



Uttar Pradesh & the Taj Mahal

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Why Go?

There's no doubting the star attraction here. Agra's Taj Mahal – the most visited sight in India by some distance – is a wonder to behold and leaving Uttar Pradesh (UP) without seeing it would be a bit like drinking *chai* without spoonfuls of sugar: absurd.

Those who linger in this enormous state, however, soon find that it's the unmistakable spirituality of UP, rather than its magnificent architecture, that leaves the longest-lasting impression.

The buildings left by the Mughals, the Nawabs and the British are certainly worth admiring, but it's the religious fervour that sweeps you off your feet at some Hindu temples, the contemplative aura that emanates from ancient Buddhist stupas and the serenity of waking up before dawn to watch locals perform *puja* (offerings or prayers) at a holy riverside ghat that create the truly unforgettable moments of a trip to this part of India.

Best Places to Eat

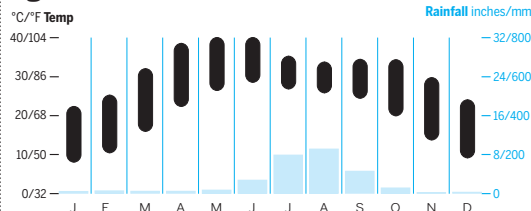
- » Tunday Kabab (p373)
- » Brown Bread Bakery (p392)
- » Joney's Place (p361)
- » Pizzeria Vaatika Cafe (p393)
- » Indian Coffee House (p380)

Best Places to Stay

- » Hotel Ganges View (p391)
- » Lucknow Homestay (p371)
- » Ganpati Guesthouse (p390)
- » Hotel Sheela (p358)

When to Go

Agra



Sep–Oct Monsoon rains are mostly over, temperatures have cooled, but not too much.

Nov–Feb Winter days are comfortable but nights are nippy; sights can be overcrowded.

Mar–Apr The evening chill has mostly gone but the raging mid-summer heat has yet to materialise.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

The only international flights are between Varanasi and Kathmandu. Otherwise, the nearest international airport is Delhi. Many travellers come overland from Nepal, usually at Sunauli. Best-connected train stations are Agra, Lucknow, Allahabad and Varanasi.

Fast Facts

- » Population: 199.6 million
- » Area: 231,254 sq km
- » Capital: Lucknow
- » Language: Hindi
- » Sleeping prices: \$ below ₹500, \$\$ ₹500 to ₹2500, \$\$\$ above ₹2500

Top Tip

Touts in Agra and Varanasi can be voracious. When arriving by train or a bus, try to look as if you know what you're doing, even if you don't. Ignore anyone who approaches you in the station; just head straight for the prepaid autorickshaw booth (opposite the main entrance) or find a rider yourself outside the station on a quieter road where you're more likely to get a fair deal.

Resources

- » Uttar Pradesh Tourism (www.up-tourism.com)
- » Agra District (www.agra.nic.in)
- » Varanasi District (www.varanasi.nic.in)
- » (Virtual tour of the Taj Mahal) www.taj-mahal.net

Food

Mughlai cuisine – rich, meaty and impossibly tasty – is the order of the day across much of Uttar Pradesh, with the best restaurants often attached to the top hotels in the big cities. Lucknow is the undisputed king of UP cuisine. You'll find some excellent Mughlai kitchens here as well as great *chaat* (snacks) and some simply sumptuous kebabs (p374).

DON'T MISS

There are two things you mustn't leave Uttar Pradesh without doing: seeing the **Taj Mahal** at sunset and taking a dawn boat ride along the Ganges in the holy city of **Varanasi**.

Top State Festivals

- » Magh Mela (Jan/Feb, Allahabad, p377) A huge annual religious fair that transforms into the world's largest human gathering, the Kumbh Mela, every 12th year (next in 2013).
- » Holi (Feb/Mar, Mathura and Vrindavan, p368) This national festival is celebrated with particular fervour around Mathura and Vrindavan, spiritual home of Krishna.
- » Purnima (Apr/May, Sarnath, p396) Also known as Vesak, Buddha Jayanti or, informally, Buddha's birthday, Purnima actually celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of Buddha. Sarnath, just outside Varanasi, takes on a particularly festive air on this day, when Buddhists from many countries take part in a procession and a fair is held.
- » Janmastami (Aug/Sep, Mathura, p368) You can barely move here during Krishna's birthday, when temples are swathed in decorations and musical dramas about Krishna are performed.
- » Ram Lila (Sep/Oct, Varanasi, p388) Every year since the early 1800s the Ram Lila, a lengthy version of the Ramayana, has been performed beside Ramnagar Fort 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.
- » Eid al-Fitr (Dec/Jan, Fatehpur Sikri, p365) Join the happy crowds in the bazaar and mosque at Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra, for the end-of-Ramadan celebrations.

History

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

Following the decline of the Mughal empire, Persians stepped in briefly before the nawabs of Avadh rose to prominence in the central part of the region. 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 First War of Independence (Indian 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, most of them from Allahabad. The local population doesn't seem to have benefited much from this, though, as poor governance, a high birth rate, a low literacy rate and an erratic electricity supply have held back economic progress in UP in the past 60 years.

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

Agra

0562 / POP 1,321,410

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

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

Many tourists choose to visit Agra on a whistle-stop day trip from Delhi. This is a shame. There is much more of interest here than can be seen in that time. In fact, you

can enjoy several days' sightseeing with side trips to the superb ruined city of Fatehpur Sikri and the Hindu pilgrimage centre of Mathura.

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

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

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. 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 First War of Independence 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 air pollution, before the Taj and tourism became a major source of income.

Sights & Activities

The entrance fee for Agra's five main sights – the Taj, Agra Fort, Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's Tomb and Itimad-ud-Daulah – is made up of charges from two different bodies, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Agra Development Association (ADA). Of the ₹750 ticket for the Taj Mahal, ₹500 is a special ADA ticket, which gives you small savings on the other four sights if visited in the same day. You'll save ₹50 at Agra Fort and ₹10 each at Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's Tomb and Itimad-ud-Daulah. You can buy this ₹500 ADA ticket at any of the five sights. Just say you intend to visit the Taj later that day.

Uttar Pradesh Highlights

1 Be inspired as the sunrise illuminates the Taj Mahal in **Agra** (p347) before returning for the oh-so romantic sunset view

2 Take a pre-dawn boat ride along the River Ganges to witness **Varanasi** (p383) at its spiritual best

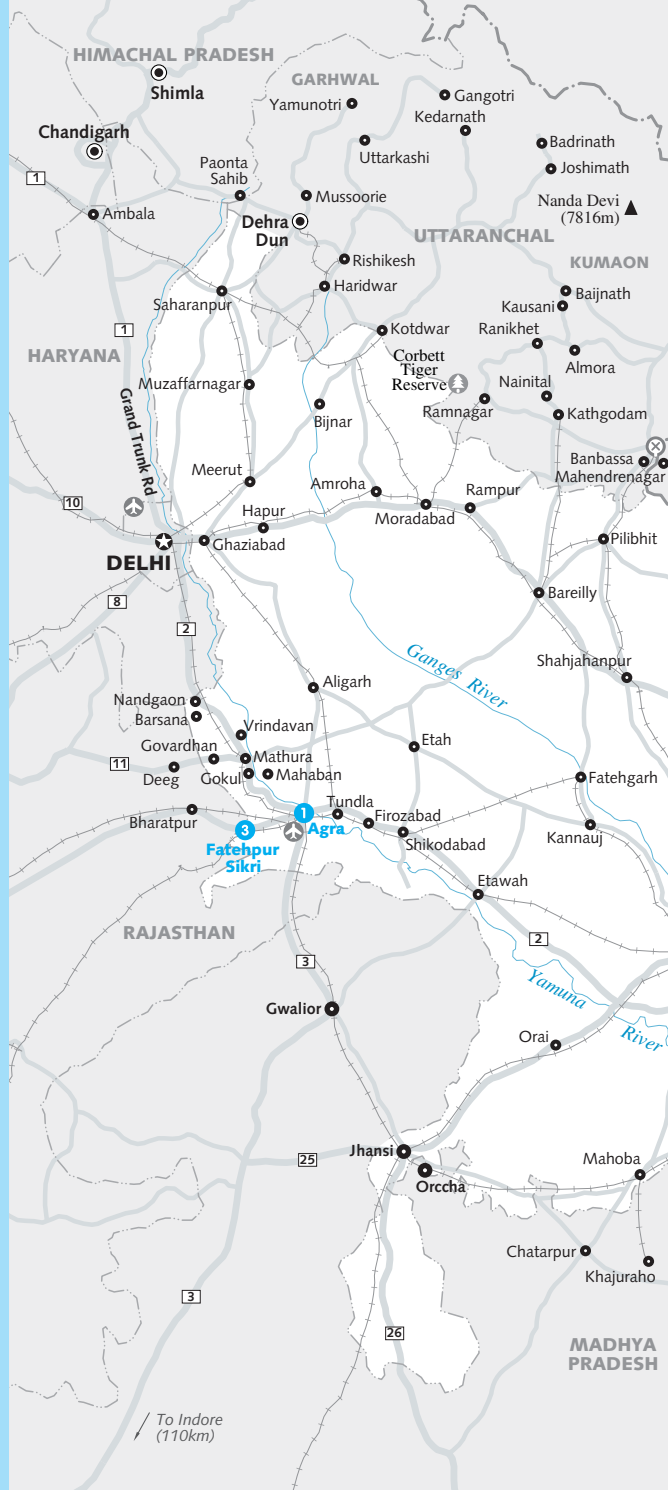
3 Stand in awe beside immense Mughal monuments in the ruined city of **Fatehpur Sikri** (p365)

4 Sign up for the Heritage Walking Tour in **Lucknow** (p370), the best way to see the old town

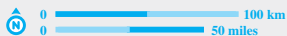
5 Escape the chaos of the cities at the pilgrimage centre of **Kushinagar** (p398), Buddha's final resting place

6 Experience the spirituality of Varanasi, without the hassle, at the more chilled-out riverside ghats of **Chitrakut** (p381)

7 Be rowed out to the confluence of two holy rivers in **Allahabad** (p377), and imagine 70 million people doing the same during the Kumbh Mela festival

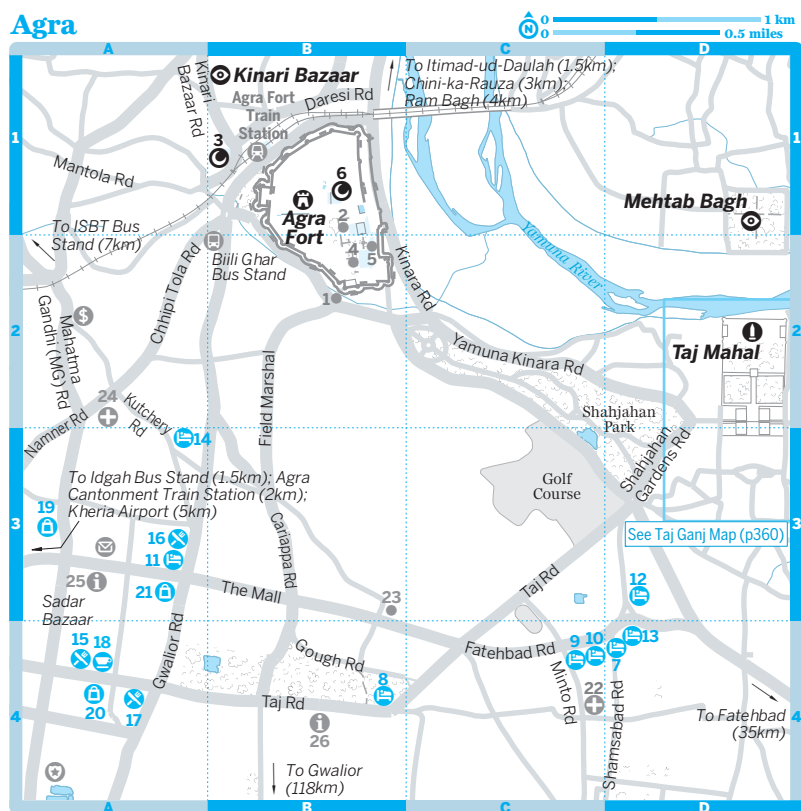


CHINA
Tibet



External boundaries shown reflect the requirements of the Government of India. Some boundaries may not be those recognised by neighbouring countries. Lonely Planet always tries to show on maps where travellers may need to cross a boundary (and present documentation) irrespective of any dispute.





All the other sights in Agra are either free or have ASI tickets only which aren't affected by the ADA one-day offer.

Admission to all sights is free for children under 15.

Taj Mahal

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Map p360; Indian/foreigner ₹20/750, video ₹25; ☺dawn-dusk Sat-Thu) Rabindranath Tagore described it as 'a teardrop on the cheek of eternity', Rudyard Kipling as 'the embodiment of all things pure', while its creator, Emperor Shah Jahan, said it made 'the sun and the moon shed tears from their eyes'. Every year, tourists numbering more than twice the population of Agra pass through its gates to catch a once-in-a-lifetime glimpse of what is widely considered the most beautiful building in the world. Few leave disappointed.

The Taj was built by Shah Jahan as a memorial for his third 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 the following year and, although the main building is thought to have been built in eight years, the whole complex was not completed until 1653. 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 away as Europe to produce the exquisite marble screens and pietra dura (marble inlay work) made with thousands of semiprecious stones.

The Taj was designated a World Heritage Site in 1983 and looks as immaculate today

Agra

📍 Top Sights

Agra Fort	B1
Kinari Bazaar.....	B1
Mehtab Bagh.....	D1
Taj Mahal.....	D2

📍 Sights

1 Amar Singh Gate	B2
2 Diwan-i-Am	B1
3 Jama Masjid	B1
4 Jehangir's Palace.....	B2
5 Khas Mahal.....	B2
6 Moti Masjid.....	B1

Activities, Courses & Tours

Clarks Shiraz Hotel.....	(see 8)
Hotel Amar	(see 9)
Hotel Atithi	(see 10)
Hotel Yamuna View	(see 11)
Park Plaza	(see 12)
UP Tourism	(see 26)

🏠 Sleeping

7 Amar Yatri Niwas.....	D4
8 Clarks Shiraz Hotel.....	B4
9 Hotel Amar	C4
10 Hotel Atithi	C4
11 Hotel Yamuna View	A3

12 Howard Park Plaza.....	D3
13 Mansingh Palace.....	D4
14 Tourists Rest House	A3

🍴 Eating

15 Brijwasi.....	A4
16 Dasaprakash.....	A3
17 Lakshmi Vilas.....	A4
Mughal Room	(see 8)
Tourists Rest House	(see 14)
Vedic	(see 16)

🍷 Drinking

18 Café Coffee Day	A4
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🛍 Shopping

19 Khadi Gramodyog	A3
20 Modern Book Depot.....	A4
21 Subhash Emporium	A3

Information

22 Amit Jaggi Memorial Hospital	C4
23 Archaeological Survey of India.....	B3
24 District Hospital	A2
25 Government of India Tourism	A3
26 UP Tourism.....	B4

as when it was first constructed – though it underwent a huge restoration project in the early 20th century. In 2002, having been gradually discoloured by city pollution, it was spruced up with an ancient face-pack recipe known as *multani mitti* – a blend of soil, cereal, milk and lime once used by Indian women to beautify their skin. Now only nonpolluting vehicles are allowed within a couple of hundred metres of the building.

Entry & Information

Note: the Taj is closed every Friday to anyone not attending prayers at the mosque.

The Taj can be accessed through the west, south and east gates. Tour groups tend to enter through the east and west gates. Independent travellers tend to use the south gate, which is nearest to Taj Ganj, the main area for budget accommodation and generally has shorter queues than the west gate. The east gate has the shortest queues of the lot, but this is because the ticket office is inconveniently located a 1km walk away at Shilpgram, a dire government-run tourist

centre. There are separate queues for men and women at all three gates.

Cameras and videos are permitted but you cannot take photographs inside the mausoleum itself, and the areas in which you can take videos are quite limited.

If you keep your Taj ticket you get small entry-fee reductions when visiting Agra Fort, Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's Tomb or the Itimad-ud-Daulah on the same day.

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

Inside the Grounds

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 its centre. When the fountains are not flowing, the Taj is beautifully reflected in the water.

TAJ MAHAL MYTHS

The Taj is a Hindu Temple

The well-publicised theory that the Taj was in fact a Shiva temple built in the 12th century and only later converted into Mumtaz Mahal's famous mausoleum was developed by Purushottam Nagesh Oak. In 2000 India's Supreme Court dismissed his petition to have the sealed basement rooms of the Taj opened to prove his theory. Oak also claims that the Kaaba, Stonehenge and the Papacy all have Hindu origins.

The Black Taj Mahal

The story goes that Shah Jahan planned to build a negative image of the Taj Mahal in black marble on the opposite side of the river as his own mausoleum, and that work began before he was imprisoned by his son Aurangzeb in Agra Fort. Extensive excavations at Mehtab Bagh have found no trace of any such construction.

Craftsmen Mutilations

Legend has it that, on completion of the Taj, Shah Jahan ordered that the hands of the project's craftsmen be chopped off, to prevent them from ever building anything as beautiful again. Some even say he went so far as to have their eyes gouged out. Thankfully, no historical evidence supports either story.

Sinking Taj

Some experts believe there is evidence to show that the Taj is slowly tilting towards and sinking into the riverbed due to the changing nature of the soil beside an increasingly dry Yamuna River. The Archaeological Survey of India has dismissed any marginal change in the elevation of the building as statistically insignificant, adding that it has not detected any structural damage at its base in the seven decades since its first scientific study of the Taj was carried out, in 1941.

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 masterstroke 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 is an important gathering place for Agra's Muslims. The identical building to the east, the **jawab**, was built for symmetry.

The central Taj structure is made of semitranslucent 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.

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

Agra Fort

(Map p350; Indian/foreigner ₹20/300, video ₹25; ☀dawn-dusk) With the Taj Mahal overshadowing it, one can easily 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 ₹50 reduction in ticket price. Construction of the massive red-sandstone fort, on the bank of the Yamuna River, was begun

FORT

by Emperor Akbar in 1565. Further additions were made, particularly by his grandson Shah Jahan, 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, and the emperors had their own bathing ghats here. It contains a maze of buildings, forming a city within a city, including vast underground sections, 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. Even today, much of the fort is used by the military and so is off-limits to the general public.

The **Amar Singh Gate** to the south is the sole entry point to the fort these days and where you buy your entrance ticket. Its dog-leg design was meant to confuse attackers who made it past the first line of defence – the crocodile-infested moat.

A path leads straight from here up to the large **Moti Masjid** (Pearl Mosque), which is always closed. To your right, just before you

DON'T MISS

TAJ MUSEUM

Within the Taj complex, on the western side of the gardens, is the small but excellent **Taj Museum** (admission ₹5; ☀️10am-5pm Sat-Thu), housing a number of original Mughal miniature paintings, including a pair of 17th-century ivory portraits of Emperor Shah Jahan and his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal. You also find here some very well preserved gold and silver coins dating from the same period, plus 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.

reach **Moti Masjid**, is the large open **Diwan-i-Am** (Hall of Public Audiences), which 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 First War of Independence.

A tiny staircase just to the left of the Diwan-i-Am throne leads up to a large courtyard. To your left, is 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.

On the far side of the large courtyard, along the eastern wall of the fort, is **Diwan-i-Khas** (Hall of Private Audiences), which was reserved for important dignitaries or foreign representatives. The hall once housed Shah Jahan's legendary Peacock Throne, which was inset with precious stones including the famous Koh-i-noor diamond. The throne was taken to Delhi by Aurangzeb, then to Iran in 1739 by Nadir Shah and dismantled after his assassination in 1747. Overlooking the river and the distant Taj Mahal is **Takhti-i-Jehangir**, a huge slab of black rock with an inscription around the edge. The throne that stood here was made for Jehangir when he was Prince Salim.

Off to your right from here (as you face the river) is **Shish Mahal** (Mirror Palace), with walls inlaid with tiny mirrors. At the time of research it had been closed for some



BEST TIMES TO SEE THE TAJ

The Taj is arguably at its most atmospheric at **sunrise**. This is certainly the most comfortable time to visit, with far fewer crowds. **Sunset** is another magical viewing time. You can also view the Taj for five nights around **full moon**. Entry numbers are limited, though, and tickets must be bought a day in advance from the **Archaeological Survey of India office** (Map p350; ☎️2227263; www.asi.nic.in; 22 The Mall; Indian/foreigner ₹510/750). See its website for details.

Note, this office is known as the Taj Mahal Office by some rickshaw riders.

One final word of advice; whatever you do, don't plan your trip around seeing the Taj on a Friday, as the whole complex is closed to anyone not attending Friday prayers at the mosque inside the Taj grounds.

Taj Mahal

TIMELINE

1631 Emperor Shah Jahan's beloved third wife, Mumtaz Mahal, dies in Buhanpur while giving birth to their 14th child. Her body is initially interred in Buhanpur itself, where Shah Jahan is fighting a military campaign, but is later moved, in a golden casket, to a small building on the banks of the Yamuna River in Agra.

1632 Construction of a permanent mausoleum for Mumtaz Mahal begins.

1633 Mumtaz Mahal is interred in her final resting place, an underground tomb beneath a marble plinth, on top of which the Taj Mahal will be built.

1640 The white-marble mausoleum is completed.

1653 The rest of the Taj Mahal complex is completed.

1658 Emperor Shah Jahan is overthrown by his son Aurangzeb and imprisoned in Agra Fort.

1666 Shah Jahan dies. His body is transported along the Yamuna River and buried underneath the Taj, alongside the tomb of his wife.

1908 Repeatedly damaged and looted after the fall of the Mughal empire, the Taj receives some long-overdue attention as part of a major restoration project ordered by British viceroy Lord Curzon.

1983 The Taj is awarded Unesco World Heritage Site status.

2002 Having been discoloured by pollution in more recent years, the Taj is spruced up with an ancient recipe known as *multani mitti* – a blend of soil, cereal, milk and lime once used by Indian women to beautify their skin.

Today More than three million tourists visit the Taj Mahal each year. That's more than twice the current population of Agra.

DANIEL MCCORMAN

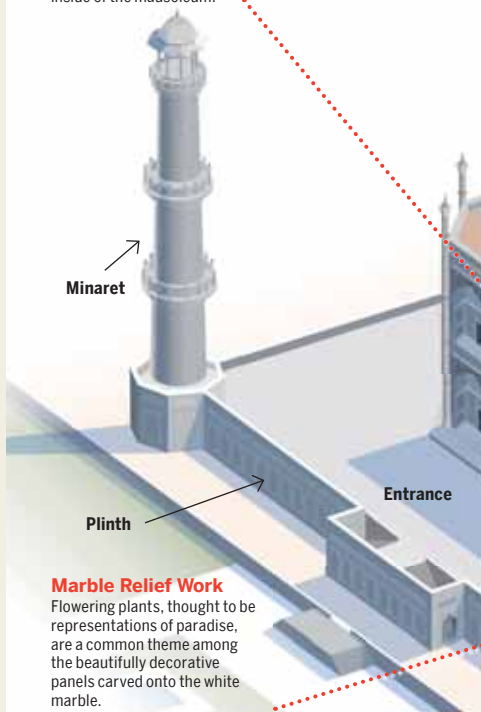


Go Barefoot

Help the environment by entering the mausoleum barefoot instead of using the free disposable shoe covers.

