

Uttar Pradesh



Uttar Pradesh doesn't quite roll off the tongue like Rajasthan, Kerala or Kashmir, but as a travel destination this expansive state looms large, thanks to Agra, home of the Taj Mahal, and the enthralling city of Varanasi.

Known as UP, and often referred to as the cow belt or Hindu belt, India's most populous state covers the vast, sprawling plain of northern India, bordering Delhi, Uttarakhand (formerly Uttaranchal, was part of UP until it split in 2000), Nepal and Bihar. The mighty, myth-laden Ganges – Hinduism's most sacred river – rises in Uttarakhand and flows through the state providing a spiritual backbone exemplified by the bathing ghats of Varanasi and the pilgrimage centre of Allahabad – the most auspicious of India's four Kumbh Mela sites. Just outside Varanasi, Sarnath was where Buddha first preached his gospel of the middle way, and Kushinagar, near Gorakhpur, is where he died. Devotees of a different kind are drawn to Mathura and Vrindavan, the birthplace of the much-loved god Krishna.

But nothing draws tourists like India's most famous icon, the Taj Mahal, and the other Mughal monuments in Agra and Fatehpur Sikri. On the banks of Hinduism's second-holiest river, the Yamuna, the white-marble Taj stands as an unrivalled monument and architectural wonder. Of course, the nawabs in UP's capital Lucknow and the British in Allahabad also left behind an impressive architectural legacy that's lasted well beyond their downfall. Although Agra and Varanasi stand out in UP, it would be a shame not to delve deeper into one of India's most historically and politically important regions.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Rise before dawn and be inspired as the sunrise illuminates the magical white-marble **Taj Mahal** (p399), in Agra
- Take a predawn boat ride along the bathing ghats that line the sacred Ganges at **Varanasi** (p425), then enjoy a rooftop yoga session before breakfast
- Stand in awe amid Akbar's elaborate red-sandstone palaces and the magnificent Jama Masjid at **Fatehpur Sikri** (p408)
- Walk with Buddha's spirit around the peaceful villages of **Sarnath** (p438) and **Kushinagar** (p440)
- Row to the point where the Yamuna and Ganges Rivers meet, then visit the shrine to the Nehru family in undiscovered **Allahabad** (p420)
- Dine on nawab cuisine and step back into the turbulent times of the Indian Uprising at the Residency in **Lucknow** (p413)



History

Over 2000 years ago the region was part of Ashoka's great Buddhist empire, but only archaeological evidence of this era remains today. 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 Fatehpur Sikri, Agra and then Delhi.

Following the decline of the Mughal empire, Persian invaders stepped in briefly before the nawabs of Avadh rose to prominence in the central part of the region. The nawabs were responsible for turning Lucknow into a flourishing centre for the arts, but their empire came to a dramatic end when the British East India Company deposed the last nawab, triggering the Uprising of 1857. 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. However, the people of the state have not benefited much from this as poor governance, a high birth rate, a low literacy rate and an erratic electricity supply have held back economic progress in the past 60 years.

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

Information

The state tourism organisation, **UP Tourism** (www.up-tourism.com) has an office in most towns and cities, usually connected to a government-run hotel.

AGRA

☎ 0562 / pop 1,321,410

Agra's magnificent white marble Taj Mahal stands like a bulbous beacon, drawing tourists like moths to a wondrous flame. Despite the hype, it's every bit as good as you've heard. While Agra itself is a sprawling, bloated and polluted industrial city that few travellers seem to have a good word for, the Taj is not a stand-alone attraction. The legacy of the Mughal empire has left a magnificent fort and a sprinkling of fascinating tombs and mausoleums, while the Yamuna River provides a suitably sacred backdrop. The Mughal emperor Babur established his capital here in 1526, and for the next century Agra witnessed

FAST FACTS

- Population: 166.1 million
- Area: 231,254 sq km
- Capital: Lucknow
- When to go: October to March

a remarkable spate of architectural activity as each emperor tried to outdo the grandiose monuments built by his predecessors.

The city has a lively but chaotic *chowk* (marketplace) and plenty of places to stay and eat, but the hordes of rickshaw-wallahs, touts, unofficial guides and souvenir vendors can be as persistent as the monsoon rain.

Many tourists choose to visit Agra on a whistle-stop day trip – made possible by the excellent train services from Delhi. However, Agra's attractions are much more than can be seen in a day, and if you have the time you can enjoy several days' sightseeing with side trips to Fatehpur Sikri and Mathura.

History

In 1501, Sultan Sikander Lodi established his capital here, but the city fell into Mughal hands in 1526, when Emperor Babur defeated the last Lodi sultan at Panipat, 80km north of Delhi. Agra reached the peak of its magnificence between the mid-16th and mid-17th centuries during the reigns of Akbar, Jehangir and Shah Jahan. During this period the fort, the Taj Mahal and other major mausoleums were built. In 1638 Shah Jahan built a new city in Delhi, and his son Aurangzeb moved the capital there 10 years later.

In 1761 Agra fell to the Jats, a warrior class who looted its monuments, including the Taj Mahal. The Marathas took over in 1770, but were replaced by the British in 1803. Following the Uprising of 1857, the British shifted the administration of the province to Allahabad. Deprived of its administrative role, Agra developed as a centre for heavy industry, quickly becoming famous for its chemicals industry and atmospheric pollution, before the Taj and tourism became a major source of income.

Orientation

Agra sits on the Ganges plain on the western bank of the Yamuna River. The fort and the main marketplace, Kinari Bazaar, are north-

east of Agra Cantonment train station and Idgah bus station. The Taj Mahal is about 2km east of the fort on the far side of the spacious British-built cantonment.

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.

Information

For an online guide to the city see www.agra-india.net.

BOOKSHOPS

Aanee Bookshop (Map p403; Taj South Gate) Second-hand books.

EMERGENCY

Tourist police (Map p398; ☎ 2421204; UP Tourism office, Agra Cantonment train station; 🕒 24hr) The guys in sky-blue uniforms are based at the tourism office.

INTERNET ACCESS

ipay Internet Fatehabad Rd (Map p398; per hr Rs 30; 🕒 7am-11pm); Sadar Bazar (Map p398; Hotel Pawan, Taj Rd; per hr Rs 30; 🕒 7am-10.30pm); South Gate (Map p403; per hr Rs 30; 🕒 8am-11pm)

LEFT LUGGAGE

Agra Cantonment train station (Map p398; per piece Rs 10; 🕒 24hr)

Yash Café (Map p403; Taj South Gate) Storage space and showers are offered to day-trippers for Rs 50 per day for both.

MEDICAL SERVICES

District Hospital (Map p398; ☎ 2361099; MG Rd; 🕒 24hr)

SN Medical College (Map p398; ☎ 2361314; Hospital Rd; 🕒 24hr)

MONEY

Citibank ATM (Map p398; Fatehabad Rd)

HDFC ATM (Map p398; Fatehabad Rd)

LKP Forex (Map p398; Fatehabad Rd; 🕒 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Part of a reliable India-wide chain; exchanges currency and travellers cheques.

State Bank of India (Map p398; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Off Chhipi Tola Rd.

State Bank of India ATM (Agra Cantonment Train Station)

UTI ATM Sadar Bazaar (Map p398); Taj East Gate (Map p403)

POST

Main post office (Map p398; ☎ 2363886; the Mall; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon-Sat)

Post office (Map p398; Clarks Shiraz Hotel, Taj Rd; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat)

FESTIVALS IN UTTAR PRADESH

Magh Mela (Jan/Feb; Allahabad, p420) This religious fair is held at Sangam on the banks of the Ganges (p420) at Allahabad. Hindu pilgrims from all over India camp out and take a soul-cleansing dip at auspicious times. Every 12 years the fair is replaced by the massive Kumbh Mela (next in Allahabad in 2013) and every six years with the Ardh Mela (last held in 2007).

Taj Mahotsav (18-27 Feb; Agra, opposite) Held in Shilpgram, a crafts village and open-air emporium. Features live music and dance, food tasting and a Mughal procession.

Holi (Feb/Mar; Barsana, near Vrindavan, p412) This national festival is celebrated with particular fervour around Mathura and Vrindavan, spiritual home of Krishna. In Barsana village, near Vrindavan, a traditional festival takes place where local women, armed with bamboo sticks, beat off men from a nearby village who defend themselves with straw shields.

Purnima (Apr/May; Sarnath, p438) Sarnath, just outside Varanasi, takes on a festive air during Buddha's birthday, when Buddhists from many countries take part in a procession and a fair is held.

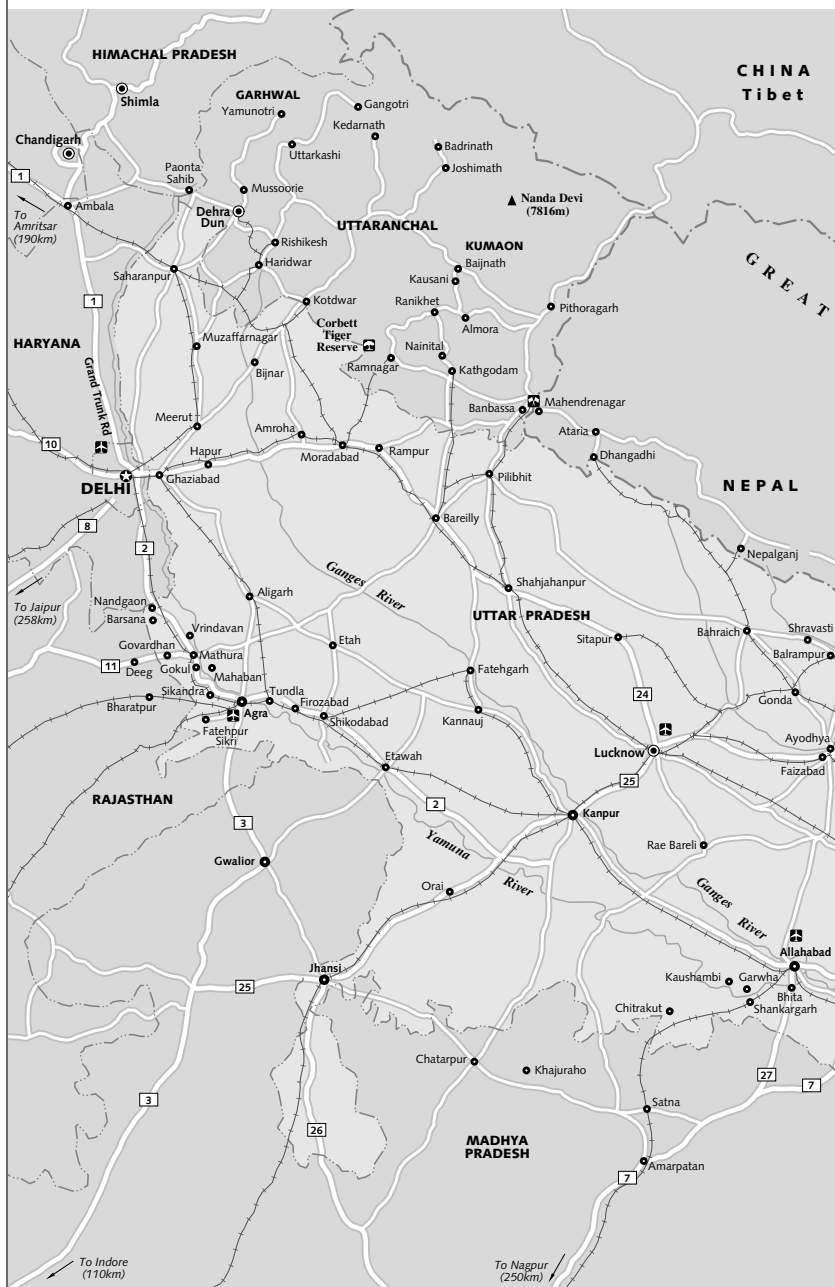
Janmastami (Aug/Sep; Mathura, p410) You can barely move here during Krishna's birthday, when the Dwarkadeesh temple is swathed in decorations and musical dramas about Krishna are performed.

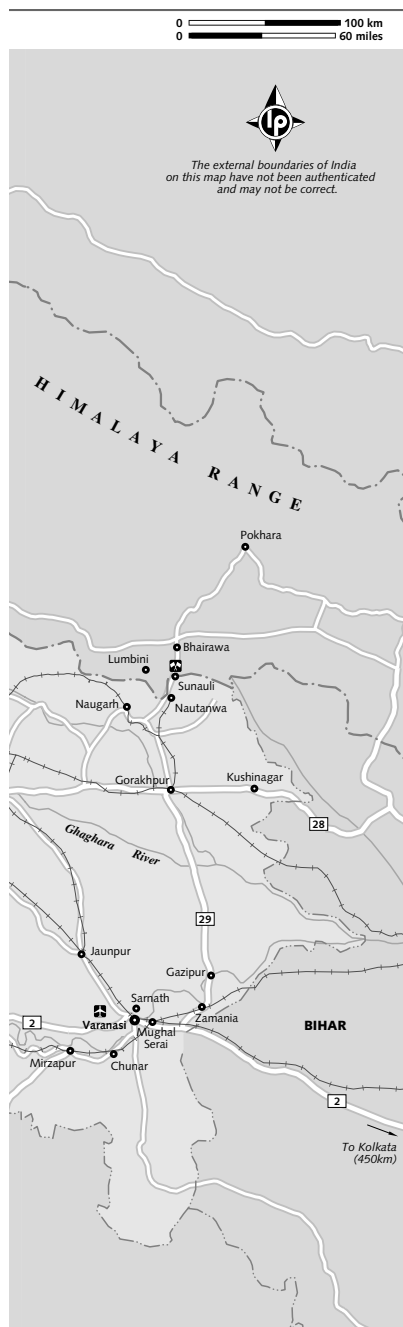
Ram Lila (Sep/Oct; Varanasi, p425) Every year since the early 1800s, the Ram Lila, a lengthy version of the Ramayana, has been performed at Ramnagar in Varanasi. The epic saga of Rama's marriage to Sita and his battle against the demon king, Ravana, is performed mainly by Brahmin youths aided by masks, music, dancing and giant papier-mâché figures.

Lucknow Mahotsava (late Nov-Dec; Lucknow, p413) The spirit of the nawabs comes back to life during this 10-day festival. Events include processions, plays, Kathak dancing, *ghazals* (Urdu songs), sitar recitals, kite flying and tonga races.

Eid ul-Fitr (Dec/Jan; Fatehpur Sikri, p408) Join the happy crowds in the bazaar and mosque at Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra, for the end-of-Ramadan celebrations.

UTTAR PRADESH





TOURIST INFORMATION

India Tourism office (Map p398; ☎ 2226368; www.incredibleindia.org; 191 the Mall; 🕒 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) Has brochures on local and India-wide attractions; can arrange an official guide (half-/full day Rs 350/500).

UP Tourism office Agra Cantonment train station (Map p398; ☎ 2421204; 🕒 24hr); Taj Rd (Map p398; ☎ 2226431; 64 Taj Rd; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) The train station branch has round-the-clock help and advice, and is the place to contact the tourist police.

Dangers & Annoyances

Touts, vendors and rickshaw-wallahs can be pretty draining in Agra, particularly around the Taj, but it's certainly more an annoyance than a danger – it helps to maintain a sense of humour and patience. Many hotels, tourist shops and money changers pay hefty commissions to taxi drivers and rickshaw-wallahs who bring in customers; if this happens you will pay more in order to cover their commission. When booking a hotel or guesthouse, arrange for a pick-up from the train or bus station or use the prepaid stand. Cheap or free rickshaw rides always lead to a gem or souvenir shop. Lots of 'marble' souvenirs are actually soapstone. Avoid hole-in-the-corner travel agents.

SCAMS

Don't fall for the gem import scam that has been conning naive tourists in Agra for more than a decade. Travellers are convinced to help a shop avoid import duty by carrying gems back to their home country, where a company representative will reimburse them for their costs plus a tidy profit. The travellers are asked to make a small credit-card payment 'as a sign of good faith'. Without exception, the gems are worthless, the representative never materialises and travellers are lumped with a credit-card bill of US\$1000 or more. Keep your credit card firmly sheathed!

Sights & Activities

Two tickets are issued to visit some of Agra's mains sights: the Agra Development Association (ADA) ticket is valid for the Taj, Agra Fort, Akbar's Mausoleum, Itmad-ud-Daula and Fatehpur Sikri for one day, so hang on to it. The separate Archeological Survey of India (ASI) ticket must be purchased for each of these sights. Both these tickets are only available from the sites themselves. Children under 15 get in free to all monuments.

AGRA

0 800 m
0 0.5 miles

A

B

C

D

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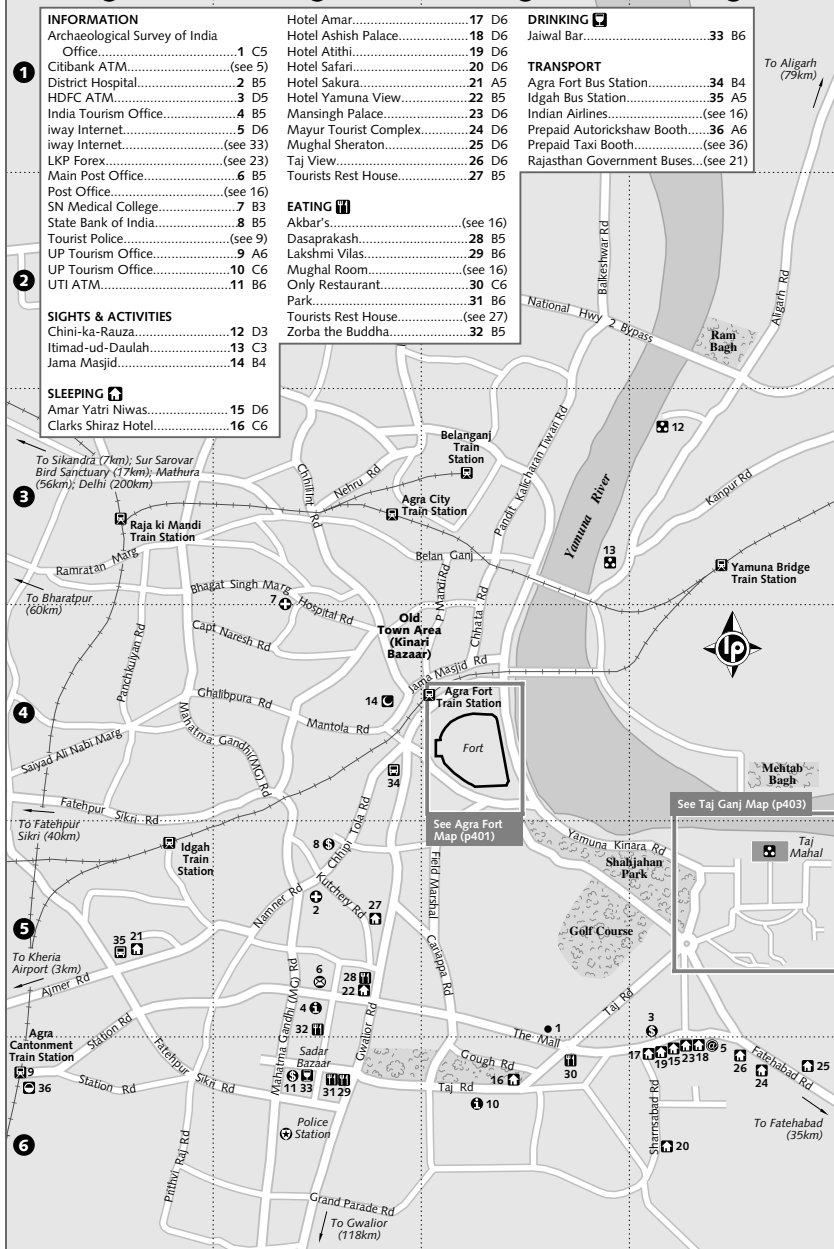
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To Aligarh (79km)



TAJ MAHAL

Described as the most extravagant monument ever built for love, this sublime Mughal mausoleum is India's most ogled icon. Many have tried to sum up its beauty – 'a teardrop on the face of eternity' according to Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, 'the embodiment of all things pure' according to British writer Rudyard Kipling. As an architectural masterpiece it stands alone.

The Taj was built by Emperor Shah Jahan as a memorial for his second wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who died giving birth to their 14th child in 1631. The death of Mumtaz left the emperor so heartbroken that his hair is said to have turned grey virtually overnight. Construction of the Taj began in the same year and was not completed until 1653 – although there's some debate as to the exact date of completion. Not long after it was finished, Shah Jahan was overthrown by his son Aurangzeb and imprisoned in Agra Fort where, for the rest of his days, he could only gaze out at his creation through a window. Following his death in 1666, Shah Jahan was buried here alongside Mumtaz.

In total, some 20,000 people from India and Central Asia worked on the building. Specialists were brought in from as far afield as Europe to produce the exquisite marble screens and *pietra dura* (marble inlay work) made with thousands of semiprecious stones. A popular story that Shah Jahan had intended to con-

struct an identical Taj in black marble as a tomb for himself on the opposite bank of the Yamuna – creating a mirror image in negative – is probably too fanciful to be true. Local guides are fond of saying this was part of the reason Aurangzeb threw him in jail – the Mughal empire couldn't afford his grandiose plans!

The spectacular mausoleum was designated a World Heritage site in 1983 and looks as immaculate today as when it was first constructed – though it underwent a huge restoration project in the early 20th century after falling into disrepair and even suffering vandalism. In recent times the threat of damage has come from atmospheric pollution. Acid rain, produced by sulphur dioxide from vehicle and industrial emissions, began to discolour the famous white marble and erode the fine carving and inlays. In an attempt to reduce pollution, new industrial developments in Agra were banned in 1994, and only nonpolluting vehicles are allowed within 500m of the Taj.

Entry & Information

The **Taj** (☎ 2330498; Indian/foreigner Rs 20/750, video Rs 25; 🕒 6am–7pm Sat–Thu) can be accessed through the west, south and east gates, which all lead to an outer courtyard. The south gate is the main access and easiest to reach from Taj Ganj, while the east gate generally has the shortest queues. The west gate can get very crowded with tour groups coming from Agra Fort. There are separate queues for men and

TAJ BY SUNRISE, SUNSET OR MOONLIGHT?

With the relatively high entry fee discouraging repeat visits, a big decision for many travellers is exactly when to visit the Taj. Most people want to avoid the worst of the crowds, or the heat of the day, or choose the best time for photography. If you're an early riser, sunrise offers the best of all worlds. It's a magical time when the air is cool and the morning light spreads across the Taj, turning it from dark purple to pale blue and finally a golden glow. Tour groups generally don't start arriving till 9am. Sunset also provides a beautiful, softer light – arrive at least an hour or two before sunset to soak up the atmosphere. Don't discount the middle of the day – especially if you take a book and relax in the shady archways or gardens for a while.

Finally, moonlight viewings are possible for five nights either side of each full moon (except on a Friday) – but with plenty of security restrictions. A maximum of 400 visitors are allowed in groups of 50. Each group stays only 30 minutes between 8.30pm and 12.30am and must stand some distance away from the Taj itself. Visitors are subject to strict security checks. Cameras are allowed but not video cameras and there are no refunds if clouds cover the moon. Tickets must be bought at least 24 hours in advance *only* from the **Archaeological Survey of India office** (Map p398; ☎ 2227263; 22 the Mall; Indian/foreigner Rs 510/750). You can get current information and full-moon dates up to 2010 on the **UP Tourism website** (www.up-tourism.com).

Considering all this, a better place to see the Taj by moonlight is probably the rooftop restaurant of one of the Taj Ganj guesthouses, such as Shanti or Kamal.

women. Prohibited items such as food, tobacco, matches, mobile phones and camera tripods can be left without charge in cloakrooms. Cameras and videos are permitted, but you cannot take photographs of the tombs inside the mausoleum, and areas where you can take your video camera are limited.

From the south gate, entry to the inner compound is through a 30m red sandstone **gateway** on the south side of the forecourt, which is inscribed with verses from the Quran.

