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The wildlife wonder

Tigers in the wild

It's a few minutes after dawn at Bandhavgarh National Park, a sprawling wilderness 800km southeast of Delhi, in Madhya Pradesh. You're sitting, shivering, in a line of open-topped jeeps at the park gates. Officials are waving bits of paper and pocketing cash here and there as they decide which of the Forest Department's guides will accompany which vehicle. Each has an assigned route, and if you get the wrong one, you'll probably see some deer — maybe an owl. Get the right one, though, and you might see a tiger. Welcome to India's big-cat lottery.

India has 50 tiger reserves of this kind — between them, they're home to about 2,225 of the beasts. Bandhavgarh is one of the best, with an estimated 70 tigers, but finding them isn't easy. Vehicles are allowed in twice a day: for five hours at dawn and three in the afternoon. Game drives involve following rutted tracks through dense, dry sal forest, over rocky hills, past lakes and ancient ruins, eyes straining to spot a predator designed to be invisible. Radios are banned, but the guides use their mobiles to keep in contact and if one gets lucky, he'll share the intel with his mates. But getting lucky

is so rare that to pin your hopes on actually seeing a tiger is to set yourself up for almost certain disappointment. Guides will emphasise the importance of focusing on the birdlife, the wild dogs, the deer and the incredible scenery. But deep down, we're all praying for tigers.

Sometimes, those prayers are answered. You follow the vultures and spot a tigress and her cubs on a kill. You round a bend to find a male the size of a small horse standing in the road. Your first instinct is to pull out a camera. Don't do it. Your hands will be shaking and the shots will be rubbish; burn the image into your memory instead. Look at the whiskers, the enormous paws, the rippling fur and big teeth. Finally, look into its amber eyes, meeting a deeply indifferent gaze — one that says you're nothing but meat in too much packaging. Study every detail of this desperately endangered predator. Your grandchildren may never see one in the wild, and you need to be able to describe it to them.

Many Golden Triangle tours offer two-night side trips to Ranthambore. These are like buying a lucky-dip lottery ticket, so if you're desperate to see a tiger, allow at least five days, and pick a tour operator specialising in wildlife-spotting. Two of the best are Exodus, which has a 16-day Land of the Tiger group trip from £2,499pp, B&B, including flights and most dinners (exodus.co.uk), and Steppes, which has a 14-day tour of three tiger parks from £3,345pp, full-board, excluding flights (steppetravel.com).



Eye of the tiger: up close with the big cats in Bandhavgarh National Park



How to do... The cities
 Believe the stereotype: urban India is a sensory bombardment of bleating horns, beggars and hawkers. It's also a must-see if you want to get a sense of the nation now. Try to factor in a stop en route home, so you'll have acclimatised, and choose your hotel wisely, checking online reviews for noise levels and cleanliness. Which 'cool metro' — as the locals put it — should you go for? Mumbai (pictured) has the high life and Bollywood glitz, Delhi the Modernist architecture and millennial metro system, Kolkata the faded colonial charm, and Chennai the trendy food scene. Get to know the real city by following local, rather than guidebook, recommendations: burrrp.com for nosh, indiaeve.com for events and insider.in for a curated pick of music and arts.



Desert title:
exploring India's
remote Nubra Valley



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Peak adventure

The Himalayas

In the country's mountainous northernmost reaches, you'll discover a whole different India — high-altitude and spiritual, stalked by snow leopards.

Days 1-2: Amritsar, Punjab

Punjab's iconic city, Amritsar, is a thrilling starting point, home to one of India's most spectacular sites: the shimmering Golden Temple, Sikhism's holiest shrine. There's also a bubbling food scene (find freshly baked *kulcha*, leavened flatbread cooked in a tandoor oven) in the colourful market, as well as the Partition Museum, documenting the division of this region between India and Pakistan in 1947. Don't miss the daily Wagah border ceremony, involving a Bollywood-style dance-off (4.15pm in winter; 5.15pm summer).

Days 3-4: Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh

Home to the Dalai Lama (normally in residence in May — check at dalailama.com), this quaint hill station is

surrounded by cedar forests in the Himalayan foothills, and has a rich Tibetan feel. Crimson-robed monks meander to monasteries, plaintive Buddhist chants fill the air and a muddle of small streets overflow with shops selling handicrafts (snap up a *thangka* silk painting for about £30).

Days 5-6: Leh, Ladakh

With jagged peaks and blindingly blue sky, Ladakh's landscape feels as mythical as Narnia. Strung with prayer flags whipping in the wind, the capital, Leh, is a laid-back frontier town with an ancient palace, whitewashed stupas and a thronging bazaar that fans out into barley fields. The Ultimate Travelling Camp (tutc.com; three nights from £1,247pp, all-inclusive) at the base of Thiksey Monastery is pricey, but overwhelmingly peaceful.

Days 7-9: Hemis National Park, Ladakh

You're here to spy one of the world's biggest recluses — the powerful and elegant snow leopard. Around 200 of them live in Hemis National Park, a wild Eden of magnificent mountains, cobalt rivers and plunging ravines. Trek through deep snow with local trackers during the day, and bed down at night in a traditional homestay.

