

The Best of India

India will humble, awe, frustrate, amaze, and intimidate you—all on the same day. Home to some of the world's most spectacular medieval structures and largest slums; sacred rivers and filth-strewn streets; deeply religious ritual and endless traffic jams; aristocratic tigers and low-caste untouchables; jewel-encrusted tombs and pavement-bound beggars; ancient traditions and modern-day scams—there is so much to take in. Whether you're here to soak up India's spirituality, chill out on the beaches, or live like a king in the land of princes, this chapter will help you experience the very best India has to offer.

1 Experiencing Spiritual India

Visiting temples that pulsate with devotion will evoke a sense of the sacred, but in India, where religion is such an integral part of daily life, spiritual experiences occur when you least expect them.

- **See Things As They Really Are** (Vipassana Centers throughout India): Maintaining a strict code of silence with no sensory stimulation for 10 days may sound like a self-induced hell, but after attending a 10-day Vipassana meditation course, most people claim transformation and find the mental training invaluable. And it costs nothing. See chapter 2.
- **Hop on a Motorbike and Head for the Drumbeat** (Goa): Once capital of the global beach party, Goa may be past its prime, but when rumors start that an event is in the making at a to-be-announced venue, keep your ear to the ground. Why? Because only in some deserted clearing near a golden Goan beach can you trance out with the nationals of the world, and find solace in the serenity of a rural villager's smile as she hands over cups of

soothing *chai* for the duration of the party. See chapter 5.

- **Worship the Sunrise as It Touches the Southernmost Tip** (Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu): You can't help but be moved by a sense of the miraculous when a simple daily occurrence is venerated by thousands of pilgrims who plunge themselves into the turbulent swell, believing that the tri-oceanic waters at India's southernmost tip are holy, while others delight in the glorious spectacle as if it's a Bollywood (the nickname for India's booming film industry) premiere. See chapter 6.
- **Lose All Sense of Reality in the City of Light** (Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh): Drifting at dawn on a boat on the Ganges along Varanasi's bathing *ghats* (steps leading down to the river), against a backdrop of 18th- and 19th-century temples and palaces, you will witness surreal sights—hundreds of pilgrims waist-deep in the Ganges cleansing their souls in its holy waters, while others

pound laundry, meditate by staring into the sun, or limber up to wrestle. All the while, bodies burn on the sacred banks, thereby achieving *moksha*—liberation from the eternal cycle of rebirth. See chapter 9.

- **Purchase a Pushkar Passport** (Pushkar, Rajasthan): As you wander around the *ghats* of Pushkar, the beautifully serene temple town on the edge of the Thar Desert, you will almost certainly be approached by a Brahmin priest to offer *puja* (prayers) at the sacred lake. In exchange for a “donation,” he will tie a red thread around your wrist—the “passport” you can brandish at the next priest who approaches. This is the commercial side of India’s spirituality, and one you need to be aware of. See chapter 10.
- **Make a Wish at the Tomb of a Sufi Saint** (Ajmer, Rajasthan): The great Sufi saint Khwaja Moin-ud-Din Chisti was known as “the protector of the poor,” and his tomb is said to possess the power to grant the wishes of all those who visit. His Dargah Sharif is the most sacred Islamic shrine in India, second in importance only to Mecca but frequented by Hindus and Muslims alike. The atmosphere of pure devotion is both ancient and surreal; some pray fervently, and others tie threads onto the latticework while supplicating the saint to fulfill their wish, while throughout these activities, the *qawwali* singers seated in front of the tomb repeat the same beautiful, haunting melodies that have been sung for centuries. See chapter 10.
- **Carry the Holy *Granth Sahib* to its Evening Resting Place** (Amritsar, Punjab): In Sikh temples, the *Granth Sahib*—Holy Book of the Sikhs—is an object of devotion in its own right, and nowhere is this more evocative

than at the Golden Temple, the most tangibly spiritual destination in the country. In the evenings men line up to carry the precious *Granth Sahib* from its golden sanctuary at the center of the Amrit Sarovar (Pool of Nectar), crossing **Guru’s Bridge**, which symbolizes the journey of the soul after death, to **Akal Takht**, where the Holy Book rests for the night. You can take part in this ceremony by joining the line that forms behind and ahead of the heavy palanquin. Being part of this ancient tradition is a deeply moving experience and indicative of the embracing atmosphere you’ll find in Sikh temples throughout India. See chapter 11.