Visiting the Taj

Once inside, the **ornamental gardens** are set out along classical Mughal *charbagh* (formal Persian garden) lines – a square quartered by watercourses, with an ornamental marble plinth at the centre. When the fountains are not flowing, the Taj is beautifully reflected in the watercourses.

The Taj Mahal itself stands on a raised marble platform at the northern end of the ornamental gardens, with its back to the Yamuna River. Its raised position means that the backdrop is only sky – a master stroke of design. Purely decorative 40m-high white **minarets** grace each corner of the platform. After more than three centuries they are not quite perpendicular, but they may have been designed to lean slightly outwards so that in the event of an earthquake, they would fall away from the precious Taj. The red sandstone **mosque** to the west of the main structure is an important gathering place for Agra's Muslims. The identical building to the east, the **jawab**, was built for symmetry and was probably used as accommodation for travellers.

The central Taj structure is made of semi-translucent white marble, carved with flowers and inlaid with thousands of semiprecious stones in beautiful patterns. A perfect exercise in symmetry, the four identical faces of the Taj feature impressive vaulted arches embellished with *pietra dura* scrollwork and quotations from the Quran in a style of calligraphy using inlaid jasper. The whole structure is topped off by four small domes surrounding the famous bulbous central dome.

Below the main dome is the **Cenotaph of Mumtaz Mahal**, an elaborate false tomb surrounded by an exquisite perforated marble screen inlaid with some 43 different types of semiprecious stones. Beside it, offsetting the symmetry of the Taj, is the **Cenotaph of Shah Jahan**, who was interred here with lit-

tle ceremony by his usurping son Aurangzeb in 1666. Light is admitted into the central chamber by finely cut marble screens. The real **tombs** of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan are in a locked basement room below the main chamber and cannot be viewed.

On the western side of the gardens is a very small **museum** (admission Rs 5; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Thu), housing original architectural drawings of the Taj and some nifty celadon plates, said to split into pieces or change colour if the food served on them contains poison.

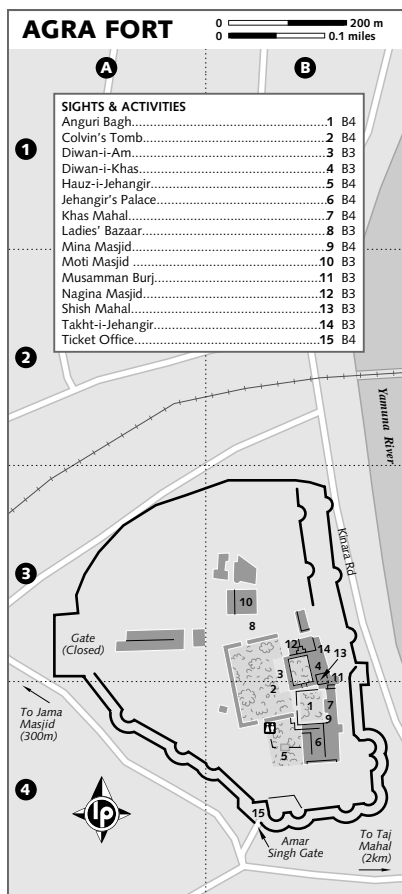
AGRA FORT

With the Taj Mahal overshadowing it, it's easy to forget that Agra has one of the finest Mughal forts in India. By visiting the fort and Taj on the same day you get a Rs 50 reduction in ticket price. Construction of the massive red-sandstone **fort and palace** (Map p398; ☎ 2364512; Indian/foreigner Rs 20/300, video Rs 25; ☎ dawn-dusk), on the bank of the Yamuna River, was begun by Emperor Akbar in 1565. Further additions were made, particularly by his grandson Shah Jahan, who added buildings using his favourite building material – white marble. The fort was built primarily as a military structure, but Shah Jahan transformed it into a palace, and later it became his gilded prison for eight years after his son Aurangzeb seized power in 1658.

The ear-shaped fort's colossal double walls rise over 20m in height and measure 2.5km in circumference. The Yamuna River originally flowed along the straight eastern edge of the fort. It contains a maze of buildings, forming a city within a city, though many of the structures were destroyed over the years by Nadir Shah, the Marathas, the Jats and finally the British who used the fort as a garrison.

The **Amar Singh Gate** to the south is the sole entry point to the fort and its dogleg design is meant to confuse attackers who made it past the first line of defence – a crocodile-infested moat.

Diwan-i-Am (Hall of Public Audiences) was used by Shah Jahan for domestic government business, and features a throne room where the emperor listened to petitioners. In front of it is the small and rather incongruous **grave of John Colvin**, a lieutenant-governor of the northwest provinces who died of an illness in the fort during the 1857 Uprising. The Moti Masjid (Pearl Mosque) is usually closed to



visitors, but don't miss the tiny but exquisite **Nagina Masjid** (Gem Mosque), built in 1635 by Shah Jahan for the ladies of the court. Down below was the **Ladies' bazaar** where the court ladies bought goods.

Diwan-i-Khas (Hall of Private Audiences) was reserved for important dignitaries or foreign representatives. The famous jewel-encrusted Peacock Throne was housed here until Aurangzeb moved it to Delhi. It was taken off to Iran in 1739 by the Persian plunderer Nadir Shah. Overlooking the river and the distant Taj Mahal is **Takhti-i-Jehangir**, a huge slab of black rock with an inscription around the edge. This throne was made for Jehangir when he was prince Salim. An interesting optical illusion occurs when the Taj is

viewed from this throne and then from the other side of the courtyard – though further away, it appears much larger.

The **Shish Mahal** (Mirror Palace) has its walls inlaid with tiny mirrors, but at the time of research was closed for restoration. Even so, caretakers will offer to let you in for outrageous baksheesh.

Musamman Burj and **Khas Mahal** are the wonderful white-marble octagonal tower and palace where Shah Jahan was imprisoned for eight years until his death in 1666, and from where he could gaze out at the Taj Mahal, the tomb of his wife. The **Mina Masjid** was his own private mosque.

In the courtyard of the large harem quarters is **Anguri Bagh**, a garden that has been brought back to life; now it looks like it may have done in Shah Jahan's time.

The huge red-sandstone **Jehangir's palace** was probably built by Akbar for his son Jehangir; it blends Indian and Central Asian architectural styles, a reminder of the Mughals' Afghani cultural roots. In front of the palace is **Hauz-i-Jehangir**, a huge bowl carved out of a single block of stone, which may have been used for bathing.

AKBAR'S MAUSOLEUM

This outstanding sandstone and marble tomb (☎ 2641230; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/110, video Rs 25; ☎ dawn-dusk) commemorates the greatest of the Mughal emperors. The huge courtyard is entered through a stunning gateway. It has three-storey minarets at each corner and is built of red sandstone strikingly inlaid with white-marble geometric patterns.

Akbar started the construction himself, blending various elements just as his religious and political philosophy did (see the boxed text, p402).

The mausoleum is at Sikandra, 10km northwest of Agra Fort. Getting there by public transport is tricky but buses (Rs 10, 30 minutes) heading to Mathura from Agra Fort bus station go past the mausoleum. An autorickshaw should cost Rs 150 for a return journey, including waiting time. Consider hiring the autorickshaw for longer and visiting other sights on the same trip.

ITIMAD-UD-DAULAH

Nicknamed the **Baby Taj** (Map p398; ☎ 2080030; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/110, video Rs 25; ☎ 6.30am-5.30pm), the exquisite tomb of Mizra Ghiyas Beg should

AKBAR THE GREAT

Regarded as the greatest of the Mughals, Akbar was brought up in Afghanistan and although thrust into power at the tender age of 13, he expanded the Mughal empire to cover most of northern India. A wise and just ruler, Akbar followed a policy of Sulh-i-Kul (Peace for All) and abolished many of the restrictions placed on infidels, including the very unpopular 'pilgrimage tax' on Hindus.

Although Akbar's military campaigns were as bloody as any in the Mughal era – following his victory at Panipat, he is said to have built a tower of Hindu heads – the great Mughal is best remembered for his tolerance of other religions. Akbar counted Christians and Hindus among his many wives and went on to invent a philosophy known as Din-i-Ilahi (Faith of God), asserting the common truth in all religions.

Honouring the Sufi mystic Shaikh Salim Chishti, whom Akbar credited with bringing him a male heir, a 'perfect city' was constructed in the desert at Fatehpur Sikri, designed as a physical expression of Din-i-Ilahi. A community of intellectuals from many different religions was created to fulfil the emperor's love of debate.

In fact, the perfect city was Akbar's only folly. Built far from the nearest river, Fatehpur was plagued by water shortages and all the ingenious irrigation systems developed by Akbar's engineers were unable to solve the problem. Fatehpur was abandoned shortly after Akbar's death, along with most of his liberal attitudes.

not be missed. This Persian nobleman was Emperor Jehangir's *wazir* (chief minister). His daughter Nur Jahan, who married Jehangir, built the tomb between 1622 and 1628, in a style similar to the tomb she built for Jehangir near Lahore in Pakistan.

Though it lacks the magic of the Taj, many of its design elements foreshadow the Taj. The Itimad-ud-Daulah was the first Mughal structure totally built from marble and the first to make extensive use of *pietra dura*.

The mausoleum is on the east bank of the Yamuna, so you'll need an autorickshaw or taxi to get there – the return trip should cost about Rs 80 from Agra Fort. Combine a trip here with Chini-ka-Rauza and Mehtab Bagh, from where you can see the back view of the Taj.

CHINI-KA-RAUZA

This is the Persian-style, riverside **tomb** (Map p398; ☎ 6am-6pm) of Afzal Khan, a poet and high official in the court of Shah Jahan. It was built between 1628 and 1639. This relatively unknown mausoleum is hidden away down a shady avenue of trees on the east bank of the Yamuna. Bright blue tiles still cover part of the exterior and the interior is painted in floral designs. The upper storey offers fine views.

MEHTAB BAGH

This **park** (Map p398; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 7am-dusk) is an attempt at re-creating a Mughal-style garden on the riverbank directly opposite

the Taj Mahal. Even if you don't visit the garden itself, it's well worth coming here to enjoy the wonderful view of the back of the Taj – in some ways a better view than the view from the front, especially when it's reflected in the river. It's free to walk down to the Yamuna River on the path that runs alongside the park and view the Taj without any tourist crowds in a peaceful and natural ambience of buffaloes and wading birds. For safety reasons, it's best to leave before dusk.

TAJ NATURE WALK

Follow the stone pathways through this mini **nature park** (Taj East Gate Rd; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/50; ☎ 9am-6.30pm) for a pleasant nature ramble among birds and butterflies, with the Taj hovering in the background.

JAMA MASJID

This fine **mosque** (Map p398), built in the Kinari bazaar by Shah Jahan's daughter in 1648, has no minarets but features striking marble patterning on its domes.

SWIMMING

Hotel Amar is the best-value place for a swim, charging nonguests Rs 200 to use its outdoor pool and Rs 45 to use the gym. Other hotels with outdoor pools are Hotel Atithi (Rs 250), Hotel Yamuna View (Rs 350), Mansingh Palace (adult/child Rs 300/50), Taj View (Rs 350) and Clarks Shiraz Hotel (Rs 450).

Tours

UP Tourism runs exhausting **daily tours** (incl entry fees Indian/foreigner Rs 400/1700) that leave Agra Cantonment train station at 10.15am, after picking up passengers arriving from Delhi on the *Taj Express*. The AC coach tour includes the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri with a 1¼-hour stop in each place. Tours return to the station so that day-trippers can catch the *Taj Express* back to Delhi at 6.55pm. Contact either of the UP Tourism offices (see p397) to book a seat.

Sleeping

Agra unsurprisingly has plenty of accommodation and quite a few places offers views of the Taj. But while the budget range is generally good value, there's a dire lack of quality midrange hotels. The main places for budget accommodation are Taj Ganj, immediately south and east of the Taj, and Sadar Bazar to the southwest, while most midrange and top-end places are southeast along Fatehabad Rd.

BUDGET

Some of the hotels south of the Taj have a wonderful close-up view of the Taj, but from their rooftop restaurants rather than from the rooms.

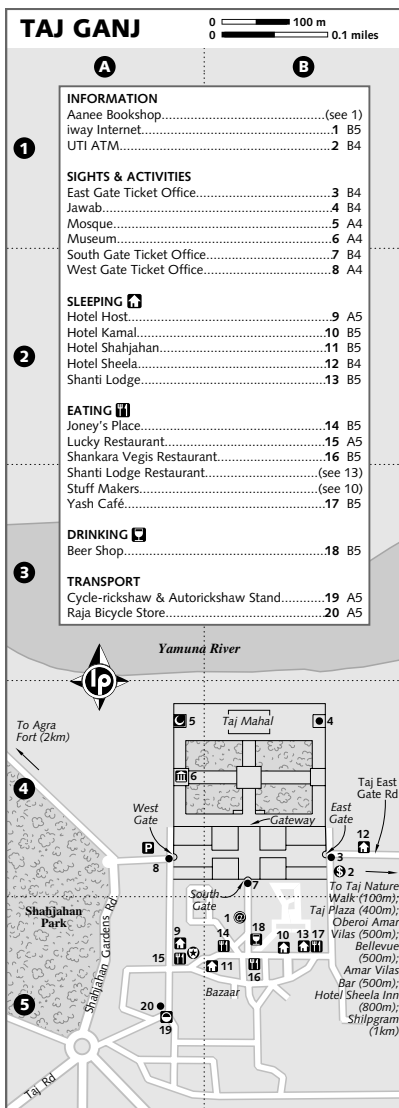
Taj Ganj Area

Shanti Lodge (Map p403; ☎ 2231973; shantilodge2000@yahoo.co.in; Taj South Gate; s Rs 150, d Rs 200-300, r with AC Rs 500; 🏠) Some rooms have TVs and the deluxe top-floor room (Rs 600) and rooftop restaurant have great Taj views at this popular budget hotel. Some rooms are pretty shambolic so check out a few – those in the newer section are better – but you can't beat the price.

Hotel Host (Map p403; ☎ 2331010; Taj West Gate; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 120/150, d Rs 150-250) All the rooms have TV in this good-value budget place on the road leading to the Taj West Gate. Avoid the stuffy windowless rooms.

Hotel Shahjahan (Map p403; ☎ 2233071; Taj South Gate; s/d with shared bathroom from Rs 70/120, s/d from Rs 150/250, r with AC Rs 700; 🏠) Run by a helpful manager, there's a real mixed bag of rooms here – some good, some ordinary – and a rooftop restaurant.

Hotel Kamal (Map p403; ☎ 2330126; hotelkamal@hotmail.com; Taj South Gate; s/d from Rs 300/400, with AC from Rs 600/700; 🏠) The best budget hotel with a rooftop close-up view of the Taj – great for



early morning photography. Rooms vary in size, shape and window light, but are all simple and clean. Helpful, friendly staff and the restaurant is recommended.

Hotel Sheela (Map p403; ☎ 2331194; www.hotel sheelaagra.com; Taj East Gate Rd; s/d 350/400, with AC Rs 700/750; 🏠) There are no Taj views but the location, around the corner from the East

Gate, and the lovely palm-filled garden make this one of the best of the Taj Ganj budget places. The rooms are generally well kept and clean, and there's an interesting bamboo bungalow in the garden. The garden restaurant is a peaceful, shady place.

Hotel Sheela Inn (☎ 3293437; www.hotelsheelainn.com; Taj East Gate Rd; s Rs 300-500, d Rs 400-600, s/d with AC Rs 600/700; 🏠) The bright yellow Sheela Inn is 800m further east of the Taj and is a clean, newish, though slightly nondescript, hotel. Rooms are in various sizes, with tile floors and TVs, and a Taj view from the roof.

Taj Plaza (☎ 2232515; hoteltajplaza@yahoo.co.in; Taj East Gate Rd; s/d Rs 500/600, with AC Rs 800/1000; 🏠) Recently renovated, this bright modern hotel is spotless and well located, though the price has jumped from budget to almost midrange. All rooms have TV and hot water and four have a view of the Taj, as does the rooftop terrace restaurant.

Sadar Bazar

Tourists Rest House (Map p398; ☎ 2463961; dontworrychickenurri@hotmail.com; Kutchery Rd; s Rs 150-275, d Rs 250-350, s/d with AC Rs 350/450; 🏠 📺) Regarded by many as Agra's best budget address, this is away from the bustle of Taj Ganj, but the shady central courtyard garden is an oasis of peace, a great place to meet other travellers and the helpful owners create a homy, secure atmosphere. Rooms are spotless with tiled floors, TV and hot water. Free pick-ups, free transport reservations and reliable taxi tours of Rajasthan (Rs 1100 per day) are available. It's popular, so book ahead.

Other Areas

Hotel Safari (Map p398; ☎ 324115; hotelsafari@hotmail.com; Shamsabad Rd; s/d Rs 300/350, with AC Rs 350/400; 🏠) All rooms are clean with hot water and TV and the staff is helpful. The rooftop terrace has a distant view of the Taj. Safari is run by the same family as Tourists Rest House so standards are high – but it lacks the ambience.

Hotel Sakura (Map p398; ☎ 2420169; ashu_sakura@yahoo.com; 49 Ajmer Rd; d Rs 200-500; 🏠) Location-wise, the only compelling reason to stay here is the proximity to the Idgah bus stand and deluxe buses to Jaipur, but it's a decent-value hotel. The restaurant is also recommended – lots of travellers spend time here waiting for the bus.

MIDRANGE

Good midrange hotels at a reasonable price are hard to find in Agra – many midrange

places would be in the top-end price bracket anywhere else and the facilities and services offered rarely reflect the price. Most places are conveniently clustered together in Fatehabad Rd, so look at a few and try bargaining before making your choice.

Mayur Tourist Complex (Map p398; ☎ 2332302; mayur268@rediffmail.com; Fatehabad Rd; s/d Rs 1000/1150, with AC Rs 1300/1500; 🏠) If nothing else, Mayur is a change from Agra's bland midrange hotels. Rooms are cottage style and set in a large lawn area with kids' playground, swimming pool and a garden restaurant. The cottages are not flash but are cosy and clean, and ample parking would suit overlanders.

Amar Yatri Niwas (Map p398; ☎ 2233030; www.amaryatrinivas.com; Fatehabad Rd; s Rs 950-1200, d Rs 1200-1450; 🏠) Very clean, but with all the atmosphere of a hospital. The more expensive rooms are spacious, particularly the Mughal Room, and all have marble floors, TV and hot water.

Hotel Ashish Palace (Map p398; ☎ 2230032; vngupta@sancharnet.in; Fatehabad Rd; s/d Rs 1200/1500; 🏠) One of the newest hotels on Fatehabad Rd, Ashish Palace has smart rooms with marble finishes, TV and fridge, but the whole place feels a bit forlorn and neglected.

Hotel Atithi (Map p398; ☎ 2330880; www.hotelatithiagra.com; Fatehabad Rd; s Rs 1400-1650, d Rs 1650-2200; 🏠 📺) The pool and lawn at the back are the main attractions at this hotel – otherwise it's a bit soulless. Rooms are spacious and well equipped, but ultimately overpriced.

Hotel Amar (Map p398; ☎ 2331884; www.hotelamar.com; Fatehabad Rd; s Rs 2200-3600, d Rs 2600-4000; 🏠 📺 📺) Amar maintains a good standard and was undergoing some major front-end renovation when we visited. There's a good pool and gym at the back. The rooms are showing wear but the better rooms have a touch of maharaja style, and there's a pleasant restaurant and coffee shop.

Hotel Yamuna View (Map p398; ☎ 2361223; www.hotelyamunaviewagra.com; 6B the Mall; s/d Rs 3400/3900; 🏠 📺) A pool in the garden, a water feature in the grand lobby, a plush Chinese restaurant and some spacious rooms are the main features in this hotel in a quiet part of Sadar Bazar.

Mansingh Palace (Map p398; ☎ 2331771; www.mansinghotels.com; Fatehabad Rd; s/d/ste from Rs 4500/5000/10,000; 🏠 📺 📺) Built of red sandstone, this stylish hotel has plush rooms and is crammed with Mughal design themes, along with cool green marble, wood panelling and ex-

otic furnishings. The garden has an unusually shaped pool and outdoor BBQ area, there's a gym and the quality Sheesh Mahal restaurant has live *ghazals* (Urdu songs) nightly.

TOP END

Clarks Shiraz Hotel (Map p398; ☎ 2226121; www.hotel.clarksshiraz.com; 54 Taj Rd; s Rs 4000-5500, d Rs 4500-5800, Taj-facing Rs 6200/6500; 🏠 📺 🚿) One of Agra's original five-star hotels, Clarks is showing a bit of age but it's good value for Agra and has plenty of facilities, including two excellent restaurants, bars, a gym, a shady garden pool area and Ayurvedic massages. Rooms are well furnished and some have distant Taj views.

Taj View (Map p398; ☎ 2232400; www.tajhotels.com; Fatehabad Rd; d US\$165, d with Taj view US\$190-215; 🏠 📺 🚿) Cool elegance and Indian style feature in the communal areas with an open-plan foyer, restaurant and bar, and a flow through to the outdoor pool and landscaped gardens. Renovated rooms are elegant but disappointingly ordinary for this price.

Mughal Sheraton (Map p398; ☎ 2331701; mughal.sheraton@welcomgroup.com; Fatehabad Rd; s US\$205-350, d US\$230-375, ste US\$550-1200; 🏠 📺 🚿) This sprawling red-brick luxury hotel is set amid tranquil gardens. Everything is shining, elegant and exclusive to guests, with a lovely pool, tennis, badminton, minigolf and kids' activities on offer. One of the three restaurants serves Northwest Frontier BBQs.

Oberoi Amar Vilas (☎ 2231515; www.oberoihotels.com; Taj East Gate Rd; d US\$600-650, ste US\$1100-3300; 🏠 📺 🚿) Forget about being Agra's best hotel – this is one of the best in India. The elegant interior design is suffused with Mughal style, as are the exterior fountain courtyard and the swimming pool set in a water garden. Most rooms and the restaurant have fine views of the Taj. If you can't afford to stay (the walk-in rates are insane but discounts are available in the off season and through agents), take a look around this modern palace and sip a beer or cocktail in Agra's finest bar.

Eating

Delicious Agra specialities can be found in the bazaars. *Peitha* is a square sweet made from pumpkin and glucose that is flavoured with rosewater, coconut or saffron. *Dalmoth* is Agra's famous version of *namkin* (spicy nibbles). From October to March look out for *gajak*, a slightly spicy sesame-seed biscuit strip.

For such a touristy city, Agra isn't bursting with great restaurants – the cream can be found in the top hotels – but there are plenty of reasonable travellers restaurants in the Taj Ganj area, a few minor gems around Sadar Bazaar, and several terrace or rooftop restaurants where the quality of food is secondary to a view of the Taj.

TAJ GANJ AREA

This lively but congested and dusty area directly south of the Taj has plenty of budget rooftop restaurants, where the meals and menus appear to be carbon copies. None are licensed but it's often possible to order in a clandestine beer, which may arrive wrapped in newspaper or even in a teapot.

Joney's Place (Map p403; mains Rs 10-30; ☎ 5am-10.30pm) In the heart of Taj Ganj, this little cabin with pink chairs and an open 'kitchen' is a travellers institution. Open at the crack of dawn for early risers, Joney has been whipping up veg snacks, toasted sandwiches and creamy lassis for years.

Shankara Vegis Restaurant (Map p403; meals Rs 25-60) This relaxed rooftop restaurant has no Taj view but does have all the vegetarian favourites, as well as music and games like carom.

Stuff Makers (Map p403; meals Rs 25-70) Eat downstairs in the thatched hut at Hotel Kamal or join the crowd on the rooftop terrace with its fairy lights and sweet early morning Taj views. The food is reliable but uninspired, with all the backpacker favourites.

Yash Café (Map p403; mains Rs 25-90) This laid-back 1st-floor café has wicker chairs, sports channels on TV, movies in the evening, and a good range of veg and nonveg meals from thalis to pizzas. Also offers a shower and storage space to day visitors.

Lucky Restaurant (Map p403; meals Rs 20-100) A convivial place to hang out, with reliable food and a rooftop section.

