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Golden Triangle & the Land of the Kings

This might be a well-worn trail, but there's a reason for that. The Golden Triangle of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur combines some of India's most jaw-dropping sights.

Kick off in Delhi, visiting the tumult of Old Delhi with its Mughal-era Red Fort and Jama Masjid, and taking it easy wandering Lodi Gardens, and Humayun's Tomb. Next, catch a train to Agra and see how beautiful the Taj Mahal, the world's most extravagant monument to love, really is. Explore Agra Fort and devote a day to nearby Fatehpur Sikri, a ghostly Mughal city. Continue on to the Pink City Jaipur, and devote several days to its whirlwind of bazaars, the City Palace, Hawa Mahal, and the Amber Fort.

Loop back to Delhi, or travel on to Pushkar for a few days of chilling out around lakeside temples, then take time to stay lakeside, go boating and explore elegant Udaipur. Next visit magnificent hilltop Kumbhalgarh and the temple at Ranakpur, en route to Jodhpur. See the Blue City unfurled beneath you from the mighty battlements of Mehrangarh Fort. Finish off in fortified Jaisalmer and go all Lawrence of Arabia on camelback through the dunes, sleeping under a firmament of stars. Finally, loop back to Delhi, with one last cycle ride through Old Delhi, an early morning trip to the ruins of Qutb Minar, or shopping in its amazing emporiums, markets and boutiques.
Tourist visas last six months, allowing you explore a lot of India.

Kick off by exploring Delhi before riding the rails north to Amritsar, to see Sikhism’s most holy site, the glittering Golden Temple. Connect through Chandigarh to the laid-back vibes of Shimla. From this classic hill station you can roam northwest to Buddhist Dharamsala, home of the Dalai Lama, or Manali, starting point for the beautiful, thrilling but gruelling overland journey to rugged Ladakh (July to September), gateway to the high Himalaya. When you’ve had your fill of mountain air, head south for some yoga in Rishikesh, and descend to Agra, to see the vision-like Taj Mahal. Next go south Khajuraho, with its risque temples, and scan the jungle for tigers in Bandhavgarh National Park. Continue to the holy city of Varanasi for a boat trip along the sacred Ganges.

You can meander on detours as you train it eastwards to Kolkata (Calcutta), bustling capital of West Bengal. Swing north as far as Darjeeling or Sikkim for sweeping Himalayan views, then drift down the coast to the temple towns of Konark and Puri in Odisha (Orissa). Fly south to Chennai (Madras) for a different kind of India.

From here you have a chance to visit the wonders of Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram), for temple carvings; Puducherry (Pondicherry), for colonial-era heritage combined with contemporary charm; and Madurai, for deity-encrusted temple towers. At this point, you’ve more than earned a long stay at Kerala’s beaches, before taking a trip inland to nostalgic Mysuru to see how maharajas lived.

Continuing north, head to Hampi, where temples and ruined cities are strewn among the boulders, then get a second dose of beach life on the coast of Goa. Wine, dine and go Bollywood-crazy in Mumbai (Bombay), fast-paced capital of the west coast; then admire the glory of the cave paintings and carvings at Ajanta and Ellora.

Finish on a high in Rajasthan with its the coloured-city triple – pink Jaipur, blue Jodhpur and white Udaipur. There might just be time to detour to the fascinating temples, exquisite embroidery villages and nature reserves of Gujarat, before closing the circle with a last train ride to Delhi.
Sikkim and the Northeast States, with their incredible mountain scenery, are still a well-kept secret for many travellers. Insurgencies and permit restrictions have long put off visitors, but India’s last frontier is slowly opening up to the outside world. From Kolkata, you can go north to Darjeeling, see astounding Himalayan vistas in Sikkim then visit the world of India’s hill tribes. Advance planning is essential – permits are mandatory and there are security risks to consider.

Starting in Kolkata, make your first stop genteel Darjeeling – here you can sample India’s finest teas and pick up a permit for Sikkim, one of India’s most serene quarters. Gangtok, the Sikkimese capital, is the starting point for jeep rides to historic Buddhist temples set amid dramatic scenery. Veer to Namchi to see the giant statues of Shiva and Padmasambhava, and to Pelling for inspiring views of the white-peaked Khangchendzonga and the beautiful Pemayangtse Gompa, ringed by gardens and monks’ cottages. Take the weeklong trek from Yuksom to Goecha La, a 4940m pass with incredible views, then exit Sikkim via Tashiding, with more wonderful views and another stunning gompa, before travelling to Siliguri for the journey east.

Arrange tours for the Northeast States (including permits for Arunachal Pradesh) in Guwahati or online. Then head from Guwahati to Arunachal Pradesh to pay your respects at the stunning Buddhist monastery at Tawang, before exploring the tribal villages around Ziro, where the elders have dramatic facial tattoos and piercings. A visit to Nagaland opens up fascinating tribal villages around Mon – featuring a rugged countryside dotted by traditional longhouses and remote settlements – and the capital Kohima, with its WWII relics. Going south, there’s a fair chance of encountering Meitei culture in Manipur and Mizo culture in Mizoram, before you fly back to Kolkata.

