

Start Local's
Ultimate Destination Guide To

INDIA

Find insider tips and local resources with this handy guidebook



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Chapter 1

Introduction

Traveling in India is like a journey through time; you can literally walk through thousands of years of history, culture and tradition. It is a vast canvass on which a dazzling array of traditions, religions, natural beauty, and architecture blends into a breathtaking collage.

Diversity and variety are the themes that define India, home to more than one billion people who speak 18 different languages in over a thousand different dialects. It is by far, one of the most exciting countries to travel through. Sensory overload may be an understatement to describe the experiences that await a traveler in India.



Whether you are looking to bask in mesmerizing natural beauty or eager to learn about thousands of years of history or want to undertake a spiritual journey, India has something for all palates. Warm sandy beaches, beautiful waterfalls, historical monuments, forts, forests alive with primal energy, temples and shrines, it is all there to be explored. Don't forget the food. For a tame tongue, Indian cuisine can be a wild safari of tastes, smells, and textures.

Images of snake charmers, yogis, and donkey carts once depicted India for westerners. Today's India rivals any modern country with mega cities, sky scrapers, ultra-luxury hotels, modern transportation, dazzling shopping malls and a variety of entertainments including bars and discotheques.

It may not be possible for a leisurely traveler to do more than a sampling of the sights and experiences in the vast land of India that stretches from the majestic Himalayas to the exotic Kerala on one side, and from the Ganges to the Thar Desert on the other side. Some of its most memorable destinations include:

Mumbai

It is the home of the Indian film industry, known as Bollywood. Mumbai is where dreams come true and enormous wealth changes hands.

Kochi (Kerala)

It is the epitome of scenic beauty in India with abundant greenery, tranquil backwoods and beautiful beaches.

Jaipur

If stories of the courts of maharajas fascinate you, then Rajasthan is the place for you. Jaipur, the pink city should possibly be the first stop among many others like the breathtaking lake palace in Udaipur and Pushkar city which houses the only temple of Brahma.

Ajanta and Ellora Caves

These caves are one of the most famous sites of Buddhist history. The paintings on the walls of the caves tell many stories of the Buddhist tradition.

Goa

If you love sun, sand and water, then you can't afford to miss Goa. Lying on tranquil beaches and enjoying exotic Goa cuisine can be a memorable experience.

Agra

Agra is the city of Taj Mahal which is a timeless tribute to an everlasting love.

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

Mark Twain

Chapter 2

Travel Planning



About the climate and weather in India

The climate in India is as versatile as its people and the culture. The answer to the question about the best time to visit India depends upon the travel destinations you have in mind. In a country with seven climate regions, you can experience an incredible variety of weather. For the most part, you should expect to be either hot, cold or dripping wet, courtesy of the three seasons, i.e. summer, winter and monsoon. The diversity of the climate makes it possible to find suitable destinations in every season.

While individual preferences largely dictate the best time to visit, winter is generally the most preferred season for tourists. During winter, the weather in most of the regions in India is quite pleasant. Then again, if you consider yourself a traveler rather than a tourist, exploring India in summer or monsoon can provide you with an even better chance to integrate with the elements of the nature.

Arranging travel documentation

Regardless of how hospitable Indians are, you will still need a tourist visa to visit India. Tourist visas are issued for a period of six months to ten years depending upon your nationality. A caveat, however, is that you can't stay in India for longer than six months in one stretch regardless of the duration of the validity of the visa. Also, if you leave India during the six month period and then wish to come back to continue your trip, you will have to wait for two months to re-enter. This two month period will be included in the total duration of the visa. A 14 day extension

is possible but the criteria for extension are quite stringent. If you happen to be more adventurous than an average tourist, and want to visit one of the restricted border areas or other such territories, you will need to obtain special permits. The process for obtaining such permits can be extremely complicated.

The cost of a tourist visa varies from country to country; for example, it is \$70 for the US citizens and £30 for UK nationals.

The process involves filling out a visa application and submitting the following documents along with the required fee:

- A passport valid for a minimum of six months and with at least two blank pages
- A recent passport size picture
- Itinerary details

Note: For some countries, proof of residential address may also be required.

Money matters

Aside from the super-rich, most others would want to have at least a ball park figure in mind that they will spend on their trip. Fortunately, most western travelers would find that a trip to India would not burn any holes in their pockets due to favorable exchange rates. Whether it is transportation, accommodation, food or sight-seeing, there is a wide range of choices available for all budget sizes. Costs are higher in bigger cities and in popular tourist destinations. Sixty to Seventy USD per day can provide you with a fairly comfortable travel experience.

