, and verandahs are typical of palaces in the 1800s, and each of the 23 ensuite rooms come with traditional décor and modern facilities.

Feel free to step into the kitchen



Hawa Mahal



Amber fort gateway

to learn secrets of Rajasthani cooking, wander into the stable to pet the horses, or feed the chickens. Ride the sand dunes on a camel, hike up to the old fortress, or tour surrounding hamlets.

## Palaces and forts

See the impressive pink sandstone façade of the Hawa Mahal, and step inside to peer onto the busy streets below like the Rajput women of the royal household once did. It was built in 1799 to offer the women privacy as they watched daily life through the 953 beautiful *jharokas* (windows).

Walk around the 18th century City Palace, admiring the Rajasthani and Mughal architecture, impressive entrance gates, elaborate arches, and sandstone walls adorned with fine designs and murals.

Visit the neighboring Jantar Mantar,

“”

**Step inside to peer onto the busy streets below like the Rajput women of the royal household once did.**

## NORTHERN INDIA

an astronomical observatory, and now UNESCO Heritage Site, full of massive instruments.

Take in the grandeur of the 16th century Amber Fort and Palace, located on a hill overlooking the Maota Lake.

Admire the intricate glass mosaics of Sheesh Mahal, manicured royal gardens, and colorful murals on Amber Gate.

Explore the watchtowers of Jaigarh Fort, a military fortress built in 1726 to protect all of Jaipur. Jai Ban, the world's largest cannon on wheels, stands here. Ironically, it was never fired, and the fort was never attacked.

### Temples

Inside the Galtaji Temple complex are several shrines dedicated to Hindu deities. The natural springs here are believed to be holy, as are the seven *kunds* (water tanks) in which pilgrims take a dip.

The Govind Dev Ji Temple is home to an image of Lord Krishna, which is believed to be the most accurate depiction of his incarnation on earth.

Visit the Shila Devi Temple to see the idol of the goddess Durga, which



Amber Fort, Jaipur

was brought by the Maharaja of Amber from Bangladesh in the 17th century.

### Markets and bazaars

Bring your best haggling game while shopping in Jaipur.

The Small Cottage Industries Showroom in Amer is a great place to buy block-printed *saris* and Jaipur *razais* (quilts).

Head to Johari Bazaar to buy textiles, semi-precious gems, gold jewelry, and pieces with beautiful *minakari* (enamel) work.

At Chandpole Bazaar, you'll find handicrafts, marble sculptures, traditional *jutis* (shoes), and great gifts and souvenirs.

### Off the beaten path

Take a stroll through the cobblestone lanes of Amber village, and visit the Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing to learn about traditional block-printing techniques and see related exhibits.

For art and photography exhibitions, music, dance, and theatre, check event schedules for the recently-refurbished Jawahar Kala Kendra.

“”

Take a stroll through the cobblestone lanes of Amber village, and visit the Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing.

### Rajasthani Cuisine

A rewarding part of a trip to Jaipur is the rich and flavorsome cuisine. Think slow-cooked succulent meats, creamy gravies garnished with dried-fruit, and deep-fried desserts.

Whether it's at a fancy restaurant like Surya Mahal or the no-frills Laxmi Mishthan Bhandar, be sure to try a traditional *thali* (a big meal of appetizers, assorted curries, bread, rice, and dessert), and local favorites like *dal batti churma*.



Jaipur traffic

# Rajasthan

Beyond Jaipur, Rajasthan is home to so much more than historic palaces and forts. Visit holy lakes, go for desert camel rides, and join in the fun of local festivals to get a real taste of this desert state.

## Fairs and festivals

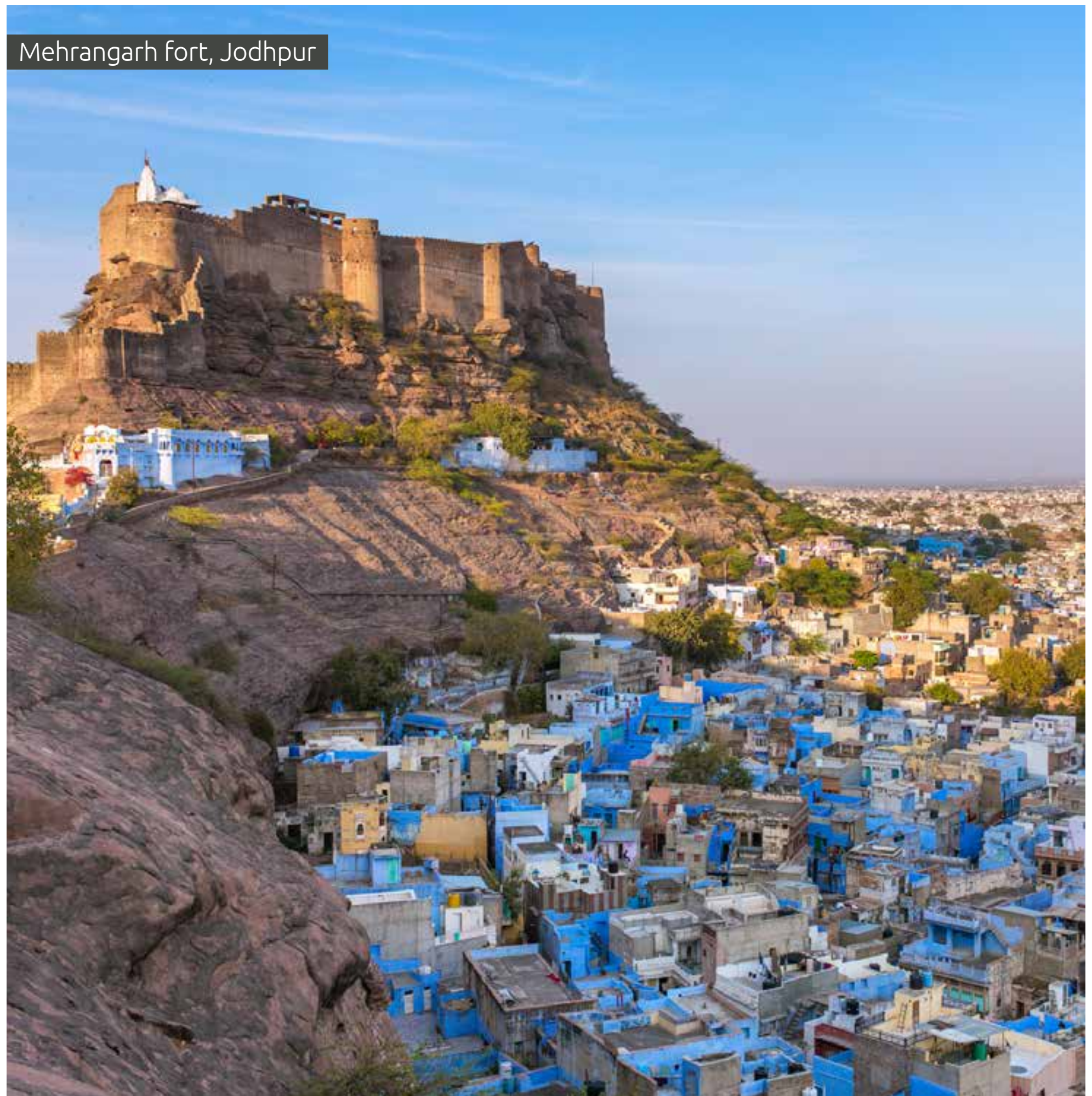
Try to coincide your trip with Rajasthan's festivals, and you'll get to experience the local culture at its best.

For one week in November, the Pushkar Camel Fair brings camel and horse traders from across the country to the holy city of Pushkar. Visitors can expect to see street shows, magicians, camel races, and beauty contests throughout the week.

Jaisalmer's Desert Festival, held in the Sam Sand Dunes each winter, is all about fun for three days. See camel races, polo matches, puppeteers, jugglers, turban tying competitions, and watch someone win the title of "the longest moustache". These celebrations glorify the rich culture of the region,



Bada Bagh, Jaisalmer



Mehrangarh fort, Jodhpur

and are a huge draw card for tourists, so book ahead!

On 14th January each year, Jaipur holds the International Kite Festival, one of the most-attended festivals in Rajasthan. The festival attracts kite fliers from afar, and visitors will see kites in every shade of the rainbow flying above crowded rooftops and throughout the city.

## Jaisalmer

The walled, fortress city of Jaisalmer holds intricately-carved *havelis* (traditional townhouses and mansions in India), stunning temples, and markets to explore. Wind through seven beautiful, maze-like, yellow sandstone Jain temples, dating from the 15th and 16th centuries.

A visit to Jaisalmer wouldn't be complete without seeing Jaisalmer Fort, one of the six hill forts of

“”

**For one week in November, the Pushkar Camel Fair brings camel and horse traders from across the country to the holy city of Pushkar.**

## NORTHERN INDIA

Rajasthan, collectively designated as World Heritage Sites.

6km north of Jaisalmer, see royal cenotaphs dating back to the 16th century at Bada Bagh, which means “huge garden”. Back then, a dam was commissioned to create a water tank, which made the desert green in this area.

The Patwon Ki Haveli is made up of five small *havelis*, and is the largest, oldest, and most important in Jaisalmer. Located in a narrow lane near Patwa Complex, marvel at the intricate architecture of the gateways and arches.

Go for a picnic, or hop on a colorful rowboat to see the temples and shrines on Gadisar Lake. The most popular pilgrimage site, Tilon Ki Pol, is a yellow sandstone gateway that is dedicated to the Lord Krishna.

### Udaipur

Lovingly known as the Venice of the East, Udaipur’s lakefront palaces – and the lake itself – are truly dazzling.

After a walk around Udaipur’s almost 500-year-old City Palace, take a boat ride on Lake Pichola with a stop at Jag Mandir, a palace built on an island.

Visit the large Hindu temple in the middle of Udaipur, Jagdish Temple, and climb 32 marble steps to reach the main shrine.

The artificial Fateh Sagar Lake has three small islands, popular for picnickers and boat rides to and from each park.

Overlooking the lake, Monsoon Palace is a hilltop residence where you’ll



Tilon Ki Pol, Gadisar Lake

get panoramic views of Udaipur’s lakes, palaces, and surrounding countryside. The name is derived from its original objective: for people to watch the monsoon clouds roll in.

Inside Bagore Ki *haveli*, on the waterfront of Lake Pichola, there are over a hundred rooms with displays of costumes and modern art, including Mewar paintings on the walls of the Queen’s Chamber.

In the evening, find a rooftop restaurant to sit down for dinner and catch the sunset.

### Activities

A trip to Rajasthan would be incomplete without a desert camel ride among the sand dunes, followed by fire-roasted flatbreads and camping under the starry skies.

Go on a wildlife safari in Ranthambore National Park to see wild tigers, leopards, boar, and marsh crocodiles.

For the truly brave, a visit to Bikaner’s Karni Mata Temple (or rat temple), home to thousands of rodents, is the ultimate test in courage.

### Palaces and Forts in Rajasthan

#### Udaipur

City Palace and Udaivillas.

#### Jaipur

Amber Fort and Palace, Jaigarh Fort, Rambagh Palace, and Hawa Mahal.

#### Bundi

Bundi Palace.

#### Bharatpur

Deeg Palace.

#### Jaisalmer

Jaisalmer Fort.

#### Bikaner

Lalgarh Palace and Junagarh Fort.

#### Jodhpur

Umaid Bahwan Palace and Mehrangarh Fort.

#### Chittorgarh

Fateh Prakash Palace and Chittorgarh Fort.

# Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh isn't a big state, but the undulating terrain can make it slow to traverse, so pick a base and explore these outdoor activities and cultural experiences in far northern India.

## Manali and surrounds

While the rest of India scorches in the summer, Manali (2,052m) in the Kullu Valley is a comfortable temperature and becomes a popular base for outdoor activities, or chilling in one of the many traveler cafes.

If you're going overland to Ladakh, Manali will be the point of departure. It's possible to motorbike the 450km road, or even cycle it. If you're looking for a less strenuous adventure, travel companies around Manali can arrange mountain biking, trekking, rock climbing, canyoning, and white water rafting.

Some of the top trekking spots near



Himachal Pradesh

Elen Turner



Fruit market in Manali

Manali include the Parvati Valley, the Malana Valley, and Lahaul/Spiti, as well as elsewhere in the Kullu Valley.

Get a taste of the local culture in Manali by visiting the wooden Hadimba Temple, which stands in a cedar forest, and is unlike others in India.

Across the Beas River from Manali is Vashisht, a quieter, backpacker hangout, with gorgeous natural hot springs attached to the small Hindu temple.

An hour's bus ride from Manali is Naggar, which is well worth a day trip. There's an unusual wooden palace, some lovely temples, and the spectacular Nikolai Roerich Museum. Naggar is also a good trekking base.

