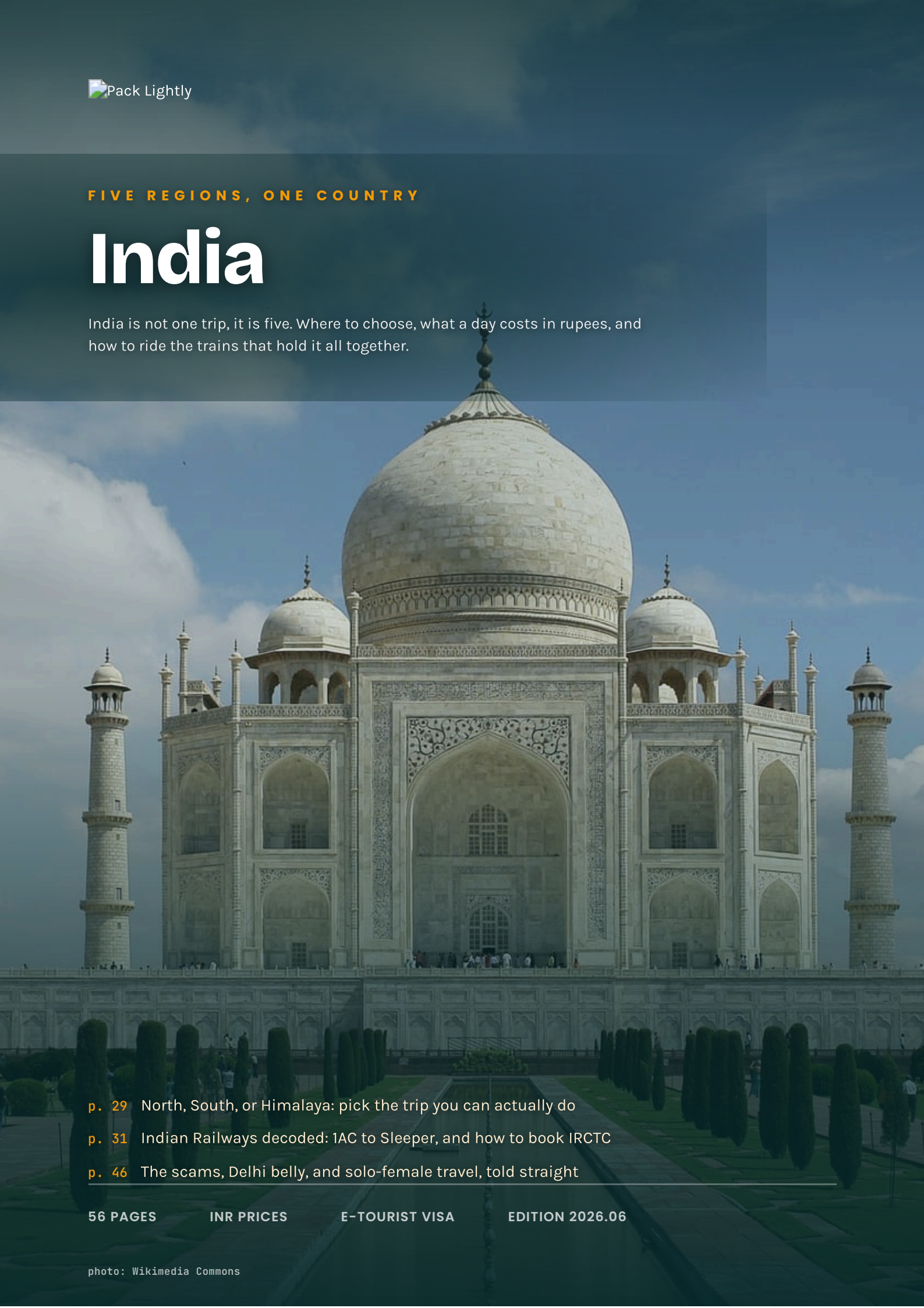


FIVE REGIONS, ONE COUNTRY

India

India is not one trip, it is five. Where to choose, what a day costs in rupees, and how to ride the trains that hold it all together.

- 
- p. 29 North, South, or Himalaya: pick the trip you can actually do
- p. 31 Indian Railways decoded: 1AC to Sleeper, and how to book IRCTC
- p. 46 The scams, Delhi belly, and solo-female travel, told straight

56 PAGES

INR PRICES

E-TOURIST VISA

EDITION 2026.06

Start here

why India is a choice between five trips, not one



India is the size of a subcontinent, so the first decision is not where to go but how much to leave out. The classic North trip threads the Golden Triangle and Rajasthan's forts; the South runs on backwaters, temples and beaches; the Himalaya is a different country on an inverted calendar. Trains are the spine that connects all of it, and the food changes every few hundred kilometres. This guide is built around that choice: what each region costs, which famous sights earn the queue, and the logistics that catch every first-timer, from booking a sleeper berth to surviving Delhi in May.

The shape of a trip

Two weeks covers the North in depth: Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, then Udaipur and Varanasi by train and one flight. Three weeks adds the South or the Himalaya. Trying to do all three in one trip turns it into an airport tour.

What a day costs

Backpacking runs about 25 USD a day, mid-range around 60, captured May 2026. India is the cheapest of the big trips. The full receipt, bed to nightcap, is itemised on page 40.

Sort before you fly

An e-Tourist Visa applied for online, an eSIM the moment you land, and rupees for the markets. Page 42 lists the four bookings that reward going early, the trains chief among them.



HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

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tap a line to jump straight there

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Your trip on one page

the North in 14 days • 25 to 180 USD/day • best Oct-Mar

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip most first-timers take: the North, run as the Golden Triangle plus Rajasthan and Varanasi over two weeks, with one internal flight to skip a long leg. Budget from the bars below, not from palace-hotel rack rates. Book the three things at the bottom right before you fly, the trains chief among them; everything else is cheaper and easier once you are in the country.

THE ROUTE (THE CLASSIC NORTH)

○

Delhi

day 1-3

train 2h

○

Agra

day 4

train 4.5h

○

Jaipur

day 5-7

train 7h

○

Udaipur

day 8-10

flight 1.5h

○

Varanasi

day 11-14

BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker

25 USD

Standard

60 USD

Comfort

180 USD

BOOK FIRST

01

International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out

Aviasales

02

Long train legs and one internal flight, 2 weeks out

12Go

03

eSIM, install before departure

Saily

BEST MONTHS (THE PLAINS)

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

Aug

Sep

Oct

Nov

Dec

best: cool and dry on the plains

shoulder: post-monsoon green

furnace heat or monsoon rain

page 4 of 56

pack-lightly.com

India at a glance

scores 0-100 · India vs the South Asia average

01

The country

What India is, what it is not, who goes, and the five regions you have to choose between before you pick dates

AMBER FORT, JAIPUR

KERALA BACKWATERS

GANGA AARTI, VARANASI

KEY MONASTERY, SPITI

IN THIS CHAPTER

One country, five regions, four readers	07
.....	
What things cost, and the honest caveats	08

What India is

1.4B people • 28 states • 22 official languages

A federal republic of 1.4 billion people, the most populous country on earth, spread across 28 states from the Himalaya to the tropics. New Delhi is the capital; Mumbai is the commercial engine. India is the value pick of Asia: a thali for a dollar, an overnight train that crosses a state while you sleep, and a culture so deep that any single trip only scratches one corner of it. Three things pull travellers here: the history, legible from Mughal Agra to colonial Bombay; the spirituality, from the ghats of Varanasi to the monasteries of Ladakh; and the sheer sensory volume of the place. The flip side is that India asks more of you than its neighbours. The infrastructure is uneven, the scams are real, and the heat and the crowds are genuine. This guide shows you the version that works in 2026.

CAPITAL

New Delhi

~32M metro

POPULATION

1.4B

Hindu majority, many faiths

CURRENCY

INR

1 USD = ~83 rupees

BEST MONTHS

Oct-Mar

Himalaya: Jun-Sep

FIVE REGIONS, THREE TRIPS



MEHRANGARH FORT, JODHPUR

North: Delhi, Agra, Rajasthan

forts + palaces • cool dry winters

The headline trip. The Golden Triangle plus the Rajasthan desert cities, all linked by train. Best October to March; brutal April to June.



ALLEPPEY BACKWATERS

South: Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Goa

backwaters + temples • tropical

Slower, greener, easier. Backwaters and tea hills in Kerala, giant temples in Tamil Nadu, beaches in Goa, ruins at Hampi.

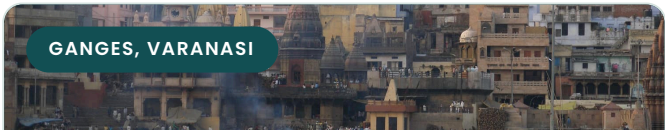


LEH, LADAKH

The Himalaya: Ladakh, Spiti, Himachal

high desert + monasteries • inverted season

A different country on a flipped calendar. The passes only open June to September. Monasteries, mountain deserts, and altitude.



GANGES, VARANASI

The spiritual core: Varanasi, Rishikesh

the Ganges • pilgrimage and yoga

Varanasi on the holy river is the most intense city in India; Rishikesh in the foothills is its calm yoga counterpoint.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

First-time North

14 days, mid-range, the Golden Triangle plus Udaipur and Varanasi by train.

Slow-South traveller

Kerala backwaters and Tamil Nadu temples, gentler pace, 2 to 3 weeks.

Solo backpacker

25 USD a day, sleeper trains and hostels, a month or more on the road.

Mountain second-timer

Ladakh or Spiti in summer, altitude and monasteries, for repeat visitors.

