



# West Bengal & Darjeeling

## Includes ➔

Sunderbans Tiger Reserve .....	485
Up the Hooghly .....	486
Bishnupur .....	487
Shantiniketan .....	488
Nabadwip & Mayapur .....	489
West Bengal Hills .....	490
Siliguri & New Jalpaiguri .....	490
Jaldhapa Wildlife Sanctuary .....	493
Kurseong .....	494
Darjeeling .....	494
Singalila Ridge Trek .....	506
Kalimpong .....	507

## Best Places for a Cuppa

- ➔ Windamere Hotel (p502)
- ➔ Sunset Lounge (p503)
- ➔ Makaibari (p494)

## Best Places to Stay

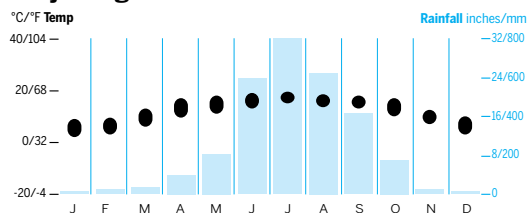
- ➔ Dekeling Hotel (p500)
- ➔ Holumba Haven (p510)
- ➔ Backpackers (p486)

## Why Go?

A sliver of fertile land running from the tea-draped Himalayan foothills to the sultry mangroves of the Bay of Bengal, West Bengal offers a range of destinations and experiences that few other states can match. In the tropical southern areas, the sea-washed hamlet of Mandarmani vies for attention with Bishnupur's ornate terracotta-tiled Hindu temples and palaces. The striped Bengal tiger sizes you up as you float down muddy rivulets in the Sunderbans, while a bunch of European ghost towns line the banks of the Hooghly (Ganges) further upstream as vestigial reminders of the state's maritime heydays. And in the cool northern hills, the 'toy train' chugs its way up the charming British-era hill station of Darjeeling, revered for its ringside views of massive Khangchendzonga. Combine all these with a vibrant art scene, a delectable cuisine and a genuinely friendly population, and you've got a cracker of an itinerary.

## When to Go

### Darjeeling



**Oct–Dec & Mar–May** Best for West Bengal hill 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 (and/or a pinch of sugar), but never with milk. Not to be outdone, Bengali food – with its varied fish preparations and sweetmeats – is considered iconic by locals and visitors alike.

### 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

- ➔ **Ganga Sagar Mela** (☺ mid-Jan, Sagar Island, p486) Hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims converge where the Ganges meets the sea, to bathe en masse in a riotous festival.
- ➔ **Bengali New Year** (☺ mid-Apr, statewide) A statewide holiday celebrating the first day of the Bengali calendar, also called Nabo Barsho.
- ➔ **Rath Yatra** (☺ Jul/Aug, statewide) Celebrated by pulling the juggernaut of Lord Jagannath's chariot.
- ➔ **Dussehra** (Durga Puja: ☺ Sep/Oct, statewide) Across the state, especially in Kolkata (Calcutta), temporary *pandals* (temple shrines) 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, p486) Honours the goddess Jagaddhatri, an incarnation of Durga.
- ➔ **Poush Mela** (☺ 23-26 Dec, Shantiniketan, p488) Folk music, dance, theatre and Baul (a sect of mystical minstrels) songs radiate across the university town.

### MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

Kolkata Airport; Howrah, Sealdah and Kolkata (Chitpore) train station; Bagdogra Airport; New Jalpaiguri train station.

## Fast Facts

- ➔ **Population:** 91.3 million
- ➔ **Area:** 87,853 sq km
- ➔ **Capital:** Kolkata
- ➔ **Main language:** Bengali
- ➔ **Sleeping prices:** \$ below ₹1000, \$\$ ₹1000 to ₹2500, \$\$\$ above ₹2500

## Top Tip

During the month-long '*pūja* (prayers) season', from Durga Puja to Diwali, 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 Tourism** ([www.westbengaltourism.gov.in](http://www.westbengaltourism.gov.in)) Information and online booking for West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation (WBTD) lodges, such as Jaldhapa and boat cruises.
- ➔ **Kalimpong** ([www.kalimpong.org](http://www.kalimpong.org)) Travel information with an emphasis on accommodation.