

Tailor-made **India**

Sri Lanka | Bhutan | Nepal | Maldives





Welcome to TransIndus

Welcome to our new brochure for the Indian Subcontinent!

Since the last one was published, TransIndus has been through a period of sustained growth and development, with a new look to our website and several talented new people added to the team at our HQ in Ealing. Our offerings for each of the five countries covered in the following pages – India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives – have also broadened considerably.

Over the past few years our clients have been asking us more and more to provide experiences that help them deepen their understanding of the countries they visit with us. Which is why, along with a brace of lovely, new places to stay in gorgeous locations, we have included in this brochure ideas for memorable, interactive things to do between all those dreamy landscapes and monuments.

Numerous examples of what I mean featured on a recent journey to the Malabar Coast in northern Kerala, which I undertook with ‘Our Man in Ernakulam’, Sinna, whom many of our regular clients will remember. What a revelation the trip was. In the course of ten days we visited schools where local youngsters were taught Kathakali dance, experienced fabulous masked spirit-possession rituals in village temples, learned how to make a celebratory ‘sadya’ meal with a local chef, and helped haul a fishing boat ashore on a deserted beach. Interacting with local people in such ways left a much more rounded impression of the

region than I’d have gained if I’d spent my afternoons relaxing by the pool (though I did a fair bit of that too, it has to be said!).

Leaf through the pages of this brochure and you’ll find dozens of similarly inspiring experiences on offer across the Indian Subcontinent, ranging from archery lessons in a Bhutanesse village to a cookery workshop in the home of a Bohri family in downtown Mumbai. After a period of political turbulence, we’re also delighted that Sri Lanka is very much open for business again – a fact we celebrate with some special new experiences, such as mask making with a master craftsman and monkey spotting with a primatologist in the ruins of ancient Polonnaruwa!

Thirty years after we sent our first clients to India, the Subcontinent continues to enthrall and astonish – and there really aren’t many places in the world you can say that about these days!

From myself and all the TransIndus team, we wish you happy, enriching travels in 2020 and beyond.

Amrit Singh - MD



Contents

Welcome to TransIndus	2 - 7	Introduction to Sri Lanka	128 - 129
Introduction to India	8 - 9	Colombo & the Cultural Triangle	130 - 135
The Golden Triangle	10 - 21	Kandy & the Hill Country	136 - 141
Rajasthan	22 - 33	Jaffna & the North	142 - 143
Train Travel in India	34 - 35	Sri Lankan Wildlife	144 - 149
North & Central India	36 - 47	Galle & the South Coast	150 - 155
Indian Wildlife	48 - 57	Sri Lanka’s East Coast	156 - 159
Indian Himalayas	58 - 67	Planning your trip to Sri Lanka	160 - 161
East & Northeast India	68 - 81	Maldives	162 - 165
River Cruising in India	82 - 83	Bhutan	166 - 183
West India	84 - 97	Nepal	184 - 203
South India	98 - 111	Family Holidays	204 - 205
Kerala	112 - 125	How to Book	206 - 207
The Andamans	126 - 127	Responsible Travel	208 - 209

Planning Your Holiday

Let's Have a Chat

It all starts with an informal conversation – either over the phone, or face-to-face at our London office – in which we'll gain a sense of your precise requirements. We want to know whether you are dreaming of a cultural trip highlighting historic monuments and the arts, or a nature-based one with wildlife as its focus. If there is a particular hotel that you like the look of, or there is a certain style of accommodation that you prefer, let us know so that we can incorporate this in your holiday. An idea of your budget is important too so that we can provide the best possible holiday experience within what you're willing to spend.

The Itinerary

Once we've spoken, we will put together an itinerary taking into account everything we have discussed. This itinerary will then be refined over the course of further conversations until you're completely happy with every detail of your trip and are ready to book.

Preparing to Travel

Three weeks before you go, we'll send you detailed travel documents, which will include a lot of useful information for your journey. In the days leading up to your departure, we'll be on hand to talk through your trip in greater detail, advising on sightseeing priorities, the best places to eat, shop and experience local culture. We're here to help at every step along the way.

How to Get in Touch

Phone 020 8566 3739

Email enquiries@transindus.com

Address 75 St Mary's Road, Ealing, London W5 5RH

Financial Protection

All our clients are financially protected. When booking with TransIndus, you can rest assured that, should your travel arrangements be disrupted by circumstances beyond your control, you will be looked after.

Flight inclusive holidays are covered by our Air Travel Organiser's License (ATOL 3429) issued by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), while those without flights are protected by our financial bond with the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA V0709). In addition, we are proud members of the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO), whose 'Client's Charter' assures you receive the highest standards of service.



Why Travel With TransIndus

Your Journey. Our Expertise.

The TransIndus team regularly travel to their specialist regions to keep abreast of the latest developments, and are passionate about sharing their discoveries. We understand that our customers place great value on their holidays and we will be with you every step of the way, helping you make the best choices at the planning stage, and ensuring things run smoothly while you're away.

Over 30 Years of Experience

With decades of experience designing journeys and a wealth of travel knowledge and local contacts, we are able to create trips of the highest quality, featuring the most desirable destinations and memorable activities. This expertise, backed by gold-standard customer service, has ensured our company generates satisfaction ratings of 99%. Over half our clients travel more than once with us, or else have been referred by family and friends.

With You on Your Journey

While you are away travelling, a local TransIndus representative will be close by should any queries or problems arise. We'll always include local contact information in your travel documents, and of course, someone at our London office will be contactable 24/7 on a dedicated emergency number.

Flexibility

Travelling tailor-made instead of opting for an off-the-peg tour gives you much greater flexibility. Although every country and subregion has its unmissable highlights, there's rarely a single route around them. You may have specific interests, which you'd like to pursue, or a list of less well-known destinations that you'd like to include. And our team of specialists are here to recommend an itinerary that encompasses all of this and more.

Sound Advice

We want our clients to enjoy not just a revitalizing, inspirational holiday, but return home feeling that they have had a genuine insight into the countries visited. We achieve this by recommending destinations that may not feature in guidebooks and favouring lesser-known gems. If a particular coastal resort has grown too crowded, we'll suggest an alternative and we know the best monuments, nature sanctuaries and lunch stops to include on days of travel.

Smooth Travel

We'll take care of your required international and domestic flights, make all your transport arrangements in advance, and even discuss meal plans with you, so that all you need to do is enjoy your trip.



Essential Travel Information

■ International Flights

We work with a number of airlines to ensure the best possible route for your journey and we will only work with those with a reliable reputation. Where possible we will always suggest using a direct service although indirect flights via the Middle East are also available for those looking to do a stop-over en route. All holiday prices are based on economy class flights, unless requested otherwise, but upgrades are available.

■ Guides & Driver

Chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned cars are our preferred mode of transportation, as they allow you to make more frequent stops along the way – though you may well need to add some domestic flights to cover longer distances on your itinerary. All the holidays we arrange are accompanied by a knowledgeable, qualified English-speaking local guide, who will be available to you 24/7.

■ Food

Discovering regional specialities is one of the great joys of travelling around Asia, and there is a great diversity across the Indian Subcontinent. Whether it be the refined Mughlai cuisine in north India or delicate coconut-based, fresh seafood dishes in the south, we encourage you to sample authentic local food wherever possible. All our recommended local restaurants are tried and tested. If you have particular dietary requirements or suffer from an allergy of any sort, do let us know so that we can ensure hotels and restaurants cater for you.



■ Accommodation

Finding great places for our clients to stay is at the heart of what we do and we go to great lengths to find the loveliest hotels and guest houses. Landmark luxury hotels, particularly those with a colonial-era pedigree, are perennial favourites among our clients, but we also favour smaller heritage and boutique properties, and if a new hotel opens, our team will know if it's worth staying there and which its best rooms are.

We check the quality of every property to ensure they meet our exacting standards for cleanliness, service delivery, health and safety. In remote regions and destinations where tourism is still in its infancy, availability of rooms can be limited but we nevertheless endeavour to always use the best accommodation available.

Throughout this brochure, we've highlighted hotels and guest houses that stand out from the crowd, offer exceptional service and represent great value for money. More of our preferred accommodation options appear on our website.



■ Passport & Visa Information

All travellers are required to hold a passport valid for at least six months after the return date of their trip. It should also be endorsed with all the visas required for your journey and it is solely the traveller's responsibility to obtain correct visas for travel. Your TransIndus consultant will provide you with the relevant information required for you to obtain your visa and Travcour is our preferred partner for all visa-related services. They will be able to assist you with the application process if you need. Visit www.travcour.com for more information.

■ Travel Insurance

All travellers are required to take out a comprehensive travel insurance policy providing financial protection from the time of your booking to the end of the holiday, including the journey to and from your destination. If you need help obtaining cover you can contact Holiday Extras, our insurance partners, on their free UK helpline at 0800 093 1900 quoting reference TRANSINDUS for a quotation. Please note: TransIndus is not responsible in any respect if you fail to arrange appropriate cover for your entire holiday.



■ Fitness to Travel & Special Requirements

All sightseeing excursions and transfers require some walking over short distances on easy ground. Monuments, places of interest and ancient sites may include more walking, occasionally on uneven ground or inclines. While most of the Indian Subcontinent is very accessible and a great deal of assistance can be sought, it is essential that you advise us of any mobility limitations in walking or of any special requirements so we can advise you correctly and help you choose the right holiday.

■ Health Advice

It is advisable to check if there are any recommended vaccinations for your destination. Please consult your doctor at least six weeks prior to departure, and bear in mind that some vaccinations require several doses for effective cover. Information is also available online at www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk.

■ Foreign Office Travel Advice

The FCO monitors safety and security issues all over the world and offers guidance to travellers via their website: www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice. We follow the FCO advice and may have to re-route, cancel or postpone certain trips to comply with their recommendations. If we are forced to make changes to your itinerary or cancel the visit altogether we will contact you to discuss options.

■ World Travel & Cultural Differences

Local culture, lifestyle, attitudes and infrastructure in your chosen destination may be very different from what you are used to at home. Most of us travel precisely to experience these differences, but even so, they can sometimes create inconvenience, especially if they impact your travel arrangements. We therefore suggest that if anything should not go strictly to plan on your trip, you try to keep an open mind, make allowances for cultural differences and seek assistance from our local representatives, who are ideally placed to resolve any concerns you may have.



India

India has enthralled travellers for thousands of years and its modern incarnation, home to nearly one fifth of the world’s people, remains a country of incomparable fascination. Where else is it possible to attend mass bathing rituals at sunrise performed to verses composed at the time Stonehenge was still in use? Or listen to sitar music on a palace rooftop before wandering around a Mughal tomb garden in the moonlight? Every day in India can yield memories that will last a lifetime. You just need to know where to find them. Which is where we come in.

Whether you’re travelling to India for the first time or as a seasoned veteran, the main challenge with a country on such a vast scale is deciding where to start. The answer depends on what kind of trip you have in mind, of course. But roughly speaking, if this is your first visit you’ll probably be setting your sights on one of two regions: either the Golden Triangle of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur; or Kerala and the historic highlights of neighbouring Tamil Nadu in the far south.

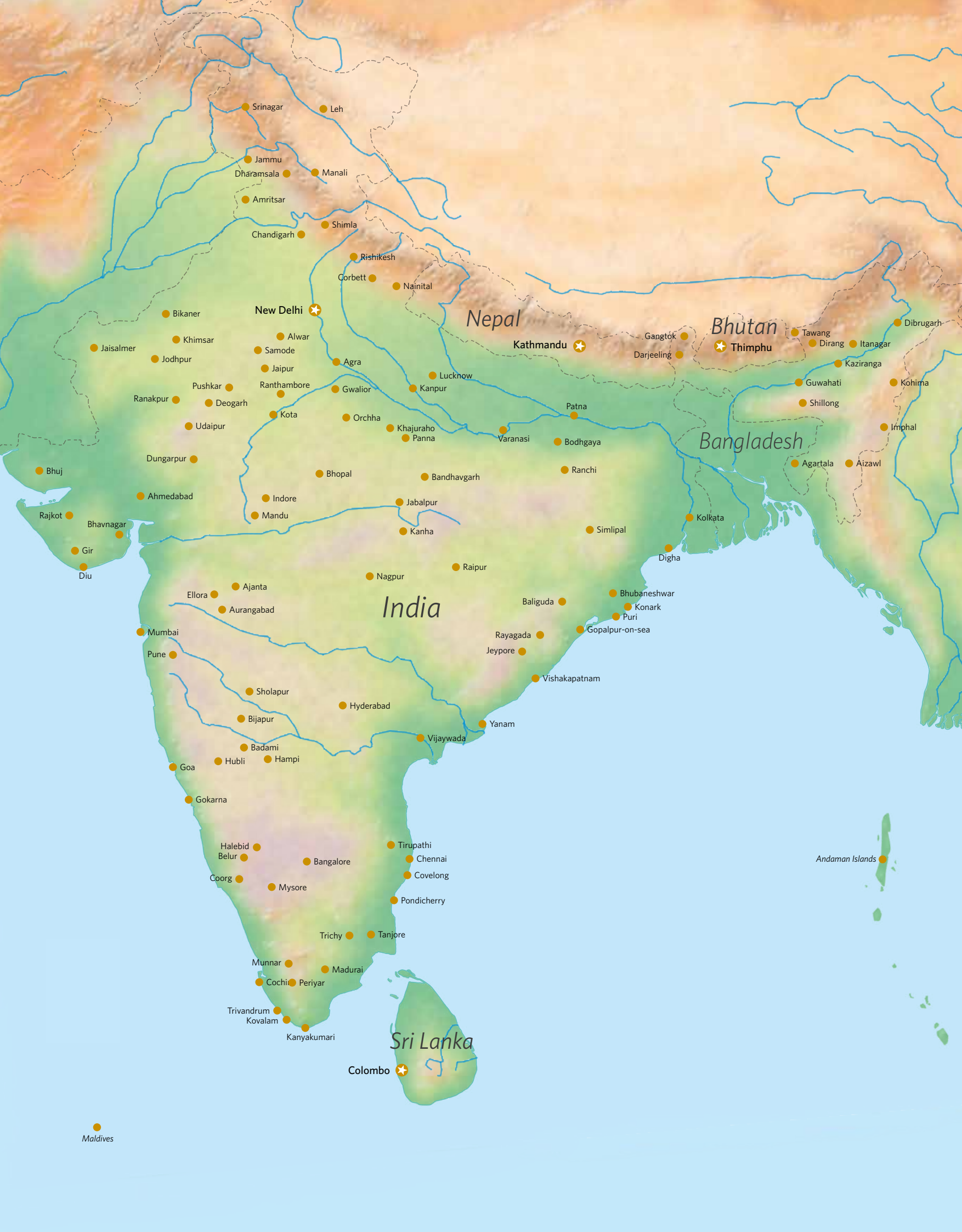
TransIndus tours to India cover both these popular regions in depth, and pretty much everything in between and beyond, with routes winding into some of the least visited corners of the country.

One of the main things that distinguishes our trips is the emphasis we place on quality of experience. At TransIndus, we never merely rely on local guides to plan your days. Instead, our experts in London will help you design each stage of the holiday, suggesting the best things to see and do according to your personal preferences. Having spent three decades exploring the country, our team know it inside

out. Whatever your interests – whether wildlife, textiles, music or food – we’ll ensure you and whoever you are travelling with find inspiration at every turn.

To give a sense of what you might expect, we’ve set out some examples in the following pages of the kind of experiences we often recommend. Our aim is two-fold: to inspire and provide insight into local life. So as well as the famous landmarks, we might suggest a visit to a little-known marigold market or temple workshop where deities are fashioned from clay, or an evening performance of classical dance somewhere atmospheric.

We’ve also showcased some of our favourite properties in India – places we think define the TransIndus experience, from Himalayan tea bungalows to Rajput lake palaces, jungle lodges and former royal hunting camps. And, finally, in our suggested itineraries sections, you’ll find ideas on tried-and-tested routes we often use as starting points for designing our award-winning tailor-made journeys.

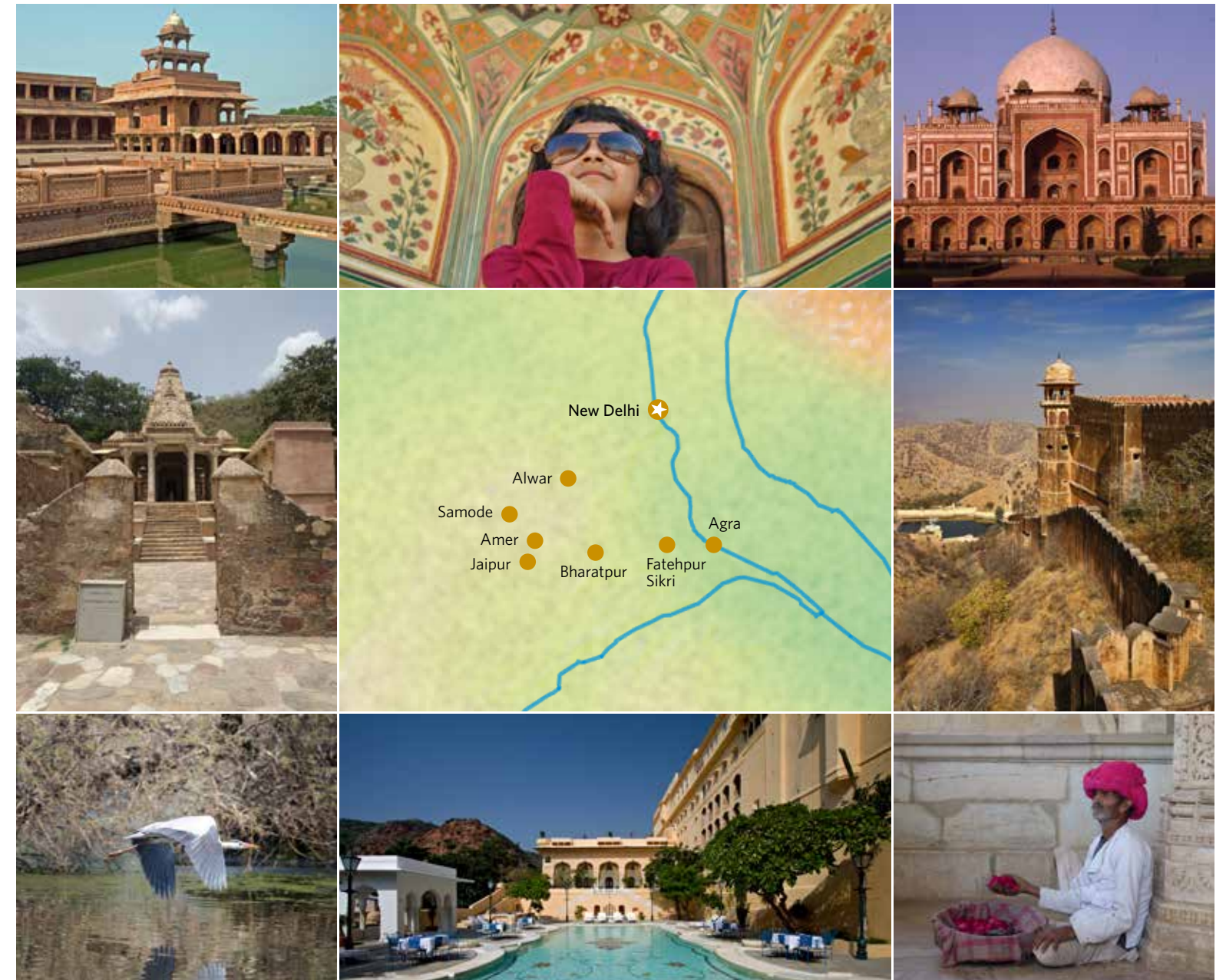




The Golden Triangle

The cities of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur in north India form the three main points of a route often referred to as 'the Golden Triangle' – as much for its wealth of historic monuments as its enduring popularity with visitors. For centuries the hub of the Mughal Empire, the region holds the country's most splendid forts, palaces and tombs, including the Taj Mahal, and offers a broad spectrum of different cultural experiences, reflecting India's complex mix of religious and ethnic traditions.

The arts and crafts remain particularly vibrant in this region, where for centuries royal courts maintained ateliers dedicated to various decorative traditions, as well as music, dance, calligraphy and miniature painting – all of which continue to thrive. In short, if this is your first trip, the Golden Triangle will probably form the backbone of your journey, although numerous extensions are well worth considering – to hidden palaces, heritage hotels and into the forests of Rajasthan to see a tiger in the wild.



Highlights of the Golden Triangle

New Delhi

The remnants of seven cities survive in the capital, among them Shah Jahan's magnificent Jama Masjid Mosque and Red Fort.

Agra

This city on the banks of the Yamuna River was at one time the Mughal capital and retains some of Asia's most spellbinding buildings (including the Taj Mahal).

Jaipur

Explore the famous City Palace, colourful textile bazaar and jewellery markets of Maharajah Jai Singh's lavish capital, painted in an earthy pink hue.

Alwar

With wonderful 18th-century Rajput palaces and onion-domed cenotaphs, this town in northern Rajasthan is one of our favourite off-track destinations.

Samode

Hidden in the hills between Delhi and Jaipur is this fairy-tale palace, now run as a luxury heritage hotel – a romantic base for rural adventures.

Amer

The ochre walls of Rajasthan's most beautiful fortress-palaces are an astounding spectacle, but the ornate interiors are what really captivate here.

Bharatpur

This former royal hunting reserve is nowadays India's most famous bird reserve, hosting hundreds of exotic species. Safaris are conducted on foot or by bicycle.

Fatehpur Sikri

The Mughal Emperor Akbar built his lavish palace complex on a hill outside Agra as a symbol of his dynasty's wealth and power, and it still makes an impact.



Delhi

Delhi is one of the longest continually inhabited cities in the world, with a history spanning 3,500 years, which makes it a particularly fascinating one to explore for anyone with a feel for history and culture. The remains of seven great urban centres survive on the banks of the Yamuna River here, and their vestiges form an evocative backdrop to modern life: Afghan mausolea crumble on traffic roundabouts; millennia-old fort walls stand next to eight-lane expressways; and medieval Sufi shrines huddle beside multi-storey shopping malls.

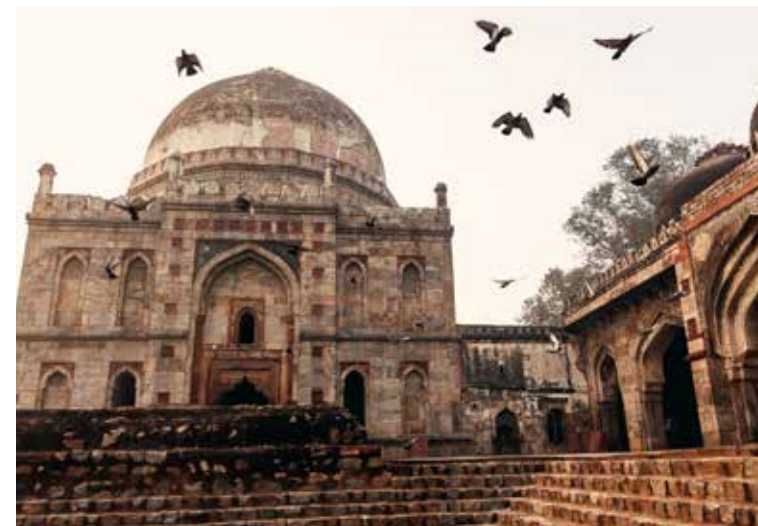
Whether this is your first or fifth visit to India, you'll find great inspiration in our carefully tailored tours of the capital, which take in its less well known monuments, markets and old Mughal-era core as well the grandiloquent buildings of the Mughals and British Raj.

The most evocative of them is the Jama Masjid, the 'Friday Mosque' constructed by the Emperor Shah Jahan in Old Delhi. Climb one of its minarets for a matchless view over the surrounding roovescape to the ramparts of the Red Fort. Evenings may be spent enjoying recitals of Kathak dance in an old haveli, souvenir hunting in the backstreets of Hauz Khas, or dining in some of India's most sophisticated Mughlai restaurants. Whatever your particular interest, our consultants will have plenty of great suggestions.



Explore Old Delhi on a Walking Tour

Explore the warrenous streets of the former Mughal capital, 'Old Delhi', in the company of a local history buff. Conducted by cycle rickshaw and on foot, our tours can last a few hours or a full day. They always start with a chat over tea in which your guide will quiz you on your interests. Whether you choose to track down the last surviving Mughal-era mansions, watch Friday prayers at a mosque from the rooftop of a spice market, or visit traditional silver smiths at work on Chandni Chowk, your explorations of the old quarter will yield vivid insights into everyday life in the Indian capital.



Discover the Tombs of South Delhi

Amid the prosperous neighbourhoods of south Delhi are scattered vestiges of several former capitals, spanning over 3,000 years of Indian history. Most conspicuous among them are the tombs of the country's first Islamic rulers, which range from the magnificent, red-and-white mausoleum of Mughal Emperor Humayun to the splendour of the Lodi Garden. Most jaw-dropping of all is the Q'tub Minar, a giant, tapering pillar of victory dating from 1182AD. A perfect pitstop on your tour is the 13th-century Hauz Khas complex, home to a bumper crop of trendy boutiques, art galleries and antique emporia.



Browse the National Museum of Delhi

Delhi's National Museum houses the finest collection of antiquities in the country. The prehistory section, which displays famous treasures from the Indus Valley Civilization, is worth the ticket price alone. Elsewhere, you can marvel at a bumper crop of ancient temple sculpture, a whole gallery devoted to exquisite gold and silver jewellery across the ages, plus exhibitions of manuscripts, weapons and coins. The adjacent Museum of Modern Art is where you'll find the world's most extensive arrays of Mughal miniatures and so-called 'Company' paintings dating from the early British era.

Watch Kathak in the Courtyard

Back in pre-colonial times it was common for Delhi's Mughal aristocrats and wealthy merchants to host recitals of Urdu poetry, music and dance in the courtyards of their mansions, or 'havelis'. You can sample the magic of these bygone 'mehfils' at a beautifully restored heritage hotel called Dharampura Haveli in the lanes of Old Delhi, where performances of traditional Kathak are staged three nights each week by dancers in swirling pleated skirts and glittering jewellery. Watch the show over a candle-lit meal in the ground-floor restaurant, or from one of the balconies above – a magical experience.

Prayers at the Gurudwara Bangla Sahib

The gilded domes of the Gurudwara Bangla Sahib dominate the skyline to the west of Connaught Circus, New Delhi's commercial core. In contrast to the hubbub of the nearby shopping malls, an atmosphere of devotion and spirituality prevails inside this marble-lined complex – the principal place of worship for the capital's Sikh population – making it an ideal acclimatiser if it's your first day in India. Join the worshippers filing past the central shrine to the shimmering waters of the great Sarovar tank behind, followed by a complementary lunch of dal and chapatis in the temple canteen, or 'langar'.



Agra

Sprawling across the banks of the Yamuna River, Agra served as the imperial capital of the Mughals in the 17th century and retains a wonderful collection of buildings from the era, including, of course, the Taj Mahal. Most visitors see little more of the city than the beautiful marble tomb, but it's a mistake to rush off. Hidden in the backstreets of its old walled city are some of north India's most atmospheric markets, Indo-Islamic buildings and colonial monuments, including Asia's oldest European cemetery. Here are some of our favourite experiences and activities in the former capital of Mughal India.



View the Taj Mahal

Agra's heart-stopping centrepiece needs little introduction. Rising from the southeast fringes of the city like a vision of heaven, the Taj Mahal is, quite simply, the world's most ethereal building. In over 30 years of creating holidays for people, we've never heard of anyone who wasn't enthralled by their first glimpse of it. That said, Shah Jehan's architectural masterpiece has become a victim of its own popularity in recent decades, which is why our consultants take great care when scheduling visits.

Our first tip is to visit early in the mornings, when the light is soft and atmospheric. As a rule of thumb we prefer the East Gate as its approaches are marginally less cluttered and the crowds thinner. Moonlight has a transformative effect on the white marble surfaces of the building, and the complex is open for two days before and after the full moon. Special tickets have to be procured (we'll take care of that for you).

It's also worth setting aside time to view the tomb from outside its gardens. We recommend two sites. The first, the Mehtab Bagh, on the opposite side of the Yamuna River, which has a view of the tomb facing the rising sun. The second viewpoint, a domed pavilion to the south, forms part of a ruined mansion and is the perfect spot for sunset.

Discover Forgotten Agra

Agra's beautiful Jama Masjid stands in the heart of the old city, neglected among a chaos of railway overbridges and cluttered bazaars. Foreign visitors are a rarity, yet the building, which is adorned with geometric designs of marble-inlaid sandstone, numbers among the most elegant and exotic in the country. More splendid still is the tomb of Mughal Emperor Akbar, on the northern outskirts of the city at Sikandra, which rises from 119 hectares of leafy, green parkland, where langur monkeys and black-buck antelope roam wild, like scenes from a Mughal miniature painting.

Cycle Around Local Villages

A network of sandy lanes winds through the mustard fields, orchards and farming hamlets outside Agra – ideal for leisurely explorations by bicycle and the perfect antidote to the traffic of the city centre. Most tours start shortly after sunrise, when a carpet of woodsmoke from cooking fires lingers over the villages. Join local people as they prepare meals on traditional clay stoves, milk buffalo, and work in the fields. You might also visit a school, a wrestling gym or pottery workshop, depending on your interests. Most of our cycle rides end with a spectacular view of the Taj.

Shop at the Bazaar

Hundreds of dealers descend at first light on Agra's wholesale flower market, tipping huge piles of marigolds, roses and lotus flowers into vibrant heaps – a superb photo opportunity. A trip to the densely packed bazaar district nearby is also a must. You'll see stalls specializing in necklaces made of bank notes (used as wedding gifts), a street given over to marble deities, and an auction devoted solely to the sale of betel leaves. Many past clients have told us they regard the hours spent wandering around these jam-packed lanes as the highlight of their entire trip.



Enjoy a Kabooter Safari

Pigeons – 'kabooters' in Urdu – are an obsession in India's former Muslim cities. Unlike in the UK, here the birds are flown in flocks, with their owners controlling their movements in the sky with shouts, whistles and waves of rags tied to canes. An early start is required, but the spectacle of Agra's kabooters wheeling over the rooftops beside the Taj is something really special. Your guide will act as interpreter, enabling the pigeon master – or 'kabooter baz' – to explain how neighbours compete to drive each others' flocks to ground, and then charge ransoms to return them!





Jaipur

The capital of Rajasthan, Jaipur, has a markedly different feel from the other two corners of the so-called 'Golden Triangle'. The traffic is no less intense, but amid the chaos of its walled Old City still wander the odd painted elephant and camel cart, driven by men in vibrant turbans with handle-bar moustaches. The architecture is spectacularly flamboyant, too. Set in an orderly grid plan by Maharaja Jai Singh II in 1727, the buildings here are painted a regulation salmon-pink colour, forming a striking backdrop for markets crammed with tie-dye cloth and mirror-inlaid patchwork quilts. While they were attending court, the region's princes and other wealthy landowners used to reside in beautiful courtyard mansions, or 'havelis'.

Many of these delightful period buildings survive in the city's antique core and have been converted into beguiling heritage hotels, where you can while away the hot afternoons by the poolside or recline in a window seat, surrounded by delicate cusp arches and onion-domed cupolas.

Today, as in centuries past, Jai Singh's palace forms Jaipur's principal focal point for visitors. The complex is beautifully maintained and includes a series of interlocking museums displaying royal treasures, as well as the iconic Hawa Mahal ('Palaces of Winds'), a richly ornamented façade of stucco and pierced-stone 'jali' windows from which the women of the royal household used to watch goings on in the bazaars below.



It can be tempting, once you've ticked off the big sights, to move on promptly from Jaipur. But if you do you'll be missing out on some unique experiences, including the chance to explore India's most sumptuously decorated fortress-palace, as well as the fascinating, warrenous bazaars of the old city. Here are just four great things to do in Jaipur which have proved popular with past clients.



Go Jewellery Shopping at the Bazaar

Jaipur is one of India's most renowned shopping hubs, known above all else for its jewellery. The bulk of the world's semi-precious stones are cut and polished here and your guide will know the best emporia to look for them: choose from a dazzling array of lapis lazuli, amber, emeralds, rubies, sapphires and aquamarine, and have them set in silver or platinum for collection the next day. The Pink City is also a good place to buy fine-quality, hand-printed calicos and other textiles, as well as richly decorated, Mughal-style silk rugs and pashmina shawls woven in Kashmir.



Explore the Old City on a Walking Tour

There's really no better way to get a sense of local life in the Rajasthani capital than a walking tour of the old city. We always recommend starting at first light, with a visit to a typical Jaipuri tea shop for chai and hot 'jalebis'. Then follow your guide to see gem cutters, jewellers, perfumers, flower vendors and sweet makers beginning their day, pausing at a local Hindu shrine or two along the way (there are an estimated 2,000 temples crammed into the Pink City). Secret rooftop viewpoints yield some great views of famous landmarks, such as the Jantar Mantar and Hawa Mahal.

Visit Amber Fort and the Stepwell

Rising from a craggy escarpment to the north of the city, Amber is the 'Jewel in the Crown' of Rajput fortress-palaces, enclosing a wonderland of sumptuously decorated halls, pavilions, ornamental entranceways and gardens, all enlivened by intricate mirrorwork and mosaic. Tours generally last around one hour. Before leaving the area, our guides also encourage clients to explore the village below the fort, where a beautiful old stepwell offers a worthwhile detour. Nearby stands Anokhi's Museum of Hand Printing, where you can admire fine antique fabrics and watch block printers in action.

Glamp with Elephants

A handful of rescue centres have recently been created near Jaipur to care for the elephants who used to carry visitors around the city's monuments. The best of them, in our opinion, is Dera Amer, where the animals have two-hundred acres of wilderness to roam about. A dozen luxury hunting tents provide the perfect base from which to explore the surrounding forest and villages, which can be done in the company of resident pachyderms, Laxmi and Rangmala, who were adopted from the Amber Fort herd. Spend the night here, and you can bathe them in the river just after sunrise.



Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra

The Golden Triangle: Places to Stay

Ranging from international-grade five stars to opulent Rajput palaces and suave Art Deco town houses, luxury accommodation is plentiful throughout this region. It's even possible to bag a room with a view of the Taj Mahal from the bathtub (if you book early enough). Some of our all-time favourite properties lie short detours off the well-trodden route around the Golden Triangle, hidden in the rocky Aravalli Hills outside Jaipur, or tucked away in the backlanes of Old Delhi.



The Grand Imperial Hotel, Agra

As its name implies, the Grand Imperial served as the city's top hotel in colonial times, accommodating heads of state and visiting dignitaries. Today it's a more modest four star, but we love it for the old-world atmosphere of its whitewashed arcaded verandahs and lawned garden. Retaining their original Arhangudi tiled floors, the rooms are large and comfortable, with repro antique furniture to accentuate the period feel. Service is excellent, and there are nightly performances of puppetry and music in the garden.



Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra

Located just six-hundred metres from the Taj Mahal, the Amarvilas enjoys the finest views of the tomb of any hotel in Agra. You can gaze at the fabled white domes and minarets from all the rooms, as well as the lobby, lounge and bar. From the outside, it resembles a miniature Moroccan palace, with a colonnaded entrance of Moorish arches and fountains. To the rear, terraced lawns, reflection ponds and pillared pavilions frame a spectacular pool, which looks especially beautiful lit up after dark.



The Imperial, New Delhi

Dating from the twilight of the British Raj, the Imperial was intended to be among the world's grandest hotels – a position it has retained ever since its gala opening in 1931. From the minute you pull up to its colonial Art Deco façade, the impression is one of old-world elegance. Cream walls offset by Burmese teak dominate the interior, where staff in gold epaulettes breeze over floors of gleaming Italian marble, beneath sparkling chandeliers. The rooms are plush without being showy and the courtyard pool is a welcome haven from the brouhaha of the nearby shopping district.



Haveli Dharampura, Old Delhi

Dharampura Haveli is unique for being the only bona fide luxury heritage hotel in the former Mughal capital, Old Delhi, offering a wonderfully atmospheric base in the heart of the city. Screened from the hubbub of the surrounding streets by thick stone walls, the mansion is surprisingly quiet once you are inside its cusp-arched gateway. The rooms are spacious and decorated in Indian boutique style. Outside, pillared galleries enfolding a central courtyard lead to a roof terrace where you can enjoy a sundowner with a glorious view of the Jama Masjid's domes and minarets.



Royal Heritage Haveli, Jaipur

When it was built in the late-18th century, this elegant former hunting lodge stood amid acacia scrub on the outskirts of Jaipur. It has long since been absorbed into the city's fringes, but still retains the feel of a serene oasis. The 19 suites are palatial, and have had a recent revamp with extensive use of traditional motifs and materials. We love the stylish cocktail bar, and the top notch courtyard spa. Relax in the afternoon by the garden pool, surrounded by salmon-coloured sandstone, or play a round of croquet on the lawn. Meals are served al fresco on a raised terrace.



Rambagh Palace, Jaipur

Lord Louis Mountbatten, Jaqueline Kennedy and Princess Diana are among the VIPs who've enjoyed the charms of the Rambagh Palace, one of the world's most spectacular hotels. The building and its interiors were designed to dazzle and they still do, from the moment you step in the entrance, when turbaned doormen shower you with rose petals. Highlights include the arched ground floor verandah, where guests sip cocktails while gazing through carved marble pillars to the gardens and the exquisite indoor pool, encrusted with elaborate stained glass and stencilled murals.

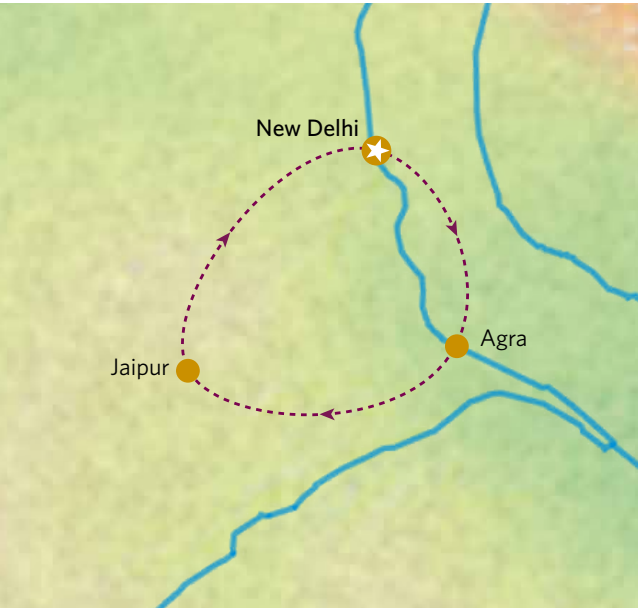


The Golden Triangle | 9 days



This tour is a true introduction to India. Visit the capital city, Delhi, India's most iconic building, the Taj Mahal and the Pink City of Jaipur.

Day 1 Fly overnight to Delhi. **Day 2** Transfer to your hotel for a two night stay. Spend the afternoon relaxing or choose from one of our suggested experiences. **Day 3** Enjoy a full day's sightseeing of Old and New Delhi. **Day 4** Drive to Agra for an overnight stay. Visit the Taj Mahal at sunset. **Day 5** Drive to the former palace, Fatehpur Sikri, then on to Jaipur for three nights. **Day 6** Full day sightseeing of Jaipur including the Amber Fort, Hawa Mahal, Janta Mantar Observatory and the City Palace Museum. **Day 7** Spend the day enjoying one of the many experiences available in Jaipur, or relaxing before your journey home. **Day 8** Drive to Delhi this afternoon for an overnight stay at an airport hotel. **Day 9** Transfer to the airport for your flight home.



Planning Your Trip: The Golden Triangle

A typical tour of India's Golden Triangle region takes around ten days. In that time you can expect to tick off the highlights, but not much more. Extend your holiday by a few nights and a detour for a tiger safari or a stay somewhere rural becomes feasible. With three weeks to spare, it's possible to explore parts of neighbouring Rajasthan, visit Varanasi on the Ganges River or fly south to end your holiday in style on the beaches of Goa or Kerala.

As well as suggesting the most rewarding route, our team of India specialists will also help identify the best hotels for your budget and make all the necessary travel arrangements on your behalf, from airport pickups to booking that spa session you've been dreaming of.

When to Go

The best time to visit India's Golden Triangle, from the point of view of weather, is between October and March, when temperatures and humidity levels are ideal for sightseeing. From April, the heat starts to build and by May becomes oppressive as the monsoon season approaches. The rains erupt in earnest around mid- to late-June and last through September – a time of abundant greenery and cloudy skies with occasional bursts of rain and sunshine.

Suggested Itineraries

The following tried-and-tested itinerary is the classic Golden Triangle itinerary, which can be done on its own as a complete trip or serve as a starting point for your trip planning. We have also made some suggestions as to what works well in combination with the Golden Triangle, should you wish to travel further. Nothing however is fixed and our consultants will have lots of suggestions for easy detours to other parts of the country should you wish to extend your tour elsewhere.

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	14	16	23	28	34	34	32	30	29	26	20	16
Rainfall mm	23	18	13	8	13	74	180	173	117	10	3	10
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●

●● Best time to travel

● Good time to travel

● Low season

Tigers of Ranthambore (Pages 50-51)



Rajasthan, Land of Kings (Pages 22-33)



Kerala Backwaters and Beaches (Pages 112-125)



Beaches of Goa (Pages 96-97)



Shimla, Summer Capital of the Raj (Page 60)



Amritsar & the Golden Temple (Pages 38-39)





Rajasthan

Picture a Rajput palace, its ochre-washed walls rising sheer from a sandstone outcrop to apartments encrusted with domed cupolas. Now imagine gazing from one of the courtyards hidden within it to a horizon of scrub hills and dried riverbeds. It's a vision you could encounter a hundred times or more in Rajasthan. Nowhere else in the country boasts such flamboyant architecture. Traditional dress is more prevalent here too than most other regions, with the men wearing bulky turbans dyed vibrant colours, and the women decked from head to toe in embroidered textiles and heavy silver jewellery.

Couple all this with world-class heritage accommodation in converted royal palaces, and you'll understand why Rajasthan offers the perfect recipe for a memorable holiday. Our itineraries will guide you through the state's highlights, from its salmon-coloured capital, Jaipur, to the majestic lake city of Udaipur, via some lesser known gems where you can gain a taste of off-track, rural Rajasthan as few visitors experience it.



Highlights of Rajasthan

Jodhpur

A contender for India's most dramatic view is the one over the blue mosaic of Jodhpur's old city from the towering fortress-palace of Mehrangarh.

Jaisalmer

Rajasthan's dreamy desert citadel emerges from the sand flats like a vision from the Arabian Nights – perfect for rooftop music recitals and star gazing.

Udaipur

Watch the transformative effect of the fading light on the delicately domed palaces and havelis of the Sisodia dynasty, as the sun sets over serene Pichola Lake.

Nagaur

This market town on the edge of the Thar Desert is dominated by a well preserved fort made of richly carved red sandstone – now a chic boutique hotel.

Jawai

Nowhere else in India has a population of wild leopards as large as this corner of southern Rajasthan, dominated by granite boulder hills of surreal beauty.

Ranthambore

Glimpse wild tigers prowling around remnants of a Rajput hunting reserve, dominated by a tumbledown medieval fort.

Ajmer

Baskets of fragrant rose petals, clouds of incense and live Qawwali (devotional music) create a memorable atmosphere at India's most venerated Sufi tomb.

Deogarh

Immerse yourself in the extraordinary sights and culture of a deeply rural part of the state at one of our favourite places to stay in all of India.



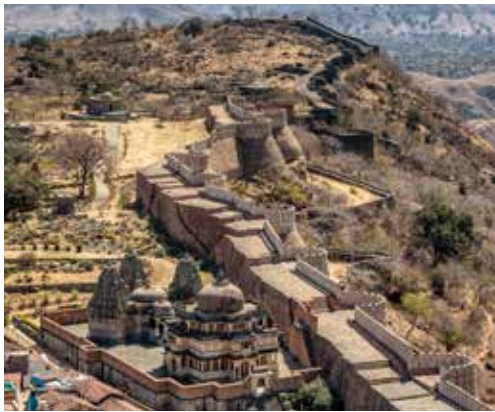
Udaipur

Spread around the shores of shimmering Lake Pichola, Udaipur is the dreamiest of Rajasthan’s cities. Its skyline of whitewashed havelis and temple towers, rising to the ochre domes of the Sisodia dynasty’s exquisite palace, is one of the most recognisable in Asia, while the sunset views across the water and pleasure pavilions on the lake are justifiably the stuff of legends. Visitors tend to divide their time between explorations of the warrenous old quarter and tours of the palace museum, with its richly ornamented mahals and superb collection of royal treasures. Spend an extra day here, and you can delve more deeply into traditional markets and local neighbourhoods, or venture out to experience the monuments and wonderful vistas of the Aravalli Hills.



Udaipur Walking Tour

Experience a hidden, more authentic side to the city on our popular walking tour. It starts at Gangaur Ghat’s ornately carved Hindu shrines, and from there winds through the temples, stepwells and narrow bazaars of the old city to a traditional haveli where you’ll pause for tea and samosas in a family home decorated with centuries-old murals. Later, try your hand at pot making and shop for embroidered camel leather shoes and jewellery in the silversmiths’ quarter.



Trekking India’s ‘Great Wall’

Crowning a pinnacle in the Aravalli Mountains, Kumbalgarh is the loftiest of the region’s many fortress-palaces. Its ramparts undulate for 25km around the edge of a rocky plateau, resembling the China’s Great Wall. The walk around them is a must for anyone who enjoys a lung-stretching trek and exotic scenery. You’ll be accompanied throughout by a local Bhil guide, who knows the wood-cutters trails around some of the hilltop’s remote ruined temples – idyllic picnic spots.



Tea on the Lake

Jag Mandir is one of two whitewashed island palaces seemingly afloat on Lake Pichola. It was built by the royal family in the 17th century as a summer retreat and once accommodated Shah Jahan, the Mughal Emperor responsible for the Taj Mahal, while he and his family were in exile. Travel out there by launch for high tea, when the afternoon heat has subsided and the views across the water to Udaipur’s magnificent waterfront are at their most magical.



Jodphur

Capital of the former Kingdom of Marwar, Jodhpur is dominated by the profile of India’s most fabulous fortress-palace – Mehrangarh, which sits at the top of a dramatic escarpment overlooking a sea of blue-painted houses. The colour is said to denote the homes of local Brahmins though it actually derives from attempts to discourage termites by adding copper sulphate to limewash. Whatever its roots, the custom has created a unique spectacle, one best appreciated from the royal apartments of Mehrangarh, whose ‘jarokha’ balconies and finely scalloped windows frame wonderful views of the cobalt chequerboard below. Here are three great experiences you might consider while you’re visiting the region, as recommended by our specialist India consultants.



A Day with the Raika

For thousands of years, Raika herders have migrated across the plains of Rajasthan with their livestock. We’ve teamed up with a local NGO to offer a unique, immersive experience of their disappearing way of life. Visit the homes of local families, joining them as they milk their animals. Joanna Lumley greatly enjoyed her stay at the centre when she visited. Profits go towards a camel milk dairy designed to provide a sustainable livelihood for Raika villagers.



Ultimate view of the Blue City

There’s no better time to savour the extraordinary spectacle of Jodhpur’s skyline than just after sunrise. Your guide will lead you through the eerily silent bazaar district and up a winding path to a temple dedicated to the God Balaji, which clings to a spur of rock just below the fort. Its terrace affords what must surely rank among Asia’s greatest panoramas, encompassing a 360-degrees view over the oldest, most colourful quarter of the blue city.



Horse riding in Rajasthan

Riding a thoroughbred Marwari horse over the desert outside Jodhpur is one of the most memorable ways to explore this unique corner of India. We offer a full equestrian program to clients, from hour-long hacks to fully fledged, six-night expeditions taking in traditional desert villages, remote forts and picturesque tracts of the Thar Desert. You’ll sleep in Rajasthani hunting tents and will be treated like royalty, while the horses themselves are among the finest in the country.

Festivals in Rajasthan

Whenever you travel in Rajasthan, chances are your trip will coincide with at least a couple of local festivals. Whether revolving around local temple deities or nation-wide events celebrated the length and breadth of the country, they'll definitely provide some of the most memorable moments of your holiday. Here are some of our favourites:



Into the Thar

To the west of Jodhpur stretch the scrub flats and dunes of the Great Indian Desert, aka 'Marusthali', or 'Thar' for short. The oasis towns of Osian and Bikaner provide atmospheric stopovers on the journey west, their finely carved temples and palaces bearing witness to the riches that once poured through on the old silk route to Persia. When this trade artery was severed by Partition in 1947, the most remarkable of all India's former caravan towns was marooned in a sea of yellow sand: Jaisalmer's chimeric citadel, exquisitely carved havelis and extraordinary desert views these days entice a new kind of traveller west – one seeking an experience of the Thar itself.



Desert Glamping

In times past, those hardy souls who undertook the journey across the Thar Desert used to overnight on the cold sand with their camels for company. Now travellers can sleep in a style fit for a Maharaja in regal hunting tents and dine on gourmet cuisine. The camps we use have the highest standards of design and service: expect majestic Mughal tents with gorgeous interiors, shimmering turquoise plunge pools and romantic candle-lit suppers under star-filled skies.



Tour of Jaisalmer Fort

Surrounded by 99 barrel-shaped bastions, Jaisalmer's golden fort encloses a medieval town of richly carved mansions and temples, all made from the same honey-coloured sandstone. Unlike most such citadels in India, this one is still very much inhabited, seemingly by as many stray cows as people. Your guide will lead you through narrow, winding alleyways to hidden Jain and Hindu shrines, pointing out ornately carved jharokha balconies and the mansions of former merchants.



Sundowner Safaris

One of the most civilized ways to savour the distinctive atmosphere of the desert is to travel off-road – either by Jeep or on camel back – to a remote hilltop or dune. Here your hosts will have set up tables and chairs, and perhaps a small bar on the tailgate of a 4WD, from which you'll be served a long, cool drink as the sun sets. As the first stars appear, blankets will be distributed for the journey back under darkening, opalescent skies to your hotel or luxury camp for supper.



Holi

India's 'Festival of Colour', Holi, is celebrated with great enthusiasm in Rajasthan. Large bonfires are burned in public parks on the eve of the festival, and from breakfast time the following morning the sound of drumming in the streets heralds the onset of general mayhem as local youngsters throw bombs of brightly coloured water paint at unwary passers-by. If this all sounds too rowdy, rest assured your TransIndus consultant will be able to suggest more sedate alternatives: traditional havelis and favourite palace hotels of ours where guests are invited to 'play holi' in courtyard gardens using more old-fashioned powders, or 'gulal'. Processions of elaborately decorated camels and elephants are staged by the royal family in Udaipur, along with a spectacular firework display.

Diwali

Rajasthan is a great place to be in the week leading up to Diwali, when the entire state is festooned with fairy lights and decorations. In the run up to the festival, oil lamps ('diyas') are lit at homes and businesses as people shop for new clothes and boxes of special sweets in the bazaars. The night of Diwali itself is also marked by fireworks and special pujas dedicated to Laxmi, the Goddess of Wealth and prosperity. Among the great seasonal spectacles in this part of India is that of Udaipur's royal palace draped in strings of white lights. Jaipur's Johari Bazaar is another famous Diwali hot spot: shopkeepers club together to create jazzy illuminations in the market, while fireworks explode from the ramparts of Nahargarh Fort.