## Dharamsala, McLeod Ganj, and surrounds

McLeod Ganj is home to the Dalai Lama, and Tibetan Government-in-Exile, so

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**Across the Beas River from Manali is Vashisht, a quieter, backpacker hangout, with gorgeous natural hot springs attached to the small Hindu temple.**



Daranghati peak hillside in Shimla



many of the town's attractions revolve around Tibetan Buddhism.

Visit temples and monasteries, spin prayer wheels, watch colorful prayer flags fluttering in the wind, and appreciate the peaceful and rather incongruous nature of this Tibetan community in the heart of the Hindu-dominated Indian Himalayas.

Good hikes are accessible from Dharamsala/McLeod Ganj, including a

day hike to Bhagsunag Waterfall and Shiva Cave, a two-day camping hike to Triund and the snowline, and a four-day trek to Kareri Lake and the Minkiani Pass (4,250m).

### Shimla

Shimla was the summer capital of the British Raj, and what's left today is a quirky town full of tumbledown, colonial-era buildings, improbably built on mountain slopes.

Cars are not permitted in the center, so it's a pleasant place to walk around. There are mountain views in the distance and short hikes around the town – just watch out for the monkeys!

The Kalka-Shimla Railway was completed in 1903, and while it's not the quickest option, it's a quaint and enjoyable way of traveling down to the Indian plains, as you can connect to Chandigarh.

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Shimla was the summer capital of the British Raj, and what's left today is a quirky town full of tumbledown, colonial-era buildings.



Elen Turner

Naggar

**NORTHERN INDIA**

# Ladakh

Sandwiched between the world’s highest mountains, the ancient, high-altitude desert region of Ladakh is one of India’s most unforgettable destinations, with jaw-dropping landscapes and unique, Sufi and Buddhist-influenced culture.

## Nubra Valley

Above Leh, Ladakh’s main city, a rocky road winds its way to Khardung La, the world’s highest motorable pass at almost 18,000ft (5,359m). The treacherous high pass – an attraction in its own right – marks the halfway point to Nubra Valley, a lush and picturesque oasis in northern Ladakh.

In Diskit, check out the 100ft golden Buddha that presides over the valley’s oldest monastery. White sand dunes and purple mountains are home to a special breed of two-humped camels – which you can ride – in nearby Hundar.

Further down the fast-flowing Shyok river lies the edge-of-the-world Balti



Road to Leh

village of Turtuk, surrounded by fruit orchards and famous for its warm hospitality.

## Hiking

Before you start hiking in Ladakh, acclimatize to the high elevations with a slow walk around Leh town. A rugged, hilly path leads from the Old City to Leh Palace, the former royal headquarters. It continues to Sankar Gompa, a stunning monastery built into the hillside.

Further afield, the village of Ule in western Ladakh is a prime spot for day hikes, and – if you’re lucky – snow leopard spotting.

## Trekking

There’s no better way to discover Ladakh than by crossing it on foot. But be warned, treks involve unshaded climbs and steep ascents.

The popular Markha Valley

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**There’s no better way to discover Ladakh than by crossing it on foot. But be warned, treks involve unshaded climbs and steep ascents.**



Rumbak Valley, Markha Trek



Tso Pangong

Ariel Sophia Bardi

## Tso Pangong

Tso Pangong (4,350m) is a high-altitude lake that shares a border with neighboring Tibet. Were it not for chilly mountain winds, you might mistake Pangong's white sand shores and glittering waters for a Caribbean beach.

trek crosses barren, mountainous terrain through villages and passing monasteries. The smoother Sham Valley trek, a so-called “baby trek,” is a four-day hike through orchards, fields, stupas, and farms.

Most treks take place in summer, but the Chadar trek is only accessible in winter, and is a one-of-a-kind journey, deep through the Zaskar Valley, walking on top of a frozen river.



Thikse Monastery, Leh

Not so keen on slushy hikes or icy campsites? Try summer white water rafting on the Zaskar River instead.

## Monasteries

Centuries-old Buddhist monasteries, known as gompas, are an unforgettable part of Ladakh. Topped by snowy peaks, they're perched at the top of bare, twisted hills.

Lamayuru, located in Ladakh's famous “moonland,” overlooks a strange, lunar-looking landscape. The fascinating temple contains ancient ritual objects, some crafted from human bones.

Thiksey, close to Leh, stuns visitors with its vertically-stacked buildings and stupas, giving it the look of a majestic beehive. Visitors can glimpse ancient statues, frescoes, and *thangka* paintings inside the monasteries – as well as monks chanting, deep in prayer.

“Thiksey, close to Leh, stuns visitors with its vertically stacked buildings and stupas, giving it the look of a majestic beehive.”



# SOUTHERN INDIA

**D**own here, the food is spicy, the people are warm, and the climate is tropical. Find evocative monuments, hire a bike to see revered temples, take a hike through lush forests, laze about on the beaches, or try your best at yoga in southern India.

# Kerala

With 580km of palm-fringed beaches, vibrant spice gardens, and backwaters to paddle through, Kerala's natural beauty is top-notch.

## Wildlife and national parks

Wayanad in the north is dotted with rice paddies, thick forests, and home to the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary where you'll find Indian bison, elephants, deer, tigers, and many endangered species of flora and fauna. Adventure-seekers can try climbing Chembra Peak (2,100m) in the Nilgiri Hills, the highest peak in Wayanad.

Periyar National Park in Thekkady, among the Western Ghats, is south India's most popular wildlife sanctuary. Famous for jungle walks and gorgeous mountain scenery, it's also a great place to see wild elephants, tigers, bison, and many other animals.

In Munnar, you're often up above the clouds among rolling hills of every shade of green. Munnar is the center of the tea trade, and it's also



a top spot to visit for several bird and wildlife sanctuaries, including Eravikulam National Park.

## Beaches

Head north of Kochi, where there are less tourists, to find long white-sand beaches – ideal for those of you trying to get off Kerala's beaten-track. Try Thottada beach, 8km north of Kannur city.

In central and south Kerala, you'll find some of the state's most popular beaches: Varkala and Kovalam.

While most visitors make a beeline for the restaurants and cafes atop Varkala's north cliff, head to the less busy Odayam Beach and the serene south cliff.

Muzhappilangad Beach in Kannur is Kerala's only drive-in beach. Crescent-shaped and 4km in length, it's a beautiful beach that attracts

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**In central and south Kerala, you'll find some of the state's most popular beaches: Varkala and Kovalam.**



Mariellen Ward



Kerala harvesting

adventure travelers who enjoy paragliding and parasailing.

## Kochi

Kerala's coast has been an important stop on the spice route for more than six centuries. Fort Kochi (Cochin) is a trading port with a fascinating history that lives on through a mix of ancient Chinese fishing nets, medieval Portuguese buildings, a 400-year-old synagogue, and the crumbling remains of the British Raj.

It's also crammed with local homestays, boutique inns, and hip cafes. It's certainly a favorite spot to chill out in Kerala.

## Kerala's backwaters

From Kochi, it's an easy drive to Alleppey, the gateway to Kerala's famous backwaters. Here (and in Kottiyam and Kollam), you can rent a houseboat and crew to cruise the network of canals.

Alternatively, hire a canoe or kayak for the day so you can access narrower canals that houseboats can't squeeze through. Paddling through the quieter

backwaters with a local guide will offer a unique glimpse into the local life.

## Kerala's unique culture

There's a wide mix of cultural beliefs and practices in Kerala; with Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and a series of deities that the *Adivasi* (native inhabitants) worship, each with their own set of customs and values.

Some of India's most colorful festivals and beautiful temples are in Kerala, and cultural traditions include *kathakali*, a 300-year-old dance form known for elaborate make-up and costumes.

If you're staying at a local homestay, ask your host if there are any festivals on while you're there, as you'll find almost every village has its own unique festival in Kerala.

If you're invited to a local's wedding – don't pass on the opportunity! Hundreds of relatives, friends and neighbors gather to celebrate marriages, but the exact structure and rituals of each ceremony will depend on their religion, and can vary significantly.



Backwaters of Kerala

## Learn the Local Lingo in Kerala

Learning a little bit of survival *Malayalam* (mother tongue of Keralites) is a great way to spark a meaningful conversation between you and your host when you arrive. It also shows a sign of respect.

When you catch public transport, there's no doubt *Malayalis* (Keralites) will strike up a conversation with you.

Do you play cricket? Do you like Ricky Ponting? Do you play football? Do you know Cristiano Ronaldo? What is your name? Where are you from (maybe from Melbourne? My sister is working there!) Do you have siblings? Are you married (if not, why)?

Don't be shy! It's also a good idea to bring pictures of your close family for your host to see.

# Pondicherry

On the shores of Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry (or Puducherry) is a mix of gardens, cobblestoned streets, and temples – bringing to life French colonial history with unmistakably Indian culture.

## Beaches

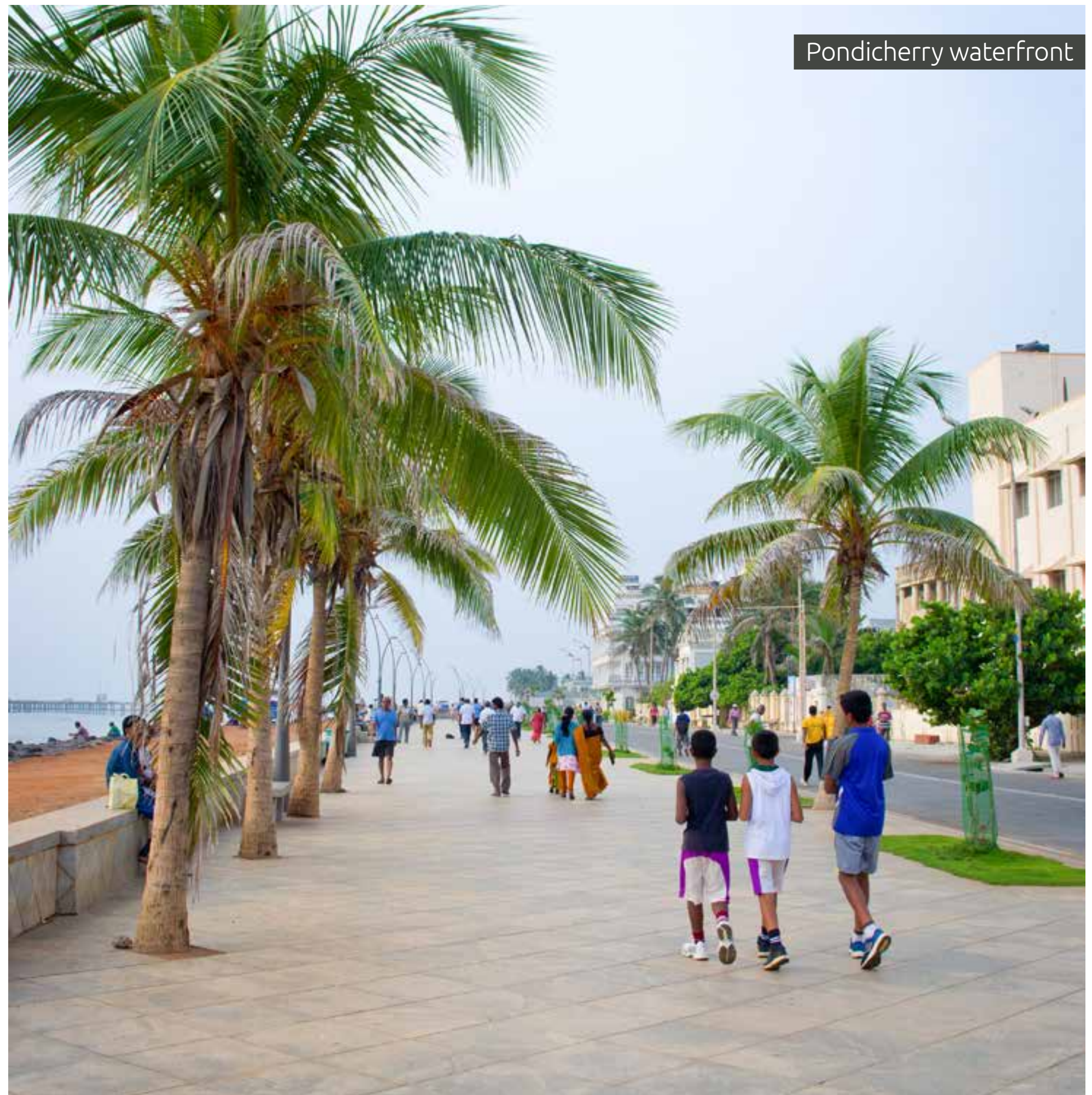
Pondicherry's coastline is perfect for packing a picnic of indulgent local treats on hot, lazy afternoons. Check out Paradise Beach (8km from Chunnambar town), Mahe Beach (22km south of Kannur city), or simply stroll down Pondicherry's 1.5km promenade.

