



West Bengal & Darjeeling

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Best Places for a Cuppa

- » Windamere Hotel (p493)
- » Sunset Lounge (p495)
- » Makaibari Tea Estate (p486)

Best Places to Stay

- » Dekeling Hotel (p493)
- » Holumba Haven (p502)
- » The Ffort Raichak (p478)

Why Go?

Stretching from the jagged northern hills down to the sultry mangroves of the Bay of Bengal, few states offer such a rich range of destinations and experiences as West Bengal.

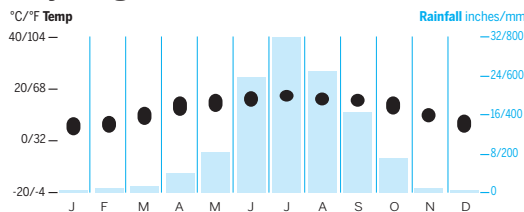
Down south in the plains, brilliant green rice fields surround bustling trading towns, mud-and-thatch villages, and vestiges of Bengal's glorious history: ornate, terracotta-tiled Hindu temples and monumental ruins of Muslim princes.

Up in the cool northern hills the 'toy train' of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway chugs its way up the British-era hill station of Darjeeling, a quintessential remnant of the Raj, whose views of massive Kkangchendzonga towering over the surrounding tea estates rank as one of the region's most inspiring sights.

Overshadowed perhaps by the reputation of its capital Kolkata (Calcutta), the rest of West Bengal sees surprisingly few foreign tourists. Perhaps visitors should learn from the Bengalis themselves, enthusiastic travellers who never tire of exploring their own fascinating and diverse region.

When to Go

Darjeeling



Oct–Dec & Mar–May Best for West Bengal hills views, trekking and spring bloom.

Oct–Mar Best for avoiding the heat on the lower plains.

Jan The best time to navigate the dense mangrove forests of the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve.

Food & Drink

Darjeeling is *the* place to taste a range of teas from local tea estates. Noted for its delicate taste, the teas range from black to green to white and are best taken alone or with a slice of lemon, but not with milk. For more on the best tea-related travel experiences see p492. Not to be outdone, Bengali food is considered iconic by locals and visitors alike – for more information on the delicacies of this region, see p443 and p1115.

DON'T MISS

The views of 8598m Khangchendzonga, the world's third-highest mountain, are easily one of the West Bengal Hills' highlights. The classic viewpoints are from **Tiger Hill** or from the **Singalila Trek**, where the Himalayan skyline stretches from Nepal to Bhutan. **Darjeeling** town also has great views, as does Deolo Hill in **Kalimpong**. The major potential spoiler is the weather. The most reliable clear skies are at dawn during the post-monsoon months of October to December.

Top State Festivals

- » Lepcha & Bhutia New Year (Jan, West Bengal Hills) Colourful fairs and traditional dances in and around Darjeeling.
- » Ganga Sagar Mela (mid-Jan, Sagar Island, p478) Hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims converge where the Ganges meets the sea, to bathe en masse in a fervent festival.
- » Magh Mela (6-8 Feb, Shantiniketan, p479) Crafts and rural arts take centre stage at this festival.
- » Bengali New Year (mid-Apr, Naba Barsha) A statewide holiday celebrating the first day of the Bengali calendar.
- » Rath Yatra (Jun & Jul, Chariot Festival, statewide) Celebrated by pulling the juggernaut of Lord Jagannath's chariot.
- » Jhapan (mid-Aug, Bishnupur, p479) Draws snake charmers to honour the goddess Manasa, the central figure of snake worship.
- » Fulpati (Sep & Oct, West Bengal Hills) Linked to Durga Puja and marking the seventh day of Dashain, this predominantly Nepali festival is also celebrated by Lepchas and others with processions and dancing from Ghum to Darjeeling.
- » Durga Puja (Oct, statewide) Across the state, especially in Kolkata, temporary *pandals* (pavilions) are raised and intense celebrations take place to worship the goddess Durga. After four colourful days, beautiful clay idols of the 10-armed deity are immersed in the rivers.
- » Jagaddhatri Puja (Nov, Chandarnagar, p478) Honours the goddess Jagaddhatri, an incarnation of Durga.
- » Poush Mela (23-26 Dec, Shantiniketan, p479) Folk music, dance, theatre and Baul songs radiate across the university town.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

- Kolkata Airport (p470)
- Kolkata (Chitpore) Train Station (p470)
- Bagdogra Airport (p483)
- New Jalpaiguri Train Station (p484)

Fast Facts

- » Population: 91.3 million
- » Area: 87,853 sq km
- » Capital: Kolkata
- » Main language: Bengali
- » Sleeping prices: \$ below ₹600, \$\$ ₹600 to ₹3000, \$\$\$ above ₹3000

Top Tip

During the month-long 'puja season', around the Durga Puja, Dasain/Dushera and later Diwali festivals, hotels, jeeps and trekking huts are often booked out by travelling Bengali tourists. Pack a jumper and visit in November to avoid the crowds.

Resources

- » West Bengal Tourist Department (www.westbengaltourism.gov.in) Information and online booking for WBTD lodges like Jaldaphara.
- » Kalimpong (www.kalimpong.org) Travel information with an emphasis on accommodation.