



Northeast Tribal States

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Why Go?

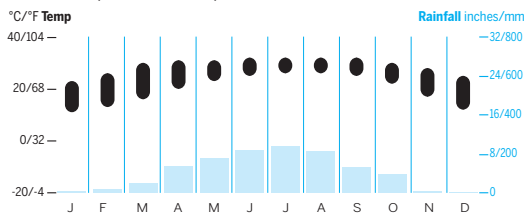
India's Northeast States, dangling way out on the edge of the map and the national perception, are strictly for explorers who want something different from their India experience. These remote frontier lands, where India, Southeast Asia and Tibet meet, are a collision zone of cultures, climates, landscapes and peoples and are one of Asia's last great unknowns. It's a place of rugged beauty where uncharted forests clamber up toward unnamed Himalayan peaks. It's a land of enormous variety where rhinoceros live in swampy grasslands and former head-hunters live in longhouses in the jungle. And it's an adventure in the truest sense of the word.

Infuriating permits and over-exaggerated safety worries mean the northeast is way off the tourist trail, yet the people are probably the friendliest in India.

So with all this on offer, why wait? Don your pith helmet and set forth in search of adventure.

When to Go

Assam (Guwahati)



Mar The wildlife is at its most visible in Kaziranga and other national parks.

Oct The Himalayan vistas are perfect and the roads to Tawang and Mechuka remain snow-free.

Dec Fierce Naga warriors descend on Kohima for the Hornbill festival (December 1–7).

Food

The food in the northeast is as varied and exotic as the people and the terrain. Sure, you can get all the North Indian and Chinese staples in most places, but if travel is all about new experiences then Northeast India is going to be a culinary adventure you'll never forget. Things start off tame enough in high mountain areas like Tawang, where the food is reminiscent of neighbouring Tibet – delicious *momos* and less-delicious Tibetan tea are all the rage. Head east and things become more interesting. Barbecued rat, forest antelope and something we couldn't quite identify were on the menu in central Arunachal Pradesh. If you're going to Mizoram, don't take Rover – dog meat is a delicacy there. In Nagaland, grubs, maggots, snakes, hornets and giant spiders all get taste buds excited.

DON'T MISS

There aren't all that many places left in the world where the maps may as well have blank spaces on them, snow-capped mountains remain unnamed and unclimbed, forests are filled with creatures that scientists have yet to lay eyes upon and hill tops are crowned with unmolested tribal villages, but northeast India is one such place. As the region slowly opens up, don't miss this opportunity for genuine, undiluted adventure. Areas that are safe yet largely unexplored by tourists include almost all of rural **Mizoram**, large tracts of **Tripura** (check the security situation first), the furthest reaches of **Nagaland** and, best of all, huge chunks of steamy forests, alpine meadows and high Himalayan wildernesses have finally started opening up in **Arunachal Pradesh**.

Top Festivals

- » Torgya and Losar (Jan/Feb, Tawang, p569) Masked Tibetan Buddhist dances.
- » Ambubachi Mela (Jun, Kamakhya Mandir, Guwahati, p554) Tantric rituals and animal sacrifices.
- » Nongkrem (Oct, Smit, p582) Khasi royal festival.
- » Wangala (Oct/Nov, Meghalaya statewide, p579) Harvest festival with impressive dancing.
- » Ras Mahotsav Festival (3rd week of Nov, Majuli Island, p562) Major Vishnu festival.
- » Hornbill Festival (Dec 1-7, Kohima, p571) Naga tribes in full warrior gear.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

Guwahati airport has flights to most major Indian cities. It's also the only big city in the northeast with a train line connecting it to the rest of India.

Fast Facts

- » Population: 44.99 million
- » Area: 255,083 sq km
- » Main languages: Assamese, Bodo, Hindi, Nagamese, Manipuri, Mizo, Khasi, Garo, Bengali
- » Sleeping prices: \$ below ₹800, \$\$ ₹800 to ₹2500, \$\$\$ above ₹2500

Top Tip

If you're using a tour company, allow at least one month to obtain travel permits and two months if travelling in a group of less than four (and you're not a married couple). If applying independently allow at least two to three months.

Resources

- » www.assamtourism.org
- » www.arunachaltourism.com
- » www.tourismnagaland.com
- » <http://manipur.nic.in/tourism.htm>
- » www.mizotourism.nic.in
- » www.tripuratourism.in
- » www.megtourism.gov.in

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



Northeast Tribal States Highlights

- 1** Ride atop an elephant in search of rhinos in **Kaziranga National Park** (p559)

2 Touch the clouds at the 4176m pass of Se La before descending to **Tawang Valley** (p569), Arunachal Pradesh's 'little Tibet'

3 Visit intriguing tribal villages around **Ziro** (p565) and meet the last of the bizarrely adorned Apatani women

4 Gaze down on the plains of Bangladesh from the lofty escarpment around **Cherrapunjee** (Sohra; p582)

5 Feel as if you've stepped out of India into a different culture and country in Nagaland's **Mon** (p572)

6 Search for the Last Shangri La in **Mechuka** (p567)

7 Row, row, row the boat gently out to the floating palace of **Neermahal** (p578)

8 Avoid the ghosts and hang with the Gods on the **Blue Mountain** (p576) of Mizoram

ASSAM

Fascinating Assam (also known as Asom and Axom) straddles the fertile Brahmaputra valley, making it the most accessible of India's Northeast States. The archetypal Assamese landscape offers golden-green vistas over seemingly endless rice fields and manicured tea estates framed in the distance by the hazy-blue mountains of Arunachal.

Assamese people might look Indian, but Assamese culture is proudly distinct: their Vishnu-worshipping faith is virtually a regional religion (see the boxed text, p562) and the *gamosa* (a red-and-white scarf worn by most men) is a subtle mark of regional costume.

With warm and genuinely hospitable locals, national parks crawling with animals big and small, slow boat rides down the Brahmaputra and a string of Hindu temples, Assam is a delight to travel in.

Guwahati

📍0361 / POP 809,805

The biggest, most cosmopolitan and, some might say, the most 'Indian' city in the north-east, Guwahati is an essential stop on any northeastern tour. A casual glance might place Guwahati alongside any other Indian city but wander the back alleys around Jor-pulkuri Ponds, away from the concrete jungle of the central business district, and you could almost imagine yourself in a village made up of ponds, palm trees, small single-storey traditional houses and old colonial-era mansions.

History

Guwahati is considered the site of Pragjyotishpura, a semi-mythical town founded by Asura King Naraka who was later killed by Lord Krishna for a pair of magical earrings. The city was a vibrant cultural centre well before the Ahoms arrived, and later it was the theatre of intense Ahom-Mughal



PERMIT PAINS

Permits Permits for this region are a pain, being too bureaucratically involved for many foreigners, but those who take the trouble will be rewarded. Permits are mandatory for Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Manipur, and entry without one is a serious matter. Indian citizens just need an inner line permit, issued with little fuss in Guwahati or Kolkata (see p469). The rest of this box applies to foreigners who'll require a Restricted Area Permit (RAP).

Minimum Group Size Permit applications need a four-person minimum group. Exceptions are Nagaland, for a legally married couple with marriage certificate; and Arunachal Pradesh for a minimum of two people. In reality though, it's now possible for single travellers to get permits to all the states, but only if you use a tour company (and even then you need a lot of patience).

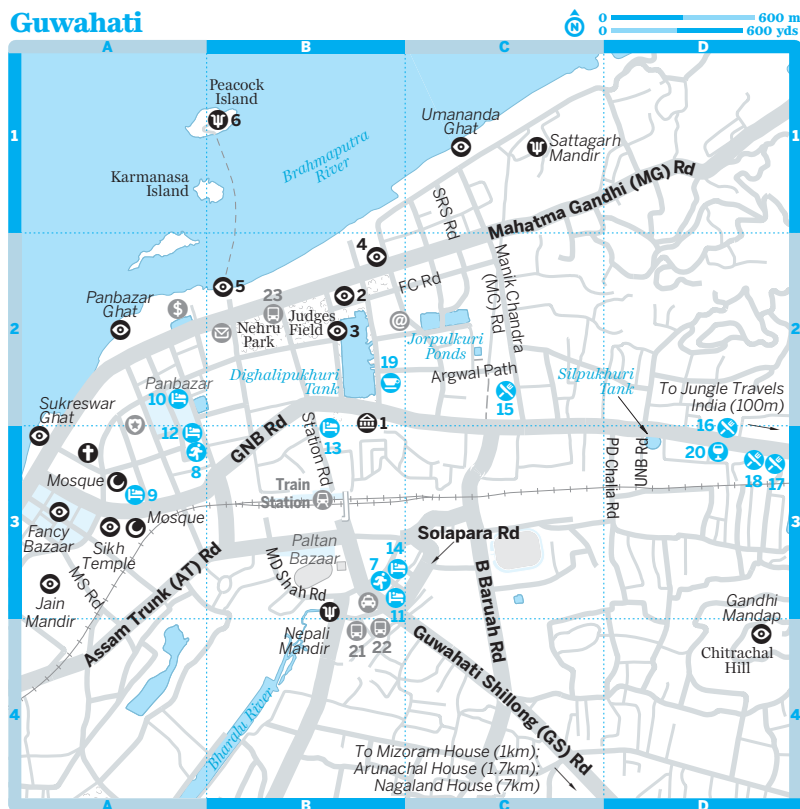
In Nagaland and Manipur, authorities may refuse you entry if some people listed on your permit are 'missing'; Mizoram doesn't seem bothered and Arunachal Pradesh is now much more relaxed.

Validity & Registration Permits are valid for 10 days from a specified starting date, but Arunachal allows 30 days. You *might* be able to extend your permit, but only in state capitals at the Secretariat, Home Department. Be aware that permits only allow you to visit specified districts between specified dates, so plan carefully as changing routes might be problematic.

Be sure to make multiple photocopies of your permit to hand in at each checkpoint, police station and hotel.

Where to Apply Applications made independently through the **Ministry of Home Affairs** (📞011-23385748; Jaisalmer House, 26 Man Singh Rd, Delhi; 🕒inquiries 9-11am Mon-Fri) or the appropriate State House in Delhi can take weeks and will normally end in frustration. Kolkata's **Foreigners' Registration Office** (FRO; 📞22837034; 237 A/C Bose Rd; 🕒11am-5pm Mon-Fri) can issue permits but it seems to want to exclude Tawang from Arunachal, restrict access to Nagaland and not allow you into Mizoram.

The easiest and most reliable way to get permits is through a reputable travel agency; see the Information section for each state.



fighting, changing hands eight times in 50 years before 1681. In 1897 a huge earthquake, followed by a series of devastating floods, wiped out most of the old city.

🕒 Sights

Kamakhya Mandir

HINDU TEMPLE

(admission for no queue/short queue/queue ₹500/100/free; ☀️8am-1pm & 3pm-dusk) While Sati's disintegrated body parts rained toes on Kolkata (see p443), her yoni fell on Kamakhya Hill. This makes Kamakhya Mandir important for *shakti* (sensual tantric worship of female spiritual power). Goats, pigeons and the occasional buffalo are ritually beheaded in a gory pavilion and the hot, dark inner womblike sanctum is painted red to signify sacrificial blood. The huge June/July **Ambubachi Mela** celebrates the end of the mother goddess' menstrual cycle with even more blood.

Kamakhya is 7km west of central Guwahati and 3km up a spiralling side road. Occasional buses from Guwahati's Kachari bus stand run all the way up (₹20, 20 minutes).

Umananda Mandir

HINDU TEMPLE

(Peacock Island) The temple complex sits on a small forested river island, accessed by a 15-minute ride on a ferry (₹10 return, half hourly 8am to 4.30pm) from **Kachari Ghat**, which itself offers attractive afternoon river views. The Shiva temple, which sits atop the island, is less interesting than the boat ride out to it.

Assam State Museum

MUSEUM

(GNB Rd; admission/camera/video ₹5/10/100; ☀️10am-5pm Tue-Sun, until 4pm winter) This museum is worth a visit. It has a large sculpture collection, while the upper floors are devoted to informative tribal culture displays. You get to walk through reconstructed tribal homes.

Guwahati

Sights

- 1 Assam State Museum..... B2
- 2 Courthouse..... B2
- 3 Dighulipukhuri Park..... B2
- 4 Guwahati Planetarium..... B2
- 5 Kachari Ghat..... B2
- 6 Umananda Mandir..... B1

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 7 Network Travels..... B3
- 8 Rhino Travels..... A3
Traveller's Point..... (see 13)

Sleeping

- 9 Dynasty..... A3
- 10 Hotel Prag Continental..... A2
- 11 Hotel Siroy Lily..... B3
- 12 Hotel Suradevi..... A3
- 13 Prashaanti Tourist Lodge..... B3
- 14 Sundarban Guest House..... B3

Eating

- 15 Beatrix..... C2
- 16 Dhaba..... D3
- 17 Curry Pot..... D3
- 18 Paradise..... D3
Tandoori..... (see 9)

Drinking

- 19 Café Coffee
Day..... B2
- 20 Trafik..... D3

Information

Assam Tourism..... (see 13)

Transport

- 21 Blue Hill..... B4
- 22 Deep..... B4
- 23 Kachari Bus
Stand..... B2

Old Guwahati

AREA

The distinctive beehive dome of the **Courthouse** (MG Rd) rises above attractive **Dighulipukhuri Park** (HB Rd; admission ₹5, boats per person ₹15; ☀9.30am-8pm) with its large tank full of row boats. The nearby **Guwahati Planetarium** (MG Rd; shows ₹15; ☀noon & 4pm, closed 1st & 15th of the month) looks somewhere between a mosque and a landed UFO.

Sleeping

Most midrange and top-end hotels add a 15% tax and 10% service charge to their nightly rates. These have been included in the prices listed here.

Hotel Prag Continental

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2540850; www.hotelpragcontinental.com; MN Rd; s/d from ₹1180/1725; ☹) The spacious and well-furnished rooms with wooden floors on offer at this hotel are as spotless as the aquarium full of brightly painted fish that sits in the reception. The staff are attentive and discounts easy to come by. It's on a quieter side street and has a good restaurant.

Sundarban Guest House

HOTEL \$

(☎2730722; s/d from ₹385/550; ☹) A cheery, colourful hotel that's the best budget option in town and about the closest the northeast comes to a backpacker hangout. Rooms are atypically clean and tidy with stain-free sheets, and management is helpful. It's off Manipuribasti East (ME) Rd, in the first side lane and away from road noise.

Dynasty

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2516021; www.hoteldynastyindia.com; Sir Shahdullah (SS) Rd; r from ₹6100; ☹@☹) The shabby exterior makes it hard to believe that this is really Guwahati's top hotel, but as we all know it's what's on the inside that counts: magnificent rooms with an old colonial flavour. It has all the facilities you'd expect from a top-end hotel, including a couple of superb restaurants plus a sauna and steam room.

Hotel Siroy Lily

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2608492; www.hotelsiroylily.com; Solapara Rd; s/d from ₹836/1083; ☹) Professionally run but tired-looking hotel with a pleasantly air-conditioned foyer, complimentary breakfast and free newspapers delivered to your door. Considering the price it's a pretty good deal.

Also recommended:

Prashaanti Tourist Lodge

HOTEL \$

(☎9207047841; Station Rd; r from ₹578; ☹) Convenient for the train station, the rooms are OK but the staff could do with a brush-up in hospitality management. It's a genuine bargain, though, but be prepared for some train noise.