What things cost, and the honest caveats

cheap to travel, uneven to navigate

India is genuinely cheap once you are moving: a thali lunch, a sleeper berth across a state, a heritage guesthouse in a fort town all cost a fraction of what they would anywhere else. The price of that value is friction. Trains book out weeks ahead, the tourist-versus-local price gap is wide, and the heat on the plains from April to June is a real planning constraint, not a footnote.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Bed (hostel dorm / 3-star / heritage)	USD 6	USD 30	USD 120
Meal (thali / restaurant / hotel)	USD 1.50	USD 7	USD 25
Sleeper train, overnight	USD 5	USD 18	USD 35
Auto-rickshaw across town	USD 1	USD 2	USD 5
Monument entry (foreigner rate)	USD 6	USD 12	USD 18

verified 2026-05-15 · per-category numbers in the budget guide

THE FOUR CAVEATS NOBODY TELLS FIRST-TIMERS

☐ **Dual pricing is official.** Monuments charge foreigners far more than locals (the Taj is about 13 USD versus under a dollar). This is legal and fixed, not a scam; argue only the unofficial markups.

☐ **The plains cook April to June.** Delhi and Rajasthan hit 45C. Travel Oct to Mar on the plains, and save the Himalaya for summer.

☐ **Trains are the bottleneck.** Popular routes sell out weeks ahead. Book the long legs before you fly, not on the day.

☐ **Distances lie.** A short hop on the map can be a 12-hour train. Fly the longest legs, take the train for the scenic and overnight ones.

GO DEEPER

The full cost model in the [budget breakdown](#), the notes and exchange traps in the [currency rundown](#), and the traditions behind it all in the [culture page](#).

02

Where to go: the three Indias

North, South, and the Himalaya are three different trips on three different calendars. Choose one before you pick dates. You cannot do them all in one visit.

IN THIS CHAPTER

North vs South vs Himalaya	10
Delhi	11
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North vs South vs Himalaya

the one decision that shapes the whole trip

The single biggest mistake first-timers make is trying to see all of India in one trip. The country is too big and too varied: the North and the South run different food, climates and rhythms, and the Himalaya is open in the exact months the plains are unbearable. Pick one region as your spine. Below is how to choose, by what you want and when you can travel.

FIRST TRIP • OCT-MAR

The North

Golden Triangle + Rajasthan + Varanasi

- Forts, palaces, the Taj
- Trains link everything
- Intense, iconic, the classic

EASIER PACE • NOV-MAR

The South

Kerala + Tamil Nadu + Goa

- Backwaters, tea, temples
- Greener, calmer, cleaner
- Best for a first India that worries

SECOND TRIP • JUN-SEP ONLY

The Himalaya

Ladakh, Spiti, or Himachal

- High desert, monasteries
- Inverted season, altitude
- For repeat or adventurous visitors

3+ WEEKS • OCT-MAR

North then South

one internal flight between them

- Golden Triangle, fly to Kerala
- Covers two of the three Indias
- The only realistic combination



The Himalaya season is the opposite of the plains. June to September, when Delhi is a furnace, Ladakh and Spiti are at their best and the passes are open.



North and South do not combine well overland. The distance is a day on the train; fly Delhi to Kochi (about 2.5 hours) if you want both.

READ ON

The regions ranked in the [best places rundown](#), the month logic in the [best time to visit breakdown](#), and the far corners in the [off the beaten path guide](#).

Delhi

North • the gateway • 2-3 nights • cool Nov-Feb



Delhi is the arrival shock and the country in one city: imperial Mughal in the old north, broad Lutyens avenues in the colonial south, glass towers in Gurgaon to the side. Most trips start here because the flights and the trains do. Two cities sit inside it. Old Delhi is the dense, intense one: the Jama Masjid, the Red Fort, and the Chandni Chowk bazaar where the street food is a meal-by-meal education. New Delhi is the planned counterweight, with the Qutub Minar and the leafy tombs of Lodhi and Humayun.

Give it two nights, three if you have them. Spend one day in Old Delhi on foot or by cycle-rickshaw, one on the New Delhi monuments and gardens. Do not try to like it on day one; Delhi rewards the traveller who treats it as a place to learn the rules of India before moving on, not a place to relax.



The airport prepaid taxi booth or an Uber beats the touts. Anyone who tells you your hotel is "closed" or "full" is steering you to a commission.



The Delhi Metro is clean, cheap, and air-conditioned. It skips the traffic and the haggling; buy a tourist card on arrival.

02

Jama Masjid + Chandni Chowk

India's largest mosque and the Old Delhi food bazaar below it. Go hungry, go early.

Qutub Minar

The 73-metre victory tower, the oldest Islamic monument in Delhi. A quiet morning stop.

Lodhi Gardens

Mughal-era tombs in a green park where Delhi walks at dawn. Free, calm, photogenic.

Lotus + Akshardham temples

The modern marvels: the Bahai lotus and the vast carved Akshardham complex.

MORE ON THE SITE The full [Delhi city page](#) ranks ten picks, the mosque in the [Jama Masjid page](#), the tower in the [Qutub Minar write-up](#), and the gardens in the [Lodhi Gardens breakdown](#).

Agra and Jaipur, the Golden Triangle

North • Agra 1 night, Jaipur 2-3 • cool Nov-Feb



TAJ MAHAL AT DAWN, AGRA



The Taj is closed every Friday for prayers. Buy the timed ticket online, go for the 6am opening, and skip the paid "guides" at the gate.



Skip the elephant ride up Amber Fort. The animals are overworked; walk up the ramp or take a jeep instead.

Agra holds the Taj Mahal, and the Taj earns every word of its reputation. See it at sunrise: the marble shifts colour as the light climbs, and you beat both the heat and the crowds. The Agra Fort across the river is the underrated second act, a red-sandstone Mughal palace-fortress with the best distant view of the Taj. Agra itself is a one-night town; sleep, see the Taj at dawn, and move on.

Jaipur, the Pink City, is the third corner and the gateway to Rajasthan. The Amber Fort on its ridge above a lake is the headline, reached on foot or by jeep, and the City Palace, Hawa Mahal and Jantar Mantar observatory fill a second day. Two to three nights. Jaipur is also where the trip turns from monuments to the living, walled-city texture of Rajasthan.

Taj Mahal, Agra

The marble mausoleum at sunrise. The one sight in India nobody regrets.

Agra Fort

The red Mughal fortress across the river, with the finest distant Taj view.

Amber Fort, Jaipur

The hilltop palace-fort above Maota Lake; go early for the light and the quiet.

City Palace + Hawa Mahal

The royal palace and the honeycomb Palace of Winds in Jaipur's walled old city.

KEEP READING

The marble in the [Taj Mahal page](#), the rest of Agra in the [Agra rundown](#), the hill fort in the [Amber Fort write-up](#), and the city in the [Jaipur write-up](#).

Rajasthan: Udaipur, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer

North • the desert cities • 2-3 nights each • Oct-Mar



LAKE PICHOLA, UDAIPUR

Rajasthan is the India of the imagination: warrior forts, mirror-work palaces, camel deserts, and cities painted by colour. Each has a character. Udaipur is the romantic one, a city of lakes and white palaces, the gentlest landing in the state. Jodhpur is the Blue City, its old town a sea of indigo houses under the cliff-top Mehrangarh Fort, the most dramatic fort in India. Jaisalmer is the golden desert citadel near the Pakistan border, where the fort is still a living town and the dunes start at the edge of it.

You cannot do all of Rajasthan in one trip without it blurring. Two to three nights each, and pick two or three cities, not all of them. Udaipur and Jodhpur make the classic pair; add Jaisalmer for the desert and the camel-camp night under the stars, or Pushkar for its sacred lake and the camel fair.



Sleep inside Jaisalmer Fort once for the romance, but know the living fort strains its old drains. One night in, then move to a haveli below.



Overnight trains link the desert cities cheaply. Book a 2AC or 3AC berth weeks ahead; these routes sell out fast in winter.

City Palace, Udaipur

The lakeside palace complex; pair it with a sunset boat on Lake Pichola.

Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur

The cliff-top fort over the Blue City; the best-preserved in Rajasthan.

Jaisalmer Fort + dunes

The golden living fort and a camel-camp night in the Thar Desert beyond it.

Pushkar

A sacred lake, the rare Brahma temple, and November's vast camel fair.

THE LONG VERSION

The lake city in the [Udaipur breakdown](#), the fort in the [Mehrangarh page](#), the desert citadel in the [Jaisalmer Fort write-up](#), and the sacred town in the [Pushkar rundown](#).

Varanasi and Rishikesh

North • the Ganges • 2 nights each • cool Oct-Mar



Varanasi is the oldest living city in the world and the spiritual heart of Hindu India, and it is the most intense place most travellers will ever stand. Pilgrims bathe in the Ganges at dawn, bodies are cremated openly on the burning ghats, and the evening Ganga Aarti fire ceremony draws thousands to the riverbank. Take a sunrise rowboat along the ghats; it is the calmest, most affecting hour. This is not a relaxing stop, and it is not meant to be. Treat the cremation ghats with silence and no cameras.

Rishikesh, upriver in the Himalayan foothills, is the opposite register: where the Ganges runs clear and cold, the yoga capital of the world, made famous when the Beatles came in 1968. It is calm, green, vegetarian and alcohol-free, with white-water rafting and the suspension bridges of Lakshman Jhula. Two nights each makes the pair: the intensity of Varanasi, then the calm of Rishikesh.

Dawn boat, Varanasi
A rowboat along the ghats at sunrise; the city's most moving, calmest hour.

Ganga Aarti
The evening fire ceremony at Dashashwamedh Ghat; arrive early for a riverbank spot.

Sarnath
Where the Buddha gave his first sermon, a calm half-day from Varanasi.

Rishikesh bridges + yoga
Lakshman Jhula, the Beatles Ashram, riverside yoga and rafting in the foothills.



At the burning ghats: no photos, no questions, no "donations" to self-appointed guides. Watch quietly from a distance, then move on.



Book the dawn boat the night before through your guesthouse. The 5:30am light along the ghats is the trip's quiet centre.

ON THE WEBSITE The holy city in the [Varanasi rundown](#), the fire ceremony in the [Ganga Aarti page](#), and the yoga town in the [Rishikesh rundown](#).