Shanti Lodge Restaurant (Map p403; mains Rs 50-100) The rooftop Taj view here is brilliant so this is a great place for breakfast or an evening meal – there's some shade at the front for hot afternoons.

SADAR BAZAAR

Lakshmi Vilas (Map p398; Taj Rd; meals Rs 35-50; ☎ 8am-11pm) This South Indian specialist is plain in décor but clean and whips up over 30 dosa varieties, as well as *idli* (rice dumpling), *vadai* (fried snack of lentil or potato) and noodles.

Tourists Rest House (Map p398; ☎ 2363961; Kutichery Rd; meals Rs 30-80) The courtyard garden restaurant here is always full of chattering travellers enjoying candle-lit atmosphere; the veg menu is short but well regarded.

Zorba the Buddha (Map p398; meals Rs 80-150; ☎ noon-4.30pm & 6-9.30pm, closed Jun) Vases of flowers on neat little tables greet guests at this Osho-inspired bistro-style veg restaurant. It's clean and popular for its healthy soups, salads and indulgent ice creams.

Park (Map p398; Taj Rd; meals Rs 50-175) The large dining room at the Park has a hint of elegance with wood panelling and soft music. Veg and nonveg Indian, Chinese and continental food includes chicken au gratin, fish dishes and Mughlai tandoor specialities.

Dasaprakash (Map p398; ☎ 2363535, 1 Gwalior Rd; meals Rs 65-180) Highly recommended by locals for consistently good South Indian veg food, Dasaprakash whips up spectacular thalis, dosas and a few token continental dishes. The dessert sundaes are tempting but pricey (Rs 80 to 95). Comfortable booth seating and screens make for intimate dining.

OTHER AREAS

Only Restaurant (Map p398; ☎ 2226834; 45 the Mall; mains Rs 60-225; ☎ 11am-3pm & 6-11pm) Beloved of tour groups, Only has character and the food is good, if a little pricey. Bamboo-lined walls and red tablecloths set the scene, and attentive staff serve up a big range of veg and nonveg dishes in styles such as Mughlai, Afghan, Chinese and continental. There's live music in the evening in season (November to March).

ourpick Bellevue (☎ 2231515; Taj East Gate Rd; mains Rs 70-200; ☎ 6.30am-10.30pm) Although the more casual of the two restaurants in Amar Vilas, Bellevue is all class and a fine place to enjoy a sumptuous breakfast buffet (US\$20 for two people) or lunch with a Taj view through the large windows.

Mughal Room (Map p398; ☎ 2226121; 54 Taj Rd; mains Rs 80-200; ☎ 12.30-3.45pm & 7-11.30pm) On the top floor of Clarks Shiraz Hotel, you can dine in style with a distant view of the Taj and Agra Fort. There's live classical music here every evening and the food is thoughtfully prepared Indian, Chinese and continental. If you're really hungry, try Akbar's, a buffet restaurant also at Clarks Shiraz, where you can help yourself to breakfast (Rs 250), lunch and dinner (Rs 550).

Drinking & Entertainment

Beer shop (Map p403; ☎ 10am-11pm) In Taj Ganj, this is the place to pick up a cheap bottle of Kingfisher (Rs 60) to enjoy on a rooftop.

Jaiwal Bar (Map p398; 3 Taj Rd, ☎ 10am-11pm) In Sadar Bazar, this small bar is one of the few not in a midrange or top-end hotel. A beer costs Rs 70 and snacks are available.

Amar Vilas Bar (Taj East Gate Rd; drinks Rs 150-250; ☎ 11am-11pm) For a beer or cocktail in sheer opulence, look no further than this superb bar at Oberoi Amar Vilas. A terrace opens out to views of the Taj.

Catch live Indian classical music and *ghazals* at several restaurants and top-end hotels.

Shopping

Agra is well known for marble items inlaid with coloured stones, similar to the *pietra dura* work on the Taj. Sadar Bazaar (Map p398) and the area around the Taj are full of emporiums of one kind or another, but prices here are more expensive than in the bazaars of the old town area. Prices are set according to the quality of detailed workmanship, not the size of the item. Be careful when buying marble, as fake marble (usually soapstone that scratches easily) is common.

Other popular buys include rugs, leather and gemstones, though the latter are imported from Rajasthan and are cheaper in Jaipur.

Kinari bazaar (Map p398) is a crowded tangle of streets but if you brave the mad traffic you can find traditional market stalls selling everything from textiles and handicrafts to fruit and produce.

About a kilometre along the traffic-quiet road from Taj East Gate, **Shilpgram** (☎ 10am-10pm Oct-Mar) is an open-air collection of stalls selling handicrafts and artworks that also has a café and bar. Every February a week-long food, craft and culture festival takes place.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Agra's Kheria airport is 7km from the city centre, but **Indian Airlines** (Map p398; ☎ 2226820; Clarks Shiraz Hotel, 54 Taj Rd; ☎ 10am-1.15pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) has ceased its Delhi-Agra-Khajuraho-Varanasi flights and there are currently no scheduled flights to or from Agra.

BUS

Most long-haul buses leave from **Igdah bus station** (Map p398; ☎ 2420324; Ajmer Rd). Hourly buses

run to Delhi's Sarai Kale Khan bus station (Rs 91, five hours) via Mathura (Rs 30, 1½ hours) on the multilane motorway. Deluxe AC buses (Rs 166) depart at 7.30am and 3.30pm. Hourly buses go to Jaipur (Rs 124, six hours) and two buses daily go to Khajuraho (Rs 175, 10 hours) leaving at 5am and 6.30am. Frequent buses head off to Fatehpur Sikri (Rs 17, one hour) and Bharatpur (Rs 35, 1½ hours).

From Agra Fort bus station buses leave for Dehra Dun (Rs 210, 12 hours), Haridwar (Rs 190, 11 hours), Lucknow (Rs 197, 10 hours) and Delhi (Rs 105, five hours) via Mathura (Rs 30, 1½ hours).

Rajasthan government buses (Map p398) depart from Hotel Sakura, very close to Idgah bus station. The white deluxe buses run hourly to Jaipur (Rs 174, 5½ hours) between 6.30am and 2.30pm and then at 4.30pm, 5.30pm, 7.30pm, 10pm and midnight. Between March and October AC buses (Rs 250) run three times daily.

TRAIN

The train is easily the best way to travel to/from Delhi, Varanasi, Jaipur and Haridwar (for Rishikesh). **Agra Cantonment (Cantt) train station** (Map p398; ☎ 2421204) is an important stop on the main Delhi–Mumbai (Bombay) line, with several trains daily from both New Delhi and Hazrat Nizamuddin train stations. The fastest and most comfortable train to and from Delhi is the daily AC *Shatabdi Express* (chair/executive ex Delhi Rs 370/720, ex Agra Rs 395/760, two hours). It leaves New Delhi at 6.15am and departs from Agra for the return trip at 8.30pm, making it ideal for day-tripping.

A cheaper alternative is the daily *Taj Express* (2nd/chair Rs 56/211, three hours), which leaves Delhi's Hazrat Nizamuddin train station at 7.15am and departs from Agra for the return trip at 6.55pm. This gives you less time in Agra, but it connects with the daily tour (see p403). Be extra cautious with your luggage on this route.

Most east–west trains now leave from Agra Fort station. For Varanasi the best option is the nightly *Marudhar Express*, which leaves Agra Fort train station at 9.15pm, reaching Varanasi around 9.30am the next morning (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 243/687/985). The same train also runs west to Jaipur, leaving Agra at 6.15am, reaching Jaipur (Rs 117/330/473) at 11.30am and Jodhpur (Rs 220/622/892) at 6.20pm.

Agra also has several long-haul daily trains from Agra Fort to Kolkata (Calcutta; (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 365/1029/1479, 20 to 30 hours).

For Khajuraho, take any train to Jhansi (sleeper/3AC Rs 108/305, three hours) and a bus from there. Other trains run to Mumbai, Pune, Goa, Chennai (Madras) and Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum).

Getting Around

AUTORICKSHAW

Just outside the Agra Cantonment train station is the **prepaid autorickshaw booth** (Map p398; ☎ 24hr). It costs Rs 15 for a short 1km ride, Rs 30 to Sadar Bazaar and Rs 50 to Taj Ganj. A three-hour return tour to the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort costs Rs 160, a four-hour tour costs Rs 200 and an eight-hour tour costs Rs 300. A round trip, including waiting time, to Sikandra for Akbar's Mausoleum costs Rs 120. Autorickshaws are not permitted to come within 500m of the Taj Mahal itself. The chances of getting an autorickshaw driver to agree to any of the above fares away from the prepaid stand is wishful thinking – expect to be asked for at least double and bargain hard.

Keep an eye out for the newer green-and-yellow autorickshaws that are starting to become more common in Agra. These are run on CNG (compressed natural gas) rather than petrol, and so are less environmentally destructive.

BICYCLE

Bicycles can be rented from **Raja Bicycle Store** (Map p403; per day Rs 50; ☎ 8am–8.30pm) in Taj Ganj, but getting between monuments is a long, hot ride and the traffic is horrendous.

CYCLE-RICKSHAW

Best for short distances and around Taj Ganj, pedal power is cheaper than autorickshaws and more environmentally friendly. Rides should cost between Rs 20 and Rs 40 depending on the distance travelled.

OTHER TRANSPORT

From the Taj Mahal the road east to Shilpgram is mostly free of traffic, but horse-drawn tongas, electric *vikrams*, camel carts and even an elephant provide exotic transport, and there are also free battery-operated buses (every 15 minutes from 6am to 7pm).

TAXI

Just outside Agra Cantonment train station the **prepaid taxi booth** (☎ 24hr) gives a good idea of what taxis should cost. Taxis take up to four people: from the station to any five-star hotel is Rs 120 (AC Rs 150), while a three-hour tour costs Rs 300 (AC Rs 375) and a four-hour tour costs Rs 450 (AC Rs 650). An eight-hour tour is Rs 650 (AC Rs 950) or Rs 950 (AC Rs 1400) if it includes Fatehpur Sikri. A four-hour trip to Fatehpur Sikri costs Rs 600 (AC Rs 900). A return trip to Mathura costs Rs 750 or Rs 950 if it includes Vrindavan, while a return trip to the wonderful bird sanctuary at Bharatpur costs Rs 950, including waiting time. Further afield, one way to Delhi is Rs 2500 and Jaipur Rs 2700.

FATEHPUR SIKRI

☎ 05613 / pop 28,750

This magnificent fortified ghost city, 40km west of Agra, was the short-lived capital of the Mughal empire between 1571 and 1585, during the reign of Emperor Akbar. Akbar visited Sikri to consult the Sufi saint Shaikh Salim Chisti, who predicted the birth of an heir to the Mughal throne. When the prophecy came true, Akbar built his new capital here. Although a brilliant Indo-Islamic masterpiece, the city was erected in an area that suffered from water shortages and was abandoned shortly after Akbar's death. The well-preserved palace buildings and the still-used mosque are a superb reminder of the Mughals at their architectural peak, and you can wander around other ruins scattered behind the mosque and the mint.

SAVING THE BEARS

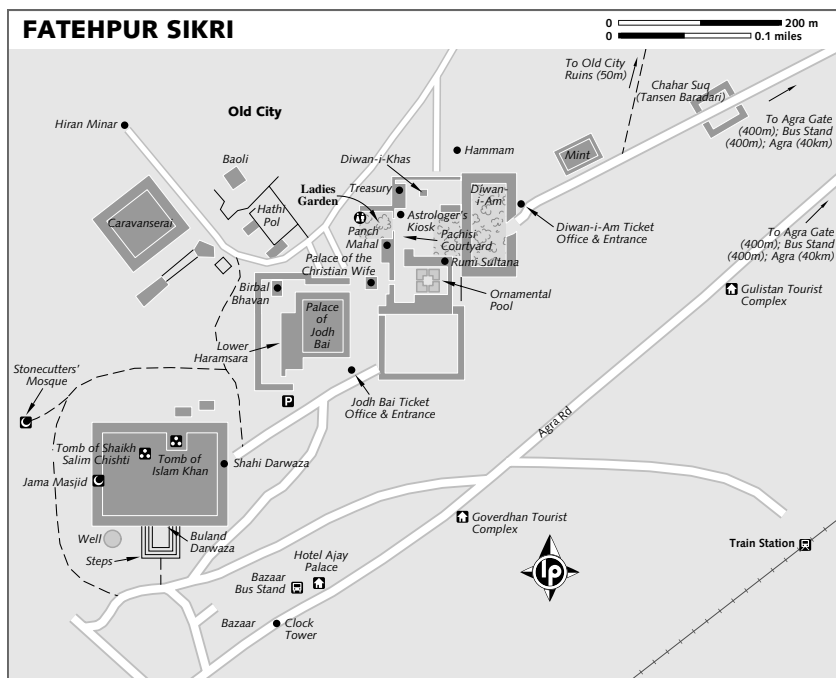
Just a few years ago, travellers on the road between Agra and Fatehpur Sikri would have seen captive sloth bears by the roadside, forced to dance like circus animals for money. You won't see them there anymore – although you may still see them elsewhere in northern India – thanks to the efforts of a passionate group of people who are working to stop this cruel practice and save the bears.

India's first sanctuary for 'dancing' bears, the Agra Bear Rescue Facility, was established by **Wildlife SOS** (☎ 9810114563, Delhi office 011-24621939; www.wildlifesos.com) in 2002 when an eight-hectare site was secured inside the Sur Sarovar Bird Sanctuary, 17km west of Agra. The sanctuary provides refuge, rehabilitation and veterinary care for more than 130 sloth bears that have been rescued from Qalander gypsies. The bears are poached from the forests as cubs – their mothers often killed – and sold in illegal markets to Qalanders, who have used the dancing bears as a source of income for centuries. A metal rod is inserted through their muzzle so that a rope or nose ring can be attached and they spend much of their miserable lives in pain chained to a stake or in a cage. Their canine teeth are crudely knocked out, and the bears are beaten into submission to teach them to 'perform'.

When bears are brought into the facility, they are given veterinary treatment and placed in a 90-day quarantine before moving to a socialisation pen where they can learn to interact with other bears, and finally to a larger enclosure. Because the bears have been captive most of their lives, it's unlikely they can ever be released into the wild, but the goal of Wildlife SOS is to stamp out the practice of dancing bears – which has been illegal in India since 1972 but still enslaves some 800 bears – and thus stop the poaching of cubs. An important part of this is finding an alternative source of income for the Qalander tribespeople and educating them about the cruelty of their former profession. A number of young Qalander men are even employed at the sanctuary helping care for the bears.

The Agra Bear Rescue Facility welcomes small groups of visitors who are interested in seeing first-hand this important rehabilitation work. It's moving to see the passion of the people who work here, and wonderful to witness the bears enjoying their new-found health and freedom. To visit, first contact the Wildlife SOS by phone or email. To enter you need to go into the Sur Sarovar Bird Sanctuary (Rs 350) – since it's owned by the forestry department, everyone must pay the entry fee; however, official donors can have the fee waived by prior arrangement.

For more information and if you want to donate, see the Wildlife SOS website or contact one of the fund partners **Free the Bears** (www.freethebears.org.au) or **World Society for the Protection of Animals** (WSPA; www.wspa.org.uk).



Most people visit this World Heritage site as a day trip from Agra, but you can stay in the nearby town, and the red sandstone palaces are at their most atmospheric at sunset.

Orientation & Information

The palace buildings lie along the top of a ridge with the small town of Fatehpur Sikri just to the south. The Jama Masjid and the ruins near it and behind the mint can be visited free of charge. Swarms of unofficial guides will follow you relentlessly, demanding a ridiculous fee of Rs 300, but if you want a guide it's best to hire an official one near a ticket office (Rs 50 to 100). The purpose of many buildings is uncertain and much of what the guides say is pure fiction.

Sights

JAMA MASJID

This beautiful and expansive mosque, also known as the Dargah Mosque, was completed in 1571 and contains elements of Persian and Indian design. The main entrance is through the highly impressive 54m-high **Buland Darwaza** (Victory Gate), perhaps the

largest in Asia, and built to commemorate Akbar's military victory in Gujarat. A Quranic inscription inside the archway quotes Jesus saying: 'The world is a bridge, pass over it but build no house upon it. He who hopes for an hour may hope for eternity', which seems appropriate considering the fate of the city.

Inside the courtyard is the superb white marble **tomb of Shaikh Salim Chishti**, completed in 1581. Inside the mausoleum are brightly coloured flower murals and the canopy is decorated with mother-of-pearl shell. Just as Akbar came to the saint four centuries ago hoping for a son, childless women visit his tomb today and tie a thread to the *jalis* (marble lattice screens), which are among the finest in India. To the right of the tomb lie stone slabs marking the graves of royal family members and nearby is the entrance to an underground tunnel (barred by a locked gate) that reputedly goes all the way to Agra Fort!

Around the perimeter of the courtyard is a shaded arched arcade occupied by various artisans and souvenir vendors.

PALACES & PAVILIONS

The first of the **palace buildings** (Indian/foreigner Rs 20/260, video Rs 25; ☀️ dawn-dusk) you enter from the south is the largest, the **Palace of Jodh Bai**. Constructed around a courtyard, it blends traditional Indian columns, Islamic cupolas and blue Persian roof tiles.

The **Palace of the Christian Wife** was used by Akbar's Goan Christian wife Mariam, and you can see the remains of the paintings that once covered the inside. Mariam married Akbar in 1562, gave birth to Jehangir in 1569 at Fatehpur Sikri and died in Agra in 1623.

Birbal Bhavan, ornately carved inside and out, was probably used by two of Akbar's senior wives.

The function of the **Lower Haramsara** is controversial – it may have housed servants but it looks more like stables for the horses, camels and elephants.

The most intricately carved structure is the wonderful **Rumi Sultana**, which is entirely covered with a mass of exuberant carving.

The whimsical **Panch Mahal** is a five-storey pavilion that was used by the court ladies. Each of the storeys is reduced until the top one consists of only a tiny kiosk. The lower floor has 84 columns, all different.

The **Treasury** has sea monsters carved on the ceiling struts to protect the fabulous wealth once stored there, while the so-called **Astrologer's Kiosk** in front has roof supports carved in a serpentine Jain style.

The **Diwan-i-Khas** (Hall of Private Audiences) has an ordinary exterior, but the interior is dominated by a magnificently carved stone column in the centre of the building. The pillar flares to create a flat-topped plinth linked to the four corners of the room by narrow stone bridges, from where Akbar is believed to have debated with scholars who stood at the ends of the four bridges. Outside is the **Pachisi Courtyard** where Akbar is said to have played the game pachisi using slave girls as the pieces.

The **Diwan-i-Am** (Hall of Public Audiences) is where Akbar dispensed justice 'without harshness or ill-will', according to the information board.

Plenty of ruins are scattered behind the mosque, including the **caravanserai**, a vast courtyard surrounded by rooms where visiting merchants stayed, and the bizarre 21m **Hiran Minar**, a tower decorated with hundreds of stone representations of elephant tusks. Badly defaced elephants still guard **Hathi Pol**

(Elephant Gate), while the remains of the small **Stonemasons' Mosque** and a **hammam** (bath) are nearby. Other unnamed ruins can be explored north of the mint, including some in the middle of a village.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Ajay Palace (☎ 282950; Agra Rd; d with shared/private bathroom Rs 150/200; meals Rs 20-80) There are just four rooms in this guesthouse close to the main monuments and right by the bus stand. It's squat toilets only, but rooms are neat and the hosts are friendly.

Goverdhan Tourist Complex (☎ 282643; www.hotel.fatehpursikriviews.com; Agra Rd; s/d Rs 450/650, d with AC Rs 800; 🍴 📺) About 200m from the Jama Masjid, Goverdhan has some spacious rooms, a garden and some nice touches, such as a small library and free internet. There's a decent restaurant and the owners use filtered water for cooking.

Gulistan Tourist Complex (☎ 282490; s/d from Rs 325/400, with AC Rs 775/900; 🍴) The first hotel you come to after Agra Gate, this red sandstone UP Tourism place is set in a slightly unkempt garden and has a restaurant and bar. Rooms are tidy but a bit gloomy.

Fatehpur Sikri's culinary speciality is *khataie*, the biscuits you can see piled high in the bazaar.

Getting There & Away

Tour buses usually stop for 1½ hours, which is not long enough. Make a day of it by catching a bus (Rs 17, one hour) from Agra's Idgah bus stand; buses depart every 30 minutes between 7am and 7pm. Get on a small bus direct to Fatehpur Sikri town rather than one of the big buses going to Bharatpur that will drop you near Agra Gate, a 1km walk from the monuments. The last bus back to Agra from the bazaar bus stand leaves at 7pm.

Autorickshaws are not allowed to make the Agra to Fatehpur Sikri trip, but a taxi should cost Rs 600 return including waiting time.

Buses from the bazaar bus stand leave regularly for Bharatpur (Rs 15, 30 minutes) and Jaipur (Rs 80, 4½ hours).

MATHURA

☎ 0565 / pop 319,235

Braj Bhoomi – the 'Land of Eternal Love' and the name given to the region where the popular god Krishna is believed to have been born and spent his early years – existed only in the collective consciousness of Hindus until it was

rediscovered by 16th-century scholars in the physical world in and around Mathura, 58km northwest of Agra.

Mathura was once a Buddhist centre with 20 monasteries that housed 3000 monks, but during the 8th century Buddhism began to give way to Hinduism. In 1017 most of the Buddhist temples and Hindu shrines were levelled by the Afghan warlord Mahmud of Ghazni. More destruction occurred in the 16th century when Aurangzeb flattened the Kesava Deo Temple during one of his many demolition sprees and built a mosque in its place.

Nowadays the area is a religious centre full of Hindu temples that attract floods of pilgrims, particularly during **Janmastami** (Krishna's birthday) in August/September.

Information

A **UP Tourism office** (☎ 2505351; Station Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) is here. The **State Bank of India** (Station Rd; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) exchanges travellers cheques and cash in US dollars, British pounds and euros. A UTI Bank ATM is opposite Hotel Mukund Palace on Junction Rd.

Sights

SRI KRISHNA JANMBHOOMI

Among the foundations of the mural-filled **Kesava Deo Temple** (☎ 5am-noon & 4-9pm) is a small, bare room with a slab of rock on which Krishna is said to have been born 3500 years ago. He was obliged to make his entry into the world in these undignified surroundings because his parents had been imprisoned by the tyrannical King Kansa, Krishna's uncle.

Surrounding the temple are gardens and arcades of shops that sell Krishna souvenirs. Next door is **Katra Masjid**, a mosque built by Aurangzeb, which is guarded round the clock by soldiers to prevent a repeat of the events at Ayodhya in 1992 (see p424).

About 200m away is **Potara Kund**, a tank where baby Krishna's nappies were supposedly washed.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

This large **museum** (☎ 2500847; Museum Rd; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/25, camera Rs 25; ☎ 10.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) is well worth visiting for its superb collection of religious sculptures by the Mathura school, which flourished from the 3rd century BC to the 12th century AD. The world-class skills of the unknown craftsmen who created these artworks centuries ago are more than impressive.

VISHRAM GHAT & AROUND

A string of ghats and bustling temples line the Yamuna River north of the main road bridge. The most popular is **Vishram Ghat**, where Krishna is said to have rested at after killing King Kansa. Today colourful boats gather along the banks touting for boat rides along the Yamuna River (Rs 50 for half an hour). Beside the ghat is the 17m **Sati Burj**, a four-storey tower built by the son of Behari Mal of Jaipur in 1570 to commemorate his mother's **sati** (self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre). Nearby in the bazaar is **Dwarkadheesh Temple**, which was built in 1814 by Seth Gokuldass in honour of – you guessed it – Krishna.

GITA TEMPLE

This serene marble **temple** (☎ dawn-dusk), on the road to Vrindavan, has the entire Bhagavad Gita written on a red pillar in the garden.

Sleeping, Eating & Drinking

Mathura has a scattering of hotels, particularly around Station Rd and around Sri Krishna Janmbhoomi. Krishna devotees can stay in the **International Guest House** (☎ 2423888; d Rs 50-150) at Sri Krishna Janmbhoomi, which has basic but clean rooms.

