

Destination Northeast India

People often describe the northeast of India as a backwater – we prefer to think of it as the gateway to a wild frontier. Only tenuously connected to the rest of India, Sikkim and the ‘Seven Sisters’ – the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram – are a world apart from the Indian plains. This is the ‘Wild East’ of India, where a string of Adivasi (tribal) societies have had their way of life protected by impregnable jungles, densely forested hills and the curtain wall of the Himalaya.

In language, culture and attitude, the people of the far northeast take their cues as much from Tibet and Southeast Asia as from the rest of India. Even the Mughals and the British Empire failed to bring this remote corner of the subcontinent into the Indian mainstream. The maps of the Northeast States created at Independence bear little relation to the cultural boundaries of the northeast, which cross state and international borders, marking the homelands of hundreds of different Adivasi communities.

A little of the frontier feel has rubbed off on the states abutting the northeast. Orissa to the south is a sleepy sprawl of rice fields and fishing villages that washes out into the Bay of Bengal, with its own Adivasi heartland in the hills of the Eastern Ghats. To the west, West Bengal shares borders with three neighbouring countries – Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh – opening up some exciting opportunities for old-fashioned overland travel.

The doorway to this fascinating and little-explored region is Kolkata, India’s fourth largest city after Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru (Bangalore). From this fast and furious metropolis, you can escape to a different India, where adventures (and the possibility of a one-horned Indian rhinoceros) lurk at the end of every dirt road, and where foreign travellers are still a novelty. However, a lack of tourists also means a lack of infrastructure. You’ll have to be much more independent and tolerant of discomfort and inconvenience if you want to explore this untamed corner of the country.

Travellers should note that political tensions run high in the northeast. The seven Northeast States have almost as many separatist movements as there are peoples, and dozens of armed insurgent groups are fighting the Indian government for an independent homeland. Security in the region improves and deteriorates with the changing political climate, but the wave of devastating bombings that hit Assam in 2008 would seem to indicate that the political situation is at a low ebb.

Conversely, it has never been easier to visit the northeast. Access to the states that border China is controlled by a complicated series of permits, but each year the restrictions become slightly less onerous, making it possible to travel deeper into the northeast. That said, you still need an easy-to-obtain permit for Sikkim, and foreigners are required to travel as part of a group to visit Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. If you plan to visit any of these four states, apply through a local tour agency well ahead of time.

For travellers, the northeast offers a mix of famous sights and unexpected delights. Kolkata is a must-visit on any travel itinerary, and Konark in Orissa is arguably the most famous Hindu temple in India. West Bengal has the legendary Sunderbans Tiger Reserve and the quintessential Indian hill station at Darjeeling, and Sikkim has excellent trekking and more Himalayan viewpoints that you can shake a spyglass at.

FAST FACTS

Population: West Bengal 80,221,171, Orissa 36,706,920, Sikkim 540,493, Northeast States 38,495,089 (2001 census)

GDP growth rate: West Bengal 8.5%, Assam 4.5% (2006)

Rural unemployment rate: West Bengal 11.1%, Arunachal Pradesh 0.8% (2001)

Female participation in labour: Orissa 24.7%, Sikkim 53%

National inflation: 11%

National population growth rate: 1.58%

National literacy rate: 54% (women) and 76% (men)

National life expectancy: 66 years (women) and 63 years (men)

Share of India’s tea harvest: 70%

In the far northeast, Assam is the most accessible of the Northeast States, with tranquil tea gardens, Tantric temples and national parks full of rumbling rhinos, while Meghalaya boasts thundering waterfalls and dramatic views, and Tripura offers a window onto pre-Partition Bengal. The four permit states – Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur – are something else again, an edgy frontier where villages of bamboo houses melt seamlessly into the jungle.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the northeast has made the news for all the wrong reasons. Assam barely had time to celebrate a peaceful resolution to the conflict with Bodo separatists before a new wave of violence hit the state in 2008. Bomb attacks on trains and markets continued through 2009, linked to Bodo hardliners and organizations fighting for a separate homeland for Adivasi tea workers, for the Dimas and Karbi people and for the ethnic Assamese. A weak government response to the devastating floods on the Brahmaputra in 2008 may well be a contributing factor.

The imposition of central rule in Nagaland in 2008 also caused resentment, but no significant increase in violence, though scuffles were reported between the National Socialist Council of Nagaland and other rebel Naga groups. Probably the most risky areas are Manipur and northern Tripura, where Adivasi insurgents continue to stage attacks against Hindi- and Urdu-speaking migrant workers.

Before you cancel your plane ticket, be aware that these hotspots represent only a tiny part of the northeast. Sikkim, Orissa and West Bengal are no more risky than Goa or Rajasthan, and Mizoram managed to stay peaceful and addicted to guitar-based rock throughout 2008, despite a plague of rats linked to the blooming of its bamboo forests (last time the forests bloomed in 1959, it caused a state-wide famine).