Kerala: backwaters, Kochi, Munnar

South • the gentle India • 4-6 nights • Nov-Mar



HOUSEBOAT, ALLEPPEY BACKWATERS

Kerala is the easiest landing in India, the place to start if the North sounds overwhelming. Green, calm, literate and tropical, it runs at a different speed. The backwaters are the signature: a network of palm-lined canals and lagoons around Alleppey, cruised on a converted rice-barge houseboat for a night, drifting past village life on the water. Fort Kochi is the cultured port town, a layered history of Portuguese, Dutch and British traders, with the Chinese fishing nets on the shore and a strong cafe and arts scene.

Inland and up, Munnar is tea-plantation country: rolling green hills combed with tea bushes, cool air, and walks between the estates. The classic Kerala week pairs the backwaters, Fort Kochi, and Munnar, with a side trip to the Periyar wildlife sanctuary at Thekkady for elephants and a boat safari. Four to six nights covers it without rushing.



One night on a houseboat is the sweet spot. A two-night cruise drifts the same canals twice; spend the second night in a homestay instead.



Eat the banana-leaf sadya, the Kerala feast served on a leaf. Fish moilee and appam are the regional plates worth seeking out.

Alleppey backwaters

A night on a houseboat through palm-lined canals; the signature Kerala experience.

Fort Kochi

The trading port: Chinese fishing nets, Mattancherry Palace, and a strong cafe scene.

Munnar tea hills

Cool green tea estates for walks and a plantation tour; the highland counterpoint.

Periyar, Thekkady

A wildlife sanctuary and lake boat safari for elephants and gaur; an easy side trip.

MORE DETAIL

The cruise in the [houseboat page](#), the port in the [Kochi guide](#), the tea country in the [Munnar rundown](#), and the safari in the [Periyar write-up](#).

Tamil Nadu temples, Goa, and Hampi

South • temples, beaches, ruins • 2-3 nights each



Tamil Nadu is temple country, where the Dravidian gopuram towers rise in tiers of carved, painted gods. Madurai's Meenakshi Amman Temple is the giant: a living temple-city of corridors and shrines, busiest and best at the evening ceremony. Pondicherry, the former French colony down the coast, is the change of pace: yellow colonial streets, a seafront promenade, and the spiritual community of Auroville next door.

Goa, on the west coast, is the beach south: a Portuguese legacy of white churches and old-town Panaji, plus a coastline that runs from the quiet south beaches to the party north. It is the easiest beach decompression in India. Inland in Karnataka, Hampi is the wildcard: a vast field of Hindu temple ruins scattered across a surreal boulder landscape, the capital of a 14th-century empire. Rent a scooter and lose a day among the rocks and the ruins.



At big temples: shoes off, shoulders and knees covered, and inner sanctums are sometimes Hindu-only. Watch and follow the locals.



South Goa (Palolem, Agonda) is calm; north Goa (Anjuna, Baga) is the party strip. Pick the coast that matches your week.

Meenakshi Temple, Madurai

The towering Dravidian temple-city; go for the evening ceremony.

Pondicherry

The French Quarter, the promenade, and Auroville's Matrimandir next door.

Goa beaches

Old Portuguese churches inland, quiet sand in the south, the scene in the north.

Hampi ruins

A boulder-strewn field of temple ruins; the Virupaksha temple is still active.

WORTH A READ

The temple in the [Meenakshi page](#), the French town in the [Pondicherry page](#), the coast in the [Goa rundown](#), and the ruins in the [Hampi write-up](#).

The Himalaya: Ladakh and Spiti

the inverted season • Jun-Sep only • high altitude



The Indian Himalaya is a different country, and it runs on the opposite calendar to everywhere else in this guide. While the plains roast from June to September, that is the only window the high passes are open and the mountain regions are at their best. Ladakh, reached by flight to Leh or the spectacular road from Manali, is a high-altitude Buddhist desert of whitewashed monasteries, turquoise lakes and 5,000-metre passes. Spiti, further west, is the rawer, harder-to-reach version: a remote valley of cliff-clinging monasteries like Key and Tabo, reached on rough roads that only clear in summer.

Altitude is the real constraint. Leh sits at 3,500 metres; you need two full days to acclimatise before any trek or high pass, and altitude sickness is common and serious. Himachal further south is the softer entry: the hill stations of Manali and the Dalai Lama's home at McLeod Ganj, lower, greener, and open longer. Treat the Himalaya as a second India trip, not a bolt-on.



Acclimatise. Fly into Leh and rest two full days before any high pass or trek. Altitude sickness above 3,500m is real and can be dangerous.



The window is short. Most of Ladakh and Spiti is only reliably open mid-June to mid-September. Plan the rest of your year around that.

Leh and the monasteries

The Ladakh base, with Thiksey and Hemis monasteries an easy drive away.

Pangong and Nubra

The turquoise high lake and the dune-and-camel valley over the Khardung La pass.

Key Monastery, Spiti

The cliff-stacked monastery above the Spiti River; the image of the valley.

Manali and McLeod Ganj

The softer Himachal entry: hill stations and the Dalai Lama's Dharamsala.

SEE ALSO The remote valley in the [Spiti write-up](#), the cliff monastery in the [Key Monastery page](#), the hill town in the [Manali rundown](#), and the high lake trek in the [Chandratal write-up](#).

The regions, mapped to what you want

five regions · pick the row, read across

India runs at least five distinct climates and characters. The matrix below replaces a page of prose: decide what you want from the trip, then read across the row for the region that fits. Each region also has its own gateway city and rail or flight network, and a season that may invert the others.

REGION	GATEWAY	CULTURE	NATURE	BEACH	EASE
North	Delhi	●●●	●●○	●○○	●●○
South	Kochi	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●
Himalaya	Leh	●●○	●●●	○○○	●○○
The Ganges	Varanasi	●●●	●○○	○○○	●○○
Northeast	Guwahati	●●○	●●●	○○○	●○○

● filled dots = stronger fit (3 = built for it)

assessment: pack-lightly India cluster, 2026-06



First India and nervous about it? Take the South. Easier, greener, gentler, and you still get temples, backwaters and beaches.



The Northeast (Assam, Meghalaya) and Kashmir need permits or extra caution and their own research. They are not a first-trip add-on.

DIG IN

The places ranked in the [best places rundown](#), the rated coast in the [beaches ranking](#), and the far corners in the [off the beaten path breakdown](#).

Wildlife and the tigers

the world's best tiger safaris • Oct-Apr, dry season



India holds about three-quarters of the world's wild tigers, and a safari here is the best chance on earth to see one in the wild. Ranthambore in Rajasthan is the most accessible, slotting neatly into a North trip: open jeep and canter safaris through a landscape of ruined forts and lakes where tigers are genuinely spotted. The central parks, Bandhavgarh and Kanha in Madhya Pradesh, have higher densities and feel wilder, but take more effort to reach. In the northeast, Kaziranga in Assam is the place for the one-horned rhino.

Sightings are never guaranteed; this is wild country, not a zoo. Book two or three safari sessions across a couple of days to raise your odds, go in the dry months when animals gather at the water, and use a reputable operator with a trained naturalist. The morning safari, just after the gates open, is the best slot. Skip any "guaranteed sighting" promise; it is a red flag.



Book the morning session and at least two or three safaris in total. One drive rarely finds a tiger; multiple drives shift the odds.



Parks close in the July to September monsoon. The dry months of March and April, when water is scarce, give the best sightings.

Ranthambore

The accessible tiger park, easy from Jaipur; jeep safaris among ruins and lakes.

Bandhavgarh

The highest tiger density in India, deep in Madhya Pradesh; for the dedicated.

Kaziranga, Assam

The one-horned rhino stronghold in the northeast; elephant and jeep safaris.

Periyar, Kerala

The southern option: a lake boat safari for elephants and gaur, no tigers expected.

THE FULL PICTURE

The fifteen parks ranked in the [national parks rundown](#), the tiger species in the [wildlife breakdown](#), and the Rajasthan safari in the [Ranthambore write-up](#).

Off the beaten path

for second trips and longer stays • the India most miss



Once you have done one region, India opens up. The Northeast is the prize that almost no first-timer reaches: Meghalaya's living root bridges and the wettest villages on earth, Assam's tea and rhinos, the tribal cultures of Nagaland and Arunachal. It is greener, quieter and culturally distinct from the rest of the country, though some states still need an Inner Line Permit.

Closer in, the central temple town of Khajuraho holds a UNESCO group of intricately carved 10th-century temples that most North itineraries skip. Orchha nearby is a near-forgotten royal city of cenotaphs on a river. In the deep south, Gokarna offers Goa's beaches without the crowds, and the temple town of Tiruvannamalai draws a quieter, spiritual crowd to its sacred hill.

Some Northeast states (Arunachal, parts of Nagaland) need an Inner Line Permit. Arrange it online or via an agent before you travel.

The Northeast and Kashmir reward research and flexibility, not a tight schedule. Treat them as their own dedicated trip.

Meghalaya, Northeast

Living root bridges, Shillong, and Cherrapunji, the wettest place on earth.

Khajuraho + Orchha

Carved 10th-century temples and a forgotten riverside royal city in the centre.

Gokarna + Tiruvannamalai

Quiet temple-town beaches and a sacred hill, the calmer southern corners.

GO DEEPER Eight off-route spots in the [off the beaten path rundown](#), the hill state in the [Shillong rundown](#), and the carved temples in the [Khajuraho breakdown](#).

03

What to do

Temples, forts, tigers and trekking, the food that changes every few hundred kilometres, and the yoga and wellness that draws half the long-stayers. Plus where to sleep and which tours to pay for.

IN THIS CHAPTER

What India asks of your days	22
Forts, temples, and the sacred sites	23
Regional food, the thali decoded	24
Yoga, wellness, and the slow days	25
Stay: the North and Rajasthan	26
Stay: the South and Kerala	27

What India asks you to do with your days

monuments and markets • food first • one slow stretch



SPICE MARKET, OLD DELHI

India arranges its days around three things: the great monuments, the living chaos of its streets and markets, and food. Almost every city rewards a guided street-food walk and a slow morning in its bazaar more than a checklist of sights. The forts and temples are the headline acts, but the texture is in between: the chai stall, the tailor, the train platform, the temple at the hour the locals come.