Indian currency is called Rupee which is divided into 100 paisas. For all practical purposes you should carry bills in small denominations including 10, 20 and 50. Larger bills might be difficult to use on the street. You can use an ATM to withdraw cash as well as go to money changers to convert cash into local currency. Popular credit cards like Visa and Master card can be used in cities but other than that carrying cash or travelers' cheque is the safest bet. If you run out of money, no need to despair, you can have money sent from home through Western union or Moneygram.

Packing List

Clothes & footwear

You might be considered a fashion idol in your hometown but don't let this dictate your clothing choices for India. Although western attire is popular in large cities, majority of India is relatively conservative when it comes to clothing. It is best to avoid exposing too much skin for two reasons, females may get a lot of unwanted attention which could be uncomfortable, and Indian sun is pretty unforgiving so bare skin may cause discomfort. If you don't find the local clothing appealing enough to give a try, wear whatever is comfortable but try to keep the legs and shoulders covered as a general rule. Do remember to bring two pairs of comfortable shoes to leave your foot prints on as much of the Indian soil as possible.

Personal Care Items

Most major brands of personal care products such as, shampoo, moisturizers, deodorant etc, are available in India. Strictly loyal users of specific brands of personal products, however, might want to check before arrival or bring with them at least a small supply just to be safe.

Medicines

One of the worst nightmares for a tourist is to become ill on a foreign trip. Every tick of the clock while you are sick, takes a chunk out of your fun time. Along with a sufficient quantity of your regular medicines, bring along other commonly used over-the-counter medicines and also a detailed prescription for your medicines, preferably with brand names as well as generic names of the medication.

You can bring as much foreign currency into India as you like. If you have over \$10,000 in cash or traveler's checks, you should fill out a declaration form. Import of Indian currency into the country is not allowed.

You can bring 2 liters of alcohol, and 200 cigarettes or 50 cigars. (foreign liquors and imported cigarettes are heavily taxed.) You may carry a cell phone, camera, and pair of binoculars, but officially you may have only five rolls of film. You must complete a special Tourist Baggage Re-Export Form if you are carrying valuables such as a laptop computer, major video equipment, special camera gear, or high-value jewelry.

Source:
www.frommers.com/

Miscellaneous Items

Although for some travelers the most enjoyable way to travel is to leave caution to the wind but for most people a little care helps to get the most out of the trip. Some seemingly minor items like mosquito repellent spray, anti bacterial wipes, and disposable toilet seats may come in really handy. Unless you are a true minimalist you would probably pack a few electronic devices. To ensure proper usage of these devices you might need a plug adaptor and possibly a voltage convertor. One more thing, in addition to suitcases, a sturdy backpack with several compartments can be invaluable especially for the more adventurous types.

Coming to India

The most convenient and popular way to travel to India is by air. There are, however, land routes also available which are challenging but tempting for tourists who want to follow the steps of the great ancient travelers. Most major airlines fly to and from India and tickets can be purchased online as well as through travel agents.

Suggested Reading for Further Information

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/india/>

<http://goindia.about.com/>

Chapter 3

Favorite Destinations

There is so much to see and experience in India that one vacation or trip is only enough to scratch the surface. Let us give you a sampling of India and then you can come back for more.



Mumbai

Mumbai is the financial hub of India and also its entertainment capital. It is a city of stark contrasts with the wealthiest dwellings situated side by side with abject poverty of the largest slums of India.

Sights

Among the numerous places to see in Mumbai some of the favorites are:

Elephanta Caves:

A 45 minute ferry ride takes you from Gateway of India to Elephanta Island situated in the east of Mumbai. It is home of Elephanta caves which have exquisite rock sculptures created in the honor of Hindu god Shiva. A festival with lots of music and dance takes place here each year in February.

Mahalakshmi Dhobighat (Laundry):

It is not a tourist attraction in the traditional sense yet included in most tours. This is the place where Mumbai airs its dirty laundry, literally. In this vast open air

laundry you can see thousands of people hand-wash tons of clothes day in and day out from one generation to another.

Dargah Haji Ali:

Built by Haji Ali, in the middle of the ocean off the coast of Worli, this mosque with a tomb is over 600 years old. The only access to the dargah is available during low tides through a walkway.

