



Uttar Pradesh

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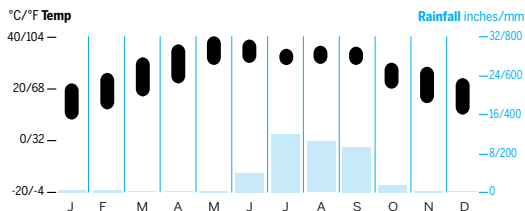
Why Go?

There are few states more quintessentially Indian than Uttar Pradesh. The subcontinent's historic and religious roots – Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and secular – intertwine in this land of sacred rivers and vast plains, manifesting in sights of profound importance.

Aside from iconic Agra, UP is home to Varanasi, India's holiest city, famed for its cremation ghats and vibrant ceremonies along the Ganges River. Stories tell us that Krishna was born in Mathura, while Rama was born in Ayodhya – a place of tragic conflict in modern times that reveals much about the shadow side of the collective Indian psyche. Buddha gave his first sermon in Sarnath and died in Kushinagar, now tranquil pilgrimage destinations. And the Mughals and the Nawabs made their marks as well, leaving behind architectural and gastronomic masterpieces – particularly in Lucknow (and of course Agra). UP offers more than enough to satisfy the senses – and curiosities – of any traveller.

When to Go

Varanasi



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

Nov–Feb Comfortable winter days and nippy nights means it's cool but overcrowded.

Mar With evening chills subsided and raging mid-summer heat still at bay, some say it's perfect.

History

More than 2000 years ago this region was part of Ashoka's great Buddhist empire, remnants of which can be found in the ruins at the pilgrimage centre of Sarnath near Varanasi. Muslim raids from the northwest began in the 11th century, and by the 16th century the region was part of the Mughal empire, with its capital in Agra, then Delhi and, for a brief time, Fatehpur Sikri.

Following the decline of the Mughal empire, Persians stepped in briefly before the Nawabs of Avadh rose to prominence in the central part of the region, notably around the current capital of Lucknow. The Nawabs were responsible for turning Lucknow into a flourishing centre for the arts, culture and culinary delights, which continues to this day. But their empire came to a dramatic end when the British East India Company deposed the last nawab, triggering the First War of Independence (Indian Uprising) in 1857. During the 147-day Siege of Lucknow, British Chief Commissioner Sir Henry Lawrence was killed defending the British Residency, which remains in remarkable preservation in Lucknow.

Agra was later merged with Avadh and the state became known as United Province. It was renamed Uttar Pradesh after Independence and has since been the most dominant state in Indian politics, producing half of the country's prime ministers, most of them from Allahabad (locus of the Nehru/Gandhi dynasty). The people of UP don't seem to have benefited much from this, though, as poor governance, a high birth rate, a low literacy rate and an erratic electricity supply have held back the state's economic progress over the past 70 years.

In 2000, the mountainous northwestern part of the state was carved off to create the new state of Uttaranchal, now called Uttarakhand.

VARANASI

📍 0542 / POP 1.4 MILLION

Varanasi is the India of your imagination. One of the most colourful and fascinating places on earth, surprises abound around every corner.

This is one of the world's oldest continually inhabited cities, and one of the holiest in Hinduism. Pilgrims come to the ghats lining the Ganges to wash away sins in the sacred waters or to cremate their loved ones. It's a

particularly auspicious place to die, since expiring here offers moksha (liberation from the cycle of rebirth).

Most visitors agree Varanasi is magical – but not for the faint-hearted. Intimate rituals of life and death take place in public, and the sights, sounds and smells on the ghats – not to mention almost constant attention from touts – can be intense. Still, the so-called City of Light may turn out to be your favourite stop of all. Walking the ghats and alleyways or watching sunrise from a boat can be unforgettable.

History

Thought to date back to around 1200 BC, Varanasi really rose to prominence in the 8th century AD, when Shankaracharya, a reformer of Hinduism, established Shiva worship as the principal sect. The Afghans destroyed Varanasi around AD 1300, after laying waste to nearby Sarnath, but the fanatical Mughal emperor Aurangzeb was the most destructive, looting and destroying almost all of the temples.

The old city of Varanasi may look antique, but few buildings are more than a couple of hundred years old. Rajas and other wealthy families from around India built palaces and mansions along the ghats to be close to the sacred river; most of these are now in states of serious disrepair, though a few have been bought by hotel companies and renovated into something resembling their previous glory.

TOP STATE FESTIVALS

Magh Mela (Allahabad; ☺ Jan/Feb) A

huge annual religious fair that transforms into the world's largest human gathering, the Kumbh Mela, every 12th year (next in 2025).

Holi (p410) Perhaps the world's most colorful festival. Prepare to be powdered!

Purnima (☺ Apr or May) Buddha's birthday party.

Janmastami (p410) Krishna's birthday party.

Dev Diwali (Ganga Diwali; Varanasi; ☺ Nov) A festival of light in the 'City of Light'.

Ram Lila (Varanasi; ☺ Sep/Oct) The dramatic retelling of Lord Rama's quest to reclaim his wife, Sita, from the demon Ravana.