Few travellers encounter problems of any kind in Arunachal Pradesh or Meghalaya, and even Assam and Nagaland can be negotiated safely if you pay attention to local news reports and avoid travel during times of political tension. If things look hairy, head to safe havens like Kolkata, Sikkim and the West Bengal hills, and roam northeast when the situation calms.

For our money, the rewards of travelling in this region still vastly outweigh the risks. With a little advance preparation, it's easy to stay safe and travel far off the beaten track, and even risk-averse travellers can unleash the inner pioneer in the peaceful backwoods of Sikkim, Orissa and West Bengal. Above all else, the northeast is a place where the maps have gaps and trails can be blazed – pack your pith helmet and see what you can discover...

Getting Started

Compared to more established destinations like Kerala and Rajasthan, the northeast of India is a wild frontier. The tribes, temples, mountains and monasteries of this blissfully untouched corner of the country are only just being discovered by travellers, though the gateway cities of Kolkata (Calcutta) and Darjeeling are established stops on the traveller circuit. From these hubs, you can escape to a different India, where foreign visitors are still a novelty and where the landscape throbs to the beat of drums and the chattering of birds in the jungle.

This is India at its most undiluted – an evocative, energising infusion of sights, sounds, smells and sensations. Infrastructure is limited once you leave the tourist hubs, and a certain degree of self-sufficiency is essential, not least because you can travel for weeks here without encountering another traveller. Because of the low visitor numbers, there are refreshingly few scams waiting for new arrivals, but you still need to prepare yourself for the challenges that India can deliver.

India is the second-most populous nation on earth and the crowds and congestion can turn even a short bus journey into a long, draining ordeal. You will have to get used to being stared at, photographed, prodded and engaged in deep conversation by complete strangers on a regular basis. Then there's the infamous Indian bureaucracy – at times it can seem like nothing gets done without a complicated form, countersigned and filled out in triplicate. But this all adds to the intensity of travel on the subcontinent – after visiting India, other countries can feel like they have the sound turned down.

If this is your first trip to India, take a few days to acclimatise before you head off into the unknown. Read up about the region before you travel and pay particular attention to the cultural and religious framework. India makes a lot more sense when you understand some of the complex religious and social rules that govern the way people behave. Luck favours the prepared – start planning your trip at least a month in advance to make time for immunisations and applying for visas and permits.

Two essential virtues for travel in India are patience and flexibility, particularly when using public transport. Delays and cancellations are par for the course and you'll have a much more relaxing time if you accept that in India, you get there when you get there. Always build some flexibility into your plans and be prepared to change your itinerary if anything off the route catches your attention.

HOW MUCH?

A sweet *paan* Rs5

A thali (plate meal) Rs40 to Rs80

Three-hour bus ride Rs50 to Rs100

Budget hotel Rs100 to Rs500

Jeep tour per day US\$20 to US\$50

THE INDIA EXPERIENCE

India is not a country you just see, it is a country you experience. As well as sightseeing make some time for the following:

- Food, fireworks and fun at India's fantastic festivals (see p18)
- Advanced retail therapy at the northeast's shops, markets and state emporiums (see p315)
- Giving something back, by volunteering on a local development project (see p323)
- A bit of adventure, like an elephant safari in Assam or a rafting trip in Sikkim (see p92)
- Getting educated – learn a language, pick up some recipes or improve your yoga on a course in the northeast (see p306)

Above all else, give yourself some time to relax. Every now and then, find a quiet spot to sit back and smell the wafts of incense – then when you're ready, throw yourself back into the wonderful, energetic maelstrom that is India.

WHEN TO GO

As with any trip to the tropics, it pays to heed the climate when planning a trip to northeast India. Different areas are affected by different climatic patterns at different times of year, and the local topography can also affect the weather. Generally speaking, the climate is defined by three seasons – the hot, the wet (also known as the monsoon) and the cool. Most visitors come during the 'cool' months from November to mid-February.

See the 'Fast Facts' box at the start of each regional chapter for the best times to visit specific regions. Apart from the weather, you may also want to time your visit to coincide with the best festivals and special events – see p18.

The Hot

After the cool winter, temperatures start to climb in March and April, peaking just before the breaking of the monsoon rains in May or June. This can be an unbelievably sticky and uncomfortable time to visit the lowlands and many people retreat to the hill stations in West Bengal and the Northeast States. The plains of Assam, southern West Bengal and Orissa in particular bake like a bread oven – take advantage of AC where you can find it. Late in May the first signs of the monsoon appear – high humidity, electrical storms, sudden rain showers and dust storms that turn day into night. Carry an umbrella or raincoat or get soaked.

