



Lonely Planet India

By Sarina Singh

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Editorial Review

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With one foot grounded in time-honored traditions and the other fervently striding into the entrepreneurial e-age, India embraces diversity as passionately as few other countries on earth could.

Boasting a population of one billion people - and growing - India is as vast as it is crowded and as sublime as it is squalid. The plains are as flat and featureless as the Himalaya are towering and spectacular, the religious texts as perplexing as their underlying message is simple, and the people as easygoing as they are tenacious.

Perhaps the one thing that encapsulates India is that it is a place to expect the unexpected. Indeed, that's what often makes travelling in the subcontinent so frustratingly draining, yet also so inimitably inspirational. Love it or hate it, India jostles your entire being and, while more than a few travelers are only too happy to get on their flight home, many will later find themselves hankering to get back.

India can be hard going for travelers and is guaranteed to challenge, inspire and confound all at once. The poverty is confronting, Indian bureaucracy would test the patience of a saint, bus journeys on pothole-riddled roads can zap your energy in a flash, and even the most experienced travelers find their tempers frayed at some point. Yet it's all part of what makes India the unique travel experience that it is.

India, it is often said, is not a country but a continent. From north to south and east to west, the people are diverse, the languages are varied, the customs are distinctive, the landscape is manifold.

In a nutshell, India's landmass roughly resembles an upside-down triangle with the top formed by the mighty Himalayan mountain chain. Here you will find the intriguing Tibetan-influenced region of Ladakh and the awesome mountainous areas of Himachal Pradesh, Garhwal and the Darjeeling and Sikkim regions. South of this is the flat Ganges plain, crossing east from the colorful and comparably affluent Punjab in the northwest, past the capital city Delhi and buzzing tourist attractions such as Agra (with the Taj Mahal), Khajuraho, Varanasi and the holy Ganges to the northern part of the Bay of Bengal, where you find frenetic Kolkata (Calcutta), which has long been acknowledged as India's cultural capital.

South of this northern plain the Deccan plateau rises. Here you will find cities that mirror the rise and fall of the Hindu and Muslim kingdoms, and the modern metropolis that their successors, the British, built at Mumbai (Bombay). India's story is one of many different kingdoms fiercely competing with each other, and this is clearly evident in places such as Bijapur, Mandu, Golconda and other central Indian centers. Finally, there is the steamy south, India's Dravidian heartland, which is just as extraordinarily diverse as North India in terms of its landscapes, people, arts, traditions and culture.

India's glorious diversity can make it a veritable quagmire when planning itineraries. If you want to see places of worship, there is an astonishing array of sacred sites, from immaculately kept Jain temples to weathered Buddhist stupas. If it's history you're after, it's around every corner; the countless monuments, battle-scarred forts, abandoned cities and ancient ruins all have their tales to tell. If you simply want to splash around, there are beaches to satiate the most avid sun worshipper, while lovers of the great outdoors will find no shortage of scenic walks.

On a personal level, India is going to be exactly what you make of it. This country is not a place you merely 'see'; it's an assault on all the senses, a journey that's impossible to define because it's so different for everyone. But there's one thing for sure - no matter where you go or what you do, it's a place you'll never

forget.

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