Hotel Suradevi

HOTEL \$

(☎2545050; MN Rd; s/d ₹200/300, without bathroom ₹100/250) Well-organised warren of spartan rooms. Check in early to get a room. The owner speaks good English.



TRAVELLING SAFELY IN THE NORTHEAST STATES

In recent decades many ethnolinguistic groups in the northeast have jostled – often violently – to assert themselves in the face of illegal Bangladeshi immigration, governmental neglect and a heavy-handed defence policy. Some want independence from India, others autonomy, but more are fighting what are effectively clan or turf wars. At the time of writing Arunachal Pradesh, most of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and the tourist areas of Tripura were fairly peaceful.

The problem is that trouble can flare up suddenly and unpredictably. In 2010 bombings hit parts of Assam and the Garo hills area of Meghalaya. Much of Manipur remains dangerous to visit (but the areas open to tourists are currently calm). If you stick to the main tourist routes, the worst problems you're likely to encounter are the regular strikes that paralyse Assam.

Even so, it's wise to keep abreast of latest news with the *Assam Tribune* (www.assamtribune.com) and if you're with a tour group, ensure your guide is up to date with the latest situation.

Eating

Tandoori

NORTH INDIAN \$\$

(☎2516021; SS Rd; mains ₹200-300; ☀noon-3pm & 7-11pm) Inside the Dynasty Hotel, Tandoori concocts majestic North Indian dishes which are served at stylish low tables by waiters in Mughal uniforms accompanied by gentle live tabla music.

Paradise

ASSAMESE \$\$

(1st fl, GNB Rd; mains ₹100-200) Well known for its authentic Assamese cuisine, its thali is the best way to get a lot of small tasters. Assamese food is not a lip-tingler like typical Indian food and for some this cuisine can seem rather bland, but it's the subtleties you're after rather than the heat.

Dhaba

NORTH INDIAN \$\$

(Silpukhuri, GNB Rd; mains ₹120-180) This simple canteen-style restaurant serves good North Indian staples as well as some token Chinese dishes. You can eat indoors or, if you prefer, out in the courtyard where the side portion of carbon monoxide comes free with the meal. They have a couple of other branches around town.

Kurry Pot

SOUTH INDIAN \$\$

(GNB Rd; mains ₹100-180) The specialities of this clean and peaceful restaurant are the dosas (₹40 to ₹80) and the list of different types is almost as long as the dosa itself. If a dosa's not for you then they dish up a range of other Indian staples. It's popular with the lunchtime work crowd.

Beatrix

MULTICUISINE \$

(Manik Chandra (MC) Rd; dishes ₹60-165) Upbeat and cartoon-walled, Beatrix is just a peg

above a student hangout. Its eclectic menu offers fish and chips, *momos* (Tibetan dumplings) and Hakka Chow. The beautiful old villa it sits next door to is also worth gawping at.



Drinking

Café Coffee Day

CAFE

(Taybullah Rd; espresso ₹25; ☀10am-10pm) Guwahati's central coffee shop, pumping out contemporary music, attracts the city's students and nouveau-riche youth with perfect (if very slow) macchiato.

Trafik

BAR

(GNB Rd; beers ₹70; ☀10am-10pm) This underlit bar has a vast screen for cricket matches or *filmi* (slang term describing anything to do with Indian movies; in this case, Bollywood music) clips.



Information

Emergency

Police station (☎2540126, Hem Barua (HB) Rd)

Internet Access

iWay (Lamb Rd; per hr ₹25; ☀9am-last customer)

Medical Services

Downtown Hospital (☎2331003; GS Rd, Dispur) The area's best.

Money

ATMs abound and it's a good idea to stock up on local currency here as ATMs in smaller centres can be unreliable.

State Bank of India (SBI; 3rd fl, MG Rd) ATM, changes major currencies and travellers cheques.

Permits

Indian citizens can obtain inner line permits (see the following list) but foreigners shouldn't expect any assistance (for foreigner permits, see p553).

Arunachal House (☎23341243; Rukmini Gao, GS Rd)

Manipur Bhawan (☎2540707; Rajgarh Rd)

Mizoram House (☎2529441; GS Rd, Christian Basti)

Nagaland House (☎2332158; Sachel Rd, Sixth Mile, Khanapara)

Post

Main post office (Ananda Ram Barua (ARB) Rd)

Tourist Information

Assam Tourism (☎2542748; www.assamtourism.org; Station Rd) Informal help desk within the Prashaanti Tourist Lodge, with a tour booth just outside.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Air India (☎2264420, Ganeshguri), IndiGo Airlines, **Jet Airways** (☎2633252; Tayebullah Rd), Kingfisher and SpiceJet fly to Guwahati from most major Indian cities (often with a stopover in Kolkata). Getting into town from Guwahati's orderly Lok-Priya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport costs ₹500/100/70 for taxi/shared taxi/airport bus.

HELICOPTER

Pawan Hans Helicopters (☎2842174; www.pawahans.co.in) shuttles to Shillong (₹1200, 45 minutes, 9am & 1pm Mon-Sat), Naharlagun near Itanagar and Lumla for Tawang (₹3000, 1¼ hours, 10am Mon-Sat). Phone through your booking then pay at the airport if the service flies (weather and passenger numbers permitting).

Meghalaya Helicopter Service (☎2223129; airport) has two to three daily (except Sunday) flights to Shillong (₹1200, 30 minutes, 9am & 12.30pm plus 2pm Tuesday & Thursday). There are also services to Tura (Garo Hills, ₹1500, 50 minutes, 10.30am Mon, Wed & Fri).

Helicopter travel in India has a poor safety record.

Bus & Sumo

Distance buses leave from the Interstate Bus Terminal (ISBT) 8km east of Guwahati. Private bus operators run shuttle services from their offices to the ISBT. With extensive networks are **Network Travels** (☎2522007; GS Rd), **Deep** (☎2152937; Heramba Prasad Borua (HPB) Rd) and **Blue Hill** (☎2601490; HPB Rd). All companies charge the same regulated fares.

Train

Of the four daily trains to Delhi, the *Guwahati New Delhi Rajdhani* (No 2423; 3AC/2AC ₹1995/2565, 27 hours, 7.05am) is the fastest; others take over 42 hours. The best daily train to Kolkata (Howrah Junction) is the *Saraighat Express* (No 2346; sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹386/1012/1366, 16½ hours, 12.45pm). For New Jalpaiguri (for Darjeeling and Sikkim) the best train is the *Guwahati New Jalpaiguri Rajdhani* (No 2423; 3AC/2AC/1AC ₹733/926/1522, six hours).

Several trains serve Dimapur (sleeper/3AC/2AC from ₹166/401/531, four to six hours), Jorhat (sleeper/3AC ₹202/521, seven to 11 hours) and Dibrugarh (3AC/2AC/1AC ₹926/1206/1970, 11 hours). Trains to Jorhat and Dibrugarh cut through Nagaland, but you don't need a Nagaland permit as long as you stay on the train (the same rule doesn't apply for buses however).

i Getting Around

Shared taxis to the airport (per person/car ₹100/500, 23km) leave from outside the Hotel

BUSES FROM GUWAHATI

DESTINATION	FARE (₹)	DURATION (HR)
Agartala (Tripura)	660	24-26
Aizawl (Mizoram)	750	28
Dibrugarh	380	10
Imphal (Manipur) via Mao	700	20
Jorhat	260	8
Kaziranga	260-300	6
Kohima (Nagaland)	330	13
Shillong (Meghalaya)	90-110	3½
Sivasagar	310-390	8
Tezpur	140-150	5

Mahalaxmi on GS Rd. From the Adabari bus stand city buses travel to Hajo (bus 25, ₹50, one hour) and Sualkuchi (bus 22, ₹50, one hour). Autorickshaws charge ₹25 to ₹50 for shorter hops.

Around Guwahati

HAJO

Some 30km northwest of Guwahati, the pleasant little town of Hajo attracts Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims to its five ancient temples topping assorted hillocks. Haigriv Madhav temple is the main one, which is accessed by a long flight of steps through an ornate quasi-Mughal gateway. The images inside of Madhav, an avatar of Krishna, are alleged to be 6000 years old.

POA MECCA

Two kilometres east of Hajo is a **mosque** sheltering the tomb of the multi-named Hazarat Shah Sultan Giasuddin Aulia Rahmatullah Alike who died some 800 years ago. Muslims need to walk (the less pious may drive) 4km up a spiral road to reach the mosque, which is architecturally unremarkable.

POBITORA NATIONAL PARK

Only 40km from Guwahati, this small national park has the highest concentration of rhinoceros in the world. Entrance fees are the same as Kaziranga National Park (see p561). Getting into the park involves a boat ride over the river boundary to the elephant-mounting station. From there it's a one-hour trip atop an elephant lumbering through boggy grassland and stirring up petulant rhinos.

Northwestern Assam (Bodoland)

MANAS NATIONAL PARK

📍03666

Bodoland's **Manas National Park** (www.manas100.com; Indian/camera/video ₹50/50/500; foreigner/camera/video ₹250/500/1000; 🕒Oct-Mar) is Unesco-listed and has two 'ranges' – Bansbari and Koklabari – with different access points.

Bansbari Range

NATURE RESERVE

Famous for tigers (though you'll probably only see their pug marks), this range is comparatively accessible and can be

appreciated in delightful comfort from **Bansbari Lodge** (📍3612602223; www.assambengalnavigation.com/bansbari.htm; d ₹2000, jungle package ₹7500). Jungle packages cover full board, early morning elephant safari, jeep safari, guide, park entry fee and village and tea garden excursions. Ask about river rafting. Contact Jungle Travels India in Guwahati (p560) for bookings. Access is from Barpeta Rd.

📍 Getting there & Away

Guwahati–Kokrajhar buses serve Pathsala junction and pass within 3km of Barpeta Rd.

The *Kamrup Express* (No 5960, sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹144/280/345, 2½ hours, 7.35am) and *Brahmaputra Mail* (No 4055, sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹144/280/345, 2½ hours, 11.50am) connect Guwahati and Barpeta Rd.

Jeep rental is available at Koklabari, Barpeta Rd and (for guests) at Bansbari Lodge.

Tezpur

📍03712 / POP 80,573

Tezpur, with its large Bangladeshi immigrant population, is probably Assam's most attractive city thanks to beautifully kept parks, attractive lakes and the enchanting views of the mighty Brahmaputra River as it laps the town's edge. The imaginatively named **Internet Cafe** (Main Rd; per hr ₹20; 🕒9am–8pm) has, you guessed it, internet.

👁️ Sights

Chitralekha Udyan (Cole Park; Jenkins Rd; adult/camera/video ₹20/20/100; 🕒9am–7pm) has a U-shaped pond (paddleboat hire ₹10 per person) wrapped around pretty manicured lawns, dotted with fine **ancient sculptures**. The park also contains bumper cars and waterslides (🕒Apr–Sept)! A block east, then south, stands **Ganeshgarh temple**, which backs onto a ghat overlooking the surging river, a good place for Brahmaputra sunsets. Nearly 1km east along the narrow, winding riverside lane is **Agnigarh Hill** (Padma Park; adult/camera/video ₹20/20/100; 🕒8.30am–7.30pm) that might have been Banasura's fire fortress site.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Centre Point

HOTEL \$\$\$

(📍232359; Main Rd; r from ₹660; 🕒🕒) The cheaper rooms at this new hotel bang in the town centre are splashed in smart white paint, but have cold water-only showers,

while the 'executive' rooms, with flat screen TVs, hot showers, desks and polished wooden floors are truly swanky, with business class standards for non-business class prices. Wi-fi is 'coming soon'.

KF

HOTEL \$\$

(☎237825; Mission Charali; s/d from ₹1760/1980; 🏠🏠) With slick, contemporary rooms, good customer service and plenty of attention to detail, this hotel has lots going for it. In fact, about the only downside we could come up with was its location, 3km north of town and on a busy junction. There's an in-house restaurant.

Tourist Lodge

HOTEL \$

(☎221016; Jenkins Rd; s/d from ₹473/525) Facing Chitrallekha Udyan, two blocks south of the bus station, the Tourist Lodge is unusual for a government-run hotel in that the staff do actually care about the well-being of their guests and the cleanliness of their hotel. This place offers good-value spacious rooms with bathrooms (some squat toilets) and mosquito nets.

The modern glass tower **Baliram Building**, on the corner of Naren Bose (NB) and NC/SC Roads, contains several floors of good dining. The ground-floor stand-up-and-eat **dosa house** (☺6am-9pm) has South Indian fare and cheap breakfasts. Semismart **China Villa** (meals from ₹120; ☺10am-10.30pm) offers Indian and Chinese food in AC comfort, while the rooftop **Chat House** (snacks from ₹30; ☺8am-9.30pm) has an open-sided, but roofed, terrace for cooling breezes, views, Indian snacks, noodles, pizzas and *momos*.

i Getting There & Away

Sumos have their booking counters in Jenkins Rd and run to Bomdila in Arunachal Pradesh (₹250, eight hours) and Tawang (₹500, 15hrs). Bargain for a private taxi in the same street for the Eco-Camp at Potasali (₹1500) and Kaziranga (₹1500). A little further on is the **bus station** (Jenkins Rd) with frequent services to Guwahati (₹140 to ₹150, five hours), Jorhat (₹100, four hours) and Kohora for Kaziranga (₹45, two hours).

Tezpur's train station recently closed down, meaning that you now have to head to Guwahati or Jorhat if you want to ride the rails.

Around Tezpur

Picturesque **Nameri National Park** (Indian/camera/video ₹20/50/500, foreigner/camera/video ₹250/500/1000; ☺Nov-Apr) specialises in

low-key, walk-in birdwatching treks. Around 374 bird species have been recorded in the park, including such rarities as the white-rumped vulture (which may now be extinct in the park), greater spotted eagle and the white-winged duck. Of the big mammals, wild elephants are present as are numerous deer species and a few rarely seen tigers. However, for many mammal-spotting naturalists, the park's most exciting resident is the critically endangered dwarf hog, which, after many years of absence has recently been returned to the wild thanks to a successful captive breeding project run by the **Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust** (www.durrell.org). Park fees include the compulsory armed guard. Access is from **Potasali**, 2km off the Tezpur-Bhalukpong road (turn east at one-house hamlet Gamani, 12km north of Balipara).

Eco-Camp (☎9435250052/09854019932; dm/d ₹200/1620, plus membership per person ₹50) organises all Nameri visits, including two-hour birdwatching rafting trips (two people ₹550). Accommodation is in 'tents', but colourful fabrics, private bathrooms, sturdy beds and thatched-roof shelters make the experience relatively luxurious. The camp is set within lush gardens full of tweeting birds and butterflies drunk on tropical nectar. There's an atmospheric, and excellent, open-sided restaurant and the staff are simply superb. All up it gets our vote as the best place to stay in the entire northeast. It's very popular, so book way ahead. If it's full the government-run **Jibboroli Wild Resort** (☎9954357376; tw ₹1200) just a short walk beyond the Eco-Camp, has plain 'cottages' that aren't quite as quaint as a cottage should be. It's very much the second choice.