Alternately, you could also try this classic loop (Arunachal permits not required): from Guwahati, head to Kaziranga National Park to spot rare rhinos. Detour to sleepy Shillong, and hike to the waterfalls and incredible living root bridges of Cherrapunjee. Drive on to Agartala, the capital of Tripura, before returning to Kolkata by air or overland through Bangladesh.
**3 WEEKS**

The Spiritual Centre

Take in some of India’s most fabulous temples in this temple-hopping trip around the central plains.

Start amid the chaos and rich cultural life of Kolkata, then swap the big-city bustle for the peace and spirituality of Bodhgaya, where the Buddha attained enlightenment. Roll across the plains to Sarnath, where the Buddha first taught the dharma.

Move onto the sacred city of Varanasi. See the rituals on the banks of the River Ganges, then ramble to the Hindu temples of Khajuraho, which seethe with erotic carvings. Head southwest to Sanchi, where Emperor Ashoka first embraced Buddhism, then zip through Bhopal to Jalgaon, jumping-off point for the carving-filled caves of Ajanta.

Next, detour into Rajasthan; stop off in whimsical Udaipur, with its lakes and palaces, then explore the Jain temples of Ranakpur or Mt Abu. Continue to Pushkar, curled around its sacred lake, then make a trip to nearby Ajmer, one of India’s key Islamic pilgrimage sites. Take a final stop in atmospheric Jaipur, then end the trip in Delhi, with its magnificent Islamic ruins and the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin.

**4 WEEKS**

Himalayan Adventures

See soul-feeding Himalayan views on this mountainous loop.

Start by riding the rails from Delhi to Kalka, to board the narrow-gauge train to colonial-era Shimla. From here you can ramble around the hills, then join the traveller pilgrimage north to the Kullu Valley, stepping up a gear with some adventurous mountain activities.

From the hill resort of Manali, embark on the thrilling, winding, two-day journey to Leh in Ladakh (July to September), to hike to dramatic Buddhist monasteries and trekking peaks. For a short loop, continue from Leh to Kargil and on to Kashmir (checking first that it’s safe to travel). Stay on a Srinagar houseboat, then loop through Jammu to elegant Dalhousie, and soak up Buddhist culture in nearby Dharamsala, before returning to Delhi.

With more time to spare, head southeast from Leh into the dramatic Spiti Valley, where ancient monasteries blend into the arid landscape. Ride the rattletrap bus to rugged Kinnaur, with its plunging landscapes, and make stops in Dehra Dun and Rishikesh to soak up some Hindu culture, before finishing in Delhi.
Chennai is the easiest starting point for exploring India’s southern tip. Ideal timing weatherwise is from October to February, when the weather is balmy and neither too hot or hitting the monsoon.

Kick off with some fiery thalis in Chennai, then see intricate temple carvings in Mamallapuram, one-time home of the Pallava kings.

Next, head for French-flavoured Puducherry, before leaving the coast behind and heading inland to the temple towns of Tamil Nadu: take in the boulder-covered Trichy (Tiruchirappalli), and Madurai, with its soaring, deity-covered gopurams (temple towers). From here, it’s easy to zip down to Kanyakumari, the southernmost point of India.

Kick back on the coast at Kovalam or Varkala, then trade the sand for jungle fronds in steamy Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary, home to tigers and elephants, or take a trip up to Munnar, Kerala’s centre of tea plantations, for tranquil rambles in the hills. En route back to Chennai visit colourful Mysuru, with its fabulously flamboyant maharaja’s palace and giant stone Nandi (bull statue).

This route meanders to some of India’s finest beaches and charismatic coastal towns.

Start in Mumbai and people-watch, amble and sample bhel puri (crisp noodle salad) at Girgaum Chowpatty beach. Take a boat trip to the rock-cut temples on Elephant Island, then travel south by train to beach-blessed Goa.

Take your pick from tropical sandy stretches of Arambol, Vagator and Palolem, then continue along the coast to the sacred town of Gokarna. Now for a change of pace; head inland to Hampi, with its serene Vijayanagar ruins, and witness the zenith of medieval stone carving in the Hoysala temples of Belur and Halebid. Return by train to Mangalore to dine on spectacular seafood, then chug south to the lovely, laid-back town of Kochi (Cochin), a melting-pot mix of influences from as far afield as China and the Middle East.