See Climate Charts (p305) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Getting a visa (p322) and travel insurance (p310) and investigating the permit situation for the Northeast States (p199)
- Seeking medical advice about vaccinations (p343) and anti-malarial drugs (p346)
- Clothes that cover your shoulders and legs – modesty is the default dress code (see p44)
- Lots of film or memory cards for your camera, particularly at festival time
- A permanent marker – for scrawling addresses on cloth-wrapped parcels at the post office.
- An mp3 player or personal music player – for instant privacy on buses and trains
- Good-quality earplugs, for noisy hotels, trains and buses
- A well-concealed money belt, with a stash of emergency cash (p308)
- Sunscreen lotion, lip balm and good, UV-resistant sunglasses, particularly in the mountains
- A small LED torch for poorly lit streets, power cuts and finding the toilet at night in mountain lodges
- A small pocket knife – for cutting open mangoes and a thousand other Boy Scout tasks
- A universal sink plug – few hotels have them
- Tampons – sanitary napkins are widely available but tampons are rare outside of big cities
- Mosquito repellent and a mozzie net or plug-in mosquito killer
- The eye mask from your flight – light pollution is a major problem in budget hotels
- Your sense of humour!

The Wet

Most of the rain in the northeast comes from the heavy southwest monsoon. Showers become more frequent and heavier in June and temperatures fall a few degrees, but the cooling effect doesn't last long – the period from July to September is marked by persistent high temperatures and massive humidity.

Although it doesn't rain solidly all day, it rains virtually every day. National parks turn into quagmires and roads through the hills are frequently blocked by landslides. On the flip side, many interesting festivals take place at this time of year – see the itinerary on p25 for more on monsoon travel.

The Cool

From October to February, the rains slow to a trickle and temperatures become more bearable. This is the peak season for tourism and there is heavy competition for rooms and tourist quota seats on trains. November and December are the best times to visit national parks in the plains. To enjoy the best of the mountain views, visit Sikkim, the West Bengal Hills and Arunachal Pradesh in October or November, before the icy fingers of winter grip the Himalaya.

COSTS & MONEY

Travelling around the northeast can cost as much or as little as you like, depending on where you go and the level of luxury you crave. Once you leave the mainstream tourist circuit, budget options may be limited, or undesirable. If you visit any of the permit-only states, you may be required to travel on an expensive chartered jeep tour, which will also dramatically ratchet up your costs.

Meals, hotel rooms and tickets for buses and trains can cost just a few pennies or as much as you would pay for the same services in the West. The best way to assess the costs for your trip is to read the relevant regional chapters of this book. Expect to spend considerably more in large cities such as Kolkata, if only because there are more things to spend money on.

How does this all translate to a daily budget? As a rough indication, shoestring travellers can get by on Rs500 to Rs800 per day, staying in dorms or rooms with shared bathrooms, travelling on cheaper classes of bus and train, and eating at local restaurants. Add in an evening beer and you'll need closer to Rs1000.

It's worth spending a little more for hotel rooms with hot water and private bathrooms, the occasional slap-up curry dinner, more comfortable seats on buses and trains, and local transport by autorickshaw and taxi. Midrange travellers can get by on Rs1000 to Rs2000 per day, or less in smaller, not-so-touristy towns.

At the top end, the sky is the limit. A budget of \$US200 per day will open up the most luxurious accommodation and the fastest and most comfortable classes of long-distance travel – including internal flights – allowing you to see the sights on your own time scale.

In all classes, accommodation prices fluctuate with demand. During the peak tourist season and major festivals, many hotels charge at least double the normal rate. You'll also pay extra for AC, a private bathroom with a tub or a Himalayan view. Most hotels in the northeast fall somewhere within the following ranges:

Budget: Single rooms Rs100 to Rs400; doubles Rs200 to Rs500

Midrange: Single rooms Rs300 to Rs1500; doubles Rs500 to Rs1800

Top end: Single and double rooms Rs1800 upwards

TOP 10

Nepal
Patna
NORTHEAST INDIA

FABULOUS FESTIVALS

The northeast is always colourful. At festival time, it goes into overdrive. Here are some of the best:

- 1 Gangasagar Mela – January; Sagar Island
- 2 Losar – February/March; Sikkim, West Bengal and Arunachal Pradesh
- 3 Holi/Dol Yatra – February/March; India-wide
- 4 Ambubachi Mela – June; Guwahati
- 5 Rath Yatra – June/July; Puri and Kolkata
- 6 Durga Puja/Dussehra – September/October; Bengal-wide but especially in Kolkata
- 7 Diwali – October/November; India-wide
- 8 Kolkata Film Festival – November; Kolkata
- 9 Hornbill Festival – December; Kohima, Nagaland
- 10 Losoong – December/January; Sikkim

ROUSING READS

India has inspired some seminal literary works – bookworms should hunt down the following:

- 1 *Midnight's Children* – a mystical novel set at the precise moment of Indian Independence, by Salman Rushdie
- 2 *A Suitable Boy* – a tale of politics and marriage partly set in Kolkata, by Vikram Seth
- 3 *A Fine Balance* – a unique perspective on the legacy of Independence, by Rohinton Mistry
- 4 *The Inheritance of Loss* – Man Booker–prize-winning novel set in 1980s Kalimpong, by Kiran Desai
- 5 *White Mughals* – stories of British colonials who 'went native', by William Dalrymple
- 6 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* – a modern tale of white-collar rebellion, by Kiran Desai
- 7 *City of Joy* – the book that created the Western image of Kolkata, by Dominique Lapierre
- 8 *Sheshher Kobita* – Shillong-based romance from Rabindranath Tagore
- 9 *The Raj Quartet* – four tomes detailing the fall of the Raj, by Paul Scott
- 10 *The Calcutta Chromosome* – a time-travelling thriller, by Amitav Ghosh

