

INDIA

a survival guide



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Welcome To India	3
Arrival	4
Hotels	5
Transport	6
Airlines	6
Train	6
Bus	7
Taxis & Rickshaws	7
Food	9
Health and Hygiene	12
Food Poisoning	12
Water	12
Animals	12
More Serious Ailments	13
Where To Go	14
Agra	14
Udaipur/Rajasthan	15
Leh/Ladakh	16
Manali/Kulu Valley	17
Kerala	18
Hampi	19
Haridwar & Rishikesh	20
Assam & Darjeeling	21
Varanasi/Benares	22
General Safety	23
Roads	23
Women & Sexuality	23
Touts	23
Beggars	24
Scams/Robberies etc	24
Just Go...	25

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Welcome To India

The sights, the smells, the noise, the culture... There really is nowhere quite like India. This vast beguiling country can both enchant you and drive you mad, often at the same time!

It can be hard knowing where to start or what to do when in India and visitors will have many questions before setting off and often after they've left too. Modern air travel means there are more points into India than ever before, so visitors may find they can bypass the giant and polluted megalopolises of Mumbai and New Delhi.



Photo by Adam Sherez on Unsplash

Arrival

Any airport into India will likely be a chaotic experience with people clamouring for your attention and telling you theirs is the best price and even taking you by the hand to their taxi. Be firm but polite with refusals.

Most airports have an information counter and a pre-paid taxi booth where you can make sure you won't be ripped off on your first journey into town. New Delhi now has a modern metro line linking the airport to the city whereas visitors into Mumbai, Bangalore and other cities will find they will need a taxi.

A taxi from the airport to Mumbai will cost you approx Rs500 for non a/c taxi (at time of writing 2017) and will take around 40 mins to an hour, traffic depending.



Photo by Rhema Kallianpur on Unsplash

Hotels

Indian cities can be relatively expensive compared to the rest of the country. For example a fairly low grade hotel in Mumbai or Delhi will likely set you back in the region of US\$10-15 where the same hotel in the styx would be nearer US\$2.

Pre-booking a hotel for the first few nights on arrival is highly recommended, especially in Mumbai or Delhi. We use Booking.com for a great choice and easy booking. You'll also find great deals on sites like Trivago, Expedia and Tripadvisor. These tend to be the more high end hotels.

Once you're on the road it is relatively easy to turn up and shop around on arrival in a new town, in fact this is the norm. Backpackers will normally head to the main drag, walk in and out of hotels and ask to see rooms. If they don't meet your expectations, move on...

Asking a taxi driver can result in being taken to an overpriced hovel but it can equally result in a surprisingly nice and well priced option. As a general rule of thumb (although exceptions abound) hotels will be found near train and bus stations and on streets around the centre of any town.

India can be a good place to splurge on a top end hotel, or at least a more indulgent hotel than you would be used to, especially in the less touristed areas. A four or five star hotel in a smaller city such as Kochi or Udaipur can be had for around US\$60-70.

For those slumming it you will never be short of a US\$2 (Rs150-200) room in most towns although don't expect much beyond a basic (fairly grubby) bed and a window.

Transport

Getting around India is easy but frustrating and exciting yet terrifying. The train network is vast, well run and cheap, buses too can be a great way to get around although the traffic can be like nothing you've ever seen.

Airlines

For bigger distances there are numerous budget airlines criss crossing the continent including [IndiGo](#), [SpiceJet](#) and [Jet Airways](#).

They are all much of the same and are very efficient. Fares are rarely much different between them but holidays such as Holi, Diwali or Eid can push fares up.

Train

Trains will need to be booked before boarding at a station, often after waiting in a badly managed line with a guy who looks like he isn't that bothered if you get your train on time or not.



Photo by Braden Barwich on Unsplash

Try to arrive with plenty of time, keep that smile on your face and remain polite even if he keeps making you fill out another form or he just keeps making non-committal head wobble movements every time you ask a question.

There are various classes of train from 1st AC (First class with Air Conditioning) down to what is effectively 5th Class. There is also chair class (meaning you have a reclining chair in an air conditioned carriage).