Agra Hotel (☎ 2403318; Bengali Ghat; s/d Rs 225/300, d with AC Rs 600; ☎) The riverside location on the ghats just south of Vishram Ghat and close to the bustling bazaar makes this Mathura's most interesting budget hotel. Rooms are small but have hot water and TV. There's a room with shared bathroom for Rs 150.

Gaurav Guesthouse (☎ 2502772; s/d Rs 450/600, with AC Rs 700/800; ☎) Near the museum, off Junction Rd, this hotel has tidy rooms and a restaurant. Cheaper rooms, some with shared bathroom, are available in the annexe.

Hotel Mukund Palace (☎ 2410316; Junction Rd; s Rs 500-1500, d Rs 600-1800; ☎) Large outdoor sculptures, a night fountain and very wide corridors are curious features of this hotel, a 10-minute walk from the new bus stand. However, there's a good range of rooms and all are spacious, clean and have all facilities. The hotel is often enlivened by wedding parties and has a popular restaurant.

Hotel Brijwasi Royal (☎ 240 1224; www.brijwasiroyal.com; Station Rd; s/d/ste from Rs 1500/1700/3200; ☎) The comfortable rooms in this centrally located midrange hotel have bathtubs and overlook a buffalo pond and lawn area. The multicuisine veg Status Restaurant has a striking Krishna

mural and is deservedly popular (meals Rs 45 to 85). There's also a bar here.

Getting There & Around

Mathura is 58km northwest of Agra and 141km south of Delhi. From the **new Mathura bus stand** (☎ 2406468) half-hourly buses (Rs 80, four hours) run to southern Delhi's Sarai Kale Khan bus station, and even more frequently buses go to Agra (Rs 30, 1½ hours). Most local buses, such as those to Vrindavan, leave from the old Mathura bus stand.

Several trains between Delhi and Agra stop at **Mathura Junction train station** (☎ 2405830). The fastest train from Delhi is the *Taj Express*, which departs from Hazrat Nizamuddin station at 7.15am (2nd class/chair Rs 44/169,

two hours). Frequent direct trains also run to Agra (2nd class/chair Rs 26/142, one hour), Bharatpur, Sawai Madhopur (for Ranthambore National Park) and Kota.

VRINDAVAN

☎ 0565 / pop 56,618

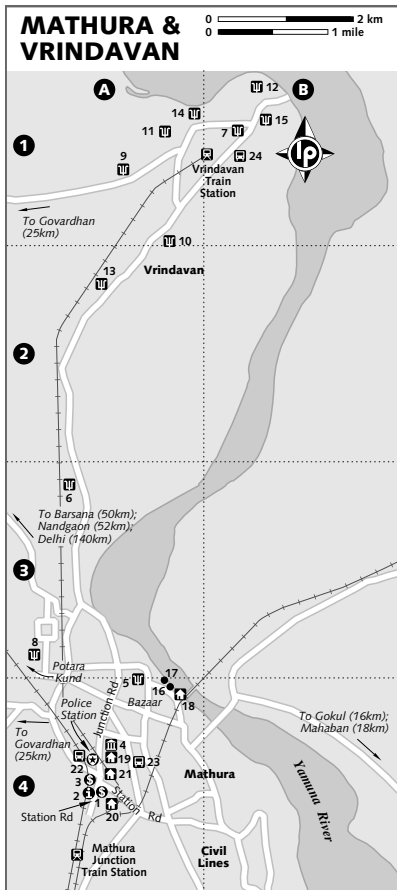
Dusty and crowded Vrindavan is where the young Krishna indulged in pranks such as stealing clothes from the *gopis* (milkmaids) while they bathed in the river. Little now remains of the legendary forests and pastures, but pilgrims still flock here in droves from all over India, and in the case of the Hare Krishna community, from all over the world.

Information

The Vrindavan **information office** (🕒 10am-1pm & 5-8.30pm) in the Krishna Balam temple complex can help with booking Gita classes. Nearby is a bank, an ATM, a post office and an internet café.

Sights

Dozens of temples, ancient and modern, dot the area; most are open from sunrise to sunset and admission is free. Since the temples are well spread out, a cycle-rickshaw or



INFORMATION

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EATING

Status Restaurant.....	(see 20)
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autorickshaw tour is the best way to see them. Expect to pay Rs 60 for a half-day tour by cycle-rickshaw.

The **International Society for Krishna Consciousness** (Iskcon; ☎ 2540343; www.iskcon.com) is based at the elaborately carved, white-marble **Krishna Balaram temple complex**. Also known as the Hare Krishnas, the organisation was founded in New York in the 1960s by Swami Prabhupada (d 1977). Several hundred foreigners attend courses and seminars here annually. It's possible to stay at the guesthouse behind the temple complex.

Rangaji temple dates from 1851 and is a bizarre mixture of architectural styles – a Rajput entrance gate, a soaring South Indian *gopuram* (intricately carved gateway tower), decorative Italianate pillars and a golden mast.

The cavernous, red sandstone **Govind Dev temple**, built in 1590 by Raja Man Singh of Amber, has cute bells carved on its pillars. Resident monkeys are adept at stealing sunglasses and anything else not tied down.

The castlelike, 10-storey **Pagal Baba temple** (admission Rs 2) has an amusing succession of animated puppets and dioramas behind glass cases on the ground floor, which depict scenes from the lives of Rama and Krishna.

The glittery **Krishna temple**, at the town's entrance, is modern and adorned with mirrors, enamel art and chandeliers. On the right is a fake **cave passageway** (admission Rs 3) where you walk past a long line of slightly moving tableaux depicting scenes from Krishna's life.

Radha Ballabh temple, built in 1626, **Madan Mohan temple** and **Nidhivan temple** are also worth a visit.

Getting There & Away

Tempos (large autorickshaws) charge Rs 5 to travel the 10km stretch between Mathura and Vrindavan.

LUCKNOW

☎ 0522 / pop 2.27 million

Liberally sprinkled with British Raj-era buildings, the ruins of the historic Residency and boasting two superb mausoleums, Lucknow oozes historical interest, although you have to go looking for it in the sprawling congestion that characterises the capital of Uttar Pradesh.

The city rose to prominence as the home of the nawabs of Avadh (Oudh). They controlled a region of northern-central India for about a

century after the decline of the Mughal empire and most of the city's monuments date from this period.

The Shiite nawabs built huge entrance gates embellished with their royal two-fish symbol all over the city to impress their mainly Hindu subjects, as well as grandiose tombs for themselves. They were great patrons of the culinary and other arts, particularly dance and music. Lucknow's reputation as a city of culture, gracious living and rich cuisine has continued to this day.

In 1856 the British annexed Avadh, exiling Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (see the boxed text, p416) to a palace in Kolkata. The disruption this caused was a factor in the Indian Uprising of 1857 and the famous Siege of Lucknow (see the boxed text, p414).

Although many travellers bypass Lucknow on their way between Agra and Varanasi, a day or two spent here is well worth it.

Orientation

Lucknow sprawls over a wide area, but the central accommodation and shopping area is known as Hazratganj, which is split by the main street, Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Rd, about 3km northeast of the Charlbagh bus stand and the train stations. The historic monuments are northwest of the city near the Gomi River.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Ram Advani Bookshop (☎ 2223511; Mayfair Bldg, MG Rd; ☎ Mon-Sat) A Lucknow institution, it's worth visiting this bookshop just to meet the knowledgeable owner, Mr Advani, and his mountains of books.

Universal Booksellers (☎ 2225894, 58 MG Rd; ☎ Mon-Sat)

INTERNET ACCESS

Cybernet Internet Café (per hr Rs 15; ☎ 8am-10pm) Down a small side street off MG Rd

i-way Internet (Sapru Marg; per hr 25; ☎ 8am-8pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Balrampur District Hospital (☎ 2224040; Hospital Rd) Conveniently located near Kaiserbagh bus stand.

MONEY

There are ICICI, UTI and HDFC bank ATMs on MG Rd and throughout the city.

Canara Bank (MG Rd, Hazratganj; ☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Fri) Exchanges most travellers cheques and currencies.

POST

Hazratganj post office (☎ 2222887; 📧 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Off MG Rd.

Main post office (☎ 2253165; MG Rd; 📧 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Grand Raj-era architecture.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Information booth (☎ 2636465; Charbagh train station; 📧 8am-8pm Mon-Sat)

UP Tours (☎ 2612659; Hotel Gomti, 6 Sapru Marg; 📧 9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) Government-run travel agency with brochures, city tours and information.

Sights**RESIDENCY**

The large collection of gardens and ruins that make up the **Residency** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/105; 📧 dawn-dusk) offer a fascinating historical glimpse into the beginning of the end for the British Raj. All that remains are the crumbling but well-preserved ruins of the church, mosque, school, post office, jail, sheep farm, banquet hall and houses that once made up the Residency compound. The Residency was built for the British Resident by the local nawab, and completed in 1800. It became the stage for the most dramatic events of the 1857 Uprising – the Siege of Lucknow (see the boxed text, below).

The red-brick ruins are peaceful today, but thousands died on both sides during the 87 days of constant siege, sniper fire and bombardment. The Residency compound has been left as it was at the time of the final relief and the walls are still pockmarked from bullets and cannon balls.

The focus is the well-designed **museum** (📧 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) in the main Residency

building. It includes a scale model of the original buildings, paintings of the nawabs and battle scenes, and poignant marks from cannon balls' impacts on the walls. Downstairs are the huge basement rooms where many of the British women and children lived throughout the siege – battle scene dioramas now tell the tale. The **cemetery** around the ruined St Mary's church is where 2000 of the defenders were buried, including their leader Sir Henry Lawrence, 'who tried to do his duty' according to the famous inscription on his weathered gravestone.

BARA IMAMBARA

This colossal but decaying **tomb** (Hussainabad Trust Rd; Indian/foreigner Rs 20/300; 📧 dawn-dusk) is a maze of courtyards, two imposing gates, a large step-well (*baori*) and a mosque (only Muslims are allowed inside). It was built in the 1780s by Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula as a famine relief project. He, his senior wife and his architect are buried here. Keep hold of your ticket as it includes free entry to Hussainabad Imambara and the Baradari art gallery.

The central hall, a50m long, 16m wide and 15m high, is one of the world's largest vaulted galleries. *Tazias*, small replicas of Imam Hussain's tomb in Karbala, Iraq, are stored inside and are paraded around during the Shiite mourning ceremony of Muharram.

An external stairway leads to a very unusual labyrinth of passageways known as the **Bhulbhulaiya**. The guides here vehemently claim that visiting the labyrinth is dangerous and illegal without a guide. If you prefer to look around everything on your own, you can – official guide rates are quoted as Rs 165 for the main hall and Rs 75 for the labyrinth.

AN EPIC SIEGE

Upon the outbreak of the 1857 Indian Uprising, also known as the First War of Independence, or the Indian Mutiny by the British, all the British inhabitants of Lucknow – around 1300 – took refuge with Sir Henry Lawrence in his Residency.

In total, 2994 men, women and children were crammed into the Residency buildings. Most were Indian and only half the total were soldiers. Conditions soon became appalling as the surrounded and helpless captives prayed for a relief force or a miracle. Food, drink and medicines became very scarce, and cholera, typhoid and smallpox claimed more lives than snipers' bullets.

It took 87 days for a small relief force to break through, but they too became trapped inside, and the siege continued for another 60 gruesome days. Published accounts, many written by female survivors, reveal a stiff upper lip in the face of extreme adversity.

The Residency was eventually relieved, but not before 2000 had died inside, the buildings had been reduced to ruins and the edifice of British rule in India had been rocked to its foundations.

Beside the Bara Imambara, and also built by Asaf-ud-Daula, is the unusual but imposing **Rumi Darwaza**, said to be a copy of an entrance gate in Istanbul. 'Rumi' (relating to Rome) is the term Muslims applied to Istanbul when it was still Byzantium, the capital of the Eastern Roman empire. Over the road is **Aurangzeb's mosque**, but the interior is less impressive than the exterior.

HUSSAINABAD (CHOTA) IMAMBARA & AROUND

Just 500m up the road from the Bara Imambara is another **tomb** (Hussainabad Trust Rd; admission for foreigners only possible with Bara Imambara ticket; ☞ dawn-dusk) that was constructed by Mohammed Ali Shah in 1832. His tomb is here alongside his mother's. Smaller than the Bara Imambara but adorned with calligraphy, it has a much more serene and intimate atmosphere.

In the garden is a tank and two replicas of the Taj Mahal that are the tombs of Mohammed Ali Shah's daughter and her husband. A traditional *hammam* can be seen as well as Mohammed's silver throne and red crown, countless chandeliers and some *tazias*.

The decaying watchtower on the other side of the road looks like a medieval painting of the Tower of Babel. Known as **Satkhandha** (Seven Storey Tower), it actually has only four storeys because construction was abandoned in 1840 when Mohammed Ali Shah died.

The 67m red-brick **clock tower**, reputedly the tallest in India, was built in the 1880s in memory of Sir George Couper, a reform-minded Governor of UP (United Provinces in

those days). Nearby is a **baradari** (summer palace; admission only possible with Bara Imambara ticket; ☞ 8am-6pm Tue-Sun), which overlooks an artificial lake and houses large portraits and photos of the nawabs of Avadh.

SIKANDAR BAGH

This walled **garden** (Rana Pratap Marg; ☞ dawn-dusk) was created by Wajid Ali Shah, the last nawab (see below), for his favourite queen, Sikandar Mahal. The splendid gateway, the tiny mosque and part of the wall are original. Hundreds died here in a pitched battle between Indian 'mutineers' and a British and Indian relief force during the Siege of Lucknow (see p414). The main gate is locked, but the small side gate is usually open.

ZOO & MUSEUM

The large, shady **zoo** (☎ 2239588; Park Rd; admission Rs 10; ☞ 8.30am-7pm Tue-Sun) is worth a visit if only to escape Lucknow's chaotic streets. Lions, elephants, deer, bears and monkeys are on view and the enclosures aren't the worst in India.

Within the zoo is the fine **State Museum** (☎ 2206158; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/50, camera Rs 20; ☞ 10.30am-4pm Tue-Sun), which houses sculptural masterpieces dating back to the 3rd century AD. Graceful and intricately carved Mathura sculptures range from dancing girls to scenes from the life of Buddha. Other galleries display the skills of local artisans and artists who flourished under the patronage of the nawabs. In the garden behind the museum is a dumping ground for Raj-era statuary, which provides a perfect End of Empire photo opportunity.

THE LAST NAWAB

Wajid Ali Shah was deposed by the British East India Company when it took over Avadh in 1856, and he lived in Kolkata on a fat pension of Rs 1,200,000 a year until his death in 1887. He was seen as a debauched, overdressed fop who squandered his vast income on his own pleasures rather than on the uplifting of his poverty-stricken subjects. He lived in his palace cocooned by an army of wives, *muta* (temporary) wives, concubines, eunuchs, servants and slaves.

But since Independence his image has been given a makeover, and he has been described as a talented, multilingual Renaissance prince, a gourmet who appreciated good food, a poet, playwright, dancer, choreographer and theatrical producer – the Lloyd Webber of his day. He wrote and starred in his own lavishly mounted *raha* (musicals) and had hundreds of artistic types on his payroll. It is said that he was a good Muslim who never drank alcohol and said his prayers five times a day.

Satyajit Ray's complex parable about colonialism, *The Chess Players* (1977), is a fascinating film about the two colliding worlds of the last nawab and the British administrators.

LA MARTINIÈRE SCHOOL

This prestigious boarding school (☎ 2223863; La Martiniere Marg), on the eastern edge of the city, was designed and built by the Frenchman Major General Claude Martin as a palatial home. In 1800 it became his tomb – he is buried in the basement. His architectural abilities were, to say the least, a little confused – the façade is part Roman archways, part Gothic horror movie, and part Disneyland castle with a jumble of turrets and gargoyles piled merrily atop a long line of Corinthian columns.

OTHER SIGHTS

The impressive **Shah Najaf Imambara** (Rana Pratap Marg; ☞ dawn-dusk) is the tomb of Nawab Ghaziud-din Haidar, who died in 1827, and three of his wives, including one known as Mubarak Mahal who was a European.

Not far from here are two other large **tombs** (MG Rd; ☞ dawn-dusk) of Nawab Sa'adat Ali Khan (1798–1814) and his wife Begum Khurshidzadi. The tombs are next to each other and can only be viewed from the outside.

Tours

UP Tours (☎ 2612659; Hotel Gomti, 6 Sapru Marg; tours Rs 520; ☞ 9.30am–7pm Mon–Sat) runs a four-hour daily tour of Lucknow. This is a good deal as it includes guide and entry fees to three *imambaras* (tombs dedicated to a Shiite Muslim holy man) and the Residency. The tour will pick up from a number of hotels. It also offers tango tours by horse-drawn cart for Rs 300.

Sleeping

The best place to look for a bed in Lucknow is along MG Rd and just north in the commercial Hazratganj area.

BUDGET

The usual gamut of cheap, seedy hotels exists between the bus and train stations, but decent budget hotels are in short supply.

Lucknow Homestay (☎ 2235460; naheed2k@gmail.com; 110D Mall Ave; r Rs 300) This lovely family homestay in a leafy neighbourhood southeast of Hazratganj is run by an engaging couple. The seven rooms are simple but comfortable (two with private bathroom), home-cooked meals are available and there's wifi. Call ahead for availability and directions.

Hotel Ramkrishna (☎ 2451824; 17/2 Ashok Marg; s/d from Rs 200/250, d with AC 650; ☞) The AC rooms are tidy and the cheaper rooms, while not flash,

are reasonable value at this well-located hotel just north of MG Rd.

Hotel Mayor (☎ 2451824; Subhash Marg; s/d from Rs 275/350, s/d with AC Rs 550/650; ☞) One of the better cheapies near the train station – the more expensive rooms have TV and hot water and are worth the extra cost.

Hotel Gomti (☎ 2212291; hotelgomti@up-tourism.com; 6 Sapru Marg; s/d Rs 450/550, s with AC Rs 775-1100, d with AC Rs 950-1200; ☞) This UP Tourism hotel is better equipped than most with a range of rooms, restaurant, bar and gardens. The old-fashioned rooms are a bit threadbare and don't really live up to the chandeliers in the foyer.

MIDRANGE

Capoor's (☎ 2623958; capoors@yahoo.com; 52 MG Rd; s Rs 900-1100, d Rs 1050-1350, ste Rs 1550-1950; ☞) Perfectly located in the heart of Hazratganj, Capoor's is the pick of Lucknow's hotels in this range – if only for its old-fashioned ambience – and is often full. Some of the rooms are a little dark but have a certain charm and all are AC. A popular restaurant and bar add to the busy atmosphere.

Mohan Hotel (☎ 2635797; mohanhotel@rediffmail.com; Buddha Rd; s Rs 700-1150, d Rs 900-1400; ☞) Mohan is the best of the hotels close to the train station but unless you're planning a quick exit, this isn't Lucknow's prime real estate. All rooms have AC, TV and fridge, but it's pretty gloomy. There's a good restaurant and bar attached, and 24-hour checkout is handy.

Carlton Hotel (☎ 2622413; Rana Pratap Marg; s/d Rs 1150/1350; ☞) Built by a Mr Carlton in a palatial maharaja style in 1948, this place is now very run-down but renovations are promised and it has a real Raj-era charm. Rooms are musty but enormous, and the lawn and garden create a peaceful oasis.

Tekarees Inn (☎ 4016241; www.tekareesinn.com; 17/3 Ashok Marg; s Rs 990-1250, d 1350-1600; ☞) Although a small, nondescript business-style hotel, Tekarees is an excellent midrange choice – it's central, rooms are spotless with tiled floors, TV and fridge, and the staff are helpful.

TOP END

La Place Park Inn (☎ 4004040; www.parkinnlucknow.com; 6 Shah Najaf Rd; s/d/ste Rs 3600/4200/5200; ☞ ☑) This hotel claims to treat every guest as a nawab. Modern, well-furnished rooms have bathtubs, there's an open-air rooftop grill restaurant and 24-hour coffee shop. It's clearly

business-oriented – but for this standard it lacks a pool or health club.

Hotel Clarks Avadh (☎ 2620131; www.clarksavadh.com; 8 MG Rd; d/ste from Rs 5000/9000; 📶 📺 🚿) Lucknow's best all-round hotel displays a cool elegance and restrained décor. Slick rooms have baths and views of either the Gomti River or the cricket stadium. The elevated outdoor pool is superb, and there's a gym, a jazzy bar and an excellent top-floor restaurant.

Eating RESTAURANTS

The refined palates of the nawabs left Lucknow with a reputation for rich Mughlai cuisine. The city is famous for its wide range of kebabs and for *dum pukht* – the 'art' of steam pressure cooking, in which meat and vegetables are cooked in a sealed clay pot. Huge *rumali roti* (paper-thin chapatis) are served in many small Muslim-style restaurants in the old city. They arrive folded up and should be eaten with a goat or lamb curry like *bhuna ghosht* or rogan josh.

The popular dessert *kulfi faluda* (ice cream with long chickpea flour noodles) is served in several places in Aminabad. The sweet orange-coloured rice dish known as *zarda* is also popular.

Hazratganj's MG Rd is full of gourmet delights, and a number of restaurants have live *ghazal* music in the evening.

Tunday Kabab (☎ 5524046; Aminabad Rd; dishes Rs 8-35) In the bustling Aminabad district, this renowned local kababi serves up reliable plates of mutton biryani, kebabs and tandoori chicken at unbeatable prices. Rickshaw drivers know how to find it.

Moti Mahal Restaurant (MG Rd; meals Rs 40-90) Downstairs is a sweet and snack shop, while hidden away upstairs is a dimly lit restaurant serving up tasty, well-presented food. Try the Lucknow *dum aloo* (potatoes stuffed with nuts and paneer in a tomato-based sauce) followed by *kulfi faluda*.

Muman's Royal Café (MG Rd; chaat Rs 10-40, mains Rs 70-150) Even if you don't step inside this popular family restaurant, don't miss the 'world-famous-in-Lucknow' *chaat* (spicy snack) stand at the front where mixed *chaats* are served in an *aloo* (potato) basket. Inside you can dine on chicken Mughlai, tandoor kebabs and pizza.

Nawab's (Capoor's; MG Rd; Rs 80-180) Portraits of the nawabs look down from the walls as you sample the traditional food that the tal-

ented chefs here have perfected, including kebabs, biryani and slow-cooked regional specialities.

Shanghai Surprise (☎ 2201556; Sapru Marg; mains Rs 80-270; 🕒 noon-4pm & 7-11pm) This smart subterranean restaurant specialises in Thai, Chinese and an attempt at Japanese cuisine – everything from tom yum and nasi goreng to lemon chicken. Prawn and duck also feature on the menu and while the flavours aren't straight from the Orient, the food is tasty.

Falaknuma (Hotel Clarks Avadh, 5 MG Rd; meals Rs 160-280) Lucknow's best hotel also lays claim to having its best restaurant. The stylish rooftop dining room has bird's-eye views of either the Gomti River or the cricket stadium. It serves up sumptuous nawab cuisine, such as *kaori* (minced lamb) and *galawat* (minced mutton) kebabs.

QUICK EATS

Sahara Ganj (cnr Shah Najaf Rd & Rana Pratap Marg) A glitzy new shopping mall – the third-biggest in India – with a food court and fast-food chains. It's popular with Lucknow's youth.

Barista (MG Rd; coffees & sandwiches Rs 30-50) This modern and reliable Indian coffee chain provides board games along with a great range of hot and cold coffees, shakes, sundaes and snacks.

Drinking & Entertainment

Lucknow's lingering British influence extends to a penchant for bars, so there's no excuse for an early night. As well as the bars listed below, other good ones can be found at the Gomti Hotel, the nostalgic, Raj-era Simba Bar at the Carlton Hotel and the Gulfam Coffee Shop at Hotel Clarks Avadh.