FANTASTIC FLICKS

Mumbai may have Bollywood, but Kolkata is the capital of Indian arthouse cinema – check out the following classic Indian films:

- 1 *Pather Panchali* – a tragic tale of 1920s Bengal from the great Satyajit Ray
- 2 *Pyasa* – a 1950s classic, starring, produced and directed by Bengal-raised Guru Dutt
- 3 *The Cloud-Capped Star* – a dark but beautifully filmed Kolkata melodrama by Ritwik Ghatak
- 4 *Ek Din Pratidin* – a ground-breaking exploration of the status of Bengali women, by Mrinal Sen
- 5 *Gandhi* – a cast of thousands and some epic locations in Richard Attenborough's Oscar-winning biopic
- 6 *Mother India* – a rousing fable of family conflict through the generations, by Mehboob Khan
- 7 *Lagaan* – villagers defeat the British in cricket and in life in this hit by Ashutosh Gowariker
- 8 *Sholay* – the highest-grossing Bollywood film of all time, by Ramesh Sippy
- 9 *Bose: The Forgotten Hero* – controversial tale of the Bengal freedom fighter, by Shyam Benegal
- 10 *Devdas* – A lavish, big-budget romance set in period Bengal, from Sanjay Leela Bhansali

Travel costs will depend on the class and speed of travel. Domestic flights cost much more than buses or trains, but look out for bargain promotional fares on budget airlines. Shoestring travellers can cover huge distances incredible cheaply in slow 'ordinary' buses and fan-cooled sleeper carriages on trains. Travelling long distances in unreserved 2nd-class train carriages is cheap as chapatis, and as uncomfortable as sitting on a cactus. AC will boost up the price of all tickets.

Most towns have inexpensive suburban trains or buses; it costs more to travel by rickshaw, autorickshaw and taxi. Renting a car with a driver can seem expensive, but costs plummet if you split the fare with other travellers. For more information, see the Transport chapter (p332).

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Kolkata has spawned a dozen travelogues all by itself. The essential reading list should include *Calcutta* by Geoffrey Moorhouse, Simon Winchester's *Calcutta*, and *The Weekenders: Adventures in Calcutta*, featuring the musings of Monica Ali, Irvine Welsh, Tony Hawks and others.

In *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Tahir Shah tells of his travels through India to learn the art of illusion under the guidance of a mysterious master magician from Kolkata. Every traveller to India should read *No Full Stops in India* and *India in Slow Motion* by Mark Tully, the BBC's correspondent for India for 25 years.

The backpacker scene in India is entertainingly sent up in William Sutcliffe's *Are You Experienced?*. Misadventures of a darker sort are explored in Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*, the tale of a young European couple who lose their way on a quest for spiritual enlightenment.

Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola* amusingly and cynically describes the collision between India looking to the West for technology and modern methods, and the West descending upon India in search of wisdom and enlightenment.

The Northeast States fall off the radar of all but the most intrepid travel writers. Mark Shand describes an epic voyage along the Brahmaputra River in *River Dog*. In Alexander Frater's *Chasing the Monsoon*, the author races after the monsoon from Kovalam (Kerala) to Meghalaya (Northeast States).

INTERNET RESOURCES

Rediff (www.rediff.com) An extensive India portal, good for news on the northeast.

Incredible India (www.incredibleindia.org) The official government tourism site.

Northeast India (www.northeast-india.com) Tourism site covering highlights of the northeast.

123 India (www.123india.com) India-wide portal for news, sport and culture.

Sify (www.sify.com) Extensive India links from one of India's biggest ISPs.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Online travel information, hotel bookings and reader comments on the Thorn Tree.

Events Calendar

India officially follows the European Gregorian calendar but most holidays and festivals follow the Indian or Tibetan lunar calendars, tied to the cycle of the moon, or the Islamic calendar, which shifts forward 11 days each year (12 days in leap years). As a result, the exact dates of festivals change from year to year. The region-wide holidays and festivals listed here are arranged according to the Indian lunar calendar – also see the ‘Festivals in...’ boxed texts in the regional chapters. Contact local tourist offices for exact dates or check the web – see <http://festivals.iloveindia.com> and www.festivalsindia.com.

MAGHA (JANUARY–FEBRUARY)

REPUBLIC DAY 26 January
This public holiday celebrates the founding of the Republic of India in 1950.

BHOGALI BIHU (MAKAR SANKRANTI IN BENGAL)

Farmers celebrate the winter rice harvest with buffalo fights and fires lit in honour of Agni, the Hindu god of fire.

VASANT PANCHAMI

Hindus honour Saraswati, the goddess of learning, by wearing yellow and placing educational objects in front of idols of the goddess for her blessing.

