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# THE SUNDAY TIMES

## Asia

### India: The Total Guide

Gods and Goa, the Taj and trains, mountains and maharajahs... Your trip of a lifetime starts here

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#### 1 Do I really want to go to India?

Well, that depends. Do you like cities, pell-mell with people, colour, noise? Do you like coconut-palm beaches? Do you like towering mountain scenery, millennia-old monuments, Jungle Book wildlife, spirituality, shopping, spice...? If you found yourself nodding at even one of the above, then the answer is: yes, probably. OK, not everyone will love every bit of India. It can be sweltering. There are some, er, interesting smells. And it's not always an easy place to get your head round. But it does have something for almost everyone, and that reward will come in high definition. This is the country travel clichés were written for: it is an assault on the senses; it is a melting pot; it is a land of extreme opposites. It can shock and soothe, and it will provoke a response. So make this the year you go, because the most likely reaction will be: when can I go back?

#### 2 Can I get involved in a festival?

It's your duty, and India has a predictably extravagant number to choose from. Here are five of the best:

##### **Puma Kumbh Mela, Jan 27-Feb 25**

Once every 12 years, the planets and sun align, and holy men, monks, pilgrims and yogis converge on sections of the Ganges (this year, it's in Allahabad) as part of the biggest festival on Earth, with more than 30 million attendees. The aim is to achieve purification by bathing in the river.

##### **Holi, Mar 27**

At the festival of colours, crowds of normally sober Indians get wrecked on cannabis-laced milkshakes and

plaster each other with powder paints. One of the safest places to celebrate is at the Holi Cow festival in Delhi, but for an authentic experience (and stronger bhang lassis) head for Mathura in Uttar Pradesh, birthplace of Lord Vishnu – to whom Holi is dedicated.

### **Dussehra, Oct 14**

This festival celebrating the triumph of good over evil (a recurring theme) takes place over 10 days at the end of the rainy season. It starts with nine nights of Navratri, a time of fasting and sobriety in honour of the goddess Durga. On the 10th night they go crazy, parading around effigies of Dick Dastardly lookalike, the demon lord Ravana – and then torching him. Best place to see it all is in Kolkata.

### **Diwali, Nov 3-7**

Also known as the festival of light, this is India's Hogmanay – a five-day celebration of the triumph of good over evil, and of light over darkness. The fireworks are pretty good, too, but if you are buying your own, beware – they're unpredictable. Best place to celebrate? Jaipur, where the clay lamps border on fine art.

### **Pushkar Camel Fair, Nov 7-16**

A Rajasthani wrangler was once asked how many camels came to the tiny desert town of Pushkar for the 10-day annual fair. 'All of them,' he replied. It is an astonishing sight: 20,000 humped beasts being shaved, coiffed, raced, entered in beauty contests – and then sold off to the highest bidder.

*Ampersand Travel (020 7289 6100, [www.ampersandtravel.com](http://www.ampersandtravel.com)) can arrange trips to all the above festivals. Its eight-day Kumbh Mela package, staying in Delhi, Varanasi and Lakshmi Kutir camp, costs from £2,175pp, B&B, with Heathrow flights.*

## **3 Where do I start?**

India's not just a country, it's almost an entire subcontinent. Rather than trying to cram everything into a fortnight (you'll be in constant transit), it's best to focus on one region. Most travellers start with one of these four classic itineraries, which you can do independently, but for ease, do yourself a favour and book a package...

### **First-time big hits: Golden Triangle**

*10 nights: Delhi – Agra – Jaipur – Deogarh.*

One of the world's classic itineraries, the Golden Triangle route was popularised by touring Victorians for its cultural heritage. It takes you from bustling, cosmopolitan Delhi, south to Agra for the Taj Mahal and west to regal Jaipur for its monuments, temples and gardens. An add-on at Deogarh, a hamlet in the Aravalli Hills, offers respite from the tourist-thronged cities – not to mention the finest G&Ts in India, served with fresh lime and panoramic hill views on the terrace of the old palace, the Deogarh Mahal.

**Get me there:** Cox & Kings (020 7873 5000, [www.coxandkings.co.uk](http://www.coxandkings.co.uk)) has a 10-night 'Princely India' private tour of Rajasthan, taking in Delhi, Agra, Jaipur and Deogarh, from £2,245pp, B&B, with flights from Heathrow.

**Best time to go:** The Golden Triangle is best in spring (Mar to May), when skies are dry and the temperature's pleasant. Winter (Nov to Feb) is a good choice, too, although it can be surprisingly chilly in Delhi (below freezing in Jan). Avoid May-Jun, when the mercury creeps to an airless 40°C in Delhi.

### **Royal highlights: Rajasthan**

*14 nights: Jaipur – Udaipur – Jodhpur – Jaisalmer desert.*

You'll see regal architecture aplenty, from the mighty Mehrangarh Fort at Jodhpur, to the mesmerising

palace floating on the lake at Udaipur, and the mud fortress of Jaisalmer, which rises from the desert like an apparition. When you've had your fill of turrets, head off into the desert on camel-back, where the sunset view of the 'blue city' of Jodhpur will prove that all that glitters isn't Maharani gold.

**Get me there:** Intrepid Travel (0800 781 1660, [www.intrepidtravel.com](http://www.intrepidtravel.com)) has a 14-night 'Rajasthan Experience', including all the above, plus Delhi, from £1,360pp, B&B, plus some other meals, excluding flights.

**Best time to go:** Time your visit for Oct or Nov (although the weather is fine right up to Mar, with highs in the mid-30s) and you'll avoid the worst of the crowds, while still catching the Udaipur lakes at their monsoon-replenished best. Avoid Jul to Sept, when the monsoon winds sweep in.

### **Hills and thrills: Himalayas**

*12 nights: Amritsar – Shimla – Manali – Palampur – Dharamsala.*

It's here in the Himalayas that the subcontinent converges, culturally and geographically, with the rest of Asia. Start at Amritsar, the Sikh holy city, with its shimmering Golden Temple, then move on to Colonial Shimla. Next, it's Manali, a holy Hindu city with an alpine vibe, and river-fed Palampur, for rice paddies and fine hill-walking. Finally, hit unmissable Dharamsala, where the snow-capped peaks are as much of a draw as the exiled Dalai Lama.

**Get me there:** Travel Indochina (01865 268940, [www.travelindochina.co.uk](http://www.travelindochina.co.uk)) has a 12-night 'Spirit of the Himalayas' tour, including the above destinations, from £2,125, B&B, and a few other meals, with flights from Heathrow.

**Best time to go:** There's no bad time to visit – and no monsoons. Try Oct to Jan for snowy peaks and chilly air, with lows of 5°C in Dharamsala, but clear, heart-in-your-mouth views. Go in Apr or May to see the spring flowers in bloom and for temperatures in the mid-20s; Jul to Sept sees the warmest weather, with highs in the early to mid-30s.

### **Beaches and backwaters: southern India**

*12 nights: Kochi – Tamil Nadu – Munnar – Kerala.*

Kochi is unmissable – an ancient, sea-gazing city with a rich history imprinted on its strollable streets (don't miss the astonishing murals at the 16th-century Mattancherry Palace; or Jew Town, where spice sellers have plied their wares since the 1700s). Take the road along the escarpment of the Western Ghats mountains to reach the temple-cluttered city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Then it's on into the crisp air and manicured tea gardens at sleepy Munnar hill station, before kicking back on Kerala's beaches or taking a boat trip on the drowsy lagoons and lakes of its backwaters.

**Get me there:** Abercrombie & Kent (0845 485 1142, [www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)) has a 12-night 'Southern India' tour of the above for £2,475pp, B&B, with Heathrow flights.

**Best time to go:** Go in winter, from Oct to Feb, when it's mild and pleasant, with highs of 33°C. Monsoon arrives with gusto in the south – from Jun to Sept – and is best avoided for a first trip. Summer (Mar to May) is hot and humid.

