



# Uttar Pradesh & the Taj Mahal

## Includes ➔

Agra.....	351
Mathura.....	372
Vrindavan.....	374
Lucknow.....	375
Ayodhya.....	381
Allahabad.....	382
Chitrakut.....	387
Jhansi.....	388
Varanasi.....	388
Sarnath.....	402
Gorakhpur.....	404
Kushinagar.....	404
Sunauli.....	406

## Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Pinch of Spice (p365)
- ➔ El Chico (p386)
- ➔ Sakhawat (p378)
- ➔ Espahan (p364)

## Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Hotel Ganges View (p397)
- ➔ N Homestay (p363)
- ➔ Kanchan Villa (p385)
- ➔ Ganpati Guesthouse (p396)

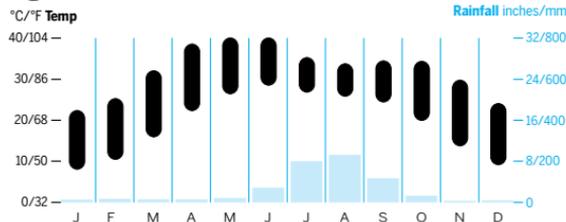
## Why Go?

Agra's Taj Mahal rises from the beaten earth of Uttar Pradesh (UP) as it does in dreams, but even the wildest imaginations leave travellers underprepared for that breath-stealing moment its gates are traversed and this magnificent world wonder comes into focus – skipping it would be a bit like drinking chai without spoonfuls of sugar: absurd.

But it's the unmistakable spirituality and religious fervour in this enormous state that leaves the longest-lasting impressions: being slapped by a divine punch of wow along atmospheric riverside ghats such as Manikarnika and Dashashwamedh in India's holiest city, Varanasi; the contemplative aura that emanates from ancient Buddhist stupas in Kushinagar; and the serenity of waking up before dawn to watch locals perform *puja* (offerings or prayers) in sacred Chitrakut. Along the way, a groundswell of Mughal and Nawab architectural and gastronomic highpoints – especially in Lucknow – ensure all-sensory satisfaction in India's imperial heartland.

## When to Go

### Agra



**Sep–Oct** Monsoon rains are mostly over and temperatures have cooled ...just enough.

**Nov–Feb** Comfortable winter days and nippy nights mean it's cool but over-crowded.

**Mar–Apr** With evening chills subsided and raging midsummer heat still at bay, some say it's perfect.

## MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

International connections include Varanasi–Kathmandu and Lucknow–Dubai. Many travellers come overland from Nepal, usually at Sunauli. Best-connected train stations are Agra, Lucknow, Allahabad and Varanasi.

## Fast Facts

- ➔ **Population:** 200 million
- ➔ **Area:** 231,254 sq km
- ➔ **Capital:** Lucknow
- ➔ **Language:** Hindi
- ➔ **Sleeping prices:**  
\$ below ₹1000, \$\$ ₹1000 to ₹3000, \$\$\$ above ₹3000

## Top Tip

When arriving by train or bus in Agra or Varanasi, ignore anyone who approaches you in the station; head straight for the prepaid autorickshaw booth (opposite the main entrance). Do not let any guide or autorickshaw driver take you to a shop, whether one of his choosing or yours. Ever.

## Resources

- ➔ **Uttar Pradesh Tourism** ([www.up-tourism.com](http://www.up-tourism.com))
- ➔ **Lucknow Tribune** ([www.thelucknowtribune.org](http://www.thelucknowtribune.org))
- ➔ **Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com/india/agra](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/india/agra))

## 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.

## DON'T MISS

There are two things you shouldn'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**.

## Top State Festivals

- ➔ **Magh Mela** (☺ Jan/Feb, Allahabad, p382) A huge annual religious fair that transforms into the world's largest human gathering, the Purna Kumbh Mela, every 12th year (next in 2025).
- ➔ **Holi** (☺ Feb/Mar, Mathura, p372, and Vrindavan, p374) This national festival is celebrated with particular fervour around Mathura and Vrindavan, spiritual home of Krishna.
- ➔ **Purnima** (☺ Apr/May, Sarnath, p402) 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, p372) 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.