FAQs

Is India too full-on for families?

Not at all. But prepare for a lot of 'trav-min': ask your doctor about jabs six weeks prior; stock up on SPF50, hand-sanitiser and baby-food pouches (hard to come by in India). Ditch the buggy: pavements are uneven and crowded, so stick to a carrier. And don't be too ambitious with your itinerary (constant scenery changes can lead to major meltdowns). Goa and Kerala, in a leafy beachside hotel with a pool, are just right.

Days 10-11: Nubra Valley, Ladakh

A chunk of the ancient Silk Route with the highest drivable pass in the world, the astonishing Nubra Valley will make you gasp and gasp again: rolling patchwork fields, crystal-clear streams, carpets of wild lavender and desert sand dunes you can traverse by camel. Camp nearby at Turtuk (the last Indian outpost on the Pakistan border) to immerse yourself in Balti culture, with its distinct way of living, local language and exuberant traditional dress.

Days 12-14: Srinagar, Kashmir

Cross the pointed mountains to Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital. Framed by pristine alpine scenery, beautiful Dal Lake is the star of the show. Stay on evocative houseboat *Sukoon* (sukoonkashmir.com; doubles from £145, B&B), moored on the lake. And for transport? The multi-coloured, gondola-like *shikaras* will take you past the floating flower markets to the city centre, dotted with historic mosques. Check FCO guidelines before visiting the area (gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice).

Exodus (exodus.co.uk) can organise a 14-night trip to Ladakh, incorporating a snow leopard trek, from £2,699pp, including most meals, international flights and transfers.

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The rural cruise

Kerala's backwaters

This state's name means 'land of the coconut', and if that conjures up images of palms on white-sand beaches, you're bang on. A serene sliver on India's southwest coast, it has beaches, then backwaters. The noise and crowds that dominate India dissipate here, making this the obvious spot for post-tour decompression.

Day 1: Kochi

India's oldest European settlement is a crumbling mess of Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese and British influences. A spice port in its heyday, it's now simply a memento of an older India. Take in the ornate Mattancherry Palace; the spice warehouses on Jew Town Road; and the cantilevered Chinese fishing nets along River Road. Most tour operators use Kochi as an overnight base — the Old Courtyard Hotel is the handsomest crashpad (oldcourtyard.com; doubles from £31, B&B) — before the real joys of Kerala, so enjoy a stroll and an early night.

Days 2-3: Head for the hills

Four hours' drive east lies the hill station of Munnar, heart of South India's tea trade. Top priority here is to find a base somewhere suitably EM Forster — perhaps the Windermere Estate, a plantation house surrounded by tea terraces — from which to hike the Letchmi Hills, visiting the tea fields and sipping evening G&Ts. Kerala is a dry state, so bring your own G — no-one will mind (windmeremunnar.com; doubles from £98, B&B).

Day 4-5: Periyar

Settle in on a bamboo-raft cruise along the shores of Periyar Lake, watching out for elephants, deer, otters and the great pied hornbill. Stay at the Spice Village in Thekkady, in low, thatched cottages clustered around an old plantation house. There's a great bar, with a 150-year-old billiard table and a resident billiards coach, Mr Francis (cghearth.com; doubles from £120, B&B).

Day 6: The backwaters

Lazing on the bow of an Alappuzha (formerly Alleppey) houseboat, watching coconut palms reflected in the still waters, and waving to locals as you drift by, is one of the world's most satisfying travel experiences. Kerala's famed houseboats are converted rice

barges staffed by a skipper, first mate and cook. Once aboard, this is your private cruise ship for 24 glorious hours. A good captain will make sure you end up on a west-facing lake in time to watch the sun set it ablaze.

Days 7-10: Beach lazing

Kovalam is Kerala's beachy side — but don't expect the party set-up of Goa. Here you'll find beaches peppered with temples; beaches frequented by cows; and beaches where fishermen call you over to help haul in their catch. It's also the best place to try Kerala's seafood-centric cuisine — prawn masalas; spiced-and-fried fish; and creamy mappas (coconut-milk-based) curries. Rooms cost from as little as £5 a night, but if you're looking for luxury, Niraamaya is a collection of polished-dark-wood cottages beside two all-but-private beaches (niraamaya.in; doubles from £148, B&B).

Wild Frontiers' (wildfrontierstravel.com) 10-day, private Kerala Explorer tour covers all of the above, from £2,095pp, full-board, excluding flights. For something more rootsy, Village Ways (villageways.com) has an 11-night Hills and Backwaters tour, using homestays in local villages, from £818pp, full-board, excluding flights.

FAQs

What travel prep do I need to do?

NHS Fit for Travel advises getting diphtheria, hepatitis A, tetanus and typhoid vaccines a month ahead, though antimalarials are not needed for the Golden Triangle or Kerala (just be sure to take the usual bite precautions). India's new e-visa has eradicated the lengthy admin process (indianvisaonline.gov.in) — upload your picture and a copy of your passport, and pay £77 to be emailed one pretty much instantly.