Cruise Kerala’s backwaters from Alappuzha (Alleppey), before dipping your toes in the warm waters around beach resorts Varkala or Kovalam. Make your last stop Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum), home to fascinating, often-overlooked museums, before flying back to Mumbai.
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- Swamp/Mangrove

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book.
Anna Kaminski  
*Odisha, Gujarat* For as long as Anna has been travelling in India, she’s been enchanted and exasperated by the country in equal measure, and never ever bored. This trip was no exception. Cons? The demonetisation crisis. Pros? Exploring two vastly different corners of the country. Highlights included the ancient architecture of Ahmedabad, spending time in traditional villages in Odisha’s tribal country, lion-spotting in Sasan Gir National Park and witnessing first-hand the centuries-old craft kept alive in the villages of Kachchh.

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John has been travelling since his teens and doing so as a Lonely Planet writer since the 1980s. The number of LP titles he’s written or co-written is well into three figures, covering a somewhat random selection of countries scattered across the globe, predominantly ones where Spanish, Russian or English are spoken (usually alongside numerous local languages). He still gets as excited as ever about heading out on the road to unfamiliar experiences, people and destinations, especially remote, off-the-beaten-track ones. Above all, he loves mountains, from the English Lake District to the Himalaya. See his pics on Instagram: @johnnoble11.

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Mumbai, Maharashtra

Kevin Raub grew up in Atlanta and started his career as a music journalist in New York, working for Men’s Journal and Rolling Stone magazines. Being a pursuer of hops himself, he was all too happy to put Kingfisher in his rearview drinking mirror and immerse himself in Mumbai’s exploding craft beer scene for this edition of the India guide. This is Kevin’s 40th Lonely Planet guide. Follow him on Twitter and Instagram (@RaubOnTheRoad). To learn more about Kevin, check out www.lonelyplanet.com/members/kraub.

Sarina Singh
Andaman Islands, Plan & Understand sections

After finishing a business degree in her hometown of Melbourne, Sarina went to India to pursue a corporate traineeship before working as a journalist. After five years she returned to Australia and completed postgraduate journalism qualifications before authoring Lonely Planet’s first edition of Rajasthan. Apart from numerous Lonely Planet books she has written for a raft of other publications and has been a scriptwriter and expert commentator. Sarina is also the author of Polo in India as well as India: Essential Encounters. Her award-nominated documentary premiered at the prestigious Melbourne International Film Festival before screening internationally.

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Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand

When Michael was young, his father made the mistake of handing him a biography of Lawrence of Arabia, along with adventure novels like Around the World in 80 Days. Something was sparked as this book-wormish boy over-identified with the main characters in these tales. Today, he is a veteran traveller, writer, and photographer, who loves exploring places far from beaten tourist trails. He’s authored three non-fiction books (set on three different continents) and writes and shoots for major publications. He also founded Traditional Cultures Project, which documents indigenous cultures around the world. To see some of his work, visit www.michaelbenanav.com.

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Jammu & Kashmir (including Ladakh), Sikkim

British-born travel writer Mark Elliott has lived and worked on five continents, authoring or contributing to more than 60 books. He has been visiting the subcontinent since a 1982 trip which lined his stomach for all eventualities. While delighting in India’s full rainbow of cultures, he’s especially drawn to the cool air, magnificent mountains and spiritual warmth of the Himalayan regions whether sharing sufi secrets in Srinagar, mumbling mantras in Ladakh or being dazzled by Sikkim’s larger than life mega-temples/statues.

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OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that’s all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, Across Asia on the Cheap. Within a week they’d sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Dublin, Beijing and Delhi, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony’s belief that ‘a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse’.

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Delhi, Plan & Survival sections A freelance travel writer, Abigail has lived and worked in London, Rome, Hong Kong, and Copenhagen. Lonely Planet have sent her to India, Egypt, Tunisia, Mauritania, Mali, Italy, Portugal, Malta and around Britain. She writes regularly for newspapers and magazines, such as the Independent, the Telegraph, and Lonely Planet Traveller. She has three children and they often come along for the ride. Follow her on Twitter and Instagram: @abiwhere

Lindsay Brown

Rajasthan Lindsay started travelling as a young bushwalker exploring the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. Then as a marine biologist he dived the coastal and island waters of southeastern Australia. He continued travelling whenever he could while employed at Lonely Planet as an editor and publishing manager. On becoming a freelance writer and photographer he has co-authored more than 30 Lonely Planet guides to Australia, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea.

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Isabella Noble

Tamil Nadu English-Australian on paper but Spanish at heart, Isabella has been wandering the globe since her first round-the-world trip as a one-year-old. Having grown up in a whitewashed Andalucian village, she is a Spain specialist travel journalist, but also writes extensively about India, Thailand, the UK and beyond for Lonely Planet, the Daily Telegraph and others. Isabella has co-written Lonely Planet guides to Spain and Andalucia, and contributed to India, South India, Thailand, Thailand’s Islands & Beaches, Southeast Asia on a Shoestring and Great Britain, and authored Pocket Phuket. Find Isabella on Twitter and Instagram (@isabellamnoble).

OVER PAGE MORE WRITERS

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