

*This article first appeared in Vol 8 Issue 4 of Global magazine*

## India

India. The country that feels like a continent. A melting pot for over a billion people sharing 18 official languages and over 1500 dialects. A land with a history that pre-dates Alexander the Great's invasion of Himachal Pradesh and one that has absorbed and rejected rulers ranging from the Portuguese to the British. You want culture? How about the Taj Mahal, the Golden Temple and the Dalai Lama's residence near Dharamsala? You want to see wildlife? No problem. India is home to the snow leopard, tiger, rhino and elephant. You have a hankering for a mountain sojourn? This is the right place. The world's highest mountain range, the Himalaya, cuts a swathe through the country. Deciding to immerse yourself in this dream destination is an invitation to be surprised, shocked, appalled, amazed and frankly overwhelmed at every turn. Welcome to India.



I love India. I also hate it. It is the ultimate country of extremes. A place that never fails to show me the softest and hardest facets of human nature. From the fingering of my arm by a leper in the capital, Delhi, to the compassion of a stranger showing me the way in a maze of alleys in Varanasi, India never fails to force me to confront my own failings and question my values, morals and the way I choose to live my life. Travelling in India is not always a comfortable or particularly pleasant journey, but that is of course part of its allure.

It would be easy to only put forward the glossy, travel brochure side of India. There is so much to recommend that an entire issue of Global and not just a single feature would be required in order to even begin to do the highlights justice. However, in order to discern the big picture, a few cautionary tales are I think equally essential.

But let's start with the high life. Some visitors to India only get as far as Delhi, Agra and the Taj Mahal. And if that is all you have the time and money for, then it is still well worth going. Such a trip will be an investment in memories that will last the rest of your life.

The Taj *is* *India*. A towering jewel that defines this nation. Comparisons with British monuments are not worth making, for whichever one you choose will not come close on either spiritual, emotional or architectural levels. Described as the greatest edifice to love ever created, the gem-encrusted Taj is a perfect construction. Upon close-up inspection it remains flawless, particularly now that a 16th Century natural Ayurvedic recipe for ridding the marble of pollution and contamination has successfully restored the skin of the building to its original glory.

Built by Emperor Shah Jahan as a mausoleum for his second wife, Mumtaz Mahal, some of the builders who constructed the Taj were rewarded for their efforts by having their hands amputated in order to prevent them using their skills to build anything as beautiful. This startling story flies in the face of a legend that the Emperor planned a second, identical Taj in black marble to house his body on the opposite shore of the Yamuna River. It is possible to visit the foundations of this supposed building, although many doubt that even the Emperor's fabulous wealth could have covered the cost of a second Taj. Incidentally, the area surrounding the foundations is the perfect place to view the Taj at sunset – a little-known fact that means only a handful of tourists set out on the half-hour motor rickshaw ride to the riverbank each evening. If you make the effort then you're likely to have the place more or less to yourself.

Money or no money, the Black Taj would never have been built as Shah Jahan was subsequently overthrown and imprisoned in nearby Agra Fort by his son. He spent the rest of his days looking out over the Taj. Upon his death, his son showed compassion and had his father buried alongside Mumtaz Mahal. Somewhat

ironically, Shar Jahan's cenotaph breaks the otherwise perfect symmetry of the Taj as he never planned to be buried with his wife. (Their physical tombs lie in a locked vault in the basement of the central dome. They cannot be visited by the public.)

Agra Fort is located just a couple of kilometres west of the Taj Mahal, and in order to understand its design and significance, it is well worth hiring a local guide whose services can be secured at the main entrance for a modest fee. One of the most frequently photographed buildings contained within its walls is the Pearl Mosque, which is widely regarded as India's most beautiful mosque.

If your visit to India must end at this point, then so be it. But to only visit the Taj would be like flying into Heathrow and just visiting Windsor Castle. There's a whole country left to explore. However, unless you have unlimited time and funding, it will be necessary to choose which region to visit. Where you go will very much depend upon what floats your boat.