## **4 Can I see tigers?**

*Yes, if the god Ganesh wills it. Tiger-spotter extraordinaire Chris Haslam knows where...*

No amount of research will prepare you for your first encounter with a tiger. Mine occurred in Bandhavgarh

National Park ([www.bandhavgarhnationalpark.com](http://www.bandhavgarhnationalpark.com)), some 800km southeast of Delhi. Getting there had been a proper journey – a long flight from London, a longer night in a top bunk on the Gondwana Express train, then a three-hour drive in convoy to the park gates. Eight kilometres from Bandhavgarh, the 4WD I was travelling in got a flat tyre. As the rest of the vehicles carried on, a call came over the radio: two tigers had been spotted within five minutes of our location. We sped away before the wheel nuts had been tightened, arriving at the hotel, where our group was sitting down to breakfast. There was little enthusiasm from the others; they were hungry, tired and wanted a cup of tea first. So the guide and I went alone. Fifteen minutes later, astride a nervous elephant, I saw my first tigers. They were lounging on a ledge no more than three metres away, their thick fur spilling over the rock in golden folds, their whiskers catching little rainbows in the dappled sunlight. The big male looked straight into my eyes, his gaze somewhere between the nonchalant and the psychotic, making it perfectly clear that if he wanted to, he could kill me, the mahout and the elephant, and there was nothing we could do about it.

**Is it that easy?** There are only around 1,500 tigers left in India, so seeing one is as much about luck as about privilege – and most of those who chose tea over tigers that morning flew back to London disappointed. You have to work hard to catch your tiger, and there are no guarantees – last year I spent 11 days in Pench and saw not even a whisker. Being first in the queue at the park gates means pre-dawn starts, often in biting cold. You drive around for hours, hope rising with every barked alarm call from sambar deer. Then, when the call arrives to say a tiger has been spotted, you find yourself at the back of a 40-vehicle traffic jam. But occasionally Ganesh smiles and you find yourself almost alone with a tiger.

**So how do I plan a trip?** Tiger reserves comprise ‘core areas’ – inviolable areas of habitat – and buffer zones, in which farming, forestry and other industries are allowed. Human encroachment in the latter means tigers are less common, so if you want to see the beast you need to go into the core areas. New rules allow access to just 20 per cent of the core area, and exactly how much of each reserve is designated as the core varies: in Ranthambore, the core area comprises more than 70 per cent of the park’s 400sq km. The trick is to choose a park with high tiger numbers and a small core – top choices are Satpura and Bandhavgarh. Avoid Ranthambore, Pench and Kanha.

**When to go:** Tiger-spotting season runs Nov to Apr. Reserves close for the monsoon period from end of Jun to mid-Oct.

**Get me there:** The 11-day ‘Tigers in Focus’ trip with Exodus (0845 527 1436, [www.exodus.co.uk](http://www.exodus.co.uk)) has a high hit rate (19 sightings at Bandhavgarh on a recent trip); it costs from £1,699pp, including some meals and Heathrow-Delhi flights. Steppes Discovery (01285 643333, [www.steppesdiscovery.co.uk](http://www.steppesdiscovery.co.uk)) has a 12-day ‘Tiger and Wildlife Study’ safari from £2,895pp, but visits more remote areas of Bandhavgarh and Panna; the last trip had 14 sightings.

## 5 How do I avoid being scammed?

Most scams you’ll encounter in India aren’t serious. Some, such as the baby-milk ruse (kid claims to have lost milk money; you buy them some, and it goes straight back to the vendor) are annoying, but not costly. But be wary of the temple-juice ploy, in which a kind man offers you fruit juice that’s been blessed by a priest. Only ‘blessed’ in this case means it’s been drugged.

## 6 Is it easy to offend?

Men and women should cover shoulders and legs below the knees (except on sunbathing beaches). Remove

shoes before entering temples and homes. Never use your left hand to eat (it's considered dirty). And avoid public displays of affection.

## 7 What are the loos like?

In hotels, mainly Western. Beyond that, hole-in-the-ground squat loos. Take your own loo paper (but bin it, don't flush) and alcohol hand gel.

See the Taj without the crowds (13) (HO)

## 8 How do I eat like a local?

Shamil Thakrar is co-owner of Dishoom ([www.dishoom.com](http://www.dishoom.com)), the duo of London restaurants inspired by Mumbai's old Irani cafes. His family is from Gujarat, north of Mumbai, a city he's visited frequently since his early childhood.

In Mumbai, I tend to regret how few mornings I have. Breakfast is a chance to envelop oneself in the wistful mood of the Irani cafes – one of India's loveliest but fading food traditions. At the classic Irani, lofty ceiling fans spin lazily, while sepia ancestors stare out of wall-hung portraits; creaking bentwood chairs are pushed up against old mirrors; and stern handwritten signs instruct diners: 'No spitting. No combing hair. No flirting with cashier.'

These eccentric, colonial-tinged, baking-scented cafes were opened early last century by Zoroastrian immigrants fleeing persecution in Iran. They functioned as a kind of comfortable all-day space for anyone, taxi-wallah or lawyer, to sip sweet, milky chai or dine on simple, tasty Iranian-influenced food.

At their peak in the '60s, there were almost 400 of these cafes; now, fewer than 30 remain. My favourite for a good breakfast is Kyani & Co at Dhobi Talao (opp. Metro Cinema, JSS Rd; 00 91 22 2201 1492; mains around 75p). It's the very picture of the classic Irani. I always order the akuri (a lightly spiced version of scrambled eggs) and chai (all for under £1), while I read the morning papers in peace.

Yazdani Bakery (Cawasji Patel St, Fort; 00 91 22 2287 0739; mains around £1) is another favourite; it bakes delicious bread and cakes. Sit at the communal table, rub shoulders with a cross-section of Mumbaikars and try the brun maska – a hot bun with a slab of butter inside, to be dunked without shame into your chai.

For lunch, it has to be Britannia Restaurant, in a charming British Raj building (16 Sprott Rd; 00 91 22 2261 5264; mains around £4). Owned by the Kohinoor family, it's been open since 1923. You will no doubt meet Mr Kohinoor himself, who is the same age as his restaurant and still serves every single customer. With a broad smile and a sort of jig, he will make you order 'fresh lime soda, nice and sweet, to beat the Bombay heat', then he will suggest the chicken berry pulao. Take his recommendation – the recipe was created by Mrs Kohinoor in 1982, and is universally revered by Mumbai foodies. When I asked Mr Kohinoor what would happen to Britannia in the future, he grasped my shoulder, peered intently at me through his thick spectacles and replied, 'the moment I'm gone, these buggers will shut the place down!' I urge you to visit Britannia before another part of old Mumbai fades into memory.

*Enchanting India (0800 098 8486, [www.enchanting-india.co.uk](http://www.enchanting-india.co.uk)) has a four-night guided Mumbai trip, with flights, from £1,265pp, B&B.*



## 9 What other regional specialities should I try?

Delhi was once India's Mughal capital, which makes for deliciously meaty food. The roadside restaurants and stalls around the Grand Mosque in Old Delhi (or Purānī Dillī) are the most authentic places for Mughlai food. Try the juicy kebabs and stuffed paranthe (layered bread) from Karim's (Jama Masjid, Gali Kababian, Old Delhi; 00 91 11 2326 9880; mains around £3).

Like a beautiful but dusty old carpet, the city of Kolkata rewards scrutiny. Bengali food is omnivorous, lightly spiced and often includes fish. Peer more closely still and you'll find Chinese cuisine here, too (especially if you visit the Tangra area). Don't leave without trying a kati roll (meat rolled in layered bread) from the legendary Nizam's (Hogg St, New Market; 00 91 98 3001 7576; mains around £2).

The most iconic dishes in princely Hyderabad are haleem (a soft lamb stew with crushed wheat) and biryani (rice layered and cooked with meat). Café Bahar serves excellent versions of both (near Old MLA Quarters, Hyderguda; 00 91 40 2324 3798; mains around £2).

Seafood is widely eaten in coastal Chennai, but the city is most famous for its traditional Hindu vegetarian food – try the Marina Beach street vendors for masala dosa (rice-flour pancakes filled with spiced potatoes; around 75p) and idli sambar (soft rice cakes eaten with spicy daal; around 50p).