Pishtaqs

These huge arched recesses are set into each side of the Taj. They provide depth to the building while their central, latticed marble screens allow patterned light to illuminate the inside of the mausoleum.



Minaret

Plinth

Entrance

Marble Relief Work

Flowering plants, thought to be representations of paradise, are a common theme among the beautifully decorative panels carved onto the white marble.

DANIEL MCCORMAN



Be Enlightened

Bring a small torch into the mausoleum to fully appreciate the translucency of the white marble and semiprecious stones.



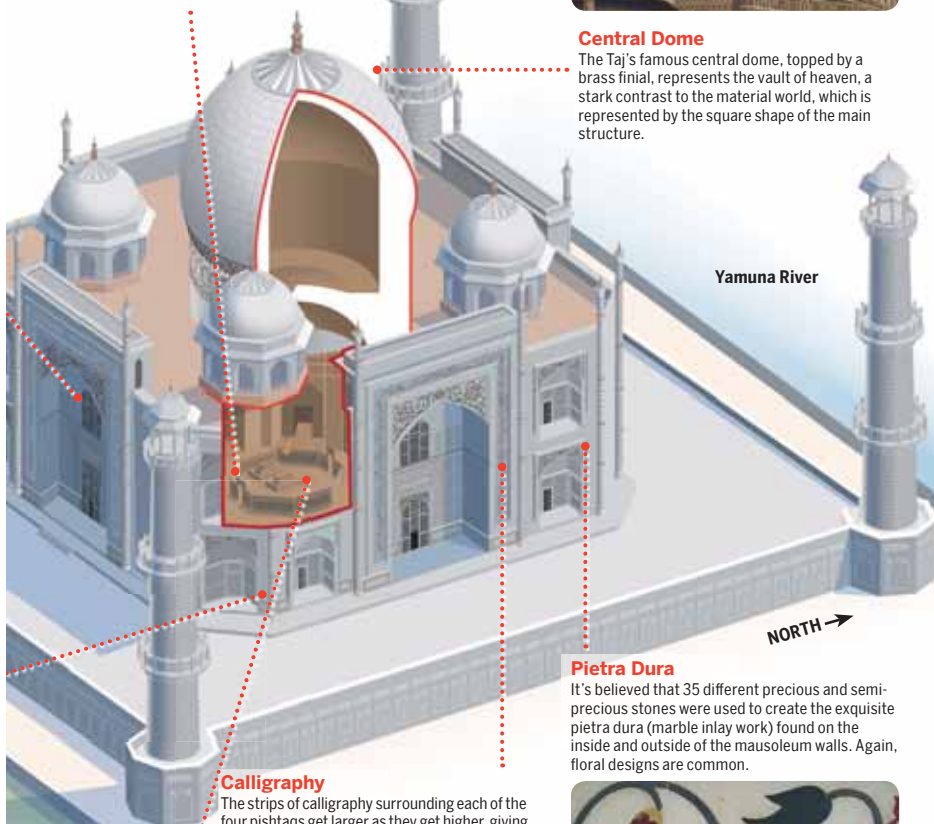
Filigree Screen

This stunning screen was carved out of a single piece of marble. It surrounds both cenotaphs, allowing patterned light to fall onto them through its intricately carved *jali* (latticework).



Central Dome

The Taj's famous central dome, topped by a brass finial, represents the vault of heaven, a stark contrast to the material world, which is represented by the square shape of the main structure.



Yamuna River

NORTH →

Pietra Dura

It's believed that 35 different precious and semi-precious stones were used to create the exquisite pietra dura (marble inlay work) found on the inside and outside of the mausoleum walls. Again, floral designs are common.

Calligraphy

The strips of calligraphy surrounding each of the four pishtaq get larger as they get higher, giving the impression of uniform size when viewed from the ground. There's also calligraphy inside the mausoleum, including on Mumtaz Mahal's cenotaph.

Cenotaphs

The cenotaphs of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan, decorated with pietra dura inlay work, are actually fake tombs. The real ones are located in an underground vault closed to the public.



Inside the Taj Grounds

You may have to pay ₹750 for the privilege, but it's only when you're inside the grounds themselves that you can really get up close and personal with the world's most beautiful building. Don't miss inspecting the marble inlay work (*pietra dura*) inside the *pishtaqs* (large arched recesses) on the four outer walls. And don't forget to bring a small torch with you so that you can shine it on similar *pietra dura* work inside the dark central chamber of the mausoleum. Note the translucency of both the white marble and the semi-precious stones inlaid into it.

From Mehtab Bagh

Tourists are no longer allowed to wander freely along the riverbank on the opposite side of the Yamuna River, but you can still enjoy a view of the back of the Taj from the 16th-century Mughal park Mehtab Bagh, with the river flowing between you and the mausoleum. A path leading down to the river beside the park offers the same view for free, albeit from a more restricted angle.

Looking Up from the South Sank of the River

This is a great place to be for sunset. Take the path that hugs the outside of the Taj's eastern wall and walk all the way down to the small temple beside the river. You should be able to find boat hands down here willing to row you out onto the water for an even more romantic view. Expect to pay them around ₹100 per boat. For safety reasons, it's best not to wander down here on your own for sunset.

On a Rooftop Cafe in Taj Ganj

Perfect for sunrise shots, there are some wonderful photos to be had from the numerous rooftop cafes in Taj Ganj. We think the cafe on Saniya Palace Hotel is the pick of the bunch, with its plant-filled design and great position, but many of them are good. And all offer the bonus of being able to view the Taj with the added comfort of an early-morning cup of coffee.

From Agra Fort

With a decent zoom lens you can capture some fabulous images of the Taj from Agra Fort, especially if you're willing to get up at the crack of dawn to see the sun rising up from behind it. The best places to picture it from are probably Musamman Burj and Khas Mahal, the octagonal tower and palace where Shah Jahan was imprisoned for eight years until his death.

time due to restoration, although you could peek through cracks in the doors at the sparkling mirrors inside.

Further along the eastern edge of the fort you'll find **Musamman Burj** and **Khas Mahal**, 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. When he died, Shah Jahan's body was taken from here by boat to the Taj. The now closed **Mina Masjid**, set back slightly from the eastern edge, was his private mosque.

The large courtyard here is **Anguri Bagh**, a garden that has been brought back to life in recent years. In the courtyard is an

innocuous-looking entrance – now locked – that leads down a flight of stairs into a two-storey labyrinth of underground rooms and passageways where Akbar used to keep his 500-strong harem.

Continuing south, 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 was used for bathing. Walking past this brings you back to the main path to Amar Singh Gate.

You can walk here from Taj Ganj, or its ₹20-30 in a cycle-rickshaw.

Akbar's Mausoleum

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Indian/foreigner ₹10/110, video ₹25; ☺dawn-dusk) This outstanding sandstone and marble tomb 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.

The mausoleum is at Sikandra, 10km northwest of Agra Fort. Buses (₹20, 45 minutes) heading to Mathura from Biili Ghar bus stand go past the mausoleum.

Itimad-ud-Daulah

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Map p350; Indian/foreigner ₹10/110, video ₹25; ☺dawn-dusk) Nicknamed the Baby Taj, the exquisite tomb of Mizra Ghiyas Beg should not be missed. This Persian nobleman was Mumtaz Mahal's grandfather and 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.

It doesn't have the same awesome beauty as the Taj, but it's arguably more delicate in appearance thanks to its particularly finely carved *jali* (marble lattice screens). This was the first Mughal structure built completely from marble, the first to make extensive use of pietra dura and the first tomb to be built on the banks of the Yamuna, which until then had been a sequence of beautiful pleasure gardens.

You can combine a trip here with Chini-ka-Rauza, Mehtab Bagh and Ram Bagh, all on the east bank. A cycle-rickshaw covering all four should cost about ₹200 return from the Taj, including waiting time. An autorickshaw (auto) will be at least double.

Chini-ka-Rauza

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Map p350; ☺dawn-dusk) This Persian-style riverside tomb of Afzal Khan, a poet who served as Shah Jahan's chief minister, was built between 1628 and 1639. Rarely visited, it is hidden away down a shady avenue of trees on the east bank of the Yamuna. Bright blue tiles, which once covered the whole mausoleum, can still be seen on part of the exterior, while the interior is painted in floral designs.

Mehtab Bagh

PARK

(Map p350; Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; ☺dawn-dusk) This park, originally built by Emperor Babur as the last in a series of 11 parks on the Yamuna's east bank, long before the Taj

was conceived, fell into disrepair until it was little more than a huge mound of sand. To protect the Taj from the erosive effects of the sand blown across the river, the park was reconstructed in recent years and is now one the best places from which to view the great mausoleum. The gardens in the Taj are perfectly aligned with the ones here, and the view of the Taj from the fountain directly in front of the entrance gate is a special one.

It used to be possible to sneak down the side of this park to the riverbank and view the Taj for free in a peaceful, natural ambience of buffaloes and wading birds. You can still reach the riverbank, but guards and a barbed-wire fence prevent you from walking freely along the water's edge.

Jama Masjid

MOSQUE

(Map p350; Jama Masjid Rd) This fine mosque, built in the Kinari Bazaar by Shah Jahan's daughter in 1648, and once connected to Agra Fort, features striking marble patterning on its domes.

Kinari Bazaar

MARKET

(Map p350; ☺dawn-late) The narrow streets behind Jama Masjid are a crazy maze of overcrowded lanes bursting with colourful markets. There are a number of different bazaars here, each specialising in different wares, but the area is generally known as Kinari Bazaar as many of the lanes fan out from Kinari Bazaar Rd. You'll find clothing, shoes, fabrics, jewellery, spices, marble work, snack stalls and what seems like 20 million other people. Amazingly, there is somehow room for buffaloes and even the odd working elephant to squeeze their way through the crowds. Even if you're not buying anything, just walking the streets is an experience in itself. Don't forget to look up from time to time at the old wooden balconies above some of the shop fronts. As with all crowded markets, take extra care of your belongings here.

Swimming Pools

SWIMMING

Hotels allowing nonguests to use their pools include Atithi (₹300), Yamuna View (₹350), Park Plaza (₹350), Amar (₹400) - with slide! - and Clarks Shiraz (₹500).

Tours**UP Tourism**

COACH TOURS

(incl entry fees Indian/foreigner ₹400/1700); Agra Cantonment train station (off Map p350; ☎2421204; ☺7am-10pm); Taj Rd (Map p350; ☎2226431;

TAKE A BREAK: FIVE RELAXING RETREATS

Touts, vendors and rickshaw-wallahs can be pretty draining in Agra, particularly around the big sights. Here are some ideas for how to escape their attentions.

Garden Retreat

Wandering around any of the half-ruined Mughal gardens of Agra can make a pleasant change from the noisy, bustling city streets. Try Mehtab Bagh or Ram Bagh. In summer, it's best to visit in the cool of the morning. Alternatively, sit in the shade of the wonderfully peaceful garden restaurant at Hotel Sheela, just a stone's throw from the Taj Mahal's east gate.

Rooftop Retreat

You'll be almost physically dragged off the street by over-keen owners trying to ensure you choose theirs, but once you're actually sitting down at a rooftop cafe in Taj Ganj you'll have all the peace and quiet you could wish for, plus fabulous views of the Taj. Saniya Palace Hotel is our favourite.

Rickshaw Retreat

Find a cycle-rickshaw with a deep, comfy, padded seat, agree to pay the rider ₹100–200 for a half-day tour of the city then sit back and watch Agra roll past you. The beauty of this retreat is that rickshaw riders don't bother tourists who are already in a rickshaw.

Poolside Retreat

For a total escape, pack your swimmers and head to one of Agra's more expensive hotels for a day by the pool. Fees for nonguests are typically ₹300–500.

Coffee Break

For a quick break, slip inside Café Coffee Day by the east gate of the Taj. Yes, it's a chain and, yes, it's relatively expensive, but it has AC and it's the only place in Taj Ganj that sells proper fresh coffee.

agraptourism@gmail.com; 64 Taj Rd; ☎10.30am–5pm Mon–Sat) UP Tourism runs daily coach tours that leave Agra Cantonment train station at 10.30am, after picking up passengers arriving from Delhi on the *Taj Express*. The 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 to book a seat, or just turn up at the train station tourist office at 9.45am to sign up for that day.

Sleeping

The main place for budget accommodation is the bustling area of Taj Ganj, immediately south of the Taj, while there's a high concentration of midrange hotels further south, along Fatehabad Rd. Sadar Bazaar, an area boasting good quality restaurants, offers another option.

Ask at the UP Tourism office for the latest list of recommended homestays. The qual-

ity of accommodation in the homestays here is generally pretty good, but locations are rarely central. Prices range from ₹2000 to ₹4000 per room.

TAJ GANJ AREA

TOP CHOICE **Hotel Sheela** HOTEL \$
(Map p360; ☎2331194; www.hotelsheelaagra.com; Taj East Gate Rd; d ₹400–600, with AC ₹800; 🍷🍷) If you're not fussed about looking at the Taj Mahal 24 hours a day, this superb budget option could be just the ticket. Rooms are simple (no TVs here), but spotless and come with towel, soap and loo roll – a nice touch for a cheapie. Best of all they're set around a beautifully landscaped garden with singing birds, plenty of shade and a pleasant restaurant area. Book ahead.

Hotel Kamal HOTEL \$\$
(Map p360; ☎2330126; hotelkamal@hotmail.com; Taj South Gate; d ₹600, with AC ₹1000; 🍷) The smartest of the hotels in Taj Ganj proper, Kamal has very clean, comfortable rooms

with nice touches such as framed photos of the Taj on the walls and rugs on the tiled floors. Some rooms also have sofas. The rooftop restaurant has a decent Taj view, albeit slightly obscured by a tree.

Shanti Lodge

HOTEL \$

(Map p360; ☎2231973; shantilodge2000@yahoo.co.in; Taj South Gate; r ₹200-1200; 📍📞) There's a huge mixed bag of rooms at this Taj Ganj old-timer; some shoddy, with dodgy bathrooms; some much smarter and cleaner. The ones round the back in the newer block are worth asking for, but check a few rooms before you commit. The rooftop restaurant here has one of the best views of the Taj.

Saniya Palace Hotel

HOTEL \$

(Map p360; ☎3270199; saniyapalaceemailid@gmail.com; Taj South Gate; d ₹400, without bathroom ₹200, with AC ₹800) Set back from the main strip down a tiny alleyway, this place has more character than its rivals, with marble floors and Mughal-style framed carpets hung on the walls. The rooms (apart from the cramped bathroomless cheapies) are clean and big enough, although the bathrooms in the non-AC rooms are minuscule. The very pleasant, plant-filled rooftop restaurant has a fabulous view of the Taj.

Hotel Sidhartha

HOTEL \$

(Map p360; ☎2230901; www.hotelsidhartha.com; Taj West Gate; d ₹400, with AC ₹800; 📍📞) First opened its doors in 1986 and still going strong. The 18 very smart double rooms are bright and clean and are set around a small, leafy courtyard, which has an OK restaurant. Hot water is available for all the rooms but only the AC ones have hot-water showers.

Oberoí Amar Vilas

HOTEL \$\$\$

(off Map p360; ☎2231515; www.oberoihotels.com; Taj East Gate Rd; d ₹35,000-40,500, ste ₹75,000-261,000; 📍📞) If money is no object, look no further. By far the best hotel in Agra, this place oozes style and luxury. Elegant interior design is suffused with Mughal themes, a composition carried over into the exterior fountain courtyard and swimming pool, both of which are set in a delightful water garden. All rooms (and even some bathtubs) have wonderful views of the Taj, as do the two excellent restaurants and classy cocktail bar, all of which are open to nonguests.

Taj Plaza

HOTEL \$\$

(off Map p360; ☎2232515; www.hoteltajplaza.com; Taj East Gate Rd; s/d ₹800/1200, with AC ₹2000/3000, 📍📞) This former good-quality

budget hotel has been stretched into a mid-range price bracket in recent years. You won't be disappointed if you stay here – rooms are clean, have TV and some come with Taj views – but you won't write home about it. Still, it's a whole lot closer to the Taj than most hotels in the same price range.

FATEHABAD ROAD AREA

Howard Park Plaza

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p350; ☎4048600; www.sarovarhotels.com; Fatehabad Rd; s/d/ste ₹6000/7000/12,000; 📍📞📞) Rooms in this very welcoming hotel are decked out in elegant dark-wood furniture and stylish decorative tiling. Bathrooms are a little on the compact side for this price, but still very smart. There's an unusual splash-shaped pool out the back, a small gym, and a spa offering a whole range of ayurvedic treatments. Wi-fi-enabled throughout.

Hotel Amar

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p350; ☎4008402; www.hotelamar.com; Fatehabad Rd; s ₹3000-4500, d ₹3400-4500, ste ₹6000-8000; 📍📞📞) Smart, wi-fi-enabled rooms come with big TV and clean bathrooms, but the real treat here is the pool area, complete with a lush green lawn and a 3.5m-tall water slide.

Amar Yatri Niwas

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p350; ☎2233030; www.amaryatriniwas.com; Fatehabad Rd; s ₹1500-2500, d ₹1800-2800; 📍📞📞) Sandwiched between a Costa Coffee and a Pizza Hut (but don't let that put you off), this place has had a recent makeover so that even the standard rooms are now smart, clean and come with modern furnishings and bright bathrooms. Be warned, wi-fi is chargeable at the ludicrous rate of ₹100 per hour!

Mansingh Palace

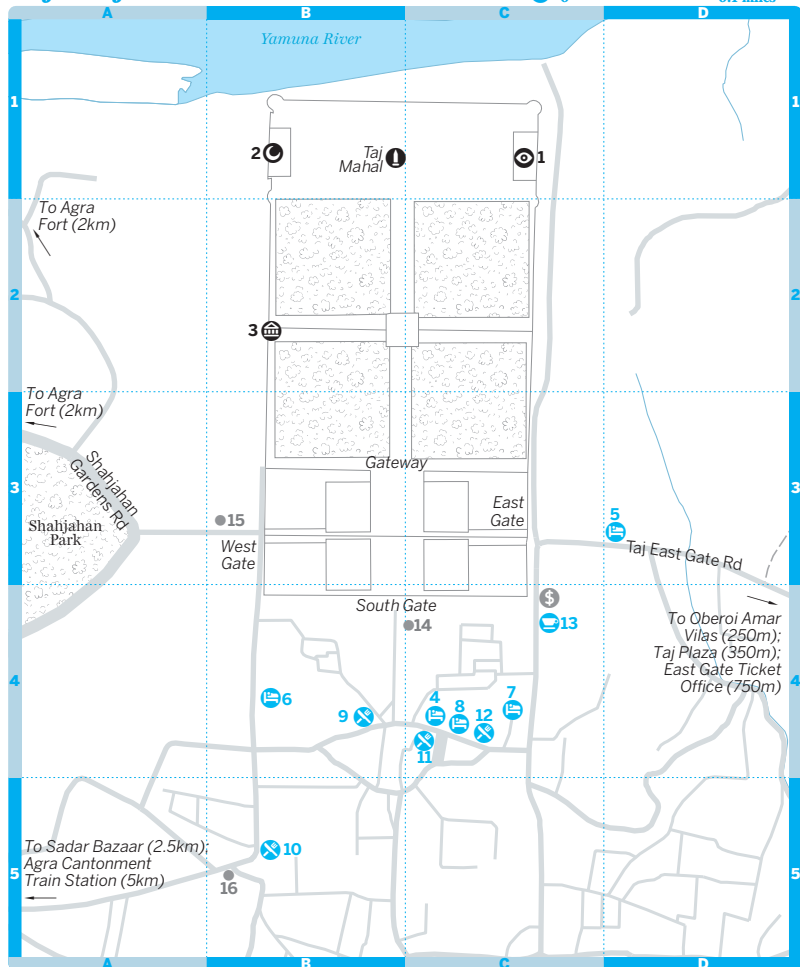
HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p350; ☎2331771; www.mansinghhotels.com; Fatehabad Rd; s/d from ₹7000/8000; 📍📞📞) The service isn't up to scratch for the quality of this hotel, but if you can put up with the grumpy staff on reception you'll find plush rooms inside a complex crammed with Mughal design themes and exotic furnishings. The garden has an interestingly shaped pool and outdoor BBQ area. There's a gym and the quality **Sheesh Mahal** restaurant has live *ghazals* (Urdu songs) nightly.

Hotel Atithi

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p350; ☎2330878; www.hotelatithiagra.com; Fatehabad Rd; s ₹2400-2900, d ₹2900-3800; 📍📞📞) Simple but comfortable rooms are a



decent size, while the white-tiled bathrooms are clean, if a little old fashioned. Guests can use the lovely public swimming pool next door for free.

SADAR BAZAAR AREA

Tourists Rest House

HOTEL \$

(Map p350; ☎2463961; dontworrychickencurry@hotmail.com; Kutchery Rd; d ₹250-550, with AC ₹750; 🍽️🍷) Very clean rooms of varying sizes come with tiled floors, TV and hot water and are set around a peaceful plant-filled, palm-shaded courtyard restaurant. Owners speak English and French and are very helpful. Phone

ahead for a free pick-up. Otherwise, it's ₹30 in a cycle-rickshaw from the train station.

Clarks Shiraz Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p350; ☎2226121; www.hotelclarksshiraz.com; 54 Taj Rd; s/d from ₹6500/7000; 🍽️🍷🍸) One of Agra's original five-star hotels has seen some recent renovation. The standard doubles are still nothing special, but marble-floored deluxe versions are excellent and all bathrooms have been retiled so are spotless. There are two very good restaurants, three bars, a gym, a shaded garden pool area and ayurvedic massages. Some rooms have distant Taj views.

Taj Ganj

📍 Sights

- 1 Jawab C1
- 2 Mosque..... B1
- 3 Museum B2

🏨 Sleeping

- 4 Hotel Kamal C4
- 5 Hotel Sheela D3
- 6 Hotel Sidhartha..... B4
- 7 Saniya Palace Hotel..... C4
- 8 Shanti Lodge..... C4

🍴 Eating

- Hotel Sheela.....(see 5)
- 9 Joney's Place B4
- Saniya Palace Hotel.....(see 7)
- 10 Shankar Restaurant..... B5
- Shanti Lodge Restaurant.....(see 8)
- 11 Taj Cafe C4
- 12 Yash Cafe C4

☕ Drinking

- 13 Cafe Coffee Day..... C4

Information

- 14 South Gate Ticket Office..... C4
- 15 West Gate Ticket Office B3

Transport

- 16 Cycle-rickshaw &
Autorickshaw Stand..... B5

Hotel Yamuna View

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p350; ☎2462990; www.hotelyamunaviewagra.com; 6B The Mall; s/d from ₹4800/5500; 📶📶📶) A pool in the garden, a water feature in the grand sunken lobby, a plush Chinese restaurant and some spacious rooms with gleaming bathrooms make this friendly hotel in a quiet part of Sadar Bazaar worth the splurge. It also has a 24-hour cafe. The free wi-fi is in the lobby only.



Eating

Dalmoth is Agra's famous version of *nam-kin* (spicy nibbles). *Peitha* is a square sweet made from pumpkin and glucose that is flavoured with rosewater, coconut or saffron. You can buy it all over Agra. From October to March look out for *gajak*, a slightly spicy sesame-seed biscuit strip.

TAJ GANJ AREA

This lively area directly south of the Taj has plenty of budget rooftop restaurants, where menus appear to be carbon copies of one another. None are licensed but most will

find you a beer if you ask nicely and drink discreetly.