Kaziranga National Park

☎03776

Assam's must-do attraction is an elephant safari to look for rhinoceros hiding in the expansive grasslands of this **national park** (☺1 Nov-30 Apr, elephant rides 5.30-8.30am, jeep access 7.30am-noon & 2.30pm-dusk). Kaziranga's population of around 1855 Indian one-horned rhinos (just 200 in 1904) represents more than two-thirds of the world's total. The park consists of a western, central and an eastern range, but the central range is the most accessible, giving the best viewing chances for rhinos, elephants and swamp deer plus plenty of bird life (take binoculars).



NORTHEAST TOURS

The vast majority of foreign tourists visiting the northeast states travel as part of an organised tour, and indeed for four of the states (Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram), independent travel in the normal sense of the word is almost impossible. Instead, the only realistic way of getting permits is to enlist the services of a tour company. Once you have a permit, travelling around independently is not normally a problem, but you're unlikely to find a tour company who'll help you get permits without first hiring a car and driver/guide from them, thus making real independent travel in the permit states pretty much impossible.

Most tour companies are based in Guwahati and all of the following can organise permits and tours throughout the northeast.

» **Traveller's Point** (Map p554; ☎2604018; www.assamtourism.org; Prashaanti Tourist Lodge, Station Rd) If you're staying only within Assam then Assam Tourism's commercial booth runs a variety of city- and state-wide tours including day excursions to Hajo via the silk-weaving centre of Sualkuchi.

» **Network Travels** (Map p554; ☎2605335; www.networktravelsindia.net; GS Rd; ☀5am-9pm) A highly experienced agency whose operations cover the whole of the northeast with tailor-made and fixed-itinerary tours. Organising permits is a speciality.

» **Jungle Travels India** (off Map p554; ☎2667871, 9207042330; www.jungletravelsindia.com; 3b Dirang Arcade, GNB Rd) Another experienced agency covering the entire northeast with tailor-made tours and fixed-date departures. It organises all the permits, but can be slightly disorganised in this regard. With two boats, it runs Brahmaputra cruises (see www.assambengalnavigation.com) for four to 10 nights at US\$350 per person per night, and also runs the Bansbari Lodge in Manas National Park.

» **Rhino Travels** (Map p554; ☎2540666; www.rhinotravels.com; M Nehru (MN) Rd) This agency offers set-date tours in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. It also offers two- to four-night river cruises.

Sleeping & Eating

Prices drop at least 30% when Kaziranga National Park closes. In season booking ahead is wise and advance payment is often required. All the better hotels listed here sell 'Jungle Plan' packages, which includes full-board accommodation, park entrance fees, a morning elephant safari and an afternoon jeep safari. Unless stated otherwise, the prices we list are for rooms only.

TOURIST COMPLEX

There are a number of fairly run-down places to stay within a five-minute walk of the range office. The following are the best options.

Jupuri Ghar HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎361-2605335; Guwahati; s/tw ₹2250/2800; ☎) Traditional-style cabins set around pleasant, mature gardens in a tranquil setting. It's well-managed and has an open-air restaurant.

Prashanti Cottage HOTEL \$
(☎9864575039; d ₹685) Right beside the ticket office, this ageing place has cheap but fairly clean rooms.

BEYOND THE COMPLEX

Wild Grass Resort

ECORESORT \$\$

(☎262085; www.oldassam.com; r ₹1900) This delightful and slightly ramshackle ecofriendly resort is so justifiably popular that it doesn't bother with a sign but carefully labels all the trees instead. Raj-inspired decor makes you feel that the clock has slowed. The dining room serves tasty Indian food. The entrance is opposite the Km373 marker on National Highway (NH) 37. In season, bookings are essential.

Diphlu River Lodge

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎361-2602223; Guwahati; www.jungletravelsindia.com; jungleplanIndians/d ₹9000/12,000, foreigner s/d ₹18,000/24,000) Fifteen minutes' drive west of the tourist complex, this new lodge, with its chic-rustic feel, is without doubt the most comfortable place to stay in the Kaziranga region. It consists of six bamboo cottages on raised stilts overlooking a river. The rooms have enormous soft beds and the bathrooms sport heavenly rain showers. There's no sign – look for the dirt track on the left (if travelling from the Guwahati direction) beside the 37 marker post.

lora; the Retreat

(☎262411; www.kazirangasafari.com; s/d from ₹3300/3900; 🏠📶📶) Not quite as discreet as you may imagine a place named 'the Retreat' to be, this vast new place, to the east of the tourist complex, is almost as big as the national park itself, but despite this its deliciously quiet and subtly decorated rooms offer superb value for money. However, if you value a personal service you'd best look elsewhere.

HOTEL \$\$\$

Bonhabi Resort

(☎262675; www.bonhabiresort.com; r ₹1600-2000) A short way east of the tourist complex, this place consists of an old villa with a colonial look and feel, and a series of comfortable cottages set around gorgeous gardens.

HOTEL \$\$

i Information

Kohora village is closest for Kaziranga's central range with an obvious Rhino Gate leading to the Kaziranga Tourist complex 800m south. Here you'll find the **range office**, **elephant-ride booking office** (☺6-7pm, book the previous night) and **jeep rental stand** (rental from ₹1200). Pay your fees at the range office before entering the park, 2km north.

Fees for Indians/foreigners are: entry fees ₹50/250 per day, cameras ₹50/500, videos ₹500/1000, elephant rides ₹350/1050, and vehicle toll fee ₹150/150 (including an armed escort – a ₹50 tip is customary).

There's an SBI ATM a few hundred metres east of Kohora village centre.

i Getting There & Away

Buses travel to: Guwahati (₹260 to ₹300, five hours, hourly 7.30am to 4.30pm), Dibrugarh (₹260 to ₹300), Tezpur (₹45, two hours) and Shillong (₹450 to ₹600, eight hours).

Upper Assam**JORHAT**

☎0376 / POP 83,670

Bustling Jorhat is the junction for Majuli Island. Gar-Ali, Jorhat's commercial street, meets the main east-west thoroughfare – Assam Trunk (AT) Rd (NH37) – in front of a lively **central market** area. AT Road is also home to an **SBI ATM** and the **Netizen Cyberspace** (₹20 per hr; ☺9am-8pm) internet cafe.

Journey another 200m west of the market along AT Rd, then south to find a small **museum** (Postgraduate Training College, MG Rd;

admission free; ☺10am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) with Ahom artefacts and nearby **Assam Tourism** (☺10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 2nd & 4th Sat) in the good-value **Tourist Lodge** (☎2321579; MG Rd; s/d ₹578/683), which has tiled floors, mosquito nets and enthusiastic staff who know how to use cleaning products.

Tucked conveniently behind the Assam State Transport Corporation (ASTC) Bus Station (AT Rd), Solicitor Rd has half a dozen reasonable hotels. The **Hotel Janata Paradise** (☎9435659461; Solicitor Rd; d ₹300) isn't quite as 'beautiful' as the manager told us, but at this price you can't be too hard on the daffodil-yellow rooms. Its **restaurant** (☺11am-4pm & 8-9pm) serves excellent-value 10-dish Assamese thalis (from ₹40).

The town's best hotel is the **Hotel Heritage** (☎2301839; Solicitor Rd; s/d from ₹478/588; 🏠), which has well-maintained rooms, obliging staff and old-fashioned character. Nearby is the **New Park** (☎2300725; Solicitor Rd; s/d from ₹687/880; 🏠), which is a big new hotel with small but tidy rooms and hot showers.

The **ASTC bus station** (AT Rd) has frequent services to Sivasagar (₹35 to ₹45, 1½ hours), Tezpur (₹120 to ₹140, four hours) and Guwahati (₹260, eight hours, eight buses 6am to noon; buses pass Kaziranga en route).

The *Jan Shatabdi Express* (No 2068, AC Chair ₹468, 6¾ hours, 1.55pm Monday to Saturday) is the most convenient of the two trains to Guwahati.

AROUND JORHAT**Tea Estate Getaways**

TEA ESTATES

After all this huffing and puffing around the Northeast it's time to relax with a jolly nice cup of tea, don't you think old chap? And where better to do so than in a colonial-era heritage bungalow on a working tea estate. Bookings are essential.

The best of the couple of different options are the tastefully renovated **Banyan Grove** (☎9954451548; www.heritagetourismindia.com; s/d ₹6272/7280; lunch ₹350, dinner ₹450; 🏠). Dating from the late 19th century, its rooms are crammed with antiques and the drawing room is straight out of a Victorian period drama. It has wonderful lawns and verandas overlooking a tea estate and swimming pool. The site is 7km down rural tracks from Km442 on NH37 (Jorhat-Deragaon Rd).

With a classical portico and wide, immaculate lawns, **Thengal Manor** (☎bookings

9954451548; www.heritagetourismindia.com; Jalukaburi; s/d ₹6272/7280; lunch ₹350, dinner ₹450) oozes grandeur. Old photos, four-post beds and medal certificates from King George VI add atmosphere to this stately mansion. Thengal is 15km south of Jorhat down MG Rd, towards Titabor.

MAJULI ISLAND

☎03775 / POP 140,000

The great muddy-brown Brahmaputra River's ever-shifting puzzle of sandbanks includes **Majuli**, which at around 421 sq km (2001 figures) is India's largest river island (many locals will tell you that Majuli is the world's largest river island, but in fact this honour belongs to Brazil's Bananal Island). Size aside, what there is no doubting is Majuli's sheer beauty. The island is a relaxed, shimmering mat of glowing rice fields and water meadows bursting with flowers. Aside from relishing the laidback vibe that permeates island life, highlights of a visit include birdwatching and learning about neo-Vaishnavite philosophy at one of Majuli's 22 ancient *satras* (Hindu Vaishnavite monasteries and centres for art). If all this makes Majuli sounds like your kind of place then don't waste time getting there – surveys indicate that at current levels of erosion the island will cease to exist within 20 years.

The two main villages are **Kamalabari**, 3km from the ferry port and **Garamur**, 5km further north. The most interesting, accessible *satras* are the large, beautifully peaceful **Uttar Kamalabari** (1km north, then 600m east of Kamalabari) and **Auniati** (5km west of Kamalabari), where monks are keen to show you their little **museum** (Indian/foreigner/camera/video ₹5/50/50/200; ☎9.30-11am & 12-4pm) of Ahom royal artefacts. The best chances of observing chanting, dances or drama recitations are around dawn and dusk or during the big **Ras Mahotsav Festival** (third week of November).

For local guiding, accommodation or bicycle hire, contact **Jyoti Naryan Sarma** (☎9435657282; jyoti24365@gmail.com, www.majuli-tourism.com; per day ₹500).

Sleeping & Eating

As well as the options listed below, many of the *satras* have very basic **guesthouses** (₹100).

La Maison de Ananda

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎9435205539; dm ₹150-200) On a Garamur back lane, this French-owned traditionally styled thatched house on bamboo stilts has rooms decked out in locally made fabrics, which give it a hippie-chic atmosphere. It's probably the best value-for-money lodgings on the island.

Ygdrasil Bamboo Cottage

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(☎9401625744; r ₹1200) Around a kilometre before Garamur (on the road to Kamalabari), this thatched hut perches on stilts above a marshy, avian-filled lake. The sound of fish plopping about in the water below your bed and a thousand screaming cicadas (as well as a million marauding mosquitoes – bring repellent!) will lull you to sleep at night. The bamboo beds are comfortable and it's nicely furnished. They serve a stunning Majuli thali in the evening and a breakfast that might be a bit too local for many tastes!

La Villa

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎9435657282; jyoti24365@gmail.com; r from ₹300) Run by knowledgeable and keen-to-please Jyoti Naryan Sarma (who also acts as a guide), this Garamur guesthouse has three brightly painted but uninspiring rooms overlooking an open-billed stork roosting site (whose dawn chorus will do away with any need for an alarm clock).

Getting There & Away

This windswept sandbank of Nimatighat, pockmarked with chai shacks, is the departure point for photogenically overcrowded ferries to Majuli

SATRAS

A *satra* is a monastery for Vishnu worship, Assam's distinctive form of everyman Hinduism. Formulated by 15th-century Assamese philosopher Sankardev, the faith eschews the caste system and idol worship, focussing on Vishnu as God, especially in his Krishna incarnation. Much of the worship is based around dance and melodramatic play-acting of scenes from the holy Bhagavad Gita. The heart of any *satra* is its *namghar*, a large, simple, prayer hall usually open sided and shaped like an upside-down oil tanker. Beneath the eastern end, an inner sanctum hosts an eternal flame, the Gita and possibly a horde of instructive (but not divine) images.

Island. It's a 12km-ride from Jorhat by bus (₹20, 40 minutes).

Ferries (adult/jeep ₹20/800, 2½ hours) leave Nimatighat at 8.30am, 10.30am, 1.30pm and 3pm; return trips are at 7.30am, 8.30am, 1.30pm and 3pm.

i Getting Around

Jam-packed buses and vans (₹10/20) meet arriving ferries then drive to Garamur via Kamalabari where three-wheelers are easier to rent. For a few days consider arranging a bicycle through Jyoti at La Villa.

SIVASAGAR

☎03772 / POP 64,000

Despite being an oil-service town, Sivasagar exudes a residual elegance from its time as the capital of the Ahom dynasty that ruled Assam for more than 600 years. The name comes from 'waters of Shiva', the graceful central feature of a rectangular reservoir dug in 1734 by Ahom Queen Ambika. Three typical Ahom **temple towers** rise proudly above the tank's partly wooded southern banks – to the west **Devidol**, to the east **Vishnudol** and in the centre, the 33m-high **Shivadol Mandir**, India's tallest Shiva temple. Its uppermost trident balances upon an egg-shaped feature whose golden covering the British reputedly tried (but failed) to pilfer in 1823.

Around 500m from Shivadol a gaggle of hotels line AT Rd, the most appealing of which is the surprisingly swish **Hotel Shiva Palace** (☎222629; hotelshivapalace@rediffmail.com; s/d from ₹715/825; 🏨), incorporating a decent restaurant, the **Sky Chef Restaurant** (mains ₹70-180).

Hotel Siddhartha (☎222276; s/d from ₹500/800; 🏨) is out of town (1.5km), but otherwise this sparkly place offers great value for backpackers in the cheaper rooms and flashpackers in the swankier rooms.

The **ASTC bus station** (cnr AT & Temple Rds) has frequent services to Jorhat (₹35 to ₹45, one hour), Dibrugarh (₹51 to ₹69, two hours), Tezpur (₹189, five hours), Guwahati (₹310 to ₹390, eight hours, frequent from 7am).

Many private buses have ticket counters on nearby AT Rd. For Kareng Ghar, use a tempo (₹10, 45 minutes), which depart from an unmarked stop on Bhuban Gogoi (BG) Rd, 300m north up AT Rd, then 50m right.

AROUND SIVASAGAR

Dotted around Sivasagar are many lemon-squeezer-shaped temples and ochre-brick

ruins built by the Ahom monarchs during their 17th- and 18th-century heyday.

TALATALGHAR

This famous (but not spectacular) Ahom ruin is 4km down AT Rd from central Sivasagar. Some 2km beyond a WWII-era metal lift-bridge, look right to see the rather beautiful **Rang Ghar** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; 🌅dawn-dusk). From this two-storey oval-shaped 'pavilion', Ahom monarchs once watched buffalo and elephant fights.