Mountain lovers, and people visiting India in the summer months, will head for the foothills of the Indian Himalaya. Some of the most popular destinations are the former British hill stations. These were established by the British during their 250-year period of occupation as mountain sanctuaries for government officials and military personnel when the oppressive summer heat in the Indian plains became simply too much. Indeed, the government moved their entire infrastructure to the hill station at Shimla in the Himachal Pradesh for several months each year. The seat of power was transferred to the imposing Viceregal Lodge which can still be visited today. The gardens retain some semblance of how they would have looked a century ago. Interestingly the Viceroy's personal quarters remain under lock and key. According to one modern occupant of the Lodge who I spoke to, entrance to the room is only possible with the personal permission of the Prime Minister. Lovers of Rudyard Kipling's books about his time in India will be able to trace the origins of some of his stories to specific places in Shimla. Elsewhere, other former hill stations

such as Darjeeling continue to attract Indian and foreign visitors keen to enjoy the more temperate climate.

Darjeeling is also a gateway to the state of Sikkim, a strategically important region of India wedged between Nepal, Bhutan and China. The roads in Sikkim are noticeably better than in most of the remainder of the country. This is because the military requires high-grade surfaces in order to move men and machines around quickly and efficiently. This makes travel in the region quite a treat in comparison to road journeys elsewhere in India.

Another part of the Himalaya which in contrast boasts few roads is Ladakh. Close to Kashmir (which sadly remains on the Foreign & Commonwealth Office's (FCO's) no-go list as a result of years of political tension which have occasionally spilled over into the kidnap and subsequent execution of foreign visitors), Ladakh is viewed as being sufficiently stable by the FCO for British tourists to visit. The trekking here takes place across much drier and more parched lands than the more fertile valleys of Nepal, and there is not always much in the way of organised tourist infrastructure. Consequently, camping rather than hostel-based treks are the norm here. In summer, a road leads from the troubled district of Kargil into the Zangskar Valley. But it is more enjoyable and safer to trek into the principle Zangskari settlement of Padum. In winter, a week-long trek along the frozen river of Zangskar can only be attempted by hardened adventurers used to operating in sub-zero temperatures who have secured the services of an experienced Zangskari guide.

A little further south, and the town of Manali has established itself as an Indian version of Chamonix (if you deduct 100 years of expansion & development!). A very limited selection of skiing and boarding runs are possible, and heli-skiing on 5000m peaks covered in the best powder in the world is sometimes possible. (For the most developed skiing in India, head to Auli in Uttaranchal, which offers 5km-long runs between January and March.) In the summer months, Manali is a hub for adventure

sport enthusiasts: rafting, mountain biking, cycling, fishing, paragliding, mountaineering and trekking are all easily organised and reasonably priced.

At the opposite end of the country, the popular beach resort of Goa also offers paragliding trips alongside windsurfing and jet-skiing. Goa continues to be a magnet for travellers, and certainly retains a different 'feel' to other parts of the country. This is due in part to the fact that until 1961 (a full 14 years after British rule ended) Goa remained under the control of Portugal. Beach activities dominate here, and there's a strip of shoreline to suit everyone, from posers to revellers to the chilled-out crowd.

Another beach venue, which was starting to become increasingly popular with tourists until the tsunami earlier this year, is the Andaman Islands. The scene of some of the darkest episodes of British rule, the nightly sound and light show at the notorious Cellular Jail makes for an uncomfortable couple of hours if you're a British citizen. Less than 40 of the 500-plus isles that make up the Andamans are open to the public, but if it is a deserted beach that you're after you will not be disappointed, although it is of course going to take time for the area to recover from the recent disaster that befell the region. Tourism is perhaps more important here than ever before, so visiting the area will put much needed cash into the hands of the people who need it most. The Andamans are renowned for diving opportunities, although the fragile marine ecosystem was starting to be adversely affected by an increase in visitor numbers even before the waves struck.

The nearby Nicobar islands have been largely off-limits to foreigners since Independence. The Nicobar islands seem to have experienced more destruction than the Andamans as a result of their geographical location closer to the epicentre of the earthquake, combined with the lack of high ground on some islands which meant the local population had nowhere to run to when the water levels rose.

