

Overview of India

From the snow-capped Himalayas in the north to the sun-drenched coastal villages of the south, India unfolds like an ancient tapestry. The perennial rivers running down from the mountains are the lifeblood on which India has flourished. Since the first civilisations developed on the banks of the Indus river almost 5,000 years ago, India has given birth to Buddhism and Hinduism, seen the rise and fall of the Sultans and Moguls, and witnessed the sun finally set on the British Empire as it reclaimed independence in 1947.

The world's largest democracy presents an incredible variety of religions, languages, cultural influences and monuments. This is the country famed for the iconic Taj Mahal, the colourful festivals of Holi and Diwali, and for traditional Carnatic and Hindustani music. Art and theatre mix traditional culture with western influences, and Bollywood far outstrips its better-known US rival in terms of output and popularity on home turf.

India's landscapes are as vast as they are varied. The peaks of the Himalayas give way to the great plains of the Ganges River and the capital, Delhi. To the west lies the Thar Desert and the Great Rann of Kutch, while the west and south coast plays host to beaches and forests and vibrant cities.

India is a feast for the senses. The air is heavy with the scent of jasmine, dancers trail frenetic melodies in colourful silk saris, and cooks compose dishes from a palette of exotic spices. India's cities are a cacophony of seemingly endless traffic and a myriad of other textures, colours and movements all jostling for attention. India can be overwhelming, but its variety is part of its charm for those who brave the sub-continent.

Key Facts

Language:

India has a total of 22 official languages, including English and Hindi. Hindi is spoken by about 40 percent of the population; Urdu is the language common with the Muslim demographic.

Passport/Visa:

Indian law does not permit dual citizenship for nationals of India. An Indian national holding dual nationality should contact their embassy or consulate for further information. Passengers in possession of an "Overseas Citizen of India" card or a "Person of Indian Origin" card, however, are allowed to enter the country without a visa. Travellers should note that a yellow fever vaccination certificate is required, if arriving in India within six days of leaving or transiting through heavily infected areas. They should also note that the following areas of India are restricted, and require that visitors obtain a permit before entering them: (Protected Areas) parts of the state of Manipur, parts of the state of Mizoram, parts of the state of Arunachal Pradesh, parts of the state of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, the whole State of Sikkim, parts of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, parts of the state of Himachal Pradesh; (Restricted Areas) the whole of the union territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, part of the state of Sikkim. It is highly recommended that travellers' passports have at least six months' validity remaining after the intended date of departure from their travel destination. Immigration officials often apply different rules to those stated by travel agents and official sources.

Currency:

The currency is the Indian rupee (INR), which is divided into 100 paise (singular paisa). Major currencies can be changed at banks, and authorised bureaux de change. It is illegal to exchange money through the black market and it is advisable to refuse torn notes, as no one will accept them apart from the National Bank. It is best to change money into small denominations. Major credit cards are widely accepted, particularly in tourist orientated establishments. ATMs are available in large cities and airports but are not generally available in rural areas.

Electricity:

230 volts, 50Hz. A variety of power outlets are used in India, but most plugs have two or three round pins.

Travel to India

Overview

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Spiritually inclined tourists make for the temples and ashrams of the north, nestled in beautiful Himalayan cities such as Rishikesh, the birthplace of Yoga. Away from the mountains, Delhi dominates the desert plains. The heaving, ancient capital is a mind-blowing mix of history and humanity.

Delhi is just one of India's incredible collection of cities, which includes Kolkata, the cultural capital, Kochi, the Queen of the Arabian Sea, and Mumbai, a major port city, and home to Bollywood. Varanasi, on the banks of the Ganges, may well be the most fascinating of the lot. This sacred Hindu destination is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities on earth.

Jungles and forests such as the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world, and the stunningly beautiful Sangla valley, are home to endemic flora and fauna. Lucky visitors to some of the national parks may be greeted by a glimpse of the rare, legendary Bengal Tiger.

India's architectural treasures need no introduction. The immortal Taj Mahal is one of the most recognisable monuments in the world. Tourists will also be fascinated by the opulence of Tirupati Balaji, the richest temple in the world, and Golden Temple, one of Sikhism's holiest shrines.

India is synonymous with vibrant, colourful festivals such as Holi, the festival of colours, and Diwali, the festival of lights. The spicy cuisine is superb, enjoyed by millions of people worldwide. Indian music, theatre and film are unique.

The endless list of attractions simply goes on and on in this vast and varied land.