Bollywood:

Bollywood is to Mumbai as Hollywood is to California. If you want to catch a glimpse of some of India's famous movie icons, take a tour of the Film City. While in Mumbai it is also possible to appear in a movie as an extra

Gateway of India:

It is one of the most notable remnants of the colonial era. Gateway of India is the first thing that becomes visible when approaching Mumbai and most tours begin from here.

Food

Mumbai has some of the finest restaurants in India but these are similar to any such restaurant around the world. For a real taste of Mumbai food you will have to explore more understated establishments, roadside cafes and street food. You must try at least a few of the delectable fares of Mumbai like Maharashtrian Thali, Bhel puri, Pani puri, Pav bhaji, kabab rolls, Vada pav, Indian Chinese, Maska bun, Kulfi faluda and Mewad ice cream. Some of the best restaurants in Mumbai include: India Jones, Indigo, Copper chimney, Mahesh munch home, Trishna, Leopold café, and Brittania.

Accommodation

Mumbai offers various types of accommodations for aristocratic travelers as well as backpackers. Majority of the tourists look for a place in South Mumbai because it houses most of the tourist attractions and business complexes. Aside from world-class hotels like Grand Hyatt, Royal Meridien and Taj Lands End, budget

accommodations can be found in Colaba guest houses and also in Dadar and Santa Cruz.

Shopping

Although traveling light is the best advice for tourists but the magic of shopping does not let them leave any destination without a souvenir or two. Cash speaks in Mumbai markets because credit cards are not accepted in many places. Do not pay the sticker price because haggling is an integral part of shopping in India except in up-scale stores and malls.

Crawford market is one of the places to see even if you are not planning on shopping. An extensive selection of handicrafts can be found near downtown. Colaba Causeway and Fashion Street are the main places for a variety of apparel. For more trendy clothing, Breach Candy and Kemps Corner can be scoured.

Antiques are on the mind of almost all tourists; Mumbai' Chor Bazaar is the place for such travelers. This selection is, however, buyer beware type. A great selection of multiple types of items can be viewed in the flea market on Mutton Street. If you consider diamonds to be your best friend along with gold and silver, visit Zaveri Bazaar. Other than these shopping havens, there are several department stores and upscale malls also in Mumbai.

Transportation

In a mad city like Mumbai with millions of people, severe traffic jams and very scarce parking space, public transport is the best option to move around. Other choices include taxi and rickshaws. Auto rickshaws here will remind you of the experience of the first time on a roller coaster.

The international telephone access code for India is 91. Dial 0091 followed by the city code then the local phone number. When using cell phone, you don't need to dial the city code, just dial 0091 followed by cell number.

Source: www.frommers.com/

Kochi (Kerala)

Kochi is considered to be the gateway of South India and the industrial capital of Kerala. It has been a center of trade for centuries. It exhibits the influences of many nations that ruled this city in the past centuries.

Sights

Being the central city of the beautiful state of Kerala, Kochi has many memorable sights for tourists.

Chinese Fishing Nets:

One hundred fishing nets which are considered national icons were given as a gift by the Chinese emperor in the 14th century but only a few are operational now. These were huge mechanical structures that carried fishing nets and were used for fishing.

Hill Palace Museum:

This is the palace of Kochi rulers that has been converted into a museum. It has 16 galleries holding 500 artifacts making it the largest palace containing archaeological remains. Kochi Royal Crown and Crown Jewels are its central attraction.

Dutch Palace:

This palace was a gift of the Portuguese government to the Maharaja of Kochi. The coronation of Kochi maharajas takes place here. One of the main attractions of this palace is a mural that depicts the whole Ramayana and Mahabharata.

International Pepper Exchange:

This is the one and only peppers exchange in the world. Consider it Wall Street trading in peppers instead of stocks.

Food

Fresh seafood is the main fare in Kochi. A large variety of fish, prawns, shrimp and squid are available. Meen Molagitta Curry which is made with smoked fish, chilies and coconut milk, is one of the specialties. A vegetarian favorite is Kurukku Kalan which is a thick yogurt curry with toasted banana and hot rice. Some of the other great tasting foods include Fish molly (a curry with coconut milk sauce), Alleppey fish curry (with tomato sauce and tamarind) and Fish Peera (fish toasted with grated coconuts and tamarind sauce).

Accommodation

A wide range of accommodations is available in Kochi for luxury travelers as well as budget customers. The hotels in Fort Kochi are according to western taste and the area is more pristine, whereas accommodations in Ernakulam City area are more geared toward domestic customers. Budget travelers can choose home stay as a less expensive option.