Pace it. India at full speed exhausts everyone; the travellers who love it build in one genuinely slow stretch, a few nights in one place doing little. A cooking class teaches you the regional differences faster than any menu. A guided heritage walk turns a confusing old city legible in two hours. And one wildlife safari or one Himalayan trek, if it fits the season, is the threshold experience most trips remember longest.

Street-food walk, Delhi

A guided crawl through Chandni Chowk; chaat, parathas, jalebi, from about 30 USD.

Cooking class, Udaipur

A home kitchen, a market trip, the spice logic explained. From about 25 USD.

Heritage walk, any old city

Two hours that make a chaotic bazaar legible; ask your guesthouse for a local guide.

Tiger safari or trek

The threshold day: Ranthambore in winter, a Himalayan trek in summer.



A guided street-food walk on your first evening in any city is the best money you spend. It teaches you what is safe to order all week.



Build in one slow stretch. Udaipur, Rishikesh, a Kerala homestay or a Goa beach: a few nights doing little is what keeps India enjoyable.

READ ON

Etiquette and the festival calendar in the [culture page](#), the mountains ranked in the [trekking grades breakdown](#), and the wildlife in the [wildlife rundown](#).

Forts, temples, and the sacred sites

many faiths, layered • the etiquette is load-bearing



GOLDEN TEMPLE, AMRITSAR

India layers Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity, and the monuments tell that story: Mughal mosques and tombs in the north, towering Dravidian temples in the south, Buddhist stupas, Sikh gurdwaras and Jain marble carvings. After a week the temples can blur, so pick the ones that hand you a story, not just grandeur. A few stand outside the pattern entirely.

The etiquette is not optional. Cover shoulders and knees, remove your shoes at the threshold (and sometimes leather belts and bags), and follow the locals on which inner sanctums you may enter. At the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the holiest Sikh site, everyone covers their head and the free community kitchen feeds tens of thousands a day. Photograph people at worship only with a nod, and never with your back to a shrine.



Shoes off at every temple and gurdwara. Bring slip-ons, leave nothing valuable in them, or pay the few rupees for the shoe-minder.



Eat at the Golden Temple langar at least once. The free communal meal, served to anyone, is one of the most moving things in India.

Golden Temple, Amritsar

The gilded Sikh shrine on its sacred pool, best at dawn or lit up after dark. The langar feeds all.

Meenakshi Temple, Madurai

The towering southern temple-city of painted gods; go for the evening procession.

Mehrangarh + Amber forts

The Rajput fortresses of Jodhpur and Jaipur; the best-preserved forts in the country.

MORE ON THE SITE

Twenty landmarks with visiting notes in the [religious landmarks page](#), the Sikh shrine in the [Golden Temple write-up](#), and the traditions behind them in the [culture rundown](#).

Regional food: the thali decoded

the food changes every few hundred kilometres • 1 to 7 USD

There is no single Indian food. The North runs on wheat, dairy and the tandoor: naan, butter chicken, rich Mughlai curries, a creamy Punjabi register. The South runs on rice and coconut, lighter and often vegetarian: the crisp dosa, fluffy idli, and tangy sambar, eaten off a banana leaf. The thali is the decoder ring for both: a steel platter of small bowls, a dal, a vegetable or two, a curd, a pickle, rice and bread, refilled until you stop. Order one in each region and you taste the place in a single meal. The tourist mistake is eating in hotel restaurants; the best food is at the busy local thali joint and the street cart with the longest queue.



Thali thali

USD 1.50-4 • everywhere

The full meal on one steel plate: dal, two vegetables, curd, pickle, rice and bread, endlessly refilled. The single best-value dish in India and a taste of the whole region at once.



Dosa dosa

USD 0.50-2 • the South

A crisp fermented rice-and-lentil crepe, often wrapped around spiced potato (masala dosa), served with coconut chutney and sambar. The South's breakfast and the lightest great meal in the country.



Butter chicken murgh makhani

USD 4-8 • the North

The North's famous export: tandoor-charred chicken in a creamy tomato gravy, mopped up with naan. Rich, mild, and the gateway to Punjabi and Mughlai cooking.



Biryani biryani

USD 2-10 • Hyderabad, everywhere

Layered spiced rice slow-cooked with meat or vegetables, every region claiming its own version. Hyderabadi is the most famous. A meal in itself, served with raita.



Eat with your right hand only, the left is considered unclean. A torn piece of bread or a ball of rice is the utensil; nobody minds a clumsy attempt.



A busy, high-turnover stall is a safe stall. The chai is boiled and safe; cut raw salads and pre-cut fruit are where stomachs go wrong.

KEEP READING The regional dishes and drinks in the [food and drinks rundown](#), and what the same plate costs street versus restaurant in the [budget breakdown](#).

Yoga, wellness, and the slow days

where the practice comes from • Rishikesh and Kerala



India is where yoga comes from, and a serious chunk of long-stay travellers come for exactly that. Rishikesh, on the Ganges in the foothills, is the global capital: ashrams and schools of every tradition, drop-in classes by the river, and the multi-week teacher trainings that draw people from everywhere. It is calm, green, vegetarian and alcohol-free, and you can dip in for a single class or commit to a month.

Kerala is the other wellness pole, the home of Ayurveda. Authentic clinics and retreats offer genuine multi-day treatment programmes, distinct from the spa-menu version. Choose carefully: a reputable centre with qualified practitioners is a different thing from a resort selling oil massages. For most travellers, a few days of unhurried practice, simple food and early nights is the real wellness, wherever you take it. Goa and the south beaches add a more relaxed, yoga-and-beach version of the same.

Rishikesh classes
Drop-in riverside yoga or a multi-week training; the global capital of the practice.

Kerala Ayurveda
Genuine multi-day treatment retreats; choose a credentialed clinic, not a spa menu.

Goa and the beaches
The relaxed version: morning yoga, beach afternoons, a slower pace to decompress.



Vet the ashram or Ayurveda centre on recent reviews and credentials. The genuine ones are transformative; the tourist-trap ones are pricey theatre.



Rishikesh fills around the International Yoga Festival in early March. Book a school and a room ahead if you want that week.

THE LONG VERSION
The yoga town in the [Rishikesh guide](#), the bridges and ashrams in the [Beatles Ashram page](#), and the southern beaches in the [Varkala rundown](#).

Where to stay: the North and Rajasthan

prices per night, double room • heritage beats chain

Two rules cover the North. First: location and character beat stars. In Jaipur and the Rajasthan cities, sleep in a converted haveli inside the old walled town, not a business hotel on the ring road; the price is often similar and the experience is the trip. Second: book your first two nights and the tight festival weeks ahead, then improvise the rest on the ground.

Delhi (Paharganj or Hauz Khas)

hostel 7 USD mid 30 USD comfort 110 USD

Paharganj for the backpacker scene near the station, Hauz Khas or South Delhi for calmer, leafier nights. [Check what a room costs around central Delhi](#), or find the dorm crowd through [Hostelworld](#).

Jaipur (the walled Pink City)

hostel 6 USD mid 28 USD comfort 120 USD

Sleep in a haveli inside or just below the old city, walkable to the bazaars and the City Palace. Backpackers run the rooftop hostel scene on [Hostelworld](#); for a heritage room, [see what the old city is charging tonight](#).

Mid-range and heritage hotels across the North, with free cancellation while your route is still moving.

[Find Stays on Booking.com](#)

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Taj Mahal sunrise tour from Agra or Delhi

on GetYourGuide

skip-the-line
half day

Jaipur full-day: Amber Fort and the Pink City

on GetYourGuide

private guide
8 hours

Udaipur City Palace and Lake Pichola boat

on GetYourGuide

sunset option
4 hours

Live tours via GetYourGuide; prices and availability shown on the booking page. Tap a card to open.

Where to stay: the South and Kerala

prices per night, double room • homestays win here

The South rewards homestays more than hotels. In Fort Kochi and the Kerala hills, family-run heritage homes give you the best food and the local knowledge that turns a stay into the trip. In Goa, pick your coast first: the quiet south or the busy north, then the village within it. Book the houseboat and the first nights ahead; the rest is easy on arrival outside the December peak.

Fort Kochi (Kerala)

hostel 7 USD mid 30 USD comfort 100 USD

Stay in a heritage homestay in the old fort quarter, walkable to the Chinese nets and the cafes. [See what Fort Kochi is charging tonight](#), or find a dorm bed through [Hostelworld](#).

Goa (Anjuna or the south)

hostel 8 USD mid 30 USD comfort 110 USD

North Goa (Anjuna, Vagator) for the scene, south Goa (Palolem, Agonda) for quiet sand. Backpackers cluster on [Hostelworld](#); for a beach room, [check what the coast costs tonight](#).

Homestays, beach huts and mid-range hotels across the South, with free cancellation on most rooms.

Find Stays on Booking.com

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Alleppey backwater houseboat overnight

on **GetYourGuide**

private boat
overnight

Fort Kochi heritage and Kathakali evening

on **GetYourGuide**

walking + show
4 hours

Goa: spice plantation and old churches day

on **GetYourGuide**

with lunch
7 hours

Live tours via GetYourGuide; prices and availability shown on the booking page. Tap a card to open.

04

Routes and itineraries

How to choose between the three Indias, the trains that connect it all, the classic North route as a map, and sample plans for two, three and four weeks.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Pick your trip: 8 paths	29
Indian Railways: the classes decoded	31
The North route, as a map	32
2 weeks, day by day	33
3 and 4 weeks, and the South	34
Solo, nomad, LGBTQ+, vegan	35

Pick your trip

three dimensions, eight paths · find yours, jump to the route

Who you travel with, how long you have, and which India you want decide the route before any list of sights does. India is huge, so almost every path leans on the train network and at least one internal flight. Find your row below; the full day-by-day routes are on the next spread and online.

