



Agra & the Taj Mahal

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Why Go?

Obviously you're here for the Taj Mahal, and quite right too. Simply put, it's the most beautiful building in the world and it's almost impossible to see it without feeling awestruck.

But Agra, with its long and rich history, boasts plenty more besides. For 130 years this was the centre of India's great Mughal empire, and its legacy lives on in beautiful art-work, mouth-watering cuisine and, of course, magnificent architecture. The Taj is one of three places here that have been awarded World Heritage status, with the immense Agra Fort and the eerie ruined city of Fatehpur Sikri making up a superb trio of top-draw sights.

Surprisingly, given its tourism clout, Agra is also a city of dusty streets, where squeaky cycle-rickshaws overtake slow-moving camels, where monkeys steal your snacks and where you're well advised to keep an eye out for runaway water buffalo. It all adds to the adventure.

When to Go

September and October are arguably the best months in which to visit Agra. Most of the monsoon rains are over and the summer temperatures have cooled, but it's not too chilly yet in the evenings.

The winter months, from November to February, are very popular because daytime temperatures are at their most comfortable, but the big sights can get overcrowded and evenings are pretty nippy. Spring (March to April) isn't bad either, as that evening chill has mostly disappeared but the raging-hot mid-summer temperatures have yet to materialise.

Agra

0562 / POP 1,321,410

The magical allure of the Taj Mahal draws tourists to Agra like moths to a wondrous flame. And despite the hype, it's every bit as good as you've heard. But the Taj is not a stand-alone attraction. The legacy of the Mughal empire has left a magnificent fort and a liberal sprinkling of fascinating tombs and mausoleums. There's also fun to be had in the bustling *chowks* (marketplaces), some of which border on the chaotic.

The downside comes in the form of hordes of rickshaw-wallahs, touts, unofficial guides and souvenir vendors, whose persistence can be infuriating at times.

Many tourists choose to visit Agra on a whistle-stop day trip from Delhi. This is a shame. There is much more of interest here than can be seen in that time. In fact, you can enjoy several days' sightseeing with side trips to the superb ruined city of Fatehpur

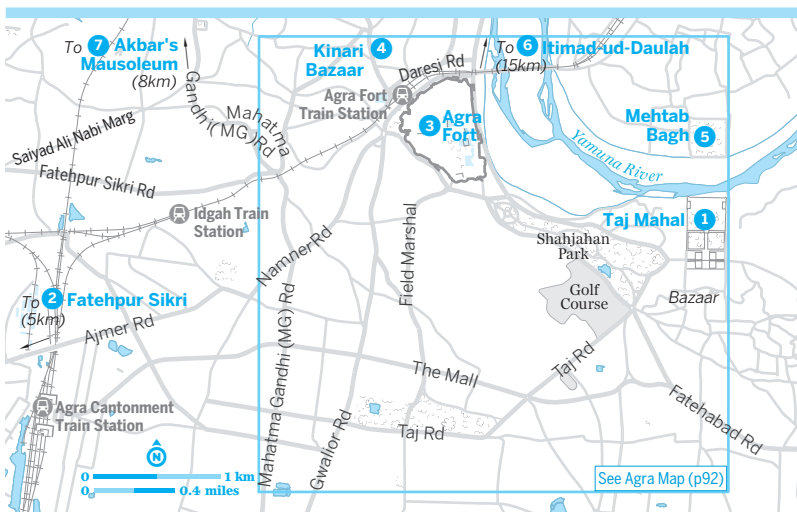
THE TAJ MAHAL BROUGHT TO LIFE

For more inspiration, check out our information-packed 3-D illustration of the world's most beautiful building (p14), a brand new feature for this edition.

Sikri and the Hindu pilgrimage centre of Mathura.

Agra sits on a large bend in the holy Yamuna River. The fort and the Taj, 2km apart, both overlook the river on different parts of the bend. The main train and bus stations are a few kilometres southwest.

The labourers and artisans who toiled on the Taj set up home immediately south of the mausoleum, creating the congested network of alleys known as Taj Ganj, now a popular area for budget travellers.



Agra Highlights

- 1 Get up bright and early to visit the **Taj Mahal** minus the crowds, before returning at the end of the day for that oh-so-romantic sunset view
- 2 Explore the abandoned city of **Fatehpur Sikri**
- 3 Gawk at the immensity of the mammoth red

- sandstone walls that surround **Agra Fort**
- 4 Join the throngs at **Kinari Bazaar**, one of India's most hectic markets
 - 5 Hire a rickshaw for the day and take in a tour of Agra's Mughal gardens, starting with **Mehtab Bagh**

- 6 Cross the Yamuna River to **Itimad-ud-Daulah**, an exquisite marble tomb nicknamed the Baby Taj
- 7 Take a trip to the suburbs to see **Akbar's Mausoleum**, the beautiful resting place of the greatest Mughal emperor of them all