Joney's Place

MULTICUISINE \$

(Map p360; mains ₹40-90; ☎5am-10.30pm) Open at the crack of dawn, this pocket-sized, brightly painted, travellers' institution whipped up its first creamy lassi in 1978 and continues to please despite having to cook its meals in what must be the smallest restaurant kitchen in Agra. Everything they do here is good, but the cheese and tomato 'jayfelles' (toasted sandwich), the banana lassi and the *malai* kofta get consistently good reviews.

Taj Cafe

MULTICUISINE \$

(Map p360; mains ₹45-90; ☎6.30am-11pm) Up a flight of steps and overlooking Taj Ganj's busy street scene, this friendly, family-run restaurant is a nice choice if you're not fussed about Taj views. There's a good choice of breakfasts, thalis (₹70-120) and pizza (₹130-170), and the lassis here are even better than at Joney's Place.

Saniya Palace Hotel

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Map p360; mains ₹70-200; ☎6am-11pm) With cute tablecloths, dozens of potted plants and a bamboo pergola for shade, this is the most pleasant rooftop restaurant in Taj Ganj. It also has the best rooftop view of the Taj bar none. Again, it's the usual mix of Western dishes and Western-friendly Indian dishes on offer, including set breakfasts, pizza and pancakes.

Eshpahan

NORTH INDIAN \$\$\$

(off Map p360; ☎2231515; Oberoi Amar Vilas hotel; Taj East Gate Rd; mains ₹1000-1400; ☎dinner) Agra's best hotel has now opened the doors of its top-notch Indian restaurant to non-guests. There are only two sittings each evening, at 7pm and 9.30pm, so booking a table is essential. The menu is small but exquisite, specialising in Mughlai cuisine with unusual offerings such as quail curry. We couldn't afford the ₹2500-thali, but it's bound to be extraordinarily good.

Hotel Sheela

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Map p360; mains ₹60-200; ☎7am-10pm) Actually the menu here is a bit limited compared to others in Taj Ganj, meaning this isn't the best spot for an evening meal. It's fine for breakfast or a lunchtime snack, though – and, let's face it, no one comes here specifically for the food. They come for the wonderfully peaceful garden retreat that makes it hard to believe you're 100m from one of the biggest tourist attractions in the world.

Shanti Lodge Restaurant MULTICUISINE \$\$\$

(Map p360; mains ₹50-150; ☎6.30am-10.30pm) The rooftop Taj view here is superb so this is a great place for breakfast or a sunset beer. There's some shade for hot afternoons, although it's not as comfortable as nearby Saniya Palace. The only let-down is the menu which, although not bad, lacks invention. Banana pancakes, anyone?

Yash Cafe MULTICUISINE \$

(Map p360; mains ₹30-130) This chilled-out 1st-floor cafe has wicker chairs, sports channels on TV, DVDs shown in the evening and a good range of meals, from good-value set breakfasts to thali (₹55) and pizza (₹80-150). It also offers a shower and storage space (₹50 for both) to day visitors.

Shankar Restaurant INDIAN \$

(Map p360; mains ₹25-50; ☎9am-10pm) Those who are bored of the multicuisine Western-friendly tourist restaurants in Taj Ganj, and are after something a bit more down to earth, should head round the corner to the *dhabas* (snack bars) near the autorickshaw stand. Most are little more than shacks serving up simple Indian dishes. Shankar is as basic as any, but is friendly and has an English menu.

SADAR BAZAAR

This area offers better quality restaurants and makes a nice change from the please-all, multicuisine offerings in Taj Ganj.

**Lakshmi Vilas** SOUTH INDIAN \$

(Map p350; Taj Rd; meals ₹40-90; ☎) This nonsense, plainly decorated, nonsmoking restaurant is the place in Agra to come for

affordable South Indian fare. Treats include *idli* (spongy, round, fermented rice cake), *vada* (doughnut-shaped, deep-fried lentil savoury), *uttapam* (thick, savoury rice pancake) and more than 20 varieties of dosa (large savoury crepe), including a family special that is 1.2m long! The thali meal (₹88), served noon-3.30pm and 7-10.30pm, is very good indeed.

Dasaprakash SOUTH INDIAN \$\$\$

(Map p350; ☎22363535, 1 Gwalior Rd; meals ₹90-150; ☎11am-10.45pm; ☎) Highly recommended by locals for consistently good South Indian vegetarian food, Dasaprakash whips up spectacular unlimited thalis (₹100-225), dosa and a few token continental dishes. The ice-cream desserts (₹90-125), which take up a whole page of the two-page menu, are another speciality. Comfortable booth seating and wood-lattice screens make for intimate dining.

Vedic NORTH INDIAN \$\$\$

(Map p350; ☎2250041, 1 Gwalior Rd; meals ₹140-200; ☎11.30am-11pm; ☎) This classy new restaurant with modern decor but a traditional ambience has a mouth-wateringly good North Indian veg menu, with paneer (unfermented cheese) dishes featuring highly. The paneer tikka masala is particularly good. There's also a range of delicious vegetarian kebabs.

Mughal Room NORTH INDIAN \$\$\$

(Map p350; ☎2226121; 54 Taj Rd; mains ₹295-950; ☎lunch & dinner) The best of four eating options at Clarks Shiraz Hotel, this top-floor restaurant serves up sumptuous Mughlai cuisine with a distant view of the Taj and

**STAYING AHEAD OF THE SCAMS**

As well as the usual commission rackets and ever-present gem import scam (see p1156), some specific methods to relieve Agra tourists of their hard-earned include:

Rickshaws

When taking an auto or cycle-rickshaw to the Taj, make sure you are clear which gate you want to go to when negotiating the price. Otherwise, almost without fail, riders will take you to the roundabout at the south end of Shahjahan Gardens Rd – where expensive tongas (horse-drawn carriage) or camels wait to take tour groups to the west gate – and claim that's where they thought you meant. Autos cannot go right up to the Taj because of pollution rules, but they can get a lot closer than this.

Fake Marble

Lots of 'marble' souvenirs are actually alabaster, or even just soapstone. The mini Taj Mahals are always alabaster because they are too intricate to carve quickly in marble.

Agra Fort. Remember, though, you won't be able to see either at night. There's also live classical music here every evening.

Tourists Rest House MULTICUISINE \$
(Map p350; ☎2363961; Kutichery Rd; meals ₹45-80) The courtyard garden restaurant here is often full of chattering travellers enjoying the candle-lit atmosphere around the small fountain, and the all-veg menu is decent.

Brijwasi SWEETS \$
(Map p350; Sadar Bazaar; sweets from ₹220/kg, meals ₹75-120; ☎8am-10.30pm; 🍷) Mouth-watering selection of traditional Indian sweets, nuts and biscuits on the ground floor, with a decent-value Indian restaurant upstairs.



Drinking & Entertainment

A night out in Agra tends to revolve around sitting at a rooftop restaurant with a couple of bottles of beer. None of the restaurants in Taj Ganj are licensed, but they can find alcohol for you if you ask nicely, and don't mind if you bring your own drinks, as long as you're discreet. You can catch live Indian classical music and *ghazals* (Urdu love songs) at restaurants in several of Agra's top-end hotels, most of which also have bars, albeit of the rather soulless variety.

Café Coffee Day CAFE
(Map p360; ☎6am-8pm) This AC-cooled branch of the popular cafe chain is the closest place to the Taj selling proper coffee (from ₹39). Also does cakes and snacks. There's another branch in Sadar Bazaar (Map p350).

Amar Vilas Bar BAR
(off Map p360; Oberoi Amar Vilas hotel, Taj East Gate Rd; ☎noon-midnight) For a beer (₹300) or cocktail (₹500) in sheer opulence, look no further than the bar at Agra's best hotel. A terrace opens out to views of the Taj.



Shopping

Agra is well known for its marble items inlaid with coloured stones, similar to the pietra dura work on the Taj. Sadar Bazaar, the old town and the area around the Taj are full of emporiums. Taj Mahal models are all made of alabaster rather than marble. Very cheap ones are made of soapstone, which scratches easily.

Other popular buys include rugs, leather and gemstones, though the latter are im-

ported from Rajasthan and are cheaper in Jaipur.

Subhash Emporium HANDICRAFTS
(Map p350; ☎2850749; 18/1 Gwalior Rd) This expensive but honest marble-carving shop has been knocking up quality pieces for more than 35 years. Watch artisans at work in the entranceway before delving into the stock out the back. Small marble boxes start at about ₹500.

Kinari Bazaar MARKET
(Map p350; ☎dawn-late) This is just one market of many in a crowded tangle of streets in the old town, selling everything from textiles and handicrafts to fruit and produce.

Subhash Bazaar MARKET
Skirts the northern edge of Agra's Jama Masjid and is particularly good for silks and saris.

Khadi Gramodyog CLOTHING
(Map p350; ☎2421481; MG Rd; ☎10.30am-7pm) Stocks simple, good-quality men's Indian clothing made from the homespun *khadi* fabric famously recommended by Mahatma Gandhi (p1132). No English sign: on Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Rd, look for the *khadi* logo of hands clasped around a mud hut.

Modern Book Depot BOOKS
(Map p350; ☎2225695; Sadar Bazaar; ☎10.30am-9.30pm, closed Tue) Great selection of novels, plus Lonely Planet guides, at this 60-year-old establishment.

Information

Taj Ganj is riddled with **internet cafes** (per hr ₹20-40). Many have webcams for Skype use, and some let you use your own laptop. Some also have CD-burning facilities for **digital photography** (per disc ₹50-100).

Emergency

Tourist police (☎2421204; Agra Cantonment train station; ☎24hr) The guys in sky-blue uniforms are based just outside the train station, but it's easier to go through the tourism office inside where they often hang out.

Medical Services

Amit Jaggi Memorial Hospital (Map p350; ☎2230515; www.ajmh.in; Vibhav Nagar, off Minto Rd) Private hospital recommended by readers.

District Hospital (Map p350; ☎2466099) Government-run local hospital on Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Rd.

Money

ATMs are all over the city. There's only one close to the Taj, though; just by the east gate.

State Bank of India ☎10am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Post

Main post office (Map p350; The Mall; ☎10am-5pm Mon-Sat, Sunday speed-post only) Has a handy 'facilitation office' for foreigners.

Tourist Information

Government of India Tourism (Map p350; ☎2226378; www.incredibleindia.org; 191 The Mall; ☎10am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) Very helpful branch; has brochures on local and India-wide attractions and can arrange guides (half/full day ₹500/700).

UP Tourism Agra Cantonment train station (off Map p350; ☎2421204; ☎7am-10pm); Taj Rd (Map p350; ☎2226431; agrauptourism@gmail.com; 64 Taj Rd; ☎10.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) The friendly train station branch has round-the-clock help and advice, and is the place to contact the tourist police. Either branch can arrange guides (half/full day ₹600/750).

i Getting There & Away

Air

Kingfisher Airlines (☎2400693; www.flyingfisher.com; airport; ☎10am-5pm) has one daily flight to Delhi (from ₹2000, one hour, 3pm). Agra's Kheria airport is in Indian Air Force territory so you won't get in without your name being on the list of those who have booked flights for that day. You'll have to purchase your ticket online or over the phone.

Bus

Some services from **Ildgah bus stand** (off Map p350):

Delhi non-AC/AC ₹149/226, five hours, frequent, 24 hours (non-AC)/6am-6pm (AC)

Fatehpur Sikri ₹27, one hour, every 30 minutes, 6am-5pm

Gwalior ₹82, three hours, frequent, 5am-1am

Jaipur ₹159, six hours, frequent, 6am-1am

Jhansi ₹141, six hours, four daily: 5am, 6am, 7am and 11.30am

Services from **ISBT bus stand** (off map p350) include Dehra Dun (seat/sleeper ₹512/574, 11 hours, at 8pm and 8.30pm, both AC).

Biili Ghar bus stand (Map p350) serves Mathura (₹42, 90 minutes, every 30 minutes, 6am-7pm).

Shared autos (₹10) run between Ildgah and Biili Ghar bus stands. To get to ISBT, take the AC public bus from Agra Cantt train station to Dayalbagh (₹20) but get off at Baghwan Talkies (₹15), from where shared autos (₹5) can take you to ISBT.

Train

Train is easily the quickest way to travel to/from Delhi, Varanasi, Jaipur and Khajuraho (p365). Most trains leave from **Agra Cantonment (Cantt) train station** (off Map p350; ☎2421204), although some go from Agra Fort station (Map p350).

Express trains are well set up for day trippers to/from Delhi (see table below) but trains run to Delhi all day. If you can't reserve a seat, just buy a 'general ticket' for the next train (about ₹60), find a seat in Sleeper class then upgrade when the ticket collector comes along. Most of the time, he won't even make you pay any more.

For Orchha, catch one of the many daily trains to Jhansi (sleeper ₹150, 3hrs), then take a shared auto to the bus stand (₹5) from where shared autos run all day to Orchha (₹10).

i Getting Around

Autorickshaw

Agra's green-and-yellow autorickshaws run on CNG (compressed natural gas) rather than petrol, and so are less environmentally destructive. Just outside Agra Cantonment train station

DELHI-AGRA TRAINS - DAY TRIPPERS

TRIP	TRAIN NO & NAME	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	DEPARTURES
New Delhi-Agra	12002 <i>Shatabdi Exp</i>	370/700*	2	6.15am (except Fri)
Agra-New Delhi	12001 <i>Shatabdi Exp</i>	400/745*	2	8.30pm (except Fri)
Hazrat Nizamuddin-Agra	12280 <i>Taj Exp</i>	75/263**	3	7.10am
Agra-Hazrat Nizamuddin	12279 <i>Taj Exp</i>	75/263**	3	6.55pm

*chair/1AC; **2nd/chair

MORE HANDY TRAINS FROM AGRA

DESTINATION	TRAIN NO & NAME	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	DEPARTURES
Gorakhpur*	19037/19039 Avadh Exp	249/672/920	15½	10pm
Jaipur*	14853/14863 Marudhar Exp	135/349/474	5	6.15am (except Thu)
Khajuraho	12448 UP SMPRK KRNTI	207/526**	8	11.20pm (Tue, Fri, Sun)
Kolkata (Howrah)	13008 UA Toofan Exp	394/1079**	31	12.40pm
Lucknow	13238/13240 MTJ PNBE Exp	161/422/574	6½	11.30pm
Mumbai (CST)	12138 Punjab Mail	410/1098/1501	23	8.55am
Varanasi	13238/13240 MTJ PNBE Exp	262/707/969	12	11.30pm

Fares are sleeper/3AC/2AC; *leaves from Agra Fort station; **sleeper/3AC only

is the **prepaid autorickshaw booth** (🕒24hr) which gives you a good guide for haggling elsewhere. Note, autos aren't allowed to go to Fatehpur Sikri. Sample prices: Fatehabad Rd ₹50; ISBT bus stand ₹80; Sadar Bazaar ₹40; Sikandra ₹80; Taj Mahal ₹50; half-day (four-hour) tour ₹200; full-day (10-hour) tour ₹400.

Cycle-Rickshaw

Prices from the **Taj Mahal** include: Agra Cantonment train station ₹40-50; Agra Fort ₹20; Biili Ghar bus stand ₹30; Fatehabad Rd ₹20; Kinari Bazaar ₹30; Sadar Bazaar ₹30; half-day tour ₹150-200.

Taxi

Outside Agra Cantonment train station the **prepaid taxi booth** (🕒24hr) gives a good idea of what taxis should cost. Prices include: Delhi ₹2500; Fatehabad Rd ₹150; Sadar Bazaar ₹70; Taj Mahal ₹150; half-day (four-hour) tour ₹450; full-day (eight-hour) tour ₹650.

mosque – still in use today – and three palaces for each of his favourite wives, one a Hindu, one a Muslim and one a Christian. The city was an Indo-Islamic masterpiece, but erected in an area that suffered from water shortages and so was abandoned shortly after Akbar's death.

It's easy to visit this World Heritage Site as a day trip from Agra, but there are a couple of decent places to stay, and the colourful bazaar in the village of **Fatehpur**, just below the ruins, as well as the small village of **Sikri**, a few kilometres north, are worth exploring. Also, the red-sandstone palace walls are at their most atmospheric, and photogenic, at sunset.

The bus stand is at the eastern end of the bazaar. Walking another 1km northeast will bring you to Agra Gate and the junction with the main Agra-Jaipur road, from where you can catch buses.

👁 Sights

The palace buildings lie beside the Jama Masjid mosque. Both sit on top of a ridge that runs between the small villages of Fatehpur and Sikri. Official guides, hired from the ticket office, will show you around for ₹125. There are other ruins scattered all over this area, all of which can be viewed for free. Colourful Fatehpur Bazaar also deserves some of your time.

Jama Masjid

MOSQUE

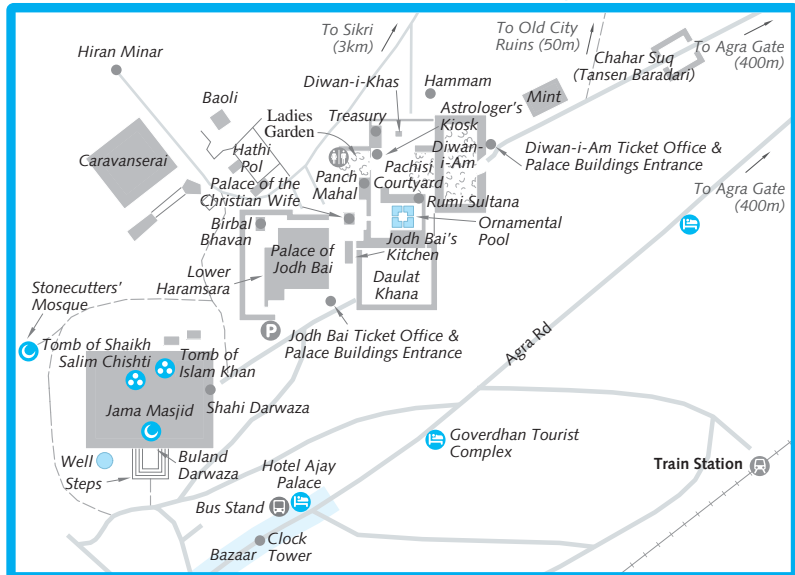
This beautiful, immense mosque was completed in 1571 and contains elements of Persian and Indian design. The main en-

Around Agra

FATEHPUR SIKRI

📍05613 / POP 28,750

This magnificent fortified ancient 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 the village of Sikri to consult the Sufi saint Shaikh Salim Chishti, who predicted the birth of an heir to the Mughal throne. When the prophecy came true, Akbar built his new capital here, including a stunning



trance, at the top of a flight of stone steps, is through the spectacular 54m-high **Buland Darwaza** (Victory Gate), built to commemorate Akbar's military victory in Gujarat.

Inside the courtyard of the mosque is the stunning white-marble **tomb of Shaikh Salim Chishti**, which was completed in 1581 and is entered through a door made of ebony. Inside it are brightly coloured flower murals while 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 *jali*, which are among the finest in India. To the right of the tomb lie the gravestones of family members of Shaikh Salim Chishti and nearby is the entrance to an underground tunnel (barred by a locked gate) that reputedly goes all the way to Agra Fort! Behind the entrance to the tunnel, on the far wall, are three holes, part of the ancient ventilation system. You can still feel the rush of cool air forcing its way through them. Just east of Shaikh Salim Chishti's tomb is the red-sandstone **tomb of Islam Khan**, the final resting place of Shaikh Salim Chishti's grandson and one-time governor of Bengal.

On the east wall of the courtyard is a smaller entrance to the mosque – the **Shahi Darwaza** (King's Gate), which leads to the palace complex.

Palaces & Pavilions

PALACES

(Indian/foreigner ₹20/260, video ₹25; ☀dawn-dusk) The first of the palace buildings you enter from the south is the largest, the **Palace of Jodh Bai**, and the one-time home of Akbar's Hindu wife, said to be his favourite. Set around an enormous courtyard, it blends traditional Indian columns, Islamic cupolas and turquoise-blue Persian roof tiles.

Just outside, to the left of Jodh Bai's former kitchen, is the **Palace of the Christian Wife**. This was used by Akbar's Goan wife Mariam, who gave birth to Jehangir here in 1569. Like many of the buildings in the palace complex, it contains elements of different religions, as befitted Akbar's tolerant religious beliefs. The domed ceiling is Islamic in style, while remnants of a wall painting of the Hindu god Shiva can also be found.

Continuing anticlockwise will bring you to the **Ornamental Pool**. Here, singers and musicians would perform on the platform above the water while Akbar watched from the pavilion in his private quarters, known as **Daulat Khana** (Abode of Fortune). Behind the pavilion is the **Khwabgah** (Dream House), a sleeping area with a huge stone bunk bed. Nowadays the only sleeping done here is by bats, hanging from the ceiling. The small room in the far corner is full of them!

Heading north from the Ornamental Pool brings you to the most intricately carved structure in the whole complex, the tiny, but elegant **Rumi Sultana**, the palace built for Akbar's Turkish Muslim wife.

Just past Rumi Sultana is **Pachisi Courtyard** where Akbar is said to have played the game *pachisi* (an ancient version of ludo) using slave girls as pieces.

From here you can step down into **Diwan-i-Am** (Hall of Public Audiences), a large courtyard (which is now a garden) where Akbar dispensed justice by orchestrating public executions, said to have been carried out by elephants trampling to death convicted criminals.

The **Diwan-i-Khas** (Hall of Private Audiences), found at the northern end of the Pachisi Courtyard, looks nothing special from the outside, but the interior is dominated by a magnificently carved stone central column. This pillar flares to create a flat-topped plinth linked to the four corners of the room by narrow stone bridges. From this plinth Akbar is believed to have debated with scholars and ministers who stood at the ends of the four bridges.

Next to Diwan-i-Khas is the **Treasury**, which houses secret stone safes in some corners (one has been left with its stone lid open for visitors to see). Sea monsters carved on the ceiling struts were there to protect the fabulous wealth once stored here. The so-called **Astrologer's Kiosk** in front has roof supports carved in a serpentine Jain style.

On one corner of the **Ladies Garden** is the impressive **Panch Mahal**, a pavilion whose five storeys decrease in size until the top one consists of only a tiny kiosk. The lower floor has 84 columns, all different.

Walking past the Palace of the Christian Wife once more will take you west to **Birbal Bhavan**, ornately carved inside and out, and thought to have been the living quarters of one of Akbar's most senior ministers. The **Lower Haramsara**, just to the south, housed the royal stables.

Plenty of ruins are scattered behind the whole complex, including the **Caravanserai**, a vast courtyard surrounded by rooms where visiting merchants stayed, and the bizarre 21m-tall **Hiran Minar**, a tower decorated with hundreds of stone representations of elephant tusks, which is said to be the place where Akbar's favourite execution elephant died. Badly defaced carvings of elephants still guard **Hathi Pol** (Elephant

Gate), while the remains of the small **Stonecutters' Mosque** and a **hammam** (bath) are also a short stroll away. Other unnamed ruins can be explored north of what is known as the **Mint** but is thought to have in fact been stables, including some in the interesting village of Sikri to the north.

Sleeping & Eating

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

Hotel Ajay Palace

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎282950; Agra Rd; d ₹200) This very friendly family guesthouse has three simple but neat and tidy double rooms with marble floors and sit-down flush toilets. It's also a very popular lunch stop (mains ₹30–70). Sit on the rooftop at the large, elongated marble table and enjoy a view of the village streets with the Jama Masjid towering above. Non-guests can store luggage (₹10) here while they visit the ruins.