Nagaur Fair

Livestock fairs remain an integral part of farming life in Rajasthan. The one held in the dunes outside Pushkar in November is the most popular, but it's also the most commercialised, attracting more foreign tourists than camel herders these days. For this reason we tend to recommend another, less well-known fair at Nagaur, which takes places later in the season, in Jan-Feb. Around 70,000 bullocks, horses and camels are traded over the course of the five-day market. Alongside it a fun fair provides an opportunity to experience traditional folk music, dance, puppetry, circus and storytelling in their authentic context, as well as livestock decoration and tug-o-wars. Book well ahead and you'll be able to stay in Nagaur's exquisitely renovated palace hotel, Ranvas.

World Sacred Spirit Festival

Over ten days in late February, some of the finest traditional musicians and dancers from across the planet gather to perform at two spellbinding venues. The first, the rooftop of Jodhpur's Mehrangarh Fort; the second, the ornately carved women's quarters of Nagaur Fort. Whether you've a candle-lit hareem courtyard or the cuboid expanse of the Blue City as a backdrop, the quality of music is guaranteed to match the splendour of the setting: expect Qawwali from the Dargahs of Muslim India, the finest troupes of Manganiyar Gypsies from Rajasthan's desert regions, Gnawa from Morocco, Saidi groups from the Upper Nile, whirling Dervishes from Istanbul, and wandering Baul troubadours from West Bengal.



Off-Track Art & Culture of Rajasthan

Some of India's finest wall paintings adorn the palaces and havelis of Rajasthan. While those inside the royal apartments of Amber and Udaipur attract the lion's share of attention, other no less noteworthy wonders survive in more remote locations, and these are well worth seeking out. The region is also a repository of some remarkable music and dance forms, developed during the Mughal-Rajput era and kept alive over the centuries by families of traditional performers. Here are some of the cultural highlights you can, with a little help from our expert consultants, expect to encounter.

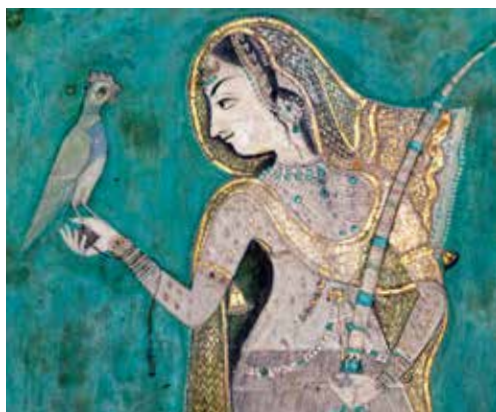


Qawwali at the Dargah

The Dargah, or 'tomb', of the 12th-century Sufi mystic, Khwaja Moin Uddin Chishti, is India's most revered Islamic shrine. Thousands of worshippers pour through its gates each day, the largest crowds on Thursday evenings when Qawwali music is performed in front of the saint's tomb. Regardless of your own religious orientation, it's impossible not to be moved by the quickening rhythms and soaring melodies of this extraordinary musical form.

The Murals of Rajasthan

Blending Persian decorative genius with Indian joie de vivre, mural painting was developed into a high art form under patronage from the region's rulers in Mughal times. Some of the most beautiful are to be found in the palace at Bundi, with a collection of vibrant early-17th-century art. The desert towns of Shekhawati retain another exceptional crop. The painted havelis feature mythological themes and reflect the changing times of the early colonial era.



Folk Music & Dance

In most luxury hotels in Rajasthan, recitals of folk music and dance are performed in courtyards or gardens by families of Langa and Manganiyar Gypsies. The women tend to do the dancing, dressed in richly embroidered and mirror-inlaid costumes, with silver jewellery and voluminous pleated skirts that swirl and sparkle when they spin. The men provide musical accompaniment on harmonium, drums, castanets and vocals, wearing colourful turbans and gold earrings.



Rajput Palaces

During the Mughal era, Rajasthan's princely rulers absorbed many influences from their Indo-Muslim overlords in Agra and Delhi. The result was a bumper crop of decadent piles in high Persian style, with an extra dash of Hindu sensuality and intricacy for good measure. Many have been converted into heritage hotels and one of the great joys of exploring the region is the chance to stay in a few of these. Expect a succession of romantic meals in exotic locations, whether onion-domed cupolas on a lofty rooftop or lamp-lit pavilions in char-bagh pleasure gardens. No two Rajput palaces are the same. Each has their particular selling points and you'll need the help of one of our India specialists to find which ones are right for you. Here are three of our current favourites.

Bhainsrorgarh Fort

Sitting astride a sandstone clifftop on the Chambal River, Bhainsrorgarh Fort is quite simply a slice of heaven. Its heritage boutique interiors and dreamy views over the surrounding guava orchards offer the perfect spot for a mid-tour wind-down. The signature experience here is a boat ride at dawn, when the red cliffs are reflected to spectacular effect in the shimmering water. Enjoy the spectacle over hot tea, as crocodiles drift past and kingfishers flash through the mangroves.



Alila Fort Bishangarh

Presiding over a tract of unspoilt farmland and scrub-covered hills north of Jaipur, fort Bishangarh epitomizes the grandeur of princely Rajasthan. It was recently acquired by the luxury Alila chain and has been sumptuously renovated, complete with huge pool, indulgent ayurvedic spa and über-stylish interiors. Opt for a room in the honeymoon-friendly corner towers, where you can lounge inside the turrets – perfect for sunset views.

Ranvas

This fabulous hotel in the desert town of Nagaur occupies the former women's' quarters of a magnificent medieval fort. Against a backdrop of finely sculpted sandstone and whitewashed walls, hand-woven local textiles provide splashes of vibrant colour. You can lounge on terraces shaded by pierced jali screens, or in a gorgeous courtyard swimming pool. The food is dominated by Mughal-Sufi dishes, and served in a gorgeous pavilion to a backdrop of flickering oil lamps.





The Serai, Jaisalmer

Rajasthan: Places to Stay

Over the past couple of decades, many of Rajasthan's former palaces have been renovated for use as heritage hotels, offering a unique and authentic experience for travellers.

Imagine waking up in a room where a Rajput queen used to sleep. Or dining in a Durbar Hall that once welcomed a British Viceroy, attended by neatly turbaned retainers. Most properties also arrange evening entertainment – recitals by local music, dance or puppet troupes. Here are a few of our favourites.



Shahpura Bagh, Jaipur

This is one of our favourite rural retreats in India. The building was originally erected to accommodate visiting nobility and the Shahpura family who own and run the property have lived here for generations. Rooms are spacious, light and airy, and large windows open on to vistas of shade-dappled greenery. It is hard to beat the large infinity pool with king-sized canopy day beds.



RAAS, Jodhpur

A fusion of traditional Rajasthani elegance and international savoir vivre, RAAS is the last word in Indian boutique chic. Its 18th-century sandstone havelis have been beautifully restored and styled with ultra-contemporary interiors. The hotel's USP is its location. Lounging by the pool, you have to only crane your neck to see Mehrangarh's magical fort towering above.



Fateh Prakash Palace, Udaipur

Part of the Maharana's City Palace complex, Fateh Prakash served as a guest wing in times past. It now hosts a glittering heritage hotel furnished in a regal style with original antiques and fine art objects culled from the royal storehouses. The lakeside location is sublime. Most of the rooms have uninterrupted views to the Lake Palace, with its backdrop of rippled desert hills.



Bera Safari Lodge, Bera

This small boutique property, located on 10 acres of land, has just five spacious cottages with private outdoor seating, and offers one of the best leopard encounters in Rajasthan. Overlooking the Liloda Hill, leopards can often be seen from the lodge and wildlife safaris can be arranged. Around 30 species of bird can be seen at the nearby Jawai Dam.



The Serai, Jaisalmer

This luxury camp in the desert takes glamorous camping to a whole new level. The tents are fit for a Maharajah: rustic-boutique interiors blending silk with hand-woven local textiles, divine bathrooms, and there is even a spa. Book a camel ride to the nearby Maulana Dunes for high tea with your own butler, and enjoy a performance back at camp by local Manganiyar musicians.



Narendra Bhawan, Bikaner

This opulent retreat is the former palace of the last Maharajah of Bikaner, who packed as many travel-inspired styles as he could into the property, from Art Deco to Lusitanian azulejo. The effect is a touch whimsical, but fabulously stylish. We particularly love the sparkling rooftop infinity pool, which has a glorious view over the old city.



Samode Palace, Samode

A pink-ochre palace enfolded by scrub-covered mountains, Samode's bougainvillea-filled courtyard immediately transports you to the heyday of the Raj. The architecture is a fusion of Rajput and Mughal, and the ornately decorated balconies and fountains are some of the most exuberant in India. There is an infinity pool on the rooftop, from where the views are breath-taking.



Ahit Bhawan, Jodhpur

This former palace was one of India's first bona fide heritage hotels and remains among the best. Rooms range from lavishly furnished quarters in the old wing to ersatz desert huts in the garden, with their own little walled gardens and charpois to lounge on. There is a large pool, and in the evening, the lawn hosts performances by Rajasthani musicians and dancers.



Ramathra Fort, Ranthambore

On the fringes of the Daang Plateau in eastern Rajasthan, Ramathra Fort occupies a superbly remote location. From a canopied seat on its ramparts, you can gaze across a sweeping expanse to Kalisil Lake in the distance. The sunrise and sunset views are especially wonderful. Accommodation comes in gorgeous suites inside the fort or luxury hunting tents dotted around the lawns.



Hotel Vivaana, Mandawa

This charming heritage property is a painstakingly restored 19th century Shekhawati haveli, where frescoes and carved woodwork of the original exterior and interiors remain. The 23 well-appointed rooms have all been luxuriously decorated, there is a magnificent courtyard, and a fine dining restaurant. Relax by the large outdoor pool or take advantage of the spa.



Planning Your Trip: Rajasthan

It's rare to spend less than a fortnight on a tour of Rajasthan, and many of our clients opt for three or even four-week trips because of the wealth of sights and experiences on offer, and the distances separating them. As a bare minimum, we generally recommend including the cities of Jaipur, Jodhpur and Udaipur, with stays at a couple of more remote heritage properties for a taste of rural life. Extend your trip to 20 days or more and you can tie in the detour west across the Thar Desert to Jaisalmer via Bikaner – two of India's great highlights – and perhaps a visit to the pilgrimage towns of Pushkar and Ajmer. From Udaipur in the south, it's an easy hop by plane to Goa or Kerala for a beach extension.

When to Go

October to March is the best period for exploring Rajasthan. At this time, blue skies, warm sunshine and cool nights are the norm, and the light is perfect for photographers. November, when the Pushkar camel fair takes place, is a busy time in the region, as is early January, when the capital, Jaipur, hosts its literary festival. By mid-April, daytime temperatures reach the 40s and continue to rise until the monsoon storms break in early June.

Suggested Itineraries

The following tried-and-tested itineraries may serve as starting points for your trip planning. They show what can comfortably be achieved over different time spans, but none are fixed; our consultants will have lots of ideas on how to tailor them to your needs, building a mix of sights and experiences around your own particular interests. They'll also have suggestions for easy detours to other parts of the country should you wish to extend your tour.

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	14	16	23	28	34	34	32	30	29	26	20	16
Rainfall mm	23	18	13	8	13	74	180	173	117	10	3	10
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●

●● Best time to travel ● Good time to travel ● Low season

Highlights of Rajasthan | 12 days



Visit Rajasthan's most celebrated sites on this classic tour. From the Mughal wonders of Delhi to the Pink City of Jaipur and the shimmering waters of Udaipur.

Days 1 & 2 Fly overnight to Delhi and stay two nights. **Day 3** Enjoy a day's sightseeing of Old and New Delhi. **Day 4** Train to Agra. Visit the Taj Mahal at sunset. **Day 5** Drive to Jaipur via Fatehpur Sikri. **Day 6** Sightseeing of Jaipur including the Amber Fort, Hawa Mahal, Janta Mantar Observatory and the City Palace. **Day 7** Drive to Jodhpur, the fabled 'Blue City'. **Day 8** Visit Mehrangarh Fort, bazaars and old city. Spend the rest of the day relaxing or we can suggest another tour to fill your afternoon. **Day 9** Drive to Udaipur via the marble temples at Ranakpur. **Day 10** Visit the city's royal palaces, and nearby temples, ghats and royal gardens. **Day 11** Day at leisure to relax by the pool or perhaps enjoy another of our suggested experiences. **Day 12** Early morning flight back to Delhi for your onward flight to the UK.

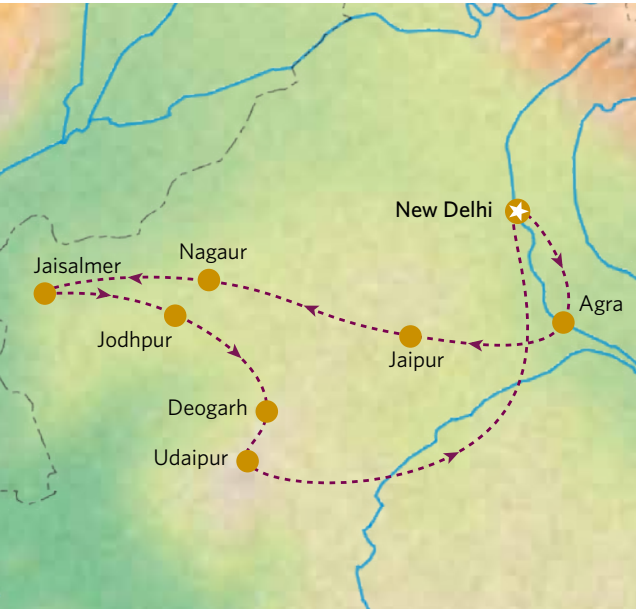


Ultimate Rajasthan | 17 days



Experience the Golden Triangle and the forts and palaces of Rajasthan, get a taste of rural life, the region's arts and crafts, and a ride on an Indian train.

Days 1 & 2 Fly overnight to Delhi and arrive in Delhi the following morning. **Day 3** Tour Old and New Delhi. **Day 4** Visit the Gurudwara Bangla Sahib. Drive to Agra for the Taj Mahal at sunset. **Day 5** Dawn view of the Taj Mahal from the Mehtab Bagh gardens. Drive to Jaipur. **Day 6** Sightseeing of Jaipur including the Amber Fort, Hawa Mahal and the City Palace. **Day 7** Drive to the fort of Ranvas in Nagaur for overnight. **Day 8** Drive to Jaisalmer. **Day 9** Sightseeing of Jaisalmer. Evening walk on the great sand dunes at Sam. **Days 10 & 11** Drive to Jodhpur and sightseeing. **Day 12** Sunrise over Jodhpur. Drive to Deogarh for two nights at Dev Shree. **Day 13** Day at leisure. **Day 14** Drive to Udaipur via Ranakpur and Kumbhalgarh fort. Evening boat ride. **Days 15 & 16** Sightseeing of Udaipur. **Day 17** Fly to Delhi for your flight to the UK.



Off-Track Rajasthan | 18 days



Combine must-see cities with stays at a selection of beautifully situated rural and small-town retreats, giving an insight into traditional life.

Days 1 & 2 Fly overnight to Delhi and stay two nights. **Day 3** Enjoy a day's sightseeing of Old and New Delhi. **Day 4** Train to Agra to visit the Taj Mahal at sunset. **Day 5** Drive to Ramathra for two nights. **Day 6** Explore the village. **Day 7** Drive to Bundi for overnight. Visit the Taragarh fort and stepwell. **Day 8** Drive to Udaipur visiting Chittorgarh Fort en route. **Day 9** Visit the city's royal palaces, and nearby temples, ghats and royal gardens. **Day 10** Drive to Rohet Garh via Ranakpur. **Day 11** Village Safari. **Day 12** Visit Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur. Overnight in Khimsar. **Day 13** Drive to Jaipur. **Day 14** Sightseeing of Jaipur including the Amber Fort, Hawa Mahal and the City Palace. **Day 15** Drive to Shekhawati. **Day 16** Explore the painted havelis and markets. **Day 17** Drive to Delhi for overnight. **Day 18** Fly to UK.



Train Holidays in India

It's said that 30 million people travel on India's railway system every day – a statistic not hard to believe if you've ever scrambled through the mêlée of porters, chai wallahs and passengers trying to board a long-distance express out of New Delhi station. Legions of employees keep the wheels turning, from the humble kitchen attendants who whip up delicious curries in the pantry car, to the redoubtable TC – or Ticket Controller – in his pristine white trousers and peaked cap.

Whatever your itinerary, a ride on the railways offers a unique perspective on the country, and we often recommend our clients try to include at least one ride during their trip. Here's a roundup of our favourite, beginning with three rolling palaces created to recapture the romance of train travel in the time of the Maharajas.

Palace On Wheels

Before Independence in 1947, the rulers of India's princely states used to travel in specially converted trains, complete with sumptuously decorated cabins, dining cars and servant's quarters. Troupes of liveried musicians would serenade them on arrival, and garlands of marigolds and caparisoned elephants waited at the station exit to transport them to their destination.

In the early 1980s Indian Railways had the bright idea of resurrecting one of the old royal locomotives. Launched in 1982, the Palace On Wheels has proved enduringly popular ever since. Guests are pampered like royalty onboard. The travelling is generally done at night (in handsomely furnished en-suite cabins) while sightseeing visits to palaces, forts and other monuments enliven the days. Meals are served in a richly decorated buffet car by courteous staff dressed in traditional frock-coats and turbans. Each cabin also has a dedicated butler.

The route takes you through the royal capitals of Rajasthan to the desert citadel of Jaisalmer, deep in the Thar desert, then on to the tiger reserve of Ranthambore National Park and famous bird reserve of Keoladeo near Bharatpur. A tour of the Taj Mahal and other highlights on the Golden Triangle bring the trip to a suitably grandiloquent end.

Other Luxury Trains

The Palace On wheels has spawned half a dozen other luxury trains, among them the Maharajah's Express, which features the most luxurious cabins on an 8-day tour taking in the sights of the Golden Triangle, Varanasi, Orchha and the temple complex at Khajuraho.

The rock-cut caves of Ajanta and Ellora are the highlights of the Deccan Odyssey, which weaves through the Western Ghat mountains via the vineyards of Nasik, a sojourn on the Konkan coast at Goa and safari at Tadoba Tiger Reserve.

In South India, the Golden Chariot cherry picks the finest sights of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, ranging from the Chola Temples of the Kaveri Delta to the wildlife parks of the Western Ghats, and Kerala's backwaters region.

Toy Trains

Two more of the subcontinent's great rail experiences are offered by the vintage narrow-gauge mountain lines of Ooty, in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and Darjeeling, in the northeast.

The so-called toy trains formed essential lines of communication between the plains and the hill stations to which the British administrators and their families would retreat in the summer months. These days it's quicker to travel the same routes by road, but the old locomotives offer a more romantic and memorable approach.

A third, and much less well-known narrow-gauge line operates in the Kangra Valley of Himachal Pradesh, amid some of the most dramatic scenery in the world.

Local Services

While we never recommend slow passenger trains for longer journeys in India, they can be an enjoyable way to experience everyday life, particularly when they trundle through beautiful corners of the country.

One such route winds through the fringes of the Aravalli mountains in central Rajasthan, where the host of our favourite heritage homestay in the region, Dev Shree, runs popular daytrips covering the most scenic stretches. Expect to encounter looks of amazement from your fellow passengers, and a constant stream of vendors and food sellers making their way through the carriages. At one signal stop, a troupe of monkeys climbs onboard in search of titbits – a great photo opportunity.

If you'd like to know more about any of the railway experiences described above, or any of the other train-based options around India, please speak to one of our India consultants.





North & Central India

North India – dominated by the great river plains of the Ganges and Punjab – holds enough extraordinary sights to keep even the most ardent Indo-phile happy for several lifetimes. Once you've ticked off Delhi and Agra, consider a loop southeast to the sacred Hindu city of Varanasi, where tens of thousands of pilgrims take sin-cleansing dips each day. En route, Lucknow retains the extravagant buildings of Avadh, while further south, Khajuraho's world-famous temples are adorned with eyebrow-raising erotica.

This region's other great spectacle – the Golden Temple at Amritsar – requires a detour west from Delhi by plane or overnight train journey to within a stone's throw of the Indo-Pak frontier. Wagah, at the only overland border checkpoint, is the venue for a 'changing of the guard' ceremony that attracts crowds of hundreds each evening. An alternative route through Central India runs due south from Gwalior's spectacular fort to the ghost town at Orchha, on the River Betwa, then on to Bhopal, springboard for some of India's top archaeological sites.



Highlights of North & Central India

Amritsar

Few buildings in the world evoke a sense of mysticism and religious intensity as vividly as the fabulous Golden Temple – the holiest shrine of the Sikh faith.

Varanasi

Jump in a boat at dawn to see the rising sun illuminate the crowded bathing ghats of India's holiest city on the Ganges River.

Lucknow

In the 18th century, the Nawabs of Avadh created some of the country's most extravagant buildings, and a cuisine to match.

Gwalior

This ancient city retains a bumper crop of monuments, including a splendid medieval fort and sumptuous royal palace.

Khajuraho

Some extraordinary erotica adorns this temple complex in Madhya Pradesh, which is usually visited en route to Varanasi or the tiger reserves further east.

Orchha

Local villagers and their animals are nowadays the only inhabitants of Orchha's magnificent palaces and temples, on the banks of the Betwa River.

Bhopal

Some of the country's finest, but least known Indo-Islamic buildings, survive in this state capital – the legacy of a dynasty of female rulers.

Sanchi

A hilltop north of Bhopal is among the last places in India where you can see 2,000-year-old Buddhist stupas and their sculpted railings still intact.



Amritsar

For pure, ethereal beauty, there’s only one building in India to rival the Taj Mahal. The Sikhs’ holiest shrine, the Golden Temple, in the Punjabi city of Amritsar, casts an undeniably powerful spell. The combined effect of the lustrous, gilded domes and shimmering reflections in the water are at once humbling and elevating – as befits one of the world’s greatest living places of worship.

After visiting the shrine, follow the streams of worshippers making their way to the nearby Guru-ka-Langa, where every day thousands of free, communal meals are served by legions of volunteers. Sharing food with all-comers, regardless of creed, is one of the central tenets of the Sikh faith, and there’s no more emphatic assertion of this than the sight of so many people sitting cross-legged on long coir floor mats, eating simple dal and chapattis together.

Amritsar has a lot more to offer than just the Golden Temple, however, and we always recommend you spend at least a day exploring the city’s fascinating markets and monuments. For the majority of visitors, the area’s other absolute must see is the daily closing of the India-Pakistan border at nearby Wagah – a serious, though highly theatrical display of military pomp.



Dawn at the Golden Temple

Sunrise is definitely the best time to visit the Sikh’s holiest shrine. At first light, its resplendent golden surfaces seem to glow like molten metal, lending a transcendental atmosphere to the sacred precinct. Your guide will lead you down the steps beneath the entrance archway, from where you’ll follow the pilgrims strolling along the marble terrace that surrounds the main shrine, the Har Mandir, where the Adi Granth, the Sikhs’ holy book, is kept. All the while, musician-priests play beautiful devotional hymns accompanied by tabla and harmonium.



The Wagah Border

Anyone who remembers the Monty Pythons’ ‘funny walks’ sketch will know what to expect at Wagah. The famous border crossing point west of Amritsar is the venue for a daily ritual in which representatives of the opposing armies open and close the gates dividing their two countries, dressed in flamboyant uniforms. As they strut and goosetstep back and forth, the soldiers are cheered on by their respective crowds: something of a holiday atmosphere prevails, and despite the serious geopolitical undercurrents the event is great fun and good natured.



KiteFlying

Early in the morning and around sunset, the skies above north Indian cities are speckled with paper kites flown from the rooftops by groups of eager children. Playing ‘patang’ is not for the faint-hearted. In Amritsar, as elsewhere, it’s a fiercely competitive sport, the object of which is to cut the line of your opposition, setting his or her kite circling to earth – achieved by caking the lines in a mixture of glue and ground glass. Join our guide for an introduction to the dark art: learn to prepare, launch and manoeuvre a ‘patang’ above the city’s skyline.

Amritsar Walking Tour

In every Indian city, the most interesting things to see are often the ones you’re least likely to come across under your own steam, and Amritsar is no exception. Opt for our tour of the bazaar district and you will be led to some fabulous rooftop viewpoints overlooking the Golden Temple, a banyan tree whose branches grow through multiple households, and a fascinating array of markets devoted to everything from brass pots to papadams. Best of all, you’ll get to taste the definitive Amritsari ‘lassi’, milky yoghurt flavoured with a heavenly blend of cardamom and saffron.

Street Food Tour

Amritsar is chok-full of little cafés, restaurants and street food stalls specializing in tasty Punjabi cuisine, and on this tour you’ll sample the city’s gastronomic highlights in the company of a local expert. Start with a plate of ‘kulche-chane’ at one of the famous joints in the market district. A ladle of chickpeas in spicy sauce eaten with a piping hot flatbread and blob of butter, it’s a favourite pick-me-up for the city’s students and commuters. At some point you’ll also get to taste the ultimate local ‘lassi’.



Lucknow

Lucknow somehow shies away from the tourist trail yet thoroughly scintillates with its architectural and cultural jewels that are well worth making a stop for. Crumbling palaces and monuments are symbols of a once great Awadh Empire, later ruled by the Mughals who were quashed by the British forces in the Siege of Lucknow in 1857. Fear not, it is still very much a land of living heritage, from the remaining architecture to the decadence of Awadhi cuisine. Between Lucknow’s frenetic markets and grand gardens, you can glimpse relics of the British Empire, ornate mosques, and shrines too, forging a skyline that once competed with the likes of Constantinople and Bukhara in its majesty.



Evening Culinary Walk

If the best way to understand a place and its people is through their food, this walk around the aroma-filled alleyways is just perfect. Lucknow is loved for its street food and restaurants, each with their own speciality and cooking technique, whether flame-grilled saffron skewers or curries fused with heady local spices. Visit some of Lucknow’s most authentic eateries with a self-confessed gastronome to get a taste of what makes the cuisine here so delicious.



Victorian Walk

Hazratganj offers a real slice of living and breathing history in Lucknow, as this bustling shopping arcade dates back to the early 18th century and was originally modelled on Queen Street in London. On this guided walk learn of the district’s importance during the First War of Independence in 1857. That 19th-century heritage is clear to see, thanks to the remains of a colonial mansion nearby and the still-standing façade, balconies and clock towers of Hazratganj itself.

Threads of Lucknow

Lucknow is a hub for exquisite textile crafts, including Chikan embroidery, a female tradition, and Zari and Aari, which are typically created by men. Naturally, there’s no better way to appreciate the intricate ways in which the artisans of Lucknow create their art than by visiting a working studio. Try it out for yourself on this hands on experience, learning the importance of this cultural keystone which has woven Muslim and Hindu communities together.



Varanasi

Varanasi, also known as ‘Benares’, is the holiest of Hinduism’s seven sacred cities. Countless shrines and temple towers cluster along the banks of the Ganges here, visited by pilgrims from across the country. The redemptory waters are said to wash away the sins of a lifetime and Hindus believe that the soul of anyone who dies in Varanasi is liberated from the cycle of rebirth. The constant activity on the riverside tends to monopolize the attention of most visitors. But the warren of alleyways and bazaars leading to the river also hold considerable interest, which is why we always recommend clients opt for one or two walking tours, led by our expert local guides. Here are three unmissable experiences the city has to offer.

Sunrise Boat Ride

Rituals on the Ganges begin before dawn, while mist blurs the contours of the sacred ghats, enveloping the shrines behind them in a mysterious half-light. The best vantage point from which to savour the spectacle is a rowing boat on the water itself. Chanting, drumming and the ringing of temple bells intensifies as the sun rises, casting the holy steps and their backdrop of sanctuary towers, pennants and parasols in a sublime glow.



Walk on the South Side

South Varanasi has always been considered the city’s more serene, contemplative flank. For centuries, poets, philosophers and musicians have tended to congregate in the neighbourhood, whose ancient cultural legacy you can experience on this fascinating half-day walking tour. Watch traditional yoga being demonstrated on one of the quieter ghats and enjoy a recital of classical bamboo flute or sitar music after a typical Banarasi breakfast of ‘kachori-sabzi’.

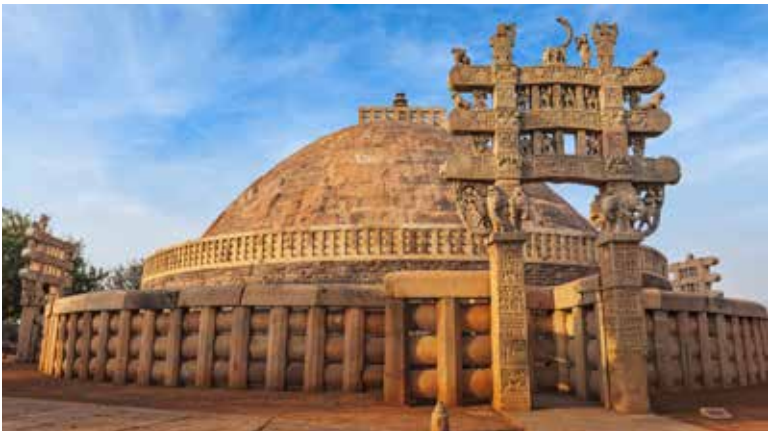
Ganga Aarti

Dashashwamedh is Varanasi’s largest and most spectacular ghat. Each evening at sunset, crowds gather on it to watch a spectacular ritual in which a row of bare-chested Hindu ‘pandits’ or priests, dressed in saffron robes, swing large, smoking oil lamps and sacred fires in tightly choreographed routines. ‘Ganga Aarti’, as the ceremony is known, has taken place on the banks of the Ganges for many centuries, but only in recent decades has it taken this larger-than-life form.



The Heart of India

With everything from Mesolithic rock art sites to the ruins of ancient Buddhist capitals, the centre of Madhya Pradesh state holds some of the country's most important archeological sites. Yet unlike those further north, they remain little visited, which is why we often recommend journeys through this part of the country to clients with a keen interest in history and architecture.



Prayers in Stone: North India's Rock-Cut Art

Since Buddhism first took root in India in the fifth century BC, large-scale religious monuments have been carved from outcrops and cliffs of volcanic rock to create monasteries and temples – a custom that became more refined, sophisticated and sensuous with the emergence of Brahmanical Hinduism a thousand years later. Today, some of the most breathtakingly beautiful religious buildings and pieces of stone sculpture may be seen on journeys across the north Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. You have to cross the region to reach the famous tiger reserves in the east of the state, and the following three destinations make perfect stepping stones on the trip, thanks to their astonishing crops of ancient monuments.



City of Ghosts: Orchha

Orchha, on the banks of the Betwa River, served as the capital of the Bundela Dynasty in the 16th century. A superb collection of deserted palaces, temples and cenotaphs remain from this era, most of them in an advance state of charismatic decay. The defining experience when visiting this extraordinary historic site is to walk at dawn along the riverbank as the rising sun illuminates the line of towering chhatris, or memorial shrines, whose great, pale-ochre spires soar above the water.

India's Mona Lisa: Gwalior

Huge round towers and bands of striking blue-green tiles distinguish the façade of Gwalior's fortress. But it is for a glimpse of a rare and enigmatic piece of sculpture that art lovers make the pilgrimage - the statue of a celestial nymph, or 'salabhanjika', discovered at a temple nearby. Her voluptuous curves are draped with gossamer-thin silk and she radiates an expression of calm serenity that has frequently inspired comparisons with Da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa'.

Tantric Temples: Khajuraho

Erotic sculpture adorns many temples in the subcontinent. None, however, depict sexual ecstasy in so many forms and with such consummate skill as these ornately carved sandstone shrines of Khajuraho, erected between 950 and 1180AD. Quite why their architects chose to ornament them with such explicit imagery remains a subject of debate, although a connection with the Tantric cults that predominated in early medieval India seems likely.

The Hidden Gems of Bhopal

In the 19th century, Bhopal was ruled by a succession of forward-looking Muslim Begums, or 'Queens'. Their reign saw the appearance of some remarkable Islamic buildings, the pièce de résistance among them being the massive Taj-ul Masjid, said to be the largest mosque in India. Other less conspicuous, but equally beautiful buildings form an exotic skyline in the old city. See the highlights on a memorable heritage walking tour, which concludes with a visit to the lavish Shaukat Mahal, a fabulously over-the-top pile fusing Indo-Islamic, Gothic and French Bourbon styles.



Sunset at Roopmati's Pavilion: Mandu

Mandu's evocative ruins are all that remains of a Muslim capital which flourished on a plateau above the Narmada Valley in the era before the rise of the Mughals. The scores of cracked tombs, dilapidated palaces and pleasure pavilions scattered across the rocky terrain here barely hint at the lavish lives led by the Sultans who ruled from here, one of whom – Gyath Shah (1469–1500) – is said to have had a harem of 15,000 courtesans. Conclude your tour with a visit to Roopmati's Pavilion, a pleasure palace overlooking the vast expanse of the distant river.

In the Emperor's Footsteps: Sanchi

Less than an hour's drive northeast of Bhopal lies one of the country's most evocative ancient sites, dating from the very dawn of Indian history in the third century BC. After his conversion to Buddhism, the Mauryan emperor, Ashoka, built a Buddhist stupa on a hill near the town of Besnagar, which over the centuries grew to be among the largest of its kind in Asia. The 'Great Stupa' and its lesser siblings still rise from the hilltop, surrounded by fragments of railings and gateway arches elaborately carved with some of the finest stonework surviving from the ancient world.



On the Banks of the Narmada: Maheshwar

Maheshwar rose to prominence in the 18th century under the Holkar dynasty, who erected an imposing sandstone palace complex on the banks of the Narmada River. They also developed the local weaving industry: Maheshwari saris remain famous across the country to this day. You can see them being hand woven in the traditional style at a wonderful workshop, staffed by a dozen women. Afterwards, head to the waterfront for a sunset boat ride as families bathe on the holy ghats, against a backdrop of richly carved sandstone domes and temple spires – an unforgettable spectacle.



Brij Rama Palace, Varanasi

North & Central India: Places to Stay

Whether you're dreaming of an iconic view over the ghats at Varanasi, a stylish safari lodge with a verandah facing pristine sal forest in Kipling country, or a suite in a bona fide Maharaja's palace, our holidays will always include the best places to stay in the most atmospheric locations. Here's a rundown of our current favourites across North and Central India. Our specialist India consultants will have dozens more suggestions, across a broad range of budgets.



Ahilya Fort, Maheshwar

It's hard to imagine a more evocative spot for a candle-lit dinner than the roof terrace of Ahilya Fort. Dating from 1766, the citadel's sandstone walls fall sheer to the Narmada river, half-a-mile wide at this point and as still as oil. The son of the last Maharaja of Indore still lives here and has transformed the place into a guest house that's a masterpiece of understatement and traditional style: antique doors open on to plant-filled courtyards, beautiful antique furniture and cusp-arched jharokha balconies suspended over the water.



Taj Usha Kiran Palace, Gwalior

Located a stone's throw from Gwalior's famous Jai Vilas Palace, this elegant Mughal-style mansion served as the Maharajah's guest wing and has accommodated numerous VIPs over its 120 years of service. The Taj Group has given the place a major makeover, but it has lost none of its charm and now ranks among India's most glittering five-star heritage properties. Exclusive garden villas are dotted around nine-acres of lawned grounds, with their own courtyards and private pools, and there's a stylishly underlit pool.



Taj Mahal, Lucknow

Taj Mahal is the most lavish high-end hotel in Lucknow. Situated on the banks of the river Gomti amid 15 acres of landscaped gardens, its grandeur reflects the amplitude of the Nawab era – an elegant 19th-century-style palace surmounted by a soaring grey-green dome. The interiors are no less opulent. After all the dust and chaos of the city streets it's a relief to enter the air-conditioned bliss of your modern, minimalist room. Be sure to have at least one meal in the fabulous Oudiyana restaurant, which specialises in Lucknow's famously sybaritic cuisine.



Brij Rama Palace, Varanasi

Built in 1812, Brij Rama Palace is a landmark of Varanasi. Accessible only by boat at times, it's perched right on the river bank on the Darbanga Ghat. In 1915 the Brahmin King of Darbhanga acquired the palace and gave the Ghat its name. Original artwork still adorns the walls and the original lift, installed by the king in 1918, still remains. The 32 rooms have all been tastefully decorated, and the superior rooms even give you a view of the Ganges from the bath. Dine on the open terrace or in the candlelit courtyard. For a really special experience the hotel can arrange dinner on the river.



Windsong Boutique B&B, Amritsar

In the midst of bright yellow mustard fields, this picturesque boutique retreat is a homestay in stark contrast to the buzz of Amritsar, just a few kilometres away. With just five well-appointed rooms - named after the five rivers of Punjab, lush gardens and a tranquil poolside, we challenge you not to relax as soon as you walk through the door. Start your day with a fresh home-cooked breakfast in the garden, and end it relaxing in the beautifully decorated drawing room, with piles of books, board games, a cosy fireplace and a well-stocked bar.



Jehan Numa Retreat, Bhopal

Just outside Bhopal city, on the edge of the Van Vihar National Park, Jehan Numa Retreat is the latest offering from the Jehan Numa Hotels. It's a peaceful haven with an intimate collection of uniquely designed low-slung cottages, borrowing details of tribal and rural art on mud-coloured walls and courtyards. Each suite has a separate living room and an extended deck, offering views of the lush green surrounds. After a day's sightseeing, escape the hustle and bustle of the city and relax by the pool, where the only noise breaking the silence will be birdsong or animal calls.



Planning Your Trip: North & Central India

The distance separating Amritsar in the far west of the region, and Varanasi in the east, are considerable, and you'd most likely want to catch a flight or two to fit both into your tour. Although they're covered in the section of the brochure devoted to wildlife (see p48-57), the national parks of Kanha and Bandhavgarh also tend to feature on journeys through the north, while forays down to Bhopal may be extended further south to the world-famous rock-cut cave temples of Ellora and Ajanta. Beach holidays in Goa, Kerala or the Andaman Islands, or detours to Ladakh in the Himalayas, can easily be undertaken via daily flights out of Delhi. Speak to our consultants for more great ideas on how to tailor your trip.

When to Go

The weather on India's northern plains is most pleasant between October and March, when dry warm days and blue skies are the norm. In December and January particularly, the temperature does drop at night and it can still be chilly, requiring an extra layer or two, for any early morning starts. By April, temperatures will be on the rise before the monsoon erupts in June, transforming the landscape and disrupting travel in rural areas.

Suggested Itineraries

The following tried-and-tested itineraries may serve as starting points for your trip planning. They show what can comfortably be achieved over different time spans, but none are fixed - our consultants will have lots of ideas on how to tailor them to your needs, building a mix of sights and experiences around your own particular interests. They'll also have suggestions for easy detours to other parts of the country should you wish to extend your tour.

When to go												
Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	14	16	23	28	34	34	32	30	29	26	20	16
Rainfall mm	23	18	13	8	13	74	180	173	117	10	3	10
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●
●● Best time to travel ● Good time to travel ● Low season												

Highlights of Northern India | 17 days



Spanning 2,500 years of monumental architecture, experience India's sacred and religious heritage on a tour across the Gangetic Plains to southern Rajasthan.

Day 1 Fly overnight to Delhi. **Day 2** Fly to Amritsar. **Day 3** Visit the Golden Temple and Wagah border or explore Amritsar further. **Day 4** Fly to Delhi. Perhaps visit the Gurudwara Bangla Sahib. **Day 5** Explore Old and New Delhi. **Day 6** Fly to Varanasi. **Day 7** Morning boat trip on the Ganges and walking tour of the old city. Visit Sarnath. **Day 8** Fly to Khajuraho. **Day 9** Discover the temple complex. Continue to Orchha. **Day 10** Enjoy a tour of Orchha. Catch the evening express train to Agra. **Day 11** Visit Agra's Fort, Itimad-ud Daulah tomb and the Taj Mahal at sunset. **Day 12** Drive to Jaipur via Fatehpur Sikri. **Day 13** Visit the Amber Fort, Hawa Mahal, Janta Mantar and City Palace. **Day 14** Drive to Udaipur. **Day 15** See the city's royal palaces, temples and ghats. **Day 16** Day to relax or explore further. **Day 17** Fly to Delhi and on to the UK.

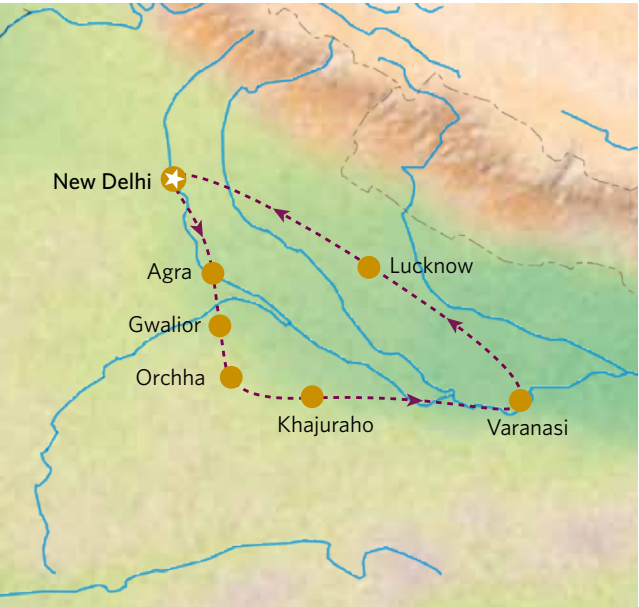


Classical Splendour | 14 days



Take a journey through the grand forts, palaces and temples of the northern Ganges plain on a tour that starts and ends in Delhi.

Day 1 Fly overnight to Delhi. **Day 2** Arrive with day at leisure. **Day 3** Explore Old & New Delhi. **Day 4** Express train to Bharatpur to visit Keoladeo National Park and Fatehpur Sikri. Continue to Agra. **Day 5** Visit the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort. Drive to Gwalior. **Day 6** Visit Gwalior's Fort and Jai Vilas Palace. **Day 7** Drive to Orchha, via the deserted palace of Datia, for overnight. **Day 8** Drive to Khajuraho and stay two nights. **Day 9** Visit the famous temples with afternoon safari in Panna National Park. **Day 10** Fly to Varanasi for two nights. Visit Sarnath. **Day 11** Early morning boat ride. Visit the temples and ghats. Attend an evening Ganga aarti ceremony. **Day 12** Express train to Lucknow for two nights. Afternoon visit to the Residency complex. **Day 13** Visit Lucknow's monuments and take a heritage walk. **Day 14** Fly to Delhi and on to the UK.

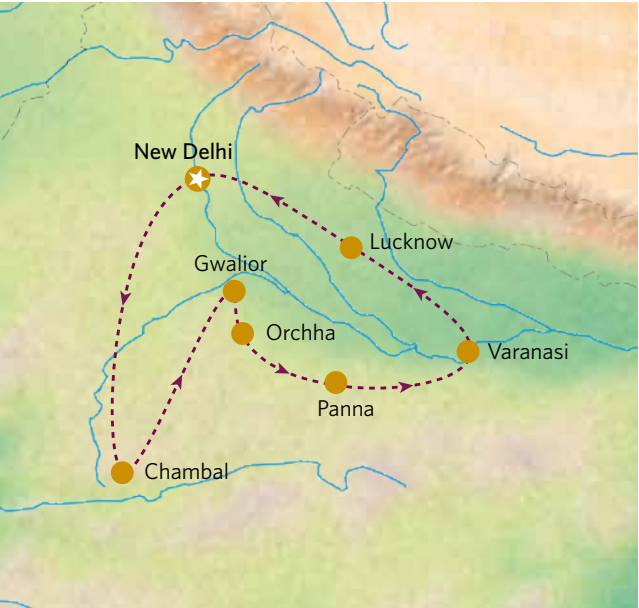


The Sacred Ganges and Lucknow | 16 days



This unique tour, built around the Ganges and its tributaries, immerses you deep into the cultural heartland of India.

Day 1 Fly to Delhi. **Day 2** Drive to the Chambal. Visit the Bateshwar temples. **Day 3** Boat ride on the Chambal River with the chance to see gharial, Gangetic river dolphin and a wealth of bird life. **Day 4** Drive to Gwalior. Evening son et lumiere show. **Day 5** Visit the fort and Scindia Museum. **Day 6** Drive to Orchha, via the palace at Datia. **Day 7** Explore the temples of Orchha. **Day 8** Continue to Panna via Khajuraho. **Day 9** Take a boat ride or a jeep safari in Panna National Park. **Day 10** Fly to Varanasi. Evening aarti ceremony. **Day 11** Early morning boat ride on the Ganges. Visit Sarnath. **Day 12** Take a walk on Varanasi's southside. Train to Lucknow. **Day 13** Visit the sights of Lucknow. **Day 14** Perhaps enjoy an evening culinary walk or learn more about Lucknow's textiles today. **Day 15** Fly to Delhi and on to UK. **Day 16** Arrive UK.





Indian Wildlife

For most of India's history, the vast tracts of forest, tarai grassland, jungles and mountains in the subcontinent supported a prodigious wealth of wildlife. A century of population growth, poaching and habitat destruction have diminished this abundance, but thanks to the national parks designated by the Indian government since Independence in 1947, it's still possible to sight tiger, one-horned rhino, wild elephant, Asiatic lion and leopard – as well as numerous other species of mammal, reptiles and birds – in their native environments.

Moreover, you can do so from the comfort of some world-class safari lodges and camps, many of them located in or alongside pristine wilderness. Whether you're an enthusiast following a wildlife-focussed itinerary, or merely someone hoping for a once-in-a-lifetime glimpse of a tiger as part of a more varied holiday, a taste of India's wild side is certain to redefine your image of the country.



Conservation in India

Since the creation of Project Tiger by Indira Gandhi in the 1970s, the Indian government struggled to reverse the decline in wildlife numbers, particularly those of the tiger itself, which a decade ago many feared was on the brink of extinction. Over the past five years, however, innovative conservation policies have been implemented and these have begun to bear fruit. Rural communities living in villages relocated to make way for the national parks are nowadays the principal source of rangers and wardens (instead of poachers), while the parks themselves are closed during key breeding periods to allow the ecosystems respite. The result has been a 33% increase in India's tiger population over four years, and a corresponding increase in the number and quality of sightings – not only of tiger, but all the other species resident in India's parks.

Expert Guides

At TransIndus, we understand the importance of being guided by a true expert when you're viewing wildlife. A well-trained and experienced naturalist-guide who knows the park you're visiting inside out will ensure you get as close to the animals as possible, and that you leave the sanctuary with a far better understanding of its unique ecosystem. For this reason, we only choose the best English-speaking guides, tried and tested over many seasons.



The Indian Tiger

Few experiences compare with seeing a tiger in the wild. No matter how many times you may have enjoyed close-ups on TV of the flame-furred cat prowling the maidans of India, the first time you set eyes on one is sure to rank among life's most magical moments.

The grace, stealth and raw power of the tiger have earned for the animal a prominent place in the country's religion and culture. And yet the cat has also been hunted to the brink of extinction – primarily by poachers from communities who inhabit its territory. Only in the past four years has the downward trend showed signs of being reversed: the most recent census indicated numbers had increased to an encouraging 2,967 nationwide.

The tiger is a highly adaptable predator, able to live in a wide spectrum of different habitats, from swampy river deltas to the forested foothills of the Himalayas. This means you can see them in many different regions of the country – though you have to travel well off the beaten track to reach the best reserves.

The two with the largest tiger populations and highest numbers of sightings are both in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Along with Ranthambore in Rajasthan and Corbett in the hills north of Delhi, Bandhavgarh and Kanha account for the bulk of safari traffic in India. They hold some of the most sophisticated lodges and are the parks most often selected by foreign film crews. But at certain times of year they can become overcrowded, which is why for clients seeking a more vivid experience of Indian wilderness we also recommended parks deeper inside the country's heart. On the following page we list four of our current favourites and our preferred places to stay in them.

Recommended Tiger Reserves

Tadoba-Andhari National Park

Nearly 87% of this far-flung reserve is covered in beautiful dry deciduous forest – a renowned storehouse of rare trees and medicinal plants. Over 60 tigers live within and around the park borders (one of the highest densities in India) along with leopard, wild dog, hyena, gaur, nilgai, sambar, civet cats, crocodiles and nearly 200 species of birds.

WHERE TO STAY:

Tiger Trails Jungle Lodge

We love this lodge on the edge of the core zone in Tadoba. The property encompasses three waterholes, fitted with camera traps that add considerably to the excitement. From the verandas of the upper-floor rooms you get uninterrupted views over the adjacent grasslands, where honey badger, gaur, porcupine and sloth bears are regularly spotted.



Satpura Tiger Reserve

The craggy, forested peaks of the Satpura mountains form a romantic backdrop for this reserve. Tiger sightings are not as frequent as other reserves in the state – but this ranks among the few sanctuaries in India where you can undertake safaris on foot through sal, teak and bamboo groves, and further afield to far-flung prehistoric rock-art sites.

WHERE TO STAY:

Reni Pani Jungle Lodge

Reni Pani's twelve eco cottages are set around a pool and cruciform central building. Splashes of jungle colours enliven the interiors of the low-slung cottages, whose metre-thick walls have a coat of whitewash within, which sets off the traditional quilts, village rugs and chunky wood furniture to great effect. There's also a pretty pool to lounge by.

Pench National Park

Comprising miles of teak forest interspersed by open meadows of tall, bleached grass, Pench encompasses a tract of wilderness where the tiger population has been stable for over a decade. Sightings occur daily here, although you're more likely to come across packs of wild dogs and striped hyena, and herds of deer and antelope as well as the odd gaur.

WHERE TO STAY:

Jamtara Wilderness Camp

Every effort has been made at this luxury safari camp to ensure the highest levels of comfort, but the real joy of staying here is the chance to experience the deep forest at night. You also get to see rural life at close quarters, while being on the far, quiet side of the park means no queues to enter the reserve.



Ranthambore National Park

For a chance to sight a wild tiger sprawled on a lakeside domed pavilion or against the backdrop of a Rajput castle, there's only one option. With 40 cats in residence, Ranthambore lies on the margins of the Aravalli Hills, amid a tract of dry deciduous forests and grassland. Nilgai, sambar, chital, hyena and boar are also regularly sighted.

WHERE TO STAY:

Aman-i-Khas

Made of traditional canvas, the ten Mughal-style tents at this über-luxurious camp look like tents only from the outside. Once inside, you could be in a stylish villa in Bali, complete with luxurious king-sized beds, hardwood floors and a spacious bathroom. There's a heavenly pool, tree-shaded terraces and cushioned nooks to lounge in between safaris.



Birdlife

Over 1,200 different species of bird are present in India, one hundred of them endemic. The reason for this world-beating abundance is the broad variety of habitats, which range from deserts to ice peaks, river deltas, mangroves and huge variety of forests. The best time for birding is between October and April, when migratory species over-winter in India. Each region has its own hotspots, the majority of them in national parks that tend to be better known for their large mammals but offer a wealth of avian interest too. Our bird-focussed trips tend to be tailor-made, so you can decide which habitat zones or species interest you the most and design your holiday accordingly. Whichever reserves you visit, you'll be accompanied by expert naturalist guides.

Where Best to Bird-Watch in India



Rajaji National Park

In the Himalayan foothills to the northeast of Delhi, Rajaji is one of the best places in India to see forest birds, including 11 species of woodpecker, three kinds of hornbill (among them the ultra-rare great pied hornbill) and five different barbets. Limits are imposed on the number of visitors permitted to enter the park at any one time, but our team will be able to arrange all the necessary paperwork in advance, as well as a birding specialist guide to accompany you.