SOLO · 14D · BACKPACKER

The North by train

USD 450 · sleeper trains + hostels

- Delhi 3 · Agra 1 · Jaipur 3
- Udaipur 3 by train
- Varanasi 3, one flight

COUPLE · 14D · MID

Golden Triangle + Rajasthan

USD 2,400 for 2 · heritage hotels

- Delhi, Agra, Jaipur
- Udaipur + Jodhpur
- 2AC trains, private drivers

FIRST-TIMER · 14D · MID

The gentle South

USD 1,900 for 2 · homestays

- Kochi 2 · Munnar 2
- Backwaters 1 night
- Madurai + Pondicherry

SOLO · 21D · BACKPACKER

North then South, one flight

USD 750 · trains + 1 flight

- Golden Triangle + Varanasi
- Fly Delhi to Kochi
- Kerala 7, slow finish

COUPLE · 21D · COMFORT

Rajasthan in depth

USD 5,000 for 2 · palace hotels

- Delhi, Agra, Jaipur
- Udaipur, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer
- Ranthambore safari

ADVENTURER · 14D · JUN-SEP

Ladakh and the high passes

USD 1,200 · flights + jeeps

- Leh, acclimatise 2 days
- Pangong + Nubra
- Monasteries, treks

NOMAD · 30D · MID

Goa base + weekend hops

USD 900 a month all-in

- Goa beach + coworking
- Hampi + Gokarna weekends
- Cheap long-stay rentals

SEEKER · 14D · MID

The spiritual line

USD 1,000 · trains + ashrams

- Varanasi on the Ganges
- Rishikesh yoga 5 nights
- Amritsar Golden Temple

**ON THE
WEBSITE**

Full day-by-day versions online: the [7-day route](#), the [14-day route](#), the [21-day route](#), and the [28-day Delhi to Kerala odyssey](#).

Which path, and the one rule for all of them

read the row above, then the logic below

The eight paths split three ways: the North for first-timers who want the icons, the South for an easier first trip, and the Himalaya or the spiritual line for something specific. The single rule that ties them together is the trains. Whatever you pick, the long legs are booked weeks ahead on a sleeper or chair-car berth, and the next page decodes exactly how that works.

IF IT IS YOUR FIRST INDIA

Start in the South, or do the North slowly

The South is the softer landing; the North is the bigger reward if you pace it.

- **South** greener, cleaner, calmer, more vegetarian
- **North** the icons, but louder and more intense
- **Either way** fewer stops, more nights per place
- **Avoid** a city a day; India punishes the rush

IF YOU HAVE THREE WEEKS OR MORE

Combine two regions with one flight

North plus South is the only realistic two-region trip, joined by a single flight.

- **Route** Golden Triangle, then fly Delhi to Kochi
- **Flight** about 2.5 hours, often under 60 USD
- **Why** overland north-to-south is a wasted day on the rails
- **Himalaya** only fits a summer trip, not a winter one



Book the long train legs the moment your dates are fixed. The tourist-favourite routes sell out a month ahead in the October to March season.



Use a domestic flight to skip one brutal overnight leg (Udaipur to Varanasi, say). Trains for the scenic and the social hops, planes for the slog.

MORE DETAIL The cheap-flight logic in the [flight tips page](#), and the hub-by-hub network in the [domestic flights breakdown](#).

Indian Railways: the classes decoded

the spine of the country · how to read a ticket and book IRCTC

Indian Railways moves more people than almost any system on earth, and the overnight train is the most Indian thing you will do. The catch is the alphabet soup of classes. Once you can read it, booking is simple. From the top: 1AC is a private lockable cabin, 2AC and 3AC are air-conditioned open berths (two and three tiers, with curtains), Sleeper (SL) is the non-AC, windows-open, fan-cooled classic, and CC (Chair Car) is airline-style seating on fast day trains. The newer Vande Bharat and the Shatabdi run premium day routes.

CLASS	WHAT IT IS	BEST FOR	ROUGH COST
1AC	Private 2 or 4-berth lockable cabin, AC	Comfort, couples, valuables	priciest, ~flight money
2AC	Open AC berths, 2-tier, curtains, bedding	The traveller sweet spot	mid, great value overnight
3AC	Open AC berths, 3-tier, curtains, bedding	Budget-comfort balance	cheaper than 2AC
SL	Non-AC sleeper, fans, open windows	Backpackers, short overnights	very cheap, the classic
CC / EC	Airline-style chair car on day trains	Fast daytime hops	moderate, comfortable

indicative 2026 fares; varies by route and distance

HOW TO ACTUALLY BOOK IT

Tickets sell through IRCTC, the official railway portal. The catch for foreigners is that the IRCTC site and app need an Indian mobile number to verify the account, which can take days to clear. The practical fix is to book through a foreigner-friendly agent such as 12Go, which handles the IRCTC layer for a small fee and takes a foreign card. Reservations open 60 days ahead and popular routes fill fast. If a train shows as full, the RAC and waitlist often clear, and the Tatkal quota (next-day emergency tickets, released at 10am or 11am the day before) is the backup. Plan the long legs first.



For one overnight, 2AC is the sweet spot: a curtained berth, clean bedding, AC, and a fraction of a flight. 3AC is the budget version of the same.



Tatkal opens at 10am (AC) or 11am (Sleeper) the day before, and sells out in minutes. Have the passenger details saved and be ready on the dot.

Book Indian trains without an Indian SIM: 12Go handles the IRCTC reservation, takes a foreign card, and shows live availability for every class.

Plan and book trains on 12Go

The North route, as a map

the classic two-week line, drawn on the country

One line covers the classic North: Delhi down to Agra and Jaipur, west into Rajasthan at Udaipur and Jodhpur, then east to Varanasi on the Ganges. The short hops go by train, cheap and scenic; the long jump from Rajasthan across to Varanasi is the one worth flying. Book the train legs and the one flight a couple of weeks ahead through [12Go](#); everything else can wait.



WHAT EACH LEG COSTS

Delhi to Agra

Gatimaan/Vande Bharat • 2h

~12 USD

Agra to Jaipur

```
train • 4.5h
```

~10 USD

Jaipur to Udaipur

train or bus • 7h

~12 USD

Udaipur to Varanasi

flight via Delhi • 3-4h

~70 USD

Delhi to Kochi

flight · 2.5h

~60 USD

overnight sleeper, typical

2AC berth • 8-12h

~18 USD

fares: 12Go and IRCTC snapshot, 2026 · indicative per person

2 weeks, the classic North

days 1-14 • Delhi to Varanasi by train and one flight

The refined North line, built for first-timers, valid for repeat visitors. Book the train legs and the one flight through [12Go](#) a couple of weeks ahead; everything else can be decided on the day.

1

Arrive Delhi

DEL + day zero

Land, Metro or prepaid taxi to the hotel. Walk the neighbourhood, an early dinner and sleep off the flight.

3 and 4 weeks, and the South

how to extend, and the gentle South route in full

2

Old and New Delhi

Metro + 1.5 hrs

More time means more depth, not more cities. Three weeks adds the South to the North by a single flight; four adds Rajasthan's deserts or a wildlife park. The South route below stands alone as a calmer 12 to 14 days for a first India that wants to ease in.

3

Train to Agra

3 weeks; add the South

after Varanasi

Morning train to Agra, afternoon at Agra Fort for the distant Taj view, an early flight to Kochi. Then Fort Kochi 2, Munnar 2, the backwaters overnight, and Madurai's temple. A complete change of register.

4

Taj at dawn, on to Jaipur

4 weeks; add depth

Desert + 4.5h wildlife

The Taj at sunrise, breakfast, then the train to Jaipur. Settle in, walk the Pink City bazaar in the evening, with a desert-camp night, or slot a Ranthambore tiger safari after Jaipur, or finish on a Goa beach.

5

Jaipur forts

South route: Kochi + Munnar

Jeep + 1.5h

days 1-5

Amber Fort early, then the City Palace, Hawa Mahal and the Jantar Mantar observatory. Two nights in Fort Kochi for the port and cafes, then up to the cool Munnar tea hills for two more.

6

Jaipur slow + market

Backwaters + Periyar

days 6-8

A cooking class or a block-printing workshop, the bazaars for textiles, an Ayurvedic night for the Alleppey backwaters, then the Periyar sanctuary at Thekkady for a lake boat safari.

7

To Udaipur

Madurai + Pondicherry

Train + 7h

days 9-12

Travel to the lake city. Arrive by evening for a sunset boat on Lake Pichola and lakeside dinner. Madurai: the Meenakshi temple at Madurai, then the French streets and seafront of Pondicherry to finish.

8

Udaipur

Beach finish, fly out

Slow day

days 13-14

The City Palace, the Jagdish Temple, and the old-town lanes. Udaipur is the trip's built-in rest stop. A couple of days on a quiet Tamil or Kerala beach, then fly home from Kochi, Chennai or Madurai.

9

Udaipur + fly

A relaxed morning, then the flight east to Varanasi (usually via Delhi). Arrive

→

Do not try to bolt the Himalaya onto a winter North trip. Ladakh and Spiti are summer-only; they need their own June-to-September visit.

🕒

The South moves slower than the North by design. Resist adding stops; the calm is the whole point of choosing it.

varanasi ghats from the riverbank.

11

Dawn boat + Sarnath

river + half-day

A sunrise rowboat along the ghats, breakfast, then the calm of the Buddhist site at Sarnath.

page 34 of 56

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04

Solo, nomad, LGBTQ+, and vegetarian in India

the specifics that change the days, one card each

13 Fly to Delhi

buffer day

Back to Delhi by air with a buffer. Last shopping, a final thali, and a clear head before the long-haul.

The eight paths assume a generic traveller. If you fit one of these four, a handful of details change the trip, and they fit on one card each.

FOR SOLO TRAVELERS

Solo, especially female-solo

India rewards solo travel but asks for more caution than its neighbours, especially for women.