- **Look into the Eyes of the Dalai Lama** (Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh): There’s a good chance you’ll meet the Dalai Lama in person if you visit Dharamsala, home to the exiled Tibetan government, which fled its homeland in 1959. Arranging a private audience isn’t easy (unless you’re Richard Gere), but if you attend one of his public appearances, you will—like everyone else in the audience—receive a personal blessing. And whatever your convictions, when you look into the eyes of His Holiness, you know you are in the presence of pure energy. See chapter 11.
- **Witness a Thousand Prayers Take Flight on the Wind** (Leh, Ladakh): Take the overland journey from Manali to Leh and enter the stark world of the Trans-Himalayas—a breathtakingly beautiful yet desolate lunarlike landscape, with arid peaks and ancient Buddhist monasteries perched on rocky crags. Here prayer flags flutter against an impossibly blue sky, sending their silent prayers to the heavens. See chapter 11.
- **Clapping Along during Evening *Aarti* as the Faithful Give Thanks**

to the **Ganges** (Rishikesh, Uttarakhand, formerly known as Uttaranchal): By day, Rishikesh is a spiritual Disneyland, where the commercial excesses of packaged meditation and two-for-one tantric yoga hang heavily about the concrete ashrams, bedecked with gaudy statues of Vishnu and Shiva. But at night, to the

accompaniment of hypnotic prayers and harmonious singing, the town undergoes a magical transformation. Head for the Parmarth Niketan Ashram Ghat and feel yourself seduced by the divine rhythms during **Ganga Aarti**, when devotees gather to sing their praises at the edge of the Ganges River. See chapter 12.

2 The Best Temples, Monuments & Lost Cities

- **Cave Temples at Ajanta & Ellora** (Aurangabad, Maharashtra): Fashioned out of rock by little more than simple hand-held tools, the cave temples at Ajanta (created by Buddhist monks between the 2nd and 7th c.) and Ellora (a marriage of Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain temples, created between the 4th and 9th c.) are the finest examples of rock-cut architecture in India, and deserving of their World Heritage status. The zenith is **Kailashnath Temple**, effectively a mountain whittled down to a free-standing temple. See “Aurangabad & the Ellora and Ajanta Caves” in chapter 4.
- **Lord Gomateswara Monolith** (Sraavanabelagola, Karnataka): One of the oldest (ca. A.D. 918) and most important Jain pilgrimage sites, this 18m (59-ft.) statue of the naked Lord Gomateswara—a representation of Bahubali, son of the first Jain *tirthankara*, said to have sought enlightenment by standing naked and motionless for an entire year—is the tallest monolithic statue on earth. See “Exploring the Hoysala Heartland: Belur, Halebid & Sraavanabelagola” in chapter 8.
- **Hampi** (Karnataka): Scattered among the Henri Moore–like boulders in the heart of Karnataka’s rural interior, Hampi was once the royal seat of the powerful Vijayanagar kingdom, its size and wealth drawing comparisons with imperial Rome. Today, the city has crumbled away to a few starkly beautiful leftovers, but the remote setting couldn’t be more romantic. See “Hampi & the Ruined City of Vijayanagar” in chapter 8.
- **The Temples of Mahaballapuram** (Tamil Nadu): A visit to this once-thriving port city of the Pallava dynasty, who ruled much of South India between the 4th and 9th centuries A.D., is an essential stop on Tamil Nadu’s temple tour. The earliest examples of monumental architecture in southern India (the celebrated **Arjuna’s Penance** is the largest relief-carving on earth), these rock-cut shrines are best explored in the morning, leaving you time to unwind on the pleasant beach and dine on succulent seafood at village cafes for a song. See “Mahabalipuram (Mamallapuram)” in chapter 7.
- **Shri Meenakshi-Sundareshwarar Temple** (Madurai, Tamil Nadu): Alive with prayers, processions, garland-makers, and joyous devotees who celebrate the mythological romance between the beautiful three-breasted goddess and her mighty Lord Shiva, this colorful and lively complex of shrines, halls, and market stalls is almost Disneyesque, marked as it is by numerous entrance towers tangled with colorful stucco gods, demons, beasts, and mythological heroes. It truly embodies the spirit of Tamil

Nadu's deeply embedded temple culture. See "Madurai" in chapter 7.