Keoladeo National Park

Midway between Agra and Jaipur on the Golden Triangle circuit, Keoladeo is India's foremost birding hotspot. Centred on a shallow lake, it formerly served as the private duck shooting reserve of the Maharaja of nearby Bharatpur. The lakeshore and surrounding marshland accommodate 190 species of migrants each winter, and 230 kinds of resident. They include pelicans, painted storks and the majestic Sarus crane. Safaris are conducted on foot or by bicycle.



Thattekad Bird Sanctuary

On the banks of the Periyar River in the state of Kerala, Thattekad is South India's top bird reserve, with a wealth of forest as well as water species present. Among them are the elusive Sri Lankan frogmouth, white-bellied treepie, Malabar grey hornbill, blue-winged parakeets, Wayanad laughingthrushes and the vibrant Malabar trogon. Accommodation is in luxurious camps sited along the riverfront, and safaris are conducted on foot, by boat and kayak.

Leopard

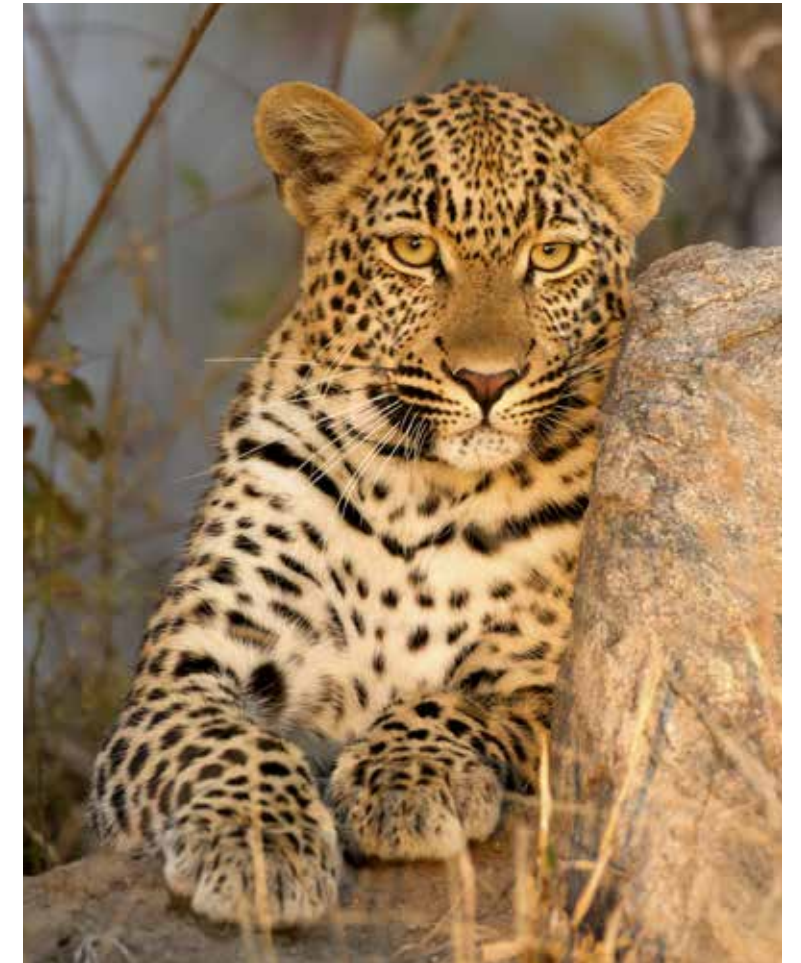
Although far less endangered than tigers, leopards are extremely elusive. You could pass within a stone's throw of one dozing in the shadow of an acacia tree and not know it was there – which is why top-notch guides are essential for a successful leopard-spotting trip.

You stand a reasonable chance of sighting one of these beautiful cats at many parks in India. But the only place you're virtually guaranteed a glimpse is an area of giant granite boulder hills in southern Rajasthan called Jawai. Here, around the shores of a lake speckled with flamingos, the local Rabari herders actually protect the leopards living in the rocks around their millet fields – the consequence of an old hunting ban imposed by the local Maharaja.



WHERE TO STAY: Sujan Jawai, Rajasthan

The retro-style tents at this luxury safari camp are dreamy, the pool is heavenly, the food a delight and, best of all, the naturalists the absolute pick of the crop. You're driven around in state-of-the-art 4WD vehicles to kopjes where the guides know the cats congregate. In some instances, it is possible to get breathtakingly close to the cats.



Snow Leopard

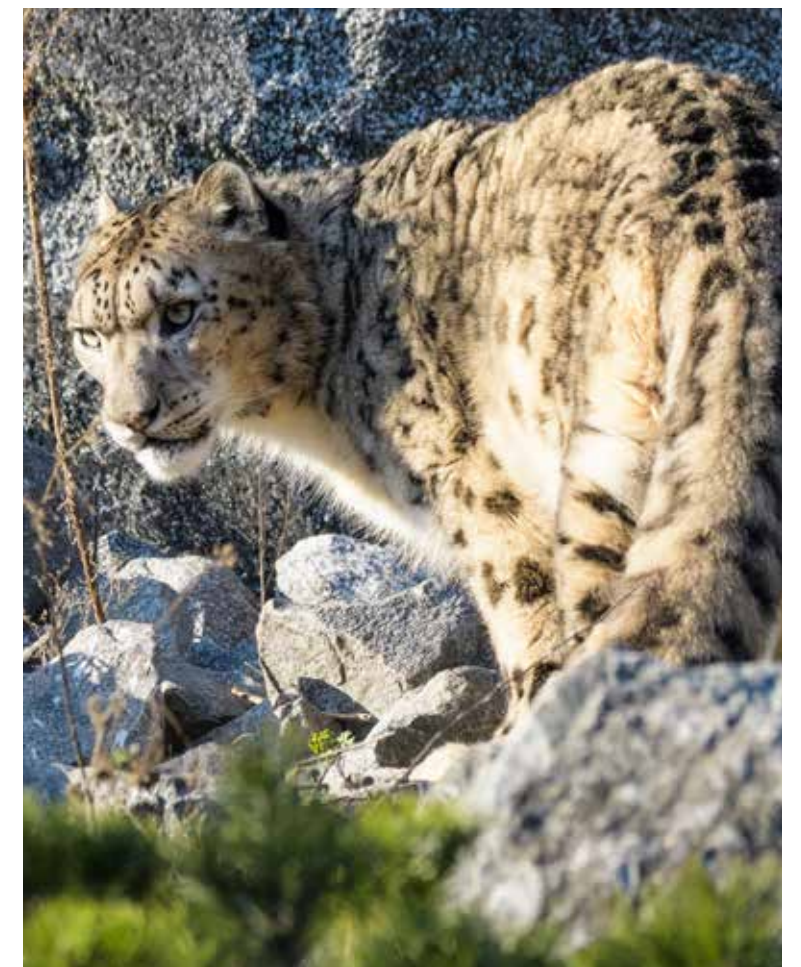
The rarest and most elusive of all India's 'Big Six' species, the snow leopard is a creature of almost mythic beauty. Film crews have spent months looking for them and many return without success. Only at the height of winter in Ladakh, India's most remote Himalayan region, do you stand a reasonable chance of seeing one.

Even then, you'll need luck on your side as the population is thought to be somewhere between 100 and 300, spread across an area the size of Scotland. Ibex and blue sheep are the snow leopard's preferred prey, but from December to March the cats are occasionally forced by extreme cold or snowfall to villages in search of a stray sheep or goat.



WHERE TO STAY: Snow Leopard Lodge, Ladakh

In a remote valley a few hours' drive west of Leh, Snow Leopard Lodge, originally a homestay owned by one of Ladakh's top snow leopard trackers, is the only dedicated wildlife lodge in Ladakh. The lodge commands excellent views down the valley and accommodation is simple but comfortable, with a welcoming communal space to unwind in.





Asiatic Lions

Sasan Gir National Park in western Gujarat is internationally renowned as the last stronghold of an animal that only survives on India's Saurashtra peninsula: the Asiatic lion. The local maharaja was responsible for setting up the sanctuary a century ago, after it was realized the local population of lions had been reduced to a mere 15. Today, over 400 inhabit the jungle, grasslands and acacia scrub of the park, and good sightings are almost guaranteed. In addition to its lions, the park also supports large populations of leopard, as well as deer, antelope, sloth bear and around 300 species of birds. Several fascinating religious sites, including Mount Girnar and Junagadh, also lie within range of daytrips.



WHERE TO STAY:

Taj Gateway, Sasan Gir

Set on the banks of the River Hiran, this luxurious five-star has water-facing rooms with fine views over landscaped gardens. Sasan Gir village is only a ten-minute stroll away if you feel like taking in some local atmosphere, and there's a generous-sized outdoor pool that's perfect for whiling away downtime between drives.

Indian Rhinoceros

One-horned rhinos once ranged across the entire Gangetic Plain, but due to habitat loss, big game hunting and poaching, numbers have dipped to under 3,000. The majority are dispersed over the tarai grasslands and forests of northeast India, along the Brahmaputra River and borders with Nepal and Bhutan, where they live alongside wild elephant and tigers.

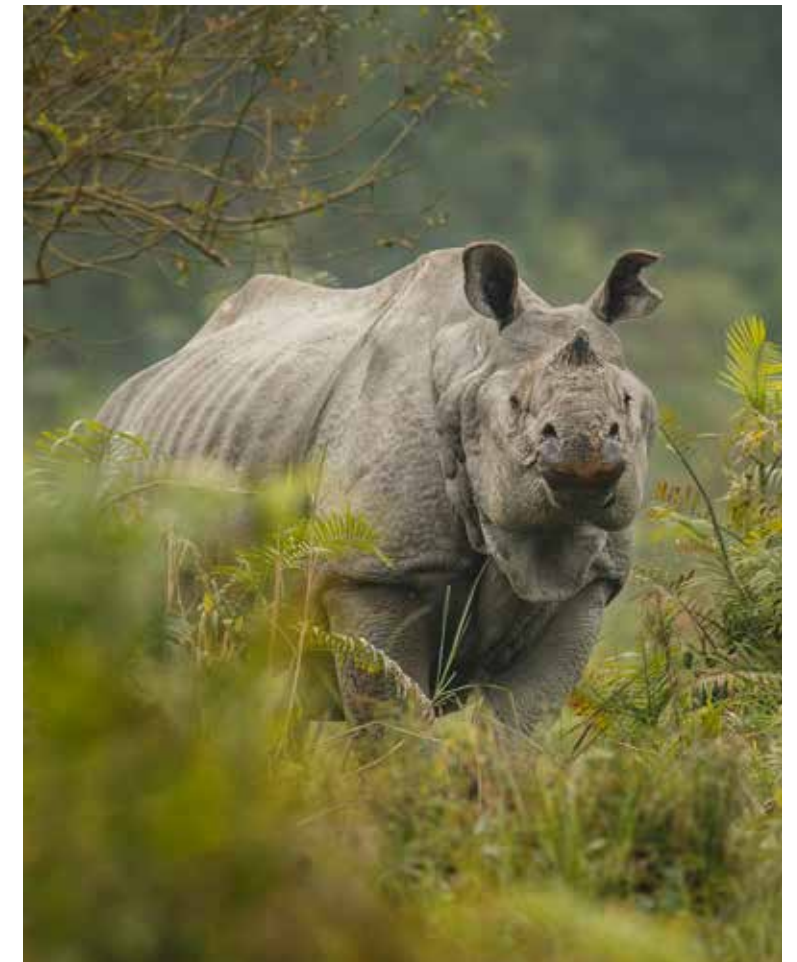
Two thirds of the country's rhinos are confined to just one park, Kaziranga, in the state of Assam. The revival is often cited as a conservation triumph, but it has been hard won. To combat poaching the Indian government conferred on park rangers' powers generally reserved for soldiers attempting to quell civil unrest: in 2015, more poachers were shot dead than rhinos.



WHERE TO STAY:

Diphlu River Lodge, Kaziranga

The best accommodation available in Kaziranga comprises a dozen stilted bungalows ranged around a lotus pond by the eponymous River Diphlu. Local textiles add a homely feel to the wood-and-bamboo interiors, where you can lounge on balconies overlooking the adjacent mustard fields. A host of activities are offered between game drives.



Sloth Bear

Sloth bears inhabit the tropical lowland forests of India and may sometimes be spotted foraging in open grasslands. With bodies up to seven feet in length and long, sharp claws designed for climbing trees, they live mainly by sucking insects out from trunks and termite mounds, although in the wet season they frequently scale higher branches in search of fruit or honey. Poaching has severely reduced their numbers over the past few decades (their gall bladders are used in traditional Chinese medicine), and their cubs are hunted by tiger and leopard. Don't be fooled by the name: sloth bears are actually not at all lethargic and can be highly aggressive if approached. They're commonly sighted in Central India's two most frequented parks, Kanha and Bandhavgarh.



WHERE TO STAY:

Kings Lodge, Bandhavgarh

The epitome of modern safari chic, Kings hits just the right balance between style, comfort and harmony with the surrounding sal forest. The cottages are stone built, with honey-hued, chunky wood furniture and deep verandas. The central lounge area, ranged around a blazing fire, is sociable, and there's a pretty pool.

Indian Elephant

Elephants live wild in forests across India, notably in the hills of the south, where they may often be sighted in the teak jungles and around the margins of tea estates lining the borders of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu – the so-called 'Nilgiri Biosphere'. It is estimated that the current population is somewhere between 28,000 and 32,000. Your chances of a sighting are excellent if you pick your spot carefully.

Our consultants know which reserves currently claim the highest numbers and our naturalist-guides on the ground will know how to maximize your chances. Tholpetty and Muthanga in Wayanad (northern Kerala) are both dependable options, while Nagarhole in the mountains of Karnataka offers the best all-round wilderness experience in the region.



WHERE TO STAY:

Kaav Safari Lodge, Nagarhole

Earthy, designer luxury meets pristine wilderness in the heart of elephant country. You can opt to stay in spacious rooms with wrap-around balconies or ultra-luxurious glamping tents with their own private decks and open bathtubs. A common area with raised verandah provides a welcome space to mingle after meals, and there's a pool shimmering in the midst of tropical greenery.





Planning Your Trip to India’s National Parks

With a few notable exceptions (Ranthambore and Keoladeo in Rajasthan are two) India’s national parks are in remote areas. Domestic flights can take you some of the way, but to access the last remaining swaths of real wilderness in the subcontinent invariably means a long overland journey – either by rail or road, or a combination of both. Not that this need be onerous: the vehicles we use are all modern, with air-con and great suspension, and the views out of the window of rural and small-town life endlessly compelling. Once in situ, game drives are mostly conducted in a variety of open 4WD Jeeps with drivers and naturalist guides.

When to Go

The dry season from late February through April is the best period for sighting tigers and other wildlife. This is when water holes in the core zones of parks dry up forcing the larger mammals towards the edges of reserves. Earlier in the season, between November and February, are the most comfortable times and sightings only marginally less frequent, though it can be surprisingly chilly during early morning game drives. Most of the parks close for the duration of the monsoon, between June and September.

Suggested Itineraries

The following itineraries may serve as starting points for your trip planning and show contrasting experience of India’s wild regions. None are fixed and our consultants will have lots of ideas on how to tailor them to your needs, building a mix of sights and experiences around your own particular interests. They’ll also have suggestions for easy detours to other parts of the country should you wish to extend your tour.

India’s Wildlife – the Big Five | 22 days



Traverse the length and breadth of India in search of the Big Five – tiger, leopard, rhino, elephant and the Asiatic lion.

Day 1 & 2 Fly overnight to Delhi for two nights. **Day 3** Sightseeing of Delhi. **Day 4** Fly to Rajkot and drive to Gir. **Day 5** Morning and afternoon game drives to see lions in Gir National Park. **Day 6** Morning game drive. Fly to Mumbai. **Day 7** Sightseeing in Mumbai. **Day 8** Fly to Nagpur and drive to Tadoba National Park. **Day 9 & 10** Morning and afternoon game drives in search of tiger. **Day 11** Fly to Kolkata. **Day 12** Sightseeing of Kolkata. **Day 13** Fly to Guwahati then drive to Kaziranga National Park. **Day 14 & 15** Morning and afternoon game drives on the look out for rhino. **Day 16** Drive to Guwahati. **Day 17** Fly to Bangalore and on to Mysore. **Day 18** Sightseeing of Mysore. **Day 19** Drive to Nagarhole. Afternoon game drive. **Day 20** Morning and afternoon game drives. **Day 21** Morning game drive. Drive to Bangalore. **Day 22** Fly home.

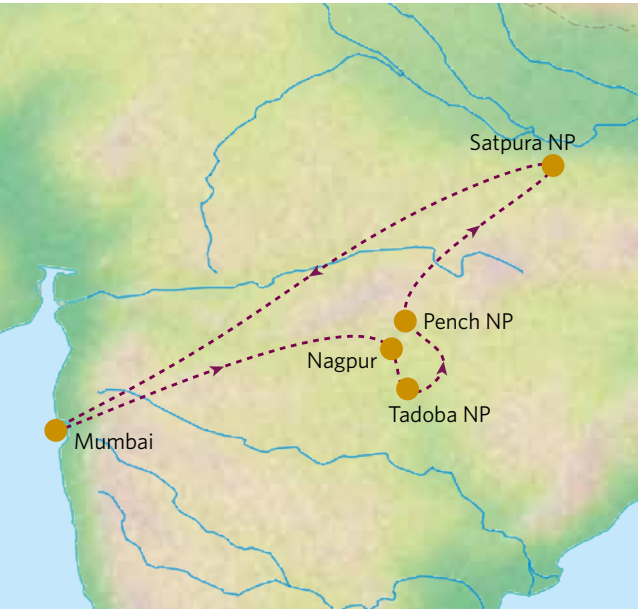


Tiger Trails | 12 days



Exceptional birding experience as well as good chances of spotting tiger and leopard in the wild – without the crowds of the busier parks.

Day 1 Fly overnight from the UK to Mumbai. **Day 2** Arrive in the morning and take a connecting flight to Nagpur for an overnight stay. **Day 3** Drive to Tadoba National Park for an afternoon game drive and three night stay. **Day 4 & 5** Morning and evening game drives. **Day 6** Drive to Jamtara on the northern fringes of Pench National Park. Stay two nights. **Day 7** Morning and evening game drives. **Day 8** Take a long drive through the Seoni and Pachmarhi hills towards the Satpura range. Stay two nights in Satpura National Park. **Day 9 & 10** Morning and evening game drives. **Day 11** Drive to Bhopal airport and fly to Mumbai. Stay overnight. **Day 12** Fly back to the UK on a day flight, arriving the same day.

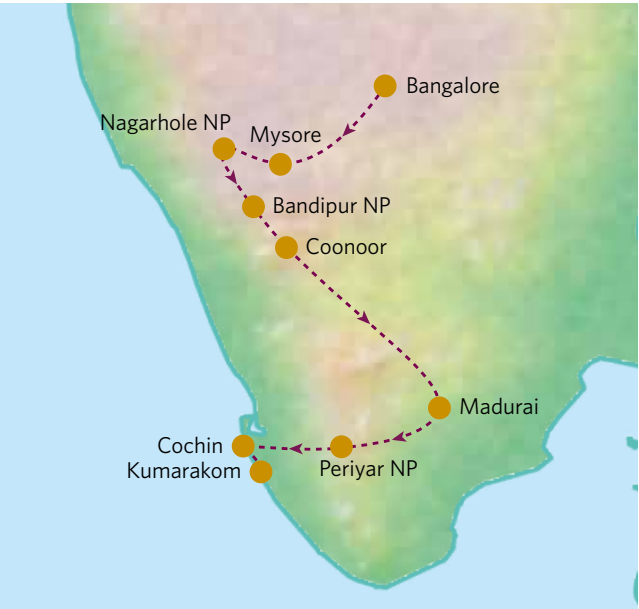


Southern Wildlife | 16 days



Safaris in three different national parks, and two world-class bird sanctuaries, bookended by visits to the historic capitals of Mysore and Cochin.

Day 1 Fly to Bangalore via the Middle East. **Day 2** On arrival drive to Mysore for two nights. **Day 3** Visit Srirangapatna and Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuaries. **Day 4** Drive to Nagarhole National Park. Afternoon safari. **Day 5** Morning and afternoon game drives. **Day 6** Drive to Bandipur National Park. Afternoon game drive. **Day 7** Drive to Ooty to see the Botanical Gardens. Board the Nilgiri Mountain railway to Coonoor. **Day 8** Explore this picturesque area. **Day 9** Drive to Madurai. Visit the Meenakshi temple. **Day 10** Drive to Periyar National Park. **Day 11** Full day inside the park: wildlife walk, bamboo rafting and boat ride. **Day 12** Drive to Kochi. Sightseeing of Fort Cochin. **Day 13** Transfer to Kumarakom for three nights. **Day 14** Visit the bird sanctuary. Afternoon at leisure. **Day 15** Day at leisure. **Day 16** Fly home via the Middle East.





The Indian Himalayas

India's northwest Himalayas are, in many respects, lands apart from the rest of the country. Inaccessible for much of the year, the convoluted valley systems stretching from the Gangetic Plains to the gleaming ice peaks along the Tibetan border offer a fascinating counterpoint to life at sea level. Due north of Delhi, the state of Uttarakhand is famous primarily for its religious Hindu sites, strung together by a network of ancient pilgrimage trails. Foremost among them are the holy towns of Haridwar and Rishikesh, located where the Ganges flows out of the hills.

Himachal Pradesh, to the northwest, is a land of vast valleys cloaked in ancient deodar cedars. Lush and fertile, its valleys retain many wood-and-stone villages, as well as the quintessential British-Indian hill town, Shimla. A wonderful two-day road trip winds north from Himachal through some astounding mountain scenery to the remote province of Ladakh, an enclave of Tibetan Buddhism centred on a particularly dramatic stretch of the Indus Valley.



Highlights of The Indian Himalayas

Shimla Former summer capital of the Raj, defined by its quirky British architecture, narrow-gauge railway and spellbinding views.	Rishikesh The town where the Beatles famously spent time in the 1960s remains a hub for yoga, meditation and spirituality.	Leh The capital of Ladakh, India's most remote region, spreads from the foot of a Tibetan-style palace, framed by shining snow peaks.	Dharamsala Dharamsala & McLeod Ganj, on a forested spur of the Dhauladhar mountains are famous as the home of the Tibetan spiritual leader in exile, the Dalai Lama.
Haridwar The precise spot where the mighty Ganges flows on to the northern plains, revered by Hindus and the site of temples and lively bathing ghats.	Spiti Awesome Himalayan scenery and pretty Buddhist villages huddled beneath ancient monasteries, in a vast valley that sees few visitors.	Kumaon & Garwahl These remote mountain regions are ringed by some of the most spectacular ice peaks in the entire Himalaya – perfect trekking terrain.	Pragpur A sleepy town in the verdant foothills of Himachal Pradesh with an exceptional crop of antique houses and temples.



Shimla

Shimla, the ramshackle capital of Himachal Pradesh, straddles a high ridge to which, during the Raj era, the entire British administration of British India used to decamp from Calcutta to avoid the summer heat. Over time a miniature England sprang among the cedar trees, complete with Anglican church, bandstand and theatre. The hill station remains a popular holiday destination today.

Strolls along the Mall, shopping for Kullu shawls in the bazaar and bone-rattling rides on the narrow-gauge toy train are the order of the day. Vestiges of the Raj have grown fainter, but with the help of our guide you'll be able to root out the most evocative of them, including the imposing Viceregal Lodge where Gandhi and Mountbatten held summits in the 1940s.



Heritage Walk: Shimla

Nothing conjours up the feel of the Raj era as vividly as Shimla's mock-Tudor British buildings. Our walking tour includes a visit to the more illustrious; the Gaiety Theatre, where Felicity Kendall performed Shakespeare in the 1940s, and the Shimla Club, where Kipling whiled away his leave from Lahore decades before.

Pragpur

The village of Pragpur, in the Kangra District of the Shivalik Hills, provides an atmospheric staging post en route to the mountains. It's one of the region's prettiest villages, with cobbled streets winding through ranks of mud-walled, slate-roofed houses. Among them are the mansions of the Sood community, who migrated here in Mughal times and subsequently prospered in the cloth trade. Weaving remains an important cottage industry and on a walking tour you'll have the chance to see traditional Himachali shawls being made.

Manor House Experience

On the edge of Pragpur village stands Judge's Court, built by a local judge in 1918 and now run as a charming country hotel. Once within its walls, you enter a parallel world reminiscent of a bygone era, where breakfast is served under a mango tree in the garden by liveried staff, and supper is preceded by a leisurely cocktail hour on the lawn.



Rishikesh

The holy Hindu town of Rishikesh has long served as a waystage for sanyasins, sadhus and yogis travelling to and from the sacred sites of the Himalayas, and for generations has attracted seekers on spiritual quests, among them the Beatles, who famously spent time here with Maharishi Yogi in 1968. The town continues to be an important New Age centre, with numerous ashrams overlooking the waterfront, and is among the top places in the country to study yoga and meditation.

Ganga Aarti

The most atmospheric among the many daily rituals performed on the banks of the Ganges at Rishikesh is Ganga Aarti, in which worshippers place offerings of incense, flowers and candles on the river in little leaf boats. The sight of these 'diyas' being swept in their thousands downriver is poignant and powerful, most pilgrims having dedicated them to the memory of recently deceased relatives.



Dharamsala

Clustered on a wooded ridge, Dharamsala – or more accurately the township of McLeod Ganj above it – is famous as the home of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It's also the home of a sizeable, and ever growing, number of Tibetan refugees. Visitors come not only to attend public teachings by the Tibetan spiritual leader, but also to learn Buddhist meditation, performing arts, crafts and medicine, and to experience the unique atmosphere of this town.

Set against the grey, snow-capped crags of the Dhauladhar Range, the rooftops of McLeod Ganj are strung with fluttering prayer flags. While monasteries and temples house ranks of red-and-gold prayer wheels, visited year-round by streams of Tibetan pilgrims from the plains.



Nunnery Visit

Dolmaling Nunnery is the first nunnery ever to offer a full Buddhist philosophy curriculum for nuns. The 17-year-long program trains nuns in Buddhist philosophy and debate, as well Tibetan language and English. A stroll through the grounds offers a glimpse into the life of a Tibetan nun, and the chance to witness a prayer ceremony.

Haridwar

Hindus regard Haridwar, located at the exact spot where the Ganges flows on to the Indian plains, as one of the key places capable of releasing souls from the cycle of rebirth, which explains why streams of pilgrims make their way here year-round to immerse themselves in the churning waters. Saffron-clad, dreadlocked sadhus are a common sight on the riverfront ghats. This is also the venue for performing aarti.

Attending the Kumbh Mela

The greatest religious gathering on earth – the Purna Kumbh Mela – is celebrated in a cycle of twelve years at four locations across India. In 2021 it will be the turn of Haridwar, attracting millions of sadhus, Hindu monks and pilgrims to the town. We'll be offering luxury tented accommodation for the duration, as well as expert guides to help you get the most from the experience. The following festival, in 2025, will be held in Allahabad.





Ladakh

The Himalayan province of Ladakh is India's most physically remote and culturally distinct region. It only takes an hour or so to fly there from Delhi, but the change of landscape and atmosphere is total: vast, ice-encrusted mountains of bare brown, ochre and wine-red scree sweep from the floor of the Indus Valley, where white-washed Buddhist monasteries preside over pretty villages wrapped in stands of poplar trees and fields of green or golden barley

In times past, Leh, the Ladakhi capital, was the hub of the trans-Himalayan trade in pashmina wool. These days, the town's income derives principally from the tourists using it as a base from which to visit the region's splendid Tibetan-style monasteries.

The Gompas of the Indus Valley

Most Ladakhi monasteries, or 'gompas', crown the tops of low, craggy hills on the floor of the Indus Valley, their slanting walled prayer halls rising from a beehive of little monk's cells. More than a dozen gompas can be easily reached from Leh. In practice, five or six will probably suffice in the course of a typical week's stay.

Start with Tikse Gompa, the largest and richest in the area: your guide will try to time your visit to coincide with the moment monks announce morning prayers with blasts from giant trumpets on the roof terrace. Tikse can be visited en route to Hemis, further down the valley and the venue for the region's main summer festival, in which a giant thangka painting is unfurled and masked dances are performed in the monastery courtyard.

Heading in the other direction, Alchi holds Ladakh's oldest temples, dating from the First Spreading of Buddhism, which originally came here from Kashmir before it reached Tibet. Further west still, the defining landmark has to be the view of Lamayuru Gompa, framed by its hinterland of spiky peaks and eroded mountainsides.

Himalayan Walks & Treks

The magnificent scenery of the Himalayas shouldn't be considered the exclusive preserve of mountaineers and hard-core trekkers. Plenty of inspiring routes are accessible to anyone with a moderate level of fitness, ranging from ambles in the foothills around Shimla and Pragpur to multi-stage expeditions winding to within touching distance of the snowline.

Our preferred options all favour contact with the people who inhabit this remarkably beautiful part of the world. On a TransIndus walking holiday you'll have the services of an expert English-speaking guide who will help you interact with the locals and interpret what you experience. Where necessary we'll also arrange for cooks, porters and ponies to ensure all you need to think about are the wonderful views. Here are four possibilities you might wish to consider – even if you've never attempted anything more ambitious than a Lakeland fell before!



Indus Valley Walks, Ladakh

You don't have to venture far from the Ladakhi capital to experience awesome Himalayan scenery. A network of old mule tracks thread their way between valleys radiating off the Indus, cresting high, rocky ridges that afford spectacular views of the surrounding snow peaks, including magnificent Stok Kangri. Ascents and descents are not sustained – which is just as well given the base altitudes here – but by leaving your car behind for a few hours you'll experience much more traditional settlements and monasteries. Of course, you'll also be able to enjoy the comfort of your luxury hotel or camp between hikes.



Sleeping Beauty Trail, Shimla

It's possible to see the snow peaks of the Great Himalayan range from the hilltops above Shimla, and on this half-day walk you'll ascend through fragrant cedar and pine forest to one of the area's finest viewpoints. Along the way, the trail passes some of the oldest British bungalows in the town, many of them sadly lapsing into disrepair. Expect to encounter the odd flying fox, itinerant sadhu and groups of inquisitive school children. After hot chai and pakoras at a local 'dhaba' (tea stall), the walk winds up at a temple in the forest, where you'll re-join your car and driver.



Binsar Villages Trek, Kumaon

Kumaon, in the state of Uttaranchal, ranks among the most unspoilt and spectacularly beautiful corners of the Indian Himalaya. On a walk through Binsar district you'll stay in family homes in remote hill villages, where special rooms have been set aside for foreign tourists. When not walking spend time helping in the fields, cooking and playing traditional games with your hosts. We'll devise the precise route according to your level of fitness, but however high you walk, wonderful vistas come as standard.



Mcleod Ganj-Dharamkot-Naddi Village

The great wall of snow-capped mountains looming above Mcleod Ganj is the Dhauladhar Range, and one of the finest views of it is to be had from the village of Naddi, 5km above the town. Passing through a mix of Himalayan cedar, larch and fir trees, the route can be covered in a leisurely three hours, with regular stops at tea stalls and village shrines along the way. It's mostly well-shaded but opens out once you reach the ridge top at Naddi, from where the astounding view is at its most spellbinding around sunset time, when scenery is bathed in magical mountain light.



The Indian Himalayas: Places to Stay

Stupendous Himalayan panoramas can be had by logging to the top of high passes. But waking up to one in a luxury room with a wood burner on the go and the prospect of fresh coffee and warm croissant for breakfast is quite another thing! Ranging from beautiful stone-walled cottages a stone's throw from the Indus River in Ladakh, to luxurious summer camps at the foot of picture-book Buddhist monasteries, our Himalayan hideaways represent the pick of the crop in this extraordinary region.



Taj Hotel, Rishikesh

This luxurious Himalayan retreat, sitting on the banks of the River Ganges in the foothills of the Himalayas, is fast becoming a favourite of ours. The views of the Ganges are breath-taking and the hotel spreads right down to the water's edge. The architecture is contemporary and has been designed to blend sympathetically into its natural surroundings, which has been beautifully achieved. We would highly recommend this hotel for a few days of R&R at the end of an itinerary. The hotel even performs its own Ganga Aarti ceremony, a magical experience to witness.



Oberoi Cecil, Shimla

The Cecil is the Oberoi Group's flagship hotel in Shimla. Kipling was a regular in his youth, but wouldn't recognize the place today. Although the trademark alpine-style, white-and-green exterior has changed little, the inside has had a total overhaul. Sparkling brass, luxurious hardwood parquet floors, plush carpets and smart upholstery have been added to create interiors that feel modern, yet classically elegant. Most of the rooms open on to balconies with stupendous views, there is an indoor swimming pool and the spa comes highly recommended.



Nimmu House, Ladakh

Nimmu House is an elegant, Tibetan-style mansion, built by the cousin of the King of Ladakh, and complete with Buddhist temple, yak stables and apricot orchards. Converted into a glamping retreat in 2012, it has five beautifully designed traditional rooms in the main house, with large windows, lime washed walls and wooden floors; and seven comfortable deluxe tents, with all the modern comforts, spread throughout the orchard. No flat-screen TVs here, but glorious Himalayan scenery on all sides and a charming atmosphere.



The Ultimate Travelling Camps

The Ultimate Travelling Camp offers a highly unique travelling experience. Covering an array of locations in India, see unexplored places and venture off the beaten track whilst staying in Nomadic style tents with added luxury. These glampsites boast locations any five-star hotel would die for. Two of our favourites are found in Ladakh in The Nubra Valley, with superb views of Diskit monastery, and Thiksey, perfect for exploring the less frequented corners of the Indus Valley. The individually designed tents feature ensuite bathrooms, private decks and a private butler.



The Shakti Village Houses

For those who seek space, peace and natural beauty, Shakti offers a rare opportunity to discover compellingly beautiful and remote regions of the Himalayas. With village houses in Ladakh and Kumaon, these truly rural areas of the Himalayas can be explored whilst returning each evening to a warming log fire, a delicious meal and a comfortable bed. All this finery is entirely understated with locals being involved in all aspects of the development. It is a unique experience and is the epitome of low-impact, sustainable tourism.



Stok Palace Heritage Hotel, Leh

Standing in regal grandeur in the valley of Singey Sangpo, popularly known as the Indus valley, Stok Palace was built in 1820 and continues to be the snug abode of the Namgyal dynasty. The palace exudes its traditional charm with low doorways, decorative balconies, mysterious corridors and shaded courtyards. It has six thoughtfully restored heritage rooms and breath-taking views. The family kitchen will lay out the best of authentic Ladakhi, Tibetan and Indian food, sourcing products from the local market and village.



Planning Your Trip: The Indian Himalayas

Gone are the days when you needed hundreds of ponies or porters to penetrate the India’s Northwest Himalaya. Nowadays it’s possible to fly beyond the highest peaks to Ladakh from Delhi in an hour – a trip that yields fantastic views of some giant ice peaks. With more time, however, overland travel is recommended as it ensures a more intimate experience of the changing terrain and cultures of the region. Manali to Leh is the region’s classic road trip, which we suggest clients bookend with explorations of the foothills around Pragpur and Dharamsala, and the Indus Valley in Leh. Most of our tailor-made itineraries in the Indian Himalaya are conducted by comfortable 4WD vehicles, which will meet you at the airport on arrival.

When to Go

The season in the Northwest Himalaya starts in late May or early June, when the passes from Himachal Pradesh and Spiti into Ladakh are generally clear of snow, and lasts until mid- to late-October, when they close again. It is, however, possible to fly into Leh at any time of year, even mid-winter, when temperatures plummet to minus 25 degrees or lower. For trekking in Himachal, the weather is best in April; for Ladakh, in September–October.

Suggested Itineraries

The following tried-and-tested itineraries may serve as starting points for your trip planning. They show what can comfortably be achieved over different time spans, but none are fixed; our consultants will have lots of ideas on how to tailor them to your needs, building a mix of sights and experiences around your own particular interests. They’ll also have suggestions for easy detours to other parts of the country should you wish to extend your tour.

When to go: The Indian Himalayas

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	14	16	20	25	28	28	27	26	25	23	19	15
Rainfall mm	43	56	44	33	59	209	617	613	242	41	6	7
Best to travel	●	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●	●

When to go: Ladakh

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	-7	-5	1	6	9	14	17	17	13	7	0	-5
Rainfall mm	12	10	10	7	7	4	14	16	11	3	3	6
Best to travel	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●

●● Best time to travel ● Good time to travel ● Low season

Spiritual Himalayas and the Golden Temple | 14 days



This tour focusses on the popular region of Himachal Pradesh, approaching via Amritsar, site of the Sikhs’ holiest shrine, the fabulous Golden Temple.

Day 1 Fly overnight to Delhi. **Day 2** Fly to Amritsar. **Day 3** Visit the Golden Temple and the Wagah border or perhaps enjoy some rooftop kite flying. **Day 4** Drive to Dharamsala. **Day 5** Visit McLeod Ganj and the Kalachakra temple. **Day 6** Drive to the pretty village of Pragpur for two nights. **Day 7** Explore the medieval village on foot and see Himachali shawls being made. **Day 8** Drive to Shimla for three nights. **Day 9** Enjoy a heritage walk of Shimla and stroll along the Mall. **Day 10** A day at leisure to see the neighbouring towns of Kufri, Chail & Naldhera, or take a ride on the toy train. **Day 11** Drive to the Hindu pilgrimage town of Haridwar; stay two nights. **Day 12** Visit Rishikesh to experience the spectacular Ganga Aarti ceremony. **Day 13** Take an express train back to Delhi, stay overnight. **Day 14** Fly to UK.

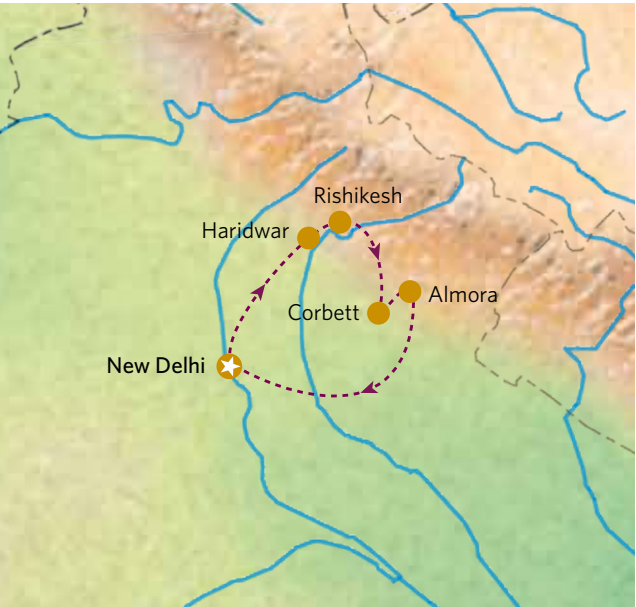


Wildlife and Walking in the Kumaon Hills | 12 days



With terraced fields and snow-covered mountains, Kumaon, in Uttarakhand state, is an ideal place to take in the breath-taking beauty of the Himalaya.

Day 1 Fly to Delhi. **Day 2** Overnight in Delhi. **Day 3** Early morning express train to Haridwar for a two-night stay. Explore the river-front temples and ghats. **Day 4** Visit Rishikesh to experience the Ganga Aarti ceremony. **Day 5** Drive through the beautiful mountainscape to Corbett National Park; stay three nights. **Day 6 & 7** Two full days of game drives by Jeep. **Day 8** Drive to the hill station of Almora, capital of the Kumaon region, visiting Ranikhet en route. Surveying a vast sweep of terraced mountains and pine forest, Almora is an atmospheric base for day trips around the region. **Day 9 & 10** Explore this region on foot visiting hillside villages, wildlife reserves, local homes and craft workshops. **Day 11** Drive to Kathgodam for your train back to Delhi; stay overnight. **Day 12** Fly to UK.

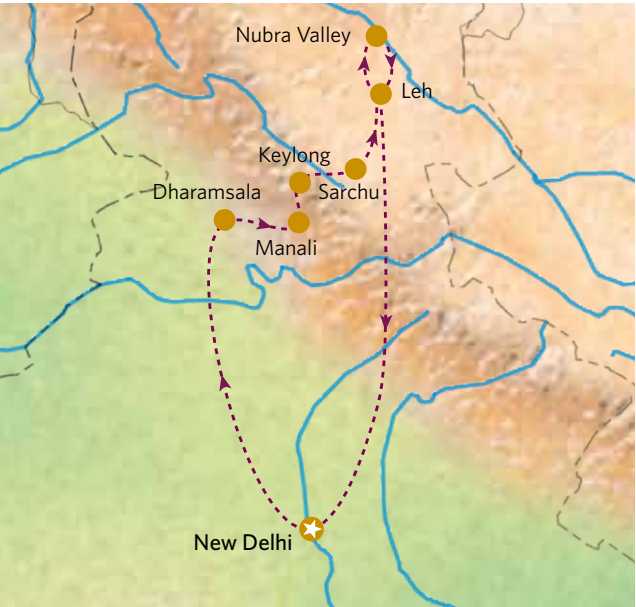


Ladakh: A Trans-Himalayan Safari | 17 days



Rugged landscape, ancient monasteries, a unique way of life and a spectacular Jeep drive along some of the world’s highest passes.

Day 1 Fly to Delhi. **Day 2** Overnight in Delhi. **Day 3** Fly to Dharamsala. Visit the Norbulingka Institute. **Day 4** Visit McLeod Ganj. **Day 5** Drive to Manali via the Baijnath temple. **Day 6** Explore the Old Town of Manali. **Day 7** Journey up through the Himalayas, over the nearly 4,000m-high Rohtang pass. Overnight in Keylong. **Day 8** Drive to Sarchu, crossing the Baralacha La pass (4,890m). **Day 9** Drive to Leh along the Rupshu plains with a chance to see rare wildlife. Cross Taglang La (5,334m). **Day 10** Visit the monasteries, bazaar and Shanti Stupa. **Day 11** Drive to the Nubra Valley via the Khardung-la pass. **Day 12 & 13** Explore the Nubra Valley. **Day 14** Drive to Leh through the Wari-la pass. At its highest point, the road cuts through glaciers. **Day 15** Visit Alchi and Likir Gompa. **Day 16** Fly to Delhi for overnight. **Day 17** Fly to UK.

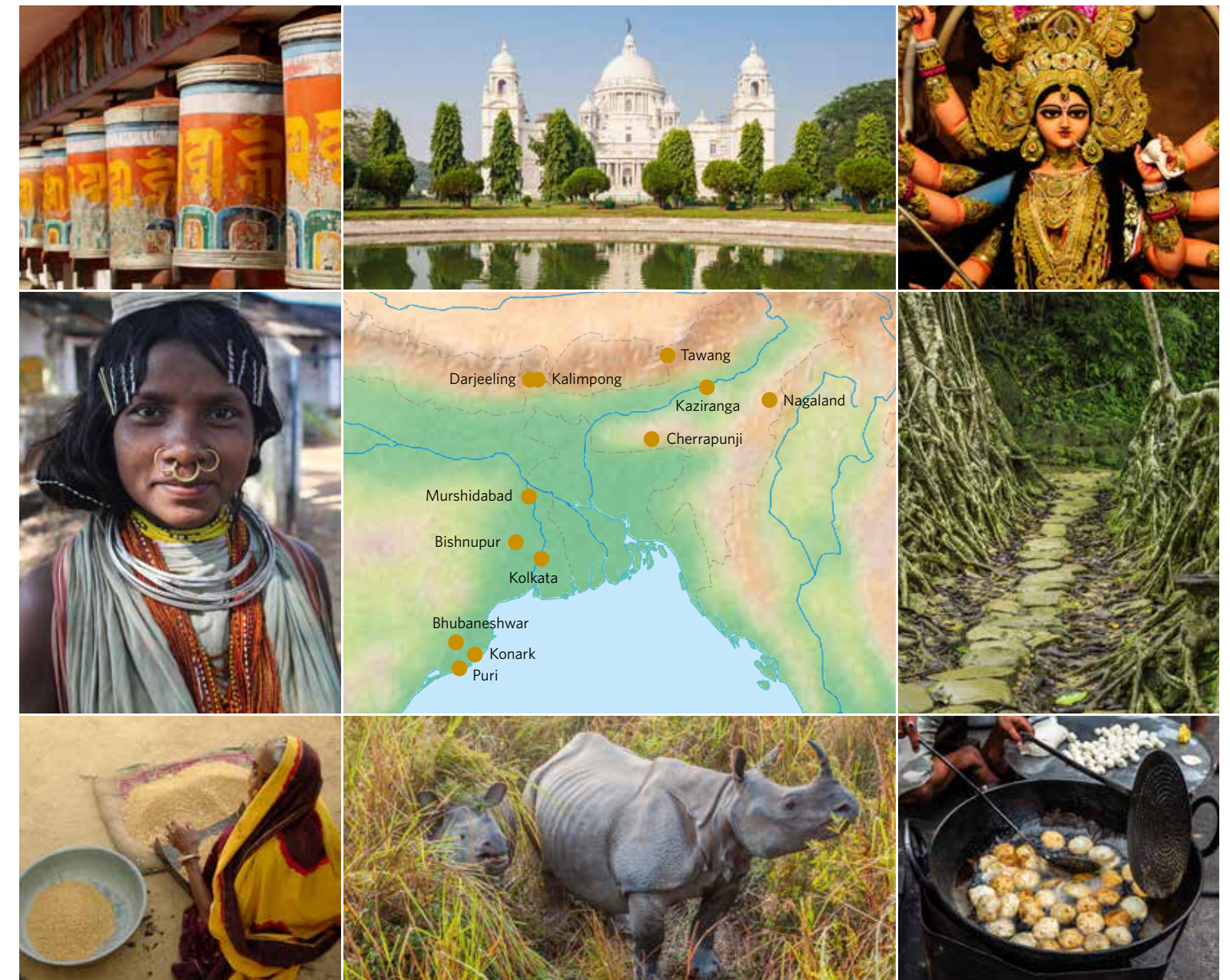




East & Northeast India

Although it served as the capital of British India, Kolkata has since Independence languished in the shadow of Delhi. Yet its charismatic colonial architecture, dramatic setting on the banks of the Hooghly River and distinctive Bengali atmosphere make it a compelling point of entry to India's lesser visited northeast. From beyond the city limits extend the flat expanses of West Bengal, littered with the remnants of long-disappeared capitals, while further north, pockets of fragile wilderness bordering the Brahmaputra River in Assam are a stronghold for tiger, rhino and other endangered species.

The first glimpse of Everest by a European was from near the river, and having travelled this far it would be a shame not to penetrate the foothills for a grandstand view of the ice peaks on the horizon. Reached via the famous toy train, Darjeeling affords one of the finest. Man-made mountains, in the form of colossal carved temples, form the focus of journeys through the coastal state of Odisha, along with the minority communities who inhabit its interior forests.



Highlights of East and Northeast India

Kolkata

One of India's most exciting destinations, with grand colonial architecture, world-class museums and fascinating street life.

Bishnupur

A bumper crop of distinctively Bengali terracotta temples bears witness to this town's prominence as a regional trade hub during the colonial era.

Darjeeling

Marvel at the views of the distant Himalayas from this quintessential tea town in the foothills, reached via a rattling old steam train.

Kalimpong

Kalimpong has some beautiful market gardens and unspoilt hill villages on its outskirts, where Lepcha communities still lead traditional lives.

Nagaland

The Naga tribespeople don elaborate bone-and-feather costumes for important celebrations such as the annual Hornbill Festival.

Konark

Staggeringly intricate carving, much of it erotic in nature, is the hallmark of the Sun Temple in Konark, on the east coast of the state of Odisha.

Bhubaneswar

Odisha's state capital holds one of the best preserved crops of early medieval temples in Asia, all of them ornately sculpted from stone.

Kaziranga

Track wild tigers and one-horned rhinos amid the tall grass, marshes and jungles of the Brahmaputra River in Assam.



Kolkata

Kolkata, or ‘Calcutta’ as it was known prior to 2001, is the capital of West Bengal state, and India’s third largest city, with a population of over 14 million. The trading post originally founded by the East India Company in the 17th century served as the country’s capital until 1911, and still preserves much of its colonial architecture, from the crumbling mansions in Chowringhee to the grandiloquent Victoria Memorial, whose marble domes soar above the banks of the Hooghly River.

Kolkata also retains a strong intellectual and cultural tradition, with a wealth of museums and art galleries. Heated debate on the latest Bengali film, novel or political scandal is the order of the day at the famous Indian Coffee House, in the University district, where paddle fans whirl overhead and the waiters all where ice-cream-wafer turbans.

This is a city where everyday sights often prove the most arresting: pilgrims pouring through the Kali Ghat temple; the flower sellers spreading out their wares in the dawn light at Mullick Ghat; the wrestlers exercising on the nearby riverside steps; the overloaded barges of straw arriving at Kumartuli Ghat, where voluptuous deities are fashioned out of clay for the annual Durga Puja festival; and the endless streams of rickshaws, trucks and pedestrians pouring across Howrah Bridge at rush hours.



Dalhousie Square Heritage Walk

Before Delhi became the capital of British India in 1911, Dalhousie Square (or ‘BBD Bagh’ as it’s known these days) was the country’s commercial and political hub. Site of the East India Company’s most imposing buildings, it epitomizes the spirit of the Empire at its zenith. Our tour will walk you through the highlights, including the splendidly domed General Post Office and Neoclassical St John’s Parish Church. You’ll also stop at a couple of typical Bengali street food stalls along the way to give a sense of modern life in the district, which recently gained Heritage Zone status.



Heritage Stay on the Hooghly

Experience life in Kolkata’s farming hinterland, based at a wonderful heritage property the Rajbari Bawali, a couple of hours’ drive south down the Hooghly. Guided by a member of the hotel staff, you can walk around the neighbouring villages, pausing at tea shops, paan stalls, temples and farmstead for a close-up taste of the local culture. A real highlight here is the sunset boat ride on the river, which is accompanied by a troupe of Baul folk musicians. Photographers will relish the opportunity to capture the sublime colours that swirl in the water as people perform evening aarti in the riverside shrines.

Pandal Hopping

Durga Puja – the 10-day, post-monsoon festival devoted to the worship of the Hindu goddess Durga – is followed fervently in Kolkata. It revolves around hundreds of lavishly decorated shrines known as ‘pandals’, which hold clay and bamboo effigies of the multi-limbed goddess draped in brocaded silk. Wearing their best new clothes, local people wander from shrine to shrine during the festival, comparing the displays of fairy lights and decorations – a tradition known as ‘pandal hopping’. On the final day of the festival, the deities are immersed in the river – an extraordinary sight.

Street Food

In common with India’s other big metropolises, Kolkata has its own array of popular street snacks. On this tour you’ll get to taste the pick of them, guided by local foodies who know the best spots for each. Sample the definitive ‘kati roll’ (paper thin rotis wrapped around spicy vegetable fillings) and plates of hot ‘luchi-alu-dom’ (pint-sized puris served with fiery potato curry). Bengali versions of the usual deep-fried treats like samosas and pakoras are also abundant. You’ll round the tour off with a stop at a typical Kolkata sweet stall for tea and moreish fruit kulfi.

Tram Ride Through Old Calcutta

Kolkata’s tram system is unique in India and a definitive part of city life. It has been running since 1902 and is much loved by Caluttans, despite the overcrowding and hard seats. Rather than using one of the old tram cars, however, our tours are conducted in an air-con alternative with 32 upholstered seats and pneumatic suspension for a more comfortable ride. Large windows enable you to get an unimpeded view of grand old buildings passed along the route, which connects Shyambazaar and Esplanade. You will, of course, be accompanied throughout by your TransIndus guide.