The tsunami also caused immense amounts of destruction on the Indian mainland. Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala were just some of the areas affected. But

tourists are already finding their way back just a couple of months after the sea returned to its normal level. Despite the tsunami, many visitors believe that the coastal state of Kerala, which borders the Arabian sea, remains something of an unsung jewel in India's crown. Full of customs and traditions not found anywhere else, Kerala is slowly but perhaps inevitably having its relaxed atmosphere slightly eroded with beach front hotel complexes and an attendant tourist industry. But for the most part, Kerala remains a place to surprise and revive the spirits of even the most jaded traveller.

Away from the damaged coastline and there is so much left to explore in India. A lifetime spent here would not be enough. Sunset and sunrise in Varanasi never fails to astound visitors. In a land dominated by religion, this place still stands out. This is where Hindu pilgrims come to bathe and also to die. Visitors to the burning ghats alongside the Ganges are unlikely to raise any eyebrows, but please show respect for the deceased by keeping photographic and video cameras buried in your rucksack. It is easy to become lost in the warren of alleyways that make up the city – and wandering about at night is certainly not to be encouraged – but inexpensive and clean accommodation overlooking the river in facilities such as the Alka Hotel can be secured if you book ahead to reserve a room. As in most other Indian cities, touts will do their level best to persuade you that your hotel has burnt or shut down and try to lead you to alternative accommodation (for which they will receive a cut of your payment). Stick to your guns and head for the hotel you want to stay in.

Another top tourist attraction – and with good reason – is the state of Rajasthan. This land of the Kings is also a land of contrasts. The blue city of Jodhpur stands in stark contrast to the pink capital of Rajasthan, Jaipur. The maharajas succeeded in maintaining autonomy even during British rule, and although modern Rajasthan is now an integral part of India, evidence of the warrior classes' independence can still be seen in its forts, palaces and old walled cities.

But spectacle after spectacle comes at a price. A large proportion of Indians have a standard of living that can shock visitors travelling from nations in the west. At some point in most travellers' trips, culture shock kicks in. I believe that it is important to recognise when this happens, and to take practical steps to alleviate the depression that a lot of tourists eventually feel overwhelmed by. This might be a night in a clean hotel and a really good meal for some, or a few days of voluntary work in-country for others. What works for one person may not do the trick for another. There are many positive ways to help support the people who you meet in India. At the very least, travel – especially when done independently – does put hard cash directly into the local economy.

Just when you think you have started to get a handle on India, she throws up a new surprise. And this is the magic of the country. From having your ears cleaned on the streets of Mumbai to riding an elephant in a national park, India is perhaps the most culturally and geographically diverse country on Earth. One visit is never enough.

### Surviving The Scams

India is the home of the scam. And it's a fair bet that during the course of your visit you will fall prey to at least one of them. Many are harmless, and the only damage you will suffer is a voluntary lightening of your wallet and a lingering feeling that you've been had – which you have. The great thing about scams is that there is an antidote for every single one. The trick is working out what that antidote is before the scam is carried through. Two of my favourite scams include:

#### a. The goo.

A dollop of unpleasant green goo mysteriously appeared on my companion's shoe, whereupon a shoe shine boy appeared and offered to clean up the mess. The shoe was duly handed over whereupon it was cleaned but not handed back until we had coughed up a significant dollop of cash. Antidote: wear sandals (they won't bother targeting you with the goo) or leave your shoe on whilst it is being cleaned – after agreeing the price.

## b. The rescuer

After being hassled for several hours by touts and scam merchants in Delhi's busy Connaught Circus, we were approached by a well-heeled gentleman of mature years who spoke perfect English. Explaining that he worked for the government, he apologised for all the hassle we had been experiencing. He then suggested that he drive us around Delhi free of charge. Exhausted and relieved, we followed like lambs to the slaughter. He showed us his office (in reality, any old office) that had the word 'Government' writ large upon it in a successful attempt to assuage our suspicions, and then took us to his car. This was the start of a two hour tour of various out-of-town 'cottage industry emporiums'. At each one we were led inside by our gallant assistant, whereupon all the predatory merchants waited for us to buy something so that our driver could receive a cut for delivering these two hapless souls into their hands. We bought nothing and were finally and unceremoniously dumped back at Connaught Circus. Antidote: Learn how to say "I do not understand" in Russian (which is pronounced "nye poni-my-you") and say this to everyone who approaches you with unsolicited offers. Remember that in India, everything is a scam until proven otherwise.