True to the city's mixed heritage, the promenade boasts memorial statues of both Mahatma Gandhi and Joan of Arc.

If you're feeling more adventurous, plunge into the sea with one of Pondicherry's scuba diving or snorkeling guides. Or, visit the nearby villages on the outskirts of the city by



Fishermen in Pondicherry



Pondicherry waterfront

bike or motorcycle, with cheap daily or weekly rentals.

## Museums and culture

The Pondicherry Museum offers a primer on south Indian art and history, displaying artifacts from Pallava and Chola dynasties.

If you're searching for something slightly offbeat, the Jawahar Toy Museum has you covered, with hundreds of handmade dolls from all over India.

If you're looking for a more hands-on cultural experience, head to SITA Cultural Centre, where you can do a workshop on local crafts like flower-garland making, Thanjavur painting, and Kolam-making.

Pay attention to the sights and sounds of the town. Tamil cultural traditions live on outside museums, and are an important part of daily life as well.

### South Is Best

Many travelers find that southern India is the ideal place to begin your travels, offering a gentler landing than north India.

If tales of Delhi's madness have you worried, try starting in the south and making your way up north.

### Day Trip to Tiruvannamalai

Rent a bike or motorcycle, and take a day-trip from Pondicherry to Tiruvannamalai, where you'll find the main temple complex, filled with dozens of worshippers.

Sri Ramana Maharshi lived in caves near here, and you can hike up the holy mountain, Arunachala. During the full moon, thousands of people circle the mountain on foot, and that's quite the experience (if you're one for huge crowds).

As you walk around the mountain, stop off at the little temples along the way. These temples are in honor of the nine *grahas*, or celestial planets.

Aside from these main sites, it's a really laid-back town on the southern hippie trail, with good cafes and vegetarian food, as well as yoga classes.



Ariel Sophia Bardi

### Things to see and do

With elegant, vine-covered houses, Pondicherry's charming, historical French Quarter merits a long walk, and a stay at one of its leafy B&Bs.

Join picnickers at nearby Bharati Park. With wide paths and abundant flower blossoms, it looks like a tropical version of a French public garden.

Don't neglect Pondicherry's vibrant spiritual center. At Manakula



Manaputti beach

Vinayagar, a 500-year-old Hindu temple, you may catch a glimpse of Lakshmi, the temple elephant.

The French Quarter contains the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the former home of the Bengali freedom fighter turned saint. On annual darshan days, you can join thousands of devotees to pay tribute to Aurobindo's former quarters.

Check out Auroville, just a ten-minute drive from Pondicherry. Known as the "City of Dawn," it's a unique, utopian, woodland township, with thousands of Indian and international residents and volunteers. Stay for a day, or even months! The community hosts visitors and volunteers for year-round events, workshops, and training seminars on anything you might be interested in exploring – from mediation to permaculture.

“With elegant, vine-covered houses, Pondicherry's charming, historical French Quarter merits a long walk, and a stay at one of its leafy B&Bs.”



# Hampi

Awash with mysterious giant boulders, secret caves, and ancient temples, there's so much to explore in Hampi.

Once the seat of the mighty Vijayanagar Empire, Hampi is impressive – even in ruins. The ancient town stirs to life every day with the chanting of local priests, while children are ferried across the river to school.

## Must see and do

Hampi has two distinct sides that are separated by the Tungabhadra River: the "Historic Side" and the "Hippie Side".

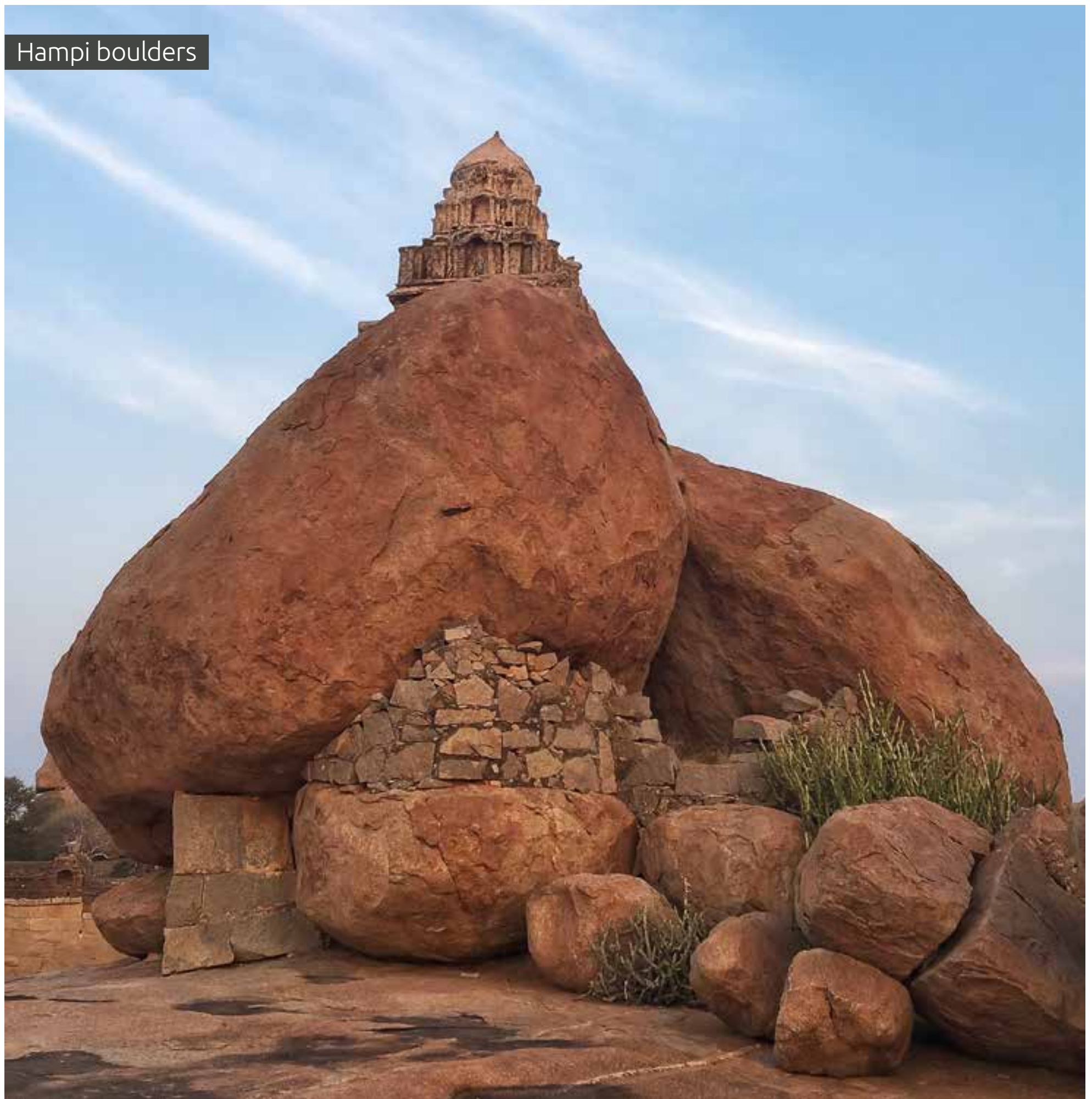
Take a crash course on Hampi in a local "auto", while your driver points out the most important ruins on the Historic Side. Or, if you'd prefer, simply hike or cycle your way around.

Cross over to the Hippie Side on a *coracle* (a local boat woven out of grass, used since prehistoric times). Across the river on the Hippie Side is where guesthouses, alcohol, and non-vegetarian food await.



Tungabhadra River

Hampi boulders



Mariellen Ward

A well-kept secret is an impromptu jam session that happens at Sunset Point on the Hippie Side – ask your local hosts to point you there. Travelers from across the world get together to play the banjo, sing, and mingle on the rocks.

## Temples

Begin temple-hopping at the 7th century Virupaksha temple. While the rest of Hampi crumbled in the wake of Mughal invasions, Virupaksha stuck it out, and is still an active temple today. Don't forget to say hello to Lakshmi, the friendly temple elephant who is led to the river every morning for a bath.

Not far away is Hemakuta Hill or Golden Hillock. Here, you'll see a sprinkling of ancient temples and lonely archways, collectively called the Hemakuta Temples, dedicated to Shiva, the god of destruction.

Keep going south and you'll spot the

“”

**Cross over to the Hippie Side on a *coracle* (a local boat woven out of grass, used since prehistoric times).**



Vittala Temple

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About an hour's hike away, you'll find the famed Vittala Temple, with its fascinating musical pillars, and the Stone Chariot – the poster-child of Hampi.

most striking idol in Hampi – the Ugra Narasimha statue. Carved out of a single stone, he's part man and part lion.

About an hour's hike away, you'll find the famed Vittala Temple, with its fascinating musical pillars, and the Stone Chariot – the poster-child of Hampi. It's a true architectural marvel and the town's prime attraction.

### Hiking

For a truly historic trek, embark on Kampa Bhupa's Path. On the way, you'll encounter hidden caves, riverside ruins, and the isolated Varaha Temple.

The rooftop of the Veerabhadra Temple on Matanga Hill is widely touted as the best sunrise/sunset point, but while the 30-minute climb offers stunning views of the boulder-strewn ruins, it's the little Hemakuta Hill that is truly charming at sunset.

### Biking

On the other side of the river at

Anegundi, hire a moped and ride to Anjaneya Hill. Perched atop the hill is the "Monkey Temple", considered to be the birthplace of Hanuman, the Monkey God.

You'll have to climb over 500 steps, but will be rewarded with a great view of the setting sun, as you get to witness a close-knit "Aarti" ceremony.

Not far away, you can then ride to the little-known Sanapur Lake, to dip your feet in after a long day of exploring.



Rice fields in Hampi

### Monsoon Season in the South

Many travelers with an interest in photography believe south India is at its best during monsoon (July–September), when the vegetation is lush, and nature really comes to life. Just bring bug spray, and a raincoat.

Avoid major cities during monsoon. Some places are prone to flooding in the streets.

# Bengaluru

Trendy microbreweries rub shoulders with ancient temples in Bengaluru (Bangalore), a city with many faces and many names: The Garden City, The Pub Capital, and the Silicon Valley of India. Its distinct western culture, however, hasn't smothered its age-old traditions.

## KR Flower Market

Don't miss the KR Flower Market – a stunning spectacle that comes alive at the break of dawn. Watch flowers get sewn together, ready to adorn Hindu idols and women's hair buns.

## Lalbagh Rock

Afterward, head to the pre-historic Lalbagh Rock at the Botanical Gardens. Over 3,000 million years old, it's one of the oldest surviving rocks in the world. It juts out in the form of a little hillock that you can climb.

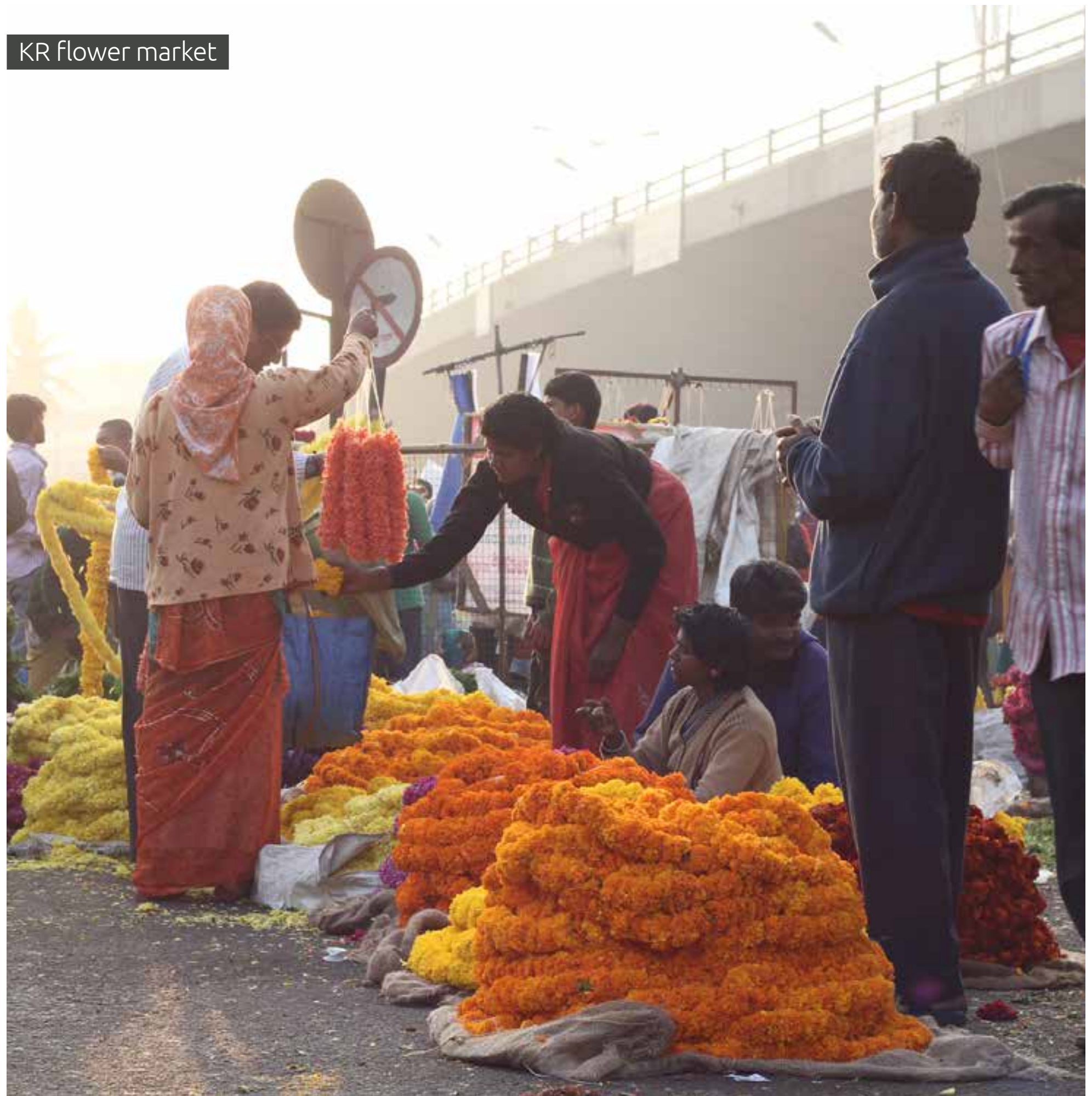
Nearby, the Lalbagh lakeside is a great place for a stroll and a haven for migratory birds.