- **Taj Mahal** (Agra, Uttar Pradesh): Nothing can prepare you for the beauty of the Taj. The perfect symmetry, the ethereal luminescence, the wonderful proportions, the sheer scale—virtually impossible to imagine from staring at its oft-reproduced image—and the exquisite detailing make this bejeweled monument to love a justifiable wonder of the world. See "Agra" in chapter 9.
- **Fatehpur Sikri** (near Agra, Uttar Pradesh): From the intricacy of the glittering white marble screens that surround the *dargah* (tomb) of Salim Chisti, to Parcheesi Court, where the emperor played a ludolike game using the ladies of his harem as live pieces, this magnificent ghost city—built almost entirely from red sandstone in 1571 and deserted only 14 years later—is a testament to the secular vision of Akbar, one of the great players in India's most dynamic dynasty. See "Agra" in chapter 9.
- **The Temples of Khajuraho** (Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh): Built between the 10th and 12th centuries by the Chandela Rajputs, these World Heritage Site monuments are most famous for the erotic sculptures that writhe across the interiors and exteriors. But even the temple designs—their soaring *shikharas* (spires) serving as metaphorical "stairways to heaven"—are striking, and are considered the apotheosis of medieval Hindu architecture. See "Khajuraho" in chapter 9.
- **Mehrangarh Fort** (Jodhpur, Rajasthan): The impenetrable walls of this 15th-century edifice to Rajput valor rise seamlessly from the rocky outcrop on which they were built, literally dwarfing the labyrinthine city at its base; from its crenelated ramparts you enjoy postcard views of the "Blue City" below. In the distance is the grand silhouette of Umaid Bhawan Palace, heritage hotel and residence of the current maharaja. Within the fort is one of the best palace museums in India. See "Jodhpur" in chapter 10.
- **Jain Temples of Rajasthan** (Ranakpur and Mount Abu, near Udaipur, Rajasthan): The Jains put all their devotional passion (and not inconsiderable wealth) into the creation of the most ornate marble temples; with exquisitely detailed relief carvings covering every inch, they are all jaw-droppingly beautiful. Make sure you visit at least one while you're in India, preferably either Ranakpur Temple or Dilwara Temple in Rajasthan. See chapter 10.
- **Golden Temple** (Amritsar, Punjab): Arguably the greatest spiritual monument in India. The name derives from the central gold-plated Hari Mandir—the inner sanctuary featuring gold-plated copper cupolas and white marble walls inlaid with precious stones—which sits at the center of the "Pool of Nectar." Every day thousands of disciplined devotees pay their respects, touching their heads to the glistening marble floor while singing devotional songs continuously—a wonderful, welcoming, and humbling experience. See "The Golden Temple in Amritsar" in chapter 11.
- **Tabo** (Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh): This 1,005-year-old Buddhist complex houses magnificent frescoes and brilliant stucco and relief figures that recount ancient myths and celebrate the deities and demons that make up the Buddhist pantheon. You'll need a flashlight to adequately explore the dark, smoldering halls and shrines lit only by thin shafts of natural light, and brought to life by

the resonant chants and ringing of bells by the monks and nuns who populate this sacred center of Tibetan Buddhism. See “Exploring Kinnaur & Spiti” in chapter 11.

- **The Sun Temple at Konark** (near Bhubaneswar, Orissa): An enormous war chariot carved from a massive chunk of rock during the 13th century, this masterpiece of Indian temple art

is covered with detailed sculpted scenes, from the erotic to the mythological. Guarded by stone elephants and lions, the immense structure is seen as the gigantic chariot of the sun god emerging from the ocean, not far from Orissa’s 500km (310-mile) beach. See “Orissa’s Golden Temple Triangle” in chapter 13.

3 Unique Places to Stay

Not surprisingly, most of these are in Rajasthan, which has almost 80 heritage properties—castles, palaces, forts, and ornate *havelis* (traditional mansions), now hotels offering varying degrees of comfort.

- **Taj Mahal Hotel** (Mumbai): George Bernard Shaw famously claimed that after staying here, he no longer had any need to visit the real Taj Mahal in Agra. Built just over a century ago by an Indian industrialist after he was treated abominably by the colonial snobs at the city’s then leading hotel (since demolished), the Taj Mahal today hosts the world’s rich and famous, and remains the most celebrated address in Mumbai. See p. 100.
- **Boutique Getaways in Goa:** Parisian fashion stylist Claudia Derain and her husband, Hari Ajwani, came to Goa on vacation and—like so many—never left. Together with Goan architect Dean D’Cruz, they’ve created an *Arabian Nights* fantasy in **Nilaya Hermitage**, with only 12 “cosmic-themed” guest suites and gorgeously informal public spaces overlooking paddy fields and coconut-palm groves. It lies 6km (3¾ miles) from the nearest beach, however; if proximity to the golden sands of bustling Goa is key, **Pousada Tauma**, another Dean D’Cruz creation, is the next contender for Goa’s best

boutique getaway. But if you prefer basic to boutique, **Elsewhere**, sandwiched between the river and the sea, comprises a simple beach house, a couple of double-roomed cottages, and “Otter Creek” tents—a quiet retreat, and utterly charming. See p. 147, 148, and 145.