PHALGUNA (FEBRUARY–MARCH)

HOLI

Hindus celebrate the beginning of spring by throwing coloured water and *gulal* (powder; also called *abeer*) at anyone in range. Bengalis celebrate the festival as Dol Yatra – when idols of Krishna and Radha are rocked on ritual swings.

EID-MILAD-UN-NABI

This Islamic festival celebrates the birth of the Prophet Mohammed; it falls on 27 February in 2010 and 16 February in 2011.

SHIVARATRI

This day of Hindu fasting recalls the *tandava* (cosmic dance) of Shiva, ending in the anointing of linga (phallic symbols) in Shaivite areas.

CHAITRA (MARCH–APRIL)

MAHAVIR JAYANTI

This is a Jain festival, commemorating the birth of Mahavir, the founder of Jainism.

RAMANAVAMI

Hindus celebrate the birth of Rama with processions, music and feasting, and enactments of scenes from the Ramayana, particularly in Vaishnavite areas.

EASTER

A Christian holiday marking the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, Easter is widely celebrated in the Northeast States.

VAISAKHA (APRIL–MAY)

BUDDHA JAYANTI

In Sikkim, West Bengal and western Arunachal Pradesh, Buddhists celebrate the birth of the historical Buddha.

JYAISTHA (MAY–JUNE)

Only regional festivals fall in this period – see the regional chapters for details.

ASADHA (JUNE–JULY)

RATH YATRA (CAR FESTIVAL)

Effigies of Jagannath (Vishnu) are hauled through cities on man-powered chariots; the biggest celebrations are at Puri in Orissa (p261) and Mahesh in West Bengal.

SHRAVANA (JULY–AUGUST)

NAAG PANCHAMI

This Hindu festival is dedicated to Ananta, the god of serpents. Snakes are venerated as totems against monsoon flooding and other evils (see the boxed text, p84).

RAKSHA BANDHAN (NARIAL PURNIMA)

On the full moon, girls fix amulets known as *rakhis* to the wrists of brothers and male friends to protect them in the coming year.

BHADRA (AUGUST–SEPTEMBER)**INDEPENDENCE DAY** 15 August

This exuberant public holiday marks the anniversary of India's Independence in 1947.

DRUKPA TESHI

This Buddhist festival celebrates the first teaching given by Siddhartha Gautama.

GANESH CHATURTHI

Hindus celebrate the birth of Ganesh by parading clay idols through the streets, then ceremonially immersing the effigies in rivers, water tanks or the sea.

JANMASTAMI

The anniversary of Krishna's birth is celebrated with gleeful abandon by followers of Vishnu.

SHRAVAN PURNIMA

On this day of fasting, high-caste Hindus replace the sacred thread looped over their left shoulder and bathe in temple tanks and sacred lakes.

PATETI

The minority Parsi community celebrates the Zoroastrian new year at this time.

RAMADAN

Thirty days of fasting mark the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, when the Koran was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed; the fast starts on 11 August in 2010 and 1 August in 2011.

ASVINA (SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER)**NAVRATRI (FESTIVAL OF NINE NIGHTS)**

This Hindu festival celebrates the goddess Durga in all her incarnations. Special dances are held and the goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati also get special praise.

DURGA PUJA

Symbolising the triumph of good over evil, Durga Puja commemorates the victory of the goddess Durga over buffalo-headed demon Mahishasura. This is the biggest annual festival in Kolkata, West Bengal and Assam, where thousands of images of the goddess are displayed then ritually immersed in rivers, tanks and the sea. See the boxed text, p102.

DUSSEHRA

Vaishnavites celebrate the victory of the Hindu god Rama over the demon-king Ravana on the same dates as Durga Puja.

GANDHI JAYANTI

2 October

This national holiday is a solemn celebration of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi's birth.

EID AL-FITR

Muslims celebrate the end of Ramadan with three days of festivities, starting 30 days after the start of the fast.

KARTIKA (OCTOBER–NOVEMBER)**DIWALI (DEEPAVALI)**

Hindus celebrate the 'festival of lights' for five days, giving gifts, lighting fireworks and burning butter and oil lamps to guide Rama home from exile.

GOVARDHANA PUJA

A Vaishnavite Hindu festival celebrating the lifting of Govardhan Hill by Krishna.

EID AL-ADHA

Muslims commemorate Ibrahim's readiness to sacrifice his son to God; the festival falls on 27 November in 2009, 16 November in 2010 and 6 November in 2011.

**AGRAHAYANA
(NOVEMBER–DECEMBER)****NANAK JAYANTI**

The birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, is celebrated with prayer readings and processions.

PAUSA (DECEMBER–JANUARY)**CHRISTMAS DAY**

25 December

Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

LOSAR

Tibetan New Year is celebrated by Tibetan Buddhists in Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal. Exact dates vary from region to region.

LOSOONG

New Year for the people of Sikkim, with processions and monastery dances, is celebrated by Sikkimese across the northeast.