Lalbagh Gardens

Nainara Rajpaat

KR flower market



## Pottery Town

Pottery Town is another charming settlement to peek into. The potters here are wizards of clay – skilfully crafting lamps, idols, and vases right in front of you.

## Cubbon Park

Early on a Sunday morning, head to Cubbon Park, known as 'the Green Lung of Bengaluru', where you'll see joggers, dog owners, and a few cultural performances. Inside the park you'll find natural rock outcrops, thickets of trees, massive bamboos, flowerbeds, and monuments.

## Pub-hopping on 100 Feet Road

Bengaluru is famous for microbreweries. Go pub-hopping on 100 Feet Road; try the Basmati Rice beer at Vapour, and the Dark Knight at Toit – a mecca for beer lovers!

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**Watch flowers get sewn together, ready to adorn Hindu idols and women's hair buns.**

## SOUTHERN INDIA

### Food Street

As the sun goes down, head to Food Street at V.V. Puram. Amidst a symphony of cow-mooing and excited locals, you can taste Bengaluru's best street food.

Try the soft, fluffy *paddus* at Vasavi Chatnis and the *obattu* (a local sweet treat) at Idli Mane.

### Culture

Theater and performing arts are a huge part of Bengaluru's culture. Watch a colorful folk drama at Ranga Shankara, and top it off with chai from its rustic, thatched café. Catch up with other theater enthusiasts here – they'll be happy to recommend must-watch shows.

For a more contemporary vibe, enjoy an evening of poetry slam and storytelling at Bengaluru's "culture cafes", such as Urban Solace and Atta Galatta. Check out their schedules before you arrive.

Keep a look out for flea markets, especially the Sunday Soul Santhe. You'll see Bengaluru's socialites descend for an evening of live music



Culture Cafe

Nainaa Rajipad

and barbeques, while shopping for vintage chests, terracotta jewelry, and Indo-Bohemian clothing.

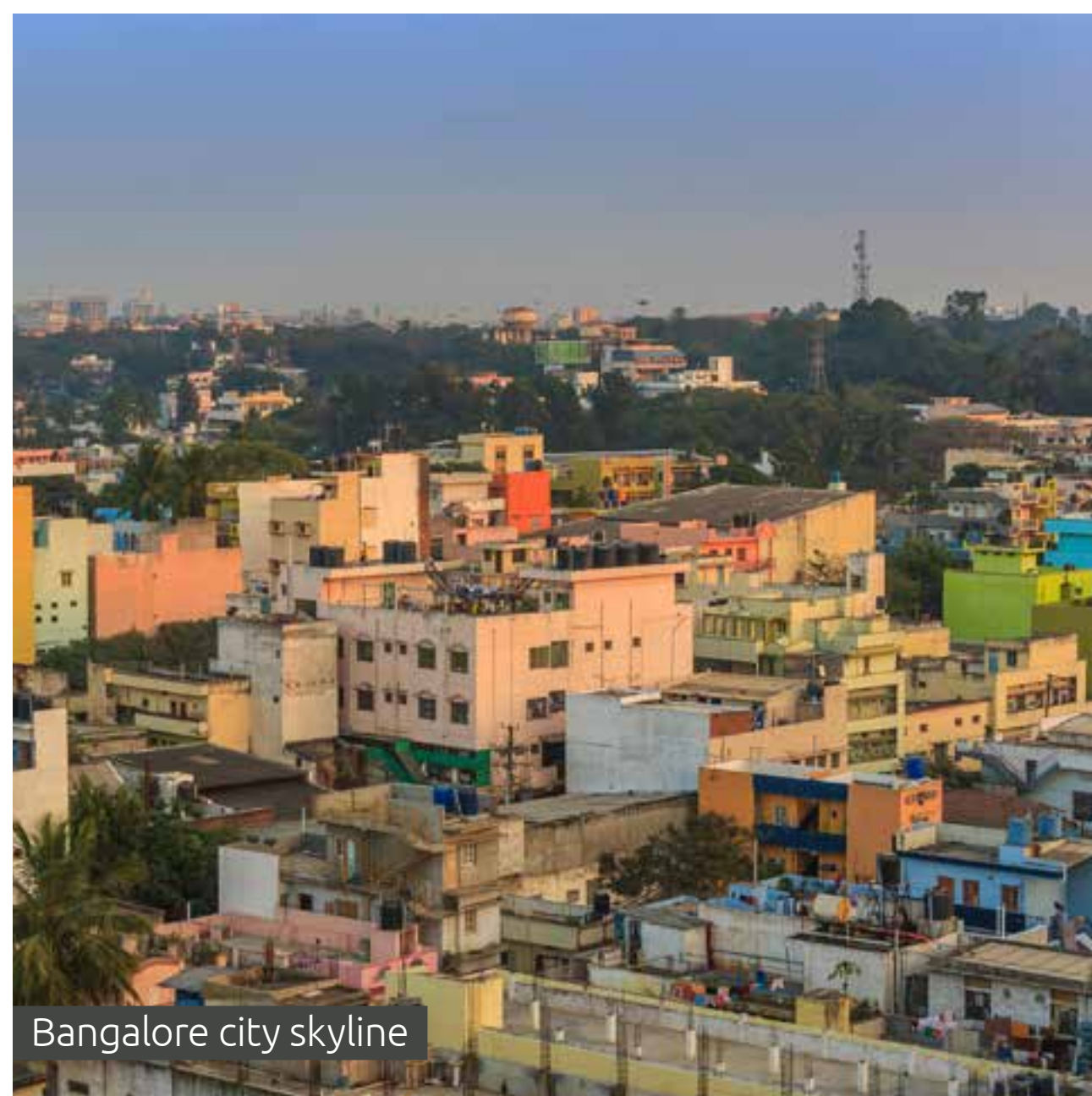
### Temples

For a true holy-cow moment, visit the Bull Temple dedicated to the demigod Nandi. Walk around to the Bugle Rock Garden, packed with ancient trees and bat colonies.

Close by, the Dodda Ganapathi Temple is famous for its "butter worship", where the idol is lavishly "battered" to appease Ganapathi, the elephant God.

The lesser-known Nandi Teertha is an ancient temple that has recently been excavated.

A mysterious trickle of water flows from the Nandi idol into a pond brimming with fish and turtles. The locals believe the water has healing properties.



Bangalore city skyline

### Cost Guide to Bengaluru

**Bus:** Rs. 6 – 65, depending on your destination.

**Auto-rickshaws (3 wheelers):** Rs. 25 for the first 1.9kms. 50% surcharge between 11pm - 5am.

**Street food:** Rs. 20 onwards.

**Simple restaurant:** Rs. 60 onwards.

**Trendy place:** Rs. 200 onwards.

**International fast food chain:** Rs. 100 onwards.

**Beer:** Rs. 150 onwards.

# Andaman & Nicobar Islands

Far off the east coast of India in the Andaman Sea (much nearer to Thailand than mainland India), you'll find one of the country's best-kept secrets.

Over 500 islands, only 38 of which are permanently inhabited, jut out of the ocean with forested mountains, pristine beaches, coral reefs and active volcanoes.

## Port Blair

Port Blair is an interesting town to explore for a few hours or overnight.

Highlights include the Cellular Jail, built by the British to house political prisoners; the Anthropological museum, for interesting history of indigenous island tribes; and the Chatam Saw Mill, which is the oldest in Asia.

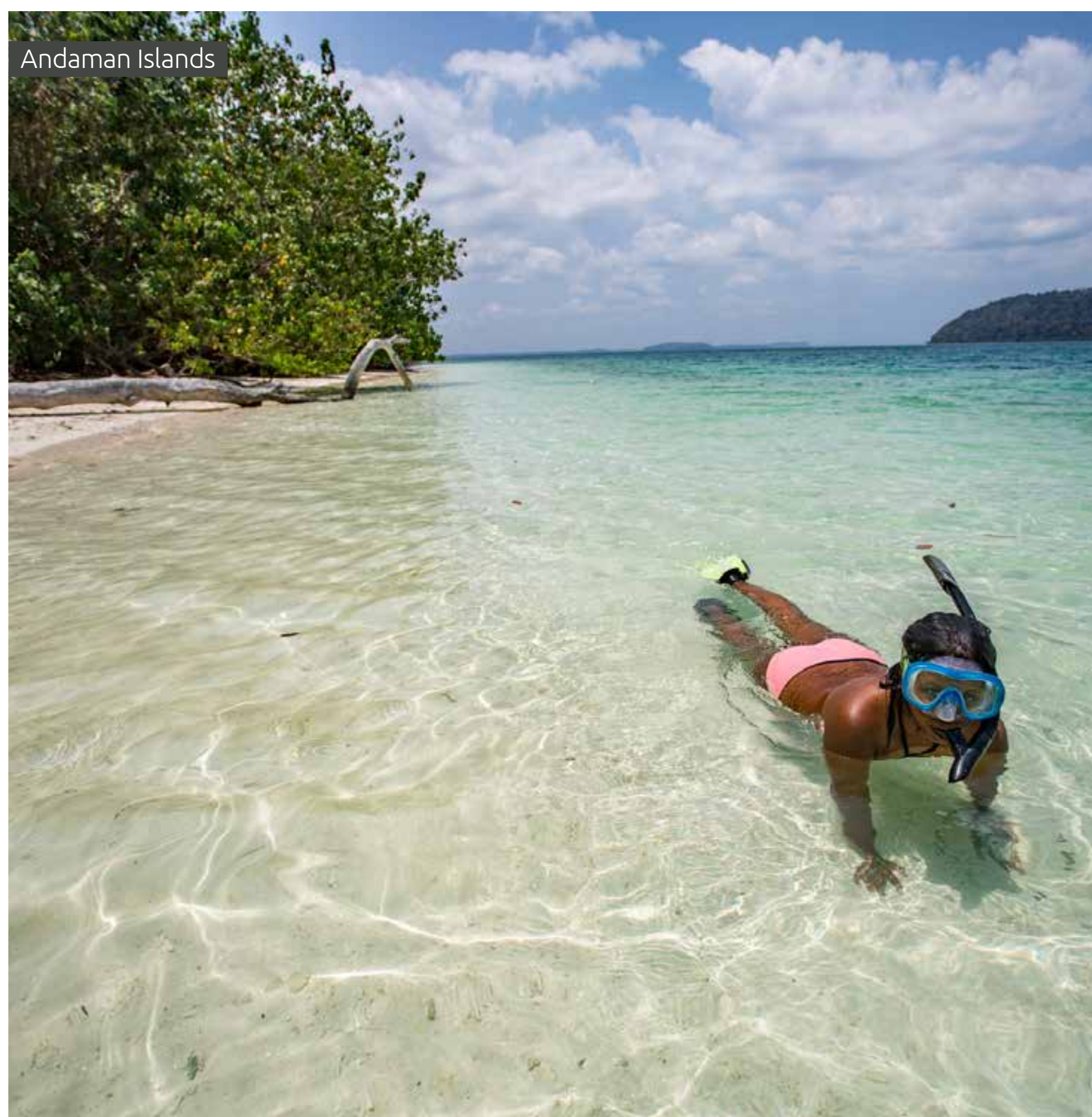
Go shopping and find restaurants in Aberdeen Bazaar, the main city square.