Just beyond, a left turning passes the **Golaghar** or Ahom ammunition store, the stonework of which is held together with a mix of dhal, lime and egg. Beyond are the two-storey ruins of **Talatalghar** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; 🌅dawn-dusk), the extensive, two-storey Ahom palace built by Ahom King Rajeswar Singha in the mid-18th century.

KARENGHAR

Dramatic if largely unadorned, this 1752 brick **palace** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; 🌅dawn-dusk) is the last remnant of the Ahom's pre-Sivasagar capital. The unique four-storey structure rises like a sharpened, stepped pyramid above an attractive forest-and-paddy setting spoilt by nearby electricity substations. It's 900m north of the Sivasagar–Sonari road: turn just before Gargaon (14km) from Sonari.

GAURISAGAR

Like a practice run for Sivasagar, Gaurisagar has an attractive tank and a trio of distinctive 1720s temples – **Vishnudol**, **Shivadol** and **Devidol** – built by 'dancing girl queen' Phuleswari. The more impressive is Vishnudol, not as tall as Sivasagar's Shivadol but sporting finer, but eroded carvings. Gaurisagar is on the main NH37 at Km501.5.

DIBRUGARH

☎0373 / POP 122,000

Travelling to Dibrugarh ('tea-city') usefully closes a loop between Kaziranga and the Ziro–Along–Pasighat route and is the terminus (or starting point) for the fascinating ferry ride along the Brahmaputra to Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh. Dibrugarh is a rapidly growing city with a new road and rail bridge being built at Bogibela Ghat (originally scheduled to open in 2008, it's now unlikely to be ready for some years to come) that will extend the railway system to north of the Brahmaputra.

Dibrugarh is a reliable place to change money; the **SBI Bank** (RKB Path) changes travellers cheques and foreign currency and there's an ATM. **Cyber@Generation Next**

(HS Rd; per hr ₹20; ☀9am-10pm) is one of several internet cafes. **Purvi Discovery** (☎2301120; www.purviweb.com; Medical College Rd, Jalan Nagar) organises regional tours including culinary tours and multiday horse-riding trips. Purvi also handles bookings for two colonial-era tea bungalow retreats: the delightful 1849 **Heritage Chang Bungalow** (Mancotta Rd, Mancotta; r ₹6600-7150; ☎☎), 4km from town, and **Chowkidinghee Chang Bungalow** (Convoy Rd; r ₹6600-7150; ☎☎), 700m from the bus station. At both places, choose the upper rooms that have polished hardwood floorboards and a wonderful heritage feel. For either of these you must book in advance. Tea-estate tours can also be organised between April and November for guests of either bungalow.

TOP CHOICE **Hotel Mona Lisa** (☎2320416; Mancotta Rd; r ₹600-1500; ☎), part Africa, part Cuba and possibly even a little slice of India, is a superb budget hotel with character. It's set back from the main road and everything is kept ticking along smoothly thanks to the lovely old man running it.

Hotel Rajawas (☎2323307; www.hotelrajawas.com; AT Rd; s/d from ₹687/860; ☎☎) is a new, mirror-fronted hotel with a flower-filled lobby, cheeky modern art on the walls and decent bathrooms. The deluxe rooms are the best bet (single/double ₹1144/1399). If you've just trudged in from the mountains and jungles of Arunachal Pradesh you'll think its in-house **restaurant** (mains ₹120-160) is the best thing since sliced bread (or maybe cold dhal).

H2O (Mancotta Rd; mains ₹80-120, beers from ₹80) is an upstairs bar-restaurant with elements of spaceship decor. For a break from the rigours of the Indian road you'll find a branch of **Café Coffee Day** on HS Rd.

i Getting There & Away

From Mohanbari airport, 16km northeast of Dibrugarh and 4km off the Tinsukia road, JetLite flies to Guwahati, Kolkata and Delhi and IndiGo flies to Guwahati.

From the main **bus station** (Mancotta Rd) both ASTC and private buses depart for Sivasaagar (₹51 to ₹69, two hours, frequent 6am to 9am), Jorhat (₹130, three hours, frequent 6am to 9am), Tezpur (₹260, six hours) and Guwahati (₹380, 10 hours).

The *Dibrugarh Rajdhani Express* is the overnight train for Guwahati (No 2423; 3AC/2AC/1AC ₹203/962/1206/1970, 10 hours, 8.15pm).

Rough-and-ready **DKO Ferries** (Indian/foreigner ₹20/100, vehicle ₹1200; 8.30am & 9.15am) cruise daily to Oriamghat, where the

boat is met by a bus to Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh. Ferries can carry just two jeeps. There's little shelter and the journey takes around eight hours (5½ hours downstream), so bring an umbrella, water and sunscreen. The journey can be quite an adventure with the boats bouncing off the ever-shifting sandbars (and sometimes not bouncing off them!) and with brief stops en route giving glimpses of isolated riverside hamlets. Exact departure points depend on the Brahmaputra's water level.

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

India's wildest and least explored state, Arunachal Pradesh, the 'Land of Dawn-lit Mountains' is the final frontier in Indian tourism. The state rises abruptly from the Assam plains as a mass of densely forested, and impossibly steep, hills. These in turn rise to fabulous snow-capped peaks along the Tibetan border. At least 25 tribal groups live in Arunachal's valleys; high up in the dramatic Tawang Valley are several splendid Monpa monastery villages. Arunachal has yet to be fully surveyed and mapped, but slowly its high passes and deep valleys are starting to open up to those with an adventurous heart.

China has never formally recognised Indian sovereignty here and it took the surprise Chinese invasion of 1962 for Delhi to really start funding significant infrastructure. The Chinese voluntarily withdrew. These days border passes are heavily guarded by the Indian military and the atmosphere is extremely calm.

Arunachal Tourism (www.arunachaltourism.com) has additional information.

Itanagar

☎0360 / POP 38,000

Built since 1972, Arunachal's pleasantly green, tailor-made capital is named for the mysterious **Ita Fort** whose residual brick ruins crown a hilltop above town. There's a stack of ATMs in Mahatma Gandhi Marg, along with several internet cafes.

With an oversized foyer better suited as a car showroom, **Hotel Arun Subansiri** (☎2212806; Zero Point; s/d ₹1100/1320; ☎) has comfortably large rooms with soft beds. It's within walking distance of the decent **State Museum** (Indian/foreigner/camera/video ₹10/75/20/100; ☀9.30am-4pm Sun-Thu) and the brightly decorated **Centre for Buddhist Culture** gompa set in gardens on the hill above.

Some 3km west on Mahatma Gandhi Marg is **Ganga Market**, landmarked by a red, triple-spired temple and nearby clock tower. The market itself is a busy clash of peoples from across the borderlands as well as piles of colourful fruit and some other decidedly exotic food items. The good-value **Hotel Blue Pine** (☎2211118; s ₹300-500, d ₹500-600) is here, with well-maintained rooms and a mix of common and private bathrooms. Don't mind the caged receptionist, he's quite tame and helpful.

The **APST bus station** (Ganga Market) has services to Guwahati (₹450, 11 hours, 6am) and Pashighat (₹170, 10 hours, 5.30am and 6am).

Over the road the **Royal Sumo Counter** has daily services to Ziro (₹250, four hours, 5.30am and 2.50pm), Along (₹400, about a million hours, 5.30am) and Pasighat (₹300, eight hours, 5.30am).

AROUND ITANAGAR

The beautifully forested hills around Itanagar hide the attractive **Ganga Lake** (5km), a local picnic spot. Further away (20km) is **Poma** village, which is about the closest place to town to see the traditional architecture of bamboo longhouses (although many of these are being slowly replaced with concrete box houses).

Central Arunachal Pradesh

ZIRO VALLEY

☎03788

After weaving for hour upon hour along a road suffocated by a wall of dense forest, it comes as something of a surprise when the

world bursts open into the flat and fertile Ziro Valley (vale would be a more accurate description) filled with rice fields and dotted with the intriguing villages of the Apatani tribe.

Voyaging to the Ziro Valley is one of the undisputed highlights of a trip to Arunachal Pradesh and, though the scenery is stunning and the village architecture fascinating, the voyeuristic main attraction here is meeting the friendly older Apatani folk who sport **facial tattoos** and **nose plugs** that would be the envy of any tattooist in the West (see p566). The most authentic Apatani villages are **Hong** (the biggest and best known), **Hijo** (more atmospheric), **Hari**, **Bamin** and **Dutta**; none of which are more than 10km apart. It's vital to have a local guide to take you to any of these villages otherwise you won't see much and might even be made to feel quite unwelcome. **Christopher Michi** (☎9402048466/8014012558; christopherdulle@yahoo.co.in/christophermichi@hotmail.com) is the chairman of the **Apatani Cultural Preservation Society** and can organise superb visits to the villages – don't be at all surprised if your tour culminates in an evening of drinking rice wine and chowing down on barbecued rat in a villager's house!

Sprawling **Hapoli** (New Ziro), starting 7km further south than **Ziro**, has hotels and road transport. Just below the Commissioner's office on a bend in MG Rd is an **SBI ATM**. There are a couple of **internet cafes** around the market area but connections are as rare as a tiger in the nearby forests. The small central market is well worth poking about in. As well as fruit, veg and clothing you can stock up on various insects and other 'delights' to snack on.

CENTRAL ARUNACHAL'S TRIBAL GROUPS

The variety of tribal peoples in central Arunachal Pradesh is astonishing, but although the Adi (Abor), Nishi, Tajin, Hill Miri and various other Tibeto-Burman tribes consider themselves different from one another most are at least distantly related. Over the last few decades Christian missionaries have been highly active throughout the Northeast and in the process have brought huge changes to the region's traditional cultures, religious beliefs and ways of life. Despite this, some aspects of the traditional lifestyle are just about holding on and many people continue to practise the traditional religion of Donyi-Polo (sun and moon) worship – sometimes at the same time as proclaiming themselves Christian. For ceremonial occasions, village chiefs typically wear scarlet shawls and a bamboo wicker hat spiked with porcupine quill or hornbill feathers. A few old men still wear their hair long, tied around to form a topknot above their foreheads. Women favour hand-woven wraparounds like Southeast Asian sarongs. House designs vary somewhat. Traditional Adi villages are generally the most photogenic with luxuriant palmyra-leaf thatching and boxlike granaries stilted to deter rodents.

The warren-like **Hotel Pine Ridge** (☎224725; MG Rd; s/d from ₹350/500), in a courtyard off the main road, is reasonable value, but foreigners are often restricted to the more expensive rooms.

Hotel Blue Pine (☎224812; s ₹650, d from ₹500) is the best-value lodgings in the town itself (though it's still a bit of a walk from the centre). It has wood-panelled rooms with plenty of character.

Out of town, and by far the best place to stay, is the new **Ziro Valley Resort** (☎9856910173; Biiri village; r in old wing ₹1000, tw/d ₹1200/1500), which has rainbow-coloured rooms in a faux colonial-style building. It's halfway between Old and New Ziro and is surrounded by sunburnt fields. It's also known as the Village Tourist Lodge. At the time of research another midrange resort style place was under construction near the Ziro Valley Resort.

Sumos depart from MG Rd, Hapoli (near SBI ATM), for Itanagar (₹250, five hours, 5am and 11am), Lakhimpur (₹200, four hours) and Daporijo (₹350, around 9.30am).

ZIRO TO PASIGHAT

A peaceful lane winding through forested hills and tribal settlements links Ziro to Pasighat via Along. Highlights are dizzying suspension footbridges and thatched Adi villages around Along. Do be warned though that the attractions along this route are very low-key, the villagers around Along are much less welcoming to foreigners (and they don't sport the Apatanis' tattoos and nose plugs) and the route, which involves three full days of travel, is very tiring. Unless you're going to be heading from Along to fabulous Mechuka or remote eastern towns and valleys such as Tuting or the Namdapha National Park then you may find this route something of a let down.

DAPORIJO

☎03792 / POP 15,468 / ELEV 699M

This is probably the dirtiest and most unsophisticated town in Arunachal Pradesh, but

it is a necessary stopover. In the town itself is the **Hotel Kanga Karo Palace** (☎223531; r ₹750), which is brand new but already looks like its on its last legs. Even so it's still a damn sight better than the couple of ultra-basic places around the market. If you have your own transport, far more interesting accommodation is available in the small, traditional thatched village of **Ligu** (coming from Ziro take the left turning just before the bridge at the entrance to Daporijo) where you'll find the basic, but delightful **Ligu Tourist Resort** (☎223114; r ₹700). The family who run it cook up fantastic meals. Vanishing under the shadow of jungle trees, Ligu village itself is well worth exploring and the people are truly lovely.

Sumos leave New Market at 6am for Itanagar (₹450, 12 hours) and Ziro (₹300, six hours). The **bus station** has a lackadaisical 7am service to Along (₹150, six hours) on alternate days – depending on when the bus returns from Along.

ALONG

☎03783 / POP 20,000 / ELEV 302M

This nondescript market town has an internet cafe, **Eastern Infotech Cyber Cafe** (Nehru Chowk; per hr ₹40; ☎8am-7pm Mon-Sat) opposite the APST bus station and an **SBI ATM** (Main Rd). Next to the Circuit House, also on Main Rd, is an informative little **district museum** (admission free; ☎10am-4pm Mon-Fri).

The best accommodation option here is **Aagaam Hotel** (☎223640; Nehru Chowk; s/d from ₹400-500), which has rooms that could almost be called plush. The attached restaurant, **Pizza Coffee Day** (mains ₹80-100, pizzas ₹80-150) is the best place in town to eat and yes, it really does sell pizzas – of a sort. Another option is the **Hotel Holiday Cottage** (☎222463; Hospital Hill; r ₹400-600) southwest of the helipad. However, it's not a cottage and nor is it the sort of place you'd really

FACIAL TATTOOING

Historically famous for their beauty, Apatani women were all too often kidnapped by warriors of the neighbouring Nishi tribes. As a 'defence', Apatani girls were deliberately defaced. They were given facial tattoos, like graffitied beards scribbled onto living Mona Lisa paintings, and extraordinary nose plugs known as *dat* fitted into holes cut in their upper nostrils. Some men also have tattoos.

Peace with the Nishis in the 1960s meant an end to that brutal practice, but many older women still wear *dat*. Photography is an understandably sensitive issue, so ask first. Some Apatani women have had cosmetic surgery to remove their tattoos.

THE LAST SHANGRI LA?

Recently the government of Arunachal Pradesh has opened up a couple of new areas to foreign tourists. Possibly the most exciting of these is the road from Along to the small, remote town of **Mechuka**, close to the Tibetan border. In the past the Mechuka valley, which until recently had no real road connecting it to the rest of the state, was called 'the forbidden valley' or even a 'Last Shangri La'. Populated by the Buddhist Mema peoples, Mechuka, sitting on the banks of the West Siang River, lives up to its Last Shangri La status and is notable for both the 400-year-old **Samten Yongcha Monastery** and the stunning landscapes surrounding the town, which culminate in a massive hulk of snow-draped mountains running along the border.

For the moment tourist facilities (and tourists!) remain virtually non-existent but sumos now ply the 180km from Along (₹300, seven hours, 5.30am). The only accommodation is the **Circuit House**, but if that is unavailable then it's likely that local people will put you up – be generous in your donation.

want to spend an entire holiday. For one night though it does just fine.