Lucknow has a strong tradition in the performing arts, and has its own schools and styles of Kathak dance (classical North Indian dance). Many restaurants, such as Chief Guest Restaurant, Falaknuma and Nawab's, have live Indian music in the evening, usually *ghazals*.

our pick **Strokes Sports Bar** (Capoor's, MG Rd; admission Rs 300 per couple after 7pm; 🕒 noon-11pm, till 3am Sat) With metallic décor, zebra print chairs and a backlit bar, this is as funky as it gets. On Saturday nights it becomes a minidisco, but only couples are allowed in (Rs 500 per couple). You get the entry cost back in coupons to spend on food and drinks. The small bar next door is always free.

Chief Guest Bar & Restaurant (Mohan Hotel, Budha Rd) Enjoy a meal and a beer at this hotel bar while listening to live *ghazals* from 8pm (except Tuesday).

Rabindralaya Auditorium (☎ 2455670; Kanpur Rd) Opposite the train stations, the auditorium hosts classical music, dance and theatrical performances.

There's a multiplex cinema at the Sahara Ganj shopping mall.

Shopping

Lucknow is famous for the delicately embroidered muslin cloth known as *chikan*, which is worn by men and women. It is sold in the small but relatively traffic-free Janpath Market just south of MG Rd in Hazratganj. Also in this market is the sweet-smelling Sugandhco, a century-old family business that sells attar – pure essence oil extracted from flowers by a traditional method.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Amausi airport is 15km southwest of Lucknow. **Indian Airlines** (☎ 2220927; Hotel Clarks Avadh, 8 MG Rd; ✈ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–2pm Sat) operates daily flights to Delhi (US\$88) and Mumbai (US\$196).

Air Sahara (☎ 377675; www.airсахара.net; Sahara India Tower, Aliganj) has discount daily flights to Delhi and Mumbai.

BUS

From **Charbagh bus stand** (☎ 2450988; Kanpur Rd), near the train stations, frequent buses leave for Faizabad (Rs 80, three hours), Gorakhpur

(Rs 150, 8½ hours) and Allahabad (non-AC/AC Rs 109/146, five hours). Several buses run each day to Varanasi (non-AC/AC Rs 160/256, 8½ hours) and Agra (Rs 197, 10 hours).

From **Kaiserbagh bus stand** (☎ 2222503; J Narain Rd) buses run to Delhi (Rs 255, 13 hours), as well as to Faizabad and Gorakhpur.

TRAIN

The two main stations, **Charbagh** (☎ 2635841; Kanpur Rd) and **Lucknow Junction** (☎ 2635877), are side by side; Northern Railway trains run to both stations, while Northeastern Railway trains run only to the latter. Essentially, Charbagh handles all trains travelling between Delhi and Kolkata, while Lucknow Junction handles many of the trains heading to the cities in the south (see the boxed text, below).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Taxis charge around Rs 300 and autorickshaws Rs 150 for the 15km trip to Amausi airport.

LOCAL TRANSPORT

A short cycle-rickshaw ride is Rs 10, and from the train station to the Residency costs Rs 30. Autorickshaws are the best way out to the Bara Imambara area (Rs 60 from the train station). A four-hour autorickshaw tour covering all the main sights costs Rs 200, while taxi charge around Rs 350. Eight-seater *vikrams* run on fixed routes and charge Rs 2 to 8. Local buses are usually too jam-packed to use.

MAJOR TRAINS FROM LUCKNOW

Destination	Train No & Name	Fare (Rs)*	Duration (hr)	Departures
Agra	4853 <i>Marudhar Exp</i>	143/404/579	6	12.05am
Allahabad	4210 <i>Intercity Exp</i>	64/223	4½	7.30am
Delhi	2004/2036 <i>Shatabdi</i>	785/1510	6½	3.35pm
Faizabad	3010 <i>Doon Exp</i>	101/216/309	2½	8.35am
Gorakhpur	5015 <i>Intercity Exp</i>	80/277	5½	4.35pm
Kolkata	3006 <i>Amritsar–Howrah Mail</i>	333/939/1349	20	10.55am
Mumbai	2534 <i>Pushpak Exp</i>	381/1074/1544	24	7.50pm
Varanasi	4204 <i>Intercity Exp</i>	85/297	6½	7am

**Shatabdi* fares are chair/executive; Express and Mail fares are 2nd/chair car for day trains, sleeper/3AC/2AC for overnight trains.

ALLAHABAD

☎ 0532 / pop 1,049,579

Allahabad, 135km west of Varanasi, holds an important place in the Hindu religion. It's here that two of India's most significant and holy rivers, the Ganges and the Yamuna, meet. The mythical subterranean Saraswati River (River of Enlightenment) is also believed to join them here. On the banks of this confluence the biggest gathering of humanity in the world, the Kumbh Mela, takes place every 12 years, but every year there is a smaller religious fair, the Magh Mela. Of more immediate interest to travellers, though, are Allahabad's grand Raj-era buildings, Mughal fort and tombs and the historic legacy of the Nehru family.

Orientation

Allahabad's Civil Lines is a district of broad avenues, Raj-era bungalows, hotels, restaurants, ice-cream parlours, bakeries and the more modern shops. The Civil Lines bus stand, which is the main bus terminal, is also here in the southeast corner. This area is divided from Chowk, the crowded, older part of town, by Allahabad Junction train station and the railway line. Sangam and Akbar's Fort are 7km southeast of Civil Lines.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Wheeler's Bookshop (MG Marg)

INTERNET ACCESS

Angelica's Cyber Point (per hr Rs 25) Opposite Samrat Hotel, off MG Marg.

ipay Internet (Sardar Patel Marg; per hr Rs 30;

☎ 8.30am-8.30pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Apollo Clinic (☎ 2421131; MG Marg; ☎ 8am-8pm)

A modern private medical facility with 24-hour pharmacy.

MONEY

HDFC ATM (Sadar Patel Marg)

ICICI ATM (Grand Continental, Sardar Patel Marg)

State Bank of India (☎ 608224; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Off MG Marg.

UTI ATM (MG Marg)

POST

Main post office (Sarojini Naidu Marg; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

UP Tourism office (☎ 2601873; 35 MG Marg;

☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) At the Rahi Ilawart Tourist Bungalow.

Sights & Activities

SANGAM

This is the point where the shallow, muddy Ganges meets the clearer, deeper Yamuna. Hindu pilgrims come all year to bathe and take a boat out to the auspicious spot where the two rivers meet. A row boat should not cost more than Rs 30 per person if you share, but boat owners are desperate to get foreign tourists on board at inflated prices. A private boat for a half-hour trip is about Rs 200.

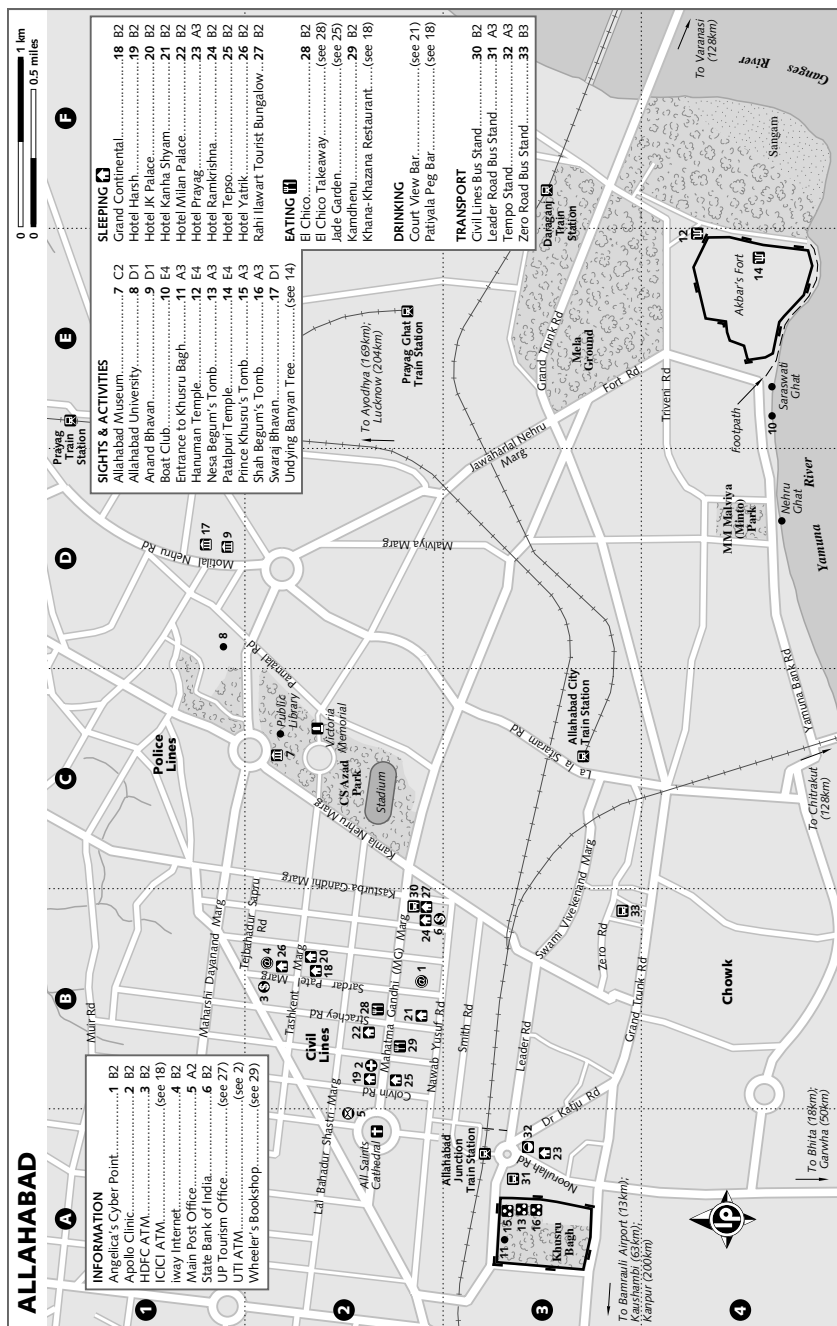
The number of pilgrims increases during the annual **Magh Mela** (mid-January to mid-February). Astrologers calculate the holiest time to enter the water and draw up a 'Holy Dip Schedule'. The most propitious time of all happens only every 12 years when the massive **Kumbh Mela** takes place. **Ardh Mela** (half-mela) is every six years. Both of these attract millions of sadhus and pilgrims. In the early 1950s, 350 pilgrims were killed in a stampede to the soul-cleansing water (an incident recreated in Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*). The next recent Ardh Mela was in 2007, while the next Kumbh Mela here is 2013.

Around the corner from Sangam are the Saraswati and Nehru Ghats, home to a **boat club** (10-seater boats Rs 300) and a nightly **ganga aarti** (river worship) ceremony.

AKBAR'S FORT & TEMPLES

Built by the Mughal Emperor Akbar and completed in 1583 after decades of construction, the **fort** stands on the northern bank of the Yamuna. It has massive walls with three gateways flanked by towers. Most of the fort is occupied by the Indian army and cannot be visited, but a small door in the fort's eastern wall near Sangam leads to one part that you can visit, the underground **Patalpuri temple** (admission Rs 21; ☎ 7am-5pm). This unique temple is crowded with all sorts of idols – pick up some coins from the change dealers outside so you can leave small offerings as you go. Outside the temple – though its roots can be seen beneath ground – is the **Undying Banyan Tree** from which pilgrims used to leap to their deaths, believing it would liberate them from the cycle of rebirth.

Nearby is a **Hanuman temple**, which is little more than a corrugated-iron shed. Underneath,



however, is an unusual supine Hanuman statue that is usually hidden under the masses of flowers thrown onto it by devotees. It is said that each year during the monsoon the Ganges River rises to touch the feet of the sleeping Hanuman before receding.

ANAND BHAVAN & SWARAJ BHAVAN

The picturesque two-storey **Anand Bhavan** (☎ 2467071; admission Rs 5; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a shrine to the Nehru family, which has produced five generations of leading politicians from Motilal Nehru to the latest political figure Rahul Gandhi. This stately home is where Mahatma Gandhi, the academic Jawaharlal Nehru and others successfully planned the overthrow of the British Raj. It is full of books, personal effects and photos from those stirring times. Indira Gandhi (Jawaharlal Nehru's daughter) was married here in 1942.

Next door is **Swaraj Bhavan** (☎ 2467674; admission Rs 2; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun), which was bought by Motilal Nehru in 1900, but is now very run-down. It can only be visited on group tours that last 15 minutes. The secret underground meeting room reveals the dangers faced by the freedom fighters who were frequently arrested.

KHUSRU BAGH

This intriguing park is surrounded by a high wall and contains three large and ornate but contrasting **Mughal tombs** (admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk). One is that of **Prince Khusru**, the tragic eldest son of Emperor Jehangir who tried to assassinate his father but was blinded and imprisoned, finally dying in 1622. If Khusru's coup had succeeded, his brother, Shah Jahan, would not have become emperor and the Taj Mahal would not exist. The other tombs belong to **Shah Begum**, Khusru's mother (Jehangir's first wife), and **Nesa Begum**, Khusru's sister. If the caretaker is around, ask to see inside the tombs – Nesa Begum's tomb has a wonderfully decorated interior while Khusru's has some high-quality fretwork windows.

ALLAHABAD MUSEUM

This extensive **museum** (☎ 2601200; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; Kamla Nehru Marg; ☎ 10.15am-4.30pm Tue-Sun), at the top of CS Azad Park, has archaeological and Nehru family items, modern paintings, miniatures and ancient sculptures.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Decent budget accommodation is in short supply, so book ahead or consider one of the cheaper midrange hotels.

Hotel Harsh (☎ 2622197; 16 MG Marg; s/d from Rs 180/200) This run-down colonial bungalow is forlorn and neglected, but it's cheap and the rooms are typically huge.

Hotel Prayag (☎ 2242826; Noorullah Rd; d with shared bathroom Rs 200, d from Rs 275, with AC from Rs 575; ☎) Noisy Noorullah Rd leading from the rear of the train station has dozens of cheap and cheerless hotels. This old-fashioned place has a range of rooms and is the best of an average lot.

Hotel Ramkrishna (☎ 2604785; s/d/tr from Rs 350/450/500, with AC Rs 700/800/900; ☎) The newest and best of the budget (or lower midrange) hotels, this place just south of the MG Marg has clean, smart rooms, but fills up fast.

Hotel Tepso (☎ 2561409; MG Marg; d with/without AC Rs 650/500; ☎) Rooms arranged around a tatty central garden vary in quality – the AC rooms are better but ask for one with a window. All have TV and hot water. The attached Jade restaurant is good.

Rahi Ilawatt Tourist Bungalow (☎ 2601440; fax 2611374; 35 MG Marg; dm Rs 100, s/d Rs 500/550, s/d with AC from Rs 975/1050; ☎) Better than some UP government hotels, the décor is institutional and uninspiring, but even the cheaper rooms are reasonably clean. The restaurant is good and the bar is bright and busy.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hotel JK Palace (☎ 2260616; Tashkent Marg; s/d Rs 500/700, with AC Rs 800/1000; ☎) An unusual wedding cake façade reveals spacious but far from flashy rooms with TV. The front rooms all have shared balconies but are noisier than those at the back. Reception is hidden away among shops at the rear.

Hotel Milan Palace (☎ 2421505; www.hotelmilanpalace.com; 4/2 Strachey Rd; s/d from \$US35/45, ste \$US80; ☎) Allahabad's most stylish hotel, this centrally located ultramodern boutique hotel features a cool glass and mock-classical façade, central AC and slick rooms. No bar, but a smart restaurant.

Hotel Yatrik (☎ 2260921; yatrik-hotel@rediffmail; 33 Sardar Patel Marg; s/d/ste Rs 1600/1700/2700; ☎) The marble lobby, heritage furniture and artworks give this hotel plenty of character, and the lush gardens and swimming pool are hard to resist. Rooms are a little threadbare, but it's still the best value in this class.

Grand Continental (☎ 2260631; www.birhotel.com; Sardar Patel Marg; s Rs 1900-2500, d Rs 2200-2800, ste Rs 3500; 🍷 🍴) Allahabad's flashiest hotel has a swimming pool set in a garden courtyard, well-appointed rooms, bright décor, and a good restaurant and bar.

Hotel Kanha Shyam (☎ 2560123; www.hotelkanhashyam.com; Strachey Rd; s/d Rs 2500/3000, ste Rs 7000; 🍷) The multistorey, multistar Kanha Shyam has had a bit of a facelift recently and boasts a new swimming pool, spa and sauna. Rooms are still a bit old fashioned, but the 24-hour coffee shop and the top-floor restaurant (Mughlai cuisine) and bar are winners.

Eating

Allahabadians have a sweet tooth and MG Marg is lined with shops selling ice creams, shakes, cakes and sweets. Outdoor eating is all the rage with many stalls along MG Marg setting up tables and chairs on the footpath in the evening. For fine dining, head to the hotel restaurants.

Kamdhenu (MG Marg; snacks Rs 10-30, meals Rs 20-50) Downstairs are homemade sweets, cakes, samosas and ice cream, while upstairs the small but busy fast-food-style restaurant offers pizzas, burgers and South Indian dishes.

Jade Garden (☎ 2561408; mains Rs 70-145; Hotel Tepso, MG Marg; 🍷 7am-11pm) Spotless hotel restaurant with attentive black-tie staff. Popular for a big range of Indian and Chinese, nonveg sizzlers, salads and tandoori.

Khana-Khazana Restaurant (Grand Continental, Sardar Patel Marg; meals Rs 70-160) By day this AC hotel restaurant serves up a tempting array of continental snacks, such as burgers, pizzas and club sandwiches. In the evening there's an interesting variety of Indian, Chinese and continental veg and nonveg dishes, including sizzlers, pasta, tandoori kebabs and Bengali fish curry.

El Chico (MG Marg; mains Rs 80-200) Swish El Chico is a popular place that's been dishing out reliable Indian, Chinese and continental veg and nonveg dishes for more than 40 years. It's a little pricey, but the extensive menu includes fish dishes and sizzlers. Next door, El Chico Takeaway (snacks Rs 10 to 35) tempts diners with ice creams, cakes, cheesecake and savoury snacks.

Drinking

The Patiyyala Peg Bar at the Grand Continental has live *ghazal* music nightly from 7.30pm.

Court View Bar, on the top floor of the Hotel Kahna Shyam, is a stylish place for a beer.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Bamrauli airport, 15km west of Allahabad on the road to Kanpur, is only used by **Air Sahara** (☎ 2260533; Hotel Yatrik, 33 Sardar Patel Marg), which has flights on Monday, Wednesday and Friday to Delhi (US\$197). An autorickshaw to the airport costs around Rs 170, a taxi Rs 350.

BUS

From the **Civil Lines bus stand** (☎ 2601257; MG Marg) regular buses run to Varanasi (non-AC/AC Rs 68/91, three hours), Lucknow (non-AC/AC Rs 109/146, five hours), Faizabad (Rs 105, five hours, hourly) and Gorakhpur (Rs 152, 9½ hours), and two buses run to Sunauli (Rs 202, 13 hours) if you're heading to Nepal.

From the **Leader Road bus stand** (☎ 2615625; Leader Rd), frequent buses leave for Delhi (Rs 300, 12 hours), and an 8.30pm bus goes to Agra (Rs 240, 12 hours).

TRAIN

Allahabad Junction (☎ 2600179) is the main station. Trains run to Varanasi (sleeper/3AC Rs 101/226, three hours), Lucknow (2nd class/chair Rs 64/223, five hours), Delhi (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 241/680/975, 10 hours) and Kolkata (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 283/800/1148, 13 hours).

Frequent trains run to Satna (sleeper/3AC Rs 101/266, three hours) from where buses run to Khajuraho.

Getting Around

Plenty of brightly painted cycle-rickshaws (Rs 10 for a short trip) are for rent but autorickshaws are in relatively short supply. It's best to take an autorickshaw (Rs 150 return) to Sangam. A four-hour sightseeing tour by autorickshaw, including Sangam, should cost Rs 300.

AROUND ALLAHABAD

Once known as Kosam, **Kaushambi**, 63km southwest of Allahabad, is an ancient Buddhist centre that was visited by Buddha. A huge fortress near the village contains the broken remains of an Ashoka pillar. Buses for Kaushambi depart irregularly from Allahabad's Leader Rd bus stand.

It's believed that Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva were 'born' and taken on their incarnations

in **Chitrakut**, 128km from Allahabad. This town, known as a mini Varanasi because of its many temples and ghats, is a popular Hindu pilgrimage destination. UP Tourism runs the **Rahi Tourist Bungalow** (☎ 015198-224219; rahitbbchitrakoot@up-tourism.com; dm/s/d Rs 80/375/400, s/d/tr with AC Rs 675/725/900; 🏠), with reasonable rooms. Buses for Chitrakut depart from Allahabad's Zero Rd bus stand.

FAIZABAD & AYODHYA

☎ 05278 / pop 208,164 & 49,593

The chaotic central UP town of Faizabad, once the capital of Avadh, is primarily a base and jumping-off point for the auspicious Hindu and Jain religious centre of Ayodhya, 7km to the east. Being the birthplace of Rama, Ayodhya is one of Hinduism's seven holy cities, but it is also where five Jain *tirthankars* (holy men) were born. The Atharvaveda described Ayodhya as 'a city built by gods and being as prosperous as paradise itself, but today it's just a dusty pilgrimage town full of temples and monkeys.

Ayodhya became tragically synonymous with Hindu extremism when in 1992 rioting Hindus tore down the Babri Masjid, a mosque built by the Mughals in the 15th century, which they claimed stood on the site of an earlier Rama temple. They put up Ram Janam Bhumi in its place. Following tit-for-tat reprisals, the problem has not been resolved and the Supreme Court has ordered archaeological investigations at the site to verify whether the Hindu claims are correct.

Information

There's a **UP Tourist Office** (☎ 05278-223214; Station Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) in Faizabad and a State Bank of India ATM about 200m from the train station on Station Rd.

Sights

In Faizabad, take a cycle-rickshaw to the **Bahu Begum ka Maqabara** (☎ dawn-dusk), the Begum's unique mausoleum. It has three domes built above each other with wonderfully ornate decoration on the walls and ceilings.

A 20-minute tempo ride (Rs 10) brings you to Ayodhya, where a pleasant traffic-free temple tour starts at the town's most popular temple, **Hanumangarhi** (☎ dawn-dusk), just off the main street. Walk up the 76 steps to the ornate carved gateway and the fortresslike

outer walls, and join the throng inside offering *prasad* (food offerings) while musicians croon bhajans.

A further 100m up the road is **Dashrath Bhavan** (☎ dawn-dusk), a temple that is approached through a colourful entranceway. The atmosphere inside is peaceful, with musicians playing and orange-clad sadhus carving beads or reading scriptures.

A few minutes walk further on is the impressive **Kanak Bhavan** (Palace of Gold; ☎ dawn-dusk), an ancient but often rebuilt palace-cum-temple.

Another 300m away is the high-security **Ram Janam Bhumi** (☎ 7-11am & 2-6pm). You must show your passport, and all bags, cameras and mobile phones must be left outside. Everyone is thoroughly searched several times, so it is a considerable effort for the chance to file past the makeshift tent of a shrine that supposedly marks Rama's birthplace.

A five-minute walk on the other side of the main road brings you to **Ramkatha Museum** (admission free; ☎ 10.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun), a large yellow-and-red building containing murals in the foyer. It has displays of shadow puppets used in the Thai version of the Ram Lila, ancient sculptures and images of Rama and Sita.

Sleeping & Eating

The following hotels in Faizabad are a 10-minute walk or Rs 5 cycle-rickshaw ride from the bus and train stations.

Hotel Shan-e-Avadh (☎ 223586; shane_avadh@yahoo.com; Station Rd; s Rs 180-300, d Rs 200-350, s/d with AC Rs 600/700; 🏠) Popular, good-value hotel with a range of rooms.

Hotel Krishna Palace (☎ 221367; fax 226765; s/d from Rs 400/600, s/d with AC Rs 750/990; s/d suite Rs 1600/2000; 🏠) Close to the train station, this flashy, whitewashed hotel is clean and comfortable, and has a good restaurant and bar.

Getting There & Away

From the Faizabad bus station on Station Rd, buses run to Ayodhya (Rs 10, 20 minutes), Gonda (for Shravasti, Rs 35, two hours), Lucknow (Rs 80, three hours), Gorakhpur (Rs 78, four hours) and Allahabad (Rs 105, five hours).

