

A Passage to India

Travel journalist and food writer, Olivia Greenway, gives us an insight into what it is like to visit India, and shares her top tips on how to get the most out of your trip to this spiritual home of spices. "India is dirty, noisy, annoying, shocking, peaceful, fascinating and wonderful all at once," says Olivia. "Go with an open mind and be prepared to be bewitched..."

Have a realistic itinerary

India is a huge country, made up of 29 states, one of which, Karnataka is almost as large as England. The most common mistake first-timers make is trying to cram too much in. Give yourself enough time to savour the experience, rather than spending it getting from one place to another.

Enjoy the food

With over 100 million vegetarians in India, it's a food paradise. All restaurants have a 'veg' and 'non veg' menu. Indian restaurants in the United Kingdom are mainly Bangladeshi; Indian food is as varied as the country itself.

'Curry' makes up a tiny proportion of what is on offer. Northern Indian food tends to be rich, with delicious sauces and nearly always served with rice. In the south, dishes are spicier, incorporating lentils and featuring various flatbreads, wheat pancakes and semolina cakes. In the coastal regions, as you would imagine, fish and seafood reign supreme but there will always be plenty for vegetarians as even meat-eating Indians have vegetable dishes as part of their meal.

The fruit is spectacular, especially the mango, and if you visit in mango season you will be in mango heaven. Much use is made of yoghurt and Indian cheese, or paneer, that is very tasty when cooked on a charcoal grill or in a tandoor oven. Not many Indians eat eggs – in any case they are unlikely to be free-range. The milk can be watery, so opt for lassi – a salted or sweet yoghurt drink, or try lime soda with salt – wonderful for coping with the heat. A large number of ethnic peoples live in India so you will find vegetarian Chinese, Thai and Japanese food.

Don't expect to drive

For getting around in cities, it's best to hire a car with driver. It's relatively cheap and coping with the traffic is not something a British driver should tackle. Pavements are often broken and even short distances are hard to cope with in the heat, so walking is not recommended. Buses are often not roadworthy and certainly not air-conditioned.



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Dress conservatively

Out of respect for your host country – unless you are sunbathing next to a hotel swimming pool – keep covered up. Indian women dress modestly so female visitors should avoid very short skirts or plunging necklines. Shoulders and the head need to be covered when visiting religious sites. Often shoes have to be removed, so take some wet wipes to clean your feet. Men should only wear shorts around the pool and skimpy vests are frowned on. Females on their own attract attention as Indian women go around in groups, so bear this in mind. Indian people are gracious and kind and like to make strangers welcome.

Avoid very hot spots

Certain places get unbearably hot in the summer, so do check before you book. The higher altitude areas and hill stations are cooler.

It gets dark around 7pm

Unlike Europe, it gets dark at around 7pm all year round, so don't expect to do any exploring in the evening. The upside is all those lovely outdoor candlelit evenings you will enjoy, sipping a cocktail, the scent of jasmine filling your nostrils with perhaps the waft of your paneer on the tandoor. Like anywhere else, don't go out after dark on your own, unless you have employed a guide.

Travel journalist and food writer, Olivia Greenway, has made over 25 trips to India. She has written articles about India for the Independent newspaper, National Geographic Traveller, ABTA magazine, Ten, Vertu, World Travel Guide, CNN travel and various Indian magazines. It's by far her favourite place.