Bishnupur

Some of the most beautiful and richly embellished temples in eastern India are to be found 93 miles north of Kolkata at Bishnupur. Although now little known outside West Bengal, the town was once the prosperous capital of the Malla rajas, who ruled the region until the rise of the Mughals in the 17th century.

Under royal patronage, the arts flourished here for nearly a thousand years and Bishnupur remains an important crafts centre – particularly for silk weaving (local ‘Baluchari’ wedding saris are highly prized by Bengali women) and hand-painted Dasavtara playing cards, featuring colourful images of Hindu deities, which you’ll see being made in workshops on Chinnamasta Rd. It is, however, to see the extraordinary terracotta temples that most visitors travel to the town.



The Terracotta Temples

Made of laterite stone and brick faced with finely carved terracotta, the temples of Bishnupur take their cue from the form of simple Bengali village huts, with gracefully arched chala roofs. Tiles around the bases of the shrine depict scenes from the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as intricate floral motifs.



Darjeeling

It’s not hard to understand why the British chose Darjeeling as the site of a sanatorium in the 19th century. Dense oak and sal forest cloak the high ridge on which the hill station was founded, at a salubrious altitude of 2,200m. For much of the year, the skies remain blue and air blissfully cool. Whole hillsides of lush tea gardens cloak the surrounding slopes – man-made additions to a view of breath-taking beauty. Looking north, the green ridges of neighbouring Sikkim ripple to the shining white vision on the far horizon of Kanchenjunga (8,586m/28,169ft), the world’s third highest mountain. Comparable views extend from the Buddhist monasteries of nearby Kalimpong, Darjeeling’s grittier neighbour, which is famed for its flower and vegetable gardens.



Murshidabad

The flat, riverine countryside to the north of Kolkata holds the remains of numerous lost cities dating from before the time of the British. Grandest of them all is Murshidabad, capital of Murshid Quli Khan, the First Nawab of Bengal, who took control of the region after the death of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in the early 18th century.

Numerous mosques, tombs and gardens survive from his reign, but the crowning glory here is a vast palace whose great Neoclassical façade rises in spectacular fashion from the banks of the Bhagirathi River. Nearby, a peaceful, Mughal-style garden encloses the tomb of Siraj-ud-Daulah - the last independent Nawab of Bengal, executed by the British in the wake of the Battle of Plassey.



Hazarduari Palace

Hazarduari Palace was built by the Scottish architect, Duncan Macleod, for the local Nawab in 1837. Displayed in some of its 114 rooms is an extensive collection of paintings, porcelain, weapons, costumes, palanquins, Persian manuscripts and votive objects – all evocative of the region’s great wealth in the 19th century.



Plantation Walks

One of our all-time favourite places to stay in the Darjeeling area is the heavenly Glenburn Tea Estate – and not just because of the old-world elegance of its colonial architecture. Glenburn also makes the perfect base for walks through the tea plantations, local villages and riverside forests in the area. Expect plenty of interaction with tea pluckers and jaw-dropping views stretching over the lush hills of Sikkim to the snow-covered Kanchenjunga massif.



Riding the Toy Train

The perfect preamble to any visit to Darjeeling is the journey up from the plains on the 19th-century toy train. Steam locomotives still haul some of the services trundling up and down the narrow-gauge line, which affords wonderful vistas of forested foothills and the distant Himalayan peaks. We generally recommend clients take the morning departure to Ghum station, during which you’ll experience a cross-section of terrain, from conifers to tea plantations.



Visit a Tea Factory

Tea was first grown on the mountain slopes around Darjeeling in the 1840s, since when it has become a multi-million-dollar export. In that time the basic techniques and machinery used to pick, ferment, wither, roll, dry, grade and pack the tea have changed little. See the entire process during a visit to a factory on the famous Happy Valley Estate. Top-grade, hand-rolled tea from its 150-year-old bushes sells at eye-watering prices in Harrods.



The Northeast Hills

The far northeast of India is the least visited region by foreigners in the country, and as such offers a mouth-watering prospect for any traveller with a keen sense of adventure. The terrain ranges dramatically, from riverine plains and tarai grassland to jungle, montane forest and the perennial snows of the high Himalaya.

Flanked by rain-soaked hills to the north and south, Assam is the most populous state in the region. Its heart is the flat, low-lying Brahmaputra Valley, where the Kaziranga National Park is among the last strongholds of the one-horned rhinoceros in India (see p55 for more details). The reserve features prominently on luxury river cruises up the Brahmaputra – by far the most leisurely and enjoyable way to explore this fascinating area – along with Majuli Island, whose Vaishnava ‘Sattras’ are repositories of unique devotional art forms, including beautiful dance dramas.

With more time, you might also consider forays into the hills and mountains of the northeast for a taste of life among minority people such as the Nagas, renowned in British times as head hunters but nowadays peace-loving Christians and hosts of an outstandingly colourful festival showcasing their traditional arts and crafts.

Finally, the remote Himalayan state of Arunchal Pradesh offers one of Asia’s greatest road trips: the journey over the Sela Pass to Tawang Monastery.



The Living Bridges

The Khasi Hills of Meghalaya state boast the highest rainfall of anywhere on earth. It is, however, worth braving the deluges to see the so-called ‘Living Bridges’ of Cherrapunjee. By training roots of ficus trees over rivers, the inhabitants of this remote hill district are able to traverse troublesome mountain streams in spate. The bridges take more than a generation to make, with responsibility for their upkeep passing to the eldest daughter. Cross them in the course of our signature Living Bridges walk, which includes a spot of wild swimming (if river levels permit).



Monastery in the Clouds

One of the most memorable road journeys India has to offer is the haul through the foothills of the Himalayas in Arunachal Pradesh to Tawang Monastery. It follows the course of a fragile, unfinished military road that climbs from Bhalukpong, on the Assamese border, through miles of misty mountains and isolated fortress towns to the 4,300-metre Sela Pass. Beyond, amid an amphitheatre of high, snow-streaked mountains, lies the tantalizingly remote Buddhist monastery of Galden Namgye Lhatse. The complex houses around 450 monks and is one of the largest of its kind in Asia.

Tea Bungalows of Assam

Known for its malty flavour, Assamese tea has formed the backbone of the region’s economy since the mid-19th century, when large-scale plantations were first created in the region. You can get a flavour of what life might have been like for the Victorian-era planters who managed the estates by staying in their original bungalows, several of which have been restored to welcome tourists. Most are of the ‘chang ghar’, or stilted variety, with projecting verandas and warm, cosy interiors. Swathed in greenery, the ones we use are particularly recommended for birdwatchers.

Hornbill Festival

The best place to experience the traditional Naga culture is the annual Hornbill Festival, staged near the state capital, Kohima, in early December. In addition to performances of songs and dances, the event features displays of crafts, sports, herbal medicine, archery and wrestling. We generally recommend clients stay at a luxury camp near the showground, alternating trips to the festival with visits to local villages. Far from the formidable characters you might expect them to be, the Nagas today are unfailingly welcoming and delighted to be the subject of so much attention.





The Temples and Arts of Odisha

The coastal state of Odisha, in eastern India, is today something of a backwater – predominantly rural, with a large Adivasi (‘tribal’) minority inhabiting the forests of its hilly hinterland. But between the 7th and 13th centuries, it was the eastern seaboard’s most prosperous and powerful region. Profits from an extensive maritime commerce (stretching all the way to Indonesia) enabled a succession of local dynasties to erect an extraordinary wealth of temples in its capitals, and these now form the focus of most itineraries. Revolving around the great shrines today is a wealth of artistic tradition, which you can experience at first-hand on visits to villages specializing in particular crafts – a perfect souvenir shopping opportunity.



Puri & Bhubaneshwar

Odisha’s elaborately carved Hindu temples number among the great wonders of medieval India. The largest concentration is scattered around the suburbs of the state capital, Bhubaneshwar, where your guide will help you chart the evolution of styles, culminating in the vast Lingaraj mandir, which remains a thriving pilgrimage centre. Dominating the nearby seaside town of Puri, the Jagannath temple is more impressive still and the focus of the famous Rath Yatra chariot festival.



Sacred Crafts

Legions of craftsmen were traditionally employed by the region’s great temples to provide decorations, offerings, utensils and sacred manuscripts for the god enshrined within them, as well as souvenirs for visiting pilgrims. The legacy of this cultural flowering survives in villages dotted around central Odisha. We can include visits to workshops of deity painters, palm-leaf etchers, appliqué makers, and lost-wax metal casters, depending on your interest.



Konark

Conceived in the form of a giant chariot for the Vedic sun god, Surya, Konark’s temple is adorned with carving of exquisite intricacy. Much of it is erotic in nature. The friezes showing courtesans and dancers in action provided templates for the revival of a lost dance tradition known as ‘Odissi’. An annual festival, staged with the floodlit shrine as a backdrop, gathers together the finest living exponents of the form, along with top performers from around India.



The Adivasis of Odisha

Referred to as ‘Adivasis’, aboriginal and tribal societies survive in pockets across remote corners of India – an exceptionally dense concentration of them in the hills of southwestern Odisha, where they gather fruit, nuts, honey and medicinal herbs from the forest and undertake subsistence farming.

Each minority has its own distinctive styles of dress, as well as music, dance and crafts traditions, though these can be difficult for outsiders to experience in their authentic setting. Weekly markets, or ‘haats’, attended by minority people have in the past provided opportunities to see them, but attention of this kind from foreign tourists is rarely welcome.

There is, however, one way you can meet its aboriginal inhabitants on their own terms and in ways that are mutually beneficial. A small guest house half a day’s drive inland from the coast has been set up as a base for visiting Adivasi villages in the surrounding districts. Local people act as the guides, showing you around their homes and giving demonstrations of traditional pottery, jewellery making, cookery and dance. They’re paid a fair sum for the interaction and clearly enjoy it as much as their visitors.

The tours are usually conducted on foot, but you can also drive to places further afield where similar arrangements have been made with members of other Adivasi groups. Your hosts will guide you around local temples and markets – a much more culturally sensitive way of experiencing these unique rural areas than merely turning up in a tour bus armed with a camera.

If you’d like to know more about exploring Adivasi in Odisha, ask one of our specialist India consultants for details of our suggested itineraries covering this area.



Rajbari Bawli (p71)

East & Northeast India: Places to Stay

The pick of the places to stay in Northeast India tend to have a strong colonial flavour: wood-lined planters' houses in Assam, beautiful estate bungalows high in the hills with views of the distant snow peaks from their verandahs, and grand old hotels in the former Imperial capital, Kolkata, all evoke the romance of the Raj era, when the region's rivers served as its principal transport arteries. Our team also know of several hidden gems for those looking to get off the beaten track.



Denzong Regency, Gangtok, Sikkim

Housed in a tastefully renovated heritage property, the family owned Denzong Regency has lashings of Sikkimese style, with spacious rooms ranged over four floors, all with balconies overlooking the valley below. The really great thing about this place, however, is the awesome view it enjoys of Kanchenjunga, whose gleaming white summits nose alluringly above the nearby foothills – a thrillingly wild spectacle for a hotel of such elegant comfort, which can be marveled at as you savour the sumptuous cuisine.



Windemere Hotel, Darjeeling

This is a corner of India where the sun has, most resolutely, not set on the Empire. Stepping into the Windemere is like entering a 1940s time warp. The rooms retain their pre-WWII furniture and floral fabrics, as well as cosy coal fires. After a relaxing game on the sun deck, retire to the dining hall for a dinner of roast beef and roly polly pudding, served by uniformed maids in white gloves. Standards of maintenance are, admittedly, not what they would have been back in the days of the Raj, but the atmosphere is priceless.



The Oberoi Grand, Kolkata

The Grand has been a Kolkata institution since it was first acquired by Mohan Singh Oberoi in 1938. Oberoi gave it a glittering facelift, which must have pleased the American GIs billeted here during World War II – and come as some surprise to any locals old enough to remember its beginnings as 'Mrs Monte's Boarding House'. Today, the strident Neoclassical façade and pillared entrance rank among Kolkata's most prominent landmarks, while the hotel itself is regularly named among India's top three. The rooms are as polished as you'd expect for one of Oberoi's benchmark addresses.



The Glenburn Penthouse, Kolkata

This elegant residence in the heart of Kolkata, and the city sister hotel to one of our all-time favourites, the Glenburn Estate, offers a rare opportunity to stay in a boutique hotel, with views of the iconic landmarks of Kolkata. Gaze out to the Victoria Memorial and the green expanse of the Maidan whilst relaxing by the rooftop infinity pool or dining on the Tea Verandah. An exquisite collection of Bengal colonial furniture and artwork can be found throughout, the drawing and dining rooms are adorned with bespoke 'Hindoostan' wallpaper and the nine suites all have antique four poster beds.



Thengal Manor, Jorhat, Assam

This charming guest house, dating from 1929, is a whitewashed colonial-style mansion, built by a wealthy tea planter just outside Jorhat. Spread over two acres, it holds five spacious guest rooms, with modern amenities, all of them packed with old family memorabilia, bits of evocative bric-a-brac and an open fireplace. The grounds harbour a recently built pool, and there's an airy front porch where you can lounge on leather armchairs watching exotic birds flash through the foliage. Spend the evening playing games in the cosy lounge.



The Heritage Club, Tripura Castle, Shillong

The young Maharaja of Tripura fell in love with Shillong when he studied here in the 1920s and built this sprawling colonial-style bungalow as a holiday bolthole. The driveway sweeps through Himalayan pines, bamboo and cherry trees to a rambling terraced garden full of rare orchids and roses. The rooms have been sensitively built using local materials, and all have lovely brass fireplaces. If you can stretch to it, go for the cavernous, high-ceilinged Maharaja's suite, with its lustrous wood floors and mahogany bed that was once slept in by Tagore.



Planning Your Trip: East & Northeast India

Kolkata is the gateway to this region, and we always recommend clients spend at least a couple of days exploring the city before moving on. In a typical two-week trip, it is possible to cover the highlights of West Bengal up to Darjeeling, including stops at the terracotta temple towns, and making a short detour to Sikkim. With another week to spare you could also venture along the Brahmaputra through Assam to see wild rhinos at Kaziranga, and on towards Nagaland and one or two of the more remote Hill States. Alternatively, consider a river cruise – the options for this are sketched on p82-83. Our specialist consultants will be able devise an itinerary that perfectly matches your travel priorities and interests.

When to Go

November to mid-April is the ideal season for northeast India, although Sikkim and the other hill areas can be chilly in December and January. Visibility may be impaired by haze from late-March onwards. That said, in the Himalayan regions this is the best time for trekking, with spectacular displays of rhododendron blooms in the valleys. The monsoon lasts between May and September, when road travel and air is often disrupted by storms and flooding.

Suggested Itineraries

The following tried-and-tested itineraries may serve as starting points for your trip planning. They show what can comfortably be achieved over different time spans, but none are fixed; our consultants will have lots of ideas on how to tailor them to your needs, building a mix of sights and experiences around your own particular interests. They'll also have suggestions for easy detours to other parts of the country should you wish to extend your tour.

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	16	19	23	24	23	25	24	24	24	24	21	18
Rainfall mm	11	30	35	60	142	288	415	350	285	142	28	16
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●

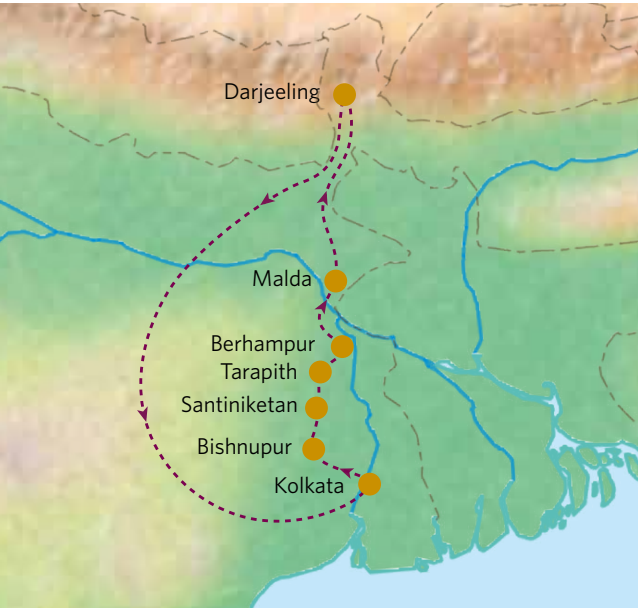
●● Best time to travel ● Good time to travel ● Low season

Rural Bengal | 14 days



This itinerary offers a wealth of sites unique to this state, rich in heritage, combining cultural, historical and spiritual legacy.

Day 1 Fly to Kolkata via the Middle East. **Day 2** Spend two nights. **Day 3** Sightseeing includes the flower market at Mallick Ghat, the Victoria Building and Park Street Cemetery. **Day 4** Drive to Bishnupur. Visit the terracotta temples. **Day 5** Travel to Santiniketan, via Bankura and Panchmura. **Day 6** Explore the Vishwa Bharati University and Kala Bhawan. **Day 7** Drive to Tarapith. **Day 8** Continue to Berhampur via Hazardwari and other sights in Murshidabad. **Day 9** Visit Gaur and Pandua near Malda. **Day 10** Early morning train to New Jalpaiguri; drive on to Darjeeling. **Day 11** Early morning visit to Tiger Hill and Ghoom Monastery, take a ride on the Darjeeling Heritage Railway. **Day 12** Visit a tea garden, walk down Mall Road and Chowrasta. **Day 13** Fly to Kolkata, overnight stay. **Day 14** Fly to UK via the Middle East.



Undiscovered East India | 15 days



Medieval temples, ancient Buddhist sites, a world-class bird reserve, vibrant traditional crafts villages and encounters with minority people.

Day 1 Fly to Kolkata via the Middle East. **Day 2** Spend two nights. **Day 3** Sightseeing includes the flower market at Mallick Ghat, the Victoria Building and Park Street Cemetery. **Day 4** Fly to Bhubaneswar. Visit the temples. **Day 5** Visit the Udaigiri, Ratnagiri and Lalitgiri Caves. **Day 6** Drive to Puri, via the artist villages of Pipli and Raghurajpur. **Day 7** Excursion to Konark Temple. **Day 8** Drive to Barkul on Chilika Lake. **Day 9** Morning boat ride to spot flamingos. Drive to Rayagada. **Day 10** Visit the Dongariya Kondh market. Drive to Jeypore. **Day 11** Visit the villages and markets of the Bonda, Gadhaba and Didayee tribes. **Day 12** Visit the Paraja market. Drive to Vishakhapatnam for a late flight to Hyderabad. **Day 13** City sightseeing. **Day 14** Visit Golconda Fort & Qutub Shahi Tombs. **Day 15** Fly to UK via the Middle East.

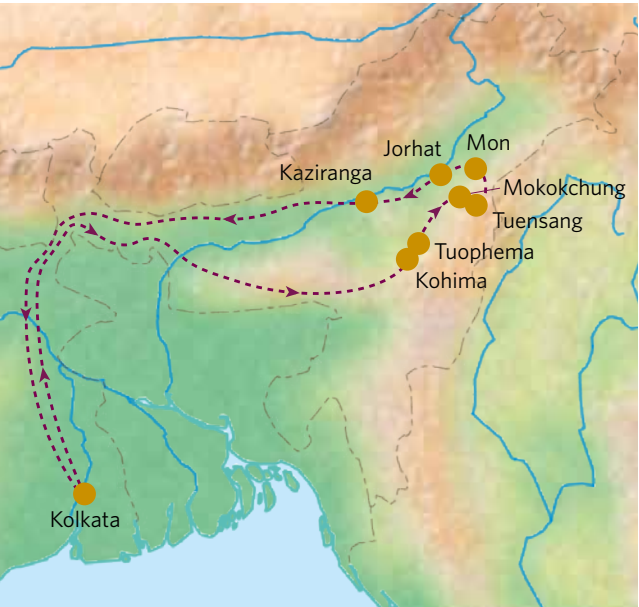


Nagaland & Assam | 16 days



Assam, best known for its eponymous tea, and Nagaland, home to many tribes, each with its own traditions, language and attire.

Day 1 Fly to Kolkata via the Middle East. **Day 2** Spend two nights. **Day 3** Sightseeing includes the flower market at Mallick Ghat, the Victoria Building and Park Street Cemetery. **Day 4** Fly to Dimapur and drive on to Kohima. **Day 5** Visit the World War II Memorial and later drive to Tuophema village; stay one night. **Day 6** Drive to Mokokchung via Mopongchukit, stay two nights. **Day 7** Explore the tribal villages around Mokokchung. **Day 8** Drive to scenic Tuensang today; overnight stay. **Day 9** Drive to Mon; stay two nights. **Day 10** Visit tribal villages around Mon. **Day 11** Drive to Jorhat in Assam visiting Sibsagar enroute. **Day 12** Visit Majuli Island and drive on to Kaziranga National Park; stay three nights. **Day 13 & 14** Jeep safaris in the park. **Day 15** Fly to Kolkata; stay overnight. **Day 16** Fly to UK via the Middle East.



River Cruising in India

Exploring north India doesn't necessarily have to mean "trains, planes and automobiles". A handful of entrepreneurial companies run luxury cruises along the Hooghly, Brahmaputra and Ganges Rivers, harking back to a more genteel era of travel. As well as offering a relaxed way to experience the country, a luxury river cruise enables you to visit parts of the country few tourists ever see.

Life on Board

All of the ships featured are essentially floating luxury hotels. You sleep in air-conditioned cabins with large windows, and dine on gourmet food served by well-trained, liveried staff. Entertainment, in the form of Indian classical music and after-dinner lectures, is often laid on, while workshops, from sunrise yoga to Indian ritual flower arranging, are frequently on offer. There's usually a well-stocked library on board too, but for the most part, gazing over the water and socializing with other travellers soaks up most free time.

Shore Excursions

One of the great delights of river cruising in India is the chance it affords to explore some truly remote areas of the country which you might otherwise never hope to visit. Every day features excursions to market towns and villages to see local potters, sari weavers and metal workers in action, as well as an array of historic monuments, among them the ruins for forgotten colonial posts and regional capitals that once ranked among the richest ports in Asia.

Cruise Lines

We work with three different companies in India. They all offer comparable routes, but costs differ slightly between them, reflecting levels of luxury and crew-to-passenger ratios.



Assam Bengal Navigation

The pioneering ABN operates three steamers in India, handsomely furnished and extremely comfortable throughout. On offer between mid-October and March are two highly varied and interesting routes.

The first follows the Brahmaputra in Assam, pausing at wildlife parks, historic towns, tea plantations and craft villages along the way. The second travels up the Hooghly, via a string of abandoned cities.

Pandaw Cruises

Pandaw began life in 1995 on Burma's Ayeyarwady River but has since expanded to offer itineraries across Indochina – and now India. Covering the Hooghly and the Bhagirathi, all their cruises are on the company's 1940s-style vessels.

Every day features a visit by cycle or auto-rickshaw to a different market town or village, many of which hold remarkable monuments, from Bengali terracotta temples to decaying old British, French and Dutch mansions.

Exotic Heritage

EH currently operate the most luxurious vessels cruising in Eastern India. The Ganges Voyagers I & II and Bengal Ganga are richly appointed triple-deck boats that run trips of between five and eight days in and out of Kolkata. You've the usual shore excursions and on-board facilities, but everything is just that little bit glossier.

They also run an exclusive, 19-metre cruiser – the Nauka Vilas – with just one spacious bedroom and an 8-man crew: perfect for a special celebration.



West India

Lapped by the Arabian Sea, India's west coast has for many centuries maintained lucrative maritime trade with East Africa, the Gulf and Persia. Evidence of this ancient prosperity survives in the richly carved and painted rock-cut caves of Ellora and Ajanta, which sit astride the caravan routes running north to the Ganges plains. Providing the shortest route to the sea from the Mughal capitals, the ports of Gujarat in time emerged as India's richest, resulting in some of the country's finest Indo-Islamic architecture and a wonderful crop of Jain temples.

Later, Portuguese domination of the seaways saw the appearance in Goa of a huge city with a diverse population and a collection of massive churches and basilicas, the remnants of which still tower above the surrounding palm canopy. The rise of the British East India Company, however, saw Mumbai eclipse Goa as the west coast's busiest harbour, particularly after the cotton boom of the late-19th century, when the city acquired some of the grandest buildings ever erected by the Raj.



Highlights of West India

Mumbai

With its iconic landmarks, richly stocked museums and breath-taking ancient monuments, the Maharashtran capital makes a memorable gateway to India.

Konkan Coast

The 580km/360miles of tropical coastline stretching between Mumbai and Goa holds a string of superb Maratha forts and amazing deserted beaches.

Ellora

Sculpted from a basalt cliff, in a now quiet corner of north Maharashtra, are dozens of intricately decorated ancient cave temples – some on a colossal scale.

Ajanta

The region's other great archaeological treasure is this famous cave complex whose swirling, vibrant murals depict life in ancient India in astonishing detail.

Ahmedabad

Richly carved medieval mosques and tombs – along with a world-famous textile museum – are reason enough to explore the Gujarati capital.

Kutch

Each of the innumerable castes and minority people who inhabit this pan-handle peninsula in the west of Gujarat retain their distinctive dress and crafts traditions.

Palitana

Encrusting a breezy hilltop in southern Gujarat are hundreds of elaborately moulded, whitewashed Jain shrines – a chimeric spectacle.

Champaner

One of the subcontinent's finest off-track gems, the ruins of Mahmud Begada's 15th-century capital holds a collection of spectacular Islamic buildings.



Mumbai

Bombay, or Mumbai as it's officially called these days, has been India's busiest port and industrial centre since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1969. As famous for its traffic jams as record-breaking movie industry, the Maharashtran capital tends not to feature high up most visitors' 'must see' list, but as a point of arrival has a lot to recommend it.

Before the last British troops garrisoned in the country slow-marched past it to board their ships back to Blighty in 1947, the Gateway of India – a huge triumphal arch in the colonial Indo-Sarcentic style – was the first landmark most new arrivals from Britain set eyes on. The second was the famous Taj Mahal Hotel beside it. Both still stand tall on the waterfront, as emblematic of the city today as they were in Victorian times.

Aside from the landmarks of the British era, Mumbai's other unmissable sight is the rock-cut cave temples of Elephanta Island, a boat ride across the bay. Hollowed from a hill of brown-black basalt 13 centuries ago, the pillared shrines contain a series of awesome bas reliefs, the most iconic of them the three-headed 'Trimurti', representing the three aspects of the god Shiva.

Having ticked off the sights, why not spend some time exploring hidden aspects of the metropolis. Here are five great experiences recommended by our consultants.



The Bohri Kitchen

The Bohri community is a small sect of Shia Muslims based in a neighbourhood of central Mumbai famous for its flavoursome cuisine. Join a cookery demonstration at the home of a Bohri family, before enjoying a seven-course feast featuring such delights as mutton and kheema samosas, chicken biriyani and – the real show stealer – melt-in-the-mouth, two-day marinated raan. In the process you'll also learn about the history and culture of the Bohris, who originated in Gujarat but migrated here in the boom period of the 19th century.

Qawwali at Haji Ali's Tomb

The marble mausoleum of Mumbai's most revered Sufi saint, Haji Ali, rests on an islet connected to the city by a slender causeway. Each Thursday evening, the promenade fills with worshippers who come to pay their respects at the shrine ahead of Friday prayers. The atmosphere is most fervent at sunset when a troupe of local Qawwalis perform in front of the tomb. A heady blend of Hindustani and Afghan folk music, Qawwali music is distinguished by its soaring vocal lines and driving rhythms – a perfect accompaniment to the sun setting over the Arabian Sea.



Heritage Walk

The districts of Fort and Kala Godha in south Mumbai hold the most splendid colonial-era landmarks in the city. They date from the Raj at its 19th-century zenith, when India was the world's main exporter of cotton, and form a fabulously grandiose backdrop for the swirl of life at street level. Join a local expert for a history-focussed tour ticking off all the big buildings, from the Gateway of India to the Prince of Wales Museum, General Post Office and VT Station, with a stop at the time-warp Yazdani Bakery for chai and traditional Parsi biscuits.

A Day with the Dhabawallas

Thanks to a quintessentially Indian delivery system, the office workers of Mumbai are able to enjoy home-cooked lunches each day, prepared after they leave for work by their wives out in the suburbs. The meals are placed in special stainless steel 'tiffin boxes' ready for collection around mid-morning by a legion of dhabawallas, who take them to their destinations downtown, guided by a colour code on the lids. Join the cotton-clad porters as they hand the boxes along a chain of suburban trains, bicycles, handcarts and head trays to their hungry customers in the business district – a unique way to experience the city.

Worli Fishing Village Tour

Spend a day exploring the world of Mumbai's aboriginal fishing community, the Kolis, at a village in the north of the city. The settlement existed long before the arrival of European traders in the region, and life has changed little here over the centuries. During the visit you'll see the fishermen fixing their nets and boats, and join devotees at a local temple dedicated to 'Golfadevi' – a much loved oracle consulted on all important matters. This daytrip also takes in a 300-year-old British watchtower and a Japanese Buddhist temple with a unique history – all about as off the beaten track as Mumbai sightseeing gets.





Beyond Mumbai

Considering the seminal role it has played in the history and culture of India, Maharashtra state features surprisingly little on visitors' itineraries these days. Yet for anyone with a sense of adventure and an eye for spectacular landscapes and atmospheric ancient monuments, the region offers rich pickings.

Its defining geographical feature is the range of table-top mountains running in parallel with the coast – the Western Ghats. In ancient times, the few easy routes through them were embellished with splendid rock-cut caves temples and monasteries. Later, a chain of towering forts was constructed on prominent hilltops and along the coastline running south to Goa to control the trade in Arabian war horses.

Nowadays known as the Konkan, this 400-kilometre stretch of tropical shoreline boasts some of India's loveliest and least discovered beaches, whose remote fishing ports, island forts and forgotten antiquities you can explore with the help of our expert holiday designers.

Quality accommodation is in short supply beyond the big cities, but we've managed to find a handful of bijou places offering comfortable bases from which to explore this little visited corner of the country, as well as some memorable experiences to enjoy once you're there. Here's a roundup of our current favourites, starting in the hills half a day's drive out of Mumbai.



Ellora & Ajanta Caves

Nowhere else in India does the distant past feel closer to the surface than at the rock-cut complexes of Ellora and Ajanta. Carved between 2nd century BC and 11th century AD, these UNESCO-listed monuments hold a wealth of exquisite sculpture and painting. Ellora's crowning glory is Kailashnath – a colossal megalith scraped laboriously from the bare rock to resemble a huge, free-standing shrine. Ajanta's caves are renowned primarily for their murals, which depict a cross-section of life in the ancient world, from court scenes to processions, markets, rituals, battles and boudoirs.



Kayaking on the Karli River

An unforgettable day of outdoor adventure awaits on a wild stretch of the Konkan just north of Goa. It begins with brunch at a remote island in the Karli River, from where you'll kayak with your guides along the shoreline to explore the ruins of an old Maratha fort, before sitting down to a sumptuous Malawani lunch of seafood and local vegetable curries. Once the afternoon heat has subsided, embark on an hour-long coastal walk, with a stop for a refreshing dip along the way, before rejoining your vehicle for the journey back to your hotel in nearby Goa.



Wine Tasting in Nasik

Just beyond the Western Ghat mountains on the Deccan Plateau, the Nasik region enjoys a climate perfect for grape cultivation. Wine experts from Bordeaux and California were drafted in 15 years ago to help create a string of vineyards that are now producing quality wines here. Sample the top vintages for yourself on a tailor-made tour of the region. We visit three different estates, all equipped with tasting rooms that wouldn't look out of place in Nappa Valley – a perfect opportunity to stock up for the rest of your trip.

Thibaw's Palace

After the British annexed Burma in 1885, the Burmese ruler, King Thibaw and his family were exiled to an obscure spot on India's Konkan Coast, where they lived out the rest of their lives. The grand hilltop mansion built for the purpose survives in a state of semi-dereliction outside the town of Ratnagiri, a day's drive south of Mumbai; a small museum houses artefacts surviving from this unlikely royal interlude. Built of local red laterite, the property occupies a hilltop looking out to sea. It is said Thibaw pined so badly for his homeland that he never left the house.

The Konkan Coast Fort Trail

The sparsely populated, tropical coastline running south from Mumbai – known as the Konkan – was in former times dotted with busy maritime ports trading with East Africa and the Gulf. To control this commerce, the Maratha warlords who ruled the region between the 17th and 19th centuries built a chain of coastal forts on prominent headlands and islands. Now in ruins, the crumbling old citadels provide stepping stones for a wonderful journey down the Konkan to Goa – one of India's great road trips. Expect some gloriously remote landscapes, deserted, palm-backed beaches and succulent local seafood.

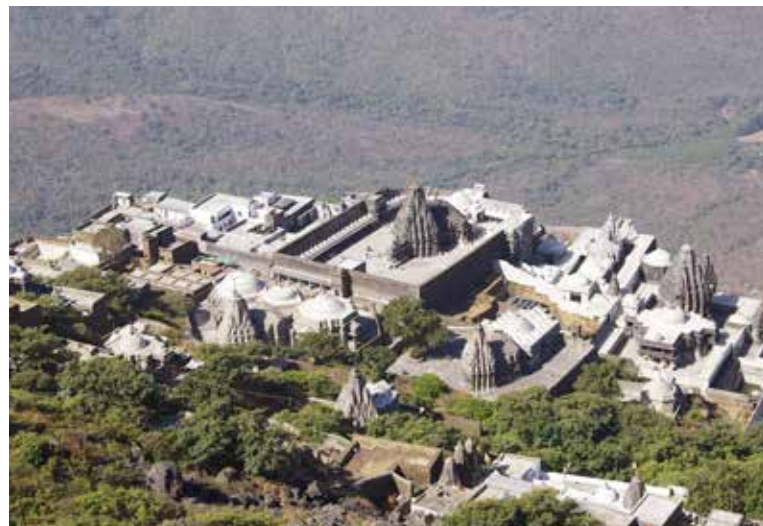


Gujarat

Though boasting a cultural richness, historic monuments and wildlife experiences comparable with those of neighbouring Rajasthan, the state of Gujarat receives only a fraction of the number of visitors. Fortune, however, favours the bold. In the course of a fortnight, you could explore Jain hilltop temple complexes, sight wild lion, visit craft villages where nomadic camel herders create fabulous textiles, relax in royal palaces and discover an amazing Muslim ghost city.

Most travellers approach the region via its capital, Ahmedabad – a fast-paced metropolis of over 7 million people which, in the 15th century, was the hub of a rich and powerful Indo-Muslim dynasty, with a penchant for finely decorated mosques. Several survive in the streets of the old bazaar district, among them the Masjid of Sidi Sayyid, whose walls are covered in designs as complex and spellbinding as any in the Alhambra or Taj Mahal.

Elsewhere in the city, the famous Calico Museum of Textiles holds examples of the richly embroidered cloth that first drew European traders here in the 17th century. With the landmarks of the capital ticked off you can then set your sights on the wonders further north and west. To whet your appetite, here are some highlights chosen by our Gujarat experts.



Shivratri at Junagadh

Hindu and Jain pilgrims from across India descend to Junagadh in Saurashtra to scale Mt Girnar, western India's holiest mountain. Over the week of Shivratri in February–March their ranks are swollen by tens of thousands of naked, dreadlocked ascetics, who mass at the base of the hill in a huge encampment, preparing to complete the sacred circuit around it by smoking prodigious quantities of hashish. In the town itself, a rock edict dating from 250BC and a particularly exuberant Nawab's tomb, the Maqbara of Vizir Sahib Baka-ud-din Bhar, are the main sights.

The Jain Temples of Shratanjaya

Some 3,200 steps have to be scaled to reach the top of Shratanjaya Hill, the holiest pilgrimage site in India for members of the Svetambara sect of Jains. Extravagantly carved towers rise in tiers from the sacred ridgetop complex near the town of Palitana, where around one-thousand walled shrines seem to float in the heavens above the Gulf of Cambay. At least one visit here is deemed essential by Jains in order for the soul to be fit for Nirvana. For non-believers, the sublime view is incentive enough to make the climb, which takes around one-and-a-half hours.



The Ghost City: Champaner

Champaner succeeded Ahmedabad as the seat of the local sultans in the 16th century, before Akbar swept through to annexe Gujarat for the Mughals. Inscribed with exquisite calligraphy and elaborate Hindu-inflected motifs, its ruined mosques, palaces, fortified gateways and tombs are scattered over four miles of scrubland – now classed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Above it looms the sandstone escarpments of jungle-covered Pavagadh Mountain, on whose summit a whitewashed Kali temple affords a stupendous view of the surrounding plains.

Go Fly a Kite: Ahmedabad

The International Kite Festival is celebrated with great enthusiasm across Gujarat, but the event (held on January 14th each year) is at its most vibrant in the capital, Ahmedabad. All over northern India, kite flying is a competitive sport: children encrust the strings of their kites in glass in order to cut the chords of their opposition's 'patangs'. Join in the fun with a local family early in the morning of the festival as your hosts climb up on to their rooftops to do battle: the breeze that blows over the city before sunrise is perfect for flying. A feast of freshly made sweets and hot chai follows the bout of aerial combat.

Textile Tours from Bhuj

For anyone interested in textiles, Kutch, in the far west of Gujarat, is a treasure trove. Women of all ages in villages around the region's capital, Bhuj, spend their days sewing, weaving and making embroidery to create clothes for themselves and their daughters, or to fashion items for sale. Settle on a shady veranda sipping hot tea while intricately sewn bedspreads, patchwork quilts and appliqué panels are unfurled – the ornate decorative patterns used are painstakingly counted on the warp and weft of the cloth, and sewn using silk thread.





West India: Places to Stay

Whether you're trying to identify the best value boutique boltholes in Mumbai or an atmospheric heritage hotel with dependable plumbing in rural Gujarat, you'll probably need some help picking the best places to stay on India's western flank. Thankfully, our team have scoured the region and come up with some real gems, ranging from a remote hideaway on a deserted stretch of the Konkan Coast to luxury Jooba huts on the Rann of Kutch.



Rann Riders, Dasada

This little eco-resort, situated a couple of hour's drive northwest of Ahmedabad, is the best base from which to explore the Little Rann of Kutch. Round thatched cottages resembling local huts, and set in beautiful gardens, provide the accommodation. Their interiors are true works of art, featuring adobe moulding, mirror inlay and woven textiles made by local artisans. Owner Malik breeds Marwari horses and leads trips by camel and Jeep around the Rann, stopping at crafts villages, temples, mosques and Jain shrines en route.



The House of MG, Ahmedabad

Mangaldas-Girdhardas - 'MG' to his friends - was a Gujarati textile tycoon and philanthropist whose lavish 1924 mansion in the capital has been turned by his descendants into a fabulous heritage hotel. Behind its elaborate neo-Baroque façade, hallways paved with polished mosaic and imported marbles lead to ten boutique rooms crammed with original furnishings and family memorabilia. There's even a small indoor pool; and on the rooftop, the Agashiye terrace restaurant serves sumptuous Gujarati thalis bursting with local flavours.



Taj Mahal Palace & Tower, Mumbai

Ever since it opened in 1903, the Taj Mahal Palace has been one of the world's finest hotels. India's first harbour landmark, and the flagship hotel of the Taj Group, it stands tall next to the Gateway of India on the waterfront of Mumbai. Popular with the city's glitterati and visiting VIPs, the historic interiors of the palace wing are more resplendent than ever, whilst the attached Tower Wing, opened in 1973, offers a chic contemporary style - book a sea-facing room, if you can, for great views over the harbour front.



Trident Nariman Point, Mumbai

Nestled in the heart of vibrant and bustling Mumbai, Trident Nariman Point soars 35 storeys high and offers panoramic views over Marine Drive out to the ocean and Queen's Necklace lights along the promenade. With 555 well-appointed rooms and suites we would highly recommend upgrading to a sea view room. Known as a dining destination in Mumbai, there are three restaurants to choose from, including a Pan Asian speciality restaurant. Relax by the swimming pool and make use of the tranquil Trident spa.



Coco Shambala, Konkan Coast

This heavenly little boutique property with just four luxury villas, sits on a slope overlooking tranquil Bhogave Beach. From your private infinity pool you can gaze for miles along the shoreline. The whole area is wrapped in lush vegetation and teeming with colourful butterflies and exotic birdlife. The villas themselves are as lovely as the landscape, with coconut wood furniture and traditional Mangalore tiled roofs. Inside, the sleek, chic rooms are enlivened with beautiful Indian textiles and antiques, but the essence of the place are the dreamy sea views from the verandahs.



SwaSvara, Gokarn

Created by our good friends at CGH Earth, SwaSvara is a wellness resort, geared towards rejuvenation through yoga, Ayurveda treatments and healthy food, though plenty of people come just to enjoy its superb location and vibrant architecture. Beautiful Om Beach is literally on the doorstep. This stretch of the Indian coast is truly heavenly and SwaSvara is the only place we recommend our clients use as a base, thanks to its high service standards, impeccably well trained staff and soothing, earthy architecture, which all complement the wonderful location.



Planning Your Trip: West India

Mumbai is the main travel hub for western India, with daily connections on several airlines to and from the UK. Travellers all too often bypass the city, but we generally recommend spending a couple of nights there before venturing north to the great cave sites at Ellora and Ajanta. Gujarat's capital, Ahmedabad, also has direct flights to and from London, and serves as a convenient gateway for the many and varied wonders of the Saurashtran Peninsula. You'll need at least a couple of weeks to do this fascinating part of India justice, and ideally three or four. With that kind of flexibility, you can travel up to the remote region of Kutch and have time to spare for a beach break in Goa, an easy 50-minute flight from Mumbai.

When to Go

The optimal time to travel in the west of India is from October to April, before humidity levels become oppressive ahead of the monsoon in mid-June. From then on, heavy rain frequently disrupts travel by air and road, while the beaches of Goa are effectively off-limits for months – though the mountains and Gujarati countryside become beguilingly green and pleasant under grey skies, hence their popularity among Indian holidaymakers at this time.

Suggested Itineraries

The following tried-and-tested itineraries may serve as starting points for your trip planning. They show what can comfortably be achieved over different time spans, but none are fixed; our consultants will have lots of ideas on how to tailor them to your needs, building a mix of sights and experiences around your own particular interests. They'll also have suggestions for easy detours to other parts of the country should you wish to extend your tour.

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	24	25	27	29	30	29	28	28	28	29	28	26
Rainfall mm	10	10	10	10	10	560	640	520	320	90	20	10
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●

●● Best time to travel ● Good time to travel ● Low season

Heritage of Gujarat | 16 days



Wonderful monuments, breath-taking landscapes, unique wildlife viewing, and the chance to experience vibrant, traditional ways of life at close quarters.

Day 1 Fly overnight to Mumbai. **Day 2** Spend a night in Mumbai. **Day 3** Fly to Bhavnagar for two nights. Visit the remnants of Lothal. **Day 4** Explore the Jain temple complex on Shrutanjaya Hill. **Day 5** Drive to Gir National Park for overnight. Afternoon safari. **Day 6** Morning safari. Drive to Gondal via the Uparkot Fort in Junagadh; stay two nights. **Day 7** Sightseeing in and around Gondal. **Day 8** Drive to the Great Rann of Kutch for three nights in Bhuj. **Day 9 & 10** Explore the tribal villages. **Day 11** Drive to Dasada for two nights. **Day 12** Morning and afternoon Jeep excursions. **Day 13** Travel to Ahmedabad, via Modhera and Patan, for three nights. **Day 14** Heritage walk in the old city, visit the Calico Museum & Gandhi Ashram. **Day 15** Day at leisure or visit Sarkhej Roza and the stepwell at Adalaj. **Day 16** Fly to UK via Mumbai.



Ancient Wonders of West India | 11 days



A brace of six UNESCO World Heritage sites feature on this off-the-beaten track journey from Mumbai into the heart of central India.

Day 1 Fly overnight to Mumbai. **Day 2** Connecting flight to Aurangabad; stay two nights. **Day 3** Visit the Ellora Caves and Daulatabad Fort. **Day 4** Tour the Ajanta Caves before driving to Maheshwar for three nights. **Day 5** Explore this charming holy town set beside the Narmada river. **Day 6** Day at leisure or visit Ujjain, an important Hindu pilgrimage town. **Day 7** Drive to Mandu for a tour of its medieval Muslim ruins; then on to Indore for overnight. **Day 8** Drive to Bhopal for two nights via Bhimbetka and Bhojpur. **Day 9** Visit the Great Stupa and other Buddhist monuments in Sanchi. **Day 10** Fly to Mumbai for two nights. Afternoon sightseeing includes the Prince of Wales Museum and Asiatic library. **Day 11** Cruise to the Elephanta Caves; afternoon heritage walk in the old Fort district. **Day 12** Return flight to UK.





Goa

As a place to unwind at the end of a tour, Goa has much to recommend it. The beaches are vast, golden and clean, with water that’s an ideal temperature for swimming. The weather from October to March is blissful. The seafood is wonderful, and there is a wealth of great places to enjoy it, from humble beach shacks to stylish gourmet restaurants with views over the coconut plantations and paddy fields.

Most importantly, Goa has a special atmosphere that’s highly conducive to relaxed seaside holidays. More than half its population are Catholics – a legacy of the state having remained a Portuguese colony for over 450 years – and attitudes to western vacation habits are far more tolerant here than in other parts of the country. You can stroll along the sand in a bikini, drink alcohol in public places and even tuck into a beef steak without attracting disapproval.

When you feel like a break from the endless sunshine and warm surf, the former capital of Old Goa offers a memorable daytrip inland. Huge churches and basilicas tower above the riverside palm forest on the banks of the Mandovi River, where the Portuguese created a prosperous trade hub in the 16th century. Panjim, its modern successor further west overlooking the river mouth, also retains some delightful colonial-era streets filled with pastel-painted houses and whitewashed churches.

Here is a selection of our favourite hotels in Goa. For more options please call and speak to one of our India specialists.



The Postcard Cuelim

It is easy to see why this stylish eight-bedroom hotel, overlooking 3,500 acres of lush green paddy fields, yet only a 15 minute walk from the beach, is a new favourite of ours. Part of the iconic regal estate of ‘Nossa Bela Casa’, this architecturally beautiful property has been thoughtfully renovated. It is light, spacious and modern yet full of Portuguese influence. All rooms come with either a courtyard or terrace and overlook the paddy fields or coconut plantations. With Ayurvedic treatments available it is ideal for spending time relaxing or exploring all that Goa has to offer.



Alila Diwa

Our current favourite resort in Goa, the Alila Diwa occupys its own serene, green oasis amid the paddy fields and coconut groves of the coastal belt. The architecture takes its cue from the Portuguese-influenced mansions nearby, with a dash of Balinese tropical chic. The interiors are sleek and contemporary, with dark wood furniture offset by pale walls. Best of all is the hotel’s lovely infinity pool, and right on the doorstep lies miles of empty golden sand and surf. Explore the winding lanes by bike, where you’ll see water buffalo lazing in lotus ponds and toddy tappers collecting sap.



Cideda de Goa

The iconic Cideda-de-Goa, designed by world-renowned architect Charles Correa as a Portuguese hamlet, has recently been taken over by the Taj Group under their IHCL SeleQtions brand. The Mediterranean influence can be seen in the vibrant colours of oranges, yellows and blues, the balcaos and tiled roofs. Situated on the secluded Vainguinim beach, the glorious sea views can be enjoyed from many of the spacious rooms. The swimming pool lies amid palm trees overlooking the beach, and there is a spa, and a range of water sports on offer.



Cabo Serai

Cabo Serai is a delightful new retreat perched on a cliff top above one of Goa’s most beautiful beaches, Cabo de Rama Beach. Accommodation is in stilted, wooden cottages and tents set into the hillside, all with spacious verandas and superb sea views. Dine on delicious seafood al fresco on the terrace or in the open sided restaurant, also the perfect spot to enjoy a sundowner and a spectacular Goan sunset. Birdlife here is exceptional and a morning or evening walk with the local guide is highly recommended.



The Leela

This palatial five-star offers luxury on a scale matched by few resorts in India. Set amid 75 acres of tropical gardens, landscaped waterfalls and lagoons, its 206 rooms and suites come in eight different categories, all of them with interiors inspired by 17th-century Portuguese palacios. A vast golden-sand beach is on the doorstep should you tire of the hotel’s three spectacular pools, and there’s a spa and casino on site. Golf carts take guests to their rooms from a dazzlingly grand reception decorated with a huge dancing Shiva bronze and exquisite pieces of Vijayanagar temple sculpture.



South India

The southern half of peninsula India has a completely different feel from the north. Stepping off a plane in Chennai (formerly 'Madras', capital of Tamil Nadu), you're struck by the intensity of the light, the greenery and prevalence of traditional dress. Equally emblematic of the South's distinctiveness are the huge temple gateways, or gopura, which tower above the entrances to Hindu shrines in the region. The mightiest of these shrines were the Vijayanagar kings, the ruins of whose resplendent capital are strewn among a boulder landscape of surreal beauty at Hampi in central Karnataka.

Further north, among the volcanic outcrops of the great Deccan plateau, are a string of other superb monuments dating from eras when this region's sultanates and kingdoms ranked among the most culturally sophisticated in the world. The main entry points for the region are Chennai, home of British India's oldest buildings, and Hyderabad, whose rulers, the Nizams, built opulent palaces on the back of their monopoly over the world's diamond trade.



Highlights of South India

Hyderabad

The sprawling modern capital of Andhra Pradesh once served as the seat of the fabulously wealthy Nizams, whose tombs and palaces are today its principal attractions.

Hampi

Remnants of the Vijayanagar's 14th and 15th-century capital are scattered among boulder hills and banana groves – one of Asia's most atmospheric archaeological sites.

Mysore

Famed for its Maharaja's palace and local markets, Mysore forms a traditional counterpoint to more modern Bangalore, with colourful markets and monuments.

Thanjavur

This busy town in central Tamil Nadu is home to the greatest surviving temple of all those erected by the mighty Chola dynasty: Brihadeswara.

Tiruchirappalli

A splendid hilltop fort dominates this bustling city. Visible from its terrace is India's biggest temple – at Srirangam on the Kaveri River.

Madurai

The soaring, multi-coloured gateway towers of Madurai's Meenakshi temple dominate the skyline that has attracted pilgrims since the days of ancient Rome.

Pondicherry

A faintly Gallic ambience persists in the old quarter of this French colony, famed for its colour-washed houses and heritage buildings.

Chettinad

Visit a unique collection of flamboyant mansions dating from the 19th century when the region's merchants and bankers made a fortune abroad.



Chennai

The capital of Tamil Nadu, Chennai, is a fast-paced, traffic-filled metropolis of five million. This strip of the Coromandel Coast first rose to prominence in the 1640s, after the East India Company constructed Fort St George. The sloping-walled citadel was where Robert Clive and his fellow company servants fended off attacks from the French and Sultans of Mysore in a bid to control the region's maritime trade. A museum holds a selection of lithographic prints and other colonial memorabilia that evoke the feel of the times.

The Peacock Trail

A spice port since Roman times, Mylapore is the oldest district of Chennai and a neighbourhood rich in monuments and myth. Join our walking tour to discover the stories of gods and demons behind the local landmarks, including the great Kapileshwar Temple and Tomb of the Apostle St Thomas. You'll also explore Mylapore's bustling market, famed for its silk emporia.