Climate in India

It is hard to generalise in a country that runs from the Himalayas to the beaches of the Indian Ocean and encompasses half a dozen climatic regions but, broadly speaking, India has a tropical climate that is dominated by monsoons, heat and humidity. Tropical hurricanes and cyclones are also part of the general weather outlook in the middle and at the end of the year, especially in coastal areas.

On average, October through to March tend to be the most pleasant months in India, when it is relatively dry and cool, but the best time to visit really does depend on the destination. In the far south the best months to visit are between January and September; northeastern areas of India tend to be more comfortable between March and August; the deserts of Rajasthan (west of Jodhpur) and the northwestern Indian Himalayan region are at their best during the monsoon season (July to September); and the mountainous regions of Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir should be visited over the summer months (May to September).

Whenever one visits, it is bound to be hot, which is why the summer months are generally best avoided in favour of the cooler winter and more mild shoulder seasons.

Health Notes when travelling to India

There are many health risks associated with travel to India. Although no vaccinations are required for entry into the country, travellers should take medical advice on vaccinations at least three weeks before departure. Outbreaks of dengue fever and chikungunya virus occur, and Malaria is common, particularly in the northeast of the country. Outbreaks of cholera occur frequently. Travellers coming to India from an infected area should hold a yellow fever certificate. Rabies is also a hazard; travellers should get immediate medical advice if bitten.

Food poisoning is the most common problem among travellers to India. Visitors should only drink bottled water and ensure that the seal on the bottle is intact. Travellers should avoid ice, as it's often made from tap water. Meat and fish should be eaten with care in all but the best restaurants, and should always be well cooked and served hot. Salads and unpeeled fruit should be avoided.

Health facilities are adequate in the larger cities, but limited in rural areas. Travellers should have comprehensive medical insurance, and carry a small first-aid kit complete with a traveller's diarrhoea kit and a course of general antibiotics.

Safety Notes when travelling to India

Although the vast majority of trips to India are trouble free, there are some risks that travellers should be aware of. As in many countries, there is a threat of terrorism; in the past there have been attacks in popular tourist haunts such as hotels, markets and temples. Travellers should take caution at large religious events, where huge crowds can result in life-threatening stampedes.

On a more everyday level, there is a risk of minor theft such as pick-pocketing, and credit card and ATM fraud occurs. Travellers using India's vast railway network are advised to lock their baggage, and keep it close. Visitors should remember that if someone offers them a 'business opportunity' that seems too good to be true, it probably is. Scammers usually target foreigners at airports and in tourist areas with scams involving the exportation of, among other things, jewels, gemstones, carpets. Taxi drivers may offer them money to export such items.

Female travellers should note that there are rare incidents of rape and assault. Women should respect local dress codes and customs, and avoid travel to secluded rural areas, including beaches, at any time of day. Foreign offices advise against travel to Jammu and Kashmir, as there are risks of civil disorder and acts of terrorism in many districts.

Customs in India

India is a tolerant society, but visitors should educate themselves about the country's religious and social customs so as not to cause offence. In this regard, smoking in public is banned, and there is a ban on e-cigarettes and related products. Consumption of alcohol is prohibited in Bihar, Gujarat, Mizoram, Nagaland and the union territory of Lakshadweep; there is a partial ban in parts of Manipur.

When visiting temples, visitors will probably be required to remove their footwear and cover their heads. Generally, women should dress more conservatively than they may be used to doing at home, both to respect local sensibilities and to avoid unwanted attention. Topless bathing is illegal. Indians do not like to disappoint and, often instead of saying 'no', will come up with something that sounds positive, even if incorrect. Social order and status are very important in Indian culture, so it's important to remain respectful and obliging with elders. Visitors should avoid using their left hand, particularly when eating. Although homosexuality is no longer prohibited by law, Indian society remains conservative and public attitudes towards LGBT people can be less tolerant than in the west.

Duty Free in India

Travellers to India over 18 years do not have to pay duty on 100 cigarettes or 25 cigars or 125g tobacco; two litre bottle of alcohol; medicine in reasonable amounts; and goods for personal use. Prohibited items include livestock, bird and pig meat products, and e-cigarettes.

Doing Business in India

Business in India is conducted formally, with punctuality an important aspect. Suits and ties are appropriate, and women in particular should dress modestly. If it is very hot, jackets are usually not required and short-sleeve shirts are deemed appropriate. It is customary to engage in small talk before getting down to business, and conversation can cover a wide range of topics that may include anything from cricket to politics. Business cards are usually exchanged on initial introduction, using the right hand only. Handshakes are fairly common, though one should wait to see if greeted with a hand, or a 'namaste': a traditional Indian greeting of a small bow accompanied by hands clasped as if in prayer. Visitors should return the greeting as it is given. It is common for women to participate in business meetings, and hold high positions in companies, and foreign businesswomen are readily accepted. Business hours are usually from 9.30 to 5.30pm (weekdays) with a lunch break from 1pm to 2pm, and Saturdays from 9.30am to 1pm.