Shopping

M.G road or Mahatma Gandhi road is the main center for shopping which offers a large variety of merchandise like clothes, cosmetics and other miscellaneous stuff. Handicrafts, spices and nuts are some of the favorites of tourists. A number of jewelry shops and branded clothing stores line M.G. Road. Other frequently visited shopping areas are Marine drive and Broadway road where you can buy electronics items. If you are a discount hunter, come here from August to September when Onam festival is on which offers heavy discounts. Grand Kerala Shopping Festival from December to January is also a good opportunity for shopping.

Transportation

The modes of transportation include auto rickshaws, taxis, ferries, trains and buses. Auto rickshaw and ferries are the most commonly used transportation modes which are convenient as well as economical. The transportation in Kochi is facilitated by

three railway stations. These three railway stations are located in the town of Ernakulam, at the Ernakulam Junction and the terminus of the harbor of Kochi.

Jaipur

Jaipur, the Pink City, is Rajasthan's largest city and is considered the first planned city in India. Proudly showing off its forts, palaces and temples, it is one of the destinations of choice for tourists.

Sights

Amber Fort:

Named after the town of Amber, this fort was used as the royal palace. You can ride an elephant to get to the fort and feel a bit princely. One of the memorable parts of the fort is Sheesh Mahal, constructed with numerous mirror tiles on the walls and the ceiling.

Jaigarh Fort:

House of the world's largest cannon, the Jaivana, Jaigarh Fort was the strongest fort in the area. The view of the gardens from the top of the fort is a spectacular sight.

Hawa Mahal:

This five story building with numerous small windows is one of the best known structures in Jaipur. Some other sites in Jaipur include City palace, Birla temple, Govind Devji temple and Sisodhia Rani Ka Bagh.

Food

The primarily vegetarian and spicy Rajasthani cuisine has amazing variety. Spicy lentils with baked balls of wheat and a generous amount of ghee (clarified butter) called Dal-bati is one of the famous Rajasthani delights. A peculiarity of Rajasthani eating is that they eat sweets before the meal. With sweets like Besan-chakki and jhajariya it might be difficult to wait till the end of the meal anyway. A few other delectable foods include churma, jhajariya, gevar, balusahi, Vadi, Keri ki sabji,

Khaddi, Makki ki raab. A word of caution, if you are a guest at a local's house, be prepared to be force-fed according to the customs of Rajasthan.

Accommodation

You can stay here like a Raja in one of the forts or palaces that have been converted to hotels. Jaipur has accommodations for all budgets from luxury hotels to moderately priced dwellings. Most of the hotels are conveniently located near tourist destinations.

Shopping

Jaipur may be an old city but it has a lot to offer for shoppers. Gemstones, silver jewelry, bangles, and clothes are some of the favorite tourist choices. MI Road is the central shopping location with most of the shops including the well known Gem Palace, Amrapali, and Chameliwala Market. Jaipur is famous for cotton stuffed quilts called Rajai. When shopping anywhere in India, never think twice about bargaining.

Transportation

The most commonly used modes of transport in Jaipur for short distances are cycle-rickshaws and three-wheelers. Both of these are quite inexpensive. Private taxis are widely available for hire and auto rickshaws are also readily available.

Most museums are closed Monday. The Taj Mahal is closed on Friday. Hours of retail outlets vary, but many close on Sunday. Banks are usually open weekdays from 10am to 2pm and Saturday from 10am to noon.

Source: www.frommers.com/

Ajanta and Ellora Caves

After lying in obscurity for centuries, the caves of Ajanta and Ellora were discovered in 1819. The 29 caves of Ajanta and 34 caves of Ellora are exquisitely crafted shrines fashioned out of solid rocks. These are located near Aurangabad in Maharashtra. The Ajanta caves exhibit exquisite paintings and sculpture, while the Ellora caves are known for their architectural masterpieces.

The caves of Ajanta in Sahyadri hills above Waghora River, tell the story of Buddhism. This magnificent art-work covering most of the inner walls of the caves was created by Buddhist monks who stayed in these caves for retreat. Different objects like plants, fruits, birds, and animals are drawn with different classes of people from kings to slaves. All of these were created at different periods in time, therefore, the caves are divided into three groups: the first and the oldest group is from 200 BC to 200 CE, the second belongs to the sixth century and third immediately after from the seventh century.