## Tribal India

India is home to literally dozens of tribal communities, known collectively as Adivasis. Whilst the government states that vast sums are spent every year on protecting these people, the situation on the ground is often somewhat different. Some indigenous peoples do welcome sensitive visitors who wish to learn more about their culture, whilst others reject approaches from outsiders, or are located in politically unstable regions.

After the tsunami swept across the Bay of Bengal, the tribal people of the Andaman Islands (Great Andamanese, Onge, Jarawa and Sentinelese) attracted the attention of the world's media when it was suggested that some kind of natural early warning

system might have encouraged these people to retire to high ground before the waves struck.

However, visitors to the Andamans be warned: it is illegal to interact with or even photograph any of these four tribes. And with very good reason: repeated exposure over the centuries with outsiders has decimated their numbers.

The Great Andamanese, who have been relocated onto Strait Island, now number less than 50. Their eventual extinction is sadly assured. As a result of continued interference, the Onge have largely surrendered their hunter-gather lifestyle and become dependent on government handouts; their total population hovers at a dangerously low 100. Meanwhile, a road has been driven through the Jarawa reserve on South and Middle Andaman Island. As a result of increased contact along the road, sometimes violent encounters with the Jarawa are on the increase.

Only the Sentinelese, who live in total isolation on North Sentinel Island (which is patrolled by the military to prevent anyone from flouting the zero-contact rule) appear to have a decent chance of long-term survival. Repeated overtures by anthropologists have always been rebuffed. Indeed, when rescuers recently overflowed the island in a helicopter to see if any of the Sentinelese had survived the tsunami, the pilot reported being shot at with bows and arrows.

### Places To Eat – Three Of The Tastiest

India is a food lover's delight. Spices and oils are added to the widest variety of vegetables and meats to produce sublime dishes that will linger in the memory long after the tastebuds have moved onto the next dish. Of course, all diners – not just the adventurous – need to stay on top of their personal hygiene drills in order to minimise the chance of contracting a bout of Montezuma's Revenge. Care must always be taken to ensure that all the water which passes one's lips has been purified. Some of the author's favourite Indian eateries include:

The Bukhara: Found within the Sheraton Hotel in Delhi, the Bukhara is based on a North-West Frontier menu whose origins come not from India but the street stalls in Afghanistan. Eaten with the hands, the savoury vegetable, chicken and lamb dishes are accompanied with breads that range in size from frisbee to surfboard. After ordering, ask for a tour of the kitchens. Conveniently located between Delhi and the international airport, the Bukhara is the perfect place for a last night blowout before the inevitable middle-of-the-night international flight departure. The hotel staff will look after all your luggage while you eat if you ask them nicely. Last year, the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) rated Bukhara as the “best restaurant in Asia and the finest Indian restaurant in the world”. [www.welcomgroup.com](http://www.welcomgroup.com).

The Oriental: Found on the outskirts of the Ladakhi city of Leh, the Oriental offers home cooking that ranges from authentic Italian pizzas to traditional Himalayan fare. This is a great place to watch Tibetan momos being made: show an interest and you might be invited into the kitchen to learn the art of wrapping vegetables and meat into parcels of dough. But be warned, it’s labour-intensive stuff. The Oriental Guest House, Changspa, Leh, Ladakh 194101 (tel: +91 1982 53153).

The Wild Orchid: A privately-owned restaurant on Havelock Island in the Andamans. The grilled kingfish steak (marinated in chilli and garlic, wrapped in a banana leaf and simmered on coals), and whole red snapper (fried in an oyster sauce and served on a bed of fragrant rice) are two dishes that are definitely worth going out of your way for. [www.wildorchidandaman.com](http://www.wildorchidandaman.com).

## Wild India – Five Of The Best

India boasts a diverse array of wildlife, some of which is receiving effective protection from poaching. Parks, reserves and sanctuaries exist throughout the country. Five of the most interesting are described here.

Kaziranga National Park: Famed as one of the last two refuges of the one-horned rhinoceros (the other is the Royal Chitwan National Park in neighbouring Nepal),

effective conservation policies have seen the rhino population rise from just 200 to some 1500 during the past 100 years. Location: Assam

Great Himalayan National Park: A protected 750 sq. km. area that is home to more than 180 different species of fauna including the elusive snow leopard. Trekkers wishing to spend more than a day inside the park must be accompanied by a ranger. Location: Himachal Pradesh.

