



# Kolkata (Calcutta)

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## Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Bhojohari Manna (p475)
- ➔ Oh! Calcutta (p474)
- ➔ Fire and Ice (p474)
- ➔ Amigos (p474)

## Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Oberoi Grand (p468)
- ➔ Chrome (p468)
- ➔ Hotel Kempton (p467)

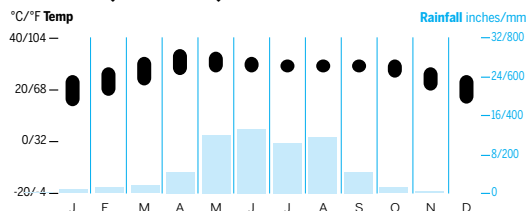
## Why Go?

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 photogenic state of disrepair. 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 metropolises, this is a city you 'feel' more than simply visit.

## When to Go

### Kolkata (Calcutta)



**Sep/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), *malaikari* (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 – dough that puffs up when fried) are the usual accompaniment. More characteristic than meat or *murgir* (chicken) are *chingri* (river prawns) and excellent fish, particularly *rohu* (white rui), fatty chital and cod-like *bhekti*. If you can handle the bones, *ilish* (hilsa) is considered the tastiest fish, *kachki* are very small and *lau ghonto* – an acquired taste – is fish head pounded with pumpkin. Excellent vegetarian choices include *mochar ghonto* (mashed banana-flower, sometimes with potato and coconut), *doi begun* (eggplant in curd) 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* (rosewater-scented cream-cheese balls) and *cham-cham* (double-textured curd-based fingers).

For a colourful and very affectionate portrait of Kolkata's ever-vibrant street food scene, see <http://streetfoodkolkata.com> which includes recipes, films and sells a brilliantly evocative book.

### DON'T MISS

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

## MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

The city has three major train stations: Howrah, Sealdah and Kolkata (Chitapore).

The newly rebuilt airport area has a growing range of international flights.

Buses arrive frequently from Bangladesh and regional destinations.

## Top Tip

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

## 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 Festivals

- ➔ **Dover Lane Music Conference** (☺ late Jan) Indian classical music and dance at Rabindra Sarovar.
- ➔ **Kolkata Boi Mela** (☺ late Jan/early Feb) Kolkata Boi Mela Asia's biggest book fair.
- ➔ **Sarawati 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** (☺ Sep or Oct) Kolkata's biggest festival.
- ➔ **Kolkata Film Festival** (☺ mid-Nov) Week-long festival of Bengali and international movies.

## Resources

- ➔ **Bengali Recipes** (<http://sutapa.com>)
- ➔ **Tourist office** (<http://westbengaltourism.gov.in/web/guest/kolkata>)
- ➔ **News & Listings** ([www.calcuttaweb.com](http://www.calcuttaweb.com))
- ➔ **Curiosities** (<http://rangandatta.wordpress.com/blog-index/calcutta-kolkata>)
- ➔ **Classified ads** (<http://kolkata.clickindia.com>)