There are sumos to Itanagar (₹400, 12 hours, 5.30am) and Pasighat (₹220, seven hours, 5.30am and 11.30am). For Daporijo you have the relative luxury of a bus (₹160; six hours, 7am).

Of the various Adi villages around Along, **Kabu** (2km north of Along) is the best known and most easily accessible. Before entering the village you must seek permission from the headman (who often demands a ₹500 fee). As well as admiring the spectacular longhouse architecture that is a hallmark of all Adi villages don't miss the terrifying cable-trussed but bamboo-decked wobbly suspension bridge over the river. Fortunately for vertigo sufferers a modern metal bridge has just been completed, which makes crossing the river slightly less sickening. It remains to be seen if the old bridge will be maintained or not. There are further interesting, and less visited, Adi villages on the road to Pasighat, but whichever village you visit be discreet with cameras as the locals aren't at all keen on them.

PASIGHAT

☎0368 / POP 23,000

Nestled before a curtain of luxuriantly forested foothills, Pasighat, which sits back out on the plains, feels more like Assam than Arunachal Pradesh. The town hosts the interesting Minyong-Adi tribe's **Solung Festival** (1-5 September). The **internet cafe** (per hr ₹60; ☎7.30am-8pm) is 50m from the Hotel Aane and there's an **SBI ATM** just along from the sumo stand in the central market area.

Sleep at the friendly, central **Hotel Oman** (☎2224464; Main Market; s/d from ₹315/630),

the owners of which have realised that it is possible to buy new tins of paint – a fairly revolutionary thought for many hotels in the northeast. Otherwise try the plusher **Hotel Aane** (☎2222777; s ₹500, d from ₹1500; ☼), which has hot showers and an appealing rooftop terrace.

Getting There & Away

Helicopters from **Pasighat Aerodrome**, 3km northeast, serve Naharlagun (Itanagar) via Mohanbari (Dibrugarh) on Monday, Wednesday and Friday; Guwahati via Naharlagun on Tuesday; and Along on Friday.

The inconveniently located APST bus station (take an autorickshaw) has services to Along (₹220, seven hours, 6am and 12pm) and Itanagar (₹170, 10 hours, 5.30am and 6am). Sumos run to Along (₹220, seven hours, 6am and noon) and Itanagar (₹300, six hours, 6am). The road to Along is in a dreadful state – be prepared for a very long and rough day. Sumos also run to Tuting (₹800) but only when demand warrants it. **Ferries** (Indian/foreigner ₹20/100, vehicle ₹1200; 8.30am & 9.15am) drift lazily down the Brahmaputra to Dibrugarh in Assam from Majerbari Ghat (sumos take one hour from Pasighat, depart at 6am and cost ₹120). Ferry tickets are sold by **Otta Tours & Travel** at the sumo stand.

Western Arunachal Pradesh

Remote, culturally magical and scenically spectacular, Tawang is the archetypal Shangri La and a mountain-hopping journey through this, the lands of the Monpa (a people of Buddhist-Tibetan origin) to the gates of the famous Tawang Monastery is one of the northeast's greatest adventures.

Ideally budget at least one week for a return trip from Guwahati (or Tezpur), breaking the journey each way at Dirang (allow one full day here) or less interesting Bomdila. Be prepared for intense cold in winter.

BOMDILA

03782 / ELEV 2682M

Bomdila is an alternative sleeping place to Dirang, with the traditionally decorated **Doe-Gu-Khill Guest House** (☎223232; r from ₹700), just below the large monastery, providing fabulous views. The **Hotel Tsepal Yangjom** (☎223473; www.hotelsepalyangjom.co.in; s/d from ₹800/1200) in the market area is probably the town's most popular hotel. Its wood-panelled rooms have a vague Scandinavian feel and it has a generator to cope with the frequent blackouts.

DIRANG

☎03780 / ELEV 1621M

Tiny **Old Dirang**, 5km south of Dirang, is a picture-perfect Monpa stone village. The main road separates its rocky **mini citadel** from a huddle of picturesque streamside

houses above which rises a steep ridge topped with a timeless **gompa**. Heading the other way, just north of New Dirang, the valley opens out and its floor becomes a patchwork of rice and crop fields through which gushes the icy blue river. A fun day could be spent walking along the footpaths between fields and little hamlets.

All Dirang's commercial services are in **New Dirang**, with a strip of cheap hotels, eateries and sumo counters around the central crossroads. **Tourist Lodge** (☎200176; d ₹825), a kilometre south and overlooking New Dirang, is a basic but friendly family hotel in an old-style hill house crowded with potted plants. Nicer is the next-door **Hotel Pemaling** (☎207265; s/d ₹1815/2420), which has shiny rooms, excellent service and a very pleasant garden where you can enjoy the views towards the sometimes snow-bound Se La and the high Himalaya beyond.

DIRANG TO TAWANG VALLEY

The road endlessly zigzags sharply upward, eventually leaving the forest behind. **Se La**, a 4176m pass, breaches the mountains and

WORTH A TRIP

RAFTING IN THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

Another newly opened route is the Pasighat to Tuting road. This route is all about two things: the River Siang and the mysterious Buddhist land of Pemako. Tuting, which sits near the Tibetan border, is the point at which the Tsang Po river – having left the Tibetan plateau and burrowed through the Himalaya via a series of spectacular gorges – enters the Indian subcontinent and becomes the Siang (once it reaches the plains of Assam it turns into the Brahmaputra). Tuting and the River Siang are starting to gain a reputation as one of the world's most thrilling white-water rafting destinations, but this ain't no amateurs' river. The few people who have descended the river have reported that the 180km route is littered with numerous grade 4-5 rapids, strong eddies and inaccessible gorges.

For those after adventure of a different kind Tuting also serves as the launch pad for searching out the legendary Buddhist land of Pemako. You will, however, need more than this guidebook and a compass in order to find it. Buddhist belief says that Pemako is a synonym for a hidden earthly paradise and that it's the earthly representation of Dorje Pagmo, a Tibetan goddess. It was said that this land of milk and honey was to be found in the eastern Himalaya and that to reach it you had to pass behind an enormous hidden waterfall.

For hundreds of years outsiders knew that the Tsang Po river left Tibet and entered a huge, and utterly impenetrable, gorge before emerging from the Himalaya around Tuting, but what happened to the river inside that gorge was unknown until the 1950s. As it turned out the river did indeed tumble over an enormous waterfall and, what's more, it passed through a rich and fertile valley populated by Memba Buddhists, completely isolated from the rest of the world.

Today, this vast region of northern Arunachal Pradesh and parts of south eastern Tibet remains almost utterly unknown to the outside world, but Pemako is out there and for those willing to endure days of incredibly tough hiking (and deal with reams of paper-work) it is possible to visit.

NAMDAPHA NATIONAL PARK

Arunachal Pradesh is said to contain fifty percent of India's bio-diversity. In fact, so rich is life in Arunachal that the whole area has been proclaimed a world bio-diversity hotspot. Nowhere is the gathering of habitats and plant and animal species so dense as in eastern Arunachal and it's here that the staggering **Namdapha National Park** (Indians/foreigners/cameras/cameras with zoom lens/video ₹10/50/75/400/750) can be found. Covering 1985 sq km this vast park has an altitude range from 200m to 4500m and contains an exceptional diversity of habitats and an equally varied array of wildlife. Namdapha is famous for being the only park in India to have four big cat species (leopard, tiger, clouded leopard and snow leopard). It's also a birdwatching hotspot with around 500 species recorded.

The park is a long haul from anywhere but it's slowly opening up to tourism. The access point is the small town of **Miao**. From here you will need private transport to take you 26km to **Deban** where the park headquarters are located. Simple accommodation is available in Miao at the **Eco-Tourism Guest House** (☎9436228763; per person Indian/foreigner ₹400/600) or in Deban at the **Forest Rest House** (☎3807-222249; s/d from ₹175/300). To really get into the middle of nowhere you'll have to stay at one of the **campsites** inside the park. Bring a tent and all supplies. Porters and guides can be obtained in Miao or Deban.

Four companies in the northeast can help with the logistics of a visit, or UK-based tour company **Naturetrek** (www.naturetrek.co.uk) runs pioneering 16-day tours of Namdapha and other northeastern parks. However you do it, prepare for real adventure.

provides access to Tawang Valley. From here the road plummets down the mountainside into the belly of Tawang Valley.

TAWANG VALLEY

☎03794 / ELEV 3048M

Calling the Tawang Valley a valley just doesn't do justice to its incredible scale; it's more a mighty gash in the earth ringed by immense mountains. Patchworking the sloping ridges of the lower hills is a vast sweep of fields dotted with Buddhist monasteries and Monpa villages.

The biggest attraction is magical **Tawang Gumpa** (admission free, camera/video ₹20/100; ☀dawn-dusk) backdropped by snow-speckled peaks. Founded in 1681, this medieval citadel is reputedly the world's second-largest Buddhist monastery complex and famed in Buddhist circles for its library. Within its fortified walls, narrow alleys lead up to the majestic and magnificently decorated **prayer hall** containing an 8m-high statue of **Buddha Shakyamuni**. Come here at dawn (4am to 5am) to see row after row of monks performing their early morning prayers. Across the central square is a small but interesting **museum** (₹20; ☀8am-5pm) containing images, robes, telescopic trumpets and some personal items of the sixth Dalai Lama. Spectacular *chaam* (ritual masked dances performed by some Buddhist monks

in gompas to celebrate the victory of good over evil, and of Buddhism over pre-existing religions) are held during the Torgya, Losar and Buddha Mahotsava festivals.

Other enchanting gompas and anigompas (nunneries) offer great day hikes from Tawang, including ancient if modest **Urgelling Gumpa** where the sixth Dalai Lama was born. By road, it's 6km from Tawang town but closer on foot downhill from Tawang Gumpa. At the time of research construction was almost complete on a chasm-spanning cable car that will link the monastery with an anigompa on the opposite side of the valley. There was no information available on whether it would be open to tourists.

Tawang town is a transport hub and service centre for the valley's villages; its setting is more beautiful than the town itself. Nonetheless, colourful **prayer wheels** add interest to the central old market area. These are turned by apple-cheeked Monpa pilgrims, many of whom sport traditional black yak-wool *gurdam* (skullcaps that look like giant Rastafarian spiders). In the market area is **M/S Cyber** (per hr ₹30; ☀9am-6pm), which has internet - sometimes. There's an **SBI Bank** with an ATM just past the market on the road to the monastery.

Tawang has a number of small hotels. Cheapest is the **Hotel Nefa** (☎222419;

s/d ₹700/1300) which has tidy, wood-panelled rooms with a more reliable electricity supply than many similar places. It's in the market area. The **Hotel Siddhartha** (☎222515; s ₹750, d ₹1030-1350) has large, carpeted and well-kept rooms that help make it the best of the town-centre options.

TOP CHOICE **Hotel Gakyi Khang Zhang** (☎224 647; r from ₹1320), a couple of kilometres out of town on the road to the monastery, offers far and away the best rooms in town – colourful sky-blue affairs with polished wooden floors. There's a decent **restaurant** (mains ₹80-120) and the staff are great fun. It also has good monastery views, a generator and, most bizarrely, a lounge bar/nightclub complete with throbbing strobe lights!

While each of these hotels have good restaurants, the cosy **Dragon Restaurant** (Old Market; mains ₹60-150) is the town's best eatery with freshly made local dishes such as churpa (₹150), a fermented cheese broth with fungi and vegetables that tastes much better than it sounds. Also don't miss the Tibetan tea. An acquired taste if ever there were one.

i Getting There & Away

From Lumla, 42km towards Zemithang, helicopters (₹3000, two hours, ☺Mon-Sat) fly to Guwahati. APST buses leave Tawang 5.30am Monday and Friday for Tezpur (₹290, 12 hours), calling at Dirang (₹130, six hours), Bomdila (₹170, seven hours) and Bhalukpong (₹240, 10 hours). More frequent public sumos to Tezpur (₹500) depart at dawn.

NAGALAND

Draped across the dazzling hills and valleys of the India-Myanmar border regions is Nagaland, an otherworldly place where until very recently some twenty headhunting Naga tribes valiantly fought off any intruders. Today the south of the state is fairly developed, but in the north, tribesmen in loin cloths continue to live a lifestyle that is normally only seen within the pages of *National Geographic* magazine.

Dimapur

☎03862 / POP 165,782 / ELEV 260M

Nagaland's flat, uninspiring commercial centre was the capital of a big Kachari kingdom that ruled much of Assam before the Ahoms

showed up. The only reason tourists visit Dimapur is to transfer to Kohima. Of the central hotels **de Oriental Dream** (☎231211; Kohima Rd; r from ₹900; ☎☎) is the smartest option.

Air India (☎229366, 242441) flies to Kolkata, Guwahati and Imphal. The **NST bus station** (Kohima Rd) runs services to Kohima (₹65 to ₹75, three hours, hourly) and Imphal (₹400, nine hours, 10am).

Kohima

☎0370 / POP 96,000 / ELEV 1444M

Nagaland's agreeable capital is scattered across a series of forested ridges and hill-tops. Avoid Kohima on Sundays as apart from hotels, everything is closed.

i Sights

War Cemetery

HISTORIC SITE

(☺dawn-dusk Mon-Sat) This immaculate War Cemetery contains the graves of 1400 British, Commonwealth and Indian soldiers. It stands at the crucially strategic junction of the Dimapur and Imphal roads, the site of intense fighting against the Japanese during a 64-day WWII battle.

Central Market

MARKET

(Stadium Approach; ☺6am-4pm) At the fascinating if tiny central market, tribal people sell such 'edible' delicacies as *borol* (wriggling hornet grubs).

State Museum

MUSEUM

(admission ₹5; ☺9.30am-3.30pm Tue-Sun) The superbly presented State Museum, 3km north, includes plenty of tableaux with mannequins-in-action depicting different traditional Naga lifestyles plus everyday tools.

i Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation becomes extremely scarce for kilometres around during the Hornbill Festival – book well in advance.

TOP CHOICE **Heritage Hotel**

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$

(☎9774416649; www.theheritage.in; Officers Hill; r/ste ₹1800/3500; ☎) Back in colonial days this was the home of the deputy commissioner and, with roaring open fires taking the chill off a cold winter night and hunting trophies and tribal arts adorning the walls, it retains something of the flavour of those times.

Aradura Inn

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(☎2241079; aradurainn@gmail.com; Aradura Hill; r from ₹1350; @) This fantastic new guesthouse

HORNBILL FESTIVAL

Nagaland's biggest annual festival, the Hornbill Festival (1-7 December) is celebrated at Kisama Heritage Village (see below) with various Naga tribes converging for a weeklong cultural, dance and sporting bash, much of it in full warrior costume. Of all the festivals in the northeast this is the most spectacular and photogenic. Simultaneously, Kohima also hosts a **rock festival** (www.hornbillmusic.com).

has simple yet immaculate rooms. It's the little touches that set it apart from the competition, such as cups of tea brought to you in bed in the morning. There are great views over the town from the garden, friendly and helpful staff and a superb restaurant.

Razhu Pru

HERITAGE HOTEL \$

(☎2290291; Mission Compound, Kohima Village; d from ₹1800; 🕒🕒) An old family house that's been lovingly converted into a heritage hotel filled with tribal arts and antiques. We thought the sleek white deluxe rooms (₹2200) offered the best value.

