



Uttar Pradesh & the Taj Mahal

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Why Go?

There's no doubting the star attraction here. Agra's Taj Mahal – the most visited sight in India by some distance – is a wonder to behold and leaving Uttar Pradesh (UP) without seeing it would be a bit like drinking *chai* without spoonfuls of sugar: absurd.

Those who linger in this enormous state, however, soon find that it's the unmistakable spirituality of UP, rather than its magnificent architecture, that leaves the longest-lasting impression.

The buildings left by the Mughals, the Nawabs and the British are certainly worth admiring, but it's the religious fervour that sweeps you off your feet at some Hindu temples, the contemplative aura that emanates from ancient Buddhist stupas and the serenity of waking up before dawn to watch locals perform *puja* (offerings or prayers) at a holy riverside ghat that create the truly unforgettable moments of a trip to this part of India.

Best Places to Eat

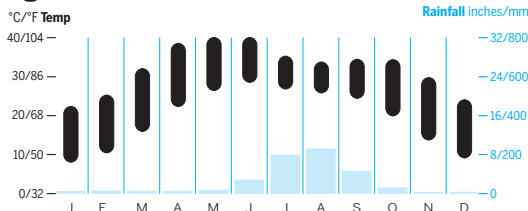
- » Tunday Kabab (p373)
- » Brown Bread Bakery (p392)
- » Joney's Place (p361)
- » Pizzeria Vaatika Cafe (p393)
- » Indian Coffee House (p380)

Best Places to Stay

- » Hotel Ganges View (p391)
- » Lucknow Homestay (p371)
- » Ganpati Guesthouse (p390)
- » Hotel Sheela (p358)

When to Go

Agra



Sep–Oct Monsoon rains are mostly over, temperatures have cooled, but not too much.

Nov–Feb Winter days are comfortable but nights are nippy; sights can be overcrowded.

Mar–Apr The evening chill has mostly gone but the raging mid-summer heat has yet to materialise.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

The only international flights are between Varanasi and Kathmandu. Otherwise, the nearest international airport is Delhi. Many travellers come overland from Nepal, usually at Suanuli. Best-connected train stations are Agra, Lucknow, Allahabad and Varanasi.

Food

Mughlai cuisine – rich, meaty and impossibly tasty – is the order of the day across much of Uttar Pradesh, with the best restaurants often attached to the top hotels in the big cities. Lucknow is the undisputed king of UP cuisine. You'll find some excellent Mughlai kitchens here as well as great *chaat* (snacks) and some simply sumptuous kebabs (p374).

DON'T MISS

There are two things you mustn't leave Uttar Pradesh without doing: seeing the **Taj Mahal** at sunset and taking a dawn boat ride along the Ganges in the holy city of **Varanasi**.

Fast Facts

- » Population: 199.6 million
- » Area: 231,254 sq km
- » Capital: Lucknow
- » Language: Hindi
- » Sleeping prices: \$ below ₹500, \$\$ ₹500 to ₹2500, \$\$\$ above ₹2500

Top Tip

Touts in Agra and Varanasi can be voracious. When arriving by train or a bus, try to look as if you know what you're doing, even if you don't. Ignore anyone who approaches you in the station; just head straight for the prepaid autorickshaw booth (opposite the main entrance) or find a rider yourself outside the station on a quieter road where you're more likely to get a fair deal.

Resources

- » Uttar Pradesh Tourism (www.up-tourism.com)
- » Agra District (www.agra.nic.in)
- » Varanasi District (www.varanasi.nic.in)
- » (Virtual tour of the Taj Mahal) www.taj-mahal.net

Top State Festivals

- » Magh Mela (Jan/Feb, Allahabad, p377) A huge annual religious fair that transforms into the world's largest human gathering, the Kumbh Mela, every 12th year (next in 2013).
- » Holi (Feb/Mar, Mathura and Vrindavan, p368) This national festival is celebrated with particular fervour around Mathura and Vrindavan, spiritual home of Krishna.
- » Purnima (Apr/May, Sarnath, p396) Also known as Vesak, Buddha Jayanti or, informally, Buddha's birthday, Purnima actually celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of Buddha. Sarnath, just outside Varanasi, takes on a particularly festive air on this day, when Buddhists from many countries take part in a procession and a fair is held.
- » Janmastami (Aug/Sep, Mathura, p368) You can barely move here during Krishna's birthday, when temples are swathed in decorations and musical dramas about Krishna are performed.
- » Ram Lila (Sep/Oct, Varanasi, p388) Every year since the early 1800s the Ram Lila, a lengthy version of the Ramayana, has been performed beside Ramnagar Fort in Varanasi. The epic saga of Rama's marriage to Sita and his battle against the demon king Ravana is performed mainly by Brahmin youths aided by masks, music, dancing and giant papier-mâché figures.
- » Eid al-Fitr (Dec/Jan, Fatehpur Sikri, p365) Join the happy crowds in the bazaar and mosque at Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra, for the end-of-Ramadan celebrations.