- **Safer bases** Kerala, Rishikesh, Udaipur, the South in general
- **Transport** 2AC or 3AC train berths, women-only carriages where offered
- **Dress** cover shoulders and knees; it eases attention and respects the culture
- **Apps** Uber and Ola for verified drivers and a fixed, tracked fare

FOR NOMADS

Digital nomads and long-stay

Goa and Bangalore are the bases; the cost of living is the draw.

- **Base** Goa for the beach-and-coworking life, Bangalore for the tech scene
- **Visa** the e-Tourist or longer tourist visa; no dedicated nomad visa yet
- **Internet** good fibre in cities, patchy in the hills and beaches
- **Pay** UPI is everywhere; link it via an Indian account or use cards plus cash

FOR LGBTQ+ TRAVELERS

LGBTQ+

Same-sex relations were decriminalised in 2018; the cities are far more relaxed than the small towns.

- **Scene** Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore and Goa have open scenes and Pride events
- **Norm** public affection is low-key for all couples, gay or straight
- **Stays** a shared double is rarely questioned in cities and tourist towns
- **Rural** far more conservative; discretion is the easier path

FOR VEGETARIANS AND VEGANS

Vegetarian and vegan

India is the easiest country on earth to eat vegetarian; a third of the country already does.

- **Veg** "veg" is a default menu category; the green dot marks it everywhere
- **Vegan** harder: ghee, paneer and curd are in much of the cooking
- **Phrase** "no dairy, no ghee" (bina doodh, bina ghee) helps
- **South** the easiest region, where rice-and-coconut cooking leans plant-based

WORTH A READ

Safety specifics in the [safety page](#), visa routes in the [visa write-up](#), and hospital quality in the [hospitals and pharmacies page](#).

05

When to go

The plains have one season, the Himalaya the opposite one, and the monsoon reshuffles the whole map. Plus the festivals worth planning around and what a day actually costs.

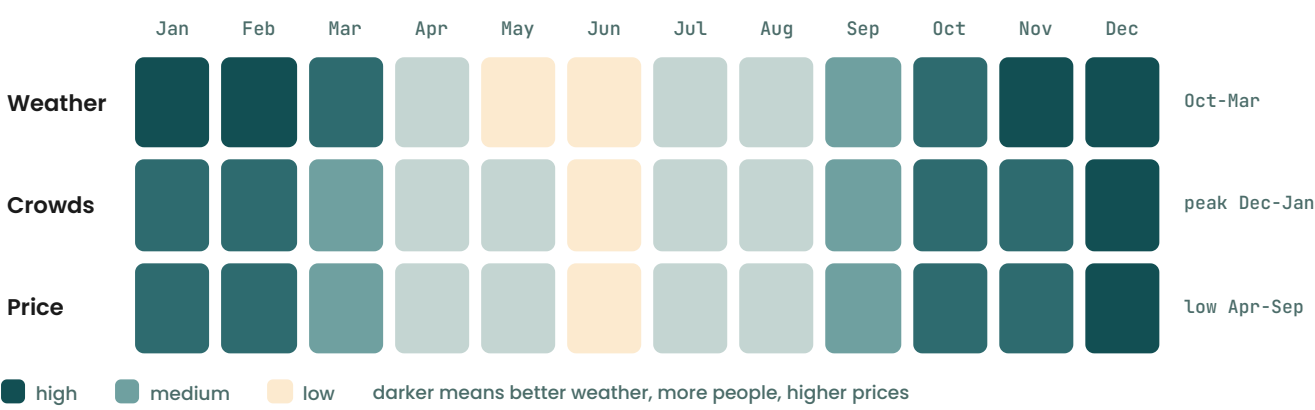
IN THIS CHAPTER

Weather, crowds, price	37
The inverted Himalaya, and the monsoon	38
Festivals: Holi, Diwali, Pushkar	39
What a day costs	40

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · the plains, where most trips go

For the plains, which is where almost every first trip goes, the answer is simple: October to March. The cool, dry winter is comfortable, clear and the high season; the prices and crowds peak around Christmas, New Year and the festivals. April to June is the furnace, with the plains hitting 45C. July to September is the monsoon, hot, wet and humid. The heatmap below is the plains; the Himalaya runs the exact opposite calendar, covered on the next page.



source: best-travel-time dataset · captured 2026-05-17

WHAT THINGS COST: QUOTED VS PAID

SAMPLE DATA

Airport to Delhi centre		14 USD taxi tout
		5 USD via Uber
Auto-rickshaw across town		4 USD quoted
		1.20 USD on the meter
A thali lunch		8 USD hotel restaurant
		1.80 USD local joint
Overnight train, one berth		35 USD agent markup
		18 USD 2AC fare

The inverted Himalaya, and the monsoon

two calendars on one map • the rule that catches everyone



Here is the single most important timing fact in India: the Himalaya runs the opposite calendar to the plains. When Delhi, Rajasthan and the South are at their best, October to March, the high passes of Ladakh and Spiti are snowed shut. And when the plains turn into a furnace and then a monsoon, June to September, the mountains are open, green and at their absolute best. You cannot do both regions well in one trip; you pick the season, and the season picks the region.

The monsoon, roughly June to September, is the third variable. It is not a washout everywhere: Kerala and the Western Ghats turn lush and dramatic, and the monsoon has its own appeal. But it floods the plains, closes some wildlife parks, and brings landslides to the hill roads. The shoulder weeks just after it (late September into October) are a sweet spot: green landscapes, fewer crowds, lower prices, before the high season fully kicks in.

Plains, Oct–Mar

Delhi, Rajasthan, the South, the temples: cool, dry, clear, and the high season.

Himalaya, Jun–Sep

Ladakh, Spiti, the passes: the only reliable window, green and open.

Monsoon, Jun–Sep

Lush Kerala and the Ghats; flooded plains and closed parks elsewhere.

⤴

Plains: October to March. Himalaya: June to September. Write it on your hand. Booking the wrong season for the wrong region wastes the trip.

📅

Late September is underrated: post-monsoon green, shoulder prices, thinner crowds, just before the December peak loads up.

SEE ALSO

The month-by-month logic in the [best time to visit breakdown](#), and the high-valley access in the [Spiti page](#).

Festivals: Holi, Diwali, Pushkar

three to chase, three to plan around

India's festivals are among the great reasons to time a trip, and among the great reasons to avoid certain weeks. The top row is worth building a trip around; the bottom row mostly spikes prices, fills trains, or shuts businesses. Most are lunar and move every year, so check the exact dates before you book.

MARCH

Holi, the colour festival

The spring festival of thrown colour, joyous and chaotic, biggest in the North around Mathura and Vrindavan. Wear clothes you will throw away, protect your camera, and join in.

OCT / NOV

Diwali, festival of lights

The biggest holiday: lamps, sweets, fireworks, and homes lit across the country. Worth timing a trip around, but book ahead, as trains and flights fill and prices climb.

NOVEMBER

Pushkar Camel Fair

A vast desert fair in Rajasthan: tens of thousands of camels, traders, and pilgrims around the sacred lake. Time a Rajasthan trip around it if the dates line up.

DEC 25 TO JAN 1

Christmas and New Year

Peak season on the beaches and in the hill stations. Goa and Rajasthan prices double; book months ahead or travel just before or after.

AUG / SEP

Ganesh Chaturthi

A spectacular ten-day festival, biggest in Mumbai, with huge processions. Wonderful to see, but it clogs the city and fills the hotels.

VARIES, LUNAR

Regional public holidays

Each state has its own holidays that spike local travel and close offices and banks. Check the calendar for your states and dates before booking trains.



Lunar festivals move every year. Verify the exact Holi, Diwali and Pushkar dates for your travel year before locking trains and hotels.



Diwali is the one to plan around hard. Trains and domestic flights sell out, and many family-run businesses close for several days.

DIG IN Exact dates per year in the [public holidays calendar](#), and the camel fair in the [Pushkar fairgrounds page](#).

What a day costs

three travel styles • printed the way the day spends it

Daily budgets hide in averages, so here is the day itemized instead: a bed, three meals, getting around, one thing worth doing, and a chai at the end. Three real versions of the same Tuesday in India, in US dollars.

A DAY IN INDIA	A DAY IN INDIA	A DAY IN INDIA
* backpacker *	* standard *	* comfort *
hostel dorm6.00	3-star double, half15.00	heritage hotel, half110.00
chai + paratha0.80	cafe breakfast4.00	hotel breakfastincl.
thali lunch1.80	restaurant lunch6.00	restaurant lunch14.00
street dinner2.50	dinner with drinks10.00	dinner, good table25.00
auto-rickshaw x22.50	Uber + autos6.00	private car + driver25.00
monument entry6.00	guided half-day tour12.00	private guide, half incl.
lassi + water1.20	2AC train share7.00	dayabove
sleeper-train share4.40		drinks x210.00
TOTAL / DAY~25 USD	TOTAL / DAY~60 USD	TOTAL / DAY~180 USD
budget-calculator data • 2026-05-15	budget-calculator data • 2026-05-15	budget-calculator data • 2026-05-15

Run the same numbers for your own dates, group size and currency in the free budget calculator on pack-lightly.com.

Open the Budget Calculator

 The gap between tiers is the bed, not the food. You eat brilliantly at every level; the room and the private driver are where the budget multiplies.

 Carry small cash for autos, chai and entry tickets, and use UPI or cards for the rest. Always have change; vendors rarely break large notes.

06

Practical

The e-Tourist Visa, money and UPI, the trains, eSIM, health, and packing. The boring parts you only read once. Done right, you never think about them again.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order	42
Money, UPI, and the cash you need	43
Visa, eSIM, and packing	44
Health and Delhi belly	45

Book in this order

four things before you fly • the trains are the catch

India rewards booking the right few things early and improvising the rest. Most hotels and tours are cheaper and easier on the ground. But the trains and the visa genuinely reward going early, and they have a natural order. The e-Tourist Visa must be applied for online before you travel, not on arrival.

8 wk
before

International flights
Fares to Delhi or Mumbai bottom out six to eight weeks ahead for the October to March high season. Midweek departures shave another 10 percent.