Pondicherry

Pondicherry (Puducherry), a half-day's drive south of Mamallapuram, served as France's principal stronghold on the Coromandel during the Carnatic Wars of the 17th century and remained a colony until 1962. Typically French houses with louvred windows and colour-washed Neoclassical facades line the backstreets of the former 'Ville Blanche', and other echoes of the Gallic era abound, from the red képis worn by local policemen to the games of pétanque played on the palm-shaded seafront square.

Exploring the Ville Blanche

The tree-lined boulevards of Pondi's old French Quarter, or 'Ville Blanche', recall a fascinating era in India's colonial history. Rediscover the tales of the forgotten heroes and villains who carved out this Gallic enclave on the southeast coast in the course of our varied walking tour. Expect evocative architecture and regular pitstops for croissants and coffee en route.



Mamallapuram

Praised by both Periplus and Ptolemy for its wealth and sophistication, Mamallapuram was the capital of the powerful Pallava Dynasty in the 7th century AD. Marco Polo enthused about the 'Seven Great Pagodas' that rose from its shore. Most have disappeared under the waves but enough ancient rock-cut monuments survive behind the beach here to make the village an essential stop on any tour of the south. Sculpture workshops specializing in Hindu deities and some great local seafood joints add to its allure.

The Rock-Cut Cave Shrines

Numerous vestiges of the Pallavas' golden era survive amid the giant, humpback granite boulders of Mamallapuram. Ranging from shrines sculpted in the form of temple chariots to cave sanctuaries and giant open-air reliefs such as the iconic Arjuna's Penance, they include the world-famous Shore Temple, whose carved surfaces have been blurred by centuries of erosion.



Chettinad

An area a couple of hours' drive northeast of Madurai, known as Chettinad, is the homeland of a caste of entrepreneurs, the Nattukuttai Chettiars, who in the mid-19th century grew as rich as bankers in the colonies of Burma, Ceylon and the Straits Settlements (modern Malaysia). To show off their wealth, the Chettiars constructed lavish mansions combining the ostentatious architectural trends of the day with traditional Tamil features. Since Independence, most of these grand residences have become deserted and now languish like discarded sets from long-forgotten costume dramas, their fancy stucco facades choked with weeds. A few, however, have been converted into heritage hotels, offering atmospheric bases from which to explore this culturally fascinating region.



Athangudi Tiles

Patterned floor tiles are a feature of most hotels and mansions in Chettinad. They come from the town of Athangudi, where you can still watch artisans making them. Blobs of oxide paint the consistency of custard are first brushed on to a glass square, then framed by a mould. This is covered in sand, backed with cement and left to cure. No firing is required, only an occasional wipe of coconut oil to keep the shine. Factory visits are all accompanied by our own expert guides.

The Mansions of Chettinad

A compelling mishmash of European and South Indian luxury, Chettinad's mansions reflect their owners' predilection for combining the old and the new. Most have typically Tamil pillared courtyards at their core, but with Neoclassical facades tacked on the front. Lashings of ornate wood carving, Belgian crystal and intricate plasterwork adorn the interiors, presided over by ancestral portraits. Your TransIndus guide will know where to find the most striking examples.

Chettinad Cuisine

In addition to its quirky architecture, Chettinad is renowned across India for its distinctive cuisine, which draws on influences from the many and diverse countries its wealthy emigrant traders travelled to during the colonial era. Expect mildly spiced, coconut-based gravies with a salty tang derived from the slightly saline well water. Sun-dried vegetables also feature prominently. An odd number of dishes are always served, usually on waxy green banana leaves.



The Chola Heartland

The defining features of most towns and cities in central Tamil Nadu are the giant gateway towers, or ‘gopura’, looming above their main temples. A particularly impressive crop of these survives along the Kaveri River, heartland of one of India’s most powerful medieval dynasties, the Cholas. Vast centres of ritual and culture on a comparable scale to Angkor or Borobudur, the shrines these powerful kings created remain among the most vibrant and otherworldly places to visit in India.



Tiruchirappalli (Trichy)

One of the most memorable panoramas in the south extends from the terrace of Trichy’s ‘Rock Fort’, where an old stone temple crowns the top of the near-vertical granite outcrop. The view stretches over the town to the Kaveri River and vast Ranganathaswamy Temple, built on an island. The shrine is the greatest of all those devoted to Vishnu in Tamil Nadu, and officially the largest functioning Hindu temple in the world. Think Angkor Wat or a sprawling Mayan complex, only teeming with pilgrims instead of tourists.

Shrine of the Seven Prakaras

The great Ranganathaswamy temple may not be well known in the West, but it’s visited by millions of Hindu worshippers each year. Seven sets of perimeter walls, or ‘prakaras’, enclose its main shrine, where a whole township of Brahmin priests, cooks, flower sellers and incense makers will be hard at work from the time the first pilgrims arrive dripping wet from the river at dawn.

Chidambaram

The city of Chidambaram has been a centre of worship since at least the 7th century, when it was eulogized in the songs of the wandering Tamil poet saints. Today, the temple at its heart is revered as the seat of Lord Shiva in the form of Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer. The deity resides under a solid gold roof and can, unlike most in the region, be viewed by non-Hindus. The streets surrounding the shrine offer rich pickings for photographers, with numerous flower stalls and a Vedic school for local Brahmin boys.

Boating in the Pichavaram Backwaters

The origins of Chidambaram’s Nataraja temple lies in a tract of mangrove forest to the north, known as the Pichavaram Backwaters. In the distant past, its shady groves attracted communities of wandering holy men. Today the wetland is the second largest mangrove forest in the world and a paradise for birders, who may explore it by rowing boat or kayak.



Thanjavur

The greatest shrine surviving from the time of the Cholas is Brihadeshwara, in the town of Thanjavur (Tanjore). A soaring pyramid of richly carved granite, its central tower looks almost as fresh today as it must have when it was built over 1,000 years ago. Elsewhere, the impressive Durbar Hall of the Royal Palace Complex stands as a reminder of the glory days of the Nayak Kings (16th -18th centuries), while in the same compound, a small art gallery holds India’s finest collection of antique Chola bronzes.

Chola Bronzes

Aficionados travel from all over the world to see the exquisite bronze deities on display at the Thanjavur Art Gallery. The dancing, multi-limbed Shivas and voluptuous Parvatis were made using the ‘lost wax’ technique, which you can see in action on a trip to the nearby caster-artists’ village of Swamimalai.



Madurai

For sheer visual impact, no Hindu temple in South India can match the magnificence of the Meenakshi-Sundeshwarar in Madurai. Sweeping nearly 70 metres off the ground, its gopura gateways are unique for their scale and complexity. Thousands of stucco figures swarm over the sides – multi-limbed gods, many-headed goddesses, celestial nymphs and fanged mythological monsters – depicted in a wild array of poses and painted in a polychrome palette so outrageous even Walt Disney may have found it a touch excessive.

The Temple Markets of Madurai

Opposite the east entrance to the temple is a grand pillared hall where tailors, flower sellers and religious souvenir vendors ply their trades. Look out for the intricate patterns of rice flour traced each morning in front of the stalls, and the music boutiques where you can buy pirated CDs of ancient Tamil hymns played on synths and electric guitars.





Hyderabad

As with any Indian megacity, the reality of modern Hyderabad can seem a far cry from the tales of its exotic past. But the legacy of its former rulers, the fabulously wealthy Nizams, endures in a rich crop of buildings, as well as a unique, Persian-influenced cuisine. The starting point for any city tour has to be the Char Minar – an iconic, late-16th-century mosque distinguished by a quartet of identical minarets. The wealth used to build it derived principally from diamond mining, profits from which later financed the construction of some lavish palaces in the city. The Falaknuma is a prime example: recently restored to its former grandeur, the Neoclassical pile holds hundreds of lavishly decorated rooms and a superb collection of royal treasures.



Golconda Fort

The ruined city of Golconda, the largest and most impressive stronghold of the Deccan region, lords over an expanse of scrubland to the west of Hyderabad. Tier upon tier of high walls and arches rise up the flanks of the hill on which the labyrinthine fort rests, creating a striking spectacle from below. Inside its three lines of defences lies a self-contained town containing royal apartments, hareems, mosques, and a treasury that once held the legendary ‘Kohinoor’ diamond.



The White Mughal Tour

No-one should visit Hyderabad without reading William Dalrymple’s ‘White Mughals’. The book relates the moving story of the marriage between a young Hyderabadi noblewoman, Khair un-Nissa, and the East India Company’s most senior British official in the city, James Kirkpatrick. Visit the once sumptuous mansion James built for his bride, re-created in miniature in the rear garden for the ladies of the household, who couldn’t see the façade as they were in strict purdah.

High Tea at Falaknuma

One of the grandest palaces in old Hyderabad was the Falaknuma, a huge Neoclassical mansion used as a royal guest house by the Nizam. Following Independence, the building fell into disrepair but has been sumptuously restored for use as a five-star hotel by the Taj Group. If your budget can’t stretch to a stay, visit for high tea: the price of the ticket includes a guided tour of the property’s standout rooms and collection of antique furniture and priceless art objects.



Mysore

Mysore (Mysuru), former capital of the Wadiyar Rajas, is far and away Karnataka’s most popular visitor destination. Unlike Bangalore, the city seems to have been largely bypassed by the dotcom revolution and retains plenty of traditional charm, particularly in its markets, which serve as important centres for the trade in sandalwood, incense and silk. The stand-out sight here, though, is undoubtedly the Maharaja’s Palace – a fairy-tale confection in quintessentially Raj-era Indo-Sarcentic style. Clad in 18-carat gold, hundreds of Mughal-style domes and Rajasthani cupolas crown the complex, which is illuminated every Sunday with 100,000 electric light bulbs. Extend your stay and you’ll be able to visit the capital of Tipu Sultan at nearby Seringapatnam.

Silk Factory Visits

Just under half the silk made in India is produced in Mysore – an industry that was originally founded by Tipu Sultan in the 18th century, then promoted by successive Wadiyar Maharajas. You can visit the famous Karnataka silk plant on the outskirts to see how the thread is made today, tracking the production process from mulberry-leaf-munching worms to shimmering brocaded saris woven on rows of noisy, Swiss-made looms – a memorable spectacle.



The Royal Murals

Its Sunday night illuminations tend to attract more attention, but the murals adorning the interiors of Mysore Palace are the city’s real show stealers. Created in the early 1900s, they offer a window of a lost world of glittering pomp, when the royals celebrated Dushera with lavish processions involving thousands of participants and animals. Every detail, from the ornate military uniforms to designs moulded on the golden elephant howdahs, are rendered in glowing colours.

Devaraja Market Tour

Mysore’s busy Devaraja Market is a feast of South Indian sights and smells, and a great source of inexpensive souvenirs. The city is synonymous with incense and you’ll find it in many varied forms here, along with conical piles of day-glo ‘kunkum’ powder – the market’s defining photo opportunity. Follow your guide through the vibrant fresh produce section to find out which exotic fruit and veg are in season, before refuelling with a traditional Mysore ‘dosa’.





Hampi

A landscape of surreal beauty provides the setting for the ruins of Vijayanagar, the former capital of southern India, laid to waste in 1565 by the Sultanates of the northern Deccan. The site is scattered over a vast area of boulder hills and banana groves along the shores of the Tungabhadra River. Connected via sandy tracks are the remains of palaces, harems, elephant stables and stepped baths, as well as dozens of exquisitely decorated temples, some of them on a simply bewildering scale. Only one of the great Hindu temples – Virupaksha – remains in use. Encrusted with writhing stucco figures of gods and demons, its giant gateway towers looms above Hampi bazaar, whose colonnaded ruins once held shops filled with precious silks, stones and jewellery.



Sunrise on Matanga Hill

Many of the prominent hilltops around the ruined city are crowned by temples, reached via winding flights of rock-cut steps. For sunrise, however, none can hold a candle to Matanga Hill. Climb up in the pre-dawn gloom with your guide for a jaw-dropping view east across a temple complex to a horizon of boulders and orchards. A chai wallah makes the climb each morning to serve visitors glasses of hot, sweet Indian tea as the sun illuminates this spellbinding panorama.



Kinnal Woodcraft Village

After the destruction of Vijayanagar in the 16th century, only a single clan of woodworkers survived from the legions of craftsmen who formerly plied their trades in the great capital. Their descendants still live in a village an hour's drive away, where they sculpt little Hindu deities and children's toys from local softwood, painted in traditional styles, including one with a beautiful metallic sheen. They're lightweight and make perfect souvenirs.



Sunset Coracle Rides

For centuries, villagers living on the Tungabhadra at Hampi have crossed the water on circular coracles to reach their fields and banana groves. These 'putti' offer a dreamy way for visitors to explore the glassy river and environs, which look at their most magical around sunset, when pilgrims come for a ritual bathe. Among the most enigmatic sites along the rocky banks is a large, flat boulder carved with hundreds of little Shivalingams, where worshippers leave offerings.

Badami

A thousand years before Vijayanagar reached its zenith, the Chalukya Dynasty carved a series of beautiful capitals from the sandstone hills of northern Karnataka. Although less well known than Hampi, the ruins of ancient Badami fully warrant the long journey north across the Deccan.

Ranging from rock-cut cave shrines to temples and forts, the monuments are scattered over a gorge between two steep, rocky hills, divided by a large water tank – a truly epic backdrop for the Bhuthanatha Temple, the town's poster piece. The site is at its most atmospheric around late afternoon, when Badami's great cliffs glow a molten red colour in the setting sun, and the faces of deities enshrined within are momentarily illuminated.



The Chalukya Trail

Badami is merely one among a trio of superb UNESCO World Heritage sites in this area. Set amid the mountains of the Malprabha river valley, Pattadakal comprises 150 richly carved temples created between the 4th and 10th centuries. Nearby Aihole, site of a famous apsidal Durga shrine adorned with exquisite sculpture, is also worth a visit.



Vijapura

The grandest Islamic buildings in the Deccan region are to be found in Vijapura (Bijapur), former capital of the Adil Shahi Dynasty. The wealth the Sultanate obtained by the defeat of Vijayanagar in 1565 financed construction of many remarkable monuments, including the Golgumbaz (the world's second largest free-standing dome) and graceful Ibrahim Rauza tomb, regarded as the high watermark of Deccani Muslim architecture.

Dozens of other impressive buildings still stand in this old walled city, whose great ramparts may be scaled at several points. On one of its bastions rests the 55-ton 'Malik-e-Maidan' canon, whose muzzle takes the form of a lion's head devouring an elephant. It is said to be the largest piece of cast-bronze ordnance in the world.



Bijapur Music Festival

On the outskirts of the city stand the ruins of the Adil Shahis' 'Palace of Songs', where the sultans staged lavish concerts of music, poetry and dance in the 17th century. The tradition is upheld each February during the annual music festival, when artistes from across India perform with the floodlit 'Sangeet Mahal' as a backdrop.





Evolve Back, Hampi

South India: Places to Stay

After a day spent visiting temples and archaeological sites in the heat of the south, you'll need somewhere cool, soothing and stylish to recuperate – ideally with a good-sized pool in the garden to lounge by. Our preferred hotels tick all these boxes, and more. Whether you need somewhere close to the airport for a stress-free getaway, or a breezy barefoot retreat a stone's throw from the surf, our team will have all the best options at their fingertips. Here are some of our current favourites.



Evolve Back Kamalapura Palace, Hampi

Standing just a few kilometres from the UNESCO World Heritage Site, this is the ideal spot to relax after a busy day exploring Hampi. Its palatial style, with stone-paved boulevards, arched hallways and regal chambers has been designed to reflect the location, with an injection of modern luxury. There is a large, and very welcoming infinity pool, a world class spa offering traditional Ayurvedic therapies and two restaurants to choose from, offering a fine selection of Indian and continental cuisine.



Taj Connemara, Chennai

Chennai's only proper heritage hotel is a mid-19th century palace, formerly belonging to the Nawabs of Wallajah. It's had a few facelifts in its time – most notably one in the 1930s when the interiors were upgraded in sumptuous Art Deco style – but the place today looks and feels every inch an international five star. Some of the rooms on the ground floor open directly on to the secluded courtyard pool, swathed in tropical greenery – a perfect haven from the brouhaha of the nearby shopping district.



Visalam, Chettinad

The wonderful CGH chain have created another exquisite heritage hotel. Distinguished by its showy Art Deco façade, Visalam dates from the 1930s, when it was used for family weddings. The old merchant's mansion itself has been painstakingly restored in earthy, understated style. The interiors preserve the feel of the period, with high-gloss wood furniture and walls painted in traditional limewash. Chettinad's distinctive regional cuisine can be sampled in the cosy restaurant and a relaxing pool (and discrete air-conditioning) are among the modern comforts added.



Villa Shanti, Pondicherry

In the heart of Pondicherry's French Quarter, hidden behind a discreet façade, is this 15-room boutique hotel, set around a palm-filled courtyard. A heritage building with a sensitively built new wing offers modern comforts with colonial architecture. Rooms are simple but stylish with classic furniture and splashes of colour adding to the character. What we love about this hotel is the relaxed ambience, excellent hospitality and the warm welcome all guests receive. The restaurant here is one of the best in town so be sure to book a table.



Madurai Heritage, Madurai

Stylish luxury with a Tamil twist, the Madurai Heritage is an object lesson in Indo-fusion-boutique chic. Its light, bright, cool, airy interior spaces are enlivened by antique features such as carved wood doors, bell-metal oil lamps and re-claimed granite temple pillars. The hotel also boasts a restaurant serving Tamil specialities, and a proper sized 'temple tank' swimming pool where you can bliss out after a day spent exploring South India's most sacred city, before enjoying a sundowner under a Banyan Tree.



Svatma, Thanjavur

A stay in this beautifully restored colonial mansion is an experience in itself, worth travelling to Thanjavur for. Each room is unique, and the building abounds with little nooks, verandahs and patios to explore. Tamil Nadu's rich culture is reflected in the artwork throughout the hotel. Cooking classes, yoga sessions, vedic chanting, dance demonstrations and Carnatic concerts are all on offer and even the food served by the vegetarian restaurant is an art form. If you have time, there is a lovely pool to relax by, and a roof top bar.



Planning Your Trip: South India

Thanks to BA's direct flights to Hyderabad, Chennai and Bangalore, getting to South India from the UK has never been easier. Once there, two main options present themselves. You can either head from Chennai through Tamil Nadu to Kerala, or north and west to Hyderabad and across Karnataka towards Hampi and Goa. Both require a few long drives, and are hard to cover at an enjoyable pace in anything less than two to three weeks. Goa, which is accessible by daily flights from Chennai or Hyderabad, is the most commendable option for a beach break, but Gokarna, an interesting temple town further south, also offers some pleasant accommodation. Given the wealth of possibilities, guidance at an early stage from our India experts will prove invaluable.

When to Go

South India has two monsoons: the first from early June to late September; the second – the so-called 'northwest' monsoon – affects the region in October and November. This explains why the prime season for visitors is quite short, lasting from December until April, when the skies are blue and the weather not too hot and sticky. Up in the hills along the Kerala border, night time temperatures in winter can fall low enough to require a blanket.

Suggested Itineraries

The following tried-and-tested itineraries may serve as starting points for your trip planning. They show what can comfortably be achieved over different time spans, but none are fixed; our consultants will have lots of ideas on how to tailor them to your needs, building a mix of sights and experiences around your own particular interests. They'll also have suggestions for easy detours to other parts of the country should you wish to extend your tour.

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	25	23	16	16	22	21	20	23	19	25	22	20
Rainfall mm	12	22	19	8	48	48	90	132	132	275	350	150
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●●

●● Best time to travel ● Good time to travel ● Low season

Temples & Traders of Tamil Nadu | 16 days



A culturally rich tour revolving around colonial trading centres on the coast and the great Chola temples of Madurai and the Kaveri Delta.

Day 1 Fly overnight to Bangalore. **Day 2** On arrival drive to Mysore for two nights. **Day 3** Sightseeing in Srirangapatnam & Mysore. **Day 4** Drive to Ooty. Visit the Botanical Gardens. **Day 5** Enjoy a ride on the Nilgiri Mountain Railway to Coonoor. Drive to Madurai. **Day 6** Visit the Meenakshi temple. **Day 7** Drive to Chettinad for two nights. **Day 8** Visit local temples and merchant homes. **Day 9** Drive to Thanjavur to see the Brihadeshwara temple. **Day 10** Drive to Tranquebar via the Kumbakonam temples. **Day 11** Explore this former Danish colony on foot. **Day 12** Drive to Pondicherry via Chidambaram; stay two nights. **Day 13** Walking tour of the French quarters; visit Auroville. **Day 14** Drive to Mamallapuram to see the ancient Shore Temple; stay two nights. **Day 15** Day at leisure (or a walking tour in Chennai). **Day 16** Fly to UK.

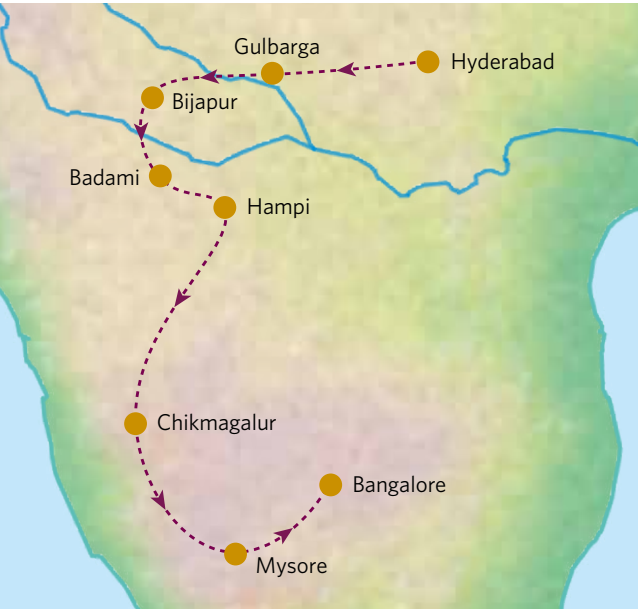


Hampi & the Deccan Plateau | 16 days



This fortnight-long tour cherry picks the highlights of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, including world-class heritage and archeological sites seen by few foreign visitors.

Day 1 Fly overnight to Hyderabad. **Day 2** Arrive early morning. Visit the Salar Jung Museum. **Day 3** Explore the city, Golconda Fort & Tombs. **Day 4** Drive to Bidar to see the ruins of the Bahmani Kingdom and then on to Gulbarga. **Day 5** Drive to Bijapur to see Gol Gumbaz. **Day 6** Travel to Badami. Visit ancient cave temples. **Day 7** Visit the archaeological sites of Aihole and Pattadakal. **Day 8** Drive to the ruined Imperial city of Vijayanagar at Hampi. **Day 9 & 10** Sightseeing in Hampi. **Day 11** Drive to the plantation town of Chikmagalur. **Day 12** Visit the temples of Belur and Halebid. **Day 13** Drive via the Jain colossus of Sravanbelagola to Mysore. **Day 14** Sightseeing in Tipu Sultan's former capital Srirangapatnam, & Mysore. **Day 15** Drive to Bangalore, for overnight. **Day 16** Fly to the UK.



Highlights of Southern India | 14 days



Covering some of the finest sights of the southern-most states of India, from the temples of Tamil Nadu across the Western Ghats into tropical Kerala.

Day 1 Fly overnight to Chennai. **Day 2** Transfer to Mamallapuram for two nights. **Day 3** Discover the temples and rock carvings of Mamallapuram. Perhaps take a walking tour of Chennai or relax on the beach. **Day 4** Drive to Pondicherry and explore the city on foot. **Day 5** Drive to Thanjavur via Darasuram. **Day 6** Visit the Brihadeeshwara Temple. **Day 7** Travel to Madurai. Visit the stunning Meenakshi Temple and markets. **Day 8** Continue to Periyar in Kerala for two nights. **Day 9** Enjoy a walk in Periyar National Park. Visit a spice plantation. **Day 10** Descend through the Western Ghats to Kumarakom. **Day 11** Board a rice boat for an overnight cruise. **Day 12** Drive to Cochin for two nights. Sunset harbour cruise. **Day 13** Explore Cochin on foot and by auto rickshaw. Evening Kathakali performance. **Day 14** Return flight to the UK.





Kerala

Since the time of ancient Greece, Europeans have been seduced by the fecundity, vibrancy and cultural sophistication of India’s far southwest – an intensely tropical region known to outsiders as the Malabar, and to its inhabitants as simply Kerala – ‘Land of the Chera Kings’. Black pepper was the reason foreigners originally came here. Now it’s Kerala’s dreamy beaches, serene backwater lagoons, forested mountains and abundant wildlife that are the prime incentives, along with the chance to experience one of the oldest and most traditional cultures in Asia.

Most journeys through the region begin at Ernakulam, the modern city on the mainland opposite Fort Cochin, former colonial trade hub and gateway to the Kuttinad backwaters. But as an alternative gateway, Kozhikode (Calicut) has a lot to recommend it, providing easy access to a long, idyllic coastline, undiscovered backwater areas and mountains carpeted in fragrant coffee plantations and spice gardens. The north of the state is also the heartland of a particularly fascinating ritual theatre form, Teyyem.



Highlights of Kerala

Fort Cochin

A cultural melting pot for centuries, Cochin retains the largest crop of early colonial buildings in Asia, many of them converted into atmospheric hotels.

Kumarakom

On the shores of Vembanand Lake, Kumarakom hosts a crop of beautifully situated luxury hotels – perfect for soaking up the area’s tropical ambiance.

Munnar

Watch teams of tea pluckers at work against a backdrop of pale-grey peaks. Trekking routes to the high ground offer adventurous escapes from the valley floor.

Wayanad

Stays on remote coffee, tea and spice plantations are great ways to experience the beauty of this plateau in the mountains of northern Kerala.

Periyar

Wild elephants and other large mammals graze in healthy numbers amid teak forest and bamboo groves in this popular park.

Kodungallur

On the Periyar River, Kodungallur serves as a base for tours of ancient Muziris and some of Kerala’s oldest mosques, churches and synagogues.

Alleppey

The quintessential Keralan market town and starting point for overnight rice boat trips into the surrounding backwater region.

Thalassery

We love this lively little fishing town in the north of Kerala for its markets, old colonial fort, antique mosques and wonderful homestay.



Fort Cochin

Fort Cochin’s low-slung, red-tiled skyline bears the imprint of the various colonial powers and migrant communities that have, over the centuries, settled and traded in the port: Lusitanian chapels, Jewish synagogues, Dutch burghers’ houses, Armenian mansions and British bungalows all survive in the grid of narrow lanes here – the largest collection of early colonial buildings anywhere in Asia. Visitors can savour the atmosphere of bygone eras by staying in one of the beautiful heritage hotels that have opened around the waterfront. Watch the container ships and local fishing boats chug past the Chinese fishing nets over a gin-and-tonic on your own veranda, then dine on spicy Keralan coastal cuisine. Here are three of our favourite experiences on offer in this venerable old port.



Auto-Rickshaw Tour

Auto-rickshaws are the most suitable mode of transport for exploring the back lanes of Fort Cochin. Your English-speaking driver-guide will lead you through the area’s historic highlights, from the Church of St Francis to the house where Vasco Da Gama lived, via an atmospheric Dutch cemetery and the local ‘dhobi ghat’, or open-air laundry. The tour winds up with a visit to the elegant royal palace and richly decorated Jewish synagogue in Mattancherry.



Cooking with a Local Family

Discover the secrets of Keralan home cooking on this fun half-day course, which starts with a trip to the local market to shop for fresh ingredients. Expect to encounter plenty of fruit, veg and spices you won’t recognize, and an abundance of wonderful seafood from the nearby backwaters. After a cookery demo in the family kitchen, you’ll sit down for lunch and enjoy the dishes you’ll have helped to prepare, exploring the local culture through its cuisine.



Toddy Shop Visit

Toddy is a mildly alcoholic brew made from palm sap that Keralan men traditionally enjoy after a day spent fishing or farming. It’s prepared in local bars, or toddy shops, which also serve tea and snacks, including some deliciously spicy seafood dishes (eaten off banana leaves). This tour takes you to a reliable toddy shop whose cooking and hygiene standards we can vouch for: you’ll travel there across the backwaters on a traditional canoe in the warm light of late afternoon.

Off Beat Retreats in Kerala

Despite being one of India’s most densely populated states, Kerala offers a wide choice of destinations where you can sidestep the crowds and enjoy the tropical greenery for which the region is famous. Boutique retreats in the backwaters and up in the plantations of the Cardamom Hills enable you to experience the distinctive atmosphere of off-the-beaten-track Kerala, where more traditional ways prevail. The following are four of our current favourite boltholes, chosen both for their luxurious architecture and sublime natural settings. All are perfect launchpads from which to explore the surrounding forest, rivers and countryside.



Cranganor, Cochin

Occupying a glorious location on the banks of the Periyar River, this heritage property is barely half an hour from the airport terminal yet feels in the depths of the countryside, meaning you wake up to the sound of bird song rather than traffic on your first morning. The décor is elegant and restrained, taking its inspiration from antique Keralan palaces. The real appeal of staying at this guest house, however, lies in its proximity to Kodungallur, site of the ancient spice port of Muziris, which may be visited alongside trips to basket workshops, sugar cane producers and textile weavers.



Neelambari, Arattupuzha

On the banks of the Karuvannur River, Neelamburi occupies a quintessential backwater location and is somewhere we recommend for clients wishing to explore the region’s deep cultural roots in comfort. The property is a grand, modern building designed in Keralan style around a traditional performance area (‘koothambalam’) and nalukettu courtyard, where recitals of ritual theatre, mime and dance are regularly staged. Hosts Sreeni and Meera also arrange trips to nearby potters, goldsmiths, wood carvers and drum makers, while the river itself may be explored by kayak or boat.



Quiet by the River, Malayattoor

At the foot of the Western Ghat mountain range, this recently launched property from our friends CGH Earth occupies a stretch of pristine tropical forest on the banks of the Periyar River. Although only a couple of hours’ drive from Fort Cochin, the hotel offers an unrivalled experience of the Keralan countryside: the world-famous Thattekad Sanctuary is nearby and the birdlife here is prolific. Spend the days lazing by the water, exploring the surrounding jungle with an expert naturalist, canoeing on the river or just relaxing back on the verandah of your luxury, wood-lined lodge.



Keralan Cuisine

If you love encountering new cuisines, meal times are likely to be a major highlight of your Kerala trip. The region has a complex culinary heritage, reflecting both its multi-ethnic makeup and the wealth of fresh ingredients available in its markets.

Vegetarians are particularly well catered for. Every restaurant, whether a simple ‘meals’ joint or a five-star bistro, offers a range of spicy stews and lentil-based dals, some mild and aromatic, others pungent and fiery. Meat and seafood also feature prominently, particularly in the dishes of the Syrian-Christian and Malabari Muslim communities. In the backwaters, ‘karimeen’ (a delicate, white fish called ‘pearlspot’) is often served steamed in banana leaves. The ultimate Malayali feast, however, is the ‘Onam Sadya’, prepared for the annual harvest festival.



Kerala’s Temple Festivals

A highlight of any trip to Kerala during the winter tourist season is the chance to experience the region’s extraordinary temple festivals. Spectacular parades are the central element of these ‘utsavam’, in which huge tusked and draped in gold caparisons slow-march around the main shrine, ridden by bare-chested Brahmin boys carrying peacock-feather fans, yak-tail whisks and colourful silk parasols. Facing the phalanx will always be a troupe of chenda melam drummers and trumpet players, whose performance rises to ear-splitting crescendos.

Recitals of lamp-lit Kathakali, devotional music and other, still more ancient, forms of ritual theatre are held in the temple precincts afterwards – a wonderful opportunity to experience Keralan ritual theatre in its authentic context.



Yoga & Ayurveda

India’s traditional system of medicine – Ayurveda – draws on the healing power of plants to restore balance in the mind and body. Its treatments have evolved over thousands of years and remain popular in Kerala, whose rain-soaked mountains are the source of many of its most powerful medicines. In recent decades, Ayurveda has also experienced a new lease of life as a rejuvenation therapy in the region: treatments such as full-body massage, steam baths and herbal decoctions are used to promote deep relaxation and a sense of wellbeing.

Most high-end hotels have special spa wings attached to them where you can experience a range of different therapies, alongside un-strenuous forms of yoga. Early morning sessions are usually conducted al fresco in dreamy covered platforms open to the breezes and views.



Kerala Backwaters

The watery world of Kerala’s coastal plain understandably exerts a great fascination for visitors, particularly the area between Alleppey and Kochi, known in Malayali as ‘Kuttinad’ – and to the rest of us as simply the backwaters. Formed by a tangle of winding waterways and lakes, the region is irrepressibly abundant, supporting a unique way of life based on farming and fishing. Whether you choose to explore the area by luxury rice boat or canoe, count on extraordinary spectacles around every corner: floating duck farms; white-bearded Orthodox priests travelling to mass in speedboats; toddi tappers dangling from giant coconut palms; and boys fishing for crab by torchlight. Rich in local seafood, Kuttinadi cuisine is also one of the most succulent in India.



Riceboat Cruising

Up until the 1980s, large barges made of oiled jackwood and canopies of plaited palm leaves were used throughout the backwater regions of Kerala to transport rice and other produce. Now, these same boats (and a fleet of recently built replicas) are used to take visitors on luxury cruises. A far cry from the unctuous craft of old, the boats are fitted with comfortable en-suite, air-con bedrooms, galleys, and viewing decks to laze on as you chug along, long drink in hand.



Kerala Village Tours

Travelling along Kerala’s highways it’s easy to get the impression the state is mainly urban. In fact, it’s still overwhelmingly rural, with an economy rooted in traditional food production and cottage industries such as coir making, fishing, crab farming and coconut cultivation. Our guided village tours offer a window on this hidden world, facilitating interaction with a wide cross-section of local people, from toddy tappers to weavers, potters and priests.



Kayaking in Kuttinad

When it comes to exploring the Keralan backwaters, rice boats can only get you so far. To penetrate deeply into the area’s roadless core, you need to navigate canals that are far too narrow for a houseboat. Kayaks are perfect for this. Your TransIndus guide will be with you every paddle stroke of the way, as you delve into the tunnels of vegetation shrouding Kuttinad’s myriad islands and hidden waterways – a great way to experience village life close up.



Kerala’s Hill Country

Tea was first introduced to the uplands of Kerala in the 1880s by a band of entrepreneurial Scots, and in a matter of decades became the region’s principal export. It continues to dominate both the economy and landscape of the area around Munnar, where vast acres of lush, neatly clipped bushes carpet the lower flanks of South India’s highest and most spectacular mountains, Anamudi (2,695m/8,842ft) and Meesapulimala (2,640m 8,661ft).

The cool climate of the highlands offers a refreshing break from the heat and humidity at sea level, and most visitors include at least a few days of hill time in their itinerary, visiting wildlife parks and enjoying the timeless ambience and striking scenery of the plantations, many of which these days offer accommodation in refurbished British-era bungalows.

Encompassing summits of grey-brown crags, grassy ridgetops and grandiose valleys, the views as you travel around by road are magnificent. Opportunities to trek at altitude are limited (due to restrictions imposed by the Indian Forest Service and estate owners), but it is possible to scale the region’s second-highest mountain in a two-day expedition – a must for keen walkers. For the less energetic, leisurely strolls among the tea gardens and tranquil afternoons soaking up the mountain vistas are the order of the day.



Tea Garden Visits

Tea cultivation, picking and processing have basically altered very little since the bushes were first planted in Kerala’s mountains a century and a half ago, which makes a visit to a working estate particularly interesting. Dressed in colourful saris with oversized baskets slung on their backs, Tamil women still do most of the harvesting, while the leaves are withered, fermented, dried, curled and chopped using machinery built in Glasgow or Sheffield before World War II. Visitors may, of course, taste the results and purchase packets of their favourite brews before leaving.



Plantation Bungalows

The British managers who ran the tea estates in Kerala’s hill country rarely returned to the motherland until they reached retirement age, and when you see the high style in which they lived you’ll understand why! Built on high natural balconies in flower-filled grounds with sweeping views, these bungalows were spacious, beautifully sited and generously staffed. Many have been restored and refurbished in period, giving visitors the chance to experience the romance of the pre-Independence era for themselves, complete with liveried servants and sundowners on the verandah.



The Ascent of Meesapulimala

With Anamudi, South India’s highest mountain, strictly off limits to trekkers for environmental reasons, its slightly smaller sibling, Meesapulimala, offers the most enticing prospect in this region for hill walkers. The ascent spans two days, with an initial approach through forest to a prettily sited campground at Rhodo Valley. From there, a pre-dawn departure is required to reach the summit before the heat and convection clouds build. The eastern flank of the massif plunges dramatically to the Tamil plains and the views of the surrounding wilderness are simply astounding.

Kerala’s Spice Trail

The combination of intense sunlight and abundant rainfall makes Kerala’s interior mountains perfect for growing spices. See how black pepper, cardamom, cloves, vanilla and cinnamon are cultivated on a small, family-run plantation. The visit starts with a cookery demonstration in which home-grown spices are combined to create traditional masala pastes. While your lunch simmers in the kitchen, join your guide for a stroll around the gardens. You’ll already know what cinnamon smells like, but by the end of the walk you’ll be able to identify the tree it comes from too.

Coffee Estate Cycle Rides

One of our all-time favourite corners of India is Wayanad, a region of high mountains and lush subtropical forest in northern Kerala. Coffee is the main crop here: the hillsides are carpeted in fragrant plantations that have changed very little in a century or more, and which retain great biodiversity. Jeep tracks outnumber surfaced roads, so cycling is the most practicable way to get around. Your guide will lead you on a tour of the local prehistoric cave art and spice gardens, identifying exotic birds and wildlife along the way, including giant Malabar squirrels and hornbills.



Kerala: Places to Stay

Kerala has a reputation for the sophistication of its luxury hotels. From tree houses in the jungles of Wayanad to chalets amid the coconut groves of the Malabar Coast, the choice is exceptional.

Places with a historical patina also feature: tea planters’ bungalows high in the hills; traditional Keralan courtyard mansions made of teak; and royal retreats on windy clifftops. Whatever your route, our team will know which offer the best experiences and value for money.



Shalimar Spice Garden, Periyar

Jungle hideaways don’t come more stylish than the Shalimar Spice Garden, whose romantic rooms are made of varnished Nilgiri hardwoods and dark silks, and where the verandahs look across coffee bushes and cardamom fronds to a wall of dense forest. Each of its cottages are thatched, giving the place a deliciously earthy feel. Luxuriate in the Ayurvedic spa or outdoor pool.



Philipkutty’s Farm, Vembanad Lake

Philipkutty’s farmstay is a world apart from the rest of the state. Occupying its own tropical islet in the backwaters, the property can only be reached by boat. Anu and her family’s warm hospitality define the experience from the moment you step ashore and are shown to your Keralan-style waterfront villa, which opens to spacious, airy, open-plan interiors.



The Malabar House, Fort Cochin

This exquisite boutique hotel in the heart of Fort Cochin’s heritage district juxtaposes old South Indian style with modern designer elegance to stunning effect. Keralan antiques, modern art pieces and luminous Indian textiles decorate the rooms, which open on to a stone-lined courtyard with a gorgeous little pool. The restaurant, serving fusion food, is among the city’s finest.

Brunton Boatyard, Fort Cochin

Dominating Fort Cochin’s iconic waterfront, Brunton perfectly captures the grandiloquence of the late colonial era. The rooms are all furnished in period and most face the sea (ships chug past your window). There’s a harbour-side pool, with palm-shaded terrace, and a restaurant specializing in seafood whose terrace looks across the water to Vypeen Island.



Pepper Trail, Wayanad

Immerse yourself in the tropical profusion of Wayanad’s mountains at this plantation retreat. Stay in the old British bungalow with two suites, both handsomely styled using an array of polished local hardwoods, or in one of the spacious luxury treehouses, nestled high amongst the trees and accessed via elevated walkways, with the plantation stretching as far as the eye can see.



Amaryllis, Wayanad

With spectacular views over the Karapuzha Reservoir and the Western Ghats, this plantation homestay is idyllic. Created from an abandoned coffee and rubber farm, Amaryllis has five rooms and two treehouses, set in beautiful gardens with a swimming pool. From the moment you arrive you will be treated as part of the family, with freshly homecooked meals and warm hospitality.



Lake Resort, Kumarakom

A sprawling swimming pool forms the focal point of this beautiful backwater resort on the shores of Vembanad Lake. Accommodation is in luxuriously refurbished antique Keralan houses, some with private overflow pools, others open on to the main pool. The whole site is bursting with birdlife, butterflies and flowers, and views across the lake constantly change with the light.



Coconut Lagoon, Kumarakom

Only reachable by launch, the resort rests on the remote north eastern shore of Vembanad Lake. Accommodation is in luxury antique Keralan houses, made of oiled wood and stone. Each has its own secluded al fresco bathroom. The traditional Ayurveda treatment shala opens directly on to the water, and there’s an old-style earth-floored gym for demos of Keralan martial arts.



Sugati Retreat, Rajakumari

About an hour outside Munnar, Sugati Retreat is set in over 10 acres of spice and vegetable gardens. Beautifully designed villas, housing only eight rooms, have chic modern interiors and picture-perfect views. With wellness at the heart of what is on offer here, from spa and Ayurvedic treatments, to yoga and meditation, it is the ideal place to unwind.



Fragrant Nature, Munnar

Built into the hillside in scenic Munnar, Fragrant Nature comes with a view that is hard to beat. The hotel has been designed so that the view can be enjoyed from all rooms, which also have a fireplace to keep the mountain chill at bay. Both restaurants offer unrivalled views, but we would highly recommend The Glass House, especially at night, with the clear starlit sky above.



Planning Your Trip: Kerala

The big decision confronting anyone contemplating a trip to Kerala is whether to combine the state with a tour of neighbouring Tamil Nadu. Both may be considered standalone destinations in their own right, but together offer a journey of considerable variety – though unless you opt for a three-week trip you'll only see the highlights. Traditionally, the south of Kerala has soaked up the lion's share of visitor traffic, thanks to its famous Kuttinad backwaters and beaches, but we've devised tours of the less frequented north that offer a comparable mix, with some unique cultural experiences for good measure. Our consultants will be able to guide you through the various permutations and tailor an itinerary best suited to your interests and priorities.

When to Go

The early part of Kerala's tourist season falls in October, over the tail end of the so-called 'northwest monsoon', when rainy interludes are frequent but rarely long lasting. By December, the skies are blue and clear and humidity levels low. The heat starts to build again in late March, peaking in late May ahead of the southwest monsoon's arrival in early June. Its first, cataclysmic storms herald the start of four months of torrential downpours.

Suggested Itineraries

The following tried-and-tested itineraries may serve as starting points for your trip planning. They show what can comfortably be achieved over different time spans, but none are fixed; our consultants will have lots of ideas on how to tailor them to your needs, building a mix of sights and experiences around your own particular interests. They'll also have suggestions for easy detours to other parts of the country should you wish to extend your tour.

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	27	28	28	30	29	27	26	27	27	27	28	18
Rainfall mm	32	24	40	100	270	615	516	330	283	422	135	40
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●

●● Best time to travel ● Good time to travel ● Low season

Classic Kerala | 10 days



Looping inland from Cochin, this tour takes you around the region's landscapes and cultural attractions - the perfect first taste of tropical Kerala.

Day 1 Fly to Cochin via the Middle East. **Day 2** Arrive in Cochin; stay two nights. Evening Kathakali dance performance. **Day 3** Explore the old colonial district of the fort town on foot and by auto rickshaw; evening harbour cruise. **Day 4** Travel up the Western Ghats to the tea growing region of Munnar; stay two nights. **Day 5** Visit a local tea plantation and factory and the Tea Museum. **Day 6** Drive to Periyar National Park; stay two nights. **Day 7** Full day of activities inside the park, from walking and bamboo rafting to a boat ride on the lake. **Day 8** Head to the picturesque backwaters near Kumarakom; stay two nights. **Day 9** Experience life on the myriad waterways with a day cruise along the rivers and canals around the town of Alleppey. **Day 10** Travel back to Cochin for your flight home via the Middle East.



Kerala with a Difference | 16 days



Take in unexplored parts of the region in between the mainstream sights. Be enchanted by the national parks, the backwaters and the delicious cuisine.

Day 1 Fly to Cochin via the Middle East. **Day 2** Transfer to Alleppey for two nights. **Day 3** Explore the backwaters. **Day 4** Board a rice boat for an overnight cruise. **Day 5** Spend two nights at Kanam Estate, in a rubber plantation. **Day 6** Explore the surrounding spice plantations. **Day 7** Drive to Munnar. **Day 8** Visit the Eravikulam National Park and a tea plantation. **Day 9** Drive to Mettupalayam. **Day 10** Day at leisure to explore the area. **Day 11** Take the Nilgiri steam train to Ooty. Drive to Wayanad. **Day 12** Visit the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary or cycle through the coffee estates. **Day 13** Drive to Thalassery for two nights at Ayisha Manzil. Visit the town or take a cooking class. **Day 14** Take the train to Cochin. Enjoy a sunset cruise. **Day 15** Explore Fort Cochin by foot and auto rickshaw. **Day 16** Return flight to UK.



Malabar Escape | 16 days



Uncovering the best of the north's varied attractions, exquisite beaches, unseen backwaters and soaring mountains draped in forest and spice plantations.

Day 1 Fly to Cochin via the Middle East. **Day 2** Drive to Kodungallur for two nights. **Day 3** Explore the Periyar River region by foot and bike. **Day 4** Drive to the backwaters via Irinjalakuda. **Day 5** Visit a kathakali school and a weaver's and pottery workshop. **Day 6** Take the train then car into the hills of Wayanad. **Day 7** Explore Wayanad with a guided walk or a cycle through the coffee estates. **Day 8** Drive to Nagarhole National Park. Evening safari. **Day 9** Morning and evening game drives. **Day 10** Continue to Thalassery for two nights at the heritage homestay Ayisha Manzil. **Day 11** Guided walk of the town. Visit the market before helping prepare your supper. **Day 12** Board a rice boat for an overnight cruise. **Day 13** Drive to the beach resort of Neeleshwar. **Day 14 & 15** At leisure or visit the local area. **Day 16** Return flight to UK.





The Beaches of Kerala

Almost the entire length of the Keralan coast is lined by beautiful white-sand beaches and coconut groves. Most still support robust fishing communities, whose wooden boats provide a pretty backdrop for dips in the warm surf of the Arabian Sea. For a relaxing sun holiday in India, our top recommendations are the string of coves to the south of Kovalam, near the capital, Trivandrum, with its wonderful temples and intriguing architecture; Varkala; or quieter Marari near Alappuzha in central Kerala, backed by a near unbroken curtain of coconut palms. The land adjacent to the resort is occupied by a fishing community whose activities on the beach, provide a constant source of fascination for visitors. Alternatively, if you are after sparsely populated, pristine stretches of sand head to Neeleshwar, Bekal or Thottada on the little visited Malabar Coast in the far north of the state, which until recently was ‘terra incognita’ on tourist maps.

Recommended Beach Resorts



The Leela Raviz, Kovalam

The Leela Raviz Kovalam, one of Kerala’s ritziest addresses, occupies a prime position on the clifftop above the northernmost of Kovalam’s three coves. Its chalet rooms, which you’re taken to in golf carts, all have private sundecks and step down the hillside to the resort’s own stretch of beach. You can also swim in a pair of exquisite infinity pools, enjoying the sublime sea views afterwards over a cocktail at the candle-lit terrace bar. The buffet spread is as sumptuous as you’d expect from a five-star-deluxe hotel, and service impeccable.



Niraamaya Surya Samudra, Kovalam

‘Heavenly’ is a word often used to describe the Surya Samudra, an ultra-chic boutique resort overlooking a pair of golden-sand coves to the south of Kovalam. Pounding surf and swaying palm leaves are the only sounds you’re likely to hear ensconced in your Keralan-style cottage, with salty breezes billowing through open windows. The resort holds 22 relocated nallukettu houses, each individually styled with a gorgeous blend of oiled wood and glowing Indian textiles. Some look straight out to sea; others have their own private courtyards with banyans growing in them.



Taj Gateway Varkala, Varkala

Perched between majestic red cliffs, overlooking the Arabian Sea, Gateway Varkala sits in beautifully designed landscaped gardens, in a picturesque beach town a few minutes’ walk from the sea. A modern resort, it has 30 rooms all with private balcony, an inviting swimming pool, with a sunken bar - the perfect spot for a sundowner, and is well known for its Ayurveda Centre and Spa. Enjoy local Keralan cuisine in the Coastal Kitchen and relax in the evenings in the lounge bar.



Marari Beach Resort, Marari

One of our favourite resorts in India, Marari is the perfect place to wind up a tour of Kerala. A large resort in the palm groves behind a shimmering expanse of white sand. Our clients love the spacious pool villas, with their own private Jacuzzis and ‘open-to-sky’ bathrooms. For al fresco swimming, there’s a huge central pool, close to the pillared hall where buffets are served in the evenings, followed by performances of local ritual music and dance. Yoga, cookery classes, ayurvedic therapies and guided nature walks are also on offer.



Neeleshwar Hermitage, Neeleshwar

One of Kerala’s most alluring beach resorts hidden away, on a gloriously unspoilt stretch of coast in the far north, is worth the journey alone for the views through the palms to the sparkling sea from your private villa. Traditional gabled Malabari cottages are dotted around the palms and lawns, most of them facing the sea. The pool is slap next to the sands; the food is fresh and fragrant; there’s a top-notch Ayurveda spa to unwind in; and fascinating talks on local culture by guest lecturers in the evenings. Most of our clients who wind up wish they could stay longer.



Taj Bekal Resort & Spa, Bekal

A luxurious, all-inclusive beach resort and spa in the far north of Kerala, with high levels of comfort and service and in a great location. The Kappil River flows through the grounds, flanked by immaculate lawns and chalets whose design was inspired by that of the region’s kettuvallam houseboats. Apart from leisurely sunset strolls along the palm-backed beach, you can go kayaking on the backwaters, relax in a sumptuous, award-winning spa and explore the undulating laterite ramparts of nearby Bekal Fort – one of India’s most spectacular coastal strongholds.



The Andaman Islands

Jacques Cousteau called them ‘the invisible islands’, but after centuries of relative obscurity, the Andamans are set to become India’s “next big thing”. The archipelago, located 600 miles across the Bay of Bengal, is lapped by vivid turquoise water, with a coastline indented by beaches of gleaming white coral sand. Development, however, remains minimal. Only one of the 38 inhabited islands has hotels that do justice to the sublime scenery. A catamaran ride from the capital, Havelock is the site of glorious Radhanagar Beach, a sweep of soft sand and opalescent water backed by dense jungles. Getting to the Andamans requires an extra effort, but we think it well worthwhile. This remains one of the few areas of pristine costal wilderness in Asia you can enjoy in great style and comfort.



Forest Trekking

Havelock Island retains a covering of tropical forest criss-crossed by trails that offer memorable hikes. The hotels we use have naturalist-guides who will be able to identify the exotic birds, insects and spectacular trees encountered en route – among them the stately ‘padauk’, a buttress-root tree even more highly prized than teak by local carpenters. Look out too for giant coconut and robber crabs lurking in the branches.



Snorkelling & Scuba Diving

Our hotels in the Andamans all have dive schools attached to them offering trips to a range of sites: there are 25 on Havelock alone, with both hard and soft coral attracting manta ray, moray eels, dugong and white-tip reef shark. In addition, keen divers may opt for a live-aboard cruise to more remote sites such as Barren and Cinque Islands. Around Radhanagar Beach itself, the transparent water and colourful aquatic life make for some memorable snorkelling.