MUHARRAM

Shia Muslims commemorate the martyrdom of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson, Imam; the festival starts on 18 December in 2009, 7 December in 2010 and 26 November in 2011.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

A SHORT HOP THROUGH THE HILLS

One Week

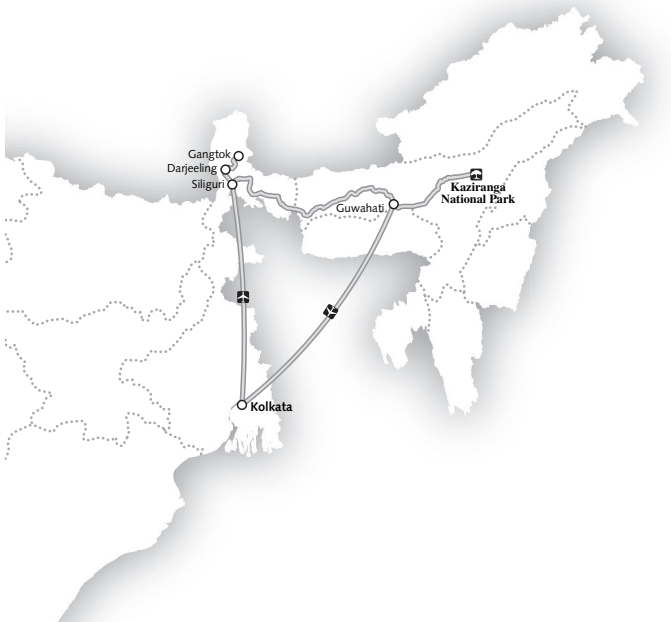
A week is a tight schedule, but the following itinerary will tick off some memorable experiences. To save time, book flights in advance (see p332).

Devote day one to exploring **Kolkata** (Calcutta, p100), making time for the glorious **Victoria Memorial** (p107) and **Indian Museum** (p110). On day two, fly north to Bagdogra near **Siliguri** (p145) and take a jeep to the green hills of **Darjeeling** (p153).

On day three, catch the sunrise over Khangchendzonga Falls from **Tiger Hill** (p157), then arrange your permit for Sikkim. Next day, travel by jeep to **Gangtok** (p176) for a taste of Buddhist culture, and more mountain views on a 'three-point tour' (p179).

You'll only have a day or so for the Northeast States, so zip back downhill to Siliguri on day five, and take the overnight train to **Guwahati** (p204) in Assam. On day six, charter a jeep for an overnight rhino-spotting trip to **Kaziranga National Park** (p213). Returning to Guwahati on day seven, you should have just enough time to visit the eerie **Kamakhya Mandir temple** (p204) before catching an afternoon flight back to Kolkata.

A whistle-stop tour of the northeast, with stops in steamy Kolkata, tea-tastic Darjeeling, gumpa-ringed Gangtok and Assam's Kaziranga National Park.



ONCE AROUND THE BRAHMAPUTRA

One Month

This grand tour starts and ends in bustling **Kolkata** (p100), taking in most of the famous sights of the northeast as it criss-crosses the mighty Brahmaputra River. To maximise your time, arrange train travel in advance at the Foreign Tourist Bureau (p133) in Kolkata.

Devote the first few days to the sights of Kolkata, including the cultural centres founded by **Ramakrishna** (p118) and **Rabindranath Tagore** (p117). Fly on to **Agartala** (p235), the sleepy capital of Tripura, and visit the **Tripura Sundari Mandir** (p239) and **Neermahal Palace** (p239).

Providing things are secure, take the overnight bus to **Shillong** (p240), the pleasant capital of Meghalaya. Haggle for tribal artefacts at the **low Duh market** (p241) and head east to **Cherrapunjee** (p243) to see the thundering waterfalls.

For week two, connect through **Guwahati** (p204) – the Assamese capital – to **Kaziranga National Park** (p213) for an intimate meeting with a rhino, or **Manas National Park** (p210) for a chance at spotting a tiger. Continue west to the temples and Ahom relics of **Sivasagar** (p216), then retrace your steps to Guwahati to visit atmospheric **Kamakhya Mandir** (p204).

Start week three with an overnight train ride to **Siliguri** (p145) and visit **Kalimpong** (p167) on your way north to **Gangtok** (p176). Explore the surrounding countryside (p182), then head west to **Pelling** (p187) for jaw-dropping mountain views and butter tea at the gompas of the Monastery Loop (p190).

For the last week head south to **Darjeeling** (p153), taking time for a ride on the famous **toy train** (p158), and then roll south again by jeep and train to Kolkata, for a well-deserved slap-up meal. Spend your last few days exploring the lowlands of West Bengal, with trips to the swampy jungles of **Sunderbans Tiger Reserve** (p139) or the terracotta temple town of **Bishnupur** (p142).