If travelling overnight you will need a sleeper train and then classes get more confusing. 1st Class A/C can be very cold, even in tropical India. Third class sleeper is normally perfectly adequate and is the more authentic Indian experience. You will inevitably make travel friends.

Don't be afraid of the food on trains. It is normally excellent and very cheap. Various salesmen will come around selling everything from soup to samosas to full on meals. Some are prepared on the train, others from guys who get on at one station and off at the next.

Embrace this as part of the experience.

Bus

Like the trains, Indian buses are an experience in themselves. You can usually arrive on the day and get a ticket.

There are Express or 'Superfast' services which are the best options on long journeys. Normal service buses will stop everywhere. Try to make clear you want a direct or fast service or you might be frustrated.

Sleeper buses are also available which are often much cheaper than sleeper trains. They are very much 'no frills' so come prepared with blankets and cushions.

With regards to safety, Indian roads are notoriously dangerous and the buses are no exception. Rarely does a week pass without a horror story about an Indian bus crash, normally in the mountains.

Having said that, with the sheer volume of bus journeys in India daily the odds are in your favour. Just be warned and consider the options, especially if you're on a [notorious](#) stretch of road.

Taxis & Rickshaws

Taking rickshaws and taxis can be an art form in itself. At most ranks the loudest and most confident guy will approach you and start ushering you to his ride, often proclaiming best fare no problem. Try and ask the price or arrange the fare before getting in the taxi/rickshaw. Failure to do so can be a licence to print money for the driver.



pic@Pexels

When asking for the meter fare many drivers will say the meter doesn't work. Often turning to the next guy will yield a more reasonable price or at least a more honest guy.

With taxi drivers, as with anyone in India, avoid losing your temper. Keep your composure even if they are pushing it somewhat. If you know the price just stick to it. If you think they are blatantly ripping you off and not budging, just walk away. They will either accept your price or you can find someone else.

Food

One of the best things - maybe THE best thing about India is the food. Indian's are proud of their food and no matter where you are there will be a man or woman proudly proclaiming that this is the world's best Masala Dosa, or this Pav Bhaji is the finest in Mumbai.



Masala Dosa (pancake with spicy sauces) @Nurabooo

Get stuck in and don't be afraid to try street food. Every region has it's specialities so explore and get stuck in. Don't be afraid to ask people what they recommend if you're new in town. They will very enthusiastically recommend numerous dishes and places to eat. They'll probably even try and take you there themselves!

The food is invariably spicy (as in spiced) and not always hot. If you are chili averse you can sometimes ask what they have that is mild. However, most people find that their palate adjusts to the masala heavy food and that they're reasonably chili tolerant by the end of a stint in the country.



A thali (mixed platter of assorted curries) @LoggaWiggler

If you really can't handle chili or Indian food then there are usually other options. Sticking with western dishes such as pizza, burgers or soup is possible. Outside of big cities you may have a hard time maintaining this but there is often somewhere to grab a burger (lamb or chicken, never beef!) or chips.

Vegetarians will find that India is a food paradise for them. Most restaurants have a dedicated vegetarian menu and the majority of dishes tend to be meat free.



Photo by Igor Ovsyannykov on Unsplash

Be warned you will not see beef on the menu, or pork for that matter. All meats tend to be either chicken or mutton. Avoid fish if you're more than a few hours from the coast.

On the subject of food...

Health and Hygiene

You'll need to recalibrate your concept of hygiene in India. What is clean in India wouldn't pass muster at home. As a consequence of that...

Food Poisoning

You're going to get food poisoning. It's part of being in India. You will no doubt have fairly loose stools for the duration of your trip but at some point you may find that you'll be bed bound, or at least unable to stray far from a toilet.

Embrace this as part of the India experience.

Minimising your chance of getting food poisoning can be hard as even the cleanest looking restaurant can be harbouring something nasty.

In general, street food tends to be fairly safe as the food is freshly prepared and there is little chance for any infestations.

Restaurants are often where you will pick up the notorious 'Delhi Belly'. If you can see the kitchen cast an eye over it and if it looks fairly grim then go somewhere else.