Hotel Pine

HOTEL \$

(☎2243129; d ₹ from 500/600) Down a side lane off Phool Bari this small hotel is centrally located, well kept and the cleaners actually seem to take pride in their job.

Arudupa Spur Cafe

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Arudupa Hotel; mains ₹120-160; 🕒 Mon-Sat) Part of the Arudupa Hotel, this is one of Kohima's most happening restaurants and is always busy with young middle-class Nagas relaxing on the sofas and tucking into a menu that spans the globe. There's a cool soundtrack playing in the background and lots of heaters for cold winter nights.

Dream Café

CAFE \$

(Cnr Dimapur & Imphal Rds; mains ₹50-100; 🕒 10am-6pm, Mon-Sat) Beneath UCO Bank and with daily lunch specials such as fried noodles or pizzas as well as coffee and snacks, this is the meeting point for Kohima's young people. Great views from the back windows, a bunch of magazines to read and lots of students keen for a chat make this a good place to linger.

Information

NIIT Internet Cafe (opp NST bus station; per hr ₹30; 🕒 6.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) The internet cafe with the longest opening hours.

SBI Bank (Police Bazar) One of several ATMs.

Secretariat, Home Department (☎2221406; Secretariat Bldg) Permit extensions.

Tribal Discovery (☎9436000759, 9856474767; yiese_neitho@rediffmail.com; Science College Rd) Neithonuo Yeise ('Nitono') is an eloquent guide to local sites and can arrange permits.

Getting There & Away

The **NST bus station** (Main Rd) has services to **Dimapur** (₹65-75, three hours, hourly Monday to Saturday, 8am Sun)

Mokokchung (₹105-155, seven hours, 6.30am Monday to Saturday)

Imphal (₹150, six hours, 7.30am)

The taxi stand opposite has share taxis to Dimapur (₹150, 2½ hours). A car for a day out to Kisama and Khonoma costs ₹800 to ₹1000.

Around Kohima

KISAMA HERITAGE VILLAGE

This **open-air museum** (admission ₹50; 🕒 8am-6pm May-Sep, 8am-4.30pm Oct-Apr), which hosts the annual Hornbill Festival, has a representative selection of traditional Naga houses and *morungs* (bachelor dormitories) with full-size log drums. Kisama is 10km from central Kohima along the well-surfaced Imphal road.

KHONOMA

This historic **Angami-Naga village** was the site of two major British-Angami siege battles in 1847 and 1879. Built on an easily defended ridge (very necessary back in head-hunting days), Khonoma looks beautifully traditional.

There are several simple homestay guest-houses in the village.

TUOPHEMA

Forty-five kilometres north of Kohima is the small town of Tuophema, which can make a useful overnight stop on the road to Mon if you leave Kohima late in the day. Although the town itself is nothing special, the **Tuophema Tourist Village** (☎9436005002; per person half-board ₹1600-1800), where you

sleep in comfortable traditionally styled Naga thatched bungalows, is very enjoyable, but make sure you let them know of your arrival in advance or it will probably be closed up.

Kohima to Mon

Beautiful forested hillsides flank the road from Kohima to Mon. Road conditions often require you to travel some of the way through Assam.

MOKOKCHUNG

Sitting almost halfway between Kohima and Mon most people sensibly choose to break their journey in laidback Mokokchung. Aside from enjoying the town's spectacular setting, try to make time for a couple of other low-key attractions including the small, privately run **Rendikala Subong Museum** (Town Hall Rd; admission ₹10), which contains tribal items collected from surrounding villages as well as what is purported to be the world's smallest Bible. The museum is open whenever someone turns up to see it. A couple of kilometres away is pretty **Ungma** village, where you'll find a couple of huge **log drums** and a cloud scrapping **Jendong** (a pole that helps connect people on Earth with the Gods high up in the skies).



Tourist Lodge (☎0369-2226373; tourist.lodgemkg@yahoo.com; r ₹750, without bath ₹400; 📍📞📺). The only place to stay worth considering is the superb Tourist Lodge, which has bright and clean rooms, excellent service and a decent restaurant serving Indian and Naga dishes.

Northern Nagaland

Northern Nagaland, the most unspoiled part of the state, is the reason you came to Nagaland. This rugged and divinely beautiful country is home to many different villages composed of thatched longhouses, many of whose inhabitants are adorned with tattoos and continue to live a fairly traditional hunting and farming lifestyle.

The most accessible villages are the Konyak settlements around Mon. Traditional houses abound, and some villages have *morungs* and religious relics from pre-Christian times. Village elders may wear traditional costume and Konyak of all ages carry the fearsome-looking *dao* – a crude machete used for headhunting right up until the mid-20th century.

Visiting a Naga village without a local guide is unproductive – there will be language difficulties and you'll be unaware of local cultural expectations.

MON

The impoverished hill town of Mon is in a gorgeous setting but feels like a frontier town. There's an **SBI ATM** in the town centre but don't rely on it working. The little village **market** is well worth exploring and like so many markets in the northeast, it's the exotic food items that stick longest in the memory. Of the numerous tribal villages in the area the closest is **Old Mon** village, a mere 5km from town. **Tamngnyu** village (13km) is a rarely visited, yet easy to reach, village with a friendly headman, a couple of human skulls left over from headhunting days and

HEAD HUNTERS

Throughout northeastern India and parts of western Myanmar the Naga tribes were long feared for their ferocity in war and for their sense of independence – both from each other and from the rest of the world. Intervillage wars continued as recently as the 1980s, and a curious feature of many outwardly modern settlements is their 'treaty stones' recording peace settlements between neighbouring communities.

It was the Naga's custom of headhunting that sent shivers down the spines of neighbouring peoples. The taking of an enemy's head was considered a sign of strength, and a man who had not claimed a head was not considered a man. Fortunately for tourists, headhunting was officially outlawed in 1935, with the last recorded occurrence in 1963. Nonetheless, severed heads are still an archetypal artistic motif found notably on *yanra* (pendants) that originally denoted the number of human heads a warrior had taken. Some villages, such as Shingha Changyuo in Mon district, still retain their 'hidden' collection of genuine skulls.

Today Naga culture is changing fast, but it was not a government ban on headhunting that put an end to this tradition but rather the activities of Christian missionaries. Over 90% of the Naga now consider themselves Christian.

some impressive traditional buildings all set, surreally, under two giant mobile phone towers. **Shingha Chingyuo** village (20km, population 5900) has a huge longhouse decorated with *mithuna* (pairs of men and women) and deer skulls, three stuffed tigers, and a store of old human skulls. **Longwoa** (35km) is spectacularly sited on the India–Myanmar border, with the headman's longhouse actually straddling the two nations. Despite its popularity with tourists it remains one of the most interesting villages. **Chui** (8km) includes an elephant skull in its longhouse collection. **Shangnyu** village has a shrine full of fertility references such as tumescent warriors, a crowing cock, a large snake, a man and woman enjoying sex and, to complete the picture, a double rainbow. **Langmeang** village, with its stack of human skulls piled up in a wooden box, is also highly impressive.

In more touristy villages such as Longwoa and Shingha Chingyuo a fairly standard ₹200 photo fee is charged.

For many a year accommodation in Mon meant the friendly, but sadly very scrappy and slightly overpriced **Helsa Cottage** (☎9436433782; r from ₹1000) run by Aunty. At the time of research Aunty was about to shut the old place down and open a new (as yet unnamed) hotel near the market area. Another venture is the confusingly named **Helsa Resort** (☎9436000028; r ₹1000), a couple of kilometres out of town on the road to Myanmar. It consists of four traditional thatched Konyak huts with springy bamboo floors, sparse furnishings and hot water by the bucket. Its generator is a huge plus. All the accommodation options serve meals.

Buses, if you can call them that, bounce painfully to Dimapur (₹450, 13 hours, 3pm) and Sonari in Assam (₹60).

MANIPUR

This 'Jewelled Land' is home to Thadou, Tangkhul, Kabul, Mao Naga and many other tribal peoples, but the main grouping is the predominantly neo-Vaishnavite Meitei. Manipuris are famed for traditional dances, spicy multidish thalis and the sport of polo – which they claim to have invented. Manipur's forested hills provide cover for rare birds, drug traffickers and guerrilla armies, making it by far the Northeast's most dangerous state.

Permit conditions usually restrict foreigners to Greater Imphal although this

represents more a zone of safety rather than a geographical area. Most foreigners fly into Imphal; it is also possible to drive in from Kohima (Nagaland) or Silchar (Assam) if you have a guide. Travelling east of Kakching towards the Myanmar border is not permitted.

Imphal

☎0385 / POP 234,958

Noisy and polluted it might be, but Imphal, with its melange of peoples and positioning right on the border lands of India and southeast Asia is undeniably fascinating and travellers who spend any time here are well rewarded. The airport is 9km to the southwest.

👁 Sights

Kangla

PARK

(admission ₹2; ☀9am–4pm Nov–Feb, 9am–5pm Mar–Oct) Fortified Kangla was the off-and-on-again regal capital of Manipur until the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 saw the defeat of the Manipuri maharaja and a British takeover. Entrance is by way of an exceedingly tall gate on Kanglapat. The interesting older buildings are at the rear of the citadel guarded by three restored large white *kangla sha* (dragons).

Manipur State Museum

MUSEUM

(Off Kangla Rd; Indian/foreigner ₹3/20; ☀10am–4pm Tue–Sun) Manipur State Museum has



REGISTERING ON ARRIVAL IN MANIPUR

On arrival at Imphal airport all foreigners must register with the police stationed next to the luggage collection point. You must then register again with the CID at the main police station. In both cases it's a fairly painless affair (assuming your papers are in order). Technically you don't need a local guide if you are just staying in Imphal, but it's highly unlikely that any tour company will help you obtain a permit without you agreeing to take one of their guides. A reliable tour company (who can also help obtain permits) to Manipur is **Seven Sisters Tourism Services** (☎2445373; sstourism@rediffmail.com; MG Ave, Imphal).

a marvellous collection of historical, cultural and natural history ephemera. Tribal costumes, royal clothing, historical polo equipment, stuffed carnivores in action and pickled snakes compete with a two-headed calf for the attention of visitors.

Shri Govindajee Mandir & Around

HINDU TEMPLE

The 1776-built **Shri Govindajee Mandir**, with two rather suggestive domes, is a neo-Vaishnavite temple with Radha and Govinda as the presiding deities. Afternoon *puja* (offerings, prayers) is for one hour at 4pm in winter and 5pm in summer.

Adjacent to the mandir is the **Royal Palace**, closed to visitors except for during the annual **Kwak Tenba festival**, when a colourful procession led by the titular maharaja heads to the Polo Ground for religious ceremonies and cultural festivities. The festival takes place on the fourth day of Durga Puja.

Khwairamband Bazaar

MARKET

(Ima Market; ☀️7am-5pm) This vast all-women's market (well, we saw one male vendor – perhaps appropriately he was selling headphones!) is run by some 3000 *ima* (mothers). Divided by a road, one side sells vegetables, fruit, fish and groceries while the other deals in household items, fabrics and pottery. It's easily one of the largest markets in the northeast.

Imphal War Cemetery

HISTORIC PARK

(Imphal Rd; ☀️8am-5pm) This peaceful and well-kept memorial contains the graves of more than 1600 British and Commonwealth soldiers killed in the battles that raged around Imphal in 1944. Off Hapta Minuthong Rd is a separate **Indian War Cemetery** (☀️8am-5pm).

Sleeping & Eating

A state tax adds 30% to your bill. This is included in the prices below.

TOP CHOICE

Classic Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎️2443967; North AOC Rd; s/d from ₹845/1170; 📞@📞) This unexpectedly classy hotel is one of the best-value business hotels in the northeast. The large spotless rooms come with full facilities, staff who love to please and the town's best **restaurant** (mains ₹100 to ₹150). Opt for one of the Classic Standard rooms (s/d ₹1885/2470).

Anand Continental

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎️2449422; Khoyathong Rd; s/d from ₹650/1300; 📞) Smallish rooms, a little too much furni-

ture, friendly management and possession of a vacuum cleaner characterise this acceptable hotel. Hot water flows from 6am to 11am, thereafter by a free bucket-load.

Hotel Nirmala

HOTEL \$

(☎️2459014; MG Ave; s/d from ₹390/650; 📞) A friendly place with an ultra quick-service restaurant, although it doesn't open until 10am so breakfast has to be by room service. The rooms are nothing special but you do feel a sense of belonging when staying here.

Information

Internet Cafe (MG Ave; per hr ₹20; ☀️8am-7pm Mon-Sat)

SBI ATM (MG Ave) About 100m from Hotel Nirmala. Note that the few ATMs in Imphal tend to have enormous queues of people waiting to use them. It's better to bring enough cash with you.

Tourist office (☎️224603; <http://manipur.nic.in/tourism.htm>; Jail Rd)

Getting There & Away

Private buses to head to Guwahati (₹700, 20 hours, 10am) and Dimapur (₹400, 10 hours, 10am) via Kohima (₹300, five hours). If you're heading to Aizawl you must change in Dimapur first. All the bus company offices are found on North AC Rd.

Air India (☎️2450999; MG Ave), IndiGo, **Jetlite** (☎️2455054) and Kingfisher Red all fly to Guwahati and Kolkata. Air India also flies to Aizawl and Dimapur.

Around Imphal

Conjure up an image of a shimmering blue lake broken up into small lakelets by floating 'islands' of thick matted weeds. Add bamboo bridges, tribal people in dugout canoes and thatched hut-villages anchored on to the floating islands, and you have **Loktak Lake**, one of the few places a foreigner is allowed to visit outside of Imphal. More peculiar than floating villages are the large, perfectly circular fishing ponds created out of floating rings of weeds. The best view is atop Sendra Island, more a promontory than island. You can hire a **boat** (per person ₹100) in order to get a closer look at lake life.

MIZORAM

Gorgeous Mizoram is slashed by north-south-running valleys and might be the most beautiful of all the states in the northeast. You'll see very few typical Indian faces among the

locals, with their Thai- and Chinese-style features, and most people are Christian.

Mizoram runs to its own rhythm. Most businesses open early and shut by 6pm; virtually everything closes tight on Sunday.

Mizo culture has no caste distinctions and women appear liberated; in Aizawl girls smoke openly, wear jeans and hang out in unchaperoned posses meeting up with their beau at rock concerts on the central field.

Festivals

Two main Mizo festivals, **Chapchar Kut** (Kut is Mizo for festival) and **Pawl Kut** celebrate elements in the agricultural cycle. Chapchar Kut takes place towards the end of February and signals the start of the spring sowing season, and Pawl Kut is held at the end of November to celebrate the harvest. In both festivals, participants don national costume and celebrate with folk dancing and song.

Aizawl


 0389 / POP 275,000

From a distance Aizawl (pronounced eye-zole) seems a painted backdrop to an Italian opera, such is the steepness of the ridge on which it's perched. Backs of homes at road level might be held there with stilts three times higher than their roofs.

Sights


Mizoram State Museum

MUSEUM

(Macdonald Hill, Zarkawt; admission ₹5;  9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri) This museum has interesting exhibits on Mizo culture. It's up a steep lane from Sunkuma Point past Aizawl's most distinctive **church**, whose modernist bell-tower spire is pierced by arched 'windows'.