Compare fares on Aviasales

4 wk
before

Visa + insurance
Apply for the e-Tourist Visa on the official indianvisaonline.gov.in portal (about 25 USD for 30 days; one-year and five-year options exist). Then buy travel insurance with strong medical and evacuation cover. Check your exact passport rule before you book.

Check entry rules per passport

2 wk
before

Trains + first nights
Book the long train legs (they sell out a month ahead in season), the one internal flight, and your first two hotel nights. The rest of the beds can wait until you arrive.

Book the trains on 12Go

1 wk
before

eSIM
Install before departure, activate on landing. The welcome text lands before your luggage does. 10 to 15 GB covers two weeks of maps, UPI and uploads.

Set up a Saily eSIM



Apply for the e-visa on the official government portal only, not a lookalike reseller. Passport must be valid six months beyond arrival.



If a train route shows full, do not give up. Waitlists clear, and the Tatkal quota opens the day before. Book the longest legs first.

Money, UPI, and the cash you need

UPI is everywhere in cities • cash still rules the small stuff

India runs two money systems side by side. UPI, the instant mobile-pay network, is everywhere in the cities: a QR code at the chai stall, the auto, the shop. Locals barely touch cash. The catch for travellers is that UPI needs an Indian bank account, hard to get on a tourist visa, though apps and prepaid options are slowly opening it up. For most visitors, the practical mix is a card plus cash. Use bank ATMs (HDFC, ICICI, SBI), always pick rupees over your home currency, and keep small notes for the auto, the temple and the tip.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Dorm / 3-star / heritage hotel	USD 6	USD 30	USD 120
Thali / restaurant / hotel meal	USD 1.80	USD 7	USD 25
Masala chai	USD 0.15	USD 0.50	USD 2
Auto-rickshaw across town	USD 1.20	USD 2	USD 5
Overnight train, one berth	USD 5	USD 18	USD 35

verified 2026-05-15 • per-category numbers in the budget guide

THE CASH RULES THAT MATTER

Carry around 2,000 to 3,000 rupees a day in small notes (100s and 200s) for autos, chai, entry tickets and temples; the small economy runs on cash and nobody breaks a 500 for a 20-rupee chai. Withdraw from bank-branded ATMs, decline the "convert to your currency" offer (it costs 4 to 7 percent), and tell your bank your dates or carry a second card. Tipping is modest and not obligatory: round up for a guide or driver, a few rupees for the shoe-minder, 5 to 10 percent at a sit-down restaurant. Agree the auto fare before you get in, or insist on the meter.



Always pay in rupees when a card terminal offers "your" currency; the dynamic-conversion rate quietly costs 4 to 7 percent every time.



Agree the auto-rickshaw price before you climb in, or insist on the meter. "Meter is broken" means negotiate first or wave the next one down.

THE FULL PICTURE

The notes and exchange traps in the [currency rundown](#), the full cost model in the [budget breakdown](#), and the road realities in the [traffic page](#).

Visa, eSIM, and packing

the e-Tourist Visa • signal • the temple-ready bag

VISA: THE E-TOURIST VISA

Most EU and US passports need an e-Tourist Visa arranged online before arrival, on the official [indianvisaonline.gov.in portal](https://indianvisaonline.gov.in) (covered in full in the visa guide). Three options: 30-day double-entry (about 25 USD), one-year multi-entry (about 40 USD), and five-year (about 80 USD). Apply at least a few days ahead, upload a passport photo and a passport scan, and carry a printout. Use the official government site, never a reseller that charges a markup. Verify your exact nationality and the current fee before you book flights.

Signal. Buy the eSIM the day before you fly and activate on landing. A 5 GB plan covers a week (from a few USD); 10 to 15 GB covers two working weeks of maps and uploads. Stays over a month are cheaper on a local Airtel or Jio SIM, bought with your passport and a photo.

Set up a Saily eSIM

BAG: THE TEMPLE-READY, CLIMATE-SPANNING LIST

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Light, loose, modest clothes: shoulders and knees covered for temples | ☐ Hand sanitiser and tissues (carry your own toilet paper) |
| ☐ A scarf or shawl (head cover for gurdwaras, sun, dust, AC trains) | ☐ 30% DEET, SPF 50, and a reusable water bottle with a filter |
| ☐ A warm layer for Rajasthan winter nights and any hill stop | ☐ Type D/M plug adapter and a 20,000 mAh power bank |
| ☐ Slip-on shoes (off and on at every temple) plus sandals | ☐ Two payment cards in separate pockets, plus passport copies |
| ☐ Strong med-kit: oral rehydration salts, loperamide, antibiotics on a doctor's advice | ☐ A padlock for hostel lockers and sleeper-train chains |

GO DEEPER

The season-by-season list in the [packing list](#), what to wear where in the [dress code page](#), and data plans compared in the [eSIM write-up](#).

Health and Delhi belly

six weeks out • the stomach is the main event

India asks more of your health planning than most of Asia, but it is very manageable. The vaccines are routine, the pharmacies are everywhere and cheap, and the private hospitals in the big cities are excellent. The one near-certainty is a stomach upset at some point, "Delhi belly", almost always mild and self-limiting. The list below is everything that actually needs doing, in order.

THE SIX-STEP LIST

- ☐ **Six weeks before:** a travel-clinic visit. Confirm routine vaccines (MMR, DPT, polio) are current.
- ☐ **Recommended:** Hepatitis A and typhoid for all trips; both are standard for India. Hep A is a two-shot series, so start early.
- ☐ **Risk-based:** Japanese Encephalitis for long rural stays, rabies pre-exposure if you will be far from care, cholera rarely. Discuss with the clinic.
- ☐ **Malaria:** risk varies by region and season; some areas warrant pills, the Himalaya does not. Get region-specific advice, not a blanket answer.
- ☐ **The stomach:** bottled or filtered water only, no ice you cannot vouch for, hot freshly cooked food, and skip cut fruit and salads from carts.
- ☐ **Insurance:** strong medical cover with evacuation, and the direct-billing private hospitals listed before you need them.

IF YOUR STOMACH TURNS

Most cases are mild: rest, oral rehydration salts (sold in every pharmacy), bland food, and it passes in a day or two. Loperamide stops the symptoms for a long bus or train day, but it does not cure anything. See a doctor if there is blood, a high fever, or it lasts beyond a couple of days, as that can mean a bacterial or parasitic infection that needs antibiotics. The private hospitals and clinics in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and the tourist towns are English-speaking and used to insurance. Dial 112 for the all-in-one emergency number, or 102 for an ambulance.



Water: bottled or filtered only, and skip the ice unless it is from a clear source. A bottle with a built-in filter saves money and plastic.



Eat where it is busy and freshly cooked, hot and steaming. The risk is cut fruit, raw salads and lukewarm buffet food, not the sizzling street pan.

READ ON The shot-by-shot schedule in the [vaccinations breakdown](#), hospital picks in the [hospitals page](#), and cover compared in the [travel insurance rundown](#).

07

Safe and smart

The scams worth knowing, the real risks told without alarmism, the solo-female reality, the etiquette that is load-bearing, and the Hindi minimum that changes how people respond.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The scams, and the real risks	47
Solo-female travel, told straight	48
Etiquette: do and do not	49
Emergency numbers + Hindi phrases	50

The scams, and the real risks

commission gifts and overcharging • the road is the real hazard

India is safer than the headlines and more wearing than the brochures. Violent crime against tourists is uncommon. What is constant is a layer of commission scams and overcharging in the tourist zones, plus two genuine hazards the brochures skip: the traffic, and the persistent touts who steer you toward a commission. Know these and you sidestep most of the money lost and most of the harm.

RISK 01

The traffic, the real hazard

Indian roads are chaotic and the accident rate is high. Crossing a busy street and riding a scooter are the things most likely to actually hurt you, not any scam.

The fix: cross slowly and steadily with the flow of locals; never bolt. Avoid renting a scooter without real experience and an IDP, and skip night driving on highways.

SCAM 02

The "it's closed" diversion

A driver or stranger tells you your hotel, the monument, or the train station is "closed", "full" or "flooded", then offers an alternative that pays them a commission.

The fix: trust your own booking and confirm with the hotel directly. Use prepaid taxis or Uber, and never let a driver re-route you to "a better place".

SCAM 03

The gem, carpet, and shop commission

A friendly new "friend" or a driver steers you to a gem, carpet or handicraft shop with a hard sell. The classic is the "export gems for profit" con; you lose thousands.

The fix: never buy to resell, never follow a stranger to a shop, and tell drivers no shop detours. If a deal sounds like free money, it is the scam.

BONUS

The overcharge and the fake guide

Auto fares quoted at triple, a "free" guide at a monument who then demands payment, or a temple "donation" pressed on you at the door.

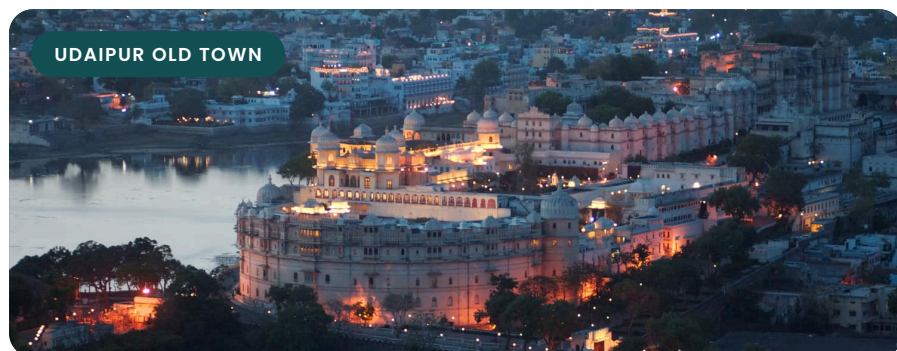
The fix: agree fares first or use the meter and Uber. Hire only official, badged guides, and ignore unsolicited "guides" and donation books at temples.