Goverdhan Tourist Complex

HOTEL \$

(☎282643; www.hotelfatehpursikriviews.com; Agra Rd; d ₹400, with AC ₹700; 🍴📶📶) Brightly painted, spotless rooms set around a very well-kept garden. There's communal balcony and terrace seating, free internet and wi-fi, and the restaurant is decent (meals ₹50 to ₹120).

Information

Dangers & Annoyances

Take no notice of anyone who gets on the Fatehpur Sikri–Agra bus before the final stop at Idgah bus stand, telling you that you have arrived at the city centre or the Taj Mahal. You haven't. You're still a long rickshaw ride away, and the man trying to tease you off the bus is, surprise surprise, a rickshaw driver.

Getting There & Away

Buses run to Agra's Idgah Bus Stand from the bazaar every half hour, from 6am to 5.30pm. If you miss those, walk to Agra Gate and wave down a Jaipur–Agra bus on the main road. They run regularly, day and night.

For Bharatpur (₹15, 40 minutes) or Jaipur (₹140, 4½ hours), wave down a westbound bus from Agra Gate.

Trains for Agra Fort Station (₹6, one to two hours) leave Fatehpur Sikri at 4.53am, 10.28am, 2.10pm (to Agra Cantonment station), 3.56pm and 8.17pm. Just buy a 'general' ticket at the station and pile in.

Mathura

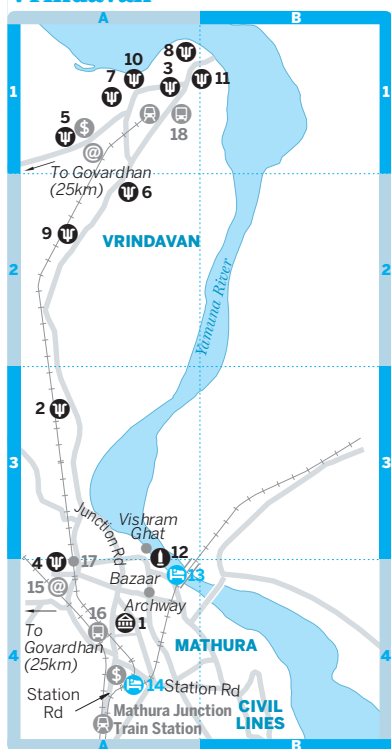
☎0565 / POP 319,235

Famed for being the birthplace of the much-loved Hindu god Krishna, Mathura is one of Hinduism's seven sacred cities and attracts floods of pilgrims, particularly during **Jan-mastami** (Krishna's birthday) in August/September. The town is dotted with temples from various ages and the stretch of the sacred Yamuna River which flows past here is lined with 25 ghats, best seen at dawn, when many people take their holy dip, and just after sunset, when hundreds of candles are sent floating out onto the river during the evening *aarti* ceremony.

Mathura was once a Buddhist centre with 20 monasteries that housed 3000 monks but, after the rise of Hinduism, and later sackings by Afghan and Mughal invaders, today all that's left of the oldest sights are the beautiful sculptures recovered from ruins, now on display in the archaeological museum.

Mathura & Vrindavan

0 1 km
0 0.5 miles



Sights

Kesava Deo Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi; ☀5.30am-8.30pm) Among the foundations of the mural-filled temple complex is a small, bare room with a slab of rock on which Krishna is said to have been born, some 3500 years ago.

Surrounding the temple are gardens and Krishna souvenir shops. Next door is **Katra Masjid**, a mosque built by Aurangzeb in 1661 on the site of a temple he ordered to be destroyed. The mosque is now guarded round the clock by soldiers to prevent a repeat of the tragic events at Ayodhya in 1992 (p376).

Archaeological Museum

MUSEUM

(Museum Rd; Indian/foreigner ₹5/25, camera ₹20; ☀10.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) The rooms that aren't empty in this large museum house superb collections of religious sculptures by the Mathura school, which flourished from the 3rd century BC to the 12th century AD.

Mathura & Vrindavan

Sights

- | | | | |
|----|--------------------------------|-------|---------|
| 1 | Archaeological Museum | ..... | A4 |
| 2 | Gita Temple | ..... | A3 |
| 3 | Govind Dev Temple | ..... | A1 |
| | Katra Masjid | ..... | (see 4) |
| 4 | Kesava Deo Temple | ..... | A4 |
| 5 | Krishna Balaram Temple Complex | ..... | A1 |
| 6 | Krishna Temple | ..... | A2 |
| 7 | Madan Mohan Temple | ..... | A1 |
| 8 | Nidhivan Temple | ..... | A1 |
| 9 | Pagal Baba Temple | ..... | A2 |
| 10 | Radha Ballabh Temple | ..... | A1 |
| 11 | Rangaji Temple | ..... | B1 |
| 12 | Sati Burj | ..... | A3 |

Sleeping

- | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------------|-------|---------|
| 13 | Agra Hotel | ..... | A4 |
| 14 | Hotel Brihwasi Royal | ..... | A4 |
| | Krishna Balaram Temple Guesthouse | ..... | (see 5) |

Eating

- | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|-------|---------|
| | New Govinda's Restaurant | | (see 5) |
|--|--------------------------|-------|---------|

Information

- | | | | |
|----|--------------------|-------|---------|
| | Information Office | ..... | (see 5) |
| 15 | Internet Cafe | ..... | A4 |

Transport

- | | | | |
|----|---------------------|-------|----|
| 16 | New Bus Stand | ..... | A4 |
| 17 | Tempos to Vrindavan | ..... | A4 |
| 18 | Vrindavan Bus Stand | ..... | A1 |

Vishram Ghat & Around

AREA

A string of ghats and temples lines the Yamuna River north of the main road bridge. The most central and most popular is **Vishram Ghat**, where Krishna is said to have rested after killing the tyrannical King Kansa. Boats gather along the banks here to take tourists along the Yamuna (₹50 per half 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).

Gita Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

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

Sleeping & Eating

Agra Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎️2403318; Bengali Ghat; s ₹250-300, d ₹400-450, with AC ₹700-750, tr ₹600-850; 📞) This area, with narrow lanes winding their way down to the ghats and temples that line the Yamuna River, is easily the most interesting place to stay. Rooms here are basic but have character and some overlook the river, while staff members are very welcoming. The restaurant has a small menu of veg dishes (₹18-30) and thalis (₹50-60) plus tea, coffee and toast.

Hotel Brijwasi Royal

HOTEL \$\$

(☎️2401224; www.brijwasiroyal.com; Station Rd; s/d incl breakfast from ₹1950/2350; 📞🍷🍷) Clean comfortable rooms come with either marble floors or carpets. All have TV, fridge and bathtub, while some overlook a buffalo pond out the back. The restaurant (meals ₹95 to ₹135), with a striking Krishna mural, does good quality Indian veg dishes and South Indian breakfasts and is deservedly popular. There's also a bar (beer from ₹110).

Information

Near New bus stand is a **State Bank of India** (Station Rd; ☀️10.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1.30pm Sat) which has a 1st-floor money-exchange desk and an ATM outside. There's a small **internet cafe** (per hr ₹30; ☀️8.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-8pm) opposite the main entrance to Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi.

Getting There & Around

BUS The so-called **New bus stand** has regular buses to Delhi (₹110, four hours) and Agra (₹41, 90 minutes) that run throughout the day and

night. **Tempos** (large autorickshaws) charge ₹10 for the 10km Mathura-Vrindavan run.

TRAIN Regular trains go to Delhi (class/chair ₹58/68, three hours), Agra (₹35/50, one hour), and Bharatpur (₹25/40, 45 minutes). The Bharatpur trains continue to Sawai Madhopur (for Ranthambore National Park, two hours) and Kota (5½ hours).

Vrindavan

☎️0565 / POP 56,618

The village of Vrindavan is where the young Krishna is said to have grown up. Pilgrims flock here from all over India and, in the case of the Hare Krishna community, from all over the world. Dozens of temples, old and modern, dot the area. They come in all shapes and sizes and many have their own unique peculiarities, making a visit here more than just your average temple hop.

The **International Society for Krishna Consciousness** (Iskcon; ☎️2540343; www.iskcon.com), also known as the Hare Krishnas, is based at the **Krishna Balaram temple complex**, accessed through a beautiful white-marble gate, which houses the tomb of Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), the founder of the Hare Krishna organisation. Several hundred foreigners attend courses and seminars here annually. The temple is closed to the public at various times of the day, most significantly from noon to 4pm. It's possible to stay at the **guesthouse** (☎️2540021; d ₹600-1500) at the back of the temple complex, where you'll also find the clean, cool and healthy **New Govinda's Restaurant** (mains ₹60-110; ☀️8am-3pm & 5.30-9.30pm), which does Indian veg dishes, pasta, cakes, shakes, salads and soups. There's a small **bakery** beside it.

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 here are as cheeky as any in India. We caught one running off with a lady's purse and saw another sitting in the rafters wearing a pair of sunglasses!

The 10-storey **Pagal Baba Temple** (admission ₹2), a fairytale-castle lookalike, has an amusing succession of animated puppets and dioramas in 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 ₹3) where you walk past a long

line of slightly moving tableaux depicting scenes from Krishna's life.

Rangaji Temple, dating from 1851, **Radha Ballabh Temple**, built in 1626, **Madan Mohan Temple** and **Nidhivan Temple** are also worth a visit.

i Information

There is an **information office** (☎10am-1pm & 5-8.30pm) in the Krishna Balaram temple complex which has lists of places to stay in Vrindavan and can help with booking Gita (studies in the Bhagavad Gita, an ancient Hindu scripture) classes.

There's an **ATM** beside the temple and an **internet cafe** (per hr ₹20; ☎9am-9pm) opposite.

i Getting There & Around

Most temples are open from dawn to dusk and admission is free, but they are well spread out so a cycle-rickshaw tour is a good way to see them. Expect to pay ₹100-150 for a half-day tour.

Tempos, shared autos and buses all charge ₹10 from Vrindavan to Mathura.

Lucknow

☎0522 / POP 2.27 MILLION

Liberal sprinkled with British Raj-era buildings – including the famous Residency – and boasting two superb mausoleums, the capital of Uttar Pradesh has enough to keep history buffs interested without attracting the hordes of tourists that sometimes make sightseeing tiresome.

The city rose to prominence as the home of the nawabs of Avadh (Oudh) who 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. And eating out is still a major highlight of a visit to the city, especially if you like kebabs!

In 1856 the British annexed Avadh, exiling Nawab Wajid Ali Shah to a palace in Kolkata (Calcutta). The disruption this caused was a factor behind the First War of Independence of 1857, culminating in the dramatic Siege of Lucknow at the Residency.

Lucknow's commercial centre, known as Hazratganj, contains much of the city's accommodation and restaurants and is centred on Mahatma Gandhi (MG) Rd.

👁 Sights

Residency

(Indian/foreigner ₹5/100, video ₹25; ☎dawn-dusk) The large collection of gardens and ruins

HISTORIC SITE

that makes up the Residency offers a fascinating historical glimpse of the beginning of the end for the British Raj. Built in 1800, the Residency became the stage for the most dramatic events of the 1857 First War of Independence, the Siege of Lucknow, a 147-day siege that claimed the lives of thousands. The 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** (admission ₹5; ☎8am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) in the main Residency building, which includes a scale model of the original buildings. Downstairs are the huge basement rooms where many of the British women and children lived throughout the siege.

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

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Hussainabad Trust Rd; Indian/foreigner ₹20/300; guide ₹75; ☎dawn-dusk) This colossal tomb is worth seeing in its own right, but the highly unusual labyrinth of corridors inside its upper floors make a visit to this *imambara* (tomb dedicated to a Shiite holy man) particularly special. The ticket price includes entrance to Chota Imambara, the clock tower and the *baradari* (summer palace), all walking distance from here.

The complex is accessed through two enormous gateways which lead into a huge courtyard. On one side is an attractive **mosque**, on the other a large **baori** (stepwell) which can be explored. Bring a torch (flashlight). At the far end of the courtyard is the huge central hall, 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.

But it's what's beyond the small entrance – intriguingly marked 'labyrinth' – to the left of the central hall, that steals the show. It leads to the **Bhulbhulaiya**, an enticing network of narrow passageways that winds its way inside the upper floors of the tomb's structure, eventually leading out to rooftop balconies. As with the stepwell, it's handy to have a torch.

Just beyond the Bara Imambara is the unusual but imposing gateway **Rumi Darwaza**, said to be a copy of an entrance gate in Is-

tanbul. '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 the beautiful white mosque **Tila Wali Masjid**, a deceptively shallow building built in 1680. The interior is repainted every year over the original designs.

On the short walk from here to Chota Imambara, a turning to your right leads to the banks of the Gomti River where you'll find some **bathing ghats**. Boat hands wait here to row visitors across the river (per boat ₹100 return).

Chota Imambara

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Hussainabad Imambara; Hussainabad Trust Rd; admission with Bara Imambara ticket; ☀️dawn-dusk) About 500m beyond the Bara Imambara, through a second beautiful gateway, is another tomb that was constructed by Mohammed Ali Shah in 1832, who is buried here, alongside his mother. Smaller than the Bara Imambara but adorned with calligraphy, it has a more serene and intimate atmosphere.

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

Outside the complex, the decaying watchtower on the other side of the road is known as **Satkhandia** (Seven Storey Tower), although it has only four storeys because construction was abandoned in 1840 when Mohammed Ali Shah died.

The 67m red-brick **clock tower** (admission with Bara Imambara ticket; ☀️dawn-dusk), the tallest in India, was built in the 1880s. Nearby is a **baradari** (summer palace; admission with Bara Imambara ticket; ☀️7am-6.30pm), a striking red-brick building, built in 1842, which overlooks an artificial lake and houses portraits of the nawabs.

Old Town

AREA

Getting lost in the crazy maze of alleyways in some of the city's older districts is a highlight of a trip to Lucknow. The bazaars in these tight lanes, overlooked by centuries-old buildings, some quite exquisite, are where traders have made their livings for generations. One great area to explore is **Aminabad**; take a rickshaw to Tunday Kebab (Lucknow's most famous kebab restaurant) then, after dining on possibly the world's greatest mutton kebabs, step out into the lanes and get lost.

Chowk, northwest of here, is even older and crazier. Everything, it seems, is made and sold here, from the impossibly thin edible silver foil that sweets are wrapped in to Lucknow's renowned *chikan* embroidery. The alleyways centre on a 1km street that runs north-south between two old gateways, **Gol Darawza** and **Akbari Darawza**. Gol Darawza is walking distance from Bara Imambara; head towards Chota Imambara, take the first left then fork right. Alternatively get up early and take the excellent Heritage Walking Tour run by UP Tourism.



Tours

UP Tourism

WALKING

(☎️2615005; Hotel Gomti, 6 Sapru Marg; 2hr tour ₹10; ☀️10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, tours 7am) This fabulous two-hour Heritage Walking Tour could well turn out to be the best ₹10 you ever spend. Meet your English-speaking guide outside Tila Wali Masjid then follow him first around the mosque, then the Bara Imambara (you won't need to pay an entrance fee at this time of the morning), before delving in to the architectural delights of Chowk. This is a great way to get your bearings amongst Chowk's maze of alleys before returning on your own in the evening when things really get started.

This tour had only just started at the time of research, so check with UP Tourism at Gomti Hotel to see that it's still running as stated here.



Sleeping



Lucknow Homestay

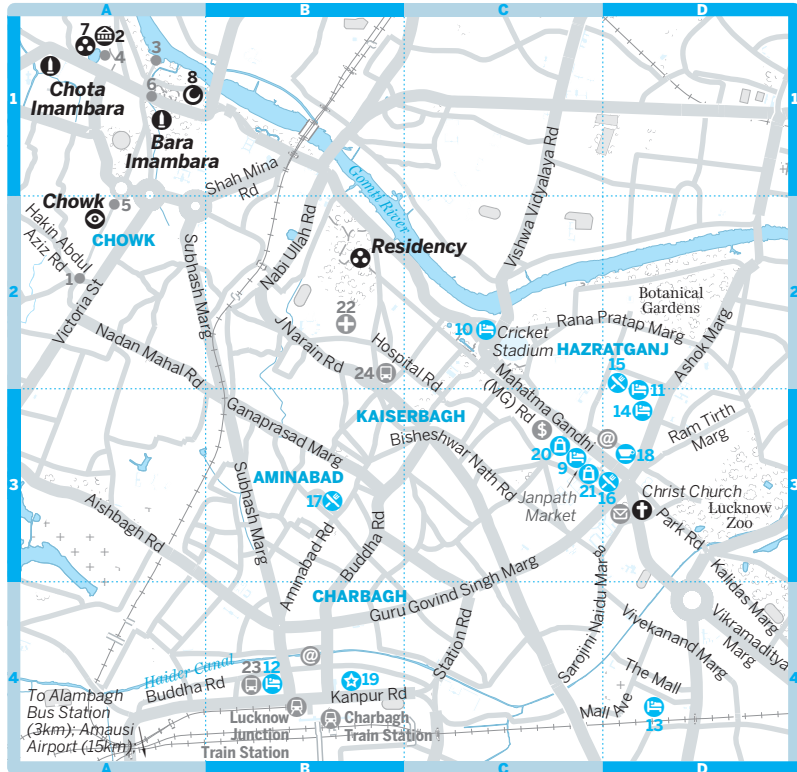
HOMESTAY \$

(☎️2235460; naheed2k@gmail.com; 110D Mall Ave; r incl breakfast ₹450; 📞) This delightful family homestay in a leafy neighbourhood is run by the very welcoming Naheed and her family. The 11 rooms are simple but large and comfortable, and two have private bathrooms. You may need to call for directions as Mall Ave is a bit of a maze. The house number isn't marked, but you enter through a small green garden gate. A sign reading 'Munni's Dream' is above the front door. To help non English-speaking rickshaw riders understand where you're going, try to draw out the word Mall; 'Ma-ah-luh'.

Hotel Clarks Avadh

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎️2620131; www.clarksavadh.com; 8 MG Rd; r from ₹8000; 📞@📞) Lucknow's top hotel displays a cool elegance and restrained decor. Slick



rooms have bathtubs 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 the wonderful top-floor restaurant, Falaknuma.

Hotel Mayur

HOTEL \$

(☎2451824; Subhash Marg; s ₹275-350, d ₹350-450, with AC ₹550/650; ☎) Good-value rooms in this well-run establishment are basic but come with cable TV and some have huge bathrooms. Definitely one of the better cheapies near the train station.

Hotel Gomti

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2620624; hotelgomti@up-tourism.com; 6 Sapru Marg; r from ₹650, with AC from ₹1200; ☎) AC rooms are decent, but the cheaper rooms, with air coolers, are a bit musty. All rooms come reasonably well equipped, though, with TV, sofa, table and chairs. A restaurant, a bar with a garden and a UP Tourism office are all here too.

Capoor's

HOTEL \$\$

(☎4954300; www.hotelcapoors.com; 52 MG Rd; s/d from ₹1500/1700; ☎) Although perfectly located in the heart of Hazratganj, Capoor's is in need of a refit. Rooms have a homely feel, and there's an old-fashioned ambience about the place, but the carpets aren't the cleanest and the bathrooms are underwhelming for this price. **Nawab's Restaurant** (☎7am-3.30pm & 7pm-11.15pm; mains ₹100 to ₹250) is very popular, however, and you won't forget the neon-tastic Strokes Sports Bar in a hurry.

Tekarees Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(☎4016241; www.tekareesinn.com; 17/3 Ashok Marg; s/d/ste ₹1700/2300/2600; ☎) Neat and tidy business hotel with marble floors in decent-sized twin rooms. Bathrooms are spartan but clean.



Eating

The refined palates of the nawabs left Lucknow with a reputation for rich Mughlai cui-

Lucknow

📍 Top Sights

Bara Imambara.....	A1
Chota Imambara.....	A1
Chowk.....	A2
Residency.....	B2

📍 Sights

1 Akbari Darwaza.....	A2
2 Baradari Picture Gallery.....	A1
3 Bathing Ghats.....	A1
4 Clock Tower.....	A1
5 Gol Darwaza.....	A2
6 Rumi Darwaza.....	A1
7 Satkhanda.....	A1
8 Tila Wali Masjid.....	A1

Activities, Courses & Tours

UP Tourism.....	(see 11)
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🛏 Sleeping

9 Capoor's.....	C3
10 Hotel Clarks Avadh.....	C2
11 Hotel Gomti.....	D3
12 Hotel Mayur.....	B4
13 Lucknow Homestay.....	D4
14 Tekarees Inn.....	D3

🍴 Eating

15 Brindavan.....	D2
Falaknuma.....	(see 10)
16 Moti Mahal Restaurant.....	D3
Royal Cafe.....	(see 9)
17 Tunday Kabab.....	B3

☕ Drinking

Barista.....	(see 18)
Café Coffee Day.....	(see 18)
18 Indian Coffee House.....	D3
Strokes Sports Bar.....	(see 9)
Tashna Bar.....	(see 11)

🎪 Entertainment

19 Rabindralaya Auditorium.....	B4
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🛍 Shopping

20 Ram Advani Bookshop.....	C3
21 Sugandhco.....	C3

Information

22 Balrampur District Hospital.....	B2
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Transport

23 Charbagh Bus Stand.....	B4
24 Kaiserbagh Bus Stand.....	B2

sine, and the city's dinner tables are heavily influenced by the Arab world. Lucknow is famous for its biryani dishes as well as its wide range of kebabs (p374). It's also known 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; *rumali* means handkerchief) 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.

Like many Indian cities, Lucknow has a fine array of *chaat*, savoury snacks typically served in mini *puris* (flat dough that puffs up when deep fried).

owned, 100-year-old kebab shop serves up delicious plates of mutton biryani, kebabs and tandoori chicken. The mutton kebab here is impossibly delicious. Consider coming along early to give yourself time for a wander around the bazaar here, a prime location for picking up *chikan* (delicately embroidered muslin cloth). Rickshaw riders know how to find this place. You'll find other Tunday Kabab restaurants around the city, but they're all copies.

Moti Mahal Restaurant

INDIAN \$\$

(75 MG Rd; mains ₹40-90 & ₹70-130; ☺11am-11pm; ☎) Downstairs is perfect for breakfast or lunch, with its dosa and coffee as well as some Chinese noodle dishes. Come evening, head upstairs for more refined dining in the good-quality, low-lit AC restaurant. You could do worse here than try the Lucknow *dum aloo* (potatoes stuffed with nuts and paneer in a tomato-based sauce) followed by *kulfi faluda*.

Royal Cafe

MUGHLAI \$\$

(MG Rd; chaat ₹10-50, mains ₹100-250) Even if you don't step inside this excellent restaurant, don't miss its exceedingly popular *chaat* (spicy snack) stand at the front where mixed



Tunday Kabab

NORTH INDIAN \$

(just off Aminabad Rd; dishes ₹20-60; ☺11.30am-12.30am) Tucked away down a small street in the bustling Aminabad district, this re-

LUCKNOW'S TOP FIVE KEBABS

Kakori Kebab

Originates from Kakori, a small town outside Lucknow. Legend has it that the old and toothless Nawab of Kakori asked his royal *bawarchi* (chef) to make kebabs that would simply melt in the mouth. So these kebabs are made adding papaya as a tenderizer to raw mincemeat and a mix of spices. They are then applied to skewers and barbecued over charcoals.