Gujarat is a 'dry' state and its food is very Hindu-influenced – so no alcohol and little meat. Its famous snacks include dhokla (savory gram-flour cakes) and it's the home of the thali – individual servings of daal, bhat, shak and roti (lentils, rice, vegetables and unleavened bread) on a steel dish. Gopi Dining Hall in Ahmedabad (Ellis Bridge; 00 91 79 2657 6388; thalis 85p) serves some of the best.

## 10 What's with all these gods?

India is a deeply spiritual country where religion (mainly Hinduism, but also Islam, Sikhism and more) is woven into the fabric of everyday life. With thousands of deities in the Hindu pantheon it's confusing, but essentially, all are forms of Brahma, the Supreme Being who created the universe, Vishnu, who sustains it, and Shiva, who energises it. Find out more about these celestial superstars over the following pages...

**Shiva**, with his trident, cobra and wild tresses, is the destroyer of all that is negative in the world, such as ego. He rides Nandi (a sacred bull) and is married to Parvati. He is also known as 'lord of the dance' and creates the cosmic rhythm of the universe.

**Krishna**, with his distinctive blue skin, is an incarnation of Vishnu. All Indians know of his role as adviser to Arjuna, the warrior prince, in the Bhagavad Gita, one of Hinduism's most sacred texts. The Guruvayur Devaswom Temple ([www.guruvayurdevaswom.org](http://www.guruvayurdevaswom.org)), in Kerala, is a major centre of Krishna worship.

**Ganesha**, the popular roly-poly, elephant-headed god (son of Shiva and Parvati) is known as the 'remover of obstacles'. No enterprise, from starting a journey to taking an exam, occurs without his blessing. The most famous Ganesh temple is the Siddhivinayak Temple ([www.siddhivinayak.org](http://www.siddhivinayak.org)) in Mumbai, popular with Bollywood stars.

**Hanuman**, known as the 'monkey god', is one of the heroes of the Ramayana, an ancient Indian epic. He is worshipped as an incarnation of Shiva, and revered as a protector and guardian. The Jakhu Temple ([www.himachaltourism.org](http://www.himachaltourism.org)) near Shimla features the tallest statue of Hanuman.

**Kali**, 'the black goddess', brandishes an arsenal of weapons from her many arms, and wears a necklace of

skulls as well as a belt of severed limbs. Her blood lust is only for evildoers and she is worshipped as a symbol of righteous wrath. The Kalighat Kali Temple ([www.kalighattemple.com](http://www.kalighattemple.com)) in Kolkata attracts pilgrims from across India.

## 11 How do I haggle?

Everyone haggles in India – rich, poor, locals, foreigners. Unless there's a firm price tag on a product, it's negotiable. Taxi drivers, tour guides – even the guy selling bottles of water from a rickshaw – all expect a back-and-forth.

Locals know the true value of goods – and how to bargain like a pro – so watch how they do it. The usual process is to ask the vendor to name a price, which will be much more than they actually expect to get. The haggle always lasts more than one round, so don't counter with 50 per cent, or they'll come back with 75 per cent. Instead, offer about a quarter of the initial price. If the vendor laughs, walk away. Chances are, they'll chase after you.

Merchants are skilled at sniffing out a rookie – to increase your chances of getting a good deal, memorise the exchange rates, carry small notes and take your time before handing over your money. Many first-time hagglers feel guilty for wrangling over what amounts to 50p, but there's a fair price for everything, and in India few vendors will sink below it, so there's no need to feel bad – you won't deprive their children of an education (even if that's how they try to convince you to pay more).

Authentic hand-crafted products are still plentiful in India. Look for fine silk saris in Tamil Nadu, marble in Agra, carpets in Kashmir, pearls in Hyderabad and embroidery in the Punjab. Rajasthan is famous for carved wood furniture, which some shops and hotel concierges can arrange to ship home for you, or use DHL ([www.dhl.co.in](http://www.dhl.co.in)) or Fedex ([www.fedex.com](http://www.fedex.com)).

Beware of 'Made in China' knock-offs – when you start seeing the same thing at every stall, it's probably a fake, low-quality import.

**Can't face the haggle?** Try boutiques or government shops. The latter charge a nominal entry fee, but prices are fixed – albeit at a slightly higher rate than you might pay in the market. Boutiques, too, are slightly more expensive than markets, but you'll still find the goods cheaper – and the quality far better – than imports back home.

## 12 What are hill stations and why would I want to go?

These Raj-era mountain resorts (usually at least 1,000 metres above sea level) bloomed across Asia and Africa in the mid to late 19th century. Originally they served, in the words of William Bentinck (Governor-General of India, 1833-35), as an 'agreeable refuge from the burning plains of Hindoostan' – and today they perform a similar function. For the Indian middle classes – and for overheated overseas tourists – they're a romantic, refreshing weekend retreat from the chaos of the cities.

Shimla is the king of these high-altitude havens, a playground in which the apparatchiks of the British Raj let their imaginations run riot. The result is a joy: a cluster of mock-Tudor and Scottish Baronial rooftops tumbling down the Himalayan foothills. Take it in with a picture-window view via the Shivalik Deluxe Express train ([www.iretc.co.in](http://www.iretc.co.in); from around £4 one way) from the Kalka plains, which scissors through 500m of elevation on a rare narrow-gauge track. Or, if you're splurging, take the Oberoi hotel group's private plane

(00 91 11 2567 1516, [www.oberoihotels.com](http://www.oberoihotels.com); £634 p/h) up to a landing strip perched between mountaintops and clouds.

For a Shimla feel without the crowds, try Dalhousie, in the far north of Himachal Pradesh, where Governor-General Lord Dalhousie built his summer getaway. Nearby, there's also Khajjiar, India's 'little Switzerland', with excellent hiking trails that cut through meadow and forest. (The Devdar's the only good joint in town; 00 91 18 9924 2136; doubles from £25, B&B.)

You'll have to head east to West Bengal for the other biggie, Darjeeling, set in the undulating tea plantations that have made its name a global brand. There's hiking, biking, fine Tibetan and Thai cuisine – and, of course, kick-ass chai. Take it at the Windamere (Observatory Hill; 00 91 35 4225 4041, [www.windamerehotel.com](http://www.windamerehotel.com); afternoon tea from £6), where it's served pale gold, 'like the Himalayan sunlight at dawn'. Hang your hat here, too, or at that other old plantation lodge, Elgin (00 91 35 4225 7226 [www.elginhotels.com](http://www.elginhotels.com); doubles from £99, full board), for marble bathrooms, landscaped gardens and oodles of colonial ambience.

Or head to the modern Indian honeymooner's favourite, Munnar, high in the Keralan Ghats, where the tea estates reside among craggy peaks, and the homely Windermere Estate (00 91 48 6523 0512, [www.windermereunnar.com](http://www.windermereunnar.com); cottages from £115, B&B) serves one of the best Indian brekkies in the south. Or to Scotland-like Ooty in neighbouring Tamil Nadu, where the last of the British clung on after Independence. There are glorious views to be had getting here on the Nilgiri (Blue Mountain) Express train.

*Greaves Travel (020 7487 9111, [www.greavesindia.co.uk](http://www.greavesindia.co.uk)) has a 12-night Darjeeling, Sikkim and Kolkata itinerary from £2,500pp, half board, including flights from Heathrow to Delhi.*

### 13 Can I see the Taj without the crowds?

Your first glimpse of the Taj Mahal, poking through the frondy kinkar trees like an iceberg, gives you goose bumps. Joining the crowds shuffling towards the Western Gate, you notice the dust, the smell of frying puris, the beggars and the garish souvenirs. You'll be sold a ticket (<http://tajmahal.gov.in>; £8.60), searched for pens, chewing gum and picnics, and issued with shoe covers. Once inside, expect a seesaw of wonder and dismay – the former at the near perfection of Shah Jahan's 17th-century memorial to his wife; the latter at the camera-clicking, football-playing hordes.