KV Paradise

MONUMENT

(Durtlang; admission ₹5;  10am-9pm Mon-Sat) V is for Varte who died in a 2001 motor accident. K is for her husband Khawlhing who has since lavished his entire savings and energy creating a three-storey mausoleum to her memory. The marble fountain-patio has wonderful panoramic views. The site is 8km from Zarkawt, 1km off the Aizawl-Silchar road via an improbably narrow dirt lane.

Market

MARKET

(Mission Veng St) A Saturday street market sprawls along the street with village women offering fruit, vegetables, maybe a dead pig, fish and live hens in individualised wicker-work carry-away baskets.



PERMITS FOR MIZORAM

Agencies, notably Mizo Holidays and Three Dimension, both in Aizawl, can arrange 10-day permits. Mizoram permit restrictions are perhaps the most lax of the Northeast States. Be sure that all places you wish to visit are on your permit and you should be allowed to go anywhere in the state. Note though that the Kolkata FRO doesn't grant Mizoram permits.

Sleeping

Hotels typically add a 10% service charge (included below).

Hotel Clover

HOTEL \$\$

 2305736; www.davids-hotel-clover.com; G-16 Chanmari; s/d from ₹750/1500;   Dolly, your host for the evening, should win an award as one of India's friendliest hotel receptionists. Rooms are equally friendly and as full of character with colourful, art-adorned walls.

Hotel Arini

HOTEL \$\$

 2301557; Upper Khatla; s/d from ₹800/1200;  Only a small red sign announces the Hotel Arini, named after the owner's daughter. The rooms are cheerily bright and fresh-looking, and the staff pleasant and obliging. Choose a back room with a stupendous down-valley view. They have a couple of very basic singles for a mere ₹200.



Eating



David's Kitchen

MULTICUISINE \$\$

 2305736; Zarkawt; mains ₹80-140;  10am-9.30pm Mon-Sat, noon-9.30pm Sun) David's fine Mizo, Thai, Indian, Chinese and continental food, mocktails, friendly staff and pleasant decor will please everyone. The views aren't half bad either.

Curry Pot

INDIAN \$\$

 2324567; Upper Khatla; meals ₹50-120;  10am-9pm Mon-Sat) Next door to Hotel Arini, this place has tasty Indian and Chinese dishes.

On Sundays only the hotels and David's Kitchen will save you from starving.



Information

Directorate of Tourism  2333475; www.mizotourism.nic.in; PA-AW Bldg, Bungkawn)

Mizo Holidays (☎2306314; to7.puia@gmail.com; Hauva Bldg, Chanmari; ☀9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Arranges tourist permits and a variety of state-wide tours including some interesting village visits.

Net Cyber Cafe (Canteen Sq; per hr ₹30; ☀9am-6pm)

SBI ATM (Raj Bhawan Junction)

Three Dimension (☎2351867; Zangtui; ☀9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Arranges permits, Mizoram tours and even paragliding (₹500).

i Getting There & Away

Taxis charge ₹600 and shared sumos charge ₹50 to efficient little Lengpui airport, 35km west of Aizawl. **Air India** (☎2322283) flies to Guwahati, Kolkata and Imphal, while Kingfisher Red goes to Kolkata.

Counters for long-distance sumos are conveniently clustered around Zarkawt's Sumkuma Point.

Guwahati (₹750; 28hrs; 6pm, Mon-Sat)

Shillong (₹650, 16 hours, 6pm, Mon-Sat)

Silchar (₹280, six hours, four daily)

Rural Mizoram

Mizoram's pretty, green hills get higher as you head east. **Champhai** is widely considered the most attractive district and is where you'll find the **Murlen National Park**, known for its hoolock gibbons. The small town of **Saitual** is a good stopover on the road to Champhai. Very close to Champhai is pretty **Tamdil Lake**, ringed by lush mountains. Further afield is the stunning **Blue Mountain** (Phawngpui), which at 2147m is the highest peak in Mizoram. It's considered by Mizos to be the abode of the Gods, but its slopes are said to be haunted by ghosts. Three Dimension can organise trekking trips here. For a more accessible taste of the Mizoram hinterland visit the **Vantawng waterfalls**, 95km from Aizawl.

TRIPURA

Tripura is culturally and politically fascinating, and the state's handful of royal palaces and temples draw a growing flow of domestic tourists. For the moment though foreign tourists remain very rare indeed. There's a large Bangladeshi refugee population in Tripura and much of the more accessible western parts of the state look and feel much like its near neighbour.

Foreigners must register with the police on arrival at the airport.

Agartala

☎0381 / POP 367,822

Tripura's low-key capital, with its small-town atmosphere, feels like an India of yesteryear. The pace of life is much slower than in the towns and cities of the Indian heartlands and people are much more likely to swerve across the street to wish you a good day than to try and sell you something. The old quarter, which centres on the Ujjayanta Palace, has some impressive town gates and pretty tanks and gardens. **Durga puja** is celebrated with huge *pandals* (temporary temples built from wood and cloth).

i Sights

Ujjayanta Palace

PALACE

(admission ₹5; ☀5-7pm) Agartala's indisputable centrepiece is this striking, dome-capped palace. Flanked by two large reflecting ponds, the whitewashed 1901 edifice was built by Tripura's 182nd maharaja. It looks particularly impressive floodlit at night, but for security reasons only the gardens are open to the public.

Temples

HINDU TEMPLES

Of four Hindu temples around the palace compound, the most fanciful is **Jagannath Mandir** (☀4am-2pm & 4-9pm). Its massive sculptured portico leads into a complex with wedding-cake architecture painted in ice-cream sundae colours. Several **royal mausoleums** are decaying quietly on the riverbank behind Batala market. To get to them walk west down HGB Rd, turn left at Ronaldsay Rd and right along the riverbank. **Chaturdasha Devata Mandir** (Temple of Fourteen Deities) hosts a big seven-day **Kharchi Puja** festival in July in Old Agartala, 7km east down Assam Agartala (AA) Rd (NH44) at Kayerpur.

Museums

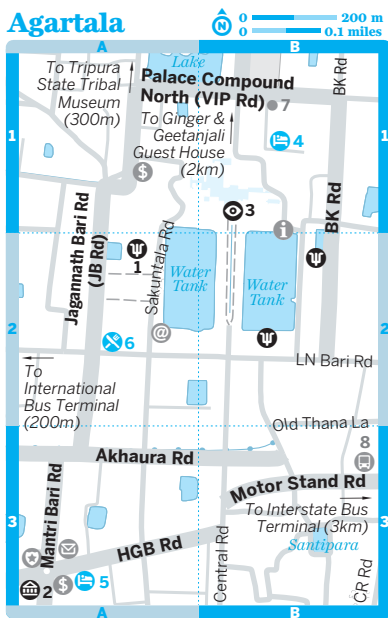
MUSEUMS

The small **Tripura Government Museum** (<http://tripura.nic.in/museum/welcome.html>; Post Office Circle; admission ₹2; ☀10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) has a variety of tribal displays plus some interesting musical instruments made from bamboo. The new **Tripura State Tribal Museum** (Lake Chowmuhani; admission free; ☀10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) has further displays of tribal dress.

i Sleeping

State taxes add 10% to your bill (included in the prices listed here).

Agartala



Ginger

HOTEL \$\$
 (☎)1800 2093333, 2411333; www.gingerhotels.com; Airport Rd; s/d ₹1649/2199; (☎) Part of the Tata-owned Ginger chain of hotels, this friendly and well-run place has superb rooms with wif-fi, real coffee and a small gym. What might be India's smallest Café Coffee Day branch is attached. For the best rates book online in advance.

Geetanjali Guest House

HOTEL \$\$
 (☎)2410009; Airport Rd; d/tw from ₹1650; (☎) Brand new and the only possible competition for the Ginger, which is right opposite, half of this government-run guesthouse is reserved for visiting Ministers, the other half is for nobodies like us. The large, perfect rooms are filled with sunlight and for the moment it's all very impressive, but as we said it's government-run so there's every chance it'll be allowed to rot away without anyone really caring!

Hotel Welcome Palace

HOTEL \$\$
 (☎)2384940; HGB Rd; s ₹500, d ₹700-1200; (☎) This hard-to-beat option has helpful English-speaking staff, eager room service and superb food. Rooms are neat, although some may not have external windows. It's by far the most popular of the city centre hotels and is worth booking in advance.

Agartala

Sights

- 1 Jagannath Mandir.....A2
- 2 Tripura Government Museum.....A3
- 3 Ujjayanta Palace.....B1

Sleeping

- 4 Hotel Chandana.....B1
- 5 Hotel Welcome Palace.....A3

Eating

- 6 Abhishek Restaurant.....A2
- Restaurant Kurry Klub.....(see 5)

Transport

- 7 Air India.....B1
- 8 Motor Stand.....B3

Hotel Chandana

HOTEL \$
 (☎)2311216; Palace Compound Lane; r ₹210) Lacklustre but cheap and bearable, the Chandana's simple rooms have mosquito nets and cold showers.

Eating

Restaurant Kurry Klub

INDIAN \$\$
 (Hotel Welcome Palace, HGB Rd; mains ₹50-200; ☎)10am-10pm) Very tasty food served in a small dining room whose decor would be rather striking if only the lighting was improved. If you're staying in the hotel, room service is faster and beers can be acquired.

Abhishek Restaurant

INDIAN \$
 (LN Bari Rd; mains ₹60-100) Reliable food served either on an inviting outdoor terrace or in a marine-themed dining room with good AC.

Information

Axis ATM (Hotel Welcome Palace, HGB Rd)

SBI (☎)2311364; top fl, SBI Bldg, HGB Rd) Changes cash and travellers cheques and has an ATM.

Netzone (6 Sakuntala Rd; per hr ₹20; ☎)8am-10pm) Best of several closely grouped options.

Tripura Tourism (☎)2225930; www.tripura tourism.in; Sweet Mahal, Palace Complex; ☎)10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 3-5pm Sun) Helpful and enthusiastic with many great-value tours.

Getting There & Around

Air India (☎)2325470; VIP Rd), Spicejet and Jet Airways fly to Kolkata and Guwahati; IndiGo Airlines and Kingfisher fly just to Kolkata. Agartala's airport is 12km north and a taxi costs ₹225.

Private bus operators are clustered on LN Bari Rd; others leave from the new **Interstate Bus Terminal** 3km east of the centre (rickshaw ₹50). Sumos use the **Motor Stand** (Motor Stand Rd) and **South Bus Station** (SBS; off Ronaldsay Rd). Destinations and their respective departure stations for bus and sumo trips are:

Guwahati bus (₹660, 24 hours, 6am and noon) Interstate Bus Terminal.

Kailasahar sumo (₹88, five hours) South Bus Station.

Melagarh (for Neermahal) bus (₹25, 1½ hours); sumo (₹20) South Bus Station.

Shillong bus (₹660, 20 hours, 6am and noon) Interstate Bus Terminal.

Silchar bus (₹153, 12 hours, 6am) International Bus Station.

Udaipur bus (₹26, 1¼ hours); sumo (₹35) South Bus Station.

Opposite the TRTC is the **International Bus Terminal** where Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation's daily bus departs for Dhaka (₹182, six hours, 12pm).

Around Agartala

Southern Tripura's best-known sights can be combined into a long day trip from Agartala, though sleeping at Neermahal is worthwhile. Any of Agartala's hotels can arrange a taxi, or you can engage English-speaking **Partha Laskar** (☎09774702908; partha.laskar@rediffmail.com) for a day trip in an AC car (₹1300 plus ₹12 per km).

UDAIPUR

📍03821

Udaipur was Tripura's historic capital and remains dotted with ancient temples and a patchwork of tanks.

MATABARI

When Sati's toes fell on Kolkata, her divine right leg dropped on Matabari. This gruesome legend is piously celebrated at the **Tripura Sundari Mandir** (🕒4.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-9.30pm), a 1501 Kali temple where a steady stream of pilgrims make almost endless animal sacrifices that leave the grounds as bloody as the temple's vivid-red *shikhara* (Buddhist monastery). Even more people come here at the big **Diwali festival** (October/November) to bathe in the fish-filled tank by the temple. The temple is 100m east of the NH44, 4km south of Udaipur. A rickshaw from Udaipur costs ₹50.

i Getting There & Around

Udaipur's bus stand has quarter-hourly departures to Agartala (₹26, 1¼ hours) and Melagarh (₹15, 45 minutes).

NEERMAHAL & MELAGARH

📍0381 / POP 21,750

Tripura's most iconic building, the 1930 Neermahal, is a long, red-and-white **water palace** (admission/camera/video ₹10/10/25; 🕒8.30am-4pm, until 4.30pm Apr-Sep), which is empty but shimmering on its own boggy island in the lake of Rudra Sagar. Like its counterpart in Rajasthan's Udaipur, this



CROSSING INTO BANGLADESH AT AGARTALA

Border Hours

The border at Agartala is open from 7am to 6pm.

Foreign Exchange

There's no exchange booth and Agartala banks don't sell Bangladeshi taka, so changing money is hit and miss; ask local traders or border officials.

Onward Transport

From central Agartala the border is just 3km along Akhaura Rd (₹50 by rickshaw). On the Bangladesh side the nearest town is Akhaura, 5km beyond, reached by 'baby taxi' (autorickshaw). From Akhaura trains head to Dhaka, Comilla and Sylhet. Coming eastbound, be sure to pay your Bangladeshi departure tax at a Sonali bank before heading for the border.

Visas

Unhelpful, but the northeast's only **Bangladesh visa office** (☎2324807; Airport Rd, Kunjaban; 🕒application 9am-1pm Mon-Thu, 9am-noon Fri, collection same day 4pm) hides down a small lane in Agartala, about 2km north of the Ujjayanta Palace.

was a princely exercise in aesthetics; the finest craftsmen building a summer palace of luxury in a blend of Hindu and Islamic architectural styles. The delightful waterborne approach by speedboat (passenger/boat ₹20/400) or fancy rowboat (boat ₹100) is the most enjoyable part of visiting.

Boats leave from beside the remarkably decent **Sagarmahal Tourist Lodge** (☎2524418; d from ₹250; ㊟), where most rooms have lake-facing balconies and a good restaurant presides downstairs.

MEGHALAYA

Carved out of Assam in 1972, hilly Meghalaya (Abode of Clouds) is a cool, pine-fresh contrast to the sweaty Assam plains. Set on dramatic horseshoes of rocky cliff above the Bengal plains, Cherrapunjee and Mawsynram are statistically the wettest places on earth. Most of the rain falls between April and September, creating very impressive waterfalls and carving out some of Asia's longest caves.

Eastern and central Meghalaya are mainly populated by the closely related Jaintia, Pnar and Khasi peoples, originally migrants from Southeast Asia. Western Meghalaya is home to the unrelated Garo tribe. Despite their different ethnic backgrounds, these two groups use a matrilineal system of inheritance with children taking the mother's family name. A good time to be in Meghalaya is when the four day, state-wide, **Wangala festival** takes place. This Garo harvest festival is renowned for its impressive traditional dancing.

Shillong

☎0364 / POP 268,000

This sprawling hill station was the capital of British-created Assam from 1874 until 1972. Since becoming the state capital of Meghalaya it has rapidly developed into a typical modern Indian town and in doing so some of its older buildings have been demolished. In parts it still retains its charm, the air is refreshingly cool and it has become a favourite holiday destination for domestic tourists.