The Ellora caves are probably one of the best examples of religious cave architecture. These caves represent the stories of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Five of the caves had the famous paintings but now only one in Kailsa temple is left. Similar to Ajanta caves these paintings were also created at different points in time, centuries apart. The earlier paintings depict Vishnu and Lakshmi, the Hindu gods. In addition to the paintings, creations of architectural significance are also found among the 34 caves of Ellora.

The Ellora caves can be reached by train from Aurangabad station and Ajanta caves from Jalgaon station. Rental cars are also available.

Goa

Goa is one of the most famous tourist destinations of India situated on the western coast. Its scenic beauty especially the beaches, and a wealth of architectural gems have made it a destination of choice for travelers. A fusion of Portuguese and local cultural influences shows itself in its architecture.

Sights

The cultural heritage of Goa is preserved in its museums and art galleries that include the Goa State Museum, Architect Gerard da Cunha's museum, and the Xavier Xandev Museum. The notable art galleries are Gitanjali, Galeria Cidade and the Peace Cottage Fine Art Gallery.

Beaches:

The first and foremost attraction of Goa is its beaches. Calangute and Baga are one of the busiest beaches with trendy cafes and euphoric musical nights. Then there is Anjuna beach with number chic bars or you can go to Arambol beach for paragliding and to see dolphins frolic. If you prefer serenity then go to Agonds beach or Benaulim Beach for some laid back fishing. One of the favorites of backpackers is Palolem Beach with plenty of palm trees.

Dudhsagar Waterfall:

For a great and fun filled day of swimming or hiking, Dudhsagar Waterfall is the place. A beautiful tropical jungle near Goa border houses this waterfall surrounded by tranquil streams. This is among the hundred highest waterfalls in the world.

Anjuna Flea Market:

Anjuna flea market is another interesting place to go for some colorful clothes woven by Lamani women or Kashmiri silver and papier-mâché boxes. This market is particularly for foreigners and is a fun place even if you are not planning on shopping; snake charmers, musicians and hippies can provide you with hours of entertainment.

Food

In a beach country like Goa you can expect some great seafood. There is a strong Portuguese influence in Goan cuisine, prawn balchao and Kingfish in Garlic are a couple of delights. The common food is rice, fish curry and fried fish. Some of the Goan fare has become nationally known like Vindaloo and Xacuti. Seafood lovers can find great tasting food in beach shacks.

Accommodation

Since it is considered a tourist paradise, following demand and supply, the accommodation here can be quite expensive. Avoiding peak season (November to March) would be a sensible decision if you are on a budget. The five star hotels can cost Rs.20, 000 - Rs.35, 000 per night in the Christmas week.

From five star hotels to cottages and country houses, there is a wide range of accommodation available for most budgets. Hotel Goan Heritage, Hotel Vista De

Colva and Hotel Lotus Suites are good options for travelers on a budget. If money is not an object, you can go to five star hotels like Hotel Taj Exotica, Hotel Cicade De Goa Resort or Hotel Majorda Beach Resort.

Shopping

Shopping in Goa is not complete without the traditional handicrafts like crochet, bamboo work, brassware, terracotta, and shell work and don't forget the famous cashew nuts of Goa. Mapusa on Friday and Anjuna flea market on Wednesday are probably the best places for shopping a wide variety of items.

Transportation

One of the most popular modes of transportation for tourists is motorcycles. You can rent an Enfield, Yamaha 100s or Honda scooter. The cost of rental ranges between 300 and 500 rupees. Another exciting choice is motorcycle taxis like the ones you might have seen in Indiana Jones movies and these are also less expensive. Bicycles, boats and ferries are other common transportations.

India operates according to one time zone which is 5 1/2 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time. Source: www.frommers.com/

Agra

Beauty and the beast might be an appropriate term to describe the Agra experience, where Taj Mahal is the beauty and the city of Agra is the beast. Unbearable pollution, littered streets, extremely pesky touts and agents, and cheating merchants are some of the major turn-offs. A visit to Taj Mahal, however, makes you forget all the ugliness with its mesmerizing beauty and elegance. Agra is a member of the 'Golden Triangle', which is one of the most famous tourist routes in India.

Sights

There are only a few sites in Agra but these are memorable nonetheless.