- **Adrift aboard *Discovery*** (Kerala): The best way to experience Kerala’s backwaters is floating along on a traditional *kettuvallam* (houseboat), but the stylish Malabar Group has upped the ante with *Discovery*, a funky modern interpretation of the Kerala houseboat concept. Accommodations comprise a comfortable and stylish bedroom with well-plumbed en-suite bathroom, separate lounge (can double as a second bedroom), and a rooftop deck (furnished with dining table and loungers) where you can while away the day, looked after by a dedicated staff of three, including a private chef. The packages can include a night at the aptly named **Privacy**, our favorite backwaters villa. See p. 199.
- **Gracious Kerala Homestays** (Olavipe, Backwaters/Tranquil, Wyanad): Experience life on a working plantation, then dine on exquisite home-cooked meals at the family dining table, personally hosted by urbane, charming owners—that’s what the

best homestays are all about. It's like finding yourself at a private house party, where you are the guest of honor. Our top picks are **Olavipe**, a stately home on an island in the backwaters, where Anthony and Rema provide the warmest welcome this side of Fort Kochi, and **Tranquil**, located at the edge of Wyanad National Park, where Victor and Ranjini ensure that you leave replenished, and heartsick to go. See p. 190 and 220.

- **Surya Samudra Beach Garden** (near Kovalam, Kerala): A small collection of traditional cottages on a terraced hillside overlooking the sea, with direct access to two picture-perfect beaches, Surya Samudra is quite simply the most Paradisiacal destination on the Malabar coast. Gazing over the Arabian Sea from your private deck (ask for a cottage near the beach), you will no doubt wish you'd spent your entire vacation here. See p. 205.
- **Mahua Kothi** (Bandhavgarh, Madhya Pradesh): The first in a highly anticipated series of ultra-luxurious safari lodges from India's Taj hotel group and South Africa's CC Africa, Mahua Kothi is not only eye-catchingly pretty and filled with whimsically stylish details, but the sumptuous guest villas are an idyllic retreat after a day of tiger-spotting with the best-trained naturalists in the country. See p. 377.
- **Amarvilās** (Agra, Uttar Pradesh): If you've always dreamed of seeing the Taj Mahal, this is the place to celebrate that achievement. Built within the green belt that surrounds the monument, you can literally see the Taj from your bed, but you'll probably spend just as much time gazing at your immediate surroundings. With its huge reflecting pools, colonnaded courts, terraced lawns, inlaid murals, and pillowed pavilions, this palatial hotel is worth every cent. See p. 348.
- **Rajvilās** (near Jaipur, Rajasthan): The first of the Oberoi's flagship Vilas properties, built like a traditional fortified Rajasthani palace, Rajvilās may not have the history of an authentic heritage hotel, but it offers a level of comfort, luxury, and service other properties cannot match, enabling even the most world-weary guest (Bill Clinton loved it) to "live in the princely style of Rajasthan." See p. 406.
- **Aman-i-Khās** (Ranthambhore, Rajasthan): Located a stone's throw from India's most famous tiger sanctuary, the superb accommodations—huge temperature-controlled Mughal-style royal tents stylishly divided by cool white drapes—and impeccable service are distinctly Aman. At night, lanterns light your way to the giant flaming *uruli* (large metal vessel) around which guests gather to enjoy the night sky and the ethereal calm, broken only by the occasional call from the wilds. See p. 427.
- **Deogarh Mahal & Fort Seengh Sagar** (Rural Rajasthan): An ornate 17th-century fort-palace with domed turrets and balconies, personally managed by the charming Thakur of Deogarh, Deogarh Mahal is one of the most authentic and best-value heritage hotels in Rajasthan, best visited on a road trip between Jaipur and Udaipur. Book the aptly named "Royal" suite, and it's not hard to feel that all you survey from your private balcony is yours. The more recently opened Seengh Sagar is an exclusive island fort that's been transformed into a sexy little villa run by the same princely family. See p. 463.