## Diving and snorkeling

Ross and Inglis Islands are big draw-cards for water activities, whether it's under or above the sea.

The unmapped waters of the Andaman Islands are one of the last frontiers for scuba diving (best from November-May), with colorful reef fish, sea turtles, barracuda, tuna, stingrays, and the occasional dugong swimming above the coral.

The shores of these areas also offer



“Smaller islands and reefs surround Havelock Island, providing some of the best water activities on the entire island chain.”

incredibly scenic kayak trips, where you can paddle through mangrove creeks while listening out for a variety of bird species calling from the trees overhead.

The best place to arrange dive or snorkel trips is from laid-back Havelock Island, which is home to the first (and only) PADI 5-Star Instruction in the Andaman Islands, Barefoot Scuba.

Smaller islands and reefs surround Havelock Island, providing some of the best water activities on the entire island chain.

Barefoot Scuba is also dedicated to the conservation of the beautiful, fragile ecosystem found here. They participate in several conservation projects and donate a minimum of US \$10 to Project Aware from each course fee.

In such a vulnerable environment, it's important for visitors to vet any tour company they book for such stewardship.

## SOUTHERN INDIA



### The best beaches

Havelock covers about 55 square miles, and has been inhabited by Bengali settlers since the 1950s. All towns on Havelock Island are numbered. Village Number 1 on the north side of the island is where the ferries drop travelers off.

Villages 3 and 5 offer a number of restaurants to eat at, and you can also go shopping at markets, find nice boutiques, motorbike rentals, Internet cafes, and accommodations from budget to mid-range resorts.

Havelock is also home to amazing stretches of beaches, many of them with few visitors, and some hidden-away eco resorts.

Radhanagar Beach on the western coast, also known as Number 7 Beach, was named "Best Beach in Asia" by Time Magazine in 2004, and is one of the most popular.

Elephant Beach on the northwest coast and Vijay Nagar Beach on the east coast are also worth a visit.

### Wildlife encounters

Not only will you be spoiled with sea life underwater, the Andaman Islands are

also home to more than 250 species of birds – about two dozen of which are endemic to Andaman and Nicobar.

Some of the largest and most colorful butterflies in the world can be seen among the tropical flora – visit Mount Harriet National Park in Port Blair if you want to see butterfly colonies.

Wild boar is a native mammal, protected by the Wildlife Protection Act. The islands are home to a biosphere reserve and nearly 100 wildlife sanctuaries, one of which provides a habitat for saltwater crocodiles. Tree shrews, macaques, and Leatherback Sea Turtles are also found here. Protecting these species, some of which are endangered, is a top priority.

It's essential for people to refrain from touching any wildlife, including coral, and be careful when shopping to patronize local artisan cooperatives. Look for the "Sustainable" tag on items.

### Hiking

The diversity of terrain paves the way for some interesting treks on the Andaman Islands. In places like Mount Harriet, easy walking paths make hiking accessible for just about anyone.

Other spots such as Chidia Tapu on South Andaman Island are more adventurous, with hilly terrain and dense forests that often require bushwhacking (it's advisable to go with a guide).

On Havelock Island, the treks to the beaches are gorgeous hikes themselves, where you'll hike through mangroves – often with boardwalks available. The walk to Elephant Beach (about 45 min) is one of the best.

### Getting Around the Andaman Islands

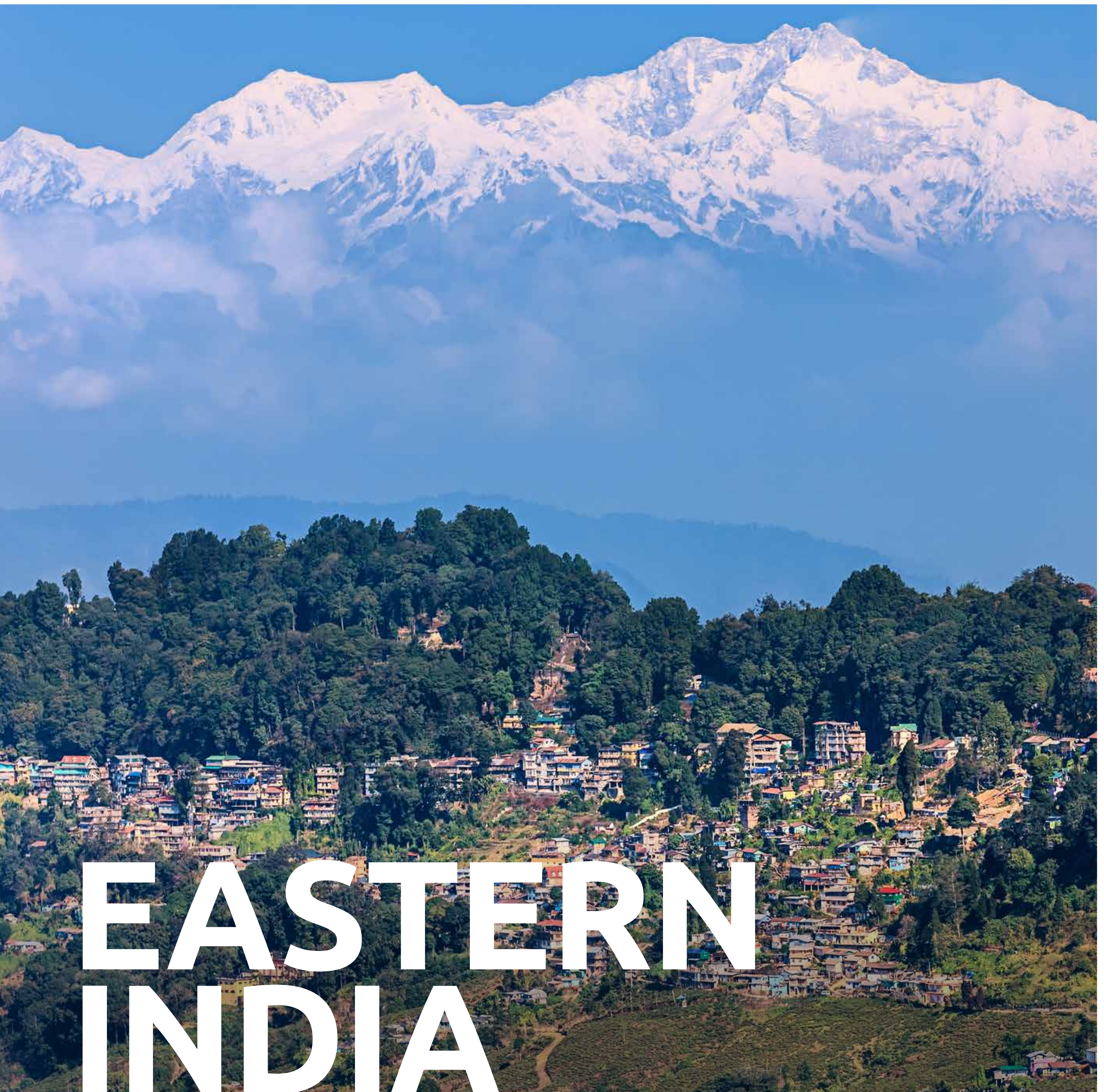
Visitors fly into the capital city of Port Blair, on the main South Andaman Island.

You can also travel by ship from Chennai, though the voyage takes 50-60 hours.

From Port Blair, ferries depart from two jetties for the other islands, which are really the draw for the Andamans.

Ferries from Phoenix Bay Jetty go to Havelock Island (2 hrs), Neil Island (1.5 hrs), Long Island (8 hrs) and other, farther destinations.

Smaller ferries from Rajiv Gandhi Water Sports Complex will take you to the closer islands of Jolly Buoy, Ross Island, North Bay, and Viper Island.



# EASTERN INDIA

**T**he northeastern reaches of India are some of the most unexplored areas of the country. Bordered by Myanmar, Bangladesh, Tibet, Bhutan, and Nepal, there's a mix of cultures, cuisine, and traditions. Find waterfalls in Meghalaya, catch views of the Kanchenjunga Mountains and tea-plantations in Darjeeling, and discover hidden gems in Kolkata.

# Kolkata

Eastern India's gateway city (formerly and locally known as Calcutta) has rich history and culture, fabulous food, and a unique soul that goes beyond clichéd India.

## Marble Palace

Though this 19th century neoclassical mansion is still occupied by the descendants of the wealthy merchant Raja Rajendra Mullick, the uninhabited parts are open to visitors.

You'll find an exceptional collection of art and antiques, as well as a small private zoo. Entry is free, but requires prior permission from the tourist board.

## Victoria Memorial

Also made of marble – and one of India's most prominent homages to Queen Victoria – the Victoria Memorial in central Kolkata is now a museum. Inside, there are 25 galleries to explore rare and antiquarian books and artwork. In particular, don't miss the royal gallery, the portrait gallery, and the new



Victoria Memorial



Traffic in Kolkata

Calcutta Gallery. Outside, wander the gardens that cover an area of 64 acres.

While you're in the area, pop over to St Paul's Cathedral, an impressive Gothic monument.

## Stroll around Kolkata's neighborhoods

Apart from the well-known attractions, why not take a stroll around Kolkata's local neighborhoods to see crumbling old houses alongside colonial structures, and modern glass buildings.

Head to Corner Courtyard, a carefully-restored, colonial building that's now home to a boutique hotel and trendy restaurant/bar, which is popular with in-the-know locals.

## Kalighat Temple

Kalighat, one of Kolkata's most famous temples, is a 200-year-old temple dedicated to the goddess Kali.

### Don't Miss!

- Calcuttawalks.com offers a range of cultural tours that truly help uncover the soul of the city.
- Byloom, a handloom boutique housed in a heritage building, where you'll find traditionally handcrafted *saris* and garments.
- Swabhumi is an atmospheric heritage center designed to replicate traditional architecture, housing a crafts market, stylish boutiques, art galleries, and food stalls.





Dakshineswar Kali Temple

Get ready for sensory overload from sights, sounds, and smells, with crowds of devotees, street stalls selling religious knick knacks, and the inevitable mess of organic waste and debris. (Beware of the extortionist touts that parade as temple priests, too.)

### Birla Mandir

A slightly calmer, if less iconic, temple is Birla Mandir – a relatively modern and striking addition to the city skyline, courtesy of the Birla industrialist family.

Built of marble, the south Kolkata temple is dedicated to a pantheon of Hindu gods.

### The Sundarbans

These mangrove forests, located a few hours' drive south from Kolkata, are home to the last few remaining Royal Bengal tigers – although sightings are extremely rare.

Accessible only by boat, the scenic, sprawling nature reserve is made up of a riverine delta, flanked by mudflats that harbor plants and animals.

Several tour operators offer overnight package trips – complete with jungle

lodging. Day-long tours are available too, although it's a bit of a trek to get there and back.

### Hooghly River at sunset

One of the nicest ways to explore Kolkata is on a sunset cruise on the Hooghly River. You'll sail past crumbling monuments, and watch everyday life go by on the riverbanks.

Stop off at Dakshineswar Kali temple, another important temple dedicated to Kali, and Belur Math, the headquarters of Swami Vivekanand's Ramakrishna Mission.

Several cruise operators can be found along the Strand waterfront.

### Kumortuli

In Kolkata's pottery precinct, Kumortuli, clay idols of Hindu deities are handcrafted inside shanty workshops by artisans using centuries-old techniques.

The historic warren of narrow streets is primarily where idols of the goddess Durga are created year-round in anticipation of Durga Puja – the quintessentially Bengali, four-day autumn festival. There's a selection of smaller clay artifacts there, too.

### Chinatown and Tiretti Bazaar

Known as Tangra, Kolkata's Chinatown was originally the home of leather tanneries, but is also renowned for its spread of authentic Chinese food in tiny restaurants.

Another pocket of authentic Chinese food can be found in the bustling, mornings-only Tiretti Bazaar. It's ideal for some breakfast *momos* (dumplings).

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One of the nicest ways to explore Kolkata is on a sunset cruise on the Hooghly River.

### Street Food in Kolkata

A mixture of influences led to Kolkata developing an extremely varied and flavorsome street food scene.

You're never too far from a succulent *kathi* roll (juicy kebabs wrapped in fried flabread); *masala* fish fry; Tibetan *momos*; or *phuchka* (fried dough balls with a spicy potato center) in Kolkata.

Hygiene conditions are questionable however, so choose carefully.

# Darjeeling

In the foothills of far northeastern India, a cool climate and breathtaking scenery make Darjeeling the perfect spot for outdoor adventurers.

