

# India Top Spots

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## The Taj Mahal



One of the Seven Wonders of the Modern World and an enduring Indian icon, the Taj Mahal in Agra was built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who sadly died in 1631, giving birth to their 14th child. In her dying breath, Mumtaz Mahal urged Shah Jahan to build a mausoleum for her, more beautiful than any the world had ever seen. In 1632 building began on the world's greatest monument to love, which, even today, undoubtedly has no peer. In order to ensure the perfection of the Taj Mahal could not be replicated anywhere else on earth, the artisans and workers who created it, are said to have later had their hands or thumbs amputated. It took some 20,000 labourers and craftsmen 22 years to build the Taj and every detail is absorbing, from the classical gardens and reflecting pool and to the elaborate patterns of semiprecious stones decorating the white marble.

## Amritsar



Holy Amritsar, located in the northwest part of India in the State of Punjab, is the holy centre of the Sikh religion. Amritsar's main attraction is the revered and beautiful Golden Temple made of white marble, bronze and gold leaf. Maharaja Ranjit Singh built this seat of Sikh religion in 1803. The Golden Temple has four entrances and the walls are inlaid with semi-precious stones in floral patterns, frescoes and glasswork. To enter the temple, one must don a traditional headscarf, wade through a shallow pool (a purification ritual) and merge with the mass of bodies that circle the embankment around the holy structure.

## Darjeeling



Sitting at a spectacular altitude of nearly 2200m with a backdrop consisting of mighty snow-clad Himalayan peaks and surrounded by verdant tea plantations, the scenic hill-station of Darjeeling in the state of West Bengal offers pleasant respite from India's oppressive summer heat. The main attractions include a number of Buddhist monasteries including Ghoom, lush tea plantations, faded relics from the Raj, colourful markets and trekking possibilities in the surrounding area. From mid-April until the end of

June, it's usually possible to see Mount Kanchenjunga, the third-highest mountain on Earth, from town. The best view is at sunrise from the top of Tiger Hill, 7 miles away. An entertaining way to reach Darjeeling is on the famous "toy train", climbing more than 8,000 ft, over 8 hours, along a narrow-gauge track before reaching the city.

## Delhi



Ancient and modern India collides with startling results in Delhi, the nation's capital and third-largest city (population of 10,000,000). While you may stay in a gleaming high-rise hotel with all the latest conveniences, you can step outside and see a lawnmower pulled by a bullock. Officially two separate cities, the old city of Delhi and New Delhi are really two parts of one sprawling metropolis. New Delhi, largely built by the British, is clean and modern with broad, tree-lined boulevards. Old Delhi, considerably less clean, is noted for spectacular Mughal architecture dating to the 10th century. The juxtapositions are, of course, what makes this city so fascinating. Travellers will find that its long history and mix of cultures have spawned an array of architectural styles, religious sites, eclectic museums and sumptuous cuisines.

## Goa



Thanks to its picturesque location on the Mandovi River, between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea and its large stretch of magnificent, palm tree-lined beaches, Goa is one of India's hot spots. The Portuguese, claimed Goa as the seat of the Catholic Church in the East and controlled the area until 1961, when India invaded to liberate it. The state's Portuguese past is most apparent in its plazas, cathedrals and architecture including the Catholic Church of Old Goa, St. Anne's Church and the Basilica of Bom Jesus. The surrounding countryside is dotted with luxurious old estates built by wealthy Indians, including Braganza Palace which is open to the public. Goa splits neatly into two districts: North and South Goa. Lively North Goa has the state capital, Panaji with its interesting churches and buildings. Notable beaches in North Goa include Fort Aguada, Candolim, Calangute and Anjuna, famous for its Wednesday flea market. South Goa is more laid back and beaches here include Bogmalo, Colva and Benaulim.

## Jaipur



A flamboyant showcase of Rajasthani architecture and a firm favourite on tourist itineraries as the third corner of India's 'golden triangle', the vibrant capital of Rajasthan is popularly known as the 'pink city'. In 1876, Maharaja Ram Singh had the entire Old City swathed in pink paint to welcome the then Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII). One of the Old City's best known landmarks is Hawa Mahal – the Palace of the Winds is a stunning example of Rajput architecture with its pink, delicately honeycombed sandstone windows. Near to Jaipur is the breathtaking Amber fort, which can usually be approached by elephant back for a novel experience. Other highlights include the City Palace and Jantar Mantar, an observatory of astronomy built in 1728.