MORE ON THE SITE

The full safety picture in the [safety breakdown](#), the road rules and IDP details in the [traffic page](#), and the live country picture in the [travel safety map](#).

Solo-female travel, told straight

practical and non-alarmist • the precautions that matter



India needs an honest word on this that the SE-Asia guides do not. Thousands of women travel India solo every year and have the trip of their lives; it is also a country where female travellers face more staring, unwanted attention and occasional harassment than in much of Asia. Both things are true. The point is not to scare anyone off, but to travel informed. The precautions are mostly common sense applied a notch tighter, and they let you relax into the country rather than brace against it.

Dress modestly (shoulders and knees covered, a scarf handy), which markedly reduces attention and respects the culture. Book the first night ahead and arrive in daylight. Use Uber or Ola for tracked, fixed-fare rides, and prefer 2AC or 3AC train berths and women's carriages over crowded general class. Trust your instincts: a firm, loud "no" and walking into a shop or toward a family or a police officer ends most hassle. The South, Kerala, Rishikesh and Udaipur are widely felt to be the easier, calmer regions to start in.

Easier starting regions

Kerala, Rishikesh, Udaipur and the South: calmer, used to solo women, gentler pace.

Transport choices

2AC or 3AC berths and women's carriages; Uber and Ola over street autos at night.

The two helplines

112 for all emergencies, 1091 the women's helpline. Saved before you need them.



A scarf is the most useful item in the bag: head cover for temples, sun and dust protection, and a layer of modesty that eases attention.



Save the 112 emergency number and 1091 women's helpline. Share your live location with someone at home on long journeys.

KEEP READING

The full safety detail in the [safety page](#), what to wear where in the [dress code write-up](#), and the cultural context in the [culture rundown](#).

Etiquette: the short list

first four are load-bearing • last four save you face

Eight things that matter. The first four cause real offense or real trouble if you ignore them; the last four mostly cost you face or money. Everything else is atmosphere.

DO

Remove shoes at temples and homes

Shoes off at the threshold of every temple, gurdwara, mosque and home. Watch where the locals leave theirs and follow.

DO

Eat and give with your right hand

The left hand is considered unclean. Eat, give money, and receive items with the right hand, or both hands together.

DO NOT

Show public affection

Kissing and close embraces in public are frowned on for all couples. Holding hands is fine; keep the rest private.

DO NOT

Photograph people without asking

Always ask before photographing people, especially women, at worship, or at the cremation ghats, where cameras are simply not welcome.

DO

Dress modestly, cover up

Shoulders and knees covered, a scarf for temples and gurdwaras. It eases attention and reads as respect everywhere you go.

DO

Stay calm to get what you want

Raising your voice loses the room. A patient, smiling firmness gets you a better outcome than anger, every single time.

DO

Bargain at markets, not at counters

Haggle at stalls and with auto drivers, never at food joints with fixed prices. Half the first asking price is a fair opening.

DO NOT

Point your feet or touch heads

Feet are unclean; do not point them at people or shrines, or step over someone. The head is respected; do not pat it.



The head-wobble is a yes, or a "sure", or "I hear you". It is not a no. You will be doing it yourself by week two.



Beef is taboo for most Hindus and pork for Muslims. "Non-veg" usually means chicken, mutton or fish; read the room on what to order where.

THE LONG VERSION Religion, traditions and the full etiquette context in the [culture write-up](#), and what to wear where in the [dress code page](#).

Emergency numbers and eight Hindi phrases

save the numbers now • the phrases change how people respond

ALL EMERGENCIES

112

nationwide

POLICE

100

nationwide

AMBULANCE

102

nationwide

WOMEN'S HELPLINE

1091

nationwide

TOURIST HELPLINE

1363

Incredible India, multilingual

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citizen services

EIGHT HINDI PHRASES THAT CHANGE HOW PEOPLE RESPOND		
ENGLISH	HINDI (PHONETIC)	NOTES
Hello / greetings	namaste (nuh-muh-stay)	works any time, with hands together
Thank you	dhanyavaad (dhun-yuh-vaad)	"shukriya" also works
Yes / No	haan / nahin	a firm "nahin" ends most hassle
How much?	kitne ka hai? (kit-nay ka)	essential for markets and autos
Too expensive	bahut mehenga hai	opens the bargaining
Vegetarian / no meat	shaakaahaari / bina maas	"veg" is widely understood too
Where is...?	...kahaan hai? (kuh-haan)	point and ask
Stop here	yahaan rukiye (yuh-haan)	for autos and taxis



Save 112 and your hotel's name and address in your phone before the first night out. A screenshot of the address in Hindi helps drivers.



These same phrases print as a wallet card on page 52; cut it out and keep it with your room key.

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out Hindi and emergency cards for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you	52
Print cards: cut, fold, take	53
Sources and methodology	54
A note on the links	56

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same India data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

India: 25 USD/day backpacker, 180 USD/day comfort.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/budget-calculator/)



Best Time to Travel

Plains best Oct-Mar, Himalaya Jun-Sep. Month-by-month worldwide.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/)



Visa Checker

Your passport's exact India e-Tourist Visa rule and fee.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/visa-checker/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/visa-checker/)



What to Eat and Drink

Dosa from 0.50 USD, thali, biryani: the menu with prices.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/local-food-and-drinks/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/local-food-and-drinks/)

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale • credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

HINDI • ESSENTIALS <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Hello</td> <td>namaste</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Thank you</td> <td>dhanyavaad</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Yes / No</td> <td>haan / nahin</td> </tr> <tr> <td>How much?</td> <td>kitne ka hai?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Too expensive</td> <td>bahut mehenga</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Vegetarian</td> <td>shaakaahaari</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Where is...?</td> <td>kahaan hai?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Stop here</td> <td>yahaan rukiye</td> </tr> </table> pack-lightly.com	Hello	namaste	Thank you	dhanyavaad	Yes / No	haan / nahin	How much?	kitne ka hai?	Too expensive	bahut mehenga	Vegetarian	shaakaahaari	Where is...?	kahaan hai?	Stop here	yahaan rukiye	EMERGENCY • INDIA <table border="0"> <tr> <td>All emergencies</td> <td>112</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Police</td> <td>100</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ambulance</td> <td>102</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Women's helpline</td> <td>1091</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tourist helpline</td> <td>1363</td> </tr> </table> My hotel: _____ Address: _____ Insurance #: _____	All emergencies	112	Police	100	Ambulance	102	Women's helpline	1091	Tourist helpline	1363
Hello	namaste																										
Thank you	dhanyavaad																										
Yes / No	haan / nahin																										
How much?	kitne ka hai?																										
Too expensive	bahut mehenga																										
Vegetarian	shaakaahaari																										
Where is...?	kahaan hai?																										
Stop here	yahaan rukiye																										
All emergencies	112																										
Police	100																										
Ambulance	102																										
Women's helpline	1091																										
Tourist helpline	1363																										

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live India hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/india/



Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the hotel.



Ask reception to write your hotel name and address in Hindi on the back. Auto and taxi drivers read it in one glance.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source

 Wouter van
Kemenade,
Pack Lightly

WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, with research grounded in the live Pack Lightly India cluster of city, route and logistics pages. Performance-marketing background, data-led travel writing. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; if a price moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Hostel and hotel pricing: Booking and Hostelworld snapshot 2026-05-14, across Delhi, Jaipur, Udaipur and Kochi.
2. Currency rates: ECB reference rates, 2026-05-25 (1 USD = ~83 INR).
3. Visa policy: India's official e-visa portal (indianvisaonline.gov.in), fees retrieved 2026-05-15.
4. Rail fares and classes: IRCTC and 12Go snapshots, 2026-05, indicative per route and distance.
5. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last update 2026-04-30.
6. Climate: Open-Meteo 10-year averages across the plains and the Himalaya, captured 2026-05-17.
7. Pack Lightly India cluster pages, retrieved 2026-06-10: [visa](#) · [budget](#) · [safety](#) · [best travel time](#) · [eSIM](#)

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored every six months; the last full re-score ran February 2026. Budget figures come from the live budget-calculator dataset, climate verdicts from the best-travel-time dataset, both stamped with their capture date where they appear.

What changed in edition 2026.06: first release of the India guide on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: December 2026. Not covered in depth here: the Northeast states, Kashmir, a dedicated trekking guide, and full Ladakh road logistics, each of which warrants its own research.

Photo credits. Every photograph is sourced from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons or public-domain license. The full per-image list, with each photographer and license, is on the next page. The cover shows the Taj Mahal. Tour links open live availability on GetYourGuide.

Image credits

every photo, its author and license

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3. **Bengal tiger, Ranthambore.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

4. **Biryani.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

5. **Butter chicken.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

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7. **Ganges, Varanasi.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

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11. **Kerala backwaters.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

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13. **Lake Pichola, Udaipur.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

14. **Leh, Ladakh.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

15. **Living root bridge, Meghalaya.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

16. **Masala dosa.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

17. **Meenakshi Temple, Madurai.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

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19. **Pangong Lake, Ladakh.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

20. **Riverside yoga, Rishikesh.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

21. **Sleeper train carriage.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

22. **Spice market, Old Delhi.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

23. **Spiti Valley in summer.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

24. **Taj Mahal at dawn reflected in.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

25. **Taj Mahal at dawn, Agra.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

26. **Taj Mahal, Agra.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

27. **Thali meal.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

28. **Thali platter.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

29. **Udaipur old town.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, varies.

Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured June 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

disclosure · why this guide is free

This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a transport leg, a tour, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A hotel area or a transport platform is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. An overrated sight is still called overrated, and a cheaper option that beats the famous one keeps the slot. The commission funds the guide, it does not choose for it.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: **Aviasales · Booking.com · 12Go Asia · Saily · Hostelworld · Stay22 · GetYourGuide · via Travelepayouts**



Links can outlive a print run. If one stops working, the live version of every page in this guide sits under pack-lightly.com/india.



This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands December 2026 and replaces this file at the same download.