To get the Taj to yourself, arrive half an hour before sunrise – the gates open at dawn every day, but a good guide will get you in a few minutes early – and head for the plinth overlooking the Yamuna River for daybreak. Late in the afternoon, ask your guide to take you across the river to Mehtab Bagh: it's a popular camel-riding spot but the wranglers can take you (camel-free, and for a price) to secret spots in the surrounding farmland for priceless views of the Taj. The most exclusive – and certainly most comfortable – spot is a balcony at The Oberoi Amarvilas ([www.oberoihotels.com](http://www.oberoihotels.com)), quite possibly the best-sited hotel on earth.

*TransIndus (0844 879 3960, [www.transindus.co.uk](http://www.transindus.co.uk)) has a 16-day private Gangetic Plain and Lucknow tour including Agra, Gwalior, Varanasi and Lucknow, with two nights at The Oberoi Amarvilas, from £3,395, B&B, including flights from Heathrow to Delhi.*

### 14 Which other historic sites shouldn't I miss?

The Red Fort ([www.agrafort.gov.in](http://www.agrafort.gov.in); £3.50) would be the prime reason to visit in any other city; Agra has that



other, bigger attraction. But do make time for the fort. You can see the room in which the Taj's creator, Shah Jahān, was imprisoned by his own son, and get an insight into the lavish lifestyle of the Moghul emperors – from the rose pool (filled with petals for the harem's perfumed baths) to the grape garden, where jewels were hung from trees to catch the moonlight.

The Khajuraho temple complex ([www.asi.nic.in](http://www.asi.nic.in); £3) in southeastern Madhya Pradesh, about 620km from Delhi, is the one with the astonishingly explicit erotic sculptures. There's nothing smutty about it: Tantric beliefs divide the cosmos into the male and female hemispheres, and unless these two interact nothing can exist. So stop giggling.

The Ajanta & Ellora Caves ([www.ajanta.ind.in](http://www.ajanta.ind.in); £2.90) are India's Petra. To describe them as caves is an injustice: on a hillside in Maharashtra state, 450km northeast of Mumbai, you'll find colonnaded temples, vast vaulted chambers and 5th-century murals described as 'the finest surviving examples of Indian art'.

The Golden Temple, Amritsar ([www.sgpc.net](http://www.sgpc.net); free), is the holiest shrine in Sikhism. The complex itself is a spectacular mélange of Hindu and Moghul vernacular – all gleaming gold and dazzling marble. But most memorable is the human buzz of the place. Thousands of devotees arrive daily to worship, bathe and share in the free daily feast known as Guru Ka Langar. Stick around for the nightly palki sahib, when strongmen jostle to carry the Sikh holy book from the main shrine back to the sanctum.

The Meenakshi Temple ([www.madurai.tn.nic.in](http://www.madurai.tn.nic.in); 1p) is another vast complex, built in the heart of the 2,500-year-old city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Dedicated to an incarnation of the wife of Shiva, the temple is a small town in itself, with daily rush hours, distinct districts and a population of priests, holy men and pilgrims. Come in April for the Chitirai festival, celebrating the marriage of Meenakshi and Shiva.

The Golconda Fort ([www.aptdc.in/Hyderabad](http://www.aptdc.in/Hyderabad); £1.15), in Hyderabad, is another reminder of the incredible power of the Muslim rulers. In its 16th-century heyday it was the centre of India's diamond trade, with a marketplace that would have out-blinded any Dubai mall. The Hope Diamond, the Regent Diamond and the cursed Koh-i-Noor were mined and sold here. The sparkle's gone now but the fort's astonishing acoustics remain – it's said these walls truly do have ears.

## 15 Which city's best for history?

### Delhi

It is an appealing irony that in this ancient land, most of the great cities are relatively new. Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru and Chennai are largely colonial creations. Delhi is different; Delhi is as old as India.

The city as it stands today is barnacled with reminders of its previous incarnations. Ramparts of vanished citadels loom over avenues of belching trucks and crowded buses. The tombs of emperors preside over traffic lights where beggars work the waiting cars. From the 11th-century Lal Kot fort to the 20th-century Lutyens avenues, every epoch is represented. But it is the remains of the splendid Mughal Empire that most impress. Marvel at the ravishing tomb of Humayan (Bharat Scouts and Guides Marg; [www.asi.nic.in](http://www.asi.nic.in); £3), stroll through the gardens and the pavilions of the enormous Red Fort (above; Netaji Subhash Rd, Chandni Chowk; [www.asi.nic.in](http://www.asi.nic.in); £3), visit Old Delhi's Friday Mosque (Shahjahanabad; free), with its eager crowds of worshippers, then delve into the maze of surrounding bazaars for a glimpse of a world little changed since the days when the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan rode his elephant down Chandni Chowk.

**Don't leave before you've...** attended the free Thursday-evening performances of Sufi devotional qawwali music at the tomb of Nizamuddin Dargah in the 'village' of the same name in southern Delhi (off Mathura Rd; free). It's haunting, elegiac and straight from the 14th century.

**Get me there:** *Bales Worldwide* (0844 488 1167, [www.balesworldwide.com](http://www.balesworldwide.com)) has four nights at the Taj Palace Hotel from £1,295pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow.

## 16 Which city's best for glamour?

### Mumbai

When Indian villagers dream of the golden city where their lives will be transformed, they dream of Mumbai. For visitors, it's India's most glamorous city, the place where money and movies have created a contemporary cosmopolitan buzz. This is the place to get out the credit cards and unpack the fancy threads.

Bars and restaurants tend to be one and the same thing in trendy Mumbai. In south Mumbai, the place to be is Indigo (4 Mandlik Rd, Colaba; 00 91 22 6636 8999, [www.foodindigo.com](http://www.foodindigo.com); mains around £12); start with a cocktail at the bar before dinner on the roof terrace. In Bandra, north Mumbai, head for Olive (14 Union Park Rd, Khar West; 00 91 22 4340 8228, [www.olivebarandkitchen.com](http://www.olivebarandkitchen.com); mains around £12) for food as sophisticated as the crowd – expect to see numerous Bollywood types. When it's time to strut your stuff, go to Aer (Four Seasons Hotel, 114 Dr E Moses Rd, Worli; 00 91 22 2481 8000, [www.fourseasons.com/mumbai](http://www.fourseasons.com/mumbai); entry £23), a stunning open-air rooftop bar with DJ, food and spectacular views. For other options, see [www.timeoutmumbai.net](http://www.timeoutmumbai.net) or look for Time Out Mumbai on the newsstands.

**Don't leave before you've...** taken afternoon tea in the Sea Lounge at the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel (00 91 22 6665 3366, [www.tajhotels.com](http://www.tajhotels.com); around £17). A window seat gives you views of the Arabian Sea and the monumental colonial Gateway of India in the company of some of Mumbai's wealthiest and most celebrated citizens.

**Get me there:** The Cleveland Collection (020 7843 3531, [www.clevelandcollection.co.uk](http://www.clevelandcollection.co.uk)) has four nights at the Leela Mumbai from £999pp, B&B, including Heathrow flights and transfers.

## 17 Which city's best for nostalgia?

### Kolkata

Long before Delhi became capital of the British Raj in 1911, Kolkata (or Calcutta, as it was then) was the centre of British India, and, with its crumbling imperial facades, it's the best place to indulge in colonial nostalgia.

Start with a wander around BBD Bagh, formerly Dalhousie Square. If it wasn't for the old Ambassador cars and the rickshaws, it could almost be Victorian Manchester. Look out for the Writers' Building, designed for the clerks of the East India Company in the manner of a French town hall, and St Andrew's Church, or 'Kirk', a testament to Scotland's strong influence in colonial affairs. Across the green acres of Kolkata's vast central park, the Maidan, you find the Victoria Memorial ([www.victoriamemorial-cal.org](http://www.victoriamemorial-cal.org); £1.70). Inside the galleries of this colossal white palace are mementos of British imperialism. A sound and light show is held in the grounds most evenings (daily Oct-Jun, except Mondays; 25p), and afterwards, the area in front of the gates becomes an outdoor party as crowds of families enjoy the evening air, musical fountains and snack stalls. At the far end of the Maidan is a monument to what is arguably Britain's greatest contribution to India, cricket – a passion here, not a sport. The Ranji Stadium in Eden Gardens has been called the game's answer to the Colosseum.