Galawat Kebab

This is the mouthwatering creation that is served up in Lucknow's most famous kebab restaurant, Tunday Kabab. There it is simply referred to as a mutton kebab, and in other restaurants it is often called Tunday. Galawat is the name of the tenderizer that's used for these kebabs. Essentially, they are the same as kakori kebabs except that rather than being barbecued they are made into patties and shallow fried in oil or ghee.

Shami Kebab

Raw mincemeat is boiled with spices and black gram lentil. It is then ground on stone before being mixed with finely chopped onions, coriander leaves and green chillies. Shaped into patties, it is then shallow fried like seekh kebabs.

Pasanda Kebab

Fillets (pasanda) of beef or mutton are marinated with papaya and salt before yoghurt, spices, ginger, garlic paste and finally roasted gram flour are added. The marinated meat is then added to heated ghee and bay leaves and cooked slowly on a charcoal fire.

Nargisi Kebab

A mix of mincemeat, roasted gram flour (which acts as a binder) and spices is coated over boiled eggs and gently tied with thread. After each egg has been deep fried, the thread is removed and the egg cut lengthwise so that it resembles the *nargis* (the flower of Narcissus, or daffodil).

chaats are served in an *aloo* (potato) basket or in mini *puris*. Inside you can dine on fine Mughlai cuisine, some mouth-watering kebabs and even pizza.

Brindavan

SOUTH INDIAN \$\$

(Sapru Marg; mains ₹45-75, thalis ₹90; ☺11am-11pm) This smart 1st-floor restaurant has good service and a modest but delicious south Indian menu including *idli*, *vada*, *uttapam*, *thali* and more than 20 varieties of dosa. There's a huge window along the far wall allowing you to eat overlooking the street scenes below.

Falaknuma

MUGHLAI \$\$\$

(Hotel Clarks Avadh, 8 MG Rd; mains ₹210-525) Lucknow's best hotel also lays claim to having one of its best restaurants. The stylish rooftop dining room has fabulous bird's-eye views and serves up sumptuous Nawab cuisine, such as *kakori* (minced mutton) and *galawat* (minced goat) kebabs. There's a small bar area (beer from ₹200) if you just want to enjoy the views.

**Drinking & Entertainment****Indian Coffee House**

CAFE

(Ashok Marg; ☺8am-10pm) This 60-year-old branch of this Indian institution has gone fusion (Indian Coffee House purists steer clear!), meaning you can now dine on dishes from around the world (pizza, noodles etc) whilst having your morning coffee. Nearby Café Coffee Day and Barista do better coffee but at much higher prices (coffee from ₹46).

Strokes Sports Bar

BAR

(Capoor's, MG Rd; ☺11am-11pm, till 3am Sat) With metallic decor, zebra-print chairs, ultraviolet lights and a backlit bar, this must be one of the strangest places in India to come to watch the latest cricket match on TV. Gets pretty lively at weekends.

Rabindralaya Auditorium

THEATRE

(☎2635670; Kanpur Rd) Opposite the two train stations, this auditorium hosts a variety of cultural shows, including classical music,

dance and theatrical performances, all free of charge. It's often used by schools, however, so is not always open to the public. Call ahead.

Tashna Bar

BAR

(Hotel Gomti; Sapru Marg; ☎11am-midnight) Has the usual AC bar with little atmosphere found in many hotels, but the added attraction of a beer garden on a well-tended lawn.



Shopping

Lucknow is famous for *chikan*, an embroidered cloth worn by men and women. It is sold in a number of shops in the bazaars near Tunday Kebab, in the maze of streets in Chowk and in the small, traffic-free Janpath Market, just south of MG Rd in Hazratganj.

Sugandhco

PERFUME

(www.sugandhco.com; D-4 Janpath Market; ☎mid-day-7.30pm Mon-Sat) A family business since 1850, the sweet-scented Sugandhco sells attar (pure essence oil extracted from flowers by a traditional method) in the form of women's perfume and men's cologne (from ₹20) as well as incense sticks (from ₹15).

Ram Advani Bookshop

BOOKSTORE

(☎2223511; Mayfair Bldg, MG Rd; ☎10am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) This Lucknow institution is worth visiting just to meet the fantastically friendly and exceedingly knowledgeable 90-year-old Mr Advani, who owns the place. Be aware, though, that he takes his sestas very seriously and is rarely seen between noon and 4pm. There's a strong collection of books on Lucknow history here as well as some popular India-based contemporary literature.



Information

Internet Access

Cyber Cafe (Buddha Rd; per hr ₹20; ☎8am-10pm)

Cyber City (per hr ₹25; ☎9am-9pm) At the end of an alley off MG Rd.

Medical Services

Balrampur District Hospital (☎2224040; Hospital Rd) The emergency department is to the right as you enter the complex.

Money

Foreign-friendly ATMs are dotted around Hazratganj. There's also one at the train station and the airport.

ICICI (MG Rd, Hazratganj; ☎8am-8pm Mon-Sat) Approximately 100m northwest of Ram

Advani Bookshop. Changes travellers cheques (Monday to Friday only, 10am-5pm) and cash and has an ATM.

Post

Main post office (MG Rd; ☎24hr) Grand Raj-era architecture.



Getting There & Away

Air

Amausi airport is 15km southwest of Lucknow. **Jet Airlines** (☎2434009; Amausi airport; ☎7am-7pm) is one of a number of airlines that has offices at the airport. Daily flights include Delhi (around ₹3000), Kolkata (₹4000) and Mumbai (Bombay; ₹5000).

Bus

Long-distance buses leave from **Alambagh bus station**, 4km southwest of the town centre. Non-AC services include: Faizabad (₹91, four hours); Allahabad (₹131, 5½ hours); Gorakhpur (₹188, eight hours); Varanasi (₹197, eight hours); and Agra (₹237, nine hours). Two or three AC buses run each day to each of these destinations. They are one or two hours quicker, but cost more than twice the price. Regular local buses (₹5) run to Alambagh bus station from **Charbagh bus stand**, near the train station.

Kaiserbagh bus stand also has hourly services to Faizabad and Gorakhpur as well as buses to Rupaiddha (seven hours), a rickshaw ride away from the rarely used Nepal border crossing of Jamunaha.

Train

The two main stations, **Charbagh** and **Lucknow Junction**, are side by side. Services (above) for most major destinations leave from Charbagh, including several daily to Agra, Varanasi, Faizabad, Gorakhpur and New Delhi. Lucknow Junction handles the one daily train to Mumbai.



Getting Around

To/From the Airport

An autorickshaw to Amausi airport from the prepaid taxi stand outside the train station costs ₹105 and takes about 30 minutes.

Local Transport

A short cycle-rickshaw ride is ₹20. From the train station to the Residency costs about ₹40, as does the trip from Hazratganj to Bara Imambara. An autorickshaw from the train station to the Bara Imambara is about ₹80. A half-day (four-hour) autorickshaw tour covering all the main sights costs ₹255 from the prepaid taxi stand at the train station. A full-day tour is ₹510.

HANDY TRAINS FROM LUCKNOW

DESTINATION	TRAIN NO & NAME	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	DEPARTURES
Agra	13237/13239 PNBE-MTJ Exp	161/422/574	6	11.55pm
Allahabad	14210 Intercity Exp	244*	4	7.30am
Faizabad	13010 Doon Exp	120/238/319	2½	8.35am
Gorakhpur	15708 ASR-KIR Exp	146/380/516	5	12.55am
Jhansi	11016 Kushinagar Exp	150/393/534	6½	12.40am
Kolkata (Howrah)	13006 ASR-HWH Mail	347/947/1302	20½	10.55am
Mumbai (CST)**	12533 Pushpak Exp	422/1131/1547	24	7.45pm
New Delhi	0429 LKO NDLS	212/564/772	9	10.50pm
Varanasi	14236 BE-BSB Exp	161/422/481***	7½	11.15pm

Fares are sleeper/3AC/2AC; *chair class only; **leaves from Lucknow Junction; ***sleeper/3AC/first class

Ayodhya

📍05278 / POP 49,593

With monkeys galore, the usual smattering of cows and even the odd working elephant, the relatively traffic-free streets of Ayodhya would be an intriguing place to spend some time even if it wasn't for the religious significance of the place. This is not only the birthplace of Rama, and as such one of Hinduism's seven holy cities, nor just the birthplace of four of Jainism's 24 *tirthankars* (religious teachers), this is also the site of one of modern India's most controversial religious disputes.

Ayodhya became tragically synonymous with Hindu extremism in 1992, when rioting Hindus tore down the Babri Masjid, a mosque built by the Mughals in the 15th century, which Hindus claimed stood on the site of an earlier Rama temple, marking Lord Rama's birthplace. Hindus built Ram Janam Bhumi in its place. Tit-for-tat reprisals soon followed, including reactionary riots across the country that led to more than 2000 deaths, and the problem eventually reached the High Court. Archaeological investigations were carried out at the site and, in September 2010, the Allahabad High Court ruled that the site should be split equally between three religious groups; two Hindu, one Muslim. At the time of research, the Muslim group Sunni Waqf Board, had vowed to appeal against the decision. In the meantime, security around the Ram Janam Bhumi remains incredibly tight.

The slightly larger town of Faizabad, 7km away, is the jumping-off point for Ayodhya

and where you'll find more accommodation. From the Faizabad bus stand, turn left onto the main road where you'll find tempos (₹8) to Ayodhya.

👁️ Sights

A 20-minute tempo ride from Faizabad brings you to Ayodhya, where you can make a walking tour of the temples.

Hanumangarhi

TEMPLE

(☀️dawn-dusk) This is one of the town's most popular temples, and is the closest of the major temples here to the main road. Walk up the 76 steps to the ornate carved gateway and the fortresslike outer walls, and join the throng inside offering *prasad* (temple-blessed food).

Dashrath Bhavan

TEMPLE

(☀️dawn-dusk) A further 200m up the side road from Hanumangarhi, this temple is approached through a colourful entranceway. The atmosphere inside is peaceful, with musicians playing and orange-clad sadhus reading scriptures.

Kanak Bhavan

TEMPLE

(Palace of Gold; ☀️8.30-11.30am & 4.30-7pm) A few minutes' walk straight on from Dashrath Bhavan is this impressive, ancient but often rebuilt palace-cum-temple.

Ram Janam Bhumi

TEMPLE

(☀️7-11am & 2-6pm) If you turn left at Dashrath Bhavan, when coming from Hanumangarhi, you soon reach the highly contentious temple that marks the birthplace of Rama.

Security here is staggering. You must first show your passport then leave all belongings apart from your passport and money in nearby lockers. You are then searched several times before being accompanied through a caged corridor that leads to a spot 20m away from a makeshift tent of a shrine, which marks Rama's birthplace.

FREE Ramkatha Museum MUSEUM

(☎10.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) A five-minute walk on the other side of the main road from the above-mentioned temples brings you to Ramkatha Museum, a large yellow-and-red building with paintings and ancient sculptures. Every evening except Monday the museum hosts free **performances** (☎6-9pm) of the Ram Lila (a dramatic re-enactment of the battle between Lord Ram and Ravan, as described in the Hindu epic, the Ramayana).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Shan-e-Avadh HOTEL \$
(☎223586; shane_avadh@yahoo.com; Faizabad; s ₹250-500, with AC ₹850-1400, d ₹275-600, with AC ₹950-1700; ☎) There's a huge range of rooms at this well-run establishment in Faizabad, and even the cheapest ones are neat and spacious, if a little basic. There's also a good **restaurant** (mains ₹55-150). This place is popular so try to book ahead. Turn left out of the bus stand and it's on your right after a few hundred metres.

Ramdhan Guest House HOTEL \$
(☎232791, 9415917626; Ayodhya; d ₹200-400, with AC ₹650-750; ☎) This pink hotel, with green-and-blue pastel interior, is the most fun place to stay in Ayodhya. Rooms are basic (tap-and-bucket showers, squat toilets) but are a good size and clean. There's no restaurant but friendly staff will whip up a thali (₹30 to ₹70) and some chai. From the path leading up to Hanumangarhi, walk back towards Faizabad, take the second left, walk for about 200m and it's on your left, just after Cyber Zone internet cafe.

Hotel Krishna Palace HOTEL \$\$
(☎221367; www.krishnapalace.in; Faizabad; s ₹500-600, with AC ₹990-1200, d ₹700-850, with AC ₹1250-1600; ☎) If Shan-e-Avadh is full, this clean and comfortable hotel is a strong alternative in Faizabad. Also has a good **restaurant** (mains ₹70-140; ☎7am-10.30pm) and a small **bar** (beer ₹70; ☎1pm to 10.30pm). Turn left out of the bus stand, then first right, then left at the small roundabout, left again and it's on your left.

i Information

There's an HDFC Bank **ATM** 100m from Hotel Krishna Palace. **Cyber Zone** (per hr ₹20; ☎10am-9pm) is an internet cafe just past Hotel Shan-e-Avadh. There's another one close to Ramdhan Guest House.

i Getting There & Away

From Faizabad bus stand, buses run to Lucknow (₹91, three hours), Gorakhpur (₹101, five hours) and Allahabad (₹107, five hours).

Daily trains include Lucknow (13307 *Gangasutlej Express*, sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹120/238/319, four hours, 11.13am), Varanasi (13010 *Doon Express*, sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹120/306/413, five hours, 11.15am) and Delhi (14205 *Faizabad-Delhi Express*, ₹252/678/930, 12 hours, 9.30pm).

A cycle-rickshaw from the bus stand to the train station is ₹10 to ₹20.

Allahabad

☎0532 / POP 1,049,579

For all its importance in Hindu mythology, Indian history and modern politics, Allahabad is a surprisingly relaxed city that offers plenty in terms of sights, but little in the way of in-ye-face hassle.

Brahma, the Hindu god of creation, is believed to have landed on earth in Allahabad, or Prayag as it was originally known, and to have called it the king of all pilgrimage centres. Indeed, Sangam, a river confluence on the outskirts of the city, is the most celebrated of India's four Kumbh Mela locations. The vast riverbanks here attract tens of millions of pilgrims every six years for either the Kumbh Mela or the Ardh (Half) Mela, but every year there is a smaller Magh Mela.

Of more immediate interest to casual visitors are Allahabad's grand Raj-era buildings, its Mughal fort and tombs, and the historic legacy of the Nehru family.

Allahabad's Civil Lines is a district of broad avenues, Raj-era bungalows, hotels, restaurants and coffee shops. The Civil Lines bus stand – the main bus terminal – is also here. This area is divided from Chowk, the crowded, older part of town, by the railway line. Sangam is 4km southeast of the city centre.

o Sights & Activities

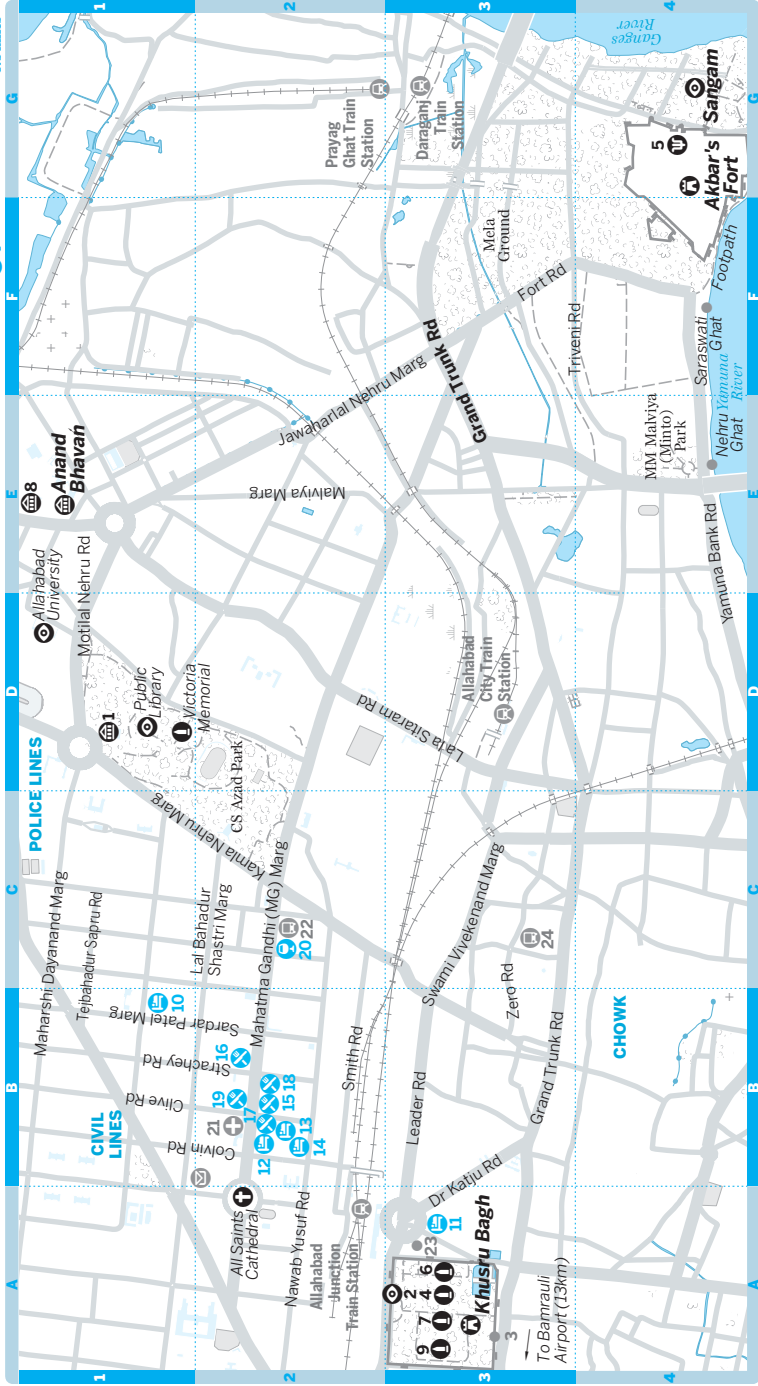
Sangam

SACRED SITE

This is the particularly auspicious point where two of India's holiest rivers, the Ganges and the Yamuna, meet one of Hinduism's mythical rivers, the Saraswati. All year round,

Allahabad

0 0.5 miles
0 1 km



Allahabad

📍 Top Sights

Akbar's Fort	G4
Anand Bhavan.....	E1
Khusru Bagh	A3
Sangam	G4

📍 Sights

1 Allahabad Museum.....	D1
2 Khusru Bagh North Gate.....	A3
3 Khusru Bagh South Gate	A3
4 Nesa Begum's Tomb.....	A3
5 Patalpuri Temple	G4
6 Prince Khusru's Tomb.....	A3
7 Shah Begum's Tomb.....	A3
8 Swaraj Bhavan.....	E1
9 Tamolon's Tomb.....	A3
Undying Banyan Tree.....	(see 5)

🛏 Sleeping

10 Grand Continental.....	B1
11 Hotel Prayag	A3
12 Hotel Tepso.....	B2
13 Hotel Valentine's.....	B2

14 Royal Hotel	B2
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🍴 Eating

15 Aao Ji Haryana Dhaba.....	B2
16 El Chico	B2
El Chico Takeaway	(see 16)
17 Indian Coffee House.....	B2
Jade Garden	(see 12)
18 Kamdhenu Sweets.....	B2
19 Shahenshah.....	B2

🍷 Drinking

Patiyala Peg Bar	(see 10)
20 Rahi Ilawar Tourist Bungalow.....	C2

Information

21 Apollo Clinic.....	B2
UP Tourism Office.....	(see 20)

Transport

22 Civil Lines Bus Stand	C2
23 Tempo & Autorickshaw Stand.....	A3
24 Zero Road Bus Stand.....	C3

pilgrims row boats out to this holy spot, but their numbers increase dramatically during the annual **Magh Mela**, a six-week festival held between January and March, which culminates in six communal 'holy dips' (p380). Every 12 years the massive **Kumbh Mela** (p1103) takes place here, attracting millions of people, while the **Ardh Mela** (Half Mela) is held here every six years.

In the early 1950s, 350 pilgrims were killed in a stampede to the soul-cleansing water (an incident re-created vividly in Vikram Seth's immense novel *A Suitable Boy*). The last Ardh Mela, in 2007, attracted more than 70 million people – the largest-ever human gathering. The next Kumbh Mela will take place in 2013. Expect a big one.

Old boat hands will row you out to the sacred confluence for around ₹50 per person, or ₹250–500 per boat.

Around the corner from Sangam (skirt the riverbank around the front of Akbar's Fort) are the **Saraswati** and **Nehru Ghats**, home to a nightly *aarti* (an auspicious lighting of lamps/candles).

Akbar's Fort & Patalpuri Temple FORT

Built by the Mughal Emperor Akbar, this 16th-century fort on the northern bank of the Yamuna has massive walls with three gateways flanked by towers. Most of it is occupied

by the Indian army and cannot be visited, but a small door in the eastern wall by Sangam leads to one part you can enter, the underground **Patalpuri temple** (admission by donation; ☀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. You may be pressured into giving ₹100 at some shrines. A few coins are perfectly acceptable.

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.

Khusru Bagh PARK

This intriguing park, surrounded by huge walls, contains four highly impressive **Mughal tombs** (admission free; ☀dawn–dusk). One is that of **Prince Khusru**, the 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.

A second tomb belongs to **Shah Begum**, Khusru's mother (Jehangir's first wife), who committed suicide in 1603 with an opium overdose because of the ongoing feud be-



DIP DATES

The following are the auspicious bathing dates for upcoming mela to be held at Sangam in Allahabad. The 2013 event will be a full-blown Kumbh Mela (see p1103).

2012	2013	2014	2015
9 Jan	14 Jan	14 Jan	5 Jan
14 Jan	27 Jan	16 Jan	14 Jan
23 Jan	10 Feb	30 Jan	20 Jan
28 Jan	15 Feb	4 Feb	24 Jan
7 Feb	25 Feb	14 Feb	3 Feb
20 Feb	10 Mar	28 Feb	17 Feb

tween her son and his father. Between these two, a third, particularly attractive tomb was constructed by **Nesa Begum**, Khusru's sister, although was never actually used as a tomb. A smaller structure, called **Tamolon's Tomb**, stands to the west of the others, but its origin is unknown.

Anand Bhavan

MUSEUM

(Indian/foreigner ₹10/50; ☺9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) This picturesque two-storey building 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, 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 was married here in 1942.

Allahabad Museum

MUSEUM

(Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; Kamlal Nehru Marg; ☺10.30am-4.45pm Tue-Sun) This extensive museum in the grounds of a pleasant park has archaeological and Nehru family items, modern paintings, miniatures and ancient sculptures.

Sleeping

Royal Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎2427201; Nawab Yusuf Rd; r ₹150-350) This wonderful old building, near the train station, used to be royal stables but was converted into a hotel by the King of Kalakankar, a former princely state, after he was re-used entry into a British-run hotel nearby.

It's basic and very run down, but has bags of character. The rooms (with 6m-high ceilings) and their bathrooms, are absolutely enormous. Has 24-hour checkout.

Hotel Prayag

HOTEL \$

(☎22656416; Noorullah Rd; s ₹250-400, d ₹350-450, with AC ₹800-900; ☹☺) South of the train station, this large, well-equipped, well-run place with an internet cafe and ATM has a wide variety of rooms, so look before you leap into one. It's pretty old-fashioned and rooms are basic, especially the non-AC ones. Note: the shared bathrooms are tap-and-bucket jobs.