Water

Years ago drinking water in India would be completely inadvisable. These days it is better but you would still be well advised to stick to bottled water. If however you are in a major town and there is a jug of water on the table, you should be able to risk it if you're absolutely parched.

You can buy bottled water everywhere. Check the seals at the vendor, although most water vendors are pretty honest.

Better still, buy a [water filtration bottle](#) or system to avoid plastic waste.

Animals

There are animals everywhere. Resist the temptation to pet them. Often for obvious reasons...

There are stray dogs in many places, no matter how friendly a dog may look, avoid it. Being strays they are invariably badly treated so if you try to pet it you may find it'll turn on you. On top of this they are normally flea ridden and they rarely look very friendly anyway.

Cows are sacred to Hindus and you'll see them everywhere. Take pictures, no problem. Probably best to avoid petting them as this can offend some people.



@Devanath

There are sometimes cats which will come and pester you for food if you're dining outside. Feeding them encourages them so don't do it. Like the dogs they can be fairly flea bitten and occasionally unpredictable.

Monkeys are a major pest in India and they are everywhere. If you have food on you they sometimes work as a pack and will try and take it off you. If they approach you, either make yourself big, noisy and scary or drop the food and step back. Do not feed monkeys.

More Serious Ailments

It is normally advisable to get standard inoculations when travelling to India. Your doctor will advise normally to get tetanus, polio and typhoid boosters. In certain parts of the country you may also be advised to get anti-malarial treatment if you're staying for an extended period of time.

Consult your GP before travelling.

Where To Go

For such a massive country with a wealth of stunning attractions, this can be a headache for any traveller. It does depend hugely on how much time and money you have.

Most visitors will have a few weeks to a month to make their way around the country, some maybe will stop in Goa or Kerala for a 14 day break and want to explore.

These are some of the most popular and unmissable stops for any visitor to India.

Agra



@myeviajes

Obviously, if you'll want to come away having seen the Taj Mahal, India's prime attraction. It is stunning and worth the price of admission (currently Rs1000 - approx US\$15). The city actually has three UNESCO heritage sites, the others being Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri.

Udaipur/Rajasthan



Photo by Bhushan Sadani on Unsplash

Famous for the palace which sits picturesquely in the middle of a the city lake, Udaipur is picture perfect India. Rajasthan as a whole has many awesome attractions including Jaipur's palace of the winds and Jaisalmer's forts.

Leh/Ladakh



@MartinPosta

Stunning Jammu and Kashmir has been the site of some skirmishes between India and Pakistan, but don't let that put you off. Leh is a stunning small city nestled high up in the Himalayas. Enjoy the stark mountain scenery, wander Buddhist temples and breathe the freshest air in India!

Manali/Kulu Valley



@confused_me

If you can't make it all the way to Leh, Manali is the next best thing. Stunning mountain scenery, thermal baths, Buddhist temples and even [skiing](#)!

Kerala



@Oliver Lynch

The state of Kerala is worthy of a trip all of its own. Bask on glorious beaches at Varkala, cruise the backwaters around Quilon/Alleppy, chill out in the cool city of Kochi and go on safari in Periyar or Silent Valley national parks. You might even see a tiger if you're lucky!

Hampi



@Sarangib

The ruined city of Hampi is like India's Angkor Wat. Numerous temple complexes are scattered among eerie scenery with boulders, lakes and forests complementing the serenity. Ideally done as a trip from Goa or Mysore/Bangalore, make a couple of days to get stuck in.

Haridwar & Rishikesh



@ganapati_brahm

For the Ganges experience, many head to Benares (Varanasi). But a more sedate (by Indian standards) experience can be had at Haridwar. Still an important pilgrimage site for Hindus, you can watch the faithful as they perform various acts of worship. Rishikesh further up river is a hippy hotspot and is packed full of Ashrams for those looking to enlighten themselves.

Assam & Darjeeling



@NGhosh

You may think of tea when you hear those names and for good reason. These mountain regions are where some of the world's best comes from. They are also stunning beautiful surrounded by lush plantations, mountains and Buddhist culture. There has been intermittent separatist violence in the area but this doesn't affect tourists in general, however check with your local Indian consulate before travelling.