Communication in India

The international access code for India is +91. International calls are expensive and there are often high surcharges on calls made from hotels. Buying a local SIM card is a good option, as international roaming fees can be high. Free WiFi is offered at cafes and hotels in major cities.

Tipping in India

Taxi drivers do not expect to be tipped, though it's standard to leave a gratuity for porters, guides, hotel staff and waiters in small establishments. A 10 percent service charge is often added to bills in tourist restaurants or hotels. 'Baksheesh' is common in India. It's more a bribe than a tip and is given before rather than after service.

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Entry Requirements

Entry requirements for Americans:

US citizens must have a passport that is valid for their six months beyond the date of their visa application. A visa is required, except for passengers with a Person of Indian Origin (PIO) or Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card or booklet. E-visas can be obtained online before departure. Passengers using the e-visa for the first time must have a passport with at least two unused visa pages, and printed confirmation of the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA).

Entry requirements for Canadians:

Canadian citizens must have a passport that is valid for six months from their date of entry. A visa is required, except for passengers with a Person of Indian Origin (PIO) or Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card or booklet. E-visas can be obtained online before departure. Passengers using the e-visa for the first time must have a passport with at least two unused visa pages, and printed confirmation of the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA).

Entry requirements for UK nationals:

UK citizens must have a passport that is valid for at least six months from their date of entry into India. A visa is required, except for passengers with a Person of Indian Origin (PIO) or Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card or booklet. E-visas can be obtained online before departure. Passengers using the e-visa for the first time must have a passport with at least two unused visa pages, and printed confirmation of the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA).

Entry requirements for Australians:

Australian citizens must have a passport that is valid for six beyond their date of entry. A visa is required, except for passengers with a Person of Indian Origin (PIO) or Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card or booklet. E-visas can be obtained online before departure. Passengers using the e-visa for the first time must have a passport with at least two unused visa pages, and printed confirmation of the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA). Australian citizens can apply for visas online before travel provided they have a printed copy of the e-Toursit visa confirmation that was applied for online, a passport containing at least two unused visa pages, and return or onward tickets.

Entry requirements for Irish nationals:

Irish citizens must have a passport that is valid for six months beyond their date of entry. A visa is required, except for passengers with a Person of Indian Origin (PIO) or Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card or booklet. E-visas can be obtained online before departure. Passengers using the e-visa for the first time must have a passport with at least two unused visa pages, and printed confirmation of the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA).

Entry requirements for New Zealanders:

Citizens of New Zealand must have a passport that is valid for six months beyond their date of entry. A visa is required, except for passengers with a Person of Indian Origin (PIO) or Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card or booklet. New Zealanders can apply for visas online before travel provided they have a printed copy of the e-Tourist visa confirmation that was applied for online, a passport containing at least two unused visa pages, and return or onward tickets; e-Tourist visas can only be issued a maximum of two times per calendar year.

Entry requirements for South Africans:

South African citizens must have a passport that is valid for six months beyond their date of entry. A visa is required, except for passengers with a Person of Indian Origin (PIO) or Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card or booklet. E-visas can be obtained online before departure. Passengers using the e-visa for the first time must have a passport with at least two unused visa pages, and printed confirmation of the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA).

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Tourist Offices

Indian Tourist Office, New Delhi: <http://www.incredibleindia.org>

India Embassies

In the United States:

Indian Embassy, Washington DC, United States: +1 202 939 7000.

In Canada:

Indian High Commission, Ottawa, Canada: +1 613 744 3751/52/53

In the United Kingdom:

Indian High Commission, London, United Kingdom: +44 (0)20 7836 8484.

In Australia:

Indian High Commission, Canberra, Australia: +61 (0)2 6225 4900.

In Ireland:

Indian Embassy, Dublin, Ireland: +353 (0)1 496 6787.

In New Zealand:

Indian High Commission, Wellington, New Zealand: +64 (0)4 473 6390/1.

In South Africa:

Indian High Commission, Pretoria, South Africa: +27 (0)12 342 5392.

Foreign Embassies in India

American Embassy

United States Embassy, New Delhi: +91 (0)11 2419 8000.

Canadian Embassy

Canadian High Commission, New Delhi: +91 (0)11 4178 2000.

British Embassy

British High Commission, New Delhi: +91 (0)11 2419 2100.

Australian Embassy

Australian High Commission, New Delhi: +91 (0)11 4139 9900.