- **Rawla Narlai** (Rural Rajasthan): Rawla Narlai, the 17th-century hunting retreat of the Maharajah of Jodhpur, is another rural gem that will have you feeling like a royal guest—and it's the ideal stopover if you're traveling between Udaipur and Jodhpur. But, with activities and experiences galore (including a stiff climb to the summit of a miraculous rock), it's more than a mere stopover—you'll stay for 1 night and wish you'd planned for 3. See p. 464.
- **Lake Palace Hotel** (Udaipur, Rajasthan): Built on an island by the Maharana in 1740 as a cool summer retreat (swimming distance from his palace), this is perhaps the most romantic—certainly the most photographed—hotel in India. Whizzing across the waters to your private palace, you'll feel you've finally arrived—and if you've booked one of the heritage suites, you have. Floating like a beautiful white ship on the waters of Lake Pichola, the hotel offers good service, comfortable lodging, and picture-perfect 360-degree views. See p. 458.
- **Kankarwa** (Udaipur, Rajasthan): A short stroll from the City Palace, this ancient haveli right on the shores of Lake Pichola is the best budget heritage option in Rajasthan. Run by a family who has resided here for 200 years, double rooms cost just Rs 1,650 to Rs 2,500 (\$40–\$61/£20–£31). Book room no. 207—a cool, whitewashed space with a separate alcove room with a mattress where you can laze in the afternoons and gaze upon the blue waters of the lake reflected below your window. See p. 460.
- **Devi Garh** (near Udaipur, Rajasthan): If you're a modern-design enthusiast, this hotel will blow you away. The formidable exterior of this 18th-century Rajput palace-fort, towering over the tiny village at its base, remains unchanged. But step inside and you'll find a totally reinvented minimalist interior, with 14 floors transformed into 23 chic suites (with 18 more opening soon) that have clearly utilized the talents of the best young Indian designers—all of whom laid to rest the perception that design here reached its apotheosis with the Mughals. It's an unparalleled modern Indian masterpiece, and a destination in its own right. See p. 462.
- **Umaid Bhawan Palace** (Jodhpur, Rajasthan): Splurge on one of the sumptuous Deco heritage suites in this glorious, monumental palace (still partially inhabited by Jodhpur's royal family), with the city and its populace somewhere far below. It stands on the summit of a hill, with the staggering Mehrangarh Fort across the way. Guests here are treated like royalty, with access to a private cinema, fabulous lounges, a squadron of butlers, and two pools—one an indoor Deco masterpiece and another at the edge of the beautiful, lush gardens where Liz Hurley married her Indian beau. See p. 470.
- **Amanbagh** (Ajabgarh, Rajasthan): Fringed by date palms and mango and jamun trees, Aman's shimmering pink-sandstone resort is the oasis you have always wanted to stumble upon while traversing the Thar Desert. Begin your day sipping ruby-red pomegranate juice on your private porch, then hike to ancient Somsagar Lake or explore the haunted ruins at Bhargarh. Or go nowhere but your private villa pool on the edge of the palm-lined canal and listen to the joyful twittering of birds. See p. 394.
- **Killa Bhawan** (Jaisalmer, Rajasthan): Built entirely from yellow sandstone,

Sonar Qila (Golden Fort) rises like a giant sandcastle from its desert surroundings—this is the world’s only living medieval fort, inhabited by families who have been here for more than 8 centuries. Within the ramparts, Killa Bhawan is a charming seven-room guesthouse with rather basic facilities (only two rooms are en-suite) but lovely furnishings and stunning views, best enjoyed from the rooftop, which is comfortably furnished with mattresses and bolsters. See p. 484.

- **Gangeshwari Suite at The Glasshouse on the Ganges** (Garhwal, Uttarakhand): It’s the location—just steps away from the raging Ganges River—more than anything that gives this room its special appeal. The simply laid-out sleeping area has a four-poster canopy bed and antique furniture, while the bathroom features a tub carved into the rock, with greenery spilling down the walls. You can relax on your private balcony and watch India’s holiest river gushing by,

or dive in for a refreshing dip knowing that you’re far away from the pollution that enters the river much farther downstream. See p. 534.

- **Glenburn Tea Estate** (Darjeeling): Centered around the 100-year-old Burra Bungalow, which offers just four magnificent rooms, this tea plantation is by far the best place to stay in the “Land of the Celestial Thunderbolt,” with great decor, delectable cuisine, and superb views of the Kanchenjunga. You can spend a night at Glenburn Lodge by the river without giving up your room at the Bungalow—the two rooms here are charming, especially at night when bathed in the orange glow of hurricane lamps (no electricity) with only the burbling of the river for music. Picnics (anywhere on the estate) will be served by liveried bearers on portable tables complete with a tablecloth, delicate crockery, and a vase of fresh flowers—all that’s missing is a chandelier. See p. 581.