Little Rann of Kutch: This dry and cracked salt plain is home to India's only remaining population of khur (Asiatic wild ass). You'll have to stay alert to spot them, as khurs can cruise at 15mph for two hours at a stretch, and speed along at 50mph when startled. Location: Gujarat.

Valley of Flowers National Park: The first outsider to explore this valley was the accomplished British mountaineer Frank Smythe. Since his visit some 70 years ago, trekkers and livestock have damaged patches of this natural carpet of flowers with the result that camping is now banned in order to protect this summer spectacle for future generations. Location: Uttarakhand.

Kanha National Park: The setting for Rudyard Kipling's 'The Jungle Book', Kanha offers a reasonable chance of seeing one of the 130-plus tigers that roam within its boundaries. Once a tiger has been detected by a park ranger, a combination of jeep and elephant is used to manoeuvre visitors into position. Location: Madhya Pradesh

## Timing Your Trip

India is so vast that it is possible to visit at any time of year and be guaranteed to find at least one region that is 'in season'. Here's a breakdown of the best times to visit some of the highlights. (UK seasons have been used here to help with your planning. In reality, the majority of India has just three seasons: hot, wet and cool!)

Spring

The southern states of India can all be visited in early spring, before the onset of the often unbearably hot weather. If you are planning to explore the state of Sikkim, then this is a superb time to visit, all the way through to May.

### Summer

As temperatures on the plains soar and the monsoon passes over the country, summer is the time to head for higher altitudes. The foothills of the Himalaya provide welcome respite from the sticky heat that engulfs the rest of the country. Further north and regions such as Ladakh largely escape the monsoon that engulfs the rest of the Himalaya, making this region the perfect choice for mountain trekkers who must take their holidays between June and September.

### Autumn

As the Indian Himalaya starts to receive its first snows (which quickly seal off roads to the region), the monsoon begins to recede from the plains, leaving behind a vibrant flora. Places such as Goa, Bombay, Rajasthan and Kolkata (Calcutta) can all start to be visited again in relative comfort during this time.

### Winter

With the exception of the far north, this is perhaps the best time of year to visit the majority of the country. Temperatures, – whilst cool – certainly aren't cold, making it a perfect place to escape to during the bleak, short and wet days of a British winter. If it is snowsports that you're after, don't forget the skiing possibilities in Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal.

### Tibetans In India

In 1959, some 10 years after the Chinese invasion of Tibet, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama left his beloved country and made the difficult journey from Lhasa to India. The Indian authorities allowed him to settle in the village of McLeod Ganj, near Dharamsala, in the Himachal Pradesh. In the ensuing 45 years, around a quarter of a million of his fellow countrymen have made a similar journey, and settling in

various parts of India as well as elsewhere in the world. Whilst western nations continue to soften their stance on the Tibet issue in order to woo China, the Dalai Lama has never been more popular with ordinary people around the world, and large numbers of visitors flock to Dharamsala every year. Courses on Buddhist philosophy as well as Tibetan art, language and food are run for several months each year.

[www.tibet.com](http://www.tibet.com)

## India: What You Need To Know

### The Facts

Population: Over one billion and rising rapidly.

Capital: Delhi.

Currency: Indian Rupee (currently circa Rs 75 to the British Pound)

Language: 18 official languages, with Hindi and English widely spoken.

### Flights

Flying to India is relatively inexpensive. Internet booking is usually the way to go, although deals can be found on the high street and on Teletext. Expect to pay upwards of £450 for flights during the more popular times of year.

### Internal Travel

According to some reports, around 80,000 people die on Indian roads every year. So unless you have a predilection for driving on potholed roads and negotiating around drivers who in the main have had to drive just a few yards in order to pass their test, driving is best left to local 'experts'. At all costs avoid road travel at night, or in buses that have one driver for long distance journeys. Drivers (and the driver's mate who is there to keep the driver awake) do fall asleep, vehicles travelling without lights at night do crash head on, and buses do drive off hairpin bends and into ravines hundreds of feet below. Minimise the chance of becoming a victim by allowing extra time to travel during the day, or consider travelling on an internal flight or on a sleeper train ([www.indianrail.gov.in](http://www.indianrail.gov.in)).