**Don't leave before you've...** been to the South Park Street Cemetery. Inaugurated in 1767, this atmospheric British relic houses the graves of many leading figures of the Raj – there are some fascinating epitaphs.

**Get me there:** Cox & Kings (0845 564 8285, [www.coxandkings.co.uk](http://www.coxandkings.co.uk)) has five nights at the Taj Bengal from £1,345pp, B&B, including Heathrow flights.

Go trekking in the Himalayas (18) (Jochen Schlenker)

## 18 What are the spas like?

India's long history of holistic wellbeing means you'll find spas of every kind...

### **Traditional spas**

The ancient Hindu medicine Ayurveda has its heartland in Kerala, where spas are usually found in leafy tropical settings at specialist hotels, such as Purity at Lake Vembanad (00 91 48 4221 6666, [www.malabarhouse.com](http://www.malabarhouse.com); three-night packages from £621pp) or Somatheeram, near Kovalam (00 91 47 1226 6501, [www.somatheeram.org](http://www.somatheeram.org); packages from £83pp per day). A therapist will assess your dosha (body type) to determine your treatments and meals; if you're lucky, you'll be prescribed a thyla dhara, in which warmed oil is poured onto your head in a soothing stream, or a massage with poultices of fresh herbs. You'll meditate and practise yoga between treatments.

### **Luxury resorts**

India's top-end spas, whether in city hotels or mountain resorts, are a bargain – prices are often around half what you'd expect to pay in Europe. One of the finest is the Kaya Kalp Spa at ITC Mughal in Agra (00 91 56 2402 1700, [www.itchotels.in](http://www.itchotels.in); doubles from £175, room only). Its interiors reflect the opulent Mughal architecture of its neighbour, the Taj Mahal, and treatments include a Gemstone Massage (£43 for 60 mins). Or try Ananda in the Himalayas (00 91 13 7822 7500, [www.anandaspa.com](http://www.anandaspa.com); doubles from £388, room only), where Tibetan massages (£61 for 75 mins) come with stunning mountain views.

### **Wellbeing retreats**

From The Beatles to Eat, Pray, Love's soul-searching protagonist, westerners who want to work on their spiritual side as well as their yoga poses have always been attracted to ashrams. These vary from mattress-on-the-floor joints, where it's all about meditation and self-sacrifice, to grander affairs where the focus is on physical and mental improvement through yoga combined with healing therapies. Guests usually stay for several days and forgo meat, alcohol, mobiles and laptops. If you want to dip your toe in, try Parmarth Niketan Ashram (00 91 13 5243 4301, [www.parmarth.com](http://www.parmarth.com); singles from £10, B&B), the largest in Rishikesh. Rooms are simple but ensuite, and the setting is on the banks of the Ganges.

## 19 How do I deal with beggars?

Poverty can be in your face in India, and while giving alms to beggars is traditional here, it often profits criminal gangs. Pratham Council for Vulnerable Children says: 'Giving money to street children perpetuates the cycle of child labour and poverty.' Donate to charities instead, such as Pratham ([www.pcv.org](http://www.pcv.org)), Salaam Baalak Trust ([www.salaambaalaktrust.com](http://www.salaambaalaktrust.com)) or i-india ([www.i-indiaonline.com](http://www.i-indiaonline.com)).

## 20 Is it safe?

Serious crime is rare, with petty theft the main problem. Watch out for luggage thieves, pick-pockets and bag-snatchers. There have been some reports of drink-spiking in Goa, and women occasionally receive unwanted

attention. If someone invades your space, protest loudly and ask others for help – people will usually come to your aid. Avoid beaches at night, specific troubled regions and the Pakistani border. Check [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk) for advice.

## 21 Where can I go trekking?

*Ian Belcher goes Himalayan hiking, the softies' way*

I'm staring at a shadowy entrance high above Hemis Monastery in the mountains of Ladakh. The Place of Vultures is eerie, otherworldly, an isolated cave where monks come to meditate for a remarkable three months, three days and three hours, barely blinking as the mercury plummets below zero. 'Some turn delirious,' whispers my guide, Sid. 'Some go mad. Some die of hypothermia.'

It's a chilling lesson; clearly, I'd better keep moving. I've come to Ladakh, in India's northernmost state, to explore on foot a region that's part lunar landscape, part savagely beautiful postcard – a high-altitude desert that, unlike any other part of the country, shares the Tibetan Plateau's arid geography and Buddhist religion. In contrast to the monks' quarters, however, my accommodation is warm and cosy, even luxurious. I'm sampling Ladakh the softies' way, moving between three traditional village houses that have received Grand Designs-type makeovers, with stylish rooms featuring plump duvets and organic bath potions. I could meditate here, I really could.

The houses make womb-like bases for daily walks – progressively longer and more challenging as you acclimatise to the 3,500m-plus altitude. We start by strolling along lanes around Stok village, past ancient irrigation channels and women in thick quilted jackets carrying bundles of freshly cut barley. And our walk ends at the former royal palace where the king – a token role these days – lives in a small apartment. (Imagine Prince Charles in a flat in, say, Bayswater.)

On another day we depart early, heading towards the whitewashed monasteries that perch on rocky plugs along the Indus Valley like fairytale castles. Thikse – dubbed Little Potala after the Tibetan palace – has 12 storeys and heart-stopping views. As the sun's first rays ignite the snow-licked Zaskar and Ladakh mountains above the vast valley, two burgundy-robed monks blow a morning call to prayer on conch-shell horns. This moment alone makes my trip.

The walking has other, more tangible rewards. Our chef bookends days with gourmet breakfasts of fresh mango juice, Welsh cakes and strawberry porridge, and evening feasts of spicy chicken, aubergine and spinach. It's further evidence of Ladakh's growing appeal to tourists; once the haunt of backpackers and hardcore hikers who stayed in rudimentary hostels after days slogging north on buses and trains, it's now reached by regular 75-minute flights from Delhi.

And we have 4WDs. The guides take us up to Khardung La, one of the highest motorable passes on earth, to walk in gaspingly thin air at 5,602m, before taking us down into a gorge to tramp past vertiginous walls of sand and towering rock buttresses. As we move between village houses, it's impossible to ignore the lorry-loads of soldiers – they're en route to the nearby Pakistan border. Ladakh, part of Jammu and Kashmir, is politically and culturally different from the rest of the state, and perfectly safe. We stroll happily through local villages, visiting the tiny primary school in Taru and exploring Nimu's irrigation channels.

Directly ahead lies the huge flat-topped ridge of an ancient ocean bed, the legacy of a continental-plate collision more than 35 million years ago. It's a brutal geology lesson from the school of hard knocks – and another utterly unique, ludicrously photogenic reason to keep on trekking.

Greaves Travel (020 7487 9111, [www.greavesindia.co.uk](http://www.greavesindia.co.uk)) has a nine-night trip, with seven nights' full-board

accommodation in village houses, two nights' B&B in Delhi, guided walks and two rafting trips, from £4,585pp, including all activities, guides and flights from Heathrow.

## 22 Is there trekking in other parts of the country?

In Madhya Pradesh, the Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve offers captivating – and only moderately challenging – hill walking that's perfect for budding Attenboroughs. Part of the reserve is Satpura, one of India's few national parks to allow walking safaris through its core area. You'll see stunning gorges, waterfalls, ancient caves and tribal villages. Look out for wildlife, too – the Indian giant squirrel, the Malabar whistling thrush and the crested hawk-eagle. *Passepartout* (020 7183 1384, [www.passepartout.co.uk](http://www.passepartout.co.uk)) has a six-night trip, including three nights' full-board camping on a trek in the Pachmarhi area, from £1,958pp, with flights from Heathrow to Delhi and internal flights.

