



Kolkata (Calcutta)

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Best Places to Eat

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Best Places to Stay

- » Oberoi Grand (p460)
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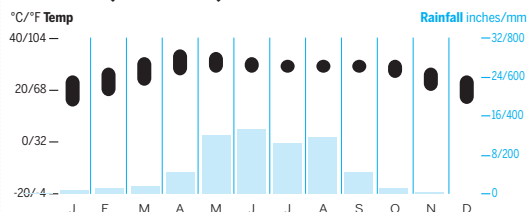
Why Go?

India's second-biggest city is a daily festival of human existence, simultaneously noble and squalid, cultured and desperate. By its old spelling, Calcutta conjures up images of human suffering to most Westerners. But locally, Kolkata is regarded as India's intellectual and cultural capital. While poverty is certainly in your face, the dapper Bengali gentry continues to frequent grand old gentlemen's clubs, back horses at the Calcutta Racetrack and tee off at some of India's finest golf courses.

As the former capital of British India, Kolkata retains a feast of colonial-era architecture, albeit much in a photo-genic state of semi-collapse. Meanwhile urban slums contrast with dynamic new-town suburbs and a rash of air-conditioned shopping malls. Kolkata's also the ideal place to experience the mild, fruity tang of Bengali cuisine. Friendlier than India's other mega-cities, this is a city you 'feel' more than simply visit.

When to Go

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Oct The city dresses up magnificently for the colourful mayhem of Durga Puja.

Nov-Jan Cool and dry; there's a November film festival and a big book fair in January.

May-Sep Best avoided unless you're prepared for a very serious drenching.

Food

Fruity and mildly spiced, Bengali food favours the sweet, rich notes of jaggery (palm-sugar), *daab* (young coconut), *malai-kari* (coconut milk) and *posto* (poppy seed). Typical Bengali curry types include the light, coriander-scented *jhol*, drier spicier *jhal* and richer, ginger-based *kalia*. Strong mustard notes feature in *shorshe* curries and *paturi* dishes that come steamed in a banana leaf. *Gobindobhog bhaat* (steamed rice) or *luchi* (small puris) are the usual accompaniment. More characteristic than meat or chicken (*murgir*) are *chिंगri* (river prawns) and excellent fish, particularly white *ruí* (rohu), fatty *chital*, cod-like *bhekti* and tasty but bone-filled *ilish* (hilsa). Excellent vegetarian choices include *mochar ghonto* (mashed banana-flower, potato and coconut), *doi begun* (eggplant in creamy sauce) and *shukto*, a favourite lunchtime starter combining at least five different vegetables in a milk-based sauce. Bengali desserts and sweets are legendary. Most characteristic are *mishti dhoi* (curd deliciously sweetened with jaggery), *rasgulla* (syrupy sponge balls) and *cham-cham* (double-textured curd-based fingers).

DON'T MISS

Sampling distinctive **Bengali food**, walking the chaotic **back alleys**, riding the Hooghly **ferries**, taking a **motor-bike tour** to see more of the city and – if you've got more time – an excursion to the **Sundarbans**.

Top Festivals

- » Dover Lane Music Conference (www.thedoverlanemusicconference.in, late Jan) Indian classical music and dance at Rabindra Sarovar.
- » Kolkata Boi Mela (www.kolkatabookfaironline.com, late Jan/early Feb) Asia's biggest book fair.
- » Saraswati Puja (early Feb) Prayers for educational success, all dress in yellow.
- » Rath Yatra (Jun/Jul) Major Krishna chariot festival similar to the Puri equivalent.
- » Durga Puja (www.durga-puja.org, Oct, see p457) Kolkata's biggest festival.
- » Lakshmi Puja (full moon after Durga Puja) and Kali Puja (Diwali) feature more idol dunking.
- » Kolkata Film Festival (www.kff.in, mid-Nov) Week-long festival of Bengali and international movies.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

The city has three major train stations Howrah, Sealdah and 'Kolkata' (Chitpore). The airport is well connected domestically and has a modest range of international flights. Buses arrive frequently from Bangladesh and regional destinations.

Fast Facts

- » Population: 14.7 million
- » Area: 185 sq km
- » Telephone code: 033
- » Main language: Bengali
- » Sleeping prices:
\$ below ₹1200, \$\$ ₹1200 to ₹10,000, \$\$\$ above ₹10,000

Top Tip

Come for the head-spinning contrasts and disarmingly human quality of the city rather than for specific sights.

Resources

- » Bengali Recipes (<http://sutapa.com>)
- » Tourist office (www.wbtourism.com/kolkata/index.htm)
- » News & Listings (www.calcuttaweb.com)
- » Classified ads (<http://kolkata.quikr.com>, <http://kolkata.clickindia.com>)