Hotel Tepsu

HOTEL \$\$

(☎22561408; MG Marg; dm ₹250, s/d ₹700/900; ☹) Small clean rooms arranged around a neat little patio courtyard are on the pricey side, but come with TV and AC. The 12-bed dorm also has its own bathroom. There's a small children's playground in the front garden beside the spotless Jade Garden Restaurant. Has 24-hour checkout.

Grand Continental

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎22260631; www.birhotel.com; Sardar Patel Marg; s ₹3000-4500, d ₹4000-5500, ste ₹6000-8000; ☹☺☹☹) Rooms are a bit old fashioned, with carpeted floors and nonmatching furniture, but they're larger than other top-end choices in town, and staying here means you can use the delightful swimming pool, housed in a beautiful open-air marble courtyard. There's also a good quality restaurant and a bar where evening *ghazal* performances are held. Wi-fi is free.

Hotel Valentines

HOTEL \$\$

(☎22560030; 7/3/2b Clive Rd, off MG Marg; d ₹1500-1900; ☹) Not as romantic as the name suggests, but smart, comfortable rooms have TV, AC, carpeted floors and big bathrooms with towels and toiletries provided.



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 some stalls along MG Marg setting up tables and chairs on the footpath in the evening.



Indian Coffee House

CAFE \$

(MG Marg; coffee from ₹13; mains ₹20-32; ☺8am-9pm) This large, airy 50-year-old coffee hall is a top choice for breakfast, with waiters

in fan-tailed headgear serving up delicious south Indian fare – dosa, *idli*, *uttapam* – as well as eggs, omelettes and toast.

Shahenshah

INDIAN \$

(MG Marg; mains ₹20-80; ☺11am-10.30pm) Watch young chefs frying up their creations from a couple of stalls set around a half open-air seating area with plastic tables and chairs and a high corrugated iron roof. This is no-nonsense, cheap eating, but it's popular with the locals so there's a nice atmosphere. The menu includes *uttapam*, *paratha* (flaky bread made with ghee and cooked on a hotplate), a few Chinese dishes, pizza and some absolutely cracking dosa. The fruit beer isn't alcoholic.

Aao Ji Haryana Dhaba

INDIAN \$

(MG Marg; mains ₹20-80; ☺9am-11pm) This airy fan-cooled shack is run by friendly staff and serves up great-value south Indian breakfasts as well as thalis (₹40-55) and north Indian curries.

El Chico

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(MG Marg; mains ₹100-240; ☺noon-3pm & 7.30-11pm; ☑) A swish restaurant with a reliable Indian, Chinese and continental menu, including fish dishes and sizzlers. Next door, **El Chico Takeaway** (snacks ₹12-60; ☺9am-10.30pm) tempts diners with ice creams, cakes, cookies and savoury snacks.

Kamdhenu Sweets

SWEETS \$

(MG Marg; snacks ₹5-25; ☺9am-10pm) Very popular snack shop selling delicious homebaked sweets (from ₹240 per box) as well as cakes, samosas, sandwiches and ice cream (from ₹25).

Jade Garden

INDIAN \$\$

(Hotel Tepsu, MG Marg; mains ₹100-250; ☺11am-11pm; ☑) Spotless hotel restaurant with attentive black-tie staff serving Indian, Chinese, nonveg sizzlers, salads and tandoori.



Drinking

Patiyala Peg Bar

BAR

(Grand Continental hotel, Sardar Patel Marg) Has live *ghazal* music nightly from 7.30pm.

Rahi Ilawart Tourist Bungalow

BAR

(☺11am-11pm)



Information

ATMs dot the Civil Lines area.

Apollo Clinic (☎3290507; MG Marg; ☺8am-8pm) A modern private medical facility with 24-hour pharmacy.

Cyber Cafe (per hr ₹20; ☺9am-9pm) Behind Shahenshah restaurant.

Post office (Sarojini Naidu Marg; ☺9am-5pm Mon-Sat)

UP Tourism (☎2408873; rtoalld_upt@yahoo.co.in; 35 MG Marg; ☺10am-5pm Mon-Sat) At the Rahi Ilawart Tourist Bungalow. Very helpful.



Getting There & Away

Air

Bamrauli airport is 15km west of Allahabad. **Air India** (☎2581370; ☺incoming flights), at the airport, has daily flights to Delhi from ₹4500, except on Sunday. An autorickshaw to the airport costs ₹150 to ₹200, a taxi about ₹350.

Bus

From the **Civil Lines bus stand** regular buses run to Varanasi (₹85, three hours), Lucknow (₹130, five hours), Faizabad (₹110, five hours) and Gorakhpur (₹180, eight hours). More comfortable AC buses are much less frequent and about twice the price. To get to Delhi or Agra, change in Lucknow, or take a train.

For hourly buses to Chitrakut (₹82, four hours, 3am to 9pm), head to **Zero Road bus stand**.

Train

Allahabad Junction is the main station. A few daily trains run to Lucknow, Varanasi, Delhi, Agra and Kolkata. Frequent trains also run to Satna from where you can catch buses to Khajuraho. Also see p382.



Getting Around

Cycle-rickshaws (₹20 for a short trip) are plentiful. The train station is your best bet for autos. A return auto to Sangam should cost around ₹150. Consider hiring one for half a day (₹300, four hours) to take in more of the sights. Vikrams (large shared autos) hang about on the south side of the train station. Destinations include Zero Road Bus Stand (₹5) and Sangam (₹10).

Chitrakut

☎05198 / POP 22,294

Known as a mini Varanasi because of its many temples and ghats, this small, peaceful town on the banks of the River Mandakini is the stuff of Hindu legends. It is here that Hinduism's principal trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva – took on their incarnations. It is also the place where Lord Rama is believed to have spent 11½ years of his 14-year exile after being banished from his birthplace in Ayodhya at the behest of a jealous stepmother.

HANDY TRAINS FROM ALLAHABAD

DESTINATION	TRAIN NO & NAME	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	DEPARTURES
Agra	12403 ALD MTJ Exp	220/561/755	7½	11.30pm
Kolkata (Howrah)	12312 Kalka Mail	318/841/1142	14	5.30pm
Lucknow	14209 ALD-LKO Intercity	244*	4½	3.20pm
New Delhi	12559 Shiv Ganga Exp	277/723/979	9	10.30pm
Satna	13201 Rajendra-Nagar Exp	120/287/387	4½	8.25am
Varanasi	15017 Gorakhpur Exp	120/243/326	4	8.35am

Fares are sleeper/3AC/2AC; *AC chair only

Today Chitrakut attracts throngs of pilgrims, giving the area a strong religious quality, particularly by Ram Ghat, the town's centre of activity, and at the holy hill of Kamadgiri, 2km away.

Dozens, sometimes hundreds, of devotees descend onto **Ram Ghat** to take holy dips at dawn before returning at the end of the day for the evening **aarti**. **Rowboats** wait here to take you across to the opposite bank (₹5), which is actually in Madhya Pradesh, or to scenic spots along the river. The 2km-trip to the **Glass Temple** (₹100 return), a building covered in religious mosaics made with thousands of pieces of coloured glass, is popular. During the day, many people make their way to **Kamadgiri** (₹5 by tempo), a hill revered as the holy embodiment of Lord Rama. A 5km-circuit (90 minutes) around the base of the hill takes you past prostrating pilgrims, innumerable monkeys and temples galore.

The most enjoyable place to stay in Chitrakut is **Pitra Smiviti Vishram-grah** (☎9450223214; Ram Ghat; r ₹350, without bathroom ₹200). Rooms built just in front of Bada Math, a 300-year-old red-stone palace, are very basic, but lead out onto a huge shared balcony overlooking Ram Ghat. Look for the word 'Lodge' painted on the balcony. There are more comfortable rooms at **UP Tourist Bungalow** (☎224219; dm ₹125-300, s/d/tr with AC ₹750/800/950; ☎), which also has an OK **restaurant** (mains ₹40-70; ☎6am-midnight).

Shared minivans and tempos ply the 10km route from the train station to Ram Ghat (₹8), passing the bus stand (2km from the train station) and the UP Tourist Bungalow (1km before Ram Ghat).

With the exception of buses to Allahabad (₹82, four hours), which run regularly all day,

buses in Chitrakut are notoriously unreliable. There *should* be a couple a day to both Varanasi (₹160, seven hours) and Khajuraho (₹76, four hours), leaving at around midday, but they don't always materialise. For Varanasi, you're better off changing in Allahabad. For Khajuraho, you will probably have to change once, twice or even three times, via either Satna or Banda, Mahoba and Chhatarpur.

Trains tend to pass through Chitrakut at stupid o'clock. Ones you may consider anyway are: Agra (12189 *Mahakaushal Exp* sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹226/577/780, nine hours, 11.24pm), Varanasi (11107 *Bundelkhand Exp*, ₹143/391/504, seven hours, 3.52am) and Khajuraho (21108 *BSB-KURJ Link E*, ₹120/297/400, four hours, 1.03am Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday).

Jhansi

☎0510 / POP 420,665

Jhansi is mostly used by travellers on their way to Orchha, Gwalior or Khajuraho, all in Madhya Pradesh. The fort here is of some interest, but otherwise there's little reason to linger.

History

When the raja here died in 1853, his widow and successor, Rani Lakshmbai, was forcibly retired by the British (a controversial law allowed them to take over any princely state under their patronage if the ruler died without a male heir). During the First War of Independence four years later, Rani Lakshmbai was at the forefront of Jhansi's rebellion. The British contingent here was massacred, but the following year the British retook Jhansi. The rani fled to Gwalior. In a fatal last stand she rode out against the

British disguised as a man and subsequently became a heroine of Indian Independence.

Sights

Jhansi Fort

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Indian/foreigner ₹5/100, video ₹25; ☀️dawn-dusk) Built in 1613 by Maharaja Bir Singh Deo of Orchha, Jhansi Fort still bears signs of the blood-letting that took place within its double walls and moat, once inhabited by crocodiles. These days its shaded lawns make for pleasant strolls and there are some good views of the city and surrounding rocky outcrops.

Near the flag turret is a parapet, over which the fleeing Rani Lakshmbai, with her adopted son mounted behind her, rode her horse. The horse is said to have died, but the story still seems incredible looking at the steep, rocky slope 15m below.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a number of cheap places around the bus station where you can grab a snack on the run.

Hotel Samrat

HOTEL \$

(☎️2444943; Elite Rd; s/d from ₹400/500, with AC from ₹775/875; 🗺️) This well-run hotel, walking distance from the train station, has decent rooms, all with TV and private bathroom, although the cheaper ones have squat toilets. Turn left out of the station then right at the roundabout.

Red Tomato

INDIAN \$\$

(Hotel Samrat; Elite Rd; mains ₹50-150; ☀️7am-10.30pm; 🗺️) This smart, clean restaurant at Hotel Samrat has a good choice of breakfasts plus curries and kebabs.

Information

Madhya Pradesh Tourism (☎️2442622;

☀️10am-6pm) On Platform 1 at the train sta-

tion; has leaflets and mini guides to the area's popular destinations.

Net Blast (per hr ₹20; ☀️9am-9pm) Internet cafe 200m from Hotel Samrat. Left out of train station, left at roundabout, on right.

State Bank of India (Elite Rd; ☀️10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Changes money and travellers cheques; there's an ATM outside the train station.

Getting There & Away

Bus

Buses for Khajuraho leave from the bus stand (₹120, five to six hours) at 6am, 7am, 8am, 9am, 11am, noon and 2pm.

Regular buses go to Gwalior (₹70, three hours, 9am-10pm).

Train

Several daily trains run to Gwalior, Agra and Delhi. In addition to the middle-of-the-night, thrice-weekly fast train to Khajuraho, there is also one daily slow train that leaves at 7.20am, takes around five hours and costs ₹30 for a 'general' ticket. See p383.

Getting Around

Tempos run all the main routes in Jhansi. Prices include: train station to bus station ₹8; train station to Hotel Samrat ₹2; bus station to Jhansi Fort ₹5; and bus station to Orchha ₹10. Autos cost up to 10 times more.

Varanasi

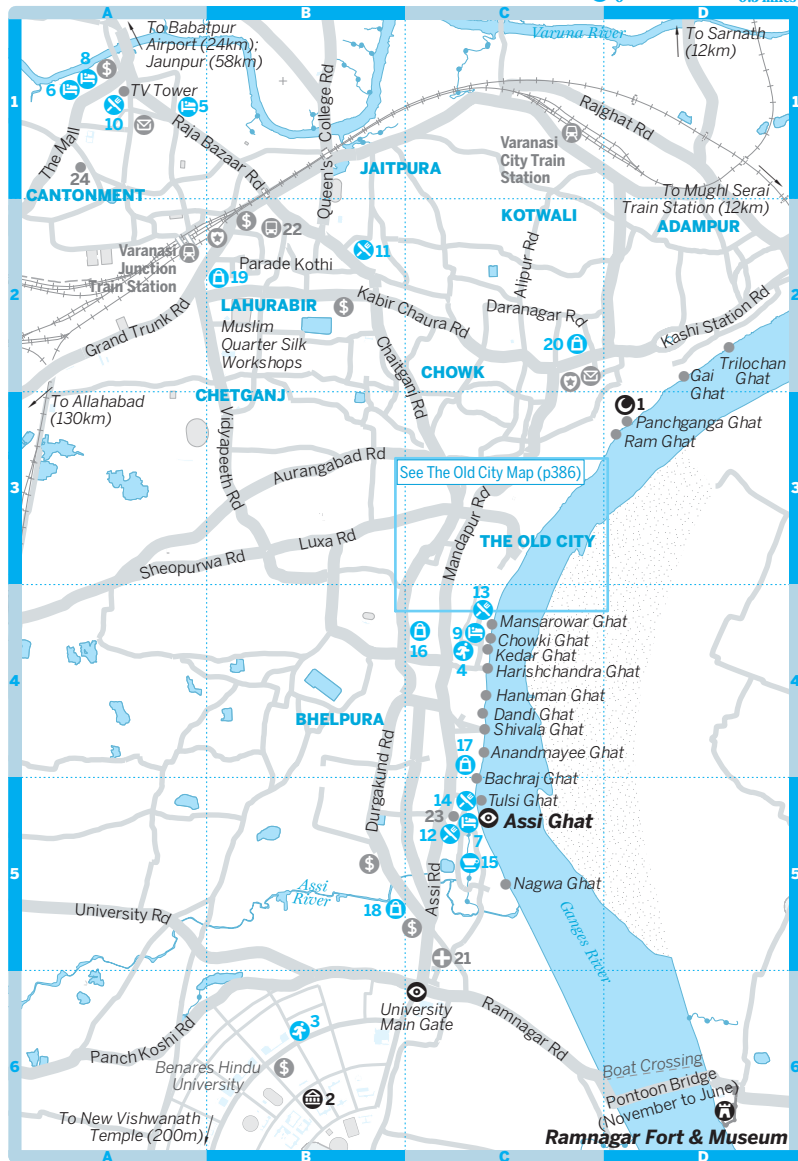
☎️0542 / POP 1.2 MILLION

Brace yourself. You're about to enter one of the most blindingly colourful, unrelentingly chaotic and unapologetically indiscreet places on earth. Varanasi takes no prisoners. But if you're ready for it, this may just turn out to be your favourite stop of all.

HANDY TRAINS FROM JHANSI

DESTINATION	TRAIN NO & NAME	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	DEPARTURE
Agra	12137 Punjab Mail	147/355/471	3½	2.30pm
Delhi	12615 Grand Trunk Exp	204/519/697	6½	11.40pm
Gwalior	12137 Punjab Mail	140/240/309	1½	2.30pm
Mumbai	12138 Punjab Mail	379/1010/1378	19	12.35pm
Varanasi	11107 Bundelkhand Exp	229/615/842	12½	10.30pm

Fares are sleeper/3AC/2AC



Also known at various times in history as Kashi (City of Life) and Benares, this is one of the world's oldest continually inhabited cities and is regarded as one of Hinduism's seven holy cities. Pilgrims come to the ghats lining the River Ganges here to wash away a life-

time of sins in the sacred waters or to cremate their loved ones. It's a particularly auspicious place to die, since expiring here offers moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth and death), making Varanasi the beating heart of the Hindu universe. Most visitors agree it's a magical

Varanasi

📍 Top Sights

Assi Ghat	C5
Ramnagar Fort & Museum	D6

📍 Sights

1 Alamgir Mosque.....	D3
2 Bharat Kala Bhavan.....	B6

🏠 Activities, Courses & Tours

Gateway Hotel Ganges	(see 5)
Hotel Clarks Varanasi.....	(see 6)
Hotel Surya	(see 8)
3 International Centre.....	B6
Palace on Ganges.....	(see 7)
4 Pragati Hindi	C4

🏠 Sleeping

Chaitanya Guest House	(see 7)
5 Gateway Hotel Ganges	A1
6 Hotel Clarks Varanasi.....	A1
7 Hotel Ganges View	C5
8 Hotel Surya	A1
9 Kedareswar	C4
Palace on Ganges.....	(see 7)
Sahi River View Guesthouse.....	(see 7)
Shiva Ganges View Paying Guest House	(see 13)

🍴 Eating

10 Brownie	A1
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Canton Restaurant.....	(see 8)
11 Eden Restaurant	B2
12 Haifa Restaurant	C5
13 Lotus Lounge.....	C4
14 Pizzeria Vaatika Cafe.....	C5
Varuna Restaurant.....	(see 5)

🍷 Drinking

Aum Cafe	(see 14)
Mango Tree.....	(see 8)
15 Open Hand.....	C5
Prinsep Bar	(see 5)

🛍 Shopping

16 Baba Blacksheep.....	C4
17 Benares Art & Culture.....	C4
18 Khadi Gramodyog	B5
19 Mehrotra Silk Factory	B2
20 Shri Gandhi Ashram Khadi	C2

📄 Information

21 Heritage Hospital & 24-hour Pharmacy.....	C5
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🚗 Transport

22 Bus Stand	B2
23 Cycle Repair Shop.....	C5
24 Indian Airlines.....	A1

place, but it's not for the faint-hearted. Here the most intimate rituals of life and death take place in public and the sights, sounds and smells in and around the ghats – not to mention the almost constant attention from touts – can be overwhelming. Persevere. Varanasi is unique, and a walk along the ghats or a boat ride on the river will live long in the memory.

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. They can be disorienting, but the popular hotels and restaurants are usually signposted and, however lost you become, you will eventually end up at a ghat and get your bearings. You can walk all the way along the ghats, apart from during and immediately after the monsoon, when the river level is too high.

Most places of interest, and much of the accommodation, are in the old city. Behind the station is the peaceful Cantonment area, home to most of the top-end hotels.

History

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

👁 Sights

Ghats

GHATS

Spiritually enlightening and fantastically photogenic, Varanasi is at its brilliant best by the ghats, the long stretch of 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 one is

Manikarnika: 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* (river worship ceremony) takes place at Dasaswamedh Ghat.

About 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 boat trip along the river provides the perfect introduction, although for most of the year the water level is low enough for you to walk freely along the whole length of the ghats. It's a world-class 'people-watching' stroll 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, sell flowers, get a massage, play cricket, wash their buffaloes, improve their karma by giving to beggars or simply hang around.

Southern Stretch

Assi Ghat (Map p384), the furthest south of the main ghats, and one of the biggest, is particularly important as the River Assi meets the Ganges near here and pilgrims come to worship a Shiva lingam (phallic image of Shi-

va) beneath a peepul tree. Evenings are particularly lively, as the ghat's vast concreted area fills up with hawkers and entertainers. It's a popular starting point for boat trips and there are some excellent hotels here.

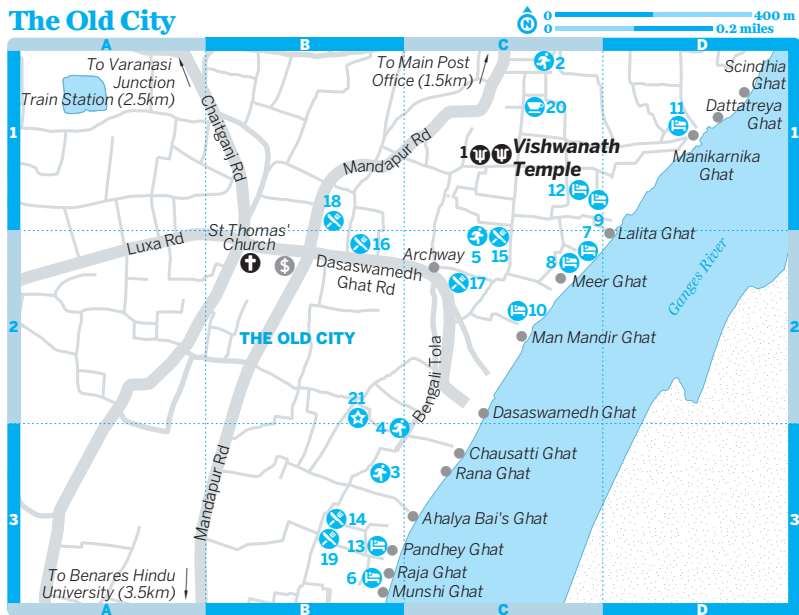
Nearby **Tulsi Ghat** (Map p384), named after a 16th-century Hindu poet, has fallen down towards the river but in the month of Kartika (October/November) a festival devoted to Krishna is celebrated here. Next along, **Bachraj Ghat** (Map p384) has three Jain temples. A small Shiva temple and a 19th-century mansion built by Nepali royalty, sit back from **Shivala Ghat** (Map p384), built by the local maharaja of Benares. The **Dandi Ghat** (Map p384) is used by ascetics known as Dandi Panths, and nearby is the very popular **Hanuman Ghat** (Map p384).

Harishchandra Ghat (Map p384) is a cremation ghat – smaller and secondary in importance to Manikarnika, but one of the oldest ghats in Varanasi. Above it, **Kedar Ghat** (Map p384) 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.

Old City Stretch

Varanasi's liveliest and most colourful ghat is **Dasaswamedh Ghat** (Map p386), easily

The Old City



reached at the end of the main road from Godaulia Crossing. 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. Every evening at 7pm an elaborate *ganga aarti* ceremony with *puja*, fire and dance is staged here.

Just south of here is **Someswar Ghat** (Lord of the Moon Ghat), said to be able to heal diseases. The **Munshi Ghat** (Map p386) is very photogenic, while **Ahalya Bai's Ghat** (Map p386) is named after the female Maratha ruler of Indore.

Just north of Dasaswamedh Ghat, Raja Man Singh's **Man Mandir Ghat** (Map p386) was built in 1600, but was poorly restored in the 19th century. The northern corner of the ghat has a fine stone balcony. Nearby **Meer Ghat** (Map p386) leads to a Nepali temple, which has erotic sculptures.

Manikarnika Ghat (Map p386), the main burning ghat, is the most auspicious place for a Hindu to be cremated. Dead bodies are handled by outcasts known as *doms*, and 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; every log is carefully weighed on giant scales so that the price of cremation can be

calculated. Each type of wood has its own price, sandalwood being the most expensive. There is an art to using just enough wood to completely incinerate a corpse.

You can watch cremations but always show reverence by behaving respectfully. Photography is strictly prohibited.

You're almost guaranteed to be led by a priest, or more likely a guide, to the upper floor of a nearby building from where you can watch cremations taking place, and then asked for a donation (in dollars) towards the cost of wood. If you don't want to make a donation, don't follow them.