Sea Kayaking

The sheltered, mangrove-lined estuaries and creeks lining the coast of Havelock Island are ideal for exploring by kayak. Led by a certified instructor, you can paddle through miles of crystal clear water, pitching up on deserted beaches to discover the unique ecosystems of the Andaman shoreline. Sunset trips and nocturnal forays to experience phosphorous are also possible for more experienced kayakers. All of the equipment used on our trips is of international standard.



Taj Exotica Resort & Spa

The Andaman Islands: Places to Stay

Our preferred hotels in the Andamans are all located on Havelock, a 90-minute sea transfer from the capital, Port Blair. Havelock Island has more beautiful, easily accessible beaches than most others in the archipelago.

With the opening of the Taj Exotica in 2018, fully fledged five-star luxury became an option for the first time here. Our other two favourite places are smaller boutique options, offering a more informal atmosphere in dreamy locations.

Taj Exotica Resort & Spa

This suave new hotel introduces cutting-edge tropical chic to the jungles of the Andamans & Nicobar Islands. Clients who have used Taj properties before will recognize the impeccable service and outstanding attention to detail, but the architecture is something totally new.

Inspired by the houses of the local indigenous tribe, the 75 spacious stilted villas have thatched roofs and are lined with lustrous hardwoods. Each has its own deck where you can relax and enjoy the exotic sights and sounds of the forest, and the gin-clear waters of Radhanagar Beach are a stone’s throw away.



Barefoot at Havelock

Voted the ‘finest in Asia’ by TIME magazine for its brilliant turquoise water, coral sand and pristine setting, No7 is the jewel in the crown of the Andaman Islands’ beaches. Here you will find Barefoot, a stylish, eco-boutique resort, whose ethos is to leave a minimal footprint on the land.

The resort comprises of 31 elegantly designed thatched tents, cottages and villas dotted under a tropical tree canopy, constructed using environmentally sensitive indigenous materials and complete with spacious interiors. The restaurant serves up delicious fresh local ingredients using traditional recipes.

Jalakara

Created with style, flair, and flamboyance by owner and master chef, Mark, and nestled under a dense hilltop forest. Specially designed & built using natural, sustainable materials like woven bamboo, Andaman teak, local stone, and clay tiles, with the entire property being a plastic free zone where even the toiletries are paraben free & vanity packs biodegradable.

Bedrooms have been conceived to maximize airflow and offer cool, spacious, stylish living spaces, several of which extend onto private terraces whilst others offer spectacular bird’s eye views across the island canopy.



Sri Lanka

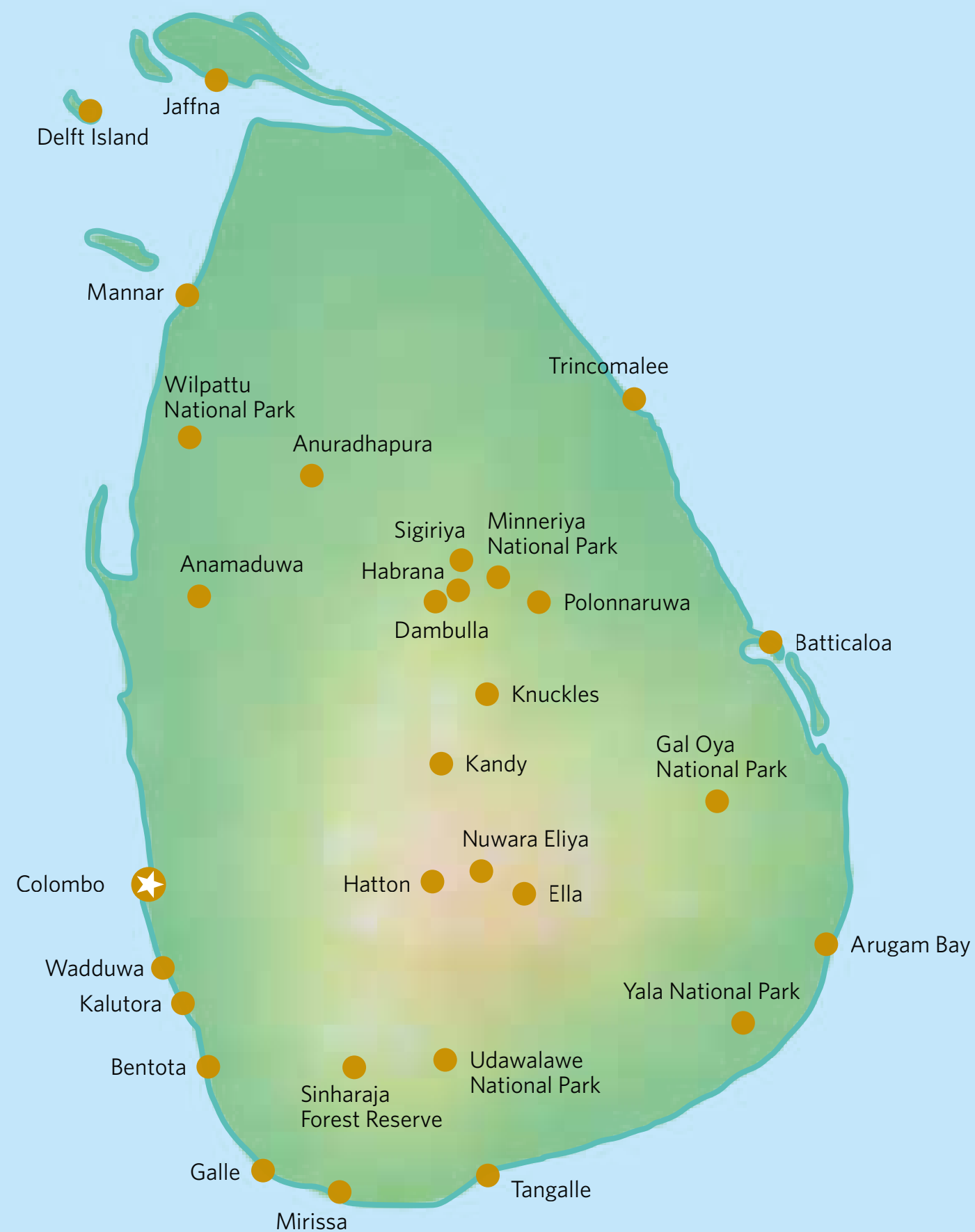
Sri Lanka fits most people's idea of what a tropical idyll should look like: glorious, golden-sand beaches along the coast; wildlife-rich savannah inland; and a tract of misty mountains at the island's core – all providing a superbly exotic backdrop for a traditional Asian culture with deep and sophisticated roots. Add to that a wonderfully rich cuisine, some of the most romantic places to stay in the world, and the fact that at least one side of the island is likely to be enjoying near perfect weather at any given time, and you'll understand why Sri Lanka ranks among our most popular destinations.

Whichever period of the year you're planning to travel, it's worth experiencing the wonders of the 'Cultural Triangle', a couple of hours' drive from the capital, Colombo, where some of Asia's greatest archaeological treasures rise from a vast, scrub-covered plain. The remnants of ancient capitals date from a period when Sri Lankan gemstones and spices were traded from the Mediterranean to the Pacific and beyond, bringing great wealth to these lost Buddhist kingdoms.

Further south and east, amid the lush slopes of the 'Tea Country', you can savour expansive vistas of rolling plantations from beautifully renovated British-era tea bungalows. The city of Kandy is the centre of this verdant hill tract and the site of the 'Temple of the Tooth' – the best place to experience traditional Sinhalese ritual music, dance and costume.

Wildlife enthusiasts will find plenty of inspiration in the island's national parks, which shelter thriving populations of wild elephant and leopard, while the cobalt waters off shore ranks among the best in the world to see whales and spinner dolphins.

As well as the must-see sights, a typical TransIndus tour of Sri Lanka will include a selection of authentic cultural experiences, visits to lesser known destinations, and stays in some heavenly hotels, boutique hideaways and homestays. Whatever your budget and preferred holiday style, our consultants will have plenty of ideas. The following pages feature some of our favourites, picked from three decades of operating tours to the island. For more inspiration, contact one of our team of Sri Lanka experts for an introductory chat.





Colombo & the Cultural Triangle

All international flights land at Colombo's Bandaranaike Airport, so you'll pass through the capital at least twice in the course of your holiday. For anyone wanting a rounded picture of island life, we recommend a couple of nights exploring the city's monuments and markets, and sampling its famously tasty cuisine, whether spicy street-food along Galle Face Green, or fancy fusion cooking in one of the many hip, new restaurants.

Half a day's drive inland, the so-called 'Cultural Triangle' encompasses the ruins of grand cities and religious sites constructed between the 4th and 10th centuries. Scattered across a plain dotted with dramatic outcrops of brown granite, they comprise one of the great storehouses of ancient monuments in the world, and should be considered un-missable even if you've no more than a passing interest in Asian history. The sight of Sigiriya rock, capped by its magical palace, is worth the journey alone. To see the monuments at a leisurely pace, we generally recommend basing yourself for a couple of nights in the region.



Highlights of the Cultural Triangle

Colombo

The island's buzzing capital has a distinctive, multi-cultural feel, with architecture, cuisine and an arts scene that reflect its many-layered history.

Anuradhapura

Towering stupas and monastic complexes are just some of the impressive vestiges of the Sinhalese city that flourished 2000 years ago.

Mihintale

Marking the place where Buddhism first took root in the island, this collection of ruined monasteries, stupas and water tanks is an off-track gem.

Avukana

One of most evocative vestiges of the early kingdoms is this beautifully carved standing Buddha, tucked away in north-central Sri Lanka.

Sigiriya

Scale this dramatic rock outcrop, surging above the jungle canopy, to see ancient murals and ruined water gardens dating from the late 5th century AD.

Pidurangala

Clamber up a steep, little used path to the top of a boulder hill for the finest view in Sri Lanka, encompassing Sigiriya rock and the entire central plain.

Polonnaruwa

Sri Lanka's finest ancient Buddhist art and architecture is laid around the well-preserved vestiges of this late-12th-century city.

Dambulla

An outstanding example of Sri Lanka's ancient religious art, these paintings and statuary are unique in scale and their degree of preservation.



Colombo

Given the splendours of the Sri Lankan coast, it's hardly surprising that a lot of visitors bypass Colombo completely. But the capital holds a great deal of interest and is well worth a stay for anyone wanting to discover what makes the island tick. A large, modern city with roots as a medieval port, it was founded by the Dutch in the 1600s and later expanded by the British. Remnants of the old colonial core are dotted around the banking enclave known as 'Fort' – a curious blend of modern office blocks and 19th-century buildings occupied by hotels and old-fashioned stores. Alongside it, Pettah is a bustling market area with lots of local atmosphere, while Kollupitiya and Bambalapitiya's chi-chi boutiques and galleries offer more refined shopping.



Fort Walking Tour

Colombo's Fort district forms the focus of our popular walking tour led by local resident, Mark Forbes. Mark will guide you through the busy streets of the neighbourhood, picking out Dutch mansions and the iconic Cargills building – an evocative vestige of British Ceylon. After tea at the Grand Oriental, the tour winds up at the old Dutch Hospital complex, where an enclave of converted 17th-century buildings now house trendy boutiques, bars and cafés.



Colombo's Street Food

Colombo is justly famous for its street snacks, and on this tour you'll sample the pick of them. In the company of an expert local foodie, start with a glass of 'arack' at a local bar, then stop at Hulsford Street for some Sri Lankan sweet treats before heading over to Galle Face Green at sunset for a plate of more-ish chicken 'kottu', 'isso vada'(spicy lentil cakes stuffed with prawns) and a plate of pungent cuttlefish curry, washed down with a cold beer or two.



Tuk Tuk Tour

Jump in your bouncy three-wheeler taxi and join the rivers of vehicles jostling for space in central Colombo for a tour of the city's most important Buddhist temples, Hindu shrines and historic mosques. Accompanied by your English-speaking driver-guide, you'll pause at Pettah market for a round of its bustling fresh produce section and stop for refreshments at a colonial-era hotel before concluding the tour at a special viewpoint, taking in a 360-sweep of the city skyline.

Anuradhapura

Anuradhapura, the vast capital that endured for nearly a millennium from around 377BC, remains a sacred city because it was Buddhism's initial home on the island. The famous 'Tooth Relic' – a canine of the Buddha retrieved from his funeral pyre – reputedly came first to what is now Mihintale, where a small but charming temple was built around a sunken water pool hollowed out of a dark, boulder-strewn hillock.

Today, Anuradhapura retains great appeal for both tourists and pilgrims. It's the sheer scale of the dagobas which impresses most. Sri Lanka is dotted with these typically bell-shaped and whitewashed memorial stupas but the most impressive are found here, among them the world's largest, Abhayagiri Dagoba.



Cycling Through the Ruins

The quiet, flat, frangipani-lined lanes winding around Anuradhapura lend themselves well to exploration by bicycle. On this varied tour you'll be guided by a local expert around the site's historic highlights before heading to nearby Mihintale, birthplace of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, to see the island's oldest stupas and water tanks.



Polonnaruwa

Set beside a shimmering artificial lake, Polonnaruwa is the most compelling of Sri Lanka's ancient capitals. Its triple-layered, concentric walls enclose the remains of once fabulous gardens, palaces, temples and monasteries – an astonishing urban creation to which the famous 'Tooth Relic' was brought.

The site is best seen at sunrise when, tinged with soft amber light, its ruins are patrolled by troops of monkeys. Five distinct clusters of monuments demand attention here, but the Royal Citadel, Quadrangle and northern groups suffice for most visits. The ethereal statues, finely sculpted architectural detail, ancient frescoes and murals, colossal Buddha images and immense stupas lend to the site a magical atmosphere.



Monkey Spotting in Polonnaruwa

The ruins of Polonnaruwa famously formed the backdrop for Disney's 2015 docu-drama, 'Monkey Kingdom', which follows the lives of a troupe of toque macaques at the site. Observe the stars in action on this primate-focussed tour. Guided by a local monkey expert, you'll see three different species in action.





Sigiriya

At the heart of Sri Lanka, a huge column of rock rises abruptly from the plains like a vision of ‘Lord of the Rings’. It’s a striking sight and a place of great historic importance due to the presence on its flat-topped summit of a 5th-century fortress, dating from the reign of Kashyapa (477-495AD).

Landscaped gardens, royal apartments, ramparts and cisterns were added to the complex, approached via the ‘Lion Gate’ from where a flight of rock-cut steps leads steeply uphill, past the apsara murals and mirror wall before continuing via catwalks and stairways to the summit. Even early in the morning the climb is hot work, but the effort is rewarded with marvellous views. For many visitors, this is understandably the country’s top cultural attraction.



The Cloud Maidens of the Rock Fortress

Half-way up Sigiriya rock you arrive at a recess of polished walls on which were painted the most alluring frescoes to have survived from ancient Sri Lanka. The murals show a cohort of curvaceous women, all lavishly bejewelled. They’re often referred to as ‘apsaras’ (or ‘cloud maidens’) and are believed depict the king’s wives and courtesans.

The Cultural Triangle: Places to Stay



Water Garden, Sigiriya

Surrounded by lakes and streams and set against the backdrop of Sigiriya Rock, Water Garden provides luxurious villa accommodation at the heart of the Cultural Triangle. The 30 chic villas are filled with designer furniture and surrounded by private gardens; some even with their own private plunge pool. Dining at Water Garden is a treat, with locally sourced organic food the focus of the menu and a choice of eating under the feature handcrafted chandelier of the main restaurant or al fresco. The spa only uses organic ingredients and Ayurvedic massages are on the menu.



Jetwing Vil Uyana, Sigiriya

In the shadow of Sri Lanka’s great rock-fortress nestles this gorgeous eco-resort, where guests stay in double-storeyed stilted cottages in the middle of a man-made lake. Boasting teak floors, king-sized beds on plinths and bathtubs as large as plunge pools, the units are huge and well-spaced, offering exceptional levels of privacy. They are wonderfully atmospheric places to lounge in, especially after dark when the sounds of the tropical forest fill the night air, and the surrounding paddy fields and marshland are teeming with exotic birds and butterflies.



Dambulla

Situated at the centre of the island, Dambulla is a small market town straddling a crossroads of two major highways. This strategic location makes it a busy distribution centre for locally grown vegetables, but numerous hotels have also been built in the area to accommodate visitors exploring the Cultural Triangle, a highlight of which is located in the heart of town.

Sri Lanka’s largest and best-preserved ancient cave-temple complex stands on the south side of Dambulla town, carved from a huge granite inselberg faintly resembling a beached whale. Five major rock-cut grottoes were chiselled from flanks of the ‘Golden Rock’ over a period of roughly a thousand years, and these hold a horde of murals and statues unique in scale and degree of preservation.



Visiting Dambulla’s Cave Temple

A good guide, and a torch, are invaluable to make sense of the Golden Temple of Dambulla. Explore the expansion into what one sees today, occurring over centuries, with over-hung cave-temples extended into the rock, brick walls constructed to screen the caves, and eventually the creation of magnificent sculpture to adorn the various shrines.



Cinnamon Lodge, Habarana

This well-run character property is set beside the Habarana Lake and has 150 rooms spread out in cottages. A chalet styled eco-friendly hotel sprawled over 27 acres of lush forested land, it is an exclusive hideaway. The hotel has been recently renovated and refurbished and offers a choice of two restaurants - with the chance to dine by the lake, a main bar and a pool bar alongside a large swimming pool and spa. The hotel has its own farm where many of the ingredients found on your plate will have been freshly grown.



Amaya Lake Hotel, Dambulla

Situated on the shores of Lake Kandalama in a 40 acre sanctuary surrounded by pristine nature, hidden pathways lead you to the traditional style suites and villas of the Amaya Lake Hotel. Wake up to the sound of bird song from your oasis amongst the trees. Choose from staying in Deluxe, Superior Club Lodge Villas or, for the ultimate in indulgence, the Amaya Superior Suite that has its own private plunge pool. The restaurant provides an extensive buffet of Sri Lankan cuisine or you could try one of the destination dining experiences, from champagne breakfasts by the lake to dining under the stars.



Kandy & the Hill Country

A region of craggy peaks and lush, manicured tea gardens, Sri Lanka's highlands form a striking counterpoint to its coastline, and no visit to the island is complete without a foray into them. Ample incentive to do so is provided by the area's main city, Kandy. A bastion of traditional Sinhalese religion and culture, it is also the home of the most revered shrine in Sri Lanka – the Temple of the Tooth, where you can attend ancient rituals being performed in a stately lakeside complex, as well as performances of local costumed dance, drumming and music in the evenings.

The region's other attractions are mostly natural. Hidden among the misty rainforests of the foothills of Tea Country are several beautiful national parks, protecting areas of extraordinary biodiversity and some of Asia's most striking landforms. January to April is generally the driest period in the Sri Lankan highlands, though it can rain at any time of year. The southwest of the region, around Adam's Peak and the Sinharaja, is officially the wettest on the island.



Highlights of Kandy & the Hill Country

Kandy

The country's cultural capital and second largest city is home of the revered Temple of the Tooth, and wonderful Esala Perahera festival.

Horton Plains

Some of the most spectacular walking trails in Sri Lanka wind through the national park, encompassing a high, rocky plateau that shelves dramatically.

The Knuckles

This is the wildest and most rugged tract of the island's hill country – a trekker's paradise of high trails, montane forest and waterfalls.

Nuwara Eliya

Fragrant tea estates carpet the slopes of this former British hill station, where you can stay in some beautifully sited planters' bungalows.

Adam's Peak

Streams of white-clad pilgrims from across the world pour year-round up the thousands of steps leading to the top of Sri Pada, or 'Adam's Peak' to pay homage to Lord Shiva.

Ella

Ringed by cloud-forested hills and tea plantations, this highland town is the culminating point of Sri Lanka's most spectacular train ride.

Little Adam's Peak

Similar in form to its namesake, with phenomenal views, but reachable in an easy walk of 2-5 hours – a perfect taster trek in the Ella region.

Hatton

Hub of the island's tea industry, Hatton serves as a springboard for plantation stays and several of Sri Lanka's benchmark treks, including Adam's Peak.



Kandy

The prominence of Kandy, Sri Lanka's highland capital, rests on its role as repository of the famous 'Tooth Relic' of the Buddha, one of Asia's most sacred objects. The holy canine is enshrined in the illustrious Sacred Temple of the Tooth, or 'Dalada Mahagana' – a fabulously atmospheric place to visit. Each year during the summer, the temple plays host to one of Asia's greatest spectacles, Esala Perahera, during which processions fill the town for eleven nights. Kandy's pretty lake, attractive streetscapes and pleasant climate combine to make it a charming halt. Nearby excursions include Peradeniya, the city's superb botanical gardens, the serene hilltop temple of Gadaladeniya and fascinating Ceylon Tea Museum.



Flower Offering at Temple

Sri Lanka's holiest shrine holds the most famous surviving relic of the Buddha, whose location for centuries was believed to determine the seat of the country's power. Join the streams of white-robed pilgrims who file through the temple's gates as they purchase frangipani and lotus blooms from the flower vendors, then continue through the incense-filled, lavishly decorated interior to the place where the relic is enshrined – the focus of elaborate rituals.



The Royal Botanical Gardens

Join Kandyan botanist Bandara Palipana for a walking tour of Peradeniya's famous plant collection. Palipana has worked in the city's Botanical Gardens for over 30 years and will guide you through the vast collection of over 4,000 trees, palms and flowers, which include more than 300 varieties of orchid. The real show stopper here, though, is the giant Javan fig tree growing on the Great Lawn – an extraordinary specimen said to be over a century old.



Esala Perahera

By far the most dazzling and extravagant festival in Sri Lanka is Esala Perahera, held over the full moon period in late-July/early August. For ten days and eleven nights, Kandy's humid air fills with the cacophonous sound of drums and trumpets, as more than a hundred lavishly caparisoned elephants lumber through the streets by flaming torchlight, accompanied by thousands of musicians, dancers, jugglers and acrobats, all dressed in beautiful Kandyan costume.

Walking in the Hill Country

Trekking the Knuckles

For anyone looking to sidestep their fellow visitors and experience the island's wilder side, the Knuckles, northeast of Kandy, is the region to head for. Named after the resemblance of its high ridges – with their 34 prominent peaks – to giant fists, the area is the least developed part of Sri Lanka, with only 40 farming villages scattered across its lush, rugged mountainsides. Boar, spotted deer, giant squirrel, purple-faced leaf monkeys and porcupine are commonly spotted, and there are around 200 species of bird present, among them many endemics.

The area's trails offer some great trekking routes, which you can tackle as half- or full-day trips, accompanied by our fully qualified local guides. Bat caves, waterfalls, hidden wild swimming spots and, of course, the mountaintops themselves offer a varied choice of targets for hikes. The best periods are March–April and June–August.



Climbing Adam's Peak

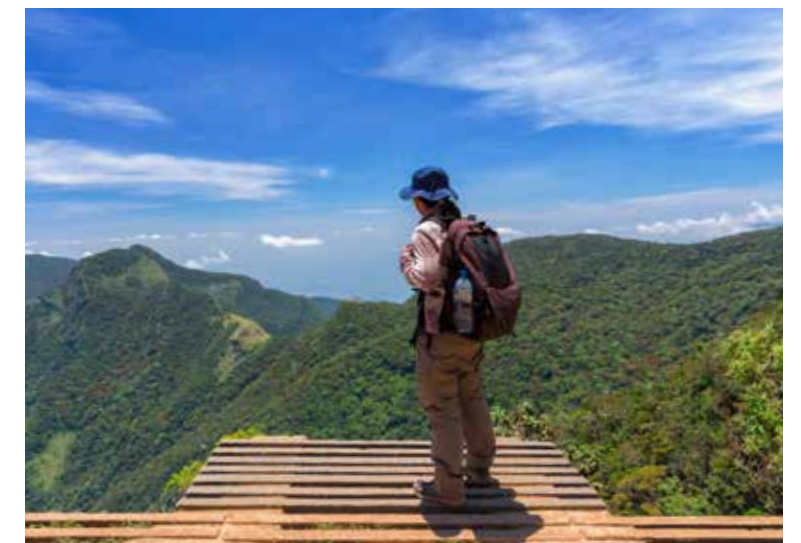
A constant flow of white-clad pilgrims of many faiths pours year round up the thousands of steps leading to the top of Sri Pada, or Adam's Peak (2,243m/7,360ft). The mountain's summit sports an impression in a rock revered by Buddhists as the footprint of the Buddha, by Christians as that of St Thomas, by Muslims as the footprint of Adam and by Hindus as a mark left by Shiva.

Following a stepped walkway lined by lanterns and shrines, the ascent starts from the town of Dalhousie and is most often made during the night to avoid the worst of the heat. Your TransIndus guide will ensure you reach the top in time for sunrise, and the extraordinary phenomenon known as the 'Shadow of the Peak' – a Brocken spectre projection of the summit on to the surrounding sea mist which lasts for twenty minutes or so and is taken by pilgrims as proof of the mountain's supernatural powers.

Walking in the Horton Plains

At around 2,200m (7,200ft), the Horton Plains National Park is the island's most isolated plateau. Covered by montane forest and undulating moor-like grassland resembling African savannah, it forms the headwaters of three major rivers and is an area rich in biodiversity, particularly birdlife.

The main reason to come is to walk in the shadow of Sri Lanka's second and third-highest mountains – Kirigalpotta (2395m) and Totapola (2359m). Another well-trodden trail winds south to Little World's End, perched on the side of a sheer cliff – a prelude to World's End itself, about a kilometre further along, where a cliff edge plunges to a spectacular, vertigo-inducing drop with far-reaching views. Walkers typically loop back past the 20-m (66-ft) high Baker Falls, pausing for a dip. On clear days you might be able to pick out pyramidal Adam's Peak in the distance.





Tea Country

Lush tea terraces have dominated the landscape of Sri Lanka's interior hills since the plant was first introduced by the British in the 1860s. Today, the island is the fourth-largest producer in the world and it's hard to imagine the uplands looking any other way. In many respects, Tea Country feels a world apart from the coast. Less densely populated, greener, and with fresher air and crisper light, it enjoys a noticeably cooler climate (nights can be quite chilly at any time of year), while the region's three main market towns – Nuwara Eliya, Hatton and Ella – have stronger echoes of the colonial era than any others. For the most vivid impression, spend a few nights in an old planter's bungalow with a valley view and a pool in the garden.



Tea Estate Tour

Visit a working organic farm hidden in the Sri Lankan highlands where tea, coffee, cinnamon, lemongrass and other spices are grown against an idyllic backdrop of misty mountains, interlaced with waterfalls. Tours begin with a gentle stroll through the tea gardens, where you can try your hand at harvesting alongside the team of local pluckers before tasting the estate's signature produce at a viewpoint overlooking Ella Gap, a steep valley plunging steeply to the coast.



Riding the Tea Train

The British-built railway line snaking through Sri Lanka's Tea Country ranks among the most scenic in the world, affording superb views of the interior valleys and mountains. Rather than covering the whole trip between Kandy and Ella in one go, we recommend the section from Nuwara Eliya, which includes some of the most dramatic views on the line. We'll ensure you're allocated seats on the left side of the first-class observation carriage for the best panoramas.



Craft Coffee & Chocolate

This experience is for avid coffee lovers with a keen interest in the island's past. It starts with an informal account by your Seattle-born planter-host of how coffee first came to Sri Lanka via Arab traders, and brings the story up to date with a tour of his working organic farm where fine beans are cultivated, roasted, blended and ground to make a wonderfully fragrant brew, which you'll taste along with chocolates hand-made on the premises.

Kandy & the Hill Country: Places to Stay



Kandy House

A former 200-year-old manor house and now a beautifully restored boutique hotel. The nine rooms, each named after butterflies, are individually furnished using local colourful fabrics and the larger Ultra Rooms have access to a verandah ideal for al fresco dining, served by your personal butler. Take a dip in the swimming pool nestled in the tropical gardens overlooking the surrounding paddy fields and enjoy nightly delicious gourmet experiences. The setting of Kandy House is wonderful and, if you are inspired by the views, then you can take advantage of the art materials available.



Ceylon Tea Trails

Life on a Sri Lankan tea plantation has its own unhurried pace and distinctive vistas, and the perfect way to savour both is a stay in a converted planters' bungalow high in the Hill Country overlooking Castlereagh Lake. Each of these five immaculately restored period properties have spectacular views from their verandahs. The interiors have been richly refurbished, but retain a colonial-era feel, with luxuriously upholstered suites and clawfoot tubs in the bathrooms. The only features that would have looked out of place in the 1930s are the glorious swimming pools in the grounds.



Camellia Hills

With just five rooms, overlooking Castlereagh Lake and surrounded by tea plantations, this boutique property reflects a tea planter's bungalow. Rooms can be booked individually or the whole villa can be booked exclusively. The villa is contemporary in style with high ceilings and vast windows to take in the views of the verdant landscape outside. The open-plan lounge has a fireplace to create a cosy atmosphere on chilly evenings and there is a 10 metre pool in the garden for when the temperatures rise. Meals can be taken on the open terrace with views as impressive as the food.



98 Acres Resort & Spa

As its name suggests, this wonderful property stands on a scenic 98 acre tea estate at Ella. Surrounded by nature, each of the chalets, with their own private balcony, has been made from recyclable materials including straw thatched roofs and railway sleeper decks. Each is designed to take in the breath-taking views of the surrounding landscape. The restaurant and Bar 98, sitting up above the chalets, have also been designed to take in the incredible views. Spa 98 offers treatments using tea and the herbal plants from the estate.



Jaffna & the North

Sri Lanka's civil war engulfed the far north of the island for 26 years, and had a greater impact there than anywhere else. But over the past decade the area has evolved rapidly, putting the conflict firmly behind it and developing some great new experiences for visitors. Travellers in search of something different will relish the chance to explore this predominantly Tamil, Hindu region.

In addition to many spectacular temples, it offers some wonderful boat trips and cruises, taking in the islands of shallow, coral-edged Palk Bay and Jaffna Lagoon. The region's hub is Jaffna city itself, worth a visit to see its grand, but now dilapidated, colonial buildings and temples. February to March and June to August are the driest periods in this part of the island.



Jaffna

A major port since antiquity, Jaffna is the capital of Sri Lanka's Northern Province. The town occupies a prominent position on the peninsula curling across the Palk Straits towards India, from where the ancestors its Tamil-speaking inhabitants originated. Hindu influence remains strong here, and the most conspicuous landmarks are the giant temple gateway towers soaring above the skyline. The largest of them belong to Nallur Kandaswamy, Sri Lanka's largest and most revered Hindu shrine. Jaffna's bustling Chunnakam Market is its other most worthwhile sight. A riot of colour, noise and intense aromas, the bazaar has a particularly lively fresh produce section. Look out for traditional cooking utensils and items made from different Palmyrah wood.



Nainativu Nagapooshani Amman

Dedicated to Shiva's consort Parvati, the Nainativu Nagapooshani Amman Temple sits on an island in the bay opposite Jaffna, reached via a long causeway and ferry. The shrine survived from antiquity until the Portuguese looted it in 1620, whereupon it was rebuilt, only to be blown apart by the Sri Lankan army during the recent war. Today's structure is mostly of recent origin but is splendid nonetheless, with its four soaring, intricately decorated gopura towers.



Delft Island

Experience the distinctive atmosphere of Delft Island on this day cruise across Palk Bay. An hour's sailing from Jaffna, the islet is a tranquil backwater, criss-crossed by walls of bleached grey coral and deserted save for a herd of wild ponies, descended from ones originally brought here by the Portuguese in the 1500s. After a picnic lunch on board the boat, you'll land on Delft and be guided to one of the only baobab trees in Sri Lanka, thought to have been planted by Arab mariners.



Mannar Island

Crossing a seascape of marshland, sand bars and shallow, blue-green water, the journey over to Mannar Island is a memorable one undertaken by few foreigners. As you cross the great causeway connecting it to the mainland, look out for flocks of flamingos, seemingly afloat the heat haze. The site is replete with mythological associations, being one of the stepping stones over which Rama and Hanuman's monkey army marched to rescue Sita in the Hindu epic the Ramayana.



Sri Lankan Wildlife

Thanks to its wide diversity of natural habitats, Sri Lanka ranks among the best wildlife destinations in the world. These habitats range from tropical jungles and mangrove-line estuaries at sea level to dry savannah grasslands and high montane forests in the interior. Off-shore, the warm waters of the Indian Ocean also support an exceptional range of marine life, including blue and sperm whales. What really sets the country apart, however, is the amount of protected wilderness it holds, with over 25% of the land mass designated as a national park, reserve or sanctuary.

Our consultants have visited all of them and will be able to help you identify which might offer the most rewarding experiences, whether you're a keen birder, a big-cat aficionado or have children or teens in tow. Even if safaris aren't generally a holiday priority, we recommend including visits to a few parks in your itinerary. To help get you started, here's a rundown of our top recommendations.



Highlights of Sri Lanka’s National Parks

Wilpattu

Sri Lanka’s largest and oldest national park, Wilpattu holds some superb scenery, with lakes attracting leopard, elephant and sloth bears.

Yala

Sri Lanka’s most popular national park can get very crowded but it’s one of the best places to see all the main species present on the island, including leopard.

Minneriya

At the heart of this park is a huge reservoir attracting herds of up to 300 elephants – one of the world’s greatest wildlife spectacles.

Udawalawe

Encompassing a tract of savannah grasslands interspersed with marsh and lagoons, Udawalawe holds around 200 species of birds and 600 elephants.

Gal Oya

Sidestep the crowds at this park in the east of the island, where elephant, crocs and prodigious numbers of birds congregate around a man-made lake.

Horton Plains

The only national park in the Central Highlands, Horton has 57 species of flora: deer, wild boar and giant squirrels are also commonly sighted.

Bundala

A quieter alternative to nearby Yala, Bundala’s wetlands and scrubby coastal forest are packed with birds, elephants, crocodiles and turtles.

Sinharaja Rainforest

This reserve is particularly rich in birdlife: 21 out of the 26 endemic species can be found here and there are wonderful nature trails to explore.



Leopard

The island has a population of around 1,000 wild leopards in its national parks. They have no natural predators which is why they have evolved to become larger and more stocky than their African cousins. Sri Lankan leopards are also solitary, nocturnal hunters, tending to seek shade in the midday heat: for this reason early morning and late afternoon are the best times to see them. Guides in the parks know their most frequented lairs and patterns of movement. Sightings are frequent and at Yala you'd be unlucky not to see one over two or three safaris.

Yala National Park

When it comes to spotting leopards, the woodlands and scrub of Yala National Park are unsurpassed. It is the country's most popular reserve with varied landscapes encompassing forest, parkland, rocky outcrops, small lakes and lagoons. Despite the prolific birdlife and large herds of roaming elephants, leopards are why most people come here.

The park currently has around a population of 35 – among the highest densities anywhere in the world. Sightings, however, remain a matter of luck. A typical Jeep safari with an obligatory tracker covers just one section of the park. For the best sightings along the rougher, less-used tracks, opt for a tented camp inside the buffer zone.

Wilpattu National Park

In the far northeast of Sri Lanka, Wilpattu is Sri Lanka's largest national park, covering an amazing 130,000 hectares. The area was off-limits to tourists for nearly thirty years during the war, but re-opened again in 2009 and is fast regaining its popularity as a wildlife destination.

In addition to leopards, the park supports 30 species of mammal, including elephant, sloth bear, jackal, sambar deer, spotted deer, buffalo, mongoose and jackal. You won't enjoy the same frequency of sightings as Yala – populations are more spread out, and less used to people. This is, rather, somewhere to come to savour wild, empty beaches, jungle and freshwater lakes – in short, a taste of proper tropical wilderness.

Birds

Wherever you are on the island, the profusion and vibrant colours of the local avian life never fail to astonish. Over 430 species of birds have been recorded, among them 33 endemics. In addition, around 240 types of migrant from India over-winter here. Habitat loss has resulted in several species coming under threat, notably the green-billed coucal and Sri Lankan whistling thrush, though with help from our expert naturalist guides, even these endangered birds may be ticked off in a typical two-week trip.

Birding tours usually start at lowland rainforest sites, where you'll be looking for rarities such as spurfowl and blue magpies. Up in the highland reserves, Indian pitta, pied thrush and Kashmir flycatchers may put in appearances.

Bundala National Park

Thanks to its wide range of habitats (which include wetlands), Bundala is our top recommendation for serious birders. Expect to sight beautiful blue-tailed bee-eaters, black and yellow bitterns, watercock, ruddy-breasted crane, and variety of waders, including Pacific golden plover and pintail snipe, in the adjacent salt pans.



Elephants

Due to extensive habitat loss caused by the island's expanding towns and cities, the elephant population has declined by more than half over the last three generations. Even so, you can still expect to see them in large numbers across many of Sri Lanka's national parks, and occasionally grazing on the roadside in rural communities.

Udawalawe attracts large herds to its lakes. For closer interaction, you should consider a visit to the park's wonderful Transit Centre, where orphaned elephants are looked after until they are strong enough to be released back into the wild. Anyone travelling near Minneriya from August may be lucky enough to encounter the world-famous 'Gathering' where herds of up to 300 congregate.

Minneriya, Kaudulla and Hurulu Eco Parks

For the frequency of sightings and size of their herds, these three interlinking national parks in Sri Lanka stand out. Large herds of elephants migrate between the parks in different seasons, so which one to visit depends on the time of year and your consultant will know which periods are most likely to yield sightings.





Whales and Turtles

Sri Lanka ranks among the best places in the world to spot whales. Ten different species are present in the deep waters off the island's shoreline, including the largest mammal on the planet: the mighty blue whale. And unlike most other locations where you can sight these majestic creatures in the wild, here you can combine a whale spotting cruise with a land-based safari to see leopards and elephants as well, all within the space of a couple of days – something that's truly unique. Sri Lanka's coastline is also a major nesting ground for marine turtles. We've teamed up with a conservation group to facilitate trips to protected sites where you can watch females laying their eggs and returning to the sea by moonlight – a truly magical experience.



Whales: By Catamaran

Sri Lanka's shoreline lies unusually close to the continental shelf, which means the deep waters where whales congregate may be easily reached by boat. Good sightings occur on nine out of ten trips. We recommend taking a luxury catamaran out of Mirissa, complete with chef to whip up a delicious full breakfast and a three-course lunch. En route back to port, the crew will anchor for a spot of paddle boarding and swimming. All equipment is provided.



Whales: From the Air

Climb aboard a 3-seater plane for an hour-long whale spotting flight over the beautiful coast of southern Sri Lanka. Aerial watching ensures you have the best views while causing no disturbance to the waters below (and avoiding sea sickness, of course, should you be prone to it). The flights take off from Koggala airfield, which will also allow you to get a bird's-eye view of the lush countryside inland. Keen photographers particularly enjoy this option.



Nesting Turtles

Five out of seven of the world's marine turtle species are to be found in Sri Lanka and they all come ashore in Rekawa to lay their eggs. Observe this heart-warming spectacle at close range under supervision from the Rekawa Turtle Watch, a dedicated conservation group set up to protect the nesting sites. Volunteer wardens lead groups on to the sands from 8.30-11.30pm. Sightings are not guaranteed, but the odds are so good they operate a "no-see, no-pay" policy!

Sri Lanka's National Parks: Places to Stay



Wilpattu Safari Camp

Situated on a five-acre plot sandwiched between rice fields, this eco-friendly luxury tented camp provides the ideal base for safaris in the nearby Wilpattu National Park. 'Tents' don't really do justice to the accommodation, which consists of individual structures set on raised plinths under the trees – all well-spaced and furnished with proper beds, pedestal fans, bathrooms and hot showers. A private verandah offers a pleasant retreat during the hot part of the day, when the surrounding foliage is alive with exotic birds and butterflies.



Leopard Trails, Wilpattu

A luxury tented camp on the edge of Wilpattu National Park, this is an authentic safari experience. The air-conditioned tents are fully equipped with large comfy beds, ensuite bathrooms and outdoor showers. Spend your days spotting wildlife in the national park, or enjoying one of the other many activities available, and spend the evenings swapping stories around the campfire, relaxing in the lounge tent and enjoying the delicious locally sourced Sri Lankan cuisine. What makes Leopard Trails truly special, however, is its highly experienced local safari guides.



Wild Coast Tented Lodge, Yala

A spectacular luxury tented camp, adjacent to Yala National Park and nestled between the jungle and shores of the Indian Ocean, on a rugged, empty beach. The 28 'cocoon' tents take on the shape and colour of the rocks and boulders that lie scattered nearby, whilst a clever layout in the shape of a leopard's paw print alludes to the area's most famous resident. The open-air bamboo-clad Ten Tuskers bar and Dining Pavilion – designed to mirror the boulders scattered across the golden beach beyond – wrap around the resort's enormous free-form swimming pool.



Chena Huts by Uga Escapes, Yala

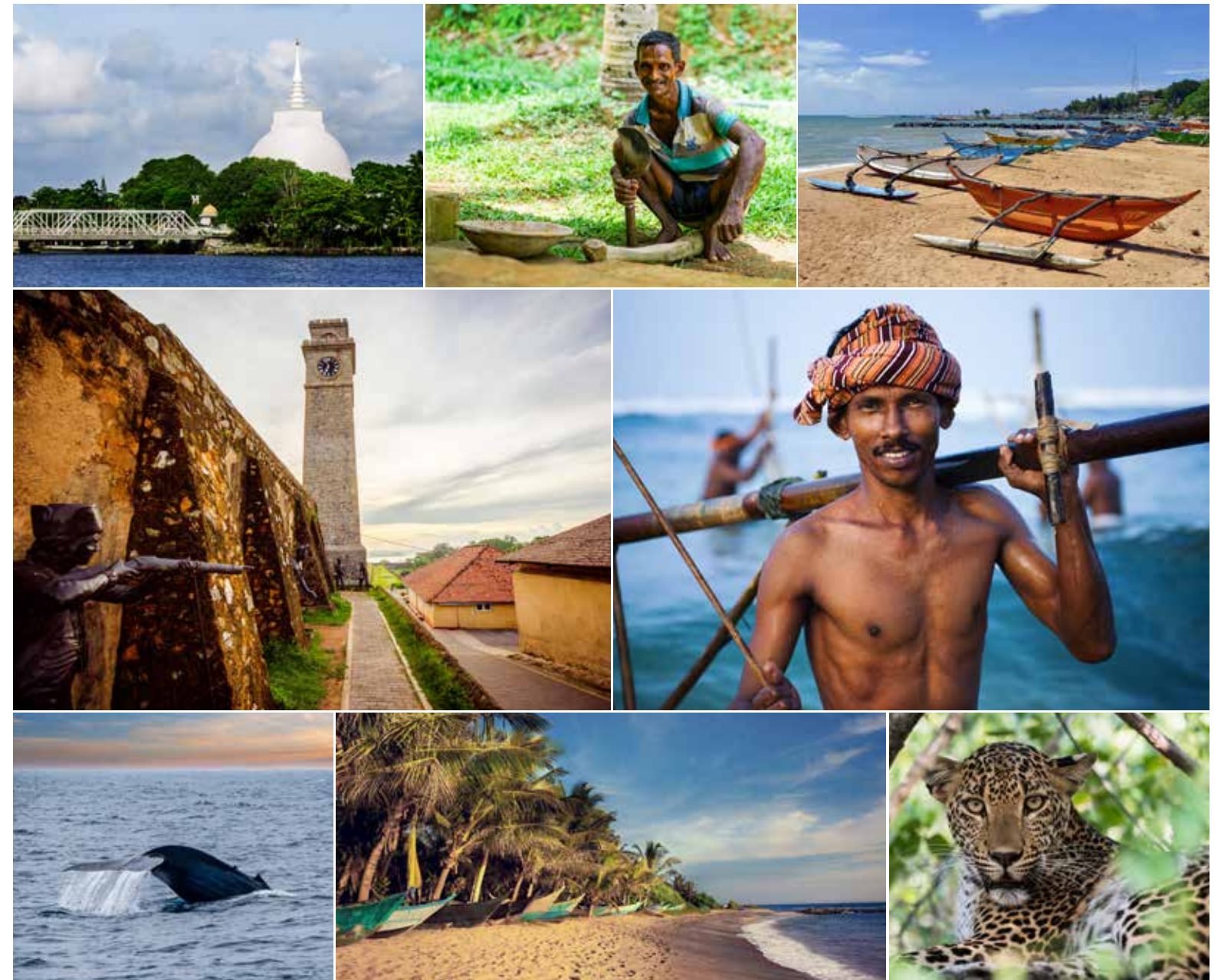
'Chena' derives from the local word used for small clearings in the jungle and so spread over seven acres you will find 14 spacious cabins reflecting the architecture of the region. Each cabin is filled with extravagant amenities including a living area and a free standing bath tub. Outside, on your shaded deck, you will find a private five-metre plunge pool overlooking the sand dunes and jungle. Meals are served at the nautically themed Basses Restaurant or dinners on the beach or under the stars can be arranged. In between safaris, relax by the main pool or make use of the spa.



Galle & the South Coast

Sri Lanka's palm-fringed southern coast is the most traditional and atmospheric corner of the island. Although development has gathered pace here in recent years, it's still a predominantly rural region, most of whose inhabitants earn a living from coconut cultivation, rice farming and in-shore fishing. Galle, the island's fourth city, is the main hub and deserves at least a day or two to explore its charismatic 17th-century fort. Behind the citadel's belt of red laterite bastions is hidden an enclave of UNESCO-listed, colonial-era villas and whitewashed churches, little changed in centuries save for a clutch of pretty boutique hotels, designer shops and cafés.

Further along the coast lie some of our favourite national parks and boutique hideaways in Asia, where you can soak up the tropical weather, marvel at the sublime coastal landscapes and take in some of the fabulous wildlife for which this region is renowned. The wettest period along the south coast is between May and September. For sun worshippers and beach lovers, the best months are February and March.



Highlights of the South Coast

Galle

Sri Lanka's best preserved colonial town, encircled by Dutch ramparts. The old quarter inside now holds a crop of smart boutiques, cafés and hotels.

Bentota

The less developed south end of this tropical paradise beach features some gorgeous boutique hotels, and top-notch watersport facilities.

Wadduwa

Less than an hour's drive south of Colombo, Wadduwa makes a handy first or last stop, with a long, quiet beach dotted with wooden fishing boats.

Kalutara

At the mouth of the Kalu Ganga River, this former spice port is now better known for its giant, white and hollow stupa, the Gangatilaka Vihara.

Weligama

Half an hour's drive east of Galle, Weligama Bay attracts surprisingly few visitors given the spectacular, golden sand beach that lines most of its coast.

Mirissa

One of the loveliest, quietest resorts in the far south, and a prime centre for the sighting of giant blue whales, which thrive in the waters off shore.

Tangalle

Dotted along the prettiest stretch of the south coast, Tangalle's gorgeous little coves are enfolded by screens of gently inclining coconut palms.

Yala & Bundala

Home to leopards and elephants, two of the most compelling national parks on the island (in fact in all of Asia) lie within easy range.



Galle

Jutting like a small peninsula into the Indian Ocean from Sri Lanka’s southwestern tip, Galle is a gorgeous, colonial-era fortified city acclaimed as the finest of its kind in Asia. Although a port since ancient times (King Solomon is believed to have obtained gold and spices from here), it expanded rapidly under the Portuguese and later, in the 18th century during the Dutch era, curtain walls, bastions linked by ramparts and a pair of solid gateways were added. These can still be enjoyed today and form a charismatic backdrop for ambles around the old town, with its lovely colonial-era houses and mansions, many of which have been converted to accommodate trendy cafés, shops, guesthouses and boutique hotels, complete with antique furniture and fixtures.



Battles & Bastions

Discover the history behind Galle’s colonial architecture on our popular walking tour of the Fort. Your guide will pick out the oldest Portuguese chapels and Dutch merchants’ houses as you stroll through the pretty, car-free streets, bringing them vividly to life with tales of sieges, shipwrecks and skirmishes between the European powers. You’ll see the iconic lighthouse, peer at the famous cricket ground from the ramparts and visit the pick of the museums.



Rural Galle Village

Break out of the old quarter by bicycle and boat to explore the town’s lush rural hinterland, guided by an expert naturalist. As well as numerous species of tropical birds and reptiles, you’ll get to see rubber, cinnamon and tea plantations, and tour a typical local rice-farming village before stopping for a lunch in a mud-walled tea shop. Cooked on a smokey open fire, traditional hoppers will certainly be on the menu, along with various herbal teas.

Mask Making Workshop

The south coast of Sri Lanka has a strong tradition of mask making. Worn as part of costumes for healing rituals and dances celebrating victory on the battlefield, the masks are intricately carved from insect-resistant kaduru wood and painted with protruding fangs, bulging eyes and hissing snake headdresses. Try your hand at making one on this half-day workshop, which uses materials as diverse as treacle, cinnamon, clay, broken tiles, bees wax and cow dung.



The South Coast

Stretching for over 60 miles from Galle to Yala National Park, Sri Lanka’s serene south coast is a non-stop parade of beautiful, wave-lashed beaches, backed by stands of gently inclined coconut palms and pretty, low-rise fishing villages and resorts. The beaches come in many shapes and sizes, ranging from secluded coves enfolded by craggy laterite headlands, to great expanses of shimmering golden sand. Your TransIndus consultant will have visited all of them recently and can give advice on which might best suit you, as well as propose daytrips to tea estates and wildlife reserves in the interior, or craft workshops and temples closer to the seashore. Wherever you end up, the seafood, served in spicy Sri Lankan style, will be melt-in-the-mouth fresh.

South Coast Cinnamon

Learn how the Southern Province of Sri Lanka became producer of the world’s most highly prized and aromatic cinnamon on this guided tour of a working estate. Start at the peeling and oil extraction shed where you’ll learn about the uses and benefits of the spice as the peelers remove the inner bark and curl it into rolls (known as ‘quills’) for drying. Then proceed to the top of the plantation for tea tasting in a traditional pilgrims’ shelter, or ‘ambalama’.



Lunch at Lunuganga

You can’t travel far in Sri Lanka without hearing the name ‘Bawa’. Geoffrey Manning Bawa is the island’s most famous and influential architect. In 1947 he built Lunuganga Estate - his country home - near Bentota. The property nowadays functions as a hotel, which you’ll tour before lunch in the grounds. The ‘tropical-modernist’ design is typically sparse and elegant and Bawa enthusiasts will enjoy the family photographs and memorabilia on the walls.

Stilt Fishing

Travelling along the coast between Unawatuna and Weligama you’ll see lots of tall wooden poles protruding from the foreshore. At low tide, many will have men sitting on crossbars lashed to them, dangling fishing rods into the waves as tourists mill around them with their cameras. The custom makes for an enthralling spectacle, especially for any teens you may be travelling with, who can expect to be invited to scale a pole and pose for a snap - perfect Instagram fodder!





Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle



Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort

Located on a wonderful secluded beachfront with a range of accommodation to choose from - ocean views or direct beach access. Families particularly love the villas of the resort with private plunge pools. The resort has a wide range of cuisines to sample and the resort's cookery school offers total immersion into the local delicacies. There is a 25 metre swimming pool, bikes to explore the local area as well as tennis and badminton courts. For those seeking relaxation, the Anantara Spa is the place to head for Ayurvedic, holistic and reflexology treatments.



Rock Villa, Bentota

Rock Villa is a wonderful 170 year old heritage home converted into an eight roomed property. Maintaining its colonial past of high ceilings and wooden floors, the villa has been tastefully furnished throughout, with modern comforts. The open-air verandahs are perfect for al fresco dining or there is a dining pavilion overlooking the pool if you would prefer. Spread over two and a half acres, Rock Villa sprawls along a wonderful stretch of beach that has been home to nesting turtles. There is a 50ft pool if you need a refreshing dip and you are just steps from the beach.