Taj Mahal:

One of the most admired, loved, and talked about sight in the world, Taj Mahal is a marvel of breath-taking beauty and a memento of eternal love. Mughal emperor Shah Jahan built it in memory of his beloved wife. It is enclosed by a beautiful garden and a quaint pond is the prelude to its entrance. Taj is as spectacular from a distance as it is in close up. A visit at either dawn or dusk reveals the true beauty of this mausoleum when the dome changes color with the sunlight. Visiting Taj Mahal on a moon lit night is an experience that may not be described in words.

Agra Fort:

The massive Red fort enclosed in one and a half mile long walls was the city of Mughal emperors. Within the fort, there are a number of palaces and exquisite architectures including Jahangir Palace, the Khas mahal, Diwan-i-Khas and Sheesh Mahal where thousands of mirrors from walls to the ceiling make for an extraordinary visual experience. The octagonal tower once offered the best view of the Taj Mahal but this view is all lost in smog.

Fatehpur Sikri:

Fatehpur Sikri is an example of the excesses of kings; this city was built by the Mughal emperor Akber as a memento of the birth of his son but the city was abandoned only after 15 years. This almost completely preserved city has everything from large buildings to beautiful gardens covered in sands of time.

Food

Agra does not have the variety of cuisine that is found in most other parts of India. It, however, does have very few but extra ordinary tasty delights like Petha which is a type of candy, a spicy lentil mix called Dal Moth and most of all Chaat. Agra is famous for spicy and delicious chaat consisting of one or more of these items: Aloo Tikki, paneer tikka, Pani Puri, dahi bhallay, mangoes and kachori. Some of the favorite chat spots are Double Phatak, Sadar and Belangunj. For great tasting plain or angoori petha, try Hari Parwat, Panchi's or the Pracheen Petha store.

Accommodation

Agra is friendly to budget travelers and backpackers with its extensive selection of less expensive hotels and guest houses. Mayur tourist complex and the tourist rest house at Kachahri road are two most affordable places to stay. While they do not burn a hole on the pocket, budget hotels do have certain drawbacks such as lack of hot water, dirty bed linen, rat infestation and rude staff. If you can afford luxury, stay at Hotel Clarks Shiraz, or the Mughal Sheraton.

Shopping

Agra is known for handicrafts, rugs and leather products. Handicrafts like jewelry and plaques adorned with inlay work similar to the inside of the Taj, are a great worth for money. Rugs and carpets with hundreds of years of craftsmanship and traditions woven into them by some of the masters, are a must buy. Sadar Bazaar is a great place to buy some of these items. Gangotri at the Taj Mahal Complex is an excellent place for marble, brassware, rugs, and leather items and provides good value for money.

Transportation

When in Agra, the first thought is mostly to get to the Taj Mahal where cars are not allowed. You can take a Tonga, electric bus or electric tempos to get there. Auto rickshaws and cycle-rickshaws are most commonly used in Agra for commute. Taxis are also widely available and in all cases it is necessary to decide the fare in advance as most modes of transportation in India do not have meters. For short distances, cycle-rickshaw is the most convenient and cheapest transportation and these are also good for viewing the surroundings due to their leisurely pace.

Suggested Reading for Further Information

<http://www.wordtravels.com/>

<http://goindia.about.com/>

<http://www.jaipur.org.uk/forts-monuments/index.html>

<http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Asia/India/TravelGuide-India.html>

Chapter 4

All about India (General Information)

Cuisine

There is a lot more to Indian cuisine than curry; known as the signature Indian dish in many parts of the world. Just like the people and languages, the food in India also exhibits an unimaginable range and diversity. Different regions and destinations have distinctive tastes which are further enhanced by variation in recipes and cooking styles at micro levels.

Every region in India offers something unique that enhances the overall variety of Indian foods.



North India

North Indian cuisine is most familiar to western travelers. Indian restaurant around the world serve the favorites like tandoori chicken, pulao and kebabs. Different types of breads are also a staple of northern cuisine, which are eaten with gravy dishes. These breads include naan, chapati, paratha, and puri. In addition to the main fare, snack items like samosa and pakora are also favorites.

South India

Just as wheat is the staple of North Indian cuisine, rice and pulses are the building blocks of South Indian foods with a heavy dose of vegetables and relatively lighter use of meat. Sambhar, avial, idli, dosa and vada are the regional favorites. In coastal regions like Kerala, coconut and coconut oil are heavily used which adds a distinctive taste but it may not be appreciated by all palates.