Trains include expresses to Lucknow (sleeper/3AC Rs 101/309, 3½ hours), Varanasi (Rs 101/286, four hours) and Delhi (Rs 241/680, 10 hours)

VARANASI

☎ 0542 / pop 1,211,749

Few places in India are as colourful, charismatic or spiritual as the bathing ghats lining the Ganges in Varanasi. The city of Shiva is one of the holiest places in India, where Hindu pilgrims come to wash away a lifetime of sins in the Ganges or to cremate their loved ones. Varanasi, previously named Benares and Kashi (City of Life) – it was renamed after the Varuna and Asi Rivers, which meet here – has always been an auspicious place to die, since expiring here offers moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth and death). The city is the beating heart of the Hindu universe, a crossing place between the physical and spiritual worlds, and the Ganges is viewed as a river of salvation, an everlasting symbol of hope to past, present and future generations. The magical but sometimes overwhelming city is where the most intimate rituals of life and death take place in public on the city's ghats. The accessibility to the practices of an ancient but still living religious tradition is what captivates many visitors, and a walk along the ghats or a boat ride on the river is one of India's most absorbing experiences.

History

Varanasi has been a centre of learning and civilisation for over 2000 years, and claims to be one of the oldest living cities in the world. Mark Twain wrote that 'Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together'.

Its history dates back to 1400 BC, but it was around the 8th century AD that Varanasi rose in prominence 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.

Orientation

The old city of Varanasi is situated along the western bank of the Ganges and extends back from the riverbank ghats in a labyrinth of alleys called *galis* that are too narrow for traffic. The *galis* can be disorienting but the hotels are usually well signposted and however

lost you become, you will eventually land up at a ghat where you can get your bearings. It pays to remember the names and relative locations of the major ghats – Manikarnika, Dasaswamedh, Mansarowar and Assi.

Immediately south of the train station are the less city congested areas of Lahurabir and Chetganj where you'll find plenty of hotels and restaurants. Behind the station is the peaceful Cantonment area, home to most of the top-end hotels.

Information

For an online guide to the city, visit www.varanasi.nic.in or www.visitvaranasi.com.

BOOKSHOPS

The following bookshops stock books on yoga, meditation and spirituality, Indian literature, travel guides and maps:

Harmony Bookshop (Map p426; ☎ 10am-9pm) Near Indica Books at Assi Ghat.

Indica Books (Map p429; ☎ 3094999; www.indica-books.com; Godaulia; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) There's a second branch of this excellent bookshop at Assi Ghat.

Universal Book Company (Map p429)

EMERGENCY

Tourist Police (Map p426; ☎ 2506670; UP Tourism office, Varanasi Junction train station; ☎ 6am-7pm) The tourism office is the base for the tourist police who wear sky-blue uniforms.

INTERNET ACCESS

All these branches have fast broadband connections, and most places offer internet phone and digital photo burning:

ipay Internet Assi Ghat (Map p426; per hr Rs 25; ☎ 7.30am-10.30pm); Hotel Surya (Map p426; per 45min Rs 25; ☎ 7.30am-10pm); off Mandapur Rd (Map p429; per hr Rs 25; ☎ 7am-10pm); off Parade Kothi (Map p426; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat)

LEFT LUGGAGE

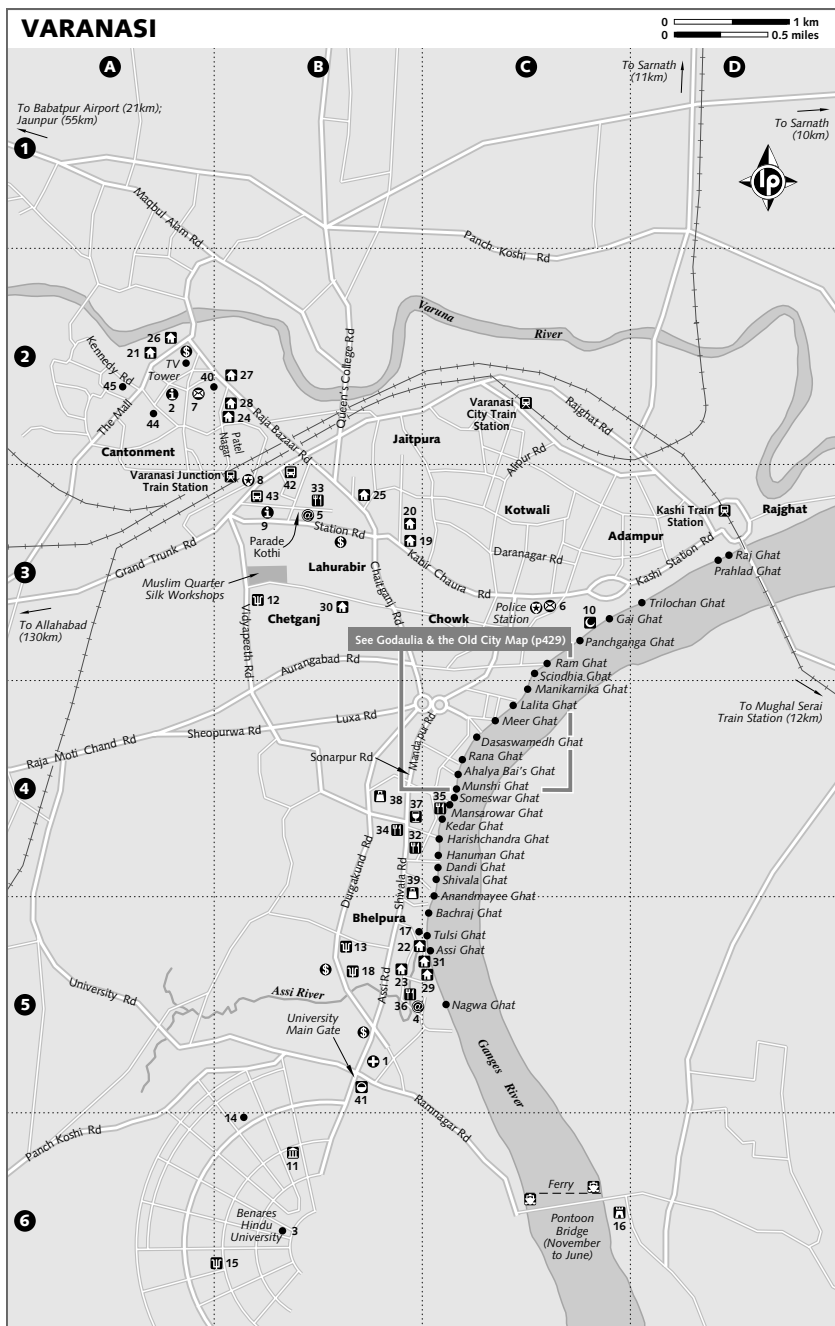
Varanasi Junction station (Map p426; ☎ 24hr)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Heritage Hospital (Map p426; ☎ 2368888) At the main entrance of Benares Hindu University, this is a modern private hospital with a 24-hour pharmacy. Also has an International Travellers Clinic (☎ 5631153).

MONEY

Several moneychangers and hotels offer a faster service than the banks at slightly lower



INFORMATION		Sankat Mochan Foundation.....17 B5	Poonam & Eden Restaurant.....(see 25)
Harmony Bookshop.....(see 31)		Tulsi Manas Temple.....18 B5	Vaatika Café.....(see 22)
Heritage Hospital & 24-hour Pharmacy.....1 B5	SLEEPING	Hotel Ajaya.....19 B3	Varuna Restaurant.....(see 27)
India Tourism Office.....2 A2		Hotel Buddha.....20 B3	Yafah Restaurant.....(see 23)
Indica Books.....(see 31)		Hotel Clarks Varanasi.....21 A2	
International Students Centre.....3 B6		Hotel Divya.....(see 23)	DRINKING
iway Internet.....4 B5		Hotel Ganges View.....22 B5	Gazal Bar.....(see 28)
iway Internet.....5 B3		Hotel Haifa.....23 B5	Patiala Peg.....(see 24)
iway Internet.....(see 26)		Hotel Meraden Grand.....24 B2	Princep Bar.....(see 27)
Main Post Office.....6 C3		Hotel Pradeep.....25 B3	Wine Shop.....37 B4
Post Office.....7 A2		Hotel Surya.....26 A2	SHOPPING
State Bank of India.....(see 26)		Hotel Taj Ganges.....27 B2	Baba Blacksheep.....38 B4
Tourist Police.....8 B3		Hotel Vaibhav.....28 B2	Benares Art & Culture.....39 B4
UP Tourism Office.....9 B3		Palace on the Ganges.....29 C5	Ganga Silk.....(see 32)
UP Tourism Office.....(see 8)		Pallavi International Hotel.....30 B3	
		Sahi River View Guesthouse.....31 C5	TRANSPORT
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	EATING		Air Sahara.....40 A2
Alamgir Mosque.....10 C3		Bread of Life Bakery.....32 B4	Autorickshaw Stand.....41 B5
Bharat Kala Bhavan.....11 B6		Canton Restaurant.....(see 26)	Bus Station.....42 B3
Bharat Mata Temple.....12 B3		El Parador.....33 B3	Buses to Sarnath.....43 B3
Durga Temple.....13 B5		Haifa Restaurant.....(see 23)	Foreign Tourist Assistance Bureau.....(see 8)
Hotel Surya.....(see 26)		I:ba.....34 B4	Indian Airlines.....44 A2
Malaviya Bhavan.....14 B6		Lotus Lounge.....35 C4	Jet Airways.....45 A2
New Vishwanath Temple.....15 B6		Open Hand Shop & Café.....36 B5	Paul Travels.....(see 5)
Prakruthi.....(see 29)			
Ramnagar Fort & Museum.....16 C6			

rates. There's a State Bank of India ATM at Godaulia Crossing and numerous other ATMs scattered around the city.

Bank of Baroda (Map p429; ☎ 2366150; 1st fl, Dasaswamedh Ghat Rd; ☎ 11am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 11am-2pm Sat) Exchanges all major currencies and travellers cheques, and will provide cash advances on major credit cards.

State Bank of India (Map p426; ☎ 2343742; the Mall; ☎ 10am-2pm & 2.30-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Will exchange US dollar, pound and euro travellers cheques and many currencies.

POST

There are post offices in the Cantonment (Map p426), near Dasaswamedh Ghat (Map p429) and south of Vishwanath temple (Map p429). The **main post office** (Map p426; ☎ 2331398; Kabir Chaura Rd; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) is not very conveniently located.

TOURIST INFORMATION

India Tourism office (Map p426; ☎ 2226378; 191 the Mall; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) Helpful staff have all-India information and brochures.

UP Tourism office Tourist Bungalow (Map p426; ☎ 2206638; Parade Kothi; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat); Varanasi Junction train station (Map p426; ☎ 2506670; ☎ 7am-7pm) The patient Mr Umashankar at the train station has been dishing out reasonably impartial information to arriving travellers for years; he's a mine of knowledge, so take advantage of it if you arrive here by train.

Sights GHATS

Spiritual life in Varanasi revolves around the ghats, the long string of bathing steps leading down to the water on the western bank of the Ganges. Most are used for bathing but there are also several 'burning ghats' where bodies are cremated in public – the main burning ghat is Manikarnika and you'll often see funeral processions threading their way through the backstreets to this ghat. The best time to visit the ghats is at dawn when the river is bathed in a mellow light as pilgrims come to perform *puja* (literally 'respect'; offering or prayers) to the rising sun, and at sunset when the main *ganga aarti* ceremony takes place at Dasaswamedh Ghat.

Around 80 ghats border the river, but the main group extends from Assi Ghat, near the university, northwards to Raj Ghat, near the road and rail bridge. A one-hour boat trip from Dasaswamedh Ghat south to Harishchandra Ghat and back provides a good introduction to the river scene (see p431).

For most of the year you can walk freely along the whole length of the ghats, although during and immediately after the monsoon the water level is too high for this. It's a unique, world-class 'people-watching' walk as you mingle with the fascinating mixture of people who come to the Ganges not only for a ritual bath but also to wash clothes, do yoga,

offer blessings, buy *paan* (a mixture of betel nut and leaves for chewing), sell flowers, get a massage, play cricket, wash their buffaloes, improve their karma by giving to beggars or simply hang around. This is traditional India at its most colourful and picturesque and photo opportunities abound.

Assi Ghat, furthest south of the main ghats, is particularly important as the River Asi meets the Ganges near here and pilgrims come to worship a Shiva lingam beneath a pipal tree. The ghats themselves were undergoing much-needed renovation at the time of writing, and there are some interesting shops, cafés and excellent hotels here. Boat owners wait to take pilgrims and tourists upstream to Dasaswamedh Ghat. Nearby **Tulsi Ghat**, named after a 16th-century Hindu poet, has fallen down towards the river but in the month of Kartika (October/November) a festival devoted to Krishna is celebrated here. The NGO campaigning for a cleaner Ganges also has its research laboratory here (see the boxed text,

p430). Next along, the **Bachraj Ghat** has three Jain temples. Many of the ghats are owned by maharajas or other princely rulers, such as **Shivala Ghat**, built by the local maharaja of Benares. The **Dandi Ghat** is used by ascetics known as Dandi Panths, and nearby is the very popular **Hanuman Ghat**.

Harishchandra Ghat is a cremation ghat – smaller and secondary in importance to Manikarnika – and one of the oldest ghats in Varanasi. Above it, **Kedar Ghat** has a shrine popular with Bengalis and South Indians. **Mansarowar Ghat** was built by Raja Man Singh of Amber and named after the Tibetan lake at the foot of Mt Kailash, Shiva's Himalayan home. **Someswar Ghat** (Lord of the Moon Ghat) is said to be able to heal diseases. The **Munshi Ghat** is very photogenic, while **Ahalya Bai's Ghat** is named after the female Maratha ruler of Indore.

Varanasi's liveliest and most colourful ghat is **Dasaswamedh Ghat**, easily reached at the end of the main road from Godaulia Crossing.

THE VARANASI SHAKEDOWN

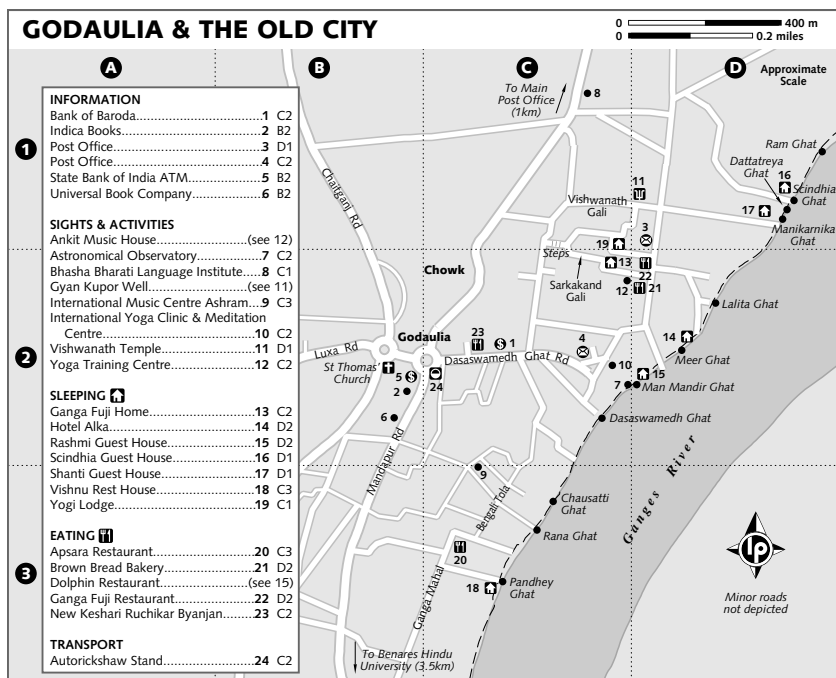
Of all northern Indian cities, Varanasi and Agra have the worst reputations for hassles, touts, crazed rickshaw drivers following you around and sundry scams. While the attention here, particularly around the ghats and old city, is more intense than elsewhere, it would be a shame to let it spoil your enjoyment of Varanasi.

The first issue is getting to your accommodation when you first arrive – and not the one your autorickshaw or taxi driver wants to take you to. With advance notice, an increasing number of hotels will pick you up or arrange to meet you at a certain point, so call ahead, especially if you're arriving after dark. Don't listen to anyone who tries to take you to a 'better' hotel or offers to be your 'friend' or 'guide'. Remember that most hotels in Varanasi operate on a commission basis so ignore nonsense from autorickshaw drivers about your hotel being closed, full, burnt down, very bad, or infested with mosquitoes or gangsters. Be firm. For hotels down by the ghats, ask the autorickshaw driver to take you to a landmark near your hotel and walk from there as vehicles are not allowed in the narrow alleys of the old city (that's one thing they will say that is true!).

While wandering around the ghats you will most likely have to put up with persistent offers from touts and drivers of 'cheapest and best' boat trips, tour operators, travel agents, silk shops and money changers (to name a few). Take it in good humour but resist most of these offers, particularly if the tout wants to lead you away to some obscure location. Authorised guides can be organised through the India Tourism or UP Tourism office. It's safer – and cheaper – to arrange boat trips in groups. Don't take photos at the 'burning' ghats and resist offers to 'follow me for a better view', where you'll be pressured for money and possibly be placed in an uncomfortable situation.

While most of this is little more than a mild irritation, Varanasi has a darker side and a criminal element operates mainly around the train station and bus station, so take extra care with your valuables in these places. The old city is potentially unsafe after dark, and hotels in this area often advise their guests to return by 10pm and some lock their doors at 10pm or 11pm – carry a torch after dark and don't walk alone late at night.

Remember, though, that not everyone is out to fleece you and meeting locals is part of the experience – act with confidence and humour and don't be too paranoid!



The name indicates that Brahma sacrificed (*medh*) 10 (*das*) horses (*aswa*) here. In spite of the oppressive boat owners, flower sellers and touts trying to drag you off to a silk shop, it's a wonderful place to linger and people-watch while soaking up the atmosphere. Note its statues and the shrine of Sitala, goddess of smallpox. Every evening at 7pm an elaborate *ganga aarti* ceremony with puja, fire and dance) is staged here.

A little further north, Raja Man Singh's **Man Mandir Ghat** was built in 1600, but was poorly restored in the 19th century. The northern corner of the ghat has a fine stone balcony and Raja Jai Singh II of Jaipur erected one of his unusual observatories on this ghat in 1710.

Meer Ghat leads to a Nepali temple, which has erotic sculptures. **Manikarnika Ghat** is the main burning ghat and the most auspicious place for a Hindu to be cremated. Dead bodies are handled by outcasts known as *doms*, and they are carried through the alleyways of the old city to the holy Ganges on a bamboo stretcher swathed in cloth. The corpse is doused in the Ganges prior to cremation. Huge piles of firewood are stacked along the

top of the ghat, each log carefully weighed on giant scales so that the price of cremation can be calculated. Each type of wood has its own price, with sandalwood being the most expensive. There is an art to using just enough wood to completely incinerate a corpse. You can watch cremations, but photography is strictly prohibited, and always show reverence by behaving respectfully. You're guaranteed to be led by a priest or guide to an upper floor from where you can watch cremations taking place, then asked for a donation towards the cost of wood (in dollars) – make a donation but don't be pressured into giving the outrageous sums demanded.

Above the steps here is a tank known as the **Manikarnika Well**. Parvati is said to have dropped her earring here and Shiva dug the tank to recover it, filling the depression with his sweat. The **Charanpaduka**, a slab of stone between the well and the ghat, bears footprints made by Vishnu. Privileged VIPs are cremated at the Charanpaduka, which also has a temple dedicated to Ganesh.

Dattatreya Ghat bears the footprint of the Brahmin saint of that name in a small temple

HELPING THE GREAT MOTHER TO BREATHE AGAIN

The Ganges River, or Great Mother as it is known to Hindus, provides millions of Indians with an important link to their spirituality. Every day about 60,000 people go down to the Varanasi ghats to take a holy dip along a 7km stretch of the river. Along this same area, 30 large sewers are continuously discharging into the river.

The Ganges River is so heavily polluted at Varanasi that the water is septic – no dissolved oxygen exists. The statistics get worse. Samples from the river show the water has 1.5 million faecal coliform bacteria per 100mL of water. In water that is safe for bathing this figure should be less than 500!

The problem extends far beyond Varanasi – 400 million people live along the basin of the Ganges River. The levels mean that waterborne diseases run rampant among many villages that use water from the river.

The battle to clean up the Ganges River has been on since 1982 when the nonprofit Sankat Mochan Foundation established its Swatcha Ganga Abhiyan (Clean Ganges Campaign). Between 1986 and 1993 there was enough lobbying to see the government invest about US\$25 million to set up three sewage treatment plants and an electric crematorium.

Unfortunately there have been many problems with the plants, which are very power intensive; Varanasi regularly has long blackout periods. In addition, their operation causes a build-up of pollution in nearby villages and is also the cause of sewage backing up throughout Varanasi; this in turn flows out into bathing areas, out through manhole covers and into the streets.

A plan for a better sewage treatment system, which has lower costs and is far more effective than the current system, has been developed by the foundation in collaboration with international agencies. The plan has not yet been accepted by the government, but the signs are good.

The Swatcha Ganga Environmental Education Centre at Tulsi Ghat runs environmental education courses with schools, local villages, pilgrims and boatmen. Changes have started to creep in, albeit slowly.

Visitors who wish to make a contribution, financially or through voluntary work efforts, should contact Professor Veer Bhadra Mishra at the **Sankat Mochan Foundation** (☎ 2313884; members.tripod.com/sankatmochan; Tulsi Ghat).

nearby. **Scindhia Ghat** was originally built in 1830, but was so huge and magnificent that it collapsed into the river and had to be rebuilt.

Ram Ghat was built by a maharaja of Jaipur.

Panchganga Ghat, as its name indicates, is where five rivers are supposed to meet. Dominating the ghat is Aurangzeb's smaller mosque, also known as the **Alamgir Mosque**, which he built on the site of a large Vishnu temple erected by the Maratha chieftain Beni Madhur Rao Scindia. **Gai Ghat** has a figure of a cow made of stone upon it. **Trilochan Ghat** has two turrets emerging from the river, and the water between them is especially holy. **Raj Ghat** was the ferry pier until the road and rail bridge was completed here.

VISHWANATH TEMPLE

Also called the Golden Temple (Map p429), this is the most popular Hindu temple in Varanasi and is dedicated to Vishveswara – Shiva as lord of the universe. The current temple was built in 1776 by Ahalya Bai of Indore,

while the 800kg of gold plating on the tower and dome was supplied by Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Lahore 50 years later.

There has been a succession of Shiva temples in the vicinity, but they were routinely destroyed by Muslim invaders. Aurangzeb continued this tradition, knocking down the previous temple and building the **Gyanvapi Mosque**, which still exists inside the temple complex.

The area is full of soldiers because of security issues and communal tensions. Cameras and mobile phones must be deposited before you enter the area. Non-Hindus are not allowed inside the temple itself so most travellers find it pointless to go through the security rigmarole, but you can view it for free from the 2nd floor of a shop across the street.

Next to Vishwanath Temple is the **Gyan Kupor Well** (Well of Knowledge; Map p429). The faithful believe drinking its water leads to a higher spiritual plane, though they are prevented from doing so by both tradition and a strong security screen. The well is said

to contain the Shiva lingam that was removed from the previous temple and hidden to protect it from Aurangzeb.

BENARES HINDU UNIVERSITY

Varanasi has long been a centre of learning and that tradition continues today at the large and well-regarded **Benares Hindu University** (BHU; Map p426; www.bhu.ac.in), which was established in 1916. Founded by nationalist Pandit Malaviya as a centre for education in Indian art, music, culture and philosophy, and for the study of Sanskrit, it now offers courses in just about every subject and has 15,000 students, including 2000 foreigners. If you're interested in studying here, contact the **International Students Centre** (☎ 2307639; Tagore House).