## Money Matters

India is a country where you can easily survive on just a few pounds a day if you are happy with a monotonous diet of rice and dahl, and a drab room in a hostel. With just a little more cash, you can live like a king with a lifestyle than in Western Europe would cost hundred of pounds a day. Changing foreign cash and traveller's cheques in banks and hotels is straightforward but time-consuming. In rural and remote areas, carry plenty of rupees in small denomination bills.

## Paperwork

Visas are necessary for British passport holders visiting India. These can be applied for well in advance of your departure by post, or in person at the Indian Consulate in London. Arrive early in the morning (preferably with a form downloaded from the website and already filled in), grab a ticket from the counter outside the building and then wait your turn inside. Expect to part with £30. Passports are processed and handed out in a slightly chaotic way (which is a good warm-up for your forthcoming trip) an hour or two later. Certain regions in India require additional permits. Some, like the Andamans, need an extra payment. Others, such as Sikkim, are free. All require extra time to obtain. Some need to be secured before departing from the UK, others can only be applied for upon arrival in India. [www.hcilondon.net](http://www.hcilondon.net).

## When To Go

India can be visited all year round; October to March is great for all areas except the mountainous region of the far north, which is best approached between May and September when the rest of the country is besieged by high temperatures and the monsoon. (For more details on specific areas, see 'Timing Your Trip' in the main article.)

## Health

Some injections and prophylactic treatments are highly recommended depending on where in the country you are visiting. Inoculations and courses of tablets which provide protection from ailments such as hepatitis, typhoid and malaria may be recommended by your GP. Taking precautions against contracting HIV, dengue fever and other conditions is equally important. Ensure that you book your first consultation with your doctor as early as possible (ideally a few months in advance) to allow enough time to have the necessary inoculations. Medical treatment in India varies enormously, but rarely comes up to the standard we are used to in Western Europe. Carrying a comprehensive medical kit that includes a sterile needle pack is a sensible precaution.

#### Accommodation

In major towns and cities, a wide range of hotels – from dusty hostels to five star palaces – are available. Rates are sometimes negotiable, especially in the off-season. Expect to pay more for rooms with views that don't look out onto busy roads or shanty towns. In some rural areas only rudimentary accommodation may be available, so carrying your own sleeping bag liner, light sleeping bag and perhaps a foam mat will allow you to deposit the supplied bedding into a corner of the room and thus minimise an onslaught of friendly bed bugs.

#### Contact

Official India tourist office website: [www.incredibleindia.org](http://www.incredibleindia.org)

North East India experts: [www.tigermountainindia.com](http://www.tigermountainindia.com)

Specialist treks & tours: [www.ibexexpeditions.com](http://www.ibexexpeditions.com)

Indian Himalaya treks: [www.worldexpeditions.co.uk](http://www.worldexpeditions.co.uk)

Supporting tribal people: [www.survival-international.org](http://www.survival-international.org)

Daily news: [www.timesofindia.com](http://www.timesofindia.com)

#### Know Before You Go

For up to the minute travel advice, visit the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website at [www.fco.gov.uk/travel/countryadvice.asp](http://www.fco.gov.uk/travel/countryadvice.asp) and follow the link to the

relevant pages. It should be noted that key areas of India, (including but not restricted to Jammu & Kashmir (except Ladakh), the majority of the Line of Control with Pakistan, and some of the North East States) are currently regarded as no-go zones for foreigners. Finally, be aware that safety and equipment standards on all manner of adventure sports may not be as high as in the UK.

Read On

India: A History. John Keay. ISBN 0006387845

India. Lonely Planet. ISBN: 1740594215

Kim. Kipling. Penguin. ISBN: 0140620494

No Full Stops In India. Mark Tully. ISBN 0140104801

Plain Tales From The Hills. Kipling. Penguin. ISBN: 0140620923

The Age of Kali. William Dalrymple. ISBN 0006547753

Trekking In The Indian Himalaya. Weare. Lonely Planet. ISBN: 1864502312

Hindi & Urdu Phrasebook. Lonely Planet. ISBN: 0864424256

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