West India

Maharashtari, Gujarati, and Rajasthani foods are representative of West Indian cuisine. From lightly spiced, mostly vegetarian Gujarati foods to spicier Rajasthani

fare to seafood rich Maharashtra and Goan delights, it is a delectable ensemble. Gujarati snack items like Dhokla and Muthia and Goan Vindaloo are some of the best known favorites of West Indian cuisine.

East India

In the east, Bengali cuisine is the primary influence with its extensive use of fish and rice. Bengali sweets like Rasgulla are a delight for the lovers of all things sweet.

Languages

If you have been planning to learn the 'Indian' language before your trip, you may be in for a little challenge. The diversity and variety that is the hallmark of India also shows itself in its languages. India has 18 official languages and over a thousand different dialects. No need to despair though, fortunately, if you know English language and learn a few common phrases and words of Hindi, you can get along pretty well. There are, however, a few places where you can't get by with Hindi or English. These include Tamil Nadu, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and some other North-East Indian states. An interesting peculiarity of English language as spoken in India is its heavy use of pre-war British English which may sound odd to many western travelers. If all else fails, you can always try your luck with gestures and hand signals but be careful in using those because of the difference in their meanings in different cultures.

Festivals

Throughout the year, India resonates and glows with the sounds and colors of hundreds of festivals and events. The diversity of the land also reflects in the colorful festivals and fairs. These are an integral part of the life in India. Most of

It is a good idea to always keep smaller bills like Rs 10 so that you can TIP the person who carries your bags or gives you an unsolicited tour etc. Reward the people who go out of their way to make your stay enjoyable. A driver or guide who's been with you an entire day will be most grateful for an extra Rs 150 to Rs 250 (\$4-\$5/£2-£3).

Source:

www.frommers.com/

the festivals stem out of religions and some are also based on other events. Majority of the festivals are based on Hindu religion and on Islam.

Notable Hindu festivals include Holi, Diwali, Durga Puja, Dussehra, Ganesh Chaturathi, Karwa Chauth, Maha Shivaratri, Naag Panchami, Navratri, Raksha Bandhan, Teej, Pongal, Sri Krishna Janmashtami, Vasant Panchami, Pushkar Fair, Maha Kumbh Mela, Haridwar Kumbh.

Ramzan, Muharram, Eid ul fitr, Eidul Azha, Eid Miladunabi, and Shab-e-Barat are some of the important Muslim festivals. In addition to these, other festivals like Christmas and Easter are also celebrated.

Relevant Laws for Tourists

Ignorance of law is no excuse even for tourists so try to get as much information about the local laws in India as possible. Some of the important laws and points to keep in mind include:

- ⦿ Crimes like murder, kidnapping, armed robbery and drug trafficking carry stiff penalties including the death penalty.
- ⦿ Foreigners are required by law to carry their passport at all times.
- ⦿ Taking pictures of certain areas including airports, military establishments and dams is against the law and the penalty is imprisonment of up to 14 years.
- ⦿ Satellite phones are not allowed without prior permission from relevant authorities and violation may result in imprisonment.
- ⦿ Tourists are often tempted by antiques from India but remember that possession and export of antiques is governed by strict laws and any violation can result in imprisonment.

Local Customs & Cultural Nuances

While Indians are generally hospitable and eager to please, travelers and tourist should know some of the customs and cultural nuances to avoid any unpleasant incident. Customs are as many and as varied as the land itself but there are certain things that apply in most parts of the country.

- ④ In almost all places of worship it is required to take the shoes off and wear modest clothing. You should not sit in a manner that your feet are pointing to a person or a religious statue or picture. Females should leave only hands, face, and feet uncovered in most cases especially when visiting a Muslim religious place. Always seek permission before entering a place of worship.
- ④ Getting anything done that requires involvement of bureaucracy can be very frustrating because the wheels often move very slowly. Impatience and anger, however, can only complicate the situation.
- ④ Punctuality is not a strong Indian trait so it would be wise not to expect things to be done on time.
- ④ As anywhere else in the world, a little courtesy goes a long way. Something as simple as using local greeting can help a great deal. 'Namaste' is the greeting used by Hindus, Muslims say 'assalam alaikum' and 'sat sari akal' is the Sikh greeting.
- ④ Correct use of hands is also an important aspect that you should know about. Right hand is normally used for most tasks such as, shaking hands, giving something or receiving and eating. Yes, expect to eat with your hands especially if you are in a rural area.
- ④ Exercise caution when interacting with women especially in rural areas. Men should not offer to shake hands with women or try to touch them even in the most benign way. Interaction with urban women may be different where some women would interact in a manner similar to the western women while others would offer a lesser degree of casualness.
- ④ It is considered rude to point at people with fingers, or winking and whistling.
- ④ Physical contact between men and women is generally frowned upon and not considered decent. Intimate contact such as kissing in public can even cost you a fine.
- ④ Preserving the memories in the form of pictures is expected from tourists but this also has some limitations. Some establishments are not permitted to be photographed including airport, military establishments, dams and bridges

and some border areas. People are generally happy to have their picture taken but don't attempt to take pictures of females without asking first.