4 Most Memorable Moments

- **Sharing a Cup of *Chai* with a Perfect Stranger:** You will typically be asked to sit and share a cup of *chai* (tea) a dozen times a day, usually by merchants keen to keep you browsing. Although you may at first be nervous of what this may entail, don’t hesitate to accept when you’re feeling more comfortable, for while sipping the milky sweet brew (often flavored with ginger and cardamom), conversation will flow, and you might find yourself discussing anything from women’s rights in India to the individualism that mars Western society.
- **Helping Lord Venkateshwara Repay His Debt to the God of Wealth** (Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh): Tirupati, the richest temple in India,

is the most active religious pilgrimage destination on earth, drawing more than 10 million devoted pilgrims every year (more than either Jerusalem or Rome!) who line up for hours, even days, to see the diamond-decorated black stone idol Lord Venkateshwara (aka Vishnu) for just a few seconds. Afterward, you stare in disbelief as vast piles of cash and other contributions are counted by scores of clerks behind a wall of glass. See chapter 7.

- **Watching the Moon Rise from Pushkar Palace during the Pushkar *Mela*** (Pushkar, Rajasthan): The sunset is a spectacular sight on any given evening, but on the evening of the full moon during the Pushkar *mela*,

hundreds of Hindu pilgrims, accompanied by temple bells and drums, wade into a sacred lake—believed to miraculously cleanse the soul—before lighting clay lamps and setting them afloat on its holy waters, the twinkling lights a surreal reflection of the desert night sky. If you're lucky enough to have bagged a room at Pushkar Palace, you can watch this ancient ritual from a deck chair on the terrace on the banks of the lake. See chapter 10.

- **Gawking & Being Gawked At** (Dungarpur, near Udaipur, Rajasthan): As a foreigner, you may attract uncomfortably long stares (particularly on public transport), but there are a few moments that you will recall with a wry smile, like the gimlet eye of the toothless old royal retainer as he watches your reaction to the explicit *Kama Sutra* paintings he will reveal hidden in a cupboard of Dungarpur's 13th-century Juna Mahal—one of the Rajasthan's undiscovered gems. See chapter 10.
- **Playing Chicken with a Tata Truck:** The rules of the road (which is almost always single-laned, potholed, and unmarked) are hard to understand, but it would seem that (after the cow, which is of course sacred) Tata trucks, all with HORN ON PLEASE written on their bumpers, rule the road, an assumption your hired driver is likely to test—and you will, more than once, find yourself involuntarily closing your eyes as destiny appears to race toward you, blaring its horn.
- **Meeting a Maharaja** (Rajasthan): India must be the only place in the world where you can, armed with a credit card, find yourself sleeping in a king's bed, having dined with the aristocrat whose forebears built, and quite often died for, the castle or palace walls that surround it. While most heritage properties are still owned by India's oldest monarchies, many of whom live there, only some (like Mandawa Castle and Deogarh Mahal in Rajasthan, and Nilambagh Palace in Gujarat) are personally managed by these urbane aristocrats. See chapter 10.
- **Unraveling the Intricacies of Hinduism** (Master Paying Residential Guest Accommodation, Delhi): Staying here is not only the best-value deal in town, but the sophisticated, charming, and extremely knowledgeable Avnish Puri will take you on a “Hidden Delhi” tour, showing you a world not seen by many outsiders, during which he will unravel Hinduism's spiritual tenets in a profoundly logical way—no mean feat! See chapter 9.
- **Being Blessed by an Elephant:** While you may expect to see an elephant in a national park, it's always a wonderful surprise when you see one ambling down a crowded street in urban Mumbai or Delhi. Outside Thirupparankundram Temple, near Madurai, the resident temple elephant waits patiently to bestow blessings on those willing to donate a rupee.

5 Exploring Natural India

- **Watch Cows Sunbathing with Tourists on the Beach** (Goa): While there's plenty of marijuana doing the rounds in Goa, you don't have to smoke a thing to be amused by the mellow cows that wander onto the beach and chill out among the tanning tourists and hawkers. Chewing their cud while seemingly gazing out to sea, these cows really take the Goan motto, “*Sossegade*” (“Take it easy”), to heart. See chapter 5.