Kerala offers stunning, moderately easy, flat walking around its eastern lagoons, home to prolific birdlife, thatched villages, paddy fields and duck herders, where locals use their boats for fishing and delivering supplies. A trek round Fort Kochi takes in historic sights including the grave of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama. *Authentic Adventures* (01453 823328, [www.authenticadventures.co.uk](http://www.authenticadventures.co.uk)) has an eight-night trip to eastern Kerala and the Fort Kochi area with six days' guided walking, from £2,389pp, full board, including flights from Heathrow and transfers.

Head to the little-known Kumaon region of the Himalayas for dazzling mountain panoramas, rivers, glaciers and the pretty hill stations of Almora and Nainital. A tented trek, passing through remote villages, would include some days of easy walking and others when it might be more strenuous. *Audley* (01993 838000, [www.audleytravel.com](http://www.audleytravel.com)) has a 13-day trip to Kumaon, including tented and village-house accommodation, from £4,375pp, including most meals, Heathrow flights and transfers.

## 23 Can I avoid Delhi Belly?

Keep hands clinically clean; avoid raw foods, salads, fruit you can't peel, ice and tap water; and eat where Indian families eat. You could also take Pepto-Bismol (check with your GP first): two tablets, four times a day, starting from three days before travel (for no more than 21 days) has been shown to reduce the incidence of Delhi belly.

## 24 How do I train like a local?

*It's easy, says Sally Howard, who took the overnight Konkan-Kanya Express from Mumbai to Goa while researching her new book, The Kama Sutra Diaries.*

**What's the route?** One of India's shining success stories, the Konkan Railway was built in 1998 to form a super-fast link from Mumbai south along the Arabian coastline to the boom states of Goa and Karnataka. The 760km line carves through some of India's most eye-pleasing scenery: a region of crisscrossing rivers, plunging valleys and mountains that soar into the clouds. The overnight Konkan-Kanya Express, which departs Mumbai at 11.05pm and arrives at Madgaon at 10.45am (for access to the central beaches at Goa) gives you hours of awesome morning views from Ratnagiri (5.25am) onwards.

**And the experience?** It largely depends on how much you pay for a ticket. In air-conditioned First Class,



favoured by Indian well-to-dos (politicians, business types), you'll get a four-berth sleeper with comfy bedding, all the mod cons and – especially if your pals occupy the other three berths – an excellent night's sleep, lulled by the susurrations of train on track. In the Second Class Sleeper, you're less likely to get any sleep on your hard plastic berth, but you'll be snug with confessional new pals among the middle-aged professionals and backpackers. Wherever you sit, you'll have the sensory surrounds of sweet chai and the cries of wallahs clattering down the carriages. It's all part of the fun.

**Which stations should I stop at?** You can't break up your journey, so wherever you get off is your final destination. Most stay on the train through to the southern states, disembarking at Thivim (9.06am) for the beaches of India's Gold Coast, or at Karmali (9.28am) for the whitewashed Portuguese splendours of old Goa. Those in the know might like to disembark earlier at Ratnagiri (5.25am), on southern Maharashtra's less-visited Konkan Coast, an appealing region of empty beaches and abandoned forts.

**Which should I skip?** If you disembark at Ratnagiri, don't make the common mistake of heading to Vagator and Anjuna, unless you're in the mood to party hard with the Israeli trance crowd. Instead, try Ganpatipule for almost pristine beaches and waters begging you to wade in.

**Insider tip:** If you're travelling Second Sleeper – and you should, as it's twice the fun – you'll need your own bedding. Buy a cheap woollen blanket from a Colaba Causeway store before you depart Mumbai; or pay one of the wallahs in First £1 to hire one.

**Jump aboard:** One-way travel on the Konkan-Kanya Express costs from £3.30 for a seat in Sleeper, and from £24 in AC First Class (00 91 11 3934 0000, [www.irctc.co.in](http://www.irctc.co.in)).

Live like a Maharaja (28) (Mainstream Images)

25... and like a lord?

*Sally Howard lives it up on a seven-day tour aboard the Deccan Odyssey Indian Maharaja.*

**What's the route?** This luxury train operates a number of itineraries, including a trip that rides the same rails as the Konkan-Kanya Express for part of the itinerary. But the show-stopper is a seven-day route northeast from Mumbai to Rajasthan and on to Delhi.

**And the experience?** A five-star Indian hotel on wheels, the Deccan is plush and hushed, offering all the trappings of the old Maharaja trains, along with some well-judged modernity: air-conditioning, wall-to-wall carpeting, hot running water, two fine-dining restaurants (continental and Indian), a bar, a sauna, a spa and a business centre. You'll be travelling with older Brits and Americans – plus a few Indian couples celebrating ruby or golden anniversaries. The food's fit for a maharajah, with a focus on north-Indian Mughal cuisine – lots of heavy breads and tandoor-cooked meats, so you'll want to make the most of the spa. Or walk it all off on your daily sightseeing excursions from the train. Best of all, there's a liveried team, including your own 24-hour attendant, to cater to your every whim.

**Which stations should I stop at?** Every day's jam-packed with off-train excursions, though you can opt out and explore the local area alone. Whatever you do, get out of bed for the glorious caves at Ajanta and Ellora: it's a treat to access them this easily. You won't want to miss the luminous Taj Mahal, either, or Fatehpur Sikri, the ancient red sandstone city built by Akbar the Great in the 16th century, which bespeaks the might of the Mughals. Or the palaces of Udaipur and Jaipur and the tiger-spotting safaris in Ranthambore National Park.

**Which should I skip?** This is a highlights tour, so they're all worth a look-see. You'll want good guides for Jaipur and Udaipur – they're arranged through your travel agent, rather than the Deccan, so go for a

reputable operator, such as Great Rail, rather than sorting it out on arrival, where you'll take pot-luck with the guides.

**Insider tip:** Opulent it may be, but it is still a train, with the usual space restrictions. If you're towing a suitcase the size of a bungalow, take a smaller bag on board and have your larger ones transferred from Mumbai to Delhi with DHL (00 91 22 6198 5400, [www.dhl.co.in](http://www.dhl.co.in)). You'll thank me for it.

**Jump aboard:** Great Rail Journeys (01904 521980, [www.greatrail.com](http://www.greatrail.com)) offers an 11-day tour with seven nights onboard the Deccan Odyssey in a deluxe cabin from £3,475pp, including most meals, five-star hotel accommodation in Mumbai and Delhi, plus outward flights from Heathrow to Mumbai and return flights from Delhi to Heathrow. Alternatively, book directly with Deccan Odyssey (00 91 98 1120 4347, [www.deccan-odyssey-india.com](http://www.deccan-odyssey-india.com)) from £242 per night, full board.

## 26 How much should I tip?

There's no need to tip rickshaw or taxi drivers for short hops, but give R30 (35p) for longer jaunts, including the journey from the airport. Hiring a driver? Tip them R150 (£2) a day. If your restaurant doesn't include a service charge, add 5 to 10 per cent to the bill. For anything else (hotel maid, porter, boatman, etc), R20 (25p) is about right.

## 27 What jabs do I need?

Pharmacist Jason Gibbs of Nomad Travel gets to the point. Everyone must ensure their tetanus, hep A, polio, diphtheria and typhoid vaccines are up to date. Depending on your itinerary, you might also need cholera, rabies, Japanese encephalitis and/or hep B. Six weeks before your trip, book in with a specialist clinic such as Nomad Travel ([www.nomadtravel.co.uk](http://www.nomadtravel.co.uk)) or, if your practice offers travel jabs, your GP. And don't forget malaria tablets – you'll almost certainly need those.

## 28 Where can I live like a maharajah?

*by Stanley Stewart*

In Rajasthan, you can hardly move without tripping over a maharajah. This 'Land of Kings' is a place of excess, a place where moustaches are the size of broadswords and turbans the size of small camels. The palaces all tend to the fairy-tale fabulous – cupolas, arches, turrets, domes, several acres of mirrorwork and enough rooms to house several regiments. In these straitened republican times, most have lowered the drawbridge to visitors. Rajasthan is the place to swan around in the regal manner.