Galle & the South Coast: Places to Stay



41 Lighthouse Street, Galle

Dating back to the 1800s, nestled in the heart of historic Galle and lovingly restored by its current owners. With just four rooms, you can be assured of personal attention during your stay with resident staff available to host you in this charming part of Galle. This stylish villa combines antique furnishings with modern amenities and adorning the walls you will find black and white photographs of this historical city. A chef is available should you wish to dine at the villa and, if you are taking the villa exclusively, menus can be pre-arranged before you arrive.



Fort Bazaar, Galle

This chic boutique hotel in the historic old quarter of Galle is ideally located for visiting the town's sights. Dominated by avocado greens and whitewashed walls, its understated interiors have a distinctly Middle Eastern flavour, as does its fabulous cuisine, both of which richly reflect the fort's Moorish history. The hotel's 18 'Bazaar' and 'Banyan' bedrooms open onto a central courtyard flanked by cushioned al fresco seating and the three incredibly spacious Upper Suites boast balconies with views over the fort's red-tiled rooftops.



Cape Weligama Resort

Built to resemble a typical Sri Lankan village, this luxury resort is perched on a cliff top and offers an infinite 270 degree panorama of the Indian Ocean. Each of the forty villas and suites have traditional terracotta styled roofs, with generously sized rooms featuring stylish and contemporary interiors, and are interspersed with landscaped gardens, winding pathways and gorgeous views. Enjoy the freshest seafood at the al fresco restaurant and relax in the breath-taking crescent-shaped infinity Moon Pool curving 60m around the cape's summit.



Reef Villa, Wadduwa

A luxury hideaway nestled between tropical gardens, lily ponds and overlooking golden sands. Antique furniture decorates the property and in the elegant, sumptuous suites you will find four poster beds, free-standing granite bath tubs and handcrafted coloured floor tiles. The spa is a hidden gem located amongst the tranquil gardens and offering treatments based on Ayurveda. Overlooking the beach is the al fresco restaurant and not only does it serve delectable cuisine, it is one of the best places to capture the mesmerising sunsets of Sri Lanka's south west coast.

Sri Lanka's East Coast

As a consequence of its distance from the airport, compounded by the effects of the long civil war (which ended in 2009, but stifled investment in the region for two decades), the East Coast is much less developed than the west or south. Although the region boasts long, exquisite stretches of sand and turquoise water, the only enclave that could be described as a resort is Passikudah, just south of the main town, Trincomalee, which now offers a wide choice of international-standard luxury hotels. Further north, tourism has still very little impact.

Aside from its glorious beaches, the East Coast's main selling point is that its dry season coincides with the northern European summer, making it perfect for the school holidays. A number of reefs also offer superlative snorkelling, while at certain times of year the seas offshore support large numbers of migrating blue whales, which can be seen on special spotting trips out of Trincomalee. April to September, when it's raining on the West Coast, is the best time to visit this side of the island.



Highlights of Sri Lanka's East Coast

Trincomalee

Trinco and its ancient harbour are dominated by a splendid 17th-century Portuguese fort. Swami Rock, a cliff-side temple and wide-ranging coastal views provide plenty of additional incentive for a day off the nearby beaches.

Batticaloa

Spread across a narrow isthmus of land hemmed in by huge lagoons, 'Batti' is the east coast's largest town and one of the most interesting on the island to visit thanks to its old Portuguese fort and lively markets.

Kuchaveli

This fishing village is scattered behind a beautiful stretch of coast backed by tropical scrub. Nearby Pigeon Island offers some of the finest reef snorkelling in the Indian Ocean. Perfect for anyone seeking peace and quiet.

Katankudy

Arab and Muslim settlement in the ports of Sri Lanka stands to the fore in this densely packed market town north of Batti, where an excellent new museum recounts the region's trade history and multi-cultural roots.

Passikudah

A breathtaking arc of pristine golden sand and warm, turquoise water, Passikudah lies a half day's drive from Colombo. Unlike the south coast beaches, the bay is shallow and gently shelving (so perfect for kids).

Arugam Bay

Arugam is Sri Lanka's surf capital and one of the most relaxed resorts on the island. Some lovely places to stay are nestled under the coconut palms, and the beach restaurants serve melt-in-the-mouth local seafood.



East Coast Beaches

Golden sandy beaches line almost the entirety of Sri Lanka's east coast, where the weather is perfect for swimming and sunbathing during the European summer. While the rest of the island is wracked by monsoon storms in June, July and August, Passikudah basks in unbroken sunshine, its shallow, turquoise water perfect for children. For greater isolation, we recommend continuing up the coast beyond Trinco to the village outposts of Uppuveli, Nilaveli and Kuchaveli, where a couple of discreet barefoot resorts nestle in the cashew-covered dunes behind empty, magnificent beaches.



Trinco Tours

The port town of Trincomalee offers a distinct change of atmosphere from the nearby resorts. Its old quarter has a salty, weathered feel, with colonial-era villas and alleyways dotted with mosques and churches that end at a very British-looking promenade. Fishing boats line up along the beach, overlooked by the weed-choked ramparts of a 17th-century Portuguese Fort. Climb up with your guide to Swami Rock, a promontory crowned by a whitewashed Hindu temple offering a superb view, or head out to Pigeon Island for snorkelling.



Catamaran Cruises

Spend an unforgettable day aboard the Topaz, a luxurious 48-ft catamaran that cruises Sri Lanka's eastern seaboard between Passikudah and Trincomalee. Its international crew know this stretch of coast inside out and will steer you to hidden coves and reefs teeming with tropical fish. Swim, dive, snorkel and paddle board to your hearts content in the calm waters of morning. Once the wind gets up after lunch, the spinnaker will be hoisted for some engine-free fun on the waves. The ultimate way to visit the East Coast.



Clean, Green Arugam

Some ground-breaking sustainability initiatives have been implemented in Sri Lanka's surfing capital, Arugam Bay, to ensure the area's tourism remains as carbon-neutral and waste-free as possible. On this unique tour, you'll be guided around the resort's fabulous plastic recycling plant before visiting a workshop where local rice bags are turned into chic handbags, laptop covers and other useful items. The enterprise also provides employment for local women, helping them to support their families.

Sri Lanka's East Coast: Places to Stay



Jungle Beach by Uga Escapes, Trincomalee

Jungle Beach by Uga Escapes combines the best of both worlds; cabins surrounded by jungle yet only steps from the beaches of Sri Lanka's east coast. The luxurious cabins are made from local materials to blend in with the natural landscape. Choose from lagoon, jungle or beach views. The restaurant uses locally caught seafood and fuses Western and Asian flavours. If you are celebrating a special occasion, private dinners in the jungle or on the beach can also be arranged. There are plenty of activities available at the resort including cookery lessons and nature cycle trails.



Uga Bay by Uga Escapes, Passikudah

Passikudah – a serene curve of translucent blue water and golden sand – is the loveliest of the beaches on the east coast and Uga Bay is the pick of the crop here. Crossing mostly open paddy fields and palm groves, the drive down here is a delight and the studios themselves cool, stylish hideaways. Most enjoy uninterrupted sea views; some have direct access to the sand from their private sun decks. Meals are served in a cosy restaurant or on your own terrace, only a stone's throw from the waves – the perfect wind-down after a tour of the island's cultural treasures inland.



Jetwing Kottukal Beach House, Pottuvil

Located on a secluded luxury cove and hidden among towering coconut trees away from the other hotels in Pottuvil. The beach house is made up of two comfortable rooms, with balcony, in the main house, and two beachside chalets, with private terrace and unobstructed view of the Indian Ocean. Fresh catch of the day is served up but you are also welcome to discuss your meals for the duration of your stay with the chef, which can be taken wherever you wish. There is a beautiful pool looking over the beach and Ayurveda treatments are available on request.



Karpaha Sands, Kalkudah

The only resort on Kalkudah Beach, with 17 spacious luxury tented suites, some sit directly on the beach and others are nestled in their own private gardens. All tents have separate living areas, indoor bathrooms and outdoor showers, a private sun deck with loungers and a generous outdoor space. The intimate restaurant serves up the freshest seafood, and there is also the option to dine in the privacy of your terrace, or on the beach. Relax by the infinity pool or the lounge bar, both overlooking the sea, and treat yourself to an Ayurvedic treatment in the Karpaha Sands Spa.



Planning Your Trip: Sri Lanka

Although renowned the world over for its tropical beaches, Sri Lanka holds a geographically varied and culturally fascinating hinterland that makes for a wonderful touring holiday. After arriving in Colombo, we recommend you explore the riches of the Cultural Triangle before heading up to the Hill Country, and ending at the coast for a spot of R&R. Alternatively head north to explore this quieter corner first, and we always recommend a visit to a wildlife park or two. Travel is by private saloon car with driver. Our regular chauffeurs all speak English and act as infomal guides, providing valuable insights into local life. The one rail journey we advise clients to take is the ‘tea train’ from Nuwara Eliya to Ella, which passes through some magnificent landscape.

When to Go

The main tourist season in Sri Lanka lasts from November until early April, when the south and west coast is mostly dry. The rainy season here is from May until August, although there may be periods of wet weather in October and November too. In the north and east, the main monsoon sweeps in from October until January. The island’s tropical climate ensures warm, balmy weather most of the year, except in the Hill Country, where the nights can be chilly enough to require a blanket.

Suggested Itineraries

The following tried-and-tested itineraries may serve as starting points for your trip planning. They are designed to show what can comfortably be achieved in two or three weeks, but none are fixed; our consultants will have lots of ideas on how to tailor them to your needs, building a mix of sights and experiences around your own particular interests. They'll also have suggestions for other options should you wish to extend your tour.

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	27	27	28	28	28	28	28	28	27	27	27	27
Rainfall mm	75	75	70	185	140	130	125	110	155	265	296	196
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●

●● Best time to travel ● Good time to travel ● Low season

Classic Sri Lanka | 14 days



The highlights of Sri Lanka in two weeks, including the ancient sites of the Cultural Triangle, a safari, time in the Tea Country and on the beach.

Day 1 & 2 Fly overnight to Colombo and transfer to Habarana for three nights. **Day 3** Take a cycle tour of Anuradhapura before climbing Sigiriya Rock Fortress. **Day 4** Visit the ancient ruins of Polonnaruwa followed by a safari in Minneriya, Kaudulla or Hurulu Naational Park. **Day 5** Transfer to Kandy, visiting the Dambulla Caves, and a spice garden with lunch en route. In the evening visit the Temple of the Tooth for the thevava pooja ceremony. **Day 6** Visit Kandy’s local market before boarding the train to Hatton. **Day 7** Visit a tea factory and enjoy a tea-infused dinner. **Day 8** Continue to Yala National Park. Afternoon safari. **Day 9** Morning and afternoon safaris. **Day 10** Drive to Bentota visiting Galle Fort en route. **Day 11 & 12** Time at leisure or perhaps visit Geoffrey Bawa’s Lunuganga Gardens. **Day 13** Return flight. **Day 14** Arrive UK.

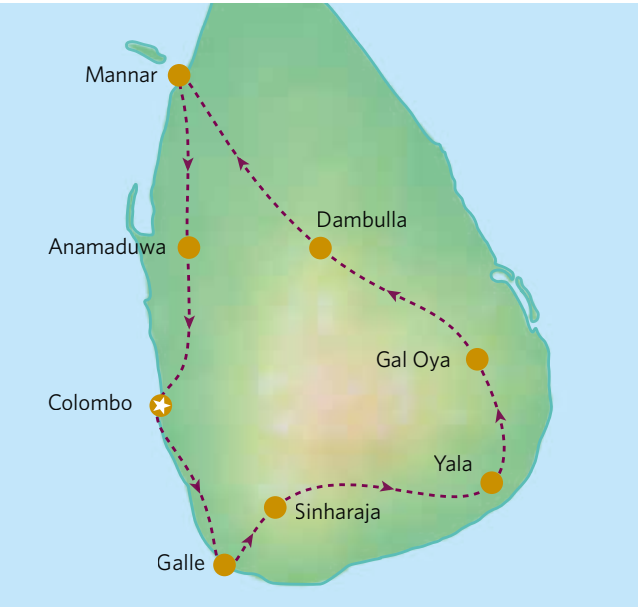


Sri Lankan Wildlife | 16 days



Travel through the country’s top wildlife parks, with the chance to spot elephant, leopard and an abundance of birdlife.

Day 1 & 2 Fly overnight to Colombo and on to Galle for two nights. **Day 3** Whale watching trip by private catamaran. Afternoon tour of Galle Fort. **Day 4** Continue to Sinharaja Rainforest. Afternoon bird watching. **Day 5** Bird watching in the rainforest. **Day 6** Travel to Yala National Park via the elephant transit home. Afternoon safari. **Day 7** Morning safari in Bundala. Afternoon and night drive in Yala. **Day 8** Morning safari. Drive to Gal Oya. Boat safari. **Day 9** Hike to Monkey Mountain. Afternoon bird watching tour. **Day 10** Drive to Dambulla. Safari in Minneriya, Kaudulla or Hurulu National Park. **Day 11** Continue to Mannar for bird watching. **Day 12** Bird watching in the lagoon. **Day 13** Travel to Anamaduwa. Visit Paranakanda Temple. **Day 14** Enjoy a cooking lesson and afternoon kayaking. **Day 15** Return flight. **Day 16** Arrive UK.

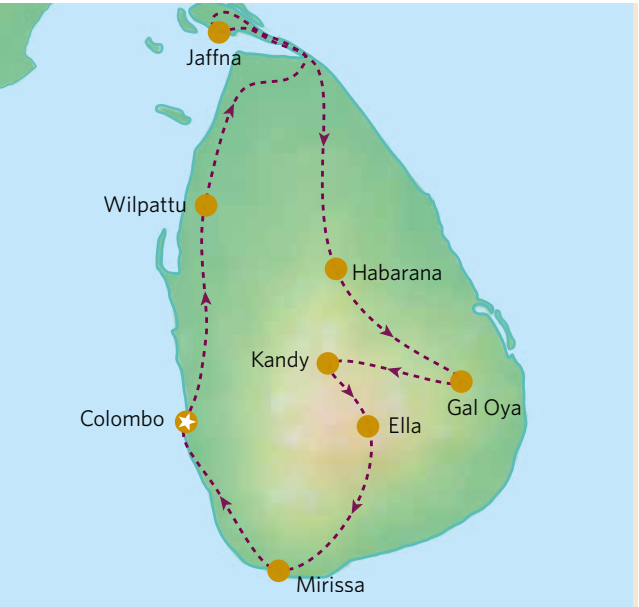


A Grand Tour of Sri Lanka | 22 days



A three-week tour combining Sri Lanka’s iconic sights with some lesser visited gems, including Wilpattu National Park and Jaffna in the far north.

Day 1 & 2 Fly overnight to Colombo. Arrive and drive on to Wilpattu National Park. **Day 3** Morning and afternoon safaris. **Day 4** Drive to Jaffna. Visit Nallur Temple. **Day 5** Delft and Nagadeepa islands. **Day 6** Jaffna’s markets. **Day 7** On to Habarana. Safari in Minneriya, Kaudulla or Hurulu. **Day 8** Sigiriya Rock Fortress. Local village cycle. **Day 9** Anuradhapura by tuk-tuk. Visit Ritigala monastery. **Day 10** Drive to Gal Oya. Boat safari. **Day 11** Visit a Veddha tribe. Jungle night walk. **Day 12** On to Kandy via the temple of the tooth. **Day 13** Trek the Knuckles. **Day 14** Drive to Nuwara Eliya and by train to Ella. **Day 15** Walk the Demodara Loop. Visit a tea factory. **Day 16** Drive to Mirissa. **Day 17** Village tour and Galle Fort. **Day 18 & 19** Relax or visit a cinnamon plantation and whale watching. **Day 20** Drive to Colombo. **Day 21** Fly home overnight. **Day 22** Arrive UK.



The Maldives

A thatched ocean cottage resting on stilts above a lagoon of such crystalline, turquoise water that it will take your breath away when you see it from your pillow in the morning. Days spent lazing on palm-backed beaches of fine, sugar-white sand, with nothing more to think about than what to have for lunch, or whether to spend the afternoon dhoni cruising, snorkelling off the reef or enjoying a massage in the spa.

If this sounds like your idea of a perfect holiday, then the Maldives are for you. The formula couldn't be simpler. This is life stripped back to basics: no distractions, no culture shock to contend with or shopping to quicken the pulse. Just sublime sea water, pristine sand, blissfully blue skies, gently swaying palm trees and coral reefs filled with kaleidoscopic fish – quite literally on your doorstep.

An archipelago of 1,190 islands spread over 90,000 sq km, the Maldives is one of the most dispersed countries in the world and when faced, in the 1970s, with the quandary of how best to exploit their one and only natural resource – pristine coral atolls – the government of the Maldives chose high-end exclusivity as a strategy. Guests would be whisked directly to luxury resorts, sited on their own individual island, at a respectful distance from the largely Muslim local population.

Detached from the hustle and bustle of daily life, these world-class resorts come in varied shapes and sizes, from minimalist, eco-friendly hideaways with thatched cottages to luxurious five-star properties boasting water villas that will make you feel like you are floating over the ocean. With transfers offered by either seaplane, luxury motorboat or even luxury yacht from Male, these are, quite simply, among the most desirable island retreats in the world.

Here we have highlighted our favourite experiences to enjoy whilst in the Maldives and, on the following pages a small selection of our preferred properties, depending on the type of holiday you are after.



Diving & Snorkelling

Manta rays are the Maldives' signature species. Plenty of people travel to the archipelago just to catch a glimpse of these giant 'birds of the deep blue', and North Ari Atoll is their great stronghold. Whether diving or snorkelling, if you choose the right spot, there's a good chance of seeing them.

Elsewhere, giant whale sharks are common in May, while several species of dolphin and whale may be encountered at any time of year. Non-divers can, of course, sample the multi-coloured splendour of local sea life at any of the coral reefs surrounding their resort.



Dhoni Cruises

Resembling Arab dhows, dhonis are multi-purpose handcrafted wooden Maldivian boats, traditionally built using coconut timber and predominately used by fishermen. Nowadays they are commonly used for excursions from resorts and make for a wonderful trip out to sea.

Sail to a deserted island or sandbank for some snorkelling and a picnic or take a romantic cruise at sunset, whilst perhaps spotting dolphins. Some resorts also offer fishing trips on a dhoni, where you can learn traditional fishing methods before enjoying your catch, specially prepared for you by the chef.



Seafood

The Maldives are paradise for lovers of fresh seafood. Fish is delivered to resort kitchens straight off the reef each morning, and the portions tend to be gargantuan. Lobsters and scallops take centre stage at many midday buffets, and you'll be offered crab, octopus and prawns too.

But for pure tongue-tingling flavour, it's hard to top a tuna steak served sizzling off a beachside BBQ with nothing more than a sprinkle of salt and twist of sour lime. Local Maldivian cuisine also draws heavily on seafood, with the fish simmered Sri Lankan-style in gravies of coconut milk and tamarind juice.



Vakkaru

Maldives Resorts

Whether you seek to celebrate your honeymoon in style, a special occasion in blissful surroundings, want a perfect family retreat away from the distractions of modern life or are hoping for the adrenalin rush of an active diving and sporting holiday, the Maldives and its wide variety of resorts can offer you a holiday that's just right for you. Here are a few of our suggestions but do speak with our consultants who will be happy to discuss your needs, and help you find the resort that is a perfect getaway for you.



Best for Honeymoons

COMO Cocoa Island

Reopening in December 2019 after an extensive upgrade, this divine boutique resort, located on a miniscule islet amid a lagoon of warm, knee-deep turquoise water, is a firm favourite of ours. Modelled on the local dhoni fishing boats, the villas are the epitome of understated chic, sitting off shore over the lagoon. There are numerous private dining options and the well-renowned Shambhala spa is idyllic.

Milaidhoo Island

Whether you choose an ocean or beach villa, a private pool will be all yours, with a large day bed and a spacious contemporary room with large bi-fold doors opening out onto the crystal-clear waters. There is a choice of gourmet restaurants serving up the freshest seafood, or private dining options are available. Explore the resort's coral reef, sail to your own private sandbank or take a champagne cruise at sunset - you can even have a star named after you!

Best for Families

Vakkaru

Scattered across the expansive white sandy beach or set on stilts above the turquoise waters, the villas and suites here range from one to four bedrooms. Activities for the whole family come in abundance, with world-class diving, water-skiing, sailing and fishing, with tennis courts and even a kids' club with children's dining options and cooking classes. Of course, there is also the serene spa and an indulgent array of dining choices.

Niyama Private Islands

With twin islands, Play and Chill, Niyama have given you the luxury of choice. For families, we would recommend Play where you'll find the fantastic kids' club as well as a whole host of watersports including snorkelling, parasailing and surfing. There are even child spa treatments available. A number of multiple bedroom villa options are offered, each with its own secluded deck and many with a private pool.



Best Eco Resorts

Six Senses, Laamu

This luxury resort with 97 private beach and water villas is serviced by an organic garden, and comes with a wine cellar boasting 500 labels and a superb menu featuring freshly-caught fish. Green turtles nest on the beach and the diving is first-class. Sustainability is at the heart of the resort's ethos. Where possible, waste is recycled on site, single-use plastic has been banned, ongoing marine conversation, including education, and supporting local communities are just some of the initiatives in place.

Gili Lankanfushi

This authentic resort's emphasis is on preserving the natural environment, protecting the fragile marine ecosystem and leaving only footprints behind. The 45 chic over-water thatched villas are constructed using local materials and recycled telegraph poles. All rooms provide organic toiletries in refillable earthenware containers and the island's dedicated desalination plant provides bottled still and sparkling water for all guests.

Best for Active Holidays

Four Seasons, Landaa Giraavaru

This 5-star luxury property, situated in the Baa Atoll, offers some of the best scuba-diving and manta ray sightings in the Maldives. Home to the Maldivian Manta Ray Project, you can spend a day with the experts, learning about manta ray conservation, and free dive to observe them in their natural habitat. The beach and water villas are a simple blend of traditional Maldivian and contemporary style, with high-thatched roofs and spacious interiors. Pamper yourself in the extensive spa or relax by the large swimming pool.

Anantara Kihavah

On the Baa Atoll in a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, surrounded by nothing but the turquoise lagoon, is this idyllic island covered in coconut, papaya and mango trees, and in our opinion one of the best house reefs. Choose between a beach or over water villa and enjoy the myriad of activities on offer. Snorkel with manta rays and Hawksbill sea turtles in the company of the resident marine biologist, scuba dive, take to the skies on a parasail, charter a yacht and even dine beneath the ocean - these are just a few of the experiences on offer.



Bhutan

While Bhutan is nowhere near as isolated from the world as it used to be, the country certainly comes closer to the old 'Shangri-La' myth than any other. Buttressed on three sides by high peaks, this small, thinly-populated mountain kingdom the size of Switzerland has maintained its traditional way of life to a degree that's unique in the eastern Himalayas – and in a style that's fabulously idiosyncratic and shrouded in myths and legends.

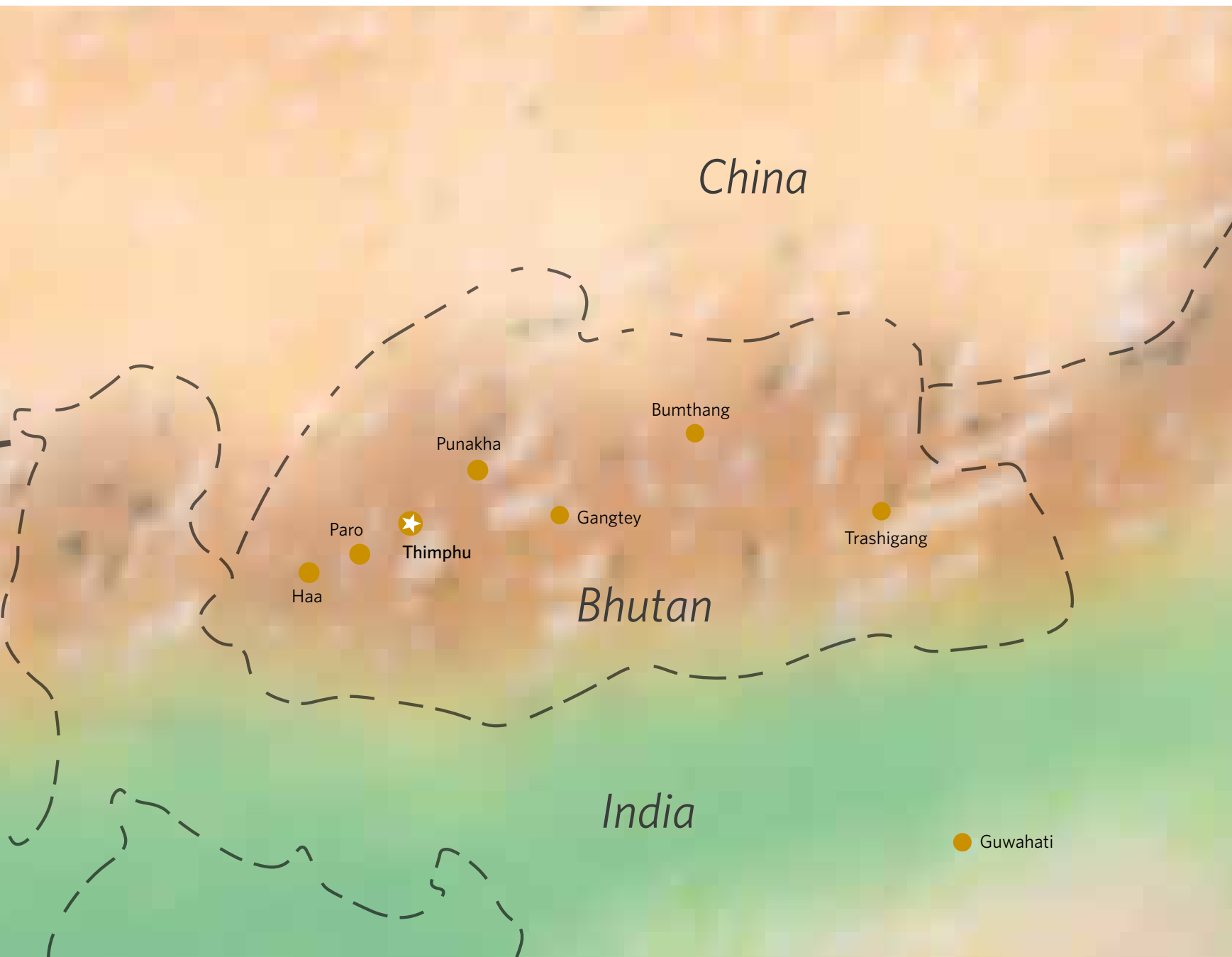
For anyone lucky enough to visit, Bhutan is a land of plenty; this unique nation packs in more magical travel experiences than most. From handsomely adorned riverside dzongs (or fortresses), cliff-side monasteries and nunneries and hilltop temples, to sheer nature at its best – pristine and stunningly beautiful. Among the most remarkable are Taksang Monastery ('Tiger's Nest'), and Punakha dzong, which stand in stark contrast to the simpler abodes, agricultural communities and sleepy mountain villages that are also characteristic of this Himalayan Kingdom.

Tradition abounds here; this is a country proud of its age-old heritage and spiritual beliefs, rural way of life and surprisingly flamboyant artistic expression too. Whether an elaborate masked dance performance, carefully woven textile or grand gilded shrine, there is a vibrancy and colour in Bhutan that you may not assume from such a modest, devoutly Buddhist country. Then there are Bhutan's abundant natural wonders. High-altitude passes shrouded in mist, thick conifer forests lying at the

bottom of deep river valleys, towering mountains blanketed in snow, and open plains primed for walking. The country's national parks and wildlife sanctuaries shelter a massive biodiversity, including the endemic black-necked crane, Himalayan bear, snow leopard and red panda.

To give an idea of what you might expect, we've set out some examples in the following pages of the kind of experiences we often recommend. Our aim is two-fold: to inspire and provide insight into local life. So as well as the famous landmarks, we might suggest a visit to a little known nunnery, tea with a local, or a trek in some of the remoter areas.

We've also showcased some of our favourite properties in Bhutan – places we think define the TransIndus experience. And, finally, in our suggested itineraries sections, you'll find ideas on tried-and-tested routes we often use as starting points for designing our tailor-made journeys.





Highlights of Bhutan

Paro

Home to the famous Tiger's Nest Monastery, holy sites hundreds of years old, and a charming landscape of rice paddies, rivers and hills.

Thimphu

A fascinating city home to 15th-century temples, traditional markets and even a nature reserve for Bhutan's national animal, the Takin.

Punakha

Sited at the confluence of two rivers, its dzong ranks among the country's most famous monasteries, with swathes of superb hiking too.

Haa Valley

Slightly off-the-beaten-track yet a real draw with its ancient monasteries and timeworn trails between hill villages and farmsteads.

Gangtey

Stunning glacial valley with wonderful walking trails, a hilltop monastery and the nesting site for the black-necked crane.

Trongsa

Home to the striking Trongsa Dzong with sweeping views, walking trails and a former watchtower-turned-museum.

Mongar

Features a host of dramatic landscapes, from waterfalls to forests and Bhutan's tallest mountain – Gangkhar Puensum.

Trashigang

Bhutan's eastern district may be big, but is still little-visited by travellers, leaving the villages, hillsides and gorges largely untouched.



Paro Valley

Approached by a spectacular flight path, the first sightings of the lush green Paro Valley bestow a stunning snap-shot of Bhutan’s rural life with its ornately carved traditional farmhouses amidst resplendent rice fields. Rich in UNESCO heritage, the must-sees for most visitors are the splendid Rinpung Dzong - displaying an ancient embroidered tapestry that depicts the life of Guru Rinpoche, the founder of Buddhism in Bhutan - and the cliff-side Taksang Monastery, where the Guru is believed to have arrived on the back of a flying tigress to meditate. Elsewhere, Paro boasts some excellent museums, traditional arts, crafts, song, dance and music, and beautiful hotels with relaxing spas and a chance to try your hand at archery, Bhutan’s national sport.



Hike to Tiger’s Nest

The unmistakable Taksang, or ‘Tiger’s Nest’ monastery, perches dramatically on the cliff-side over the Paro Valley. A slow and steady hike to the summit is as magical as the 1,500-year-old monastery itself. Set off early along dew dusted forest paths, through clusters of fluttering prayer flags and past panoramic viewpoints for a chance to witness monks at morning prayer. The mid-way viewpoint at Tasktsand Goemba offers a pit stop for a refreshing cup of local chai.

Samtenling Monastery

Samtenling, a modest yet historic 15th-century monastery on the outskirts of Paro, helps preserves the much threatened ancient Vajarana form of Tibetan Buddhism. It is home to a number of murals, statues, paintings and decorative artworks. Visitors enjoy sweeping views across the surrounding countryside and gardens and light butter lamps in the sanctum to symbolise enlightenment while receiving blessings from resident monks.



Traditions at Chubjakha Dzong

Exploring the ruins of the 15th-century medieval Chubjakha Dzong, that fell to fire in the 1950s, is a highly enjoyable experience thanks to its scenic setting. The ruins double as an atmospheric backdrop for an al fresco dining experience where guests dress in traditional costume and enjoy an evening of local folk song, dance and music around a bonfire, whilst sampling delicious local delicacies.



Thimphu

The Bhutanese capital of Thimphu is an intriguing city, where busy streets and now more modern buildings sit beside ancient shrines, 15th-century temples and traditional produce markets - look out for local delicacies such as jellied cow skin and fried fern on sale. Highlights include its impressive dzongs, the King’s Memorial Chorten, Buddhist painting school, textile museum and national folk museum. Meanwhile, the Motithang Takin Preserve – a wooded reserve for Bhutan’s national animal, the Takin, is a serene alternative to Thimphu’s inner-city attractions. The town’s other claim to fame is that it remains the only world capital without traffic lights. Some were installed but had to be removed after the locals complained they were impersonal.

Thimphu City Tour

A walking tour of Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, entails an enticing mix of holy shrines and temples, national museums, traditional farmer’s markets and an altogether more modern side of the city too. Along the way, you’ll see both the old and new of Thimphu while walking the town’s streets and squares, with particular highlights being the National Memorial Chorten, Tashichho Dzong, the Changangkha Lhakhang Buddhist temple and Bhutan Textile Museum.



Motithang Takin Preserve

Enclosed within the Motithang district of Thimphu lies an unexpected nature sanctuary: the wooded Motithang Takin Preserve. Visit this secluded spot to see how Bhutan’s national animal, the Takin, is kept safe from the hunting and habitat loss that has historically threatened them. Takins are unusual looking creatures, with a golden yellow and brownish coat, and somewhere roughly between a mountain goat, antelope and a small cow.

Astrology Reading

The 16th-century riverside monastery of Pangri Zampa, now a monastic school, is the home of ancient Buddhist astrology in Bhutan. This makes it the perfect place to visit and receive a fortune reading for yourself, safe in the insightful hands of a resident Buddhist monk. While in their company, you’ll be taught the meaning of both your name and year of birth in Bhutanese tradition, perhaps also hearing of past lives, family history and even what the future may hold.





Punakha

The Himalayan town of Punakha, and its surrounding valley, have both history and spellbinding scenery in spades. The region’s best-known attraction is the marvellous Punakha Dzong, a 17th-century fortress that was the centre of the Bhutanese government for nearly 300 years. Today, this beautifully constructed riverside structure is simply a delight to visit. In fact, the scenic setting of Punakha Dzong is typical of this entire region of Bhutan. As you drop down into the Punakha Valley, the climate becomes more tropical and the landscape lush with forested hills and rice paddies, pretty rivers (the Mo Chhu and Po Chhu chief among them), traditional villages and soaring Himalayan mountainscapes all around.



Bike Ride to Punakha Dzong

Punakha Dzong ranks among the country’s most famous monasteries. It is a veritable showcase of Bhutanese craftsmanship, with a particularly impressive assembly hall featuring fine clay statues and intricate murals. Built in 1638 and beautifully sited at the confluence of two rivers surrounded by swathes of lush green hills, a scenic bike ride is naturally the finest, most enjoyable way to reach it.



Trek to Chorten Nyingpo

This gentle hike will take you through Bhutan’s beautifully bucolic countryside, along remote paths that wind between rice paddies, into native forests and across rivers, ultimately leading to the 16th-century hilltop temple of Chorten Nyingpo. Passing through villages en route, it’s a spectacular journey with the chance to witness traditional rural life too. Once at the temple, you’ll be rewarded with a warming cup of tea and fantastic views.

The Dochula Pass

The Dochula Pass is a superbly scenic route packed with panoramic lookout points, and yet a little sobering too as the pass itself houses 108 memorial stupas, dedicated to fallen Bhutanese soldiers. Dochula and its stupas sit at 10,170ft above sea level, and form part of the original road between Thimphu and Punakha. It’s an uphill route that’s rewarded by sweeping Himalayan views when clear, or misty mountain scenes on moodier days.



Haa Valley

Though the Haa Valley is one of Bhutan’s lesser-visited destinations, this region just west of Paro is in fact home to some of the country’s greatest treasures and oldest holy sites. Haa Town is the main settlement here, recognisable for its ornate homesteads and buildings adorned with painted pillars, pretty wooden eaves and exposed beams – all topped with traditionally tiled roofs. You’ll also find a busy bazaar and handful of restaurants. Elsewhere, around the valley lie two of Bhutan’s oldest (7th-century) temples – Lhakhang Kharpo and Lhakhang Nagpo, the cliff-side nunnery of Kila Gompa, itself a holy site for over 1,200 years, plus a string of traditional villages, rice paddies and remote walking trails.

Visit a Remote Nunnery

Holy sites in the Haa Valley, indeed anywhere in Bhutan, don’t get much more dramatic than Kila Gompa, an ancient nunnery with an active community of 70 nuns, which clings impossibly to the Haa Valley. Prepare to be impressed, as Kila Gompa is not only one of the oldest nunneries in the country, but its setting is also nothing short of spectacular. Your route involves a steady climb up makeshift pathways, before being treated to the valley views below.

Traditional Abodes of Haa Town

Take a pleasant walking tour of Haa Town to admire the distinctly decorative homes that characterise this relaxed riverside settlement. In particular, the buildings of Haa are known for their beautifully carved and painted wooden façades, eaves, pillars and beams, adorned as they are in traditional patterns, mosaics and symbolic pictures. It’s a charming sight, best enjoyed at the town’s gentle pace before exploring the bazaars of Haa’s northern quarter.



Bhutan’s Oldest Monasteries

The Haa Valley is home to some of Bhutan’s oldest monasteries and temples, some dating back to the 7th century and reign of Tibetan King, Songtsen Gampo. This exciting tour will take you to two of the most famed: Lhakhang Kharpo and Lhakhang Nagpo, the ‘White and Black Chapels’. Legend has it that King Songtsen Gampo released one white and one black dove to find a spot for his Haa Valley shrines, and the temples built on their resting places are still in use to this day.





Gangtey

For the chance to see endemic black-necked cranes, a beautiful and historic hilltop monastery, plus enjoy some of the country’s best walking trails, Gangtey and the surrounding Phobjikha Valley in central Bhutan is certainly the place to come. The large 17th-century temple Gangtey Monastery is a marvellous example of the decorative architectural style Bhutan adopts for its ancient spiritual sites, and the valley views from the monastery’s lofty perch are equally as impressive. Each November, the monastery holds a festival to welcome the arrival of the Tibetan Plateau’s native black-necked cranes, which migrate here each winter. The wider Phobjikha Valley is primed for walkers with far-flung trekking trails and unforgettable viewpoints aplenty.



Endemic Black-necked Cranes

Learn about the migration patterns, conservation concerns and nesting sites of Bhutan’s black-necked cranes, a species endemic to the Tibetan Plateau, with an interesting visit to Gangtey’s research centre – set up specifically to study them. The centre does invaluable work in ensuring the protection of their roosting areas, and educating locals and tourists of their importance to the valley. They also provide care for an injured black-necked crane called “Karma”.



Blessings at Gangtey Monastery

Gangtey’s 17th-century hilltop monastery is truly impressive, an expansive complex of meditation rooms, sleeping quarters, courtyards and a grand, beautifully adorned temple at its centre. During this tour, you’ll visit for the monastery’s iconic morning prayers, followed by a blessing from the resident Master himself, breakfast within the monastery walls, and time to admire both the building and gorgeous Phobjikha Valley views all around you.

Hiking the Phobjikha Valley

Bhutan’s Phobjikha Valley is as good as purpose-made for intrepid trekking and scenic hiking trails, such is the natural beauty of this vast sweeping landscape. Exploring it all on foot is indeed the best way to go, so strap on your walking boots and gear up for sprawling open plains, forested pathways, towering hills and one or two isolated villages along the way. For the scenery, viewpoints and feeling of isolation, this is certainly one of Bhutan’s best hiking spots.



Bumthang Valley

Situated in the heart of the country, the high-altitude Bumthang Valley was completely isolated until the 1970s, when the road through it was constructed. The region therefore serves up some delightfully remote walking routes, quiet villages, an abundance of ancient monasteries and temples, and is also home to the Red Panda Brewery, which produces the kingdom’s own brand of beer. This is a great place to learn about Bhutanese culture, from the daily lives of small farming communities to the country’s love of recreational archery. Above all, the Bumthang Valley is known and loved for its untouched landscapes of Himalayan hills, forested valley floors, and vast open plains that make for the most enticing walking trails while here.

Archery Class

Where better to try your hand at archery, Bhutan’s national sport, than outdoors amongst the bucolic Bumthang Valley? As with other areas of Bhutan, archery is very popular here, and it’s not uncommon to see archery festivals – complete with dance and local beer – throughout the year. So, grab your traditional bamboo bow and arrows and enjoy taking part in one of Bhutan’s oldest cultural pastimes, under expert tutelage, of course.



Tea with a Local Family

Get an intimate insight into the daily lives of local residents whilst joining them for tea in the comfort of their own home; a traditional butter tea, to be precise, which is staple in Bhutan (as well as other Himalayan countries). Meet the people who make up these rural communities first-hand, and learn about their way of farming life in the process.

Uncover the Tang Valley

Prepare for a real adventure into the wild while discovering the Tang Valley, a largely uninhabited, high-altitude landscape of winding rivers, tree-lined plains, and just a handful of small settlements. Visit the Burning Lake where Pema Lingpa dived in holding a lit lamp and returned with it still alight and holding a treasure chest. There is a notable lack of farming communities here, meaning that the hikes feels even more remote than most.





The People and Culture of Bhutan

Culturally speaking, Bhutan is a truly fascinating place to visit, partly because this small landlocked country, tucked away in the Himalayan Mountains, has been somewhat cut off from the world until relatively recently. Traditional dress, eating habits, spiritual beliefs, ancient temples and monasteries, marriage and funeral ceremonies, festivals and farming techniques have remained largely unchanged over the centuries.

Bhutan's devotion to Mahayana Buddhism is perhaps one of the most prominent, defining aspects of the country's culture. Across Bhutan, you will find delicately decorated dzongs, ancient monasteries and nunneries. Morning prayers are called, butter lamps are lit, blessings are given and tea taken as a daily ritual that you are welcome to join.

The country's enviable principles of Gross National Happiness aims to create 'a compass towards a just and harmonious society', which is a notion firmly rooted in Buddhist belief. It is an inclusive and peaceful society made up of several ethnic groups and official religious freedom for all. There is also a vibrancy and expressiveness in Bhutan, best seen in the country's rainbow-like traditional dresses and beautifully woven fabrics adorned in mesmeric patterns – the Kira for women, Gho for men – as well as during the country's many flamboyant festivals.

Finally, if to fully understand a people is through their food, then the Bhutanese way of dining probably reflects the diverse ethnic make-up that characterises the country as a whole. There are a variety of culinary influences in the traditional dishes here, from Indian spices and chillies to Chinese rice and vegetables. In private homes, it's a rustic fare for sure: hearty lentil and beef dishes usually taken while sat cross-legged on the floor and eaten with your hands.

Festivals in Bhutan

If lucky enough to be in Bhutan during one of their many festivals, get ready for an explosion of colour, traditional dance, terrifying masks, and perhaps a cup of locally brewed beer too!

The Bhutanese simply love a celebration, whether it's for their love of archery or the annual arrival of the black-necked crane. The best known festivals are the tschechus, typically three to five day events, staged in honour of the 8th-century Guru Rinpoche, credited with bringing Buddhism to the country. It is an occasion for locals to dress in their finest clothes, eat, drink and be merry but at its heart it remains a profoundly spiritual event overseen by senior monks, nobility and officials. Traditionally, mere attendance at a tshechu is believed to bring merit.

There are a few ingredients you can be sure will feature at any tshechu, principally brightly coloured ceremonial outfits and elaborate masks. Picture silky dresses and scarfs, ribbons, pointed and painted clogs, huge hats and gargoyle or dragon-like disguises. These symbolic garbs are then joined by exuberant dance performances and rather oddly whose slapstick antics lighten proceedings.

Two of the country's largest tshechus are those in Thimphu (typically in September or October) and Paro (usually in March or April); both are extraordinary events to witness. Meanwhile, other important or interesting festivals around Bhutan include those of Jambay Lhakhang Drup (November); the battle recreations of Punakha Drubchen (March) and the Black-neck Crane Festival (November).



Remote Bhutan

For anyone who enjoys exploring places that provide a real off-the-beaten-path travel experience, and getting up close to local cultures, then these remote areas of Central and Eastern Bhutan are ideal. Whilst it's true that many of the country's high-altitude regions are relatively undeveloped, if you scratch below the surface just a little then even more isolated landscapes, wild valleys and the lesser-visited communities that inhabit them await.

Bhutan's remote regions also offer a rich collage of mini ecosystems and changeable terrains, huge biodiversity and several protected areas, meaning wildlife walks and hiking routes until your heart is fully content. From the Black Mountains and their indigenous villages to the red pandas, snow leopards and bird species of Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary, or Mongar, where one of the world's tallest unclimbed peaks towers into the sky; this hidden corner of Bhutan is special indeed.



Trongsa

Trongsa holds an important place in Bhutanese history, thanks to its strategic position in the centre of the country and the kingdom's important business that was dished out from here as a result. Indeed, the 17th-century site of Trongsa Dzong is among the country's most captivating, a warren of rooms and alleyways which enjoys the most mesmeric valley views. The former Watchtower of Trongsa, now a heritage museum, is also a real highlight, as are the myriad walking trails that dissect the nearby hills.



Trashigang

Eastern Trashigang, the biggest district in Bhutan, flaunts a tempting mix of protected wildlife areas and immense landscapes to explore, as well as an interesting central hub that's home to a diverse population of different Bhutanese cultures. Trashigang Town is well worth a visit to see its Dzong and other pretty buildings, while the rest of the region is awash with river valleys and gorges, wooded hillsides and uninhabited ridgeways. And though Trashigang is not on the main tourist map, there's a host of top trekking trails and challenging hiking routes to conquer throughout.



Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary

The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary, in the east of Trashigang, is a hive of delicate ecosystems and the flora and fauna which come with them, making it a must-see highlight when touring the region. The biodiversity that thrives here is outstanding, and includes nearly 150 bird species, 20 varieties of mammal, big cats such as snow leopards, plus red pandas, Himalayan bears, nearly 50 different rhododendrons and over 200 types of tree. This 650sq km expanse should certainly be at the top of the list for any wildlife lovers visiting Bhutan.

Black Mountains

Bhutan's Black Mountains are not quite as foreboding as the name suggests. Instead, this central mountain range (that spills off the Himalayas) forms part of a varied national park that is thoroughly exciting to visit. Sitting between the Sankosh and Mangde Rivers, the Black Mountains are a stunning landscape to behold, with peaks rising to 4,600m above sea level, thick forests lining the foothills and indigenous Moenpa Villages all around. Importantly, whilst the Moenpa People are considered Bhutan's original inhabitants, their way of life and even language is severely under threat.

Mongar

Mongar's main town is best known for its botanical gardens, traditional textiles and the ruins of Zhongar Dzong, yet visiting this district means a journey of remarkable driving roads, archaeological ruins and no shortage of natural beauty too. Here you find conifer forests, waterfalls, Thrumshingla National Park, Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary and the distant soaring peak of Gangkhar Puensum Mountain. The last of these, Gangkhar Puensum, is Bhutan's tallest mountain at 7,570m above sea level, though it has never been climbed due to symbolic spiritual status.



Bhutan: Places to Stay

Tourism has always been tightly regulated by the Bhutanese government, which has severely limited the number of hotels in the country. The resulting dearth is most noticeable at the middle of the range. High-end and budget options are more numerous, but booking is often hampered by a ruling that prohibits reservations more than sixty days in advance. Rest assured, however, that TransIndus has decades of experience handling the quirks of Bhutanese travel and is well placed to ensure a smooth holiday experience, whatever your budget. Ask any of our Bhutan experts for more details on the following standout properties, or others in our tried-and-tested hotel portfolio.



Six Senses

Chosen for their breath-taking locations and designed as a circuit of five lodges around Bhutan's highlights - Thimphu, Punakha, Paro, Gangtey and Bumthang - discerning travellers are now able to experience the luxury and hospitality of Six Senses in a part of the world few have ventured. Each of the Six Senses lodges has its own unique design reflecting the heritage of the Kingdom of Bhutan and the local surroundings. All have over-sized decks and large, floor-to-ceiling windows. There is a GEM (Guest Experience Maker) to assist you in making the most of the area and an indulgent spa and wellness centre. Each lodge is also home to a resident monk.



Como Uma Punakha

Tucked away on a high spur of rice terraces overlooking the Mo Chhu River is this boutique property of eight rooms. Modelled on a traditional Bhutanese dzong, the main building is entered by a pair of traditional wooden doors. Inside the tone is more modern, though with traditional Himalayan touches - swirling Buddhist murals, hand-knotted Nepali rugs and elegant local dress of the staff.



Como Uma Paro

Draped over a high ridge above Paro town, the panoramic views are the hotel's USP, but its décor is no less serene and soothing. Expect limewashed walls decorated with hand-painted Bhutanese murals, polished wood floors and gorgeous stone terraces looking across the valley. Free-standing, roll-top tubs dominate the Swedish-style bathrooms. The gourmet food is also a highlight.



Taj Tashi, Thimpu

This is the capital's top hotel - a spectacular five-star built in lavish dzong style with Bhutanese wood-carved windows, pagoda roofs and yellow ochre walls on the exterior and featuring hand-painted Buddhist cloud murals, luxurious Himalayan rugs and lashings of brocaded silk in the interior. The Bhutanese food served in the restaurant is fit for a king, and there's a gorgeous spa.



Lechuna Heritage Lodge, Haa Valley

We were delighted when we stumbled upon this fabulous little property in the Haa Valley. Few lodges in Bhutan occupy genuine period farmhouses, especially at the more affordable end of the spectrum, but the experience here is authentic. The century-old complex holds only five rooms and the former farmyard has been planted with a simple garden.



Lingkhar Lodge, Trashigang

Decent accommodation in this remote region was in short supply before The Lingkhar opened. It gets rave reviews for its prime rural location, just out of Trashigang town. Set amid orange orchards, the 12 spacious rooms are housed in traditional cottages, overlooking terraced fields, and are attractively designed. The site is blissfully quiet and its hosts fantastically welcoming.



Gangtey Lodge

Perched just below the monastery on the flanks of the Phobjikha Valley, this lodge offers world-class luxury in a uniquely Bhutanese style. The most spellbinding views encompass fields and traditional farmhouses framed by vast pine forest and soaring mountains. The rooms are styled with Bhutanese textiles, large windows and underfloor heating as well as wood burners.



Planning Your Trip: Bhutan

Flights to Bhutan leave from Delhi, Kolkata and Kathmandu. Overland routes are also possible from India, allowing you to knit the country into a tour of the Northeast Hill states. Travel for tourists is conducted almost entirely by private vehicle with a driver. Government rules insist you also always have a guide with you, and TransIndus has, over the years, identified a handful of really good ones that will enrich your holiday experience. Journeys invariably rely on the main East-West Highway, known locally as the ‘Lateral Road’, which for much of its length is single-track. The route crosses a number of high passes, but none likely to cause any problems with altitude sickness. Driving in Bhutan, like much of life, tends to be a leisurely affair.

When to Go

Autumn, from September to November, and spring, from March through April, are the best months to travel in Bhutan. Winter weather can be very cold at higher elevations, especially at night. From June, the views are regularly obscured by cloud and mist as the country receives the bulk of its 5.5m of rainfall during the annual monsoon. Flights are frequently disrupted and roads blocked by landslides at this time too.

Suggested Itineraries

The following tried-and-tested itineraries may serve as starting points for your trip planning. They show what can comfortably be achieved whether you are interested in Bhutan’s classic highlights, exploring the more rural side of Bhutan or travelling to its more remote areas. Our consultants will have lots of ideas on how to adapt them to suit your needs, as well as suggestions for easy detours to other parts of the country should you wish to extend your tour.

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	6	7	9	15	18	22	22	21	20	16	13	8
Rainfall mm	15	41	23	58	122	246	373	345	155	38	8	3
Best to travel	●	●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●	●

●● Best time to travel

● Good time to travel

● Low season

Bhutan Highlights | 12 days



Discover the magic and mystery of Bhutan, covering the sights of Paro and Thimphu, taking in the astonishing Punakha and the beautiful Gangtey.