A loop around the northeast, starting and ending in Kolkata and taking in snippets of Tripura and Meghalaya, rhinos and temples in Assam, mountains and monasteries in Sikkim, and high and low elevations in West Bengal.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

NORTH & SOUTH

Three Months

This itinerary offers a broad sweep across the northeast. First, take your time in **Kolkata** (p100) and detour southeast for a boat cruise through **Sunderbans Tiger Reserve** (p139). Returning to Kolkata, ride the rails south to **Bhubaneswar** (p250) and take a day trip to the Jain caves at **Udayagiri and Khandagiri** (p254). Swing through **Puri** (p258), then head south to the birdwatching paradise of **Chilika Lake** (p266) and **Gopalpur-on-Sea** (p268) for a taste of the Orissan seaside.

Head inland to **Similipal National Park** (p274) to spot tigers, deer and wild elephants, then cross back into West Bengal. Visit the temples of **Bishnupur** (p142), then make for **Malda** (p144) to explore the ruins of **Gaur** and **Pandua** (p145).

The Siliguri–Darjeeling–Sikkim loop is well trodden, so prioritise backwaters of the Bengal hills like **Mirik** (p150) and **Kurseong** (p151), or take a trek from busy **Darjeeling** (p153) to the peaceful **Singalila Ridge** (p166). Cutting northeast to **Gangtok** (p176), escape the crowds in the remote mountain villages of **Thanggu and Tsopta** (p197).

Return to Siliguri, for a train to **Guwahati** (p204). With the appropriate permit, you can head north to Arunachal Pradesh. Highlights include the spectacular **Tawang Gumpa** (p224) and the tribal loop through **Ziro** (p220).

There should be time to catch the highlights of Assam before you return to Guwahati for the flight back to Kolkata. Finally, sneak out for one more excursion through the atmospheric delta towns of **Serampore** (p141), **Chandarnagar** (p142) and **Hooghly** (p142).

A chance to explore the northeast in depth, away from the maddening crowds; highlights include sleepy corners of Orissa, little-visited towns in the Hooghly Delta and hidden tribal valleys in Arunachal Pradesh.



ALL THE NORTHEAST AND MORE...

Six Months

The Indian six-month multiple-entry tourist visa gives you time to get deep into the northeast. Starting in **Kolkata** (p100), arrange a visa for overland travel through Bangladesh, then head on by bus to **Dhaka** (p295), with a side-trip through **Jessore** (p298) to fascinating **Bagerhat** (p299). From the frenetic Bangladeshi capital, continue east to **Agartala** (p235) in Tripura, to explore Meghalaya from the capital, **Shillong** (p240).

Continuing to Assam, take in well-known stops such as **Guwahati** (p204) and **Kaziranga National Park** (p213) and get off the beaten track at the peaceful ecocamp at **Potasali** (p213) or a tea-plantation retreat at **Jorhat** (p215).

You should have time for several tribal tours in the Northeast States (p24). Continuing west from Guwahati, visit **Manas National Park** (p210) and **Jaldhapa Wildlife Sanctuary** (p149) for more unspoiled nature.

Slingshot through **Siliguri** (p145) to Sikkim, to be wowed by Buddhist monasteries and Himalayan viewpoints in **Pelling** (p187). Steel yourself for the testing **Goecha La trek** (p192), or take a tour to rugged **North Sikkim** (p195), then duck south to the hill stations of **Mirik** (p150), **Kurseong** (p151), **Darjeeling** (p153) and **Kalimpong** (p167).

From the Nepali border post at **Kakarbhitta** (p290), take the long bus ride to **Kathmandu** (p286). Roam around the Nepali capital, then head south through **Chitwan National Park** (p290) to the birthplace of the Buddha at **Lumbini** (p292).

Cross back to India at **Sunauli** (p292) and head through **Patna** (p278) to walk in the footsteps of Buddha at **Bodhgaya** (p283). Finish the trip in Orissa, with detours to temple-crammed **Bhubaneswar** (p250), famous **Konark** (p264) and **Puri** (p258), tribal tours near **Jeypore** (p270) and wildlife-spotting at **Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary** (p275), before returning to Kolkata – what a circuit!



A northeastern odyssey, snaking from Kolkata across water-logged Bangladesh to the backwaters of the Northeast States, pinballing through the hills of Sikkim and West Bengal, then looping back through Nepal, Bihar and Orissa.

TAILORED TRIPS

A NORTHEAST SAFARI

The northeast is the least-developed corner of India and untamed nature lurks around every corner. Signature species include tigers, leopards, elephants, crocodiles, rare birds, like the great Indian hornbill, and the endangered one-horned Indian rhino, found only in the northeast and remote parts of Nepal.

Starting from **Kolkata** (p100), head southeast to seek tigers in the rain-drenched creeks of **Sunderbans Tiger Reserve** (p139), then southwest to hunt for crocodiles in **Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary** (p275). Continue south to the birdwatchers' paradise of **Chilika Lake** (p266) and explore the little-seen wildlife sanctuaries of **Debrigarh** and **Badrama** (p274) near Sambalpur.