Looming above the blue houses of Jodhpur is the spectacular Umaid Bhawan Palace, one of Rajasthan's finest, as well as one of the world's largest private residences. It has 347 rooms, including two theatres, an indoor pool and a marble squash court. Only completed in 1943, it took 3,000 labourers 15 years to build. The style – a mix of oriental and European influences with Art Deco motifs – is surprisingly successful. Its domed silhouette dominates the landscape for miles around, and its lavish interiors are the stuff of legend.

The present Maharajah of Jodhpur has shoe- horned himself into a mere hundred rooms in the south wing, and leased the rest to Taj Hotels, allowing the likes of you and me to stay in royal splendour – and the likes of

Liz Hurley to host wedding parties here. I arrived in a horse-drawn carriage, then a butler led me through a pillared portico into an Indian version of Downton Abbey. Sweeping marble staircases spiralled upward to balustraded heights; beyond, beneath a dome more than 30m high, was the rotunda, which once hosted a banquet for a thousand.

My bags were delivered to a room of marble, tilework and carved wood. There was a bath big enough for three, a balcony where a peacock came to perch in the evenings, a wardrobe large enough to hold the contents of several trunks, and a palatial bed that made me regret leaving the harem at home. I slipped effortlessly into the royal way of life – to the manner born: a G&T in a bar lined with tiger kills, a game of billiards next door with a uniformed chap to keep score, and then dinner outside on a candlelit terrace overlooking Jodhpur, which appeared to have been fairy-lit for my benefit. This was a life to which one could become accustomed.

*The Umaid Bhawan Palace (00 91 29 1251 0101, [www.tajhotels.com](http://www.tajhotels.com)) has doubles from £608, room only, though much better rates are available if it is booked as part of a package.*

Rajasthan has other options for the paupers among us. One of my favourites is the Udai Bilas Palace at Dungarpur (00 91 29 6423 0808; [www.udaibilaspalace.com](http://www.udaibilaspalace.com); doubles from £78, room only). Another bargain is the wonderful Samode Palace (00 91 14 2324 0014, [www.samode.com](http://www.samode.com); doubles from £141, B&B), and the smaller Samode Haveli (00 91 14 1263 2407, [www.samode.com](http://www.samode.com); doubles from £110, B&B).

*Greaves Travel (020 7487 9111, [www.greavesindia.co.uk](http://www.greavesindia.co.uk)) has a 10-day trip from £3,360pp, B&B, including two nights each in the Samode Palace, the Umaid Bhawan Palace and the Lake Palace in Udaipur, plus flights from Heathrow to Delhi, transfers, and a private car and driver.*

## 29... and where can I experience village life?

*by Stanley Stewart*

Rural India is another world. On a walking trip in the Kumaon Highlands, in the Himalayan foothills, I stayed in village houses. Upgraded for guests, they're simple, but in this remote, rural place every detail seemed like luxury, from the pressed cotton bedsheets to water heated over the fire for my bath.

In Deora, I played cricket with the children, helped a young man herd his cow into a briar-framed corral, and accompanied a trio of elderly women to a 10th-century shrine where rough reliefs of Shiva and Parvati hovered in the gloom. In the woodsmoke-scented evening, on the long communal terrace of one of the houses, I had tea with the neighbours – milky masala chai, flavoured with cinnamon and cloves – and they told me about their lives, sowing wheat, maintaining irrigation channels, shearing sheep, having kids...

In my house, the chief concession to western taste was a bedside table for an oil lamp. It was a far cry from five-stars. But later, after the best meal I've eaten in India, tucked beneath a pile of warm eiderdowns, I felt incredible contentment. You can't order that from room service.

*The Ultimate Travel Company (020 3582 1339, [www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk](http://www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk)) has a week-long trip, including a four-day full-board Kumaon village walk, from £2,095pp, with Heathrow-Delhi flights and transfers.*

*Village Ways (01223 750049, [www.villageways.com](http://www.villageways.com)) has a 12-night trip hosted by village communities in Karnataka and Kerala from £1,071pp, with full-board accommodation in guesthouses, homestays and houseboats, and a night's B&B in a Fort Kochi hotel. Jet Airways (0808 101 1199, [www.jetairways.com](http://www.jetairways.com)) has flights from Heathrow to Mumbai, returning from Kochi, from £622.*

India has plenty of great beaches (4Corners Images)

## 30 What are the hotels like?

### **Havelis**

The Indian equivalent of a Venetian palazzo or a Moroccan riad, a haveli is a posh townhouse, often built around a courtyard or gardens. Facilities vary, but don't expect amenities such as wi-fi, minibars, TVs or room service. What you can expect is a living museum – many havelis display their extraordinary history and riches with an almost casual disdain. The family-run Haveli Braj Bhushanjee (00 91 74 7244 2322, [www.kiplingsbundi.com](http://www.kiplingsbundi.com); doubles from £17, room only), just below the palace in Bundi, is typical: a lavish, 18th-century pile with astonishing wall paintings, exquisite antiques and the best terrace views in town. Try Mahout (01295 758150, [www.mahoutuk.com](http://www.mahoutuk.com)) for a portfolio of havelis and other unique properties, including Colonial mansions in Kerala, tea estates in west Bengal and palaces in Rajasthan.

### **Budget hotels**

Slick new budget hotels are booming in India. Companies such as Peppermint Hotels ([www.pepperminthotels.com](http://www.pepperminthotels.com)), Ginger Hotels ([www.gingerhotels.com](http://www.gingerhotels.com)) and Keys Hotels ([www.keyshotels.com](http://www.keyshotels.com)) are opening dozens of properties that have free wi-fi, flatscreen TVs and smart rooms from as little as £30 a night, B&B. And beyond the corporate chains, there are tens of thousands of independent properties. Some come with cockroaches, bedbugs and dodgy wiring, but others offer astonishing value for money. Ensure you don't book a dud by researching properties online before you go – try sites such as [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com) and [www.hostelbookers.com](http://www.hostelbookers.com). The Nature Heritage Lodge (00 91 76 2726 5351, [www.natureheritageresort.com](http://www.natureheritageresort.com); doubles from £63, full board), in the Bandhavgarh tiger reserve, is a winner, and run by a tiger expert, Raj Sharm. And for all the posh hotels in Udaipur, the delightful Hotel Hanuman Ghat (00 91 93 1447 7106, [www.indianespace.in/ies1/hotelhanuman](http://www.indianespace.in/ies1/hotelhanuman); doubles from £6, room only), by the Daiji footbridge, has the best views.

### **Homestays**

If you want to experience the real India, live with a local family for a few days. Unlike guesthouses, at most homestays you're expected to be part of the family – helping in the kitchen, joining in for dinner and answering myriad questions on life in Britain. It is enlightening, joyful and highly recommended. Home and Hospitality (020 7503 6204, [www.homeandhospitality.co.uk](http://www.homeandhospitality.co.uk)) has a small collection of homestays – a mud hut in a village in the Thar Desert, accessible only by camel, for example, costs from £42 a night, half board.

### **Luxury hotels**

India's top-class hotels are among the finest in the world, rivalling those in London, New York and Hong Kong for glamour, style and service – but typically at a much lower cost. They range from grandes dames, like the Taj Mahal Palace, in Mumbai (00 91 22 6665 3366, [www.tajhotels.com](http://www.tajhotels.com); doubles from £150, room only), to sleek and shiny five-star upstarts, such as the Leela Palace (00 91 22 6665 3366, [www.theleela.com](http://www.theleela.com); doubles from £211, room only) in New Delhi. Expect plasma screens, smart spas, attentive service, fine dining and hefty bills for extras.

### **Palace hotels**

Prior to independence in 1947, India comprised more than 500 princely states – quasi-independent entities ruled by Maharajah, Nawab and Thakur. They lived in fairy-tale palaces, but the arrival of democracy brought an unhappy ending to their idyll. Forced to work for a living, many noble families opened their homes as hotels, offering tourists the unique opportunity to live like royalty – if only for one night. (See question 28.)