The wide tree-lined streets and parkland of the 5-sq-km campus offer a peaceful atmosphere a world away from the city outside. On campus is **Bharat Kala Bhavan** (☎ 316337; Indian/foreigner Rs 10/100, camera Rs 20; 🕒 11am-4.30pm Mon-Sat), a roomy museum with a wonderful collection of miniature paintings, as well as 12th-century palm-leaf manuscripts, sculptures and local history displays. An upstairs gallery is dedicated to Alice Boner, a Swiss sculptor and art historian who spent many years in Varanasi.

The **New Vishwanath Temple** (🕒 4am-noon & 1-9pm), unlike most temples in Varanasi, is open to all, irrespective of religion, but architecturally is nothing special.

The university is a 40-minute autorickshaw ride (Rs 150) from the train station and around 15 minutes from Assi Ghat (Rs 50).

RAMNAGAR FORT & MUSEUM

On the eastern bank of the Ganges, inside a crumbling but impressive 17th-century fort and palace, is a haphazard **museum** (Map p426; ☎ 2339322; admission Rs 7; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-5.30pm).

Exhibits include palanquins, howdahs, an astrological clock, clothing, weapons and other collectables. The maharaja still patronises the annual month-long **Ram Lila drama festival** (see p395) held around here.

Ferries (Rs 6 return, 10 minutes, every 30 minutes from 5am to 8pm) operate a shuttle service across the river, but from November to June you can also cross on the somewhat unsteady pontoon bridge.

OTHER SIGHTS

The small **Durga Temple** (Map p426; Durgakund Rd; 🕒 dawn-dusk) was built in the 18th century by a Bengali maharani and is stained red with ochre. Designed in North Indian Nagara style with a multitiered *sikhara* (spire), it is dedicated to Durga. Non-Hindus can enter the courtyard but not the inner sanctum.

Near the Durga Temple is the modern marble, *sikhara*-style **Tulsi Manas Temple** (Map p426; Durgakund Rd; 🕒 6.30-11.30am & 3-9pm), built in 1964. The two-tier walls are engraved with verses and scenes from the Ram Charit Manas, the Hindi version of the Ramayana. Its author, poet Tulsi Das, lived here while writing it.

The **Bharat Mata Temple** (Map p426; Vidyapeeth Rd; camera/video Rs 10/20; 🕒 dawn-dusk), built in 1918, has an unusual marble relief map of the Indian subcontinent inside.

Man Singh built a palace at Man Mandir Ghat in 1600 and in the next century Jai Singh II added an **astronomical observatory** (Map p429; Man Mandir Ghat; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; 🕒 dawn-dusk). Although vaguely interesting, it's not on the scale of the observatories in Delhi and Jaipur and it's hard to justify the entrance fee.

Activities

RIVER TRIPS

A dawn rowing boat ride along the Ganges to view the ghats and former palaces from the

GANGES DOLPHIN

The Ganges dolphin (*susu*) is a freshwater river dolphin that can be spotted throughout the Ganges river system. They are blind and rely on echo-location to get around and find small fish to eat.

Usually seen alone or in small groups, the dolphins grow to 2m long and live for around 20 years. The young are chocolate brown but the adults are grey. The Ganges dolphins are endangered and protected – it is estimated that less than 4000 and as few as 2000 have survived fishermen's nets, poaching for their meat and oil, chemical and sewage pollution, and habitat restriction due to dams and barrages. It's a miracle that any have survived.

Keep an eye out for them in Varanasi, and in Patna in Bihar, which is home to the Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary, an 8km stretch of the river designated as a protected area.

Ganges is a quintessential Varanasi experience. The best time to make the trip is from 5.30am when it is cool, the early morning light is particularly inspiring, and all the colour and clamour of pilgrims bathing and performing *puja* unfolds before you. An hour-long trip south from Dasaswamedh Ghat to Harishchandra Ghat and back is popular, but be prepared to see a burning corpse at Harishchandra. Early evening is also a good time to be on the river, when you can light a lotus flower candle (Rs 10) and set it adrift on the water. You can also watch the nightly *ganga aarti* ceremony at Dasaswamedh Ghat directly from the boat.

The rate for hiring a boat that takes up to four people is Rs 70 to 100 per hour, but the boatmen usually ask foreign tourists for up to Rs 600 before agreeing to much less. Deal directly with a boatman and be patient but firm. Although you'll have the best bargaining power at Dasaswamedh, boats can also be arranged at smaller nearby ghats, such as Meer and Manmandir.

Other boat trips are available further along the ghats – from Assi Ghat you could be rowed north to Harishchandra (an eight-person boat for two hours costs Rs 200).

STEAM BATHS, MASSAGES & SWIMMING

Hotel Surya (Map p426; ☎ 2508466; www.hotelsuryavns.com; the Mall) offers a range of massage and Ayurvedic treatments, including Ayurvedic massage (Rs 500), steam bath (Rs 100), oil massage (Rs 400), *sirodhara* (medicated oil) massage (Rs 800) and facials (Rs 300 to 400).

At Palace on the Ganges, **Prakruthi** (Map p426; ☎ 2315050; Assi Ghat; ☒ 8am-7pm) is an Ayurvedic massage centre offering steam bath (Rs 150) and Kerala massage therapies from Rs 600.

Nonguests can use the outdoor swimming pools at Hotel Surya (Rs 150), complete with waterfall, Hotel Clarks Varanasi (Rs 200) or Taj Ganges (Rs 350).

VOLUNTEERING

Varanasi offers opportunities for volunteering at local schools. One such place is the **Learn for Life Society** (www.learn-for-life.org) near Meer Ghat, which can be contacted through the nearby Brown Bread Bakery (p435). The small school here was established for disadvantaged children and travellers are welcome to turn up and help out. See the website for details on sponsorship or volunteering.

Courses

HINDI LANGUAGE

The long-running **Bhasha Bharati Language Institute** (Map p429; ☎ 2420447; www.bhashabharati.com), near Chowk police station, runs Hindi-language courses. Thirty-hour courses cost Rs 200 per person per hour for one-on-one lessons that emphasise speaking and listening. A family homestay can be arranged (US\$300 per week including lessons and meals), which is probably best for learning the language quickly.

MUSIC & DANCE

Varanasi's old city has several music centres where you can learn to play instruments such as the sitar and tabla. The family-run but grandly named **International Music Centre Ashram** (Map p429; ☎ 2452303; keshavaraonayak@hotmail.com) is hidden in the tangle of backstreets near Rana Ghat but worth seeking out. Sitar, tabla flute and classical dance tuition is Rs 150 per hour, and concerts are held every Saturday and Wednesday evening at 8pm (Rs 50).

Ankit Music House (☎ 9336567134; Sakarkand Gali), near Ganga Fuji Guesthouse, also offers sitar and tabla tuition for Rs 100 an hour, plus a free trial class.

YOGA & MEDITATION

Varanasi has plenty of opportunities for yoga courses, but beware of 'fake' yoga teachers who are mainly interested in a hands-on lesson with young females. Some guesthouses also advertise yoga classes on their rooftops, which are occasionally free to guests. The following are all genuine places located around the old city.

International Yoga Clinic & Meditation Centre (Map p429; ☎ 2397139; gurujiviyas@satyam.net.in) Near Man Mandir Ghat but difficult to find, Yogi Prakash Shankar Vyas teaches hatha, pranayama, kriya and spiritual yoga. The cost per hour is Rs 100 for one student, Rs 75 each for two students and Rs 50 each for three students.

Yoga Training Centre (Map p429; ☎ 9919857895; yoga_sunil@hotmail.com; Sakarkand Gali) Three times a day Sunil Kumar Jhingan runs two-hour courses (8am, 10am and 4pm; Rs 200) at his centre near Dasaswamedh Ghat. He teaches an integrated blend of hatha, Iyengar, pranayama and ashtanga, and serious students can continue on certificate and diploma courses.

Malaviya Bhavan (Map p426; ☎ 2307208; Benares Hindu University) Four-week physical yoga certifi-

cate course (one hour per day) for Rs 5500, and for just another Rs 300 a four-month diploma course that also covers Hindu philosophy. Students must obtain a student visa.

Tours

If time is short, contact the **UP Tourism office** (Map p426; ☎ 2506670; Varanasi Junction train station; 🕒 6am-7pm) for details of the seven-hour guided tour by taxi of the major sites, including Sarnath and a 5.30am boat ride (see p431), which costs Rs 1400 for up to four people. Half-day tours cost Rs 800.

Sleeping

Varanasi has three main areas for accommodation. Most budget hotels are concentrated in the most interesting part of the city – the tangle of narrow streets back from the ghats along the Ganges River. If you want a more peaceful location but still close to the river, there are some excellent choices around Assi Ghat. Most of the top-end hotels are in the Cantonment area north of the train station, and there are more budget and midrange places in Lahurabir and Chetganj areas.

Varanasi has an active paying-guest house scheme with around 75 family homes available for accommodation from Rs 100 to Rs 700 a night. They can be hit and miss – the UP Tourism office has a full list.

BUDGET

Old City & the Ghats

There are loads of budget hotels and a few upmarket places scattered around the old city and ghats. They vary in quality from the basic old backpacker stand-bys to newer places taking full advantage of fine views over the Ganges.

Yogi Lodge (Map p429; ☎ 2392588; yogilodge@yahoo.com; Kalika Gali; dm/s/d Rs 55/100/150) A long-running favourite with hippie types going for the bargain-basement prices and laid-back ambience. Rooms are pretty basic, and all have shared showers and squat toilets.

Vishnu Rest House (Map p429; ☎ 2450206; Pandhey Ghat; d Rs 150-300) The ghat-side location still draws travellers to this long-running guesthouse, but it's pretty pokey accommodation – the cheaper rooms have shared bathroom and all toilets are squat types.

Shanti Guest House (Map p429; ☎ 2392568; varanasi.shanti@yahoo.com; Manikarnika Ghat; dm Rs 55, s/d Rs 150/200, d with AC Rs 500; 🚻 📺) The biggest attraction

here is the very social 24-hour rooftop restaurant, which overlooks Manikarnika Ghat. The restaurant has a free pool table, yoga classes can be arranged and free morning boat rides are organised for guests in the high season. Rooms are a bit gloomy and could do with a paint, but the price is right at this backpacker favourite.

Scindhia Guest House (Map p429; ☎ 2420319; www.scindhiaguesthouse.com; Scindhia Ghat; d with shared bathroom Rs 200, d Rs 350-450, with AC Rs 600-1200; 🚻 📺) This well-kept and clean ghat-side hotel sets a high standard – the best rooms have great river views and balconies, but are well into the midrange price bracket. Other facilities include a library, a veg restaurant, and boat trips organised direct from Scindhia Ghat.

Ganga Fuji Home (Map p429; ☎ 3093949; raj327333@yahoo.com; Sakarkand Gali; s/d with shared bathroom from Rs 150/200, s/d from Rs 300/350, d with AC from Rs 700; 🚻) Back from the ghats in a relatively quiet location, Ganga Fuji is run by an exuberant and helpful family. The best and brightest rooms are at the top but all are clean, and the brand-new top-floor restaurant offers panoramic city views and live entertainment in the evenings.

Sahi River View Guesthouse (Map p426; ☎ 2366730; sahi_rvgh@sify.com; Assi Ghat; d Rs 200-400, with AC Rs 900; 🚻) Friendly Mr Sahi and family will look after you with home-cooked meals at this simple but comfortable guesthouse, overlooking Assi Ghat. Rooms of all shapes and sizes are spread over a number of floors in this old house, entered via a narrow laneway from the ghat. Rooms vary a lot but all have hot water, and a few have river views.

Hotel Alka (Map p429; ☎ 2401681; www.hotelalkavns.com; Meer Ghat; r with shared bathroom Rs 200, r Rs 250-700, r with AC Rs 550-990; 🚻 📺) With a lovely leafy terrace restaurant nudging over the river, Alka is the best of the ghat-side budget options. All rooms are clean and modern with TV, and the more expensive ones are midrange standard with wonderful views from the balconies.

Other Areas

Hotel Ajaya (Map p426; ☎ 2203707; fax 2202224; Kabir Chaura Rd; s/d from Rs 200/300, with AC Rs 500/700; 🚻) The rooms vary a lot in this generally well-kept place near Hotel Buddha – those with AC are much nicer and some have balconies. The hotel also has a restaurant and bar.

Hotel Buddha (Map p426; ☎ 2203686; hotel.buddha@rediffmail.com; s Rs 350-400, d Rs 450-500, d with AC from

Rs 650/750; 🏠 📍) Buddha has long been one of the better budget hotels in the Lahurabir area with light modern rooms with TV, built around an interestingly designed open central area. A huge marriage hall has recently been added which could make staying here interesting in the wedding season (November to February).

MIDRANGE

Old City & the Ghats

Hotel Haifa (Map p426; 📞 2312960; www.hotelhaifa.com; s/d Rs 550/650, with AC Rs 850/950; 🏠 📍) Next door to Divya, Haifa is also recommended for its clean rooms and quality restaurant serving Middle Eastern food. All rooms have TV and hot water, and there's a covered rooftop dining area.

Hotel Divya (Map p426; 📞 2311305; www.hoteldivya.com; s/d Rs 600/750, with AC from Rs 850/1000; 🏠 📍) This new hotel back from Assi Ghat is immaculate and stylish, and well run by a charming woman. There's a good range of rooms, all with TV and hot water, an excellent restaurant as well as a rooftop terrace. The location is easily accessible by taxi or autorickshaw but still close to the old city.

ourpick Hotel Ganges View (Map p426; 📞 2313218; hotelgangesview@yahoo.com; Assi Ghat; r with/without AC Rs 2500/1200; 🏠 📍) This beautifully restored and maintained traditional-style house overlooking Assi Ghat is crammed with artworks and antiques. Concerts, lectures and book readings are occasionally held. Home-cooked meals are another feature and are served in the charming dining room. Book ahead.

Rashmi Guest House (Map p429; 📞 24027778; www.palaceonriver.com; Man Mandir Ghat; d Rs 1500, river view Rs 2500-4200; 🏠 📍) The only truly midrange hotel on the river north of Assi Ghat, Rashmi has clean, modern rooms with central AC, TV and bright orange décor. You really pay the price for the 'river-view' rooms, but the rooftop restaurant offers the best views of all.

Other Areas

Hotel Surya (Map p426; 📞 2508466; www.hotelsuryavns.com; 20/51 the Mall; s/d Rs 350/500, s/d with AC Rs 600/800; 🏠 📍 🚶) Rooms are built around an enormous garden and lawn area that makes this hotel popular with overlanding tour groups. It's an excellent-value and well-designed place with clean, modern rooms, a beautiful swimming pool, a quality restaurant and a massage centre. If you don't mind staying this far from the ghats, it's a top choice. Camping is also allowed (Rs 75 per person).

Hotel Vaibhav (Map p426; 📞 2501359; www.hotelvaibhav.com; 56 Patel Nagar; s/d Rs 450/600, with AC from Rs 850/950; 🏠 📍) The well-furnished rooms have Indian art on the walls and there's a green-themed restaurant and subterranean bar.

Pallavi International Hotel (Map p426; 📞 2356939; Hathwa Pl; s/d Rs 850/950, s/d with AC Rs 1200/1400; 🏠 📍) The antique-filled former palace of the maharaja of Bahadur is now a slightly eccentric heritage hotel where every room is different – a few are modern, some are traditional, while others have strange log-cabin décor. The gardens, interior courtyards and small pool help create a tranquil atmosphere.

Hotel Pradeep (Map p426; 📞 2204963; www.hotelpraadeep.com; Kabir Chaura Rd; s Rs 1100-2100, d Rs 1400-2600; 🏠 📍) Behind the unusual classical façade are very smart AC rooms with bathrooms and minibars (some with balconies), but the standout feature here is the amazing rooftop garden restaurant Eden (opposite).

TOP END

Palace on Ganges (Map p426; 📞 2315050; www.palaceonganges.com; Assi Ghat; d Rs 2990; 🏠 📍) This immaculate heritage accommodation is an interior decorator's dream with each room carefully themed on a regional Indian style, using antique furnishings and colourful design themes – the colonial, Rajasthan and Jodhpur rooms are among the best. Some front rooms have balconies or views over Assi Ghat. The hotel has a library and quality multicuisine rooftop restaurant.

Hotel Meraden Grand (Map p426; 📞 2509952; www.meradengrand.com; 57 Patel Nagar; s US\$40-65, d US\$55-80, ste from US\$120; 🏠 📍) This new luxury hotel in the Cantonment has a beautifully designed central atrium garden and restaurant on the ground level and five floors of tastefully decorated rooms. The suite room, with private bar and butler service, is superb. There's also a rooftop restaurant and a fine bar.

Hotel Clarks Varanasi (Map p426; 📞 2501011; darkvns@satyam.net.in; the Mall; s Rs 4000-4500, d Rs 4500-5500; 🏠 📍 🚶) A range of luxurious and spacious rooms are spread over three sections of the hotel, along with a health club, bars and restaurants.

Hotel Taj Ganges (Map p426; 📞 2503001; www.tajhotels.com; Raja Bazaar Rd; d/ste from US\$175/220; 🏠 📍 🚶) Still number one by a long way in Varanasi, this five-star luxury hotel combines Western comforts and Indian style, typified by the sophisticated Varuna Restaurant. You

can walk, cycle or take a ride in a maharaja's buggy around the 5-hectare grounds, which contain fruit trees, a tennis court, pool, an outdoor yoga centre and the old maharaja's guesthouse.

Eating

In the old city, look out for locally grown *langda aam* (mangoes) in summer or *sita-fal* (custard apples) in autumn. *Singhara* is a blackish root that tastes like water chestnut.

OLD CITY & THE GHATS

Apsara Restaurant (Map p429; ☎ 3258554; 24/42 Ganga Mahal; meals around Rs 20-50) This popular, reasonably priced AC restaurant has a cosy feel with cushioned seats, good music and friendly staff. The endless menu tries to please everyone with Indian, Chinese, continental, Japanese, Israeli and Korean food.

Open Hand Shop & Café (Map p426; ☎ 2369751; drinks & snacks Rs 15-60; ☎ Mon-Sat) Enjoy plunger coffee, juices, varied teas, tasty quiches and homemade cakes while browsing the handmade crafts and textiles on the narrow balcony of this stylish café-cum-shop near Assi Ghat.

Haifa Restaurant (Map p426; Hotel Haifa; meals Rs 30-70) Near Assi Ghat, this hotel restaurant is popular for its Middle Eastern food, including a dynamite thali.

Ganga Fuji Restaurant (Map p429; Kalika Gali; meals Rs 25-80) Free live Indian classical music is played every evening at 7.30pm, which makes this otherwise ordinary multicuisine restaurant a special place to consider for dinner.

Vaatika Café (Map p426; Assi Ghat; meals Rs 25-90) This outdoor *dhaba* (snack bar) almost in the river and overlooking Assi Ghat serves up pies, pasta and pizzas baked in a wood-fired oven and is a relaxing place for breakfast.

New Keshari Ruchikar Bhanjan (Map p429; Dasaswamedh Ghat Rd; meals Rs 40-100) The upstairs veg restaurant is the brightest along this busy road and popular with families. Downstairs, premium ice creams are Rs 40 – the *chiku* (a sweet variety of fruit) one is delicious.

Bread of Life Bakery (Map p426; ☎ 227 5012; www.bolbar.com; 322 Shivala Rd; bakery items Rs 10-65, meals Rs 55-110; ☎ 8am-9pm) A clean and pleasant oasis on busy Shivala Rd. As well as tempting sweets and pastries from the bakery – bagels, cheese-cake, apple strudel and carrot cake – there are continental and Chinese dishes, soups, salads, pasta and sandwiches. For breakfast try the

muesli or French toast. Eat with a conscience as profits go to a local charity – check the website for information.

Brown Bread Bakery (Map p429; 17 Tripura Bhairavi; mains Rs 20-110; ☎) In the alleys of the old city not far from Dasaswamedh Ghat, this laid-back café is the perfect spot to relax on cushions at the low tables. Home-baked bread, cakes, pastries and creamy smoothies are great snacks but the huge menu includes dynamite sizzlers, pizza, Tibetan, Chinese and Indian dishes. The restaurant supports a couple of local charities, including the nearby Learn for Life school for children (p432).

Iba (Map p426; mains Rs 36-120) Modern glass-top tables, loungey furniture, funky décor and an emphasis on Eastern cuisines, such as Japanese and Thai, set this new place apart from most Varanasi restaurants. It's also a good place for lunch, with tasty wraps and pastas.

Lotus Lounge (Map p426; Mansarowar Ghat; mains Rs 20-140; ☎ 7am-10pm) The location of this new open-sided restaurant – overlooking Mansarowar Ghat on the water's edge – is hard to beat. With a mosaic floor and loungey furniture it's a great place to relax and enjoy an ambitious menu of mostly continental food including Thai curry and Tibetan *momos*, with Goan specialities thrown in.

Yafah Restaurant (Map p426; Hotel Divya; meals Rs 40-220) Next door to Haifa, Middle Eastern flavours waft from this elegant restaurant. Baba ghanouj, tahini, moussaka and falafel share the menu with Indian and Chinese dishes. Occasionally there's live classical music.

Dolphin Restaurant (Map p429; meals Rs 45-225; ☎ 6am-11pm) Perched high above Man Mandir Ghat, this rooftop restaurant at Rashmi Guest House is a fine place for breakfast after a morning boat ride or for an evening meal. Watch food being prepared through the glass-walled kitchen or sit out on the breezy balcony.

OTHER AREAS

Canton Restaurant (Map p426; Hotel Surya, the Mall; meals Rs 30-120) It's worth making the trip into the Cantonment area to check out this restaurant at Hotel Surya. The AC dining room has a colonial elegance and on warm evenings you can eat out in the garden. The menu is probably a bit ambitious – there's Indian, Chinese, continental, Korean and even Mexican dishes – but the food is good, with some unusual offerings such as fish Portuguese.

Poonam & Eden Restaurant (Map p426; Hotel Pradeep, Kabir Chaura Rd; meals Rs 75-130) The rooftop Eden restaurant, complete with garden, manicured lawn and wrought-iron furniture is a lovely place for a candlelit evening meal, while the downstairs Poonam features quality Indian specialities in smart surroundings.

El Parador (Map p426; ☎ 9839716157; off Parade Kothi; meals Rs 60-160; ☎ 8am-10pm) Fancy a buffalo steak, followed by waffles for dessert? Not far from the station this established restaurant, run by a Nepali family, offers something different. It's pricey (most mains are over Rs 100), but with homemade pasta, chicken souvlaki, crepes and Tibetan *momos*, it's worthwhile. Dine on the rooftop terrace amid the herbs or in the quaint 1st-floor restaurant.

Varuna Restaurant (Map p426; Hotel Taj Ganges, Raja Bazaar Rd; meals Rs 150-450; ☎ 7-10.30pm) One of Varanasi's top restaurants, Varuna is elegant without being stuffy and extravagant without being too expensive. Specialities include classic North Indian and Afghan dishes, the sumptuous maharaja thali and tandoor kebabs. Live sitar and tabla music nightly from 7.30pm.

Drinking & Entertainment

There's a discreet wine shop on Shivala Rd between Godaulia Crossing and Assi Ghat, but otherwise head to midrange and top-end hotels away from the old city for the bars.

Prinsep Bar (Map p426; Hotel Taj Ganges, Raja Bazaar Rd) For a quiet drink with a dash of history try this tiny bar, named after James Prinsep who drew wonderful illustrations of Varanasi's ghats and temples. A kingfisher is Rs 150, cocktails Rs 200. Other good bars include the Patiala Peg at Hotel Meraden Grand and Gazal Bar at Hotel Vaibhav.

The Ganga Fuji Restaurant has nightly live classical music, as does the rooftop Nir-mala Restaurant at Ganga Fuji Home and the upmarket Varuna Restaurant at Hotel Taj Ganges.

The International Music Centre Ashram (Map p429; see p432) has concerts on Wednesday and Saturday evenings.

Shopping

Varanasi is justifiably famous for silk brocades and beautiful Benares saris, but being led by touts and rickshaw drivers to a silk shop is all part of the Varanasi shuffle and virtually everyone will try to rip you off. Don't believe

much of what the silk salesmen say, even in 'government' emporiums.