- **Ply the Backwaters on a *Kettuvalam*** (Alleppey & Kumarakom, Kerala): Aboard your private houseboat, you aimlessly drift past villages, temples, and churches, watching as village children, unperturbed by your drifting presence, play at the water's edge, and elephants and water buffalo wade at will. Though the facilities might strike the well-heeled as basic, you're looked after by a private team (guide, cook, and pilot) who manage to be both discreetly invisible and at your beck and call. See chapter 6.
- **Quench Your Thirst with Fresh Coconut Water on a Tropical Island** (Lakshadweep): One of India's best-kept secrets, the 36 atolls and coral reefs that make up the remote union territory of Lakshadweep are rated among the best diving destinations in Asia. Only 10 of the islands are populated, almost exclusively by Malayalam-speaking Muslims who make their living from fishing and harvesting coconuts. These relaxed islanders are supremely welcoming, happily climbing a towering coconut tree to help you quench your thirst. See chapter 6.
- **Wake to Hear a Herd of Elephants Approaching** (Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala): The best way to experience this park—famous for its herds of wild elephants—is on a trek with the privately run Periyar Tiger Trail. Accompanied by a naturalist and a game ranger armed with a rifle, you are taken farther into the tourist zone than any other operator is allowed to penetrate. What's more, you are looked after by a team of reformed poachers, who skillfully track and spot animals, carry all the gear, strike camp, cook, clean, and—most importantly—stand sentinel throughout the night when the danger of being trampled by elephants becomes a serious risk. See chapter 6.
- **Immortalize a Wild Tiger from the Back of an Elephant** (Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh): With the densest population of tigers of any park in India, you are practically guaranteed a sighting at this relatively low-key, remote part of Madhya Pradesh. But it's the approach that's so exciting—elephant *mahouts* set off at dawn to track the royal cats. As soon as they've spotted one, you rendezvous with your pachyderm, who then takes you within striking distance of this most royal of cats. The tiger—unperturbed by the presence of an elephant—will then strike a pose of utter indifference for your camera. See chapter 9.
- **Pick a Picture-Perfect Beach** (Goa, Kerala): India has some of the world's best beaches, most of them on the Malabar Coast. Easily accessed, **Asvem** (northern Goa) is an idyllic haven, while just south of Goa, **Morjim** has been drawing Olive Ridley turtles to its shores for centuries. Both beaches are off the well-beaten tourist track. **Palolem** (southern Goa), a gorgeous crescent of sand backed by coconut palms and a handful of laid-back shacks where you can feast on fresh fish and bottles of cold beer, is another of India's loveliest beaches. From here, time allowing, you should head over the border to beautiful and remote **Om Beach** (Gokam, Karnataka). In Kerala, the competition is equally stiff, but we award the picture-perfect prize to the beaches at **Marari** and **Surya Samudra** resorts. The absolute stunners, if you can get that far, are at **Bangaram** and **Agatti**, in Lakshadweep. See chapters 5 and 6.

- **Find Divinity in *Devbhumi*, “Land of the Gods”** (Spiti to Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh): The stark, rust-colored, snowcapped slopes in the Indo-Tibetan regions of Kinnaur, Spiti, and Lahaul are the stuff adventurers’ dreams are made of, offering sublime mountainscapes, flower-filled valleys, terrifying roads, atmospheric Tibetan Buddhist *gompas* (monasteries), and high-altitude villages that seem to cling to the mountainsides. The region is one of the most profoundly beautiful in the

world, but the drive is not for the fainthearted. See chapter 11.

- **Get a Rush While Rafting Down the Zaskar** (Ladakh): White-water rafting on the Zaskar is not only exhilarating and challenging, but you pass through the most incredibly desolate, scenic gorges and stupendous cliffs. A full river journey takes at least 12 days round-trip from Leh, so this is only for the truly committed—though there are slightly tamer options closer to Leh. See chapter 11.

6 The Best Eating & Drinking Experiences

- **Bumping into a Bollywood Idol** (Mumbai): Nowhere in India is dining more rewarding than in Mumbai, where the streets are filled with literally thousands of restaurants representing every kind of Indian cuisine. But if it’s star-gazing you’re after, head for places like the **Olive Bar and Kitchen** restaurant in Bandra or **Enigma** nightclub in Juhu. Alternatively, hang out at **Leopold Café**; casting agents looking for foreigners to work as extras frequently scan the clientele at this favored travelers’ hangout. See chapter 4.
- **Eating Alphonso Mangoes in Mumbai**: You may have eaten mangoes in Mexico, Thailand, or even in other parts of India, but until you’ve had an Alphonso from Ratnagiri in rural Maharashtra, you’ll be missing a sensory experience like no other. The king of mangoes has a succulent bright orange pulp, bewitching scent, and divine flavor. See chapter 4.
- **Eating with Your Hands**: Though it may initially go against the grain, there’s something immensely rewarding about digging into a delicious meal with your hands. Indians generally do, and—at least once—you should follow suit. Note that ideally

you only use your right hand, and in the North, where the food is “drier,” you are traditionally not supposed to dirty more than the first two digits; in the South you may use the whole hand. See the appendix, “India in Depth.”