### **Houseboats**

A Kerala houseboat is a converted rice barge used to take tourists on overnight trips through the backwaters of southern India. This is a hugely lucrative business – every day, hundreds of backpackers arrive in Alleppey to rent a houseboat – and the negative effects, from congestion to pollution, are starting to show. A better way



to do it is to go with ethical tour operator Village Ways (01223 750049, [www.villageways.com](http://www.villageways.com)), which offers five nights' full board on the Kayal Kettuvallam, a community-owned eco-houseboat, plus two nights' B&B in Kochi, from £632pp. For flights, see factfile.

## 31 What's the beach scene like?

India has some lovely beaches, from lounge-lined strands and remote rural stretches to shores bustling with city folk or working fishermen. Goa is the first stop for many sunbathers, but with 7,000km of coastline, India has plenty of alternative options...

### **Mobor, Goa**

Honeymooners looking for Seychelles alternatives would do well to look instead to Mobor, a patch of five-star luxury that's great for those who simply don't want to move for a week – except, perhaps, to swim off a private-hire sailboat. Staff at the few resort hotels can point the way to local beach bars or ferry the truly idle in their golf carts.

*Abercrombie & Kent (0845 485 1142, [www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)) offers seven nights at the Leela Goa from £1,575pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow and transfers.*

### **Marari, Kerala**

An easy 48km south of Kochi and just north of Alleppey (the 'Venice of the East') is unspoilt Marari. Well-tended gardens separate the few lodges – with their antique teak beds, chandeliers and air-con – from the clean, white, hawk-free beach where everything takes place, from eating to dozing to ayurvedic treatments.

*Scott Dunn (020 8682 5400, [www.scottdunn.com](http://www.scottdunn.com)) has seven nights at Carnoustie Resort from £1,615pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow and private transfers.*

### **Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu**

Want beach and culture? You'll find both in Mamallapuram, a 7th-century port south of Chennai and a Unesco heritage site, which you can explore in digestible bites between sessions on the honey-coloured beaches. Highlights are the ornate Shore Temple, and the ancient relief rock sculptures of elephants.

*Mahabalipuram Chariot Beach Resort (00 91 44 2742 5000, [www.chariotbeachresorts.com](http://www.chariotbeachresorts.com)) has doubles from £57, B&B. BA (0844 493 0787, [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies from Heathrow to Chennai from £593 return.*

### **Gokarna, Karnataka**

Of course the hippies were going to seek a better place to beach once Goa caught on. They chose Gokarna, a lush peninsula two hours up the coast, with the same golden sands but a more low-key vibe. There are nearly a dozen temples to explore south of Gokarna town, so with the salt air comes the whiff of incense. Sleep under modest thatched roofs set back from secluded beaches and choppy but swimmable waters.

*Ampersand Travel (020 7289 6100, [www.ampersandtravel.com](http://www.ampersandtravel.com)) has seven nights at the SwaSwara Retreat from £1,560pp, full board, including Heathrow-Goa flights, yoga and massages.*

### **Neeleshwar, Kerala**

This unsullied sweep of sand on the remote Malabar coast is much less developed than its southern neighbours, but the sleepy fishing community has now welcomed in an eco-resort, The Hermitage. Cottages are cosily simple, but turtles, marine birds and other wildlife are plentiful. Far more scarce are tourists – which more than compensates for the indirect flight and two-hour transfer.

*Audley (01993 838355, [www.audleytravel.com](http://www.audleytravel.com)) offers seven nights at the Neeleshwar Hermitage from*



*£1,510pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow and private transfers.*

### **Benaulim, Goa**

The saying in Goa is that no two beaches are the same. Colva beach (above), for instance, attracts madding crowds of Indian families – whereas nearby, quieter Benaulim is a hit with their western counterparts for its warm sea (possibly the cleanest in the country), high-standard mod-con hospitality and hotels crawling with babysitters. It's also a cinch to get to from the UK, with direct flights.

Kuoni (01306 747008, [www.kuoni.co.uk](http://www.kuoni.co.uk)) has five nights at the Taj Exotica from £1,385pp, B&B, with Heathrow flights and transfers.

### **Varkala, Kerala**

Edged with red cliffs, Varkala's sands are pummelled by surfing waves (hire gear from beachfront kiosks). It's also on the pilgrimage trail for Hindus, who scatter ashes in the sea (safely downwind) and pay homage to Vishnu at glinting temples. The mood around the seafront guesthouses is mellow, with yoga tourists stretching out on the sand at dawn.

Family-run Varkala Marine Palace (00 91 47 0260 3204, [www.varkalamarine.com](http://www.varkalamarine.com)) has doubles from £5, room only. Etihad (0845 608 1225, [www.etihad.com](http://www.etihad.com)) flies from Heathrow to Trivandrum from £499 return.

### **Paradise beach, Tamil Nadu**

The French may have left Pondicherry (now named Puducherry), but their influence lives on in peeling Colonial villas, boulevards and bouillabaisse. There are brilliant beaches walkable from town, but the very best, Plage Paradiso, is accessible only by boat – once there you can enjoy the sands undisturbed or swim with the dolphins.

Hotel de l'Orient (00 91 97 8610 0269, [hotel-de-lorient.neemranahotels.com](http://hotel-de-lorient.neemranahotels.com)) has doubles from £49, B&B. BA (0844 493 0787, [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) has Heathrow-Chennai returns from £593.

## **32 I know it's daft – but can I be in a Bollywood film?**

*Ian Belcher finds his way on set*

It's not quite the Hollywood casting couch, but my body is being scrutinised. As my shirt sticks revealingly to my paunch – damn this Mumbai humidity – Johnny B Francis, Bollywood's Mr Big for aspiring western movie extras, nods reassuringly.

'You don't need a washboard stomach,' he explains. 'And your fair complexion will help. Brits are popular. So are Americans with their chewing-gum way of speaking.'

This is the moment I've been waiting for. Bollywood is huge – its films sold 3.6 billion tickets in 2009, a billion more than Hollywood; it makes 1,300 films a year to LA's 500. And now I've come to India to grab my share of the Technicolor stardust.

First, some research. At Sangam Cinema, I watch some terribly scripted, ham-acted dross (a perfect fit for my talents). And I find industry gossip in the local edition of The Asian Age: a producer has been killed in an underworld hit; a cinema owner has died; European extras are in demand...

The next day, I head for Mereweather Road in central Mumbai. It's here, outside the Red Shield Salvation Army Hostel ([www.salvationarmy.org](http://www.salvationarmy.org)), that scouts such as Francis recruit westerners after the £6-a-day roles. If he doesn't turn up, I'm told to try Leopold Cafe ([www.leopoldcafe.com](http://www.leopoldcafe.com)). But no need – Johnny arrives.

He promises to be in touch.

I'm not going to sit around waiting, though. I pursue my own luck, talking my way past the guard at RK Studio in Chembur and onto the set of Censor, an Omar Sharif film, where co-star Govinda is into a hip-wriggling routine with a bunch of cheerleaders. Remarkably, the charming director offers to write me into the script, a piece of luck repeated in the Goregaon suburb at Filmcity, one of Asia's largest film studios, where I'm cast in the comedy crime caper Hera Pheri.

Twenty-four hours later Francis calls with my big break, a crowd scene, but he's too late – I'm on the Censor set, amid a thrilling splatter of lights, cameras, make-up artists and scantily clad dancers, ready for my part as a Hollywood hunk in a jacket borrowed from my hotel's concierge (there's no wardrobe department for extras).

I'm not the only rookie but I am the worst. By far. All I have to do is clap, step back and hand over an Oscar. It requires several takes. I struggle with stepping back. I'm rubbish, but I am now a Bollywood actor. Twice over, in fact: hours later at Filmcity, I play a shady character in Hera Pheri, counting money for a gunrunner. I nail it first time.

So was I lucky, or is it really that easy? It seems that for those who want them, the cameos are there – also in my Censor scene was the secretary from the American consulate. And when I do make it to Leopold's, it's crawling with people comparing film-set notes. I'm going to leave Censor II to someone else, though. My work here is done.

## Related Images

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