👁 Sights & Activities

Ward's Lake

LAKE

(admission/camera/video ₹5/10/20; ☎8.30am-5.30pm Nov-Feb, 8.30am-7pm Mar-Oct) Colonial-era Shillong was planned around this at-

tractive lake, with its pretty **ornamental bridge**, flower beds, coy courting couples and gaggles of geese.

Colonial Shillong

NOTABLE BUILDINGS

The city's half-timbered architecture has been rather swamped by lots of drab Indian concrete, but areas such as Oakland retain many older houses and even in the centre a few gems remain.

The **Pinewood Hotel** (Rita Rd), a 1920s tea-growers retreat, is particularly representative and looks great at night. The 1902 **All Saints' Cathedral** (Kacheri Rd) would look perfect pictured on a biscuit tin. Located nearby, the turreted **Das-Roy House** (closed to the public) lurks behind a traffic circle that harbours five forgotten **Khasi monoliths** as well as a mini Soviet-style **globe monument**.

TOP CHOICE Don Bosco Museum of Indigenous Cultures

MUSEUM

(www.dbcic.org; Sacred Heart Theological College; Indian/foreigner ₹50/150; ☎9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 1.30-4.30pm Sun, until 5.30 Apr-Sep) This very professional museum displays a truly vast, very well laid-out collection of tribal artefacts interspersed just occasionally with gratuitous galleries on Christian missionary work. Tours (compulsory) last over an hour, departing on the half-hour.

Wankhar Entomology Museum

MUSEUM

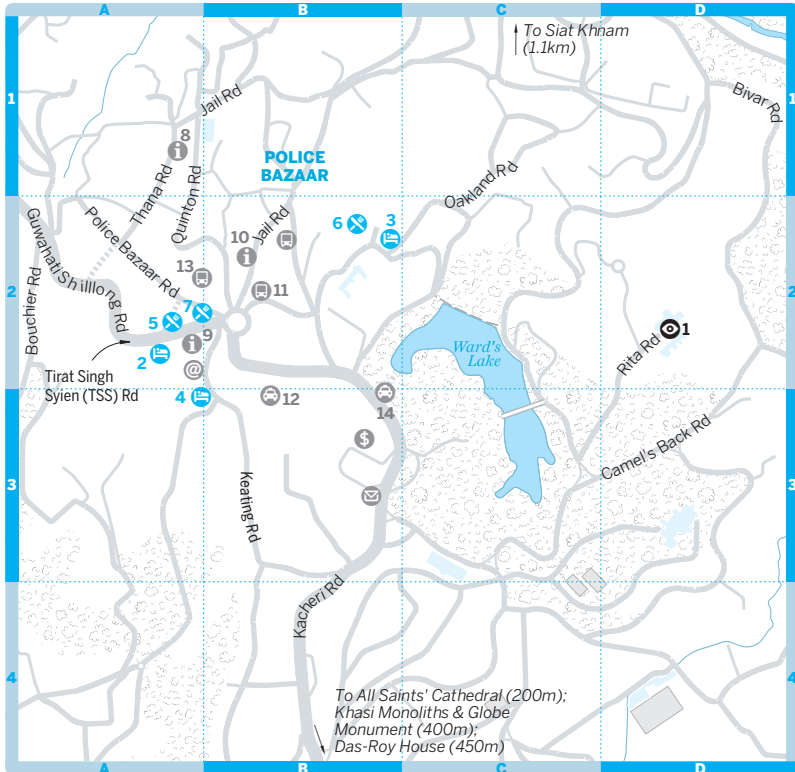
(Riatsamthiah; Indian/foreigner/camera per photo/video ₹50/100/10/500; ☎11am-4pm Mon-Sat) The memorably named Wankhar Entomology Museum is a remarkable one-room display of pinned butterflies, gruesome rhinoceros beetles and incredible stick-insects in the home of the original collector.

Both museums are northwest of the town centre.

Siat Khnam

SPORT

All around Shillong gambling booths offer 'Forecast' odds on Siat Khnam. This is a unique 'sport'. A semicircle of weather-beaten Khasi men fire hundreds of arrows at a drum-shaped straw target for a set time before a canvas curtain is raised to keep further arrows off the target. Those that stick in are counted and bets predict the last two digits of this total. It's effectively a lottery but the shooting is a gently fascinating spectacle. Shoots are usually scheduled at 4pm and 5pm every day, timings can vary somewhat by season. The easy-to-miss Siat Khnam site is a small grassy area approximately opposite the big Nehru Stadium on the south river bank.



Sleeping

Tariffs are seasonal and highly negotiable in the low season. During peak periods hotels fill fast, but there are dozens of choices around the Police Bazaar area, so just keep looking. Taxes add a discouraging 20% to your bill (included in the prices listed here).

TOP CHOICE **Hotel Tripura Castle** HISTORIC HOTEL \$\$\$
 (☎2501111; Cleve Colony; s/d from ₹3600/3720, ste ₹7200; 📶📺📺) Tucked away on a wooded hillside is the distinctively turreted summer villa of the former Tripura maharajas. It's this private 'castle' that features in hotel brochures, but accommodation is actually in a mostly new, if pseudo-heritage building behind. Pine-framed rooms have a gently stylish vibe with period furniture and a level of service that's hard to beat. For the full maharaja experience opt for a suite. The hotel is 2.5km southeast of the centre.

TOP CHOICE **Ri Kynjai**

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎9862420300; www.rikynjai.com; Umiam Lake; r from ₹7200; 📶) In the local Khasi language *ri kynjai* means 'land of serene environments' and this divine resort, on the banks of the Umiam lake, 22km from Shillong, is certainly that. Cottages lie scattered about the lush, green gardens and each is impeccably presented with lake views and bathrooms with deep bath tubs. There's also a spa, a decent restaurant and a bar that's perfect for sundowners.

Silk Route

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2503301; www.hotelsilkroute.com; Keating Rd; s/d from ₹1200/1440; 📶) This small hotel has memorably colourful rooms kept ship-shape by the enthusiastic cleaners. The stylish bathrooms contain big rain showers. It's popular, so book ahead.

Earle Holiday Home

HISTORIC HOTEL \$

(☎2228614; Oakland Rd; r ₹550-1650) The cheapest rooms at this amusingly disorganised

Shillong

Sights

- 1 Pinewood Hotel.....D2

Sleeping

- 2 Baba Tourist Lodge.....A2
3 Earle Holiday Home.....B2
4 Silk Route.....A3

Eating

- 5 Broadway.....A2
6 City Hut Dhaba.....B2
7 La Galerie.....A2

Drinking

- Cloud 9.....(see 7)

Information

- 8 Cultural Pursuits Adventures.....A1
9 Government of India Tourist
Office.....A2
10 Meghalaya Tourism.....B2

Transport

- 11 Deep.....B2
12 Khasi Hills Tourist Taxi
Cooperative.....B3
13 Network Travels Counter.....A2
14 Shared taxis to Guwahati
airport.....B3

hotel are original half-timbered affairs with-in a classic 1920 Shillong hill house adorned with sweet little turrets. Pricier rooms in the concrete annexe are less atmospheric but more comfortable. The ₹650 rooms are the best.

Baba Tourist Lodge

HOTEL \$

(☎2211285; GS Rd; r ₹500-900) Ageing but clean, and popular with backpackers, Baba hides behind a deceptively small PCO shop. The best rooms have windows and views out onto greenery. Bucket showers and bucket hot water.



Eating & Drinking

La Galerie

INDIAN \$\$

(Hotel Centrepoint, TSS Rd; mains ₹150-200) A suave restaurant compartmentalised into booths by photographs of local scenes, it offers excellent Indian food. **Cloud 9** is the top-floor bar-restaurant serving dainty Thai dishes, cold beers and cocktails.

City Hut Dhaba

MULTICUISINE \$\$

(Oakland Rd; mains ₹100-150) Tucked behind Earle Holiday Home and guarded by

gnomes, City Hut serves a variety of Indian, Chinese, barbecue and ice creams in four different eating rooms, including a family-only room and an attractive, flower-decked straw pavilion.

Broadway

INDIAN, CHINESE \$\$

(GS Rd; mains ₹60-150) With a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere and an impressive array of aquariums full of goldfish, this no-nonsense restaurant serves a tasty mix of Indian and Chinese meals.

Information

Internet Access

Techweb (basement Zara's Arcade, Keating Rd; per hr ₹20; ☎9am-8.30pm)

Money

There are many ATMs.

SBI (Kacheri Rd) Exchange of foreign currency and travellers cheques; ATM outside.

Tourist Information

Cultural Pursuits Adventures

(☎9436303978; www.culturalpursuits.com; Hotel Alpine Continental, Thana Rd) Experienced agency for caving, trekking, village stays and off-the-beaten-track stuff.

Government of India tourist office

(☎2225632; TSS Rd; ☎9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Free basic maps and brochures.

Meghalaya Tourism (☎2226220; www.megtourism.gov.in; Jail Rd) Lots of useful information.

Getting There & Away

The **MTC bus station** (Jail Rd) also has a computerised railway-reservation counter (nearest train station is Guwahati). Private buses depart from Dhanketi Point; book tickets from counters around Police Bazaar, including **Network Travels** (Shop 44, MUDA Complex, Police Bazaar) and **Deep** (Ward's Lake Rd).

Frequent buses and sumos run to the following towns:

Aizawl (₹550, 15 hours)

Cherrapunjee (bus/sumo ₹250/220, three hours)

Dawki (bus ₹110, three hours)

Dimapur (₹340, 14 hours)

Guwahati (government bus/private bus ₹90/110, 3½ hours)

Silchar (₹190, 10 hours)

Siliguri (₹430, 16 hours)

Tura (bus/sumo ₹260/360, 12 hours via Guwahati)

From a Kacheri Rd parking area, taxis will take you direct to Guwahati airport (₹1600, 3½ hours).

Khasi Hills Tourist Taxi Cooperative (Kacheri Rd) charges ₹1800 to ₹2000 for a day trip to Cherrapunjee, and for a ride to the Bangladesh border near Dawki it's ₹1600.

Around Shillong

SMIT

Framing itself as the Khasi cultural centre, Smit hosts the major five-day **Nongkrem Festival** (October). This features animal sacrifices and a curious slow-motion shuffling dance performed in full costume in front of the thatched bamboo 'palace' of the local *syiem* (traditional ruler). Smit is 11km from Shillong, 4km off the Jowai road.

CHERRAPUNJEE (SOHRA)

📞03637 / POP 11,000

Once you leave the outskirts of Shillong the road to Cherrapunjee passes through pretty scenery that becomes dramatic at **Dympep viewpoint**, where a photogenic V-shape valley slits deeply into the plateau.

Although straggling for several kilometres, Cherrapunjee (known locally as Sohra) has a compact centre. Huddling beside the marketplace is the sumo stand.

👁 Sights & Activities

Root Bridges

LANDMARK

The most fascinating sight around Cherrapunjee are the incredible **root bridges**, living rubber fig-tree roots that ingenious

Khasi villagers have trained across streams to form natural pathways. Three of these root bridges (including an amazing 'double-decker') are near **Nongriat**. Access involves a two-hour very steep trek down from **Tyrna**, a pretty, palm-clad village that's 2km from Mawshamok. From Cherrapunjee Holiday Resort the entire roundtrip hike takes eight hours, is highly strenuous and involves descending and ascending some 2000-odd steps (this particular author couldn't walk for two days afterwards!). The Cherrapunjee Holiday Resort provides maps.

Moors & Waterfalls

VIEWPOINT

The surrounding grassy moors justify Meghalaya's over-played 'Scotland of the East' tourist-office soubriquet, although they're dotted with Khasi monoliths and scarred by quarrying. Much more impressive is the series of 'grand canyon' valleys that plunge into deep lush chasms of tropical forest sprayed by a succession of seasonally inspiring waterfalls. The **Nohkalikai Falls**, fourth highest in the world, are particularly dramatic, especially in the monsoon when their capacity increases 20-fold. You can see them easily enough without quite entering the official **viewpoint** (admission/camera ₹10/200; ☀8am-5pm), 4.4km southwest of Sohra market.

Mawsmai Cave

CAVE

(admission/camera/video ₹10/15/50; ☀9.30am-5.30pm) Their popularity with domestic tourists means that the incongruous sight of

WORTH A TRIP

GARO HILLS

The lush, green Garo Hills in the far west of Meghalaya are well off the beaten path. The towns are not visually distinctive, but most houses in small hamlets remain traditionally fashioned from bamboo-weave matting and neatly cropped palm thatch. The Garo Hills are easier to visit from Guwahati than from Shillong.

Sprawling Tura is the western Garo Hills' regional centre and an unhurried transport hub. The **tourist office** (📞03651-242394; ☀10am-5pm Mon-Fri) is 4km away towards Nazing Bazaar. Friendly staff offer brochures and sketchy maps, and arrange guides for anywhere in the Garo Hills, including a three-day hike to **Nokrek Biosphere Reserve** where it's possible to watch for Hoolock Gibbons from a traditional-style *borang* (Garo tree house).

There are some cheap and not very cheerful places to stay near the market in Tura or, for something a little more comfortable, try the **Rikman Continental** (📞03651-220744; Circular Rd; s/d from ₹900/1080; 🍷@).

Almost on the Bangladesh border, **Baghmara** is the southern Garo Hills' district centre. From Baghmara you can visit the **Balpakhran National Park**, 45km away, but jeep and guide hire will have to be organised in Tura.

**CROSSING INTO BANGLADESH FROM DAWKI****Border Hours**

The border is open from 6am to 5pm.

Foreign Exchange

There's no official exchange booth but ask at the Bangladesh customs office.

Onward Transport

The border post is at Tamabil, 1.7km from Dawki market (taxis are ₹40-50). Coming from Bangladesh, beware that Tamabil has no Sonali bank, so prepay your Tk300 Bangladeshi departure tax in Sylhet or in Jaintiapura. There are frequent Tamabil–Sylhet minibuses.

sari-clad women stooping through the low passages of the 150m-long Mawsmi Cave is common. Mawsmi's tall row of roadside **monoliths** is as impressive as the cave but don't receive the same attention.

**Sleeping & Eating****Cherrapunjee Holiday****Resort**

HOTEL \$\$

(☎09436115925; www.cherrapunjee.com; Laitkynsew village; d ₹1480-1800; @☎) With seven eminently comfortable rooms, this resort is run by truly delightful hosts. They offer a selection of hikes, either self-orientated (using their hand-drawn maps) or with a local guide. Built on a ridge, rooms either look down to Bangladesh or up to the escarpment. During peak times tent accommodation (₹600) is available with shared bath-

rooms but no hot water. More rooms were under construction at the time of research. A daily bus leaves nearby Laitkynsew village for Shillong (₹40, 6am). Going the other way it leaves Shillong at 1pm. Otherwise a taxi from Cherrapunjee costs ₹250 to ₹300.

Rest House Nongriat

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎9856891520; Nongriat; per person ₹100) This highly basic four-room guesthouse is just one minute from the double-decker bridge and so is ideal if you want to explore the escarpment floor in greater depth. If you stay, take the absolute minimum with you because carrying a backpack back up all those steps would be a real bitch! Meals cost ₹100.

Sohra Plaza Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎235762; r ₹550) This mucky but friendly two-room hotel is by the market.

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