- **Sipping a Sweet Lassi**: A delicious drink of liquefied sweetened yogurt, this is almost a meal in a glass and should definitely be sampled (some of the best we’ve tried were in Amritsar, Goa, and Jaipur). Do, however, make sure that no water has been added (including ice), and beware the *bhang* lassi—spiced with marijuana, it can make the usually surreal scenes of India a little too out of this world.
- **Sitting Around a Bonfire under a Desert Sky** (Rajasthan): There’s nothing quite like eating a superb meal around a raging campfire in the peace of the desert night. Camel and horseback safaris are run out of Shekhawati, Bikaner, Pushkar, and Jaisalmer. If you opt for the latter, **Royal Desert Safaris** has a permanent tented camp with en-suite tents near Sam Dunes, run by Fort Rajwada, with food supplied by the team of chefs that cooks up a storm at Trio, Jaisalmer’s best restaurant. See chapter 10.

- **Sampling *Bod-Jha*, Tibetan Butter Tea, with a Buddhist Lama** (Leh, Ladakh): Many people gag at the taste of butter tea, made with salt and—you guessed it—a good dollop of the clarified butter known as ghee. It’s an acquired taste, but if you get the hang

of it, sipping the buttery concoction with a friendly Buddhist monk when you visit one of the many monasteries tucked in the lunar landscapes around Leh is a truly memorable experience. See chapter 11.

7 The Best Savvy Traveler Tips

- **“You pay what you like”:** This rather annoying response from guides, drivers, and rickshaw-*wallas* to the question “How much will it cost?” will no doubt end with at least one of you feeling very disappointed. Try to find out how much something should cost *before* you enter into this dialogue (we’ve tried to advise this wherever possible), and always negotiate the fare or rate upfront. (Note that “I come later” is another irritating response, this time after you decline service, and you will need to remain firm or prepare to go through the entire experience again.)
- **“Just look, no buy”:** You will be urged to enter shops from all corners in both explicit and less obvious ways—your driver, guide, even the seemingly innocent bystander offering assistance, are almost all operating on the ubiquitous commission system, and whatever they make on the deal is added to the quoted price. Note that to avoid this kind of hassle, look for the fixed-rate shops or those that mark their wares with prices. But as is the case everywhere, do beware of closely named imitations of fixed-rate shops with good reputations—for example, Cottage Industries Exposition shops, often marked CIE, are seriously overpriced outlets that cash in on the fame (and closely related name) of the government-owned Central Cottage Industries Emporiums. The latter may not be

the cheapest, but it offers good value, and you really can “just look, no buy.”

- **“We look; we look”:** This response from a rickshaw-*walla* or driver usually means that the person either doesn’t know where you’ve asked him to take you, or you’ll end up somewhere with a similar name but nothing else to recommend it (Hotel *Chandra*, for example, rather than Hotel *Chand*). Prebook your accommodations whenever you can, so that you don’t have to deal with touts and hawkers when you arrive. And be aware that a hotel or guesthouse that is successful will often have a rival opening within the year with a confusingly similar name.
- **“So where are you from, good gentleman?”** (or more commonly, “Coming from?”): You will be asked this often, so prepare yourself. One of the possible reasons Indians kick-start conversations this way is that where you come from may in the past have indicated caste or social position; whatever the reason, engage in the opener—it’s far preferable to living in a five-star hotel cocoon.
- **“Hashish, taxi, guide, young girls?”:** In the well-traveled parts of India, you will be inundated with offers of assistance; again, the best response is to doggedly desist in what is essentially a game of endurance, and certainly ignore those unsolicited offers that are illicit—these can carry a hefty penalty, including a lengthy jail sentence.

- **“Cof-fay, chai; cof-fay, chai; cof-fay, chai?”**: This incessant call given by the *chai-walla* wandering the corridors of your train will put to rest any romantic notions about the relaxation of train travel. Note that you will be most comfortable aboard the overnight **Rajdhani**s, which connect all the major cities, while the best daytime trains are the **Shatabdi**s (book Chair Class). Time allowing, you should definitely book a “toy train” to the hill stations of Shimla or Darjeeling—the latter approach is so spectacular it has been named a World Heritage Site.
- **“Yes, Madam”; “Yes, Sir”**: You will hear this everywhere, usually from hawkers wanting to draw your attention and con artists wanting to strike up a conversation. Unfortunately, the

only way to get rid of these irritants is to completely ignore them. In places like Varanasi, even saying “no” is perceived as a willingness to interact, and your pursuer will then continue to try to draw you into conversation. Just pretend you can’t be bothered, and hopefully, in a little while, you won’t.

- **“You wait, no problem”**: Finally, we can’t emphasize enough how important it is to simply relax and accept whatever’s going on around you. Many Indians subscribe to the philosophy that life is destiny, and getting uptight or flying into a rage usually won’t solve much. You’ll have a far better vacation if you simply give in to the moment and enjoy the experience; after all, the only aspect you have control over is your response.