### Jaisalmer



Jaisalmer, the medieval walled sandstone town that perches dramatically on a flat-topped hill, is exotic, remote and beautiful. Set so deep in the heart of the Thar Desert that one would expect barren near-desolation, this frontier town is today one of Rajasthan's best-loved tourist destinations. Local colour and warmth prevail over the inhospitable terrain. The old fort city rises up just like a giant sandcastle, its ancient streets and alleyways still preserving a traditional way of life. About a quarter of the old city's population resides within the fort walls. Entry is through a forbidding series of gargantuan gates leading to a long courtyard. Off here are a tangle of alleyways and streets lined with little shops, Jain temples and the old palace of the former ruler, a portion of which is open to the public. Camel safaris in the close and surrounding desert are a popular activity. In January/February, the [[Jaisalmer Desert Festival [28777]]] has camel races, folk music, dancing and singing and attracts hordes of colourfully dressed Rajasthanis.

### Kochi



Kochi (formerly known as Cochin) with its beautiful lagoons, lakes and greenery, is called the Queen of the Arabian Sea and perfectly reflects the eclecticism of the state of Kerala. Here in historical Kochi, one can see winding streets with mosques, a 16th century Jewish synagogue, 500-year old Portuguese cottages, old churches and a palace built by the Portuguese and later renovated by in the Flemish style by the Dutch. This cosmopolitan mix of cultures makes the city fascinating and is particularly apparent in the old sections of Mattancherry and Fort Cochin. Fort Cochin boasts St Francis Church - India's oldest European built church, the Santa Cruz RC Basilica, fine homes built by the wealthy Europeans, Dutch cottages and elegant Chinese fishing nets that grace the northern shores. In the Mattancherry area is the 16th century Mattancherry Palace, also known as the Dutch Palace.

### Varanasi



Varanasi is the holiest city in India and thousands of Hindu pilgrims tour its temples and bathe in the Ganges River to gain religious merit. Thousands more go to die and have their ashes thrown into the holy waters. Take a boat ride on the Ganges at dawn to see scores of people enter the water from the ghats (riverside platforms with steps) to purify themselves before the rising sun. Some perform religious rituals in the water; others go to bathe and swim. While you watch all of this, cremations take place on some of the ghats. Providing the backdrop is an incredible array of temples and ancient buildings, several of them standing at odd angles because their foundations have been eroded unevenly by floodwaters. There are 2,000 temples and shrines in Varanasi, including Vishvanatha the holiest and the Durga Temple which is teeming with monkeys so hold onto your valuables!

### **Mumbai**



Mumbai - or Bombay, as it was formerly known, remains India's city of dreams. Despite extreme poverty and eye-watering pollution, it is so dynamic that paupers still flock there in the hope of becoming successful entrepreneurs. Built largely by the British around one of the best-protected natural harbours in the world, Mumbai is India's strategic economic centre. The city is also home to the country's prolific Bollywood film industry, which produces more feature films than any place in the world. The main draw of Mumbai, like much of India, remains its contradictions. Within minutes (or a few miles) you can be awestruck by the palatial houses on Malabar Hill and then depressed by the makeshift shacks and the bedraggled children in the city's poverty-stricken neighbourhoods. In Mumbai, be sure to head to the Gateway of India – a former colonial monument and now a popular emblem of the city and a hubbub of life. Sample bhelpuri (Mumbai's favourite snack) at Chowpatty Beach along what is known as Marine Drive - one of the city's most popular promenades. Visit the bazaars of Kalbadevi and Bluleshwar and take a boat trip to the beautiful Elephanta Caves

### **Shimla**



The largest and most famous of the British hill stations, Shimla is the capital of the state of Himachal Pradesh. Set in the foothills of the Himalayas along a crescent-shaped ridge at an altitude of 2159m, it afforded a resort-like atmosphere for the British, so much so that it became the 'summer capital' of British India in 1864. Perhaps one of the most novel ways of getting to Shimla is on the toy train service

(completed in 1903) that operates from Kalka. Hauled along by a tiny diesel locomotive, the leisurely journey through stunning scenery takes between 5 – 7 hours. The famous main street of Shimla - The Mall is lined with stately English-looking houses and retains a British flavour. Replete with its Victorian-Gothic spire, Christ Church, built in 1846 is Shimla's most famous landmark.

## Leh & Ladakh



Leh is the capital of remote Ladakh – a vast highland desert located between the Karakoram and the Himalayan ranges. Described as Little Tibet and the last 'Shangri-La', it's characterised by a desolate moonlike landscape and snowy peaks (inaccessible by road during winter). When Tibet was swallowed by China in the 1950s, the Chinese did their best to dilute Tibetan culture, but Ladakh's Tibetans have carried their traditions forward unimpeded. Leh Palace, which resembles Tibet's Potala Palace, offers great views from its heights. Above the palace is Namgyal Tsemo gompa (monastery) and just outside Leh other spectacular gompas include the Shey, Hemis and Tikse monasteries