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 (Map p386) bears the footprint of the Brahmin saint of that name in a small temple nearby. **Scindhia Ghat** (Map p386) was originally built in 1830, but was so huge and magnificent that it collapsed into the river and had to be rebuilt.

Northern Stretch

Continuing north from Scindhia Ghat, you soon reach **Ram Ghat** (Map p384), which

The Old City

🕒 Top Sights

Vishwanath Temple..... C1

🕒 Sights

1 Gyan Kupor Well..... C1

📍 Activities, Courses & Tours

Ankit Music House..... (see 5)

2 Bhasha Bharati Language Institute C1

International Music Centre Ashram..... (see 21)

Learn for Life Society (see 12)

3 Musical Instrument Shops..... B3
Rashmi Guest House..... (see 10)

4 Saraswati Education Center..... B3

5 Yoga Training Centre C2

🛏 Sleeping

6 Eden Halt..... B3

7 Ganpati Guest House C2

8 Hotel Alka..... C2

9 Puja Guest House..... C1

10 Rashmi Guest House C2

11 Shanti Guest House D1

12 Uma Guesthouse C1

13 Vishnu Rest House..... B3

🍴 Eating

14 Apsara Restaurant..... B3

15 Brown Bread Bakery..... C2
Dolphin Restaurant..... (see 10)

16 Keshari Ruchikar Byanjan B2

17 Madhur Milan Cafe..... C2

18 Phulwari B1

19 VSR..... B3

🍷 Drinking

20 Blue Lassi..... C1

🎮 Entertainment

21 International Music Centre Ashram..... B2

THE VARANASI SHAKEDOWN

If you thought the touts and rickshaw-wallahs were annoying in Agra, wait till you get to Varanasi. The attention here, particularly around the ghats and the Old City, is incredible: you will have to put up with persistent offers from touts and drivers of 'cheapest and best' boat trips, guides, tour operators, travel agents, silk shops and money changers (to name a few). Take it in good humour but politely refuse. 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.

was built by a maharaja of Jaipur. Just beyond it is **Panchganga Ghat** (Map p384), 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** (Map p384), which he built on the site of a large Vishnu temple. **Gai Ghat** (Map p384) has a figure of a cow made of stone. **Trilochan Ghat** (Map p384) has two turrets emerging from the river, and the water between them is especially holy. Just north of here, **Raj Ghat** was the ferry pier until the road and rail bridge was completed.

Vishwanath Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(Golden Temple; Map p386) There are temples at almost every turn in Varanasi, but this is the most famous of the lot. It is dedicated to Vishveswara – Shiva as lord of the universe. The current temple was built in 1776 by Ahalya Bai of Indore; the 800kg of gold plating on the tower and dome was supplied by Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Lahore 50 years later.

The area is full of soldiers because of security issues and communal tensions. Bags, cameras and mobile phones must be deposited in lockers (₹25-50) before you enter the alleyway it's in. Non-Hindus are not allowed inside the temple itself, although this is not always strictly enforced.

On the northern side of Vishwanath Temple is the **Gyan Kupor Well** (Well of Knowledge; Map p386). The faithful believe drinking its water leads to a higher spiritual plane, though they are prevented from doing so by a strong security screen. Non-Hindus are also not allowed to enter here, and here the rule is enforced more strictly.

Benares Hindu University

HISTORIC SITE

(BHU; Map p384; www.bhu.ac.in) Long regarded as a centre of learning, Varanasi's tradition of top-quality education continues today at Benares Hindu University, established in 1916. The wide tree-lined streets and parkland of the 5-sq-km campus offer a peace-

ful atmosphere a world away from the city outside. On campus is **Bharat Kala Bhavan** (Map p384; ☎316337; Indian/foreigner ₹10/100, camera ₹50; ☉10.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 7.30am-1pm May-Jun), a roomy museum with a wonderful collection of miniature paintings, as well as 12th-century palm-leaf manuscripts, sculptures and local history displays.

The attractive **New Vishwanath Temple** (off Map p384; ☉4am-noon & 1-9pm), unlike most temples in Varanasi, is open to all, irrespective of religion.

Ramnagar Fort & Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p384; ☎2339322; museum admission ₹7; ☉9am-noon & 2-5.30pm) This crumbling but impressive 17th-century fort and palace, on the eastern bank of the Ganges, is a beautiful place to watch the sun set over the river. It also houses an eccentric museum. There are vintage American cars, jewel-encrusted sedan chairs, a superb weaponry section and an extremely unusual astrological clock. The current maharaja, Anant Narayan Singh – still known in these parts as the Maharaja of Benares despite such royal titles being officially abolished in 1971 – continues his family tradition of attending the annual month-long **Ram Lila drama festival** (p346) held in the streets behind the fort.

Boats operate a shuttle service across the river (₹10 return, 10 minutes) between 5am and 8pm, but from November to June you can also cross on the somewhat unsteady pontoon bridge. A boat all the way back to Dasaswamedh Ghat is ₹200-300.

Activities

Nonguests can use the outdoor **swimming pools** (Map p384) at Hotel Surya (₹200), Hotel Clarks Varanasi (₹300) and Gateway Hotel Ganges (₹350).

River Trips

BOATING

A dawn rowing boat ride along the Ganges is a quintessential Varanasi experience. 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 (₹10) and set it adrift on the water before watching the nightly *ganga aarti* ceremony (7pm) at Dasaswamedh Ghat directly from the boat.

Boats, available at most ghats, cost about ₹100 per person per hour, but be prepared for some hard bargaining.

Another trip worth considering is the lazy one-hour motorboat trip to Ramnagar Fort, which should cost around ₹100 per person from Dasaswamedh Ghat.

Many guesthouses offer boat trips, although they're more expensive than dealing with the boatmen directly.

Hotel Surya

MASSAGE

(Map p384; ☎2508465; www.hotelsuryavns.com; The Mall; massage from ₹300; ☀8am-8pm) Offers perhaps the best-value massage treatments in Varanasi.

Learn for Life Society

VOLUNTEERING

(Map p386; ☎2403566, 6450232; www.learn-for-life.net) This small charity, contacted through the nearby Brown Bread Bakery, has established a small school for disadvantaged children, and travellers are welcome to turn up and help out. The charity also runs a women's empowerment group, offering fairly paid work to local women, some of whom are mothers of the school's students. The women make produce such as jams and pickles, which travellers can buy from Brown Bread Bakery. See the website for more details.

Saraswati Education Center

VOLUNTEERING

(Map p386; ☎9839105112; www.varanasivolunteer.blogspot.com; D.32/22 Hathiphatak, Bengali Tola Lane) This reader-recommended NGO runs a school for around 40 to 50 children whose families don't have the money to provide

them with a proper education. The school runs classes in English, Maths and Science as well as activities such as music, art and games. Volunteers are welcomed for help with teaching and supervising.

Courses

Beware of 'fake' yoga teachers who are mainly interested in hands-on lessons with young females.

Yoga Training Centre

YOGA

(Map p386; ☎9919857895; www.yogatrainingcentre.com, yoga_sunil@hotmail.com; Sakarkand Gali; 2hr class ₹200; ☀8am, 10am & 4pm) Yoga master Sunil Kumar runs classes three times a day on the 3rd floor of a small backstreet building near Meer Ghat. He teaches an integrated blend of hatha, Iyengar, pranayama and ashtanga, and serious students can continue on certificate and diploma courses. This place is highly recommended by travellers.

Ankit Music House

INDIAN MUSIC

(Map p386; ☎9336567134; ankitmusichouse@hotmail.com; 5/15 Sakarkand Gali; per hr ₹150 to ₹250) In the same building as the Yoga Training Centre, in the alleys near Meer Ghat, this friendly place offers classical music tuition. Instructors Bablu and Vijay can also give advice on buying musical instruments.

Bhasha Bharati Language Institute

LANGUAGE

(Map p386; ☎9839076805; www.bhashabharati.com; 19/8 Thatheri Bazaar, Chowk; per hr ₹300) This long-running language institute, housed in a charming old courtyard, offers small classes. You must book at least a one-week block of classes including at least two hours per day. All-inclusive family homestays – staying in the courtyard building where classes are taught, and including six hours of tuition a day – can be arranged (from ₹13500). Book courses two weeks in advance.

Pragati Hindi

LANGUAGE

(Map p384; ☎9335376488; pragatihindi@yahoo.com; B-7/176 Kedar Ghat) Readers recommend

DON'T MISS

VARANASI'S TOP FIVE GHATS

- » **Dasaswamedh Ghat** (p386) Especially for the evening *ganga aarti* ceremony
- » **Manikarnika Ghat** (p387)– Varanasi's primary cremation ghat
- » **Assi Ghat** (p386) Large and lively, especially early evening
- » **Harishchandra Ghat** (p386) Another prominent cremation ghat
- » **Panchganga Ghat** (p388) Dominated by Alamgir Mosque

the flexibility of the one-to-one classes taught here by the amiable Rajeswar Mukherjee (Raju). Private classes start from ₹200 per hour. Call ahead, or just drop in, to meet Raju and arrange a schedule. Walk up the lane opposite Kedar Ghat and take the first left.

International Music Centre

Ashram

INDIAN MUSIC

(Map p386; ☎2452303; keshavaraonayak@hotmail.com; per hr ₹200) This family-run centre is hidden in the tangle of backstreets off Bengali Tola. It offers sitar, tabla, flute and classical dance tuition, and performances are held every Saturday and Wednesday evening at 8pm (₹100). There's a small, easy-to-miss sign on Bengali Tola directing you here. If you can't find it, there are loads of **musical-instrument shops** on Bengali Tola (Map p386), many of which offer tuition.

Yoga Education Training Society

YOGA

(www.varanasiindiango.jimdo.com; 2hr class ₹150-300) Founder of Saraswati Education Center, Somit Dutta, also runs this society.

International Centre

VARIOUS

(Map p384; ☎2368130; traabhu@hotmail.com; ☉10am-5pm Mon-Fri) If you're interested in studying at Benares Hindu University, contact this centre. Courses on offer include Hindi, Sanskrit, yoga, ayurveda studies, and weaving and handicraft.



Tours

UP Tourism Office

CITY TOUR

(☎2506670; Varanasi Junction train station; half-/full day tour per person ₹900/1400; ☉7am-7pm) If time is short, UP Tourism can arrange guided tours by taxi of the major sites, including a 5.30am boat ride and an afternoon trip to Sarnath.



Sleeping

The majority of Varanasi's budget hotels – and some midrange gems – are concentrated in the most interesting part of the city – the tangle of narrow streets back from the ghats along the River Ganges. There's a concentration around Assi Ghat, while others are in the crazy, bustling northern stretch of alleys between Scindhia and Meer Ghat, part of an area we refer to as the Old City.

Varanasi has an active paying-guest house scheme with more than 100 family homes available for accommodation from ₹200 to ₹2000 a night. UP Tourism has a full list.

OLD CITY AREA



Ganpati Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p386; ☎2390059; www.ganpatiguesthouse.com; Meer Ghat; r ₹700-1000; r without bathroom ₹350-550, @☎) Loads more character than next-door Hotel Alka, which is also a great choice, this old red-brick building has a pleasant, shaded, wi-fi-enabled courtyard as well as plenty of balcony space dotted around offering fine river views. Nicely painted rooms are colourful and clean and the ones facing out onto the Ganges (₹550) are lovely and spacious.

Hotel Alka

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p386; ☎2401681; www.hotelalkavns.com; Meer Ghat; r ₹450-750, with AC ₹800-1700; ☎☎) An excellent ghat-side option, Alka has pretty much spotless rooms that open onto, or overlook a large, plant-filled courtyard. In the far corner, a terrace juts out over Meer Ghat for one of the best views in all of Varanasi, a view shared from the balconies of the pricier rooms.

Uma Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p386; ☎2403566, 9628698015; brown breadbakery@yahoo.com; d ₹300, s/d without bathroom ₹150/250,) Part of the Learn for Life Society run by the excellent Brown Bread Bakery, this homely place has basic but clean rooms that are looked after by some of the women involved with the charity. A percentage of your bill goes to the charity that runs the school behind the guesthouse. Bookings should be made through the bakery, where you can also ask about volunteering or donating.

Shanti Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p386; ☎2392568; varanashanti@yahoo.com; Manikarnika Ghat; d ₹200-350, with AC from ₹500; ☎☎☎) Big, bold and bright yellow, Shanti is as popular as ever. Rooms are basic – often nothing more than a bed in a stone-floor room – but this place is well looked after (even the communal bathrooms are clean). In any case, it's the very high, 24-hour rooftop restaurant with pool table and fabulous views of the Ganges that really pulls in the punters. Wi-fi isn't free.

Kedareswar

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p384; ☎2455568; www.kedareswarguesthouse.com; Chowki Ghat; d ₹600, with AC ₹1000-1600; ☎) Housed in a brightly painted, aquamarine green building, this friendly place has small but immaculate rooms with spar-

bling bathrooms. There's only one cheaper non-AC room, so it might be worth phoning ahead. Chowki Ghat is right beside Kedar Ghat.

Vishnu Rest House GUESTHOUSE \$
(Map p386; ☎2455238; Pandhey Ghat; r from ₹200) Accessed through a small courtyard with family homes coming off it, or directly from Pandhey Ghat itself, this simple guesthouse is a pleasant place to stay. Some rooms are poky and not the cleanest, but the atmosphere is friendly and the stone terrace overlooking the ghat is a winner.

Shiva Ganges View Paying Guest House GUESTHOUSE \$\$
(Map p384; ☎2450063; www.varanasinguesthouse.com; Mansarowar Ghat; r ₹2000-2500, with AC ₹3000; ste ₹5000 ☎) Next to Lotus Lounge Restaurant, this delightful, bright-red brick building is part of the city's paying-guest house scheme. Rooms here ooze character, with central double beds, high ceilings, chunky door and window shutters, and some attractive ornaments on shelves. All have river views and spotlessly clean bathrooms. Home-cooked food is also available. The one downside – the manager can be a bit pushy.

Eden Halt GUESTHOUSE \$
(Map p386; ☎2454612; Raja Ghat; d ₹400-500, s/d without bathroom ₹200/300) This friendly, pocket-sized guesthouse only has four rooms. Two have private bathrooms, two have river views. All are simple, but spacious and come with interesting alcoves and built-in shelving (just in case you bring along your favourite ornaments). A simple roof terrace overlooks peaceful Raja Ghat, but be prepared to fight monkeys for space on it.

Rashmi Guest House HOTEL \$\$\$
(Map p386; ☎2402778; www.rashmiguesthouse.com; rashmiguesthouse@sify.com; Man Mandir

Ghat; d ₹2500-6500; ☎) Sparkling white-tiled corridors and marble staircases lead to clean and modern rooms, which are small but smart. Many have views of Man Mandir Ghat, although the excellent rooftop Dolphin Restaurant offers the best views of all. Ayurvedic massage (₹1250) is also available.

Puja Guest House GUESTHOUSE \$
(Map p386; ☎2405027; www.pujaguesthouse.com; Lalita Ghat; r from ₹350, without bathroom from ₹150; @) Hidden away up an alley overlooking Lalita Ghat, this towering building offers extremely basic, but clean enough, cheap rooms. The rooftop restaurant is one of Varanasi's tallest, with superb 180-degree views of the river and free sitar-and-tabla performances every evening from 8pm.

ASSI GHAT AREA

TOP CHOICE **Hotel Ganges View** HOTEL \$\$
(Map p384; ☎2313218; www.hotelgangesview.com; Assi Ghat; r ₹1000, with AC ₹3000; ☎) Simply gorgeous, this beautifully restored and maintained colonial-style house overlooking Assi Ghat is crammed with books, artwork and antiques. Rooms are spacious and immaculate and there are some charming communal areas in which to sit and relax, including a lovely 1st-floor garden terrace. Book ahead.

Palace on Ganges HOTEL \$\$\$
(Map p384; ☎2315050; palaceonganges@india.times.com; Assi Ghat; d ₹2500-3500; ☎) Each room in this immaculate heritage accommodation is individually themed on a regional Indian style, using antique furnishings and colourful design themes. The colonial, Rajasthan and Jodhpur rooms are among the best. The spa and massage centre (Ayur Arogyam) is also very good.

DON'T MISS

VARANASI'S TOP FIVE RIVERSIDE RETREATS

- » **Pizzeria Vaatika Cafe** (p393) Tree-shaded veranda overlooking Assi Ghat.
- » **Lotus Lounge** (p392) Laid-back yet chic.
- » **Hotel Ganges View** (p391) Sip tea in style from the gorgeous first-floor garden terrace.
- » **Puja Guest House** (p391) Offers 180-degree rooftop views with live classical music every evening.
- » **Vishnu Rest House** (p391) Simple stone terrace sandwiched between Pandhey Ghat and a colourful temple.

Chaitanya Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p384; ☎2313686; Assi Ghat; s/d ₹350/400, d with AC ₹800; 🍷) In complete contrast to next-door Sahi River View Guesthouse, Chaitanya has just four rooms: a single, two doubles and a double with AC. All are comfortable, with high ceilings and clean bathrooms, and are well looked after by friendly staff.

Sahi River View Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p384; ☎2366730; sahi_rvgh@sify.com; Assi Ghat; r from ₹250, with AC from ₹625; 🍷) There's a huge variety of rooms at this friendly place. Most are good quality and clean, and some have interesting private balconies. Each floor has a pleasant communal seating area with river view, creating a great feeling of space throughout.

CANTONMENT AREA**Hotel Surya**

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p384; ☎2508465; www.hotelsuryavns.com; 20/51 The Mall; s/d ₹600/800, with AC from ₹1200/1500; 🍷@🍷🍷) Varanasi's cheapest hotel with a swimming pool, Surya has OK modern rooms, built around a huge lawn area that includes a laid-back Middle Eastern-style cafe (**Mango Tree**). There's a nice swimming pool area, a quality restaurant (**Canton Royale**) housed in a 150-year-old heritage building, and a recommended massage centre. Wi-fi costs ₹60.

Gateway Hotel Ganges

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p384; ☎2503001; www.thegatewayhotels.com; Raja Bazaar Rd; r ₹9000-10,500, ste ₹11,500-13,500; 🍷@🍷🍷) Varanasi's best hotel is set in five hectares of beautiful gardens with fruit trees, a tennis court, a pool, an outdoor yoga centre and the old maharaja's guesthouse. You can walk, cycle or take a ride in a maharaja's buggy around the grounds. Inside, rooms are luxurious, service is top class and there are two fine restaurants, two bars and a luxury spa treatment centre (massages from ₹900). Note, prices rise by about 20% around Christmas and New Year.

Hotel Clarks Varanasi

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p384; ☎2501011; www.clarkshotels.com; The Mall; s/d from ₹5000/5500; 🍷@🍷🍷) The executive rooms are enormous, with their own private dining areas, but standard rooms are smart rather than luxurious. Service is excellent, though, as is the main restaurant, and the garden out the back has a delightful teardrop-shaped swimming pool shaded by bamboo and palm trees. There's also a 24-hour cafe. Note, wi-fi costs ₹600 per day!

**Eating**

Look out for locally grown *langda aam* (mangoes) in summer or *sitafal* (custard apples) in autumn. *Singhara* is a blackish root that tastes like water chestnut.

OLD CITY AREA**Brown Bread Bakery**

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Map p386; 17 Tripura Bhairavi; mains ₹75-230; ☺7am-10pm; 🍷) Not only does this place lead the way socially and environmentally – it supports a local school, runs a women's empowerment group and uses organic produce wherever possible – but the food is also terrific. The fabulous menu includes more than 20 varieties of cheese and more than 30 types of bread, cookies and cakes as well as main courses from around the world. The ambience is spot on too, with seating on cushions around low tables and live classical music performances in the evenings. Admittedly, it's pricier than most, but part of the profits go to the charity Learn for Life (p389). Those with bad backs might like to try their other branch **Brownie** (Map p384), which has regular chairs and tables and the same great menu.

Madhur Milan Cafe

INDIAN \$

(Map p386; Dasaswamedh Ghat Rd; mains ₹24-60; ☺8am-10pm) Popular with locals, this no-nonsense restaurant serves up a range of good-value, mostly south Indian dishes, including dosa, *idli* and *uttapam*, and *paratha*. Thalys start from ₹45, and they have lassis.

Lotus Lounge

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Map p384; Mansarowar Ghat; mains ₹90-200; ☺8am-10pm) A great place to chill, this laid-back, half-open-air restaurant, with broken-tile mosaic flooring and wicker chairs, has a terrace that juts out over Mansarowar Ghat. The menu's a mixed bag, with fresh coffee, set breakfasts, salads, pasta and curries.

Keshari Ruchikar Byanjan

INDIAN \$\$

(Map p386; Dasaswamedh Ghat Rd; mains ₹60-110; ☺9am-10.30pm) This 1st-floor veg restaurant, specialising in both North and South Indian cuisine, is the nicest place to eat along this busy market street and is popular with local families. The ground-floor *chaat* stall (chaat from ₹15) is also a big hit.

VSR

SOUTH INDIAN \$

(Map p386; 25/2 Ganga Mahal; mains from ₹25; ☺6.30am-9.30pm) This locals' favourite, right

next to Apsara Restaurant, serves up excellent-value south Indian food (dosa, *idli* and *uttapam*) in an airy, fan-cooled hall. Between breakfast (6.30am–10am) and dinner (6pm–9.30pm), it's thalis only (from ₹35).

Apsara Restaurant MULTICUISINE \$
(Map p386; 24/42 Ganga Mahal; mains ₹35-80) This cosy AC restaurant has cushioned seats, good music and friendly staff. The multi cuisine menu includes Indian, Chinese, continental, Japanese, Israeli and Korean food, and there's a small rooftop area.

Dolphin Restaurant INDIAN \$\$\$
(Map p386; Rashmi Guest House, Man Mandir Ghat; mains ₹110-300) Quality food, quality location; Dolphin – the rooftop restaurant at Rashmi Guest House – is perched high above Man Mandir Ghat and is a fine place for an evening meal. Watch food being prepared through the glass-walled kitchen by the AC restaurant, or sit out on the breezy balcony.

Phulwari MULTICUISINE \$\$
(Map p386; Chowk Rd; mains ₹45-100; ☺8.30am-10.30pm) Set back from noisy Chowk Rd in a shaded courtyard beside an old temple, this place makes an unusual change from all the rooftop restaurants nearby. Its speciality is Mediterranean, but Phulwari also does Indian and Chinese plus coffee and lassis.

ASSI GHAT AREA

TOP CHOICE Pizzeria Vaatika Cafe MULTICUISINE \$\$
(Map p384; Assi Ghat; pizza ₹65-100; ☺7am-10pm) Sit in the shady garden terrace overlooking Assi Ghat while you munch your way through top-notch pizza baked in a wood-fired oven. None of that thick-crust nonsense here – it's all thin and crispy, as every pizza should be. Don't forget to leave some room for the delicious apple pie.

Haifa Restaurant MIDDLE EASTERN \$\$
(Map p384; Hotel Haifa, Assi Ghat; mains ₹50-120; ☺7.30am-9.30pm) Specialises in Middle Eastern food – humus, falafel, even a Middle Eastern thali! – but also does Indian and Chinese like everywhere else.