## Ride the train

The Himalayan Railways steam train has been operating since 1879. Take the joyride from Darjeeling to Ghoom along the Batasia Loop, and soak in magnificent mountain views and monasteries.

The narrow gauge rail cars chug their way along mountain cliffs and down main thoroughfares of towns, alongside automobiles and people who politely move aside to let it pass.

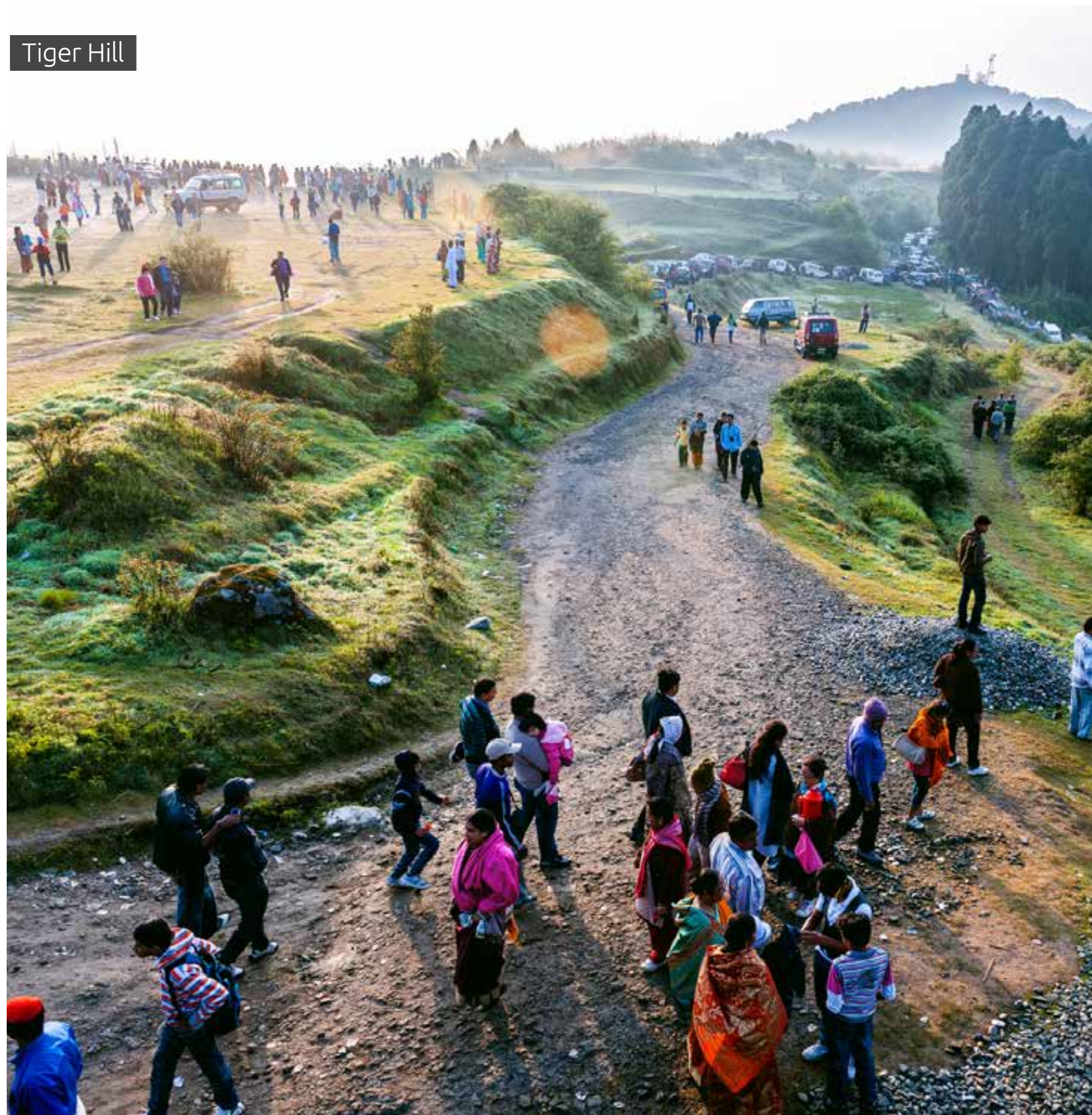
## Monasteries and museums

At the highest point of Darjeeling town, Observatory Hill, you'll find Mahakal Temple. Here, there are a number of small shrines you can wander between, and receive blessings from monks and priests who preside



Darjeeling Express

Tiger Hill



“Get up early to hike to the top of Tiger Hill (2,590m) and watch the sunrise.

over each one.

Don't miss the tiny underground Mahakal Cave, which is just downhill from the temple. Be prepared for monkeys; one traveler reported getting into a tug-of-war over her pashmina.

The Himalayan Mountaineering Institute is just past the temples, where you can visit a museum documenting expeditions and conquests of the world's highest peaks. The ticket into HMI also grants entrance to the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological park, home to Siberian tigers, black bears, red pandas, and other indigenous species.

## Hiking and trekking

Visible from most points of town in Darjeeling, the Kanchenjunga Mountains are a huge draw – especially irresistible to trekkers.



Get up early to hike to the top of Tiger Hill (2,590m) and watch the sunrise. The whole hike is approximately a six-hour round trip, depending on your pace. If you want to see the sunrise, give yourself three hours to reach the top. Depending on the time of year and what time the sun will rise, it's a good idea to start the hike at 3:30am.

For serious trekkers, the Singali La route offers a six-day journey from the Nepal border to Rimbik, with views of the Kanchenjunga mountain range and Mount Everest.

Take a half-day trek up to the small, 17th century Nezi Monastery, located close to the Sikkim border. If you're lucky, someone might unlock the doors to let you inside to see ancient prayer books, peeling frescoes, and Tibetan Buddhist statues.

### Tour a tea estate

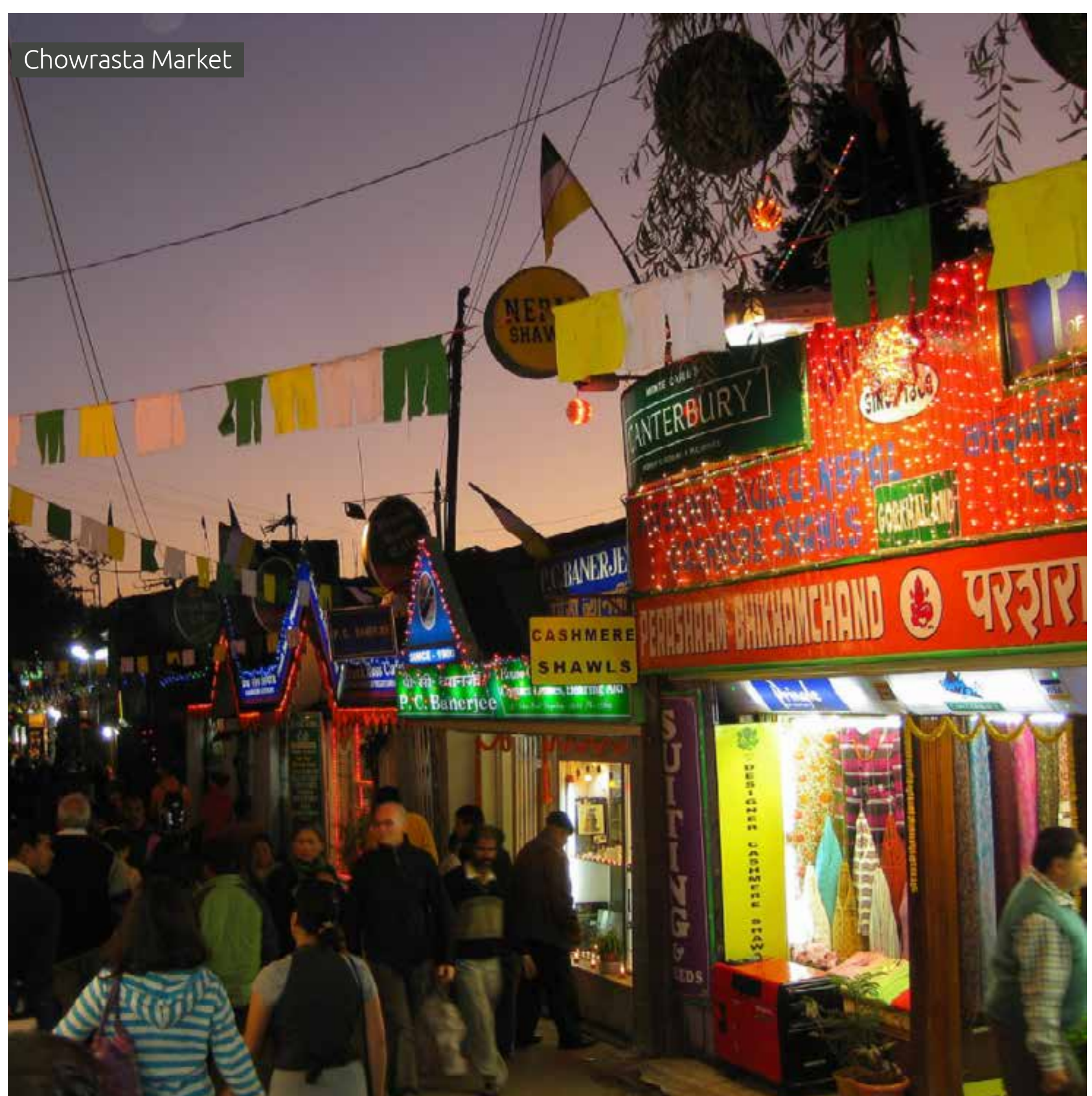
A trip to Darjeeling would be incomplete without exploring some of the 70 tea gardens found here, ranging from simple to sumptuous.

Some offer heavenly resort retreats nestled in the foothills amid acres of rolling green tea gardens, and most offer insider tours of the farms and processes.

### Shop the markets

Simply wandering around Darjeeling town is a great way to meet the friendly locals. Make your way along the maze of narrow market lanes, up to the main promenade of Chowrasta.

Here, you'll find a large open square lined with antique and jewelry shops, while horses and donkeys tote small children around the pavestones for a ride.



Chowrasta Market

Shelley Seale

# Odisha

Hordes of tourists haven't cottoned on to far-flung Odisha... yet. But, it's well worth the journey to experience local festivals, see wildlife, and explore historic monuments.

Most visitors to Odisha begin their journey in the capital, Bhubaneswar. From there, it's an easy drive east to the coast, where most of the state's attractions can be found.

## Bhubaneswar

At first glance, Bhubaneswar might not seem like a city worth exploring, but there's a lot to see and do.

In medieval times, the city was home to thousands of temples and monuments. Now, there are still at least 500 standing. Hire an auto rickshaw to take you around and see the sights.

Start at lovely Bindu Sagar, a small lake surrounded by ghats and temples. Nearby is Lingaraj Mandir, which non-Hindus can view from a platform, and the State Museum.



Mariellen Ward

Bindu Sagar



Bhubaneswar

Mariellen Ward

Within driving distance of Bhubaneswar, visit the colorful town of Pipli and the Chausathi Jogini Temple. Pipli is famous for crafts and textiles, made from a vibrant appliqué technique that incorporates tiny mirrors.

Dating back to the 9th century, Chausathi Jogini Temple is a small, circular temple that contains 64 Joginis (goddesses). Inside, there are 56 granite idols, a statue of the goddess Kali, and a central altar with another 8 goddess idols.

## Beaches and festivals

Coastal Odisha is where most travelers head – and with good reason. Konark, almost directly east of Bhubaneswar, is home to one of India's most stunning UNESCO sites: the 13th century Konark Sun Temple. The sandstone temple is in the form of the sun god's chariot.

“In medieval times, the city was home to thousands of temples and monuments. Now, there are still at least 500 standing.”

## EASTERN INDIA

Konark Beach is the site of the annual International Sand Art Festival, timed to coincide with the Konark Festival. Time your trip to join in the five-day dance festival, where travelers are treated to classical Odissa dancers performing with the Sun Temple as backdrop.

Further down the coast, Puri is famous for its beaches and the Jagannath Temple. Each year, the Rath Yatra (Jagannath Temple's Car Festival) draws millions of pilgrims to the city to see the spectacle.

Puri is one of Hindu India's most sacred sites, and attracts backpackers from around the globe.

### Wildlife

Don't make the mistake of visiting Odisha without exploring the parks and wildlife sanctuaries.

Chilika Lake, Asia's largest lagoon, is down the coast from Puri. With dozens of migratory birds flocking to the mirror-like lake in winter, this spot is a bird-watcher's paradise.

Head north up the coast to Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary – a mangrove wetland full of wildlife, including the endangered saltwater crocodile that can reach eight meters in length.