Irish Embassy

Irish Embassy, New Delhi: +91 (0)11 4940 3200.

New Zealand Embassy

New Zealand High Commission, New Delhi: +91 (0)11 2688 3170.

South African Embassy

South African High Commission, New Delhi: +91 (0)11 2614 9411.

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Exchange rate for 1 INR - Indian Rupee

0.00 BMD Bermudan Dollar	0.01 EUR Euro	0.01 USD U.S. Dollar	0.01 GBP U.K. Pound Sterling	1.83 JPY Japanese Yen	0.02 CAD Canadian Dollar
0.01 CHF Swiss Franc	0.02 AUD Australian Dollar	0.47 UAH Ukrainian Hryvnia	5.32 KZT Kazakhstani Tenge	1,115.77 LBP Lebanese Pound	0.06 LYD Libyan Dinar
0.08 BOB Bolivian Boliviano	0.00 NPR Nepalese Rupee	0.00 OMR Omani Rial	0.00 QAR Qatari Rial	0.02 SGD Singapore Dollar	0.13 SEK Swedish Krona
0.00 TTD Trinidad Tobago Dollar	0.00 VEF Venezuelan Bolivar	0.70 DOP Dominican Peso	0.00 HRK Croatian Kuna	0.20 MXN Mexican Peso	7.32 XOF West African CFA Franc
0.00 PGK Papua New Guinean kina	0.00 BSD Bahamian Dollar	0.00 FJD Fiji Dollar	0.00 HNL Honduran Lempira	1.60 DZD Algerian Dinar	0.00 MMK Myanma Kyat
0.00 BWP Botswana Pula	0.04 PEN Peruvian Nuevo Sol	11.25 CLP Chilean Peso	4.64 AMD Armenia Dram	0.28 CZK Czech Koruna	0.21 MDL Moldova Lei
1.68 ISK Icelandic Krona	150.84 UZS Uzbekistan Sum	0.04 ILS Israeli New Sheqel	0.01 JOD Jordanian Dinar	0.00 KWD Kuwaiti Dinar	0.46 UYU Uruguayan Peso
0.00 MUR Mauritian Rupee	0.00 NIO Nicaraguan Córdoba	0.13 NOK Norwegian Krone	0.05 PLN Polish Zloty	0.04 SAR Saudi Riyal	0.00 LKR Sri Lanka Rupee
0.44 THB Thai Baht	0.04 AED U.A.E Dirham	0.06 BRL Brazilian Real	0.06 RON Romanian New Leu	0.09 HKD Hong Kong Dollar	7.32 XAF Central African CFA Franc
304.56 VND Vietnamese Dong	10.53 ARS Argentine Peso	0.00 XCD East Caribbean Dollar	0.00 GTQ Guatemalan Quetzal	0.12 MAD Moroccan Dirham	0.00 BHD Bahrain Dinar
0.01 PAB Panamanian Balboa	0.02 AZN Azerbaijan Manat	46.99 COP Colombian Peso	1.06 KGS Kyrgyzstan Som	4.34 HUF Hungarian Forint	0.13 TJS Tajikistan Ruble
192.69 IDR Indonesian Rupiah	0.57 EGP Egyptian Pound	16.29 KRW South Korean Won	89.39 PYG Paraguayan Guaraní	0.06 MYR Malaysian Ringgit	6.09 CRC Costa Rican Colón
0.02 NZD New Zealand Dollar	3.33 PKR Pakistani Rupee	1.10 RUB Russian Rouble	0.22 ZAR South African Rand	0.04 TND Tunisian Dinar	0.00 BBD Barbadian Dollar
0.02 BGN Bulgarian Lev	0.39 TRY Turkish Lira	0.69 PHP Philippine Peso	0.39 TWD New Taiwan Dollar	13.96 NGN Nigerian Naira	0.00 XPF CFP Franc
0.00 GHS Ghanaian Cedi	0.00 JMD Jamaican Dollar	0.00 ANG Neth. Antillean Guilder	0.00 BND Brunei Dollar	1.31 RSD Serbian Dinar	0.09 CNY Chinese Yuan
0.08 DKK Danish Krone	0.04 TMT New Turkmenistan Manat				

Overview of the Attractions in India

India offers an astounding diversity of people, landscapes, sights and sounds. Visitors will find a rich tapestry of attractions to enjoy, the scope of which is unmatched anywhere else on earth.

Spiritually inclined tourists make for the temples and ashrams of the north, nestled in beautiful Himalayan cities such as Rishikesh, the birthplace of Yoga. Away from the mountains, Delhi dominates the desert plains. The heaving, ancient capital is a mind-blowing mix of history and humanity.

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