CANTONMENT AREA

Canton Restaurant INDIAN \$\$\$
(Map p384; Hotel Surya, The Mall; mains ₹100-300; ☺7am-11pm) Housed in a 150-year-old heritage building, Hotel Surya's excellent main restaurant has a colonial elegance, and

on warm evenings you can eat out on the large lawn. The menu includes high-quality Indian dishes as well as some Chinese and continental.

Varuna Restaurant NORTH INDIAN \$\$\$
(Map p384; Gateway Hotel Ganges, Raja Bazaar Rd; mains ₹200-1450; ☺lunch & dinner) As you'd expect from Varanasi's best hotel, this is one of the city's top restaurants. Elegant without being stuffy, Varuna's specialities include classic North Indian and Afghan dishes, the sumptuous maharaja thali and tandoor kebabs. There's live sitar and tabla music every evening.

Eden Restaurant INDIAN \$\$\$
(Map p384; Hotel Pradeep, Kabir Chaura Rd; mains ₹110-250) Hotel Pradeep's rooftop restaurant, complete with garden, manicured lawns and wrought-iron furniture, is a lovely place for a candle-lit evening meal. Note that staircase-weary waiters will be very appreciative if you order at the ground-floor AC restaurant behind the lobby before heading up to the roof. The good-quality Indian menu is the same in both restaurants.



Drinking & Entertainment

Wine and beer shops are dotted discreetly around the city, usually away from the river. Note that it is frowned upon to drink alcohol on or near the holy Ganges. For bars, head to midrange and top-end hotels away from the ghats.

There's nightly live **classical music** at Brown Bread Bakery, Puja Hotel and Varuna Restaurant at Gateway Hotel Ganges, to name but a few.

The International Music Centre Ashram (Map p390) has small **performances** (₹100) on Wednesday and Saturday evenings.



TOP CHOICE Aum Cafe

CAFE

(Map p384; www.touchoflight.us; ☺7am-5.30pm Tue-Sun; ☺) Run by a friendly American woman who has been coming to India for more than 20 years, this cute and colourful cafe has fabulously fresh juices, coffee and lassis as well as some delicious snacks and sandwiches. The back of the menu lists the ayurvedic qualities of all the ingredients used. There's also massage therapies and body piercing available. Up the steps from Assi Ghat.

Open Hand

CAFE

(Map p384; www.openhandonline.com; ☺8am-8pm Mon-Sat; ☺) A cafe-cum-gift shop with fresh coffee and juices and a range of cakes and

NO 1 LASSI IN ALL VARANASI

Your long, thirsty search for the best lassi in town is over. Look no further than **Blue Lassi** (Map p386; lassis ₹10-30; ☎9am-11.30pm), a tiny, hole-in-the-wall yoghurt shop that has been churning out the freshest, creamiest, fruit-filled lassis for more than 70 years. The grandson of the original owner still works here, sitting by his lassi-mixing cauldron in front of a small room with wooden benches for customers and walls plastered with messages from happy drinkers; most of whom seem to be Korean. All four flavours – plain, banana, apple and mango – are delicious (it's worth coming here four times to try them all!), but we think the apple one, flecked with fresh apple shreds, just about tops the bunch.

snacks plus a few main courses. There's free wi-fi plus a large selection of gorgeous handicrafts (jewellery, toys, clothing) made in the local community.

Prinsep Bar

BAR

(Map p384; Gateway Hotel Ganges, Raja Bazaar Rd; ☎midday-11pm) 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. Beers start at ₹225, cocktails ₹200.

Mango Tree

CAFE

(Map p384; ☎2508465; www.hotelsuryavns.com; 20/51 The Mall) This laid-back cafe in the garden at Hotel Surya is a relaxing place where you can smoke hookah pipes (₹100) while sipping a beer.



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 involved will try to rip you off. Don't believe much of what the silk salesmen tell you about the relative quality of products, even in government emporiums. Instead, shop around and judge for yourself.

Varanasi is also a good place to shop for sitars (starting from ₹3000) and tablas (from ₹2500). The cost depends primarily on the type of wood used. Mango is cheapest, while teak and vijaysar (a wild Indian herb, the bark of which is used in ayurvedic medicine) are of the highest quality.

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

Baba Blacksheep

SILK

(Map p384; ☎2454342; Bhelpura; 9am-8pm) Trustworthy, non-pushy and frequently recommended by our readers, this is a great

place to come for silks (scarves/saris from ₹250/3000) and pashminas (shawls from ₹1300).

Benares Art & Culture

HANDICRAFTS

(Map p384; Shivala Rd; ☎10am-8pm Mon-Sat) This centuries-old *haveli* (traditional, ornately decorated residence) stocks quality carvings, sculptures, paintings and wooden toys all made by local artists. Prices are fixed.

Khadi Gramodyog

CLOTHING

(Map p384; Khair Chaura Rd; ☎7am-10pm Mon-Sat) Stocks shirts, kurta pyjamas, saris and head scarves, all made from the famous homespun *khadi* fabric. There's another branch, called **Shri Gandhi Ashram Khadi** (Map p384), on the 1st floor of the row of shops opposite the post office. Both can arrange next-day tailoring services.

Mehrotra Silk Factory

SILK

(Map p384; ☎2200189; www.mehrotrasilk.com; ☎10am-8pm) Tucked away down a tiny alleyway near the main train station, this pocket-sized, fixed-priced shop is a fun place to buy silk scarves (from ₹250), saris (from ₹1600) and bedspread sets (from ₹5000).

i Information

Internet cafes are everywhere; ₹20 per hour is the going rate. Guesthouses tend to charge double. Wi-fi is becoming more and more popular. Places that didn't have it during our research may well do by the time you read this. Some charge. Many don't. There are several **ATMs** scattered around town. We've marked some on our maps.

Heritage Hospital (Map p384; ☎2368888; www.heritagehospitals.com; Lanka) English-speaking staff and doctors; 24-hour pharmacy in reception. Casualty to the right.

Main post office (Map p384; ☎2331398; Kabir Chaura Rd; ☎10am-7pm Mon-Sat, parcels 10am-4pm) Known as GPO by some rickshaw riders;

best PO for sending parcels abroad. Small post offices are dotted around the city. The Cantonment area (Map p384) has a large one.

State Bank of India (Map p384; ☎2343742; The Mall; ☀10am-2pm & 2.30-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Changes travellers cheques and cash.

Tourist Police (Map p384; ☎2506670; UP Tourism office, Varanasi Junction train station; ☀6am-7pm) Tourist police wear sky-blue uniforms.

UP Tourism (Map p384; Varanasi Junction train station; ☎2506670; ☀9am-5pm) The patient Mr Umashankar at the office inside 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. Can give details of Varanasi's paying-guesthouse scheme and guided tours.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Indian Airlines (Map p384; ☀10am-5pm Mon-Sat) airport (☎ 2622494); Cantonment office (☎2502529) has direct flights to Delhi (around ₹3000, daily), Mumbai (₹5000, daily), Kathmandu (₹7800, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday) and Khajuraho (₹3000, Monday, Wednesday and Friday). Other airlines are based at the airport.

Bus

The main **bus stand** is opposite Varanasi Junction train station. Popular destinations are listed below. Allahabad and Lucknow are also served by one or two AC buses that are more comfortable but cost at least twice the price.

Allahabad ₹82, three hours, every 30 minutes
Faizabad ₹160, seven hours, daily at 6am, 7am, 8am, 1.30pm and 2pm

Gorakhpur ₹144, seven hours, every 30 minutes

Lucknow ₹197, seven to eight hours, about every hour

Train

Luggage theft has been reported on trains to and from Varanasi so you should take extra care. A few years ago there were reports of drugged food and drink, so it's probably still best to politely decline any offers from strangers.

Varanasi Junction train station (Map p384), also known as Varanasi Cantonment (Cantt) train station, is the main station. Foreign tourist quota tickets (p1187) must be purchased at the helpful **Foreign Tourist Centre** (☀8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun), a ticket office just past the UP Tourism office, on your right as you exit the station.

There are several daily trains to Allahabad, Gorakhpur and Lucknow. A few daily trains leave for New Delhi and Kolkata, but only two daily trains go to Agra. The direct train to Khajuraho only runs on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. On other days, go via Satna from where you can catch buses to Khajuraho.

To/From Nepal

From Varanasi's bus stand there are regular services to Sunauli (₹206, 10 hours, 7am-8.30pm).

By train, go to Gorakhpur then transfer to a Sunauli bus.

Indian Airlines has four weekly flights to Kathmandu (₹7800). Nepali visas are available on arrival.

HANDY TRAINS FROM VARANASI

DESTINATION	TRAIN NO & NAME	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)	DEPARTURES
Agra	13237/13239 <i>PNBE MTJ Exp</i>	252/678/930	13	4.45pm
Allahabad	11094 <i>Mahangari Exp</i>	120/277/373	3	11.30am
Gorakhpur	15003 <i>Chaurichaura Exp</i>	132/340/460	6½	12.35am
Jabalpur	11062/11066 <i>MFP/DBG-LTT Exp</i>	212/562/772	10½	11.20pm
Khajuraho	21108 <i>BSB-Kurj Link E</i>	200/531/725	12	5.10pm*
Kolkata (Howrah)	12334 <i>Vibhuti Exp</i>	306/806**	14	6.10pm
Lucknow	14235 <i>BSB-BE Exp</i>	161/422/481***	7¼	11.45pm
New Delhi	12559 <i>Shiv Ganga Exp</i>	306/806/1095	12½	7.15pm

All fares are sleeper/3AC/2AC; *Mon, Wed, Sat only; **sleeper/3AC; ***sleeper/3AC/1st class

i Getting Around

To/From the Airport

An autorickshaw to **Babatpur airport**, 22km northwest of the city, costs ₹200. A taxi is about ₹400.

Bicycle

You can hire bikes (per day ₹20) from a small **cycle repair shop** (Map p384) near Assi Ghat.

Cycle-Rickshaw

Rough prices from Dasaswamedh Ghat Rd include: Assi Ghat ₹20, Benares Hindu University ₹40 and Varanasi Junction train station ₹30. Be prepared for hard bargaining.

Taxi & Autorickshaw

Prepaid booths for autorickshaws and taxis are directly outside Varanasi Junction train station and give you a good benchmark for prices around town. First pay a ₹5 administration charge at the booth then take a ticket which you give to your driver, along with the fare, once you've reached your destination. Fares include:

Airport auto/taxi ₹200/400

Assi Ghat auto/taxi ₹70/200

Dasaswamedh Ghat auto/taxi ₹60/150

Godaulia (by St Thomas' Church) auto ₹50

Ramnagar Fort auto ₹140

Sarnath auto/taxi ₹80/250

Half-day tour (four hours) auto ₹300

Full-day tour (eight hours) auto ₹600

Sarnath

☎0542

Buddha came to Sarnath to preach his message of the middle way to nirvana after he achieved enlightenment at Bodhgaya and gave his famous first sermon here. In the 3rd century BC emperor Ashoka had magnificent stupas and monasteries erected here as well as an engraved pillar. When 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 sacked the city in the late 12th century, Sarnath disappeared altogether. It was 'rediscovered' by British archaeologists in 1835.

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 trip from Varanasi, Sarnath is also a peaceful place to stay.

👁 Sights

Dhamekh Stupa & Monastery

Ruins

HISTORIC SITE

(Indian/foreigner ₹5/100, video ₹25; ☀dawn-dusk) Set in a peaceful park of monastery ruins is the impressive 34m **Dhamekh Stupa**, which marks the spot where the Buddha preached his first sermon. The floral and geometric carvings are 5th century AD, but some of the brickwork dates back as far as 200 BC.

Nearby is a 3rd-century BC **Ashoka Pillar** under an edict engraved on it. It once stood 15m tall and had the famous four-lion capital (now in the museum) perched on top of it, but all that remains are five fragments of its base.

Chaukhandi Stupa

SACRED SITE

(☀dawn-dusk) This large ruined stupa 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 constructed here in the 16th century to commemorate the visit of Emperor Humayun.

Mulgandha Kuti Vihar

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(☎2585595; ☀4-11.30am & 1.30-8pm; photo ₹20, video ₹50) This modern temple was completed in 1931 by the Mahabodhi Society. 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.

Archaeological Museum

MUSEUM

(admission ₹5; ☀9am-6pm) This fully modernised, 100-year-old sandstone museum houses wonderfully displayed ancient treasures such as the very well preserved 3rd-century BC lion capital from the Ashoka pillar, which has been adopted as India's national emblem, and a huge 2000-year-old stone umbrella, ornately carved with Buddhist symbols.

🛏 Sleeping

TOP CHOICE Agrawal Paying

Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

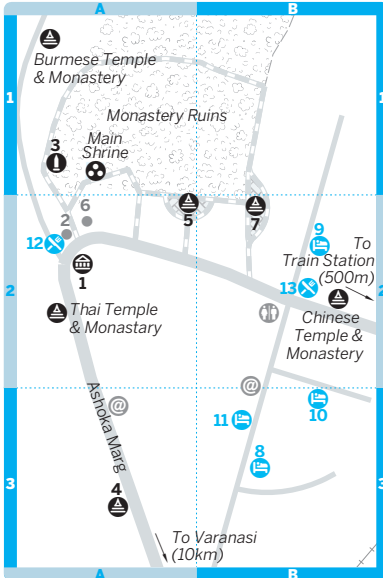
(☎2595316; r ₹500-600, with AC ₹900) Peaceful place with a refined owner and spotless rooms overlooking a beautiful garden.

Jain Paying Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎2595621; d ₹300) Simple but friendly.

Sarnath



You can stay in very basic rooms, with shared bathrooms, at these monasteries:

Tibetan Temple & Monastery

(dm ₹100)

Japanese Temple & Monastery

(dm by donation) Has one five-bed dorm.

Eating

Vaishali Restaurant

INDIAN \$

(mains ₹20-100; ☺7am-9pm) Large 1st-floor restaurant serving mostly Indian dishes, but some Chinese too.

Green Hut

MULTICUISINE \$

(meals ₹40-90; ☺8.30am-8.30pm) A breezy open-sided cafe-restaurant offering dosa, snacks and chicken dishes.

Information

Power cuts mean **internet cafes** (per hr ₹20; ☺8am-8pm) are unreliable, but we've marked a couple of options on the map.

Getting There & Away

Local buses to Sarnath (₹10, 40 minutes) pass in front of Varanasi Junction train station, but you may wait a long time for one. An autorickshaw costs about ₹100 from Varanasi's Old City. Some cycle-rickshaw-wallahs are willing to do the trip (₹80), but tip generously. On the

Sarnath

Sights

- 1 Archaeological MuseumA2
- 2 Archaeological Museum Ticket OfficeA2
- 3 Ashoka PillarA1
- 4 Chaukhandi StupaA3
- 5 Dhamekh StupaA2
- 6 Entrance to Dhamekh StupaA2
- 7 Mulgandha Kuti ViharB2

Sleeping

- 8 Agrawal Paying Guest HouseB3
- 9 Jain Paying Guest HouseB2
- 10 Japanese Temple & MonasteryB3
- 11 Tibetan Temple & MonasteryB3

Eating

- 12 Green HutA2
- 13 Vaishali RestaurantB2

way back you can snag a lift in a shared auto or *vikram* (large autorickshaw; ₹10-20) but you may have to change on the outskirts of the city. Some trains running between Varanasi and Gorakhpur also stop here. Trains for Sarnath leave Varanasi Junction at 6.50am, 11.10am, 12.15pm, 4pm, 5pm and 6.35pm. Returning to Varanasi, trains leave Sarnath at 8.43am, 9.47am, 11.31am, 11.58am, 2.48pm, 6.53pm and 9.13pm. The journey takes around 20 minutes and a 'general' ticket for an unreserved second-class seat will cost you just a few rupees.

Gorakhpur

☎0551 / POP 624,570

There's little to see in Gorakhpur itself, but this well-connected transport hub is a short hop from the pilgrimage centre of Kushinagar – the place where Buddha died – making it a possible stopover on the road between Varanasi and Nepal.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Adarsh Palace

HOTEL \$

(☎2201912; hotel.adarshpalace@rediffmail.com; Railway Station Rd; dm ₹150, s ₹300-450, d ₹600, with AC ₹800-900; ☹) There are loads of budget hotels opposite the train station, but this smarter-than-average one, 200m to the left as you leave the station, has something for everyone. The 10-bed dorm has lockers above each bed, cheap singles come with TV and bathroom and there are some decent-quality AC rooms too. As with most hotels here, checkout is 24 hours.

New Varden Restaurant

(mains ₹20-70, thalis ₹35-60; ☎8am-10pm) Right opposite the train station, this is popular with travellers and will box up your order for onward journeys.

i Information

UP Tourism (☎2335450; ☎10am-5pm Mon-Sat) is inside the train station. There's an **internet cafe** (per hour ₹20; ☎10am-11pm) opposite the train station, below Hotel Varden.

For the main bus stand, come out of the train station and keep walking straight for about 300m. For Varanasi buses you need the Katchari bus stand, about 3km further south.

i Getting There & Away

Frequent bus services run from the main bus stand to Faizabad (₹84, five hours), Kushinagar (₹36, two hours) and Sunauli (₹67, three hours). Buses to Varanasi (₹120, seven hours) leave from the Katchari bus stand.

There are six daily trains to Varanasi (sleeper/3AC, ₹132/340, 5½ hours), including one slower, cheaper night train (No 55149, seven hours, 11.15pm). A number of daily trains also leave for Lucknow (sleeper/3AC ₹146/380, six hours) and Delhi (₹312/823, 13 hours) and one for Agra Fort (No 19038/19040, ₹249/672, 1.15pm, 15½ hours). The **train ticket reservation office** is 500m from the train station; to the right of the station as you exit.

Kushinagar

☎05564 / POP 17,982

One of the four main pilgrimage sites marking Buddha's life – the others being Lumbini (Nepal), Bodhgaya and Sarnath – Kushinagar is where Buddha died. There are several peaceful, modern temples where you can stay, chat with monks or simply contemplate your place in the world, and there are three main historical sights, including the simple but wonderfully serene stupa where Buddha is said to have been cremated.

👁 Sights & Activities**Ramabhar Stupa**

SACRED SITE

Architecturally, this half-ruined, 15m-high stupa is little more than a large, dome-shaped clump of red bricks, but there is an unmistakable aura about this place which is hard to ignore. This is where Buddha's body is said to have been cremated and monks and pilgrims can often be seen meditating by the palm-lined path that leads around the stupa.

INDIAN \$

Mahaparinirvana Temple

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

The highlight of this modest temple, rebuilt in 1927 and set among extensive lawns and ancient ruins with a circumambulatory path, is its serene 5th-century reclining Buddha, unearthed in 1876. Six metres long, it depicts Buddha on his ancient death-bed and is one of the world's most moving Buddhist icons. Behind the temple is an ancient 19m-tall stupa, and in the surrounding park is a large bell erected by the Dalai Lama.

Mathakuar Temple

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

This small shrine, set among monastery ruins, marks the spot where Buddha is said to have made his final sermon and now houses a 3m-tall blue-stone Buddha statue, thought to date from the 10th century AD.

Buddha Museum

MUSEUM

(Indian/foreigner ₹3/10, photography ₹20; ☎10.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) Exhibits Buddhist relics, sculptures and terracottas unearthed from the Kushinagar region, as well as some Tibetan *thangkas* (rectangular cloth paintings) and Mughal miniature paintings.

Wat Thai complex

TEMPLE

(☎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 welcomes visitors.

Yama Cafe

WALKING

(walk incl guide, food, water & return transport ₹750) The cafe runs a so-called Holy Hike, a 13km-walk that takes in some of the area's historical sights as well as local villages and a school in the surrounding farmland.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating**Lotus Nikko Hotel**

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎274403; s/d ₹3800/4500; 📞) The best value of Kushinagar's top-end hotels, Lotus Nikko has huge, spotless rooms with dining table, sofa and chairs. There's a **restaurant** (mains ₹90-145; ☎7.30am-9.30pm) and a Japanese bath house.

TOP CHOICE Yama Cafe

MULTICUISINE \$

(mains ₹25-55; ☎7am-8pm) Run by the welcoming Mr and Mrs Roy, this Kushinagar institution has a traveller-friendly menu which includes toast, omelettes, fried rice and *thukpa* (Tibetan noodle soup) and is

the best place to come for information about the area.

Some of the temples which have basic accommodation for pilgrims also welcome tourists, including the following:

Linh Son Temple PILGRIMS' REST HOUSE \$ (tr ₹250) Simple, clean triples with private bathroom and hot water.

Japan-Sri Lanka Buddhist Centre PILGRIMS' REST HOUSE \$ (☎273044; tr ₹400) Set up for large groups, so call ahead, but has decent quality, clean rooms.

Tibetan Temple PILGRIMS' REST HOUSE \$ (r without bathroom by donation) Rooms are run down, but the place is welcoming.

i Information

You'll find a couple of private money changers here, but no ATMs. Internet connections were too temperamental to bother with when we were here.

i Getting There & Away

Frequent buses to Gorakhpur (₹36, two hours, until 7pm) will pick you up at the yellow archway.

Sunauli & the Nepal Border

☎05522

Sunauli is a dusty town that offers little more than a bus stop, a couple of hotels, a few shops and a border post. The border is open 24 hours and the crossing is straightforward (p399) so most travellers carry on into Nepal without stopping here. There are more facilities in the Nepali part of Sunauli; Bhairawa, a further 4km north, is a more substantial town.

Buses drop you just a few hundred metres from the Indian immigration office, so you can ignore the cycle-rickshaws.

If you're coming from Nepal but miss the last bus to Gorakhpur, then **Hotel Indo-Nepal** (☎238142; dm/d ₹100/350), by the bus stand, has basic rooms set around a cool courtyard. Its simple **restaurant** (mains ₹25-100; thali ₹60-150; ☎6.30am-10pm) makes a nice lunch stop even if you don't stay.

If you're leaving India, the very helpful **Nepal Tourism Board information centre** (☎0977 1520197; ☎10am-5pm Sun-Fri) is on your right, in no-man's land.

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 nowhere to change money in Sunauli, but there are foreign-exchange places just across the border on the Nepal side. Small denominations of Indian currency are accepted for bus fares on the Nepal side.

Onward Transport

Buses and shared jeeps leave all day until around 8pm from the Nepal side of the border for Kathmandu (NRs500, six hours) and Pokhara (NRs500, eight hours). A taxi to Kathmandu costs around NRs15,000. Shared autorickshaws or jeeps (NRs10) can take you from the border to Bhairawa, 4km away, where you can also catch buses to Kathmandu and Pokhara for the same prices, as well as to Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini (NRs35, one hour).

Visas

Multiple-entry visas (15-/30-/60-day US\$25/40/80 – cash, not rupees) are available at the immigration post just across the border. You will need two recent passport photos. At the time of research, travellers leaving India were being prevented from re-entering within two months. Some travellers reported being able to get round this rule by showing proof of an imminent international flight leaving from an Indian city. Others reported being able to pay (US\$10) the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu for special dispensation to re-enter earlier.

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.

Regular buses run from Sunauli to Gorakhpur (₹67, three hours, until 7pm) from where you can catch trains to Varanasi. A few morning (4.30am to 10.30am) and afternoon (4.30pm to 7pm) buses run direct to Varanasi (₹208, 10 hours), but it's a long, bumpy ride.

Be wary of buying 'through' tickets from Kathmandu or Pokhara to Varanasi. Some travellers report being intimidated into buying another ticket once over the border. 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). Travellers have also complained about being pressured into paying extra luggage charges for buses out of Sunauli. You shouldn't have to.

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