Near Bhitarkanika, Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary is the nesting site of Olive Ridley turtles. They come from as far away as South America, it is believed, to lay eggs on a 35km stretch of Gahirmatha Beach. About 50-55 days later, the tiny hatchlings emerge and make their way to the sea, with the help of volunteers.



Mariellen Ward

### Chasing Waterfalls in Northeast India

Meghalaya literally translates to 'abode of the clouds'. This small, northeast Indian state bordering Bangladesh was named "Scotland of the East" by early British settlers, thanks to its rolling hills and cloud-covered peaks.

Shillong, Meghalaya's capital, while nestled amidst the East Khasi hills, is a typically urban sprawl of over-development and traffic congestion.

To find the waterfalls, leave the multi-storeyed buildings of Shillong behind for deep gorges and misty peaks.

Climbing higher and higher along narrow roads, you'll arrive at the viewpoint for Elephant Falls, a wide three-tiered cascade.

To reach the next stop, you'll move closer to Cherrapunji (also known as Sohra) – officially the world's wettest place, receiving record amounts of rainfall.

At Kynrem Falls, make your way down a few slippery, moss-covered steps to see the water thundering down, drenching you with the spray.

Ask the locals to help you find a secret spot to view the Seven Sister Falls – a vista of seven different rapids snaking their way down the sheer hillsides.

Last stop, Dainthlen Falls. Hold on to the iron fence and look below to see the falls land in the rock pools.



# WESTERN INDIA

**G**et an adrenalin rush from watersports, catch a sunset from the beaches, and watch people perform circus tricks on the sand in Goa. Find centuries-old, rock-cut caves and go waterfall-rappelling in the state of Maharashtra. Explore the best of western India's beautiful beaches, deserts and salt flats, national parks, and ancient temples and forts.

# Goa

With everything from beaches to film-festivals, Goa is a year-long holiday destination. Whether you visit in the monsoon when everything is fresh and green, or join the throng of year-end visitors, Goa has something special for you.

## Best beaches

For long stretches of unspoiled beaches, head to the less-crowded Arambol and Mandrem in North Goa, or Palolem Beach in the south. Baga Beach is best for water sports such as parasailing, jet-skiing, speedboat rides, and banana rides.

As you make your way along Goa's coastline, be sure to stop in at the forts that are littered along the coast. Spend a day in one of the beach shacks and get to know the locals. If you make friends with the waiters and bartenders, ask them to share their story – you'll be rewarded with interesting tales.



Shigmo festival, Panjim



Palolem Beach

## Arambol

Take a stroll along Arambol beach at sundown. Everyone comes here to watch the sunset, surrounded by street performers playing music and doing circus tricks on the sand. North of Arambol, visit the Banyan Tree where The Beatles once lived to make music with the locals.

## Panjim

In Panjim, the capital of Goa, explore the colonial legacy showcased through brightly-painted heritage buildings. Visit Mapusa Market for regional delicacies such as sausages, dried fish, and Goan sweets.

## Anjuna

Even if it's not your scene, attend a psytrance event on Anjuna beach – it's quite the experience. If you're there on a Wednesday, head to the flea market

## Safety Tips for Goa

Goa is very safe, however avoid walking alone in the dark, seedy street corners at night.

It's easy to be tempted by Goa's party scene, but stay away from drugs and prostitution. It's illegal.

Make sure you check the condition of rented vehicles – it's not uncommon for the speedometer or fuel tank indicator to be broken.

Sunset in Goa



Devorah Lev-Tov

at Anjuna. If you've got time, hire a motorbike and drive the backstreets between Anjuna and Vagator.

## Old Goa

Old Goa is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and its churches are some of the most important in Asia, including the Basilica of Bom Jesus, which holds the mortal remains of St. Francis Xavier.

Visit some of Goa's museums to see the houses of Goa, its glorious agrarian past, and the state's smuggling history.

## Festivals

Goa's cultural calendar is packed with concerts, festivals, and events throughout the year. New Year's festivities continue well into February, with the Monte Music Festival in Old Goa, the D.D. Kosambi Festival of Ideas, and a four-day celebration of Carnival.

Bring in spring with the colorful parades of Shigmo, or jump into local ponds for São João in June.

In August–September, enjoy the spectacle of Ganesh Chaturthi, Goa's biggest religious festival. Or, head to Divar Island for Bonderam (Festival of Flags).

In November, the annual International Film Festival of India (IFFI) sets the tone for the year-end festivities, and is followed by the Goa Arts and Literature Festival in December.

Don't forget to see a *tiatr* (local theatre) when you're here.

## Outdoor activities

Try a water sport or two on Goa's beaches, go on an eco-friendly and sustainable dolphin-spotting trip with Terra Conscious, and scuba-diving or snorkeling off the coast with Dive Goa.

During the monsoons, or just after, head inland to Goa's forests for an invigorating trek to a gushing waterfall.

Birdwatchers should visit Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary, or Carambolim Lake, to admire the migratory birds that come this way every year.

## Homestays

The best way to see the real Goa is to spend time with a local family. Try to find a local homestay where the owners not only welcome you into their homes, but also help you see a slice of the real Goa.



Bogmalo beach, Goa

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The best way to see the real Goa is to spend time with a local family.

## Cost Guide to Goa

**Simple beach shack:** Rs. 150 onwards.

**Trendy restaurant:** Rs. 300 onwards.

**International fast food chain:** Rs. 100 onwards.

**Beer:** Rs. 60 onwards for a glass.



# Mumbai

Mumbai is a heady juxtaposition of the glamorous Bollywood lifestyle, flaunted in trendy restobars and upscale neighborhoods, and the poverty that stares back from the city's underbellies as you ride the local train.

## Taj Mahal Palace

Built in 1903, the iconic Taj Mahal Palace in Colaba is the city's most luxurious hotel. Gape at the impressive Florentine exterior, then go inside and enjoy high tea over waterfront views at Sea Lounge.

## Gateway of India

Just across is the Gateway of India – a commemorative arch built to mark the visit of King George V and Queen Mary in 1911 – through which the last of the troops exited on India's independence in 1948.

It's busy with families, tourists, balloons, chai, photographers, and



Dharavi Slum



Gateway of India monument

*chana jor garam* (delicious Indian snack) sellers. Afterward, walk through the Oval Maidan where you might catch a cricket game.

## Elephanta Island

Take the ferry across to Elephanta Island to see rock-cut caves, the largest of which is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is a UNESCO Heritage Site. The structures, sculptures, and carvings date from the 2nd century B.C.

## Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus

This UNESCO Heritage Site is an example of Victorian Gothic architecture with elaborate arches, an imposing dome, rose windows, and stone carvings.

Walk around to see other buildings from the Victorian Gothic era, and towards Flora Fountain to see the University of Mumbai with its Big-Ben

## Street Food in Mumbai

No trip to Mumbai is complete without sampling the local street food favorites *pav bhaji*, *pani puri*, *dahi puri*, *tawa pulao*, and grilled sandwich.

Try Amar Juice Center in Juhu, or Elco in Bandra.

## WESTERN INDIA

inspired clock, in the heritage area of Fort.

### Markets

Browse antiques and quirky items at Chor Bazaar, the infamous market for stolen goods. You'll find everything from old gramophones and grandfather clocks, to Soviet-era Babushka dolls. Haggle down to less than half the price quoted.

Shop for cheap trinkets, junk jewelry, trendy shoes and bags, and street fashion at Colaba Causeway, and Linking Road and Hill Road in Bandra.

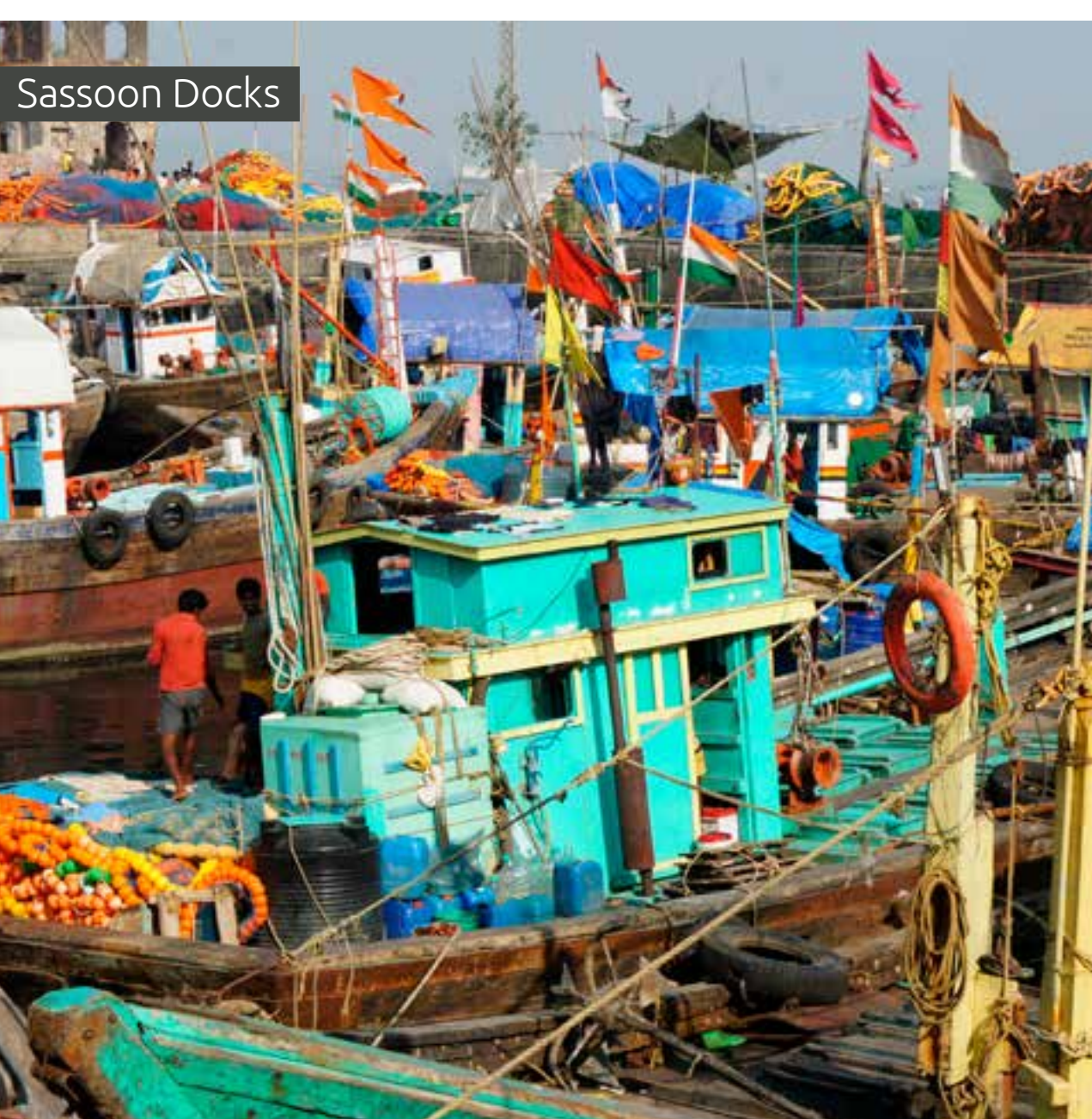
For traditional wear, handicrafts, and beautiful bangles, head to Bhuleshwar Market.

For block-printed fabrics and silk *saris*, go to Mangaldas Market.

### Other things to do

Attend the evening *arti* at the Siddhivinayak Temple, home to the city's favorite god Ganesha, and offer a basket of flowers, incense, and sweets, like the locals.

On an island accessible by a walkway, the Haji Ali Dargah is the mausoleum of



Devorah Lev-Tov

a saint, and feels a world away from the busy city. The air is briny, vendors line the walkway with trinkets, and all faiths are welcome. Wear clothes that cover the shoulders and knees.

If you're visiting in February, attend the nine-day Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, an enjoyable showcase of arts, music, dance, theatre, and screenings.

Sip tea and watch the sunset at the waterfront promenade of Marine Drive, and as night falls, admire the curved string of street lights that illuminates the bay, fondly called the 'Queen's necklace'.

Head to the National Gallery of Modern Art, and Jehangir Art Gallery in the art district of Kala Ghoda, to see exhibitions by Indian and international artists.

The Dr. Bhaui Daji Lad Museum features exhibits depicting Indian culture and customs, as does the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Museum.

### Hidden Gems in Mumbai

- Photography enthusiasts should rise before the sun to catch the action at Dadar Flower Market.
- Learn about recycling, pottery, leather tanning, soap manufacturing, and other industries in the hub of Mumbai's small-scale industries.
- On Bandra's Pali Hill, the Mount Mary Church is just as beautiful within as its semi Gothic exterior. It's a quiet sanctuary, where locals come for respite from the busy city.