Health Concerns

Be sure to see your health care provider a few weeks before leaving for the trip and get the necessary vaccinations. Developing countries like India face many health challenges that are not common in developed countries. There are certain illnesses that are frequently experienced by travelers and knowing about these conditions and taking necessary precautions will save you from a lot of trouble.

Diarrhea

Contamination in tap water and street food often upsets the stomach of travelers who are not used to it. Dietary changes especially consumption of spicy and oily food also plays a part in wreaking havoc on the stomach. You can take measures to prevent diarrhea and save your trip from getting spoiled. Always use bottled water for drinking and try to eat hot and freshly cooked food. Avoid raw vegetables including salads and street food if at all possible. Also carry the usual medicines you use for treating an upset stomach. You are probably thinking how I am going to taste all those wonderful Indian dishes that I have been hearing about. Don't worry, you can still enjoy great tastes of India just do it with caution.

Mosquito-borne Illnesses

Diseases like Malaria and Dengue fever that spread through mosquitoes are almost extinct in western countries. In India and other developing countries these diseases are fairly common. Lack of cleanliness and stagnant water serve as breeding grounds for mosquitoes that spread the disease. Medicines can help cure Malaria but it is best to avoid mosquito bites by using mosquito repellent lotions, and wearing full clothes when possible.

Hepatitis

One of the most rampant diseases in developing nations is hepatitis which results in very serious consequences. It normally spreads through exchange of body fluids and also through contaminated water and food.

Tetanus

Another thing you need to be careful about is getting a cut or wound on the road or from a rusted object because it can cause a bacterial infection called Tetanus. It can cause severe discomfort due to spasms and muscle stiffness. It can be prevented if the required shot (injection) is given within the first 24 hours of the injury.

Safety Guidelines

Traveling carries certain risks but these risks can be successfully mitigated by using common sense and caution. While traveling in India if you follow the advice given here, you would be able to have a safe and memorable trip.

- ④ Keep your family and your country's embassy or consulate up-to-date regarding your plans and whereabouts while you are traveling.
- ④ Keep a couple of copies of all of your travel documents in more than one place.
- ④ Other than the necessary amount of spending cash, keep all of your valuables in your hotel's safe deposit. Keep your wallet and anything else of value in front pockets.
- ④ Always keep an eye on your luggage when on airport or any other public place.
- ④ Try not to travel alone especially at night. Women should be particularly careful about taking solo trips.
- ④ Avoid hanging out and eating or drinking in seemingly shady establishments.

Tourist scams

Scam artists are always looking for easy targets like tourists who are not too familiar with their surroundings. Familiarize yourself with some of the most common scams.

Local Experts

Con artists relying on travelers' lack of knowledge of the local area and customs can deceive you into buying things that are not worth the money. They can also make you pay for things or services that actually don't cost money. They are excellent

salesmen who are very persistent and wait for an opening to move-in as soon as you let your guard down. You can avoid them by using common sense and trust your gut feeling. Any offer or deal that seems too good to be true more than likely will be a scam. If you ignore them and do not strike a conversation they will eventually leave you alone.

Charging through the nose

This is probably one of the most prevalent scams almost everywhere. Knowing that the foreigners do not know enough about the local market and the prices, traders quote a very high price and then after some haggling they will give you a discount. If you purchase from them, you will end up paying a lot more than the worth of the item. You can save yourself from being used like this by consulting a reliable local to get a general idea of prices and fares before you make any purchase.

Good Samaritan

Accidents happen sometimes and people get into adverse and undesirable situations which can be difficult to get out of or even dangerous. As a traveler, if you are caught in a situation like this, con artist pretending to be a Good Samaritan, will try to drive you to pay your way out of it.

Suggested Reading for Further Information

<http://wikitravel.org/en/India>

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/india/>

<http://www.incredibleindia.org/index.html>

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