Day 1 & 2 Fly overnight via the Middle East to Kolkata for two nights. **Day 3** Visit the wholesale flower market at Mallick Ghat, Howrah Bridge, Victoria Building, the Writer’s Building and Park Street Cemetery. **Day 4** Fly to Paro, and drive to Thimphu. **Day 5** Visit Thimphu’s famous dzongs, the King’s Memorial Chorten, Buddhist painting school, the national folk museum and city market. Perhaps even see a Takin. **Day 6** Drive to Gangtey. **Day 7** Visit the black-neck crane centre in the Phobjikha Valley. **Day 8** Drive to Punakha, visiting the local Dzong (fortified monastery) in the afternoon. **Day 9** Drive to Paro for a two-night stay. **Day 10** Sightseeing in and around Paro town includes a trip out to the iconic Tiger’s Nest Monastery. **Day 11** Fly back to Kolkata for one night. **Day 12** Return flight to the UK.

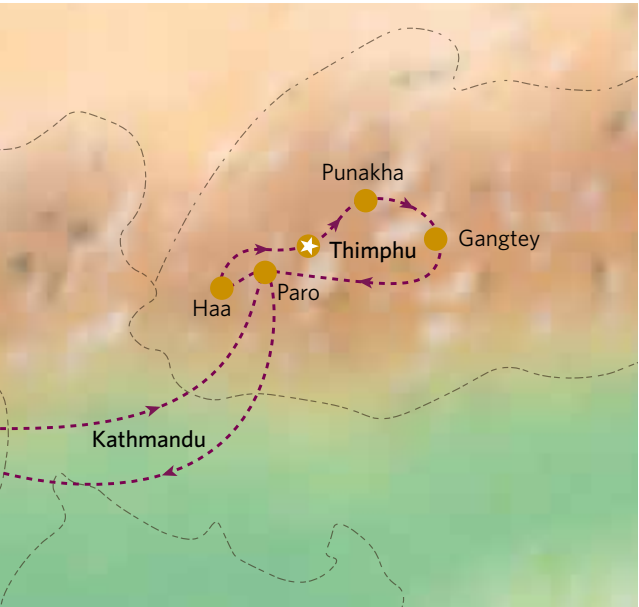


Bhutan’s Five Valleys | 15 days



A compelling blend of Bhutanese culture and glorious Himalayan scenery designed especially for active nature lovers.

Day 1 & 2 Fly overnight to Kathmandu for one night. **Day 3** Fly to Paro. **Day 4** Visit the Tiger’s Nest Monastery, Drugyel Dzong and Kyichu Lhakhang. **Day 5** Drive over the Chele La Pass to the Haa Valley. **Day 6** Visit the two great monasteries and walk through local villages. Take tea with a family. **Day 7** Drive to Thimphu via Dogar Dobji Dzong. Visit Trashi Chho Dzong. **Day 8** Drive up to Dochu La Pass and hike through forests to Lungchukezha monastery. Continue to Punakha. **Day 9** Explore Punakha Dzong. Walk along the valley to Limbukha. Visit Chimi Lhakhang. **Day 10** Visit the pretty Rinchen gang. Drive to Gangtey. **Day 11** Walk to Kilkhorthang and Tanje. **Day 12** Drive to Trongsa via the Pele La Pass. Hike to Gyeche La Pass and Kumbu Monastery. **Day 13** Return to Paro. **Day 14** Fly to Kathmandu. **Day 15** Fly to UK.

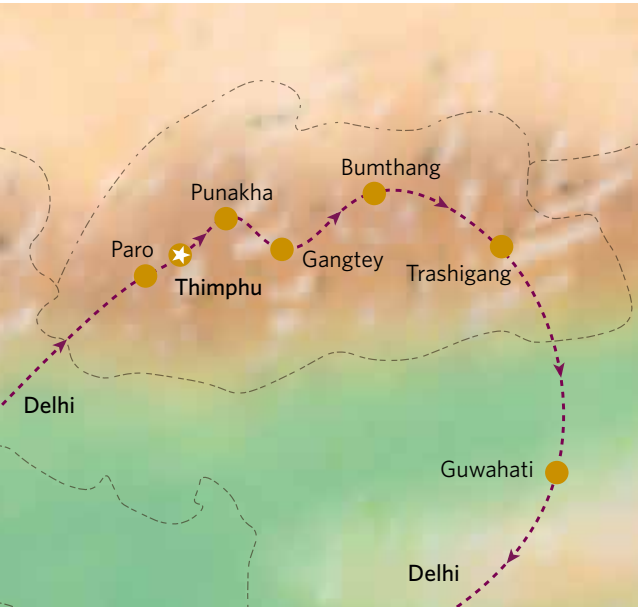


Eastern Bhutan | 17 days



Grandiose, forested valleys ringed by shining ice peaks, pretty, typically Bhutanese farmsteads, and the most spectacular dzongs in the country.

Day 1 & 2 Fly overnight to Delhi for one night. **Day 3** Fly to Paro. **Day 4** Visit the Tiger’s Nest Monastery, Drugyel Dzong and Kyichu Lhakhang. **Day 5** Drive to Thimphu. **Day 6** Sightseeing around Thimphu starts with a visit to its famous dzongs. **Day 7** Drive to Punakha, visiting the local Dzong. **Day 8** Drive to Gangtey. **Day 9** Drive to the Phobjikha Valley and the black-neck crane centre. **Day 10** Visit the sights around Trongsa and its dzong en route to the Bumthang Valley. **Day 11** Explore the Bumthang Valley. **Day 12** Drive to Mongar via the country’s highest motorable road over the Trumshingla Pass. **Day 13** Drive to Trashigang. **Day 14** Explore the market and views over the valley. **Day 15** Drive to the border down of Samdrup Jongkar, where you’ll enter India. Continue to Guwahati. **Day 16** Fly to Delhi. **Day 17** Fly to UK.



Nepal

Imagining Nepal one will first think of the Himalayas, the highest mountain range in the world, forming a great natural divide between the verdant lowland Gangetic plains and the high desert of the Tibetan plateau. But look beyond the high Himal region, and one will also find the vastly diverse landscapes of the Pahad, the lower mountain ranges with densely populated, deep valleys carved out by powerful rivers, and the Terai which is home to fertile flood plains, grasslands and tropical forests.

Nepal's history has long been influenced by its position between India and China, which has meant many transformations, revolutions and religious influences over the centuries. Having previously been under Indian rule and Chinese command, this patchwork of history and heritage can be admired in both the ancient sites and in its contemporary culture.

At the heart of the country is cradled a lush, fertile valley that has been a centre of sophisticated urban civilization for more than 2,500 years, where an unparalleled wealth of medieval palaces, Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples survive intact. To walk through the Durbar squares of the Kathmandu Valley is invocative of the ancient Newar culture which ruled over it for a thousand years.

Today, Nepal's awe-inspiring scenery provides an adventurous backdrop for outdoor pursuits of many kinds, and for all ages, ranging from soft day hikes to full-blown trekking, climbing and rafting expeditions. It's a traveller's dream, where wild national parks, mini ecosystems, thunderous rivers, beautiful

pagodas, spectacular wildlife, and the mighty Himalayas await. And everywhere you go, in the true Nepalese way, you'll be greeted with a smile and a welcome of "Namaste".

To give a sense of what you might expect, we've set out some examples in the following pages of the kind of experiences we often recommend. Our aim is two-fold: to inspire and provide insight into local life. So as well as the famous landmarks, we might suggest a visit to a little-known market or monastery, or a trek that is as awe-inspiring as the main routes, but just a little bit off the beaten track.

We've also showcased some of our favourite properties in Nepal – places we think define the TransIndus experience, from boutique hotels in pristine valleys, to riverside lodges and welcoming guesthouses that all evoke a true sense of place. And, finally, in our suggested itineraries sections, you'll find ideas on tried-and-tested routes we often use as starting points for designing our award-winning tailor-made journeys.





Highlights of Nepal

Kathmandu

Awash with UNESCO World Heritage Sites, temples and ancient palaces, decorative gardens, a heady mix of architectural styles, lively nightlife and bustling streets.

Nagarkot

Encompassed by a ring of spectacular snow-topped peaks – particularly enjoyable while dining al fresco, or wandering the village's Buddha Peace Park.

Patan

Day-to-day authenticity and historic intrigue alike, including the UNESCO-stamped Patan Durbar Square, Golden Temple and Patan Museum.

Bhaktapur

In the Kathmandu Valley, flaunting a sprawl of iconic Nepalese architecture across three central squares, each edged by temples and shrines.

Pokhara

Colourful wooden fishing boats bobbing atop Lake Phewa, waterfalls hidden amongst the hills, and swathes of green forest to explore.

Mt Everest

A true marvel of Mother Nature and undisputed highlight of Nepal. Views of Mount Everest are accessible and simply witnessing the Himalayas is a humbling delight.

Chitwan

Lush lowland plains, misty forests, rivers, the one-horned rhino and elusive Bengal tiger; a beautiful contrast to Nepal's more imposing landscapes.

Mustang

Sweeping valley trails, scenic viewpoints and stretches of uninhabited wilderness, the few settlements here are happily full of friendly locals.



Kathmandu

Kathmandu is the beating heart of Nepal and the centre of its history, art, and culture. A thriving city of over a million people, it can both overwhelm and intrigue in equal measure. It's known as the 'City of Temples' because of its vast number of gilded stupas, pagodas, and the endless temples lining the narrow winding backstreets; Kathmandu is a spiritual city with a rich living history of Buddhist & Hindu worshippers going about their lives much as they have for centuries.

At its ancient core is the famous Durbar Square, surrounded by the palaces of the Malla & Shah kings, and where you'll find the Kumari Chowk, home to the living embodiment of the Hindu mother goddess, Durga. From there journey out to the Boudhanath Stupa located on the old trade route to Tibet, up to the hilltop 'Monkey Temple' of Swayambhunath, and down to the banks of the Bagmati River to the Shiva temple of Pashupatinath; all of which will fill your senses.

For every ancient site, there is a more contemporary side to Kathmandu, seen in the vibrant live music, food and art scene, shopping districts and the persistent construction projects. The mix of old and new makes for fascinating walking tours, as atmospheric alleyways full of iconic shrines lead into hectic local markets and busy roadways, with the unfiltered sights and sounds there for the adventurous traveller to experience.



Kathmandu Walking Tour

An enthralling walking tour that weaves from timeless temples to modern-day hangouts, and everything in between. You'll begin at UNESCO-listed Swayambhunath Stupa, an ancient hilltop shrine that has overlooked this land for nearly 1,500 years. Next, Kathmandu Durbar Square, where an intoxicating collage of temples and shrines can still be admired, having survived Nepal's devastating earthquake in 2015. Then on to Freak Street, once the epicentre of the hippie trail, and the markets of Ason and Thamel District - known for its live music venues, hip bars and busy restaurants.



Nepali Feast at Dwarika's

Lose yourself in a world of authentic Nepalese cuisine with an evening spent at Krishnarpan Restaurant, housed within Kathmandu's atmospheric Dwarika Hotel. The food shows off a full spectrum of traditional organic ingredients (many of which are grown onsite), dishes influenced by regions across the country, and a decent dose of cutting-edge culinary flair thrown in just for good measure. This really is an immersive gastronomic extravaganza, with the restaurant's changeable menu ranging from six to 22 courses; you may want to skip lunch if booking this mouth-watering experience!



Mount Everest Sightseeing Flight

Enjoy the majesty of the Himalayas, and Mount Everest itself, from above, with an unforgettable sightseeing flight aboard a comfortable 16-seater aircraft. The Himalayas will form an almost continual backdrop to your time in Nepal and are always mesmerising to witness from ground level, yet an aerial view of it all will give their scale and beauty an entirely new perspective, and indeed wonder. All passengers have a window seat and, weather permitting, catching sight of Mount Everest's lofty peak above the clouds is truly something to behold.

Sacred Hindu & Buddhist Shrines

Hindu and Buddhist beliefs are apparent in almost every aspect of Nepalese culture, past and present. From ornate ancient shrines and holy stupas to revered monks and monasteries, religious learning is central to daily life here. Visit Nepal's holiest Shiva temple of Pashupatinath, where Hindus from across the country converge during important festivals. Continue to the striking Jnanakshi Rajarajeshwari Temple, and the iconic Boudhanath Stupa, on the ancient trade route from Tibet, and whose whitewashed stupa, with its piercing eyes and string of prayer flags, is the largest in Nepal.

Kopan Monastery with a Buddhist Monk

The hilltop Kopan Monastery, just outside Kathmandu, is not only beautiful to look at and exciting to visit (enhanced by its panoramic valley views) but also offers an inviting insight into the practices, traditions and stories of real-life Buddhist monks. This tour will showcase just that, beginning with a walk around Kopan's pretty gardens and the monastery itself. Then, spend some time with one of the resident monks, learning of the deeply held beliefs, rituals, ceremonies and schooling that dictate their daily lives and sense of spiritual understanding; a truly special experience.



Kathmandu Valley

While visiting Nepal, all roads ultimately lead to the ancient Kathmandu Valley, such is the significance of these enchanted lands when it comes to the country's heritage, spiritual beliefs and sacred archaeological sites. Indeed, it's no exaggeration to say the very essence of Nepal lies within and between the medieval villages, Buddhist and Hindu temples, shrines and monuments which characterise the Kathmandu Valley.

From some of Nepal's holiest sites, including the palaces of Patan, Durbar Square, and temples such as Nyatapola and Changu Narayan; to atmospheric alleyways in places like Bhaktapur, your exploration of every nook and cranny will hold something different at every turn. You then have hilltop monasteries dotted around the region, coffee houses and small settlements, artisan markets and restaurants too, and although the valley suffered during Nepal's 2015 earthquake, the resilient people of the Kathmandu Valley will welcome you with open arms.

And as with the rest of Nepal, the Kathmandu Valley is not short of natural wonders either. The ever-present Himalayan Mountains keep watch over what's below, namely the wildlife and waterfalls, Shivapuri National Park and plenty more besides; there's certainly a lot to squeeze in to your time here.



Bhaktapur at Dawn

Ancient Bhaktapur is known as the 'Place of Devotees' and when the sun breaks each day, morning prayers are called, and the monks ritually make their way to the temple – it's easy to see why. What's more, as pretty as Bhaktapur always is, there's something extra special here at dawn when sunlight fills its age-old alleyways. Heading off to enjoy the morning air, you'll visit Bhaktapur's temples, pottery workshops and scenic valley viewpoints too. Three peaceful hours later, a well-earned breakfast in one of Bhaktapur's 700-year old heritage buildings rounds things off nicely.

Newa Architecture in Tansen and Bandipur

Something that is bound to leave its mark after your trip to Nepal is the country's iconic Newa-style of architecture, proudly displayed across the monuments, palaces and temples in the Kathmandu Valley. Two prominent examples are the towns of Tansen and Bandipur, both of which will be explored during this captivating tour. The first, ancient Tansen, was once an independent kingdom and certainly retains its air of authenticity, and while 18th-century Bandipur may be relatively newer, it's just as inviting and boasts historic Indo-Tibetan influence too.



Patan Heritage Walk

Admire traditional artisan crafts and historic buildings aplenty while wandering the sand-hued streets of Patan, on this unmissable heritage walk. Patan flaunts some of the greatest ancient palaces and temples in Nepal, though is also known for its unique artistry, pottery and colourful fabrics, as you'll find out. Start in Durbar Square, home to royal palaces, kings' residences and a wonderful museum hidden behind the Patan Golden Gate, before catching a glimpse of daily Patan life, namely from the roof terrace of a nearby coffee shop, where the tour eventually ends.

Discover the Southern Ridge

Strap on your walking boots for a trek across the Kathmandu Valley's Southern Ridge, a high-altitude area of temples, traditional villages and mesmerising mountain views filling the horizon. The Southern Ridge is also a bastion of reforestation in Nepal, with these now-verdant hills having been almost lifeless only 25 years ago. On this guided walk you'll be treated to some incredible hiking trails through forest and grassland, plus postcard-worthy viewpoints and picnic spots courtesy of a hilltop cable car - if wanting to enjoy it all at a gentler pace, that is.

Namkha Monastery Tour

Lose yourself in the world of real-life Buddhist monks at Namkha Khyung Dzong Monastery, with an intimate walk through its hymn rooms, courtyards and temples, meeting resident monks along the way. This spiritual centre was built in 1906 on the Tibetan border, before being destroyed in 1959 and later rebuilt by monks practising Namkha's particular Hindu and Buddhist traditions. As you explore, the sacred Krishna and Budanilkant Sleeping Vishnu Temples are testament to their work; it's a soul-stirring experience, accompanied by valley views and lunch at nearby Shivapuri Heights Cottage.





Annapurna & Pokhara Regions

Time spent in Pokhara, on the shores of Phewa Lake, and the mountainous Annapurna Region offers an enticing mix of relaxing boat rides and bucolic countryside with some of Nepal's most glorious trekking trails. Whilst Pokhara may not be the most picturesque city, it does give instant access to Phewa Lake, which certainly is postcard worthy, and the surrounding hills that are home to farming communities and coffee plantations.

Then there is the Annapurna Region, an impossibly magnificent group of snowy mountain peaks, tree-covered valleys and distant local villages crying out to be explored. There are many hiking routes which dissect this wild expanse, each enjoying its own special sights, sunrises, elevated viewpoints and an all-round feeling of absolute isolation that invigorates the soul. The walking routes throughout Annapurna are truly not to be missed, if getting away from the usual tourist routes, losing yourself in their high-altitude beauty, and meeting locals along the way appeals, that is.

Our Nepal specialists will be happy to discuss route options with you and help identify the most suitable itinerary for your level of fitness and experience. Treks are undertaken with an experienced team of guides and porters.



Boat Ride on Phewa Lake

Though perfectly picturesque to walk or cycle around, nothing quite compares to a scenic boat ride on Phewa Lake, undoubtedly the best way to fully appreciate its natural beauty. Phewa is one of the largest lakes in Nepal, covering nearly 4.5sq km, and whilst the 'Lakeside' shores to the east are built up with cafés and hotels, your voyage – aboard a traditionally painted wooden rowboat – will head west. Here, Lakeside's houses and restaurants are replaced by the untouched, thick Rani Ban Forest, mirror-like waters and the Annapurna Mountains in the background.



Visit a Traditional Coffee Plantation

When you think of Nepal – and indeed Nepal's farming, seasonal produce and agriculture – coffee plantations may not spring instantly to mind. Don't be fooled, however, as in recent years the country's high-altitude coffee production has boomed, becoming a lifeline for far-flung village communities, as you'll see during this exciting tour.

The Himalayan climate is ideal, and despite the challenging terrain, steep hills and valleys of Nepal's wider Pokhara region, the organic brews grown here have actually won international awards for their delectable taste. It all makes for an interesting insight into an emerging element of the Nepalese economy and culture, where everyone benefits: from the growers, pickers and processors, to the wholesalers and coffee shop owners.

You'll be whisked off into the countryside to meet the plantation holders and their farmhands, getting a first-hand glimpse at the careful growing and labour-intensive techniques that go into a single cup of steaming coffee. Along the way, you'll also see every stage of the process, from picking and quality checking to the drying beds high in the hills, before having a go for yourself.



Trekking Off-the-Beaten Path

Nepal's magnificent Annapurna Region is renowned for trekking, lined as it is by awe-inspiring mountains, dramatic valleys and open plains – not to mention the occasional hilltop shrine or rural village too. This particular tour will take you far away from the main walking routes and tourist trails, delving deep into Annapurna's ethereal wilderness on a truly intrepid adventure, with local Sherpas helping along the way.

The appeal of trekking off-the-beaten path is getting all the highlights, Dhaulagiri Range mountain views and incredible sunrises found on Annapurna's better-known trails, such as the Annapurna Circuit and Annapurna Basecamp Trek, but without the crowds. Small mountain villages found throughout – Ghandruk and Tadapani among them, also add something special to this experience.

In fact from start to finish you can look forward to beautifully varied terrain, hiking through forests, exposed passes and along tight hillside walkways from one day to the next. It all adds up to a remarkable adventure, one that involves blissfully remote lodges, meeting local artisans and witnessing incredible scenery and sunsets too.



The Everest Region

The Everest (or Solukhumbu) region is kingdom of the world's tallest mountain and a veritable pilgrimage site for trekkers and mountaineering enthusiasts around the globe. This iconic region has inspired travellers, adventurers and explorers for generations, though its spiritual significance goes back many centuries before that. Mt Everest is known to most Nepalis as Sagarmatha, and to the local Sherpa people who inhabit the beautiful valleys near the great mountain's foot as Chomolungma, 'Mother Goddess of the World'.

As inaccessible as it looks, the Everest region is relatively easy to get to and just a short flight from Kathmandu to the mountain airstrip of Lukla. Hikes from here take you to the Sherpa 'capital' of Namche Bazaar and as far beyond as you wish. The spellbinding views, mesmerising sunsets and impossibly perfect mountainscapes are joined by age-old villages, hilltop shrines and isolated lodges, all of which will form an equally memorable part of your trip throughout. Overnights are spent in tea houses where you can share stories with fellow hikers and meet the locals going about everyday life.

Our Nepal specialists will be happy to discuss route options with you, and help identify the most suitable itinerary for your level of fitness and experience. Given the extreme terrain and altitude in this part of the country, it's essential to employ experienced teams of guides and porters, which is why our ground staff are hand-picked and treated well, according to the protocols set out by the International Porter Protection Group.



A View of Mount Everest Trek

For those avid walkers wishing to see Mt Everest with their own eyes, this trek, covering part of the route to Everest Base Camp, takes you to the village of Tengboche, offering those once-in-a-lifetime views. Certainly still a significant physical challenge, you will climb to 3,860m above sea level. The pace, however, is gentle enough to acclimatize well, and ensure you enjoy every single step and majestic view along the way.

Your route begins from Lukla, where a relatively easy start will see you hiking roughly three hours to a guesthouse in the Himalayan village of Phakding. The following day involves a challenging though rewarding climb, finishing at Namche Bazaar where you'll stay for two nights, to get acclimatized to the altitude. From here, the remainder of your expedition is a magical mix of gentle trails, otherworldly viewpoints and a visit to the high-altitude monastery of Tengboche; truly unforgettable.

Everest Base Camp Trek

For many, hiking to Everest Base Camp is, without doubt, the pinnacle of trekking in the Himalayas. This is certainly no leisurely stroll, instead a serious trek to 5,325m above sea level, at the frozen foot of earth's tallest mountain peak. Enjoy awe-inspiring moments, jaw-dropping landscapes and of course those postcard-worthy sunsets too.

The trailhead starts in earnest, walking from Lukla to Namche Bazaar over the first couple of days to acclimatize, ahead of the steeper climbs to come. From here, look forward to beautiful and varied hiking from trails that lead through Himalayan forests.

On top of everything this trek offers, the sheer natural wonder of what surrounds you, and the vastness of this immense land, gloriously witnessed at sunset when the light casts spells across the mountains, is simply phenomenal.



Nepal Off the Beaten Track

Nepal is a country full of hidden treasures. If you're looking to get away from the main tourist routes, meet friendly locals, get an insight into the different region's fascinating cultures, discover one of the world's great pilgrimage sites and hike to untouched areas of pristine wilderness, then read on.

Among the country's particularly special, off-the-beaten track locations you have Mustang, a wonderland of scenic trekking trails, locals unaffected by modern life, and some of Nepal's least-visited landscapes too. Then there are the lush green tea plantations of eastern Ilam, wider Janakpur with its wealth of diverse ethnic groups, and Lumbini, birthplace of Prince Siddhartha Gautama himself, better known as the Buddha.

One of the many attractions when visiting these regions is the feeling of intrepid travel, boldly hiking untamed valleys and wild mountain passes, touring little-known rural areas, or learning of an ancient cultural heritage.



Tour of the Buddha's Birthplace

This tour will take you to one of the world's great pilgrimage sites, a place revered all over the world – Lumbini, the sacred palace where Queen Mahamayadevi gave birth to Prince Siddhartha Gautama, Buddha, in 563BC. Lumbini itself, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is found in Nepal's Rupandehi District near the Indian border, and consists of archaeological remains, ornate gardens, 3rd century monasteries and ancient shrines going back centuries. Whilst here, take the time to wander the grounds and absorb the significance that Lumbini holds for the 500 million Buddhists around the globe.



Trekking in Mustang

Nepal's remote Mustang Region is set to impress, enthrall and enchant, and the most intimate way to experience it all is by strapping on your boots and hiking through these distant mountain wilds. It's no exaggeration that life here hasn't changed in hundreds of years, as this isolated enclave of hidden villages and formidable hills, near Tibet, was a separate kingdom altogether until as late as the 1950s. Trekking in Mustang is nothing short of an honour, one that will see you observe an ancient way of life, discover barren hills and far-flung valleys, and walk the scenic banks of Nepal's Kaligandaki River too.

Visit the Tea Plantations of Ilam

There's one region of Nepal that's synonymous with fine tea: the eastern district of Ilam. To visit these verdant pastures and bucolic hills, blanketed as they are in an undulating sea of green tea leaves, makes for a wonderful day out in the countryside and unbeatable picnic spot too. It's also a great chance to meet the growers and pickers themselves. Tea production is an essential part of Nepal's economy, as you'll find out while learning the age-old growing techniques needed to nurture these priceless plants – maybe having a go at handpicking them yourself.

The Tarai Culture in Janakpur

Janakpur is a religious and cultural hub in Nepal, thought to be the birthplace of Sita, a human incarnation of the Goddess Lakshmi in the Hindu tradition. What's more, Janakpur and the villages that surround it are home to a huge range of ethnic groups too, meaning a collage of artistic styles, dress and rituals, which you'll witness on this fascinating and insightful cultural tour. The focal point of Janakpur is Ram Janaki Temple, a remarkable building both inside and out, though you can also admire elaborate Mithila art and other interesting traditions of the area throughout your tour.



Wildlife in Nepal

Nepal's ten national parks, three wildlife reserves, six conservation areas, 12 buffer zones and, surprisingly, one hunting reserve – collectively about 23% of the country's total area – help support a surprising array of flora and fauna.

Most wildlife inhabits the rich lowland Terai region adjoining India. The one-horned rhinoceros is almost emblematic of this area, which it shares with a handful of wild elephants, crocodile, buffalo and bison. Deer, such as the spotted and swamp varieties along with sambar, are ubiquitous but there are also antelopes, elusive tigers, leopards, hyenas, sloth bears and jackals. A handful of Gangetic dolphins survive in the Karnali River.

Deeper into the hills, bears, boars and the almost fox-like red panda give way to several high-altitude dwelling goats and the Himalayan Tahr. Rarest and arguably the most beautiful of all is the snow leopard.

For wildlife viewing, we recommend Nepal's southern national parks of Chitwan and Bardia. Both unmissable areas of natural beauty where you can enjoy traditional Jeep safaris, or a nature walk, canoe or cycle safari to admire the forests and waterways up close. You'll be joined by an expert local guide who will ensure that you don't miss a thing and enhance your understanding of the region's wildlife and conservation challenges.



Walking with Elephants

To walk in the company of elephants in Nepal is a humbling experience. These huge creatures are just magnificent to behold, and while walking with them you'll have an intimate view of both their interactions and personalities, as they graze on surrounding plant life. The guided walk will take you through the jungle, following a path marked out by the elephants before reaching open plains and grasslands; a memorable activity that will bring you closer to these ancient animals than you might have ever imagined.



A Jeep Safari

The lush jungles and grasslands of Nepal's Chitwan and Bardia National Parks are an enthralling natural habitat to explore, especially when compared to the mountains of the country's northern regions. Tiger numbers in Nepal are up and sightings of the one-horned rhino are, of course not guaranteed, but highly possible. Taking a Jeep safari in either of these national parks gives you the best chance to see these magnificent animals up close - more ground can be covered, and your expert guide will have their eyes and ears peeled. Keep a look out for peacocks, monkeys, deer and wild boar too.



Canoe Safari

The Rapti River, which runs through mid-western Nepal into India, is an evocative, murky and mighty waterway that cradles an abundance of wildlife both on its banks and below the surface. A canoe safari is one of the best ways to witness the natural world that surrounds Rapti, so as you paddle down some of the river's smaller channels keep a look out for crocodiles, bird species such as herons and cormorants, the one-horned rhino, and if you are lucky, a glimpse of the elusive tiger too.



Visit a Local Village

The Tharu people of Nepal mostly reside in the Terai lowlands, where a string of small, quaint villages of mud and daub huts and houses can be found. Self-titled 'the people of the forest', what is not grown or hunted is gathered from the forest, including a vast array of medicinal plants. Visit a village on the edge of Chitwan National Park to witness first-hand this traditional way of life and learn about their unique culture. You will be welcomed in with shouts of 'Namaste' and there is even the opportunity to taste some local delicacies.



Nepal: Places to stay

Created by liberal use of local handicrafts and architecture, together with world-class views, the distinctive atmosphere of Nepal's hotels and lodges contributes to the enduring popularity of the country. With a few notable exceptions, the properties themselves tend not to be as well maintained as those in neighbouring countries – hardly surprising given the logistics involved in many cases. Nor, these days, need you forsake your creature comforts when trekking. Thanks to the proliferation of stylish, well set up lodges in the Annapurnas, a hot bath, delicious meal and comfy bed are now obtainable.



Begnas Lake Resort, Pokhara

The majority of visitors to Pokhara congregate around Phewa Lake, but Begnas, further east, is much more peaceful. This resort nestles on a terraced, wooded hillside on the far shore, reached via a 15-minute Jeep ride followed by a 25-minute paddle across the water. Once installed, marvel at the panorama from your cottage balcony or laze by the pool in the butterfly-filled garden.



Om's Home, Jomsom

A beautiful heritage hotel in the heart of Jomsom, with traditional Mustang architecture and a backdrop of the mighty Nilgiri Himal. Rooms are simple but comfortable; you'll find crisp linen and a rustic regional décor. Relax after a long day in the cosy lounge and enjoy local specialities in the dining room whilst soaking up the spectacular views.



Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu

Dwarika's is the most traditionally elegant hotel in Kathmandu and is a must for anyone with a penchant for traditional Asian interiors. A feast of high Newari style, its design incorporates pieces of wood carving, stone sculpture and brass work salvaged from antique buildings. Four-poster beds create a classy colonial ambience in the huge rooms, crammed with old furniture and sacred art.



Kantipur Temple House, Kathmandu

One of the finest eco-hotels in Kathmandu with authentic Nepalese architecture, food and hospitality, supporting the continuation of traditional local skills. It also has a strong responsible travel initiative, including no plastic bottles (refilling stations are provided) and traditional energy saving methods. The rooftop terrace has panoramic views of Kathmandu and surrounding hills.



Temple Tree Resort, Pokhara

Named after the fragrant frangipani, this boutique hotel offers a relaxing stay, framed by the foothills of the Annapurnas. Two storey individual cottages, designed in the distinctive architecture of Nepal's Western Himalayas, overlook the lush gardens, and each room benefits from a balcony. Relax by the pool or in the hotel's 'tree house'.



Karnali Jungle Lodge, Bardia

A small, boutique safari lodge with an emphasis is on service as much as style, ensuring a relaxing experience that does justice to its wonderful setting. Expect soft, natural colour schemes and fresh, healthy food grown in the property's own organic gardens. Guided by a strong ethos of sustainability, the lodge is mostly solar powered and built with local materials.



Dhulikhel Mountain Resort

This beautiful resort sitting in 20 acres of landscaped gardens, with a backdrop of the Eastern Himalayas, stands on a ridge overlooking the Kathmandu Valley. The cottages blend perfectly into their surroundings, using traditional Nepalese village architecture, and offer a comfortable base to explore this picturesque area.



Ker & Downey Mountain Lodges

These beautiful lodges dotted around the Annapurna Conservation Area circuit are the crème de la crème of trekking accommodation. Each has spellbinding views across the slate rooftops of a neighbouring village to gleaming snow peaks in the distance. Hand-woven rugs adorn the spacious rooms, and wholesome meals are served, followed by log fires on the terrace.



Tiger Tops Tharu Lodge, Chitwan

Nestled beside lush forest and overlooking the idyllic Terai landscape, Tharu Lodge is the perfect place to unwind. Inspired by the longhouse style of Tharu architecture and built from local materials, the lodge has just 12 rooms and nine safari tents. Tranquil gardens, al fresco dining and a refreshing pool create a relaxing atmosphere to return to after your safari experience.



Meghauli Serai, Chitwan

This Taj property on the banks of the river Rapti overlooks a vast expanse of water and has uninterrupted views of the jungle. The 30 contemporary rooms and villas offer either national park or river views, and a large infinity pool with a viewing deck and a 'machan' over the river for private dining and wildlife viewing adds to the charm.



Planning Your Trip: Nepal

Nepal’s highlights, including the monuments of Kathmandu, wildlife and a taste of the mountains, can be covered in less than two weeks. For those looking to really get under the skin of the country, however, you could easily spend a week or more walking through the remote mountain villages, potentially therefore creating a much longer trip. Nepal can also be combined with India and Bhutan to make a fantastically varied tour of two or more countries. Most journeys in Nepal are conducted in a comfortable private car with driver. To avoid longer road trips, or to reach remote mountain regions that would otherwise only be accessible on foot, you can also opt for internal flights. Weather permitting, these often yield fabulous views of the mountains.

When to Go

November to December, after the rains have cleared the dust and the air is crystal clear, and March to April, when the rhododendrons are in full bloom, are the best months to travel in Nepal. In January and February, come prepared for chilly nights at altitude and foggy mornings in the Kathmandu Valley. During the monsoon season between June and September, grey skies obscure the fabled vistas, and transport is frequently disrupted.

Suggested Itineraries

The following tried-and-tested itineraries may serve as starting points for your trip planning. They show what can comfortably be achieved over different time spans, but none are fixed; our consultants will have lots of ideas on how to adapt them to suit your needs, as well as suggestions for easy detours to other parts of the country should you wish to extend your tour.

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	9	12	16	20	22	23	22	22	22	20	15	11
Rainfall mm	13	14	10	29	70	129	325	239	175	67	7	8
Best to travel	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●

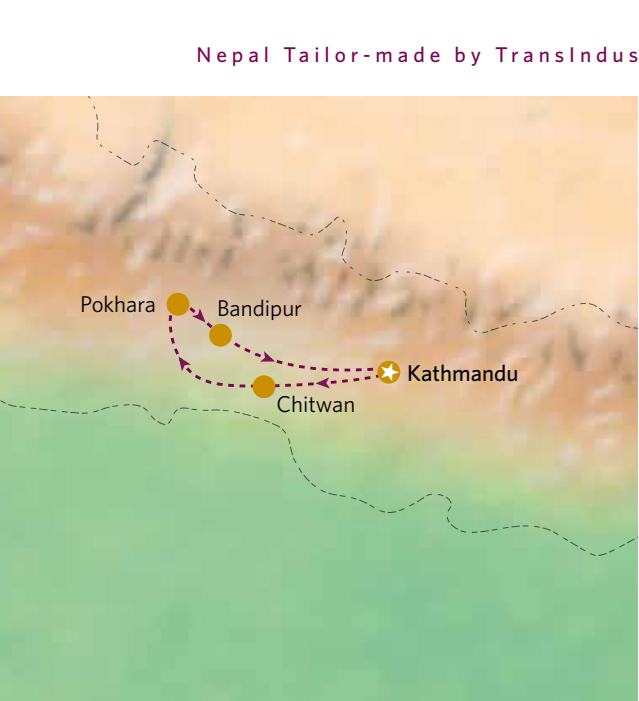
●● Best time to travel ● Good time to travel ● Low season

Treasures of Nepal | 12 days



Explore the beautiful monuments of the Kathmandu Valley, enjoy a safari in Chitwan National Park and the foothills of the Annapurnas.

Day 1 Fly from the UK to Kathmandu via the Middle East or India. **Day 2** Arrive in the morning; stay two nights. Venture out to Durbar Square this evening. **Day 3** Enjoy Kathmandu’s sights including Swayambhunath, Boudhanath and Pashupatinath. **Day 4** Take a short flight and then drive to Chitwan National Park, home to the one-horned rhino. Stay three nights. **Day 5** Explore the park by Jeep. **Day 6** Another day of safaris in the park. **Day 7** Drive to Pokhara, amid the foothills of the Annapurna range; stay two nights. **Day 8** Relax by the lakeside or take a short trek. **Day 9** Drive to the Newari town of Bandipur; stay two nights. **Day 10** Explore this medieval hill town on foot including a morning walk to the top of Gurungche Daada. **Day 11** Drive to Kathmandu; stay overnight. **Day 12** Travel back to the UK via the Middle East/India.

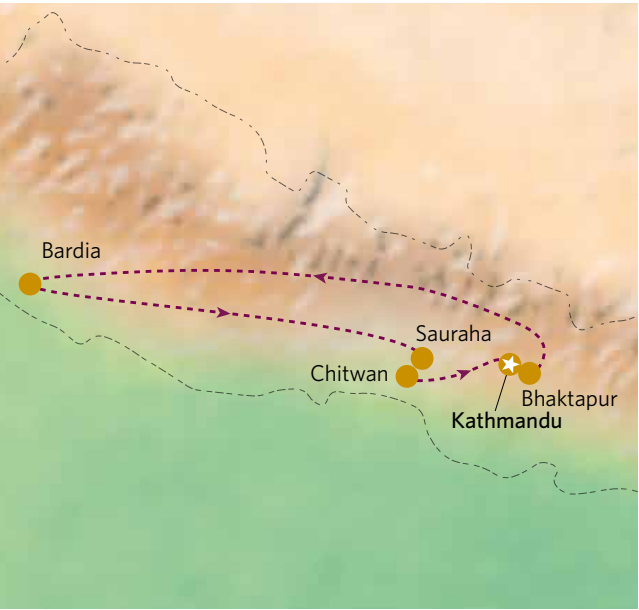


Wildlife of Nepal | 12 days



Visit Bardia and Chitwan National Parks, particularly rich in flora and fauna and protect one of the largest stretches of tiger habitat in the world.

Day 1 Fly from the UK to Kathmandu via the Middle East/India. **Day 2** Arrive in the morning; transfer to Bhaktapur; stay two nights. **Day 3** Explore Bhaktapur before a sightseeing tour of Kathmandu including Durbar Square. **Day 4** Short flight to Nepalganj; transfer to Bardia National Park; stay three nights. **Day 5** Explore the national park by Jeep. **Day 6** Another day of safaris in the park. **Day 7** Take a long drive to Sauraha on the Rapti River in the south west; stay two nights. **Day 8** Spend the day visiting Tharu villages, by car, bike, foot or bullock cart, in the forest and rice growing area around Sauraha. **Day 9** Drive to Chitwan National Park; stay two nights. **Day 10** Explore the national park by Jeep. **Day 11** Fly back to Kathmandu for a final night. **Day 12** Travel back to the UK via the Middle East/India.

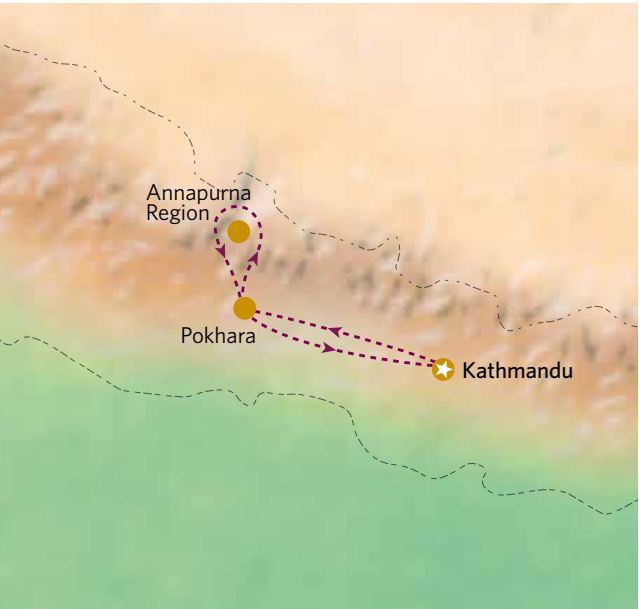


Walking the Annapurnas | 16 days



Walk the foothills of the Annapurnas through beautifully varied terrain, with time to relax in the picturesque mountain lodges.

Day 1 Fly overnight to Kathmandu via the Middle East. **Day 2** Kathmandu for two nights. **Day 3** Sightseeing of Kathmandu. **Day 4** Drive to Pokhara. **Day 5** Your walk begins in Nayapul, up to Ghandruk with views over the valley. **Day 6** Trek through jungle up to Tadapani. Enjoy the village. **Day 7** Continue up through the hills to Bayali. **Day 8** Enjoy the views of Dhaulagiri. End the day in Khopra for sunset. **Day 9** Wake early to see the rising sun on Dhaulagiri. Continue on to Swatha. **Day 10** Walk through rhododendron forests to Mohare Danda. **Day 11** Descend today through forests to Nagi. Enjoy time in the village. **Day 12** Walk to Baskharka through rice and millet fields. **Day 13** Walk to the suspension bridge of Beni, then drive to Pokhara. **Day 14** Drive to Kathmandu. **Day 15** Fly to UK via the Middle East. **Day 16** Arrive UK.



Family Holidays in the Indian Subcontinent

For families with a sense of adventure, the Indian Subcontinent is a wonderful part of the world to explore with children (or indeed grandchildren). Novelty and fascination lie at every corner, from the cows wandering through the traffic of Indian cities to the polychrome birds and butterflies that flit past hotel balconies. What child can resist red bananas that taste like heaven? Or the sight of a herd of water buffalo being walked home by a gang of kids their own age? Or a troupe of macaques grooming amid the weathered stone of an ancient temple?

As well as the constant interest inherent in the ordinary and everyday, travel in South Asia also offers some standout experiences you won't be able to share with your family anywhere else, and which you might need a little help from a team of experts like us to plan. On this page we list a handful of our favourites, just to give a sense of what is possible.

However you decide to fill your days on a TransIndus family holiday, you can be sure our team will take time to learn about your needs, ensuring any activities, experiences or journeys we recommend are age appropriate, and that they will engage your youngsters. We'll devise itineraries that keep transfer times to a minimum, and suggest homely places to stay that are safe and offer plenty of interaction with local families.

Recommended Family-Friendly Experiences



Wildlife

- Tiger spotting, India
- Camel treks in the Thar Desert, Rajasthan, India
- Walking with elephants, Nepal
- Track leopards in Yala, Sri Lanka
- Whale watching, Mirissa, Sri Lanka
- Visit Disney's Monkey Kingdom at Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka
- Spotting coconut crabs, Andamans

Arts & Culture

- Gond painting, Vinsar, India
- Rangolis floor art, Kerala, India
- Holi Festival, India
- Worli mud painting workshop, Mumbai, India
- Live Bollywood show, Delhi, India
- Bollywood movie, Jaipur, India
- Kathakali & martial arts, Cochin, India
- Kandy cultural show, Sri Lanka

Adventure

- Kite flying, Amritsar, India
- Kabooter safari, Agra, India
- Rickshaw around Fort Cochin, India
- Kayaking on the Keralan Backwaters, India
- Snorkelling, Andamans
- Riding the rails, India
- Stilt fishing at Kogalla, Sri Lanka
- Mountain biking, Nepal





How to Get in Touch

Phone 020 8566 3739 **Email** enquiries@transindus.com

Address 75 St Mary's Road & The Old Fire Station Ealing London W5 5RH



Visit us at the Old Fire Station

We're always delighted to meet clients at our office in South Ealing. You are welcome to visit us between 10am and 5.00pm on weekdays and on Saturdays by appointment. We do always recommend making an appointment so that the right person is here to meet you.

There is a paid car park just behind the office building. South Ealing underground station (Piccadilly line) is about 5 minutes' walk away. Ealing Broadway is about 15 minutes' walk and is also connected by Bus route No. 65. We are also only a bus ride or a short tube journey from Kew Gardens, so why not make a day of it!

How to Book Your Holiday

Having discussed your options with one of our travel consultants and chosen a trip that suits you, the next step is to confirm your booking by paying a deposit. This is normally 20% of the total cost of the tour, though it may be higher in some instances. A booking form will need to be completed as well and returned along with the deposit. Final payment will be due typically no later than 70 days prior to departure. Once booked and confirmed, we will then send your detailed travel documents by email, and by post should you require. We suggest you familiarise yourself with our booking terms and conditions, a copy of which will be sent to you along with the booking form.

Keeping in Touch

Social Media

Facebook at: www.facebook.com/TransIndusUK

Twitter: @TransIndus_UK

Instagram: @transindus

Enjoy our videos on www.youtube.com/user/TransIndus

Refer a Friend

If you have enjoyed travelling with TransIndus, recommend us to a friend or family member and bag them a discount for their next holiday and a gift for yourself! All you have to do is forward the names and contact details of the friend or family member you're recommending us to. With your permission, we'll drop them a line confirming the discount, and let you know if and when they book and send you your gift. More details can be found on our website.

TransIndus Exclusive Talks

At TransIndus, we believe visiting a new country, meeting its people and experiencing its culture should yield far more than just a memorable holiday. A great trip enriches one's life long after it is over. In order to gain a deeper understanding of a destination, many of our clients return to the same one again and again. To inspire and help people keep in touch with their favourite parts of the world, we regularly run events, from illustrated talks to hands-on cultural evenings focussing on different aspects of a country or region. These may be conducted by our own staff, writers, journalists, experts and even a few well-known faces! All upcoming events can be found on our website at www.transindus.co.uk/inspiration/events

Sign Up For Our Newsletter

We send regular newsletters highlighting new destinations, experiences and hotels as well some of our firm old favourites. This is also the first place to hear about our exclusive events and special offers. Sign up on our website at www.transindus.co.uk/newsletter

Photo Competition

With so many TransIndus clients being keen amateur photographers, we have thoroughly enjoyed the wonderful entries received since our first photo competition over a decade ago.

As you can tell from our brochures and website, we really appreciate the power of a striking image. So if you've travelled to any one of our destinations in the last year (or so), then send us your best travel photographs for your chance to win a prize. More information can be found on our website at www.transindus.co.uk/inspiration/photo-competition.

2018 winning photo by Nicholas Miles taken in Ladakh





Responsible Travel

Here at TransIndus we deeply believe that travel is fundamentally a good thing for the world; broadening horizons, educating, inspiring and bringing people closer together. It is our great privilege to help clients fulfil their dreams of travelling to Asia, mindful of the profoundly positive influence it can have, and we take that responsibility seriously.

As a UK travel company we are proud members of the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO) and the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA), both organisations recognised for setting the highest standards of conduct across the industry. As members we are bound to and inspired by their charters for promoting ethical and sustainable travel. We continually challenge ourselves to do better each year but acknowledge that there is still a long way to go.

We review our policies on a regular basis and update them when necessary. Amendments to our responsible travel policies are shared with our business partners and suppliers and we work with them to ensure a continuously improving approach towards compliance. We choose our partners very carefully and ensure that their policies are closely aligned with our own.

Giving Back

Each year we choose to work with a number of projects across Asia that we feel are working towards these same goals. In order to give back a little to the societies that host us and our clients, we like to support smaller charities undertaking valuable work at a local level. To this end, we support the following initiatives, which we feel do some remarkable work:

The Jaipur Virasat Foundation

The Jaipur Virasat Foundation (JVF) is a charitable trust, set up in September 2002 to conserve Jaipur's heritage, and brings together traditional arts and craft skills with modern market requirements to generate employment. We encourage our clients to visit JVF workshops as part of their tours, and donations from TransIndus travellers help to sustain the foundation's programme.

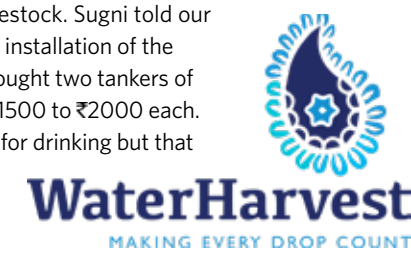


WaterHarvest

This non-profit organisation helps provide safe drinking water in rural villages in Rajasthan & Gujarat. Reducing the need to travel great distances to collect water in turn helps keep young people, especially women, in education for longer. The WaterHarvest system provides a long term sustainable solution to the problem of drought in these areas and improves the livelihoods of many families.

In 2018, TransIndus pledged five WaterHarvest systems to provide safe, clean, sustainable water for five families in the Barmer area of Rajasthan. We chose this pledge because we wanted to make a difference to the destination that has given the company and its guests so much. We also wanted to help protect its delicate rural community.

Sugni Devi and Khema Ram, an elderly couple, were among the first recipients of the TransIndus 2018 project. They manage a small piece of agricultural land and some livestock. Sugni told our representative, that before the installation of the WaterHarvest system, they bought two tankers of water per month at a cost of ₹1500 to ₹2000 each. They also collected rain water for drinking but that lasted only a few months and was not clean. Their new WaterHarvest system was



installed just in time for the first rains in 2018 and has benefitted them in terms of clean water and lower outgoings.

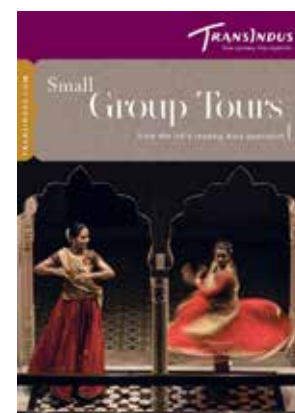
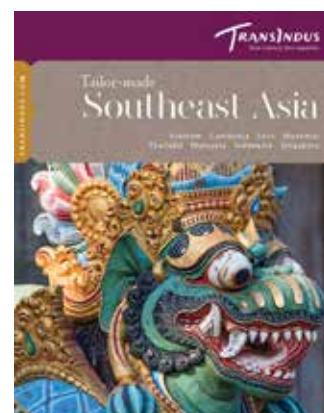
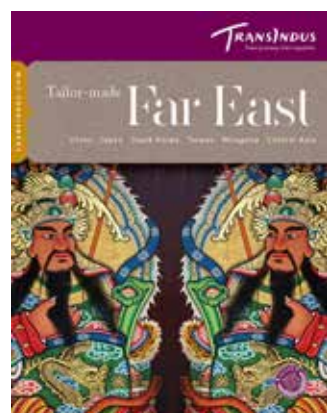
At our annual Summer Garden Party in 2019, thanks to the generous donations of our guests (all previous travellers with TransIndus), we raised £287 through a charity raffle prize draw. TransIndus matched this money raised for a total donation of £575 to WaterHarvest.





More TransIndus Brochures

If you have enjoyed reading this brochure and are interested in any of our other destinations, why not check out our other brochures, covering tailor-made holidays to Southeast Asia and the Far East, and a selection of small group tours throughout Asia. Brochures can be requested via our website at www.transindus.co.uk/brochures or alternatively by calling us on 0208 566 3739 or sending an email to enquiries@transindus.com.



TRANSINDUS

Your journey. Our expertise.

India | Sri Lanka | Bhutan | Nepal | Maldives



“ TransIndus provided an excellent service prior to our trip to India and their in-country representatives and guides were also excellent, providing an efficient service and interesting and informative tours. ”

Mr Edmund,
Tailor-made India



“ A brilliant trip to Sri Lanka. All the arrangements were just right, the country was fascinating, the hotels comfortable and welcoming, the wildlife spectacular and our guide knowledgeable and courteous. ”

Mr Walsh,
Tailor-made Sri Lanka



“ TransIndus were simply exemplary from start to end in their planning and management of our two week tour in India. We really felt that they went the extra mile at every stage of the trip. ”

Mr Thomas,
Tailor-made India

To book and for more information

Call: 020 8566 3739

Email: enquiries@transindus.com

Visit: www.transindus.com

TransIndus Limited 75 St Mary's Road & The Old Fire Station, Ealing, London W5 5RH

Registered: 2311988

★ Trustpilot