# Maharashtra

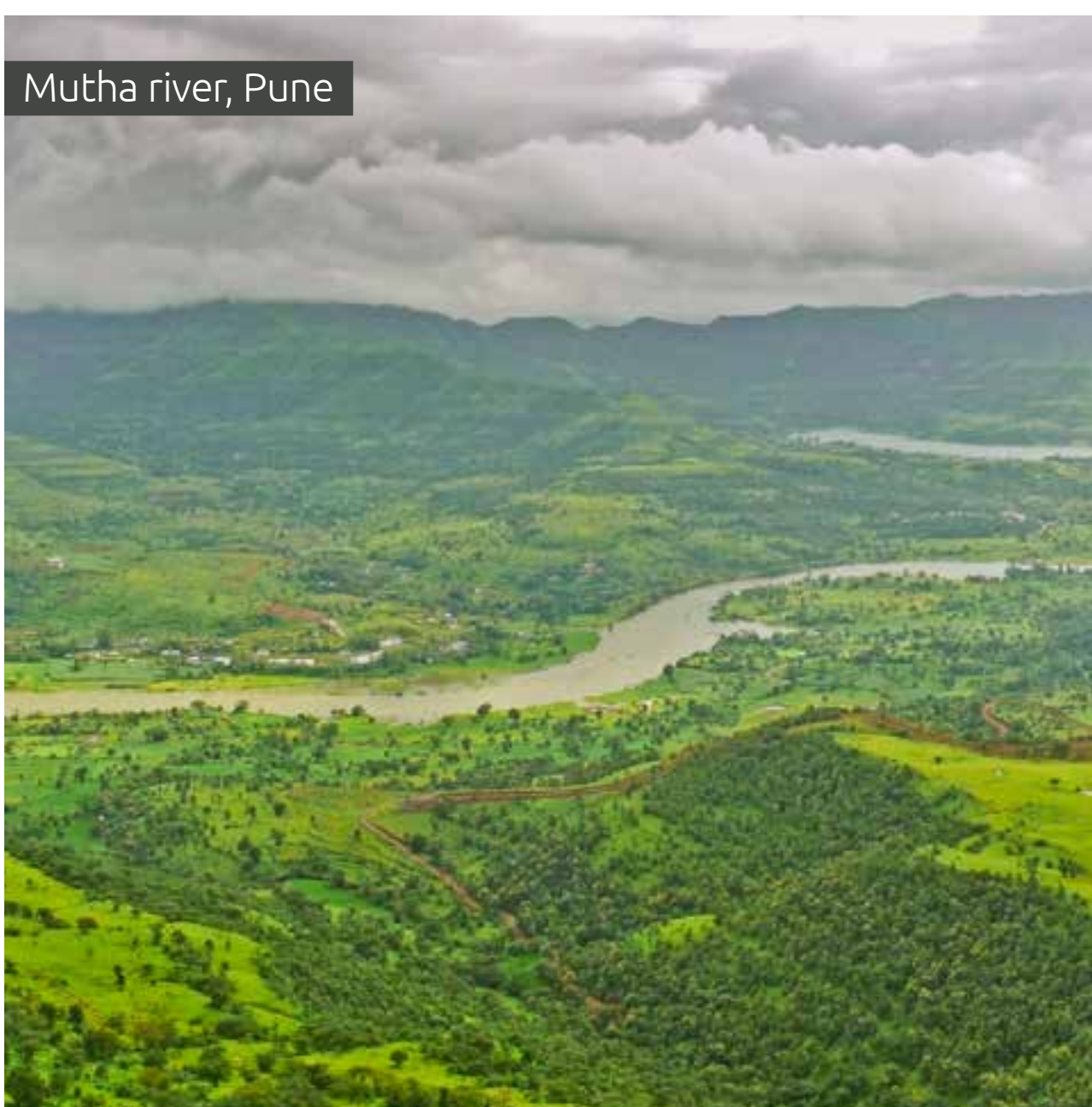
With bustling Mumbai at its nexus, the state of Maharashtra attracts business and leisure travelers alike, offering easy day trips from Mumbai, and further afield, national parks, ancient caves, and lesser-known fascinating cities.

## Day trips from Mumbai

Pune, about three hours south of Mumbai, is famous for the Aga Khan Palace, which is now a memorial to Gandhi, whose ashes are in the garden. Other highlights include an 18th century fort, and the Dagdusheth Halwai Ganapati Temple, which is dedicated to the Hindu god Ganesh.

The Karnala Bird Sanctuary, about an hour from Mumbai, is a popular picnic spot, and is home to 150 bird species.

Local hill stations make perfect one-day getaways including Matheran, which doesn't allow cars, and has 28 lookout points; Lavasa, which is modeled after the Italian town



Mutha river, Pune



Matheran

Devorah Lev-Tov

Portofino; and Igatpuri, which has lush forests and ancient ruins to explore.

## Outdoor adventure

If you're looking for adventure in Maharashtra, try white water rafting in Kolad, Kundalika, and Sarvakut Village; and waterfall repelling at Dabhosa Waterfall, Vihigaon Waterfall, Kondhana Caves, and Sandhan Valley.

You can even go scuba diving in the Arabian Sea at Malvan – the only place to do so in the state.

There are plenty of incredible spots to go hiking in Maharashtra. Some of the best are trekking at Naneghat Pass, the Vasota Fort Jungle Trek, the Raigad Fort route, and hiking Mt. Kalsubai – the highest peak in the state.

Wildlife safaris can be done at

“”

**You can even go scuba diving in the Arabian Sea at Malvan – the only place to do so in the state.**

## WESTERN INDIA

sanctuaries like Sahyadri Tiger Reserve in Chandoli National Park, Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve, Radhanagari Wildlife Sanctuary, Sanjay Gandhi National Park, and Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary – where the Indian Giant Squirrel can be found.

### Cultural sites

Maharashtra is home to many different cultures and religions, with ancient shrines, temples, and monuments found all over the state. The two most famous sites are near each other: 30 Buddhist caves at Ajanta, and more than 100 caves at Ellora. Both locations are UNESCO World Heritage Sites, along with the Elephanta Caves outside of Mumbai.

The Ellora caves contain monuments and artwork of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, including the largest single monolithic rock excavation in the world, the Kailasha Temple.

100km northeast are the Ajanta Caves, where 30 caverns were cut into cliffs between the 2nd and 7th century for Buddhist temples, shrines, prayer halls, and dormitories.

The Bibi Ka Maqbara in Aurangabad, known as the Mini Taj, bears a striking resemblance to the famous Taj Mahal and is definitely worth a visit.

The city of Nanded has historical and spiritual significance to the Sikhs, and there's a famous *gurdwara* (temple), Hazur Sahib Nanded, which houses the remains of the final Sikh guru.



Other famous temples in Maharashtra include Mahakali Mandir and Anchaleshwar Mandir in Chandrapur, Bhimashankar Temple near Pune, Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati in Mumbai, and Trimbakeshwar Temple in the Nashik district.

### See More of West India

Go to Ahmedabad, Gujarat's largest city, to see Sabarmati Ashram (Ghandi's former home), Jama Mosque, and the Calico Museum of Textiles.

Take the train from Ahmedabad to Bhuj, and visit the palace of Aaina Mahal and Prag Mahal, and see the Shri Swaminarayan Temple.

Hire a driver to take you to the villages of Kutch, rural communities dotting the desert that specialize in various handicrafts.

Visit Ludiya, with brightly painted circular huts, to see intricate embroidery; Khavda for beautiful pottery; Hodka, which is famous for its decorative mirrors and silver jewelry; and Jura for its copper bells.

Go on a jeep safari through the Little Rann, a salt desert that's also a wildlife sanctuary, home to the Indian Wild Ass and many bird species – including flamingos! You'll also see salt miners at work.

# Essential Insurance Tips

Beautiful India... gorgeous, exotic, stunning and oh so dangerous for the unprepared. Before you head off on the Spice Trail, here are the top 3 tips to help protect yourself and your gear.

## Culinary delight or medical emergency?

So you've arrived in India, homeland of tikka, korma, and madras curry. There's just one little thing lurking, ready to knock you and your travel plans off their feet... gastro! Otherwise known as "Rangoon runs", "Delhi belly", or just plain diarrhea, it single-handedly derails more Nomads' trips to the Taj than any other insurance claim in India. Many Nomads have experienced gastro before, and know the standard precautions to take: check the seals on bottles, wash your hands, and only eat steaming hot food that's cooked in front of you.

What you may not be ready for is the impact of a full-blown episode of authentic, Indian-food inspired gastro that scoffs at the western medicine you may have in your backpack and throws it back in your face... literally. Indian gastro typically hangs around a lot longer than you might expect if not treated with the right medication early. Combine that with the often-unrelenting heat of an Indian summer, and dehydration can leave you very ill. We recommend travelers with a World Nomads policy contact us earlier rather than later if they get a bout of gastro in India – we really don't

want you to miss seeing the Taj or, even worse, your connecting flight to Indonesia.

A local operator can help you place a reverse charges call to our 24-hour, 7 days a week team who are trained to deal with these situations, or you can look to claim back the cost of the call later.

We'll be able to give you info on what to do next, help locate local suitable medical facilities where you can be seen by a medical professional who can prescribe antibiotics or other medication and, if necessary, arrange hospitalization depending on the severity of your gastro.

Policies vary, but cover can include emergency local medical expenses and the costs of your trip being interrupted if the furthest you're able to travel is to the toilet and back.

## Lightening your load... and your valuables

Even our experienced Nomads have found Indian pickpockets to be some of the most brazen and bold in the world.

Before you hop on that 15-hour Mumbai to Goa bus, there are some things you need to know, because if you don't take the right precautions, your policy may not cover you for theft.

Cover varies between our insurance providers (so make sure you read the policy terms and conditions), but generally, our insurers tell us that travelers must be able to show they took "reasonable care" to protect their valuables. In India, this means if you leave your bags where they might be riffled through – such as at your feet on a busy bus, in the train baggage compartment or with people you've only just met – you may lose your cover.

“”

**Policies vary, but cover can include emergency local medical expenses and the costs of your trip being interrupted if the furthest you're able to travel is to the toilet and back.**

Lock your luggage and use under-clothing wallet holders for important documents, passport, and credit cards, with a small amount of rupee on hand for the journey's expenses. Take turns sleeping on public transport, never leave your bags unattended or with someone you've just met, and always stay aware. One of our Nomads reported having his bag stolen from under his sleeping head, so if it's not zipped in, padlocked, and secured out of sight, be prepared to lose it.

Before you travel, make sure you have receipts for your valuables, and scatter the customary passport, bank details, and photocopies throughout your bags. You will need a police report to claim, and even though those local Indian police stations can be frustrating to deal with, do try to get something in writing and document everything you do – the more information you can provide with your claim, the better.

### Hidden treasure or dangerous conflict zone?

If you want to go off-the-beaten-track in India, you really need to do your research first to ensure you're not going to void your travel insurance, or worse, end up in jail, injured, or dead. As they're often disputed and unmarked, borders between India and its neighbors can be particularly risky to travel to.

Our policy varies according to the warnings from your country of residence. In essence, if your country's government advice is to not travel to a particular area in India, your travel insurance can be void if you book or travel there, intentionally putting yourself in harm's way.

Common areas that many countries recommend you do not travel to in India include:

- In the north, the areas of Jammu, Kashmir and Srinagar (including Gulmarg, Pahalgam, and Sonamarg) experience sporadic terrorist activity and violent demonstrations, which travelers might get caught up in.
- To the west, various warnings exist for the immediate vicinity of the border with Pakistan in the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Punjab due to landmines and unexploded ordnance.
- To the east, areas in Assam bordering Bangladesh, and areas in Manipur and Nagaland bordering Myanmar may be "No Travel" areas due to the risk of insurgency.

Getting kidnapped, murdered, or injured is never fun, and even if none of that happens, with void travel insurance, if anything goes wrong, you're entirely on your own.

You should check your policy and your government's current list of travel warnings before you book your travel to India. If you're not sure, [contact us](#).

“”

**In essence, if your country's government advice is to not travel to a particular area in India, your travel insurance can be void if you book or travel there.**

All of the information we provide about travel insurance is a brief summary only. It does not include all terms, conditions, limitations, exclusions and termination provisions of the travel insurance plans described. Coverage may not be available for residents of all countries, states or provinces. Please carefully read your policy wording for a full description of coverage.

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## Thanks to our contributors:

[Ariel Sophia Bardi](#)

[Chryselle D'Silva Dias](#)

[Devorah Lev-Tov](#)

[Ed Salvato](#)

[Elen Turner](#)

[Garima Garg](#)

[Margot Bigg](#)

[Mariellen Ward](#)

[Nainaa Rajpaal](#)

[Natasha Amar](#)

[Nick Wharton](#)

[Shelley Seale](#)

[Sudeshna Ghosh](#)

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