Varanasi/Benares



@Chanpath

One of the holiest sites in India for Hindus. A day by the river is a feast for the eyes as you spy pilgrims performing rituals, funeral pyres and all the things that make India one of the most vibrant countries on the planet. Come with an open mind and a good camera.

General Safety

India as a whole is a safe place to visit despite some recent high profile incidents, including rapes and murders. However considering that India receives around 7 million tourists a year the chances of anything happening to you are slim.

Roads

The country has some of the world's worst road traffic statistics so exercise caution whenever crossing the road. Minimise your risk in buses by sitting nearer the middle or back and if you decide to hire a motorbike be even more cautious than you would be anywhere else on one.

Women & Sexuality

India is a conservative country which is coming into the 21st century, sometimes uncomfortably.

Women should be aware that they will likely be propositioned by men and will doubtless receive the sort of attention that they would normally be shocked by at home. Cat calls, groping and harassment are not uncommon and are something that visitors learn to cope with. Avoid any confrontations but master the art of being firm and direct and know when to just walk away and get to a safe place.

Away from beach areas women should try to dress as conservatively as possible. Men too should avoid too much flesh, especially around temples or other holy sites.

Homosexuality is frowned upon too, although there is a very big gay scene in India. There is a whole sub-culture of Indian men who dress as women ([Hijras](#)) which is part of an ancient tradition. But in general gay practices are still taboo. Being discreet is the best option, especially outside of the major cities and tourist centres.

Bear in mind that sex in general is a difficult subject in India and that many people are very repressed sexually due to various cultural norms.

Touts

One of the major things that everyone will come across is touts. They are quite relentless and can be incredibly annoying, especially as they will swarm around and refuse to leave you alone. Ignoring them helps a lot (which does take practice) but in places like Agra or Varanasi that can be hard work itself.

You'll likely find one tout who will refuse to leave you alone for what may seem like hours, Eventually he will get bored, mumble something in a local language which probably is an insult and then he'll leave you alone.

Handling touts is tricky and the same tactic doesn't work for all of them. If in doubt, remain calm and walk away. Try and go somewhere where they can't go in such as a hotel, bank or restaurant and wait until they've got bored or found someone else.

Beggars

Beggars are everywhere and some of them can have some quite alarming mutilations. Leprosy too isn't as prevalent as it was but most visitors will doubtless see the afflicted, especially around train and bus stations. There is no harm giving them some money, you will see many Indian's do so quite generously. But be careful giving to beggars when there are others around - you will be mobbed.

Scams/Robberies etc

Indian scammers can be very creative. They can work as a team to con you out of money, pretending to be the police or the manager of a hotel or a fake tour operator.

In general if you think you've gotten yourself into a tricky situation, remain calm and avoid getting angry. Ask lots of questions, ask the same questions again and see if the answers change. If they are pretending to be the police, insist that you contact the police yourself and get a real policeman to come.

The number for emergency services across all of India is 112.

If you think you have been scammed perhaps by a fake tour guide or merchant, walk away and contact the police yourself. You can also contact your home nations consulate if you think there may be an issue with identity theft or bigger fraud.

For things like tours or buying valuable items, ask around before committing to any one service or merchant. Talk to other tourists and read up on TripAdvisor or forums.

Sometimes, if it comes down to a matter of Rs1000 or so, it may be better just to let it go.

If it's drug related then definitely just walk away. Better still, stay away from drugs for various reasons.

Just Go...

India is one of those destinations that you will remember for ever. There is so much to do and it is such an experience that any traveller will find it rewarding no matter how long you visit for.

If you're feeling unsure, don't be. Indians as a whole are very friendly people and the tourist trail is a well trodden one. You will definitely meet many people on your travels and the sights and smells can be unlike anywhere else in the world.

So plan your trip to India and book your flight!

Have you found this guide and our advice for travelling in India useful?

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All information correct as of August 2017, however prices are subject to change. Please email us at hello@gonetravelling.co.uk if you'd like to provide feedback (gratefully received).

Oliver Lynch