Next, go north to see wild elephants at **Similipal National Park** (p274), and connect through Kolkata to **Darjeeling** (p153) to organise a trek through **Singalila National Park** (p166). Further north in Sikkim, elusive red pandas

and monal pheasants roam free in **Maenam Wildlife Sanctuary** (p187) near Ralang. Species from the high Himalaya can be spotted on the **Goecha La trek** (p192), which passes through Khangchendzonga National Park.

Returning to **Siliguri** (p145), visit lush, green **Jaldhaphara Wildlife Sanctuary** (p149) and take a wildlife-spotting river-boat ride through Assam's **Manas National Park** (p210), then take time to commune with one-horned Indian rhinos at **Kaziranga National Park** (p213) or **Pobitora National Park** (p210).

Enthusiasts can squeeze in **Nameri National Park** (p213) near Tezpur or a gibbon-spotting trek through Meghalaya's **Nokrek Biosphere Reserve** (p246), before flying back from **Guwahati** (p204) to Kolkata.



THE TRIBAL CIRCUIT

With enough time, you can push deep into tribal heartlands, but be sure to make permit arrangements (p199) and check the security situation first (p307). Start in **Kolkata** (p100) and fly to **Agartala** (p235), then ramble north to see ancient Hindu rock art at **Kailasahar** (p239). Head southeast to **Aizawl** (p233), and explore the surrounding Mizo villages.

Roll north to **Shillong** (p240) and visit **Smit** (p243) and **Cherrapunjee** (p243) for some Khasi culture, then drop in on Garo tribal villages in the **Garo Hills** (p246). Connect through **Guwahati** (p204) to **Upper Assam** (p214) to glimpse rural Assamese life.

Next, tour the Naga villages around **Mon** (p229). Continuing to Arunachal Pradesh, explore Adi and Apatani villages near **Ziro** (p220) and Monpa villages near **Tawang Gumpa** (p224). To continue the tribal theme, visit Assam's **Manas National Park** (p210) with a local Bodo guide. More tribal encounters are possible in **North Sikkim** (p195) and on tours to Adivasi areas near **Jeypore** (p270) in Orissa – best arranged in **Bhubaneswar** (p250) or **Puri** (p258).



THE NORTHEAST IN STYLE

Travelling through the northeast doesn't have to mean slumming it. There are plenty of ways to add a little class as you explore this fascinating backwater of India.

Start in **Kolkata** (p100) with a colonial-style sojourn at the **Tollygunge Club** (p124) and a day at the races at the **Royal Calcutta Turf Club** (p130), followed by a slap-up dinner at **Peter Cat** (p127).

Heading south from Kolkata, travel 1st class on the *Howrah-Puri Express* to **Puri** (p258) and arrange a tour to **Similipal National Park** (p274) to comb the jungle for tigers or **Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary** (p275) to scan the swamps for saltwater crocodiles.

Returning to Kolkata, ride the rails north to Siliguri and change to the famous **toy train** (p149) to **Darjeeling** (p153). Book into the luxurious **Elgin** (p162) and have a long, refined high tea on the lawn.

Returning to **Siliguri** (p145), arrange a helicopter transfer to **Gangtok** in Sikkim (p182) and dig deep for a **scenic flight** (p179) around mighty Khangchendzonga.

Retrace your steps to Siliguri and fly on to **Guwahati** (p204), the lively capital of Assam. See the rhinos of **Kaziranga National Park** in style by staying at the elegant Wild Grass Resort (p214), then take a luxury cruise along the Brahmaputra with **Jungle Travels India** (p206) and enjoy a peaceful tea-plantation retreat near **Jorhat** (p215), before whistling back to Kolkata by air.



WHAT TO DO WHEN IT'S WET

The monsoon lashes India with incredible amounts of precipitation from June to September. Most tourists stay away, but this is peak festival season and you'll get to see the northeast in a completely different light.

Start off your travels in **Kolkata** (p100), which changes character dramatically during the monsoon. The Hooghly frequently breaches its banks, and hand-pulled rickshaws are the only vehicles that can make it through the waterlogged streets.

Although the mountain views vanish behind swirling clouds, the **Yumthang Valley** (p196) in Sikkim becomes a carpet of flowers in the run-up to the monsoon. The gathering rain-clouds in May/June do nothing to dampen the celebrations for the Drukchen festival at **Rumtek** (p183), or the Saga Dawa festival, marked by parades of Buddhist scriptures in **Gangtok** (p176) and other monastery towns.

The June–July period can be hot and soggy, but this is the time to catch one of India's great spectacles, the Rath Yatra chariot festival at **Puri** (p258) in Orissa. There are similar celebrations in **Kolkata** (p101) and **Mahesh** in West Bengal (p137). In Agartala in Tripura, the **Chaturdasha Devata Mandir** (p237) hosts the week-long Kharchi Puja festival in July.

In August, snake charmers flock to **Bishnupur** (p142) in West Bengal for the slithering Jhapan Festival. The tail end of the monsoon is also the time to see the waterfalls of **Cherrapunjee** (p243) in Meghalaya at their gushing best.



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