Ganga Silk (Map p426; Shivala Rd) A good place to start is this small shop above the Bread of Life Bakery. Prices are fixed and the staff can explain the different types of silk.

Open Hand Shop & Café (Map p426; ☎ 2369751; www.openhandonline.com; ☎ Mon-Sat) A wide choice of quality handmade goods at fixed prices, including textiles, wood and paper products, is for sale at the Open Hand near Assi Ghat.

Baba Blacksheep (Map p426; ☎ 2454342; Bhel-pura) This small shop is recommended for reasonably priced silks and pashmina shawls, and a conspicuous lack of the 'hard sell'. Silk scarves start at Rs 200.

Benaras Art Culture (Map p426; ☎ 2313615; Shivala Rd) Although many of the artworks at this fixed-price gallery are expensive, it's worth a browse through the wonderful centuries-old *haveli* (traditional, ornately decorated residence) to see quality carvings, sculptures and art.

Rickshaw drivers may offer to take you to the silk shops of the Muslim Quarter and it's worth taking them up on the offer as there's a string of small showrooms with handloom workshops attached. Although it's unlikely that much of what's on sale is produced in these workshops, it's fascinating to see how the brocades and patterns are created, and if your bargaining skills are good the silks on offer are reasonably priced (don't forget to factor in the commission!)

Varanasi is also a good place to shop for sitars and tablas, but be careful when choosing musical instruments as some will crack or change shape when subjected to a different climate. Talk to musicians, for example at Ganga Fuji Restaurant, about the different prices and types of instrument before venturing into a shop. Ankit Music House (p432) is also a good place to ask about locally manufactured sitars (starting from Rs 3000) and tablas (from Rs 2500). The cost depends primarily on the type of wood used. Mango is cheapest, while teak and vijaysar are the highest quality timbers.

Ingenuous locally made toys, Bhadohi carpets, brass ornaments, perfumes and textiles are other popular purchases.

Getting There & Away

AIR

From Varanasi's Babatpur airport, **Indian Airlines** (Map p426; ☎ 2502529; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat),

with its office located off the Mall, has direct daily flights to Delhi (US\$112), Mumbai (US\$184), Khajuraho (US\$82) and Kathmandu (US\$110). **Jet Airways** (Map p426; ☎ 2506444; Krishnayatan Bldg, Kennedy Rd, Cantonment; ⏰ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) flies to Delhi and Khajuraho for similar fares.

Air Sahara (Map p426; ☎ 2507872; Mint House, Cantonment; ⏰ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) flies daily to Delhi and Mumbai, often at discount web fares.

BUS

Varanasi's small but chaotic **bus station** (Map p426; ☎ 2203476) is a few hundred metres east of Varanasi Junction train station. Frequent express buses run to Allahabad (non-AC/AC Rs 60/107, three hours), Faizabad (Rs 105, seven hours), Gorakhpur (Rs 121, seven hours) and Lucknow (Rs 160, 8½ hours). Two buses run daily to Khajuraho (Rs 248, 12 hours) departing at 4.30am, while one AC bus goes to Bodhgaya (Rs 252, seven hours).

Buses to Sarnath (Rs 10, 40 minutes) leave from outside the Varanasi Junction train station, as do share jeeps (Rs 20) to Mughal Serai train station.

TRAIN

Luggage theft has been reported on trains to and from Varanasi so take extra care. There have also been some reports of drugged food and drink, so it's best to politely decline any offers from strangers.

Varanasi Junction train station (Map p426; ☎ 132), also known as Varanasi Cantonment (Cantt) train station, is the main station. Foreign tourist quota tickets must be purchased at the **Foreign Tourist Assistance Bureau** (⏰ 8am-8pm

Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) near the UP Tourism information office in Varanasi Junction train station.

Many of the faster trains between Delhi and Kolkata stop at **Mughal Serai train station** (☎ 255703), 12km southeast of Varanasi. You can make reservations at Varanasi Junction train station for trains leaving from Mughal Serai. Share jeeps (Rs 20, 40 minutes) are the best way to travel between the two stations, but buses and taxis are also available.

NEPAL

From Varanasi's bus station buses leave for Sunauli (Rs 172, 10 hours, nine daily), on the border with Nepal, from around 5am.

Paul Travels (Map p426; ☎ 2208137; Parade Kothi) and other travel agents sell a 'through' bus ticket from Varanasi to Kathmandu or Pokhara for Rs 600 departing in the morning and including breakfast and a night stay on the Nepali side of the border at Sunauli. You pay quite a bit extra for the convenience and you have no choice of bus on the last leg of the journey. It also offers tickets just to Sunauli (Rs 300) and Lumbini (Rs 400).

By train the best option is to get to Gorakhpur and then transfer to a local bus to Sunauli.

To get around the long bus journey, many travellers fly direct from Varanasi to Kathmandu (US\$110) with Indian Airlines, which has daily flights – Nepal visas are available on arrival.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Babatpur Airport (☎ 2622081) is 22km northwest of the city. An autorickshaw should cost Rs 150 and a taxi Rs 350.

MAJOR TRAINS FROM VARANASI

Destination	Train No & Name	Fare (Rs)	Duration (hr)	Departures
Chennai	2670 <i>Ganga Kaveri Exp</i>	493/1389/1999	41	8.25pm
Delhi	2559 <i>Shivganga Exp</i>	271/765/1098	12	7.15pm
Gorakhpur	5017 <i>Gorakhpur Exp</i>	114/320/459	6	1pm
Kolkata	3010 <i>Doon Exp</i>	253/716/1027	14½	4.25pm
Lucknow	4257 <i>Kashi Vishwanath Exp</i>	137/386/555	7	1.45pm
Mumbai	1094 <i>Mahanagari Exp</i>	401/1130/1626	27	11.30am
Patna	3006 <i>Howrah-Amritsar Mail</i>	112/315/452	5	5pm

All trains run daily, except 6040 *Ganga Kaveri Express* (Monday and Wednesday). Express fares are sleeper/3AC/2AC.

BUS

Local buses squeeze in every passenger they can and then some more, but they only charge Rs 5. You can pick them up outside the Varanasi Junction train station.

CYCLE-RICKSHAW

Useful for short distances or in the old city where autorickshaws and taxis are banned. Drivers are always pestering foreigners and their first price is usually way above the real price. A short trip is Rs 10 (Godaulia Crossing to Assi Ghat) but even a long trip (from the train station to Godaulia) should only cost Rs 30.

TAXI & AUTORICKSHAW

Prepaid booths for taxis and autorickshaws are outside Varanasi Junction train station. From the station to Dasaswamedh Ghat costs Rs 150 by taxi, or Rs 60 by autorickshaw, while to Benares Hindu University costs Rs 200 by taxi and Rs 80 by autorickshaw. To tour around by autorickshaw should cost Rs 70 per hour, depending on how far you want to go. Drivers always ask for more at the start so bargain.

SARNATH

☎ 0542

Buddha came to Sarnath, 10km northeast of Varanasi, to preach his message of the middle way to nirvana after he achieved enlightenment at Bodhgaya. He gave his famous first sermon here to a handful of followers in a deer park, which has been recreated. In the 3rd century BC Ashoka had magnificent stupas and monasteries erected as well as an engraved pillar. When the Chinese traveller Xuan Zang dropped by in AD 640, Sarnath boasted a 100m-high stupa and 1500 monks living in large monasteries. However, soon after, Buddhism went into decline, and when Muslim invaders destroyed and desecrated the city's buildings, Sarnath disappeared altogether. It was not rediscovered until 1835 when British archaeologists started excavations and Sarnath regained some of its past glory.

Today it's one of the four important sites on the Buddhist circuit (along with Bodhgaya, Kushinagar and Lumbini in Nepal), and attracts followers from around the world. An easy day or half-day trip from Varanasi, Sarnath is a green and peaceful place to spend some time and, along with the Buddhist

ruins and monasteries, there's an excellent museum.

Information

There's tourist information at the Rahi UP Tourist Bungalow, but at the time of writing a new **Modern Reception Centre** (MRC; Ashoka Marg) was due to open opposite the archaeological museum, with an internet café, tourist information and money-changing facilities.

The **post office** (☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) is opposite Rahi UP Tourist Bungalow.

Sights

Compare the differing designs of the modern **Buddhist temples** built by Tibetan, Chinese, Thai, Burmese and Japanese Buddhists and meet some of the 400 monks who live there.

DHAMEKH STUPA & BUDDHIST RUINS

Set in a peaceful **park** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100, video Rs 25; ☎ dawn-dusk) of monastery ruins is the impressive 34m **Dhamekh Stupa**, which marks the spot where the Buddha preached his first sermon. The floral and geometric carving dates back to the 5th century AD, but some of the brickwork is thought to be even older, dating from around 200 BC.

Emperor Ashoka is said to have meditated in the **main shrine**, but only its foundations have survived. Nearby is an **Ashoka pillar** with an edict engraved on it. The famous four-lion capital that used to be on top can now be seen in the nearby Archaeological Museum.

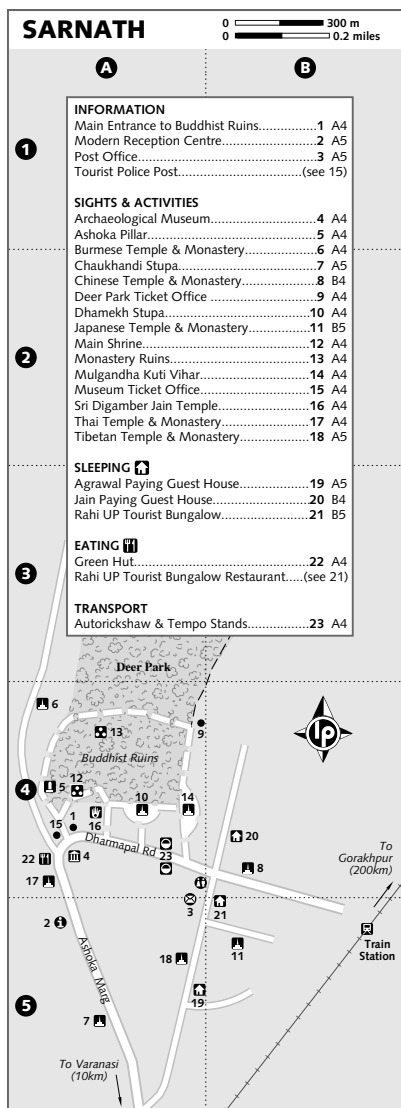
Just outside the park is the **Sri Digamber Jain temple**.

CHAUKHANDI STUPA

This large ruined **stupa** (☎ dawn-dusk) dates back to the 5th century AD, and marks the spot where Buddha met his first disciples. The incongruous tower on top of the stupa is Mughal and was built there in the 16th century to commemorate the visit of Emperor Humayun.

MULGANDHA KUTI VIHAR & DEER PARK

This modern **temple** (☎ 2585595; ☎ 4-11am & 1.30-8pm) was completed in 1931 by the Mahabodhi Society. Inside is a bookshop and the walls are decorated with large frescoes by Japanese artist Kosetsu Nosi. Buddha's first sermon is chanted daily, starting between 6pm and 7pm depending on the season. A **bodhi tree** growing



outside was transplanted in 1931 from the tree in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, which in turn is said to be the offspring of the original tree in Bodhgaya under which Buddha attained enlightenment.

Behind the temple is a large **deer enclosure** (admission Rs 2; ☒ dawn-dusk) together with some aviaries and a crocodile pool.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Don't miss this superb, modern **museum** (admission Rs 2; ☒ 10am-5pm Sat-Thu), which houses ancient treasures such as the amazing and well-preserved 3rd-century BC lion capital from the Ashoka pillar, which has been adopted as India's national emblem. Other finds include a huge stone umbrella that is ornately carved with Buddhist symbols, bas reliefs, sculptures and Buddha images unearthed from the Sarnath region. Cameras, mobile phones, lighters and bags must be left in free lockers at the front gate.

Sleeping & Eating

Sarnath is only 10km from Varanasi so it's easy to day trip, but it's possible to stay in some of the modern temples and dharamsalas. You can stay a couple of days at the Tibetan temple (Rs 50 to 100 or by donation) or the Japanese temple (by donation), but expect some language problems.

Sarnath has several places in the paying guesthouse scheme, including the basic but friendly **Jain Paying Guest House** (☎ 2595621; d Rs 100-350) and **Agrawal Paying Guest House** (☎ 221007; r Rs 400-500), a great choice with a beautiful garden, eight spotless rooms and a refined owner.

Rahi UP Tourist Bungalow (☎ 2595965; dm/s/d Rs 100/500/550, s/d with AC Rs 700/750; ☒) UP Tourism place, with pleasant lawns, reasonable rooms and an airy restaurant.

Green Hut (meals Rs 15-60; ☒ 7am-9pm) Opposite the archaeological museum, this breezy open-sided restaurant lives up to its name with lots of plants and greenery. The extensive veg and nonveg menu includes dosas, snacks and chicken dishes.

Getting There & Away

Local buses (Rs 10, 40 minutes) depart regularly from the south side of Varanasi Junction train station. An autorickshaw (30 minutes) costs about Rs 100 return from the train station, or Rs 180 from the old city or Assi Ghat. A taxi costs around Rs 300 return.

GORAKHPUR

☎ 0551 / pop 624,570

Gorakhpur is uniquely placed at the crossroad between where the Buddha was born (Lumbini in Nepal) and died (Kushinagar), although for many travellers it's merely a waystation on the road between Varanasi and

Nepal. As such it's a busy transport hub and well set up to accommodate travellers. There are no major tourist attractions in the city, although a **Buddhist museum** is near the lake on the southern outskirts and the **Gorakhnath Temple**, devoted to Guru Gorakhnath, is 4km west of the station.

Gita Press (☎ 2334721; www.gitapress.org), a renowned publisher, has a formidable range of religious books for sale and a huge art gallery of Hindu mythology on the 1st floor.

Information

Gorakhpur's train station is a convenient one-stop place for information. Inside is the **UP Tourism office** (☎ 2335450; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) and just outside on the concourse is a State Bank of India ATM and the excellent **Railtel Cyber Express** (per hr Rs 23; ☎ 24hr). Hotel Bobina can exchange travellers cheques and currency.

Break out the repellent as mosquitoes are brutal in Gorakhpur.

Sleeping & Eating

The street opposite the train station has a dozen or more cheap hotels and while the area is noisy and grubby, some of the choices are surprisingly good. With the bus station close by, this is the area of choice for backpackers looking for a quick entry and exit.

There are plenty of cheap *dhabas* opposite the train station.

Hotel Bobina (☎ 2336663; bobina@ndb.vsnl.net.in; Nepal Rd; s/d Rs 500/600, with AC from Rs 700/800; 🏠 🚿) With all the trappings of a mini-resort – palm trees in the garden, a small pool, very serviceable gym, and a good restaurant and bar – Bobina tries hard to impress. Rooms are very slick and better than the price suggests. It's 1.5km west of the train station.

Hotel Elora (☎ 2200647; s/d Rs 150/250, s/d with AC Rs 350/450; 🏠) This is an appealing cheapie with a breezy rooftop, and rooms with TV and hot water. Next door, **Hotel Sunrise** (☎ 2337458) is virtually identical.

Bobi's Restaurant (meals Rs 30-80; Main Rd) Opposite Hotel President on the busy main street south of the train station, Bobi's is clean and serves up reliable food.

Getting There & Away

Frequent (at least hourly) buses run from the main bus stand, about 300m south of the train station, to Faizabad (Rs 78, three hours), Kushinagar (Rs 29, 1½ hours) and Sunauli

(Rs 56, 2½ hours) at the Nepal border. Buses to Varanasi (Rs 112, seven hours) leave from the Katchari bus stand, south of the main bus stand, but the train is a better option.

Touts are dead keen to sell you 'through' bus tickets to Kathmandu or Pokhara from Rs 395, but they are not a great deal with plenty of profit for the tout and no choice of bus on the final leg. There are no private buses to Sunauli – only local buses – and no through buses direct to Nepal.

Gorakhpur has direct train connections with Varanasi (2nd class/sleeper/3AC Rs 65/114/320, 5½ hours, four daily), Lucknow (Rs 73/126/357, six hours), Delhi (sleeper/3AC Rs 277/782, 16 hours) and Kolkata (Rs 292/823, 23 hours, departs 1pm). Counter No 811 serves foreign tourists.

KUSHINAGAR

☎ 05564 / pop 17,982

The last of the four main pilgrimage sites marking Buddha's life – the others are Lumbini (Nepal), Bodhgaya and Sarnath – Kushinagar is where Buddha died, breathing his last words: 'All things must pass. Work out your own salvation with diligence'. According to a Buddhist text, when he died 'the earth shook, stars shot from the heavens, the sky in the 10 directions burst forth in flames and the air filled with celestial music'. Devotees from several countries have built temples here to accommodate monks and the pilgrims who visit this holy site. The sites of interest are strung out along Buddha Marg, a peaceful, green area of town with a suitably reverent atmosphere.

Information

The tiny **UP Tourism office** (☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) is opposite the Mahasulhamdadachan Thargyi Pagoda and can offer tea if nothing else.

Sights

The main places of interest in Kushinagar can be seen on a 2.5km (one way) L-shaped walk along Buddha Marg. All the sights are free and open from dawn to dusk unless otherwise indicated.

From the triple archway that marks the beginning of the street, the first temple you come across on the left is run by **Linh Son Buddhists** from Vietnam. The impressive complex includes a temple, meditation hall and gardens, and accommodation is available.

About 50m further on is the Burmese temple complex and the unmistakable golden **Mahasukhamdadachan Thargyi Pagoda**. The pagoda itself contains four Buddha images and the complex includes a school for local children.

The major site in Kushinagar is the **Mahaparinirvana Temple**, set among extensive lawns and with a circumambulatory path. The concrete temple houses the superb 5th-century **reclining Buddha** that was unearthed in 1876. Six metres long, most of it is covered in a gold cloth, this ancient death-bed statue is one of the world's most moving Buddhist icons. Behind the temple is an ancient 19m-tall **stupa**, and in the surrounding park are **monastery ruins** and a **meditation garden**. In the gardens just north of the temple is a huge **bell** erected by the Dalai Lama and Tibetan community.

Where the road turns left are more monastery ruins and the tiny and easy-to-miss **Mathakuar Temple**, where you can peer through the metal grill to admire an ancient Buddha statue inside.

Opposite the Japan-Sri Lanka Buddhist Centre is the **Buddha Museum** (☎ 274403; admission free; 🕒 10.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun). In a building that seems far too large for what's on offer are three main galleries exhibiting Buddhist relics, sculptures and terracottas unearthed from the Kushinagar region, as well as some Tibetan *thangkas* (rectangular painting on cloth) and Mughal miniature paintings.

A little further on, the large and impressive **Wat Thai complex** (🕒 9-11.30am & 1.30-4pm) features an elaborate temple, beautifully maintained gardens with bonsai-style trees, a monastery and a temple containing a gilded Buddha. There's also a Sunday school and health clinic, each of which welcome visitors.

Carry on walking for 10 minutes past rice and sugarcane fields and you reach Kushinagar's most auspicious site – the ruins of the huge 15m-high red-brick **Ramabhar Stupa**, said to have been built on the spot where the Buddha was cremated. A palm-lined path leads around the stupa and this is a good spot to ponder about the fleeting nature of life.

From here you can walk or take a cycle-rickshaw (Rs 10) back to the main road.

Sleeping & Eating

If you have an interest in Buddhism, several monasteries welcome guests by donation.

MAITREYA PROJECT

An ambitious project to build a 150m-high bronze Buddha statue and Buddhist complex is on the drawing board for Kushinagar – if and when it finally comes to fruition it will likely turn this sleepy village into a bigger Buddhist pilgrimage centre than Bodhgaya. The US\$250 million building project is being planned by the Maitreya Trust, a Tibetan Buddhist foundation, with land already set aside and plans to build an education centre, hospital, temples, meditation halls, a museum and library. The centrepiece will be the world's largest Buddha statue. For information see www.maitreya.org.

Linh Son Buddhist temple (r Rs 100-200) has accommodation with simple, clean rooms with private bathroom and hot water. The **Tibetan Temple** (r with shared bathroom by donation) offers basic accommodation. **Japan-Sri Lanka Buddhist Centre** (☎ 273044; r by donation) has a beautiful meditation centre in the red-brick stupa at the front.

Pathik Niwas (☎ 271038; fax 272038; s/d Rs 500/600, huts Rs 1100/1400, s/d r with AC Rs 1400/1700; meals Rs 30-80; 🍷) Opposite the Mahasukhamdadachan Thargyi Pagoda, this is a reasonable UP Tourism hotel and restaurant but still overpriced.

Two luxury hotels near the museum (a third was being built at the time of writing) seem a little out of place in Kushinagar, but they fill the need for jet-setting Buddhist tour groups.

Royal Residency (☎ 272250; s/d Rs 5000/5800; 🍷) This huge whitewashed hotel with a cavernous, echoing lobby has comfortable rooms with all the mod cons, a restaurant and communal Japanese baths.

Getting There & Away

Kushinagar is 55km east of Gorakhpur and frequent buses (Rs 29, 1½ hours) connect the two. Get off at the entrance to the town at the triple archway. A day trip by taxi costs Rs 800.

SUNAULI & THE NEPAL BORDER

☎ 05522
Straddling the India-Nepal border, Sunauli is a dusty town that offers little more than a bus stop, a hotel, a few shops and a border post on the Indian side – most travellers make the border crossing as soon as possible. A few

CROSSING INTO NEPAL

Border Hours

The border is open 24 hours but closes to vehicles at 10pm, and if you arrive in the middle of the night you may have to wake someone to get stamped out of India.

Foreign exchange

There's a State Bank of India in Sunauli and foreign-exchange places just across the border on the Nepal side. Indian currency is accepted (ie for bus fares) on the Nepal side but Rs 500 notes cannot be exchanged.

Onward Transport

Private buses leave from the Nepali side of the border for Kathmandu and Pokhara (both destinations cost NRs 180 to 220, and take 10 hours or more) roughly hourly between 6am and 1pm, and at 4pm and 8pm. Night travel takes longer and you miss the views. A taxi (NRs 850) is faster and a good option if you can find others to share the cost. In the early morning and evening, government buses leave for Kathmandu (NRs 170) from Bhairawa, a town 4km north of Sunauli that can be reached by rickshaw. Tickets are sold from a kiosk near the Hotel Yeti in Bhairawa, on the main road from Sunauli.

Visas

Visas (US\$30 cash, not rupees) are available at the immigration post just across the border. If you just want to visit Buddha's birthplace at Lumbini, you can get a free, three-day visa at the border.

more facilities are available in the Nepali part of Sunauli, but Bhairawa, 4km away, is a more substantial settlement.

Buses drop you 200m from the Indian immigration office, so if your luggage is not too heavy you can ignore the crowd of cycle-rickshaw drivers.

Near the bus stand, **Rahi Tourist Bungalow** (☎ 238201; rahiniranjana@up-tourism.com; dm Rs 75, s/d from Rs 250/300, with AC Rs 500/600; 🍴) is a UP Tourism concrete bunker but is the only recommended accommodation on the Indian side of Sunauli. There's a restaurant and the rooms are comfortable enough.

The Nepali side of Sunauli has a few cheap hotels, outdoor restaurants and a more upbeat atmosphere, but most travellers prefer to stay in Bhairawa, or get straight on a bus to Kathmandu or Pokhara.

Getting There & Away

Regular buses run from Sunauli to Gorakhpur (Rs 56, 2½ hours) with the last one leaving Sunauli at 9pm. Early morning and early evening buses run to Varanasi (Rs 150, 11 hours). A better option for onward transport is to take the bus to Gorakhpur and a train from there. We get lots of reader feedback about bullying and intimidation of travellers who have bought through tickets from Kathmandu or Pokhara to Varanasi. After crossing the border at Sunauli into India, travellers have reported being forced – often with threats – to buy an overpriced new ticket for a local bus. Travelling in either direction it's better to take a local bus to the border, walk across and take another onward bus (pay the conductor on board). The worst traveller reports concern touts at Baba Restaurant.

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